

“Challenging the boundaries: Redefining family by including animals in the social work curriculum”

This presentation approaches the inclusion of animals within the social work curriculum through both theoretical and practical lenses. Aligning deep ecological principles with a proposed expansion of the social work ecological perspective, the presentation establishes a theoretical rationale for the inclusion of animals within the social work curriculum. In so doing, the presentation aims to describe the subtle shifts in perspective that are required to make social work practice sensitive to the power of attachment relationships with animals, to the vulnerability of animals when subjected to human decision-making in times of stress and crisis, and to the potential strengths inherent in recognising the human-animal bond within our practice.

Utilising examples from disaster planning and response, and from domestic violence intervention, the role that companion animals play within families and relationships is highlighted, and a practical example of animal-inclusive teaching is presented. Linking the philosophical assumptions of sustainability and inclusion to what is taught in Schools of Social Work provides the opportunity to ask some fundamental questions about the definition of ‘rights’ and ‘justice’: the presentation ends with a challenge to social work practice in regard to the inclusion of animals within our definitions of human rights and social justice.