

Context, Connections and Care: Towards animal healthcare nested within a shared planetary home.

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When faced with daunting, open-ended questions, my inclination is to return to what I refer to as ‘first principles’, or what are perhaps better described as ‘patterns’ of ideas that have consistently offered a useful point of reference in the past. This is my response to the important, but challenging question of ‘how to encourage animal health professionals to make useful contributions when faced with complex challenges that span health, ecosystems and society’?

My offering here distills ideas developed in relation to “Working Together for WHOLE Systems”, where the WHOLE refers to approaching ‘Well-being and Health Oriented to Living systems and Equity’, as part of a larger text focused on Animals, Health and Society (see Parkes, 2021, especially Box 5.2). For this contribution, I focus especially on the three interrelated imperatives of *Context, Connections* and *Care*.

Context.

In the work I am involved with “context matters”. I view this to be the case for any coherent health practice, whether considering the health of people, animals, place or planet. The idea of context is not only important for the animals (and people, and places), you may be interacting with or serve, but also you and what you bring, as a health professional. I encourage any health professional to consider their positionality as part of a reciprocal contextual relationship, that also determines how you will approach the connections and care that will enrich your work. Context also offers a necessary step toward a WHOLE Systems perspective, strengthening your own capacity to focus on well-being and health while (also) orienting to the wider context of living systems and equity.

Accordingly, my context(s) as I write this piece matters. I am writing as a woman whose heritage is of English, Irish and Scottish descent, born in Aotearoa/New Zealand in the east coast town of Timaru in the territory of Kāi Tahu Iwi (tribe). A foundation for my orientation to health is my training and work as a medical doctor in Aoteroa and subsequent work and experience across the fields of human ecology, public health and ecosystem approaches to health, with ongoing alignments to approaches to one health and planetary health. Alongside this, my orientation to health as occurring within, and deeply related to the living systems (and ecosystems) we depend on, has been deeply informed by my orientation to rivers and watersheds (Parkes, 2022). My ongoing work and learning is influenced by over five decades of (re)orienting to, visiting and occasionally living at Taieri Mouth in the southeast of Aotearoa/NZ (where the Taieri River meets the Pacific Ocean). In addition, for the past decade, I have also been privileged to mostly live, work, learn, play, love, mourn and be filled with wonder, within the unceded territory of the Lheidli T’enneh which, in Dakelh language, describes ‘the people of the confluence of the two rivers’ (Lheidli T’enneh First Nation 2020), referring to the Nechako and the Lhtakoh (or Fraser) rivers, which flow together Prince George, BC, Canada. Introducing myself in this way, reveals my inclination to consider rivers as a form of eco-social ‘elder’, in ways that have profound influence on my work, including how I understand health-in-context. For over 20 years my approach to health, has been tightly coupled with how I understand ecosystems and equity dynamics within the context, or setting, of watersheds (Jenkins et al 2018). The watershed context invites a combined attention to both ecosystems and social systems, drawing attention to equity and power dynamics

(including distribution of decision-making power, authority and influence), in ways that is closely related to the theme of connections.

I encourage all animal health professionals to consider how your work is influenced by your own positionality, your own wider context, and how these in turn influence how you see the contexts within which the health is emerging, for the animals you are interacting with, and the systems that health is embedded in.

Connections

An intentional appreciation of context raises questions about different axes of connections that influence health. As noted earlier, these connections are especially important for an understanding of well-being and health that is oriented to living systems and equity. For some, the full scope of relationships and interactions involved with 'systems connections', can be a little disorienting in their complexity. To avoid feeling overwhelmed, and to help me navigate the enriched perspectives I have gained from focusing on connections, I have found it useful and deeply informative, to return to **three axes of connections**, that each deepen my understanding of health. Some may see resonance with familiar patterns in the clinical method. Others may see these connections as just a way to understand context. I find asking questions about these connections re-assuring, opening ways to find patterns that can deepen health from whatever perspective you are bringing.

Nested connections: What parts of the health system am I interested in? If I am caring for a particular animal, do I have what I need to grasp health of this animal as part of a nested system (Parkes and Horwitz, 2016), with relevant insights to be gained from the scale below (the diseased organ?) *and* the scale above (the herd?). Am I willing to go beyond this, further 'upstream' in the ecological hierarchy? Am I able to imagine health within a herd, nested within a farm, within a watershed, within a bioregion, within our planetary home? At what point do I lose focus? What happens when I identify blind-spots, when for example, when seeing the planetary, or the global climate change, seems easier than understanding health in watersheds, and direct living systems of lands and waters all animals depend on. How to these nested connections deepen my appreciation of health?

Temporal connections (past, present, future). What time-scales am I paying attention to, when seeking to understand the health of the animal I am caring for? What of the past for this animal, and it's predecessors? Or of the lands and waters they depend on? What are the implications of my decisions beyond the immediate time-frame for this animal and the nested systems it exists within. What are the lines of connections and pathways of influence between the past, present and future health of this animal, and the possible future health of other animals, humans, species. What are the points of connections for this animal and my own future?

Iterative, reflective connections: How much does your practice reflect that understanding of health and well-being, is iterative? Does your practice reflect the ways that future learning will create opportunities to deepen understanding of matters missed earlier? Are you open to celebrating different, connected phases of work that recognize the new insights possible across short, medium-, and long-term practice? How do you maintain and retain curiosity about these iterative connections and your own emergence as a learner, practitioner and health-carer?

I encourage all animal health professionals to remain curious about the patterns of connections in their work, and how greater attention to these might enhance their health care practice, and/or the ways they care about the ways health is nested within our shared planetary home.

Care.

Being curious about context and connections, is a pathway to invigorate your healthcare practice, as well as the ways in which you *care about health*. Caring about health is, of course different than healthcare. Asking connections about the context and connections, can deepen the care about your own health, alongside the health of those you are charged with caring for and, in addition, your care about the state of the (animal) healthcare you are engaged in. This work isn't easy and, reiterating the comments above, a key way to ensure express your commitment to care and positive is to **commit to asking good questions** (Walsh, 2016; Kania et al 2018). The quality and scope of the questions you ask is likely to determine the extent to which your work and practice will be informed by context, connections and the your capacity to change in ways that will improve present and future (health)care.

Asking good questions about 'Well-being and Health Oriented to Living Systems and Equity', often takes us beyond the familiar, an into new terrains of knowledge, engagement, action and change. This is when attention to WHOLE systems also requires attention to 'Who and How are we Open to Listen, and Engage/exchange?'. Care about WHOLE Systems, is often determined by the extent we are willing to **be open to refer and/or collaborate**. Being prepared for and open to teamwork is an expression of care and raises a further set of questions. As a (particular type of) healthcare provider, what determines your willingness to embrace working with others, across specialties, disciplines, sectors or partners, in order to improve the quality of care? Does your care for health and those you are caring for lead you to recognize, respect, and learn to work with, and bridge across, other knowledge and approaches?

I encourage all animal health professionals to devise and revise their own list of questions that will create opportunities to deepen their attention to interrelationships among context, connections and health, in ways that will enhance their own health practice, and to enrich how they care about health now and into our shared future.

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