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Cold hands and Cuddle Monsters: exploring subjective experience and psychological wellbeing with volunteers in a community pet rescue centre

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ABSTRACT

The psychological benefits of human–animal interaction (HAI) for pet owners and animal carers are well-documented. To further explore community-based HAI and psychological wellbeing, this paper presents findings from an ethnography at a pet rescue center. Nine volunteers were interviewed and observed whilst looking after rabbits, chickens, goats, and ducks. An interpretive phenomenological analysis produced four themes relating to the experience and psychological benefits of the work: (i) holistic, individual care, (ii) volunteer resilience, (iii) communities and interactions, and (iv) porous boundaries, strong connections. This research extends the psychological literature on HAI, which mainly focuses on pet ownership and therapeutic HAI.

KEYWORDS

Animals; community; wellbeing; volunteering; phenomenology; ethnography

Introduction

The psychological health benefits of HAI are well-documented anecdotally, especially among pet owners and those who work with animals. Regular HAI occurs across various contexts, including domestic pet ownership, pastoralism, competitive sport, and community care. Pet ownership is the most common form of HAI in the UK. Following the COVID-19 pandemic the proportion of pet-owning UK households rose from around 47% (pre-pandemic) to 62% in 2022, perhaps because of increased time spent at home, stabilizing to 57% in 2023. There are approximately 13 million pet dogs and 12 million pet cats in the UK; second only to Germany in Europe (Department, Statista Search, 2024). Pet ownership notwithstanding, around 90,000 people in the UK work with animals in some medical or care-giving capacity (Department, Statista Search, 2024).

Besides domestic pet ownership, another key area of HAI takes place in the so-called third sector. Third sector animal care includes performing community-based duties like dog-walking, fostering, grooming, collecting injured

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wildlife, vet visits, and animal care in volunteer-run pet refuges. The latter of these is the focus of this paper.

According to The Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, 2023), the UK's largest animal welfare charity, around 50,000 complaints of animal neglect are made annually in the UK, with abandoned animals being discovered on an hourly basis. Whilst dogs and cats are the animals most often reported as missing or abandoned, there is less attention to the fate of mistreated birds, rabbits, and goats. The present study focuses on these species. Third sector animal care organizations aim to prevent cruelty, offer advice to those with regular HAI, and offer refuge to lost, abandoned, or mistreated animals. In the UK, the RSPCA reports that more than 16,000 animal lovers participate third sector animal care. There was a rise in animal care volunteering in 2021, with an upsurge of volunteers coming forward to work in pet refuge centers for abandoned animals. This increase was predominantly in younger demographics, with 66% of new volunteers under 35 years old (Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, 2023).

This paper reports on an ethnographic study in a community pet rescue center in northern England. Whilst there is existing psychological research in the psychological benefits of HAI (Brown, 2011; Enmarker et al., 2012; Hui Gan et al., 2020), there is an acknowledged need for more research looking into third sector animal care, such as pet sanctuaries (Shoesmith et al., 2021). This paper presents data gathered over a six-month fieldwork period. Unlike most other qualitative research into HAI and psychological wellbeing, this study focuses on third-sector animal care rather than interactions with domestic pets.

Literature review

HAI and psychological wellbeing

The multifaceted concept of psychological wellbeing can be seen as an objective or subjective phenomenon (Voukelatou et al., 2020; Western et al., 2016). The former relates to quality-of-life indicators like income, material resources, or qualifications. The latter encompasses experiences of pleasure, fulfillment, and purpose, and is reflected in self-reported evaluations of satisfaction, happiness, or anxiety. Although psychological wellbeing is about more than merely the absence of ill-health, its constituent parts include the absence of mental health, as well as effective problem-solving, effective emotional control, and the ability to overcome challenges (Cohen et al., 2016; Dhanabhakym & Sarath, 2023). It also encompasses emotional health, which in turn relates to the maintenance of positive social relationships, feelings of personal growth, self-esteem, self-acceptance, and autonomy (Dhanabhakym & Sarath, 2023;

Park et al., 2023). Psychological wellbeing has prompted considerable debate among researchers, and the World Health Organization (WHO) opts for the following definition;

A state of mind in which an individual is able to develop their potential, work productively, and creatively, and is able to cope with the normal stresses of life

WHO, 2021

This multidimensional definition will serve as a valuable point of reference for the current paper. The purpose here is not to redefine psychological wellbeing, but to explore it in relation to volunteers' first-hand experiences working in a community pet rescue center. The focus of this paper is on how psychological wellbeing is experienced subjectively (through self-reports of factors such as positive relationships, feelings of personal growth, stress reduction) by volunteers with regular HAI. As the theoretical approach adopted here is phenomenological (related to personal experiences), this paper will focus on subjective, rather than objective, psychological wellbeing.

Previous literature links varieties of HAI with enhanced psychological wellbeing. Research on domestic pet ownership suggests that it can enhance physical health and psychological wellbeing (Scoresby et al., 2021; Shoesmith et al., 2021). Dog ownership is associated with higher levels of walking and physical activity (Christian et al., 2013), with positive consequences for mood and contact with neighbors (Wood et al., 2015). Beyond pet ownership, several studies illustrate positive psychological consequences of other forms of HAI, for example with children participating in pet-therapy programs (Braun et al., 2009). Interacting regularly with farm animals is associated with reduced anxiety, enhanced mood, self-esteem, and coping abilities in psychiatric patients (Berget et al., 2011). Furthermore, following an animal-assisted intervention, children in acute care settings had significant pain reduction, compared with a control group (Braun et al., 2009). One Norwegian study associated the experience of working on a dairy farm with the alleviation of depressive symptoms (Pedersen et al., 2012). Equine-assisted interventions have benefited young recipients of solvent abuse treatment in Canada (Dell et al., 2011). These interventions have also enhanced the effectiveness of counseling for at-risk teenagers in the US, compared with conventional classroom-based programs (Trotter et al., 2008). In research with older populations, clients attending animal-assisted interventions improved cognitive function, mood, and perceived quality of life, compared with a control group (Moretti et al., 2011). The development of bonds with horses has also predicted recovery from physical and psychological trauma (Yorke et al., 2008), whilst interaction with dogs is associated with psychological and social development for war veterans with PTSD (Taylor et al., 2013).

Evidently, domestic and non-domestic HAI enhances various forms of psychological wellbeing.

In the literature reviewed above, many of the positive effects of HAI relate to subjective psychological wellbeing, such as self-reported mood, perceived quality of life, levels of anxiety and feelings of connectedness. Other positive effects relate to objective measures of wellbeing, such as rates of physical activity. In the present study, the focus will be on the relationship between HAI and self-reported subjective psychological wellbeing. As the epistemological approach used here is qualitative and phenomenological, there will be an emphasis on exploring how psychological wellbeing is subjectively reported, for example in interviews, rather than how it is objectively measured. Subsequent sections show how these phenomena have been explored using epistemologies which are in line with those used in the present paper.

Ethnographic research into HAI and psychological wellbeing

Ethnography is a method for gathering rich data in particular cultural groups over a prolonged period (Hurn, 2012; Madden, 2022). It is conducted in settings which are familiar to participants, by researchers who participate in activities which form the subject matter of the research. Two notable ethnographies explored the psychological benefits of HAI in the animal care third sector (Alger & Alger, 1999; Koralesky et al., 2023).

One ethnography explored human–cat and cat–cat interactions in a cat shelter, focusing on intersubjective relationships (Alger & Alger, 1999), showing that behavioral norms of affection, affiliation, and social adaptation were more important determinants of cat behavior than individualized norms of territoriality. Another ethnography took place in a dog shelter in British Columbia, where dogs with challenging behaviors were adopted and matched with appropriate fosterers (Koralesky et al., 2023). Typical daily tasks for staff included behavioral evaluations of dogs, developing individual care-plans, preventing human-directed aggression, and organizing adoptions. It was found that staff were time-pressured to work with challenging animals in limited space and that emotional attachments to animals were mediated for fear of interfering with professional duties. Future research looking at HAI in institutional, non-domestic settings was recommended by the authors. It is intended that the present study can contribute in this regard.

Phenomenological research into HAI and psychological wellbeing

Phenomenological research explores lived experiences by engaging with the participants' life-worlds and the meanings created from those experiences (Husserl, 2001; Smith et al., 2022). Phenomenological research enables participants to report first-experiences of phenomena such as psychological wellbeing, rather than using objective measures of happiness or resilience. A notable study focusing on HAI and psychological wellbeing explored the

effects of goat yoga (Berbel & Praetorius, 2023), which was pioneered in Oregon by yoga teacher Heather Davis. Goat yoga involves close physical contact with goats during practice and aims to alleviate depression and anxiety. Students attending classes reported subjective aspects of psychological wellbeing such as increased joy, fun, and calm. Doing yoga with goats helped remove interpersonal barriers and was regarded as enjoyable. The goats were described as “hilarious” and “adorable,” bringing a light and happy atmosphere to the yoga experience. Another phenomenological study exploring the psychological benefits of HAI was conducted in a community-based pet sanctuary (Jau & Hodgson, 2017). Three female participants were recruited through animal rescue and fostering programs. All had been diagnosed with a depressive illness. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were carried out, alongside observations of everyday animal care duties. The authors noted direct and indirect benefits of HAI for psychological wellbeing and recommended future attempts to incorporate animals into residential support programs to enhance social skills, confidence, and other life skills. Following the studies reported here, this study is about the subjectively experienced benefits of working with animals.

The present study

This study explores the subjective experience and benefits in relation to psychological wellbeing of HAI for volunteers in a community pet rescue center. It builds on previous research and incorporates several innovations. First, this study will extend previous phenomenological work (Jau & Hodgson, 2017) by using a larger participant group and incorporating data collection from the embedded perspective of a working volunteer-researcher. Second, whilst existing studies highlight the positive effects of HAI in domestic and therapeutic settings, few studies report these effects in the community sector. The present paper explores psychological wellbeing in relation to HAI in the community-based animal care third sector. Third, whilst most research into non-domestic HAI and psychological wellbeing focuses on participants with specific challenges relating to depression or anxiety, or who are part of therapeutic communities, this study features participants who have not reported such challenges. Another gap in the literature relates to previous ethnographic research on psychological wellbeing and HAI and its focus on interaction with dogs and cats (Alger & Alger, 1999; Koralesky et al., 2023). As reported above, the RSPCA highlights that cruelty and neglect toward dogs and cats typically receives more attention in the public discourse than do cases relating to less-typically domesticable animals, such as goats, ducks, and rabbits. The present study will therefore focus on subjectively reported psychological wellbeing among third sector volunteers whose HAI is with such species. Overall, the present study will contribute to the field of psychological

wellbeing and HAI by; (i) gathering data from an embedded perspective; (ii) focusing on HAI in the animal care third sector; (iii) recruiting participants for research into non-domestic HAI and psychological wellbeing from non-therapeutic sample frame; (iv) broadening the scope of ethnographic research into HAI and psychological wellbeing to include interactions with more diverse species.

The research questions are

What are the first-hand subjective experiences of volunteers who work with animals at a community pet rescue center?

How does the experience of working voluntarily in a community pet rescue center affect psychological wellbeing?

Research design

Theoretical framework

This paper explores HAI from a psychological perspective (focusing on psychological wellbeing) and from an anthropological perspective (using ethnography), with a phenomenological epistemology (Husserl, 2001; Langdridge, 2018). Phenomenology looks at how participants make sense of experiences in their life-worlds and emphasizes everyday intersubjectivity (interactions and relationships), spatiality (the importance of place), temporality (experiences over time) and embodiment (corporeality). The study focuses on the lived experience of a specific group of animal carers, but also aims to yield knowledge which is transferable to other animal-care settings with a view to informing future research.

Methodology

Ethnography involves observing and taking part in behaviors and experiences that are being studied (Langdridge & Hagger-Johnson, 2013; Madden, 2022). It is a contextual method, enabling in-depth understanding of a community. Ethnography involves a variety of data collection methods, such as ethnographic interviews (Trundle et al., 2024) participant observation (Langdridge, 2018). In practice, ethnography is a flexible method which (as in the present case) involves interviewing participants in familiar surroundings whilst carrying out familiar activities, as well as making observations relating to behaviors and interactions.

Behaviors and experiences studied by ethnographers barely depart from how people routinely act and feel. As well as observing and participating, ethnographers interpret and share participants' experiences through the senses of touch, olfaction, and sound. Although ethnography heralds from anthropology, it has been used by psychologists in settings as diverse as gymnasia

(Bunsell, 2013), music festivals (McConnell, 2020) and migration detention centers (Esposito et al., 2021).

Setting, participants, and data collection

Nine adult volunteers in a community pet rescue center in the north of England participated in this study. The center is situated in a public park, surrounded by trees, away from busy roads, on the outskirts of a large city. It has separate enclosures for its population of two goats, four rabbits, thirteen chickens, and six ducks. The center is open to the public (free of charge) and the animals are visible for much of the day, although visitors are not permitted to enter animal enclosures.

Volunteer participants were recruited through a group e-mail sent to volunteers. From a sampling frame of 25 volunteers, nine (two males, seven females, whose names have been changed to protect anonymity) participated. Participants were drawn from various age ranges. Whilst exact ages were not recorded as this was not seen as relevant, the group included volunteers who were aged from their early twenties to beyond retirement age. Most volunteers had been in the role for over a year, and in some cases for more than 10 years. One volunteer was relatively new to the work. As with the age range, there was a wide range of experience in the volunteering role.

All were interviewed during daily duties such as chopping vegetables, feeding, and sweeping animal enclosures. Six participants were interviewed individually, whilst three were interviewed together during a shared shift. Each interview lasted approximately 1 hour. All interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed. Whilst interviewing, the researcher moved around with participants and gave a helping hand where appropriate (and where feasible), since the researcher was familiar with the tasks being carried out. As well as collecting interview data, first-hand observations of life at the community pet rescue center are reported to add detail to the paper. Hence, the data collected was primarily from open-ended interviews, conducted in a natural setting. To supplement these data, observations of daily routines were also recorded in field notes. Some of these observations are referred to in the analysis section, for context.

Reflexivity statement

My interest in psychological wellbeing and HAI extends beyond the academic. I began working voluntarily in a community pet rescue center after the COVID-19 pandemic. Besides finding this work personally fulfilling, my (ongoing) volunteering has enabled me to conduct this study.

Data analysis

Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyze interview transcripts. IPA allows flexibility and engagement with lived experiences and is suitable for smaller participant groups with overlapping life experiences (Smith et al., 2022). The analysis adhered to a stepped model, involving; (i) reading/rereading interview transcripts; (ii) listening to original recordings (iii) taking exploratory notes; (iv) converting notes into experiential statements (summarizing meanings in short textual segments); (v) clustering/naming statements for individual participants; (vi) developing convergent themes across participant transcripts (Smith et al., 2022). Data interpretations were shared with participants on request.

Ethical approval

The project adhered to the ethical clearance procedures of the university and was approved by the Health and Education Research Ethics and Governance Committee, Manchester Metropolitan University (approval number 57,461). All participants provided informed consent for their participation in this study.

Results

The analysis produced four themes. These are outlined in [Table 1](#) (with subthemes) and explained in subsequent sections.

(1) Holistic, individual care

Animals were treated as individuals with specific characters and tastes. This theme is about how animals are treated as individuals by the volunteers, according to what are perceived as their unique personalities, individual tastes and traits. Volunteers reported being aware of unique abilities and limitations of animals' bodies and adapted care accordingly. As part of this holistic, individual care, volunteers looked out for physical and behavioral signs of distress or illness, such that for these volunteers, care superseded feeding and cleaning to include affection and companionship. Overall, this theme relates to the development of empathy for each animal's uniqueness. This theme produced four subthemes.

(1a) Individual characters and tastes

Interacting closely with animals over a prolonged period helped volunteers build up individualized stories and character profiles of every chicken, goat, and rabbit (quotes 1–4, [Table 1](#)), typically related to perceived personality traits (stubbornness, affection, aggressiveness) and idiosyncratic food preferences. It was common to hear phrases such as “they’ve all got separate personalities” (Ann), or “these two are very fussy” (Al). This supports findings

Table 1. Data themes and examples.

Theme	Subtheme	Description	Examples
1. Holistic, individual care	1a. Individual characters and tastes	Animals treated as individuals, according to what are perceived as their unique personalities and individual tastes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) That myth of 'Oh they'll eat anything' is completely untrue. They're very fussy. If stuff goes on the ground they tend not to eat even the things that they like. They'll eat from a nice silver bowl (Alan) (2) You get really close to all the animals here, and they're all got separate personalities, especially there's a duck called Lilly which is really sweet (Ann) (3) Yeah, they've definitely got two different personalities. Candall's a little bit more confident and I just think Frodo's cheeky (Ann) (4) They've all got their own personalities, and it might be totally food orientated, but when you walk up and they all recognize you and they come running, it feels really special (Pat)
	1b. Understanding little bodies	Volunteers are aware of the unique abilities, limitations and capacities of animals' bodies and care for them accordingly	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Don't squeeze them. Keep their wings nice and tucked in so they don't flap around and get them hurt. Lilly is really good because she will let you pick her up (Heather) (2) With the ducks it's a lot easier from behind because they can only see out the sides, so they can't really see unless they're turning the head round (Heather) (3) Getting the beak open and trying to get meds down is more difficult with a duck than with here because they've got such a long beak (Lisa) (4) You need a lot of maintenance on the hooves to keep them trimmed down. It can get soil and twigs, and stuff stuck in the cavity in the middle. You've got to get a brush and sweep out all the debris (Pat)
	1c. Beyond sustenance	Care goes beyond feeding and cleaning and includes affection and companionship	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Sometimes I'll do food, sometimes I'll do cleaning, but we'll always do fuss (Al) (2) As long as you have fed, watered and cleaned the animals you can spend as much time as you like with them (Al) (3) They don't actually need this food I'm prepping here. But I think life would be pretty boring if we only had just exactly what we needed, not what we fancied (Ann) (4) The love and the affection that goes into looking after the animals. People feel so strongly. They will do anything for them. They go above and beyond (Heather)
2. Volunteer resilience	1d. Vigilance and observation	Volunteers look out for physical and behavioural signs of distress or illness	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) I think the chickens can have pomegranate, but it would be something I Google before I give it to them (Al) (2) They only have half a banana each because they're on a diet. They both have arthritis, so we need to keep an eye on the weight (Ann) (3) Everything in moderation and making sure we keep an eye on the, you know, their poops and their general behavior (Pat) (4) These eggs actually are real good sign, that all is well with them (Kay)
	2a. Therapeutic rewards outweigh physical challenges and threats of the work	Therapeutic space and animal happiness outweigh challenges of the work	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) I love spending time with animals, even in the pouring rain or in the snow in the winter, it doesn't matter how much I look out the window and think, I don't want to go, I always feel great afterwards. The animals are like therapy. And getting outdoors, as much as you can, is another form of therapy, isn't it? It's really rewarding (Al) (2) I do work 9 to 5, so it's like, why do I do this? But then I get here and it's worth; they're all happy, and then that makes me happy (Mary) (3) It's brilliant for just for being outside. Sometimes it's just nice to come in and see the animals. And that's fantastic for mental health, at least for mine (Heather) (4) On a cold day or a wet day, it's not so inviting. But the animals are just so great. It's just nice to be able to interact with them. Really, because there's not many places where you can get up close and personal with goats and ducks (Lisa)
3. Communities and relationships	2b. Haptic rewards outweigh physical threat	Physical contact and intimacy with the animals outweigh physical dangers they pose	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) They will happily climb all over you if you give them the chance (Heather) (2) The year I joined Frodo was really poorly. We had to come in and force feed him with a pipe down his throat, which was a very interesting experience. Ultimately, he was fine, but I missed away with a big lump on my head. Some people are a little bit wary of him, but if you just take the time to get to know him, he's lovely. He's just a sensitive little chap (Al) (3) They can seem a little bit daunting because they're quite big, but they're just really funny (Ann) (4) Some people are a bit intimidated. He'll sort of try to on and try and bite. He'll chase after them and stuff. I think he's just testing the boundaries. If you don't show fear, you'll be absolutely fine. It's the ones that go, oh, get away from me. You know, he loves that because he thinks he's won. But this falls in just a cuddle monster (Pat)
	3a. Animal communities and relationships	Animal group dynamics and integration are part of the caring experience	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Their lives are far more intricate than you ever gave them credit for. They are social hierarchies. They have fall-outs and a proper little social life. It's really fascinating to see. We're going through drama with Rita at the moment. For some reason she's getting bullied. I don't know what she's doing or what's changed, but we have to keep an eye on her and we'll keep us separate if needs be (Al) (2) There's a little bit of rivalry. I think it's a love hate relationship. They do this thing where they swap with each other sometimes. They seem to know each other. Read each other's minds (Ann) (3) At the minute we need to quarantine them, because they've been kept in an enclosure where they've been mixing and sharing food and water with the wild birds. They're the big carriers of bird flu. We have to quarantine them in here for a couple of weeks before we introduce them to the rest of the flock (Pat) (4) We'll pick a couple of the more dominant ones and the females that are at the top of the pecking order and bring them in here to introduce them to these girls, leave them, supervised, for 20 minutes. If it all looks quite calm and nobody's getting attacked, we'll bring them across and introduce them to the rest. You bring the dominant ones out so that they're on unfamiliar territory and less likely to defend their patch against any newcomers. (Pat)
	3b. A voluntary community of practice and support	The volunteer community of practice provides a sense of belonging, despite little face-to-face interaction	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) You don't always see everyone because you've got certain volunteers on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. We're rarely ever all together. There can be volunteers here for years and you won't necessarily have met them. (Al) (2) I like working even with the people I don't get to see. Personally, for myself, I don't get to see very many people during my day. I'm live on my own. So, you know, it can get quite quiet (Heather) (3) I've been volunteering at Pets Corner since 2013 when the council first sort of stepped away. A group of us formed a committee to try and keep the place running (Pat) (4) The council said it could no longer be maintained. A group of residents decided to take it on. It's been maintained ever since then by volunteers (Alan)

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Theme	Subtheme	Description	Examples
4. Porous boundaries and strong connections	4a. The animals are like us	Experiential similarities between humans and animals	<p>(1) Until Covid I've never had long hair and never had a beard. So, I thought I might as well go goat like (Alan)</p> <p>(2) You and I would be bored if we had the same thing every day. I'm sure it's the same for the rabbits as well (Pat)</p> <p>(3) I'm not this meticulous with my own food. They eat far better than I do. And far more sabbids (Al)</p> <p>(4) The fruit and veggies that we give to the animals I would happily eat myself (Heather)</p>
	4b. The animals are like our pets	Community petcare is like caring for domestic pets	<p>(1) I've taken several hens home and accommodated them in my kitchen. I've had Victoria, who was poorly and Dolores to be a friend for her because hens can be miserable on their own. I had Coco Pops because her feet were painful. The female bunnies stayed with me so that I could give them their meds and keep an eye on them, make sure their stitches were okay and not infected (Lisa)</p> <p>(2) We used to have a rabbit. She was a girl. I thought she was a boy when we got her, so we called her Harry, but she turned out to be a girl. She was similar to these ones. She had floppy ears like Casper. She was a Dutch top, Big and brown. Just as cute (Lara)</p> <p>(3) We're going to ask the volunteers to nick names for them. Luna and Daisy are favourite at the moment (Pat)</p> <p>(4) You get quite upset if somebody dies. It's like losing one of your own pet (Pat)</p>

showing how animal care work produces understanding of individual animals which goes beyond a generalized knowledge of species. Arguably, volunteers become so familiar with individual animals that their knowledge is comparable to that which parents have of their children (Hui Gan et al., 2020). This tendency to treat animals with a degree of individuality that blurs boundaries between animal care and parenting was observed in ethnographic research with Melanesian women who suckle pigs with their breasts, give them names, and refer to them as their own children (Hurn, 2012).

(1b) Understanding little bodies

Intimate, embodied knowledge was accumulated through handling little (or bigger, in the case of goats) bodies routinely. Volunteers developed nuanced understandings of hooves, beaks, and wings (quotes 5–8, Table 1), reflecting incremental learning. This “learning on the job” is an example of pre-cognitive, embodied knowledge, accumulated through repetitive practice (Ingold, 2000), rather than the formal instruction that veterinary practitioners receive. Making allowances for capacities and vulnerabilities of individual bodies is part of the daily animal care work routine. For example, during my fieldwork, I saw makeshift ramps set up to help individual ducks with sore legs to access their bathing pond. This subtheme was also illustrated by volunteers’ descriptions of how, through trial and error, they learned safe methods to pick up chickens and ducks (quotes 5–6, Table 1). This accumulated awareness of bodily needs, sensations, and limitations arising from repeated exposure has previously been reported by jockeys who learn horses’ capabilities through daily handling (Jackman et al., 2014), and by a partially sighted researcher who grew accustomed to the embodied habits of a guide dog (Healey & Michalko, 2021).

(1c) Beyond sustenance

Volunteers’ care levels transcended mere sustenance (quotes 9–12, Table 1), and extended to “fuss,” “love and affection”, and “spending time” with the animals. It was typical to hear about “affection that goes into looking after the animals” (Heather). Evidently, the volunteering experience amounts to more than just rescue and prolonging life. Animals were often fed unnecessary treats just to make their day more interesting (quote 11, Table 1). During fieldwork, I saw volunteers lingering to play with rabbits after they had been fed, echoing the findings of another phenomenological exploration of animal care in which participants spoke of unconditional love toward animals and a desire to please them, rather than just meet their basic needs (Jau & Hodgson, 2017). Exceeding mere sustenance reflects an animal care ethos which is designed to promote wellbeing, rather than mere survival.

(1d) Vigilance and observation

Vigilance and observation were central to the volunteer experience (quotes 13–16, Table 1). During my volunteer training, I shadowed a volunteer and was advised that my best resources for looking after animals were my eyes and

ears. Volunteers used patterns of egg laying, toiletry habits, and mobility as signs of individual health and illness (quote 16, [Table 1](#)). Google was also valuable for double-checking that chickens can have grapes, or that bananas do not aggravate arthritis or whether to be worried if a rabbit is spending a lot of time alone. Vigilance is a byword for effective animal care, enabling the detection, through everyday behavioral monitoring, of health and welfare. This resonates with findings from a recent study showing that chickens' contentment levels could reliably be detected by participants with no prior training by listening to recordings before and after feeding (McGrath et al., 2024).

(2) Volunteer resilience

This theme is about how challenges faced by volunteering were outweighed by the rewards of working closely with animals in a peaceful, tranquil space. This enhanced subjectively experienced psychological resilience and well-being. The concept of psychological resilience relates to developing wellbeing in the face of challenges and risks (Ungar, 2011). Alongside components such as emotional stability and optimum problem-solving, psychological resilience is part of the broader category of psychological wellbeing (Cohen et al., 2016). People demonstrating psychological resilience report using their own physical, psychological, or social protective factors to overcome everyday challenges (Ungar, 2011). For pet rescue volunteers, these protective factors include feelings of group belongingness, pleasant surroundings, or the company of the animals. For example, they reported how the rewards of physical contact and intimacy with animals outweighed dangers posed by their size or aggression. Volunteers also reported how rewards of the therapeutic space and the animals' happiness levels outweighed physical challenges of the work. Overall, volunteer subjective psychological wellbeing was partly down to the rewards of the company of animals and the therapeutic space. This theme produced two subthemes.

2(a) Therapeutic rewards outweigh physical challenges

The protective factors of animal happiness and the therapeutic location of the center outweighed the challenge and inconvenience of working in cold, dark, smelly conditions, "come rain or shine" (Al). One volunteer highlighted the perils of "chopping vegetables when your hands are cold" (Lara) and used a hand warmer to combat freezing temperatures. Making the animals happy and the tranquil, therapeutic space made the work "worth it" (Ann) and contributing to psychological wellbeing (quotes 17–20, [Table 1](#)). I heard several volunteers voice their gratitude for the outdoor, tranquil setting for enhancing their mood. The company of the animals compensated for the cold and wet (quote 20, [Table 1](#)). The protective benefit of therapeutic space is evidenced in quote 19 ([Table 1](#)). The transformative effect of HAI in therapeutic space has been explored in relation to the practice of care farming (Gorman & Cacciatore, 2020), where animal care in therapeutic settings is

explicitly used to help build psychological resilience. As reflected in the presented study, Gorman & Cacciatoe argue that peaceful, sensuously rewarding spaces, whose effects are augmented by HAI, allow people to build resilience as they “navigate and negotiate adverse contexts and access support in a manner and space in which they feel comfortable” (2020, p. 6).

2(b) Haptic rewards outweigh physical threats

The embodied protective factor of physical contact outweighed physical threats of bulky, boisterous, or “pecky” animals. Ankle pecking bantam cocks and hefty, horned goats can be physically challenging. I was shown several bruises acquired by volunteers attempting to administer medication (quote 22, Table 1), but the affection received generally outweighed these challenges (quotes 21–24, Table 1). The enhancement of psychological wellbeing from physical contact with animals is illustrated in the finding that stroking pets (even snakes) can help to reduce stress and blood pressure levels (Allen et al., 2001). Unconditional love and physical contact derived from animal company has been identified as a positive factor for psychological wellbeing (Jau & Hodgson, 2017).

(3) Communities and relationships

This theme is about the role played intersubjectivity and group dynamics in reported psychological wellbeing among volunteers. Intersubjectivity occurs when individuals attribute intentionality to others. It has been observed in human–human interactions, in HAI and between animals (Hurn, 2012). In other words, both animals and humans are social beings with awareness of others’ intentions. For the volunteers, both their observations of animal–animal dynamics, and their own sense of belongingness, were positively experienced in this regard. Observing animal–animal relationships was key to the volunteer experience, as was the experience of belonging to a volunteer community. This theme produced two subthemes.

3(a) Animal communities and relationships

Besides investing in them individually, volunteers engaged with animals’ “social hierarchies, fall outs and social life” (Alan). They had detailed knowledge of their friendships, rivalries, and support networks (quotes 25–28, Table 1). Quote 28 (Table 1) describes complex hierarchies in the duck community during the integration of two newcomers. Most volunteers observed animals’ communal habits and developing affiliations. During fieldwork, I followed the story of Lilly’s “intro-duck-tion” (Mary) to the rest of her “new mates” (Ann) following a period of isolation during a bird flu outbreak. Volunteer awareness of animal intersubjectivities echoes findings from an ethnography exploring cat–cat interactions in a rescue shelter, wherein care workers observed affiliative patterns as well as individual welfare (Alger & Alger, 1999). It also reflects a trend toward researching ecological (as well as individual) animal behaviors in the field of anthrozoology (Hurn, 2012). For example, a recent study has shown that even traditionally solitary octopus

species engage in social behaviors relating to leadership, sociality, and conflict management (Sampaio et al., 2024).

3(b) A volunteer community of practice and support

Volunteers formed a community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), learning animal care in situ whilst simultaneously working for the continuation of the rescue center itself (quotes 29–32, Table 1). The center formed amidst public funding cuts and relies on the goodwill of volunteers and public donations (quote 32, Table 1). Animal care projects strengthen communities and connect people who might feel socially isolated, for example among dog owners whose friendships bloom on daily walks (Enders-Slegers & Hediger, 2019). The present study suggests that this can also happen in the voluntary animal care sector. I heard several volunteers praise the rescue center for offering social connections, even among volunteers who spend more time with the animals than with each other (quote 30, Table 1). Typically working alone (or in pairs), most volunteers only saw each other occasionally. Arguably, the volunteers constitute an imagined community (Anderson, 1983), rarely meeting face-to-face, yet feeling a sense of belonging through shared superordinate goals relating to animal welfare. WhatsApp, Facebook groups, a message book and chalkboard in the supplies shed further sustained connectedness. This subtheme suggests that workplace belongingness is not reliant on face-to-face interaction (Mangaleswaran, 2017). For these volunteers, arguably face-to-face contact with the animals was more important than seeing other volunteers, which sufficed as a remote protective factor.

(4) Porous boundaries, strong connections

This theme is about challenging categorical distinctions between humans and animals, and between community animal care and domestic pet care. First, this theme highlights reported similarities between human experience and animal experience. Second, it highlights reported similarities between community animal care and domestic pet care. This theme reflects porous boundaries and strong connections between human and animal identities, and between community care and domestic care practices. This theme produced two subthemes.

4(a) The animals are a lot like us

Several volunteers empathized with animals in relation to living conditions or dietary preferences (quotes 29–32, Table 1). One participant even said he was starting to look like a goat (quote 33, Table 1). Volunteers regularly projected their tastes onto the animals (quote 36, Table 1). These connections challenge individualizing, separating narratives relating to humans and animals (Thrift, 2007). Human-animal comparisons and identifications suggest that animals we connect with can become extensions of the self (Preto-Previde et al., 2022), or even role models. Several volunteers said that the animals ate more healthily than they did (quotes 35, 36, Table 1). Human identification with animals is well documented in anthropological literature in relation to the

concept of totemism (Lee et al., 2012); a form of empathy in which people develop a kinship with plants or animals. Identifying with animals at a psychological level reflects feelings of connectedness and similarity which can be associated with attributing human personality characteristics to animals (Amiot et al., 2020); a very common practice among the volunteers.

4(b) We treat them like our pets

Several comparisons were made between rescue animals and volunteers' own pets (quotes 37–70, Table 1). Furthermore, the rescue center's spatial boundaries were frequently extended into the domestic domain. Volunteers regularly took the animals home for extra care (quote 37, Table 1).

Whilst strong attachments between humans and domestic animals are well-documented (Preto-Previde et al., 2022), there is less research relating to human-animal attachments in community settings. However, emotional attachments evidenced by separation anxiety were observed in people with disabilities in relation to assistance dogs (Kwong & Bartholomew, 2011). Findings from the present study support the view that long-term HAI in the community can lead to animals being treated not just as pets, but as friends who are “credited with human feelings and responses, spoken to and expected to understand, given names” (Ingold, 2021, p. 90). Arguably there is scope for further research into this boundary-blurring phenomenon of domestic and community-based HAI, and the pros and cons of developing strong attachments in HAI in community, disability or workplace settings (Koralesky et al., 2023).

Discussion

This section briefly reviews main themes and subthemes and highlights how these help us to understand the relationship between HAI and psychological wellbeing.

The first theme, holistic, individualized care, has four subthemes. First, each animal was acknowledged as having unique characteristics and tastes which affected how they were cared for. Arguably, animals were treated as though they were persons (Hurn, 2012), where a person is an animate, self-conscious being with individuality and intentionality (de Castro, 1998). Besides adopting distinct care strategies for chickens, goats and rabbits, individuals were treated differently due to injuries, advancing age or a need for integration into a group. Phenomenologically speaking, animals acquired their individuality through everyday interactions with volunteers. Second, care related to limitations of each animal body, using corporeal knowledge which was accumulated through routine handling, stroking, and lifting. Third, animal care exceeded basic feeding and cleaning, extending into “fuss,” “playing”, and “spending time.” Fourthly, care was characterized by vigilance and observation. Animals

were looked after, not just fed and watered. Volunteers used their eyes and ears to look out for signs of distress. According to this holistic, individualized animal care regimen, time spent with the animals was effective, pleasurable, and informative for the volunteers (Jau & Hodgson, 2017). In relation to psychological wellbeing, pleasure derived from being with the animals reflected a state of flow for the volunteers. Flow involves losing oneself in an activity, be it walking, painting or enjoying the company of rabbits and goats, and can bring a deep sense of satisfaction (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Flow derives from activities which are immersive, challenging, and educational. The enjoyment felt by the volunteers, and the development of empathy for each animal's uniqueness, suggests that animal care is conducive to flow and enhanced psychological wellbeing (Meyer et al., 2016).

The second theme, volunteer resilience, has two subthemes. First, the therapeutic space and happiness of the animals were protective factors for the volunteers, compensating for challenges such as early starts, cold weather and smelly working conditions. Second, the corporeal experience of stroking and petting compensated for physical threats like sharp beaks, teeth, bruising horns, and bulky bodies. This supports the view that caring for distressed, abandoned, or injured animals raises carers' psychological resilience levels, helping them overcome challenges and develop qualities such as perspective taking and sensorial awareness (Hernandez-Wolfe & Acevedo, 2021).

The third theme, communities and relationships, has two themes. First, the importance of relationships within animal communities was acknowledged. Volunteers engaged with animals' friendships, affiliations, and rivalries, developing detailed knowledge of animals' social dramas and group dynamics. Observing animals in groups, seeing them "get along," produced positive responses in volunteers, supporting the existing finding that close-up observation of animals' affiliative behaviors (for example in a zoo) can lift participants' moods (Luebke et al., 2016). Second, a sense of belonging derived from membership of the volunteer team, supporting the view that contributing to animal care at the community level benefits psychological wellbeing at the individual level (Brown et al., 2003, Jau & Hodgson, 2017).

The fourth theme, porous boundaries, strong connections, has two subthemes. First, volunteers made comparisons between human and animal tastes and habits, endorsing the view that people who identify or show solidarity with animals also experience elevated levels of psychological wellbeing, pro-sociality, and socially inclusive behavioral intention. It was also noted that the spatial boundaries of the rescue center were fluid, with animals often taken home for added care, indicating a willingness among volunteers to override the boundary between community and domestic spaces of care, benefitting animal health and providing company, structure, and enjoyment for some volunteers (Jau & Hodgson, 2017).

Limitations, contributions, and future research

One potential limitation of the study is that ethnography adopts an ideographic epistemology, seeking detailed insights into meanings and behaviors of specific groups, and so thematic findings may not easily generalize to other settings. However, both the methodological approach and some thematic outcomes from this study could inform future research. In terms of the method, there is little existing ethnographic psychological research investigating HAI in community settings (Jau & Hodgson, 2017), despite the method's suitability for self-contained, community-based, non-domestic animal care settings. Ethnography enables researchers to situate themselves in working environments and participate in daily activities. Arguably, the existing anthropological ethnographic literature around this topic (Hurn, 2012) could be supplemented by more psychological research using ethnography, and this study could provide a valuable methodological template for exploring psychological factors relating to working in spaces such as stables, farms, and other animal sanctuaries. In terms of themes, this study uncovered questions around HAI which could be further researched. For example, participants reacted positively when observing animal–animal interactions. The phenomenon of animal carers' interacting with and integrating groups of animals is under-researched (Luebke et al., 2016), compared with the field of individual pet care. What we might call ecologies of care, where attention is paid to groups of animals getting along, newcomers being integrated, issues of segregation and affiliation, permeated the interviews in this study and my own experience as a volunteer. I suggest that ecologies of care might be integrated into future research on HAI, into training for volunteers in the third sector, and even into teaching about animal welfare in schools. This would broaden our understanding of animal care training and animal welfare teaching toward engaging with AAI (animal–animal interaction) as well as with looking after individual animals. This ecologies of care approach would arguably improve animal welfare and enhance the volunteer experience in the third sector. Furthermore, more knowledge about animal group dynamics would benefit potential future volunteers who do not own individual pets, whose own experience of HAI is likely to be in the community sector. After all, for many people in rented accommodation who lack a garden, owning a pet is not an option, so more knowledge about community animal care would be desirable and may encourage more of them to volunteer in the third sector, where (and I speak from experience here), many more volunteers are needed.

Another limitation of the study relates to the unrepresentative participant group. The pet rescue center where the research took place has around 25 volunteers. However, during the fieldwork period, volunteer turnover was relatively high. The participants in this study were relatively long-term volunteers, so cannot be considered as representative. Consequently, there were few

opportunities to interview short-term volunteers for whom the rewards of the work did not compensate for the challenges. This is an interesting question for future research. Previous studies suggest that volunteer-attrition in the animal care sector is due to compassion fatigue (Jacobs & Reese, 2021; Monaghan et al., 2024). However, in this study, most attrition occurred among newly recruited volunteers. This suggests that more research is required on reasons for volunteer attrition, or training requirements, among newly recruited animal-care workers. This would be valuable for those animal care projects which find it challenging to keep new recruits.

A third limitation of this study relates to when the research was conducted. Fieldwork took place shortly after the lifting of COVID-19 lockdown restrictions in the UK. The rescue center was encountering a challenging time, and this influenced volunteers' responses. For example, experiences of psychological wellbeing were often attributed to having the freedom to go outside and meet people, rather than to the particular appeals of working in animal care. Whilst this accident in history could not have been avoided, it would be valuable to see more research of this nature in the future, looking at the health benefits of HAI during less extraordinary times.

The literature on psychological wellbeing and HAI primarily focuses on domestic pet ownership or clinical interventions. This study extends the under-researched field of community animal care by exploring the benefits of HAI with participants drawn from a sampling frame who have not necessarily previously experienced mental health challenges, who are not necessarily pet owners, and who are not in clinical settings. Established research relating to the psychological benefits of HAI has been conducted with people in challenging circumstances, who may be incarcerated (Wilson, 2023), socially isolated (Brooks et al., 2018), or experiencing depression (Peel, 2024). Arguably, the setting and method for the present study might be transferable to other researchers wishing to broaden the scope of the field.

Conclusions

The overall impression of the subjective experiences of the pet rescue volunteers was positive, showing several beneficial effects to psychological wellbeing. Volunteers cared for the animals as individuals with nuanced needs and characteristics yet were attentive to animal–animal relationships and interactions. Awareness of individual animals' stories, their communities and interactions, and of the supportive nature of the volunteer community itself, all contributed to the rounded volunteer experience. Furthermore, despite the physical challenges of working with boisterous animals in often inclement conditions, the haptic rewards and pleasant company offered by animals were seen as more than adequate reward. Whilst these findings were drawn from a single location, the methodological approach and resulting themes

contribute to our understanding of the benefits of animal care in the third sector and provide the basis for future research and training.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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