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PROMOTING POSITIVE HUMAN-ANIMAL INTERACTION: THE ROLE OF THE SOCIAL WORKER IN THE MULTIDISCIPLINARY TEAM

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ABSTRACT

Social Work is identified as one of 23 disciplines involved in the study field of human-animal interaction. The therapeutic and developmental value of positive interaction with companion animals has been extensively researched since the early eighties. Social Work focuses on, among other things, the bond between people and their environment. More than half of all families have one or more companion animals, which makes animals an important part of the environment. Social Work also strives to improve the quality of life of the community. Companion animals can fulfil different needs for different target groups and are therefore important role players in the pursuit of a better quality of life for individuals, groups and communities. The role of the social worker in the multidisciplinary team can be divided into five main areas: the aim of social work intervention, the roles of the social worker, target groups in Social Work, the needs of people, and approaches towards rendering aid. Recommendations are made by which the social worker can promote positive human-animal interaction through multidisciplinary co-operation.

INTRODUCTION

The main focus of the social worker is on helping people to improve their social functioning and quality of life through their ability to interact and relate to others in a positive way. Human problems can, however, not be seen in isolation and therefore need to be addressed through multidisciplinary intervention. Hoffman and Sallee (1994:329) are of the opinion that no other profession relies so much on the integration of the social, behavioural, and biological sciences, and that Social Work builds its practice on the complexities of interdisciplinary study. A unique characteristic of human-animal interaction as a field of study is the combination of human sciences and natural sciences. This combination not only offers opportunities, but sets specific challenges for multidisciplinary co-operation.

Social Work focuses on the interaction between people and their environment. The bond between the person and relevant others is thus one of the reasons for the involvement of the social worker in human-animal interaction (Sable, 1995:338). The bond between people and companion animals might be so obvious in our day-to-day lives that we hardly spare this phenomenon a second thought (Mithen, 1999:195). The ability of companion animals to be consistent in their approach towards humans, give their undivided attention, are able to maintain confidentiality, are always available, and under normal circumstances not pose a threat to physical contact, might even give them an advantage over the human therapist (Stewart, 1996:7-11). Odendaal (1988:98) identified some corresponding characteristics of social workers and companion animals in that both stimulate communication, can intervene as mediator, improve human dignity, enhance responsibility, alleviate loneliness, offer physical assistance and provide an opportunity for catharsis.

Social Work strives to improve the quality of life of the community at large (Potgieter, 1998:9). Quality of life involves much more than the quality of interpersonal relations and includes physical conditions like energy, vitality, health and relaxation, life satisfaction, spiritual and

emotional well-being, social interaction, cognition, financial security and successful role fulfilment (Wilson, 1994:8; Potgieter, 1998:240-241; Wilson, 1998:xiv). The extent to which companion animals can contribute to the quality of life of specific target groups will be largely linked to individual perceptions. Netting, Wilson and New (1987:63) are of the opinion that the social work professional is often searching for ways to improve the quality of life of persons who have overwhelming obstacles to overcome. To those clients who could benefit from an animal companion, a social worker may be able to facilitate a new relationship, or support a long-established relationship, by being sensitive to what is occurring in the field of human-animal bonding and by knowing what resources are available. Needs, aspirations, values, personality and phase of life determine the quality of life experienced by an individual. For some it is the quantity of material goods and income, for others it might be working conditions, leisure activities, safety, level of education, religious or spiritual life, relationships with important others, contact with nature or general living conditions. All people strive to enhance their quality of life to some extent, even if it is only to have more fun, to feel a bit safer, to experience closeness in a relationship, to relieve stress, to forget about pain for a while, to be independent, or to be close to nature. It is thus important to respect individual factors when implementing human-animal interaction programmes as method of intervention in social work.

THE MULTIDISCIPLINARY TEAM

A number of disciplines have entered human-animal interaction as a field of study in the last decade. The most important breakthrough was crossing the bridges between scientific approaches. Midgley (1994:190) describes this as a gradual process: "With slow, persistent, grueling work from both sides, it turns out that both the social and the biological sciences, far from being threatened, can acquire new and important insights in this way". No one approach comprehends the full set of realities (Knitter, 1988:160), and to limit the study field to the contributions of a single discipline impoverishes the scope of practical application as well as scientific development.

The contribution of Social Work in the development of human-animal interaction as a field of study is still underestimated. Social Work distinguishes itself from other helping professions in that it has a multidisciplinary frame of reference and body of specific knowledge at its disposal. Hoffman and Sallee (1994:343) state that: "At once, we use understandings from sociology, psychology, political science, anthropology, biology and economics, coupled with our experience in working with people". This integration of knowledge and skills offers a holistic and ecological perspective on aid rendering.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Social Work was identified by the researcher as one of 23 disciplines involved in human-animal interaction. The twenty-three disciplines were identified by means of a literature review. The disciplines were chosen from: a) titles and contents of books and articles on related topics, identified through a search done by the Academic Information System (*UP Explore CSIR*) of the University of Pretoria, South Africa; b) the descriptions of the aims and activities of societies listed in *Interactions of Man and Animals* (1991), *The Interactions Bibliography* (1992 – 1996) and *Humans & Other Species* (1997 – 1999); and c) the titles and contents of 122 presentations at the 8th International Conference on Human-Animal Interactions in Prague (1998). The disciplines identified were then linked with a list of academic departments of the University of Pretoria.

Two respondents per discipline were selected through target sampling. Target sampling can be done by compiling a list of names until a sufficient number of respondents are identified that meet the criteria for selection (Strydom & De Vos, 1998:199-200). The most important disadvantage of

a non-probability selection method is that one cannot generalise the results of the survey to the broader population. The motivation for this selection method, however, was that the sample had to consist of elements that contained the most characteristic, representative or typical attributes of the population (Strydom & De Vos, 1998:198).

Six criteria for inclusion in the sample were used: a) membership of a society or participation in organised discussion in the field; b) attendance at a conference or other scientific meeting; c) publications (scientific or popular); d) involvement in research; e) in education and training; and/or f) programmes in practice. The final sample size was 45 as only one qualifying representative of Sociology could be identified by means of target sampling in South Africa at that point in time.

TABLE 1
RESPONDENTS' ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF THE DISCIPLINES INVOLVED IN THE STUDY FIELD OF HUMAN-ANIMAL INTERACTION

Discipline (N=45)	% YES	% NO	% UNSURE
Anthropology & Archaeology	84,5	13,3	2,2
Architecture	60	26,7	13,3
Art	93,3	2,2	4,5
Communication Pathology	64,4	15,6	20
Criminology	84,5	11,1	4,4
Education	100	0	0
Journalism	88,9	2,2	8,9
Law	68,9	22,2	8,9
Marketing	95,6	0	4,4
Medicine	82,2	8,9	8,9
Nursing	84,4	8,9	6,7
Occupational Therapy	77,8	13,3	8,9
Philosophy	82,2	2,2	15,6
Physiology	88,9	4,4	6,7
Physiotherapy	66,7	22,2	11,1
Psychiatry	93,3	2,2	4,5
Psychology	95,6	2,2	2,2
Public Health	95,6	0	4,4
Social Work	88,9	2,2	8,9
Sociology (N=44)	80	2,2	17,8
Town- and Regional Planners	84,4	6,7	8,9
Theology	66,7	11,1	22,2
Veterinary Science	97,8	2,2	0

Face to face interviews were conducted by means of a semi-structured interview schedule (Bless & Higson-Smith, 1995:107-108; Kvale, 1996:129). The interview schedule consisted of open-ended questions (e.g. to describe or explain their own involvement in the field) and closed-ended questions (e.g. a control list and nominal scale value question where they had to choose between one or more disciplines on a list and state 'yes,' no' or 'unsure' on each one's involvement).

Responses indicated that 88.9% respondents acknowledged the role of the social worker in this study field. In the following table the identified disciplines are listed in alphabetical order as well as the respondents' reaction to the question on acknowledging each discipline's involvement in human-animal interaction.

Although 60% and more of the respondents acknowledged the role of all the disciplines identified by the researcher, this does not reflect the scope of multidisciplinary co-operation in the field. The following table illustrates the respondents' reaction to the question on which of these disciplines they have co-operated with so far, specifically in the field of human-animal interaction:

TABLE 2
EXTENT OF CO-OPERATION WITH OTHER DISCIPLINES IN THE FIELD OF
HUMAN-ANIMAL INTERACTION

Discipline (N=45)	f	%
Anthropology & Archaeology	4	8,9
Architecture	4	8,9
Art	7	15,6
Communication Pathology	2	4,4
Criminology	3	6,7
Education	15	33,3
Journalism	13	28,9
Law	7	15,6
Marketing	9	20
Medicine	8	17,8
Nursing	9	20
Occupational Therapy	8	17,8
Philosophy	6	13,3
Physiology	5	11,1
Physiotherapy	3	6,7
Psychiatry	7	15,6
Psychology	15	33,3
Public Health	3	6,7
Social Work	12	26,7
Sociology	4	8,9
Town and Regional Planners	3	6,7
Theology	6	13,3
Veterinary Science	28	62,2

Although Social Work was identified by 88,9% of the 45 respondents on the basis of its role in the study field, only 26,7% had co-operated with a social worker at any point in time. It seems that acknowledgement of other disciplines in the field does not relate to multidisciplinary co-operation

in practice. Co-operation *per se* can also be interpreted differently and can vary from a once-off contact to get advice to daily personal contact through joint participation in a project. Knowledge of one's own as well as other disciplines' involvement in a field refers to role definition (Compton & Galaway, 1994:502-508; Potgieter, 1998:12), which is an important step towards promoting multidisciplinary co-operation.

In order to comprehend the extent of the social worker's role in the multidisciplinary team, examples of the role and value of companion animals in addressing the needs of specific target groups will be discussed briefly.

HUMAN-ANIMAL INTERACTION AND SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTION

Companion animals have a different value for different people. Some people keep them for security, others for friendship, companionship, support, independence, affection and fun. People also satisfy the need to remain in touch with nature and the environment through animals, while others like having them around to attract attention and promote their status. And some people don't like animals at all or have neutral feelings towards them. But for those people who do have a *positive* relationship with companion animals, the benefits outweigh the disadvantages by far.

Target groups in social work that could benefit from the human-animal bond

Two of the most outstanding characteristics of human-animal interaction are its applicability in all the different target groups of social work intervention, and the fact that it is not limited to any age, gender, status, culture, family type or economic position.

Families

Companion animals form part of more than half of modern families and are valued as family members (Jung, 1993:54, 59; Fogle, 1999:237). Positive interaction with companion animals is associated with closeness in family ties, fun and joint activities, focus point of interaction and physical activity (Belk, 1996:121-145). Specific roles that companion animals can fulfil are: emotional support; source of stability, continuity and security; stress reliever and substitute for absent or negative relationships (Belk, 1996:125; Beck & Meyers, 1996:248; Bodmer, 1998:238). Negative interaction with companion animals can be linked to specific dynamics in the family system, and the link between animal abuse and family violence is an important component of assessment (Boat, 1995:232; Arkow, 1998:2; Ascione & Arkow, 1999). The role of companion animals in the family will, however, be influenced by the family structure and composition, well-being of the family members, social climate and family life style (Odendaal, 1988:71; Poresky & Daniels, 1998:236-241; Albert, 1999:15).

Elderly people

The quality of life of elderly people is threatened by rapid changes and development in society, the loss of positive emotional relationships and general well-being, but insight into the diversity of needs of the elderly and the enhancement of self-help and independence can again restore the balance (Eckley, 1999:9-11). Interaction with companion animals can stimulate physical exercise, promotes self-care and feelings of security, and relieves loneliness, boredom and social isolation (Behling, 1993:176; Ramnath, 1993:18; Roberts, McBride, Rosenvinge, Stevenage & Bradshaw, 1996:64; Taylor, Maser, Yee & Gonzalez, 1994:15), all functions that can contribute to the enhancement of self-worth and meaningfulness in life.

Correctional services

The original aim of implementing human-animal interaction programmes in prisons was to offer prisoners better job opportunities through skills training and thereby empower them for reintegration into the community. The social and psychological advantages of interaction with companion animals originate from the skills training programmes. Studies showed that human-animal interaction programmes resulted in a decrease in unrest between inmates, a decline in levels of medication and fewer suicide attempts (Odendaal, 1988:85); the interaction with companion animals showed a positive effect on the self-worth and depression levels of female offenders, and participants also stated that the programme gave them the opportunity to be innovative, more active, less bored and to make positive contact with the outside world (Walsh & Mertin, 1994:126, 127). At a youth prison in the USA (Granger, Linnabary & New, 1993:18) offenders were involved in a programme that entailed raising of and caring for farm animals. Involvement in this programme enhanced the self-esteem and sense of responsibility of the participants. The emotional benefit of positive human-animal interaction is most likely the non-judgemental and non-threatening attitude of companion animals. Companion animals have no knowledge of your past and are therefore able to help you to focus on the future without any baggage from the past.

Children

Companion animals can play a vital role in the cognitive, emotional, social and psychological development of children (Poresky & Hendrix, 1990:53; Stevens, 1990:177-183; Sloane, 1994:114-118; Poresky, 1996:159). Positive interaction between children and animals stimulates speech and creativity; enhances empathy, responsibility and respect towards others; promotes social interaction and play; and relieves loneliness and sadness (Serpell & Paul, 1994:141; Davis & Juhasz, 1995:81; Endenburg & Baarda, 1995:7-17; Beck & Meyers, 1996:249; Triebenbacher, 1998:136). All these factors contribute to the development of a healthy self-concept and general well-being. Negative interaction between a child and an animal can, however, be an early indicator of dysfunction within the child's system (Boat, 1995:89; Arkow, 1994:1005; Beck & Meyers, 1996:252; Arkow, 1998:2).

People with disabilities

The non-judgmental, accepting and non-defensive attitude of companion animals, their ability to make spontaneous contact, show love and admiration, give support and physical assistance, and relieve stress and loneliness are but some of the advantages of human-animal interaction programmes for people with physical and developmental disabilities (Valentine, Kiddoo, & LaFleur, 1993:109-125; Guest, 1994:22; Woods, 1994:16; Duncan, 1998:255; Steffens & Bergler, 1998:154-156). Companion animals offer disabled people the opportunity to function independently and empower them to take control over their own lives. To be empowered enhances quality of life to a great extent.

Health care

Visitation programmes with animals at hospitals and other healthcare facilities are the most familiar application of human-animal interaction programmes. The therapeutic environment that is created by the presence of companion animals and the effect of positive interaction on blood pressure, heart rate and neurotransmitters contribute to the healing process (Anderson, Reid & Jennings, 1992:300; Patronek & Glickman, 1993:27; Friedmann & Thomas, 1995:1-17; Odendaal & Meintjes, 1999:1-10). For the chronically ill or institutionalised patient interaction with a

companion animal can distract the attention from pain and discomfort and alleviate depression and loneliness (Bernard, 1995:95; Spanola, 2000:13). The constant, non-demanding and calming presence of an animal can play an important role in times of bereavement (Sable, 1995:338; Stewart, 1996:9; Adkins & Rajecki, 1999:40). The animal's presence reduces feelings of fear and helplessness and thus offers comfort in a very special way. Psychological conditions and social functioning are important components of mental health. For the psychiatric elderly interaction with animals stimulates physical activity, decreases withdrawal behavior and enhances social interaction and self-care (Bowes, 1991:5; Kalfon, 1993:19; Zisselman, Rovner, Shmueli & Ferrie, 1996:47-51; Van der Walt, 1996:87, 89). The calming effect of interacting with animals and feelings of security as a result of their presence, have a positive effect on feelings of anxiety and depression (Cusack, 1988:64-69; Jessen, Cardiello & Baun, 1996:339-348; Holcomb, Jendro, Weber & Nahan, 1997:32-36; Rieger & Turner, 1999:231). The non-threatening interaction with companion animals promotes the communication skills, cognitive abilities and social interaction of the mentally disabled child (Nathanson, 1993:8; Anderson, 1994:5; Tschochner, 1998:138). As mental health depends largely on the quality of relationships with significant others, companion animals should be included in this circle of attachment figures.

Substance abuse

Companion animals have the special ability to serve as role model, catalyst and non-judgmental friend for the person who, because of substance abuse, has lost most of his/her positive relationships with significant others (Cusack, 1988:75-85; Sable, 1995:339; Stewart, 1996:9; Nicolai, 1998:126). The most suitable application of human-animal interaction programmes in this service field is within institutional care (Miller, Cross & Underwood, 1998:3; Nicolai, 1998:126). Visitation programmes at rehabilitation centres offer all the benefits of positive interaction with animals, but without the responsibility of pet ownership. The unconditional acceptance, without any baggage from the past and loss of respect, offers emotional support and a bridge to other relationships in the process of rehabilitation.

Poverty

Poverty deprives a person not only of basic needs and security, but also of positive social interaction and self-worth. Companion animals are not aware of status, are non-judgmental and are always loyal, no matter to what extent their needs are met. These undemanding characteristics offer the opportunity to experience the comfort and support of a positive relationship even under difficult circumstances (Kidd & Kidd, 1994:16; Singer, Hart & Zasloff, 1995:854-856). Although poor people might not have adequate financial resources required for companion animal ownership, they cannot be deprived of the positive experience of the human-animal bond.

Regardless of what target group is involved, it should be taken into account that human-animal interaction is a two-way relationship. The animals' well-being depends largely on the ability of humans to provide for their physical, emotional, social and mental needs. The well-being of animals may never be jeopardised in our own pursuit of a better quality of life.

Knowledge and skills of the social worker

Not only do social workers have the knowledge and skills that equip them for intervention with the different target groups, but the social worker's integration of knowledge and skills from different frames of reference offer an ecological and holistic perspective on aid rendering (Sherif, 1979:197; Potgieter, 1998:54). The essence of an ecological perspective is the person as a social being and as an interactive member of a family system, social group, community, organisation and/or

environment. No matter what system is involved, the person should always be acknowledged within the context of his/her interaction with significant others. Hoffman and Sallee (1994:343) regard this as a core issue in Social Work: "All of our work, from engagement to evaluation and transition, recognizes this fundamental fact and leads us in our understanding of human behavior".

The complexity of human problems, changing life styles and the changing landscape of the past century has intensified the nature and extent of problems and needs that should be addressed through social work intervention. In order to address this, the social worker of the 21st century needs to acquire knowledge from different disciplines. Because of the changes in the profile of human needs, we also need to expand our interpretation of the term quality of life. Leichter (1997:359) makes use of the words 'life style correctness' and 'wellness'. The social worker needs to be prepared to face this challenge and equip him/herself to facilitate multidisciplinary teams and activate resources in order to intervene proactively.

The variety of methods and techniques of intervention that social workers are trained in enable them to co-operate with different disciplines and under different circumstances. Social workers work with individuals, families, groups and communities. The nature and extent of the problem or need will determine the method of intervention and the composition of the multidisciplinary team. Intervention can be on different levels, e.g. prevention, development, rehabilitation, enrichment, therapy and assessment (Thackeray, Farley & Skidmore, 1994:140; Wilson, 1994:8; Copeland, 1998:3; Miller, Cross & Underwood, 1998:3; Nicolai, 1998:126; Reyneke, 2000:82-84). Human-animal interaction programmes are applicable to all the methods and levels of intervention. Different models of intervention are currently utilised, namely visitation programmes, animal-assisted therapy, assistance animals, personal companions and live-in animals (Van Heerden, 2001:342-343). The social worker is fully equipped to enhance the human-animal bond by facilitating the process of implementing any of these human-animal interaction programmes.

Social workers are described by Hoffman and Sallee (1994:3) as bridge builders who empower people to reach their goals in life: "They bring communities together, and they make the passage from one area to another possible... Bridges bring ideas together, and they bring people together. Building bridges exercises our creative ability to solve problems – to make something new out of disparate sections, linking the old and the new and reaching a goal". Multidisciplinary co-operation in the implementation of human-animal interaction programmes focus on building bridges between disciplines, methods of intervention and resources in the process of addressing community needs. The social work profession can take the lead in facilitating the process: "It is recognized that social workers have a breadth of knowledge and skill in regard to the larger community that is positive and can be meaningful in leadership positions" (Thackeray *et al.*, 1994:375). The practice of social work intervention is thus built on a model of co-operation and differentiation – a model especially effective for a multidisciplinary approach towards human-animal interaction.

CONCLUSIONS

Positive human-animal interaction is an important component of the person-in-environment framework. Acknowledging the relationship between people and their environment as one of the determinants of quality of life can broaden the social worker's perspective on aid rendering. Companion animals are an important link with nature and offer stability in a changing environment and the opportunity for extended and alternative relationships. People do experience the meaning of life not only in their relationships with other people, but in a network of meaningful relationships, which can include animals. Social workers are aware of, and skilled in, addressing the different needs of specific target groups and can therefore assess to what extent,

and under which circumstances, companion animals can play a role in addressing these needs. The multidisciplinary nature of the social work profession empowers the social worker with the skills and knowledge to play a central role in the multidisciplinary team by building a bridge between human needs and available resources.

Examples of multidisciplinary co-operation could be the following:

- In the rehabilitation programme for disabled persons, the social worker, occupational therapist, physiotherapist and communication pathologist can join forces to achieve the same goal. The social worker can assess the role of a companion animal as significant other in the client system and make recommendations accordingly.
- In the treatment of people with depression, anxiety disorders or intense relationship difficulties, the social worker can co-operate with the psychologist and psychiatrist to use companion animals to stimulate social interaction and reality orientation, break isolation and relieve stress.
- In an effort to enhance the quality of life of elderly people, and others dependent on high-density living conditions, the social worker can co-operate with town and regional planners, architects and developers to plan and design housing facilities in such a way that provision is made for opportunities to interact with animals.
- In conjunction with occupational therapists and nurses, human-animal interaction programmes can be initiated to stimulate physical activity and social interaction, offer fun and relaxation, and relieve boredom and passivity with institutionalised patients.
- The social worker, psychologist, occupational therapist and teacher can join forces in order to address the cognitive, emotional and social needs of children at risk.
- Knowledge of the link between family violence and animal abuse is relevant to the social worker, lawyer, and veterinary and medical practitioner in an effort to break the cycle of violence.
- Co-operation between the veterinary practitioner and social worker is important in bereavement counselling after the death of a companion animal.
- The knowledge of the social worker in a health care setting of the physiological health benefits of positive human-animal interaction will be valuable in making the health team aware of the role of companion animals in the healing process.
- The social worker depends on the sociologist, criminologist and environmental psychologist to identify important social phenomena in society in order to develop prevention programmes relating *inter alia* to violence, substance abuse, suicide, etc.

Different models for the implementation of human-animal interaction programmes exist. The most appropriate model, using carefully selected animals for a specifically identified person or target group, and for the right reasons or motives, needs to be in place in order to promote positive human-animal interaction. The team members to be involved will depend on the target group concerned, the specific needs to be addressed, the goal to be achieved, the team members available and the resources in the community.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order for the social worker to promote positive human-animal interaction through multidisciplinary involvement, certain principles need to be taken into account. It is important to be informed about the role that other members of the multidisciplinary team can play and to select them accordingly. Individualise to what extent companion animals can meet the identified needs of different target groups, individuals and communities. Make the correct match between the needs and behaviour of the different target groups and the needs and behaviour of the different companion animals. Respect the right of individuals, groups and communities to decide for themselves if they want to get involved in this form of intervention, and acknowledge differences in cultural values and attitudes towards companion animals. Always take into account differences in social, emotional, mental and physical functioning of people and thus their ability to form and maintain a positive relationship with companion animals. Equally important is respect for the physical, emotional, social and mental needs of the animals involved in the programmes. As a facilitator of human-animal interaction programmes, the social worker must ensure thorough preparation, planning, implementation and evaluation of such programmes. As with all professional intervention programmes, the underlying principle remains adherence to ethical and responsible conduct towards people and animals at all times.

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