Animals as Agents to Inform the Intersection of Micro and Macro Practice

Maureen MacNamara

Abstract: Social work is my second career, but my childhood and first career experiences contributed to my realization of the ways in which the larger mezzo and macro systems can create barriers for individuals, making it difficult or even impossible for people to reach their full potential. This article explores how the existence of animals in human cultural, social, and emotional environments requires that all social workers develop a foundational understanding of the relevance of human-animal relationships to individual, family, and community well-being.

Keywords: animal-assisted interventions, human-animal relationships, macro practice, animal-assisted social work

Social work is my second career. My childhood and my first career experiences provided the bedrock in my understanding of the ways in which the larger mezzo and macro systems create barriers for individuals, such that it is difficult or even impossible for people to reach their full potential.

As a child with disabilities, I was prevented by school administrators from attending school and participating in school sports. Without input from my family or my physicians, school officials determined that participation would be "too difficult" for me. In more public areas such as the community swimming pool or the neighborhood playground, parents often pulled their children away, whispering, "Don't play with her, something is wrong with her." Even my church refused to allow me to attend catechism classes; the priest remarked that my presence could inspire the other children to question God's grace.

Although my family included me in every game and activity, no matter how rough and tumble, the clear message from others was that I was defective. In fact, "defective" was the label most often used to describe me. I had a heart defect, my heart was deformed, I had heart disease. At best I had a heart condition. This "condition" gave me a blue complexion, purple lips and clubbed fingers. Adults and children called me names, and the song "One-eyed, one horned, flying purple people eater" provided a lyrical chant to their harassment. (The creature's full description is "a one-eyed, one-horned, flying, purple people eater," the lyrics make it clear that this is a creature who eats purple people. Sheb Wooley (1958). Writer/s: S. WOOLEY; Publisher: DOTSON-WOOLEY ENTERTAINMENT; Lyrics licensed and provided by LyricFind.) As a result, I spent hours in self-imposed seclusion. I often locked myself in the bathroom and pinched my lips until they turned red, wondering what it would be like to be the right color. I could not understand why this color difference made people seem to hate or fear me.

My world was not, however, without friends, playmates, or confidants. Instead of people, I relied on animals for support, encouragement and understanding. The family pets—dogs, cats, and a

small pony—never excluded me. The dogs would happily sit by as I rested to regain my breath rather than leave me behind. Our family cat was a willing listener while I sobbed from the latest name-calling by neighborhood children. Instead of trying to make things better or dismissing my hurt feelings as foolish, her warm presence reassured me that I was loved, and her soft purr soothed hurt feelings. When I faced the fear and loneliness of frequent hospitalizations, my pony's halter, not a doll, gave me a sense of control and security.

For me, animals served as a great equalizer. With animals as partners I found that I was as capable as able-bodied children and even adults. Bike riding was an incredibly strenuous activity for me, but when I rode my pony I was able to keep up with other children as we rode for miles. Animal-related sports (i.e. horse jumping contests, dog coursing [racing] trials) showed me that I was capable, that I could be effective in my life. For example, horse shows gave me the opportunity to alter my self-perception as "disabled" and "not as good" to the "best" and "champion" as my horse and I won jumping contests.

Most importantly, animals provided me with access to community. When the neighborhood children learned that I had a pony they forgot about my differences, and they seemed to see me as a person. Of course they wanted to ride my pony, but I noticed that the conversation about the pony changed the way other children related to me. I noticed that gradually the conversation about the pony moved on to other topics. Over time friendships developed. The common interest in the pony bridged the divide between us.

I also began to question the difference between the behavior of people and the behavior of animals. This was a time when animals were considered to be mere automatons without feelings and possessing brains that responded mechanically to stimulation. However, I observed that animals cared for each other and even cared for members of other species. My dog licked my face when I cried. The cat often slept on the pony's back. I observed my dog and cat learning to play together. The cat sheathed her claws and the dog was careful in pouncing in their games of chase.

At the same time, the violence and determination of the civil rights movement was playing out on our television. I realized that discrimination based on an aspect of a person's physical appearance was occurring in a larger context than my own community. My world grew exponentially larger by watching the struggle of others and recognizing commonality with people I didn't know personally. I empathized with the anger and frustration I heard and witnessed on the television. I wondered why humans, who were supposed to be more "advanced" than animals, were so cruel to others because they looked different or had different customs.

These insights guided me in my first career as an equestrian coach. I worked with young riders who aspired to compete in the Olympics. I assisted competitors in developing their own skills and also in developing the skills of the horses they rode. To be competitive the young riders had to learn resiliency, patience, and communication. They had to bounce back and learn from defeat and to win with grace. I drew on my understanding of animal behavior and realized that the children were encountering developmental challenges similar to young animals with the

exception that the timeline for humans was more drawn out. Adolescent animals struggle to take on adult behaviors. For example, an adolescent kitten might work at catching a mouse but still runs back to its mother when frightened or hungry. Most of my riders were between the ages of 12-18, and I found that they too wanted to be independent and capable but needed reassurance and support when things went wrong.

During this time, I was also working with racehorses. At the time, the racehorse world was strictly men's purview. The world of the racetrack existed in an unspoken yet strictly enforced hierarchical arrangement; the high ranking, high paying role of trainer was reserved for white men, and the low ranking, low paying role of groom was reserved for men of color and women. I felt I could train horses as well as the men and couldn't understand why I was considered less capable just because I was a woman. However, this goal required me to, once again, negotiate systemic barriers to my participation. Rather than discrimination based on physical ability, now I faced discrimination based on gender.

Again, I reflected on my knowledge of animal systems. In herds the leader is the one deemed most capable. Large migratory herds of buffalo, elephants and others are led by older females that know where to find water and the best grazing areas. Males serve as guards to protect against other males or predators. With this knowledge, I persevered in my quest to become a licensed trainer by taking on horses rejected by male trainers as failures. Under my guidance many of those horses became winners. Finally, the men gave in and accepted my application for trainer. I became one of the first women licensed by the United States Trotting Association. This experience added to my understanding of feminism and gave me a new perspective of systemic oppression.

A turning point in my life came when I was offered a position as a high school vocational instructor for a horse science program. I imagined that the students in this program would be similar to the riders I coached. However, on the first day of the school year, a student threw a pitch fork at me when I asked him to clean up some hay. I soon realized that the school administration placed students in the program who were considered "bad actors." Today these students might be labeled "behaviorally and emotionally disordered" (EBD). The school administration reasoned that anyone could learn how to clean up after a horse.

After consulting with a friend who worked as a psychologist in a juvenile detention center, I placed students with the horse that most matched their behavioral profile. I reasoned that I could better coach them if the horse's response provided them with immediate feedback for their behavior. I matched the boy who threw the pitch fork at me with a particularly challenging colt. This colt had lots of energy and little self-control. He was hard to manage because he would snap and stomp when people worked around him. This adolescent horse resembled the adolescent boy, Jim (not his real name), as both challenged authority and were most likely to resist direction rather than follow it.

I monitored the interactions between Jim and the colt as the boy strove to teach the horse how to pull the race cart and cooperate with bathing and foot care. One day Jim was struggling to trim the horse's mane. Every time the boy reached toward the horse's head, the horse would shake his

head and rear up. As Jim became more frustrated he began to handle the colt roughly, jerking on the halter and shaking his fist. Rather than let them hurt each other, I offered to help. Jim glared down at me from his 6-foot-tall frame and said, "You think you can do this, you're too short." I agreed that I was short, but I bet him I could get the horse to put his head down. The boy laughed and handed me the clippers. With gentleness and soft reassuring words I enticed the horse to lower his head and I quickly trimmed his mane. The boy was astonished but wanted to recover his pride. "Well," he blurted, "that's a girlie way to do it." I smiled and explained that not everything needed to be a battle. I told him that if he wanted this horse to go fast on the track, then he had to get the horse to work with him, not against him.

Over the course of the next few months, I intervened in much the same way whenever Jim was beginning to respond to the colt's adolescent behavior with rough handling and anger. Each time the colt resisted direction, I modeled for Jim methods to encourage the horse to cooperate. At first Jim resisted direction, telling me those methods were "girlie" and too "kissy-face." However, Jim observed that the colt responded to clear direction and consistent handling. Jim noticed the difference and began little by little to alter the way he handled the colt. The interactions between the two became quiet and predictable. One day, after a particularly successful training session, Jim remarked that he realized that if he wanted to be a trainer, he had to get the horses to work with him and hitting them didn't work. I agreed and suggested people might respond the same way. Jim said he thought that might be true.

This young man went on to become a real leader in the class. Gradually, Jim dropped his machismo posturing and replaced it with leadership and self-discipline. He opened up to learning and helped classmates learn as well. The results of this change in focus and attitude were immediately apparent. The horse he battled with settled down and became, under his training, a first-rate race horse, and classmates who previously avoided Jim now came to him for help. It amazed me to see the changes in the students. I discovered that these adolescents who were expected to fail seemed to blossom by carefully matching horses and youth and scrupulously observing and guiding the interactions between them.

Given my personal experiences of pets as sources of significant social support I was intrigued with the link between people and their animals. As I was considering how I could best bring people and animals together, I learned of a group exploring "the human/animal bond." I attended a conference hosted by the group and met, to my surprise, academics, veterinarians and human service providers interested in the very same phenomenon. I was inspired by meeting the leader of the group, Leo Bustad, DVM. Leo listened with delight as I told him of the horse program and my experience working with challenging youth. He noted that I had extensive animal experience and suggested my next step should be to gain just as much knowledge and skill in human behavior.

I explored graduate programs in education and psychology, but my experience being labeled as defective made me uncomfortable with the psychological perspective that labeled behavior as pathology. The stories I heard from the youth in the horse program were full of loss, family, violence and neglect. I had trouble thinking of their behavior as pathological rather than as misplaced survival behavior. Through working with animals I was aware that survival is the

central concern. Animals arrange themselves in a variety of groups to ensure their survival. Taken out of context, many behaviors that are important to group success look maladaptive. For example, horses are adapted to stay with their herd (group). However, a rider may want to take a horse on a ride alone. The horse may try running back to be with its group. While this is an important survival behavior for the horse, it is considered bad behavior by riders and the horse may be labeled as a "problem."

Quite by accident I stumbled on the field of social work. I was delighted to read of social work's theoretical emphasis on person-in-environment. I was also taken with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) perspective on human ecology and systems theory. I was further delighted to discover the macro practice concentration offered by Columbia University. Given my personal experiences, I felt I could make a greater impact by working to change systemic barriers. Organizational and community theories were a good fit with my understanding and experience of animal community systems. Herds, packs and flocks are devised of different leadership structures and internal mechanisms, but all are organized to provide the group with food and security.

In one of my first jobs as a social worker I served as the executive director of a sexual assault crisis center. Agency clinicians confirmed that my understanding of traumatized animals could be applied to traumatized people. Reestablishing trust and encouraging new behaviors were primary goals for both. The work of the agency suddenly became front page news when a particularly high profile child sexual assault occurred. The perpetrator, a recent parolee on another assault charge, had assaulted and maimed a young boy. As it turned out, the perpetrator also had a history of animal abuse, and I was familiar with the nascent research supporting a link between animal cruelty and interpersonal violence (Ascione, 1999). I contacted the researchers involved in this area of investigation and invited them to participate in a community training for human service workers and animal control staff to develop a method for cross reporting abuse. The researchers were happy to participate in one of the first cross trainings for human and animal welfare workers on the link between human violence and animal cruelty.

In the meantime, Leo Bustad and others I met at that small gathering about the human/animal bond had formed the Delta Society, a non-profit organization dedicated to exploring the role of pets in human lives. During the years that I attended graduate school and worked in those first positions as a social worker, Delta Society had grown and was poised to launch a national initiative to support research and program development in improving individual lives through contact with animal companions.

I was able to bring together my education in animal behavior and learning with my education in macro practice social work as vice president of programs for Delta Society. The macro practice aspects included advising and facilitating the work of multi-disciplinary teams such as the American Humane Association Task Force on Violence, the Bar of the City of New York regarding service animals and the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the New York State Public Health Commission regarding regulations for pet animals in long-term care facilities. Work with these complex systems caused me to reflect more about the similarities between animal systems and human systems. Some of the community groups I worked with resembled a flock in which members shared leadership to accomplish a specific task and then disbanded.

Other groups were more similar to packs with strict hierarchical structures and a need for clear role definition. I believe understanding these parallels helped me become an effective and flexible facilitator.

I am most proud of my work on a nation-wide needs assessment to determine how to best introduce human service professionals to the impact of companion animals on human health and well-being. From the needs assessment, I created the Pet Partners program which became a model for animal-assisted intervention programs throughout the U. S. The one hundred plus professionals who collaborated on this project developed the terms "animal-assisted therapy" and "animal-assisted activities." The program changed the way we think about animals and people.

My position with Delta Society allowed me to consult with clinicians to discover the best way to create goal directed animal-assisted interventions. For example, I was contacted by an agency serving children with anxiety disorders. Still in its infancy, the program brought school children with a variety of social-emotional issues out to a small farm with the goal of helping children learn social skills. One child, Rudy (not his real name), was the source of a great deal of staff concern. Rudy was an eight-year-old boy, the youngest of three siblings. He lived with his mother and brothers, but no father was present in the home. Rudy was failing in school work, had no friends, and was often the target of bullies. The staff were afraid to include Rudy in the horse program as he refused to listen to directions and had to be physically restrained from chasing the horses. I assisted the clinicians in identifying clear goals for Rudy's involvement at the farm. Thus the goals for Rudy were the development of self-control and increased positive interactions with peers.

I reasoned that Rudy's unpredictable behavior presented a risk for working around horses, but pairing him with a highly tolerant older horse would not provide the kind of feedback that would encourage him to change his behavior. Rudy needed to be matched with animals that could provide him with immediate feedback without the danger of hurting him if they became frightened and ran away. Based on this analysis and my knowledge of animal behavior, I brought a small flock of Icelandic sheep to the farm for Rudy's next visit. Icelandic sheep offered a number of advantages for work with Rudy. First, they were small. Adult Icelandic sheep weigh about 100 to 200 pounds as compared to the 400 to 500 pounds for many other breeds of sheep. If Rudy scared these small sheep, he was less likely to get hurt. Furthermore, the sheep I selected were very friendly if approached slowly and quietly. Second, Icelandic sheep have a variety of wool colors including black, white, brown, grey and spotted. This would help Rudy recognize individuals so the staff could direct him towards a specific animal.

When Rudy arrived at the farm, he was given the task of feeding "Lucy" her favorite food. Despite directions to approach the small brown sheep slowly, Rudy took off chasing the sheep with the bucket of feed. After twenty minutes of running back and forth across the sheep pen, Rudy was breathless. I asked him if he would like some help. Frustrated and tired, Rudy accepted my help. I encouraged Rudy to sit in the straw with me and set the bucket down in front of us. All the running had made Lucy hungry and she immediately approached the bucket. Of course Rudy jumped up to pet her and Lucy dashed away. After several more attempts, Rudy

was able to control himself long enough for Lucy to eat some of the feed.

Over the next weeks the staff built on Rudy's success, helping him gain more patience and understanding of others' needs. The staff used the interaction between Rudy and the sheep to help him see how his behavior influenced others. In addition, working with the sheep provided Rudy with opportunities to experiment with new ways of behaving. And just as my pony had become a topic to draw children to me, Rudy's work with the sheep became a focal point from which he was able to make friends with other children at the farm and eventually at school.

I have spent over twenty years pioneering the inclusion of animals in social work practice. However, I find that the social work profession rarely acknowledges the countless places where human and animal needs, experiences, and rights intersect. According to Risley-Curtiss (2010), only seven of 230 schools of social work in the United States include human-animal relationship (HAR) content in curricula, marking an absence of animals in foundational training for professional social workers. The existence of animals in human cultural, social, and emotional environments requires that all social workers develop a foundational understanding of the relevance of human-animal relationships to individual, family, and community well-being. Animals, and the shifting values regarding the place and consequence of animals in rapidly changing client populations, are steadfastly embedded in all levels of our communities. Given ongoing calls for culturally competent practice, fully integrating human relationships with animals into micro, mezzo, and macro level social work practice is not only timely, but critical (Moga and MacNamara, 2014).

Animals can be a key to bridging the divide between micro and macro practice. Consider the trend in which domestic violence prevention agencies are establishing partnerships with animal welfare organizations to provide outreach, community education, and policy development to address the link between animal abuse and family violence (Ascione, 2005). In the United States, there are numerous collaborations between social services and animal welfare agencies to provide safe haven for the pets of domestic violence victims. Additionally, efforts to develop cross-reporting protocols where human issues and animal issues intersect are growing (Long, Long & KulKarni, 2007).

Social workers in all levels of practice should advocate for informed policy regarding animal welfare and care, particularly because animal welfare is linked to individual, community, and public health. In times of natural- and human-made disaster, the lack of integration between micro level needs and macro level policies becomes more crucial as people are often forced to choose between their own health/safety and the health/safety of their animal companions. The costs of this gap in terms of mental and public health are well documented and include evacuation failure in times of disaster (Brackenridge, Zottarelli, Rider, & Carlsen-Landy, 2012; Heath, Kass, Beck, & Glickman, 2001) and an increased risk of post-traumatic stress disorder among disaster survivors who are forced to leave animals behind (Hunt, Al-Awadi & Johnson, 2008).

The rapid proliferation of animal-assisted interventions in mental health programs is an additional area of concern. These interventions appear to be driven by the ardent faith of

practitioners and supporters who believe that these interventions work even in the absence of consistent efficacy data. Researchers and clinicians sometimes accentuate the positive by discussing the beliefs of subjects based on anecdotes, despite empirical evidence that the animal-assisted interventions had no measurable beneficial effect. For example, in a study on the impact of pets on individuals with chronic fatigue syndrome, Wells (2009) emphasized that subjects felt that their pets improved their health even though three quantitative measures found no evidence of any impact of pets on physical symptoms or psychological health of their owners.

It is my impression that practitioners who are interested in animal-assisted interventions use such reports to reinforce their beliefs about the value of animal-assisted interventions. However, more skeptical audiences, such as administrators of budgets who might fund animal-assisted interventions or research, require a higher standard to begin to endorse the use of nontraditional therapies. Moreover, it is important to be cognizant of the fact that socialization and culture play an important role in determining the efficacy of any intervention. Not all people have warm associations with animals, and may indeed find their presence to be stress inducing. It should not be expected or implied that including animals will be appropriate or beneficial for all individuals.

While anecdotal accounts, such as those described above, are intriguing, it is quite another matter to raise the empirical question of whether animal-assisted interventions can ameliorate social, emotional, behavioral adjustment problems and diagnosable psychiatric disorders (e.g., anxiety, depression, conduct disorders). As many investigators have pointed out, evidence for the efficacy of animal-assisted interventions still does not rest on a firm empirical foundation (see Kazdin, 2011). Notably, in a meta-analysis of animal-assisted interventions, Nimer and Lundahl (2007) concluded that animal-assisted interventions showed promise as an additive to established interventions and suggested that future research investigate the conditions under which animal-assisted interventions could be most helpful. The authors did, however, concede that although the quality of studies in this area has improved, providers including animals in clinical settings should consider the possibility that poor research is not necessarily preferable to no research.

Finally, fully understanding of the role of animals in people's lives requires more than personal experience as a pet owner. Still, the vast majority of practitioners who choose to integrate animals in practice depend upon informal mechanisms of knowledge distribution (networking amongst peers and personal relationships with animals)—not graduate or post-graduate training—to inform their clinical reasoning and practice methods (Risley-Curtiss, Rogge & Kawam, 2013). Of concern is the trend for organizations, communities, and even local governments to offer—and sometimes mandate—these programs despite the lack of specific program goals, outcome expectations, and coherent practice methods (MacNamara & Butler, 2010). Formal training in the many ways animals inhabit social, emotional, physical and spiritual worlds is necessary to combating reductionism and completely serving the individuals and communities in which social workers practice (Moga & MacNamara, 2014).

It is incumbent upon social workers, particularly with our discipline's focus on systems thinking and evidence based practice, to propel change in the form of the implementation of

evidence-based social work practice inclusive of human-animal relationships. For social workers to consistently acknowledge and respond to system challenges that include animals as a central rather than peripheral component of the human social landscape, the discourse among social workers must move beyond that of pets and animal assisted therapies. While both are potentially important and useful, this narrow focus leaves out those for whom animals are not companions, but sources of basic life support, economic health, professional partnership, and social exchange. Of critical importance is the acknowledgment that supporting the human-animal relationship requires attention to the many resources (including social, physical, and financial) required to support these relationships in healthy, life-long ways.

As people become more isolated, less trustful of diversity, and as they live longer, it is vital that social workers at all levels of practice attend to the ways human/animal relationships serve as either a door, or a barrier, to the provision of basic services. Most important, however, is the premise that expanding the human social landscape to include animals is an ethical, practical, and just approach to improving the services we offer. When viewed from this perspective, access to animals and the natural environment becomes an issue of social justice (Moga & MacNamara, 2014).

References

Ascione, F. (1999). The abuse of animals and human interpersonal violence: Making the connection. In F. R. Ascione & P. Arkow (Eds.), *Child abuse, domestic violence, and animal abuse: Linking the circles of compassion for prevention and intervention*. (pp.50-61). West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press.

Ascione, F. (2005). *Children & Animals - Exploring the Roots of Kindness & Cruelty*. Indianapolis, IN: Purdue University Press.

Brackenridge, S., Zottarelli, L., Rider, E., and Carlsen-Landy, B. (2012). Dimensions of the human-animal bond and evacuation decisions among pet owners during hurricane Ike. *Anthrozoös, 25*(2), 229-238.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979) *The ecology of human development. Experiments by nature and design*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA.

Heath, S., Kass, P., Beck, A., & Glickman, L. (2001). Human and pet-related risk factors for household evacuation failure during a natural disaster. *American Journal of Epidemiology, 153*(7), 659-665.

Hunt, M., Al-Awadi, H., & Johnson, M. (2008). Psychological sequelae of pet loss following hurricane Katrina. *Anthrozoös, 21*(2), 109-121.

Kazdin, A.E. (2011). Establishing the effectiveness of animal-assisted therapies: Methodological standards, issues, and strategies. In P. McCardle, S. McCune, J.A. Griffin, & V. Maholmes (Eds.). *How animals affect us: Examining the influence of human-animal interaction on child*

development and human health. (pp. 35-51). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Long, D., Long, J., & KulKarni, S. (2007). Interpersonal violence and animals: Mandated cross-sector reporting. *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare. 34*(3). 147-64.

MacNamara, M. & Butler, K. A., (2010). Methods, standards, guidelines, and considerations in selecting animals for animal-assisted therapy, In A. H. Fine, (Ed.), *Handbook on animal-assisted therapy: Theoretical foundations and guidelines for practice*. 2nd ed. (pp. 111-134) San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

Moga, J., and MacNamara, M., (2014) The place and consequence of animals in contemporary social work practice. In T. Ryan (Ed.) *Animals in social work*. Hampshire, UK, Palgrave Macmillan.

Nimer, J., & Lundahl, B. (2007). Animal-assisted therapy: a meta-analysis. *Anthrozoös, 20*(3), 225-238.

Risley-Curtiss, C. (2010). Social work practitioners and the human-companion animal bond: A national study. *Social Work, 55*(1), 38-46.

Risley-Curtiss, C., Rogge, M., & Kawam, E. (2013). Factors affecting social workers' inclusion of animals in practice. *Social Work, 58*(2), 153-161.

Wells, D. L. (2009). Associations between pet ownership and self-reported health status in people suffering from chronic fatigue syndrome. *The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine, 15*(4), 407-413.

About the Author: Maureen MacNamara, Ph.D. is Assistant Professor, Department of Social Work, Appalachian State University (macnamarama@appstate.edu).