

# Re-imagining social work beyond the human: A post-anthropocentric and antispeciesist proposal

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## *Abstract*

*This article argues that in the twenty-first century, it would be desirable for social work to open itself to a bolder and more creative new imaginary, which is capable of moving it away from an anthropocentric paradigm towards a more-than-human social work. Despite the growing attention to ecological issues, social work continues to reproduce an anthropocentric orientation, in which more-than-human animals remain marginal and, if they are present, they are considered as resources or tools for human well-being rather than as subjects of justice. For this reason, the article proposes the adoption of a post-anthropocentric and antispeciesist approach, considering speciesism as an axis of oppression and advancing a critique of the humanist roots of social work. In particular, this paper proposes a post-anthropocentric and antispeciesist re-interpretation of Boetto's transformative eco-social model, showing how it can provide a basis for imagining new practices of multispecies justice.*

## *Keywords*

*Post-anthropocentric social work, More-than-human animals, Antispeciesism, Transformative eco-social work.*

## **Introduction**

Within an era defined by the strong human influence on Earth, this article aims to contribute to a critical reflection on how social work, understood both as a discipline and as a profession, can be opened up to the inclusion of a post-anthropocentric perspective that is attentive to multispecies relationships. In fact, the context in which we live is characterized by anthroparchy (Cudworth, 2005, 2022), that is a social system of relationships

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in which the more-than-human<sup>1</sup> is subject to the domination of social organizations that privilege the human and, at the same time, subordinate the more-than-human.

In this way, anthroparchy favors a reductive vision of the «social» in social work, which continues to refer exclusively to the human, ignoring the interspecies dimension of relationships (Laing, 2021). It is, therefore, possible to reflect on the fact that an inclusion of more-than-human animals in social work is not enough without the development of a critical dimension that problematizes the fact of living in societies based on the hierarchy of species, in which violence and exploitation are normalized within the relationships between human and more-than-human animals. In fact, in them a vision of species is perpetrated not in biological sense, but as ideology translated into devices of control both symbolic and material bodies (Timeto, 2024), the same ideology at the base of speciesism.

According to Nibert (2003) this concept, from a sociological point of view, presents itself as an ideology, that is a «set of socially shared beliefs that legitimates an existing or desired social order» (Nibert, 2003, p. 8). Considering speciesism in this way allows social work not only to promote an understanding of the causes of human mistreatment of other animals (Nibert, 2003), but also to move away from its basis characterized by an anthropocentric humanism (Bell, 2012, 2023; Bozalek & Pease, 2021), becoming, paraphrasing Cudworth's (2014) reflection on sociology, a *critical social work of species*.

In the current scenario, despite the growth of studies in the panorama of ecosocial work, if more-than-human animals are taken into consideration by social work they are understood as resources to be exploited and not as subjects of justice. Consequently, it is necessary for social work to recognize within itself speciesism as an axis of oppression and anthropocentrism as an axis of privilege in order to achieve a decentralization of Man (Fraser et al., 2021), adopting a process of creative re-imagination (Panagiotaros et al., 2022). Since contributions that address these aspects remain limited, this article is based on a narrative review of the literature and aims to contribute to the debate by proposing a post-anthropocentric and antispeciesist reinterpretation of social work.

To address these aspects, the article is divided into a first part in which the links and differences between eco-social work and the post-anthropocentric approach are analyzed. The latter is more detailed in the second part, where it reflects on the role of more-than-human animals in social work in the light of this perspective. Finally, in the third part, a reinterpretation of Boetto's (2017) transformative eco-social model is proposed in a post-anthropocentric and antispeciesist key, highlighting how this reinterpretation can provide a basis for a transition towards a multispecies social work.

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<sup>1</sup> This term refers to all forms of animal life including vertebrates and invertebrates, even all those often not considered as such by humans, such as insects or sea creatures, excluding only people themselves from this concept. It has been chosen to refer to animals as more-than-human and not as non-human, since the second term can recall an opposition and a negative process of differentiation.

## Is eco-social work also post-anthropocentric?

Eco-social work can be defined as a conceptual umbrella, useful as a tool not only to integrate the ecological perspective within social work, but also to highlight the mutual relationship between living environments and human well-being and to support the study of ecological and social sustainability (Närhi & Matthies, 2016). Within the debate about the inclusion of the environmental dimension in social work, there are several terms and approaches: deep-ecological social work (Besthorn, 2011), eco-spiritual social work (Gray & Coates, 2013), green social work (Dominelli, 2012), environmental social work (Gray, Coates & Hetherington, 2012), social ecological social work (Peteers, 2012) and transformative eco-social work (Boetto, 2017).

These perspectives can be associated by the fact that they provide theoretical frameworks that extend the field of action of social work beyond the social environment, including the natural one, and by highlighting the link between the environmental crisis and human well-being (Pavani, 2025). However, as Banks and colleagues (2024) point out, despite the increasing focus on developing ecological awareness through these approaches, there is often a risk that they focus on improving the natural environment only for human benefit. The adoption of a post-anthropocentric approach would make it possible to overcome this critical issue through a decentralization of humans, who would become only a part within an interdependent network of connectivity together with more-than-human animals and the environment, where all have an intrinsic ethical value, that is not dependent on the utility attributed to them by humans (Bozalek & Pease, 2021).

It is necessary to underline that not all approaches connected to this environmental shift in social work are characterized by this problem, in fact it is possible to identify some of them that can be seen as a bridge towards post-anthropocentrism. Among these, the transformative eco-social work developed by Boetto (2017) stands out, in which the author proposes a reorientation of perceptions of the human-centered world towards visions consistent with a holistic and interdependent vision of humans as part of the natural world (Boetto, 2017). This part of eco-social work, therefore, has several points in common with the post-anthropocentric approach, such as the fact that humans are not at the top of a pyramid, but part of a larger and more complex network of life (Yildirim et al., 2021) and the idea that sees all species as intrinsically valuable and interdependent (Hirvilammi & Helne, 2014).

In addition, a recurring element in the post-anthropocentric approach is also the critique of the modernist and positivist roots of social work that legitimize an unsustainable use of resources and allow the maintenance of exploitation and unequal power relations (Boetto, 2017). The post-anthropocentric perspective inserts all these principles within it, but also expands them with elements deriving from other theoretical developments deriving from a union of aspects of critical social work and external disciplines. In fact, the landscape of critical social work includes a variety of marginalized indigenous cosmologies

and ecofeminist discourses, which, along with posthuman materialisms, address social work to highlight how it, as well as other knowledge based on the Western Enlightenment, has been both informed and implicated in the investments of anthropocentrism, colonialism, and capitalism (Carstens & Bozalek, 2021). These different approaches, therefore, contribute to the development of the theoretical foundations of post-anthropocentric social work, and for this reason it is necessary to briefly outline their main features.

The *decolonial approach* thematizes the fact that the ways of understanding the world do not end with those made explicit by the West, which has caused the marginalization of other knowledge (Tascón & Ife, 2020). For this reason, it aims to recover and enhance the knowledge developed by missing peoples, which have never entered the official maps (Braidotti, 2019). Their «minor» knowledge, in fact, could become a source of benefit and turn into «breeding ground for possible futures» (Braidotti, 2019, p. 53), in which social work is rebuilt in the light of the dominance of white Western modernity (Tascón & Ife, 2020).

The *feminist approach* to social work can offer a further lens to support social justice, emancipation, and social, political, economic, and cultural change (Noble et al., 2024). Within it there are countless possible facets, including those related to ideas of commonality, solidarity and kinship between human and more-than-human animals and the environment, for example connected to ecofeminism or focused on animal oppression in an intersectional perspective (Fraser & Taylor, 2024). This approach has within it numerous currents, some explicitly in the form of more-than-human feminisms, which are concerned with questioning the modern constructions of human exceptionalism and the clear separation from the more-than-human world of animals, plants, other organisms and inorganic phenomena such as rivers or mountains (Lykke, 2025).

However, it is the *post-human* approach that provides the main framework for the post-anthropocentric approach, since it transposes thoughts of philosophers such as Haraway or Braidotti into social work to criticize the liberal framework and the exaltation of humanism within it (Bozalek & Pease, 2021). In particular, the post-anthropocentric approach is grounded in the theoretical developments deriving from critical feminist post-humanism, since this perspective can be part of what Braidotti (2019) defines critical post-humanities. Post-humanism, understood as an attempt to re-access every field of knowledge through the awareness of the limits of anthropocentric and humanistic assumptions, provides a more complete point of view to reflect on possible futures (Ferrando, 2013). It can be defined as the result of post-humanism and post-anthropocentrism which, although they have different theoretical and disciplinary genealogies, converge in a critical intersection (Braidotti, 2019; Bozalek & Pease, 2021). In this way, a «post» is inserted to the concept of human and to the historical occurrence of humanism (Ferrando, 2013), moving on the one hand the criticism of Man taken as a universal measure according to the humanistic ideal and on the other hand the criticism of the hierarchy of species that leads to human exceptionalism (Braidotti, 2019). Moreover, posthumanism can also be seen as post-dualisms since it criticizes any ontological polarization and does

not resort to any dualism (Ferrando, 2016). In addition, it also provides the possibility of relational ontology and the importance of human and more-than-human animal bodies (Bozalek, 2023).

In particular, through posthuman convergence it is possible to establish affective, epistemological and ethical relationships between different spheres, as well as to be based on a zigzagging scheme of conjunctions and crossings and to relate through a sense of interconnection between humans and non-humans that makes possible a fundamental openness and mutual generosity (Braidotti, 2021). Feminist posth-umanism is, therefore, characterized in the first place by a Spinozian reading of bodies (understood as coextensive with minds) and matter (understood as the only intelligent and self-organized substance), secondly by a curious but critical approach to technosciences and, finally, the desire to denounce how, behind the alleged universality of *Homo sapiens*, there lies the particular white Western man, accompanied by the awareness that the human species is not superior by nature to any other (Balzano, 2021).

Other important theoretical developments for post-anthropocentric social work are new materialism and affective turn, given their importance to move a critique of the liberal framework and the idea of moral superiority of humans imposed by humanism (Bozalek & Pease, 2021).

The opening to *new materialism* allows a further deconstructive level of the human through the analysis of matter and the ways in which it materializes (Ferrando, 2016). Other relevant aspects of this movement are its rejection of the nature/culture dichotomy and the lack of any division between language and matter (Ferrando, 2013). Furthermore, it is based on the idea that all matter is alive, capable and informed, and that life is co-implication and entanglement in a natural-cultural continuum (Timeto, 2024).

Finally, the *affective turn* is based on Spinoza's view of affect, which contests the fact that affect resides in the body, as an inner personal feeling or emotion owned by an individual, arguing, instead, that it is a force that occurs in the intermediate and influences what a body can be and do (Bozalek & Pease, 2021). Moreover, according to this perspective, affect can be both relational and dispersed (*Ibidem*).

Despite the slightly different emphases given by posthumanism, new materialism, and affective turn, these theoretical perspectives provide similar views, since they are all focused on the critique of dualisms, interactions with matter and the more-than-human, and relational ontologies (Bozalek & Zembylas, 2016). Moreover, all the theoretical aspects outlined so far are not to be understood as clearly separated, since they can be combined with each other and create new theoretical niches, as it has happened in the case of post-anthropocentric social work.

Starting from this rich theoretical framework, therefore, the innovations that the adoption of a post-anthropocentric approach could provide can be highlighted. Firstly, it offers social work new ways to make sense of the environmental, material, affective, and social problems that the profession addresses (Bozalek & Pease, 2021). Secondly, its

theoretical frameworks offer new insights and ways of thinking about social and environmental justice, allowing for an openness to multispecies social justice. In particular, the vision offered by Matsuoka and Sorenson (2014) of trans-species social justice in which the interests of all animals (including humans) are taken into account in order to achieve institutional conditions free from oppression and domination. Furthermore, in the light of these theories, ethics can also be rethought to the point of reaching a rethinking of deontological codes, generally characterized by a predominantly human attention<sup>2</sup> and a moral lack towards the more-than-human dimension which, in addition to weakening them, reflects an oppressive inaction that reflects the will of the dominant species in power (Silberberg, 2023). This approach, therefore, thematizing in detail the importance of a vibrant more-than-human world and endowed with an intrinsic value in itself (Bozalek & Pease, 2021), provides the cue both to insert speciesism as a additional axis of oppression that social work must deal with and to thematize in more detail the condition of more-than-human animals, who become potential new actors to whom social work should pay attention.

## Post-Anthropocentric Social Work and More-Than-Human Animals

Post-Anthropocentric Social Work can be defined as an approach that contests the presence of the anthropocentric paradigm in social work, seen not as an innate disposition but as a historical construction resulting from its humanist bases; moreover, the task that arises at the macro level is to adopt an intersectional view that holds together and explores the links between all axes of oppression, not only those which afflict humans, but also those that concerning more than-humans (Bozalek & Pease, 2021). This perspective, therefore, through «multifaceted, comprehensive, and non-linear transformative actions» seeks to address «the wide-ranging deleterious effects of anthropocentrism» and «intersecting systems of oppression» (Bell, 2023, p. 135). One of the existing systems of oppression is that concerning more-than-human animals, creatures historically neglected by social work as they were considered at the beginning of the twentieth century as distant from their moral map and sphere of interest (Ryan, 2011). Despite

<sup>2</sup> The presence of more-than-human animals within the codes of ethics is difficult, in fact due to anthropocentric assumptions of human domination over nature there is a professional silence within the social work towards these creatures, supported by their invisibility within the professional ethical codes (Taylor et al., 2016). The same is subsequently confirmed by Buck and Rauscher (2019), who illustrate how, in the face of the fact that social workers have the ethical obligation to be competent to practice in complex and changing socio-cultural contexts and the fact that the relational dynamics between people and animals are growing, these professionals must start reflecting on aspects such as speciesism and the consumption of animals, since prejudices in these areas are not benign. Although the absence of more-than-human animals in the codes of ethics found in these contributions continues to persist in most of them, following a revision the Australian and New Zealand codes are an exception.

Wolf's (2000) call in the early 2000s to develop reflections and discussions on whether it is right for social workers to employ a differentiated treatment based on species, their inclusion still remains peripheral (Ryan, 2011) and far from the post-anthropocentric shift (Webb, 2021). The exclusion of more-than-human animals allows social work to avoid conflicts with institutions, markets and policies based on their exploitation and to continue to feed a reality in which they are seen as inferior and employable for human use and consumption, ignoring the fact that they are sentient beings with intrinsic values and rights (Matsuoka & Sorenson, 2013). It can therefore be said that social work continues to perpetrate an anthropocentric worldview in which humans are considered autonomous and exceptional, as well as legitimized to use other creatures as means for their own profits (Webb, 2021). As partly anticipated above, social work still keeps the principles of humanism firmly anchored as pillars, closely connected with anthropocentrism and limiting towards the possibility of an openness to approaches characterized by innovation, flexibility and creativity (Bell, 2023). In this way, the discourses that prevail in theory and practice of conventional social work reproduce a pervasive anthropocentric paradigm (Bell, 2012, 2023) which, as Weitzenfeld and Joy (2014) point out, is reinforced by humanism itself, along with the concepts of speciesism and carnism,<sup>3</sup> benefiting from the reproduction and legitimization of the person-animal binarism. If, therefore, these four concepts are connected, then they can be made to fall within the framework of social work given its humanist roots still currently being reproduced. In particular, correlating the latter with the more-than-human animals, it is possible to see how, thanks to their contribution to the maintenance of dualisms and fractures, they slow down a path of true inclusion of these creatures in social work.

The transition to a post-anthropocentric approach would provide an interesting novelty, given the possible development of new practices based on the inclusion of more-than-human animals in social work through adherence to a post-humanist and feminist antispeciesism, which has as its basic characteristics a strong critique of the ontology and epistemology of humanist philosophy, a willingness to challenge the dominant ways of conceptualizing human and more-than-human animals and also an adoption of a dialogical, attentive and relational care practice towards the latter (Weitzenfeld & Joy, 2014). In particular, a feminist ethics of care can help social work to enhance the connections and interdependence between species, giving value to relationality (Fraser & Taylor, 2021). The adoption of a relational approach that captures multispecies interactions, in fact, can open the door to the inclusion of more-than-human animals as full-fledged social actors (Fraser & Taylor, 2021).

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<sup>3</sup> The term carnism, as Weitzenfeld and Joy (2014) illustrate, refers to the ideology that legitimizes the exploitation, killing and consumption of more-than-human animals. In particular, this belief system influences to eat only certain «types» of animals, due to the action, in the form of defensive distortions, of the Cognitive Trio composed of objectification, deindividualization and dichotomization (Joy, 2010).

## Multispecies Transformative Eco-Social Model: a post-anthropocentric and antispeciesist reinterpretation of Boetto's model

Given the need to translate post-anthropocentric and antispeciesist approach into concrete professional practices, a framework capable of linking theory and action is required. Boetto's transformative eco-social model is particularly suitable for this task because in it the author outlines a subdivision into three levels of the concepts of ontology (being), epistemology (thinking) and methodology (doing) for practice (Boetto, 2017, 2020). If these aspects are declined in a different approach, they can allow to outline a transformative approach that tends to a post-anthropocentric and antispeciesist principles. The advantage of rereading this model is that it can provide a good basis for rethinking social work, so that these reflections do not remain theoretical notions and calls to action but become detailed recommendations to generate concrete practices.

### *Being With: Relational Ontologies Beyond the Human*

The first level is connected to a personal dimension since, as illustrated by Boetto (2017), aspects related to one's own person, such as worldview, beliefs and personal attitudes, have an influence on behaviors and approaches to professional practice. Consequently, the ways in which humans relate to more-than-human animals and how this relationality is understood will have an influence on professional practice and on the use of a post-anthropocentric and antispeciesist approach. However, developing a personal dimension consistent with the latter aspects is difficult, since the context shapes our understanding, our explanations and interpretations of the world (Gruen, 1994); moreover, in the surrounding world characterized by anthroparchy (Cudworth 2005, 2022), there is not always space for alternative visions not based on human exceptionalism that thematize the oppression conducted towards more-than-human animals. An example of this can be found in media representations, which feed on and, at the same time, perpetuate a speciesist ideology that leads to the legitimization of these issues by the public, validating a system of values, beliefs and attitudes speciesist and anthropocentric (Almiron et al., 2018).

This discourse does not only concern an adult audience, but also children, who are the subject of a transmission of messages about what culturally appropriate relationships with more-than-human animals should look like (Cole & Stewart, 2014, 2018), not only in a direct way, as in Disney films in which human superiority is celebrated (Leventi-Perez, 2011), but also subtle and insidious, for example through television advertising broadcast during the listening hours most used by children (Cole & Stewart, 2018). If, however, personal awareness begins to develop regarding the speciesist domain and, consequently,

the dominant anthropocentrism that affect the behaviors implemented,<sup>4</sup> it is possible that the personal and professional spheres begin to merge, as hypothesized by Boetto (2017) with regard to the broader side of the natural environment, allowing the transition to a professional ontology. To develop a new ontology within social work, which challenges the dominant ways of conceptualizing humans, more-than-human animals, and morality, it is necessary to draw on different theoretical perspectives, particularly post-humanist and feminist ones. These, in fact, criticize the ontology of humanism and the idea it promotes of a liberal subject, opposing it with an embodied and relational individual and a morality as embodied care (Weitzenfeld & Joy, 2014).

As Bell (2023) illustrates, post-anthropocentric social work is characterized, ontologically, by an idea of connection between human and more-than-human animals and the natural environment, which allows us to recognize dynamism and fluidity of interconnection. The human-animal binary, therefore, does not find space within this new ontology, which also breaks down the myth of human exceptionalism to promote relationality and interdependence of all material and immaterial entities (Bell, 2023). At the same time, the dominance of the universal Man is also being dismantled in favor of an ontological vulnerability that promotes in men «a relational and embodied sense of self, empathy and compassion not only in relation to people but also in relation to other non-humans and the planet» (Pease, 2021, p. 108). Adopting an ontology consistent with a post-anthropocentric and antispeciesist perspective can allow social work not only to foster its holistic transformation in which social and environmental justice distant from mechanisms of oppression is promoted (Bell, 2021), but also to adopt relational ontologies of equality, interdependence, embodiment and interconnection as new bases (Bell, 2023).

### *Thinking With: Situated and Multispecies Epistemologies*

As Boetto (2017) illustrates, the epistemological basis implies a thinking aspect, since it concerns the application of professional knowledge and values to guide a post-anthropocentric and antispeciesist approach of practice. This level can therefore be divided into two sub-categories, namely professional knowledge, focused on the knowledge necessary to apply this approach, and professional values, related to ethical issues.

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<sup>4</sup> An example of this can be the aspirational veganism outlined by Gruen and Jones (2015), in which it is seen not as a lifestyle aimed at moral purity or superiority but as a type of practice to work on, in which people do their best to minimize violence, domination and exploitation. In this way, it is possible to forge a powerful and grounded form of individual political engagement and, therefore, realize veganism as an ethical-political practice (Timeto, 2024).

## *Professional knowledge*

Regarding the knowledge side, it is necessary to employ knowledge that thematizes the intrinsic value of the more-than-human world as such (Bozalek & Pease, 2021). In particular, Bell (2023) illustrates how post-anthropocentric social work relies on transdisciplinary, rich, and diversified sources of knowledge to counter the division, competition, and partial knowledge perpetrated by anthropocentrism. Epistemologically, therefore, knowledge that moves a critique of oppression is used, often drawn from embodied and experiential knowledge of widely marginalized figures (Braidotti, 2019; Bell, 2023), such as indigenous ones. Starting from these, it is necessary to underline how it is necessary to achieve a decolonization of social work (Tascon & Ife, 2020; Clarke, 2022), since their marginalization within it has had an influence on ways of knowing and professional identity (Clarke, 2022). Indigenous wisdoms, in fact, illustrate concepts suitable for challenging anthropocentric privilege and allow to adopt a critical view able to question the motivations behind the human privilege compared to the rest of the living earth (Ife, 2020).

As proposed by Koleszar-Green and Matsuoka (2018) reflecting on indigenous views of more-than-human animals through a perspective of Critical Animal Studies (CAS) it is necessary that the decolonization process also considers the oppression and exploitation of more-than-human animals, leading to their liberation. CAS also constitute an important epistemological piece, since they engage in a fight against the identity, normative, proprietary, hierarchical, abstracting and exclusionary anthropocentrism at the heart of speciesism (Timeto, 2024) and apply an approach for animals, politically antispeciesist, intersectional and libertarian, and always praxis-oriented (Timeto, 2024). This field of study does not only rejects cruel treatment towards other animals, but also extends its criticism to their use as resources or tools for human profits (Matsuoka et al., 2020). In addition to CAS, Feminism Animal Studies (FAS) are also relevant since these last two currents of study, while sharing the idea of the intersectionality of animal oppression, can be differentiated. The first one, in fact, defined in this way in 2007 thanks to the dialogue between scholars and activists for animal rights and liberation (ICAS), adopt an approach not only on but for animals, politically antispeciesist, intersectional and libertarian (Timeto, 2024), aimed at challenging the dominant relationship between human and more-than-human animals and promoting justice for all (Nocella et al., 2014). The second one, on the other hand, starting from CAS, adopt a more contextual and attentive approach to differences, focused on concepts such as the critique of dualisms, care, vulnerability and the relationship between species (Cudworth et al., 2023; Timeto, 2024). The intersectional perspective present in CAS and FAS is the same that Braidotti (2021) suggests employing in an ecologically anchored mode while retracing two other epistemological approaches suitable for transforming social work, namely ecofeminism and feminist posthumanism, imagining the former

as an anticipation of the latter. Ecofeminism is characterized by elements of criticism towards humanist approaches such as the nature/culture dichotomy or speciesism, through whose re-evaluation it is possible to engage collaborative relational modalities with more-than-human animals and to reflect on the systemic exclusions of the latter (Braidotti, 2021).

Moreover, by criticizing the hierarchies of species, ecofeminist thinking also allows to reason about the production and consumption of meat (Adams, 1991, 2020). As regards, on the other hand, feminist posthumanism, Balzano (2021) outlines its main characteristics and among them is the awareness that the human species is not superior by nature to any other. In addition to this aspect, which gives social work a further step in building a post-anthropocentric and antispeciesist epistemology, it is important to emphasize how the posthuman is a theoretically enhanced cartographic tool which, through a critique of humanism and anthropocentrism, allows to initiate processes of «undoing» of the human (Braidotti, 2019).

From these knowledges just outlined, it is possible to extract some key terms that can form a foundation for the epistemology of social work, including multidisciplinary, intersectionality, critical approach and decolonization. These, in combination with future research developments, may represent knowledge suitable to inform the professional practice of social work through fluid interaction (Bell, 2023).

Moreover, a further step towards epistemology is necessary. In fact, from the feminist epistemology of Sandra Harding (1986), in particular from her *standpoint theory*, CAS derive their epistemology and their *animal standpoint theory*. The latter extends the theory of the traditional point of view that is still anthropocentric, but no longer humanist, with different angles and declinations (Timeto, 2025); in particular, *animal standpoint theory* deals with providing a representation of the perspectives and points of view of those who have been historically marginalized, oppressed and exploited (Horsthemke, 2018). More specifically, it examines the crucial role that animals play in sustaining the natural world and shaping the human world in co-evolutionary relationships with humans (Best, 2012). Another element to highlight is the fact that by using this theory it is possible to clarify the role of more-than-human animals and their decisive influence as historical agents<sup>5</sup> on human history and, in particular, on human-animal relationships and interactions (Best, 2012). Another important aspect is how care is

<sup>5</sup> The ahistoricity of more-than-human animals has been postulated within historiography, in which the ahistorical «Other» continues to be represented as an entity without identity (Horsthemke, 2024). The adoption of a *Critical Animal Historiography* could overcome this problem, especially if applied within didactic and pedagogical practices, in which more-than-human animals could obtain a status both of historical subject and of agent in general, highlighting their contributions, often not even voluntary, given in the name of a progress desired by others (Horsthemke, 2024). The examples throughout history are countless and involve slightly more well-known subjectivities, such as Laika, but also uniformed and flattened entities, such as horses and their contribution to the formation of places and spaces as active actors with an important role in the construction and structuring of the world (Ward, 2024).

interpreted in *animal standpoint theory*, which is not taking charge of animal lives, but an activation of other ways to relate with more-than-human animals to learn to listen to what they can say, through senses and abilities not only connected with reason and verbal language (Timeto, 2025). Finally, a final key point of *animal standpoint theory* consists in avoiding an individualistic and universalizing vision, understanding each animal subjectivity as separate and too different in experiences to create a single joint picture (Horsthemke, 2018).

### *Professional values*

The adoption of post-anthropocentric and antispeciesist values within social work is a fundamental step to modify ethical principles and achieve transformative change within the profession. In the still dominant paradigm there is a prevalence of individualistic and human-centered values that legitimize the belief that all other living beings are means for human profits (Kopnina et al., 2018). In contrast to this, Bozalek and Hölscher (2023) imagine that the ethics of social work is «of the world, rather than in the world» (Bozalek & Hölscher, 2023, p. 382), opening up not only to the idea that humanity is «part of an enfolded and entangled articulation of the universe» (Bozalek & Hölscher, 2023, p. 383) and to the possibility of escaping the centrality of individualism in the ethics of principles and approaches to human rights present in social work, but also to the «yearning for a justice-to-come» that is greater than individual humans and that concerns, instead, «a ongoing concern for living and dying across species on our damaged planet» (Bozalek & Hölscher, 2023). Values that can be based on these statements are, therefore, more open to a collective vision, which can be suitable for examining structural issues and not just more individual ones. In this framework, trans-species social justice that expands the founding value of social work beyond species boundaries can be inserted (Matsuoka & Sorenson, 2014; 2020). In fact, as Fraser and Taylor (2024) illustrate, the concept of social justice needs to be expanded towards a more comprehensive modality, made possible by feminist intersectionality and the inclusion of more-than-human animals in its framework, along with the critique of speciesism. The relationships between human and more-than-human animals can also be seen in the light of an alternative and ecofeminist moral epistemology according to the vision of Gruen (1994). The values that can be derived from it, shaped by historical and philosophical ideologies, social norms and individual processes of categorization, have at their base three characteristics, namely community, experience and *situatedness*, which provide a justification for knowledge and obligations towards the natural world (Gruen, 1994). Focusing on *situatedness*, it is necessary to highlight how its absence generates problems in the attitudes undertaken by humans towards more-than-human animals, since this removal allows, for example, not to think about the way in which they are

transformed into food (Gruen, 1994). Precisely for this reason, Gruen encourages us to undertake real experiences of the more-than-human world in order to be able to make more informed decisions later, through an inclusion of nature in epistemic communities. To do this, it is necessary to open oneself to humility, a way of relating with respect to differences and which encourages the suspension of judgments, replacing this with a propensity to listen and relationality (Gruen, 1994).

The same invitation is repeated by Gruen (2015) in a more recent work, in which humility is associated with entangled empathy,<sup>6</sup> since to achieve this connection with more-than-human animals it is necessary to adopt conscious and responsible choices that reflect ethical action. From the joint approach of Gruen's contributions it is possible, therefore, to extract some concepts to be included in the epistemological set of social work, such as the idea of a curious approach towards all creatures, of openness, responsibility and humility. These ideas have some affinities with the figuration of the becoming-octopus presented by Bozalek and Hölscher (2023), used by the authors to re-imagine the values and ethical sensibilities of social work from a post-anthropocentric perspective. In particular, the curiosity and openness to flow typical of octopuses can provide an expansion of the ability to feel, perceive and relate attentively, leading to important repercussions in the relationship with the Other. In this way, in fact, connections and care rather than control could be emphasized in social work, and the relationship with people could be aimed at involvement and entanglement with the Other. In conclusion, the social work that emerges from this epistemological process could be «guided by an ethics of not-knowing, of humility, and being-with» (Bozalek & Hölscher, 2023, p. 388).

### *Doing With: Enacting Post-Anthropocentric and Antispeciesist Social Work*

As Boetto (2017) illustrates, the methodological aspect is connected to «doing» the practice through actions, interventions and strategies employed in social work in daily work. In particular, according to the author, the methodology must be consistent with the two levels previously outlined, as well as unfold within it a further division into five levels of practice, which can be aligned with the concepts of micro, meso and macro (Boetto et al., 2020). They are presented in Table 1 with a revision to decline them in a manner consistent with a post-anthropocentric and antispeciesist approach to practice.

<sup>6</sup> Gruen (2015) defines this concept as «a type of caring perception focused on attention to another's experience of well-being. An experiential process involving a blend of emotion and cognition in which we recognize we are in relationship with others and are called upon to be responsive and responsible in these relationships by attending to another's needs, interests, desires, vulnerabilities, hopes and sensitivities» (Gruen, 2015, p. 13).

TABLE 1

Five levels of practice declined for a post-anthropocentric and antispeciesist social work  
– Re-elaboration starting from Boetto et al.,2020

Levels	Explanation	Example of practice
Personal level: Developing the «self»	Focused on the personal dimension of the self and personal worldview	Acquisition of greater awareness on food consumption, up to an aspirational veganism (Gruen and Jones, 2015)
Individual level: Holistic approach to working with individuals	In contrast to the neoliberal individualistic approach, this level envisions an aspiration for trans-species social justice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Recognise the importance of multispecies bonds and protect them within social services</li> <li>- Integration of more-than-human animals into professional practices as protagonists</li> </ul>
Group level: Communities of practice and organizational change	Development of communities of practice with people followed by services, colleagues and organizations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- People followed: implementation of group activities to promote multispecies sensitivities</li> <li>- Colleagues: create collaboration groups with social workers who share this vision</li> <li>- Organizations: animal-inclusive service design</li> </ul>
Community level: Culturally sensitive, community-based approaches	Culturally sensitive community-based approach	Disaster planning across all species (Fraser et al., 2021)
Structural level: Social and political action	It includes social action to facilitate social and political change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Organize advocacy actions to promote the interests of more-than-human animals</li> <li>- Address the relationship between animal oppression and politics of meat (Fraser &amp; Taylor, 2024)</li> </ul>

Table 1, in addition to illustrating the five levels, provides an example for each of them that illustrates some of the activities that social workers could do to support transformative change not only within the discipline and profession, but also at the societal level. In particular, social workers can develop the personal level of how they understood and relate to the more-than-human animals through the development of informed interventions in their private lives about antispeciesism. For the individual level, the adoption of this critical approach, capable of problematizing the idea of an area conceived as exclusively human such as the «social» (Major, 2025), can allow practitioners to recognize the importance of multispecies bonds and to protect them within social services.

Currently, the non-adoption of post-anthropocentric practices by social workers produces effects on multispecies kinship, for example in the case of women who delay leaving from violent relationships for fear of leaving their companion animals since refuges do not accept them (Fraser & Taylor, 2021), or homelessness who maintain interspecies bonds, and whose vulnerability is further amplified by stigma within social work (Laing, 2021), or the older adults who, due to «no pet» policies, are prevented from accessing housing (Matsuoka et al., 2020). Moreover, practitioners should integrate the more-than-human animals into professional practices as protagonists; for example, in the case of domestic violence, within a post-anthropocentric and antispeciesist practice, they are no longer declined as mere indicators but are described as victims/survivors, who need practices focused on them (Fraser & Taylor, 2021).

For the group level, social workers, in addition to carrying out post-anthropocentric interventions with people followed and colleagues, can promote organizational changes, like animal-inclusive service design from the outset of the projects. For the community level, practitioners can reflect and stimulate action on disaster, not only for companion animals, but also for farmed and free-living animals (Fraser et al., 2021). Finally, for the structural level, social workers can stimulate advocacy and policy practice for more-than-human animals, in addition to facing the politics of meat (Fraser & Taylor, 2024).

In addition, assonances can be grasped with what Bell (2023) outlined regarding methodological approaches consistent with post-anthropocentric thinking. The author, in fact, places as cornerstones of practice in the light of this approach the use not only of participatory, democratized and co-constructive approaches, which therefore employ transdisciplinarity, but also of respectful and affirmative partnerships for collective action. To improve practices consistent with those hypothesized within the five levels, however, it is necessary to work on the dissemination of this approach through education. Currently, these activities could be implemented by professionals as a result of individual commitment and passions, although this may not be enough. In fact, even if there were a desire on the part of social workers to include more-than-human animals in practice, they would encounter obstacles such as a lack not only of clear workplace policies, but also of support and professional training (Yeung et al., 2020). Furthermore, the implementation of practices consistent with a post-anthropocentric and antispeciesist approach is opposed by the persistence of beliefs about the inferior morality of more-than-human animals, and the idea that they do not deserve the same consideration as humans continues to tend social worker towards an anthropocentric approach (Duvnjak & Dent, 2023). One way to overcome these obstacles could be to allow professionals to develop skills on this approach through its inclusion in training, which could permit them to recognise the need for change. Following a few hours of training on these issues, in fact, some Italian social workers have recognised the need for ethical change but also identify institutional and organisational barriers to implementation (Aschero et al., 2026). To overcome these aspects, it could be imagine a gradual integration through interdisciplinary training and policy adaptation (Aschero et al., 2026).

## Conclusions: Towards a multispecies justice and post-anthropocentric imaginaries in social work

This article has argued that, despite the growing eco-social orientation, social work remains largely anchored to an anthropocentric and speciesist paradigm that marginalizes more-than-human animals and excludes them from the field of justice. In this sense, it has tried to contribute to the existing debate by advancing a post-anthropocentric perspective attentive to multispecies relationships and by expanding the concept of relationality beyond an exclusively human dimension. In particular, an opening towards a post-anthropocentric and antispeciesist imaginary was proposed through a re-reading of Boetto's transformative eco-social model, offering an innovative attempt to connect theoretical reflection with potential developments in professional practice.

However, what has been outlined necessarily constitutes a gradual project that clashes with institutional and social limits linked to the normalization of the vision of more-than-human animals as inferior, which legitimizes their oppression and exploitation. In addition, the adoption of a post-anthropocentric approach opens up new ethical dilemmas and requires strong political positioning by social work. From this perspective, through a radical effort of imagination, this article tries to start an opening towards a post-anthropocentric and antispeciesist vision of social work that challenges its humanist roots, reflects on the interdependencies between human beings, more-than-human animals, and the environment, and ultimately contributes to the promotion of a multispecies society. The hope is that these reflections can offer a contribution to the realization of a real change that pushes both discipline and profession to question what role they could play in supporting the construction of a world that is more equitable and multispecies.

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