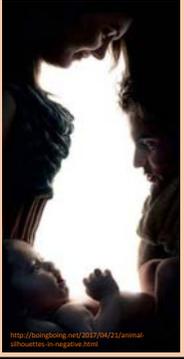# Challenging the boundaries: Redefining family by including animals in the social work curriculum

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With thanks to John Darroch, MSW,
for literature review on companion animals and disasters (2016)

http://boingboing.net/2017/04/21/animal-silhouettes-in-negative.html

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Goals for the presentation:

- **Theory:** The theoretical positioning of animals within social work
- **Rationale:** Companion animals and human decision making in crisis
- **Education practice:** The inclusion of companion animals in social work education
- **Challenge:** Human rights, animal rights & the teaching of social work

Ida Adamson

## The conceptual basis for considering animals in social work

- In social work, animals and humans are often seen as two distinct domains due to '*the submersion of social work in an individualistic, materialistic, anthropocentric, clinical, modernist paradigm*' (Ramsay & Boddy, 2017).
- Growing paradigm shift towards a greater acceptance of holistic and whole-of-earth perspectives that recognise interconnectedness and interdependence (Besthorn, 2012).
- Two theoretical perspectives used for this presentation:
  - Importance of **attachment theory** for understanding human-animal bond.
  - Influence of **deep ecology**

Environment-including-people

Social workers are educated in an ecological, **person-in-environment** perspective, with people as the focus...

https://geopolicraticus.wordpress.com/tag/urie-bronfenbrenner/

However, an **environment-including-people** approach may be best suited for ecologically complex investigations (e.g. Taylor, 2013)

EGO   ECO

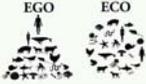http://www.reflectforchange.com/?p=353
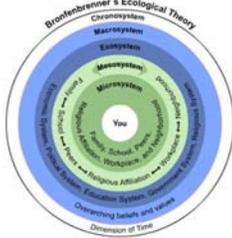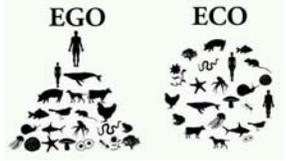
Theoretical perspectives

The familiar: Attachment theory	**The challenge: re-framing the ecological perspective**
• Relationships that are important for/to people	• Intrinsic human interrelationship with nature
• Anthropocentric & instrumental	• Human responsibility for influence over the environment
• Available to social workers working from modernist *and* post-modern perspectives	• Imperative to critique neo-liberal agendas
• Informs practice skills (focus on face-to-face practice)	• Practice skills less identified or developed (focus on wider systems)

Example 1: evidencing the importance of animals for disaster planning

www.la-spca.org

Animal-human relationships:
- Increasing public concern for the **wellbeing of companion animals** (Ivry, 2005), e.g Hurricane Katrina (US), Victorian bushfires (Australia)
- Enhancing **resilience**: companion animals can provide a range of physiological and psychological benefits to individuals (Wells, 2009).
- **Trauma** resulting from separation from animals (Awadi, Hunt, & Johnson, 2008).

Impact on human behaviour:
- Animals can encourage people to **prepare for disasters** as well as assist people in their recovery from disaster (Thompson et al., 2014).
- Presence of companion animals has been consistently linked with **failure to evacuate** in accordance with disaster warnings (Heath, Kass, Beck, & Glickman, 2001; Hunt, Bogue, & Rohrbaugh, 2012; Irvine, 2006 Westcott, 2015).

Animals, disasters and eco-social justice:

- Those with **poor support networks** are also disproportionately impacted by the loss of a companion animal in a disaster (Antonacopoulos & Pychyl, 2010; Lowe, Rhodes, Zwiebach & Chan, 2009; Zotarelli, 2010).
- Significant **costs of failing to plan** for the wellbeing of animals during disasters (Glassey, 2014).

Example 2:
Animals and family violence

71% of pet-owning women entering women's shelters reported their batterer had threatened, injured, or killed family pets for revenge or control.
- American Humane Association

One New Zealand study:
- Normalised violence/ psychological/emotional abuse
- Family violence-related animal cruelty was most commonly reported as a form of punishment – cruelty by proxy
- Jealousy – often a first indicator of violence – 'can't love anyone but me'
- Animal cruelty as a threat to maintain "good behaviour" or to stop woman leaving
- Collateral damage, or hurting animals to avoid police attention
- Animals as sexual objects

(Roguski, 2012)

http://washhumane.typepad.com/blog/2013/04/unspoken-abuse.html

Animals, domestic violence & eco-social justice

Systems and structures:

- The inability of survivors to bring their pets to residential shelter services (Collins et al., 2017)
- Delays in making and effecting safety plans (Collins et al., 2017; Roguski, 2012)
- Non-existent or un-operationalised practice agreements between human and animal agencies (Krienert et al., 2012)

Abusers of animals are five times as likely to harm humans.

http://washhumane.typepad.com/blog/2013/04/unspoken-abuse

Making social work education animal-inclusive
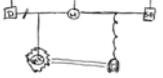
Raising the awareness of the needs of animals in disasters can be done by:

- **Re-framing the 'people in environment' perspective** taught as a standard systems/ecological theory base, to include animals, and to challenge students to take a deep ecology stance which could be termed 'environment including people', linking consideration of animals with sustainability and climate change debates.
- Addressing ecological **assessments** – e.g. the use of eco-maps and genograms that signify relationships and interconnectedness – and including the relationships with animals-as-pets.
- Using the teaching of **relevant theoretical perspectives** – such as attachment theory and current perspectives on resilience that include community – to highlight the importance of the human-animal bond and the implications for fields as diverse as interpersonal and family violence; loss and grief; social inclusion of groups such as the homeless, those with disabilities, etc).
- Using **disasters as a case study in community development**, and reinforcing the importance of **social inclusion**, connectedness and networks in the re-building and recovery of communities.
- Looking at family violence and disaster planning within **organisation and management courses** and auditing the existing plans of agencies to assess their levels of animal awareness.
- **Extending the definition of suitable practicum & research projects** to those involving animal rescue and shelters.

"When Ida came to class":
an example from educational practice

Adamson, C. E., & Darroch, J. P. (2016). When Ida Came To Class: The Inclusion Of Animals In The Social Work Curriculum. *Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education, 18*(2), 39-51.

- Two hour teaching session in a final year 'best practice' class
- Two theoretical perspectives ('redefining family')
- Two examples of animal-inclusive social work practice (disasters & domestic violence)
- Two agendas

Explicit agenda:
- to increase social work students' awareness of the inclusion of animals in practice
- To explore practice & policy imperatives (genograms, planning, identification of vulnerable populations)

Implicit agenda:
- To challenge the definition of family/ecological perspectives
- To raise issues about animal rights/human rights
- To explore issues of activism and the social work role

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Human rights are an accepted value of social work: where do we place *animal rights?*

- Attachment theory (for example) provides a platform for us to include animals in our practice – but it remains anthropocentric (we consider animals because our relationships with them influence our behaviour).
- Challenges from the broad deep ecology & environmental movements redefine our relationships with animals as **intrinsic, not instrumental** – this can fundamentally influence our practice in education & the field.

HUMAN FREEDOM ANIMAL RIGHTS ONE STRUGGLE ONE FIGHT

Key questions:
Do we accept animal rights on the same 'footing' as human rights?
Does social work's remit extend to farmed and undomesticated animals?
How do we attend to animal-inclusive practice, sustainability and climate change issues in education whilst practice is dominated by attempts to define social work in a neo-liberal agenda?

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