Animals in Disaster Social Work: An Intersectional Green Perspective Inclusive of Species

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Abstract

Disasters do not just affect humans. And humans do not only live with, care for or interact with other humans. In this conceptual article, we explain how animals are relevant to green and disaster social work. Power, oppression and politics are our themes. We start the discussion by defining disasters and providing examples of how three categories of animals are affected by disasters, including in the current COVID-19 pandemic. They are: companion animals (pets), farmed animals (livestock) and free-living animals (wildlife), all of whom we classify as oppressed populations. Intersectional feminist, de-colonising and green social work ideas are discussed in relation to disaster social work. We argue that social work needs to include nonhuman animals in its consideration of person-in-environment, and offer an expanded version of feminist intersectionality inclusive of species as a way forward.

Keywords: Alliances, animals, climate change, disasters, intersectionality

Accepted: March 2021
Introduction

In this article, we argue for animals to be included in disaster social work. Image 1, Koala after the 2019 bushfires, is included as a visual reminder of the threat disasters pose to animals. We start from the premise that social workers already play important roles in the face of disasters, however with the worsening effects of climate change producing a significant rise in the number of disasters and the destruction they are causing, we expect increasingly more social workers will be pulled into the work, or otherwise risk becoming irrelevant (Alston, 2013; Bauwens and Naturale, 2017).

Our central argument is that it is necessary to understand the importance of nonhuman animals in disaster response and planning, and that doing so offers both a challenge and an opportunity to social work (both the discipline and profession). The challenge it offers is to interrogate the speciesist and humanist underpinnings of the discipline. The opportunity is for social workers to become more involved in identifying the specific inequalities and vulnerabilities nonhuman animals face, and to find ways to address them. To achieve these aims, we recognise profound cultural, social, economic and political change is needed in and beyond social work.

We begin with a discussion of what constitutes disasters and how disasters can affect different (overlapping) categories of animals. We then advocate for the use of a feminist intersectional perspective, but through an expanded version that recognises speciesism as an axis of oppression
and humanism as an axis of privilege. We then consider how an expanded green social work—informed by a feminist intersectional account of speciesism—might be harnessed to address the animal question in social work, including and beyond disasters.

**What is a disaster?**

Disasters are events that are or have the potential to be catastrophic and often leave a legacy of injury, trauma, loss and devastation (Howard *et al.*, 2018). The National Center for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder defined a disaster as ‘a sudden event that has the potential to terrify, horrify or engender substantial losses for many people simultaneously’ (Norris, 2002, p. 1, cited in Bauwens and Naturale, 2017, p. 99). This definition was then expanded to include a distinction between natural or weather related, technological, deliberate (i.e. terrorism/mass violence) or armed conflict/war-related disasters (Bauwens and Naturale, 2017, p. 99). Historically disasters have been classified as ‘natural’ (e.g. floods, fires, cyclones, volcano eruptions, earthquakes and pandemics) or ‘human induced’ (such as war, oil spills and similar toxic events and plane crashes), however, climate change makes spurious many of these distinctions (see Pyles, 2017).

Asking ‘What is a disaster?’ Perry (2007) traced the changing scholarly definitions of disasters over many decades. Large-scale disasters affecting significant populations usually garner most attention, but in the last two decades there has been a move away from an exclusive ‘hazards disaster definition’ to include references to vulnerability to, and resilience after, disaster (Perry, 2007, pp. 8–9). Unsaid but clearly implied in both definition and response is that these definitions refer only to humans (see Perry, 2007). And even when considerations extend beyond the human to—at least nominally—include nonhuman animals—they tend to be deeply anthropocentric, focused on what animals can bring to humans in the aftermath of disasters, or how their presence increases risks for humans. For example, in a systematic review of literature on companion animals and natural disasters, Day (2017) argues that guardians and their companion animals must be included in disaster planning, response and recovery because it is a ‘matter of public health and safety to consider the needs of animal guardians before, during and after disasters’ (p. 85). The reasons she gives, based on her review of the literature, are that (1) guardians often return to disaster sites to reclaim their animals, (2) the ties that guardians have to their animals determine decisions that they make which may put first responders in danger and (3) abandoned or lost animals affect the health of their guardians and may also threaten public safety (through zoonoses, aggressive behaviours, etc.) (pp. 85–6).
In contrast to this traditional view of animals, there is growing scholarly interest in human entanglements with the more-than-human generally, and in post-anthropocentric social work specifically (e.g. Dominelli, 2012, 2013, 2018; Alston, 2013; Bozalek and Pease, 2021). This body of work attends ‘closely to the rich array of the senses, dispositions, capabilities and potentialities of all manner of social objects and forces assembled through, and involved in, the co-fabrication of socio-material worlds’ (Whatmore, 2006, p. 604) and acknowledges that we live in a multispecies world where lives, deaths and wellbeing are irrevocably entangled. As we will discuss when we consider the challenges and opportunities of including nonhuman animals in disaster social work, scholars working with these ideas point to the ways in which our humanist legacies depend upon the use of dualistic and hierarchical forms of knowledge that sit at the very heart of practices of marginalisation (e.g. Cudworth, 2011; Ryan, 2011). Before considering this in more detail, however, it is necessary to understand how animals are currently configured within social work theory and practice.

Social work and nonhuman animals

The overarching mission of social work is to focus on social problems, within their local, national and global contexts, and to do so from a social justice if not anti-oppressive perspective. Climate change and its catastrophic possibilities have been widely publicised for the last 40 years, alongside the devastating and extremely oppressive impacts for both human and animal populations (Chester, 2020). Yet until relatively recently, social work has been slow to engage with the environment and climate change (see Dominelli, 2012, p. 218; Walker et al., 2015; Alston et al., 2016). Those who do engage with climate change mostly do without much consideration for nonhuman animals (Ryan, 2011); largely ignoring the growing evidence that climate change is directly connected to animal agriculture (see Probyn-Rapsey et al., 2016). This is a significant problem if animals are to be included in disaster social work. As Alston (2013, p. 236) points out, we can use crisis situations ‘as a space for making inequities visible and challenging the assumptions on which they are based’. One of these assumptions is that nonhuman animals either do not matter, or matter second only to humans, when it comes to social workers and disaster response and planning.

Yet some change is occurring in social work albeit, in ways that mirror the endemic specieisism of societies, wherein some categories of animals are considered more valuable than others. For example, whilst free-living (koalas, deer, wild brumbies) and farmed animals (pigs, cows, chickens) have captured very little attention in social work, companion animals have fared better. In the last decade in particular, social work
has begun to acknowledge that companion animals do matter, for both the profession and the people with whom it is involved (Ryan, 2011; Walker et al., 2015). This focus tends to be on the various positives companion animals (pets) offer humans, particularly marginalised humans, such as the unconditional love offered to gender and sexuality diverse people in the face of family and societal discrimination (Rosenberg et al., 2020), or the grief experienced by humans at the loss of a companion animal (Furman, 2005; Wrye, 2009). Other points of companion animal interest within social work tend to be on (1) the links between human and animal directed violence, particularly links between domestic violence, child abuse and animal abuse and (2) the therapeutic utility of nonhuman animals to humans through animal-assisted therapy and/or animal-assisted interventions. The first area has received considerable attention, with collaborations between practicing social workers and academics facilitating much of it (e.g. Faver and Strand, 2003; Becker and French, 2004; Allen et al., 2006; Taylor and Fraser, 2019). Beyond this, the idea of veterinary or animal-assisted social work has also become more commonplace, with social work courses offered by the University of Tennessee and the University of Denver, respectively. These courses cover grief and pet loss; animal-assisted interventions; the link between human and animal violence and compassion fatigue for people working with abused, injured, neglected and/or euthanized animals.

Other formal acknowledgements of human entanglements with other animals are also evident in the profession. The Australian Association of Social Workers’ (2020) Code of Ethics, for example, mandates that social workers ‘ensure that any animal engaged as part of social work practice is protected’. It follows the lead of the Aotearoa New Zealand Association for Social Workers 2019 Code of Ethics that includes the following: ‘We recognise the sentience of animals and ensure that any animal engaged as part of our social work practice is protected’. Sentience refers to animals as conscious beings who have thoughts, feelings and a consciousness of their surroundings, and the capacity to have meaningful connections with others (see Bekoff, 2010). Whilst small, these acknowledgements of the forms of work nonhuman animals do in social work are still important. As Ryan (2011, p. 5) points out, ‘The omission of any individual, group or issue sends a loud and incontrovertible message that any and all of the aforementioned do not matter, that their interests are trivial, and that we ought to concern ourselves with more pressing issues’. Future social work codes of ethics can build on these small steps to include all nonhuman animals affected by human presence on earth, including free-living (wild) and those held captive in animal agriculture (farmed).

Theoretically, social work’s historical recognition of people in their environments also provides a framework to include other animals. As others have noted, the concept of the person-in-the-environment has
long been central to social work, however, it has mostly if not exclusively referred to human psycho-social contexts and interpersonal relationships (Besthorn, 1997; Alston, 2013). Traditionally this has meant social work screening out all non-human and related issues, including natural and built environments (Krings et al., 2020). This is a very narrow definition of person-in-environment and one that urgently needs to expand (Besthorn, 1997; Alston, 2013; Krings et al., 2020). By contrast, we suggest any consideration of person-in-the-environment calls for us to appreciate the habitat requirements of multiple species, not just human beings, and give due consideration to ecology and ecological change (Evans and Gray, 2012).

The question then remains, who does social work define as a person? The most obvious response is human beings. However, legal personhood has not been reserved for humans. For instance, the Catholic Church is declared a person under law in many countries, as are many other wealthy corporations; and other inanimate objects such as ships. To quote Gindis (2016, p. 500), ‘It is important to recognize that from the legal point of view “person” is not co-extensive with “human being”. Nor is it synonymous with “rational being” or “responsible subject”.’ In some countries, such as the USA, nonhuman legal personhood has been achieved for particular species of animal or individual members, such as chimpanzees and elephants (Non-Human Rights Project, 2020). However, most legal systems view animals as objects or property belonging to humans. Elsewhere we have argued for more animals to be granted a form of legal personhood, whilst recognising the embedded nature of speciesism and carnist practices (meat eating) makes it extremely difficult to even make this claim (Riggs et al., 2021a):

Some people may believe that it is a stretch to attribute personhood to animals. But is it such a stretch to claim personhood for living animals given corporations have a long history of being granted personhood, and they are entirely devoid of sentience?… Unlike animals, who can experience emotions, conscious thought and most importantly can suffer bodily pain, corporations are abstracted entities deliberately extracted from their ‘owners’ for legal purposes (Riggs et al., 2021b).

**Animals, disasters and rescue**

Animals are embroiled in disasters in a number of ways, in no small part because they are intimately involved with human lives and structures (Bankoff, 2015; Green, 2019), and as Green (2019, p. 43) points out, they have been made to live in human-modified environments that generate particular forms of vulnerability. At a macro level, they are vulnerable to the impacts of climate change—a disaster in and of itself—given it has increased the frequency and severity of other disasters that
harm nonhuman animals, such as volcanoes, typhoons, floods, droughts, snow and icy conditions, nuclear disasters and diseases.

Human treatment of nonhuman animals can also have profound impacts on humans. Intensive animal farming is, for instance, one of the biggest contributors to global warming (Probyn-Rapsey et al., 2016), and there is a well-documented history of diseases, including the current COVID-19 pandemic, that spread from animals to humans. The coronavirus is thought to have originated from the ‘wet markets’ in Wuhan, China, which sell animals and often slaughter them on site (Maron, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic was caused from by the slaughter and sale of animal body parts, as were the avian/bird flu, swine flu (see Poudel, 2020), mad cow disease and several others (see Greger, 2010). In some of these wet markets in China and many other countries around the world, locally captured wildlife is still sold and slaughtered (Maron, 2020). When such diseases make their way across species lines, then animals suffer yet again. They are, for example used in increasing numbers in medical laboratories, killed en masse with little consideration for any ‘humane’ measures usually in place, and as is the case in the current pandemic, surrendered in large numbers due to their humans facing financial constraints (Fraser et al., 2020). Below, we expand on some of these issues for free living, companion and farmed animals.

**Free living animals and disasters**

Research consistently demonstrates that current climate warming is already impacting free living animals. Many are already extinct or face extinction, and many of those still with us have been forced to adapt in order to survive. For example, Root et al. (2003) in a meta-analysis of the effects of temperature change on free living animals (and plants) found four types of changes in species traits: (1) the density of species changes, (2) the timing of events—migrations, egg laying and so on—changes, (3) changes in morphology (e.g. body size) and (4) shifts in genetic frequencies. They point out that these are changes already happening and that future climate change that will occur more rapidly, offers yet more of a threat. Furthermore, this threat is coupled with other stressors such as habitat disruption. Taken together, these changes could disrupt the connections across ecosystems, including the separation of communities.

Climate change also impacts animals by increasing the frequency and severity of other ecological disasters such as bushfires. In the 2019–20 bushfires in Australia, more land mass was burnt than Wales and Scotland combined, and the emergency responses were so frequent over an extended period of time that magpies (native Australian bird) imitated emergency vehicle sirens (Chester, 2020). A conservative
estimate—one known to deliberately underestimate the density of animal populations—is that one billion animals perished in these bushfires alone (RMIT ABC Fact Check, 2020). Others estimate it is closer to three billion animal deaths (RMIT ABC Fact Check, 2020).

Shortly after the drought and bushfires wreaked havoc, along came the coronavirus pandemic. The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2020) declared the pandemic on 13 March 2020, but by mid-November 2020, the spread of Covid-19 had taken hold across the world with more than 52 million human cases and 1.2 million human deaths (Worldometer, 2020), but the number of animal lives lost from the pandemic is not as clear. Periodic lockdowns of humans allowed some species of free-living animals to enjoy the freedom to move into spaces usually dominated or reserved for humans. For instance, there have been verified stories of monkeys roaming in empty streets of Lopburi in Thailand; wild boars coming down from the mountains to urban spaces in Barcelona, Spain and herds of deer wandering empty streets of Eastern Ghats in India (Moulds, 2020). However, not all animals have experienced new-found freedom. With humans in lockdown, poachers have been more active and some animals have gone hungry because of their loss of habitat and subsequent reliance on being fed by tourists (Moulds, 2020).

Farmed animals and disasters

Across the world more concerted efforts have been dedicated to raising awareness of the plight of animals produced for animal agriculture. The human population is expected to be close to 10 billion by 2050, leading to an estimated increased demand for agricultural products by approximately 70 percent. Given ‘livestock’ provides 17 percent of global kilocalorie consumption and 33 percent of global protein consumption, it is expected that the number of ‘farm’ animals will grow in concert with human populations (Rojas-Downing et al., 2017). This means growing numbers of nonhuman animals will live in the disastrous conditions of extreme confinement that in and of themselves are cruel and abhorrent, but also expose them to potential impacts from climate change that include decreased quality of food, limited availability of water, diseases, heat stress and resultant compromised health (Asner et al., 2004; Howden et al., 2008; Rojas-Downing et al., 2017). Even animals living in more traditional open-air farms often face grave threats to their health. For instance, the 2019 bushfires in Australia came after hundreds of thousands of farmed animals, such as pigs and cows, had already perished or been prematurely euthanised from chronic drought and flooding. In Queensland alone, there was an estimated 500,000 cattle deaths from flooding (Smee, 2019).
Lessons about the dangers of animal agriculture—are of all kinds not just relating to the slaughter and consumption of wildlife—are not being heeded by enough of the human population. Some sections of the population, especially younger people but also Buddhists, vegetarians and vegan social workers are heeding the science showing that the global animal agriculture system’s intensive use of water and destruction of land and rivers water is making it impossible to feed the world’s human population (see Twine, 2018). However, too many other groups of people, including in social work, remain largely ignorant to the connections between animal agriculture and pandemics (such as the coronavirus, swine and bird flus, mad cow disease or the Ebola virus), and animal agriculture and climate change.

**Companion animals and disasters**

Social work is gradually realising that animals are considered family members by many humans, including the diverse communities we serve (Taylor and Fraser, 2019; Riggs et al., 2021a). This necessarily means that companion animals are affected by the same disasters that affect human communities. For instance, companion animals have also been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, at different times being reviled and at others, exalted. Initially some were at risk of surrender or premature euthanasia due to (unfounded) fears that they were COVID-19 carriers. Since then, we have seen a dramatic rise in people willing to foster or adopt surrendered animals (Fraser et al., 2020). The closing of borders and frequent lockdowns have also created significant dangers for companion animals, such as animals trapped in violent domestic homes, which has attracted growing interest including publications (Taylor and Fraser, 2019). Similarly, animals are often caught up with issues affecting climate refugees—either displaced with their humans or left behind when their humans are forced to flee. They are also subject to increased heat, scarcity of food and water and increased diseases, all as a result of climate change (Green, 2019).

Beyond climate change, animals are affected by other disasters that hit our multispecies communities, yet they are often left unconsidered when it comes to disaster planning and response (Evans and Perez-y-Perez, 2013; Potts and Gadenne, 2014; Thompson, 2018). In their social work study of the earthquake in Christchurch, for example, Darroch and Adamson (2016) underlined the human–companion animal bonds so often by those affected by disasters but not always understood or provided for through policies and programmes. As they note,

For many people, the idea of leaving their companion animals behind during a disaster is unthinkable... The presence of companion animals during a disaster often leads to people staying in dangerous situations or
attempting to evacuate with them, even if this places people and animals at increased risk (Darroch and Adamson, 2016, p. 102).

Fortunately, mainstream disaster management and recovery knowledge and practices are slowly expanding to include nonhuman animals. For instance, attention is increasingly given to the inclusion of pets and other animals on private properties in bushfire evacuation plans, and the need for animal-inclusive emergency and post-disaster accommodation arrangements (see Darroch and Adamson, 2016). Admittedly, animal inclusive disaster planning poses several complexities, especially for larger animals such as horses, donkeys and lamas, who are more likely to be living in rural and remote areas where the needs can be high but the support services spread thin. However, with more collective efforts including from social workers working with animal protection agencies, local councils and local rescue groups, there may be possible alternatives. Other practical forms of assistance can involve social workers joining the many community efforts already underway to assist with the micro-chipping of companion animals, which can help locate lost animals in times of crisis. Sharing information about animals in disasters and how people can assist local groups, and fundraising to help support with the buying of pet food and other necessary supplies, are other straightforward possibilities.

Disasters, oppression and green social work

Although social work has been slow to embrace nonhuman animals, there are existing frameworks that, with some modification, can help guide us. Green social work is one of these. Green social work recognises that power relations, including those that are unjust, pulsate through all fields and modes of social work practice, including disaster work (Dominelli, 2012, 2013; Alston, 2013). Disasters usually magnify inequality and oppression, as has been seen through COVID-19 (Chomsky and Robert, 2020; Lohmeyer and Taylor, 2020). Oppressed groups are most prone to: not having decent and safe housing; being subjected to domestic violence; having no or little income support; high health needs but problematic access to medical services and those most likely to be ignored or left behind when recovery resources are distributed. Even so, when disasters occur, such as COVID-19, there is a common injunction that ‘we [humans] are all in this together’ (Golightley and Holloway, 2020). The reality is that whilst disasters such as bushfires, floods and pandemics may be happening around us, social stratification means that different populations are likely to experience radically different impacts.

Oppression and privilege on the basis of class, race/ethnicity, gender, ability, age and sexuality impact disaster susceptibility and recovery. For example, indigenous groups, women, elders and people living with
disabilities—who are prone to impoverishment, social isolation and exclusion before disasters occur—are the most susceptible to the negative impacts of disasters (Howard et al., 2018). Whilst mainstream resilience discourses admonish all (human) survivors of disasters to ‘come back better/stronger/wiser’, the reality is that the risks of exposure to the harms from disasters, and the resources available to rebuild and recover post-disaster, are very unequal. With vastly different access to the information, resources and support needed not to both survive the crisis and rebuild in the future, the needs of oppressed populations are often underestimated or ignored, with many examples of those most in hardship left to fend for themselves (Alston, 2013). With reference to the Haiti earthquake, Pyles (2017) advocates for the decolonisation of disaster social work, which first involves recognising the differential impacts disasters have on colonised and other subjugated groups largely due to the promulgation of neoliberalism, which has significantly increased social inequality. Neo-liberalism, a family of social and economic policies that values unlimited growth, deregulation, commodification and privatisation of social services and an individualistic approach to social problems, is arguably part and parcel to the legacy of colonialism (Fraser and Taylor, 2016). This is a legacy of ‘progress’, ‘civilisation’, exploitation of land and resources and expropriation of labour (Gray et al., 2013). It is a legacy that negatively impacts the culture and social identities of indigenous people by imposing a European worldview on their bodies, minds and spirits (Pyles, 2017, p. 632).

Humanitarian aid, including international aid, is a common part of disaster recovery work that social workers may lead or be involved in, especially during the relief phase that occurs directly after the crisis. Yet, who gets aid and how it is dispensed are often political matters. Cautioning us to ensure that aid is not used a secondary or latent form or (re)colonisation, Pyles (2017) makes three basic recommendations that involve understanding the interplay between disasters, environmental destruction and capitalism; avoiding the replication of a colonial past and ensure that local community needs drive responses.

Decolonising social work calls for a shift from traditional, individualistic and hierarchical thinking, and to acknowledge a diversity of knowledge claims, including indigenous ontologies and epistemologies previously ignored (see Crampton, 2015). Ordinarily it involves non-indigenous social workers learning about indigenous knowledges that recognise the connections between land, oceans, animals and humans (Gray et al., 2013). There are already examples of human–animal programme possibilities in operation in indigenous communities, such as the use of equine-assisted psychotherapy to aid in trauma recovery (see Bennett and Woodman, 2019). But it also requires the ongoing interrogation of non-indigenous worldviews, so that they do not continue to be treated as the default position.
Inclusive of anti-racist and eco-feminist ideas, green social work has been deeply concerned about human populations in their physical environments—specifically how patriarchal capitalism reproduces structural inequality and environmental degradation, both of which influence who is hardest hit from disasters (Dominelli, 2012, 2013, 2018). To quote Dominelli and Ku (2017, p. 8),

... green social work is committed to: holistic views of the world; a structural analysis of human and social development; integrating social and environmental justice; challenging neoliberal forms of social development and highlighting interdependencies among peoples and between peoples and their physical and social environments.

We recognise climate change and the extreme weather events it generates, are as much political problems as they are environmental that cannot be solved by technology alone.

Green social work is built on feminist ideals (Dominelli, 2013, 2014, 2018), and the feminist adages ‘the personal is political’ and ‘the political is personal’ apply to green social workers’ understanding of disasters. Transformative change requires diverse, working (and sometimes temporal) alliances across the many lines of difference. The purpose of these alliances is to oppose injustice and domination (see Ferguson et al., 2018) and in green social work, it is to prevent further environmental destruction (Dominelli, 2013, 2014, 2018). Interdisciplinary and interprofessional alliances are necessary, as well as alliances across the traditional lines of gender, rich/poor, young/old, able bodied and disabled, straight/queer, manager/worker and worker/volunteer, worker/client. The time is here for green social work to include (other) animals and the remarkable possibilities for alliances in this space lie in the animals themselves. So many of us humans, in spite of our differences, share a concern for, if not love of, animals, and many of us in social work are or would be motivated to practice in animal-inclusive ways.

**Intersectionality inclusive of species**

It is our contention that green social work, combined with both ecofeminist and feminist intersectional perspectives, offers a framework to transform the discipline by attending to the more-than-human. Intersectionality is used across many disciplines including social work as both a theory and analytical method of inquiry that focuses on the interplay of race, gender, class, age, ability and sexuality as fluid and often mobile identities (Fraser and Taylor, 2019). Intersectional social workers pay close attention to power relations (symbolic and material), especially those relating to privilege and oppression reproduced through the relations of class, gender, age, sexuality, race/ethnicity and ability. However,
attention is often given in-and-between these categories, to understand multiple, cumulative and/or hidden forms of domination (Hovorka, 2012).

Crenshaw (1991) originally used the notion of intersectionality to explain the interlocking oppressions that black women experience on the basis of class, religion, age, sexuality and dis/ability (also see Cho et al., 2013). Historically many black and female populations have been denied personhood through slavery and other acts of gross subordination (Spillers, 1987). Slavery is one of the most absolute forms of oppression. To quote Wolf (2000, p. 90), ‘The subjugation of human beings in slavery is perhaps the most pernicious form of oppression, and many thinkers have realized a connection between slavery and speciesism’. It is a connection yet to be made in social work, including most versions of anti-oppressive practice and critical social work. Green social work has been built on critical analyses of power and are concerned with intersectional experiences of oppression—but only for humans (see e.g. Dominelli, 2012, 2013, 2018).

Nonhuman animals are oppressed on the basis of species and humans derive automatic privilege from being the dominant species. Speciesism refers to a ‘prejudice or attitude of bias toward the interests of members of one’s own species and against those of members of other species’ (Singer, 1975, p. 7). Twenty years ago, Wolf (2000, p. 88) wrote, ‘Speciesism is discrimination based on species, and social workers are urged to reflect on and discuss the issue of whether differential treatment based on species is justified.’ As social work grapples with an expanded ecological consciousness of the impacts of climate change (see e.g. Dominelli, 2013, 2014, 2018; Boetto, 2017) there needs to be an awareness that humans share this planet with other animals who are also affected by the destructiveness of human practices and beliefs (see e.g. Ryan, 2011).

A significant barrier to social work including nonhuman animals relates to the discipline’s positivist and modernist roots that maintain the status quo vis-à-vis power relations (Boette, 2017, p. 49). As Bell (2012) argues, uncritical adoption of traditional post-enlightenment positivist paradigms that are grounded in notions of rationality leaves unchallenged the dualistic and hierarchical frameworks that we know from radical social work traditions must be removed if we are to meet the social justice aims of the discipline. Leaving such frameworks intact is problematic, not least because it gives epistemic privilege to a certain masculinist perspective wherein the ‘perspectives of “others” are either excluded entirely, incorporated as pathological and atypical according to the male-as-standard yardstick and/or have interpretive frameworks imposed on them regardless of fit’ (Bell, 2012, p. 413). Whilst the majority of those espousing arguments like this acknowledge the roles that these ideologies play in excluding both the environment and marginalised
humans, they often fall short of acknowledging that this also ignores other (nonhuman) animals.

The inter-related nature of human and animal wellbeing on our planet also means that we need to refashion our ideas about ‘natural’ and ‘man-made’ disasters, erroneous ‘pure’ categorisations (Latour, 1993) that do not exist, and instead support a view of the world that sees humans as apart from, and better, than other life forms. It is time for intersectionality, especially as it is used in social work, to include species, as illustrated in Image 2.

For explanatory purposes, we have attempted to visually represent a species-inclusive map of intersectionality and in the future, we plan to develop this figure further. We have placed companion animals in the ring before other categories of animals because they are more likely to be named, included in human families and treated better than free-living or farmed animals. Some may argue that ‘pets’ often receive better treatment than some marginalised groups of people. However, with only the barest of legal protections around the world and whilst they do not have legal personhood, the treatment companion animals receive

Image 2: Intersectionality map inclusive of species.
depends largely on human goodwill. Bear in mind that premature euthanasia from humans surrendering or abandoning them is a serious problem (see Parry, 2020). Questions may also be asked about the placement of free-living animals in the same outer ring as animals subjected to intensive farming. The logic here is that free-living animals are so commonly subjected to habitat loss from human practices (land clearing, toxic spills, climate change, being baited or ‘culled’ as ‘vermin’) that many species survival hangs in the balance. Nevertheless, we accept such maps run the risk of oversimplification. We know species need to be more than an ‘add on’ to human frameworks; and much more than a charitable move to include people’s ‘pets’. It requires the recognition of nonhuman animal oppression—a recognition that many may not care to consider.

Finally, excluding nonhuman animals from our understandings and frame of reference means that we are missing vital information. As Bankoff (2015) argues, perhaps we can learn from nonhuman animals when it comes to disasters. Such learning may take the form of observing and understanding animals’ coping mechanisms that may mitigate the worst effects of disasters, or it may take the form of understanding that human behaviour is affected by their bonds with companion ownership (as seen most clearly in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina). Similarly, the ways animals are treated during and after disasters give us an opportunity to learn about, and critique (with a view to changing) social structures that are more clearly illuminated in times of disaster. Irvine (2006), for example, points out how the ways dogs were shot and killed post-Katrina due to a ‘disaster myth’ about ‘dangerous’ dogs illuminates the ‘justifications governments will offer for the use of violence and of the power that myths have over behavior’ (p. X).

Concluding comments

In this article, we have argued social workers will be better placed to respond to disaster survivors if they/we cast our sights across the human/animal divide and that without including human–animal relations in a person-in-environment approach, social workers will remain ill-prepared in disaster social work, irrespective of how energetic or well-meaning we/they may be. Our message is also that social work is inherently political work, work bound up in webs of often unequal power relations and that disaster social work is no exception. Our position is social work urgently needs to reconsider its silence on animals and the attendant anthropocentric framework. Recognising speciesism as part of intersectional social work will require social work to challenge the assumed primacy of humans over all other animals and the environment.
We appreciate this ambitious proposal requires social work to re-evaluate core elements of its identity and operations.

Acknowledgements

We’d like to acknowledge the reviewers who provided us with useful feedback.

Conflict of interest statement. None declared.

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