Social Work Ethics And Animal-Assisted Therapy: Balancing Human And Animal Welfare

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Abstract
Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) is an increasingly popular technique in Social work, providing clients with emotional, psychological, and social advantages. However, adopting animals into therapeutic settings has peculiar ethical issues. Social workers must prioritise not only their clients' well-being, but also the safety and well-being of the animals involved. This article explores the ethical concerns in Animal-Assisted Therapy from a social work perspective, emphasising the importance of balancing human and animal welfare, following the professional code of conduct, and encouraging responsible and compassionate methods.

Key Words: *Human and Animal Co-existence, Animal-Assisted Therapy and Social Work Ethics.*

Introduction

Social work is a profession comprised of the values of dignity, respect, and social justice. In recent decades, animal-assisted therapy (AAT) has emerged as an innovative technique in Social work, offering clients alternative pathways for healing (Tedeschi, Fitchett, & Molidor, 2005). In this therapy, dogs and horses are utilised as therapy animals. They are integrated into clinical, educational, and community settings as an innovative coping mechanism, increasing engagement, and promoting positive emotional well-being. As many merits are vested with the AAT for clients, less awareness is adhered to the ethical implications for animal welfare (Kruger & Serpell, 2010). This gap identifies the need for a more balanced approach that considers the well-being of both humans and animals. Social workers are nowadays utilising animals in therapeutic interventions. This article concludes and suggests that animals can reduce stress, promote emotional regulation, and enhance client engagement (Tedeschi, Fine, & Helgeson, 2010). While much of the focus has been on client outcomes, less attention has been given to the ethical implications of involving animals in practice. However, an ethical question arises about how social workers take care of the welfare of the animals while maintaining their social work practice.

Social Work Practice and Animal-Assisted Therapy

Animal-assisted therapy is a systematic interaction between clients, trained professionals, and animals to achieve the aims of any therapy. Therapy dogs, horses, and even smaller animals like rabbits have been used in social work settings such as schools, hospitals, mental health clinics, and elderly care facilities (Nimer & Lundahl, 2007). For individuals enduring trauma, bereavement, or social isolation, animals often act as non-judgmental companions that cultivate trust and emotional safety.

Review of Literature

The primary obligation of social workers is to ensure client safety and effective outcomes. Social workers must assess whether AAT is appropriate for each client, considering allergies, phobias, cultural attitudes, or potential risks (Kruger & Serpell, 2010). Animals involved in therapy are not simply tools but sentient beings whose welfare must be respected. Overworking animals, exposing them to stressful environments, or neglecting their physical and emotional needs constitutes ethical violations (Serpell et al., 2020). Clients must be fully informed about the role of animals in therapy. Similarly, the animal's participation should be voluntary, which requires recognising stress signals and respecting the animal's right to disengage. Unlike traditional therapeutic tools, animals require ongoing care, advocacy, and ethical consideration. This dual responsibility places social workers in a vital position as they must duly take care of the welfare of the client and animal (Hanrahan, 2011). Indian papers frequently highlight human clinical benefits but give limited detail on structured monitoring of animal welfare (stress signs, rest periods, workload limits, veterinary oversight) in Indian programs. Authors call for formal animal-welfare procedures and monitoring protocols to be embedded into practice (Narvekar , 2021). Nammalwar & Rangeeth (2018) reported reductions in dental-waiting anxiety among children after short animal-assisted activity exposure in a paediatric dental unit. The study was small and uncontrolled but illustrative of immediate anxiolytic effects reported in clinic contexts. A central theme in AAT ethics is the dual-client relationship, where the practitioner has an ethical responsibility to the human client and the therapy animal (Bachi, 2018). The social worker must simultaneously uphold the client's right to autonomy and safety while ensuring the animal's welfare. This means a therapeutic goal for the human client cannot be pursued if it causes undue stress or harm to the animal involved (Fine, 2019). Ethical practice requires recognising the animal as a sentient being, not a therapeutic tool.

The practitioner is responsible for monitoring the animal for signs of stress, providing adequate care and rest, and immediately removing them from situations that compromise their well-being (Glenk, 2017). AAT was an emerging and geographically concentrated practice in India. Major implementing organisations (Animal Angels Foundation, Healing Horses, Hands & Paws, and a few university centres) led most visible programmes in urban hubs (Pune, Mumbai, Bengaluru, Chennai, Bhubaneswar). The social workers should have AAT-specific training or work in multidisciplinary teams with certified handlers and veterinarian oversight; continuing professional development should be mandated. Practitioners must know the specific species and individual temperament of the animal they are working with. This includes understanding animal communication, recognising subtle signs of stress, and knowing how to handle the animal safely and humanely (Fine, 2019). The ethical codes suggest that social workers work within professional boundaries. In AAT, this extends to managing the client's relationship with the therapy animal, ensuring the interactions remain therapeutic and do not foster unhealthy attachment or blur the lines of the professional relationship (Bachi, 2018). The absence of formal regulating bodies or standardised certification for therapy animals in India presents a major ethical challenge. This burdens the individual social worker more in ensuring animal welfare and client safety through rigorous self-regulation and adherence to international best practices (Walsh, 2009).

Balancing Human and Animal Welfare
Achieving a balance between human and animal welfare in animal-assisted therapy is a dynamic process that requires a multifaceted ethical commitment from the social worker. This balance is operationalised through several key practices. Foundational to ethical practice is ensuring that social workers and the therapy animals have undergone accredited training and certification, establishing a baseline for safety, professionalism, and competence in the therapeutic environment (Fine, 2019). This is complemented by the continuous monitoring and evaluation of client outcomes and the animal's well-being, as routine assessment is critical to prevent burnout, stress, or harm to the animal partner (Glenk, 2017). Furthermore, the social worker's role extends to advocacy, championing policies that protect animals in therapeutic settings by ensuring humane treatment and appropriate working conditions. Ultimately, all actions must be grounded in ongoing ethical reflection, where practitioners consciously apply professional codes, such as the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics, in conjunction with animal welfare guidelines to navigate the complex decision-making inherent in the dual-client relationship (Bachi, 2018).

Expanding the "Person-in-Environment" Perspective
The inclusion of animals in social work practice represents an expansion of the profession's core "person-in-environment" perspective. This expanded view recognises that clients' environment includes their social and physical surroundings and relationships with non-human beings. Some scholars advocate for an "eco-social work" approach that considers the well-being of the entire ecosystem, including animals and the natural world, as integral to human well-being (Boetto, 2017). This perspective encourages social workers to consider the broader context of their clients' lives and to recognise the therapeutic and supportive role that animals and nature can play.
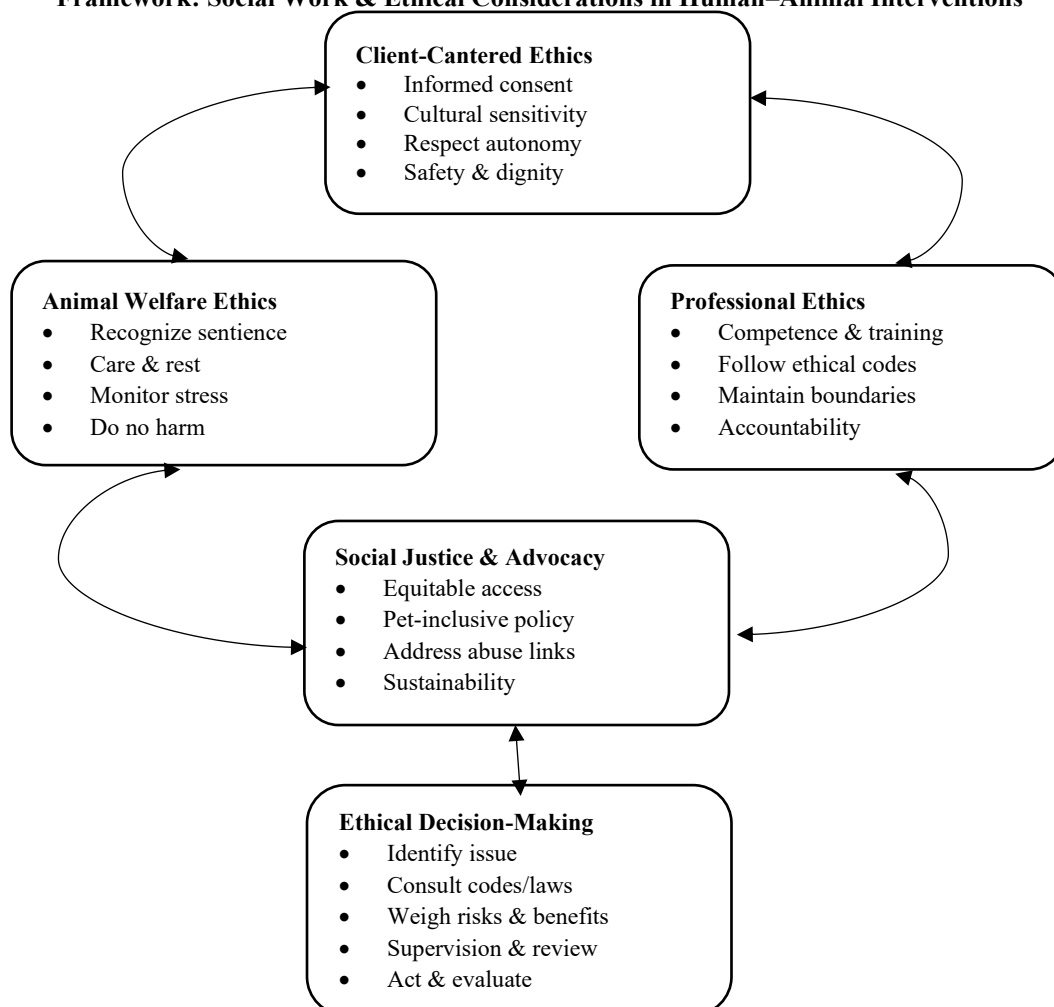
Unique Features of HAB and AAT in Social Work:

In social work, HAB and AAT offer distinctive dynamics that enrich the therapeutic process. First, the mutual benefit of these interventions fosters emotional connections that nurture both client and animal; evidence indicates that interactions with therapy animals can lead to physiological and psychological benefits for both parties, including reductions in cortisol and increases in positive neurohormones (Arkow, 2020). Second, AAT emphasises emotional support beyond words, harnessing the non-judgmental presence of animals to facilitate unconditional acceptance, thus enhancing therapeutic rapport and client engagement. Third, many clients view pets as integral to their family unit—integration into family systems—and social workers can leverage this bond to tap into clients' social capital and community connectedness. Fourth, animals act as a motivational catalyst, encouraging clients to participate more actively in therapy, build resilience, and adopt healthier routines through companionship and structured engagement. Finally, HAB and AAT demonstrate accessibility across populations—benefitting diverse groups such as children, older adults, trauma survivors, and individuals with disabilities—by bridging cultural, linguistic, and developmental barriers, uniquely engaging and inclusively (Walsh, F., 2009).

Methods
This study has employed a relevant literature review as its research methodology. This optimal approach allows for a structured, replicable, and comprehensive synthesis of existing scholarly work. The objective is to identify, critically appraise, and integrate findings from published articles to understand the ethical complexities of balancing human and animal welfare in Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) within a social work context. The review will identify established ethical frameworks, recurring dilemmas, and proposed best practices.

Framework: Social Work & Ethical Considerations in Human–Animal Interventions

Client-Cantered Ethics
- Informed consent
- Cultural sensitivity
- Respect autonomy
- Safety & dignity

Animal Welfare Ethics
- Recognize sentience
- Care & rest
- Monitor stress
- Do no harm

Professional Ethics
- Competence & training
- Follow ethical codes
- Maintain boundaries
- Accountability

Social Justice & Advocacy
- Equitable access
- Pet-inclusive policy
- Address abuse links
- Sustainability

Ethical Decision-Making
- Identify issue
- Consult codes/laws
- Weigh risks & benefits
- Supervision & review
- Act & evaluate

Source: Prepared by the author

This ethical framework tries to provide a clear, comprehensive, and responsible guide for professionals working with people and animals. In a field with unique ethical complexities, this model offers an essential structure for ensuring the highest standards of care. It is built on a dual commitment to client-centred ethics, which safeguards human dignity and autonomy, and a robust dedication to animal welfare, recognising their sentience and protecting them from harm. Furthermore, the framework upholds professional integrity by demanding competence, accountability, and adherence to ethical codes. It empowers practitioners with a practical decision-making process to navigate difficult situations thoughtfully. Finally, it promotes a forward-thinking approach through social justice and advocacy, encouraging equitable access and sustainable practices. By implementing this framework, we can mitigate risks, enhance the quality of our services, and build greater trust within the community, establishing a benchmark for excellence in our field. This framework ensures that human–animal interventions are safe, ethical, and socially responsible, protecting clients and animals while promoting professional accountability and social justice.

Application of AAT in India

In India, Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) is still an emerging practice, but several organisations and initiatives have pioneered its use in diverse settings. The Animal Angels Foundation, based in Mumbai and Pune, is one of the earliest AAT providers in the country and has conducted interventions with children with autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, and developmental delays, as well as with patients in hospitals and elderly care homes, reporting improvements in social interaction and reduced anxiety (Animal Angels Foundation, n.d.). Similarly, Therapaws in Mumbai, established in 2016, engages therapy dogs in hospitals, special schools, and community programs, including a "Read to Dogs" initiative that helps children overcome reading anxiety. The CAPE Foundation in Hyderabad and Bengaluru combines clinical practice with training for professionals in AAT, focusing on counselling for adolescents and children with special needs. In Bengaluru, Healing Horses provides equine-assisted therapy for children with autism and cerebral palsy to improve

balance, coordination, and confidence. Additionally, smaller pilot projects have emerged in collaboration with animal welfare organisations, such as the Blue Cross of India in Chennai, which experimented with dogs in therapy for children with developmental disabilities, showing improvements in attention and communication. Academic studies also highlight AAT applications; for instance, a pilot study in a South Indian dental college found that therapy dogs reduced children's anxiety during dental procedures (Velliangiri, 2021). These examples demonstrate that while still nascent and mostly NGO-driven, AAT in India is expanding across education, mental health, disability rehabilitation, and healthcare settings, highlighting the importance of balancing therapeutic benefits with animal welfare.

Challenges in Integrating HAB and AAT

Integrating Human-Animal Bond (HAB) and Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) faces several challenges that need careful consideration. Ethical concerns remain a primary issue, particularly in balancing the well-being of humans and animals involved in therapeutic settings (Rawlings, 2021). The lack of standardisation is another limitation, as there are currently no uniform training protocols or guidelines, making it essential to establish clear standards for practice. Additionally, allergies, phobias, and cultural differences pose barriers, as not all clients are comfortable interacting with animals, and some may resist handling them altogether (Narvekar, 2021). Ensuring animal welfare is equally critical, as therapy animals may face stress or risk of exploitation if not adequately protected. Practical barriers, including costs, liability concerns, and institutional restrictions, further complicate adopting AAT programs. Moreover, significant evidence gaps highlight the need for more substantial, long-term research to establish effective frameworks and best practices for integrating animals in therapeutic interventions.

Solutions to Overcome the Challenges

A multi-faceted approach is essential to address the challenges in integrating the Human–Animal Bond (HAB) and Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT). Ethical concerns can be mitigated by establishing and adhering to clear guidelines—such as those outlining informed consent and ensuring the welfare of both clients and animals—which are increasingly recognized as critical in AAT practice (M.A. & M.A,, 2016). Combatting the lack of standardisation requires developing professional standards, certification processes, and competencies for handlers, animals, and program implementation—as outlined in the Standards of Practice in Animal-Assisted Interventions (Human-Animal Interactions Ethics Workgroup, 2021). To address allergies, phobias, and cultural issues, integrating animal-assisted work into routine therapeutic practices gradually and with sensitivity can help alleviate stigma and increase acceptance—though empirical studies to guide this approach are needed. Ensuring animal welfare involves monitoring stress indicators, scheduling adequate rest, and planning for the eventual retirement of therapy animals—practices supported by growing research into welfare monitoring and retirement planning (NG & Fine, 2019). Overcoming practical barriers such as funding limitations, liability concerns, and institutional restrictions may be facilitated through advocacy, fundraising, the creation of liability frameworks, and partnerships with NGOs or community organisations—strategies aligned with broader policy recommendations in the field. Finally, closing evidence gaps calls for interdisciplinary collaboration and rigorous research, including experimental trials and longitudinal studies, which are increasingly highlighted as necessary in the evolving standards for AAT (Peralta & Fine, 2021)

Conclusion
The human-animal bond (HAB) is a mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and animals influenced by behaviours essential to the health and well-being (Fine, 2019). Social work literature increasingly recognises this bond as a significant factor in clients' lives, impacting mental health, social support, and overall well-being. Research has shown that positive interactions with animals can reduce stress, alleviate anxiety and depression, and combat loneliness (Walsh, 2009). For vulnerable populations, such as older adults, individuals with disabilities, and those experiencing homelessness, companion animals can provide a crucial source of unconditional positive regard, stability, and motivation (Risley-Curtiss, 2010). Traditionally focused on human relationships, the profession increasingly acknowledges that animals are integral members of their family and support systems for many clients. Animal-Assisted Therapy offers powerful opportunities for enhancing social work practice. However, its success relies on the ethical responsibility of practitioners to respect and protect both human clients and animals. By integrating principles of compassion, justice, and care, social workers can ensure that AAT remains a practice that promotes mutual well-being. Future research and policy development should continue expanding on frameworks safeguarding human and animal participants in therapeutic relationships.

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