

When the Professor Becomes a Student: Reflecting on the Importance of the Relationship Between Social Work, One Health, and Humane Education

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Abstract: Social work is a field containing theories, such as cognitive behavioral theory, that include the environment when thinking about people in society. However, in practice and teaching, sometimes the environment gets taken out of the equation as social workers fail to consider the physical environment when addressing patterns of behavior. This paper describes the journey of a social work professor who entered a graduate program in humane studies in order to make her practice and teaching more inclusive of the environment and other living things. It also includes narrative from an MSW student who learned about the paradigms of One Health and humane education through the social work professor. Through a mix of explaining these paradigms and our lived experiences, this paper encourages others to think more about the importance of the interconnectedness of humans, living things, and the environment in their helping profession.

Keywords: One Health, humane education, person in environment

This paper was developed as a result of a social worker with a PhD entering the world of academia and quickly realizing that social work theories and practices were not enough to make the changes needed in society. It is my (Ashley's) hope that this paper will get others to be more contemplative in their understanding of the meaning of social work to be the most impactful they can be in society. It took me many years of practice to realize what I was missing in my interactions with others. I always spoke about the importance of the environment and thinking about reciprocal relationships with other living things but did not quite understand how to incorporate that into my life. This paper discusses my journey, briefly explains the paradigms of One Health and humane education, and includes narratives of changes in my work, as well as narrative from an MSW student on including these paradigms in her own work, as she will soon enter the world of social work more fully.

Growing up, I loved exploring nature and thinking about how humans interacted with one another and other creatures. In grade school, I connected to other students by showing off my cat and asking others if they had any pets. One of my teachers noticed this and made sharing about pets a part of class. I would also take friends on walks with me and take notice of how many other types of living creatures we saw.

As a result of the strong connection I felt with animals, I dreamed of having a job in the future where I could work with them. As the years went on, I changed my dream from "veterinarian" to "therapist" because I knew I wanted to make an impact on society, but didn't think I had the strength to work with sick animals or see their owners' sadness over their state of health. In 2010, I gained my MSW degree and began work as a clinical research assistant with veterans who struggled with symptoms of posttraumatic stress (PTS). (As a note, I want to point out that I

don't like to include "disorder" when I write about what others consider PTSD. From the many individuals I have worked with who experienced trauma, it has become apparent that their "disorder" is a natural reaction to enduring situations the majority of humans are lucky to never have to experience.)

I chose to work in research because I felt like I could see the impact of my work on an individual level, but research could also change things for veterans on a larger level. Somehow, I still felt like I could do more. A life-changing event happened when I started working with veterans in a college setting. One of the student veterans had a service dog for their PTS, and not only did I hear their stories of how the dog made them feel like they could finally breathe and live again, but the dog's presence helped create a sense of comfort among other veterans on campus and helped them create social connections with one another.

I had also just recently moved to San Francisco at that point, and I was experiencing adjustment concerns. I finally adopted a dog, and it changed my world. I went from never wanting to go for hikes and being afraid of new experiences to fully embracing life and spending way too much money at REI. Knowing this personally in conjunction with the student veteran and fellow students' reports made me realize that maybe I *could* work with animals in my career. It was then that I decided to get my PhD in order to research the human-animal bond.

In 2015, after I finished my PhD courses, I was lucky to gain employment working as the clinical research coordinator of a VA PTSD dog study in order to gain further understanding of the benefits of human-animal interactions. Previous research findings on the positive relationships between animals and humans have indicated they are useful in improving physical and mental health. In general, positive interactions with animals can reduce stress by releasing oxytocin, a hormone in the body that naturally reduces stress; also, chemicals that stabilize mood and help with happiness, like serotonin and dopamine, can increase (Beetz et al., 2012). Interactions with animals can also lead to relaxed muscle tension, a decrease in blood pressure, and more regulated breathing (Beetz et al., 2012). However, in the majority of studies, the well-being of the animals is not examined.

During my job as the VA PTSD dog study coordinator, I had conversations with other researchers who were interested in the human-animal bond and realized that there seemed to be a struggle between researchers in the field who wanted to study the impact of animals on the well-being of humans, and those who felt that animals should not be seen as instruments to help with well-being. The study employed clinicians to ensure the safety of the veterans in the study and dog trainers to ensure the dogs were not being impacted negatively. I felt there should not be a divide between the different types of professions: Why can't we all ensure well-being for both the humans and the animals in the study? Luckily, this is what happened with my team members, and we discussed how to ensure the welfare of animals in research and mental health.

Upon finishing that study, I knew it was going to be my turn to create research to study the human-animal bond, but I wanted to make sure I knew enough about the welfare of animals in order to bring this care of both sides into my work. So, I decided to get a second master's degree in humane studies online through Madonna University. I started the program in 2019 and have

one semester left as I type this. Humane studies was developed as a concept in the late 1800s (Unti & DeRosa, 2003) but has recently gained traction through the work of Zoey Weill, who created a Humane Education Certificate Program in 1997 (Institute for Humane Education, n.d.). The mission of the Center for Humane Studies at Madonna University is to contribute to the development of the cutting-edge field of humane studies linking social justice, environmental conservation, and animal protection. The two courses I took that really started to help me use this education in my work were Do Animals Matter, and Humane Studies. I had previously considered the importance of the welfare of animals in research by exploring the paradigm of One Health, a model applicable to studying the human-animal bond.

One Health is an approach to health created by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that recognizes the connection between the health of humans, animals, and the environment in allowing for the spread of disease and other health-related concerns (CDC, 2018). The paradigm of One Health encourages humans to think about prevention of the spread of disease and promotion of the well-being of society as a whole in a different light, in that the sole focus of health cannot only be on humans, animals, or the environment. Instead, exploration of these three factors' interaction and connection must be performed so that promotion of lasting change can occur on both the micro and macro level, as the CDC (2018) explains. The One Health paradigm, the organization says, can be linked back to research completed as early as 1821, when Rudolf Virchow established a link between human and veterinary medicine while studying infectious diseases. Since that time, the domain has been expanded upon and was ultimately adopted by resolution in 2007 by the American Medical Association as a means of promoting increased collaboration between the human and veterinary communities (CDC, 2018).

Humane Studies Program

In my humane studies program, I have been given the opportunity to gain an education so that I can think more about human-animal interactions and the connection between social work and humane studies in social justice. I was also lucky to gain the opportunity of an internship in humane education, which was a paradigm I had not quite been familiar with before. The Humane Education Coalition (n.d.) offers that humane education is a teaching methodology that encourages learners to develop sensitivity and appreciation for all living things. Encompassed within this framework is the idea that human rights, the preservation of the environment, and animal protection are all interrelated, and that in order to adequately address one of these concerns, we must acknowledge them all (Institute for Humane Education, n.d.). Initially, I was hesitant to take on an internship as I had also recently accepted a job as an assistant professor at a university and felt like these dual roles were a contradiction. However, this experience led to me thinking about my work in an entirely new way.

The Connection Between Social Work, Humane Education, and One Health

While I had previously recognized the importance of the connection between humans, other species, and the environment through the paradigm of One Health, being immersed in the world of humane education took my interest even further as I thought about these paradigms and the connection to social justice. While the connection between these areas started in week one, I was

unaware that this was actually something that others in social work had thought about. However, during the creation of an annotated bibliography for my internship, I discovered an article by Bretzlaff-Holstein (2018), in which the author explored the similarities between social work and humane education. Bretzlaff-Holstein linked the fields together, as they are both based on the concepts of social justice and equity. In addition, both social work and humane education support solution-focused, interdisciplinary interventions that aim to address both micro- and macro-level factors that impact societal issues. The Humane Education Coalition (n.d.) states that the mission of this paradigm is to collaborate, educate, empower, and inspire. This is in line with the National Association of Social Workers (2017) Code of Ethics, which lists empowering the oppressed and promoting responsiveness of social institutions as part of its mission.

However, Bretzlaff-Holstein (2018) also wrote that social work has historically failed to include the natural environment and other species in the person-in-environment framework, which is a large focus of humane education, and that social work should attempt to also include this. This can be seen when looking at different theories utilized in social work. One example is cognitive behavioral theory, which promotes looking at learned patterns of behavior that have developed in response to life events (González-Prendes & Brisebois, 2012). In this theory, the life events are considered to be the environment in which the person is viewed. However, this often fails to take into consideration one's actual physical environment or interactions with other species. As such, it stands to be further developed. Through a literature review, the importance of the connection between One Health, social work, and humane education became even more complete.

Existing Literature

The spreading of diseases addressed through One Health and the humane treatment of animals in humane education are both concerns that impact the well-being of humans, making them valid focuses for social work. An example of this is interpersonal violence. While social workers utilizing the person-in-environment theory examine many different factors that impact the experience of interpersonal violence, they often fail to look at the natural environment or the impact on and of animals. Ross (1996) proposes that there is a connection between the mistreatment of animals and humans. Ross suggests that the mistreatment of animals can be an indicator that interpersonal violence is occurring between the individuals involved. Faver (2010) also discusses this connection, looking at the relationship between witnessing or experiencing violence and perpetrating violence on animals.

Faver (2010) also discusses the development from abusing animals to abusing humans. Research has indicated that animal abuse may be an indication of abuse of humans to come, and individuals in the justice system who have committed more violent crimes are more likely to have a history of abusing animals (Overton et al., 2012). The mistreatment of animals can also include lack of adequate health care, which is why it is so important to also factor in the ideas of One Health. An animal that is mistreated and poorly cared for can also act to spread disease, which will further impact the humans that interact with it. As such, I argue that the social work person-in-environment approach must be expanded to include the theories of both One Health and humane education in order to address the situation of interpersonal violence.

This concept of interpersonal violence is just one example of the ways in which One Health and humane education can relate to social work, but the implications extend far beyond this example. Currently One Health, humane education, and social work utilize comprehensive approaches to view interactions between animals, humans, and the environment. However, they often focus on separate topics and influencing factors, with One Health focusing primarily on environmental health and the spread of disease, humane education on building empathy through human-animal interactions, and social work on individuals.

Research on the connection between humans, animals, and the environment is limited, but growing. A recent publication by Rambaree et al. (2019) supports the need to increase connections between social work and one's physical environment by proposing the expansion of social work to include a greater focus on ecosocial work. Ecosocial work recognizes the interconnectedness of all lives in our ecosystem and provides a holistic framework with which to promote sustainable development (Rambaree et al., 2019). The inclusion of ecosocial work within the larger field of social work is therefore expected to contribute to a healthier physical environment, which aligns with the goals of One Health (CDC, 2018).

Boddy et al. (2018) make a similar argument, suggesting that the environment needs to become a central focus of social work theory, ethics, and practice. However, neither of these publications makes a strong connection between ecosocial work and animals, suggesting the need for additional work to eliminate the remaining disconnect between humans, animals, and the environment. It is therefore proposed that social work must expand to take into consideration the paradigms of humane education and One Health in order to make sustainable, micro- and macro-level changes that positively impact our society.

Including an MSW Student in the Conversation

The more I learned, the more I thought it was important to start teaching my own social work students about One Health and humane education. I started by including a student I was working with on a potential service dog study in discussions around the connection between social work, One Health, and humane education. Being new to Alaska, I was lucky to find a student there who was both knowledgeable about service dogs and experienced in working in animal shelters.

As we studied service dog organizations and therapy dog resources, I realized that we were learning from one another. I brought up my MS program to her and started to explain what humane education was. Seeing her interest in the discussion was what led to the development of the concept of this paper. I asked her if she was interested in being included in it and explained that I thought it was important to share both a student and a professor's views in order to reach a broader audience for this topic. She immediately agreed and we got to work.

An MSW Student's View

After graduating with an undergraduate degree in psychology, I (Amber) accepted a position in Western Alaska working at a domestic violence shelter. I took this job in order to gain real-world experience and a little adventure before pursuing a PhD in psychology. However, the

real-world experience ended up teaching me that I was much more interested in the field of social work than I ever was in psychology.

Social work seemed to capture a more authentic version of individuals' lived experiences than psychology did. My experience of working in the shelter and seeing the complex needs of the women who came through our doors taught me that simply diagnosing and treating that diagnosis was not effective. Rather, the person-in-environment (PIE) view promoted in social work seemed more effective for our clients, as it took into account the many factors that could be impacting an individual's mental health.

As I have begun to study social work more closely through a master's program, I have come to think that even the seemingly all-encompassing PIE perspective is lacking in scope. While PIE involves examining how individuals interact with and are impacted by their environments in order to gain a better understanding of their situation and mental health, I would argue that the current PIE view could stand to be expanded. As such, I propose that the next logical step in the development of social work is to expand the concept of PIE to include a greater focus on factors that are addressed through other fields, such as One Health and its connection with humane education.

Theoretically, the PIE view includes one's physical environment, however, the emphasis is on interactions with systems and people in one's environment more so than the physical environment itself. One Health suggests that one's physical environment impacts an individual's health and, as such, one's physical environment is of extreme importance. Climate change and changes in land use are cited by One Health to be examples of important environmental factors that contribute to the health of both humans and animals, yet they are not typically focused on in social work.

The domestic shelter where I worked provides an example of the need to blend environmental factors into social work. Staff members were routinely working with women to help get them into safe, long-term housing, which often included living with relatives back in their home villages. When discussing these options with clients, we performed safety screenings as it related to the other individuals in the home—are the other occupants safe and supportive, does the client feel comfortable in that home, etc.? The World Health Organization (n.d.) lists access to safe water as one of the most effective mechanisms for ensuring health, yet we didn't always screen for factors impacting the physical aspects of the living environments, like if the house had running water and if the sewer system was functioning.

We frequently met with women who had homes they could move into where they would not be at risk of physical harm, but where the environment was not conducive to healthy living due to a lack of clean water or a heating system. Furthermore, several clients could not return to their home communities at all because their homes were being destroyed due to the erosion caused by climate change. Not only does this impact whether a woman is able to leave shelter, it also impacts her mental health and well-being. Failing to address these factors thus prevents social workers from gaining insight into a client's full story and, as such, limits one's ability to provide meaningful assistance.

Creating a Fuller Field of Social Work

In order to fully blend One Health with social work, I (Ashley) feel it is necessary to not only examine the ways in which humans and animals interact with the environment, but also how humans and animals interact with each other. The interactions between humans and animals can tell us a lot about a person's situation. Humane education is a relatively new field of study that attempts to view the ways in which we can nurture compassion and respect for all living beings by drawing attention to the positive impacts derived from interactions between humans and animals (Humane Education Coalition, n.d.).

Ross (1996) wrote of an Indigenous belief that one could learn about the health of a community by looking at their dogs. Ross described how abuse often gets passed down from stronger to weaker, until ultimately the only remaining being to be harmed is the dog. In Western Alaska, a common criticism from outsiders is that people take poor care of their dogs in this region. While I believe this issue to be fairly complex, an argument can certainly be made for Ross' theory of power and abuse being at play. Working on the inverse of this theory, if we can foster a sense of connection, care, and respect between people and their dogs through humane education, these feelings could in turn promote the same sense of connection, care, and respect between humans.

This is supported by a study by Faver (2010) that looks at how humane education can foster empathy and prevent violence in humane education students. Furthermore, Bretzlaff-Holstein (2018) discusses how humane education can lead to improvements in human rights, environmental preservation, and animal welfare and proposes that humane education should be considered an important aspect of social work. This also pairs well with One Health, which attempts to promote the overall health of people, animals, and the environment (CDC, 2018), falling in line with the missions of both humane education and social work. As such, it seems that connecting humane education, One Health, and the current PIE perspectives in social work will lead to a more complete and holistic approach to care.

In order to fully integrate humane education and One Health into the field of social work it is imperative that social work education begins to place a greater focus on the physical environment. Further collaboration between the fields is also needed. One Health notes the importance of collaborating with other professions to address the animal-human-environment interface, which opens the door for a partnership between One Health, humane education, and social work (CDC, 2018). This would provide an opportunity to address many aspects of wellness previously discussed while also leaving opportunity for including additional development, such as how the spread of disease impacts the overall well-being of humans, animals, and the environment.

We can use the information from this paper to improve social work education. I was lucky to be able to develop and teach a BSW/MSW human-animal interactions course this summer. As I was creating the course, I realized I could have been creating three courses. While other professors and students at first thought the class was going to be all about mental health dogs, I knew I was going to include information about One Health and humane education as a quarter of the course's content. I was pleased that some of the students wrote that they learned more than

anticipated in the class and were going to be able to apply content from it more often in practice due to its inclusion in the course map. Please email me at my correspondence if you would like to see the syllabus and content for that class.

Conclusion

Engaging in a master's degree program in humane studies has been more educational and useful than imagined. I knew I was missing something in my work, and I feel that considering the interconnectedness of humane education, One Health, and social work was that missing piece. Being able to share the utility and excitement about thinking more humanely in social work practice with my student was an unexpected positive as well. I am lucky that my dual role as an educator and student broadened my views so that I can continue to incorporate these areas in all aspects of my career. I hope to continue this conversation with others in all fields so that we can truly work together for the sake of society and living creatures.

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