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Exploring the role of pets in social work research: Enhancing qualitative methods through the researcher-participant-pet dynamic

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: Social work researchers engage with a diverse range of participants, stakeholders, and clients, many of whom share a deep bond with animals, particularly household pets. For example, in 2022, statistics revealed that 61% of Australian households and 64% of households in Aotearoa New Zealand owned a pet. To enhance their research, social workers are encouraged to adapt their skills in building rapport, demonstrating empathy, and employing critical questioning techniques to effectively connect with research participants. However, despite qualitative research training provided to emerging social workers, this training often overlooks the significance and opportunity of participants' relationships with their pets. This gap is significant as the context of research interactions is rapidly changing, with online and digital methods of data collection becoming more common in qualitative research. Connecting with pets can help social work researchers foster connection in challenging, and often disconnected, environments.

METHODS: Reflecting on research experiences and interview transcripts that involved interactions with pets, we explore how the researcher-participant-pet dynamic influences the research process and can be used to facilitate deeper connections with research participants.

FINDINGS: Through examining these specific examples, including in-person and online interviews, as well as Zoom focus groups, we emphasise the importance of recognising and incorporating pets as part of the research process.

CONCLUSIONS: If social work researchers aim to adopt a more inclusive approach encompassing the human-animal connection in their practice it is essential to integrate such perspectives in traditional research methods.

Keywords: Social work research, qualitative methods, researcher-participant-pet dynamic, human–animal connection, inclusive research practices

Traditional social work research often focuses on human relationships and interactions. The purpose of this focus has been to explore, navigate, and support people through complex social and structural situations. Despite this background, the inclusion of non-human animals into social work research and practice is gaining momentum. There is an emerging body of research that explores the role of animals in relation to the domains of attachment and wellbeing (Arkow, 2020; Chalmers et al., 2020; Riggs et al., 2024), the area of family violence (Taylor & Fraser, 2019), the relationship between

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the death of a pet and family dynamics (Turner, 2006), and in response to disaster management (Darroch & Adamson, 2016). In Aotearoa New Zealand, this growing recognition of including animals within the scope of social work can be seen in changes made to the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW) *Code of Ethics* (2019), which actively acknowledged the need to protect animals, and recognised their existence as sentient animals. In Australia, the recently updated Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) *Code of Ethics* included reference to animals in section 4.2: "commitment to social justice and human rights," and notes that social workers in Australia are required to "ensure that any animal engaged as part of social work is protected" (AASW, 2020, p. 13). While it is reassuring to see social work codes of ethics acknowledge the role and importance of animals, which has emerged alongside an increase of animal inclusive service programmes (Taylor et al., 2016), this does not mean that these codes and services are necessarily operating from an ethical basis, as these services include the potential of harm to animals, or position them as tools for the benefit of humans (Fraser & Taylor, 2024). However, this emerging attention to human–animal relationships and dynamics remains on the edge of social work practice and, in particular, social work research. Despite social work's commitment to person-in-environment models, these perspectives rarely include pets within the wider scope of a person's environment or systems (Duvnjak & Dent, 2023; Gant & Meadows, 2023; Turner, 2006).

Part of this reticence to include animals more broadly within the scope of social work research can be attributed to what has been described as a "pervasive humanism" that underpins the majority of social work perspectives, which has "normalised distinguishing between humans and other animals in a binary mode of thought" (Fraser & Taylor, 2024, p. 573). In response to this, animal studies, and more specifically critical animal studies, seeks to understand and resist the power differences between humans and animals, recognising them as situated within interconnected forms of oppression alongside humans (Fraser & Taylor, 2024). Fraser and Taylor argued that critical animal studies—and more broadly the social work ambition of achieving social justice—advocates for the recognition of animals as having value regardless of the utility they provide to humans, and should be recognised as independent, sentient creatures of equal importance as humans (2024). This recognition needs to be incorporated within research spaces and environments in order to champion animal advocacy, as well as to fully capture the scope and complexity of human social lives. As Walker et al. (2015) stated, "social work is traditionally human-centred in practice, even though for many the bond between humans and animals is the most fundamental of daily-lived experiences" (p. 24), and social work research needs to include this fundamental relationship.

An important sub-domain of human and animal relationships, and one that has significant ramifications for incorporating the perspectives of critical animal studies in social work research, is the subject of companion animals, commonly called pets. Pets play an essential role in human–animal relationships, both for individuals and within families. They may act as companions, confidants, and attachment figures, contributing significantly to emotional wellbeing (McNicholas & Collis, 2006; Turner, 2006). Pets often become integral parts of support networks, promoting social connections, trust, and a sense of community (Wood et al., 2017). Similarly, the dynamics between humans and their pets within a household can reflect the overall wellbeing and security of the family members (Hoffer et al., 2018). Recent statistics show that 69% of Australian households and 64% of households in Aotearoa owned a pet (Animal Medicines Australia, 2022; Forrest et al., 2023). There is

a significant body of literature published on the positive impact of having a pet (Chalmers et al., 2020; Darroch & Adamson, 2016; Riggs et al., 2024), and there is also a developing acknowledgment of the practical components of including pets within the scope of social work and social work research. Arkow (2020) argued that asking about experiences with pets can help social workers explore risk and resilience factors, and that an assessment of a pet's physical condition and behaviours can provide insight into human experiences and functioning. Arkow provides six reasons why social workers—including social work researchers—should be mindful of human–animal relationships, which are:

- That a 21st century definition of "family" includes its non-human members as well.
- The presence of pets enhances communities' social capital.
- Actively asking about pets can build rapport and trust.
- Children's positive and negative experiences with animals can have lifelong implications.
- Animal abuse can reveal other forms of family violence.
- And pet loss can have significant implications for individual and family wellbeing (2020).

It is the notion that asking about pets can build rapport and trust that is central to this article. Focusing on the practitioner–client relationship, Arkow argued asking about animal-related experiences can provide important information to the practitioner, as well as establish a caring and trusting relationship between the practitioner and client (2015, 2020). The central idea behind this concept is that pets serve as channels for communication. A recurring idea in the literature is that pets act as "social lubricants", breaking the ice and fostering social support and interpersonal connections (Garrity & Stallones, 1998; Messent, 1983, p. 37). Research by Fawcett and Gullone (2001) indicated that even just observing animals can lower physiological responses to stressors and enhance positive mood. Additionally, studies such as that by Lange et al. (2006) have shown that animals can induce a calming effect, bring about stress-reducing humour, increase feelings of safety, evoke empathy, and boost motivation, particularly among adolescents. Arkow stated, "the inclusion of human–animal relationships should be considered more widely in training and practice as part of social work's commitment to social and environmental justice and fighting oppression and seen as an expanding opportunity for research, practice, advocacy, and advancing public policy" (2020, p. 584). We echo the sentiment that including human–animal relationships can enhance social work, specifically in how social work research is conducted.

While many studies published on human–animal relationships focus on the impact of pets on people, there is little published on how to include animals in the process of conducting research *with* people. A secondary data-analysis conducted by Ryan and Ziebland (2015) on the relationship between pets and health used 61 in-depth interviews conducted by other researchers. By returning to the interview video recordings, rather than the published outputs, they were able to explore the "sometimes three-way interactions, the co(a)gency, between participants, pets and researchers" (2015, p. 69). They found that the interactions with pets were frequently noted as interruptions in the transcripts, sometimes leading to a temporary pause in the recording. Pets were handled in various ways during interviews, and they were often physically removed from the setting by either the participant, another household member, or the researcher themselves. In transcripts, pets were often omitted and labelled with an interruption marker, while researchers sometimes displayed disinterest or considered them irrelevant to the process of interviewing the participant. Subsequently, pets received little mention in the analysis and documentation of findings (Ryan &

Ziebland, 2015). We believe that these interactions can be seen as an opportunity for deeper engagement with the research participants, rapport building within the data-collection process, and as a method to build genuine human (and animal) connection. However, we emphasise that this approach should not be utilitarian in nature, in that we do not see animals or pets as tools for building a more "successful" research project. Rather, it is a result of the broadening of social work's scope of practice to recognise animals and pets as part of social and family systems, and the inherent deep connections people share with their pets and companion animals (Walker et al., 2015).

To enhance their research, social work researchers are encouraged to adapt their skills in building rapport, demonstrating empathy, and employing critical questioning techniques to connect with participants. However, despite qualitative research training provided to emerging social workers and researchers, this training often overlooks the significance and opportunity of participants' relationships with their pets. This gap is significant as the context of research interactions is rapidly changing, with online and digital methods of data collection becoming more common in qualitative research (Tungohan & Catungal, 2022). Connecting with, and building rapport through, pets can help social work researchers foster connection in challenging and often disconnected environments, while incorporating critical perspectives that challenge social work's traditional humanist perspectives. In this article we reflect on research experiences and interview transcripts that involved interactions with pets and explore how the researcher-participant-pet dynamic influences the research process. By examining specific examples, including in-person and online interviews, as well as Zoom focus groups, we emphasise the importance of recognising and incorporating the role of pets as an active and applied qualitative research skill.

Methodology

Research projects

The experiences and transcripts reflected on in this article are drawn from various research studies conducted over the last 8 years. None of these studies included pets or animals as a primary focus of the research design; however, all of these studies recorded interactions between the participants, their pets, and ourselves as researchers. These interactions were not initially used as data as they did not relate to the research questions, but the interactions prompted us to reflect on our methods and skills as researchers, and how they impacted our rapport building and connection with participants. The studies this material is drawn from include:

- A project exploring the relationship between social capital and wellbeing for older queer adults in Aotearoa New Zealand, which used face-to-face interviews to collect data.
- A project exploring the 2017 marriage equality postal survey in Australia, which used face-to-face interviews to collect data.
- A project examining social work practitioner competencies to work with older gender-diverse adults, which used interviews conducted via Zoom to collect data.
- A project that explored queer representation in young adult literature, which used focus groups conducted in-person and via Zoom to collect data.

Analysis

When we returned to the transcripts, we used a process of reflexive thematic analysis to examine our interactions with participants and their pets. Reflexive thematic analysis was an important process for re-engaging with this material, as we not only wanted to collate and organise patterns within the data, but we wanted to emphasise our experiences, reflections, and feelings as equally important elements

of the analytic process. Reflexive thematic analysis, following the work of Braun and Clarke (2019), emphasises research subjectivity, reflexivity, and the role researchers have in generating and creating knowledge, and therefore was well suited to examining our role in creating, establishing, and reflecting on the relationships built during the research process.

For the purposes of this article, we reviewed the transcripts that involved interactions with the participants' pets, identifying instances where: both participants and researchers would talk about the pets present at the time of the interview; pets would interact with either the participant or researcher; or when the presence of a pet would prompt either the participant or the researcher to talk about their own pets. Instances when participants would broadly discuss their pets—for example, talking about their household or daily activities—that did not result in a discussion or interaction were not included for analysis, as our focus was on the research-participant-pet dynamic.

After compiling this secondary dataset, we reviewed the extracts multiple times, developing themes from the observed interactions and our reflections on how they did, or did not, impact the research process. The extracts presented in the subsequent results section serve as examples, yet they do not reflect all the extracts identified within the secondary dataset.

Findings

Building rapport and connection

A primary theme that emerged from our reflexive analysis was the ability for the researcher-participant-pet dynamic to build rapport and connection within the research space. We anticipated a degree of connection from engaging with pets during the research process but encountered a surprising number of occasions where this resulted in ongoing conversation and connection with participants. This occurred commonly in face-to-face interviews, where we noted that many of our initial interactions focused on pets before beginning the formal interview process. One example, reflective of the many conversations included within the secondary dataset, showed how we inadvertently had a conversation about pets to relate to the participant:

> Participant: I go and house-sit and have a good time with their dog.
>
> David: What sort of dog is it?
>
> Participant: It's a King Charles Poodle. That's it. King Charles Spaniel Poodle, half and half. It's beautiful.
>
> David: Yeah. I love dogs. I've got two myself.
>
> Participant: What sort?
>
> David: A Dalmatian and a Beagle. Which make a very weird pairing. But they get on really well, so that's good.

We use the term, *inadvertently,* as this was not a deliberate strategy, nor did we see the pets as a tool that could be used within that space. Rather, it reflected our natural desire to engage with the participant's pets and share stories about our own, fostering a connection to the participant unrelated to the research questions or agenda. Another excerpt we identified illustrated this desire, and how it naturally occurred during our early engagement with the participant:

> David: Oh yep, brilliant [pause while participant makes tea 23.42 to 23.58]. Did you say Bruno was the dog's name? [discussion re dog's name 23.59 to 24.15]. Is he very old?
>
> Participant: No, about four or five.
>
> David: Oh yeah, that's a good age.

> Participant: Yeah, he's great company; I talk to him like he's a wee human. Cos I'm on my own most of the time.
>
> David: Well, I do the exact same thing with my dogs, I just talk to them all the time.
>
> Participant: Yeah. [to Bruno: What do you want? You're not going anywhere]. Right, I'll get that tea made, David. And coffee [pause/calls out to partner re coffee]. How do you like your tea, David?

Reflecting on these excerpts was an interesting process as a researcher. At the time, these interactions felt ordinary, comfortable, and natural. However, assessing these interactions in context, and examining how the rest of the interview proceeded, it became apparent that this trend of engaging with, and importantly being genuinely interested in, the participants' pets helped build a sense of connection and rapport, which facilitated an environment to engage with the more personal, sometimes sensitive, research questions. An additional consideration on this specific excerpt is that all of the interview recordings were transcribed by a professional transcription service. In line with Ryan and Ziebland's observation (2015), certain transcribers opted to sideline discussions pertaining to pets, deeming them less pertinent compared to other interview content. Initially, we paid little attention to this choice by the transcription service, as it did not align with our research focus. Yet, upon revisiting the secondary dataset and engaging with the literature on pets, it underscores a tendency of researchers and their affiliated services to marginalise or overlook pets in research contexts.

While many of the excerpts in the secondary dataset show examples of us willingly and happily engaging with the pets present during the interviews, others show examples where we were slightly less comfortable. One example occurred during an interview with a participant, where their small dog insisted on sitting on the researcher's lap during the interview. While it would be more than acceptable to ask for the dog to be removed from the space—as researchers did in the material analysed by Ryan and Ziebland (2015)—we made the decision to continue, and make the best of the situation:

> Participant: I'm sorry, is this okay?
>
> David: [Laughing] Yes of course, he's much smaller than mine. I love his little jumper, by the way.
>
> Participant: Oh, he needs it. Look at him. He's naked. No fur. Got ripped off by life. He got the David Bowie haircut too.
>
> David: It suits him though.
>
> Participant: Yeah, it does.
>
> **[…]**
>
> Participant: I think he's fallen asleep on you.
>
> David: [Speaking to the dog] Oh, dear. Oops, sorry I woke you up.

Part of this decision was a desire not to impose on either the participant or their pet, as it was their home and their environment, and we recognised that both had individual agency within that space. But equally this decision was an effort to show ourselves as willing to engage and be part of their world, which was required in order to conduct the research interview in a genuine manner. When analysing and reflecting on this excerpt in the context of looking at the researcher-participant-pet dynamic, kind and careful engagement with pets is important not just for general empathy, but to also build rapport and engagement—even in circumstances that are not ideal.

Connecting through devices

On the subject of connecting with participants in non-ideal circumstances,

a number of the research studies that contributed to the secondary data set included research interviews conducted via Zoom or over the phone. While both methods are widely used data-collection techniques, and have been used successfully for a long time, a lack of face-to-face interaction can hinder engagement and rapport with participants (Tungohan & Catungal, 2022). This might be particularly true for social work researchers who are primarily trained in face-to-face interactions.

Reflecting on our own experiences conducting research via these mediums, we have personally found it harder to build that initial connection with participants. Part of this barrier is the limited opportunity for small-talk and observations about what is occurring around you, which naturally occurs when conducting interviews in-person or in people's homes. However, on occasion we found we had experiences where we could engage with the participant's pet via these mediums, and it helped us to connect through these various platforms.

One such example, which occurred in an interview via Zoom, allowed us to establish a connection early on with a participant, and establish a thread that was referred to a few times throughout the interview:

> Participant: Okay. I've still got the dogs though. Well, for a while anyway, for a while.
>
> David: How many dogs do you have?
>
> Participant: Two, both are rescues, we have a Caboodle, called Snoopy we've had for nine years. And Poppy, a Cavalier who was being thrown away by a breeder who said she wasn't worth feeding once she had stopped having multiple pup litters.
>
> David: That's really nice of you to adopt them.
>
> Participant: Oh, love them, love them. The best thing we ever did.
>
> David: I have a rescue cat around here somewhere, Gertrude, is her name.
>
> Participant: Gertrude B Stein.[1]
>
> David: Yeah, she's a very formal cat when she wants to be.
>
> Participant: Well cats can be very formal generally, I think. That's my experience of being a cat owner.
>
> […]
>
> Participant: I'm sorry the dog's knocked something off the sofa.
>
> David: Don't worry, I've got Gertie around my feet just attacking me. I get what it's like.
>
> Participant: Oh well, there you go, so between Gertie, Snoopy and Poppy...
>
> […]
>
> David: Thank you so much, it's been a pleasure, to talk to you today, and to hear your dogs in the background as well.
>
> Participant: Oh well, that's the little Cavalier, she's snoring at the moment.
>
> David: Well, I've got Gertie tearing up my couch here behind me so I'm going to have to tell her off.
>
> Participant: You go tell her off. Listen, go safe, stay safe and I look forward to hearing from you.

As minor as these interactions might seem, the back-and-forth exchange about our pets allowed us to connect and build common ground, creating the foundation for a genuine, in-depth research interview. When reflecting on this excerpt in the secondary dataset we compared it to the

other interviews from the same project, all of which utilised Zoom as well. Those other interviews, while for the most part successful, lacked the same level of connection and engagement. There are multiple factors that contribute to successful research-participant engagement over Zoom, including researcher skills, participant comfort levels, and suitable technology (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017; Tran et al., 2021; Tungohan & Catungal, 2022). On reflection, we found it helpful to bridge the digital divide by connecting with the human desire to talk about and share our pets. While this is only one element within a researcher's skillset, it should not be disregarded or downplayed in online data collection methods, especially as this is becoming an increasingly common form of data collection in social work research (McInroy, 2016).

Group connection and engagement in challenging circumstances

While the previous excerpts have focused on one-on-one interviews, conducted either in-person or via Zoom, our secondary dataset also included material from a study that utilised focus groups over Zoom to collect data. To provide context, this study focused on exploring queer representation in young adult literature and the impact of this representation on young adults. To conduct the study, we designed a project that used monthly focus groups modelled after book-clubs. The project was planned to run over eight months, and the initial plan was to conduct these focus groups in-person; however, due to Covid-19 restrictions, we were required to quickly pivot to online focus groups. We were concerned that this change, without the capacity for in-person interactions, would result in disengagement from the participants. However, we found that surprisingly, engagement levels increased. While this increase in engagement was likely due to a variety of factors, including increased participant comfort levels of being able to take part in their own home (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017), the participant's familiarity and skill-level using digital technology (Tran et al., 2021), and the pre-existing connections established between participants (Betts & Herb, 2023), we found that the sharing (and often active celebration) of our household pets proved to build group connection and engagement in the online focus groups.

Initially this process started as a method of breaking the ice and easing into the online focus group environment. After noticing the participants' pets in the background it quickly become a group rule that we should introduce our pets to the group:

> Annika: We can wait a minute for them to set up. Oh beautiful. Here they come now. Excellent. I see [Participant A's] gorgeous puppy dog in the background!
>
> Participant A: Sorry. He can't leave me alone.
>
> Annika: I give mine treats. I love seeing him there. Pets are always welcome.
>
> […]
>
> Participant B: Thank you very much. Also, David, what is the name of your cat?
>
> David: Gertrude.
>
> Participant C: God, I love it so much!
>
> Participant B: Thank you! Made my day.
>
> Participant D: Did not notice a cat. I love the cat!
>
> David: She's just keeping an eye on things.
>
> Annika: She can be the mascot of the group. I think I had similar reaction I think, [participant C] when your dog, I think it was, appeared in the screen. I saw [Participant B] had the same like, "What

is it? Let me just have a quick look." So, pets are always appreciated.

Participant C: Yeah. That's Mia. And funnily enough, we have a student in our school who's been Zooming lessons. And they have recently come out as non-binary and queer, which is really, really cool. And they are obsessed with Mia. Like every time they come on zoom, they're like "Where's Mia?" So, I go down and grab Mia, "here's Mia" and they want to like meet Mia. So, when we go back to school, I'm going to have to do some kind of like car park, meet the dog session or something and, and everything. So yeah. She's great. She's super moody. Like I mean, she's a Chihuahua, she's got tiny, tiny dog problems. But yeah, she's really great. Super cute.

Annika: I'm just thinking how great all teaching would be, how much better it could be if we just add pets. Just that little addition, then it's perfect. Okay. Well, and that's obviously a very subtle hint to say, bring your pets along next time. Always happy to see them.

Interactions like this were common at each focus group, and helped build a sense of connection and relationship between the participants and ourselves. They also proved to create a more comfortable and relaxing space for the participants, in what otherwise might have felt like a disconnected environment. Another example from the secondary dataset illustrated the joy in sharing pets, and being exposed to other people's pets during the online focus groups:

Annika: If you've got pets, I would really want to see. [Participant E] is summoning someone. Ooh, who've we got here? Ahh. Oh, I love a good cockatiel.

Participant E: This is Hughie.

Annika: Hi, Hughie!

Participant E: The only reason that she can be out is because the dogs are currently in the lounge room with my partner.

Annika: Nice. She can have some wholesome solo time outside of the cage, now.

[Typed into the Zoom chat by another participant]:

I would die for Hughie.

We also found that these regular interactions also served to help some participants feel comfortable opening up and sharing in the online focus groups. When we reflected on the difference between the few face-to-face sessions we had before we pivoted to Zoom, and the eventual Zoom groups and dynamics that were established, we noticed a number of the participants who rarely spoke in person were much more open and engaged in the online space. For some of these participants, the regular moments of sharing pets on their camera screens, and receiving numerous, often joyful declarations of praise from other participants, created a space where they could engage more openly, willingly, and with a sense of comfort, which we believe came from the researcher-participant-pet dynamics present in the online focus groups.

Lastly, one of the significant findings of our analysis of the secondary dataset was the impact of sharing and engaging with the participant's pets in creating a sense of group cohesion. While we have reflected on the ability of the researcher-participant-pet dynamic to create a sense of connection between ourselves as researchers and the participants, and to facilitate a greater sense of comfort and rapport with participants, the online focus groups demonstrated how this process strengthened the connection between participants themselves. Over the course of the project, we observed many interactions between participants that showed their growing sense of identity as a group. Part of this development occurred due to the nature

of discussing and sharing queer themes and ideas in an intimate setting, but we also noticed occasions where the inclusion of pets in the discussion demonstrated this bond in action. One such example, and one of our favourite excerpts from the secondary dataset, shows these group dynamics in action:

> Participant F: Yeah, I'll be right back. I just have to go get ... I'm looking after a baby possum. I'm an animal carer. So, I just have to go get them because I need to feed them. So, I'll be one second. Sorry. I'm really sorry.
>
> Annika: No, go for it.
>
> Participant F: Okay. Thanks.
>
> David: I really hope we get a chance to see this baby possum.
>
> Participant G: Yeah, definitely want to see the possum.
>
> Annika: Me too. Immediately I was like, "Can you just bring it back though?" Like I need to see this, especially if it's getting like a little bottle feed or something.
>
> [A few minutes later]
>
> Annika: Yeah. We're about to start chatting. Do you have a possum though? Is my really important question. Can we see it?
>
> Participant F: [Shows baby possum]
>
> Whole group: Oh!
>
> Participant F: Hang on. Wait, I'll turn you guys down. I've got you up really loud.
>
> Annika: Oh yeah.
>
> Participant G: We don't want to scare the baby.
>
> Participant F: Yeah. Okay. Now you can go.
>
> Whole group: [Softly] Oh...
>
> Participant G: He's a little baby.
>
> Participant F: He's an orphan. I've called him Ziggy, which isn't his name in the books, but his name is a horrible reference. So, I've called him Ziggy.
>
> Annika: Ziggy's good. I like Ziggy as a name.

When we were reflecting on the outcome of this research project, we were grateful that, throughout the 8-month long project, our participants decided to remain engaged, committed, and open to the research. We had anticipated a barrier to engagement and connection when we shifted to an online format, and expected to see a number of participants disengage from the project entirely. Instead, we witnessed an increased commitment in engagement, and saw a sense of group connection and cohesion develop between the participants. As previously stated, this sense of connection between research participants can emerge due to a variety of factors. However, our analysis of the secondary dataset leads us to believe that the researcher-participant-pet dynamic is significant in contributing to this and should be considered as a vital part of the research process.

Discussion and conclusion

Social work researchers are encouraged to strengthen their research skills by developing their ability to establish rapport, show empathy, and employ critical questioning techniques. However, despite receiving qualitative research training through undergraduate and post-graduate degrees (International Association of Schools of Social Work [IASSW], 2014), emerging social workers and researchers often overlook the importance and potential of participants' relationships with their pets (Walker et al., 2015). This oversight is notable as the landscape of research interactions is evolving

rapidly, with online and digital data-collection methods becoming increasingly prevalent in qualitative research (Tungohan & Catungal, 2022). Alongside these practical changes, social work as a profession is increasingly moving away from humanist perspectives that privilege the human experience over animals, and researchers need to be mindful to incorporate such critical perspectives in their research design and methods (Fraser & Taylor, 2024). Engaging with, and building rapport with, pets can assist social work researchers in both these goals, by establishing connections in challenging and often disconnected environments, while acknowledging the importance of the researcher-participant-pet dynamic within research spaces.

Drawing from research experiences and interview transcripts involving interactions with pets, we have explored how the researcher-participant-pet dynamic influences the research process. Through various examples, including in-person and online interviews, as well as Zoom focus groups, we have highlighted the significance of acknowledging and integrating the role of pets as a proactive and applied qualitative research skill.

The benefit of actively being aware of the research-participant-pet dynamic is significant for building qualitative research skills. Broadly, across contexts and environments, it has the capacity to increase participant engagement and rapport building. This can occur in face-to-face interviews, where researchers might be present in the homes or communities of the participant. The researcher-participant-pet dynamic in this context might involve interacting and engaging with the participants' pets if they are present and using this as an opportunity to share their own stories and experiences with pets. This process lends itself to establishing a personal bond, one that is not directly tied to the process of asking and responding to specific research questions. In the context of modern data-collection methods, the researcher-participant-pet dynamic also serves to support connection and rapport building in online and digital methods of data collection. Such methods are increasingly commonplace but do pose challenge for traditional engagement and rapport building (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017; Tran et al., 2021). While not applicable in every circumstance, the researcher-participant-pet dynamic can facilitate connection through the screen and digital environments. Further building on this benefit, the researcher-participant-pet dynamic can support participants to relax in research spaces that might prove daunting to some individuals, such as sharing personal stories or insights in group settings, and can help establish a sense of group cohesion, and facilitate long-term engagement with group-based research designs.

This consideration of the researcher-participant-pet dynamic also requires qualitative researchers to reconsider what is, and is not, considered as a form of data and research material. Often, transcripts and records of research interactions will omit the researcher-participant-pet dynamic if it is not seen as relevant to the assumed research question, reflecting the potential humanism that underpins traditional social work perspectives (Fraser & Taylor, 2024; Ryan and Ziebland, 2015), but we would argue that the inclusion of this material allows for a deeper analysis and reflection of how the researcher-participant-pet dynamic impacted the research process, interactions, and subsequent data. This inclusion allows qualitative researchers, including social work researchers, to be active in their acknowledgment of the role, importance, and place of pets, which is part of social workers commitment to the rights and responsibilities of animals in their practice (AASW, 2019; ANZASW, 2019).

Lastly, we want to end on a note of caution and restraint when it comes to approaching the idea of the researcher-participant-pet dynamic as specific tool. Throughout this

article we have argued that the researcher-participant-pet dynamic can be actively used by researchers to facilitate greater connection, engagement, and enhance the depth of data collected through the research process. But as Jones and Taylor noted, "simply positioning animals as entities to be studies risks objectifying them further" (2023, p. 33), and equally, simply viewing pets as a tool to gain access or connection to human participants risks objectifying and diminishing their role as companions, confidants, and attachment figures (McNicholas & Collis, 2006; Turner, 2006). Rather, in line with the ANZASW (2019) and AASW (2020) *Code of Ethics*, companion animals and pets should be recognised as sentient animals, protected under social work's ethical and moral mandate, and an integral part of people's family and social systems. The researcher-participant-pet dynamic, both as a research process and perspective, should be seen as method for recognising, valuing, and acknowledging the important role pets have in our lives, and as a method for advancing social work's commitment to critical and inclusive practices.

Ethics

All the research studies reflected on in this article received approval from their respective university human research ethics committees to proceed in accordance with their university ethical guidelines. These guidelines allowed for extended consent, where the data collected could be used in projects and outputs that were considered as either extensions of the original project, or through the process of analysis resulted in the development of a new area of research inquiry.

Note: [1] A reference I evidently did not understand at the time.

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