

THE ROLE OF ANIMAL-ASSISTED INTERVENTIONS IN ANTI-OPPRESSIVE SOCIAL
WORK PRACTICE

by

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ABSTRACT

The Role of Animal-Assisted Interventions in Anti-Oppressive Social Work Practice
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This study explores the role that animal-assisted interventions (AAI) can play in anti-oppressive social work practice. A review of relevant literature has shows that while AAI have been demonstrated over time to have many benefits for service users, these types of interventions remain neglected by social work scholarship, and the relationship between AAI and anti-oppressive practice (AOP) has yet to be explored through research. Engaging a critical, AOP, and ecofeminist approach, this study uses qualitative methodology to explore the research question, “What role can animal-assisted interventions play in anti-oppressive social work practice?” Ultimately, this study confirms that AAI practitioners have found their approaches to be congruent with an anti-oppressive approach to social work practice. Data and themes which support this finding, as well as implications for the field of social work and recommendations for future research, are explored.

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DEDICATION

For D, who taught me all about the potential impact of involving other-than-human animals in social work practice, and continues to remind me how lucky I am to share my life with many beautiful creatures.

For Atlas and Stella, whose lives were dedicated to supporting humans, and who passed on too soon.

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CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Prior to moving to Toronto in September of 2012, I worked as a front-line social work practitioner with youth experiencing homelessness in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Because she was certified as a therapy dog, I was able to bring my adopted greyhound, D, with me to my place of work. The youth formed a relationship with D quickly, and I was flooded with stories about the animals in their lives. It was obvious that to many of the youth, animals played a significant role in their social lives and family structures. That D was able to facilitate the relationship-building process between myself and the youth was relatively unsurprising. This particular benefit of involving animals in therapeutic practice has been documented as far back as Levinson (1962), who wrote one of the earliest available articles on the subject of animal-assisted interventions. Involving D in my practice challenged not only the hierarchy that existed between me and the youth, but also the dominant discourses about what important relationships are, and what defines a friend or a family member.

My academic interest centres on anthropocentrism in the social services and the field of social work, as well as the interactions between humans and other-than-human (OTH) animals in shared social environments. I am inspired and influenced by scholars in the field of critical animal studies, and by activists in the animal welfare, animal rights, and animal citizenship movements. I am also influenced by those scholars in social work who share my interest in this subject matter, and who have laid the groundwork for the research that I hope to undertake in the future.

It is a tenet of anti-oppressive (AOP) social work that all people are subject to the effects of the dynamics of oppression and privilege in our society, what bell hooks (2000) has described as the “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (p. 90). These dynamics serve to benefit some people based on their social locations, and marginalize others. Anthropocentrism, sometimes referred to as a “humancentric” perspective (Risley-Curtiss, Zilney, and Hornung,

2010), is defined by Hanrahan (2011) as the prioritization of humans over other animals, nature, and the planet, and it is described as the “central organizing feature of western social work” (p. 278). Mullaly “explains that discourses are the ‘delivery systems’ for political perspectives that reflect the interests of those in dominance and help to reproduce social inequities through current social and political power arrangements” (Heron, 2005, p. 343). The discourse of anthropocentrism contributes, along with other social discourses, to a constructed social hierarchy, in which humans are the highest valued subjects.

Not all human subjects are constructed as equals. Systems of power, oppression, and marginalization produce some human subjects that are more privileged than others. The most valued of us in Eurowestern society all is the ideal neoliberal subject, described by Davies (2005) as a person who operates within the terms of dominant discourses (p. 8). The pervasive nature of this potentially unattainable ideal of the neoliberal subject exacerbates the effects of anthropocentrism, as well as other forms of marginalization, in social work, and, more broadly, in society at large. In this oppressive system, anyone who is unable to strive toward the embodiment of this ideal neoliberal subject with adequate zeal is characterized as the “Other”. This notion of “othering” is central to anthropocentrism, as well as neoliberal systems of surveillance and control. Risley-Curtiss, Zilney, and Hornung (2010) state that, “A continuing barrier [...] is the issue of humancentric bias in many human service fields, among both staff and academics. This bias often takes the form of dismissing animals and their importance in the lives of humans despite a large interdisciplinary body of research demonstrating evidence to the contrary” (p. 78). Hanrahan (2011) adds to this, stating, “At the centre of the western civilizing mission is the effort to tame and control the 'other,' which throughout history has meant oppression and exploitation of women, non-Whites, children, other-than-human animals, nature, and other environments” (p. 283).

In this study, I will focus on animal-assisted interventions (AAI), and the role that they play in anti-oppressive social work practice. As I discuss in the literature review below, this is a topic that has yet to be explored in scholarly literature in any significant depth or breadth. In this investigation, I operationalize a critical, qualitative approach - conducting semi-structured interviews with social work practitioners who are familiar with anti-oppressive practice (AOP), who have an understanding of the various intersecting forms of oppression, and who employ AAI in their practice. With this study, I hope to begin a concerted investigation of the issue of anthropocentrism in social work through an exploration of the emerging field of AAI and human animal bond (HAB) in social work.

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature Search Strategies

I have invested significantly in researching and learning about the intersection between other-than-human animals and the field of social work. In order to conduct the literature review for this study, I began with a course syllabus developed by Robin Greene for a directed reading class about social work and nonhuman animals, supervised by Dr. Cassandra Hanrahan at Dalhousie University. I used several readings that were selected for that course, as well as articles written by Hanrahan herself, and others that she recommended, as my starting point for this literature review. Other professors with relevant expertise also supported me in my literature search. Next, I carried out a more traditional literature review, relying on research databases including Social Work Abstracts, Social Service Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts, PsycInfo, PsycARTICLES, and Academic Search Premier. From all of the sources described here, I focused my reading on literature relevant specifically to AAI and social work, as well as literature that seemed to be theoretically progressive.

AAI Literature: Scope and Limitations

The body of literature which exists on AAI is limited in some ways. Not only is the quantity of literature on this topic lacking in comparison to what has been written about other interventions, but what does exist is somewhat limited in scope. These limitations are identified in Wolf (2000), Hanrahan (2013), Risley-Curtiss, Rogge, and Kawam (2013), and Dell et al. (2011). The existing literature that is relevant to both AAI and social work comes from a wide range of disciplines, and belongs to a variety of theoretical frameworks. The dominant strains of literature in this field are works from biomedical or clinical perspective (Altschuler, 1999; Brodie & Biley, 1998; O'Callaghan & Chandler, 2011; Fine, 2010; Fine, 2011; Geist, 2011; Jaspersen, 2010; Levinson, 1962; Marcus, 2013; O'Haire, 2010; Odendaal, 2000; Parish-Plass, 2008; Pollack, 2009; Reichert, 1998; Sable, 1995; Siegel, 2011; Walsh, 2009a; Walsh, 2009b).

The majority of these articles are quantitative and come from the fields of psychology and psychiatry, with the exception of Pollack (2009), a mixed-methods social work study. These authors explore the effectiveness of AAI and the role of OTH animals in clinical settings and treatment. In some of these articles, AAI are framed as a prescription, or treatment. Odendaal (2000) is unique in its problematic framing of AAI, posing the question, “Animal-assisted therapy – magic or medicine?” This artificial binary is not representative of dominant perceptions of AAI, which are neither purely mysterious nor fully scientifically quantifiable in nature. There is also a significant body of literature that uses ecological, structural, or person-in-environment theoretical frameworks. (Netting, Wilson, and New, 1987; Risley-Curtiss, Holley, and Wolf, 2006; Risley-Curtiss, Holley, and Kodiene, 2011; Risley-Curtiss, Rogge, and Kawam, 2013, Mallon, 1994; Putney, 2012; Slatter, Lloyd, and King, 2012; Villalta-Gil et al., 2009; Wesley, Minatrea, and Watson, 2009; Wigget-Barnard and Steel, 2008). These articles are not exclusively focused on quantitative analysis, however this approach remains dominant. While most of the clinical literature originated from the field of psychology, the literature based on this framework is broader in scope, and there is some representation from social work as well. The research represented here tends to focus on relationships between humans and other animals, as well as HAB, in clinical and social environments. Further, these articles begin to focus on specific human populations that experience differing degrees of marginalization, including people of colour and queer communities. Other theoretical frameworks sparsely represented in the literature on AAI reviewed for this study included psychosocial and indigenous (Dell et al., 2011), feminist and anti-racist (Risley-Curtiss, Holley, and Wolf, 2006), and critical and anti-oppressive (Hanrahan, 2013; Faver, 2009; Ryan, 2011; Burgon, 2011), and these will be discussed in more detail later in this section.

The variety of epistemological paradigms represented in this body of literature is also limited. Moosa-Mitha (2005) offers a basic list of epistemological paradigms in social

sciences research, including liberal, positivist, Marxist, feminist, postmodern, and critical or anti-oppressive (p. 40-67). I would describe the majority of the articles examined here as operating from positivist or interpretivist paradigms, with few exceptions. As identified above, Dell et al. (2011), Adams (1994), Hanrahan (2013), Faver (2009), Ryan (2011), Burgon (2011), and Risley-Curtiss, Holley, and Wolf (2006) represented a greater diversity of epistemological paradigms, including indigenous, critical, AOP, anti-racist, and feminist. This is problematic, as there is low representation of the most current and progressive research paradigms, particularly AOP, postmodern, and critical. It is evident that there is space in the literature relative to this field of study for more radical and progressive literature.

It is an essential observation that the majority of the literature explored here originates from the metropole, as described by Connell (2007). “Metropole” (and its counterpart, “periphery”) are terms used to designate global divisions between those locations where there is a “long-lasting pattern of inequality in power, wealth and cultural influence that grew historically out of European and North American imperialism” (p. 212). The literature that exists in this field originates almost exclusively from an American context (Bekoff, 2007 and 2008; Black, 2012; Donohue, 2005; Faver, 2009; Geist, 2011; Jaspersen, 2010; Lasher, 1998; Levinson, 1962 and 1984; Marcus 2013; Netting, Wilson, & New, 1987; Risley-Curtiss, Holley, & Wolf, 2006; Sable, 1995 and 2013; Siegel, 2011; Walsh, 2009a and 2009b; Wolf, 2000; Gonski, 1985; Jalongo, Astorino, and Bomboy, 2004; Monsen, 2001; Kahn et al., 2008; Peacock, 1984; Gee et al., 2009; Rew, 2000; Sobo, Eng, and Kassity-Krich, 2006; Esteves and Stokes, 2008; Kurdek, 2009; Reichert, 1998; Mallon, 1994). Other than American perspectives, there are some studies from other metropole locations: Burgon (2011) is a study out of the UK; Odendaal (2000) and Wigget-Barnard and Steel (2008) are from South Africa; Slatter, Lloyd, and King (2012) from Australia. This is indicative of the obvious dominance of the Eurocentric, Western perspective in the literature explored for this study. Significantly, all of these are either colonized societies or parent

states of colonized societies. This is also true of the few articles that present a Canadian perspective (Dell et al., 2011; Hanrahan, 2011; Hanrahan, 2013; Zilney and Zilney, 2005). While it is clear that this an emerging and innovative area of study within the Canadian context, nevertheless the primarily Eurocentric perspective offered by the literature relative to this field of study remains.

A final limitation which I feel is significant is the lack of regard for the other-than-human (OTH) animals involved in all of these studies and articles. Although this is beyond the scope of my MRP in some respects, it is relevant because of my interest in pursuing future research on this topic. Going forward, it would be necessary to critically explore issues of anthropocentrism and speciesism and the inherent privileging of humans over other animals based solely on their species membership. This is a crucial dynamic of social work practice involving animals (Putney, 2012, p. 4; Ryan, 2011, p. 2-3; Wolf, 2000, p. 90-91), and the direct benefits and detriments experienced by human service users have yet to be examined in social work research. This issue as it relates to social work practice has been tackled in theoretical literature (Hanrahan, 2011), however it has not been studied directly. The voices of animals, who are not only essential to these interventions, but also to this research, are completely missing from the body of literature reviewed for this study. While all of these articles have some discussion of the “population” involved in each study, only Burgon (2011) includes the animals involved in her study in this discussion. In all of the other studies here, they are referred to by the researchers only by their species designation (ie., dog, cow, horse), and are thus objectified. It is arguable that this preferential treatment of humans over animals can be detrimental to our practice as social workers, and although it is beyond the scope of this study to discuss this more fully, this is something that needs to be more thoroughly considered in future research.

Benefits of AAI

Despite the need for ongoing research on AAI in social work practice, particularly in AOP and critical social work, the evidence presented in the existing literature seems to overwhelmingly support the effectiveness of AAI generally. There is a vast body of literature on the positive benefits of the human-animal bond (HAB) (Barker, et al., 2003; Black, 2012; Hanrahan, 2013; Mallon, 1994; Putney, 2012; Risley-Curtiss, Holley, & Wolf, 2006; Risley-Curtiss, 2010; Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006). Many other sources delve specifically into the benefits of AAI (Burton, 2011; Dell et al., 2006; Wiggett-Barnard & Steel, 2008; Levinson, 1962; Levinson, 1984; Coleman, Hall, and Hay, 2008; Breitenbach et al., 2009; Gonski, 1985; Hemsworth and Pizer, 2006; Jalongo, Astorino, and Bomboy, 2004; Peacock, 1984; Prothmann, Ettrich, and Prothmann, 2009; Gee et al., 2009; Rew, 2000; Sobo, Eng, and Kassity-Krich, 2006; Esteves and Stokes, 2008; Kurdek, 2009; Reichert, 1998). Fine (2010) offers a succinct compilation and discussion of the documented therapeutic benefits of AAI for service users in a social work context, as discussed in many of the aforementioned articles. They are described in four categories, which are: (1), effects on loneliness, (2), socializing effects, (3), motivating effects, and (4), physiologic and calming effects (Fine, 2010, p. 64-73). Much of the literature also focuses on benefits for youth, for example, Levinson (1962) indicates that animals who participate in AAI can play many roles for young people, some of which are roles that are traditionally occupied only by other humans. Some of these include: companion, friend, servant, admirer, confidante, toy, team-mate, slave, scapegoat, mirror, trustee, and defender. Finally, the participation of an other-than-human animal in service provision was said to provide a sense of consistency, control, comfort, confidence and ability, and lowering of anxiety for young service users (Gonski, 1985; Reichert, 1998; Levinson, 1962; Levinson, 1984; Burton, 2011; Mallon, 1994; Kurdek, 2009). That these benefits would be so widely documented and supported is noteworthy, however, it is significant that the structural and systemic effects of these interventions and relationships have not been explored. Some scholars have asserted that it is

unreasonable, therefore, that the field of social work would continue to neglect these practice strategies in research (Hanrahan, 2011, 2013; Risley-Curtiss, 2010; Ryan, 2001; Wolf, 2000).

It is significant, however, that while there is mention of the limitations of these interventions, no article drew any negative conclusions about the use of AAI overall. Why, then, is this type of intervention represented so sparsely in the literature, and employed so infrequently in practice? Levinson (1962) indicates that the role of an animal in any intervention is primarily psychological, not practical. It is also significant that many articles explore AAI as a useful “adjunct” to other forms of intervention, as opposed to advocating for AAI as primary interventions (Sobo, Eng, and Kassity-Krich, 2006; Esteves and Stokes, 2008; Jalongo, Astorino, and Bomboy, 2004; Reichert, 1998; Levinson, 1984). The capitalist, neoliberal roots of this value of the practical are obvious. Practicing social work in our political climate means seeking reportable outcomes that result in funding. Many of the benefits of AAI, as documented above, are difficult to report in a quantifiable way. The emotional benefits of AAI are not easily measurable, particularly in terms of provision of statistics to funders and other stakeholders. The services which we offer, even as critical practitioners, are subject to this kind of demand. Thus, we tend to offer services which will guarantee us continued funding, as well as efficient “results”. By complying with this, we operate within the terms of the dominant discourses in our profession and our society, instead of seeking innovative and creative practice solutions that may be powerful in other ways.

AAI Literature: Significant Works

The article by Dell et al. (2011) is significant not only because of its Canadian context, but also because of its unique theoretical perspective. This study explored a culturally relevant equine-assisted learning program for Aboriginal youth seeking treatment for addictions. HAB and the Aboriginal worldview were foundational for this study, as researchers attempted to distance themselves from the traditional biomedical model of AAI. Dell et al. (2011) found that

this type of intervention resulted in the creation of therapeutic and spiritual relationships between OTH animals and human participants in the program, the opportunity for youth to engage in non-verbal communication with the horses, and in experiences of authentic occurrence between all parties involved, including experiences of positive physical touch between human and equine participants. Risley-Curtiss, Holley, and Wolf (2006) explored this topic from a feminist and anti-racist perspective, and drew links between race and ethnicity, beliefs about OTH companion animals, and pet ownership practices. This study concluded that people who identified as Indigenous were the most likely to own pets, followed by people who identified as white, and that people of different ethnic backgrounds may prefer to engage with different types of animals. The most significant finding was that regardless of ethnic background or type of pet, all participants in this study indicated that their OTH companion animals were a source of support for them in their lives. Finally, Hanrahan (2013), Faver (2009), Ryan (2011), and Burgon (2011) are the only works that I am aware of that address this topic from critical or AOP perspectives. Hanrahan (2013) explores the knowledge and awareness of HAB among health care providers in Nova Scotia from a critical social work perspective, and found that “lack of preparation in human-animal interactions has serious implications for social work” (n.p.). Faver (2009) and Ryan (2011) are both based on a critical perspective. Faver (2009) discusses the links between animals and human spirituality from a social work perspective, while Ryan's (2011) book presents a detailed argument for the inclusion of OTH animals within social work frameworks in a variety of contexts, based on moral and philosophical considerations. Finally, Burgon (2011) also explores equine-assisted learning and therapy, and is the only literature on any kind of AAI that is written from an AOP perspective that I was able to locate over the course of my extensive literature review. As Burgon writes, “Themes related to the risk and resilience literature such as self-confidence, self-esteem, self-efficacy and a sense of mastery, empathy and the opening of positive opportunities are explored [...]” (p. 165).

Another dynamic of this small body of literature that should be discussed is the proportionately large presence of the work of Christina Risley-Curtiss. Risley-Curtiss is an associate professor at Arizona State University, and her academic interest is in “the link between animal cruelty and human violence, animal assisted social work, and other animal-human connections” (Arizona Board of Regents, 2010, n.p.). She is one of the foremost researchers in the field of social work with animals, but this is also a very limited cohort, and relatively speaking her body of work in this field is sizable. In preparation for this study, I read five pieces for which she was the principal author, and other works examined here are co-authored by her, or, in the case of Putney (2012) and Hanrahan (2013) for example, are influenced by her in some way. Risley-Curtiss has examined the meaning of the HAB between a variety of human populations and the OTH companion animals involved in their lives. In the works explored for this study, she focused on HAB in racialized populations (Risley-Curtiss, Holley, and Wolf, 2006), specifically with women of colour (Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006), men (Risley-Curtiss, Holley, and Kодиene, 2011), and social work practitioners (Risley-Curtiss, 2010). Most recently, she conducted a national study in the United States around factors affecting social workers' inclusion of OTH animals in practice (Risley-Curtiss, Rogge, and Kawam, 2013). Her theoretical perspective is typically ecological, and she tends to conduct research which can be classified as positivist and quantitative.

AAI Literature: Themes

The findings of the studies in the literature which I explored for this study were quite varied due to the fact that the studies came from an assortment of fields and approaches and had a broad range of research questions. Despite this, there are some themes that emerge, some of which are specific to experiences of service users, and others which are more related to the structural elements of service provision. These themes include the effects of HAB on humans;

the benefits and effectiveness of AAI; the prevalence of involvement of OTH animals in social work practice; finally, organizational dynamics of involving animals in social work.

The first two themes which I have mentioned are more relevant to direct practice with service users. Many studies presented evidence around the effects of animal guardianship on humans (Ascione, Weber, and Wood, 1997; Barker et al., 2003; Black, 2012; Burgess-Jackson, 1998; Coleman, Hall, and Hay, 2008; Cooke, 2011; Donohue, 2005; Duvall Antonacopoulos, 2008; Faver, 2009; Faver and Strand, 2003; Fitzgerald, 2007; Flynn, 2000; Guéguen and Ciccotti, 2008; Hemsworth and Pizer, 2006; Kurdek, 2009; McNicholas and Collis, 2000; Mallon, 1994; Miller et al., 2009; Monsen, 2001; O'Haire, 2010; Putney, 2012; Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006; Risley-Curtiss, Holley, and Kodiene, 2011; Sable, 1995; Sable, 2013; Siegel, 2011; Slatter, Lloyd, and King, 2012; Walsh, 2009a; Walsh, 2009b; Wigget-Barnard and Steele, 2008). These studies were predominantly positive. Some studies examined companion animals specifically, while others focused on service or therapeutic animals and their human guardians. Black (2012), which looked at youth living in a rural context, found that companion animal guardianship decreased loneliness in adolescents. The findings in Mallon (1994) were consistent with Black's study, which concludes, "Companion animals clearly provide social, emotional, and physical benefits for children" (p. 470). Several other studies discussed how animals contributed to various aspects of psychological well-being (Putney, 2012; Fitzgerald, 2007; Risley-Curtiss, Zilney, and Hornung, 2010; Ascione, Weber, and Wood, 1997; Flynn, 2000). Other studies indicated that companion animals played such a significant role in the lives of humans that they were viewed as members of the family (Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006; Risley-Curtiss, Holley, and Kodiene, 2011; Fitzgerald, 2007; Adams, 1994; Risley-Curtiss, Zilney, and Hornung, 2010; Ascione, Weber, and Wood, 1997; Flynn, 2000). Wigget-Barnard and Steel (2008), a study that focused on service animal guardianship, indicated that although OTH animal companionship brought with it some added responsibility and lifestyle changes, there were also significant

benefits, such as companionship provided by the OTH animal, increased self-esteem and pride in owning and caring for an OTH animal, and that OTH animals can act as “absolute social magnets” (p. 1021). Slatter, Lloyd, and King's (2012) findings were congruent, although their study focused on people living without shelter. They found that although many people living without shelter are unable to accommodate animal guardianship, there are several benefits for those who are able to do so.

Other themes present in this literature are focused more on service provision and organizational aspects of AAI. Risley-Curtiss (2010) conducted a national study in the United States around social workers' inclusion of animals in their practice. She found that about one third of practitioners ask questions about animals during their intake processes, and that about one quarter use animals as part of their intervention strategies, largely without adequate education and training. Hanrahan (2013) conducted a similar study provincially in Nova Scotia, which had findings consistent with the American study. Both of these studies highlight a lack of awareness of HAB and other animal issues in social work practice and related research.

O'Callaghan and Chandler (2011) also had a service provision element, which indicated that AAI are used in a variety of settings and with a variety of populations. Risley-Curtiss, Rogge, and Kawam (2013) examined some of the factors that affect social workers' decision whether or not to include animals in their practice, and they found that social workers are slowly beginning to embrace HAB for client well-being, that social workers who know other social workers who include animals in their practice are more likely to do the same, and that practitioners who have a companion animal of their own are more likely to practice AAI.

Cross-reporting between humane societies and child welfare agencies is a final theme which involved the organizational dynamics of animal involvement in social work. Several studies found that there is a need for cross-reporting, differences in duty to report at the two organizations were highlighted, and partnerships between agencies involved in some studies

were strengthened through the research conducted (Zilney and Zilney, 2005; Risley-Curtiss, Zilney, and Hornung, 2010; Ascione, Weber, and Wood, 1997; Faver and Strand, 2003).

Impacts on the Research

As discussed above, although the benefits of AAI are well-documented, there remain significant gaps in the body of research that exists relevant to the topic of AAI and social work. Risley-Curtiss, Rogge, and Kawam (2013) identify a lack of discipline-specific literature around AAI in the human service professions, despite an abundance in other disciplines. Hanrahan (2013) corroborates this, stating, “Despite the extant research on HAB and human health, there remain significant gaps in the literature on how the health professions, including social work, respond to practice issues” (n.p.). In particular, it is clear that there is a lack of theoretically relevant literature within the field of AOP social work. This study responds to some of these gaps, in particular the lack of literature regarding AAI and the AOP theoretical framework. The research question for this study, which was developed as a response to the gaps in literature identified by this extensive literature review, is, “What role can animal-assisted interventions play in anti-oppressive social work practice?”

CHAPTER 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Payne (2005) defines “theory” as “an organized statement of ideas about the world” (p. 5). This loose definition may describe any number of theories that we use in our daily lives or our social work practice. As a researcher, academic, and social worker, I would identify my personal theoretical framework as encompassing several complementary approaches, including critical, anti-oppressive, and feminist theories. In acknowledging that no research is without bias, I recognize that this framework has inevitably influenced every aspect of this study, from its inception forward, and as such, it is necessary to explore its meaning and unearth some of the potential implications that it might have in the context of this research.

Gibbons and Gray (2004) suggest that the art of critical thinking, as an integral part of social work education and practice, encourages “assumptions to be unearthed and challenged” (p. 21). They go on to state, “When we encourage students to think critically we are inviting them to think creatively, to come up with new ideas and innovative ways of solving problems” (p. 22). This combination of challenging problematic assumptions and creative thinking is the basis upon which I build not only my theoretical framework for social work practice, but also the way that I approach the world. However, as Mullaly (2010) asserts, critical theory is distinctive in that unlike other theoretical models, is not a “singular or unified body of thought” (p. 18). Instead, it can be described as a “theory cluster” (Mullaly, 2010, p. 18), encompassing several related approaches, necessarily including a structural approach. Those who operate from a critical perspective understand social problems to be inextricably linked to the larger structures in society, and recognize that these structures are often the root cause of problems that manifest in many different ways. Mullaly (2010) writes, “Traditional critical social theory has always emphasized social structures as a major source of oppression” (p. 24). For this reason, social justice becomes a crucial element within this grouping of theories. This theoretical framework has appreciably shaped my research question from its very inception, causing me to

question the fundamental assumption that human beings are more valued in society than other species of animal, and leading me to an interest in anthropocentrism more generally, as well as in my professional field. As this study developed, my own critical perspective shaped how I chose and interpreted the literature that I worked with in my review. I gravitated more toward texts which took progressive approaches to the subject matter, and was driven to question literature which came from a biomedical perspective. My critical perspective also shaped my personal data collection process. Throughout this process, I attempted to engage in active self-reflection as much as possible in order to conduct my interviews effectively and ethically, and in order to manage the role that I played in the power dynamics that existed between myself and my research participants as much as possible. This theoretical framework also inevitably shaped the analysis of the data collected as part of this study, as well as the conclusions drawn, and this will be explored more thoroughly later.

I also embrace an AOP approach to this study, and this has shaped my research design. I have conceptualized anti-oppressive (AOP) social work as practice which aims to actively challenge aspects of various forms of oppression, as outlined in Young (2000), including exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. While AOP falls under the general umbrella of critical theories, it is a distinct approach, and due to my positionality as a student in an AOP-oriented school, it influenced this study in specific and significant ways. The AOP perspective has a very limited understanding of the topic of AAI at this moment in time. I would assert that this is largely due to the influence of anthropocentrism on not only the profession of social work, but the academic field as well. As acknowledged in the literature review, the topic of OTH animals and social work has been largely ignored by the academy. At this point in time, social work understands OTH animals involved in AAI as objects, and not subjects, in these interventions. There is no acknowledgement of speciesism as a legitimate form of oppression experienced by both humans and other animals in society. I would

assert that this lack of acknowledgement limits our current understanding of AAI as a practice strategy, and of the field of study of animals and social work as a whole.

The AOP perspective also had a significant influence on this study in terms of the approach taken to the study, specifically in terms of methodological considerations and design. Potts and Brown (2005) outline several theoretical considerations for conducting AOP research. The three key tenets are (1), it is social justice and resistance in process and outcome, (2), it recognizes that all knowledge is socially constructed and political, and (3), the research process is all about power and relationship (p. 260-263). This article also asserts that “if we are to transform research into an anti-oppressive practice, then it is the epistemological underpinnings (e.g., relationships of the knower, the known, and those who want to know) that are key” (p. 283). This sentiment resonated with me in particular, as a researcher who hopes to investigate and critique a community which I am personally involved in – that is to say, my professional community. In embracing the third tenet of this approach, it is necessary to examine my own positionality with regards to this research, and it is here that I have found Humphrey's (2007) notion of “insider-outsider” to be particularly relevant. Although my research participants are professionals in the field of social work rather than service users, our relationship will be impacted by the context of our interaction, a context in which I am constructed as having a level of power because of my status as researcher, and in which participants' knowledge may be constructed as less valid than my own because of their positionality as field practitioners rather than academics. Our relationship will also be impacted by my construction as less powerful, because of my age, my lack of experience, and my status as student as opposed to professional. In this project, in part because of hyphenated identities, the relationship between myself and my research participants is complex.

The ecofeminist framework has also influenced my personal perspective, as well as why I am drawn to conducting research in the area of social work and animals, and how I

frame issues in this areas. Based on feminist, peace, and ecological perspectives, Gaard (1993) asserts that the premise of ecofeminism is “that the ideology which authorizes oppressions such as those based on race, class, gender, sexuality, physical abilities, and species is the same ideology which sanctions the oppression of nature. Ecofeminism calls for an end to all oppressions, arguing that no attempt to liberate women (or any other oppressed group) will be successful without an equal attempt to liberate nature” (p. 1).

Additionally, the feminist framework has influenced my decision to settle on a qualitative, narrative, semi-structured data collection methodology. Bryman, Teevan, and Bell (2009) write that “unstructured and semi-structured interviewing are prominent in feminist research” (p. 175), and that qualitative methods are often operationalized in feminist research because of their potential to facilitate the realization of some of the goals prescribed by this theoretical framework. These goals can include “a high level of rapport between interviewer and interviewee, a high degree of reciprocity on the part of the interviewer, the perspective of the woman being interviewed, and a non-hierarchical relationship” (p. 176). These goals are complimentary to Potts and Brown's (2005) tenets of AOP research. Due to the scope of this study, as well as some practical considerations, not all of these goals were realized; however I looked to them as ideals and guidelines for the development of this project.

CHAPTER 4. METHODOLOGY

Taking into account the theoretical approaches which are mentioned above, I chose to use qualitative methodology for this study. I feel that by utilizing a qualitative approach in both my MRP and my future research, information that has yet to be documented through previous studies will be put on record. I base this theory on the work of Miller (1998), who suggested that key anecdotal information about the experiences of people is often lost through quantitative data collection methods. Without the limitations of the MRP, grounded theory may have been the best approach to address the questions posed in this study; however it would be impossible to achieve theoretical saturation with the data collected in four interviews. Therefore, for this exploratory study, I have drawn on Creswell's (2007) conceptualization of qualitative methods in designing this project in the hopes of laying the groundwork for this future research. Creswell (2007) states,

“Qualitative research begins with assumptions, a worldview, the possible use of a theoretical lens, and the study of research problems inquiring into the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is inductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, and a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and it extends the literature or signals a call for action” (p. 37).

I have attempted to take these aspects of qualitative methodology as well as my own theoretical influences into consideration in the design of this study.

Here, I would like to address a few of the key concepts explored in this study that warrant explanation. First, I have used a broad definition of AAI in this study, conceptualizing animal-assisted interventions (AAI) as any social work intervention involving a human service

user and an OTH animal. In some cases, the OTH animal involved is a trained “therapeutic” animal, while in other cases the OTH animal participants are companions to the social workers or service users involved. These interventions are facilitated or made possible through the involvement of OTH animals, and some involve interventions which simultaneously impact human and OTH animal service users. For the purposes of this study, I have defined social work practitioners as those who possess specifically social work credentials (BSW, MSW, RSW, PhD). It may also be worth noting that in this study, the language of other-than-human (OTH) animal will be used to designate any animal which comes from a species other than the human species. This language is commonly used in literature which aims to challenge anthropocentrism, and speciesism, or by complicating the assumption that the human species is implicitly distinct and more valued than other species of animals. In keeping with this, I will also be using the term OTH companion animal to designate parties which might otherwise be referred to as “pets,” and OTH animal therapist to designate OTH animals who actively contribute to AAI. Finally, I have chosen to use gender neutral pronouns in the report for this, as participants in were not asked to identify their gender at any point during recruitment or data collection.

As stated above, the research question explored in this study is, “What role can animal-assisted interventions play in anti-oppressive social work practice?” Individual, semi-structured, long-form interviewing was chosen as a data collection method in order to gain as thorough an understanding of the perspective of each participant as possible through qualitative research. This study is still exploratory, since this topic remains under-researched as the literature review has demonstrated. Using this methodology, the complexities of each person's experiences can be considered. Bryman, Teevan, and Bell (2009) state, “In semi- and unstructured interviews, the process is designed to bring out how the interviewees themselves interpret and make sense of issues and events” (p. 160). I aimed to be as flexible and adaptable as possible in my approach to each interview, in order to allow the participants to direct their narratives I viewed this study as

collaboration between myself and the professionals involved as participants: this is congruent with the tenets of AOP research as outlined by Potts and Brown (2005). The individual interviews took between 45 minutes and 75 minutes each.

The following interview guide was developed as a starting point. In order for participants to make the most informed decision possible about their involvement in this study, the interview guide was provided to them prior to their interview. This was in order to ensure that participants were aware of and comfortable with the subject matter prior to committing to and engaging in an interview with me. All participants reviewed the interview guide prior to scheduling an interview time, and none chose not to proceed with participating in the study.

1. What kind of interventions involving other-than-human animals do you use in your social work practice?
2. Why do you choose to use these types of interventions in your practice?
3. What benefits do these interventions have for the people who you work with (clients)?
4. From an anti-oppressive practice perspective, what benefits have you experienced these interventions to have? What risks?
5. Are there any observable structural or systemic benefits or risks to using these interventions?
6. Would you call animal-assisted interventions an anti-oppressive social work practice? Why or why not?
7. Do you feel that animal-assisted interventions challenge oppression and marginalization in a meaningful way? Why or why not?

I interviewed practitioners who self-identified as having an understanding of an anti-oppressive theoretical perspective, who had an understanding of the various intersecting forms of oppression, and who employed AAI strategies in their practice. I chose a very specific, relatively privileged, and easier to access population for data collection purposes due to the limitations of the project and necessitated timeline. I chose this particular population to draw participants from because it is a community that I am involved in and already have prior relationships with. I chose snowball sampling, a form of convenience sampling whereby “the researcher makes initial contact with a small group of people who are relevant to the research topic and then uses them to establish contact with others” (p. 198), for similar reasons.

Unfortunately, due to the limited sample size, this strategy was not carried out to its full extent. I began by providing my recruitment materials, consisting of a flyer and form Email, to key informants from the academic and activist communities with whom I have personal connections. These communities largely consist of scholars and activists interested in issues of the involvement of OTH animals in human-oriented social systems, as well as AAI more specifically. These informants circulated my materials through their networks, and interested parties contacted me by Email. I had intended to then request that the participants in the study pass on my materials to additional potential participants, but in the end this was not necessary, and all participants in the study were referred by key informants. Both the population selected as well as the recruitment methodology dramatically increased the feasibility of this study within the prescribed time frame.

For the purposes of this study, I sought out three to six adult social work practitioners living and practicing in Canada who self-identified as anti-oppressive practitioners or who identified that they had an understanding of the anti-oppressive practice framework. Ultimately, I was able to successfully recruit and conduct interviews with four participants living in Saskatchewan and Ontario, who all identified as using an AOP framework in their practice. In this study, participants will be referred to using codes P1 through P4. I began recruitment on February 14th 2014, and my interviews were conducted throughout March and April of the same year. The participants had to use interventions in their practice which they identified as being assisted, or made possible, through involvement of at least one OTH animal. Under my definition of AAI, some eligible interventions included animal-assisted therapy; therapeutic presence of an animal during service provision, for example during counselling or in a residential setting; animal-assisted learning; cross-reporting between human and other-than-human social services, for example in child welfare and animal welfare organizations; and support for service users and the OTH animals involved in their lives. The four practitioners who participated in this

study worked in a range of fields. Two of the participants (P1 and P2) worked with equine-assisted psychotherapy. An explanation of this type of intervention from EAGALA, the primary certifying body for equine-assisted psychotherapy in Canada, is offered below.

“Equine Assisted Psychotherapy incorporates horses experientially for emotional growth and learning. It is a collaborative effort between a licensed therapist and a horse professional working with the clients and horses to address treatment goals. Because of its intensity and effectiveness, it is considered a short-term, or 'brief' approach. EAP is experiential in nature. This means that participants learn about themselves and others by participating in activities with the horses, and then processing (or discussing) feelings, behaviours, and patterns. This approach has been compared to the ropes courses used by therapists, treatment facilities, and human development courses around the world. But EAP has the added advantage of utilizing horses, dynamic and powerful living beings” (EAGALA, 2010, n.p.).

P3 worked with a certified therapy dog in a clinical mental health setting. They worked with children up to age twelve and their families, and incorporated AAI into individual and family therapy sessions. P3 reported that they used the dog both to increase the comfort level of the clinical space in which they worked, as well as while working on specific skills and strategies with service users. P4 worked for an organization that supported human service users and their OTH companion animals. In most cases, human service users were people experiencing homelessness or precarious housing, or who were struggling to support their OTH companion animals for financial reasons. Recognizing the therapeutic value of the relationship between people and their OTH companions or family members, the organization that P4 worked with provided support including advocacy, referrals, liaison with veterinary services, and OTH animal foster care or boarding to their service users in order to maintain these relationships.

In accordance with the recruitment methodology, my form Email and flyer (see Appendices A and B) were distributed through key informants as described above, and in addition the flyer was posted publicly online using social media. The study was not publicized

through any one specific institution or organization. Informants and community members were asked to pass the material on to other potential participants. Interested parties then contacted me through Email in order to participate. The interviews were audio-recorded, and following the interview a full transcript was sent to the participant for approval. This review was optional for participants. Participants were given two weeks to reject the whole transcript or parts thereof, and then it was considered as data for the purposes of this study. While no one chose this option, every participant was able to opt out of the study at any time, up until the point that the interview transcripts were approved.

My process of analyzing the data for this study was conducted strictly electronically. After transcribing all of the interviews, transcripts were reviewed and coded in their electronic form. At this stage, I read all the transcripts thoroughly. At this point, I was seeking statements that were striking either because they were direct responses to my research questions, or because they contained insight or information that was novel based on the literature review conducted for the study. I then highlighted these noteworthy statements or sections. Next, I pulled these quotes out of the larger transcripts and systematically reviewed them, grouping them into small sub-themes of related or similar statements, and then later these sub-themes were analyzed and sorted under broader thematic headings. The chapter of this study on findings was written based on the information gleaned during this coding process.

Finally, I will briefly comment on the ethical considerations of this methodological approach. The most significant ethical challenge within this study was involving participant identification. As I have mentioned before, the community of social work practitioners who are involved in AAI or social work with animals more generally is quite limited within Canada. Because of this, there was a significant risk that any participant involved in the study could be identified by their statements, regardless of if identifying markers were changed within the study and direct quotations did not involve identifying information. However,

the study may also have been experienced as empowering for those participants who choose to be involved, as it gives voice to a population of practitioners who are to date unrepresented in scholarly literature. This is the first qualitative study on the subject of AAI that examines the practice as a component of anti-oppressive social work practice, and which attempts to operationalize anti-oppressive approaches to research. This study has the potential to contribute to the awareness, legitimization, and promotion of this set of practice strategies.

CHAPTER 5. FINDINGS

The key finding confirmed by this study is that social work practitioners who use AAI in their practice have not found these interventions to be at odds with an AOP approach to social work, and in fact quite the opposite. While AAI have benefits that are extensively documented by practitioners in other fields or with different theoretical frameworks, that these interventions can be congruent with AOP social work has not yet been documented in scholarly literature.

In this section, major themes derived from the data collected in this study that support this primary finding will be explored. There are three salient themes which emerged from the data collected for this study that will be explored here, including theoretical congruences between AOP and AAI, direct barriers and benefits for service users from an AOP perspective, and the novelty of AAI in an AOP context. In this section, each theme and its associated sub-themes are reviewed along with their supporting data.

Theoretical Congruences

One of the most relevant themes that emerged from the data is the identification of some theoretical congruences between the AOP approach and AAI. In this section, I will explore the congruences of AOP social work and AAI, including the role of AOP theory in AAI practice, parallels between oppression faced by humans and other animals, as well as challenging dominant discourses and problematic social constructions of people who experience oppression.

All of the participants in this study identified that they had an understanding of the AOP social work framework, and that this was a lens which they applied to their social work practice, including in their use of AAI. All participants also identified that they felt that AAI was a practice strategy that was congruent with the AOP framework. P3 stated, “Yeah, my framework is anti-oppressive practice. I went to [University], and that was our framework that we studied under for graduate work. So I would say that that's my primary lens that I use in practice, and

animal-assisted therapy is just like an adjunct to the other therapies that I use, yup.” All the participants in this study identified different ways that they operationalized AOP theories within their AAI practice. P4 identified examination of the way in which they use language to be one way in which AOP theory has influenced their work; they said, “So, from, you know, the word, for example, is it 'applicant', is it 'owner', is it 'family', is it 'household', cause you don't have a house... designations around 'male' and 'female', um, the obligations that our funder asks us to ask and how we ask those questions and what that means.” P3 said that they try to make connections “between the individuals and the systems and the environment and the community”.

Oppression and marginalization are key concepts in AOP social work. Participants in this study drew parallels between the forms of oppression experienced by the service users which they worked with and by OTH animals. Three parallels were drawn by different participants in this study. P4 identified that the people with whom they work and the OTH animals involved in their lives experience structural challenges based on governmental policies. They described a situation in their city involving regulation of OTH animal kennel facilities and regulation of boarding homes, both of which ultimately created barriers to access for service users, which they compared to illustrate this parallel. P4 also identified that a number of people without shelter with whom they worked who had OTH companion animals who were involved their lives had rescued these animals from situations that seemed to mirror their own. They said,

“[...] if they have animals or more than one animal, they've rescued that animal 99% of the time. And they've rescued it from abuse, or from being killed, or from on the street, and it was cold out, and they just couldn't turn away. So they're doing this advocacy, they're doing this rescuing, and then not always can they afford um, all the expensive things, but they always make sure they're fed. It just comes down when they need medical attention, that when they present at the vet office, the vet kind of can see a different way that, why do you have these three animals? Well, I saved them and they're my best friends, and why would I turn them away?”

P3 identified a third, related parallel, stating that sometimes the OTH animals who worked with her in the context of AAI had life experiences similar to those of her service users. They identified that occasionally this experience of oppression shared between service user and OTH animal therapists assisted in building rapport or allowed service users to address issues that they would not have necessarily been able to address without the support of the OTH animal involved. They described in detail the story of a young female service user with whom they worked;

“Oh, yeah. I just think about kids that are, in particular, in foster care. I have one girl that has been in seventeen homes and she's just nine – yup. And one of the pieces of engaging with her that I did was, um, it was really interesting. It was, she, she first met [therapy dog], and wasn't going to talk to me about her experiences, because I'm just another person, right? Um, but I knew her background, and so I asked her if she's been in any other homes, because [therapy dog]'s been in a couple of homes, right? And I wondered if she misses her biological family, and those types of questions, right? That I wouldn't be able to ask – I-I'm middle class, white, Caucasian, [laughs] I've had a, you know, a primary family I've lived with my whole life, and she was just that little connection piece that I was able, and she said like, 'yeah, I bet she misses her mom.'”

As was outlined above, there is a final theoretical intersection between AOP social work and AAI, which is that AAI were identified by the participants in this study to challenge dominant discourses and problematic social constructions of people who experience oppression, both of which are congruent with the goals of AOP social work.

P4 pointed out that their AAI practice challenges dominant discourses about who their service users are as people without shelter who have OTH companion animals. They identified that there is a great deal of judgement surrounding financial capacity, the ability to care

for an OTH animal, and the need to access services. They stated, “[...] there's this assumption that with an animal, that you're not going to be on hard times, or an underlying assumption that if you are, you should not be having an animal anymore, and these hidden messages for people, lots of judgement [...]” These discourses were all challenged through this participant's use of AAI with their service users, which acknowledged and respected the complexities of their identities in a non-judgemental setting. Participants in this study identified that service users who experience poverty experience personal and institutionalized oppression from social systems which they encounter if they are involved with OTH companion animals. P4 spoke specifically about veterinarians, who often oppose subsidized health care for OTH animals. They said, “Um, vets don't believe people should have animals if they can't afford it, so you've got these kind of philosophies.” Through advocacy, collaboration with veterinarians' offices, and consciousness raising, among other interventions, this practitioner challenges these constructions of the people with whom they work by increasing their capacity to care for an OTH animal and preserve an important therapeutic relationship in their lives. P4 also identified that some people involved in AAI use these services as an opportunity to explore various aspects of their experiences and their identity as it relates to their OTH companion animals. AAI becomes an opportunity to explore these issues. They stated,

“Like, you do get treated differently, and probably it is because you're on OW and, and, because you have a large Rottie. And, and, and that is a lot of different things. And kind of we'll talk about that, and it's, it's kind of, people find it to be a little bit reassuring, even if there's kind of no answer? To actually feel – and they'll say, oh it's so great to talk about these kinds of things, actually, be heard.”

In short, it is clear that AAI can challenge discourses and problematic constructions of service users in subtle ways, which is congruent with an AOP framework for practice.

AAI can also be a technique used to shift power within the practitioner-service user relationship. P1 said, “I mean, it basically is directed by them, and the horses, and I'm actually in a position where I'm just allowing it to unfold, so there's a real letting go. And there is no controlling it.” P3 stated, “Yeah, see, and I, I guess when I think about anti-oppressive practice, I really specifically think about the role of power and when you think about animal-assisted therapy, I mean, it just brings you down to where that client is at in that moment. Right? Regardless of the situation that they're presenting with.” P2 suggested that AAI requires a complete re-examination of the power that a social worker supposedly has in the supportive relationship. They stated, “You know, that whole um, human need... our whole need to dominate and control. It's huge, it permeates everything we do. And what I'm suggesting is a totally different paradigm.” This new paradigm would be one that is congruent with AOP practice.

Barriers and Benefits

The participants in this study spoke at length about their experiences as AOP practitioners who utilized some form of AAI in practice, including the barriers and benefits for service users. In this section, I will explore the direct barriers and benefits for people served by these practitioners from an AOP perspective.

The most common barrier for service users involved in AAI as described by the research participants was fear, particularly some type of fear involving the OTH animal participants involved in AAI. This was an issue that was raised by three of four research participants (P1, P2, P3). P1 stated, “For some it's just um, their own fear of working with animals. That's a barrier. Um, some of it is just it's different.” Other service users may experience particular fear around specific types of OTH animals involved in interventions. This barrier is not specific to horses however, but is also a consideration with other species of OTH animals, since as P3 indicated, fear of OTH animals who are present in office or clinical settings can increase to the point of a safety risk for some service users. They stated, “And you can tell in people's eyes, I

don't always need a physical, but you can tell if somebody's not interested in the dog, right? They don't make eye contact with you, and... so, we have to be very careful of those things, and make sure nobody is at a safety risk.” Along with actual safety risk, participants in this study identified perceived risk, independent of actual risk, as a barrier to accessing AAI. P3 said, “[...] first of all, there's always safety risks, and so we get the family to sign a consent form, basically waiving if anything were to happen with the dog, they're taking responsibility for that. We haven't had an incident, but of course we had to have a form to fill out.” Allergies were also raised as a direct barrier to access for some service users. Some participants indicated that people with allergies were screened out of their programs or that this was identified during intake processes. P3 described, “I mean, of course there's people that don't like dogs or have an allergy or a fear, um, and those are screened out. I certainly don't force myself on them.”

A significant number of direct benefits for service users involved in AAI were also identified by the participants in this study. The benefits identified here included adaptability, physicality, anti-oppressive interaction, therapeutic relationships, as well as the potential of AAI to challenge a traditional biomedical approach to social work practice. The adaptability of these interventions was evidenced by the wide range of people served by the practitioners interviewed for this study, which was not limited to any specific age range or community of people. Although one of four practitioners interviewed worked with a specific population, children involved in the mental health system, all four practitioners identified the applicability of AAI to any population. Even from a restricted sample size, it is clear that AAI are being utilized with a broad range of service users who work with AOP practitioners. P3 stated, “Um, and it's a therapy that can fit with really anybody. You know? Like you use CBT for mood. You can use narrative. But with kids, like, narrative isn't as effective with kids, you know? But animal-assisted therapy, I have parents that are just as excited as their child to spend time with the dog, right?”

The physicality of AAI was a benefit identified by three of the four participants in this study. The participants in this study identified that one of the benefits for service users involved in AAI is that they are physical, in the moment, interactive, and experiential. P2 practiced in the area of equine-assisted psychotherapy, which blends the intellectual and emotional aspects of psychotherapy, in this case from an AOP social work perspective, and the physicality of AAI. They explained, “Um, you do exercises. So, it could be anything from you know, use anything in the arena and bring me a horse, um, to, actually we set up obstacles or we set up an activity for them to do. To um, have the horses do. And, you know, then we ask questions like, who's the horse in your life, why have you chosen that horse, how was that for you? So it's very experiential and it definitely makes you talk differently.” It is also evident that this way of interacting that is based on physical activity means that practitioners are forced to experience their practice differently. Rather than focusing on critical analysis of text or language, practitioners must operate in a more visual and tangible way. P2 stated, “I choose it because it gets really awesome results. I think when you have the experiential, you actually um, see the shift.” For this reason, AAI may appeal to some types of people more than others, and may pose unique challenges practitioners.

In AAI, OTH animals serve the function of a non-judgemental presence in the lives of many service users. I have chosen to call this theme “anti-oppressive interaction” because I feel as though this non-judgemental way of being is something that many AOP practitioners strive toward. P2 said, “Well, the horse doesn't care what you make. You know, the horse doesn't care that you are a million dollar producer, or if you're a, you're a stay-at-home mom, or anything. The horse doesn't know, doesn't care. So you have a level playing field there.” This “level playing field” can facilitate rapport and make the process of seeking support less jarring for some service users. P1 identified that it can give service users the “freedom to explore gently without judgement”. This benefit is essential because, as P2 spoke about at length, people

who have social work training are still capable of judgement on a level that is not typical for OTH animals. P2 said, “We're just judgement machines. [laughs] We're taught to judge. We're encouraged. This is black, this is white, this is right, this is wrong, this is good, this is evil, this is... we're just judgement machines.” Having anti-oppressive interaction with OTH animals, in this case, can give people positive experiences. P3 spoke about one young service user who they worked with for whom this was true, stating “But in here, I see empathy coming out of every orifice of him. Like he, he's so affectionate with her, and it doesn't fix his problems 100%, but at least lets him feel positive, feel successful, feel loving, feel all the things that he doesn't get to feel day to day, cause he's so cornered into this label, you know?”

Another benefit of AAI is the maintenance or creation of therapeutic relationships between humans and other animals. The maintenance of these relationships was a focus for P4, whose practice focused mainly on working with service users and their OTH companion animals. While they struggled with whether or not their practice qualified as direct AAI, they determined that their practice served to provide humans with integral therapeutic relationships with OTH animals, which supported them in making positive change in their lives. P4 stated, “And I thought, wow – you know, we don't do direct 'animal-assisted intervention', however all the work we do is about supporting people with their animals to keep that informal and therapeutic relationship that they have.” They went on to make a direct link between the type of AAI that they practice, and other forms of oppression experienced by the people who they worked with, explaining, “So I'm very interested in this dynamic of, the financial barriers that people have. Um, as it lends itself to giving them the support so they can keep their animal, and get that support from their animal. Which I know isn't about animal-assisted interventions, but it is, at the same time?”

It is also possible for AAI to challenge the biomedical model of practice when used in conjunction with an AOP framework. For example, the integration of an OTH animal in

social work practice can provide an opportunity for service users to experience physical comfort from another living being – something with therapeutic benefit that would not be possible using exclusively biomedical approaches. P3 said, “And people often need that physical comfort, and, and, nor, I mean, obviously it's not appropriate nor would it be comfortable for me to do that! But, when we're sad, and those of us that are dog owners, and you're having a rough day, there's nothing better than a dog snuggling up to you.” In this way, AAI offers something that the biomedical approach simply could not offer.

Novelty

The final theme which I would like to explore here is novelty of AAI from an AOP perspective, and some of the positive and negative aspects of this novelty. The primary negative aspect of this novelty that was reported was a general lack of awareness of the existence of AAI among social workers and the people with whom they work, or at worst, that the service is negatively perceived or delegitimized within professional circles. A lack of awareness of AAI can have negative repercussions for service users who do not access these services for this reason. P1 said, “Well, I think the big barrier is that people aren't in the know of it, and it's, does seem new, even though it's not, and so then it's getting people to buy into it, or to even give it a chance.” Some of this lack of awareness among service users, however, may be due to lack of awareness among practitioners. P1 discussed their experiences trying to explain their area of practice to other professionals. They said, “Like as soon as I say I do equine-assisted psychotherapy, they think it's therapeutic riding. And I say, no it's not therapeutic riding, it's dealing with trauma, and it's working on the ground, and the horse is the counsellor, and they just stare at me and think I'm crazy.” This participant also indicated that this lack of awareness meant that they often had a hard time getting referrals from other service providers and being seen as credible within the field of social work. This is unfortunate given the number of well-documented benefits of AAI. Furthermore, this lack of awareness extends to a systemic level,

and according to P3, this is due to the fact that AAI are not considered to be evidence-based interventions. They said,

“The main risk, I think, in running this type of work is that it's going to be pulled out from under us. So, because it's not evidence-based, and our system is very much about the quantity of services and the dollar amounts and they want you practicing therapies that basically, they can demonstrate in a quantitative way is effective, right? And so we have to advocate so much for this program. And we've been really supported so far, but that's a huge risk for us, so.”

The novelty of AAI does have some positive features. Three of four participants in this study spoke to the fact that AAI is an intervention that is completely unfamiliar to many service users when they first encounter it, and that it is so different from “traditional” social work approaches can be an advantage. P1 pointed out that engaging in AAI does not always hold the same stigma that other types of social work practice might, because service users do not have any history with them. They stated, “You don't know what to expect, you have no preconceived ideas maybe of how it's gonna go, because you've never experienced it before [...]” P2 indicated that their use of AAI challenges and shifts how they and their practice are perceived by the people who work with them, saying, “Um – you know, just challenging how you think something should look. Like, therapy doesn't have to look like a desk, or, you know, an office. Therapy can be in a barn. Therapy can be anywhere. Therapy can be eating an ice cream cone. You know, yeah.” In some cases, P2 points out, the novelty of AAI can even remove some of the stigma of being involved with social services, particularly because of the non-traditional environment in which the practice is conducted. They stated, “People can say, we're just going to the barn. They don't even have to say that they're going to therapy.” According to participants in this study, this removal of stigma can make it easier for service users to seek support from professionals. P2

said, “They want to try something different than the traditional kind of approach. And, it's really so hard for people to ask for help. It's still not really that accessible.”

The environment in which AAI are conducted, and the ways in which the presence of OTH animals affects this environment, also plays an important role in how social work practice is received by service users. Both P1 and P2 identified that when AAI are conducted in non-traditional environments, such as the barn which they use to conduct equine-assisted psychotherapy, it facilitates service users being able to talk in a way that might not be possible for them in an office setting. P2 identified that this is because this unconventional therapeutic space was able to become “sacred” for the service users involved. They said, “And you're not in an office setting, you're in a barn, it's very, it's the most peaceful barn I've ever been in in my life. And it's just, nature, and, and um, peacefulness really.” They continued on to describe that the OTH animals in this space were integral to this experience, stating, “With the horse, you just, you just walk into a totally different world when you walk into a barn with horses and dirt and you know, nature.” In addition, P1 noted that because of the less active role played by the practitioner in equine-assisted psychotherapy as compared to more biomedical models of practice, in a barn setting, they can often spend time passively observing rather than participating directly.

“Yup, nobody's around, and it's just them and the animal, and it's, they just kind of go into this zone. No, there's nothing really intimidating there. And once they get past whatever it is that they have with the animal, they start to just seem to really enjoy the experience, and they just get into the experience, and, and they forget about me. They don't even know I'm watching, and, observing” (P1).

P3 spoke at length about how having an OTH animal therapist in their clinical office space seemed to shift the way that the environment was experienced by service users, which is

somewhat of a novel experience for people who have been involved in social services over a long period of time. They said,

“You know, they come in feeling intimidated. Their parent is telling them that they have to come in and talk about all of the bad things they've been doing, and then they come in, and it's so formal, you know, and there are a million pieces of paper for the parent to fill out, um, and before you're – doing this work, the child used to sit and listen and stare at all this paperwork, and now they come in, and they know they have this goal to help me brush [dog's name]'s teeth while I talk to their mom or yeah. There's just a different feeling. Sometimes it's hard to put words to it.”

It was also a theme among participants that they identified a desire to pursue additional education, training, or professional development related to their field of practice. P1 said, “[...] I just feel like, I'm always learning, and I need to be adding to my toolbox, and I never get to a place where I think I know everything, because when I get there then I'm dangerous, so, I don't want to be dangerous.” P3 mentioned adjunct trainings in CBR or human-animal bond and animal-assisted therapy.

CHAPTER 6. DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that AAI can be congruent with an anti-oppressive approach to social work practice. In this section, the themes that emerged from the data collected for this study will be explored in relation to the theoretical frameworks that were discussed in the opening chapters.

Overall, the data that was collected in this study was rich. The participants in this study spoke enthusiastically and at length about their experience with AOP social work, and were also passionate and eager to talk about their work with AAI. The practitioners interviewed were involved in a variety of different AAI, and while they had many distinct experiences to contribute to this study, there were also commonalities. In addition, while some of their contributions were congruent with existing literature in this area, some of the themes which emerged were unprecedented in scholarship. These will be discussed in more depth in the sections that follow. It is also noteworthy that in addition to the four practitioners who were successfully recruited and participated in this study, there were many more who presented themselves and who were unable to participate, either due to eligibility requirements, particularly those around educational qualifications, or due to feasibility restrictions. It was my sense that the community of progressive social workers who are working in the area of AAI have great spirit about their work, and are seeking opportunities to make their voices heard in the academic arena.

Major Themes: Theoretical Congruences

The first theme that emerged was theoretical congruences between AAI and AOP social work, of which there were a few, including the role of AOP theory in AAI practice, parallels between oppression faced by humans and other animals, challenging dominant discourses and problematic social constructions of people who experience oppression, as well as the potentiality of AAI as a tool for shifting power in the practitioner-service user relationship. It is noteworthy that all the participants in this study stated that the AOP framework influences

some aspect of their work with OTH animals and service users, particularly since this relationship between theory and practice has yet to be explored in scholarly literature. This study begins to address this gap. The practitioners interviewed spoke to the ways in which the forms of AAI employed in their practice fit into the theoretical framework of AOP social work, and conversely how that framework influences the way in which they work with AAI.

Parallels between oppression experienced by service users and OTH animals were evident to the population of practitioners surveyed for this study. This is perhaps due to their unique positioning of being in direct contact with human service users and OTH animals on a regular basis in an AOP social work context. In this context, OTH animals may be accorded value comparable to that assigned to humans in the situation, and humans are regarded with inherent worth and dignity regardless of their social location. This gives these practitioners a perspective which may not be as prevalent in other contexts, and therefore heightened awareness of instances of oppression, regardless of species membership. While parallel experiences of oppression encountered by humans and other animals are significant in society generally, to my knowledge these have not yet been explored within social work or related literature.

AAI also have the potential, in an AOP practice context, to be used as a mechanism with which to challenge dominant discourses, including the anthropocentrism on which Eurocentric social work is based (Hanrahan, 2011; Risley-Curtiss, Zilney, and Hornung, 2010). This happens in a number of subtle ways. For example, two of the participants in this study are equine-assisted psychotherapists certified through EAGALA (P1 and P2). This model of practice takes place in a barn or farm setting rather than clinical setting typical of psychotherapy and is carried out by two professionals, at least one OTH animal, and the service user(s). The use and promotion of this model challenges the dominant discourse of anthropocentrism by including OTH animals in therapeutic interventions in a way that acknowledges their unique ability to support human service users. For this reason, these OTH

animals are regarded with heightened respect that they would not ordinarily be accorded. This shift in how animals are constructed within social work practice is significant in terms of challenging the discourse of anthropocentrism within the field.

One of the defining features of AAI is that this type of intervention is often client-directed. In addition, the OTH animal therapist plays an important role; therefore the importance of the social work practitioner is significantly diminished. The shift in power in the practitioner-service user relationship is another benefit of AAI from an AOP perspective. The introduction of an OTH animal in the social work relationship directly challenges the binary of professional-client, because of the third necessary party involved, and this shifts the power dynamic in important and meaningful ways. This is clearly a departure from the traditional power dynamics in supportive professional relationships. Although AOP social workers often have strategies that they use to attempt to challenge this power dynamic, that it still plays a prominent role in social services today is still very much a reality in the current context. AAI may be an additional tool that can be used to attempt to move beyond this practice paradigm.

Major Themes: Barriers and Benefits

The second major theme which emerged from the data was barriers and benefits of AAI as an AOP practice strategy. Barriers included fear and allergies, which will be discussed more deeply in the implications section below because of the potential impact on organizational policies for social service agencies. Based on the literature review, it was not surprising that the benefits of AAI would be a finding of this study. Some of the benefits mentioned were common. For instance, that interaction with OTH animals can provide anti-oppressive interaction, often called non-judgemental or accepting interaction, is a benefit of AAI that is documented in previous literature, and was corroborated by practitioners interviewed for this study (Burgon, 2011; Levinson, 1962; Levinson, 1964). However, some of the benefits mentioned by participants were not documented by previous research. Potential benefits documented in this

study included adaptability, physicality, anti-oppressive interaction, therapeutic relationships, as well as the potential of AAI as an implement to challenge a traditional biomedical approach to social work practice.

AAI have a distinctive focus, as documented in this study. It is arguable that many AOP interventions commonly used by social workers could be broadly described as intellectually or emotionally focused. Most clinical interventions or counselling could certainly be categorized in this way. Other approaches, such as resource liaison or crisis management emphasize basic needs or logistics. Some benefits of AAI are unique to interventions that depend on the participation of an OTH animal. While it is obvious that AOP interventions are not exclusively based on intellectual, emotional, or logistical types of practice, in particular the physicality of AAI seems to be unique, and when combined with its adaptability, would suggest that they are at minimum a valuable adjunct to more traditional ways of practicing social work. This finding is congruent with the results of Dell et al. (2011), whose study found that the EAL intervention with which they worked provided the opportunity for valuable experiences of positive physical touch between human and equine participants.

From a critical ecofeminist, AOP, and critical perspective, while the creation and support of relationships between service users and OTH animals, companion or otherwise, has direct benefits for service users involved in this type of practice, it also has the potential to support consciousness raising of service users and other humans involved in their lives. Consciousness raising may encourage people engaged in AAI to examine their relationships to features of their community, ecosystem, and planet that are less anthropocentric in nature. For example, many people do not have the opportunity in their daily lives to engage in relationships with OTH animals, or with nature more generally. Additionally, one of the barriers identified by participants in this study was that that some service users experience a general fear of OTH animals. In some cases, this may be due to sheer unfamiliarity with interaction with members of

other animal species. AAI have the potential to facilitate inter-species engagement in such a way that can be beneficial not only to the people involved, but to humans, other animals, and larger society more generally. This is one way that social workers can use AAI to work on mezzo and macro levels of practice to encourage greater social equity and other kinds of positive social change, something which is congruent with the values of ecofeminism, as well as AOP and critical social work.

The benefits of AAI have overwhelmingly been documented using anecdotal or qualitative data, rather than quantitative empirical data, and for this reason they are not generally accepted as an evidence-based practice, although the literature reviewed for this study indicates that some AAI are becoming more accepted within clinical fields. The involvement of an OTH animal in a therapeutic setting is not a traditional biomedical approach. It was even found in this study that when coupled with an AOP approach to practice, AAI have the potential to be used to challenge the biomedical model of practice. Based on the data collected in this study, it is possible to surmise that this can make it difficult for practitioners who operate from a clinical, positivist framework to appreciate AAI as a broad and diverse group of practice strategies. There is a need for ongoing research and scholarship in this field to promote AAI and the many benefits that they can have for service users.

Major Themes: Novelty

The final theme that emerged from the data collected for this study was novelty, or the perceived newness of AAI to practitioners and service users engaged in social work. At this stage, AAI are still considered emergent in social work practice, despite their deep history, and they do not seem to be well-known. This is obviously challenging for practitioners who work with AAI, despite some of the resultant benefits. Participants in this study indicated that funding for these types of interventions is conservative, and there is a sense that their effectiveness needs to be constantly proven to ensure its ongoing existence in their organizations. In a setting that is

so rigidly monitored, practitioner creativity and exploration is limited. The influence of neoliberal systems of surveillance and regulation are also evident in these types of situations.

Novel experiences of social work are also the result of integrating AAI into AOP practice. It is evident that the presence of an OTH animal and the environment in which AAI is conducted play a significant role in the overall experience of social work practice and social services. From an AOP perspective, these novel experiences of social work, facilitated through AAI, are important because they challenge dominant discourses around what it means to offer and receive social services, and what these services are conceptualized and perceived to be or to mean.

The implications of the perceived and actual novelty of AAI within AOP social work was the most unexpected theme to emerge from this study. As a practitioner who has always been involved in work with humans as well as other animals, that AAI would be perceived as novel or actually be novel to many service users was surprising for me as a researcher. Yet, this novelty seems to have some positive byproducts. That said, I did not find it surprising to hear that the participants of this study had experienced a lack of awareness about these interventions among other professionals. This is something which I experienced first hand during my studies, and which is also documented in the literature (Risley-Curtiss, 2010; Hanrahan, 2013). For this reason, I would consider this theme to be important to consider, particularly with regards to looking to the future. It seems that AAI are growing in popularity, and this novelty may shift over time.

Limitations

This study was subject to a few noteworthy limitations. As was discussed in earlier sections, many of these were feasibility considerations. Some of these were explored in the methodology section, particularly with regards to selection of approaches to analysis. Further, because of the program requirements for the MRP, this study was required to have a focus on

AOP social work, and as was evident from the literature review, there is not a strong foundation of existing literature on OTH animals and social work from this perspective. In addition, the institutional setting in which this work was completed, notably one which does not recognize speciesism as a legitimate form of oppression in an AOP social work framework, influenced the content in that the study had to comply with program requirements. This limited the purview of what could be explored, and further research is needed to explore this topic outside of this notable limitation. This study was also completed on a very restricted timeframe – only nine months from inception to submission of the completed MRP. For this reason, only four participants were interviewed for this study. While this provides a base to build upon with future research, it limits the utility of the findings. Furthermore, due to the restricted sample size for this project, all of the participants identified as operating from an AOP framework. This made analysis of data and coding of themes challenging, as it is difficult to discern in many cases if the experiences that were described by participants had occurred because of their use of AAI in an AOP context, or simply because they were AOP practitioners. This is especially true in the case of the theoretical congruences that were observed between AAI and AOP. In order to adequately address this limitation, it would be useful to recruit social work practitioners with diverse theoretical perspectives in order to compare experiences of AAI in a variety of contexts. This would clarify findings and allow for further exploration of the role that AAI can play in AOP social work practice. Additionally, due to the considerations outlined above, the perspective of service users involved in AAI is conspicuously absent from the data collected by this study, and this will be essential to consider moving forward.

Hypothesis

The research question posed by this study was, “What role can animal-assisted interventions play in anti-oppressive social work practice? The principle finding of this study did not directly address this question, and in fact serves to pose several additional questions.

Ultimately, it was beyond the scope of this study to expect to fully understand the role that AAI might play in AOP social work practice. However, what was determined was that AAI is, in fact, able to play a role in AOP practice, something which has been disputed within the social work community, and which had yet to be explored in scholarly literature.

These findings confirm that practitioners in the field of AOP social work have knowledge about AAI, despite the lack of recognition for these practice strategies in the academy. They confirm that social workers are using these interventions within the context of AOP practice, and have found value in these interventions, despite some challenging barriers. These findings also confirm that AAI practitioners have not found these interventions to be at odds with an anti-oppressive approach, and in fact quite the opposite. The findings of this study were not surprising to me, and I do not anticipate them to be surprising to other practitioners or academics with a vested interest in the field of AOP or critical social work and OTH animals. However, it is essential that this knowledge be documented in order for AAI to gain exposure and legitimacy within the discipline of AOP social work, not least because of the remarkable gaps in knowledge and literature, but also in order to further the conversation which is beginning to gain momentum in this field about the appropriateness and utility of an anthropocentric model of social work practice.

CHAPTER 7: IMPLICATIONS

In this section, I would like to address some of the implications of the findings of this study from practice, research, policy, and theory perspectives as they relate to AOP social work.

From a practice perspective, this study documents evidence which would suggest that AAI are a valid and important practice strategy for AOP social workers to consider implementing in their own practice or organization. This was suggested by previous literature based on other theoretical frameworks, but had never been examined through an AOP lens (Burgon, 2011; Dell et al., 2006; Wiggett-Barnard & Steel, 2008). Participants in this study indicated that these interventions have a broad range of benefits and can serve as complementary, adjunct approaches to accompany other AOP strategies for practice. This was congruent with findings of research from other fields and perspectives as well (Levinson, 1962; Levinson, 1984; Burgon, 2011; Mallon, 1994). The findings of this study also indicate that including AAI in social work practice can increase service user engagement and accessibility of services. This was identified in discussions with participants about the potentiality for anti-oppressive interaction between humans and other animals in AAI, and the capacity for the novelty of these interventions to minimize stigma associated with therapy. Anti-oppressive interaction is an essential feature of AOP social work practice, and involving OTH animals in the strategies that we use with our service users is another way to ensure that the people who we work with as practitioners are likely to have positive experiences of support and success while involved in the services which we provide. These positive experiences can encourage service user engagement. P4 in particular noted as well that when the importance of the relationships between people and the OTH animals in their lives is recognized by a service, this validation can also result in enhanced engagement and motivation among service users. Further the removal of stigma associated with therapy that is a result of the novelty of AAI can also increase service

accessibility, according to participants in this study. From the perspectives of the participants of this study, if service users are happy, enthusiastic, and unashamed to access services, higher engagement and motivation will result. This is an obvious potential benefit of including AAI in social work practice.

The implications from a research perspective are very straightforward, and have been discussed extensively throughout this MRP. This study reaffirms that there is practical and theoretical knowledge about AAI that is not currently documented in existing literature. This is one of the first research projects to explore AAI as an AOP social work strategy, and the data that was collected was unique and rich. Furthermore, there are still substantial gaps in literature which need to be filled. From a research perspective, the implications of this study are a call for further work based on progressive theoretical frameworks in the area of OTH animals and social work.

Although it was not a prominent theme in this study, the lack of clear policy around OTH animals and AAI in social services was raised by the participants to be complicated, and potentially problematic. Human-serving social service organizations need to begin to consider the legitimate, real importance of the relationships that people have with OTH animals when developing organizational guidelines in order to better serve people accessing services, and to begin to address OTH animal welfare issues that are currently exacerbated by this gap in policies and services. This is particularly true of organizations which focus on areas of practice such as housing, family violence, or other family practice, where people who have relationships with OTH companion animals experience severe oppression and discrimination, and where the welfare and safety of OTH animals is neglected. Another policy implication that was raised was the idea of real or perceived safety risks involved with AAI in an AOP practice environment. These risks are not only important to consider when developing policy around including AAI in practice, but also when assessing barriers to access for service users. From an AOP perspective,

all of the barriers identified in this study, including unfamiliarity with OTH animals, species-specific or generalized fear, safety considerations, perceived risk, and allergies, can decrease the accessibility of the services offered by a provider, particularly if an OTH animal is often present in an office setting frequented by a range of people accessing a variety of services. Mechanisms must be put in place not only to account for actual risk to service users, practitioners, and OTH animal therapists where all are involved, but also to minimize perceived risks and maximize service accessibility for all human service users, as well as their OTH animal companions where applicable.

Finally, the findings of this study have theoretical implications for the field of AOP social work. Ultimately, the findings of this study contribute to a growing necessity for academics in the field of social work to engage in the conversation around the anthropocentrism that defines our professional discipline. This is not only necessary because of the direct links which can be seen between forms of oppression and barriers experienced by humans as well as other animals, but also because it cannot be denied that OTH animals play significant roles in the lives of people, including those seeking social services. To continue to ignore this significant role is to do a disservice to our service users. It is therefore essential that social workers engage in knowledge acquisition in that area of AAI and the questions about OTH animals and social work more generally, and begin to expand our anti-oppressive theoretical perspectives to encompass critical discussion and theorizing around these important issues.

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

This study explored the research question, “What role can AAI play in AOP social work practice?”. The primary finding is that AAI can be congruent with an AOP approach to social work practice. I have presented three broad themes and their corresponding sub-themes which emerged from the data collected from this study. It became evident that AAI and AOP social work have some important theoretical intersections. In addition, the practitioners interviewed spoke at length about the barriers and benefits of AAI for service users from an AOP perspective. While many of these are described in previous literature, this was a subject that participants were passionate and eager to speak about. It is valuable in the sense that these barriers and benefits have never before been described from an AOP perspective. Finally, the perceived and actual novelty of AAI within AOP social work had advantages and disadvantages for social work practitioners and service users, and these were also explored.

The other findings which emerged from the data hold importance for different reasons. The theoretical intersections between AOP practice and AAI have never before been explored in research; therefore these are a valuable addition to the limited body of literature that exists on OTH animals and social work, and a rare addition to the subset of this literature which does not come from a biomedical perspective. That said, while these findings are beneficial within academia, the benefits of AAI from an AOP perspective which were documented by this study are arguably more important from a practical standpoint. It is necessary to examine why we as practitioners choose the approaches that we do, and to keep the people with whom we work at the forefront of our consciousness when choosing or evaluating practice approaches.

This study was subject to some limitations, however, including feasibility considerations. The grounded theory methodology that was an ideal fit for this project was beyond the scope of this study, and so could not be fully carried out. In addition, the restricted timeframe of the MRP required that a small sample of practitioners be recruited for participation,

which limited the amount of data that could be collected, and affected the diversity of perspectives included in the data analysis. There were also theoretical limitations in that due to the institutional context of the MRP, this research was required to have a strong AOP focus. Equally, the scope of what could be explored in this study in order to fulfill program requirements was limited by the lack of recognition of speciesism as a legitimate form of oppression within the university.

Nevertheless, the data collected for this study is the first data which has been collected exploring AAI as an AOP practice strategy, and many of the findings around benefits of the interventions are compatible with data present in previous literature on animals and social work. The information collected over the course of this research project serves to add to this growing body of work, and offer an important, current perspective which has not yet been adequately explored. The literature which exists on this topic is limited, however, and this study alone is inadequate to fill the gaps which exist. The topic of AAI and AOP social work, as well as the topic of OTH animals and social work, requires further scholarly attention in the future.

APPENDIX A: Form Email for Recruitment

If you are a social work practitioner who identifies as working from an anti-oppressive (AOP) perspective, and who uses any kind of animal-assisted intervention in your practice, I would love to hear from you!

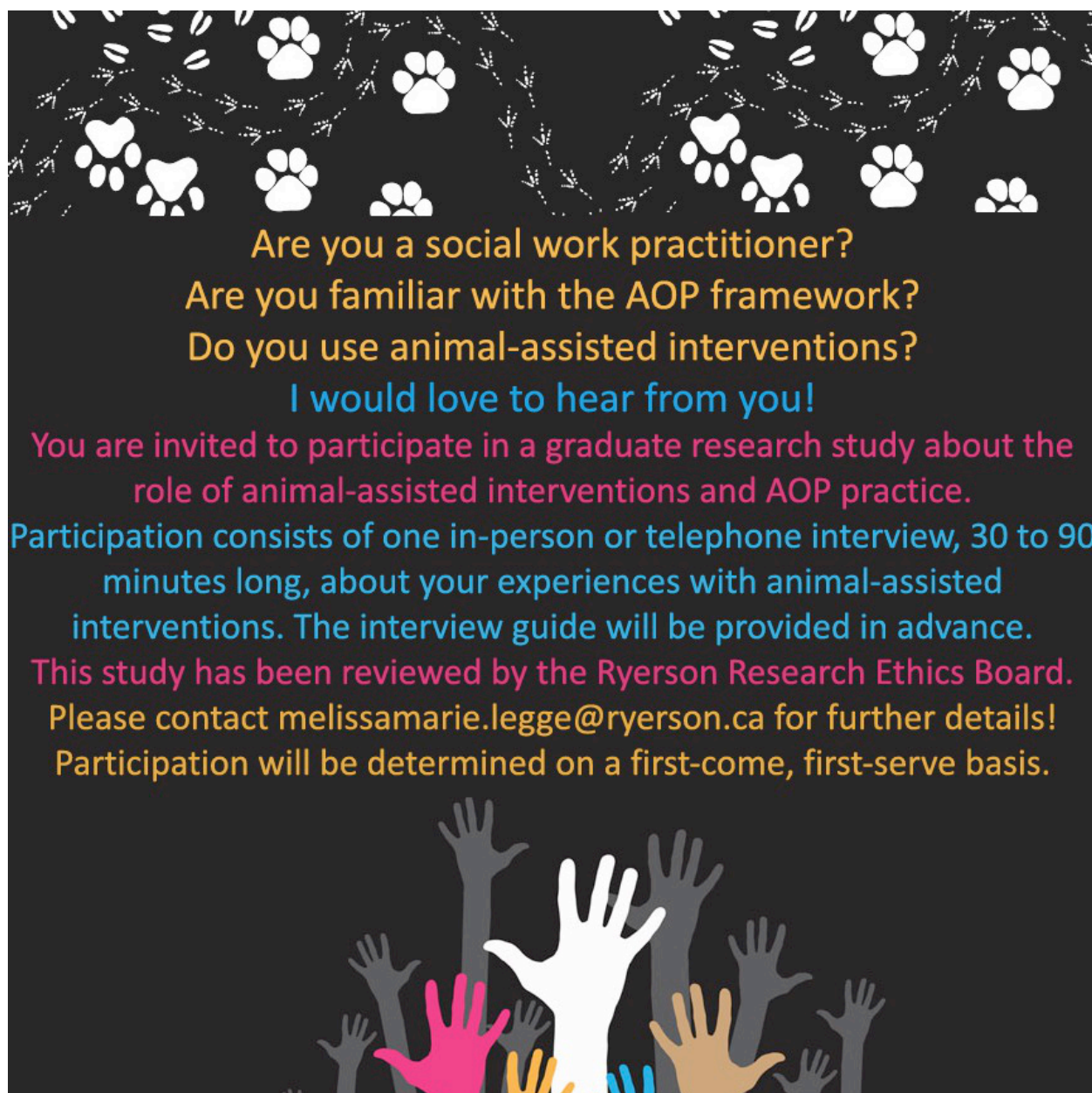
My name is Melissa Marie Legge, and I am a graduate student at the Ryerson School of Social Work. My graduate research is about the role of animal-assisted interventions (AAI) in AOP social work practice. This study has been reviewed by the Ryerson Research Ethics Board.

Over the coming months, I am hoping to interview practitioners who are familiar with the AOP framework about their experiences with AAI. Participation will consist of a single, semi-structured interview, which can be conducted in person or over the phone. The time commitment will be between 30 and 90 minutes. The interview guide will be provided in advance of the interviews, and participation is completely voluntary.

If you are interested in participating in the research or knowing more about it, please contact me directly at <melissamarie.legge@ryerson.ca>. Participation will be determined on a first-come first-serve basis.

Thank you!

APPENDIX B: Recruitment Flyer



APPENDIX C: Participant Consent Form



Ryerson University Consent Agreement

The Role of Animal-Assisted Interventions in Anti-Oppressive Social Work Practice

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Before you give your consent to be a volunteer, it is important that you read the following information and ask as many questions as necessary to be sure you understand what you will be asked to do.

Investigators: Melissa Marie Legge, graduate student in the School of Social Work, Ryerson University. Supervised by Dr. Lisa Barnoff, director of the School of Social Work.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of the study, as the title suggests, is to gain insight into the role that animal-assisted interventions can play in anti-oppressive social work practice (AOP). 3-6 interviews will be conducted with social workers and social service providers familiar with the AOP framework who use animal-assisted interventions in their practice.

Description of the Study: You will be asked to complete a semi-structured interview. The interview guide will be provided in advance. The interview can be completed over the phone, or in a private location agreed upon by the participant and the investigator, for example a room at Ryerson can be booked for this purpose. The interview should last between 30 and 90 minutes, and will be audio recorded. Following the interview, a typed transcript will be sent to the participants for review before it is finalized for use in the study. Some direct quotations from these transcripts will be used in the study, without the use of any information which is potentially identifiable in the case of a participant who indicates that they wish to maintain confidentiality.

Risks or Discomforts: You would experience minimal risk in this study. The most significant risk is that of potential for identification of participants, owing to the fact that there is a small pool of practitioners with relevant experience from which to draw participants. That said, every effort to maintain confidentiality will be made, including the use of code names and alteration of key identifying markers. If at any point during the study a participant begins to feel uncomfortable, they may discontinue participation, either temporarily or permanently. Any direct quotations used in the study will not contain information that is potentially identifiable.

Benefits of the Study: There are no direct benefits that individual participants in this study can reasonably expect. The benefits of the study are primarily to contribute to a growing body of literature in an emerging field of study within social work practice, and to provide an AOP perspective on this topic, which until this point has been absent.

Confidentiality: The interviews conducted for this study will be audio recorded and transcribed. All of the information and records collected for the purpose of this research will be stored and backed up on external flash drives which will be password protected with XTS-AES 128 encryption. Only the investigator (Melissa Marie Legge) will have access to this data. The audio recordings will be kept only until the completion of the study, that is to say August 31 2014, after which time it will be erased. Participants will have the chance to review transcripts of their interviews prior to their use in the study. Participant information and coding lists will be stored and backed up in separate, encrypted documents stored on these external flash drives, also password protected with XTS-AES 128 encryption. All coding will be conducted online, and transcripts of the interviews will not be printed. All data will be destroyed in a maximum of ten years following this study, that is to say August 31st 2024.

While the investigator will not breach confidentiality, research records may well be subject to subpoena, or to disclosure by operation of law. Further, the investigator is under obligation to report child abuse, neglect, or suspicion of such, as well as imminent harm to self or others, to the proper authorities.

Costs for Participation: The only cost associated with participation in this study is the cost of transportation or telephone use for the purpose of the interview.

Voluntary Nature of Participation: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your choice of whether or not to participate will not influence your current or future relations with Ryerson University or the School of Social Work. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to stop your participation at any time without penalty.

At any particular point in the study, you may refuse to answer any particular question or stop participation altogether.

Questions about the Study: If you have any questions about the research now, please ask. If you have questions later about the research, you may contact:

Melissa Marie Legge
melissamarie.legge@ryerson.ca

or

Dr. Lisa Barnoff
416 979 5000 ext. 6243
lbarnoff@ryerson.ca

If you have questions regarding your rights as a human subject and participant in this study, you may contact the Ryerson University Research Ethics Board for information.

Research Ethics Board
c/o Office of the Vice President, Research and Innovation
Ryerson University
350 Victoria Street
Toronto, ON M5B 2K3

Agreement:

Your signature below indicates that you have read the information in this agreement and have had a chance to ask any questions you have about the study. Your signature also indicates that you agree to be in the study and have been told that you can change your mind and withdraw your consent to participate at any time. You have been given a copy of this agreement.

You have been told that by signing this consent agreement you are not giving up any of your legal rights.

Name of Participant (please print)

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

Your signature below indicates that you acknowledge and understand that the interviews that you participate in will be audio recorded for transcription at a later time, and by signing, you agree to be recorded.

Name of Participant (please print)

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Investigator

Date

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