Animal Studies Journal

Volume 11 | Number 1 Article 3

2022

Mutual Rescue: Disabled Animals and Their Caretakers

Lynda Birke
University of Chester

Lori Gruen
Wesleyan University

Follow this and additional works at: https://ro.uow.edu.au/asj

Part of the Agricultural and Resource Economics Commons, Animal Studies Commons, Art and Design Commons, Art Practice Commons, Australian Studies Commons, Communication Commons, Creative Writing Commons, Digital Humanities Commons, Education Commons, English Language and Literature Commons, Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons, Film and Media Studies Commons, Fine Arts Commons, Legal Studies Commons, Linguistics Commons, Philosophy Commons, Political Science Commons, Public Health Commons, Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons, Sociology Commons, and the Theatre and Performance Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Birke, Lynda and Gruen, Lori, Mutual Rescue: Disabled Animals and Their Caretakers, *Animal Studies Journal*, 11(1), 2022, 37-62.
Available at:https://ro.uow.edu.au/asj/vol11/iss1/3

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Mutual Rescue: Disabled Animals and Their Caretakers

Abstract

In this paper, we explore how caretakers experience living with disabled companion animals. Drawing on interviews, as well as narratives on websites and other support groups, we examine ways in which caretakers describe the lives of animals they live with, and their various disabilties. The animals were mostly dogs, plus a few cats, with a range of physical disabilities; almost all had been rehomed, often from places specializing in homing disabled animals.

Three themes emerged from analysis of these texts: first, respondents drew heavily on the common narrative of disabled individuals as heroes, often noted in disability rights literature – while simultaneously drawing on, and challenging, ideas of disability as incapacity. The second theme was love and empathy. Several of our interviewees spoke of empathy being enhanced thro

We discuss these caretakers' stories of animal disability in relation to both studies of human-animal relationships, and to disability rights, as well as to ideas about what constitutes care. What these narratives emphasize is a particular sense of sharing and reciprocity, felt through the body, especially when caretakers spoke of their own ill-health. They saw disability – the animals' or their own – not as limiting, but as enabling both to flourish within caring relationships

Keywords

disability, animals

Mutual Rescue: Disabled Animals and Their Caretakers

Lynda Birke

University of Chester

Lori Gruen

Wesleyan University

Abstract: In this paper, we explore how caretakers experience living with disabled companion animals. Drawing on interviews, as well as narratives on websites and other support groups, we examine ways in which caretakers describe the lives of animals they live with, and their various disabilities. The animals were mostly dogs, plus a few cats, with a range of physical disabilities; almost all had been rehomed, often from places specializing in homing disabled animals.

Three themes emerged from analysis of these texts: first, respondents drew heavily on the common narrative of disabled individuals as heroes, often noted in disability rights literature – while simultaneously drawing on, and challenging, ideas of disability as incapacity. The second theme was love and empathy. Several of our interviewees spoke of empathy being enhanced through their own histories of disability or illness. Because of those parallels, many felt it was a case of humans and animals rescuing each other. The third theme was care. This includes providing animals with technological assistance, such as wheelchairs, as well as taking care of animals' daily needs. But respondents also saw the care as reciprocal, as one caring for the other.

We discuss these caretakers' stories of animal disability in relation to both studies of human-animal relationships, and to disability rights, as well as to ideas about what constitutes care. What these narratives emphasize is a particular sense of sharing and reciprocity, felt through the body, especially when caretakers spoke of their own ill-health. They saw disability – the animals' or their own – not as limiting, but as enabling both to flourish within caring relationships.

Keywords: disability, animals

> When I first met him, he was a very depressed little dog… it would take time… And seeing Dan transform into the happy dog he is today … gives me hope that as time goes by some of my own scars from a previous life with an abuser could also be healed. (Della, research interview)[1]

An internet search of ‘animals’ and ‘disability’ leads to many pages highlighting various roles animals play for people – as guide dogs, assistance animals or riding for the disabled. But what about the animals themselves? While benefits of living and working with other animals for humans with disabilities are well-documented (Gee and Mueller; Rodriguez et al.), there has been less focus on what these animals experience, though that is now changing (see Bremhorst et al; Serpell et al.).

There has, however, been another omission. Animals who are themselves disabled have largely been absent – until a recent surge of images of disabled animals on social media (Houser; Taylor). Images of dogs on three, or even two legs, or farm animals whose lives have been saved by sanctuaries – and prosthetics – seem to pop up regularly, accompanied by narratives emphasizing how happy/heroic the animals are.

Their absence from scholarly literature reflects negative attitudes toward both disability and animals, combined with often unacknowledged beliefs that some lives are disposable. Many disabled animals are euthanized, if the disability is deemed too difficult for human caretakers, or would cause animal suffering. These animals are sometimes seen as pitiable, with lives not worth living. At the same time, other animals – the ones in the social media images – are depicted as heroic in their abilities to overcome or happily deal with their conditions. Both perceptions are widespread with regard to humans with disabilities too. To be sure, any individual of whatever species trying to contend with non-accessible urban spaces, for example, may indeed have to overcome adversity. But what these narratives omit is the relationships that are formed between humans and other animals: as Della speaks about her blind dog, Dan, the relationship not only benefitted Dan, but Della too, in dealing with her own PTSD. For both, the relationship was meaningful, helping each to overcome obstacles.

In her book *Beasts of Burden*, Sunaura Taylor describes the predominant view of disability as one that emphasizes 'personal tragedy'. In contrast, she insightfully laments how some disabled individuals are seen as special, as inspirational. And so too with animals. Taylor emphasizes connections between thinking about animals and about disability. Acknowledging that the word 'disability' is specifically human, her interest is in exploring how 'disability' impacts nonhuman animals, and how they themselves experience it. She writes:

> … it is not only disabled animals who could be called crips. All animals – both those we human beings would call disabled and those we would not – are devalued and abused for many of the same basic reasons disabled people are. They are understood as incapable, as lacking in the various abilities and capacities that have long been held to make human lives uniquely valuable and meaningful. (43)

For some time, a central part of the critique offered by the disability rights movement has been to emphasize the social/cultural construction of disability, rather than a medicalized focus on bodily impairment (Goodley). There is now considerable literature in critical disability studies, which moves away from overly deterministic medical diagnoses and analyses, instead emphasizing more nuanced theorizations of embodiment and corporeality (Garland-Thompson, Hall, Shildrick). For example, there is a deep and increasingly familiar critique of conceptualizing disability as rooted in 'faulty bodies' because it downplays how physical environments themselves produce impairment; moving around cities, entering buildings, getting onto buses, are all activities that can be very difficult for some disabled people, because buses and buildings simply are not designed for diverse bodies. Some of those working in critical disability studies argue that disability itself is the product of power relations (Tremain), meaning that disability, as well as discussions of disability, cannot be considered without simultaneously attending to social and political arrangements and distributions of power. Disability must be understood as relational, historical, and structural, which means that thinking of disablement or impairment simply as describing individual bodies at particular times is problematic. And this sort of individualization, as Taylor reminds us, removes us from the networks of social care that make all of our lives possible.

Unsurprisingly, individualized discourse informs descriptions of disabled animals. Here too the emphasis is on bodies not working as they should; legs amputated, unseeing eyes, bladders that fail to empty. And spaces which are difficult to navigate for humans who are not able-bodied may well be difficult to navigate for disabled nonhumans already potentially disadvantaged by living in human environments. Going out for walks with an incontinent dog or one with cognitive disabilities poses other challenges, limiting where the human/dog dyad can go. If the terrain we must navigate disables many of us (for reasons of less able bodies, temporary illness, or inaccessible urban spaces), then narratives of animals 'overcoming the odds' are also predictable. But this framing makes those who do manage to navigate ableist spaces seem special and those individuals, and their disabilities, become foregrounded. Such exceptionalism is set against a background in which billions of animals are disabled by human actions – in agribusiness, for example (Taylor, *Beasts of Burden*). We directly produce animals who are disabled (in comparison with their wild cousins) and indirectly by damaging and polluting their environments.

Despite their growing presence on social media, disabled animals remain largely hidden from view, including within academic inquiry. However, Taylor's work has opened up the conversation and more scholarship exploring animality, disability, and madness is emerging (for example, Gruen and Probyn-Rapsey; Jenkins et al.; Lundblad; Tremain, 'Ableism, Animals and Apparatuses'). In this paper, we seek to contribute to this growing scholarship by focusing on companion animals who are disabled, and to ask: who are they – at least as perceived by the humans they live with? How are their lives framed within prevailing narratives of value and meaning? And what questions do they pose for animal studies? We are not primarily concerned here with ethical questions raised by taking care of disabled animals, although we allude to some of these. Rather, we focus on stories people tell, about living with or adopting animals with some form of disability. Stories matter: they 'help people recognize that the lives of other animals follow strong lines, representing a subjective identity. One way in which we can come to appreciate their subjectivity, therefore, is through telling their stories as best we can' (Kheel 249).

Although we met and observed several disabled animals during this project, learning directly from them was not possible, as we had little opportunity to spend time with them. So, we turned to accounts from people closest to them – their guardians, the people perhaps best placed to tell their stories 'as best they can'. To explore the stories of disabled animals' lives, we drew on interviews with caretakers, and commentary on social media support groups. We wanted to know how caretakers perceive their animals: how do they perceive 'disability' in the animal's life? Our aim is to narrate stories of animals (and human-animal relationships) who are variously seen as pitiable and/or heroic, and to consider how their humans understand and experience their shared lives. This, then, is about how these guardians navigate narratives of animality and disability in daily dealings with their companion animals.

Who are they, the animals and their people?

To begin this exploratory study, we sought volunteers, recruited via websites and groups specializing in rehoming disabled companion animals. Participants lived in different places: mostly the UK, but also some in Romania, Bulgaria, Tunisia, France, Spain, the UAE, and Thailand. We interviewed twenty-one people, three men and 18 women, although the number of animals involved was greater. Interviews were direct, via skype or through iterative written messages. We also drew on commentaries on dedicated websites and Facebook pages.[2]

Some respondents stumbled into having a disabled pet by accident, perhaps after spotting a picture on the internet, or because a non-disabled pet had become sick or injured. Others seemed actively to seek out disabled animals, to ensure that these animals were 'given a chance'. This exploratory study was a limited sample, in that it relied on voluntary contribution (although no-one refused to speak about their disabled animals when asked), and these were people who self-identified as having an animal who is disabled – one whom 'other people did not want'. This excludes people with disabled animals but who do not identify with the support groups and online communities. It also excludes people who consider disabled animals to have less valuable or happy lives.

There are many sanctuaries providing homes for disabled animals, of many species.[3] Here, we focus on companion animals – mostly dogs, who are brought into the home, and whose care becomes part of everyday life within the household. Reported physical disabilities varied, from very minor (loss of an ear, with minor effects on communication, according to the guardian), to some incapacity (loss of a leg; blindness) to more severe incapacities, such as paralysis and spinal damage, combined with incontinence. Some animals were born with their disabilities (for example, congenital blindness in dogs; cerebellar hypoplasia in cats); others acquired them, often due to road traffic accidents, and/or later amputation following injury.

Companion animals used as assistants to people with disabilities tend to be specific breeds, or specific crosses; 'Guide Dogs', the UK organization dedicated to training and placing dogs, notes that Labrador and golden retrievers make excellent guide dogs, as do crosses between the two.[4] By contrast, the stories told here were of mixed (or unknown) breeds – 'mutts' or street dogs (see McHugh), often brought over from Eastern European countries. In her work on mutts, McHugh describes how they have often been represented as dog-in-the-street, roaming the neighbourhood – in contrast to the affluent homes where breed dogs might reside. The disabled dogs in these narratives were frequently described as having been subject to abuse, or to terrible street accidents in their countries of origin.

McHugh notes that mutts are aligned with forms of social oppression (around race, class and gender), and that 'the street stories and scenes represent the non-breed dog as part of a mixed community, living with – and not simply alongside – people and other animals' (169). The origin stories our respondents told, of rescuing badly injured dogs from other (poorer) countries, play on themes of othering; while the focus here is on animals with disabilities, it is noteworthy that there is a wider movement of animals from (for example) Romania or Thailand into wealthier countries like the UK – from street mutt to homed pet.[5]

Narratives: stories of animals/disability

We asked contributors to talk about living with their disabled animal: who was the animal? What was the extent of the disability – and did this, in fact, mean that the animal experienced

problems? What happened when they encountered other people, or other animals? How did they talk about – and care for – the animal? From examination of texts from interviews and relevant websites, three overarching (and overlapping) themes emerged.

1. A significant theme concerned human perceptions of disabled animals. Unsurprisingly, these draw on tensions between narratives of heroism – animals who 'overcome' – and those of deficiency, sometimes leading to hostility from others. While some caretakers claimed they would ignore hostility, it bothered others; the support of specialist groups and online communities mattered here.

2. Another theme focused on love, empathy, and building relationships. Nine respondents reported long-term illness, or physical disability (their own or a family member), which they saw as allowing greater empathy or sense of identification with the animal – or even, as some put it, that there was 'mutual rescue'. Caretakers/companions took pains to emphasize the strength of the relationship between themselves and their animals.

3. The final theme centred on care. This might include providing technological aids, from prostheses to wheelchairs. It might mean reorganizing physical space within the home. It often involved considerable work; thus, if for example the animal is incontinent, it might mean learning to express urine, or frequent cleaning up. It could also entail care and support experienced through social networks. But to talk about care also means to question what care means: is 'caring for' the animal enough?

1. Perceptions: From 'heroes' to being 'better off dead'

> …she's been on TV, and she is making people more aware of the fact that a disabled dog is not to be pitied, but to be loved and to be given freedom… She is and always will be one of the greatest inspirations in my life… A disabled dog does not consider himself to be disabled; they just carry on with life. (Judy, Facebook page)[6]

Judy speaks for most caretakers of disabled animals; these are, after all, people who willingly take on challenges of dealing with disability, who seek to portray their companion in a positive

light. They choose to find ways to make the animal's life in the household easier, from reorganizing spaces, to sourcing wheels. Judy speaks of how Vesper is 'an inspiration', how she is 'brave', not to be pitied. Here is a clear example of the overwhelming narrative of heroism: 'this dog has overcome so much', this cat is 'amazing'. These illustrate what Taylor describes as the 'supercrip' trope. She explains: 'Disabled people are supposed to find the courage to overcome their own personal limitations through strength of character rather than by overcoming discrimination and oppression… Anything a disabled person does, no matter how mundane or remarkable, is seen as amazing and inspirational' *(Beasts of Burden* 11*).*

Knowing that the interview aimed to explore how they lived with disabled animals, it is not surprising that respondents, too, used such terms. Yet despite these prevalent notions, none of the caretakers spoke of their *own* role in those terms; rather, taking in a disabled animal was portrayed as extending practices of care toward other companion animals in the home. They carefully emphasized that the animal was happy to 'just be a dog/cat', implying that the animal did not seem particularly bothered by having a physical disability. Rather, most respondents sought to emphasize their animals' capabilities: Dana reported for example that two of her cats had two legs amputated, but this seemed to have little effect on their mobility – 'both disabled kitties zoom around without too many issues'.

Respondents rarely portrayed their animals as suffering. That is, perhaps, unsurprising as they sought to emphasize the joys of living with them. Taylor points out, however, that 'While disability advocates have pushed away from narratives of suffering, it is everywhere within animal ethics scholarship' *(Beasts of Burden,* 43*).* That traditional animal ethics places great emphasis on suffering is certainly true, and it was an achievement to have people recognize that animals suffer. Utilitarian ethics generally focuses on suffering, both human and animal, and controversially, on the avoidance of suffering – even to the extent of advocating euthanasia to end suffering in some cases. But there is always more that matters in human and animal lives, even when those lives contain suffering. The experiences of disabled animals are only beginning to be explored within animal ethics and animal studies more broadly. How do the animals experience their lives? How do they experience themselves in social relations with non-disabled animals? Do they experience pain? Does pain affect their behaviour? Are they picked on by other

animals? Are they cared for by other animals? Though these are important questions, our respondents were keen to emphasize how their animals *enjoyed* their lives, how they got on well with other animals in the household, and about how much 'they have to give'.

In part, these stories draw on what might be termed rescue narratives – that is, that an animal has been saved from dire or painful situations. People who rehome animals such as dogs, cats, or horses typically draw on tales of rescue to a 'better life', positing the animals' supposed pasts against their present. This is a familiar story: 'the animal is better off now, in my care; he/she had a terrible past' (see Birke, Hockenhull and Creighton). For many of the animals described to us, this may well be true – some undoubtedly had histories of neglect and abuse, and were rescued in that sense.

The rescue narrative is enhanced by stories of epic journeys – not only in terms of rescue, but also sometimes of lengthy global travels. As we noted above, many of these animals were rehomed from other countries. Caretakers reported that conditions in countries of origin were 'terrible', with little or no animal welfare standards, and animals frequently abused. Thus, Veronica spoke about the difficulties of rehoming dogs from Romania or Bulgaria; these animals, she said, 'have bad, sometimes horrendous backstories, and it shows in them, they are mostly more terrified!' Moving companion animals between countries typically requires extensive paperwork and veterinary examination: it is, in effect a kind of 'animal trafficking with colonial connotations – dogs often come from the south and are rescued to the north' (Birke, Holmberg, and Thompson). Not only, then, is there othering centred on disability, but also geographical othering in these stories.

The trope of 'being exceptional' is an example of what has been called 'inspiration porn', a term referring to the way disabled people are seen as inspiring for doing things nondisabled people do routinely. And not only humans: Hamilton discusses similar uses of images of disabled animals, which fetishize them. She explains:

> Gawking at these disabled animals – and sharing their 'inspiring' stories (usually written by nondisabled humans) across social media – becomes a way for people who may not have significant personal experience with disability to engage with some common tropes

> about disability. Unfortunately, many of these … [images] … are still damaging… it is accepted – even encouraged – for nondisabled people to project these feelings about disabilities onto disabled animals. (Hamilton)

Not everyone emphasizes rescue or animal heroism, however. While the predominant trope in interviews was positive, several respondents pointed to negative attitudes other people have toward disabled animals. These negative attitudes apply not only to the animals, but also to their caretakers, who may be perceived as 'crazy' (to use an ableist term) for choosing a disabled pet (Chrulew). There may be misunderstandings too; Veronica recounted how she encountered hostility from someone at her vet practice, accusing her of abusing Patti because the dog could not use her back legs. Others spoke of comments along the lines of, 'is your dog lazy? Why doesn't the dog walk?' The questioners were, Veronica said, usually quite embarrassed when they were told. While those who take in disabled animals have strong, positive feelings for their own particular animal, it takes resilience for guardians to deal with others' hostility or incomprehension.

One powerful response to disabled animals, not unlike some prominent animal ethicists' response to severely disabled humans, is that the animal's life is not really worth living. 'Why do people euthanize dogs like me so readily? Two of my legs have stopped working but my mind is happy and healthy', writes a UK rescue centre for disabled animals on their webpage.[7] When Gemma arrived for an interview to discuss disabled dogs, she brought Don; he had both hindlegs amputated, but walked on his front legs, his rear end poised in the air. Gemma asked: 'isn't this quality of life for this dog? He hates wheels and does so well without them', she observed. Whatever their beliefs, guardians had to contend with how other people responded. Several spoke of overt hostility from others, including veterinarians: the animal would be 'better off dead', or has no 'quality of life'. As Milly – who was herself a wheelchair user – explained: 'The difficulty was in finding an understanding vet that gives these dogs a chance. I am so sick of hearing "what about quality of life?" I use a wheelchair, so I say, do you think I should be "put to sleep" too?'

The idea of 'mercy killing' or euthanasia is widespread, particularly with regard to animals (Taylor; Lorenzini). Taylor gives an example of a fox who was shot for reasons of 'mercy'; yet this animal, who had the same kind of disability that Taylor herself has, seemed to have managed perfectly well alone. The idea that disabled animals should not exist because they have a disability, she suggests, is driven by belief in 'survival of the fittest' in wild populations, a belief which 'negates the value and even the naturalness of such experiences as vulnerability, weakness, and interdependence' (26).

Cara has cared for disabled dogs for many years; she now runs a rescue organization for animals with disabilities, in the south of England. She argued that: 'Disabled animals don't have to die just because they are different… so many poor souls die because no one wants the responsibility and vet bills… I know without help from me these dogs don't stand a chance'. But she also noted that some dogs 'come here to die, especially puppies'. That is, animals produced through puppy mills, who are often diseased or have serious deformities. Yet they can outlive veterinary predictions. One of her dogs had hydrocephalus; the vet did not think she would survive to six months, yet she was still there at four years old.[8]

These are powerful motifs in caretakers' stories, and support groups' websites: the heroism/inspiration on the one hand, contrasted to negative evaluations of quality of life for disabled animals. But how are these different narratives mobilized? What do they accomplish?

Images in print and online media no doubt help to make animal disability better known, so that more animals are rehomed. At the same time, however, people involved with rehoming work are quick to recognize how such images can promote sympathy – and hence bring in much-needed revenue. As John Dalley, co-founder of the Soi Dog Foundation in Thailand, pointed out: 'you get more support from one sad story than when we talk about the problem [of overpopulation] … you see this outpouring of almost grief for, and wanting to help, the seriously disabled animals' (interview). Indeed, some people working with rehoming disabled animals have suggested that this growth in awareness contributes to abuses, with dogs/cats being maimed deliberately in order to rehome them more easily (Gemma, interview).

Both discourses of heroism, and those of (lesser) quality of life, serve also to bolster ideas of 'perfect bodies'. Rescue centres tell of animals with 'slight imperfections', or with specific disabilities, being overlooked by would-be adopters; even being black means dogs get overlooked in rescue kennels (Waldman). One new organization in the US, called 'The Functional Dog Collaborative', is furthering the discourse of the perfect body and 'perfect dog' by breeding 'healthy, behaviorally sound' dogs.[9] The idealization of 'perfect bodies' has been much criticized – notably by disability theorists, and feminists, among others. Writing during the height of the coronavirus pandemic, Taylor and Orning note the irony of this, at a time when our ideas about bodies and disease are so troubled. Even 'perfect' bodies have little resistance against viral foes.

The ideal of 'perfect bodies' is not just aesthetic: it also references capability. This is what several websites for disabled animal rescue seek to emphasize, when they refer to 'handi-capable' animals. In that sense, narratives of 'impaired' bodies fuel the idea of extending capability – not least by the use of prosthetics (see fig. 1). Shildrick notes that prosthetics have been used for a very long time to aid human mobility, and – increasingly – as forms of body enhancement, which challenge modernist ideas of corporeal boundaries. She notes that disabled bodies are enmeshed in connections of organic and inorganic (such as connection between amputated limb and artificial leg), as well as interconnections of human and non-human (such as the role played by assistance animals). In this sense, she suggests, all are forms of prostheses – extending capabilities – even the assistance animals, in the sense that they engage with 'the production of new forms of embodiment and desire, and mobilizing a particular performativity of the embodied self" (143). Besides being material artifacts then, prosthetics can be seen as embedded in wider social connections, which both extend corporeal possibilities and capabilities, and allow for the development of networks of care.

2. Understanding and 'love at first sight'

> I only have to look at him & he makes it all ok, watching him be a normal dog, the small things, running around the garden, loving his walks brings a smile to my face, he is an

inspiration, I do believe he should be an ambassador of disabled dogs because he has such a zest for life, he doesn't see himself as disabled. (Joanne, talking about Blueberry)[10]

Adopters often spoke of 'love at first sight' and particularly close relationships. Kate thus explained of her paraplegic dog, 'we fell in love with his gorgeous face and fighting spirit'. Echoing that theme, Jenny said 'I knew I had to have him' after seeing photos, admitting that 'I had no idea what I would be dealing with, I couldn't touch him, he was terrified beyond belief'. At one point, he bit and scared her, but she persisted, and one of her other dogs took him 'under his wing'. Despite all this, she adopted again when she learned about Bill, who was 'difficult to rehome', having had both hind legs amputated: 'I saw one photo and I knew he was coming home, he had had no interest in a year, I guess being big, a paraplegic and black he wasn't going to get noticed, it was instant love when he came home'.

That sense of a special rapport came through many times: Patti's adopter, Veronica, spoke of how 'I have all the time for her and she is my shadow'. That sense of rapport is no doubt facilitated by the time it takes to care for particularly disabled animals like Patti, whether dealing with incontinence, sores, or prosthetics. Undoubtedly, these guardians spend a great deal of time caring for/interacting with their animals. Gemma, who runs a rehoming centre for disabled animals explained: 'Once someone has had a disabled dog, an affinity builds up, you know, between you and the disabled dog – they look to you more. If it's possible for a dog to be thankful, then these dogs are thankful'.

One striking feature of these interviews, however, is how many spoke of personal experience with disability, long-term illness, or stress, either their own or in the family. This enabled, some felt, deeper understanding and something akin to entangled empathy (Gruen); in particular, they emphasized how much mutual support and understanding there was in their relationships. One visitor to the disabled animal rehoming centre in Wales had adopted disabled children; so Gemma asked her: 'if you have several kids in wheelchairs, why not pets?'[11]

In some cases, humans might recognize and identify with specific problems the animal might face; this was the case with Cola, a dog in Bangkok, who lost both his front legs as a result of a machete attack. Eventually, he was rehomed with Gill Dalley, who, with her husband John,

had established the Soi Dog Foundation in Thailand, to provide help to the street dogs there. Gill, like Cola, was a double amputee, having lost her legs after sepsis, subsequently using prostheses to get about.

When Gill met Cola, 'It was love at first sight and it was determined then and there that Cola would come and live with us in Phuket'. Gill consulted her prosthetist, who had previously only ever worked with human limbs. Both humans and dogs face similar problems, such as painful sores developing, from friction:

> having two prosthetics on her legs [Gill] understood what Cola was going through, and learning, because he gets sores on his legs, same as Gill did, so obviously there was a bit of a bond there, and I think Gill was probably, if she was still alive, and you were to ask her, she would probably say yeah, Cola was, she did have a special relationship with Cola… He was special to Gill, no doubt about it, and I think that was because Gill had the same disability. (interview, John Dalley; Oct 2018)[12]

Della and Dan

Della adopted Dan, a blind ex-street dog from Thailand. On reading his story, Della knew she 'could give him everything he needs'. She described how his behaviour changed over time as he learned to trust her, and how she reorganized the house, installing things to help him, such as water fountains, so he could hear where water was. He found his way around easily. She explains how he tapped her feet, to 'see … which boots I'm wearing' – thus to determine if a walk is imminent.

After leaving an abusive marriage, she said, she felt isolated, 'so I completely understood how Dan would be feeling. Life on the streets had gone, he was safe, yet he didn't feel safe because he was in a totally alien situation… So Dan and I have similar experiences in the way it affects our minds'.

She went on to explain her own disabilities, as she has fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue syndrome, and PTSD, which limit her mobility – so, she says, Dan 'has rescued me as much as I have him. He is sensitive to how I'm feeling, not just my moods but to my pain too… I come to rely on Dan as much as he does me. He helps me so much with my anxiety and depression which comes from [her disabilities]'. There was, she suggests, 'an unspoken connection' between them: 'we just seem to understand how each other are feeling. He knows when my pain levels are high, he can't see that I'm struggling to move or the pain written on my face but he knows and is always close by. Just stroking him and cuddling him can ease my pain to a degree'.

While many people describe relationships with companion animals as close, there is a sense in these interviews of people experiencing particularly deep relationships, at least with some animals – to the extent that they readily recognize benefits to their own well-being. One example is that of Della and Dan, another dog coming originally from the Soi Dog Foundation (see Della and Dan's story, above). Della felt strongly that Dan was able to understand her own limitations and behaved accordingly, producing an 'unspoken connection'. In that sense, the relationship is less about the *disability* of either animal or human and more about a mutual *enabling* – perhaps even a shared understanding of dealing with a disabling world.[13]

3. Looking after disabled animals: expressing care

Having a shared purpose matters in a world which privileges able-bodiedness, and independence. Taylor and Orning, writing during the global pandemic, discuss how Covid-19 has thrown up many questions, and exposed vulnerabilities. However, we live in a culture which disavows vulnerability, and in which care is not valued; rather, care-work is often feminized, further contributing to its undervaluation (Adams and Donovan, Butler). Yet, we are all enmeshed in networks of care, we are all dependent, and we are all vulnerable – as the pandemic forcefully reminded us. Writing about care and disability, Rachel Adams notes that

‘Care is work, an attitude toward others, and an ethical ideal … the intimate and necessary labor required to sustain those who are dependent, but also the action needed to sustain the lives of vulnerable others more distant in time, space, and identity’ (695).

For the caretakers in this study, care was a central concern. In a relatively mundane sense, it entailed providing for the animal materially, including supplying prostheses and technological aids. These artifacts were seen as enabling, whether that be an artificial limb, an implant, a wheelchair (see fig. 1), or nerve stimulators to facilitate excretion. Several respondents who had animals with amputated limbs provided their animals with a set of wheels to provide greater mobility. There are dedicated websites specializing in mobility aids for animals. Those respondents whose animals used wheels mostly emphasized how the animal ‘loved’ using them, appearing to relish the enhanced ability to move. John Dalley noted that Cola seemed to enjoy using the prosthetics: he 'exudes happiness when he is running and playing with the other dogs, something that would be virtually impossible without prosthetics/ (interview, 2018). Still, not all dogs relish them, as Gemma pointed out about Don (above).

Figure 1: Dog with Wheelchair (PublicDomainPictures.net)[14]

Providing material care can also involve altering the house to provide safer spaces. For animals with visual impairments, for example, everything in the house needs to remain the same, or staircases barricaded off and sharp corners softened. Les explains, for example, how his dog Hal, who was blind from birth, quickly 'learned the layout of the house or garden and learns his walking route, he never bumps into anything! … Like he has a sixth sense for objects'. Disabled humans, of course, often have to rearrange their homes: housing is rarely built with disabled bodies in mind. The widespread notion of home as 'haven' clashes with disabled people's experiences of domestic spaces, which may include what can be seen as dysfunctional areas (Imrie). For caretakers of animals, our houses may well become similarly dysfunctional: wheels or prostheses may be useful to the animal outdoors, but much less so in the confines of a house.

Providing care for any animal is work (Coulter) – sometimes more so when the animal has physical disabilities. Jenny explained how she adopted Bill, who had had both hind legs removed; shortly after, his tail became infected, and also needed amputation. On being told that she might lose him, Jenny 'wasn't having that, [so] I slept in the cabin built onto our house for three months nursing him, changing his dressings … I did this around 10 times per day … he still has one sore…which I do daily'. As several caretakers explained, it was sometimes 'daunting' to care for disabled animals, especially if they needed to be 'expressed' to urinate – quite literally expressing care.

Caring for another entails close bodily work and connection. In a prosaic sense, this might mean the needs of one body impinging on another – literally in Veronica's case, since her bad back, she felt, was the consequence of all the heavy lifting that her dog required. More often, however, respondents spoke of an overwhelming sense of connection, of relationship and working together with the animal, shaping how they move together in the world.

As a result, the care given to disabled animals seems to be reciprocated. As we have mentioned, some of those caring for sick or disabled animals are themselves disabled.[15] In relations with disabled animals, the difficulties and vulnerabilities that disabled bodies experience, whatever the species, can come to be shared. Writing about overlapping notions of 'care', Sunaura Taylor ('Interdependent Animals') explains: 'Within a feminist ethic-of-care

framework, the dependency and vulnerability of animals... adds to our responsibility toward them...[it] offers a framework of justice that has the potential to complicate conceptions of dependency (perhaps in a similar vein to disability studies), to understand animals not as dependent beings with no agency, but rather as vital participants and contributors to the world' (110). While caretakers in our interviews talked about caring *for* animals, for their special needs, there was also a sense that, for the humans at least, there was reciprocity, that the animals were collaborators with their own subjectivities (also see Despret). They saw in their animals a shared understanding of suffering, and of capabilities too. They also recognized wider networks of care, for example, through support received via online communities: 'the disabled dog Facebook community is beyond excellent', enthused Veronica, after she received multiple offers of help with her dog after straining her back; these wider networks support, and enable, she emphasized.

Of course, relations of care need not be reciprocal in order to be sites of valuable caring connection. Caregiving under many conditions can be rewarding in itself, and building relations with disabled animals can heighten appreciation of differences, physical difference as well as species difference. Attunement to differences can be extended beyond immediate caring relations and directed toward more distant humans and animals in need. However, relations of care can sometimes be oppressive and imagining that one 'truly understands' the situation of another can lead to a host of problems, including condescension and disrespect. While caring for disabled animals is personally meaningful and ethically significant, there are dangers with such relationships too.

4. Conclusion

Our respondents shared a sense of purpose, a desire to make things work. They had, of course, been recruited through websites about disabled animals, so perhaps this is unsurprising. However, their emphasis on success stories also serves a purpose; for many of them, it mattered a great deal that we, the researchers, told positive stories about disabled animals.

The stories we heard illustrated discursive tensions between seeing animals with disabilities as exceptional, heroic, and wanting to see them as unexceptional. Although respondents drew heavily on tropes of heroism and exceptionalism, they were quick to challenge sources of discrimination, whether toward humans or nonhumans. Adopters' stories emphasized that their animals were just like others; they sought to make life for their dogs/cats as comfortable – as 'normal' as possible – 'watching him be a normal dog' gave Joanne great pleasure. To her, living with Blueberry was not about 'overcoming' problems of his disability, but was about helping him to 'just be a dog'.[16] Interviews foregrounded animals' unique disabilities (and Joanne emphasised his 'ambassadorial' role in this regard), yet, respondents sought to tell stories of their animals as being unremarkable, 'just like the others'. That is, while drawing on narratives of the animals' disabilities as specialness, they simultaneously also played it down, stressing instead a common ground of species-specific behaviour. All of our discussion represents the perspectives of the caretakers, who probably are in the best position to 'speak for' their companions, but speaking for others, particularly other animals, is fraught with challenges (Donovan, Gruen, Meijer).

Working with disabled animals – caring for them, and building relationships – became transformative for many respondents, extending their own capacities. Della spoke, for example, of how she learned to be 'guide human' for Dan. She not only acted as his eyes, but doing so enabled her to meet more people and overcome her loneliness. Rod Michalko has written about how working with his guide dog Smokie became an intimate experience, which connected his own embodiment with Smokie's. He described how they moved through the world 'alone together… in the midst of the plurality of our world and its many blindnesses… The world we generate springs from our communication in the midst of the world and from our movements through it' (Michalko 186; also see Higgin). Michalko's experiences of blindness were changed through his relationship to Smokie. His bodily experience of being in the world was extended through and with his dog.

Just as Shildrick speaks of prostheses not as indicators of inadequacy, but as offering possibilities of becoming, so too might we think of human-animal connections in such terms. For both disabled animals, and their caretakers with their own potential bodily limitations, the

relationship can work to extend how to be in the world. Certainly, technological devices might aid this connection, but they are firmly embedded in the affectional relationship. We cannot know what the animals experience, in their relationships with their caretakers, but for the humans, their testimonies make clear that they see the relationship as transformational – for themselves, and for their animals.

There are several limitations to this exploratory study. For a start, it represents only a small, self-selected sample. As noted earlier, we sought to explore how these caretakers of disabled companion animals experienced their shared lives, and what is accomplished by the discourse they use. There are many issues, too, that are not explored in detail here. The (human) sample was overwhelmingly white and comprised a high proportion of women, for example, and the intersections between disability, gender, and race, with species and breed, need much more exploration, despite Taylor's ground-breaking work.

More could be done as well to explore questions around embodiment raised by our respondents. Narratives of overcoming, of enabling (whether through social relationships and/or technologies), imply a kind of transcendence of the disabled body, moving beyond its physical limitations. That this dominant tale of transcendence fuels ideas of disability as limiting has been addressed by many scholars (see, for example, Taylor, *Beasts of Burden*; Wendell); and it certainly ran through our interviews. But there was also a sense of sharing, expressed through the body and its experiences, shown particularly when the human caretakers themselves reported illness or physical limitations. This shared experience, they felt, enabled them to empathize, to generate what McWeeny called 'topographies of flesh', intercorporeal relations.

This sharing in turn contributes to an interdependent agency (Pemberton), a specific set of connections between caretaker and animal(s), as well as with prostheses, family, medical professionals and so on. Human caretakers seek to 'become well' – to foster good health – with and alongside animals in their charge (Kirk, Pemberton and Quick; Porter).
That sense of mutual wellbeing was strongly emphasized by these guardians of disabled animals, who saw 'rescue' and 'rehoming' as two-way processes. Within these interdependencies, the caretakers of disabled animals understood disability – their animals' or their own – not as limitation or ill-health, but as well-being and possibility, which enable mutual care and flourishing.

Notes

[1] These names are pseudonyms; most names in this article have been changed, unless they are already in the public domain.

[2] Texts were analysed by means of a reiterative thematic analysis to explore consistent themes across the interviews and written texts. The sample was self-selecting (participants responded to invitations via emails or Facebook messages), and so cannot necessarily be considered representative of larger populations.

[3] We hope to write about these individuals in a future paper.

[4] See https://www.guidedogs.org.uk/about-us/guide-dogs-centres/what-the-national-centre-does/our-breeds/

[5] One of us (LB) has rehomed a dog from the Soi Dog Foundation, in Phuket, Thailand. This involved a considerable journey, involving flights and ferries, to arrive at the UK border.

[6] Judy Jooste, ‘Vesper on Wheels’, https://www.facebook.com/groups/541284616007198. Accessed March 2021

[7] From the website of ‘Broken Biscuits’, a UK organization which rehomes disabled pets.

[8] We should stress here that longevity is not in itself a ‘good’. For example, in ‘broiler’ chickens, if you feed them a calorie restricted diet, so they are always hungry, they live longer, but is that worth it?

[9] https://functionalbreeding.org/

[10] https://www.facebook.com/groups/193167134596964

[11] The point the speaker makes here refers to the work involved in being a carer for someone with substantial physical disabilities, whatever their species; it is, however, somewhat problematic, in that many disability rights activists dislike any allusion to animals (see Taylor, *Beasts of Burden*).

[12]Gill sadly later died of cancer; her story, and the establishment of the Soi Dog Foundation is told in John Dalley and Donna Freelove, *Just Gill: The Story of Gill Dalley, Co-founder of Soi Dog Foundation,* Victorina Press, 2020.

[13] Dan (pseudonym) died of cancer in late 2020.

[14] See also https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GwFvb5ly7sY

[15] Although it seemed that a relatively high proportion of our respondents reported their own disability or long-term illness, the predominance of this narrative here may reflect that the theme of the interview was disability. Thus, respondents may not in fact have a high incidence of illness, but are simply ready to report it in this context.

[16] This is similar to Marquez's discussion of living with sanctuary dogs, and offering them a space where 'dogs can be dogs' (p. 95).

Works Cited

Adams, Carol, and Josephine Donovan. *The Feminist Care Tradition in Animal Ethics*. Columbia University Press, 2007.

Adams, Rachel, 'The Art of Interspecies Care.' *New Literary History*, vol. 51, no. 4, 2020, pp. 695-716.

Birke, Lynda, Tora Holmberg and Kirrilly Thompson. 'Stories of Animal Passports: Tracing Disease, Movements, and Identities.' *Humanimalia*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2013. Accessed online: https://humanimalia.org/

Birke, Lynda, Jo Hockenhull and Emma Creighton. 'The Horse's Tale: Narratives of Caring for/about Horses.' *Society and Animals*, no. 18, 2010, pp. 331-347.

Bremhorst, Annika, et al. 'Spotlight on Assistance Dogs – Legislation, Welfare and Research.' *Animals*, vol. 8, 2018, p. 129.

Butler, Judith. 'Companion Thinking: A Response.' *New Literary History*, vol. 51, no. 4, 2020, pp. 687-694.

Chrulew, Matthew. 'Abnormal Animals.' *New Literary History*, vol. 51, no. 4, 2020, pp. 729-750.

Coulter, Kendra. *Animals, Work and the Promise of Interspecies Solidarity*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Despret, V. 'The Becomings of Subjectivity in Animal Worlds.' *Subjectivity*, vol. 23, 2008, pp.123-139. doi:10.1057/sub.2008.15

Donovan, Josephine. 'Feminism and the Treatment of Animals.' *Signs*, vol. 31, no. 2, 2006, pp. 305-329.

Garland Thompson, Rosemarie. 'Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory.' *NWSA Journal*, vol. 14, no. 3, Feminist Disability Studies, 2002, pp. 1-32

Gee, Nancy and Mueller, Megan. 'A Systematic Review of Research on Pet Ownership and Animal Interactions among Older Adults.' *Anthrozoös*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2019, pp. 183-207

Gruen, Lori. *Entangled Empathy: An Alternative Ethic for our Relationships with Animals.* Lantern Press, 2015.

---. 'Animal Studies.' *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Philosophy*, edited by Kim Q. Hall and Ásta. Oxford University Press, 2021, pp. 552-560.

Gruen, Lori and Probyn-Rapsey, Fiona, editors. *Animaladies: Gender, Animals, and Madness*. Bloomsbury, 2018.

Goodley, Dan. 'Dis/entangling Critical Disability Studies.' *Disability & Society*, vol. 28, no. 5, 2013, pp. 631-644.

Hall, Melinda C. 'Critical Disability Theory.' *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2019.

https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2019/entries/disability-critical/

Hamilton, Anna. 'What's Up with the Internet's Fascination with Disabled Animals?' 2017. https://annaham.net/2017/05/11/whats-up-with-the-internets-fascination-with-disabled-animals

Higgin, Marc. 'Being Guided by Dogs.' *Crossing Boundaries: Investigating Human-Animal Relationships,* edited by Lynda Birke and Jo Hockenhull, Brill, 2012, pp.73-90.

Houser, A. Marie. 'Grace for a Cure: Poisoned Ethics and Disabled-Nonhuman Images.' *Journal of Critical Animal Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2014, pp.17-37.

Imrie, Rob. 'Disability, Embodiment and the Meaning of the Home.' *Housing Studies*, vol. 19, no. 5, 2004, pp. 745-763

Jenkins, Stephania, Kelly Struthers Montford and Chloë Taylor, editors. *Disability and Animality: Crip Perspectives in Critical Animal Studies.* Routledge, 2020.

Kirk, Robert G.W., Neil Pemberton and Tom Quick. 'Being Well Together? Promoting Health and Well-Being through More Than Human Collaboration and Companionship.' *Medical Humanities*, vol. 45, 2019, pp. 75-81.

Kheel, Marti. *Nature Ethics: An Ecofeminist Perspective.* Rowman and Littlefield, 2008.

Lundblad, Michael, editor. 'Animality/ Posthumanism/ Disability.' Special issue of *New Literary History*, vol. 51, no. 4, 2020.

Marquez, René J. 'Free to Be Dog Haven: Dogs Who May Never Be Pets?' Animal Studies Journal*, vol. 9, no. 1, 2020, pp. 93-113.*

Meijer, Eva. *When Animals Speak*. NYU Press, 2019.

Michalko, Rod. *The Two in One: Walking with Smokie, Walking with Blindness.* Temple University Press, 1998.

Pemberton, Neil. 'Cocreating Guide Dog Partnerships: Dog Training and Interdependence in 1930s America'. *Medical Humanities*, vol. 45, 2019, pp. 92-101.

Porter, Natalie. 'Training Dogs to Feel Good: Embody Well-Being in Multispecies Relations.' *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* vol. 33, no. 1, 2018, pp. 101-119.

Rodriguez Kerri E., et al. 'The Effects of Assistance Dogs on Psychosocial Health and Wellbeing: A Systematic Literature Review.' *PLOS ONE*, vol. 16, no. 8, 2021, e0256071

Serpell, James, et al. 'Welfare Considerations in Therapy and Assistance Animals.' *Handbook on Animal-Assisted Therapy,* 3rd ed., edited by A. H. Fine, Academic Press, 2010, pp. 481-503.

Shildrick, Margrit. 'Border Crossings: The Technologies of Disability and Desire.' *Culture - Theory - Disability: Encounters between Disability Studies and Cultural Studies*, edited by Anne Waldschmidt, Hanjo Berressem and Moritz Ingwersen, Transcript-Verlag, 2017.

Taylor, Sunaura. 'Interdependent Animals: A Feminist Disability Ethic-of-Care.' *Ecofeminism: Feminist Interactions with Other Animals and the Earth,* edited by Carol Adams and Lori Gruen, Bloomsbury, 2014, pp. 109-126.

---. *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation.* New Press, 2017.

Taylor, Sunaura, and S. E. Orning, S.E. 'Being Human, Being Animal: Species Membership in Extraordinary Times.' *New Literary History*, vol. 51, no. 4, 2020, pp. 663-685.

Tremain, Shelley. *Foucault and Feminist Philosophy of Disability*. University of Michigan Press, 2017.

---. 'Ableism, Animals, and Apparatuses.' Speciesism and Other Discriminations conference, online, 30-31 Aug. 2021. https://biopoliticalphilosophy.com/2021/08/31/presentation-ableism-animals-and-apparatuses-online-aug-31-2021/

Waldman, Katy. 'Black Dog Syndrome: Why Do People Discriminate Against Dark Pets?' *Slate*, 29 Jun. 2014. https://slate.com/technology/2014/06/black-dog-syndrome-are-people-racist-against-black-pets.html, 2014, accessed January 2021.

Wendell, Susan. 'Feminism, Disability and Transcendence of the Body.' *Canadian Women's Studies*, vol. 13, no. 4, 1993, pp. 116-122.