



The Role of Animals in Buffering Against Cisgenderism in and Beyond Family Contexts for Trans Young People Living in Australia

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Abstract

Purpose The purpose of the study reported in this paper was to explore the role of animals in buffering against cisgenderist violence experienced by trans young people.

Method Interviews were conducted with 17 Australian trans young people and one of their parents who spoke with us about their relationships with their animals living in the home, including in terms of animals providing a protective function against the negative effects of cisgenderism. The transcribed interviews were analyzed thematically.

Results Thematic analysis resulted in the development of three themes. First, at the psychological level, animals helped young people to combat feelings of dysphoria, wrought by the violent effects of social norms about gender. Second, at the interpersonal level, animals helped to soothe young people when they were faced with less than supportive or indeed hostile responses from family members and other people in their lives. Third, at the community level, the companionship provided by animals offered a buffer against feelings of marginalization premised on cisgenderist social norms.

Conclusions All three themes speak to the importance of conceptualizing violence in family contexts as more than just the obvious: as encompassing more subtle forms of marginalization that in their net effect may constitute forms of violence or microaggressions. As a counter to these subtle forms of violence, animals are thus perceived as playing an important role as confidantes, as offering a place of non-judgemental safety, and as a touchstone to the more-than-human.

Keywords Trans young people · Animals · Family · Cisgenderism · Microaggressions

Introduction

For many trans young people, hostility unfortunately remains a common experience within the context of the nuclear family. While trans young people live in a diversity of family forms, and indeed form their own chosen families, our focus in this paper is on the nuclear family context as a key site where hostility and more subtle forms of violence occur in

the lives of trans young people. Key to exploring a diversity of experiences of hostility within and beyond family contexts for trans young people is to focus on microaggressions. Nordmarken (2014) defines microaggressions as everyday instances where it is communicated to a person that they are viewed by others as unwelcome, not acceptable, or undesirable. In terms of trans people specifically, microaggressions are typically shaped by cisgenderism: the ideology that delegitimizes people's own understandings of their bodies and genders (Ansara & Hegarty, 2014; Riggs et al., 2015). The daily toll of microaggressions can lead trans people to feel apathy or weariness in the face of constant exposure (Parr & Howe, 2019), often resulting in withdrawal from social interactions and negatively impacting mental health.

In the context of families for trans young people, microaggressions are often more common than are explicit acts of violence (Gartner & Sterzing, 2018). Nonetheless, many trans young people face explicit rejection from family members, and for some young people such rejection can include acts of violence by family members (Grant et al., 2011;

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Grossman et al., 2021). Unsurprisingly, negative experiences with family members are related to poor mental health outcomes for trans young people (Platt et al., 2020; Strauss et al., 2020). Less often talked about, however, is the fact that poor mental health outcomes are not simply associated with explicit acts of violence and rejection within family. Living with family members who are what Pariseau and colleagues (2019) refer to as ‘indifferent’ is also associated with poor mental health outcomes for trans young people. As they suggest, then, focusing on more subtle forms of marginalization within families constitutes an important area when studying the experiences of trans young people.

Equally important as looking at a diversity of forms of marginalization and violence experienced within families by trans young people is looking at buffers against marginalization and violence. Family support more broadly has been found to buffer against marginalization directed from outside of the family (Simons et al., 2013). Less often focused on, however, are buffers within the family that serve to mitigate or at least counteract marginalization or violence both within and from outside of the family. A key buffer in the family context is offered by the role of animals who live in the house, reflecting the broader literature on gender and sexuality diverse people and kinship that includes animal companions (e.g., Gabb, 2019). Animals are often perceived by their human companions as offering non-judgmental care, but to trans people it has been suggested that animals are perceived as offering unique benefits. These include buffering against microaggressions (Matijczak et al., 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2021), engendering personal hardiness (McDonald et al., 2021), helping with the development of coping strategies (Schmitz et al., 2021), and serving as a reminder that there is more to life than the beliefs and actions of other humans (Riggs et al., 2018; Rosenberg et al., 2020).

In a world that has so categorically privileged humans over other animals, and human–human relationships over any relationships humans have with animals, there are numerous theories regarding why some humans might want to live with other animals. For example, Franklin (1999) argues that animals offer a form of ontological security in the face of the dissolution of traditional ties between humans. Tuan argues that it is a deep-seated need for dominance over others within the human psyche that motivates at least part of human ‘pet-keeping’ (1984). And Ritvo (1987) has persuasively argued that the human desire to live with animals, at least historically, has been a product of the performance of social class. Accounts such as these constitute a turn within the study of human-animal interactions, typically referred to as critical animal studies (CAS). Research and theorizing in the field of CAS seeks to move beyond the simplistic idea that animals are objects in the world there for use by humans (Taylor & Twine, 2015), and instead examines the discourses by which such accounts of animals come into being (i.e.,

anthropocentrism), the purposes that such discourses serve (i.e., to justify human dominance), and the ways in which animals display agency in the face of human dominance (i.e., through their own patterns of kinship and relationality).

Focusing on trans people specifically, Riggs and colleagues (2021) have theorized, using a critical animal studies approach, that animal companions may offer a unique form of recognition for trans people. Contrary to the popular liberal assimilationist narrative of trans people that ‘the gender changes but the person remains the same’, Riggs and colleagues explore how animals may often recognize that what changes for trans people is more than just a label. Rather, and particularly for trans people who commence hormone therapies, there are physiological, behavioural, and interpersonal changes that occur that animals cue into and engage with. Animal companions may thus be valued by many trans people not as a form of dominance or class performativity, but perhaps in a version of Franklin’s account of ontological security, such that ontological shifts experienced by trans people are witnessed and recognized by animal companions in ways they are not necessarily recognized by other humans. Further, and as outlined in a collection edited by Vakoch (2020), the concept of ‘trans ecologies’ frames trans people’s lives in a broader environmental and social context, such that analogies are made possible between the harms wrought against trans people by toxic social contexts, and the harms wrought against the environment by humanity. Trans ecologies as a concept also creates a much-needed space to examine how trans people’s lives sit in a relationship to animal lives, both in terms of harms experienced, but also in terms of a broader resistance to the binary of culture and nature.

As we explore in this paper, trans young people navigate both experiences of harm alongside their resistance to binary thinking as wrought by living in a relationship to cisgenderism, and how these experiences and resistances sit in a relationship to trans young people’s relationships with their animal companions. Yet at the same time as we seek to celebrate the unique role that animals play in the lives of trans young people, we are also mindful that animals do not typically get to purposively choose this role (i.e., for animals who live in the home, this is a product of histories of domestication and the regulation of animal lives), that the focus on the benefits to humans of animal companions all too often overlooks whether or not animals similarly benefit and relatedly, and that in living with humans animals too may be subjected to violence and control (Wadiwel, 2017; Wilcox & Rutherford, 2018). Focusing on the agency of animals in their relationships with trans young people is thus a much-needed addition to existing CAS research and theorizing that explores animal agency and resists anthropocentrism.

The study reported in this paper sought to further examine the role of animals who live in the home with trans young people, including in terms of buffering against violence or

marginalisation both within, and from outside of, the family. Following the work of Riggs and colleagues (2021) outlined above, the paper starts from the premise that the ‘buffering’ role provided to trans young people by animal companions is not that of an object absent of agency. Rather, adopting a CAS approach, in this paper animals are viewed as sentient beings whose agency is central to the benefits derived from animal companionship by trans young people. It is the recognition accorded by animals that helps trans young people to navigate the complexities of disclosure, and it is the agency of animals in offering care and support that helps trans young people to be resilient in the face of hostility. As the results reported below suggest, and as will be explored in more detail in the discussion, animals provided trans young people with ways to navigate potential complexities within the family and give comfort to trans young people when navigating less than supportive interpersonal and broader societal situations. Specifically, animals helped to buffer the effects of cisgenderism, and reminded trans young people that they are loved and seen.

Method

Researcher Reflexivity

We come together as a team of academics with differing genders, sexualities, gender histories, engagements with animal rights, experiences of living with animals, and experiences of academia. While we work together as a team, we are very mindful of our differing experiences and standpoints, even within our broad parameters of feminist, intersectional, and CAS politics. What brings us together is our commitment to animal rights, and our views about the importance of focusing on animal and LGBTQ human lives.

Among us we have worked in animal shelters, fostered animals, advocated for the rights of animals, taught about the lives of animals (and their humans) to our students, and resisted the marginalization of CAS within academia. Our relationships with our animal kin fundamentally shapes our work, and all of us have sat alongside our animal kin in undertaking the study reported in this paper. Our collaborative work centres an academic praxis that is inseparable from our own life worlds and standpoints situated in a relationship to animals, both those whom we live with, and those in the world more broadly. A desire to connect with and advocate for the lives of animals in the world more broadly is reflected in our commitment to veganism.

Participants

Ethics approval for the study reported in this paper was granted by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research

Ethics Committee. The study was undertaken in partnership with Parents of Gender Diverse Children, an Australian organization that supports trans young people and their families. The organization circulated a flyer advertising the study via their social media. This was shared widely by other organizations and individuals, making it difficult to determine response rates out of the target population who potentially viewed the advertising materials. Inclusion criteria were 1) being a trans young person aged 10–17 years, 2) living in Australia, 3) living with at least one animal, 4) being willing to be interviewed with a parent (an ethics requirement to ensure the safety of young people). Upon contacting the research team, interested people were sent an information sheet, a full one for parents and an abridged version for young people. Interested people were then asked to complete a brief demographic form, parental consent form, and to organize an interview time with the second author. During the interview young people were asked to assent to participation. Both parents and young people consented to their transcribed interview material being used in subsequent publications. Participants were given a \$50 voucher as recognition of their time and contribution to the study.

In total 17 parent–child pairs participated in the study. Of the parents interviewed 15 were women and two were men. The average age of parent participants was 47 years (range 38–54 years). Young people participants reported a diversity of genders: non-binary (5), male (6), female (5), and gender fluid (1). The average age of the young people interviewed was 14 (range 10–17 years). Participants lived in one of six Australian states or territories: Victoria (5), New South Wales (3), Queensland (4), South Australia (3), Australian Capital Territory (1), and Western Australia (1). All participants lived in metro areas. Most participants described their cultural background as Australian, though a small number described having European backgrounds. Parents reported that their children were seeing a diversity of health care professionals related to being trans, including endocrinologists, counselors, psychologists, general practitioners, fertility specialists, surgeons, social workers, and speech pathologists. Between them participants lived with 23 dogs, 14 cats, many fish, as well as reptiles and birds. Parents and participants described their relationships with animals as either siblings, primary caregivers, friends, companions, co-carers, walkers, mothers or aunties.

Materials

Participants were interviewed by the second author via Zoom in November 2021. All interviews were undertaken when the participants were in their own homes. Interviews began with a short introductory overview provided by the second author, where the research team was introduced, along with the focus of the study. Young people were then asked to provide assent to participation and were asked to

provide their pronouns. Participants were then asked about the animals they live with, with many introducing their animal companions on Zoom. Participants were informed that animals were welcome to join the interview.

Participants were asked what their animals mean to them, what special role animals might play for trans young people, what they do to care for their animals, how their animals are involved in their receipt of health care services, and how animals help them to feel confident and safe. The focus of the present paper is on responses to the following interview questions: “what special role do animals play in your life as a trans young person”, “what special meaning do you think animals hold for trans young people”, and “how do animals make you feel more confident, safe, or happy as a trans young person”, with ad hoc prompt questions utilized during the interviews to further expand on these interview questions.

All interviews were audio recorded. Interviews lasted on average for 33 min (range 18 – 48 min). The interview process continued until the second author felt that thematic saturation had been achieved (i.e., the same sets of responses were re-occurring in interviews). Audio recordings were transcribed by a professional service and pseudonyms were allocated by the research team. Participants had the option to review their transcripts. Only a small number elected to do so, and of those who did, only one made minor changes to some of the identifying information included.

Analytic Approach

For the purposes of the present paper, responses to the interview questions outlined above were extracted for analysis. Importantly, while these questions were purposively included in the interview schedule, and then purposively selected for analysis in the present paper, the analysis itself was inductive: it did not begin with a specific hypothesis to test nor, given the limited previous research, an indicative list of likely topics that would be developed from the data.

Having extracted interview responses, the first author coded the data according to the approach to thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The first step in this process involves familiarization with the data set through repeated readings. The first author read all of the transcripts three times, looking for repeated topics or codes. Having developed codes based on repeated readings of the transcripts, the first author then shared these codes with the other authors, who confirmed the codes as representative of the data set in terms of core topics. The first author then developed themes based on the codes. While codes encompass broad salient topics repeated across the data set, themes by comparison organize codes into logical and coherent sets of information. Themes developed are indicative of topics seen as salient by researchers, rather than being exhaustive of all

possible readings of the dataset. Further, codes and themes were not mutually exclusive across participants; some gave interview responses located within more than one code or theme.

For this paper, three main themes were developed through a process of repeated readings of the initial coded data and developing codes into coherent thematic groupings. Having developed these themes, the first author again shared them with the other authors, who confirmed the thematic structure. The first author then identified and collated representative quotations for each theme. As such, the quotations included in the results are indicative but not exhaustive of each theme. Having identified representative quotations for each theme, the first author then compiled the thematic groupings and developed the results reported below. Given the relatively small population size and the potential for identification, in the results below we do not differentiate participants by age or gender.

Results

Three themes were developed through the analysis described above. Together, they encompass three differing levels or avenues through which animals helped to buffer against cis-genderist microaggressions, and the broader effects of cis-genderism on the experiences of trans young people within and beyond family contexts. First, at the individual or psychological level, animals helped to buffer against the effects of cisgenderism in terms of gender dysphoria and helped young people to develop strategies for talking to their family members. Second, at the interpersonal level, relationships with animals provided young people with a non-judgemental touchstone or safe space in the context of less-than-positive or explicitly negative interpersonal interactions. Third, at the societal level, animals served as a reminder that there is more to the world than cisgenderism, grounding trans young people in a space of safety and care. These three themes are now explored in turn.

‘Having them there to vent to beforehand was really helpful’: Animals Buffering Psychological Stressors

In this first theme, participants spoke about the many different ways in which relationships with animals helped to buffer against psychological stressors arguably specific to trans young people. These were commonly stressors related to cisgenderism, specifically in terms of the potential responses of others, and distress related to embodiment. Stressors included young people disclosing to parents that they were trans, finding ways to experience gender euphoria in the face of dysphoria, and for the following participant, feelings of suicidality:

Interviewer: So, can you think of a particular time where animals were important for you around your transition?

Melinda: Well, I guess, a very important time would have been when I was in a very depressed state, and when I had begun to self-harm, [My dog] would – I feel like he would know that I was not well, and I was harming myself. So, he would – I would go, when I was about to like – when I was in a very stressed mood and thinking of harming myself, he would be there. And just basically ask me not to, at that time.

For Melinda, the period between realising that she was trans, disclosing this to her family, and then being able to access support, was a particularly fraught time that resulted in self-harming. Melinda's dog became adept at identifying when she was at risk of self-harm, and as she notes 'asked her' not to self-harm. Here Melinda accords intentionality and agency to her dog, an important counter to both the involuntariness often associated with dysphoria and self-harm for many trans young people, and the lack of agency or personhood often accorded to animals. Another participant too noted that animals were an important antidote to feelings of dysphoria, but also that animals were a gateway to feelings of euphoria.

Interviewer: Have your animals played a role in your transition?

Zeffie: If I'm feeling really dysphoric and I don't want to be around people, because I don't want to be perceived in a certain way, I can just hang out with the dog all day, and it feels great. There was a little while, after I started hormones, where I realised that your smell changes. And because dogs identify you by smell, I was like, "I really hope they don't think I'm a different person." And there was a little while where I did notice that they approached me differently in a way. But in a way, it ended up being a source of gender euphoria, because they didn't fully forget who I was, and I could tell they didn't think I was a totally different person, but they were like, "Something's different."

Euphoria is increasingly recognised as an important counter to feelings of gender dysphoria. Examples of euphoria include being correctly named and gendered by others, seeing oneself in the mirror in ways that reflect one's sense of self, and making concrete changes to reflect one's gender (such as a legal name change) (Beischel et al., 2021). For Zeffie, spending time with her dog not only countered feelings of dysphoria, but her dog's recognition that 'something's different' helped to engender euphoria. The recognition of gender transition accorded by animals, as sentient beings, has been noted as an important part of trans people's understanding of themselves in other research (Riggs et al.,

2021). Beyond dysphoria, other participants spoke about animals as an important testing ground for conversations about disclosure:

Cameron: I have had multiple conversations with [my animals] that I feel like I couldn't talk to about with anybody else. And I'm not getting a reply from them, but it's nice to have that comfort there, to just let it out in the open, and just let it settle. And then, I feel better, and they're not going to judge me for that.

Interviewer: It sounds almost like that would have been a pressure valve

Cameron: Yeah, for sure. Coming out was a big step for me, it terrified me quite a lot, and having them there to vent to beforehand was really helpful to come to terms with me being trans, and to know that, even if some people don't like me for who I am now, that they are always going to be there for me. Having to talk about gender dysphoria and all that to an actual real-life person who can reply to me is terrifying. Because, especially when it's somebody like my parents who don't understand as well, it's like talking to a wall, but a wall that can hug you back. And that really helped me to just let it all out and just feel so much better.

For Cameron, there were concerns that his parents might not understand conversations about dysphoria, as well as concerns that disclosing that he was trans might lead to some people not liking him for who he is. By contrast, talking with animals provided Cameron with opportunities to rehearse conversations with his family, but more broadly to feel supported and affirmed. In the face of cisgenderism – feared or realized – animals thus provided some participants with a safe psychologically space through which to negotiate change, and indeed it was the relationship with animals – as a relationship between two sentient beings – that appeared to be most valued by the young people we interviewed.

"I love how they're not judgemental': Animals as Providing a Safe Space in the Context of Fraught Interpersonal Relationships

While in the previous theme we focused on psychological or individual experiences for which relationships with animals perceived to be helpful, in this second theme we focus on the ways in which relationships with animals helped to mitigate less-than-positive interpersonal relationships with other humans. Some participants specifically named family as a source of stress, framing animals as an important counter to this:

Interviewer: It sounds like that had been really impactful to have your animals around.

Zeffie: Yeah, it is very cool. Because it's like, there were some moments where certain family members or friends weren't particularly supportive, and I was like, "Yeah, well, the dogs here, and I like the dog even more. So, that's fine."

For Zeffie, the presence of animals more than made up for unsupportive friends and family members. Here again animals are not simply objects in the home there for human entertainment, but rather are framed as members of a kinship system, members whom Zeffie 'likes even more'. For Cameron too, animals offer a 'form of stability' in the face of 'parental struggles':

Cameron: I only came out as trans this year. So, it's been a recent thing, and I guess with parental struggles, and them coming to terms with it, having a form of stability, even if it is an animal, he doesn't care. He's like, "I just want to be fed, and I want cuddles". And, I guess it feels nice to have that. And there'll be times where I've been really upset, and I guess he can sense that. And he'll come in for a cuddle, he'll know I'm upset and he will be extremely affectionate towards me just out of the blue, knowing that I am upset or not feeling the best. And that's been a real help to me, knowing that there's something there that isn't judging me for who I am. And is a stable figure in my life, you know?

As we explored in the previous theme, Cameron had concerns about disclosing to his parents, and despite 'practising' with his animal companions, his parents still struggled to understand that he was trans. As noted in the literature, the effects of cisgenderism mean that many parents struggle to affirm their trans children, instead prioritising their own 'lost hopes and dreams' (Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2018). For Cameron, his parents' struggles meant that his animals continued to play an important supportive role, and in particular one that Cameron experienced as non-judgemental. Again, animals are not objects within the home, but rather they are sentient beings who are a 'real help'. The continuity or stability provided by relationships with animals helped Cameron through a difficult time in his family, just as for Mika relationships with animals helped to mitigate less-than-positive experiences at school:

Interviewer: I really want to hear a little bit more about what role animals have played in your transition?

Mika: When I feel low, sometimes I've come home from school feeling really low, and they've helped me diffuse and get back into my happy place. Other people can be quick to judge, and sometimes it's hard to communicate with them. And you don't know what they're going to turn around and think, if you explain how you're feeling or what is going through your life

at the moment. But, because these guys really only understand your emotions, they're like therapy dogs. So, they just can listen to you and feel what you're feeling without giving any judgement, but you know they are supporting you. I love how they're not judgemental. We don't deserve dogs, honestly. And for trans kids who've grown up not seeing that kind of support, and struggling with acceptance and stuff, then their dogs or their animals are probably their biggest support and help them build confidence.

Microaggressions, as experienced by trans young people, can lead to what Parr and Howe (2019) refer to as 'defence stress', meaning that trans young people are always on the lookout for further instances of discrimination. For Mika, there was concern about what other people might think, or the judgements they might make. In the face of this, animals were almost like 'therapy dogs', providing a non-judgemental source of support. While in the family home, Mika experienced support, they nonetheless noted that other trans young people may not be supported, and that for such young people animals might be an especially important source of acceptance. Ari too noted that the love provided by animals was an important counter to the 'shitty' views of other humans:

Interviewer: Thinking about young trans people more broadly; what kind of meanings do you think that animals hold for young trans people?

Ari: I think a lot of it as well, as I've said already, is that comfort, having somebody there who will always love you no matter what is very, very important to have.

Interviewer: Why is that important? For you at least, why does that feel like something that's quite important?

Ari: Because I feel like with humans there is always shitty people, there is always people that suck, there's people that turn their back on you, but a puppy or another kind of animal will never do that. They will always love you and that's wonderful.

Again echoing the 'defence stress' described by Parr and Howe (2019), Ari here signals the *potential* that exists for other humans to hold 'shitty' views. In part, for Ari this was based on experiences of people 'sucking' or 'turning their backs', but more broadly such experiences result in a generalised sense of concern, or at least awareness that, cisgenderism shapes trans young people's interpersonal interactions. By contrast, as Ari noted, animals 'always love you and that's wonderful'. While we might question whether the provision of unconditional love is the job of animals (or indeed reflects the actual view of animals), it is the fact that animals are viewed as a 'somebody' rather than

a ‘something’ that speaks to the agency accorded to animals as active participants in the relationship.

‘Animals don’t have any biases that humans might have’: Animals Provide a Counterpoint to Social Norms

In this final theme we focus beyond the human nuclear family to an extent to consider how animals as loved companions and kin provide a buffer against the world external to the family, and specifically in terms of social norms including cisgenderism. Unlike many other young people, trans young people are forced to confront discrimination on a regular if not daily basis, including in the form of cisgenderist micro-aggressions. For many of our participants their animal companions served as a reminder that there was more to life than human conventions:

Interviewer: You mentioned that the animals see you, it sounds like, almost outside of your gender?

Cameron: Yeah, they don’t care, which helps me to come to terms with being trans. And also, that there’s going to be people who just – like people are going to see me as a man, some people are going to see me as before I came out, and then there are animals, who just don’t give two shits about who I am. And they just love me, because I’m a human that feeds them. And I want everybody to be like that. It just feels so much better to know that I’m loved, because I exist, rather than who, what, I identify as.

Cameron was very aware that other people are likely to view them in particular ways that do not reflect their own understandings of their gender. By contrast, animals ‘don’t give two shits’. Indeed, for Cameron animals appeared to provide a model for how all relationships should work: to be loved for existing, not for how someone identifies. Zeffie too spoke with fondness about her animals because they didn’t subject her to specifically human constructs:

Interviewer: What special meaning do you think that animals might hold for young trans people in general?

Zeffie: I think just in general having a living creature – because, I think as people we connect obviously to other living things. You’re not going to emotionally connect to a chair, but I think especially when you’ve just come out, even if you do have a really supportive family, there’s still a lot of social overwhelm, and not conflict, but being confronted with a lot of social norms. So, an animal is a living thing with emotions and empathy that you can also empathise with and have a relationship with, but it’s a break from social constructs, and standards and stuff. Where, you can have that empathetic connection without having to

think, “Are they going to misgender me? Are they going to think a certain thing?”

Importantly, Zeffie notes that even when human families are supportive, this does not necessarily mitigate the effects of social norms. Animals, however, provide a ‘break from social constructs’, allowing for a space where cisgenderism and other social norms are not the salient factor. Rather, an empathetic connection with animals allows for a state of being that does not hinge on how one is spoken about or viewed. Importantly, we would note here that Zeffie does not seem to suggest that animals do not hold their own value systems or social norms and rules, but rather that what animals provide is a respite from specifically *human* systems and rules. Kasey too noted that the joy of spending time with animals was that they don’t appear to hold the biases that humans hold:

Interviewer: What sort of special meaning do you think that animals might have for trans youth in general?

Kasey: Maybe like an anchor if you’re feeling a bit out of it, they can help in that sense, and also just having something there to be able to connect with and feel good with. And maybe going through a hard time they’re like that friend who can help you. Maybe feeling a bit like they love you no matter what because they don’t really have biases like that, so I think that’s what I meant by that. Animals don’t have any biases that humans might have. They just love you for who you are.

This idea of unconditional acceptance was a thread that ran through all of our interviews, and indeed is evident in the literature summarised earlier in this paper. In one sense, and as we have noted above, this could be viewed as treating animals as acultural or indeed as culturally mute (Riggs et al., 2021). But in another sense, and as Kasey’s reference to her animals as ‘friends’ would suggest, animals are very much viewed as agentic beings, offering love on terms that are outside of those set by humans, rather than being on no terms at all. As Zeffie noted above, and Cameron earlier in this paper, being in a relationship with an animal is not like a relationship with a chair or a wall. Rather, it involves being in a loving *mutual* relationship with another sentient being, albeit one with a markedly different view on the world, one absent of discriminatory biases.

Discussion

Taking our lead from Pariseau and colleagues (2019), in this paper we have explored experiences of violence and marginalisation both within and beyond the family that do not sit neatly within the more typical definitions of violence.

Focusing on more subtle forms of violence and marginalisation, and specifically cisgenderist microaggressions, has allowed us to provide a more holistic account of the experiences of trans young people living in Australia, and especially those who live with families who are largely supportive. However, even in contexts where families seek to be affirming of trans young people, this does not mean that marginalisation does not occur within the family, nor that the human family can entirely mitigate violence and marginalisation from outside the family. Animals who live in the home, then, are perceived by humans as playing an important role in buffering against violence and marginalisation.

At the psychological level, relationships with animals offered the young people we interviewed a non-judgemental relationship that served as a testing ground for conversations with humans, as a facilitator of gender euphoria, and as a safeguard against self-harm. We must of course note that relationships with animals are unlikely to entirely mitigate dysphoria or poor mental health for trans young people, and certainly we do not mean to suggest this must be the 'job' of animals. But at least for the young people we interviewed, relationships with animals most certainly appeared to play an important role in providing psychological support, echoing previous research on the topic (e.g., McDonald et al., 2021; Schmitz et al., 2021), and emphasising that it is the *relationship* that matters. In other words, animals are not mute objects who buffer against hostility. Rather, they are active agents with whom trans young people form loving bonds, and it is through these bonds that buffering occurs.

At the interpersonal level, while as noted above the young people we interviewed lived in largely supportive families, this did not mean that parents did not at times struggle, nor that the young people did not experience marginalisation from outside of the family. Animals thus again played an important role in providing avenues for debriefing, for offering a holding space for feelings and a way to process them, and animals did this by offering unconditional love. Again, this echoes previous research (e.g., Matijczak et al., 2021; Tomlinson et al., 2021), while extending it in important directions by looking specifically at the agency of animals in relationships with trans young people, and the sentience accorded to animals. In other words, again, animals were not transitional objects. Rather, they were seen by the young people we interviewed as active partners in a relationship that helped to buffer against fraught human interpersonal relationships.

Finally, and arguably unique to the present study, the young people we interviewed spoke about the role of animals in providing a counter to human biases and constructs. Without specifically naming cisgenderism, our participants often oriented to the topic of social norms when accounting for the importance of animals in their lives. For our participants, animals appeared to make a positive impact simply

due to the fact that they are not human. Certainly, animals engage with us humans, come to know our ways, and their own ways are often shaped by our own. But more than that, animals always also have their own ways of being, ways of being that bring meaning to trans young people. They may serve as reminders of the caring relationships trans young people have. They may provide a sense of safety in otherwise challenging social contexts. And they may help to connect trans young people to their own passions and desires. All of this is to say that relationships with animals brings with it a reminder that there is more: more to life than dysphoria, more to life than less-than-positive interpersonal relationships with other humans, and more to life than human constructs such as cisgenderism. Relationships with animals are thus a reminder that there is always more to the world than what humans might make of it.

Limitations

We must of course acknowledge some limitations to the study reported in this paper. The young people we interviewed lived with families who were largely supportive, so it will be important in the future to explore the role of animals for trans young people who are not so well supported. While our sample encompassed a diversity of ages and genders, the sample was relatively racially homogenous and all lived in metro areas, so it will be important that future research looks at more diverse samples. Further, all of our participants lived in a nuclear family context, and it will be important for future research to explore how trans young people navigate relationships with animals outside of this context, including in the context of chosen family or for young people who are in state care. Finally, while prompts were used to explore any negative experiences against which animals may buffer, this was an ad hoc approach (reflected in some participants appearing in this paper more than once: they were the participants who naturalistically oriented to topics related to cisgenderism and microaggressions). Future qualitative research would benefit from more explicitly focusing on the role of animals in buffering against cisgenderist microaggressions.

Implications for Practice

Despite the above limitations, the findings reported in this paper have clear implications for practice. First is the importance of recognizing the role of animals in the lives of trans young people, but to do so in ways that is mindful of the agency and internal worlds of animals. In other words, while it is important that when asking trans young people about their families, for example, that we ask about animal companions, we must do so in ways that are open to listening

to animals on their own terms, rather than solely through a lens of utility and human need. This should include listening for potential instances where animals may be at risk, such as when trans young people live in abusive families. This would entail exploring how animals cope with the fall out of cisgenderist marginalization and violence, and how they may themselves be subjected to family violence (Taylor et al., 2019). Looking at human and animal lives together, rather than as separate, it thus vital when it comes to exploring the effects of cisgenderist and speciesist violence.

Important for research practice is the inclusion of animals in interviews. In the study reported in this paper we clearly invited animals to join the interview, and indeed included questions in our interview schedule about animals who were present. This led to many funny and joyful interactions with animals in the interviews, a topic we plan to explore in a further paper from this study. Including animals in the interview space helps to shift the focus away from just humans, and to instead include a focus on the agency of animals within the interview (and broader family) context. While we cannot claim to speak for animals, we can most certainly create interview (and other research) spaces where animals can be present, and are often likely to assert their agency.

Finally in terms of the field of trans studies, a focus on animals is a growing aspect of the field (e.g., see Vakoch, 2020). However to date much of the focus has been on exploring animals as metaphors for human experience, or considering what multispecies worlds mean for the rights and existence of animals and marginalized humans. These are of course vital and much-needed interventions into the status quo. However also needed is a concerted focus on the quotidian. How trans people and animals share their lives, how those lives are shaped by cisgenderism and speciesism, and how animals and their human trans companions create other worlds in which living becomes not just possible, but joyful.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper makes a useful contribution to how we understand the experiences of trans young people beyond explicit marginalization and violence. It would seem clear that even when marginalization is more subtle – such as in the form of cisgenderist microaggressions and psychological stressors related to being trans as a result – animals who live in the home play an important role. This speaks to the importance of researchers being mindful of animals when conducting research with trans young people. Importantly, and as our findings would suggest, this requires moving beyond seeing animals as variables, objects, or as playing a compensatory role. Rather, our findings suggest the important of focusing on the close kin relationships that many

trans young people enjoy with animals as sentient agentic beings. Doing so will only serve to benefit both trans young people and the animals they live with.

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Author Contributions DWR designed the project, sought ethics approval, and drafted the manuscript. SR collected all data and contributed to manuscript drafting. HF and NT contributed to the formulation of key concepts for the manuscript and contributed to manuscript drafting.

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Data Availability The data from this project are not available given ethics restrictions.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare they had no conflicts of interest.

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