CANADIAN JOURNAL OF
Disability Studies
Published by the Canadian Disability Studies Association · Association Canadienne des Études sur l'Incapacité

Canadian Journal of Disability Studies

Published by the Canadian Disability Studies Association

Association Canadienne des Études sur le handicap

Hosted by The University of Waterloo

www.cjds.uwaterloo

Normative tensions in the popular representation of children with disabilities and animal-assisted therapy

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Abstract

This article contributes to the critical disability and human-nonhuman animal studies literatures through a discourse analysis of newspaper stories about animal-assisted therapy (AAT) and children with disabilities published in the United States and Canada. The articles in our corpus form a recognizable genre that we call AAT human-nonhuman animal interest stories. We pose two central questions of the genre: (1) how is the therapeutic value of AAT constituted? and (2) what are the effects, in discourse, of associating nonhuman animals and children with disabilities in narratives of therapeutic benefit? We emphasize the normative tensions associated with the representation of children with disabilities and nonhuman animals in news stories about AAT. On one hand, news articles objectify children with disabilities, inscribe their need to be made "normal" and silence their own experiences of AAT. On the other hand, they are written in ways that extend and strengthen the disabled body and self through connections with nonhuman therapy animals. They disrupt sharp species distinctions and present narratives of how interspecies relationships formed through participation in AAT co-constitute the agency of nonhuman therapy animals and children with disabilities. We argue that the normative tensions in the popular representation of AAT present important possibilities for intervening in public discourse about disability and nonhuman animals.

Keywords

Animal-assisted therapy, children with disabilities, narrative, therapeutic value

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Introduction

This paper contributes to the critical disability and human-nonhuman animal studies literatures by exploring the popular representation of animal-assisted therapy (AAT). The growth of AAT in recent decades has brought humans and nonhuman animals into relationship with one another in new ways, often unsettling established notions of selfhood and therapeutic agency. In this paper, we examine these and related issues as they play out in newspaper stories about AAT programs for children with disabilities.

Critical disability studies (CDS) and critical animal studies (CAS)—the intersection of which motivates this special issue of CJDS—offer strong normative frameworks for analyzing the relationships between people with disabilities and nonhuman animals. Working from these perspectives, one might anticipate a particular form of critical analysis of popular representations of AAT, for example, one emphasizing how children and nonhuman animals are conferred a

shared oppressed status in news stories that treat nonhuman therapy animals as tools for correcting or repairing children with disabilities.

We take inspiration from CDS and CAS and their respective visions of liberation for people with disabilities and nonhuman animals. And yet, our critique of newspaper representations is somewhat different from what might be expected of the forms of normative critique often associated with CDS and CAS. We do not argue that the news stories in our analysis are entirely oppressive. Rather, we emphasize that newspaper stories about AAT are contradictory and combine liberatory and oppressive forms of representation of children with disabilities, nonhuman therapy animals, and their relationships with one another. In our view, scholars concerned with human-nonhuman animal relationships should be encouraged to recognize and reckon with the tensions of representations of AAT that are both affirming and limiting. Embracing the contradictions of representation can assist meaningful engagement with the lay public in the spaces through which they make sense of disability, nonhuman animals, and therapy.

Our article is based on a discourse analysis of 105 newspaper stories about AAT published in the United States and Canada from 1982 to 2016. We focused on articles about AAT programs involving children with disabilities because children are among the most popular AAT "client groups". We posed two key questions of the news articles in our corpus: (1) how do they constitute the therapeutic value of AAT? and (2) what are the effects, in discourse, of associating nonhuman animals and children with disabilities in narratives of therapeutic benefit?[1]

[1] Effects in discourse is a term we use to center, in our analysis, questions about the power dimensions of the construction of meaning. It directs us to the significance of particular ways of associating nonhuman animals with children with disabilities in language. Our work rests upon an understanding that language is not neutral, that discourses can structure thought and action and that media representations are a site of contestation and struggle (Hall 1997). The specific effects of our corpus on the thoughts and actions of particular readers is beyond the scope of our analysis. When we pose questions about discursive effects we are asking about how particular forms of

Our findings demonstrate that the therapeutic value of AAT in our corpus is constituted through first-person narratives from parents and AAT volunteers that describe observable transformations in children's emotional, social, communicative, and physical capacities. These narratives rely on three main strategies of representation that have varied normative dimensions. First, the representation of transformations as "small miracles" ties AAT's therapeutic benefit to problematic depictions of children with disabilities as wonderous heroes deserving of awe. Second, framing AAT as an alternative to biomedical and related interventions expresses a critique of psy[2] interventions that is in keeping with the spirit of CDS. Third, the popularization of the human-nonhuman animal bond represents nonhuman therapy animals as possessing a moral agency that surpasses that of humans.

Drawing on the post-humanist turn in human-nonhuman animal studies we emphasize the contradictory moral dimensions of representation in our corpus. News stories about AAT combine affirming and limiting narratives about nonhuman therapy animals and children with disabilities. They rely on problematic discourses about children with disabilities as wonderous heroes in which disability is presented as a limit to be overcome through participation with AAT. Furthermore, children rarely appear as speakers about their own experiences of disability and AAT but are spoken about by others. However, the articles also communicate the acceptance and support of children with disabilities *as* children with disabilities in community settings. AAT news stories do not simply denigrate disability; they present narratives of how the interspecies

discourse—such as news stories about therapeutic value that link nonhuman animals and children with disabilities—may construct meaning about disability and nonhuman animals in problematic ways.

2 Following Rose (1999), we use the term "psy" as an umbrella term that groups together a range of authoritative forms of knowledge that shape our understanding of the human individual. The psy disciplines include psychology, psychiatry and a number of applied fields such as applied behavioural analysis "where consequential judgments are made about people's mental health, behavior, cognitive capacities, personalities and social functionality" (McAvoy 2014:1527).

relationships formed through participation in AAT co-constitute the agency of nonhuman therapy animals and children with disabilities.

What is AAT and Why is it Important?

Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is a therapeutic practice that brings humans and nonhuman animals into direct relationship with one another with the primary goal of enhancing the health and quality of life of human beings (Fine, 2015). AAT connects an astonishing range of nonhuman animals—dogs, cats, horses, birds, dolphins, guinea pigs, tortoises, and snakes, among others—with diverse groups of human beings, including, children with disabilities, stroke patients, the elderly, and people experiencing challenges with mental health. Delivered in schools, hospitals, long-term care facilities, prisons and other institutional settings, AAT programs enjoy significant public reach. For example, Therapy Dogs International has some 25,000 dog/handler teams registered across the United States and parts of Canada. A robust popular discourse about AAT can also be found in trade books, pet magazines, the popular press, as well as on YouTube®, websites such as the UK's www.petsastherapy.org and online chat communities like USA Therapy Dogs.

AAT is important not simply because of its scale and diversity. It is a historically specific configuration of interspecies relationships developed to enhance human health and wellbeing. As such, its full implications engage broad questions about the politics of health and health care. Most obviously, as an initiative that enlists nonhuman animals as agents in promoting human health, AAT is situated within longstanding debates about the ethics and politics of using nonhuman animals for human health purposes (Regan, 1983; Ryder, 1983). Indeed, from CAS and related perspectives, AAT can be called into question as a relation of domination over

nonhuman animals for how it disciplines their care and labour and subordinates their needs to the goal of enhancing human health (Coulter, 2016, 2019).

Because of its "fringe" status relative to established health care, AAT also animates questions about the politics of biomedicine. For example, AAT attracts users—particularly people with disabilities—who are part of communities that have long struggled with and critiqued medical and psychiatric interventions (Morrison, 2005). AAT is also in tension with one of the most significant recent developments shaping biomedical reason and practice: evidence-based decision making (Mykhalovskiy & Weir, 2004). As AAT has grown institutionally, it has encountered criticisms from medical researchers about the rigor of its claims and struggled with the epistemological conventions and resource requirements of new demands for the efficacy of health interventions to be scientifically demonstrated (Marino & Lilienfeld, 2007; Maujean, Pepping & Kendal, 2015).

As a relatively novel project with implications for how therapeutic practice is imagined and organized, one might expect AAT to have been of considerable interest to medical sociologists and anthropologists. That has not been the case, perhaps because of the humanist bias of established social science and the associated tendency to view AAT as a "cute" triviality or oddity. When social scientists concern themselves with AAT, they tend to conduct applied evaluation research that assesses its psychosocial and health effects. Researchers have evaluated AAT along a host of health outcomes including postural stability, perceived self-competence, and levels of anxiety, depression, and loneliness (for a review of the AAT evaluation literature, see O'Haire, 2013).

This paper contributes to a growing body of work that displaces the project of evaluating AAT health outcomes with a broader concern for the complex ways that humans and nonhuman

animals interact in therapeutic contexts and the significance that interspecies relationships have for understanding contemporary forms of sociality. Examples include Savishinsky's (1992) early ethnographic study of volunteer identity formation in the context of nursing home nonhuman animal visitation programs, and Solomon's (2010, 2015) more recent work on how communication with AAT nonhuman animals reorganizes autistic children's interactional habitus and contributes to nonlinguistic forms of interspecies intersubjectivity. Our paper is concerned not with AAT health outcomes per se, but with how they are accounted for and with what implications for popular understandings of nonhuman animals and children with disabilities.

A similar concern can be found in Malcolm et al. (2018) whose ethnographic and interview research explores narratives of therapeutic efficacy expressed by staff and parents of riders involved in a UK horse therapy centre. Malcolm et al. found that parents and staff challenged conceptions of autism as an individual intersubjective deficit and understood AAT's benefits in terms of autistic children's enhanced communicative and empathic abilities. Participants further attributed these benefits to the embodied experience of riding and the movements, rhythms, and personalities of individual horses. This paper extends Malcolm et al.'s work through a focus on accounts of the therapeutic value of AAT that are produced in popular news. We were drawn to an analysis of news representations because of work that underscores their significance for people's health-related decision making (Hayes et al., 2007; Henderson & Hilton, 2018). We view popular news stories as a fertile ground for exploring the discursive tensions that arise in the representation of therapeutic interventions, nonhuman animals, and children with disabilities.

Research Strategy

Our approach to the analysis of news representations is informed by poststructuralist insights about the constitutive properties of discourse (Foucault, 1980). Our paper does not make claims about the "true" therapeutic value of AAT. Instead, it analyzes how therapeutic value is written about in newspapers and with what implications for representations of disability and nonhuman animals. Our research is also influenced by work on the centrality of narrative within contemporary representations of health (Frank, 1995; Kleinman, 1988) which has sensitized us to the storied form in which the therapeutic benefit of AAT is made known to potential users. Finally, our engagement with newspaper articles is influenced by approaches to genre that emphasize the sociality of written texts. Drawing on Bakhtin's work on the novel (1981), scholars such as Bazerman and Paradis (1991) and Smith (1999) emphasize that textual genres mediate a broad range of complex social practices. Their analyses have encouraged us to identify the news articles in our corpus as a particular genre, what we call AAT human-nonhuman animal interest stories. We cannot make claims about how specific readers have made sense of or responded to the news stories we analyzed. However, we conducted our discourse analysis with an appreciation that our news articles address readers who have the potential to become involved with AAT programs as volunteers, donors, and as parents of participating children with disabilities.

Data Collection

We used Factiva and Proquest databases to identify our news articles. We limited our search to Canadian and U.S. English language publications for which full-text documents were

available. Factiva articles were collected from the category "Major news and business publications, Canada and the U.S." and Proquest articles from Canadian Newsstand and Proquest Newspapers. We chose a start date of 1982, as the extensive organization, use, and documentation of AAT in North America dates back to the early 1980s (Beck, 2000), and an end date of 2016.

Our search strategy used the following syntax: ("animal" OR "pet") AND ("facilitated" OR "assisted" AND "therapy") AND ("child" OR "youth") AND ("special need" OR "disability" OR "handicap") as well as a variation that used truncation characters to expand the search: (animal OR pet OR pets) AND (facilitated OR assisted AND therapy) AND (child* OR youth) AND (special need OR disabil* OR handicap). The documents retrieved using this search strategy were manually sorted to remove newspaper articles that were irrelevant to the topic of inquiry, as well as articles that were not feature stories (for example, event calendars, letters, and editorials).

Articles that concentrated on a population other than children (such as features about AAT and senior citizens) were not retained for analysis unless there was notable discussion of AAT for children with disabilities as well. Similarly, articles containing only a brief mention of the research topic were omitted as were those focused only on nonhuman service animals, such as guide dogs for people who are blind or visually impaired. In cases where an article appeared in duplicate or had multiple versions with variable lengths, the article with the largest word count was retained for analysis and all others were removed.

This sorting process yielded a corpus of 105 articles for analysis. The majority of the articles were from publications based in regional centers, as opposed to major cities, in the United States. Therapeutic riding and dog visitation programs were the most popular AAT

programs covered. Community centers, schools, and riding stables were the most common sites where programs were delivered to a range of children with autism, Down syndrome, muscular dystrophy, and other disabilities.

Data Analysis

To analyze our corpus of news articles, we created a table summarizing the articles across the following six fields: (1) the nature of the article's central narrative; representations of: (2) disability; (3) AAT and its value; and (4) human-nonhuman animal relationships; (5) relevant quotations; and (6) additional comments. We drew special attention to the normative dimensions of representations of disability and AAT and to the central narrative elements of the articles' representations of how AAT "worked" with children with disabilities. A preliminary table was created by the first author and was extended with additional observations on the six fields by the second and third authors. The first author generated, and the second and third authors commented on, a series of analytic memos (Miles & Huberman, 1994) that expressed, in narrative form, the connections among the main findings from the analytic table. The memos emphasized how the news articles linked representations of interspecies relationships with stories about the value of AAT. They reflected on that relationship in light of recent trends in the literature on interspecies relationships (Birke & Hockenhull, 2012; Blue & Rock, 2014; Carter & Charles, 2011; Cockram & Wells, 2011; Franklin et al., 2007; Haraway, 2008) as well as recent critiques of "normalization" by disability scholars (Bumiller, 2008; Race et al., 2005; Titchkosky & Michalko, 2009).

Research Findings

AAT human-nonhuman animal interest stories—a textual genre

While the articles in our corpus are varied, we were struck by their narrative coherence, to the extent that we understand them to form a consistent AAT human-nonhuman animal interest genre. AAT human-nonhuman animal interest stories intend relations of support for local AAT programs by describing their activities in ways that might attract clients, volunteers and funds. They focus on AAT programs that are part of readers' local communities and tell stories that frame AAT as a community good that children with disabilities can enjoy and benefit from. Their positive tone is suggested by such titles as "Warm and Fuzzy" (Newman, 2001, p. E1), "Child's best friend: Therapy program bringing out the best in kids" (Ballard, 2003, n.p.), and "Magical paws get magical results" (Poliakov, 2012, p. A1).

The genre is discursively structured by characteristic topical foci, narrative sequences, and other language devices. Typically, articles describe the services that a given program offers and discuss how the program was established. In some instances, founders and the challenges they encountered in establishing AAT programs are profiled at length, helping to position the programs as heroic accomplishments. At the heart of the articles are extended narratives about the value of AAT programs. Many of the articles close with gentle appeals for support from readers, either in the form of financial donations or volunteer participation. In their original form, most of the articles include photographs of children with nonhuman animals from the programs in which they participate. Unfortunately, limitations with our news aggregators prevent us from including the photos in our analysis of the corpus.

AAT and popular narratives of therapeutic value

Given the scientific controversies associated with AAT and the growing expectation for all manner of health-related decisions to be "evidence-based," we expected to encounter recourse to scientific research on AAT outcomes in popular news accounts of AAT's therapeutic value. To our surprise, few articles in our corpus cited empirical research or quoted scientific experts to make the therapeutic case for AAT.

Instead, the genre privileges the moral authority of experiential knowledge to "tell value" as first-hand stories of transformations in the capacities of children who interact with nonhuman therapy animals. In our corpus, the therapeutic value of AAT is constituted for readers through accounts from parents and volunteers about before/after transformations (Heller, 2007) that attribute children's new capacities and self-worth to their participation in AAT programs. Three discursive moves are central to this mode of representation. First, the trope of "small miracles" is used to name the transformations children with disabilities experience. Second, the articles underscore the unique nature of children's involvement in AAT by critiquing established biomedical and psy discourses and practices. Finally, a popularized notion of the human-nonhuman animal bond is drawn upon to emphasize the therapeutic effect of strong emotional ties that children form with nonhuman therapy animals.

Small Miracles

At the heart of the articles that form our corpus are extended narratives of AAT's therapeutic benefit. These narratives rely on before/after comparisons that position AAT as the source of an increase in children's physical, communicative, emotional, and social capacities. They typically feature descriptions of the unique relationships individual children with disabilities form with specific nonhuman therapy animals. Most importantly, they rely on

extended first-hand accounts—a kind of witness testimony—from parents and AAT volunteers who are quoted throughout the articles about what children, having experienced AAT, can "now do". The trope of "small miracles" is a discursive lynchpin of these accounts.

The presence of the miraculous in news stories about AAT positions our corpus within a long history of representing disability in wonderous terms. In an important article on the visual rhetoric of disability, Garland-Thomson (2000, p. 352) argues that contemporary modes of the wonderous genre are meant to elicit admiration and respect for people with disabilities by positioning them as "courageous 'overcomers.'" In our corpus, some articles directly use miracle phraseology to represent AAT's therapeutic value. For example, in "Mending hearts at ground zero," Elizabeth Teal reflects on her work with therapy dog Annie, remarking, "I've witnessed so many miracles, like the autistic child who wasn't responding to anyone and then started to play peek-a-boo with the dog" (Dale, 2001, n.p.). In an article on Full Circle, an AAT program involving marine animals, the author notes that "those involved in the program say many small miracles do happen out of the animals' love for the youngsters" (Moks-Unger, 2000, n.p.). She elaborates by describing changes that Mario, a 12-year old boy with partial paralysis is said to have experienced: "The results were great. When he was ready to go home, Mario could grasp and release a handful of fish to feed the dolphins. It was a very uplifting experience for everyone" (Moks-Unger, 2000, n.p.).

Other articles do not explicitly use miracle terminology but still preserve the form of witnessed transformations characteristic of the "small miracles" trope. Consider, for example, the discussion of Jonathan Larouche's experiences with a two-week dolphin therapy program based in Curaçao. When the news article was written, Jonathan was a 14-year-old boy living with autism and cerebral palsy in Montreal. His parents raised $20 000 for the family to travel to

Curaçao in order for him to take part in the program. Jonathan's mother notes the effects of the program: "we came back and we had a different child" (Miller, 2014, p. B3). Jonathan's parents:

> Watched in awe as their son fed himself spaghetti . . . and when he later went the entire night without wetting the bed—and was in his own bed, no less—they were convinced his confidence and fine motor skills had reached an unprecedented high . . . his parents credit his leaps entirely to the Curaçao Dolphin Therapy and Research Center. (Miller, 2014, p. B3)

Stories that represent children's transformations as extraordinary or miraculous extend a tradition that objectifies children with disabilities by representing them as subjects deserving of readers' awe and amazement. A peculiar feature of such stories is the relative absence of children with disabilities as speaking subjects. Time and again we read newspaper stories in which the "small miracles" of AAT were recounted by parents or AAT volunteers, while the actual perspectives and experiences of the children participating in AAT programs were silenced.

In our corpus, therapeutic value is constituted through problematic transformation narratives that represent children's new-found abilities as discrete, observable moments of changed capacities that follow from their experiences with nonhuman therapy animals. Unlike scaling a rock face in a wheelchair or other "superhuman" achievements described by Garland-Thomson, small miracles, such as sitting up straight, uttering a new word, or reaching for an object, combine the wonderous with the mundane. They thus underscore the register of parents' everyday experience and favour it as a site from which to know about the therapeutic value of AAT. In contrast to a rhetoric of scientific efficacy, small miracles make the benefits of AAT knowable in ways that recapitulate stereotypical narratives of "overcoming" disability, all the

while representing transformations that parents value and come to recognize by comparing what children can do before and after their engagement with AAT.

Critiquing biomedical and psy discourses

While the small miracle trope stereotypes children with disabilities, it also expresses a critique of biomedical and psy discourses and practices similar to that found in CDS. In his classic work *Governing the Soul,* Nikolas Rose (1999) argues that psychology and associated forms of expertise, what he calls the psy disciplines, have played a fundamental role in shaping thought about human subjectivity and enabling forms of authority that rely on liberal notions of individual autonomy and freedom. He argues that a complex assemblage—of counseling, schooling, clinical and therapeutic practices, quasi-professional activities, mass market media, and much else—stabilizes a particular version of human subjectivity marked by a deep, interior self.

Popular newspaper stories about the therapeutic value of AAT paint a complex picture of AAT's relationship to biomedical and psy knowledges and practices. In some stories, the AAT programs being described have been established by psy practitioners, including, for example, psychotherapists, social workers, and occupational therapists. Other stories position AAT as a helpful adjunct to behavioural or biomedical approaches to disability. By contrast, the predominant narrative in our corpus presents AAT as a distinct alternative to biomedical and behavioural interventions that are framed as dehumanizing children with disabilities. Thus Kerstin Fosdick, executive director of the Saddle Light Center, notes that her program tries "to help children who a lot of folks have forgotten about" and that many of the participants "have defied doctors' predictions" (Huddleston, 2003, p. 1B).

Writing about a hospital-based AAT program, Jane Brody (1982, n.p.) describes two success stories: Marsha, who came to AAT "withdrawn, frozen and almost mute" after receiving drug and electroshock therapy for schizophrenia; and Sonny who, "did not respond to traditional therapies" and who, prior to AAT, "spent nearly all his time lying in his hospital bed." An article about a dolphin-assisted therapy program describes how "Deena and Peter Hoagland's three-year old son Joe" suffered a stroke and was left with no prognosis for recovery by medical practitioners but recovered "complete mobility" after two years of intensive swimming with dolphins (Downs, 2002, n.p.).

Contra Rose, these narratives paint a picture of the limits and exclusions of the subjectifying practices of established psy and biomedical discourses. They suggest troubling experiences on the part of parents and children of being neglected or passed over by traditional biomedical and psy interventions and of the failure of such interventions to help children with disabilities realize their full potential as human subjects. In doing so, they engage a mechanics of contrast between AAT and established therapeutic interventions that supports representations of the positive therapeutic value of children's contact with nonhuman animals. They further detach therapeutic effect from human intervention and confer an agentic status to nonhuman animals who are represented as having a positive impact on the lives of children that human therapists do not. As Diane Wiezen, lead instructor at Light Center, an equine therapy center notes, "The animals are the real therapists here" (Gibbons, 2006, n.p.). Whether framed as accounts of children with disabilities who have been failed by physicians and psychologists, or of children who, from a biomedical perspective, are deemed "therapeutic failures," the critique of psy discourses in our corpus adds a normative twist to the stereotyping trope of small miracles by

suggesting that AAT orients to children with disabilities in more human ways than do established biomedical and psy approaches.

The human-nonhuman animal bond

The concept of the human-nonhuman animal bond refers to mutually health-enhancing emotional, psychological and physical relationships formed between humans and nonhuman animals. With roots in the early work of Levinson (1962) and Bustad (1983), the concept has been elaborated over the years primarily by veterinarians and researchers interested in human-nonhuman animal interaction (Hines, 2003). In our corpus, the final discursive move through which the therapeutic value of AAT is constituted rests on popularizing the notion of the human-nonhuman animal bond. Our articles draw on emotionally-charged representations of the human-nonhuman animal bond to answer the question of just what it is that AAT has to offer that biomedical and behavioural interventions do not.

Newspaper articles on AAT repeatedly emphasize that the small miracles children with disabilities experience through AAT stem from the unique relationships they establish with nonhuman therapy animals. These relationships are often described as having a near "magical" quality. For example, Marlene Meyer, the founder of Rainbow Reins, notes that it is "a beautiful combination to have a horse and a child communicating…it's amazing. It's magical" (Yorio, 2010, p. F1). The therapeutic source of children's bonds with particular nonhuman animals is typically tied to the nonhuman animals' unique capacity to be nonjudgmental or to love unconditionally. Thus, Laurie Martin, a volunteer with Canine Helpers remarks: "Dogs don't discriminate… They don't pass judgment. They don't care if a person has slurred speech, a burn scarred-face or uses a cane or wheelchair. They just give unconditional love" (Dummit, 2000,

n.p.). In a similar fashion, program coordinator Heather MacKneson describes the results of a therapeutic riding initiative designed for children whose disabilities require that they lie rather than sit on a horse's back: "It's like a three-dimensional massage… They become closely bonded with the horse, and the horse accepts them unconditionally. It brings tears to my eyes" (Goodwin, 1998, p. B2). In an article about Hearts & Hooves, a US-based horse therapy program, miniature, as opposed to full-sized, horses are described as particularly well-suited for AAT because of their particular "nonjudgmental," "passive", and "very sympathetic" natures (McGhee, 2005, n.p.).

Narratives of this sort tie the therapeutic benefit of AAT to particular interspecies relationships and to unique empathic and nonjudgmental ways of relating to humans that are ascribed to nonhuman therapy animals. In a kind of inversion of speciesism, our corpus affects a twist on standard forms of anthropomorphism, such that nonhuman therapy animals are described as having so-called human capacities—to be non-judgmental and loving—that some humans themselves find difficult to express with respect to children with disabilities. These capacities and the bonds they help create with children are central to stories that position AAT as amplifying or replacing human therapeutic endeavors. Against a backdrop of problematic or unfulfilling experiences with human-centered initiatives, nonhuman animals surface in our corpus as transformative, emotionally-significant agents. It is precisely *as nonhuman animals* that they are represented as having a durable therapeutic impact on children.

Nonhuman Animals, Children with Disabilities and Representation

What are the effects, in discourse, of associating nonhuman animals and children with disabilities in narratives of therapeutic benefit? In answering this question, we have been influenced by critiques made by disability scholars who call attention to the subhuman status conferred to people with disabilities in the popular media. At the same time, we have been mindful of how the post-humanist turn in human-nonhuman animal studies has cautioned against the consequences for an interspecies ethics of valuing the human above all else. The normative tensions associated with these different orientations to "humanity"—the humanizing impulse of CDS against an emphasis on the limits of the human and a blurring of species distinctions in post-humanist human-nonhuman animal studies–surface in our analysis of how relationships between nonhuman animals and children with disabilities are represented in our corpus.

Contributors to the CDS literature have emphasized how popular media dehumanize and devalue people with disabilities (Jones & Harwood, 2009). In an early statement, Shakespeare (1994) drew on feminist work on objectification to argue that "disabled people" are treated in popular culture not as active subjects but as ciphers, spectacles, or objects. More recently, Titchkosky (2005, 2007) has engaged with contemporary work on discourse, embodiment and representation to argue that mainstream media offer a dominant representation of disability as a limit or negation. Titchkosky emphasizes that mainstream media accounts generally privilege non-impairment and treat disability as a problem—something that is always lacking and in need of repair.

The concerns raised by critical disability scholars about the popular representation of disability certainly apply to our corpus. The news stories we read position disability as the object of a therapeutic practice and, therefore, as in need of intervention and amelioration. In our corpus, the small miracle narrative frames children with disabilities as objects of awe and often

invokes discourses of normalization (Wolfensberger, 1972). One way this happens is in accounts of equivalence and erasure that represent children with disabilities as becoming like "everyone else" through participation in AAT. For example, in an article on the 4 Paws for Ability program, Kelly Martin, mother of Carter, a young boy with autism, describes her hopes for dog therapy by stating, "This dog will give Carter and my family back a lot of freedoms that we've had to forgo because it is too hard for Carter to do normal things" (Staples, 2008, p. J1).

While in our corpus children with disabilities are represented as requiring transformation to become "normal" and as objects of wonder and awe for their efforts, the small miracle narrative also underscores their objectification by erasing their status as speaking subjects. Our articles are filled with accounts of how children have enjoyed and been strengthened by their encounters with AAT. But rarely, if ever, are those accounts their own. For example, three children with disabilities are featured in a story about Challenge Unlimited, a therapeutic riding program (Dabilis, 1995). Of the nine statements included in the article about the positive effects of the program, five are quotes from parents and four are statements about the children made by the reporter, not a single one comes from the children themselves. This pattern of relying on adult proxies when claiming AAT's therapeutic value is repeated throughout our corpus, reproducing the status of children with disabilities as objects to be known by others.

While we recognize the problematic ways that disability is represented in our corpus, we argue against viewing AAT human-nonhuman animal interest stories as simple extensions of mainstream media's diminishment of disability. To do so would obscure the normative tensions inherent in the representation of AAT and children with disabilities in newspaper articles. While our corpus depicts children with disabilities in oppressive ways, it also includes more positive and affirming forms of representation. We note, for example, that biomedical definitions of

disability, a stalwart of media objectification of disability, have a muted presence in our corpus. When formal biomedical diagnoses are included in the articles, they are not key to the central narrative. Rarely are children presented simply as bearers of a diagnosis. More commonly, the genre draws strongly on humanism to position children with disabilities as unique individuals. The limitations and problems they experience are not presented as inherent to disability itself. Rather, in a manner that approximates established CDS critiques, they are sourced in the discrimination children encounter in schools, and in their experiences of being discarded by medical practitioners and underserved in sterile therapeutic environments against which AAT is positioned as a welcome alternative.

At the same time, in our articles, descriptions of how children and nonhuman therapy animals interact do not follow in the direction of nonhuman animal capacities being ascribed to children in ways that dehumanize them or deny the subjectivity of either. Instead, in a fashion suggestive of work on interspecies relationships (Haraway, 2008; Wolfe, 2003, 2010), involvement in AAT programs is represented as mutually constitutive of subjectivity for both nonhuman animals and children. Through participation in AAT, nonhuman animals become therapists and children acquire new measures of independence and selfhood. The nonhuman animal-therapist/child-with-agency pairing is the primary way that any rhetorical use of nonhuman animals to dehumanize people with disabilities is disrupted in the genre. Yet, established identifiers for, and boundaries between, nonhuman animals and humans are also challenged in stories about AAT programs in which disability is a status shared by both nonhuman animals and children.

For example, in an article about the I Think I Can Learning Center, therapist Sally Thompson describes Bean, a four-month old deaf and blind dog, who has a “very special job at

the center," as a therapist "to help counsel a set of twins," one of whom is deaf, the other of whom is blind (Newman, 2001, p. E1). Another story focuses on Cara Mia, a "handicapped French poodle" who lost a front leg after a long struggle with bone cancer; Cara Mia is framed as an inspiration to children and their parents due to her "courage to go on, despite the problems she herself faced" (Newhouse, 2002, n.p.). Finally, a story about the Clearwater Marine Aquarium's Full Circle Program notes that all of the program's marine animals have injuries or disabilities and all receive therapy. For example, a partially blind dolphin named Sam undergoes art therapy. At the same time, through their various "amazing acts" in the Program's pool, the marine animals are understood to inspire children with disabilities and to encourage them to challenge their own limits (Moks-Unger, 2000, n.p.).

Stories of this sort create a shared cultural space between nonhuman animals and children. Unlike other such discursive spaces, such as those found in popular writings about feral children (Newton, 2003), our corpus does not treat children as animal-like in order to diminish children. Nor is this shared space used to devalue disability. Instead, our articles position disability as a common status in ways that disrupt sharp species distinctions and suggest how, in AAT settings, nonhuman animals and children become connected with one another through disability in mutually positive ways.

Conclusion

Our research is based on a small sample of newspaper articles. We caution against generalizing our findings and underscore that we cannot make claims about how children with disabilities and AAT are portrayed in social media and other forms of popular communication and representation. We have conducted a study of representation which means we cannot make

claims about how people actually experience AAT. By the same token, our study cannot answer questions about how such stories were created, about how actual readers interpret and respond to news articles about AAT, or about what the protagonists who feature in the stories feel about how they have been represented.

However, our appreciation that the genre of texts is as much about their social presence as it is about their classification as a type of text encourages us to consider how journalists—as well as their sources—were trying to "do something" in the social world by enabling the circulation of stories about AAT through newspapers. Our analysis suggests that the AAT human-nonhuman animal interest genre is written in ways that seek to invite parents of children with disabilities to participate in and support particular AAT programs. The stories try to produce a credible presence for AAT programs in specific communities through the popular constructions of AAT's therapeutic value. Our corpus does not enlist scientific research to tell stories of AAT's value. Rather, it relies on first-hand accounts from parents and volunteers about how direct contact with nonhuman therapy animals transforms the lives of children with disabilities.

We argue that AAT human-nonhuman animal interest stories offer contradictory representations of interspecies relationships that are not fully accounted for in the established critical work on media representation of nonhuman animals and disability. On the one hand, our corpus reinforces discourses of normalization that position disability as a limit that should be overcome and children with disabilities as sources of awe and amazement. On the other hand, narratives of engagement with AAT tell stories about how children with disabilities acquire new agency through their connections with nonhuman animals. These stories are written in ways that extend and strengthen the disabled body and self through connections with nonhuman therapy

animals. Articles that describe disability as a status shared by children and nonhuman therapy animals—that present disability as an interspecies bond—are not primarily about oppressing people with disabilities.

Newspaper stories about AAT disrupt the stability and hierarchy of species distinction presupposed by the use of nonhuman animals as a discursive resource to dehumanize. Stories that describe children surpassing previous limits through AAT represent disability through a therapeutic lens that reinforces negative views about disability as something that requires change. The stories fall silent when it comes to how children directly experience AAT and rarely do they pose questions about nonhuman animals' care, labour and treatment in AAT programs. And yet, the many stories we read about AAT and transformations in the lives of children do not portray these transformations as cures and actively critique biomedical and psy discourses. They do not speak a simple monologue of oppression that erases disability. They tell contradictory stories that challenge us to recognize and reckon with the uneasy tension of representations that are both affirmative and limiting. On first blush, AAT human-nonhuman animal interest news articles may appear as little more than happy stories about the positive effects of AAT. We counter that they are sites of normative contradictions that suggest important possibilities for intervening in public discourse about disability and nonhuman animals that should be of interest to critical scholars.

Acknowledgements

We thank the editors and reviewers of the article for their helpful feedback and comments. We also thank Julia Gruson-Wood for her careful and thoughtful suggestions on an earlier version of this paper.

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