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A multispecies journey: companion animals and family development from a life-course perspective

Un viaje multiespecie: animales de compañía y evolución familiar desde una perspectiva de trayectoria vital

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ABSTRACT

This study provides information about the role of companion animals in the life courses of the family from a developmental approach, conceiving the bond between species as the intersection of journeys of humans and companions. Three online focus groups were conducted. A thematic analysis was performed, using an experiential and constructivist perspective. Four themes referred to moments of co-existence: 1) the arrival of the companion, 2) the joint maturation of the relationship, 3) changes related to family transitions, and 4) the end of the relationship. These themes describe how the selfhood of the companions and the identity of the family coevolves along the life-course and highlight the challenges the families face. These findings contribute to the literature that questions dominating social discourses and show emerging models of multispecies families.

Keywords: Family transitions, life-course perspective, companion animals, thematic analysis, animal turn.

RESUMEN

El presente estudio analiza el papel de los animales de compañía en el curso de vida de la familia. Utiliza para ello un enfoque evolutivo, conceptualizando el vínculo entre especies como una intersección de trayectorias vitales de animales humanos y no humanos. Se llevaron a cabo tres grupos focales en línea y se realizó un análisis temático utilizando una perspectiva vivencial y constructivista. Los cuatro temas extraídos hacen referencia a

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momentos de convivencia: 1) la llegada del animal, 2) la maduración conjunta de la relación, 3) los cambios relacionados con las transiciones familiares, y 4) el final de la relación. Estos temas describen cómo la individualidad de los animales de compañía y la identidad de la familia coevolucionan a lo largo del curso de la vida y ponen de relieve los retos a los que se enfrentan las familias. Estos hallazgos contribuyen a la literatura que cuestiona los discursos sociales dominantes y muestran modelos emergentes de familias multispecies.

Palabras clave: transiciones familiares, trayectoria vital, animales de compañía, análisis temático, giro animal.

INTRODUCTION

The composition of Spanish homes has changed considerably in the last decades (Meil et al., 2023; Mínguez et al., 2017). In line with data from other Western countries, the number of companion animals (those that cohabitate with human beings with the main role of providing company, without keeping the house, chasing, or having other duties) has risen in a sustained manner (Sobotka & Berghammer, 2021). There is an increasing presence of companion animals in Spanish homes, with currently over 15 million registered dogs and cats (Veterindustria & ANFAAC, 2021), while there are currently less than 8 million people under 18 years of age (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2021). At the same time, the concern for their well-being is increasing (European Commission, 2017; US Census Bureau, 2022). Spanish legislation also reflects this concern: In 2023, the law on the protection of animal rights and well-being was passed, recognizing the obligation of “keeping them integrated in the family nucleus” (Law 7/2023). Companions receive increasing attention in our households.

Despite their ubiquitous presence in our daily lives, the importance of interaction between humans and other animals has been largely ignored within the sociological literature (Bryant, 1979; Sanders, 2003). This absence found support in classic authors such as G.H. Mead, who argued that only human beings can participate in certain symbolic interactions, relegating non-human animals to a peripheral role, and depicting them more like objects than like subjects (Irvine, 2004a). However, this view has been intensely debated and several voices that call for reconsidering the continuity between human and non-human animals (Irvine, 2004b; Sanders, 2003).

From a macro point of view, it is easy to anticipate that changes in the composition of families would create new narratives, and that these may challenge the homogenic social norms (Ehmer, 2021; Sobotka & Berghammer, 2021), something that may foster open debates on their adequacy. In addition, the relationship between human beings and other species is full of inconsistencies (Herzog, 2011): for example, a rabbit that is considered a *pet* receives veterinary care and attention throughout their life, while many others are raised as food or subjects of scientific study (*profit*) or eliminated as a *pest* (Taylor & Signal, 2009). In other words, the status of non-human animals is not derived from the species or any objective characteristics (e.g., phylogenesis or scientific taxonomy), but from elements such as their appearance or usefulness within the social context (Berlin, 1992; López-Cepero et al., 2021). These *folk taxonomies* derive from cultural preferences and taboos and facilitate the perpetuation of discourses that affect the recognition—or exclusion—of animal rights (Gray & Young, 2011; Harris, 1989).

Focusing on the lives of companion animals, previous studies show that most of the participants consider companion animals to be relatives (Bouma et al., 2022; Carlisle-Frank & Frank, 2006) but, what does *relative* mean? The family is one of the elemental units that allow defining contemporary societies (Furusten, 2023), yet it is difficult to provide an exact

definition of what characterizes a family. Classical perspectives present in Western societies tend to privilege the physical context (e.g., household), use definitions based on legal bonds and/or consanguinity, and functions such as raising offsprings; however, these configurations (i.e., heteronormative marriage with children in their care) are just one of the many situations that exist, and an increasing number of homes are dwelled by reconstituted, one-parent families, same-sex couples and/or living apart together families (Ehmer, 2021; Meil et al., 2023).

For all the above, analyzing how companion animals fit within families represents a double challenge, defined by the intersection of transformation of families and the nature of human-animal interactions. Different authors highlight the difficulties encountered in the process of integrating non-human animals within the conception of the family (Fox & Gee, 2019; Irvine & Cilia, 2017; Laurent-Simpson, 2017). These difficulties are reflected in the appearance of novel expressions that describe the new households (e.g., *multispecies family*, instead of *family with a pet*) and in the roles that those animals play (e.g., *furry babies*), which are subject to strong debate within both general population and researchers.

Moving towards a microsystemic approach, it is important to analyze how those debates interpellate people in terms of conceiving and labeling their relationship with non-human animals. Exploring the friction points between the classical-hegemonic and the new discourses contributes to understanding the challenges faced by the emerging family models (Hintz & Brown, 2020).

When talking about how animals fit into human families, two complementary concepts have played a central role in literature: anthropomorphizing and humanization. Anthropomorphizing consists of the recognition of human qualities in nonhuman entities, living or inert, placing the emphasis on individual cognition; and humanization includes the level of incorporation of these entities into the contexts of human activity (Shir-Vertesh, 2012). Given that both concepts refer to the degree of resemblance between human and non-human animals, most of the studies available are rooted in an anthropocentric conception, with animals being depicted not as subjects, but as objects orbiting around the (real) human family.

Several authors called for a reexploration of the interaction between human and non-human animals that gives a voice to the experience of companion animals as subjects, and not as mere objects (Adams, 2018; Charles, 2016). Within sociology, some authors claim that non-human animals may fulfill the requirements to develop selfhood, thus making them susceptible to study within the theoretical paradigms traditionally used with humans (Irvine, 2012). For example, symbolic interactionism points to four self-experiences as ingredients for the emergence of selfhood: agency, coherence, affectivity, and history, whose application to non-human animals has been explored and debated in recent decades (Irvine, 2021, 2023). Therefore, it is of interest to analyze the fit of animals within families not from a static point of view, but as a process in which coexistence determines the appearance of family relationships.

Each family evolves through its own history. The family life cycle is understood as the succession of steps or stages that families go through. However, the life-cycle model offers a standard that is not met by all families. In contrast with a classical view, in which families are determined by legal bonds, coexistence, and child upbringing, the life-course perspective provides a more flexible view, which includes different types of family (Aeby & Gauthier, 2021; Bernardi et al., 2019). This approach understands that families do not follow a single, socially determined path, but that they can have different journeys, moving from some states to others and back (Aeby & Gauthier, 2021; Gauthier et al., 2018). Not every family meets the same standards.

As a corollary of the above, it is important to highlight some characteristics that may influence the relationship between humans and other animals. First, the literature shows that women represent the vast majority of participants in studies of human-animal interactions; this disequilibrium has been linked to gender roles, as women tend to be more positive in expressing affection and empathy toward animals (Cleary et al., 2022; Randler et al., 2021). Second, the composition of the household is relevant to the debate, as the idea of companions playing the role of *surrogate children* (i.e., substitute experiences to *real* parenthood) directly connects to hegemonic discourses, where a family implies having offsprings (Hintz & Brown, 2020; Volsche, 2018). Third, the place where participants live may affect their experiences, as people living in a rural environment may interact with more animals in their daily context (such as wild and feral individuals, free-ranging animals, or livestock) than the urban population does. It is important to take those variables into consideration in the sampling process to ensure that results may represent a wide range of discourses.

Therefore, the literature shows an interest in updating knowledge about how human and non-human animals relate to each other in the home, giving it a less anthropocentric perspective (what has come to be called *animal turn*) and analyzing these changes as a dynamic process. However, most of the available studies focus mainly on analyzing the human-animal bond from a static point of view, establishing that companion animals are integrated into the traditional human interactions and roles (e.g., being part of triangular formations or serving as emotional cushions in conflictive relationships) (Leow, 2018; Walsh, 2009b). In coherence, the aim of the current study was to provide information about the role companions played in the life-course of families. To this end, the family experience was analyzed from a qualitative approach, exploring how the selfhood of companions develops along cohabitation, and how this affects the appearance of multispecies families.

METHODOLOGY

Participants and sampling

The sample consisted of 11 women and 1 man, distributed in three focus groups. The age of the participants ranged between 18 and 64 years and two thirds of them lived in urban centres. Three cohabitated with their parents, while the remaining had started new multispecies households with or without intimate partners and offsprings. They coexisted with 1-5 company animals, and all of them have cohabited at different moment of their lifespan, being dogs and cats the most usual species. Cohabitation lasted more than one year in all cases. The main sociodemographic data and their distribution in the focus groups are specified in the appendix.

The participants agreed to share their experience of how pets fit into Spanish families. The instructions stated that the study focused on the coexistence and development of the daily life of families who live with animals. Participants were required to be over 18 years of age, be a native Spanish speaker, and co-exist with company animals in the 6 months prior to the meeting. Similarly, the relationship of the participants with animals had to be limited to coexistence, excluding people who worked with animals as a livelihood (e.g., veterinaries, dog educators, or animal groomers).

There is no consensus on the adequate minimum number of participants for qualitative studies (APA, 2020). Braun & Clarke (2013) note that three focus groups may be sufficient to complete medium-sized projects (p. 48), as in the case of the present study. Our work aimed to explore the meanings and experiences of multispecies families rather than to verify the

quantity or extent of such discourses in the Spanish population. Therefore, the quantification of their relative presence falls outside of the objectives of the present study.

Instruments

The researchers created an ad hoc semi-structured script for the whole project, which included three main topics to explore: 1) the relative position of the animal within the family organization, 2) the functional organization in the family nucleus, and 3) the assimilation of the animals to categories of human relationship (e.g., children, friends, etc.). The focus groups were conducted in the Blackboard Collaborate Ultra environment. This platform allows recording meetings in rooms that can only be accessed by invitation. To code the transcriptions, we used InVivo v.12 qualitative analysis software, which allowed organizing the information derived from the analysis.

Procedures

The participants were recruited online, using social networks (Facebook and Twitter) and the laboratory website of the HABIER lab [Human-Animal Bond in Interventions, Education & Research; <https://grupos.us.es/habier>]. People who were interested in this study completed an online form, which requested their informed consent, in compliance with the requirements of the Ethics Committee of University of Sevilla (Spain). Participants were distributed in three focus groups according to their schedule availability. Although recruiting was open to both men and women, most of the participants referred to be women.

The data were gathered online, thus facilitating the access of people from all over Spain (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015). Participants could choose whether to share the video image or only the audio file, as well as the use of a pseudonym, to preserve their intimacy (Lobe et al., 2020).

The meetings were 103 minutes long on average. They were recorded and transcribed verbatim attending to the semantic content (Braun & Clarke, 2013), and they were analyzed following the thematic analysis (TA) method (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021). Coding was carried out in several sessions by the three authors and each session was attended by at least two of them. TA offers a guide to develop the analysis in six steps, from the identification of specific codes to the abstraction of general themes, including several stages of code revision and refinement.

Our procedure of TA used an experiential and constructivist perspective, attending to both the discourses and the emotional expressions that accompanied them. The analysis was initiated with a deductive and semantic approximation, paying special attention to terms that are frequently used in family studies (e.g., structure, hierarchy, and communication), the development of selfhood (agency, coherence, affection, and history), in the scope of human-animal interaction (e.g., humanization, anthropomorphizing), and that referred to family evolution (e.g. stages, turning points) that appeared along the interaction, as a guide to recognize response patterns. The elaboration process evolved toward a more inductive analysis that was focused on the latent contents.

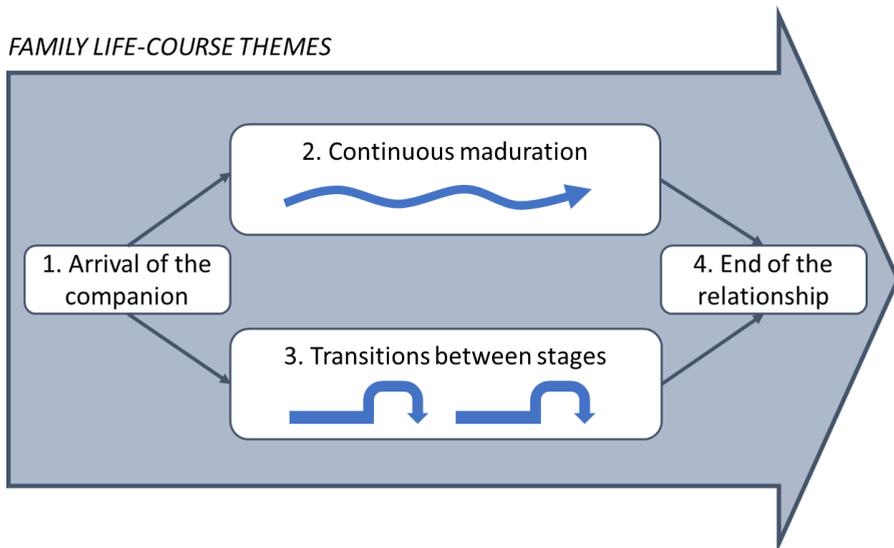
The results of the analyzes for the whole study were grouped into four overarching themes: 1) key elements in the creation of the multispecies family relationships; 2) choice of terms to describe these relationships; 3) organizational schemes of multispecies families; and 4) developmental aspects of the human-animal bond in the life cycle of the family. The

current study presents the results related to the last of these overarching themes, reserving the rest of the analyses for other publications.

RESULTS

The analysis allowed for reaching a consensus on a model of four interrelated themes, which referred to 1) arrival of the animal in the household, 2) joint maturation of the relationship, 3) adaptation to family course transitions, and 4) end of the relationship. [Figure 1](#) presents a graphic scheme of the organization of these themes.

Figure 1. Four themes to understand coevolution of the multispecies family.



Theme 1. Preparing for the arrival of our new companion animal: The map comes before the trip

The arrival of our new member to the multispecies family implies decision-making and an anticipation process. Elements such as expected coexistence time (lifelong adoption or temporary fostering) and adaptation in the preexisting family structure and dynamics (whether the animal is added to the family or the family changes to receive the new member) were typical decisions in the discourses given by the participants. Therefore, part of the animal's journey is negotiated even before she arrives home.

I have the house as "catified", which is what they say when you adapt the house to the needs of the cat. She has her place to stretch her nails, she has a loft to climb, things like that. In other words, I have tried to meet the needs that the cat may have. [FG 1; MR]

The debate (or lack of debate) on how to incorporate the animal, the distribution of care duties, and the necessary changes in the organization of the household provides a context for the family to negotiate its structure and limits ([Walsh, 2009a](#)).

[About two couples she knows in her environment] One of the couples, they both agreed that when she arrived, they adapted her a couple of years ago, they were very clear that when the dog arrived, she was going to do what she wanted. So, there has been no conflict there. The other couple I am not sure [...] In our case, we adopted him when we have come to live together, we did not have to argue, we both agreed. [FG2; MG].

As described above, most discourses based the incorporation of the animal on human decisions, implicitly characterizing the companion animals as passive subjects (Charles, 2016). Our participants decided to adopt or buy animals, so it was a completely human decision. A small proportion of the participants used narratives in which the non-human animals played a decisive role in this inclusion, —e.g., when the animal follows one of the family members on his/her way home (Imber-Black, 2009)—, which takes place more frequently in rural environments. In those cases, the behavior of the animal is interpreted as a gesture of will, thus recognizing the ability of the nonhuman animal to make decisions, in the sense of the agency described by symbolic interactionism (Baggio, 2023; Irvine, 2012).

Incorporation of the animal represents a moment of transition that is influenced by social and family values. This is reflected in some ethical debates (which are active in the sociological environment, e.g., in social networks) about the decision of incorporating the animal through adoption or purchase, or about the preference for a specific breed over mixed-breed animals.

This is a frequent reason for arguing in groups [social networks], because some of us belong to these groups and we oppose... purchasing animals [...] [for me] the act of buying an animal poses a moral debate, and the fact that there is an industry around the animal. I tell you, this is hot. [FG2; LS]

As a whole, the incorporation of a companion animal to the home poses a chance to generate internal debates in the family (with regard to the routines, structure, and values), as well as external debates (establishing a dialogue between the identity of the new family configuration and the dominating social discourse). Therefore, the impact of this transition must be valued as a dynamic process, in which individual and contextual journeys make it necessary to search for a new family identity (Adams, 2018, 2019).

Theme 2. Maturation of the relationship: by walking you make the path

The family configuration varies throughout time, and the journeys of humans and nonhumans coevolve during coexistence. In general, the participants stated that the passing of time is an important factor to generate an emotional bond with their companion animals, who can reach a greater status as the attachment grows. Companions get included in the family primary, meaningful frames of behavior (such as rituals and traditions), creating transformed patterns of activity that will lead to being perceived as an individual (Irvine, 2004b, 2023).

The truth is that I have shared many things with her, right? Apart from the day-to-day routine of having a family dog, I have worked a lot with her, and I have enjoyed it a lot. And I know that she has also enjoyed it, right? To see how she has overcome many things, to come in a certain context and, little by little, she has also been growing and evolving. And now she shows a personality, a different character than when I adopted her and met her, right? And then the issue of the bond that has evolved over time, of course, has been improving to this day. [FG1; BE]

The previous quote provides a complete example of the recognition of self-experiences that are in the core concept of selfhood, in terms of Mead's symbolic interactionism (Irvine, 2004a). The participant (BE) describes her ability to feel (*she has also enjoyed it*), her coherence and individuality (referred to as *personality/character*), the agency to change the world (*to see how she has overcome many things*) and the sense of shared history (regarded as *evolution of behavior and growing up*) (Baggio, 2023; Irvine, 2023). So, through shared experiences, non-human animals get more and more recognized as individuals and get involved in the family structure and rituals (Sanders, 2003).

As expected, the discourses of the participants showed a variety of family structures where companions fit. Even when attachment was intense, some participants described that animals are added to the family costume, fitting the schema of 'pet of the family':

The dogs I have are a Mastiff and a Labrador. The Mastiff and the Labrador cannot be inside the house because that is not feasible. [...] If it is very cold, it rains a lot, the dogs come in and lie down in the entrance, but that's it, they know perfectly well that they cannot be living, they cannot come to my room to sleep in my bed, they understand that. [FG 1; CA]

Others described changes based on the interaction, considering intentions and preferences, thus creating rules of cohabitation that try to be respectful of the needs of all components. In these cases, they matched the definition of 'multispecies family' (Irvine & Cilia, 2017). However, recognizing the needs of non-human animals entails paradoxes and debates since, on many occasions, the needs of companions are competing with human preferences.

My animals are part of my family, but a child is a child, it is a completely different thing from my dogs [...] And I personally think that often treating them as humans also generates problems later. [...] There is a difference between thinking about what a dog is and their needs as an animal and humanizing them. [FG2; LU]

When children reach adolescence, they become more autonomous in making decisions about the limits and rules imposed on the animals; this could also pose a decrease in the time they play or interact with the companions (Bures & Gee, 2021). In those cases, the transition of the human may affect the role and status recognized to the companions.

[In the beginning] my parents did not want the dog inside the house. Later, when I was a bit older, I let her inside the house, in my room, in the bathroom, all the places where I went. Then, my mother consented, as she also grew attached to her. [FG2; MJ]

Theme 3. Changes in the relationship due to family course transitions

While some of the changes in the structure of the family may take place through a process of maturation, others may occur in a concrete, faster period. In those cases, the participants described inflection points or the start of new episodes in which the families experienced abrupt changes. To the question of which events may modify the consideration of the animals within the family, our participants debated four transition moments (Bernardi et al., 2019; Walsh, 2009b): the creation of a couple, the breakup of the relationship, the birth of a child, and leaving the family home as independent adults.

Several of our participants commented on their experience in the transition from coexisting only with non-human animals to integrating a new partner into the household. In some cases, the interaction between their companion animals and their potential partners was used as an element of judgement on future compatibility, attributing to the animal some degree of

relevance in the decision to establish a relationship, which is consistent with the results of previous studies (Cloutier & Peetz, 2016; Gray *et al.*, 2015). In those situations, in which the relationship evolved toward coexistence, the status of the companion animal was not devalued. In fact, many of the participants stated that ‘the animal came first’, making it clear that respecting the status of the companion was a condition for progress in the relationship. In the following paragraph, the participant alludes to both affectivity and shared history with his companions as elements that justify the decision.

I think it also depends on the situation. I mean, if you have a partner before having a companion animal, I think the decision on whether to include the animal in the household should be made between you and your partner. But if you have an animal before you find a partner and you are used to sleeping with her, then, in the end, the animal will win in most cases. [FG1; CA]

Some participants provided experiences about the effects of breaking up with a partner on the fate of companion animals. The legal (who is the legal owner of each animal) and emotional (bond or attachment) elements were discussed. Several interviewees referred to the need to establish a balance between the human preferences and the needs of the companion animal, showing an interest in giving a voice to non-human animals (Adams, 2010).

Sometimes you have to share “custody of the pets”. And they have some needs, I mean, I also now live [outside of Spain], I see my cat when I return to [hometown], but it would seem pretty shitty of me to put my cat in a car for a six hour drive to come with me for a month or two and I don’t even have good conditions here for him either [...] He has his needs covered, his emotional needs are also covered, and I still maintain a bond with him when I see him. [FG3; CR]

Since companion animals are usually labeled surrogate children in the popular way of thinking (Laurent-Simpson, 2017), it is not surprising that the birth of a new human family member was one of the debated milestones in the family journey, even among participants who were not parents. Discourses pointed out that the arrival of a child makes it necessary to adapt routines and schedules to the new needs, posing an objective decrease of the available resources to take care of the animal. On the other hand, the birth of a child facilitates the re-adjustment of the use of terms created for human relationships, such as *baby* or *child* (Power, 2008; Volsche, 2018), which are then reserved for the infant. Nevertheless, this does not necessarily worsen the status of the animal.

She is a dog. She needs to run around, vent, come home tired. So, whenever we could, we went for a walk, in [the former city of residence] there were a lot of cool places and, when we moved to [the current city], we tried to find every park available for this purpose. The baby arrived, and we tried to do the same, but adapting to the schedules of a baby. However, the dog was first, and so... we cannot change her. Besides, she is an animal; she could get depressed or something, and I am afraid this could happen. [FG1; LU]

Lastly, the participants mentioned the transition of the family to the empty nest. Specifically, they highlighted the changes they observed when they left their home of origin. The discourses showed that the bond with companion animals became more intense, receiving greater attention, as was also reported in previous studies (Gouveia & Castrén, 2021).

There have always been dogs at my home, and in the end, there was only one dog and no children, so that dog became my mother’s child [...] We had big dogs, but this one, due to his [small] size, was more prone to that kind of attitude. My mother puts clothes on the dog, because he is old and has arthritis. She also covers him with a blanket [...] She also makes special food for him in the morning and at night. So, he is the most spoiled child of all [FG3; CR].

Theme 4: End of the relationship: Parting way

Although families tend to maintain their identity throughout time, development may imply the modification of their composition and, subsequently, the end of some relationships and bonds. These breakups may be due to natural reasons, such as the death of the animals, or unexpected events, such as the inability to take care of them or to find a place —e.g. rental house— to coexist (Eagan et al., 2022).

Companion animals have a considerably shorter life expectancy than human beings (Laing & Maylea, 2018), therefore, all participants had had experiences (either of their own or through someone known to them) related to the death and mourning of a companion animal. The participants performed farewell rituals that were very similar to those used after the death of a loved one: obituaries and goodbye letters on paper or social networks, burials (with or without a ceremony), cremation (keeping the ashes or spreading them at a meaningful place), and preparation of elements to remember the animal (e.g., photo book, celebration of death anniversaries, etc.) (Chur-Hansen, 2010; Rennard et al., 2019). Participants also described actions that aim to continue relationships (*continuing bonds*), such as keeping objects with which they remember the deceased animal and visiting meaningful places to keep their memory alive (Habarth et al., 2017).

On my phone, Google Photos reminds me “one year ago, two years ago, three years ago”, and the only thing it reminds me is pictures of my cat [...] She passed away recently, over a month ago [...] She is very present. For example, there are pictures of her, objects we used with her, which we keep at home. The scratcher for my cat is in the living room. When we buried her, we put all her things away, but some of them are in places where we can see them [...] So, these are little reminders of her at home. [FG3; RQ]

However, the loss of the bond with the companion animal may not be due to natural reasons, such as the break-up of the couple (already reflected above in the text) or unexpected events, such as job, financial, or housing problems. The hypothetical proposition of what decision should be made in case of not being able to provide adequate care for the companion animal generated an intense debate, which was linked to emotional responses of sadness and anguish, in line with the findings of previous studies (DiGiacomo et al., 1998; Kogan et al., 2022).

I would not think of anything that would separate me from my cats and my dog. [...] That’s something I don’t understand. We have also had animals at home all my life and I do not know if that is the reason, but I cannot imagine that and I don’t want to imagine that, because I believe I would never be able to separate myself from my animals, neither the ones I have now nor the ones I had in the past. [FG 3, EL]

When asked about the reasons that could justify the dissolution of the bond, the discourse of the participants was again focused on family values: it does not matter what happens, the relationship with the animals is unbreakable, as is the case with human family members. In their opinion, someone can only relinquish an animal if there is no recognition of their selfhood. In the next quotation, the participant (MC) talks about animal’s affect and the shared history as self-experiences that help to create this family bond.

I imagine the situation where my partner and I break up [...] The dog is his and would live with him, but that does not imply that I stopped feeling her as part of my family because this is the one [dog] that I had to feed her with a baby bottle, I had to help her when it choked, we controlled the growth curve to see if she gained the weight it had to gain, that is, there has been an involvement. [...] There are people who detach themselves, but it is because the dog was in the yard all the time and there was no relationship. [FG3; MC]

These responses could be understood as an idealization of the bond, although several participants mentioned that they had indeed become indebted to provide veterinary care for their companion animals and/or changed their routines to be able to take adequate care of them (e.g., in their last days of life). They were also willing to change their place of residence or job to care for them, which agrees with the dilemmas that have already been pointed out in other studies (Eagan *et al.*, 2022; Kogan *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, these discourses show a clear conviction about treating companion animals as any other member of the family. In the few focus groups that highlighted some type of limit, this would also be applicable to human family members.

Now I have a small baby niece and if he [the companion] hurts her in some way, that would change my view on this whole matter [...] If someone in my family hurt the baby, I would end the relationship with that person. I don't care if it's a person or an animal that hurts my niece. [FG3, RQ]

These findings show consistency between the family relationships established with human beings and non-human beings. Elements such as loyalty, the unconditionality of the bond, the assumption of effort and compromise to maintain the relationship, and the pain caused by the loss of the companion animal are consistent with the traditional discourses reserved to human interactions.

DISCUSSION AND FINAL REMARKS

This study analyzed the intersection between the life-course of humans and non-human animals in Spanish families. Our findings agree with the previous literature in several aspects, such as pointing out the similarity of the relationships we can build up with both humans and non-human animals and highlighting the importance that non-human animals may reach within multispecies families. Beyond this, it also provides some new insights regarding the development of the relationship along the family life-course, paying attention to the changes in the recognition of individuality (selfhood) of the companions.

The analysis has been carried out based on indicators of self-experience, providing an interactionist vision of how animals are incorporated into Spanish families. This approach makes it possible to overcome some of the limitations found in the literature. First, most studies analyze the role of animals as if it were fixed, ignoring the process of building up the relationship, while our study offers a dynamic image in which the status of companion animals is modified through joint action (Irvine, 2023; Sanders, 2003). Second, previous literature describes those roles from a mainly anthropocentric point of view, where animals are objects that humans can include in their family schemas (Walsh, 2009b). Our study highlights the nature of animals as sentient beings, *subjects* with their own agency and history, allowing us to give voice to their needs and characteristics and helping to generate the *animal turn* that other authors claim (Adams, 2019; Irvine, 2021).

Our findings showed that the recognition of the needs and will of companions changes along the relationship, helping to migrate from people-centered decisions to a new arrangement, where the individuality of animals is considered. Even from the first steps of coexistence, animals may express their individuality *choosing* their humans by following you home or *calling* you out at the animal shelter. Changes can develop slowly, crystallizing day by day, or be associated with faster episodes, such as transitions from being single to cohabitation, empty nest, and others (Charles, 2016; Fox, 2006). Our findings indicate that the changes are not directly related to the utility that the companion can have to the humans—e.g. having surrogate children (Laurent-Simpson, 2017; Shir-Vertesh, 2012)—, but with the degree of intersubjectivity developed: when the companion's selfhood was poorly recognized, their

status was more variable; but when they are already recognized as someone, the challenges in the family context would not devalue the bond. Although relationships may change, they are family members.

It is important to note that a strong attachment to companions does not imply the existence of a multispecies family. As stated by our participants, *loving animals* and *respecting animality* are different matters, and incorporating non-human animals to human costumes and dynamics—it is, *humanizing* them— may go against their wellbeing. Analyzing the recognition of selfhood, as expressed by the indicators of self-experiences, is of interest to continue delving into our understanding of how people can relate in a more respectful way to companion animals. Although quantification was beyond our objectives, we found that perception of affectivity and shared history were the most frequent indicators cited, while coherence and agency were among the least quoted; future studies should try to check this impression.

Of course, the conclusions drawn in the current study have the characteristic limitations of the procedure used. We conducted three focus groups, mainly composed of women, with a medium-high education level, from urban contexts, and with a socioeconomic and cultural level that allows them to access digital technologies. The lower participation of men is common to many other studies in the field, and the literature usually explains this phenomenon due to the higher openness to speak of family, relationships, and caring among women (Cleary et al., 2022; Randler et al., 2021). At the same time, rural population is underrepresented among our participants, as they usually are in the literature, perhaps because the salience of the human-companion bond is greater for urban population, thus motivating them to participate in the studies (Serpell, 2010). Equally, although the recruitment by the internet allowed to reach a geographic diversity, it could leave out realities of people could not access or were not literate with digital resources. In this sense, the next research lines may devote more attention to the intersection of these realities to guarantee the visibility of all positions within the debate. In any case, this sample matched the requirements for small to medium-sized studies that use this data collection method (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

The findings of the present study are of interest from both the basic and applied points of view. On the one hand, it provides new insights about how companion animals fit within families, adding new evidence to the applicability of usual sociological frameworks to the relationship between humans and non-human animals. Regarding practical implications, we found that Spanish families can incorporate companions as full family members, that being able to take care of them is of great importance, and that separation and loss of the companions can arise personal dilemmas (Eagan et al., 2022; Kogan et al., 2022). Despite this, and although those changes have a reflection in the legal regulations, the truth is that non-human animals do not have a guaranteed access to sanitary services, or housing. Our participants continued to experience the incomprehension of the environment, feeling it as a threat to the integration of their family identity and to the representation of their specific needs throughout their life course. Multispecies families seem to be far from being fully instituted in our society. Therefore, it is important that the professionals who work with families in clinical, educational, and political contexts incorporate human-animal interaction into their evaluation objectives. This would allow for a broader approach to the family journey and would also help to represent emerging models of multispecies families.

USE OF AI

The present study did not involve the use of any Artificial Intelligence software.

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APPENDIX

Sociodemographic data of participants

# Group	Tag	Gender	Age	Environment	Caring of any human relative?	Care of animals	Current # of companions	Species cohabitated
1	CA	Male	18-29	Rural	No	Shared	4-5	Dog, cat
1	B	Female	30-39	Urban	No	Alone	1	Dog
1	MR	Female	30-39	Urban	No	Shared	1	Cat, other
1	LU	Female	30-39	Urban	Siblings	Shared	1	Dog, rabbit
2	CB*	Female	30-39	Urban	No	Shared	2-3	Dog
2	MG	Female	18-29	Rural	No	Shared	1	Dog
2	LS	Female	40-64	Rural	No	Shared	2-3	Dog
2	MJ	Female	18-29	Rural	No	Shared	None	Dog, other
3	EL	Female	18-29	Urban	No	Shared	2-3	Dog, cat
3	RQ	Female	18-29	Urban	No	Shared	None	Cat, other
3	CR	Female	30-39	Urban	No	Shared	4-5	Dog, cat
3	MC	Female	30-39	Urban	No	Shared	4-5	Dog

* Participant could not complete the interview due to technical problems.