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Revised commentary

Why should the welfare of therapy animals involved in animal assisted interventions matter to child healthcare researchers and professionals?

While Animal Assisted Interventions (AAI) have been gaining attention from child health researchers and practitioners over the past three decades the welfare of the therapy animal has not been so clearly articulated in research reports published. The International Association of Human-Animal Interactions Organizations (IAHAIO, 2018 pp. 5) define AAI as a '*...a goal oriented and structured intervention that intentionally includes or incorporates animals in health, education and human services...*'. But what of the therapy animal? We must not lose sight of their needs and benefits to the human-animal relationship, or we risk overwork, stress, and even commercialisation of therapy animal services (Serpell *et al.*, 2020). Why should child healthcare researchers and professionals care? It is important that the benefits to humans do not outweigh the welfare of the animal but should be considered in terms of the advantages and disadvantages for both (Glenk, 2017). This commentary will explore the human-animal relationship from a sociological perspective and outline the origins of AAI as well as discussing how the future may unfold.

The rising interest of Human Animal Studies (HAS) within academia is linked to the animal protection movement, debate, and interest in animals as a subject worthy of philosophical and ethical inquiry (DeMello, 2012). The moral considerations of animal welfare were highlighted by two humanistic philosophers, Singer (1975) - *Animal Liberation*, and Regan (1983) - *The Case for Animal Rights*. They raised concerns around factory farming, especially in relation to excessive usage of crates to house animals, such as pigs, indoors. The intense confinement practices in agriculture, in the 1970's, raised public awareness on animal welfare in the 1980's and led to further exploration in this area through the study of human-animal relationships (Shapiro, 2020).

To understand how our relationship with animals developed it is necessary to look at the Human Animal Relationships (HAR) in the 16th Century when humans and animals lived side by side in the time of hunter gatherers. Thomas (1984) discussed the shared vulnerabilities of humans and animals as they shared space to shelter and were open to the same infection risks. These confined spaces meant that humans and animals were quite intimate and more aware of each other and their collective needs for shelter, warmth, and rest. Some philosophers commented upon animal and human relationships as symbiotic, but Clutton-Brock (2012) disagrees since she stated only humans seemed to benefit from the relationship.

Domestication of certain animals was a gradual transformation, from 1500-1800, when people settled and there was greater urbanization space between humans and animals (Thomas, 1984). Clutton-Brock (2012) discussed how humans and wolves hunted side-by-side during the ice age. Hunter gatherers moved pastures in small mobile groups. They made shelters, settled for a period, and found animals to feed upon. When seasons changed, they moved onto other valleys for more shelter and food. Humans found that their combined efforts of hunting with wolves and later dogs was more beneficial. The 'space' created by urbanisation has meant that humans

have largely forgotten how their lives co-existed with animals in more natural surroundings. The artist, Banksy, illustrates this fact through his display called, 'The village pet store and charcoal grill' in 2008 in New York. He illustrated how Americans might think that chickens lay chicken nugget babies as the housing and production of chicken largely goes unnoticed by people, unless chicken ends up on their dinner plates! (DeMello, 2012).

The domestication of dogs; the most popular therapy animal; began when dogs became hunting partners to humans. Franklin (1999) discusses the wolf as being the first animal tamed as it was a hunting animal which retrieved its kill alongside humans. Diamond (1999) stated that wolves were domesticated in America and Eurasia to become dogs and hunting companions. Domestication being described here as owning animals close by the settlement so that they could be bred for food. One of the earliest domesticated dogs to be reported was evidenced by a puppy found in the arms of Charles Darwin's first cousin Galton buried 15000 years ago (Franklin, 1999). There is an interesting debate in the literature as to why only certain species were domesticated over others (Diamond, 1999; Shapiro, 2020). The ability of the animal to be herded is one important element so that man can dominate and herd the animals themselves.

As far back as 1860, Florence Nightingale noted the benefits of pet companions to infirmed patients (Nightingale, 1946). She observed that, '*a small pet is often an excellent companion for the sick, for long chronic cases especially*' (Nightingale, 1946, p.103). A war story by Lewis (2014) describes the trauma suffered by prisoners of war and how keeping a dog 'Judy' as their mascot was helpful in terms of coping with their ordeal. The UK animal charity, People's Dispensary for Sick Animals (PDSA), awarded the dog Judy the Dickin Medal and her handler the White Cross the highest honor for humans. The human-animal relationship was recognised as helpful to both parties as a result.

The One Health concept is an example of the latest movement in our society which aims to address a balance between, '*humans, animals, the environment and how each affects health*' (Chalmers & Dell, 2015 p. 562). The research team have collaborated with staff in Veterinary Medicine, Sociology, and the Charity, Irish Therapy Dogs to ensure a more balanced view of AAI in their research (Howe *et al.* 2021) The view of the therapy dog involved in the intervention could be captured through photography and narratives from the animal handler's familiarity with their own animal's behaviour. It might also be possible to observe the animal's behaviour during the intervention through video recording the interaction between the dog and the child. The Veterinary Medicine research team could then observe the animal's behaviour as a way of analysing the therapy dog's response to the intervention. Indeed, the child's view of the intervention, which surprisingly is under-reported in the literature, could also be captured through creative ways such as drawing, art work, story telling and rich narratives. The environment where the intervention takes place can also be captured by inviting narratives from parents, guardians and child healthcare practitioners.

To return to our question why should child health practitioners and researchers care? We pride ourselves in providing evidence-based care but to do so in terms of AAI it is necessary to take a more global view by ensuring there are guidelines in place to protect the child, the dog and the environment. Then we will have a more comprehensive understanding of what each party brings to the AAI and it will reflect in a more balanced outcome. Organisations need to develop adequate guidelines to reflect the needs of the human, animal and the environment to align with One Health concepts.

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