Jane Addams (1940) perhaps the most prominent of the founders of modern social work, describing the impetus to dedicate herself to the welfare of others and develop Hull House, wrote, "We had been to see a bull fight rendered in the most magnificent Spanish style, where greatly to my surprise and horror, I found that I had seen, with comparative indifference, five bulls and many more horses killed" (p. 85). Jane's companions were horrified immediately by the needless killing, although Jane "had not thought much about the bloodshed." Later in the day, however, "the natural and inevitable reaction came and in deep chagrin I felt myself tried and condemned, not only by this disgusting experience, but by the entire moral situation which it revealed... Nothing less than the moral reaction following the experience at a bull fight had been able to reveal to me that so far from following in the wake of a chariot of philanthropic fire, I had been tied to the tail of the veriest ox-cart of self-seeking" (p. 86).

Perhaps Jane Addams was a sentimentalist. After all, the NASW Code of Ethics (NASW, 1996) describes the primary mission of the social work profession as being "to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people" (p. 1). There's no mention of bulls, horses, or any other animal species. Maybe Jane Addams's feeling for the pain of animals was misguided emotion. Or it may be that Jane Addams, with her concern for these animals, can serve as an important role model for today's social workers.

Social Work, the Environment, and Oppressed Populations

Meyer (1981) discussed noxious "-isms," such as racism, sexism, ageism, jingoism, and militarism, that are woven into the fabric of American society. These "-isms" by their nature tend to marginalize those who do not fit under the rubric of one's group. Witkin (1998) identified attention to marginalized groups as a defining attribute of the social work profession and stated that we must consider which groups the profession is not serving. It is suggested here that the profession should at least consider the issue of speciesism. Speciesism is discrimination based on species, and social workers are urged to reflect on and discuss the issue of whether differential treatment based on species is justified. Furthermore, a core value of social work is appreciation and respect for the inherent dignity and worth of all persons (NASW, 1996). It is worth deliberating over whether our treatment of other species, in places such as slaughterhouses, is associated with our own sense of dignity and self-respect.

Many authors (Berger, 1995; Berger & Kelly, 1993; Hoff & Polack, 1993; McMain-Park, 1996) have emphasized the importance of social workers becoming aware of and involved in environmental issues. Berger described environmental decay as "the gravest threat to our social welfare" (p. 443). Animals are an essential component of our
environment and a key element in maintaining ecological balance. Thus, a person-in-environment orientation warrants concern for our treatment of animals.

There are many connections between our treatment of animals and environmental integrity; these touch on issues such as hunger, poverty, and war. Toffler (1975) suggested that the most practical hope for resolving the world's food crisis is a restriction of beef eating that will save billions of tons of grain. Ehrlich and Ehrlich (1972) reported that production of a pound of meat requires 40 to 100 times as much water as the production of a pound of wheat. Altschul (1964) noted that in terms of calorie units per acre, a diet of grains, vegetables, and beans will support 20 times as many people as a diet of meat. Singer (1990) wrote that the reduction of U.S. meat consumption by only 10 percent for one year would free about 12 million tons of grain for human consumption and added that the amount of food wasted by the slaughter of animals in the affluent nations would be sufficient, if properly distributed, to end both hunger and malnutrition throughout the world. The economic disadvantages of mass slaughter of animals for food have been known to humankind for a long time. In Plato's Republic (1942), Socrates recommended a vegetarian diet because it allowed a country to make the most intelligent and efficient use of agricultural resources. He warned that eating animals leads to the need for more land for pasture, which leads to war between countries over limited land resources.

Even if it is argued that social work is concerned intrinsically only with the human species, a strong case can be made that there is an association between ill-treatment of animals and antisocial behaviors, including oppression and persecution of subgroups that exist on the outskirts of society. Boat (1995) asserted that there is a need for research linking cruelty toward animals with cruelty toward children, because violence toward animals tends to exist where there is violence toward children, and children's violence toward animals is a revealing source of information about the origin of children's future violent behavior toward humans. Wax and Haddox (1974) found that animal cruelty is a key predictor for violent behavior in adolescent males. Kellert and Felthous (1985), who found that aggressive criminals perpetrated animal cruelty when they were children significantly more than nonaggressive criminals and more than noncriminals, suggested that childhood animal cruelty be viewed as a potential indicator of future aggressive criminality and advised that society should encourage a nurturing attitude toward animals. Miller and Knutson (1997) found that a prison population was more likely to have been exposed to animal cruelty as children than in a nonprison population, and Ressler, Burgess, Hartman, & Douglas (1986) found that cruelty to animals is a prevalent behavior in sexual murderers. Besharov (1990) described a case of severe emotional abuse of a child, which consisted of the child witnessing "many acts of sadism throughout his childhood including watching his father riddle with bullets a paper bag containing a newborn litter of kittens" (p. 2). It is accepted that such treatment of kittens reflects and leads to emotional and behavioral abnormalities and deficiencies. Perhaps we should contemplate that similar maltreatment of the young and the adults of other species, such as cows, sheep, and chickens, has similar effects on the psyche.
After researching several databases, including Sociofile, Psychlit, PsycINFO, and Social Work Abstracts, I found that speciesism was conspicuously absent in discussions related to social work. When we consider social work's stress on subjugated or oppressed populations, this absence is curious.

**Discussion of Speciesism in Other Fields**

Animal rights and speciesism have been discussed extensively in the field of psychology in relation to issues such as development of empathy (Shapiro, 1990), concern for the spiritual and religious beliefs of the client (Mitchell, 1993), reduction of aggression in humans (Ulrich, 1992), and the many ethical and moral issues related to causing suffering to another living entity simply to satisfy human desires (Bowd & Shapiro, 1993; Mitchell; Ulrich, 1991). Peek, Bell, & Dunham (1996) examined the relationship between women's greater overall support of animal rights and a relational orientation of care and nurturing, as well as women's experiences with structural oppression. They found that an egalitarian gender ideology, among both genders, is associated with greater involvement in the cause of animal rights. Many social and philosophical disciplines, such as law (for example, Francione, 1996; McCarthy, 1982; Wicklund, 1997), ethics and morals (for example, Beauchamp, 1997; Dombrowski, 1997; Pluhar, 1981; Regan, 1982; Singer, 1990) have recognized the importance of animal rights issues. As evidenced by its coverage in other academic and social fields, animal rights is clearly a social and moral issue, and its neglect in the social work profession is significant.

The intention of this article primarily is to suggest that discussions of animal rights and speciesism have their place in social work. Surely, as an expression of personal values some social workers are vegetarians, work against animal experimentation, or participate in other aspects of the animal rights movement. This article recommends that the issue of speciesism should be incorporated as a basic element of the profession.

**Ethics and Speciesism**

Although this article does not elaborate on the philosophical arguments with regard to speciesism and its sequelae, it provides a brief description for beginning the discussion with regard to the field of social work. Singer (1990) argued that there is no justifiable reason for refusing to extend the principle of equality of consideration to members of other species. A common argument opposed to animal rights involves the assertion of the superior intelligence of human beings or the manifestations of intelligence, such as language. In response, it may be noted that a human infant possesses less intelligence, in any sense, than many species that are routinely killed in human society. Of course, it may be argued that the human infant has the potential for greater intelligence than any animal. However, there are humans, such as those who suffer from profound retardation, who do not possess such potential, and an argument that favors exploitation of another species would be in the unfortunate position of favoring similar exploitation of such humans for the gratification of our own desires. Singer asked, "If
possessing a higher degree of intelligence does not entitle one human to use another for his own ends, how can it entitle humans to exploit nonhumans for the same purpose" (p. 6)?

Sometimes it is contended that animals do not feel pain as humans do. However, the external signs, such as writhing, facial contortions, yelping, or other forms of calling and attempts to avoid the source of the pain that cause us to infer pain in humans can be seen in other species. Furthermore, these animals have nervous systems similar to our own (Singer, 1990). Singer quoted Lord Brain, a renowned neurologist: "I personally can see no reason for conceding mind to my fellow men and denying it to animals" (p. 12).

Of course, these topics raise many complex and subtle philosophical issues, but to deny right to life to living creatures simply because they are not members of the homo sapiens species is, ethically, at least questionable, and social workers ought to study the issue for the integrity of themselves and the profession. Regan (1982) wrote, "To cause animals to suffer cannot be defended merely on the grounds that we like the taste of their flesh, and even if animals were raised so that they led generally pleasant lives and were 'humanely' slaughtered, that would not insure that their rights, including their right to life, were not violated" (p. 1).

Slavery, Feminism, and Speciesism

The subjugation of human beings in slavery is perhaps the most pernicious form of oppression, and many thinkers have realized a connection between slavery and speciesism.

Alice Walker (cited in Spiegel, 1988) wrote, "The animals of the world exist for their own reasons. They were not made for humans any more than black people were made for whites or women for men" (p. 10). Dr. Humphrey Primatt (cited in Spiegel) wrote, "Pain is pain, whether it be inflicted on man or on beast;... The white man...can have no right, by virtue of his color, to enslave and tyrannize over a black man...For the same reason, a man can have no natural right to abuse and torment a beast" (p. 13). Harriet Beecher Stowe, Frederick Douglass, Abraham Lincoln, and many others involved in the fight against slavery expressed sympathy with the causes of animal rights and sensitive treatment of animals, specifically because of the relationship between animal mistreatment and human mistreatment (Spiegel).

Dick Gregory (1973) related that, under the leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King, he became totally committed to nonviolence and that this commitment was accompanied by opposition to killing in any form. He applied this idea not only to war, lynching, assassination, and murder but also to killing animals for food and sport. Gregory expressed the conviction that the killing of animals is immoral and unnatural. Isaac Bashevis Singer (1971) narrated the story of Herman, a fictional character: "As often as Herman had witnessed the slaughter of animals and fish, he always had the same thought: in their behavior toward creatures, all men were Nazis" (pp. 256-257). Many other social reformers and progressive thinkers have advocated that humans should
cease their violence toward animals, because they saw a connection with such activity and human violence perpetrated against other humans (Hill, 1996). Hill wrote, "I share the conviction of many before, including Thoreau, Shaw, Einstein, and Gandhi, that the human race will one day, perhaps not too far in the distant future, look back upon our earlier practice of eating animals as yet another obstacle that had to be overcome on the road to our humanity" (p. 186).

There are obvious connections between speciesism and feminist theory and causes. Donovan and Adams (1995) wrote, "We support the radical feminist thesis that the male pattern of female subordination and degradation, which is nearly universal in human societies, is prototypical for many other forms of abuse, although we also wonder whether that original pattern of domination was not itself preceded by and modeled upon the domination of animals by humans ... Women must not deny their historical linkage with animals but rather remain faithful to them, bonded as we are not just by centuries of similar abuse but also by the knowledge that they--like us, often objectified as Other--are subjects worthy of the care, the respect, even the reverence, that the sacredness of consciousness deserves" (p. 7). Dunayer (1995) contended that linguistic sexism has its roots in speciesism. Birke (1994) delineated the relationship between experimentation on animals in science and objectification of women, and Adams (1995) expounded on the relationship between cruelty to animals and battering of women. Other animal rights issues, such as hunting (Comninou, 1995; Kheel, 1995), slaughterhouse savagery (Adams, 1990), and treatment of livestock (Davis, 1995), have been discussed with regard to rape, discrimination, and other forms of exploitation of women.

**Conclusion**

Because the NASW Code of Ethics does not refer to any species other than humans, the proposal to integrate the struggle against speciesism as part of the social work profession is substantial, as it entails rethinking or at least thinking more deeply about our values and principles of conduct. Social work education programs, especially with their focus on ecological social work, can encourage students to consider the source of their food and its effect on the environment and the people served by the social work profession. The social work profession should encourage its students, educators, scholars, and practitioners to become informed about environmental, political, and economic issues connected with treatment of animals. Toward this goal they can research the references in this article and can contact groups such as the International Society for Animal Rights, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, and United Action for Animals. After reflecting on salient issues of animal treatment, social workers may alter their personal behaviors and thus affect the world. Berger (1995) wrote "[C]onsider that a typical steak produced by modern methods represents the consumption of a gallon of gasoline... Even a small reduction in the quantity of animal protein consumed by Americans will have a beneficial impact on land, water, and air quality" (p. 442). Social workers discovering injustices in the area of animal treatment can advocate to rectify the situation for an improved ecology as well as increasingly enlightened client service, because we are all affected by environmental factors.
Combating speciesism can be added to the list of social welfare concerns for the social work profession, and ecologically based practice models can include content on speciesism and animal rights issues.

This commentary has of course not resolved or even addressed all concerns related to social work and speciesism. For example, there are important questions pertaining to respect and appreciation of religious and cultural traditions and the relative worth of animal, plant, and human lives in areas such as medical experimentation. Still, as social workers we are obliged to at least consider the moral, ethical, and practical implications of our treatment of species other than ourselves. Jane Addams did.

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References


Organizations

International Society for Animal Rights, 965 Griffin Pond Road, Clarks Summit, PA 18411, Tel: 717-586-2200.

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, 501 Front Street, Norfolk, VA 23510, Tel: 757-622-7382.

United Action for Animals, P.O. Box 635, Lenox Hill Station, New York, NY 10021, Tel: 212-249-9178.

Letters from Readers on the article Social Work and Speciesism, July 2000 issue of Social Work (Volume 43, Number 4)

I was thrilled to read David Wolf’s article “Social Work and Speciesism” (January 2000, pp. 88-93). Too often I have felt that our profession isolates itself from the larger environmental and spiritual issues, although we cannot achieve our goal of better treatment for humans while doing so. If every social worker were to become vegetarian, we would do as much for the world at our meals as we do at our jobs. Cruelty is cruelty, and ideologies based on dominance and hierarchy are destructive no matter who the underclass is. My only complaint is that he omitted Susan Griffin’s On Woman and Nature: The Roaring Inside Her from his bibliography. This book illustrates better than any other I have read the interrelation of sexism, racism, speciesism, and mistreatment of the earth. I hope that Social Work will continue to publish articles like this that address the larger picture of abuse and the need for a holistic strategy of healing and progress. Alison Stone, New York, NY

I was dismayed to see that David B. Wolf’s discussion of speciesism (January 2000, pp. 88-93) completely overlooked a darker side of this issue, which involves much more than an arid philosophical debate. Peter Singer, a Princeton professor who is referenced in Wolf’s piece, has gone far beyond the positions taken in his book, Animal Liberation. Singer is now advocating that there be no moral distinction between animal
life and human life; the decisive characteristic is whether one is a "person" or "nonperson." Animals have the capacity to rise to personhood in his view, and humans may lose their status as persons by being disabled. (Montgomery, 1999; Singer, 1993).

The potential consequences of this sort of moral paradigm are ominous for many of the clients we serve. Singer's "preference utilitarianism" even goes so far as to endorse infanticide and involuntary euthanasia for the disabled (LAETF, 1999). Building on his work, the Hemlock Society has continued down what has been referred to as the "slippery slope" in advocating for the creation of a judicial determination to permit involuntary euthanasia for "burdensome," "demented," or "severely disabled" individuals (Hentoff, 1995; IAETF, 1998).

As bizarre as it may seem, policy initiatives that pose a direct threat to the human population with disabilities have originated in the benevolent-sounding animal rights movement. A closer review of pronouncements made by animal rights activists reveals intolerant references to humanity as a "cancer" and the assertion of a moral equivalence between the 6 million victims of the Holocaust and chickens perishing in slaughterhouses (Marquardt, Levine, & LaRochelle, 1993). Despite the chilling possibilities inherent with such reasoning, the human services community has been largely silent regarding these new "bioethicists," and Professor Singer, for one, is not considered to be on the fringe (Smith, 1997). This stands in contrast to rebuttals from some of the "nonpersons" whose lives would be at risk; the disability rights group Not Dead Yet protested Singer's appointment at Princeton, and Marcia Bristo, Chairperson of the National Council on Disability, said any proposed lessening of the rights of people with disabilities to establish a system of involuntary euthanasia amounts to "a defense of genocide" (Montgomery, 1999).

Social work as a profession would be well advised to scratch the surface of the animal rights movement, which at first glance can seem to be progressive and well-intended. What will be found if it is examined critically is a growing school of philosophy that holds our disabled clients to be less than persons and subject to being killed for the convenience of the fit.

William C. Hughes
St. Louis, MO

References


Response to William Hughes
When a writer cites a reference to support a point,
there is not an implication that the writer concurs with all views of the referenced author. There are surely many positions and views possessed by Singer and other animal rights advocates with which I do not agree. In the commentary "Social Work and Speciesism" I asserted, "as social workers we are obligated to at least consider the moral, ethical, and practical implications of our treatment of species other than ourselves." I stand by this point, though I don't advocate going down the slippery slope and backing absurd ideas such as ascribed by Hughes to the "new bioethicists." The commentary acknowledges that it has "not resolved or even addressed all concerns related to social work and speciesism," and maintains that "the profession should at least consider the issue of speciesism." Responses such as those of Hughes contribute to this discussion, and this is the sort of dialogue that is valuable for social work.

David Wolf

With David Wolf's "Social Work and Speciesism" (January 2000, pp. 88-93) we have truly reached the apogee of the trivialization of the profession. Using the pretext of person-in-environment, Wolf embarks on an exploration of making speciesism required content for social work's mission. This is but another illustration of the profession's simplistic rendering of "-isms" into content worthy of exploration. Unfortunately, social work has failed to deliver on what it has promised in the past, so it has little to gain from taking on new orders. The profession has failed with respect to two of its traditional assignments: Child welfare is a scandal, though social welfare professionals have proven more adept at rationing services than admitting it (Costin, Karger, & Stoesz, 1996; Epstein, 1999). Public welfare was so neglected by social work that it became ripe for conservative welfare reform (Stoesz, 1999, 2000).

If past is prologue, social work will bow to ideological fashion and add speciesism to its agenda, plodding along unwittingly in its uncritical presumption that it has the wisdom to facilitate universal, if not galactic, well-being. The Council on Social Work Education will mandate that syllabi incorporate relevant course content. In affirming the validity of another marginal group, NASW will augment its Board of Directors--the sole difficulty being the choice of species.

David Stoesz

Richmond, VA

References


Response to David Stoesz

For the reasons stated in the commentary "Social Work and Speciesism" I contend that consideration of our treatment of species other than humans has potential to enhance and enrich the mission of social work, at the individual and institutional level. The article did not presume to evaluate comprehensively the
effects of such consideration on the many facets of the mandate of social workers, and of course in fulfilling our responsibilities we must prioritize. I don’t believe that appropriate sensitivity to other species trivializes the profession, but rather such humaneness dignifies the field of social work. Furthermore, as mentioned in the commentary, there is research evidence that indicates that attention to the issue of speciesism can augment our effectiveness in more traditional areas of social work concern, such as child protection, juvenile justice, and reduction of violent crime. David Wolf

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