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Exploring the Effects of the Human-Animal Relationship on Care-Farms in The Context of Trauma Histories

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the effects of human-animal relationships on care-farms, with specific attention to the context of trauma histories. We questioned how the interpretative act and belief in identifying shared narratives of prior suffering can change how people relate to their own narratives of trauma and grief, and to animals. Drawing on a study of grieving individuals' experiences on a care-farm providing support and psychoeducation to individuals who have experienced traumatic grief, we present the results of an in-depth qualitative survey. As part of the study, participants were asked to reflect on whether it was important that the service-provider's model included helping rescue animals, 91% answered affirmatively. Participants were invited to expand discursively why, or why not, this had been meaningful to them. Our results show that participants assigned benefits from personally identifying a 'shared narrative' of trauma with the animals, that witnessing a level of rehabilitation and resilience in animals with trauma histories was meaningful for participants for their own integration of grief, and that being able to contribute 'care' for animals provided a mechanism for compassionate practice.

Our findings suggest that animals with loss and trauma biographies may provide unique and unexpected psychological benefits to humans facing grief and trauma. We are not suggesting that animals who have a traumatic past have an inherent capacity for providing salutary benefit, nor that such animals should be engaged to provide therapeutic opportunities. Rather, we emphasize the importance of narrative, and how such narratives change how participants relate to, and interact with, animals. Our research serves as an important reminder that 'therapy animals' are living beings with their own life histories and experiences and careful thought needs to be given when working with animals in a therapeutic context in order to protect both vulnerable humans and animals.

Keywords: Care-farming, rescue animals, trauma, grief, animal-assisted therapy, human-animal interaction

Introduction

This study involved exploring the effects of human-animal relationships as they unfold on care-farms, but with a specific attention to the context of trauma histories. We were interested as to whether learning about the impacts of historic trauma in other animals can support humans affected by traumatic grief, and how this might change the way people relate to their own narratives of trauma and grief? Specifically, we questioned whether the trauma history of an animal impacts therapeutic effect?

Care-farming, animals, and trauma

Care-farming is an innovative practice which incorporates aspects of both agriculture and health and social care through using agricultural production, places, and practices to provide care to different client groups (Elings, 2020). As Leck et al. (2014, p. 314) explain: "the term 'care farming' is a catch-all or shorthand expression for a wide variety of operations and activities united by their support of welfare processes taking place within a broadly agricultural context". Generally groups and individuals are invited into a working agricultural environment as part of a structured program of care.

Animals are an important, often essential, feature of care-farms. Hassink et al. (2017, p. 8) describe animals as being "the fabric of the care farm", noting that animals are often reported as being one of the most engaging aspects of care-farming. Several studies of care-farms have identified benefits from contact with care-farm animals including feeling needed by animals (Pedersen et al., 2012), establishing bonds with

animals (Ferwerda-van Zonneveld et al., 2012), and the nonjudgmental nature of animals (Kogstad et al., 2014). However, as Hassink et al. (2017, p. 3) note, “the role and effect of farm animals at care farms for different client groups is a relatively new area of research that requires further study”.

The benefits of animal-assisted therapies, more broadly, are well documented (Fine, 2011; Nimer & Lundahl, 2007). Human-animal interactions offer many benefits to humans, including the facilitation of social contact, the provision of social support, and increased self-efficacy and self-esteem (Berget & Braastad, 2008). A recent meta-analysis found animal-assisted interventions to be effective for addressing pain, anxiety, and distress (Waite et al., 2018), while another found animal-assisted therapy to improve outcomes related to emotional well-being, behavioral problems, and autism (Nimer & Lundahl, 2007). Animal-assisted activities and therapies also seem to be effective in reducing depression (Souter & Miller, 2007). While most studies involve companion animals, Berget et al. (2011) have found that interventions involving farm animals also reduced anxiety and depression symptoms in a randomized controlled trial.

However, the animals discussed in scholarly depictions of animal-assisted therapies are rarely described in great detail, often presented as having little backstory themselves, rendered more frequently as objects or ‘tools’ (Hanrahan, 2014). Whilst there is often discussion of clients’ past experiences, and how these may shape the unfolding of any therapy undertaken (Walsh, 2009), this is rarely mirrored to think

about animals' past experiences. The 'animal turn' within scholarship (Wilkie, 2013) has led to the recognition of animals as subjects and a focus on how animals' lives are biographical; that they accumulate lived experiences (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010; Krebber & Roscher, 2018). As Gillespie (2018, p. 5) argues, "animals each have stories and personalities of their own, with distinct likes and dislikes, histories, and emotional traumas they carry with them".

Stolorow (2003) describes psychological and emotional trauma as a world collapse, a sudden shattering that unmoors individuals from a feeling of safety and predictability. In the absence of a holding space, what Stolorow (2015, p. 125) calls a "relational home", the trauma and fear embed in the personality construct and manifest behaviorally. By contrast, having a relational home can moderate the sharp edges of trauma, making it more bearable (Stolorow, 2015). Whilst there is an emerging literature discussing the specific benefits that animals might bring to individuals affected by trauma and grief (Cacciatore et al., 2020; Gorman & Cacciatore, 2017, 2020; Symington, 2012; Thieleman et al., 2021), there has been little attention of how this integrates with animals who have experienced trauma, or terror, themselves.

Of course, attributing 'trauma' to animals is controversial, and risks counter-claims of anthropomorphizing or sentimentalizing (Gillespie, 2018).¹ Ferdowsian and Merskin (2012, p. 452), however, note that "animals often exhibit fearful, avoidant, and hypervigilant behaviors considered parallel to those expressed by traumatized humans". Indeed, Granovetter (2021, p. 664) notes that the field of "trans-species

psychology recognizes the formal diagnosis of PTSD in wild African elephants, chimpanzees, parrots, and other nonhuman animals". To quote Bekoff (2000, p. 861) "current interdisciplinary research provides compelling evidence that many animals experience such emotions as joy, fear, love, despair, and grief". Thus, for Bekoff, using human terms to describe what we see in other animals is a way of usefully allowing other animals' behavior and emotions to be accessible and understandable (Bekoff, 2000). In this article, we are less concerned with debating the 'correctness' of ascribing trauma to animals, but rather how the interpretative act and belief of identifying shared narratives of prior suffering can change how people relate to their own narratives of trauma and grief.

Methods

This was part of a larger study on grieving individuals' experiences on a care-farm in the Southwestern United States operated by a non-governmental organization that helps those who have experienced traumatic grief (see also; Thieleman et al. (2021)). Traumatic grief is a complex experiential condition, having biological, psychological, social, and cultural facets, and capable of inciting long-term and intense forms of distress (Cacciatore, 2007; Prigerson et al., 1997). This care-farm focuses on providing support, psychoeducation, and compassion. Clients engage in formal counseling, whilst also immersing themselves in the natural environment of the farm and helping take care of, and learning about, the animals and the land. Participants are encouraged to build a relationship with the animals. Bereaved parents are the most frequent clients, though the site also works with bereaved siblings, spouses/partners,

and those grieving the traumatic or early death of a parent. Clients are referred to the care-farm by members of their support groups, therapists, or psychiatrists, or arrive independently following internet searches for grief support. The time spent at the farm varies depending on individual client need.

Unconventionally for a care-farm, this 'farm' exclusively houses animals rescued from varying degrees of abuse, starvation, and homelessness. For example, one of the farm's horses had been worked as a pack animal by previous owners, and when rescued was more than 500 pounds underweight, dehydrated, and had back wounds open to the bony processes of his spine. His recovery took nearly 18 months but he is now quite healthy and spirited. Two of the goats who now reside on the farm were rehomed from a place where they were being sold for their skin and their horns, while one of the pigs at the care-farm was saved from a domestic violence situation where she was physically abused and mistreated. A pair of cats who now roam the farm were rescued and rehomed just before they were euthanized as 'nuisance' animals. This is quite different to many care-farms, where, as Hassink et al. (2017, p. 3) note 'animals on care farms are, generally speaking, used for production'. Instead, there are connections here to Gillespie's (2018, p. 1) definition of 'sanctuary', "a place dedicated to the care and rehabilitation of animals who have labored or experienced abuse or neglect on farms around the country [...] a place where animals who would otherwise be farmed for milk, meat, or eggs can live out their lives". The farm aims to provide a level of autonomy and agency to the animals. Their willingness to interact

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with humans or not is foregrounded and respected; animals are never coerced into interacting with people.

This research was approved by an Institutional Review Board at Arizona State University (#00007934). Within four weeks of having spent time at the care-farm clients were sent a Qualtrics survey link that contained questions about demographics, bereavement, and ratings of various care-farm activities, as well as a set of more open-ended, qualitative questions about their experiences at the care-farm and their subjective experiences of trauma and grief. The analysis of other aspects of the survey can be read elsewhere (see Thieleman et al. (2021)) – our focus here pertains specifically to whether learning about the impacts of historic trauma in other animals can support humans affected by traumatic grief. Survey question development was guided by Creswell and Miller's (2000) criteria for validity in qualitative inquiry, with a particular focus on eliciting thick and rich description from respondents during the open-ended questions. The survey was initially tested by a select group of clients to ensure that it was accessible, appropriate, and importantly, given the topics under investigation, sensitive.

The survey was sent to 176 clients and yielded a 68% response rate with 120 participants fully completing the survey. Participants' survey responses were imported into NVIVO and thematically analyzed. Thematic analysis is "a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Importantly, "in thematic analysis the importance of a theme is not

necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures, but rather on whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question" (Vaismoradi et al., 2013, p. 403). Our analysis involved systematically coding the entire data set, labelling portions of responses based on the sentiments and experiences they alluded to. Once the dataset had been fully coded, we were able to identify coherent but distinctive and prevalent themes from across the diverse variety of our participants. These themes speak to what participants found to be important facets of their experiences, interpretations, and reflections of learning about the trauma histories of animals, and how it impacted how they related to their own narratives of trauma and grief.

Results

The majority of the 120 respondents were female ($n=99$), $n=20$ male, and one nonbinary, age ranges from 18-45, $n=70$, 46-55, $n=50$, and older than 65, $n=13$. Household income ranges were from \$50,000 per year, $n=27$; \$50,000- \$100,000, $n=48$, and more than \$100,000, $n=43$. Of the bereaved, 55% experienced child death ($n=66$), 13% parental death ($n=15$), and the remaining cited losses of spouses/partners, grandchildren, sibling, or another type of relative or friend. The losses had occurred for 35% of participants within last three years ($n=42$), 39% ($n=47$) from 4-8 years earlier, and 22% ($n=26$) more than 8 years prior.

When asked to reflect on whether it was important that the service-provider's model included helping rescue animals, 91% of 120 respondents ($n=109$) answered in the

affirmative, 6% maybe ($n=7$), and 3% ($n=4$) that it was not an important aspect. Participants were then invited to expand via a reflective and discursive open-ended question about why, or why not, this had mattered or been meaningful to them. We were surprised and impressed at the level of detail in which people responded to this open-form query, an aspect which perhaps in itself suggests the importance to which people attributed these encounters within their personal experiences and models of grief. In what follows, we present three qualitative themes representing the primary reasons that participants perceived the integration of rescued animals to be valuable and helpful. Firstly, participants assigned benefits from personally identifying a 'shared narrative' of trauma with the animals. Secondly, witnessing a level of rehabilitation and resilience in animals with trauma histories was particularly meaningful for participants for their own integration of grief. Finally, being able to contribute 'care' for animals who have suffered provided a mechanism for compassionate practice.

Whilst we focus on the interpretations and reflections of human participants regarding whether learning about traumatic histories in other animals provided opportunities for therapeutic growth, it would be remiss of us to not at least think about the animal experience of these interactions (Gorman, 2019b). Volunteers and employees at the care-farm, as well as grieving clients, regularly report noticing significant changes in the animals as they learn to trust and become comfortable with humans again. Noticing these changes proved to be significant for many of the bereaved visitors, as we go on to discuss. For the animals, it is perhaps the absence of coercion that helps build their trust, and the consistent steady presence of food and water and respect for

their space that might contribute to their capacity to engage with humans (at times the source of their tremendous pain and trauma) once again. However, as Taylor et al. (2016) recognize, careful and reflexive thought needs to be given when working with rescue animals in a therapeutic context, appreciating that, due to their histories, they may be unsuitable to the rigors of therapeutic work.

Perceiving benefits from identifying a shared narrative of trauma with the animals

When asked to reflect on what they gained from spending time and working with the care-farm's animals – all of whom had been rescued from abuse, neglect, and/or homelessness – participants regularly talked about the sense of connection they derived from identifying shared narratives with the animals. Participants reported feeling a sense of closeness, kinship, and commonality with the animals. The fact that many of the animals on the farm were slow to trust, found socializing with humans hard, and were wary of touch – such as one of the farm's 'guardian dogs', who had been rescued after spending the first years of their life locked up – served as a model for clients.

There is a real beauty in finding common ground with animals who have known true pain. They carry a different meaning than an animal that has always known love and protection.

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As the quote discusses, participants perceived that the relationships they developed with rescue animals carried a 'different meaning' than animals whom had more 'normal' lived experiences. That is, participants often felt that they were better able to relate to, and form a connection with, animals they identified as having also experienced a level of what might be described as trauma:

Because rescue animals (in my opinion) can relate more to people experiencing trauma - and vice versa.

There was the sense that, as a 'rescue' animal, participants could form a more immediate connection with the animals, providing a route to quickly build a relationship and engagement in the wider process of animal-assisted therapy.

The rescue animals are broken, just like the humans who visit.

I felt a real sense of understanding with the animals.

Participants regularly referenced a belief that the animals were able to understand their experiences and frequently discussed feeling a beneficial connection with the animals and relating to their experiences of suffering.

There is something very powerful and healing about looking
into another soul which has also experienced a certain pain
and isolation.

Even if this sense of healing is only taking place in the thought-worlds of particular people, it still holds important implications for health and wellbeing. That is, whilst encounters with the animals may be quite 'ordinary', the deeper meanings associated with identifying a shared narrative between human and non-human can lead therapeutic growth, changing how people relate to their own narratives of trauma and grief (Gorman & Cacciatore, 2020).

For some, animals provided a possible way of understanding, connecting, and relating their own experiences in ways that they had not previously been able to express, both to themselves, and to their counsellors/service providers.

Compassion for animals who have suffered echoes our own
suffering and helps me to connect with my grief.

This is not about a return to utilizing animals as merely metaphors for human experiences (Buller, 2014), but emerges through a deep and situated engagement with the lived experiences of the animals on the farm. It is a recognition that the animals who might assist in promoting human wellbeing through practices like animal-

assisted therapies have their own biographies. This involves both appreciating how their histories may make them unsuitable to the rigors of therapeutic work (Taylor et al., 2016), but also beginning to question how learning about animals own traumatic lives may bring something additional to the (therapeutic) relationship.

Witnessing rehabilitation and resilience in animals with traumatic histories can be salutary

Relatedly, many participants suggested that they found a sense of hope and inspiration from witnessing a level of rehabilitation and resilience in the animals dwelling on the care-farm. Several talked about finding a renewed optimism toward their own integration of grief as a result of identifying perseverance and survival in the animals.

When it's animals that go through all that sadness and you see how much they recovered. It helps to see that, it gives you hope. If they can recover then so can anyone else.

Many participants identified qualities in the animals that they had thought were missing, and perhaps, forever lost, in themselves – particularly, the ability to trust and feel safe. They saw themselves, and their own histories, reflected in the animals. By interpreting these values and behaviors in the animals' actions, participants emerged from their animal encounters with a level of anticipation that they too might redevelop such traits themselves, in spite of their own suffering.

It provides the opportunity to connect safely with other beings
who have learned to trust even when the world can feel scary
or painful.

At a time when participants are perhaps lacking – or unable to relate to – human role models of rehabilitation, the animals provide an important embodiment of the potential for hope.

For me, they create the necessary resonance between the
shock of traumatic loss and the hope for surviving that, and
eventually thriving.

Indeed, some even went as far as describing the animals as an 'example to live up to', viewing the animals as representing an image of resilience that they sought to achieve themselves – and again, showcasing that such a journey was possible in the first place.

That was one of the most moving things for me that help me
realize that I could heal like the animals did. They all felt
many of the same things I've felt and they are living life free

and happy now but they didn't forget what happened to them
they just learned to deal with it and were now safe.

Some participants spoke about the isolation of their loss and the salutary benefits they found from being able to feel resonance with an animal who they attributed as having had a 'similar' experience.

There is something very powerful and healing about looking
into another soul which has also experienced a certain pain
and isolation.

Participants also found animals to be an important signifier of potential – of post traumatic growth, but also of community, compassion, and care. That there was a space in the world for beings who had experienced such suffering, and people who supported such beings, was an important narrative that people took from their encounters with the care-farm animals, and used to imagine possible futures for themselves.

These rescue animals give me hope. Every living being
deserves to live without violence and abuse. I feel love like
they made it. They survived. It shows me that there is still love

in the world, that there are still good people in the world, in order to learn how to live again.

Some participants spoke to this idea specifically, talking about how it gave them a chance to see that there was support available and that accessing it and building relationships with others might be productive and a source of hope.

It was critical for me to see how they had been helped to overcome suffering.

Caring for animals who have suffered is an outlet for compassion

Whilst being able to 'care for' an animal is a crucial part of many animal-assisted-therapies (Gorman, 2019a; Hassink et al., 2017), for these participants, there was something additional generated from the realization that these were animals who had their own traumatic histories and stories. Offering care to animals who, perhaps, needed it was an outlet for the expression of compassion.

Additionally, being able to love those animals, care for them, and give them safety is an imperative. Rescuing animals is a compassionate practice. Those animals, like bereaved families, deserve a space to be held and comforted.

Again, there was a sense of comparing the animals' experiences to participants' own situations and tragedies, a rejection of a straightforward human-animal binary. Instead, participants expressed a desire to identify connections, similarities, and a sense of community. There are links here to Haraway's (2008) concept of 'shared suffering', that recognizing animals as significant others produces consequential relationships. For Haraway, this notion is the "the practical and moral obligation to mitigate suffering among mortals—and not just human mortals—where possible and to share the conditions of work, including the suffering, of the most vulnerable" (p.70). Here, it is the importance of "remaining at risk and in solidarity in instrumental relationships" (p.70) that allows mutual care to flourish.

It feels so incredibly good in your heart to know that you have
helped even saved a living, breathing, helpless, animal.

The opportunity for reciprocity is particularly important as an additional way of structuring the encounter. Participants are no longer engaging in the activity because they themselves have experienced a traumatic event and require 'therapy'. Rather, they are caring for the animals because the animals require care. This is a subtle reframing of the activity, but one that opens generative possibilities, both for engaging participants, and also allowing them to reclaim, or continue, identities as care-givers. For some, this was linked very specifically to their losses:

When your ability as a Mama to care for your babies is instantaneously taken away, your mothering instincts are still alive and well. Your heart desire, to raise and protect your children, is still alive and well, and caring for these animals, who have been abused and neglected and abandoned.... using your mother instincts to nurture and have patience, and just sit and BE with these scared and sacred animals.... it is healing for everyone.

Whilst there are aspects of these narratives that might be realized through forming caring relationships with any animal, there was a sense from participants that what they gained from these specific relationships was more meaningful because of the animals lived histories of trauma.

For some participants, caring for these animals was a way of applying what they had learnt in the related counselling sessions, seeing the value of cultivating renewed trust in practice.

I think they are great space holders for our grief and they too need someone to hold their grief, to love them and teach them that it's ok to trust again. It's a mutually beneficial

relationship and I've asked myself several times, who's
rescuing who here?

There was an element of (belief in) mutual support emerging from the relationships that participants formed with animals that was important for participants. Indeed, even the possibilities for this type of egalitarianism in care was cited as important, with some suggesting that the model's commitment to working with rescued animals symbolized a level of authenticity.

Just encourages that the model is true, not just for show - you
can purchase all sorts of beautiful perfect animals, rescued
animals know they have been rescued and that the care-farm is
based on love and caring and not just for show.

This is similar to findings by Cacciatore et al. (2020), for whom the presence of animals in a therapeutic intervention came to act as an important initiating factor for participants partaking in support, with the animals signifying the philosophy of care and compassion explicitly built in to the intervention. Here, once again, the stories of the nonhumans involved in the intervention acted to solidify this reputation and demonstrate to participants the extent to which care and compassion was centralized and practiced.

Discussion

In this study, participants' descriptions of animal interactions reflected feeling soothed, sensing a shared connection and mutual resonance with animals, and experiences of giving and receiving compassion and trust with animals. These results also reflect previous findings on the powerful sense of feeling accepted and understood via human-animal interactions for people who have difficulty trusting others due to adverse experiences (Kogstad et al., 2014), in this case bereavement. The idea of a sense of shared suffering with animals served as a focal point of connection for participants. In fact, participants sometimes drew inspiration for learning to live with their own grief and trauma from witnessing animals with a history of suffering now thriving. These animals serve as a symbol of hope for the bereaved. Of course, we are not suggesting that animals who have a traumatic past have some inherent or improved capacity for providing salutary benefit in the context of animal-assisted therapies. Rather it is the work of narrative here that is important and how such narratives change how participants relate to, and interact with, the animals.

Our research is an important reminder that any 'therapy animal' is not just created – these are specific and individual living beings, each with their own life histories and experiences. This is worth bearing attention to, both for the sake of the animals involved, but also to be open-minded as to what additional therapeutic benefit might be produced through engaging in the embodied histories of animals. As we have

shown, identifying the subjectivity of animals can allow for the emergence of transformative relationships.

Careful thought always needs to be given when working with animals in a therapeutic context (Taylor et al., 2016), appreciating their biographies, histories, lived experiences – their trauma. Hatch (2007, p. 45) reports that, if animal based therapies are practiced in more-ethical ways, there are potential positive benefits for animals, arguing that animals can (re)learn to “trust and like humans”, and that the interactions can enrich the lives of animals, providing new stimuli. Similarly, and in a care-farming context specifically, Braastad (2005) suggests that through increasing farm animals' interaction with humans, fear of humans is gradually reduced through processes of socialization. Gorman (2019b, p. 9) also argues that “care farms could provide a crucial place in the world and mechanism for rescuing, rehabilitating and providing care for abandoned and neglected animals, aligning the provision and funding of care for humans and animals in ways that creates opportunities for both”. By drawing two previously disparate and unconnected sectors together, fortuitous connections may arise, efficiently combining resources to address multiple societal challenges. Our aim has been to focus on the interpretations and reflections of human participants regarding whether learning about traumatic histories in other animals provided opportunities for therapeutic growth. However, as we have discussed, grieving clients regularly reported noticing significant changes in the animals, and that noticing these changes was particularly meaningful for participants for their own integration of grief. Many of the animals arrived at the care-farm terrified of humans,

skittish, and underweight. Through the rehabilitative work that the care-farm undertakes, clients see these animals transform into well-fed, curious, and slowly trusting beings. For example, one of the rescue horses had been badly mistreated and physically mishandled; a halter had to be surgically removed from his face. While the horse in question is still in rehabilitation, he is learning to trust again, and will interact with visiting grieving clients.

Of course, the challenges at play should not be underestimated. As Gillespie (2018) explains, any process of healing and learning to trust humans is a long one without any guarantee, and some animals will likely remain wary of humans their whole lives. Indeed, Gillespie (2018, p. 134) further notes that there will always be a certain imbalance in power where animals are still captive (though this can be mitigated) and “even sanctuaries cannot guarantee animals live lives entirely free from suffering”.

Additionally, some of our respondents felt apprehensive that working with animals who had specific needs might compromise the focus of care toward the human participants. For example, one person responded that *“it's okay until it has a negative impact on caring for human beings who are in deep pain.”*. However, participant responses generally revealed that while the animals were valued for the benefits they provided to humans, there was also belief that people and animals were mutually benefitting from the relationships (which perhaps compounded the human benefit). A greater awareness of the sentience, and suffering, of animals was also evident in responses to questions about changes that occurred as a result of the care-farm visit,

with some participants citing a move toward vegetarian or vegan dietary changes as well as a greater respect for life in all its forms. This links to Hatch's (2007) idea that incorporating rescued animals within therapeutic practices might serve to raise awareness of the plight of animal issues.

It is worth noting that a large proportion of our participants for this study were female. This is perhaps to be expected, given there are well documented gender differences in seeking social support after bereavement (Stroebe et al., 2001). Similarly, animal sanctuaries often have a strong ecofeminist tradition (Adams & Gruen, 2021). 'Care work' is also highly gendered. There is limited scholarship that explores the interface of care-farming and gender. Research by Wydler and Gairing (2010) in a European context suggests that care-farming practices are often highly bound up with rural and agricultural gender stereotypes, though care-farming can also be a catalyst for challenging these norms. Similarly, Gorman (2017) has discussed how activities on care-farms are frequently grounded in specific gender performances and identities. In their work on care-farms, Murray et al. (2019) found a predominance towards male participants and noted the challenge of exploring the perspectives of women in these spaces. Thus, from the perspective of grief scholarship the gender weighting amongst our participants is to be expected, yet from a care-farming perspective it is more unusual and perhaps speaks to the ethos involved in the care, rescue, and rehabilitation of abandoned, abused, and unwanted animals – particularly, when contrasted against some of the more masculinized imagery associated with conventional agricultural systems. As mentioned earlier, many of our participants

specifically mobilized the language and identity of 'using your mother instincts to nurture'. There are perhaps questions to be asked about how this language and affective engagement might translate to engaging men. Compared to 92% of women, only 80% of men suggested it was important that the service-provider's model included helping rescue animals. Though equally, Thieleman et al. (2021, p. 8) suggest that care-farming may be "more acceptable to men than more traditional mental health settings". There are clearly opportunities for further research at the boundaries of gender, care-farming, and human-animal relationships.

Our work also draws attention to the fact that there are challenges that the specifically agricultural context of care-farming can produce.² Complex moral and emotional relationships can emerge through engaging livestock for therapeutic purposes. This may be especially true in this bereaved sample, where the shared suffering with animals served as a focal point of connection for participants. In fact, many responses reflected deep attachment bonds to animals, and it is easy to imagine how in a different context, one of agricultural production rather than a paradigm of rehabilitation, the knowledge that the animals may be slaughtered or separated from their offspring to produce milk for humans could be troubling. In a context where the commonality of loss and trauma developed and a shared sense of suffering emerged, such practices could be retraumatizing for many clients on a care-farm.

Additionally, the agricultural context of care-farming may exclude those who have specific perspectives regarding the farming of livestock for food. Whilst scholarship

on care-farming has elucidated the benefits from participation in a care-farming program, this has had a somewhat reductive effect, conceptualizing people solely through the lens of their health – just one aspect of identity. We wish to raise the question of how accessible, and indeed, appropriate, a care-farming program may be to individuals practicing vegetarianism or veganism (given that traditional models of care-farming in Europe are frequently set against the backdrop of rearing animals for food)? In discussing social work's entanglements with animal-assisted therapies, Taylor et al. (2016, p. 136) recognize that "some social workers are vegetarian or vegan specifically because they do not want to eat animals and participate in the farming and processing of meat". Of course, this is not to criticize the exceptional work and benefits that many conventional care-farms provide, but rather to recognize how an agricultural paradigm might produce certain barriers to engagement and involvement, and question what differing modalities of practicing therapeutic encounters, interactions, and relationships with livestock might produce – for humans and animals alike. A focus on removing the 'productive' element may, for some, trouble the label of 'care-farm', and raise questions as to whether a level of meaningfulness is lost. However, this is not about creating an 'artificial' setting. Caring for animals remains an important part of the experience, and meaningfulness can emerge through care for animals – as our participants have shown – even if this is within a paradigm of rehabilitation, rather than agricultural production.

Animals who have suffered neglect and abuse deserve care and respect. We are not arguing that all animals with trauma histories should be engaged to provide

therapeutic opportunities to humans. Indeed, there are many cases where this would not be appropriate at all. However, there are also a growing number of sanctuary spaces where animals who have suffered receive care, support, and rehabilitation. Places where animals receive a level of such care, rehabilitation, and opportunities for flourishing may also provide places for therapeutic growth in vulnerable and at-need human groups – such as our participants who reflected so powerfully and evocatively on how meaningful their encounters with the animals were. A multi-species egalitarian approach leads us to consider the opportunities for drawing care-farming together with the care, rescue, and rehabilitation of abandoned, abused, and unwanted animals; opportunities for rehabilitating people and animals together. Animals would not be merely “helpers” or “property” but equal partners toward mutual aid and compassion (Andrianova, 2016, p. 84). In this type of relationship, both human and non-human animals would have an opportunity to flourish. As Hatch (2007, p. 39) argues, ideally, programs which utilize animals within therapeutic interventions should “benefit the animals as well as the humans involved”. Rather than starting with the goal to benefit humans, what happens if the primary goal is to benefit animals, with any human benefit accrued an optional extra? Further studies are warranted to ensure that both vulnerable humans and animals are protected in such therapeutic settings.

Conclusion

Current research on care-farming has suggested positive benefits for humans, often traumatized, in need. Little, however, if any, exploration has been done on the

particular status of the animals and their trauma biographies, including how that relates to humans symbiotically and symbolically. A sense of mutuality in trauma seems to foster resonance for those grieving significant loss, one that feels important to participants in this study. This resonates with findings from Cacciatore et al. (2021) who found that animals may be able to provide qualities of emotional and social support differently – and without potential deleterious effects – to that which humans are able to provide. Our findings suggest that animals with loss and trauma biographies may provide unique and unexpected psychological benefits to humans facing grief and trauma. The care-farm model is a well-established segue into an intervention that captures the import of these human-animal interactions where there exists potential for benefit to both humans who are suffering and animals who have suffered. There are clearly opportunities for future research to explore therapeutic engagements in similar and additional contexts, and continue to emphasize the individuality and subjectivity of animals, their lived experiences and biographies, and work towards egalitarianism in care.

Notes

¹ And, likewise, as a kindly reviewer pointed out, anxieties around being accused of anthropomorphizing can get in the way of witnessing the emotional responses animals have, particularly those that are like 'ours'.

² It is perhaps worth acknowledging that the very practices of animal-assisted-therapy have often been critiqued from the standpoint of certain ethical perspectives, and is at times considered as an

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uncomfortable or even completely disagreeable practice within certain animal liberationist philosophies (Iannuzzi & Rowan, 1991; Zamir, 2006).

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