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THE STRENGTH AND CONFLICTS OF THE HUMAN-ANIMAL BOND
IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND

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INTRODUCTION

This paper presents a qualitative research study that explores the lived experiences and relationships between individuals and their animals. The research methodology employed is narrative inquiry, allowing for deeper understanding of the participants' stories and the meanings attached to their relationships. Although narrative inquiry is gaining popularity in the human medical field, its application in animal science-related fields is still limited. The study involved interviewing 30 participants, primarily of New Zealand European ethnicity. The findings of the study consistently revealed a strong and meaningful connection between participants and their animals, contributing significantly to their overall well-being. This aligns with previous research indicating the positive impact of the human-animal bond on health and well-being but this study adds a depth to the notion of the human-animal bond through its use of narrative enquiry. The connection between humans and animals and the positive effects on well-being make it clear there is opportunity to investigate ways to improve access to animal ownership. Conflicts within the human-animal bond were also identified, even in the presence of a strong bond. These conflicts included environmental concerns, individual circumstances, emotional decision-making processes, changing circumstances during guardianship, and unacceptable behaviours exhibited by animals. The study emphasises the importance of providing support and access to services for individuals facing conflicts within the human-animal bond too. The study contributes to the understanding of the human-animal bond and its implications for individuals and animal welfare. The findings underscore the strength of the bond and its positive impact on well-being, while also acknowledging the conflicts that can arise.

BACKGROUND

The American Veterinary Medical Association describes the human-animal bond as “a mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and animals that is influenced by behaviours essential to the health and wellbeing of both” (American Veterinary Medical Association, n.d.). This includes emotional, psychological, and physical interactions. The bond between humans and animals is a crucial aspect of many animals owners' well-being. This is well-supported by existing evidence.

McNicholas and Collis (2000) concluded that being accompanied by a well-behaved dog increased the frequency of social interactions in multiple daily activity settings, particularly with strangers. The social catalysis effect was attributed to the presence of a dog, over and above other differing characteristics of the male handler in the study. When combined with Hawkley and Capitano's (2015) findings that social isolation (loneliness) is linked to adverse health and fitness outcomes, it is reasonable to presume that the presence of animals may counteract loneliness and improve health and fitness outcomes concurrently. McConnell et al. (2011) further supports this as they found that animal owners tend to have better well-being, self-esteem, and social support compared to non-animal owners. The proposed ability of animal ownership in reducing loneliness may have impacts in

childhood too. It is recognised that childhood and adolescence are important phases that influence the health and well-being across a person's life span. Purewal et al. (2017) conducted a systematic review of the evidence supporting potential associations with animal ownership on the emotional, behavioural, cognitive, education and social development outcomes. This review found positive supporting evidence for effects on self-esteem and loneliness, however, there was inconclusive evidence for effects on childhood anxiety and depression.

Government-mandated and self-imposed lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic brought about significant periods of social isolation. Ratschen et al. (2020) concluded that animal ownership appeared to mitigate some of the detrimental psychological effects seen during this time. Morgan et al. (2020) analysed data which showed that as social isolation increased during the pandemic, the interest and rate in dog adoption increased significantly. However, they also found that there was a clear association between individuals impaired quality of life and their perceptions of a parallel deterioration in the quality of life of the dogs; an important association to be aware of. The One Welfare Model serves to highlight the interconnections between animal welfare, human welfare, and the environment, and is a useful concept when considering the human-animal bond. Pinillos et al. (2016) explain that adopting the concept of One Welfare could be used to help to improve animal welfare and human wellbeing concurrently.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The objective of this research was to explore animal owner experiences with animal healthcare professionals using a narrative approach; however the opening question in the interview which had been intended only to set the scene ended up providing a very rich narrative supporting the strength of the human-animal bond and providing additional evidence which supported the existing body of research attesting to the strength of the human-animal bond.

Therefore, this first paper explores the specific narrative relating to the importance of animals in participants' lives reflecting the strength of the human-animal bond. Later papers will explore the positive and negative experiences of these participants with their animal healthcare providers.

METHODS

This research set out to listen to real experiences of animal ownership and animal healthcare provision and to explore the emotions within those experiences. Although narrative inquiry is gaining popularity as a research method in the human medical field, its utilisation in animal science-related fields is still limited. However, it presents an opportunity to connect better with animal owners' relationships, both with their animals and with those working to support animal welfare. The use of narrative enquiry research methodology allows for the exploration of real-life experiences through storytelling, offering a rich description and exploration of meanings that may not be captured by quantitative research or survey-based approaches (Wang & Geale, 2015) and it allows for expression of emotions and personal reflection with fewer constraints. This, combined with active and empathetic listening by an interviewer within a safe space, is an appropriate research method to achieve the research goal. Lewis (2011) discussed story telling as being supportive of human meaning. The root of this research is the human component of animal ownership and the relationship with both the animal and those responsible for the animal's healthcare. By seeking to develop a profound understanding and connection with people's stories concerning their relationship and bond with their animals, this study adds meaning to the relationship that might not be apparent in studies that disconnect the human narrative in the research. Datta (2018) identified narrative approach as culturally appropriate research which can empower researchers and research participants.

In 2022, six researchers interviewed 30 animal owners using a semi-structured interview. This semi-structured interview had four sections to guide the transition of the story, allowing participants space to tell their story in their own way while allowing the researchers to gather data that could be compared. This paper is focused on the narrative pertaining to the first section of the interview.

The four sections and guiding questions used were:

1. Tell the interviewer about your animals and their importance in your life.
2. Tell the interviewer about your relationship with your veterinary clinic.
 - Thinking about your last visit to the veterinary clinic, tell the interviewer about the visit from booking to follow up after the visit; walk the interviewer through it and how you felt during the experience from booking the appointment through to post visit follow up.
 - Recall an experience/s where you felt better and/or worse than this visit you have just described? Explain what the experience was and why you feel this was the case.
3. When considering the financial value of your visits to the veterinary clinic, what is informing your feelings about the cost? Consider scenarios that you have talked through already for context.
4. When considering your animals' healthcare, is your veterinarian always your first port of call? Or are there other places you go for advice/guidance? Tell the interviewer where you go and why?

These questions were shared with the participants in the days leading up to the interview, allowing them time to consider the areas we wished to explore, and the stories they might want to share. This allowed participants to reflect and consider their responses and it resulted in clear narratives. Several participants mentioned during the early stages of the interview that they had taken time to contemplate the broad themes the interview aimed to cover and had even prepared notes to ensure they shared important aspects with the interviewers. Allowing this pre-interview reflection and consideration likely contributed to the richness of the stories shared by the participants, reducing the likelihood of leaving the interview with a sense of unshared thoughts or experiences. This likely contributed to there being no changes or additions requested to transcripts post interview.

Listening to participants share their stories through the narrative inquiry approach provided a means to connect with their emotions as they expressed their own lived experiences. Interviewers took care to listen attentively, empathise, and ask probing questions that encouraged participants to share more without imposing the interviewer's perspective or worldview. The research findings are presented as themes and subthemes, supported by direct quotes from the interviews. It is important to acknowledge that the interpretation of these themes and quotes may be influenced by the researchers' own lived experiences, and this should be considered when examining the results.

Participants were assured of anonymity as part of the process through details on the consent form, and at the beginning of the interview. Time was allowed for whanaungatanga at the being of the interview, providing an opportunity for the participants to be comfortable with the interviewer and to check in if there were any questions or concerns.

Participants were selected from expressions of interest provided in a 2021 industry survey to animal owners. The last question in the 2021 animal owners' survey invited participants to share their details if they wished to participate in an interview. One hundred and twenty-five respondents of the animal owner survey expressed interest. Initially 30 participants who represented the most diverse range were selected from the 125 respondents. However, only 10 of this first cut responded to the invitation to engage, meaning we had to select less diverse participants resulting in the 30 participants of this study being less diverse than anticipated.

Of the 30 participants, 25 were New Zealand European ethnicity, three were from overseas European backgrounds, one Māori participant (pseudonym – Manaia), and one Asian participant (pseudonym – Maya). It is important to acknowledge that the lack of cultural diversity within the sample is a limitation of this study, and future research using the same methodology is planned to address this limitation by including participants from more diverse cultural backgrounds.

Consequently, themes were identified that applied specifically to Manaia and Maya. It is crucial to note that these themes may not be exclusive to the cultural diversity represented by Manaia and Maya. Another limitation regarding demographic diversity is that only one participant, Eric, was involved with animals in a commercial setting, specifically in farming. Again, although the themes drawn from Eric's narrative did pertain to the relationship between animals and his farming business, it cannot be assumed that the themes drawn are a true representation of the rest of the farming community throughout Aotearoa New Zealand.

Acknowledging the limitations associated with cultural diversity in the sample and the limited representation of commercial farming involvement, presents an opportunity for further exploration of the themes; specifically, those identified from the narratives of Manaia, Maya, and Eric. Future research should aim to incorporate a more diverse range of cultural backgrounds to provide a comprehensive understanding of the human-animal bond and its implications across different cultural contexts.

There was diversity in other demographic measures, and no discernible differences were observed in the interview themes when considering these other variable dynamics including age, gender, income bracket, location, and number of animals.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and participants were given the option to review the transcripts and quotes. Five requested to review their transcripts, however no changes were made. Following this, thematic analysis was carried out. Each transcript was read, and key pieces of text (sentences) were highlighted by researchers. Themes were identified and highlighted text was grouped together. In some cases, subthemes were created. This is an example of inductive constant comparison analysis (Leech and Onwuegbuzie 2007) and is considered grounded theory research. This research received ethical approval to undertake this research on 26th April 2022 by the Otago Polytechnic Research Ethics committee, approval number 948.

RESULTS

The thematic analysis of the narratives relating to the importance of animals in the participants' lives resulted in the creation of two categories:

1. The positive aspects of the human animal bond (Table 1)
2. The conflicts arising in the human animal bond (Table 2)

Within each category, two overarching strong themes emerged which are outlined in Tables 1 and 2. Under each of these themes were subthemes. These subthemes comprise of the way the participants articulated the overarching theme identified.

Table 1. Category 1: Strength of the human animal bond (Source: Authors).

Theme	Wellbeing (25)	Family Members (25)
Subthemes	Emotional support and companionship (25)	Owners going above and beyond (15)
	Exercise and Routine (8)	Instead of or after children (11)
	Encouraging human connections (3)	Shared interest (5)

Table 2. Category 2: Conflicts arising in the human-animal bond (Source Authors).

Themes	Conflicts that emerge before animal-ownership (8)	Conflicts that emerged during animal ownership (13)
Subthemes	Environmental Concerns (3)	Emotion in decision making (6)
	Individual circumstances (2)	Change in circumstances (5)
	Family conflict (2)	Unacceptable behaviour (2)
	Breed selection conflicts (1)	Unpleasant medical conditions (1)

CATEGORY 1: THE STRENGTH OF THE HUMAN-ANIMAL BOND

Following whanaungatanga, the interview opened with a prompt for the participants to share the importance of their animals in their lives. All 30 participants attested to the strong connection to their animals, opening with statements that clearly demonstrated the strength of their bond, demonstrating the importance to the owners in terms of connection and relationship. The word 'love' was used many times. This is highlighted separately prior to the theming of the remainder of the narrative due to the strength and universal nature of it. No participant started their story with an alternative narrative, and all participants were enthusiastic about sharing how important their animals were to them. Themes and sub-themes present on the narratives associated with the strength of the human animal bond are outlined in Table 1.

...we're a bit of an animal-mad family which is part of the reason I was quite excited to have the chance to get involved in this discussion with this project... Deanna...he's my best buddy... just love him to bits, we have a lot of fun together, he's very spoilt. (Graham)

Wellbeing

Human wellbeing has many aspects, and for 25 participants of this study, animals were reported as being a major contributor to their overall wellbeing. Across the participant narratives the strength of the connection to their animals was evident. For example indicating the importance animals have in the lives of humans.

Participants linked animal ownership to their well-being, but their explanations highlighted different aspects, leading to creation of subthemes of well-being. The emphasis in each narrative supports presenting them as three distinct subthemes of wellbeing.

1. Emotional support/Companionship

The emotional support and companionship provided by animals stood out for 25 of the participants, highlighting the bond and unconditional love found in animal ownership. This was particularly evident during COVID isolation.

Right after the COVID lockdown... he got me out of a really dark place, and then it's just been onwards and upwards since then... (Leanne)

I was desperately trying to get just any dog, so I didn't have to do lockdown by myself... (Ruth)

Some participants expressed how the strength of the emotional connection to their animals was a literal life saver during difficult times, the benefits of which were clear through the stories shared for example,

...the reason I'm still here is because of my dogs... (Fiona)

The absolute intensity of the bond that can form with a companion animal, my dog, that had basically supported my life the loneliness antidote is that companionship of an animal... (Petra)

For Greta, her cat provided companionship as a much younger child in a family,

...because I was quite a bit younger than my siblings, the cat always became my buddy, so I would, when I was very, very young, six or seven, I would go rabbiting in the paddocks with the cat.

2. Exercise and Routine

Exercise and routines are also linked to wellbeing. Eight participants shared stories that highlighted the important role their animals play in creating and supporting this part of their lives. Some examples include:

...always there, he comes with me most places ... he's always there when I wake up, he's there when I go to sleep and he's there when I'm de-stressing at the end of the day when I take him for a walk after work, so he's an incredibly important component... (Cam)

we walk together with them, we take them to the beach together; you know, it's our lives, he gets them up in the morning, I put them to bed at night... (Anne)

...we live a really active lifestyle so he has a really important role in helping us stay active... (Isla)

...having a dog around the house is good, if nothing else, when you're retired and getting on a bit, it makes you get up and go for walks... (Darcy)

3. Encouraging human connection

While the benefit of increased exercise was identified, three participants' narrative also strongly linked the presence of their animals to encouraging human connection.

...it's not just company like, you get outside and you're walking them and you're getting fresh air and you're getting sunshine and you're meeting other people and it's just a whole package really... (Leanne)

I'm retired and widowed, and so on my own, and I moved I'm finding because I'm now at home that this little dog is my companion gives me a purpose I'm getting to know the neighbours as well through the little dog... (Joy)

FAMILY MEMBERS

Twenty-five of the participants articulated that they considered their pets as family members and are consequently treated as such. Within this theme, three sub themes emerged that align to the theme of being a bona fide family member.

1. Owners going above and beyond

While most participant narratives expressed the importance and benefits of having animals within their family unit, 15 explained what having an animal as part of their family meant to them in terms of the lengths they go to, to ensure their animals have a good quality of life.

...we've got two houses that we split our time between, and she comes with us wherever we are so she moves with us... it's transformed our enjoyment of both places... (Beth)

I was working an extra at least four shifts a month to afford to give them all their treatments and things that I think that they need to maintain their best quality of life. (Hayley)

2. Instead of or after children

For 11 participants, animals were brought into the family instead of children, or after children had grown and left home.

He's, well, effectively a son really... (Bernie)

...plays a big role of course... we don't have any kids, so the dog gets a lot of attention... the whole holiday was planned around the pet... (Nicola)

Animal-mad family... we don't have kids three cats and three dogs, but it's been as high as three dogs, five cats and an indoor rabbit they're really family members for us we like to think of them as humans ... we appreciate they're not humans, but they're very much, you know, full-fledged members of the family. (Deanna)

...they are everything, and we've got no children at home any more... they're like our children... (Anne)

3. Shared interests

Five participants articulated specific shared interests ranging from sporting activities to training and breeding, all of which related to being considered part of the family and their families activities.

...this weekend just gone, he got his rally advanced excellent title, which is one step below champion, so we've been working on that for quite a few years and he really enjoys that... (Bernie)

...our whole life revolves around the dogs, everything we do revolves around the dogs or dog shows... we don't really have a lot of time for anything that's not dogs but it's our lifestyle, it's our livelihood... (Margaret)

MINOR FINDINGS

This section summarises three isolated findings that were identified as worthy of further exploration as the themes aligned through anecdotal stories outside of this research and with experiences of the researchers.

Resolution of fear

Not every participant always loved animals. One participant described how her family taking on a dog, which she described as her best friend, helped her resolve her fear of dogs.

...when I was a really small child, I was actually scared of dogs and got nipped as a result, you know how dogs' kind of, can be a little bit anxious around people who are scared of dogs... so that [ownership of a dog] really helped me to kind of get over that. (Carly)

Business

Eric was the only participant from a commercial rural background. For him, animals are part of his life and part of his business. Eric pointed to the changing requirements and standards required for farmers now, but noted that for his family and business, animal welfare has always been central. While the high monetary value of animals as income units was recognised, he also acknowledged animals' welfare needs within the farming context.

Teaching/learning

The opportunity for animals to be a teaching tool, not only in terms of resolution of fear, but to foster traits such as empathy, was also recognised.

I can see how gentle and encouraging the boys are, you know, and the empathy that they have for the dogs if they're not well. And I just love being able to foster that in them... (Fiona)

CATEGORY 2: CONFLICTS CAUSED DESPITE THE STRENGTH OF THE HUMAN ANIMAL BOND

Despite participants' strong connections with their animals, conflicts were mentioned by 18 participants (60 per cent), recognising that challenges can arise within the human-animal bond. The conflicts of animal ownership were themed into conflicts before animal ownership and during animal ownership, and then within each themes sub-themes emerged. They are outlined in Table 2.

CONFLICTS THAT EMERGE BEFORE ANIMAL OWNERSHIP

Eight participants identified conflicts that have arisen before animal ownership. Four sub-themes were identified within this theme.

I. Environmental concerns

Environmental concerns associated with animal ownership were raised by three participants, typically relating to the protection of other native species.

My dad's a real animal person like he's a conservationist and keen on native birds... but in a strange paradox he also would look after cats and possums and things if it fell upon him... (Carly)

I like cats, but I'm not big on the sort of, them killing native birds and stuff, and one of the places I go hunting there's a lot of wild cats, which are not good for the environment, so that's put me off them a bit... (Hamish)

Another participant did also acknowledge this concern but went on to describe his journey into cat rescuing, with the purpose of managing stray cats in the area to help reduce the associated environmental impacts.

2. Individual circumstances

Two participants in this study highlight how individual circumstances can influence decisions on animal ownership, where the desire to have a pet is overruled by other factors, such as rental accommodation limitations.

I'm renting now, I can't get a dog... so I volunteer at Dog Rescue, Dog Watch on a Sunday morning. (Kim)

So I finally had my own home and was in a situation to be able to get a dog... (Eve)

3. Family conflict

Family feelings about animals are not always compatible and can influence entry into animal ownership. This type of family conflict was identified by two participants. These participants explained how the conflict affected family life and how compromises were made to negotiate change.

...when I was a kid my mother didn't approve of pets... (Darcy)

...my husband doesn't really like animals, so when he met me I had a [breed of dog], but that was a really big thing for him and it was too much for him. So when that dog died I wanted another dog but he didn't want any more pets. So I had to wait, and when he wanted to move house... he said that if I moved house I could have a dog, and that's the only reason I moved house... (Manaia)

Conflict over training styles was also identified throughout the narrative; another negative impact on family cohesiveness because of animal ownership.

...different attitudes to training, I like a well-behaved dog and my husband doesn't like to do any kind of thing that might upset the dog... (Manaia)

4. Breed Selection conflict

This conflict was highlighted by one participant and for here it was a conflict between personal health and the breed that was desired.

Despite being allergic to cats, Maya longed to have one and specifically chose a Scottish fold, even though this breed is not hypoallergenic and she suffers cat allergies. Maya was very aware of the breed's typical health issues but opted to get one anyway, carefully selecting a variant bred to minimize potential health problems. This breed decision was driven by the influence of a celebrity who owned this breed.

CONFLICTS THAT EMERGED DURING ANIMAL OWNERSHIP

Conflicts that emerged during animal ownership were raised by 13 participants. Some of these were personal conflicts, others interpersonal conflicts with other humans, and some were between the animal and the human.

1. Emotion in decision making

Six participants raised the conflict between emotional attachment to animals and the necessity of making objective decisions. The effects of this type of conflict were variable and personal to each of the participants who reflected on different situations through their narrative.

In some cases, attachment led to emotional, rather than objective, decisions.

...the sense that your relationship to your animals leaves you open to being pushed into spending far more than you intended to and that your own health doesn't require emotive decisions – you just do what needs to be done... (Adam)

Others felt that the process of making objective decisions was highly emotive, causing some to second guess decisions that had been made.

...really hard for me emotionally and just, it felt like having a toddler all over again... maybe I wouldn't have put her through the treatment, just because, she had to have a bone marrow biopsy, she did well with that, but I think just all the repeat blood, the blood checks every week and then fortnightly and then I was quite stressed out so in hindsight I felt bad, so I don't know if I would do that again, but at that time, when you have a fair chance that she might pull through, then why not? (Susan)

Tammy explained her journey into fostering cats, which ended up in foster failing the first pair because they were with them so long, they couldn't bear to part with them.

...my intent was to foster many, many kittens to help in that way, but as you said, totally foster failed, and they definitely are an important part of our lives now... (Tammy)

Bernie has two aging dogs who have lived together most of their lives, and she worries about one going before the other. She is conflicted by the idea that maybe a puppy would help, but maybe it is too late now and in humanising dogs' feelings, worries about how that would make the existing dogs feel.

...which is something of a concern for me 'cause if she goes before him, then I don't really know what he's gonna be like, but yeah, I also don't really wanna get like a pup or two now, because they might think I'm trying to replace them... (Bernie)

2. Change of circumstances

Despite best laid plans, circumstances can change during the lifetime of an animal, and this can unfortunately cause conflict. Five participants whose narratives reflected this sub-theme told stories of failed relationships or changes in employment and the effect this had on lifestyle, routines, and responsible animal ownership.

...when I was with my now ex-partner, it was originally their idea to get a dog, and I was somewhat talked into it, I was – I think I had thought it through and was more aware of the enormous responsibility that owning an animal comes with, and yeah, and so when we separated, I was the one who got [name of dog], I think the dog chooses you at the end of the day, he's always been more my dog than he was my partner's, he always did what I told him to do and that sort of thing, in contrast to what my partner would ask him to do... (Cam)

...once I moved away from my ex-partner because I couldn't take her with me... she didn't like it...my girls were coming back and telling me about [name of cat]... they suggested it... Mum, why don't we get [name of cat] here? And I thought, went back to him and said, yeah, what do you think? And he goes, nope, nope, not getting [name of cat], you walked away, you're not getting [name of cat], back. Couple of days later, he agreed that I could have her... (Kim)

I can remember when it got to the point that I was sneaking [name of dog] into the bed and wanting to give him a hug rather than my fiancée, I realised that I was just gonna end that engagement. I was just happier on my own with [name of dog]. (Petra)

I'd had her for a couple of years and... community support work... 12-hour days being away from home ... [and] this new job was gonna be in the weekends [too]...arranged for some people to come in and walk her during the day... she'd spend most of the time in the crate... we decided that the best thing for her while she was still young was to look at rehoming her. So I found a guy who lives on the beach who had had a wee dog that had recently passed and he was really looking for a new dog, and so it worked out perfectly. (Eve)

3. Unacceptable behavior

Times when an animal's behavior was considered unacceptable were identified specifically for two participants, but the human animal bond that existed allowed the animal to stay, and in some cases, the participants explained sacrifices they made to enable that to happen.

...she was diabolical, pretty much, she was very, very stressed and very anxious, and she ate everything. She ate the cords, she ate the computer, she ate the chair legs, she ate her beds. She just chomp, chomp, chomp. And so I rang up the SPCA and I said, "lovely dog, lovely dog, but I'm afraid we're gonna have to bring her back." They said, "oh dear, oh dear, OK, alright, well, actually, we're closed at the moment. Can you bring her back on Monday?" And we said, "yep." And bringing her back on Monday and she's still here two years later, so she must have talked us around in the weekend. But she's a very important part of the family now... (Adam)

Adam believes the strict routines they set up for the dog solved her anxiety issues, allowing her to stay with the family. This act alone shows the power of the human-animal bond and the commitment to supporting the needs of the dog as a family member.

The other example was a participant who had chickens that were originally purchased for the purpose of egg production. Egg production stopped but the chickens stayed because they were loved, even though their behaviour was challenging.

...precious chickens, beautiful chickens that gave up laying and gave up actually being anything other than a pain, but we still kept them with us because we loved them... (Beth)

4. Unpleasant medical conditions

Although this sub-theme was only mentioned by a single participant it was agreed to be worth highlighting as anecdotally, the veterinarians in the research team have observed this in the clinical setting. The conflict noted was due to the participant's cat's medical problem that made him smell. Despite sharing how her cats are the most important things in her life, this problematic smell impacted the participant's relationship with her animal. It wasn't until the problem was resolved that she could interact with him normally.

DISCUSSION

Strength of human animal bond

The findings from the interviews consistently revealed a strong and meaningful connection between the participants and their animals, which significantly contributed to their overall sense of well-being. It is important to acknowledge that participation in this research was voluntary, and there may have been a bias towards individuals who had strong bonds with their animals and wanted to share their experiences. However, the strength of the human-animal bond has been well-documented, as demonstrated by previous studies (Hawley & Capitanio, 2015; McConnell et al., 2011; McNicholas & Collis, 2000; Morgan et al., 2020; Purewal et al., 2017; Ratschen et al., 2020), suggesting these findings are likely representative.

The strength of the human-animal bond should not be underestimated, particularly when working with individuals and their animals. The bond between a human and their animal(s) influences how they respond to different situations. This has significant implications in animal healthcare settings, where animal owners may be faced with decisions regarding animals with debilitating diseases and eventual loss. Uccheddu et al. (2019) demonstrated the depth of emotion associated with the loss of an animal and equated it to a similar level as the loss of a spouse. Consideration of the strength of the human-animal bond is also crucial in other situations, such as accommodation. The strong bond formed between individuals and their animals, although beneficial for their well-being, can also restrict housing options (Cleary et al., 2020). Additionally, victims of domestic abuse often face difficulties escaping the situation due to concern for their animals, as animal abuse is prevalent in domestic violence cases. Addressing the welfare of animals in these cases is essential to support the victims of domestic violence in achieving safety (Strand & Faver, 2005).

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns highlighted the impact of animals in reducing feelings of loneliness and providing companionship, particularly for individuals living alone. This finding was consistent with the experiences shared by the participants in this study and supported by Ratschen (2020). The bond with a canine companion was identified by the participants as significant in maintaining exercise routines, which in turn contributed to their well-being. This theme is supported by research conducted by Higgins et al. (2013), who found that canine companions motivated, enabled, and sustained walking behaviours in their human companions. With regards to the subtheme of shared interests between humans and animals, it is challenging to determine whether the interest in a particular animal sport drove animal ownership or vice versa, the shared interest positively impacted the well-being of both humans and animals. Dog sports, such as sledding, agility, and obedience, were reported by participants as ones they participated in and are likely to have benefits for both humans and canine competitors. However, it is crucial to ensure that animals participate willingly and with consideration for their well-being to avoid negative welfare outcomes.

Humans are social beings, and human-to-human connection is a determinant of mental health and well-being (Klussman, 2020). The participants in this study supported the notion that ownership of a canine companion facilitated the development of human connections. Although literature exploring the role of dogs in human social interaction is limited, McNicholas and Collis (2000) have shown a positive impact on human social interactions when the dog behaves well. There is an opportunity for further exploration of this topic, including the impact of different dog breeds and dog behaviour on positive human social interaction.

Within the category of positive animal experiences, three minor themes emerged from the experiences of individual participants. Although these themes were drawn from the experiences of a single participant for each theme, they align with anecdotal reports and warrant acknowledgement. There is limited existing literature on these sub-themes, presenting potential opportunities for further exploration.

Observations from social media posts and community discussions indicate the existence of conflicts between animal owners and non-animal owners. In some cases, these conflicts may be related to previous negative experiences with dogs. One participant in this study reported that dog ownership helped resolve her fear and this raised the possibility that spending more time with animals could help alleviate such fears and increase understanding of animals and their behaviour. Further investigation in this area is warranted.

Eric emphasised that despite animals being part of his business, their welfare, and his connection to them, were paramount. This highlights that the concern for animal welfare and the bond with animals existed for him in a commercial setting, even before the increased formalised requirements for reporting and acting on animal welfare in farming. Anecdotally, media reports appear to highlight negative animal welfare (neglect) and the potential disregard for it by commercial entities in the farming sector, which might not be representative of the farm owners.

Fiona described the development of empathy for animals that she cultivated with her grandchildren through their connection with her dog. Svensson (2014) reported the potential of using animals for educational purposes to stimulate increased knowledge in social behaviour and an interest in animal care. Animal-assisted therapy has also shown positive results in the treatment of child abuse (Dietz et al., 2012; Parish-Plass, 2008). The findings from this research, along with existing supporting research, suggest opportunities to connect animals to human learning from childhood, while considering the welfare of the animals involved.

In summary, existing literature supports the notion that animal ownership contributes to human mental health and well-being across all life stages; which is further supported by this study. Therefore, integrating animal ownership into human healthcare plans should be considered. However, the issue of access to animal ownership remains a concern as it is not currently accessible to all members of the community, given the lack of a welfare system that covers animal healthcare (College of Social Work, The University of Tennessee, 2018). This issue requires further exploration in the context of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Additionally, it is important to recognise that the welfare of humans and animals is interconnected. When a human's welfare declines, it can also impact the welfare of their animal(s). For example, individuals, forced to live on the streets due to a lack of accommodation for their dogs, experience reduced health and well-being for both them and their animals. Similarly, victims of domestic violence may be unable to remove their animals from abusive situations, leading to negative welfare outcomes for both the humans and animals involved. The well-being of humans and animals should be considered together, as emphasised by the One Welfare model.

Conflicts in animal ownership

The human-animal bond is a multifaceted relationship that encompasses both positive and negative aspects. While all participants in this study expressed positive experiences, 60 per cent also shared conflicts. While studies frequently highlight the benefits of this bond, it is essential to acknowledge the potential detrimental effects on both animal and human wellbeing from conflicts. For example, Prato-Previde et al. (2022) examined the impact of animal hoarding, revealing that dysfunctional relationships with animals can lead to physical and psychosocial suffering in animals. In this study, it was negative effects on the human owners that were highlighted by participants, though some of the conflicts mentioned, such as a family break up or rehoming, would inevitably have had at least short-term effects on the animals. This was not highlighted in participants' narratives.

Environmental concerns, specifically related to cats, were raised by participants, possibly due to the topic's media coverage during the research period. Kikillus et al. (2017) discussed the challenges faced in designing urban cat management strategies due to the need for cooperation with cat owners in what is an emotive subject. The narrative of two of the participants in this study highlighting cat environmental issues suggests that at least some cat lovers are beginning to consider the environmental impact of cat ownership. Dogs also have their own environmental impacts, but this was not highlighted by the participants.

Individual circumstances, such as current accommodation or employment commitments, and family conflicts, emerged as sub-themes causing conflicts for potential animal owners. Balancing the desire to have an animal with the practical considerations of their current situation posed conflicts that required resolution and careful weighing of pros and cons.

Maya's narrative highlighted conflicts related to human allergies and the risk of breed deformities. Although raised by a single participant, these conflicts are acknowledged by the authors from experiences in veterinary clinical practice. It highlights the presence of these conflicts and opportunities for the veterinary profession to assist in the decision-making process regarding animal companionship.

Conflicts can also arise during animal ownership, including emotionally charged decision-making processes. Participants shared stories indicating that decisions may have been driven by emotions rather than rationality, while others reported successfully balancing emotions with rational responses regarding animal healthcare and or euthanasia decisions. Regardless of the decisions made, acknowledging the presence of emotions within the human-animal bond is crucial, especially when owners face difficult decisions. This conflict is deeply intertwined with the emotional connection of the human-animal bond.

Even with careful planning, circumstances can change during animal ownership, leading to conflicts. Unexpected employment changes that make it challenging to own a dog, or relationship breakdowns that disrupt living arrangements and increase human conflicts can strain the human-animal bond. Exploring how the social structure in Aotearoa New Zealand can better support individuals in these situations, rather than resorting to rehoming, surrendering, or euthanising animals with the associated negative impacts on both humans and the animals they were owners of, presents an opportunity for further investigation.

Adam and Manaia shared situations where they made sacrifices to keep their animals, despite facing unacceptable behaviours. Although the participants in this study did not explore conflicts that strain human connections, such as uncontrolled dog barking or ownership of an aggressive cat, it is reasonable to assume that the scope of unacceptable behaviours and their impacts is broader than reported in this study. This highlights the need to provide support to individuals facing such conflicts, which often require the involvement of experts. The equity of access to these services remains a concern, as they may not be universally available due to location or cost.

The final conflict sub-theme was unpleasant medical conditions, as highlighted by Maya's experience with her cat's smell. While this sub-theme was based on the narrative of a single participant, the researchers' veterinary clinical practice experience supports the likelihood of such conflicts among animal owners. Animal healthcare providers should recognise and address these conflicts during conversations with clients.

The discussion revealed the complex nature of the human-animal bond and the existence of various conflicts that can disrupt this bond. It is essential to understand and address these conflicts to support individuals in their decision-making processes and to ensure the overall welfare of both humans and animals. It is crucial to listen actively to clients, maintain objectivity, and engage in non-judgmental conversations that foster a partnership approach (Küper & Merle, 2019). Further research is warranted to delve deeper into these conflicts, the provision of adequate support, and to develop strategies that promote the resilience and longevity of the human-animal bond.

CONCLUSION

Narrative inquiry serves as a powerful research methodology for exploring relationships imbued with emotion; it allows researchers to gain profound insights into the stories and experiences of participants and foster a deeper understanding of the connections between humans and their animals, and the impact on human health and wellbeing. The depth of connection and emotion experienced during interviews by the researchers has contributed to a newfound understanding of this bond and its impact on interactions with animal healthcare professionals. The strength of the human-animal bond in improving well-being and fostering social connection should not be underestimated. This raises pertinent questions about the need for recognition of this and the opportunity for the integration of human and animal healthcare for the social good it provides.

Currently, inequitable access to animal ownership and animal healthcare, due to the privatised nature of animal healthcare, presents barriers for individuals. Without sufficient funds, they may not be able to access ownership, meaning they miss out on the potential positive human health and well-being impacts; or if they do own an animal, to barriers to accessing optimal care may exist, potentially resulting in negative outcomes for animals. There is a need for research in the Aotearoa New Zealand context to examine and address these specific issues, allowing

for recommendations to improve access and equity. Recognition of conflicts in animal ownership is crucial, and support should be provided, particularly by animal healthcare professionals, in navigating these conflicts using a partnership care model. By acknowledging and addressing these conflicts, a more compassionate approach to animal healthcare can be fostered.

In summary, this study has further exposed the profound connections between humans and animals, a depth allowed by narrative enquiry. This research calls for a re-evaluation of the integration of human and animal healthcare, addressing issues of access and equity while recognising and supporting the complexities inherent in animal ownership. By continuing to explore these narratives in a broader range of contexts, we can deepen our understanding and promote more compassionate and inclusive practices in animal healthcare.

LIMITATIONS

The limitations of this study include the limited culturally diverse voice. Expanding cultural diversity within the study would increase the depth of this narrative by exploring animal ownership from a wider range of world views and either strengthen the findings in this study, or potentially add additional themes.

The participants were primarily from small or large urban environments. The commercial rural sector and their relationship with their animals was presented by one participant only. Given the drive for animal welfare and the often-negative press surrounding farming, increasing the narrative from people in the commercial rural sector about the value of the animals in their lives may be useful in redirecting the narrative and solutions to improve animal welfare in commercial settings.

None of the participants were in extreme living situations such as homelessness and there is potential that the stories of people living with pets in situations would provide further deeper understanding about the bond and the conflicts of pet ownership from another lens.

FUTURE RESEARCH OPPORTUNITIES

Future papers will expand upon the narratives collected from these participants, exploring their experiences with veterinary clinics, perceptions of the financial aspects of animal healthcare, and their interactions with various courses of animal healthcare and advice on animal ownership and health.

1. Expansion of this research to include greater diversity of participants including cultural diversity, diversity of living situation and animal owners, where animals are their business.
2. Research examining the relationship between type of dog and its behaviour in facilitating human connection.
3. Research focusing on the impacts of conflicts that disrupt a strong positive human-animal bond, particularly those that occur during animal ownership.
4. Research exploring ways to improve equity of access to animal ownership, as the importance of animals in human wellbeing is strongly supported in terms of health and well-being, but the nature of animal healthcare being private within Aotearoa New Zealand, among other factors, animal friendly accommodation, does not allow equitable access to animal ownership. This is a gap that needs further exploration.

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Sylvia Ma is a Massey University graduate of 2019. She has been in general practice, serving a diverse range of clients in South Auckland, and is currently a non-clinical veterinarian working at Ministry for Primary Industries. During her time at University, she founded the Student Veterinary Business Society, which aimed to provide undergraduate veterinary students with a business understanding of their future clinical practice, increase graduate confidence in their worth, and equip graduates with non-clinical soft skills.

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