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'I want to bring him from the aeroplane to here': The meaning of animals to children of refugee or migrant backgrounds resettled in Australia

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Abstract

Separation from animals with whom children have caring relationships can lead to considerable loss and grief, perhaps especially in the case of migration. This paper reports on a thematic analysis of interviews undertaken with children of migrant or refugee backgrounds who had resettled in Australia. Findings suggest that children who spoke about animals framed their experiences in ways that either evoked a sense of loss with regard to animals, or referred to animals as engendering a safe haven following resettlement. The paper concludes by exploring potential service responses, and encourages a focus on animals' needs in the context of migration.

Keywords: refugees; migrants; children; forced migration; animals; loss and grief; resettlement; service provision

Introduction

In 2015, two media reports documented stories of people fleeing their countries of origin due to war, bringing with them their animal companions. One report told of a 17 year old who had walked more than 300 miles from Syria, carrying his canine companion with him. The young person, who was reported to have an animal passport for his companion, stated 'I love my dog, I need her' (Dearden, 2015). The second report focused on a couple, again walking from Syria seeking refuge, suggesting that whilst the couple did not have a passport for their companion animal, authorities were happy to work with them to secure one so that their companion could remain with them. This report featured quotes from a range of figures, all of whom spoke in support of the couple and their companion, such as the following:

'That gorgeous dog is as much a refugee as anyone else', said Dana Kennedy, a journalist based in France, who was moved by their story. 'He and his guardians are a family like any other family. I bet this couple never imagined in their worst nightmares that they'd have to leave home and walk into this terrifying, unknown future' (in Raphaëlle Davis, 2015).

Both reports raise important issues. Both make it abundantly clear that animals are often considered to be family members; both emphasise the close relations that many humans experience with animals (Charles, 2014; Charles and Davies, 2008; Power, 2008); and both suggest that animals may also need help and

protection in times of war. Both reports also challenge the assumption that close cross-species ties are a primarily a western phenomenon (as implied by the overwhelming western-concentration of research in human-animal studies), instead suggesting that caring relationships with animals may be a much wider cross cultural phenomenon, echoing much social anthropological work (Hurn, 2012; Jegatheesan, 2012).

In the present paper we take up the suggestion made in both of the media reports outlined above, namely that animal companions may be a source of affection and thus potentially a source of (additional) loss for those who migrate, either by force or as part of a planned migration. Specifically, we focus on children who have migrated with their families to Australia, either with parents on skilled migrant visas, or as humanitarian refugees. To capture the differences between these groups of children we use the language of 'children of migrant or refugee backgrounds'. However, we acknowledge that many nominally 'migrant' children may have 'refugee-like experiences' (Woods, 2009), and also that migration pathways may differ amongst people who undertake a planned migration, as opposed to seeking refuge (see Ogbu 1978 for a discussion of potential differences between marginalized groups in relation to migration).

We start by providing a brief overview of research on belonging with regard to children, before then specifically exploring the relationship between belonging and migration with regard to animal companions. Next we provide an overview of the study from which the data were derived, and then, having presented our analysis, we conclude with a discussion of some of the potential implications of

our findings, in terms of the role of animals in supporting children through resettlement experiences, the importance of acknowledging the loss and grief that children may experience when they have to leave animals behind, and the needs of animals themselves in terms of migration.

Previous Literature

Having a firm sense of belonging to the society in which one lives has been found to be strongly related to subjective wellbeing amongst children (Hagerty, Williams and Oe, 2002). This is largely due to the fact that a strong sense of belonging is associated with greater psychological wellbeing, increased feelings of self-worth and self-efficacy, and better educational outcomes (e.g., see Lambert, et al., 2013; O'Connor et al., 2011). Conversely, a poor sense of belonging can result in isolation and social exclusion. As such, being able to establish and maintain social connections is an important protective factor for children and young adults (Roffey, 2013).

Research in the field of human-animal studies has consistently found that positive relations with animals can result in both mental and physical well-being for humans, including children, by facilitating an increased sense of belonging (for an overview, see Taylor, 2013). Indeed, a large and growing body of research clearly demonstrates that animals can deeply and positively affect the social, emotional, cognitive and educational development of children (e.g., Arbour, Signal and Taylor, 2009; Endenburg and van Lith, 2011). For instance, humane education programs have been shown to positively affect the development of

empathy amongst children toward both animals and other humans, particularly for children who have experienced some form of abuse (e.g., Kemp et al, 2014). Animal assisted therapies have been shown to be particularly beneficial for children who have experienced trauma, often helping them to overcome difficulties in establishing therapist-client bonds (e.g., Chardonens, 2009; Signal et al, 2016), and facilitating the development of self-esteem, social competence and autonomy as well as empathy (Endenburg and van Lith, 2011). These positive outcomes from children's relationships with animals reflect research findings more broadly which have consistently shown that childhood contact with, and experiences of, nature (across a broad array of sites such as wilderness experiences and outdoor education programmes) leads to improvements in self-awareness, self-confidence, psychological energy, interpersonal skills and school performance to name a few (Faber Taylor and Kuo, 2005).

To date, however, only a relatively small body of research has examined relationships with animals in the context of migration, and none of this research has explored the role that animals may play in facilitating a sense of belonging for children of migrant or refugee backgrounds (though there is of course a substantial body of research on children's relationships with animals more broadly, see Tipper, 2011, for an overview). Focusing on British adults who migrate to Dubai, Fox and Walsh (2011) suggest that animals can play an important role in facilitating a sense of belonging for this population. Migrating with animal companions, however, is often the province of those with the necessary financial resources to access services that facilitate such migration. Strict requirements in terms of vaccinations and animal passports effectively

exclude many people from migrating with animals. Further, and as Fox and Walsh point out, there is a contradictory understanding of animal companions amongst some British migrants: while many people who are able to bring animals with them when they migrate will do so, many may also abandon them if they then decide to return home again. The value of animal life in the context of planned migration is thus highly contingent, it would appear, on the decisions that humans make.

In terms of humans being forced to leave animals in the context of natural disasters, Thompson and colleagues (2014) have suggested that attachment to animals may have an important role to play in facilitating disaster preparedness. Specifically, they suggest that many humans who are forced to leave animals may experience survivor guilt, and that the potential for this may be used as leverage to encourage humans to plan for possible natural disasters, so that both they and their animal companions may seek refuge together. The findings of Hunt, Al-Awadi and Johnson (2008) provide support for this argument. In assessing depressive symptoms amongst adults who were forced to abandon their homes (and in some cases animal companions) as a result of Hurricane Katrina, they found that those who were either forced to abandon animal companions when fleeing the hurricane or who did not flee but whose animals were lost during the hurricane reported higher depressive symptomology than those who were able to either stay in their home with their animal companions, or those who could take their animal companions with them. Importantly, their findings also suggest that multiple traumas (i.e., losing one's home and losing one's animal companion) may compound one another, leading to complex grief. This is

supported by several studies which point to the importance of companion animals during difficult life transitions such as divorce and widowhood, and the complex interactions of grief, loss and guilt that those forced to abandon animal companions often feel (e.g., Flynn, 2000).

The point above with regard to multiple traumas is of significant interest in the context of forced migration (i.e., people fleeing war and/or state sponsored violence), where people who experience forced migration due to war may often experience loss and grief over animals left behind (Boucher, 2009; Jegatheesan, 2012; Masquelier, 2006). Given it is abundantly clear from the broader literature on forced migration and 'refugee-like' experiences that multiple traumas can compound one another, and leave those who experience them vulnerable to compromised mental health (Hollifield and others, 2002), it is important to consider the role that the forced abandonment of animals (including animals who live in the home) may play in adding to the complexity of multiple traumas. Whilst negative sequelae associated with animal abandonment are not unique to children, animals may hold specific meanings for children who are forced to leave them behind, making this under-researched area one deserving of attention.

Method

Project

The data reported in this paper are derived from a longitudinal project conducted in Adelaide, South Australia, between 2012 and 2015. The project focused on the experiences of children of migrant or refugee backgrounds who entered into an English language program after arriving in Australia, following them through their time in the program and through their transition into mainstream schooling. Specifically, the project sought to examine factors that facilitate belonging in resettlement countries, and the intersections of belonging and migration in educational contexts.

Setting

At the commencement of the project, the children were each enrolled in an Intensive English Language Program (IELP) located in Intensive English Language Centres (IELCs) which are situated on the grounds of public primary schools. Students are eligible for 12-18 months in the program. Students enter the program on a continuous, rolling, basis soon after their arrival in Australia. Students exit the program to either the same school as their IELC or to a different school, depending on the wishes of their parents and factors such as housing and job locations.

Participants

The project included a total of 63 children, enrolled at one of three different IELCs. This broader sample included 15 children with refugee backgrounds and 48 children with migrant backgrounds. Participants were aged between five and 13 years of age at the start of the study, with 28 female participants and 35 male participants. Participants came from 21 countries of origin: Bangladesh, China, Columbia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Malaysia, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Syria, Venezuela, Vietnam, and Zambia. Many spoke multiple languages, reflecting a number of moves prior to coming to Australia, with languages of origin including Urdu, Punjabi, Nepali, Mandarin, Bengali, Indonesian (Bahasa Indonesia), Spanish, Hindi and Gujarati.

The findings reported in this paper focus on a sub-sample of eight participants (13% of the original sample): six students with migrant backgrounds and two with refugee backgrounds, aged between six and 12 years old. Further details about these participants can be found in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant details

Participant number and pseudonym	Gender	Age	Country of Origin	Visa status on arrival
1. Mohammed	Male	8	Syria	Refugee
2. Khushan	Male	6	India	Migrant
3. Tatiana	Female	9	Russia	Migrant
4. Hei	Female	12	China	Migrant
5. Andy	Male	11	China	Migrant
6. Chandi	Female	9	Bangladesh	Migrant
7. Brian	Male	9	Papua New Guinea	Refugee
8. Aarav	Male	6	India	Migrant

Procedure

Ethics approval was granted by The University of Adelaide's Human Research Ethics Committee, and the Department of Education and Child Development (DECD) in South Australia for primary data collection. In addition, DECD also gave approval for the researchers to be provided with select demographic data about the children from the Education Department School Administration System (EDSAS).

It is important to note that the authors are aware of the ethical issues of working with this vulnerable group of young people, including issues such as gaining ongoing *assent* from children in addition to informed consent for parents and caregivers (Due, Riggs and Augoustinos, 2014; Gifford and others, 2007; Crivello and others, 2009; Ebrahim 2010). As such, the second author (who undertook the data collection) took care to ensure that the children themselves (rather than only their parents or carers) were informed about the study and its goals, and provided their assent to participate. Information sheets and consent forms (translated into first languages) were sent home to the parents or caregivers of all students enrolled in the IELP at the time of the study, with the exception of some families where it was considered inappropriate to do.

Following an initial ethnography of the schools, in which rapport was developed with students, interviews were conducted in conjunction with a professional interpreter where necessary. The interviews included open-ended questions concerning ethnic identity and belonging (based on Phinney, 1992), peer relationships and experiences at school and within the broader community based on questions included in the Australian Health and Wellbeing Survey (Bond et al, 2000), discrimination (based on Verkuyten, 1998), self-efficacy (see Bandura, 1990; Smith, Walker, Fields, Brookins, and Seay, 1999), and school transition. Examples include: "What country do you come from?"; "Do you like coming from [country]"; "Do you like it in Australia?"; and "Do you like school". All questions were developed or adjusted by the researchers in conjunction with the Department of Education and Child Development (DECD).

In line with gaining ongoing assent, children were told that the study aimed to explore the things they liked or didn't like about school and other areas of their life in Australia, including things that helped them to feel that they belong.

Demographic data concerning children were obtained from the data available in school databases, as the researchers were restricted to asking questions concerning time in Australia due to ethical constraints. This information included broad visas status, gender, and academic records. Interviews were transcribed by the second author and pseudonyms assigned.

Analytic Approach

No specific questions were asked about animal companions, however once the interviews were completed, the second author noted that a number of children had brought up the topic of animals in response to two questions that asked about their country of origin. It was thus deemed useful to conduct a deductive thematic analysis of the instances where this occurred. Whilst this was an ad hoc analysis, previous literature has at times similarly reported on findings specific to animal companions when this was not a focus of the research project (e.g., Charles and Davies, 2008).

Having identified instances where eight of the children spoke about animals, a thematic analysis was undertaken following the six stages outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2013): reading and familiarisation, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes and producing a thematic map, naming and defining themes, and finalising the analysis through writing. The final thematic structure received

consensus from all authors. Given the relatively small corpus of data on animals, all extracts are included in the analysis below.

Results

The thematic analysis identified two themes: 1) migration and the loss of animals, and 2) animals as a source of strength and/or connection to Australia as the resettlement country. To a certain degree, these themes mirror the suggestions of Thompson and colleagues (2014), who utilise an attachment framework through which to understand the meaning of animal companions to people who experience natural disaster-related displacement. Thompson and colleagues suggest four aspects derived from Bowlby's (1999) account of attachment theory that may be applicable to animal-human relationships: 1) proximity maintenance, 2) a safe haven, 3) secure base, and 4) separation distress. The findings we report suggest that both aspects two and four are applicable to our participants, with some of the children we interviewed experiencing distress upon separation from animals, and some children reporting that relationships with animals offered them a safe haven that potentially relieved distress. The category 'animals' encompassed both animal companions, and animals as a general category.

Migration and the Loss of Animals

That animals were a salient topic for some of the children in terms of what they liked about their country of origin (and thus potentially what was lost when they

left) was indicated by the fact they spoke about them without prompting. The first two extracts below come from the two children who arrived in Australia on a humanitarian visa, and in both cases animals were raised by the children in response to interview questions concerning ethnic identity and belonging. It is notable to us that both of these children only spoke about animals in terms of loss:

Interviewer: is there anything you like about being from Syria?

Mohammad: my dog. I want to bring him from the aeroplane to here.

Interviewer: yeah. Fair enough.

Mohammad: you know what? I get food and put it in his mouth and he didn't bite me. He didn't be bad to me.

Interviewer: can you tell me where you come from?

Brian: Papua New Guinea

Interviewer: and do you like that?

Brian: yes

Interviewer: what do you like about it?

Brian: I can go everywhere I like. And I like watching fish.

Of the eight children whose narratives are included in this paper, Mohammad was the child who most clearly stated that he wanted to bring an animal companion to Australia. By comparison, part of what Brian liked about his country of origin is being able to watch fish. There is a clear difference between these two accounts, though this does not necessarily undermine the fact that

animals were salient to Brian as a key aspect of his country of origin, even if the fish he likes to watch were not *per se* companion animals.

With regard to the other three extracts that appeared to evoke a sense of loss, the first situates the loss of relationships with animals as a reason for not liking resettlement in Australia, and therefore points to loss of animals as a factor which may decrease sense of belonging in a resettlement country:

Interviewer: what about Australia? Do you like living in Australia?

Tatiana: I like it but mmm Australia is not for me. In Russia we have animal shops and I can go and buy everything like horse stuff but here there is no horse stuff. I only have horse play like two times.

For Tatiana, horses appear to have played an important role in her life in her country of origin. For many reasons – potentially including the lack of space to home horses (as indicated by Tatiana herself later in the interview where she states “...my house in Russia is like 3 times bigger than my house in Australia. In Australia my house is tiny!”) – Tatiana is unable to engage with horses in Australia. For the following two migrant children, animals are also mentioned as something that they like about their countries of origin:

Interviewer: do you like being from India?

Aray: yes

Interviewer: what do you like about it?

Aray: I like my dog there. And I like to play there.

Interviewer: how much do you like coming from Bangladesh?

Chandi: Very much

Interviewer: what do you like about it?

Chandi: the desert park. It's a really big park. And it has a rollercoaster and stuff.... Living with my cousins and my grandma and grandpa. And having my animals there.

Animals, for both Aray and Chandi, are stated as reasons for why they like their country of origin. Here, leaving animal companions behind appeared to constitute a form of loss, perhaps particularly for children from refugee backgrounds who were unable to return to their home countries. As we shall see in the second theme, this is different to the experiences of some of the children from migrant backgrounds, who were able to return to visit their country of origin and who had the opportunity to see animal companions again.

Animals as a Safe Haven Following Resettlement

The theme of animals as a safe haven appeared in two forms. The first appeared in the comments of Hei, who had been able to visit her country of origin and thus see her animal companions who had been left behind:

Interviewer: what about being in Australia now? What do you like about that?

Hei: ummmmm the food. And the people are really nice. And I liked
ahhh I liked the – what's it called – the the the – all Australia is like,
really natural. I like the animals – that's right – they are cute!

Interviewer: so have you been back to china?

Hei: yes, twice

Interviewer: so do you like doing that?

Hei: yes

Interviewer: so do you catch up with family?

Hei: yes. And I see my pets.

Being able to visit family – including animal companions – appeared important to Hei, and potentially served as a facilitator of her resettlement experiences in Australia (i.e., that she knew she could see them again). Also important to Hei, as was the case for the other two children included in this theme, was the possibility of having time with animals in Australia:

Interviewer: what about living in Australia now? Do you like that?

Khushan: mmmhmm. It's the best.

Interviewer: what do you like about it?

Khushan: playing. Activities. Go to the school. Playing with my friends.

And I like to play with the birds. And with my dog. My dog is friendly.

He is friends with the birds. He doesn't eat any birds. You know the cat wants to eat the birds. My dog chases the cats away.

Interviewer: what about living in Australia now do you like that?

Andy: yes

Interviewer: what do you like about it?

Andy: the homework is – there is less. And there are many animals. Like kangaroos and koalas.

Of all of the children interviewed, Khushan was the only child to mention currently living with animal companions. As other researchers have noted (e.g., Mattu, 2002), this may be a product of the fact that for many migrant or refugee families, living in rental accommodation typically prohibits cohabiting with animals. Children such as Andy and Hei, however, appeared to have found other ways through which to spend time with animals, which appeared to be an important source of identification with resettlement in Australia, and potentially contributed to a sense of belonging within Australia.

Discussion

It is important to note, as we did above, that we did not ask participants specifically about animals. Moreover, no demographic or contextual information could be obtained beyond that accessible through the schools' databases. As such, the information that participants provided on this topic was relatively limited, and our findings must be interpreted with caution. Nonetheless, it was notable to us that children did bring up animals as a reference point when talking about both their country of origin, and in some cases when talking about Australia. Also notable is the fact that the two children of refugee backgrounds spoke about animals as a source of loss, and did not speak about animals as a

safe haven, whereas migrant children did speak about animals as a safe haven in Australia, especially when they could 1) return to their country of origin and see animal companions who had been left behind, 2) live with animal companions in Australia, or 3) have opportunities to spend time with animals. Despite our small sample, our findings appear to offer some support for the work of Thompson and colleagues (2014) with regard to the utility of attachment theory as a framework for understanding the impact of separation from companion animals.

We now consider some of the potential implications of our findings, both specifically drawing on our findings, but also extrapolating more widely by drawing upon previous research and our own insights from the field of both migration studies and critical animal studies. Specifically, there are three points that we explore in turn. The first of these, and following Fox and Walsh (2011) and Thompson and colleagues (2014), focuses on how including animal companions in plans for migration or in responses to cases of forced migration may facilitate movement and subsequent wellbeing as facilitated by a sense of belonging. The second, following Hunt and colleagues (2008), focuses on the potential trauma of being separated from animal companions, and the service responses that this requires. Finally, we focus on animals themselves, and the ethical considerations that arise in the context of migration.

In terms of the inclusion of animal companions to facilitate migration, it seems clear from the two news reports with which we opened this paper that animal companions may both aid and hinder forced migration. For those who are able to plan enough ahead to have a passport for their animal companion, being able to

leave, travel, and be granted refuge along with animals may be a factor that encourages them to migrate, and subsequently to experience a sense of belonging in their country of resettlement. Supporting potential refugees to access animal passports, or to access quarantining that can provide time for animal passports to be secured, is thus an important task facing humanitarian organisations into the future. This requires humanitarian responses that facilitate awareness of the possibility of migrating with animal companions.

Shifting to focus on service responses in resettlement countries, it seems clear from our data that at least some children of migrant or refugee backgrounds welcome being able to spend time with animals, and that this may increase a sense of belonging in a resettlement country. The literature on animals as members of therapeutic teams for young people who have experienced trauma is unequivocal in its support for this practice (Kemp and others, 2014; Martin and Farnum, 2002), including with refugee populations (Every and others, 2015). Yet beyond the mental health sector, there are likely opportunities for children, even those who are doing relatively well, to connect and spend time with animals.

Whilst services targeted at refugees and migrants are always at risk of funding cuts, it would seem important nonetheless to advocate for such services to connect in with other services through which connections with animals may be facilitated. This may be through zoos, through animal shelters, or through organisations that bring animals to visit children in schools.

Finally, and perhaps in some ways in contradiction to the suggestions made above, it is vital that animals' rights and needs are considered, including

instances where they may not necessarily align with those of humans. The multidisciplinary field of human-animal studies increasingly points toward the problems inherent to conducting research into human-animal relations that prioritises human interests and issues (e.g., Birke and Hockenhull, 2012; Hamilton and Taylor, 2012). Not only does it lead to poor scholarship (in that one part of the dyad is ignored in the research), but it helps reinforce social constructed hierarchies that privilege humans, which much of this scholarship seeks to contest. There is thus an important role for animal welfare advocates to act on behalf of animals in instances of migration that are not in their best interest. Similarly, whilst animal therapies may be beneficial to humans, it is important to maintain a focus on whether such therapies are beneficial to animals (Evans and Gray, 2012; Taylor and others, 2016). Whilst children visiting zoos, or having animals visit schools, may be beneficial to children, such experiences may not be beneficial to animals, who are forced to live in zoos or be exposed to children outside of their daily environment (Bisgould, 2014; Cole and Stewart, 2014).

Despite the limitations noted here, our findings add to previous social anthropological research on the meaning of animals to people from non-western cultures, in addition to adding to research on animals in the context of forced migration by focusing specifically on children. Needed, however, is further research that purposively focuses on children's experiences of migration (either forced or planned migration) and their relationships with animals. Research is also needed on how animals experience migration. Whilst we can take at face value the suggestions in the news reports included in the opening of this paper

that the 17-year-old young person loves his dog, and whilst we can agree with the journalist who suggests that the dog who is travelling with the couple is a part of their family, these are human-centric accounts. How animals cope with migration, and how their interests are best served, must be the focus of future research. It is only by looking at all sides of the equation (including children and adults, animals, service providers, and governments who engender situations where migration becomes necessary) that we can truly understand the full picture of what it means for humans and animals to migrate together.

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