

Animal-assisted interventions in Canada: AAI as potential field guide in/to alterity relations

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Ideas about non-human animals within animal-assisted interventions (AAI) and the general public are changing and evolving. There is, however, a dearth of empirical investigation on those changes in the AAI field. Drawing from four key findings of a qualitative Nova Scotia study that investigated AAI from the perspectives of AAI practitioners in a variety of settings, this paper examines the inter- and intra- relational dynamics of AAI in a Canadian province through 36 semi-structured interviews and four related thematic findings that emerged as illuminating trends. These themes form the basis of this paper: 1) AAI Entry point is personally motivated and AAI dyads are highly relational and intuitive; 2) AAI practitioner initiative is central to continuance and development; 3) AAI theoretical framework(s), competencies, ethics, and standards of practice are informally eclectic; and 4) Attitudes towards animals involve limited ideas about justice. An overarching purpose of this analysis was to examine the changing/evolving views of companion animals from tools/property to sentient partners within AAI practitioner perspectives and what this looks like in practice. Participants discussed entry points into AAI as personally motivated within highly relational human-animal AAI dyads. While the researchers determined practitioner initiative as crucial to AAI continuance and development, they also ask what this can tell us about how the field of AAI might contribute to or limit a critical reconceptualization of humanity; about understandings and experiences of individual and collective wellbeing within an interconnected web of life. Using a posthumanist theoretical lens and a constructivist approach to knowledge making about animal-assisted intervention and human animal interaction, this paper provides a substantial departure from the usual positivist epistemological lens used in animal assisted intervention and human animal interaction (AAI –HAI) scholarship and offers the potential to transform AAI/HAI scholarship. Exploring key findings through the emergent overarching theme of *relationality*, this paper aims to strengthen AAI services through a critical and creative discussion of practitioner motivations and resolve; experiences and perceived outcomes of working with and drawing inspiration from animal partners for clients and providers alike; and conceptions/misconceptions of animal justice. The broader changes in how interrelationships between people, other animals, and the environment are being conceptualized and understood must be integrated into the evolving perspectives of AAI practitioners. The authors respond with prescient optimism to the strengths and challenges of AAI in a time of transgression of planetary boundaries involving global pandemics, climate change/injustice, environmental degradation.

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Research about the benefits of positive human animal interaction (HAI) with populations across the life course has been growing since the 1960s. Irvine and Cilia (2016), argue “the way people value and regard animals, in general, and pets [sic], in particular has changed in the last half century with a move away from anthropocentrism (the assumption of human ascendancy) to zoocentrism (the recognition of animals as full or partial subjects) (p.1). Canadian households have at least one dog, an estimated population of 8.2 million dogs [41%]” and “38% have at least 1 cat, an estimated 8.3 million cats” (Canadian Animal Health Institute, 2019, para 1). This totals approximately 62% of the general population living with an animal companion in Canada with similar figures in the USA and United Kingdom (Rock et al., 2014). Correspondingly, “the importance of pets [sic] in families has become much harder to ignore” (Irvine & Cilia, 2016, p. 1; Smith et al., 2017).

While ideas about non-human animals within the general public and AAI are changing and evolving, there is a dearth of empirical investigation on this in the AAI field. As such, an overarching purpose of this analysis is to examine the changing and evolving views of companion animals from tools and property to sentient partners within AAI practitioner perspectives. Drawing from four key findings of a qualitative Nova Scotia study that investigated AAI from the perspectives of AAI practitioners in a variety of settings, this paper examines the inter- and intra-relational dynamics of animal-assisted interventions (AAI) in Nova Scotia. Through 36 semi-structured interviews thematic findings emerged as illuminating trends, four of which form the basis of this paper: 1) AAI Entry point is personally motivated and AAI dyads are highly relational and intuitive; 2) AAI practitioner initiative is central to continuance and development; 3) AAI theoretical framework(s), competencies, Ethics, and Standards of Practice are eclectic; and 4) Attitudes towards animals involve limited ideas about justice.

Using a posthumanist theoretical lens and a constructivist approach to knowledge making about animal-assisted intervention and human animal interaction, this paper provides a substantial departure from the usual positivist epistemological lens used in AAI-HAI scholarship and offers the potential to transform AAI/HAI scholarship. Exploring key findings through the emergent overarching theme of *relationality*, this paper aims to strengthen AAI services through a critical overarching discussion through the four themes of practitioner motivations and resolve; experiences and perceived outcomes of working with and drawing inspiration from animal partners for clients and providers alike; and conceptions of animal justice and animal informed relational ethics.

Participants discussed entry points into AAI as personally motivated within highly relational human-animal AAI dyads, and while researchers determined practitioner initiative as crucial to AAI continuance and development, they also ask what this can tell us about how the field of AAI might contribute to or limit a critical reconceptualization of humanity, and vital sustainable understandings and experiences of individual and collective wellbeing within the global web of life. As AAI have continued to evolve over the past decade, the authors respond with prescient optimism to the strengths and challenges of AAI in a time of global pandemics, climate change and injustice, environmental degradation, and transgression of planetary boundaries (Rockström, 2015; 2010; Willett et al, 2019).

The subsequent section will review the literature and methods for the current study, followed by a discussion of key findings. These insights contribute to a broader discussion about alterity or otherness, and the need to re-examine and ultimately ethicize human other-animal interactions. We conclude the paper by underscoring the considerable therapeutic benefits of ethical positive AAI with other animals, but also the potential of AAI as a field guide in and to

alterity relations in a posthumanist world that “attends to diversity and remains open to not-yet imagined possibilities for planetary becoming” (Bauman, 2018 p. 387).

People across the life course from diverse populations experience human animal bonds (HAB), which are defined by the American Veterinary Medical Association [AVMA] as “mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship[s] between people and animals that [are] influenced by behaviors that are essential to the health and well-being of both” (2017). The benefits to human health and wellbeing and other positive effects derived from interacting with companion animals, or “zooeiyia” as these have been labelled by Hodgson and Darling (2011) are a key dimension of animal-assisted interventions (AAI). Hodgson and Darling (2011) further argue that “zooeiyia is the evidence base for the philosophical construct of the HAB” (p. 190) and can be understood as “the positive inverse of zoonosis” (Hodgson & Darling, 2011, p. 189). Understanding zooeiyia as the positive construct of HAB and the basis for AAI interactions and best practice including the subsidiary fields of animal-assisted therapy (AAT) which promote a unique approach to client treatment and care, and animal-assisted activities (AAA) such as visitations, creates a reservoir and source of impressionable new relations for human adjunct healthcare and animal occupation. Indeed, “zooeiyia extends beyond the benefits to the individual pet owner [sic]; companion animals also strengthen communities. Pets [sic] facilitate social interactions; they promote a sense of safety...[and] encourage reciprocity – the give and take among neighbours that builds a sense of community. Pet owners were 57% more likely to be civically engaged than non-pet owners (Hodgson & Darling, 2011, p.190).

In a world of global pandemics, the majority of which are caused by zoonoses, we believe it is not overstated to suggest that AAI and its positive uptake of zooeiyia holds tremendous potential for the imperative development of more sustainable health and mental health care and relations. Additionally, as posited by Hodgson and Darling (2011), “chronic diseases place the greatest burden on the health care system, society, patients, and their families”, and many of the controllable risk factors of these diseases that “include diminished/limited physical activity, obesity, tobacco/alcohol use, hypertension, challenges to activities of daily living and the social isolation of chronic disease...are positively influenced by human contact with companion animals” (p. 189). There is however notable institutional incongruity regarding animals and “zooeiyia” (Hodgson & Darling, 2011) in core post-secondary human health, mental health, and social service curricula, as well as in practice settings like counselling and health care (Walsh, 2009a,b), even though there is a robust and growing evidence-base affirming the important intersections of human and other animal wellbeing, and a growing diversity of animal-assisted or animal-informed (Hanrahan & Chalmers, 2020; Moga, 2019) therapeutic practice (Hanrahan, 2013; Hanrahan et al., 2018; Risley-Curtiss, 2010; Tedeschi et al., 2005; Zilney & Zilney, 2005).

The majority of AAI education, support and services comprise elective, self-regulated, and in some cases, unregulated, private sector non-profit organizations (Table 1). While organizations that train, evaluate, and register therapy animals and offer AAI (e.g., Pet Partners, 2019; Therapy Dogs International, 2020) have proliferated in the USA (Serpell et al., 2020), there are far fewer in Canada, and no organizations that span across Canada to create a cohesive national reach. International organizations like the International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organizations (IAHAIO), while accessible online or via travel to the United States and Europe for training, have no corresponding branches in Canada that extend credentialization. In the absence of an “animal therapy industry” (Serpell et al., 2020) in Canada, existing AAI organizations do not extend past their local reach as broad-spectrum leaders “dedicated to quality assurance [sic] in the practice of animal assisted interventions” (Info, <https://www.aat-isaat.org/>) and the promotion of “official recognition of [AAI] as a valid therapeutic or pedagogical form of intervention which

supports salutogenesis” (*ibid*). Unsurprisingly, although AAI are increasingly growing in popularity (Serpell et al., 2020), the availability and access to AAI programs and services remain ad-hoc; subject to funding cuts and individually motivated practitioners or teams often within practice settings with minimal structural supports with policies that facilitate AAI-friendly or supportive spaces (Glenk, 2017; Hanrahan, 2013; Horowitz, 2010). As such, the maximal number of people who might take advantage of and benefit from the wide range of approaches like, for example, equine-assisted psychotherapy, hippotherapy, and animal-assisted education (AAE) including reading and introduction to animals, are currently limited.

Table 1
Volunteer-Specific AAI Training and/or Evaluation

Volunteer AAI Training	Number of Sources (n=)	Percentage
Equestrian-Assisted Therapy (EAT)- (Horse Boy, EGALA, PATH, CANTRA, Hippotherapy)	6	28.5
Not Applicable	4	19.0
Various	3	14.2
St. John Ambulance Therapy Dog Program	2	9.5
Multispecies Operant Conditional Behaviour Assessment (OCBA)	1	4.7
Therapeutic Paws of Canada (TPOC)	1	4.7
Sublime Canine	1	4.7
Distance Coaching	1	4.7
Animal Health Technician	1	4.7
Farmer/Biologist	1	4.7

The definition of animal assisted intervention (AAI) has fluctuated widely with “as many as 20 different definitions and 12 different terms” (Parenti et al., 2013, p. 4). The general understanding of differences in AAI terms remains ambiguous, with terminology for service animals and AAI being used interchangeably for instance (IAHAIO, 2018; Pet Partners, 2019). The vernacular for AAI was still largely unregulated even three to five years ago, thus our interviews and original research used terminology from Pet Partners (2019), to define AAI practices and vernacular. At the beginning of this study in 2014, Fine’s (2010) third edition of their critical text, *Handbook on Animal-Assisted Therapy* and Pet Partners (2019) reflected the terminology and definitions most commonly ascribed in 2014. Some of this vernacular is reflected in the quotations from practitioners as well as the interview questions throughout this paper. Although the authors have taken pains to work from the most current and contemporary research, we have chosen to leave the vernacular from the participant’s reflections unedited. For a current list of AAI terms, see Animal-Assisted Intervention International (AAII) (<https://aai-int.org/aai/glossary-of-terms/>).

The refinement of terminology, attention to greater accuracy and consistency across usages increases accountability, edifies individual and organizational development, facilitates public understanding, and in general, strengthens research and development of the field. To these aims, we consciously refer to relationships between people and other animals in terms of companionship,

peaceful co-existence, and ethical relationality. We recognize the common distinction between people and other animals is a false dichotomy propping a humanist taxonomy that naturalizes speciesism and human privilege (i.e., anthroprivileging). Regarding the more-than-human world, humanism prioritizes the human, but notably not all people, over non-human beings, with a superiority status. Idioms such as ‘pet,’ ‘pet ownership,’ and ‘handler’ pervade common vernacular and the AAI lexicon. In deference to animal agency, multi-species relationships, co-habitation, and respect for the emotional and physical labour contributed by animals in AAI, we use the terms ‘companion animal,’ ‘non-human animal,’ ‘other animal,’ and for brevity, ‘animal,’ throughout this paper (Coulter, 2016). While the politics of naming (and shaming) animals and of the intersectionalities of oppressions are beyond the scope of this paper, our choice of terms reflects an animal-informed lens (Hanrahan & Chalmers, 2020) – an ontological view that extends the shift in focus from “animal-assisted” to “animal-informed” practice proposed by Moga (2019, p. 261) in her work on integrating clients’ animals in clinical practice, to “the integration of both a theoretical lens and practice approach” (Hanrahan & Chalmers, p. 208, 2020). An animal-informed lens represents solidarity with non-human beings, “demand[ing] an alternative model of sympathy that deprioritizes notions of sameness, acknowledging that even humanist sympathy can function across relations of alterity” (Fielder, 2013, p. 501). The shift from ‘pet’ to companion animal is an ideological move away from commoditizing perceptions of non-human animals as possessions and/or resources, toward a view that prioritizes animal agency and relationality across and among species. Discarding other terms like ‘pet ownership’ and ‘handler’ for instance, in both conventional discourse and AAI lexis is an important action towards a much-needed paradigm shift in global animal relations (Akhtar, 2013; Fine, Beck, & Ng, 2019; Willet et al., 2019). While such a shift is incumbent for all ultimately, it is vital for AAI practitioners because the very configuration of AAI involving people and other animals in therapeutic/socio-educational contexts, in a world today where the interconnectedness of individual wellbeing can no longer be denied or underestimated.

Method

The purpose of this study was to explore the provision of animal-assisted interventions (AAI) in Nova Scotia (NS), Canada from practitioners’ perspectives to better understand how AAIs are organized within the broader context of health and mental health service delivery within the province. Conducting in-depth interviews and using animal-informed critical theory (Hanrahan & Chalmers, 2020) and constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014, 2017), the research team compiled and analyzed 36 interviews with AAI providers in NS.

Constructivist grounded theory purports four key components to developing trustworthiness in qualitative research including: originality, credibility, resonance and usefulness (Charmaz, 2014, 2017). While no a priori coding was determined before the interviews were reviewed and member checked in several rounds by the PI and research assistants (see below for further elaboration), theoretical concepts from existing literature such as zoeyia, anthropocentrism, and salutogenises were consulted to ground the four key themes in the continuing development and understanding of AAI practice.

Participants

The 36 AAI practitioners in Nova Scotia who were interviewed included those who provide animal assisted activities (Table 2) and animal-assisted therapies (Table 3). For the purpose of this study, persons receiving payment for their AAI services were characterized as professional; those in non-paid capacities as volunteers.

Table 2
Volunteer-Specific Animal-Assisted Activity Settings

Primary Volunteer Settings	Number of Sources (n=)	Percentage
Other: Varied Visitations	6	28.5
Private Practice Support	3	14.2
Stable/Farm Support	3	14.2
Inpatient Health Visitations	2	9.5
College/University Visitations	2	9.5
Private Home Visits	1	4.7
Community Group Visits	1	4.7
Court/Justice System Visitations	1	4.7
Outpatient Health Visitations	1	4.7
School Visitations-preschool-Grade 12	1	4.7

Table 3
Professional AAT Settings

Primary Professional Settings	Number of Sources (n=)	Percentage
Private Practice	9	60.0
Inpatient Mental Health	2	13.3
Outpatient Health	2	13.3
College/University	2	13.3

Procedure

A grounded theory approach to data collection and analyses was used (Charmaz, 2014). Grounded theory affirms personal lived experiences of realities and contexts co-created by participant narratives (2014). As the literature and research in AAI continues to be primarily observant of human client experiences of AAI efficacy, an exploration of AAI practitioner's reflections and motivations through semi-structured interviews is novel and warrants a methodology that upholds iterative development of themes that emerge from multiple stories. Saying this, a priori use of the literature regarding human-animal bonding was consulted after themes emerged to affirm practitioner experiences and reflections on best practice. The following strategies were employed to arrive at the primary findings: (a) simultaneous data collection, analysis, and memoing following each data collection session; (b) a two-step data coding process, line-by-line coding followed by identification of categories; (c) constant comparison of each additional set of data with the previous for similarity and variation; (d) further sampling to refine the researcher's emerging theoretical concepts; and (e) integration of the concepts into a conceptual framework that explains the data as well as participants' perspectives on the means by which knowledge of HAB and AAI are acquired and practiced. The interviewees were recruited from theoretical and snowball sampling, posters, professional associations list-servs (e.g., Nova Scotia College of Social Workers and Association of Psychologists of Nova Scotia), and social media (e.g., Animal-Assisted Interventions in NS Facebook site).

Interested parties were invited to participate in a 60-minute semi-structured interview that consisted of 41 questions divided thematically into six sections, 1) Working with Animals: The Beginning; 2) Working with Clients and Within the Broader Health Services Landscape; 3)

Organizational Context: Policies, Standards and Practice; 4) Education/Training Background; 5) Attitudes Toward Non-Human Animals; 6) Wrap-up. Two groups of participants were recruited, volunteers and health professionals, and both were asked the same interview questions: We're very interested in learning more about your work with AAI. Could you begin by describing what this is for you? How do you include animals in your practice? What led you to decide to include animals in your practice or to volunteer with an animal assisted activity? For participants with a professional health degree, we also asked them to describe the main theoretical approach or philosophy that frames their work with animals and the best practices of this approach to AAI. We queried if they encountered any policy or legal barriers in their workplace that prevented them from including animals initially or changed the ways in which they practiced. We asked both groups if they followed an AAI standards of practice or protocols in conducting assessments, treatments, or activities, and if they adhered to an AAI code of ethics? We also asked both groups how they ensured the welfare of AAI animals, and that of human clients attending AAI sessions and/or residents receiving visitations in settings such as long-term care and inpatient mental health, volunteers, staff, and/or visitors during interactive sessions, and what steps are taken to assure this. In the wrap up we noted that currently under Canadian law animals are defined as property and asked participants about their thoughts on this, about animal justice/rights in particular, and if their thoughts about other animals and trans-species justice had changed since conducting AAI. The study was approved by the Dalhousie University Research Ethics Board, and participants gave informed consent. The interviews took place over two phases starting in 2014 and recommencing in 2016; were transcribed and coded in 2016 and 2017.

Data Analysis

Analyses began with hearing participant testimonies to understanding their experiences in their own words and ways. The interviews discussed several themes including relationship; work environment; significant moments of change or resistance; animal welfare/rights/justice; and AAI practice frameworks/competencies. We use the phrase animal welfare/rights/justice to underscore the spectrum of ideas about animal wellbeing both in and those ideas outside of AAI that are being gradually introduced into the field. The furnishment of basic physiological needs like access to adequate food, shelter, and medical care constitutes animal welfare on one end of the spectrum and represents the customary approach to AAI program design and delivery. Animal justice on the other end, represents emerging transformative concepts that are not yet part of the AAI discourse, but which, we purport must be because of how they speak to the ways people reflect critically beyond how we treat an individual being or even a particular species of beings, to broader questions about how we live on this planet, and rethinking our identities, relationships, affiliations, and practices. The concept of animal rights that in general refers to the ways other animals are entitled to recognition and protection, sits we suggest, uncomfortably within AAI between the two ends of the spectrum.

No a priori codes, categories or concepts were imposed on the data. Codes were created based on explicating the processes, actions, meanings, assumptions, and consequences as shared by the participants. These interviews were coded with NVivo 12 into overarching themes emerging in animal welfare; AAI environments; personal motivations and connections to AAI; AAI practice; and observed results and benefits of AAI with clients. The codes were peer-reviewed in several iterations with the principal investigator (PI) and 3 research assistants (RA) (Charmaz, 2017). Three RAs independently viewed and verified the findings of the study as part of their position. The first RA, hired in 2014, supported initial coding and case classifications in NVivo, followed by a summary of each node in the codebook. A summary report of the nodes synthesized the large dataset from the interviews for continued team analysis. The summarized findings in the report

helped to build and bridge significant correlations across participants' responses, which in turn formed the basis for the four main themes discussed in this paper. The second RA hired in 2016 conducted more interviews and created a second literature review. Following this, the second RA also contributed their thoughts to the original node summary through research journal entries. The third RA (second author here), hired in 2018, reviewed all materials, interviews, literature reviews, and coding to co-write an initial draft of this paper. Each RA consulted extensively with the PI (first author here) to discuss iterative themes and verify the main findings.

Results

Four major thematic findings emerged from the study through the 36 semi-structured interviews that inform the inter- and intra-personal dynamics and varied relational dynamics informing AAI: 1) AAI Entry point is personally motivated and AAI dyads are highly relational and intuitive; 2) AAI practitioner initiative is central to continuance and development; 3) AAI theoretical framework(s), competencies, Ethics, and Standards of Practice; and, 4) Attitudes towards animals involve limited ideas about justice. These results are presented in two separate sections with a basic description of each core finding provided below in this section in a logical sequence following the description of participants. A thorough presentation of the results with interpretation and evaluation including participant quotes and supported by the literature is presented in the next section titled Discussion, and highlights implications for the knowledge base of AAI.

Description of Participants

Of the 36 research participants, 15 were professionals and 21 volunteers. For the purposes of this study, persons receiving payment for their AAI services were characterized as professional; those in non-paid capacities as volunteers. Study participants ranged between 26-70 years of age. Thirty participants were female-identified, comprising 84% of the total population. Six participants identified as male, representing approximately 16% of the sample. At the time of interviews no one self-identified with other genders. All participants identified as Caucasian, apart from one who identified as Irish/French/Native Canadian (sic).

Thirteen participants (87%) indicated they had either a master or doctoral degree; the remaining stated they had a bachelor's degree. Participants from the volunteer category represented a greater range of educational backgrounds from high school diplomas, trades training, college, undergraduate and graduate degrees (Tables 1 above, 4 below). Nine of 14 (64%) professionals indicated they had incorporated AAI into the scope of their practice in the past one to five years from the time of the interview.

AAI took place in multiple settings (Table 1). Visitations primarily took place in institutional settings such as correctional centers, courtroom visits, inpatient and outpatient hospital floors including mental health, veterans, and geriatrics, long-term care homes, and public and post-secondary education facilities. Clients also came to various settings where AAI practitioners were situated in private practice such as offices and barns, farms, and pastures (Tables 2, 3 above).

Table 4
Professional Training Designations (pre-AAI training)

Professional Training	Number of Sources (n=)	Percentage
Psychology	4	26.6
Registered Counseling Therapist	4	26.6
Other	4	26.6
Social Work	1	6.6
Recreation Therapy	1	6.6
Veterinary Medicine	1	6.6

Dogs and horses were the most prevalent choice for animal companions with 24/36 (75%) of participants indicating a dog as their primary companion in AAI. Horses comprised 32% of AAI practices from the interviews. Horses, as opposed to dogs, would often have AAI interactions with clients overlap with other animals in their environment, such as cats and goats. In five of these relationships with horse companions, participants were classified as professional, that is, they received payment for their AAI services, and six were classified as volunteers. Some participants worked with multiple species inclusive of dogs, cats, goats, and rodents. One participant mentioned including a lizard, depending on client interest. The inclusion of animals beyond dogs and horses tended to be ad-hoc and not a direct focus. Overall, 92% of all participants currently had an animal companion(s) full-time, that is, sharing a home. All but 8% identified having companion animals themselves, either at the time they participated, or previously in their lives. Participants identified working with more than one population including seniors, adults, adolescents, children, and families.

Thematic Findings

Finding 1: AAI Entry point is personally motivated and AAI dyads are highly relational and intuitive

Nearly all study participants (91%) identified a revelatory event through which they realized therapeutic dynamics of human animal interactions (HAI). In this way, participants discuss beginning AAI accidentally. The proceeding pathways from initial HAI experiences to AAI, however, were informed through considerable reflection. All participants shared initiation stories in relation to a current or former animal companion. These stories ranged from experiences with animals during a personally difficult time to witnessing an animal responding to another individual's emotional state: "people didn't realize what was happening because they thought he was just being friendly. But he went to every person that was in trouble; every person he would go in to see, it took him two seconds to clear that away" (12-P, 2016). Fifty-three percent of participants said they recognized in their animal companions an ability to attune to people around them, or to sense and connect to the emotive states of others, coded as empathy. Eighty-six percent spoke to the positive emotional connections people made with animals in practice.

Finding 2: AAI practitioner initiative is central to continuance and development

Motivated by positive interactions, most participants integrated AAI into an established practice under their personal leadership and resourcefulness. Coding identified ten common challenges such as: safety (91%), public and professional awareness (86%), regulation (66%), finances (63%), administrative or policy concerns (61%), education and training (50%), staff and

volunteer limitations (50%), team-facility capacity (58%), animal partner longevity (30%), and standardization of terminology (22%).

While only 30.5% of participants specifically named AAI as a sub-specialty or serviceable health “adjunct”, innovative thinking was critical to the practitioner motivated development of AAI in settings typically not supported by a systematized professional AAI culture. Practitioners in NS have fostered a range of complimentary AAI to support several populations and issues (Tables 5, 6), despite the mainstream physical and mental health systems’ favouring of dyadic clinical practice. While these AAI theoretical frameworks and/or approaches are client centered (see Table 7), we suggest the therapeutic goal(s) as well as the procedural focus be expanded to become non-anthropocentric, non-hierarchical, and mutually strengths-based.

Table 5

AAI Client Populations

Target Population	Number of Sources (n=)	Percentage
Adults	1	2.0
First Responders	2	5.0
Inmates	2	5.0
Seniors	3	8.3
People with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)	4	11.0
Children	14	38.8
University Students	3	8.3
Veterans and Armed Forces	7	19.4
Women	2	5.0
Families and multiple clients		

Table 6

AAI Client Symptomology

Symptomology Treated	Number of Sources (n=)	Percentage
Stress and Anxiety	19	52.7
Physical Support	19	52.7
Trauma	14	38.8
Acute Mental Health	10	27.7
Cognitive Capacities	10	27.7
Physiotherapy	6	16.6
Depression and Suicide	5	13.8
Bereavement	2	5.0

Table 7
AAI Theoretical Framework

Theoretical Framework	Number of Sources (n=)	Percentage
Personal or Affiliated Program	24	66.6
Philosophy		
Adjunct Health Service	11	30.5
Client-Centered	9	25.0
Recreational Therapy	4	11
Cognitive-Behavioural Theory	7	19.0
Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)	3	8.3
Hippotherapy	2	5.0
Equine-Facilitated Wellness	1	2.0
Narrative Therapy	1	2.0
Pastoral Counselling	1	2.0
Attachment Theory	1	2.0

Finding 3: AAI theoretical framework(s), competencies, Ethics, and Standards of Practice are eclectic

Study participants reported training opportunities, especially in Nova Scotia, to be limited and expensive to seek elsewhere. Often these programs were identified as difficult to find even within Canada, especially outside of Western provinces such as Alberta, with practitioners stating that they had to seek training opportunities as far as the United States and Europe. Only 27.7% reported they travelled outside the province and/or country to acquire specific AAT/AAI training; eight of whom sought Equine-Assisted Therapy (EAT) specific training.

Professional practitioners had mixed backgrounds (Table 4); some having pursued formal professional development training through fee-for-services programs and others self-taught. Six (42%) self-taught practitioners were a specific group of health professionals who had relationships with their dogs and organically involved them in their work in part due to practitioner perceptions of the animal’s suitable temperament. Generalized volunteer programs for visitations with dogs/cats are present in Canadian communities, including in NS. Study volunteers were involved with *St. John Ambulance* (n.d.), *Elder Dog* (2016), and *Therapeutic Paws* (2011); national organizations with regional branches offering social support programs with volunteers able to make a commitment and ascribe to the established programs (Tables 1, 2).

Finding 4: Attitudes towards animals involve limited ideas about justice

This study found attachment and positive regard for individual companion animals the foremost reasons why practitioners enlisted AAI, also constituted the primary basis for care and animal

welfare provisions in practice. Personal experiences of positive human animal interaction informed participants' convictions of the pleasures and gratification of relationships with non-human animals, as well as their understanding of AAI benefits for people. Participants were asked about animal justice and rights and found this notion, as distinct from animal welfare, not generally part of AAI practitioners' personal worldviews or practice theories.

Discussion

Finding 1: AAI Entry point is personally motivated and AAI dyads are highly relational and intuitive

Participants described animal companion support in interventions, and with their own companion animals both at home and in interventions, with mental health struggles like depression, eating disorders, and post-traumatic stress, in addition to childhood and adult life-changing events like divorce and death, to be non-judgmental and unconditional. Participants held these experiences with animals as significant catalysts for eventual AAI involvement:

I first started understanding the therapeutic benefits animals could offer humans when I was eleven. That was because my father died very unexpectedly. I don't think I would have made it through that time in my life if I didn't have the animals. They filled something in me that humans have never fulfilled (09-P, 2014).

She was on top of my night terrors, waking me when they started. Now, rather than waking up to those I get woken up with a gentle nudge from a wet nose. It's a lot easier to stare at big brown eyes attached to some floppy ears than it is to deal with what I was dealing with before (02-V, 2014).

Pathways to AAI that developed from revelatory events incorporated: 1) animal partners into existing therapeutic practice: "I had to bring him to work one day and serendipitously discovered he was a great adjunct to the work I was doing with clients" (04-P, 2014); and 2) therapeutic services for people into activities with animals after experiencing zooeyia: "I was always drawn to animals. Being a veterinarian wasn't an option. I decided to find something that incorporated therapy, people, disabilities, and animals, because I always saw they can help us, and I always had animals around me" (18-V, 2016). As mentioned in the findings section, over half of AAI professionals indicated they had incorporated AAI into the scope of their practice in the past one to five years from the time of the interview. This differs from when they report having begun their human service practice between 11 to 20 years ago. This suggests AAI has increased in popularity during the past decade and inspiration from a personal animal companion is a common gateway to AAI: "It began when I was practicing psychotherapy, my cat would be scratching at the door, trying to get in" (04-P, 2014).

The majority of participants discussed their relationships with companion animals as special, even in some cases revelatory. Personal experiences of zooeyia, the catalytic beginnings of participants' AAI practice, informed understandings of resilience:

A family dynamic can get sorted out pretty quick when you put them in with some horses, a lot quicker than any kind of a talk therapy (10-P, 2014);

Clients feel stressed, because they don't know what to expect. Sometimes, they haven't left their home for long periods before coming here, this is their first step, in moving forward, with their professional, educational,

employment, and having animals reduces stress levels. It's easier to project on them, when they talk about themselves, and reflect different emotions (18-V, 2016).

Another dynamic of zooeyia motivating entry into AAI is the view of animals as family members: "They're central! I make most important decisions in my life around my dogs" (04-V, 2014). The majority of participants identified they had animals themselves, either at time of interview, or previously (see Findings): "It's just him and I. He has a very big place in my family structure" (4-P, 2014); "They are our fur children. We don't have two legged children. We have four legged children" (14-P, 2016). When asked if companion animals were family, participants simultaneously described them anthropomorphically as fur babies or four-legged children, while some spoke to the changing culture of animal companionship in the last two decades, commenting that terminology and understandings of the role animal companions have in family structures are evolving, engaging new definitions of relationship and care giving. Blouin (2012) argues comparisons of animals and children can be easily made as it is common for people to draw on a familiar frame of reference such as parent/child relationships. When this happens, an animal's integrity or autonomy is not automatically disregarded, but rather we suggest, signals a need for novel conceptual and grammatical language with which to describe alterity and caregiving in inter-species relationships.

Participants expressed similar sentiments about multispecies households regarding facility animals who receive specialized training before being placed with a handler (sic) and their family: "The dog will become kind of part of our family and we will develop a relationship and a partnership, and we will commit to caring and nurturing for this creature, and the creature will reciprocate with oodles of love" (13-P, 2016).

In equine-assisted work, participants also saw the horses as part of their family, but with autonomy different than their own or that of canine companions for instance, due to their size and separate housing: "Even horses are often kept in a way that is un-horse-like. Not that animals shouldn't be people's babies, it's important we respect them for the beings they are and allow them the choice to be. If they want to come into the house, great. But they're not our 'babies', our children, allow them to be who they are" (08-V, 2014). Generally, participants' filial attachments to individual animals involved commitments to caregiving that align with animal welfare, including basic physiological needs of food, water, warmth and rest, as well as security and safety, encompassing psychological needs of belongingness and love:

You kind of know your own dog, when she's tired, you can tell. You make sure she gets outside for walks. She's limited to how many patients she sees. If we're doing one patient for a three-hour exposure, for example, that might be it, that day. Or, if we're visiting a lot of people or if the unit's really stimulating, then I might, lessen the time she's on the unit (05-P, 2014).

It's important to have a clear idea of what situations your dog may not be comfortable in, if your dog's licking his lips and yawning and you're thinking oh, my dog is thirsty and tired you're probably missing cues that that animal is saying something's not right here for me... when I'm working with him I'm careful to make sure he has breaks, water, and a comfortable place in the office where he can go to if he chooses not to participate. There's a crate that has a big soft duvet inside and toys. The door's never closed; he can go in and out as he wants. I know how to read

his calming signals; if he's showing signs of stress, I take steps to alleviate that stress (08-P, 2014).

We look at them as a sentient being, a huge part of that process, just like us as therapists, we need our downtime. After we've had difficult sessions, there's self-care for us. Self-care for a horse after a difficult session might be, a bunch of hay or the pasture for a big run (15-P, 2016).

In the absence of an animal-informed psychological theory, sociological framework, or professionally sanctioned code of ethics (see Ryan's (2014) proposed non-anthropocentric code of ethics), to facilitate the identification and articulation of non-human animal cognitions and emotions, discussions of the non-human animals' experiences were awkward, raising the specter of speciesism and cognitive dissonance. The historical "anthroprivileging" (Springer, 2021) of minds and hearts as uniquely human phenomena, render discussions about self-fulfillment/actualization and esteem-needs for animals Others, as sentient beings, who within the embodiment of their respective species, have wants and preferences – quickly controversial, or at best uncomfortable, and open to denunciations of anthropomorphizing.

Over half of the participants said they recognized in their animal companions an ability to attune to people around them, or to sense and connect to the emotive states of others, coded as empathy. The majority of participants spoke to the positive emotional connections people made with animals in practice. Markedly, these observations were articulated using language and senses corresponding to and typically reserved for people. For instance, participants talked about animal companions responding to, encouraging, initiating caring contact, demonstrating compassion, patience and understanding:

A guy raising his voice, not at me, but when he was talking, she got up, came over, tugged on his shirt sleeve. He said 'Oh, she doesn't like me raising my voice, does she?' I said, 'Well, I guess not.' So, he lowered his voice. If [clients] are upset, she'll often approach them. If they want to hold her on their knee, while they're talking about something, they can do that. (09-P, 2014)

It amazes me how horses conduct themselves in ways that reach into the heart and issue of a client, in a way that we simply couldn't set up; a huge benefit, and it seems to happen in a quicker way than just talk therapy when the horse accepts you, is willing to just be present with you, as long as you're soft, present yourself; that's a direct contradiction of the habit of self-condemnation and self-blame. (10-P, 2014).

It's very easy to make initial contact with an animal and trust; with the non-judgmental love, acceptance, and immediate feedback they will receive in that interaction with the animal. (18-V, 2016).

As a result of such observations, some practitioners reported they initiated additional AAI activities:

When I think about those clients, the ones he seems to help the most, people who are lonely [or see themselves as] being unlovable or not worthy, or even [those who have] pathological stories about the world in general...a relationship, a rapport, even a bond could be quite transformative to them in terms of feeling like they've made a

connection, or they have a relationship that is contrary to some of those [negative narratives/ruminations] (05-P, 2014).

Although participants conceptualized the care of animal companions in individual terms and defaulted to proprietorial language (e.g., ownership), they also extolled animals for meaningful relational qualities and abilities. Despite ideological anthropocentrism and idiomatic speciesism that render talk about non-human animals as individual subjective beings with inherent integrity challenging, participants enthused about relating to animals, their ability to attune with people, and the joys of inter-species reciprocity: “It’s about being a good owner [sic], attending to the subtle cues she gives me. That she is also aware of my subtle cues. We worked on our relationship well enough that we communicate on that level” (07-P, 2014).

Finding 2: AAI practitioner initiative is central to continuance and development

The development of AAI in a milieu marked by an absence of specialized programs, underscores practitioner and client convictions in the restorative power of zooeyia (Hodgson & Darling, 2011), the positive effects and dynamics of human animal interaction. Participants spoke passionately regarding the integration of AAI into organizational programming: “When we introduced this program, I said straight up, ‘my goal is dogs will be supporting victims of crime in the courtroom setting,’ We’re getting ready to meet with judges to ask them ‘How can we make this happen?’” (14-P, 2016). At the same time, study participants reported barriers to the growth of their AAI (see findings). To overcome such barriers, one participant reported they “made a list of horrible things, horrible, horrible things that could possibly happen. And as long as we had a mitigation strategy for each one of those, no one’s been able to argue with it, especially in a hospital setting” (14-P, 2016).

Study participants were unwavering in their belief in the potential for AAI to positively affect people’s mental and physical health: “Bringing a dog in just shifts their idea of what psychology may be. What the psychologist may do. It doesn’t fit with what the media has shown them” (01-P, 2014). Yet, despite a growing body of research on the benefits of AAT/AAI in clinical practice (Compitus, 2019; Hoy-Gerlach & Wehman, 2017), and on the interconnections between human and planetary health, resilience, and sustainability (Hanrahan & Chalmers, 2020; Lindgren & Öhman, 2018; Ryan, 2014; Ulmer, 2017), “many clinicians are unsure how the process works or how to implement AAT with their own clients” (Hartwig & Smelser, 2018, as cited by Compitus, 2019, p. 1). The substantial interest in human animal bonds by health practitioners is unheeded by a gap in education and training curricula (Chalmers et al., 2020; Fraser et al., 2020; Walsh, 2009a, 2009b).

Study participants reported they primarily did not receive AAI education, specialized training, or mentorship, and were not networked with other AAI practitioners. Most were middle-aged (50-65) having completed their education several years even decades ago. Then as now, relatively few disciplines acknowledged the relational significance of animals on human health and wellbeing (Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006; Hanrahan, 2011; Smith et al., 2017; Tedeschi et al., 2005; Turner, 2008; Walsh, 2009a), let alone the systemic HAI in local and global communities and complex issues like climate change and zoonotic pandemics: “It’s only really been the last ten years that there’s been a focus on animal abuse and things like that. That’s ‘new’ as well within veterinary medicine where the ‘health’ of the pet was the main focus more so than animal abuse” (02-P, 2014).

In the current study, practitioners’ personal relationships with individual animal companion(s) in practice were perceived by all as the pivotal nexus that: 1) informed their

therapeutic work, 2) strengthened the therapeutic alliance between themselves and clients, 3) and mitigated animal partner stress and needs. Although not citing specific standards of practice or theoretical frameworks (see Finding 4), all participants variously reported how those relationships enabled them to recognize and attend to the therapeutic dynamics of their work with clients, and the needs of their animal companions. Investigating familial bonds with animal companions, Irvine and Cilia (2016) contend “families are, and always have been, constituted as ‘more-than-human’” (p. 8). In this way, “the inclusion of animals in clinical treatment planning may tap into that long-established reciprocal relationship in a way that enhances therapeutic healing in humans” (Compitus, 2019, p.1), a key assessment for appreciation of an AAI practitioner’s entry into and pursuit of AAI with little or no formal training. As maintained by Compitus (2019):

One of the core values of social work includes the importance of human relationships and animals often help to build, establish and enhance interpersonal relationships among humans. From an evolutionary standpoint, humans have been working cooperatively with animals for 11-16,000 years and the mutual benefits of the human–animal relationship has long been established. Humans are social beings and caring for, or working cooperatively with, animals may be instinctively gratifying. (p. 1)

Without hesitation all study participants described animal companions as family members with the majority of participants currently living with one or more animal. At times anthropomorphized filial attachments simultaneously merged with a discourse of ownership and control– “We’re the typical middle aged, children all out of the house, couple that gets two fluffy dogs and they’re like new babies” (09-P, 2014)– and with counter stories of an animal’s autonomous disposition and perceptiveness– “he’s weeping...My dog senses this and comes up and puts his head on his lap and they’re having a moment and my client is feeling suddenly really cared about and connected and not so isolated” (04-P, 2014). These discussions reveal how relationships with animals, people’s lived experiences of them, are phenomenological and precede cultural mores and institutions, and as such shaped contradictorily in messy intersections of private/public, individual/systemic.

Appreciation for zooeia was found to be a central motivating factor for practitioners’ pursuit of AAI and in shoring their resilience within a field that is largely self-directed. While few participants specifically named AAI as a sub-specialty or serviceable health “adjunct”, all practitioners shared anecdotes about the efficacy of AAI and advantages of partnering with organizations to support clients, and the multiple applications such as: additional visitations that support staff in facilities; expanding equine-wellness programs to families or providing families breaks and respite during programing; integrating canine support into more of the judicial system and interviews; and complimentary physical and mental health support.

This little girl leaned over and started talking to (O). She was saying some pretty heart-breaking things, was really sad and experiencing a lot of pain. She was tired of it all and wished she could sleep. I felt she was saying to (O) that she wanted to go, didn’t want to tell her parents or the nurses really how she was feeling. But she could express it to (O) (03-V, 2014).

The unique contribution of AAI dogs in long term residences was observed by study participants regarding people isolated in their rooms due to age and/or illness and typically reticent with their human care providers, but who opened up with the visiting AAI animals: “It made them happy, and they loved seeing (O). So, they would always make sure when I came in

that I'd have one of the patient wheelchairs, and I would put (O) in the wheelchair and her tail would hang out the back and I would wheel her around to see the patients. And they all got a blast out of it (03-V, 2014)".

Many found the experience of riding and grooming the horse was also a powerful form of communication and reciprocal communication:

It's a direct sensual experience. The horses are very sensitive to emotional energy. It's not unusual for someone who's very numb, very frozen or very angry, very shut down emotionally, to come out there, start touching and grooming the horses and start crying. And maybe they haven't cried for years. So immediately, there is this emotional opening for people (03-V, 2014).

He's non-verbal, was so sick and understandably, being a bright five-year-old, was really tired of physiotherapy. He was bored. He was frustrated. He did the hippotherapy. He rode until he was seventeen (19-V, 2014).

Such findings highlight the need for health and wellness programs, as well as existing AAT/AAI training programs to include education about other animals, our relations, and the more-than-human world from a non-anthropocentric perspective, in order to shift AAI practice away from a notion of *animals as resources or therapy for people*—towards a transformative approach that leverages people's experiences of zooeyia and the unique qualities and personalities of other animals within a mutual relationship— that also informs a broader view of species from the same lens. In so doing, AAI advocates could potentially transform the applied field of AAI in partnership with any number of other fields, professions and disciplines— into an active and leading contributor to current public health discourse, connecting individual, community and public health from local to global.

Finding 3: AAI theoretical framework(s), competencies, Ethics, and Standards of Practice are eclectic

The development of AAI necessitates practitioners to more systematically define their practice and for “more rigorous scientific scrutiny” (Fine, Beck, & Ng, 2019, p. 9) overall (also see Howie, 2015; Johnson et al., 2002). In Canada and even in the USA surprisingly where the total number of AAI organizations is substantially higher than elsewhere and where there are recognizable field leaders with a national reach, there is no “nationally-recognized accrediting agency, nor commonly accepted standards or policies, governing their activities” (Serpell et al., 2020, p.2). When asked specifically about an AAI code of ethics and standards of practice, study participants referred to those existing within their respective professions/fields in the context of human safety and liability (Table 7).

While justice for animals and AAI animal partner rights per se are not regulated, participants were aware of their animal's sensitivities and needs as working companions. In conversation, this appeared as anthropomorphizing of their companion's needs from the participant's personal frames of reference, intuition, and professional code of ethics: “I have an egalitarian perspective on humans and animals in relationship. That means best practice would reflect that, honouring the animal's needs as much as the person's” (04-V, 2014); “I struggle with it ethically sometimes...(F) is my partner; but he doesn't really have a voice. His voice is non-verbal, it is in his body language. So, I have to be very careful about staying in tune with his body language” (08-P, 2016). Five professionals with specific formal training noted breed selection as important to their work and building a co-facilitation alliance with their animal companion. In

these conversations, participants spoke to the importance of predictable and gentle temperaments, general health in hips, legs, and teeth, and being ‘hypoallergenic’. Conversely, participants also spoke to selecting breeds to encourage conversation with clients about social justice and feelings of ostracization, emphasizing breeds such as ‘pitbulls’. All participants noted relational skills and knowledge of species-specific behaviours were significant criteria of successful AAT/AAI.

Significant contributions made to the field of AAI have helped to formalize AAI theory and practice since 2015, after or coinciding with the time participants in this study were interviewed. In particular, in collaboration with the AAT in Mental Health Interest Network of the American Counseling Association (MHINACA), Stewart, Chang, Parker, and Grubbs (2016) introduced an unprecedented theoretical framework describing competencies in AAT in counseling (AATC) recognized as:

An evolving field of specialized skills and competencies that allows professional counselors to incorporate specially trained animals into the counseling process...[and] together, the mental health professional and the therapy animal influence the therapeutic process in ways that are beyond the scope of traditional counselor–client helping relationships (p.2).

Two more recent examples include contributions to research on credentialing and standards of practice for canine AAI: *Canine-Assisted Interventions: A Comprehensive Guide to Credentialing Therapy Dog Teams* (2020), and peer reviewed article *Current Standards and Practices Within the Therapy Dog Industry: Results of a Representative Survey of United States Therapy Dog Organizations* (Serpell et al., 2020), do much to bolster the AAI field by furthering consistency within practitioner knowledge base and skill sets.

The lack of reference to this emergent AAI specific theory and practice knowledge among study participants highlights their individualized operations and is not surprising due to the absence of an AAI culture supported and fostered by specialized programs in postsecondary educational institutions. Conversely, it is the private sector of the AAI field that leverages and supports community capacity and resources such as in the USA and elsewhere.

Finding 4: Attitudes towards animals involve limited ideas about justice

Animal welfare as an *essential* component of AAI design, has only recently been introduced, and there are few references in AAI literature to animal rights, and even less if any to the notion of animal justice (see Lori Gruen’s *Entangled Empathy* (2005) for insights into a reconceptualization of animal rights discourse). Two notable contributions to AAI theory suggestive of animal welfare as something more than basic needs and that apply the word ‘rights’ were made within the past five years. Howie’s (2015) *Therapy Animal’s Bill of Rights* centered on the notion of consent expands basic welfare stipulating workers ensure mental, physical, and psychological health by engaging therapy animals in activities that equate to self-care. Similar provisioning in the recently revised *Animal Assisted Intervention International Standards of Practice* (2019), is signaled by the novel inclusion of the term ‘rights’ in the phrase, “Basic Needs and Rights of the Dog” (2019, *Section I–Standards of Practice for the Health, Welfare, and Well-being of dogs*, p. 4).

While use of the term *rights* in AAI animal welfare discourse may possibly shift conventional thinking about animals towards greater appreciation as subjective beings entitled to recognition and protections, this focus is limited to individual animals working in AAI. The absence of collectivist animal justice thinking among AAI practitioners in the current study reflects dominant humanist beliefs. According to critical human geographer Simon Springer (2021), “human supremacy remains the principal way in which most human beings envisage the world, and so while a general awareness

for anthroprivilege is already acutely known, actually reckoning with it is far from the minds of most people” (p. 17). Comparatively speaking, it may be said that AAI working animals constitute in some ways a privileged group; more readily the subjects of people’s sympathies and “affective kinship” (Fielder, 2013), due to their domestic proximity to people (for a nuanced discussion on privilege and dogs see online article by Erin Jones, What can ‘Streeties’ teach us about companion dogs? <https://issue19.iaabcjournal.org/what-can-streeties-teach-us-about-companion-dogs/>). As said by one participant from the volunteer group: “The idea of animals being property is just an idea. It's not mine. I live with them and they live with me. We look after each other. We're part of the same living Earth. That's my notion of property” (20-V, 2016).

Study participants draw on individual relationships with animal companions and seek individual behavioural cues in themselves and their companions to inform their practice and mitigate animal partner stress and needs as a working co-therapist. Practitioner connections with individual animals with whom they live and/or work function as the primary impetus for animal welfare. The importance of relationship and its emergence as a strength in individual AAI, especially in the absence of a coordinated professional culture including specialized education, does not however directly challenge the status quo; that is, the constructed social order that reproduces other animal brethren as exploitable resources and commodities.

The individualist approach to animal welfare and even justice as bestowed upon individual animals, leaves animal exploitation intact and their treatment, ultimately, subject to the vicissitudes of people.

Affection for individual working animals expressed throughout the interviews and the passionate recognition of their unique contributions in practice, contrasts sharply with the historical lack of regulation of non-human animal wellbeing in AAI. A growing number of AAI proponents have sought clarification of welfare definitions and a comprehensive, widely adopted framework that would define practitioner competencies regarding working with animals in multiple interventions (Chalmers & Dell, 2015; Glenk, 2017; Glenk, Stetina, Kepplinger, & Baran, 2011; Parenti et al., 2013).

They can define it any way you like, but I relate to them as fellow creatures. So, I don't know if they own, I never really took to ownership. They were members of the same family. It's about being open to life itself and its engagement, finding creatures, creating an environment where those creatures could respond in their donkey-ness or whatever, or their horse, their dogginess or catness or whatever (07-P, 2014). Glenk (2017) argues:

The demands therapy dogs encounter during their performance in therapeutic environments go beyond the challenge of accepting close social contact with strangers...research has demonstrated walking on different floor substrates (e.g., parquet, plastic, stairs, iron grids) can trigger physiological arousal in dogs with no previous history of floor fearfulness. Therapy dogs are expected to remain comfortable with a variety of potentially challenging stimuli including wheelchairs, crutches, metal walkers, sudden noise, white coats, high temperatures in their working environments (p. 4).

Study practitioners similarly noted potentially hazardous physical conditions in institutional settings like hospitals and nursing homes: “One thing I don't want him to do, is lick things off the floor. I try to stop him. When I first took him, somebody would give him a treat, it would fall on the floor, he'd lick it off the floor. I wasn't thinking about it at the time, but once when we left, we didn't make it home, I had to stop so he could throw up” (09-V, 2014).

Obedience was a frequent indicator of an animals' capacity for work, conflated with good or healthy animal welfare. Natural behaviours like licking, panting loudly, barking or stamping

feet were sometimes considered a nuisance and distractions to work: “When his leash is on, he knows he’s at work, and it does change his disposition a little bit. He’s a little less likely to play although occasionally with the person, he may decide he wants to play. When he doesn’t settle easily, I used to have a crate in the office” (06-P, 2014); “These dogs are not permitted to lick. They don’t even groom in public. And this has been trained into them” (14-P, 2016). This study found the limitations placed on animals engaged in AAI resulting from obedience, while often in the animal’s best interests, are not typically appraised as potential infringements on an individual animal’s preferences:

The dog can’t do what they want, really ever. They have to be under complete control. That’s not a problem because the way you’re bonded so much. They have to do what they’re told. Unless once in a while, they have to go out and have a poop, even though they’d gone out five minutes before. They have to do that. The dog has to obey, that’s another protocol...But it’s work. There are times when you have to do things you don’t want to do, and so I think that has to be part of the process, of realizing ‘Now does he know that he’s doing a lot of good?’ I don’t know. I haven’t asked him (12-P, 2016).

As noted above, ethics and practice standards concerning animal participants are generally considered in terms of human safety and liability: “when dealing with assist type animals, the balance goes with the safety of the human” (02-P, 2014); “Safety for people around horses, because horses are animals...you cannot always predict, even the calmest may be spooked sometimes” (14-V, 2016).

Genuine care and affection for individual AAI animal companions was mixed with ambiguity or indifference regarding other animals. Most practitioners in this study disclosed they eat meat and dairy: “To have any sort of animal come in and fill that void even for five minutes, then I eat it? I don’t know. There is a weird disconnect. Don’t get me wrong, I still do eat animals from time to time” (13-V, 2014); “I’m not prepared to give up my occasional hamburger because of concerns about cruelty to animals, yet I’m still concerned about cruelty to animals. You know? It’s that kind of hypocritical thing that a lot of people do” (09-P, 2014); “When I take on an animal, take a dog, has the intelligence of a two-year-old, I have to be willing to be responsible for that animal for the rest of its life. The fact that it’s labelled as property doesn’t bother me, because I’m going to be responsible for it anyway. My will covers their care” (07-V, 2014). The study found the majority of AAI practice does not integrate a systemic animal rights or trans-species justice theory.

Notwithstanding the manifest anthropocentrism shaped by the limits of human bodies and cognition, the language used by study participants to articulate their experiences and perceptions of AAI is exclusive to companion animal species and, for the most part, anthropocentric. Notably, there is little if any distinction between the professional lexicon used in AAI and everyday vernacular for imagining and talking about animals. While some studies have looked at the language used to talk about different kinds of animals (Sealey & Charles, 2013), there are surprisingly none about AAI and language. Our examination of the latent humanism and associated speciesism of dominant cultural discourse that informs the study data, concludes the presence of a degree of contradiction or cognitive dissonance within AAI that limits consideration of other animal alterity, not unlike how gender specific pronouns (and other language) naturalizes essentialist models of identity. In her article about how words matter when we talk about animals, pronouns and choices, Todd (2020) notes: “In everyday language, our pronoun use may reflect the kind of animal we’re talking about and the closeness of our relationship with them. It’s one

thing to think of people’s pets [sic] as he or she, but what about animals that are eaten?” (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/fellow-creatures/202009/animals-aren-t-it-pets-pronouns-and-choices>).

The combination of an anthro-specific (and gender specific as a means to personalize) discourse with the desire to help others by leveraging positive and therapeutic HAI, reflects we argue, a significant paradox within AAI that has for too long been obscured. On one hand, AAI practitioners clearly value positive HAI and acclaim the physical and emotional labour of animal companions, yet the majority do so selectively within the personal realm, exclusively within the parameters of interpersonal relations. Indeed,

[t]he pronouns we choose reflect in part our beliefs about the use of animals: companionship, food, or connection to nature, for example. They also reflect relationships – the indoors-only pet cat vs the barn cat, the dog that lives inside vs. the dog on a chain, and a feral or village cat or dog. Our relationship affects whether or not we give them a name, and that has implications for pronouns, too. We can ponder the inconsistencies in our usage but these days, many animal lovers will agree: Animals aren’t *it*. (Todd 2020)¹

The view of animal companions as sentient partners in AAI was unanimous among study participants. In relation to questions about animal justice, however, this perspective did not correspond to thinking about the treatment of all animals. Borrowing from Heron’s (2005) discussion about racism and privilege in critical social work, her astute cautioning of the ‘double comfort’ of naming our privilege in practice, offers key insights for AAI. Like Heron who asserts we in critical social work must delve deeper into the processes of self-reflection and self-location, we argue AAI practitioners must do the same and deconstruct one’s anthropocentric positionality and human privilege that manifest as naturalized phenomena.

We argue the integrity and future of AAI require that the ongoing efforts fostering consistency across professional terminology be guided by rigorous attention to the ideological underpinnings of the nomenclature *and relations* of AAI – that is to say, to the complex questions about animal identity and agency. AAI practitioners can no longer practice within a humanist vacuum. The divisive realities of anthroparchy (Springer, 2020) characteristic of hierarchical western and non-hierarchical non-western cultures, must be bridged. The systems classifying animals according to how people use them (e.g., food, entertainment, religious/spiritual sacrifice, therapy), are arrangements that have benefitted the development of AAI by both allowing proponents to enlist sympathies for and with individual animal beings as co-therapists without disrupting conventional HAI within the status quo.

Study Limitations

The study is anthropocentric in so far as data collection, limited to the provincial population and snowball sampling, focused on human service provider experiences of AAI, inclusive of their interpretations of the experiences of the animals in practice. According to Weitzenfeld and Joy (2014), “some degree of an anthropocentric orientation is inescapable simply by the fact that *as humans*, humans perceive the world within the limits of human bodies and cognition” (p. 4). This becomes an unavoidable facet of research about or including other animals,

¹ In addition to Todd’s point, the authors suggest while the pronoun ‘it’ is typically associated with inanimate material objects and not sentient (human) beings, AAI must look to queer theory and the rise of non-binary pronouns to enrich the field’s linguistic and conceptual base.

even research that values other animals' voices and perspectives.

Moreover, due to the specific focus on AAI, this paper does not encompass the breadth of multispecies relationships beyond the AAI settings.

Conclusion

This study highlights *relationality* as a key finding; its prominence and power. Animal-assisted intervention (AAI) practitioners express affection for the companions animals with whom they live and/or enlist in practice. They recognize, appreciate and promote zooeyia in their activities and practices by leveraging benefits of human animal interactions to foster healthy outcomes. Inspired by personal lived experiences, practitioners overcome in the majority of cases, institutional and professional barriers, often with notable resolve to foster innovative relational interventions to improve people's health and wellbeing.

As discussed, the appeal and effectiveness of AAI lie to a significant extent in the relational qualities and abilities of the animal companions in practice (that constitute under-accredited phenomena in the field beyond the scope here). This is more, however, than a matter of giving credit where credit is due and finding the right words, such as cohesive terminology and lexicon for AAI. As with other therapeutic interventions, success is largely determined by the therapeutic relationship, which first and foremost must be an ethical alliance (Coulter, 2016). The world is in a global pandemic and climate crisis the center of which are exploitative human practices towards animal Others.

The question for AAI practitioners is how do we ethicize dyadic inter-species therapeutic relations? We suggest a creative more-than-human vision of HAI to advance AAI that simultaneously recognizes human animal interactions represent "a more complex structure than stewardship" (Fielder, 2013, p. 501), and extends the core value that guides therapeutic work – Respect for the Inherent Dignity and Worth of Persons (Code of Ethics, Canadian Association of Social Workers [CASW], 2005) – to 'all beings'. In other words, we need a radical, more-than-human "ethics of relationality" (Oliver, 2009) in AAI, wherein a notion of domestic proximity with animal companions allows sympathy to be transferred across positions of "difference or alterity," rather than necessitating "sameness" (p. 21) for ethical behavior. And as a benefit, this may help people to sympathetically appreciate differences across and within humanity.

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