Directions in Veterinary Social Work

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Abstract: This article introduces readers to the emerging and growing field of veterinary social work. The article provides a definition of veterinary social work and presents an overview of current research findings relating to the various domains that comprise the field: animal-assisted interventions, the link between human and animal violence, animal-related grief and bereavement, compassion fatigue, and conflict management. Additional topics explored include the interdisciplinary nature of the field, the social work host settings, and relevant professional associations and organizations. Ethical issues arising in the practice of veterinary social work are discussed.

Keywords: *Social work, veterinary social work, animal-assisted interventions, ethics, family violence, grief and bereavement.*

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1. Introduction

Although domesticated and small animals have been common partners to mental health clinicians since the 1800s (Fine, 2019), veterinary social work as a distinct subspecialty is relatively new within the field of social work, having been named and recognized only as recently as 2002. The term “veterinary social work” was coined in 2002 by Dr. Elizabeth Strand of the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee, the site of the first formal training program in veterinary social work (Poe & Strand, *in press*).

Veterinary social work has been defined as an area of social work practice that supports and strengthens interdisciplinary partnerships that attend to the intersection of humans and animals. As such, it falls within the “One Health” paradigm, which is “a worldwide strategy for expanding collaborations and communications in all aspects of health care for humans, animals and the environment” (One Health Initiative, 2021). “One Health” explicitly connects the wellbeing of humans, animals, and the environment in order to improve problem-solving around increasingly complex and interconnected health problems (Centers of Disease Control and Prevention, 2018). Accordingly, veterinary social work comprises four areas that reflect such connections: animal-assisted interventions, animal-related grief and bereavement, compassion fatigue and management, and the link between human and animal maltreatment.

The breadth of this specialty is reflected in both the diverse venues in which veterinary social workers are engaged and the nature of their work. Veterinary social workers may be engaged by veterinary hospitals, schools of social work, veterinary programs, hospitals, veterinary practices, private therapeutic practices, and nonprofit organizations (NGOs). The services that they offer vary widely, although the specific service depends upon the nature of the work setting. These include: providing support to grieving animal owners; working with humans and animals in psychotherapy practices; providing support to veterinarians, veterinary technicians, shelter workers and other staff; teaching in social work and veterinary programs; providing services in prisons; serving as expert witnesses in court cases; and conducting research. At the macro level, social workers may choose to work in settings focused on advocacy efforts, which may include roles in nonprofit or nongovernmental organizations or legislative bodies. A discussion of these four domains and reliance on animal collaborators in each follows below.

In the United States, regardless of the venue in which they work and their specific responsibilities, trained veterinary social workers are to adhere to the Veterinary Social Work Oath. This oath, originally penned by Dr. Elizabeth Strand, founder of the University of Tennessee's veterinary social work certificate program, states,

Specializing in veterinary social work, I pledge my service to society by tending to the human need that arise in the relationship between humans and animals. From a strengths perspective and using evidence-based practice, I will uphold the ethical code of my profession, respect and promote the dignity and worth of all species, and diligently strive to maintain mindful balance in all of my professional endeavors.

2. Animal collaborators

Veterinary social work education emphasizes the roles of animals in human-animal interaction (therapy animals, emotional support animals, companion animals and service animals). However, in social work practice, the relevant roles are therapy animal and facility animal. Emotional support animals, companion animals, and service animals are animals (often dogs) that clients may bring into their lives through the recommendation or support of a social worker. However, that animal is not a collaborative member of the therapeutic experience.

Often the breed and species determine the type of training and education needed to work with an animal in social work practice. Veterinary social work specifies that animal collaborators in clinical practice should be domesticated animals (Ng et al., 2019). Practices such as dolphin-assisted therapy, which can be observational only, are not considered to be in alignment with best practices (Jegatheesan et al., 2014). As an example, animal-assisted psychotherapy may rely on animal collaborators such as dogs, cats, horses, alpacas, donkeys, goats, rats, rabbits, guinea pigs (Winston, in press).

All professionals must have knowledge and training to work with animal collaborators (Ng et al., 2015); the animals must also receive training to work in these contexts. As an example, dogs can have basic training through programs such as K9 good citizen, Pet Partners or Therapy Dogs International. Professionals who wish to work with horses require training from horse-specific organizations such as the Professional Association for Therapeutic Horsemanship International (PATH International) or the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA), which

maintain best practice standards. Professionals are encouraged to obtain additional training from aligned organizations that cover foundational knowledge and serve to support professional practice, e.g., The Human-Equine Relational Development (HERD) Institute and the Canadian Therapeutic Riding Association (CanTRA).

3. Exploring the four domains of veterinary social work

3.1. Animal-assisted interventions

The term “animal assisted interventions” refers to activities involving human-animal interaction that are goal-oriented, structured and facilitated, with an animal collaborator-partner. These interventions may be led by professionals, paraprofessionals or volunteers who have had the necessary training and experience. The activities may serve any number of purposes, such as motivation enhancement, skills development, educational learning, and/or recreational enjoyment (International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organizations, 2014). The activity may involve an animal being present and actively involved, present but only observed, or even absent but still the focus of the intervention, as might be the case with drawing or speaking about animals in the context of an intake and assessment process (Chandler, 2012). A specific intervention may be premised on attachment theory (Rockett, & Carr, 2014; Wanser et al., 2019), a biopsychosocial framework (Miles, 2014), or the biophilia hypothesis, which posits that humans have a natural affinity for other living things and a need too affiliate with life (Wilson, 1984).

Animal-assisted interventions have been used in airports to help travelers de-stress (Salgado, 2017); courtroom settings to accompany children; schools, to reduce children’s stress and increase their motivation, focus, and task persistence (Jalongo, 2018); medical centers and hospitals, to reduce pre- and post-treatment anxiety (Calcaterra et al., 2015; Uglow, 2019); prison systems, as a means of providing vocational training to prisoners and to retrain behaviorally challenged shelter dogs (Corleto, 2018); and with veterans to assist in their recovery from posttraumatic stress disorder (McKissock, 2018).

3.2. Animal-related grief and bereavement

The loss of a pet or animal can lead to grief and mourning, just as the loss of a friend, family member or loved one can. Social workers can support their clients by providing support during the animal’s illness and treatment and during the process of decisionmaking regarding treatment

possibilities. The veterinary social worker can be present with the client during the animal's euthanasia or natural death, holding space for the client to grieve and process the animal's death. The social worker may also facilitate pet support groups.

The support of the social worker to the human client in this context cannot be overstated. Individuals may not find the emotional support and comfort that they need from their friends or family members, who may not have as close a relationship with the animal or who do not view the animal as a family member.

3.3. The link between animal and human maltreatment

Parallel to interpersonal violence, violence against animals may occur within a family system. The term "battered pet syndrome" has been used to refer to the intentional harm of an animal, which may include intentional neglect; the infliction of pain, distress, or injury; or malicious killing (McGuinness et al., 2005). Abuse may be physical, social, emotional, or sexual or may be neglectful in nature. Abuse may include burns, lacerations, gunshot wounds, poisoning, injury to genitalia, bruising, and fractures; neglect refers to a failure to attend to an animal's needs, such as the need for food and water, socialization, shelter or medical care, as well as hoarding and abandonment (McGuinness et al., 2005). One survey found that the pets of 71 percent of the domestic violence victim participants had been abused by the perpetrators of the partner violence (Humane Society of the United States, 2021). Perpetrators of the violence may abuse or threaten to abuse the animals in the home as a result of unrealistic expectations of animals' behavior or as a strategy to upset or control other family members, including children. Many children may risk their own safety in an effort to shield their pets from harm. However, children who are repeatedly exposed to animal abuse may become desensitized to animal suffering and, learning to accept it, become more likely to engage in animal abuse themselves (Monsalve et al., 2017).

Children who abuse animals may have been abused themselves. Further, engaging in animal abuse or observing animal abuse is one of the strongest predictors of children's engagement in interpersonal violence and animal abuse later in life. Researchers conducting a United Kingdom birth cohort study of several thousand twins reported on the basis of parental reports that approximately 6 percent of young children and 1.5 percent of children over the age of 10 had abused animals. Those who did so were approximately three times more likely to have been abused themselves,

compared to their counterparts who did not abuse animals (McEwen et al., 2014).

Anywhere from 25 percent to more than 86 percent of women in domestic violence shelters may have had their animals abused by the perpetrators of the intimate partner violence (Monsalve et al., 2017). Intimate partner violence may occur not only in the context of heterosexual marriages, but also in the context of same-sex relationships and in dating relationships, and may be either unidirectional or bidirectional (Straus, 2008).

Trained veterinary social workers are aware of the link between animal and human abuse and of indications that abuse is occurring. Social workers are encouraged to report concerns for family systems, including animal members, in locales that have established reporting mechanisms. Ideally, a systems infrastructure should allow and encourage cross-reporting across multiple domains, e.g., social services, law enforcement, and facilitate collaboration between humane agents, social welfare and animal welfare systems, law enforcement, veterinary care personnel, and allied human service professionals (Vincent et al., 2019).

Many veterinarians across multiple countries are aware of the link between animal abuse and family violence (Munro & Thrusfield, 2001a, b, c). Nevertheless, some veterinarians may not report the abuse due to uncertainty as to whether the abuse was accidental or intentional and/or their belief that education of the owner would result in a better outcome (Kogan et al., 2017). Additionally, there have been concerns expressed regarding the potential for reporting efforts to lead to a reduction in business (Landau, 1999).

3.4. Compassion fatigue and conflict resolution

Veterinary social workers are trained to serve as mediators in caring for people who care for animals. In this role, the social worker maintains neutrality and holds space for challenging conversations, such as those involving the appropriate care for animals, treatment procedures, and end-of-life decisionmaking.

3.4.1. Compassion fatigue

Individuals who work with animals may do so in the context of animal health, animal welfare, or biomedical research. Animal health includes the examination of animals and the diagnosis of and care for conditions affecting them. Individuals employed in animal welfare may investigate allegations of abuse or neglect, rescue lost or abandoned animals, or trap feral cats for their neutering and return. Individuals engaged in

biomedical research are responsible for the care and welfare of animals that are used in research. Work in each of these domains has the potential to expose the animal care provider to trauma in connection with their work (Rohlf, 2018). Individuals may experience stress associated with their dual responsibilities to care for animals and to euthanize them (Andrukonis & Protopopova, 2020), as well as circumstances encountered in many employment settings, e.g., limited resources, conflicts with co-workers, and long hours. Individuals may experience compassion fatigue as the result of their exposure to the animals' trauma, pain, and suffering (secondary traumatic stress) and burnout, a feeling of exhaustion, negativism, and reduced effectiveness as a result of the mismatch between high job demands and relatively few resources to meet those demands (Maslach et al., 1996; Mastenbroek et al., 2012).

It is unclear whether veterinary care providers in societies with fewer animal protections are more or less likely to experience burnout, trauma, or compassion fatigue. As an example, animal cruelty is more common in Romania than in many other countries within the European Union (Barberá, 2020) and there are few legal protections for the welfare of wild, domestic, companion, and farm animals (World Animal Protection, 2020). It is possible that veterinary care providers in such contexts may experience increased levels of distress as a result of witnessing the injuries caused by the abuse. Alternatively, if they have become desensitized to the abuse, they may experience lesser levels of distress in comparison with their counterparts in other countries who have not witnessed a high prevalence of abuse and have not become desensitized to it.

Attention to compassion fatigue among veterinary care providers is critically needed. A 2014 survey of more than 11,000 veterinarians in the United States found that 9 percent experienced serious psychological distress, almost one-third suffered from depressive episodes, and almost one-fifth had experienced suicidal ideation after their completion of veterinary school (Nett et al., 2015). The underlying stresses often reflect a convergence of multiple factors, including a high debt load due to education expenses, cyberbullying and harassment, the demand by owners to euthanize their animals with treatable conditions because they cannot afford or will not pay for the necessary care, and lack of a healthy work-life balance (Chan, 2019). Poor psychological health has also been found in a sizable proportion of veterinarians in Australia, Belgium, and Finland (Fritschi et al., 2009; Hansez et al., 2008; Reijula et al., 2003). A number of factors were implicated, including client expectations, professional and social isolation, and unexpected veterinary outcomes (Hatch et al., 2011). Increased rates of

suicide have also been noted among veterinarians in Scotland, England, Wales, and Australia (Bartram & Baldwin, 2010; Jones-Fairnie et al., 2008).

Veterinary social workers may help to reduce the likelihood that veterinary care personnel will experience compassion fatigue and to ameliorate it if individuals do experience it. They may work with the management/administration of a practice or organization to reorganize the procedures and develop policies designed to reduce the likelihood that individuals will experience burnout. Programs can be developed to increase awareness of the warning signs of secondary trauma and burnout. They may also teach personnel strategies to enhance communication and support within the organization and for individuals to practice self-care. Importantly, they may provide individuals struggling to cope with needed referrals to mental health professionals. Unburdened (<https://www.unburdened.online/>) is one example of a program that is designed to help reduce stress and burnout in veterinary medicine through the collaborative efforts of psychologists, a social worker and a veterinarian, working together to deliver a series of skill-building stress reduction workshops to veterinary care providers.

3.4.2. Conflict resolution

Conflict may arise in many situations that confront a veterinary social worker. One common example of such conflicts occurs in the context of a veterinary practice and decisionmaking regarding the proper course of treatment for a specific animal. The American Veterinary Medical Association (2021) advises veterinarians to use their skills and knowledge for “the protection of animal health and welfare, the prevention and relief of animal suffering, the conservation of animal resources, the promotion of public health, and the advancement of medical knowledge.” The United Kingdom’s Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Surgeons (Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, 2021) declares that “[v]eterinary surgeons must make animal health and welfare their first consideration when attending to animals.” However, veterinary surgeons are also told to “be open and honest with clients and respect their needs and requirements.” Conflict may occur in some situations because the veterinarian may feel that he or she should advocate with the owner for a higher standard of care for the animal, but the owner may disagree because he or she does not have the financial resources to approve that course of treatment or may not share the veterinarian’s perspective. In other situations, the veterinarian may feel that it is in the best interest of the animal patient to offer euthanasia because of the extent of the animal’s suffering, but the human owner refuses, arguing

that they are not ready to accept the animal's death and wish to continue care to preserve the animal's life. These situations may raise conflicts not only between what an owner wants and what the veterinarian recommends, but also for the veterinarian's moral self. The veterinarian may experience internal conflict because of the difficulty inherent in efforts to reconcile the needs of the human client with those of the animal patient (Morgan & McDonald, 2007).

4. Ethical challenges in veterinary social work practice

Significant ethical issues may arise in the context of social work practice with animals and humans. Many of these ethical issues are not new to social work, e.g., concerns regarding confidentiality and privacy, the mandated reporting of abuse and neglect in jurisdictions that require that social workers report suspected abuse to designated authorities, and boundary crossings and violations. Some ethical issues, although not new in social work practice and research, take on particular aspects in the context of veterinary social work.

Despite social work's call to action (Sterman & Bussert, 2020), few, if any, codes of social work ethics acknowledge the role of animals in the lives of clients or in social work practice or research, and do not address the ethical responsibilities that come with working with animals. Additionally, while Western systems typically have legal and procedural processes in place to support reporting and procedural justice for both humans and animals, many jurisdictions and territories lack such mechanisms and/or the necessary law enforcement processes necessary to support them. Under such circumstances, we cannot demand adherence to Western codes of ethics for social work practice as there may be no authority to place a report, refer, or resource. Cross-disciplinary infrastructures for social services, even if they do exist, may be limited in what they can accomplish for a client or community. Accordingly, we argue for the worldwide and unifying practice of legislative advocacy, without which there may be no mechanism and no structure to report to or through which services can be provided.

A violation of the requirement that social workers practice only at the level and within the scope of their competence may occur less obviously in the context of veterinary social work. In the usual course of social work practice, as an example, a social worker who works only with adults would likely recognize that he or she does not have the level of competence necessary to work with children, absent additional training and consultation with someone who may be more experienced. However, in the context of veterinary social work, a well-meaning social worker might mistakenly

believe that involving their pet dog in the provision of psychotherapy with clients does not require additional training because, after all, it is their own dog and the social worker has been providing psychotherapy to clients for years.

However, one's own relationship with one's pet is far different than involving that same animal in a psychotherapeutic process. One's dog, for example, may be calm and peaceful in its own home setting, but may become distressed in chaotic, noisier environments, such as in a school or hospital. In the context of providing animal-assisted therapy, the clinician is responsible for the well-being of both the humans and the animals involved and must, accordingly, continually assess their safety, welfare, and emotional well-being (Parish-Plass, 2013; Winston, 2015a; 2015b). A social worker who has not received adequate training to provide a safe and structured intervention, or who does not have adequate experience to recognize signs from either their animal or their human client that suggest distress, may be practicing outside of the scope of their competence.

Conflicts of interest may also surface in less conventional ways in the context of veterinary social work. A veterinary social worker employed by a private veterinary practice or hospital may be consulted by other employees for referrals to mental health services, or even other services. A conflict of interest arises if the social worker refers them only to his or her own private practice; the social worker is then both the employee's peer, or possibly their supervisor, as well as their therapist. A less direct conflict occurs, albeit still a conflict of interest, if the social worker were to profit from his or her provision of mental health services by getting care for their animals at no cost by the same providers they are supporting in the veterinary clinic.

5. Current research directions

Research in the area of veterinary social work reflects the interdisciplinary nature of the subspecialty. As examples, research in the area of intimate partner violence and animal abuse often involves multidisciplinary teams that comprise professionals in veterinary social work, law, and veterinary medicine (Collins et al., 2018). Similar interdisciplinary efforts are evident in research related to insurance and equine-assisted services (Ballard et al., 2021) and social work and veterinary science (Holcombe et al., 2016).

Significant research has been conducted in the area of animal-assisted interventions. Examples of this research include investigation into the behavioral effects of equine therapy among children diagnosed with

autism and interventions with dogs and horses designed to ameliorate depression among older adults (Moga, in press).

Much of the research focusing on animal-related grief and bereavement has been in the area of grief subsequent to the death of the animal, while a lesser body of work has examined anticipatory grief (Moga, in press). Research has also focused on the extent to which veterinary personnel experience grief following the death of an animal in practice (Dow et al., 2019) and the receipt of training to address end-of-life decisionmaking (Dickinson, 2019; Littlewood et al., 2020). Growing bodies of research are focusing on the link between human and animal maltreatment and the well-being, or lack thereof, of veterinary care providers.

6. Professionalization and association

Formal education can begin at the outset of social work or aligned mental health education. Currently, the University of Tennessee, Knoxville offers the only Veterinary Social Work Certificate Program worldwide and the only one to offer education in the four domains of the link between human and animal maltreatment, grief and loss, compassion fatigue, and animal-assisted interventions. The veterinary social work certificate program is a collaboration between the School of Veterinary Medicine and the School of Social Work. To expand access, the program became fully virtual in 2019 and is engaged in efforts to offer satellite campus development worldwide. A second certificate program, the Veterinary Human Support Certificate, was launched in 2019 to provide similar education to professionals who are interested in the human-animal bond, but work predominantly with animals, rather than humans (University of Tennessee, Knoxville, n.d.). Other institutions also offer certificate programs related to veterinary social work, but these programs generally focus on a specialty area or on animal assisted interventions with a specific species. As an example, the University of Denver offers a certificate program focused on animal-assisted interventions.

There are three primary considerations for the professionalization of veterinary social work in the context of employment: the education of practitioners, the scope of the professional role, and animal training and welfare. The establishment of a formal educational training process facilitates the establishment, maintenance, and continual improvement of the standards of practice and the professionalization of the field. As the scope of the field continues to grow in breadth and depth, the transdisciplinary nature of veterinary social work practice has become increasingly evident. Practice is inherently interdisciplinary as those trained in veterinary social work gain

education at the nexus of veterinary medicine and social work. Education and research often rely on transdisciplinary professional teams (Vincent et al., 2020).

Professionals working within the veterinary social work space are supported by an international association, the International Association of Veterinary Social Work (IAVSW), founded in 2020. The organization, which is open to members of all professions engaged in activities involving animal-human relations, seeks to provide community connection, education, and practice standards and to serve as the common resource for all veterinary social work professionals. A second entity will support a credentialing process to transition the certification of education towards a certified professional.

7. Future directions

Although the profession of social work acknowledges and responds to diversity, and codes of social work suggest that social workers are to understand and welcome diversity, the subspecialty of veterinary social work itself lacks significant diversity with respect to sex, race, ethnicity, and nationality. Additional outreach is needed within the social work profession and to students contemplating social work as a career to make them aware of this subspecialty and encourage and support their development and participation in this field.

Veterinary social work as a subspecialty is not recognized in many countries and accessibility to training is limited. As of this writing, The University of Tennessee, Knoxville is the only institution worldwide that offers a veterinary social work certificate program. Although the program is now completely virtual, it is still not universally accessible or recognized. Expansion of training opportunities to additional institutions and additional countries is critically needed in order to address the needs of both humans and animals at the interface of human and animal interaction.

There are various areas of clinical practice that have not received adequate attention. First, as indicated above, ethics codes governing the practice of social work, both national codes across a wide range of countries and international codes as well, have failed to address social worker responsibilities for the well-being of animal collaborators. Additionally, relatively few jurisdictions worldwide require social workers to report animal abuse that they see or suspect among their clients. Although codes of ethics are often viewed as aspirational in nature, they establish expectations for those practicing in the profession. They also provide a level of assurance to

individuals seeking services that their provider will accord them, their family members—including their animal members—and their communities the respect and level of care that are owed to them.

Second, forensic veterinary social work has often focused on individuals' maltreatment of animals and the underlying reasons for their behavior. However, it is likely that veterinary social workers will be increasingly called upon in court cases involving (1) separation and divorce—who is most attached to the animal and, because animals are generally considered to be property, to whom should the animal be awarded—(2) cases involving child custody—how attached is a particular child to the family animal(s), should the animal be awarded to the parent receiving custody, and what happens to the animal if child custody is to be shared—and (3) the potential for child maltreatment in homes that are suspected of having perpetrated animal abuse, neglect, or hoarding. Veterinary social workers may also find themselves playing an increasingly important role in the context of administrative hearings to determine whether an individual is entitled to disability benefits.

Third, increased advocacy efforts are needed across countries to increase knowledge and understanding among both professionals and the general public regarding the animal-human bond and the need to protect the human, the animal, and their relationship. This work can be undertaken jointly by mental health professionals and veterinary care and welfare professionals, reflecting the multidisciplinary nature of the veterinary social work.

Too, we have relatively little knowledge about various issues that are directly relevant to veterinary social work. Research is urgently needed to address issues such as:

- The extent to which veterinary social work interventions may facilitate the retention of veterinary technicians and nurses
- The effectiveness of veterinary social workers and interventional approaches in addressing compassion fatigue, including burnout and depression, among veterinarians and other veterinary personnel
- Approaches to facilitate the integration of veterinary social workers into the healthcare team, both for humans and animals
- The roles that veterinary social workers might play in less traditional settings, such as animal shelters, equine facilities, zoos, and municipal animal control agencies

- Strategies to expand access to veterinary social work services, which entails expanding access to veterinary care for lower-income pet owners
- The extent to which variations and similarities exist across populations with respect to their conceptualization of animal maltreatment, their existing infrastructures to support human clients and their animals, and their actual or potential acceptance of veterinary social work services
- Pet owner experiences with veterinary social work.

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