## Multi-Species Dementia Studies: Contours, Contributions and Controversies

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## Abstract

Developed via an online collaborative writing project involving members of the Multi-species Dementia International Research Network, this article seeks to refocus “the lens of the dementia debate” (Bartlett and O’Connor, 2007) by bringing dementia's complicated relations with the more-than-human world into sharper relief. Specifically, the article explores four thematic areas (contours) within contemporary dementia studies (Care & Caring; Illness Experience & Disease Pathology; Environment, Self & Sustainability; Power, Rights & Social Justice) where the application of multi-species theories and concepts has potential to foster innovation and lead to new ways of thinking and working. Whilst incorporating multi-species perspectives within dementia studies can create new ways of responding and new spaces of response-ability, the potential for conflict and controversy remains high. It is imperative, therefore, that the field of dementia studies not only becomes a site within which multi-species perspectives can flourish, but that dementia studies also becomes a vehicle through which multi-species concepts may be refined.

**Keywords**: dementia; multi-species; interspecies; more than human; animals; animal assistance

## Introduction: Why “multi-species” dementia studies?

Our social enterprise is not composed of humans alone. Creatures of all variety are inextricably involved in many of our behavioral activities and play important interactive roles in society ... we can no more appropriately ignore the zoological dimension, than an analysis of drama can ignore the seminal actors in a play.

(Bryant, 1979, p. 417)

Dementia is likely as old as humanity itself (Boller & Forbes, 1998), but it has never been an exclusively human affair. Whilst for more than two centuries, the field of dementia studies has largely failed to explore dementia's zoological and ecological dimensions, there are at least three reasons for thinking that this might now be changing:

First, the rise of animal assisted interventions (AAIs) in dementia is leading to growing awareness of the roles animals play in care settings. The development of initiatives such as [Dementia Dog](https://dementiadog.org) and [HenPower](https://equalarts.org.uk/our-work/henpower) in the UK, for example, are helping to foreground relations with animals in care and in so doing, are usefully highlighting the ways in which relationships with animals matter to many people affected by dementia. The increase in sensory gardens (e.g. Gonzalez & Kirkevold, 2013), horticultural activities (e.g. Detweiler et al., 2012), and landscape therapy (e.g. Conradson, 2005) in dementia care is similarly giving rise to interest in ecological approaches to mind, memory and personhood in dementia (Bateson, 1972). Second, since the turn of the century, a distinctly animal turn (Ritvo, 2007) has been taking place across arts, humanities, and social science disciplines as diverse as history, anthropology, psychology, sociology, and geography, as well as across interdisciplinary fields such as science and technology studies, ageing studies, and disability studies (amongst others). With the animal turn has come increased willingness to challenge “settled assumptions and relationships” (Ritvo, 2007, p. 122) about the standing and status of animals, as well as a desire to highlight contributions made by animals to human civilisations. Third, the rise of posthumanistandnew materialist worldviews has led to increased points of connection between the natural and social sciences, as well as between the sciences, arts, and humanities (Coole & Frost, 2010). Such connections are in turn leading to new ways of conceptualising relationships between matter and culture and between the human and the non-human.

In the sections that follow, we explore some of the primary contours, contributions, and controversies of multi-species dementia studies. We highlight four thematic areas (contours) within dementia studies, within which multi-species approaches have the potential to foster innovation and lead to new ways of thinking and working. These we have defined as: Care & Caring; Illness Experience & Disease Pathology; Environment, Self & Sustainability; Power, Rights & Social Justice. Whilst each of these themes contains elements of overlap, sections are designed to be read independently of the others. The final section of the paper seeks to bring these four separate discussions together, to summarise the nature and potential future directions of multi-species dementia studies.

Our primary aim is to refocus “the lens of the dementia debate”(Bartlett & O’Connor 2007) in ways that further opportunities for multi-species work. As Bartlett & O'Connor argue, to broaden the lens of the dementia debate is to enable communities to see and to respond to forces which dominant forms of discourse tend to obscure. We draw upon this optical metaphor, but prefer the term *refocus* (rather than broaden) in the context of our current project. Animals and other forms of more-than-human life have always been in the frame, yet the ways in which our gaze is currently configured tends to minimise and distort their presence. To refocus the lens of the dementia debate is to adjust our conceptual apparatus in ways that redirect attention, bring heightened acknowledgement, and enable new ways of seeing.

There are some key considerations that we wish readers to keep in mind as they engage with the following discussions: First, we do not conceive of multi-species dementia studies as being an entirely novel project. Rather, we see it as deploying approaches which are anchored in other disciplines, particularly in anthropology. These include multi-species ethnography (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010), the anthropology of life (Kohn, 2007), and more-than-human anthropology (Locke, 2017), amongst others. Second, we do not envisage that multi-species dementia studies will become a post-anthropocentric field of enquiry. Many practical areas of concerns within multi-species dementia studies remain rooted, fundamentally, in a desire to advance human health and wellbeing, albeit in ways that - to borrow Gruen’s (2015) phrase - are less unconsciously anthropocentric. Third, the thinking tools that are discussed in the sections that follow tend to be foundational concepts, rather than those taken from the “cutting edge” of multi-species theorising. As such, several of the concepts that each section draws upon have been critiqued, revised, and revisited in recent years. What each exploration offers, therefore, is not a “state of the art” discussion on multi-species work but, rather, an introduction to frameworks and thinking tools that researchers, scholars, practitioners, and activists working within dementia studies may not be familiar with. This, we envisage, will help enable those currently working within dementia studies, with an interest in multi-species theory, to join the debate and to offer critical engagements that may, in turn, help shape future, cutting-edge work - both within dementia studies and amongst wider multi-species scholarship.

In each of the sections that follow, we highlight how thinking with multi-species frameworks in mind can lead us to question, reframe, and re-articulate established concepts within dementia studies, such as intersubjectivity, care, empathy, self, and rights. In doing so, we introduce concepts that are relatively novel within the field of dementia studies, such as entanglement, intra-action, and somatic sensibility. Discussion of these and other concepts is not meant to be exhaustive but, rather, indicative of the sorts of work that multi-species dementia studies may one day prove capable of.

## Care and caring

It would be impossible to explore the contours of multi-species dementia studies without a focus on the concept of care. With the rise of the Personhood Movement during the late 1980s, biomedical understandings of dementia were fundamentally destablised, as care (as opposed to disease) came to be positioned as a central factor influencing the progression of neurocognitive disorder. This shift in thinking in turn brought new (second-order) concepts to the field of dementia studies, including notions of ”positive person work“ and its counter-concept, “malignant social psychology” (Kitwood, 1997). Since then, understandings of care and its impacts on the dementia journey have expanded considerably, both within the *Personhood* movement (e.g. Brooker, 2006) and beyond (e.g. Nolan et al., 2004).

And yet, within contemporary dementia studies, understandings of what it means to care are often poorly defined in the policy and practice literature and are frequently conflated with notions of kindness, compassion, and benevolence. Equally, and despite the growing animal turn across the social sciences, understandings of care in dementia remain predicated upon interpersonal (i.e. human-human) interaction. Thus, within dementia studies, caring tends to be positioned as an *intra*-species activity for which there is “no substitute for human touch” (Jenkins, 2017). This, however, is increasingly at-odds with multi-species research.

As Malcom, Ecks & Pickersgill (2018) highlight, empirical research involving neurodiverse subjects is coming to evidence how care and caring can be constituted *across* species. Drawing on ethnographic research undertaken at a riding centre offering horse-assisted autism therapy, Malcom, Ecks & Pickersgill explore how embodied interaction between children and horses can “open up” autistic children to new ways of relating and can challenge conventional understandings of the nature of intersubjectivity. As the authors argue (p. 230-231):

... discussions of intersubjectivity have often confined this concept to something achieved through the cognitive processes of humans and not animals, and especially through the use of language. Yet, such framings fail to fully resonate with the empathetic processes and their associated therapeutic effects promoted and reflected upon when discussing the rider-ridden relational assemblage of equine therapy.

Central within multi-species dementia studies is attending to the ways in which care may be constituted *across* species. To do this, however, requires that we first (re)conceptualise what it means to care. As Martin, Myers & Viseu (2015) highlight, care is a notoriously “slippery” concept. From an *Ethic of Care* perspective, care has been defined as ***“***a species activity that includes everything we do to maintain, contain, and repair our “world” so that we can live in it as well as possible” (Fischer & Tronto, 1990, p. 40). Other scholars, however, are critical of such definitions for failing to attend to relations of power that are inherent within practices of caring. Relations of care have a dual character, in that they can emerge as both enabling and constraining (Fox and Ward, 2008). Martin, Myers & Viseu (2015, p. 627) thus offer a more critical approach to care, defining care as: “a selective mode of attention [which] circumscribes and cherishes some things, lives, or phenomena as its objects [and] in the process … excludes others”.

Operationalising care as a selective mode of attention (as opposed to an intrinsically benevolent form of social practice) opens-up important opportunities for exploring how relations between people with dementia and animals have been “forgotten” (Davies, 2012) within dementia research, policy, and practice. Despite a considerable amount of literature highlighting the benefits of interacting with animals amongst older adults and people with dementia, the companionship of pets remains an underestimated and even belittled topic (Scheibeck et al., 2011). With age, social support networks often diminish through the loss of human companions (e.g., loss of spouse or friends; children moving away; retirement), which can have direct and long-lasting effects on health, well-being, and social isolation. In this context, the majority of dog and cat owners from an American study said that “companionship” is the greatest benefit of having a pet (Faunalytics, 2000). Furthermore, many Americans have long considered their pets to be family members (e.g. Albert & Bulcroft, 1988), with some seniors reporting stronger attachment to their pets than to the human members of their families (Cole, 2019) - a relationship which Charles (2016) suggests indicates the emergence of “post-human families”. This form of attachment goes beyond the preoccupation with one's physical wellbeing in the form of “nourishing care” (Mol, 2010) or replacing socialization with other humans. As Swall et al. (2017) show, caring for a therapet[[1]](#footnote-1) can take multiple forms and enables the person with dementia to manifest personhood and be empowered. Indeed, there is compelling evidence to suggest that the comfort, intimacy, purpose, and feelings of kinship that other species can provide in later life should be acknowledged and incorporated within assemblages of dementia care (Suthers-McCabe, 2001).

“Forgetting” interspecies forms of caring, kinship, and intimacy can have lethal consequences. As Fox & Ray (2019) highlight, each year thousands of older people experience forced separation from companion animals at the point of transitioning into residential care, which typically results in the animal’s forced rehoming or in euthanising. Because, as Fox and Ray highlight, companion animals are not recognised in law as either persons or as kin, instances of forced separation are not typically treated as family breakdown within Western legal systems, leaving those affected with limited avenues through which to seek redress.

Whilst dominant modes of attending in dementia tend to cherish interpersonal connection and (as a result) ignore relations forged with members of other species, multi-species modes of attending may usefully contribute to refocusing the lens of the dementia debate, by enabling ways of seeing affective (interspecies) relations that exist within dementia caring assemblages. Gruen (2015), for example, advances the concept of “entangled empathy” as part of a broader framework for understanding and cultivating affective relations across species. Entangled empathy, according to Gruen, is a practical endeavour rooted in contemporary, real-world global challenges of how we are to live well together on an increasingly damaged planet. In this context, entangled empathy represents an ethical and epistemological standpoint from which it becomes possible to understand embodied experiences of others; of “what the world seems, feels, smells, and looks like from their situated position” (Gruen, 2015, p. 62). This involves more than simply putting one's self in the shoes of another, especially (as Gruen highlights) “other animals don't wear shoes!” (Gruen, 2015, p. 42). Rather, entangled empathy is “a process that involves integrating a range of thoughts and feelings to try to get an accurate take on the situation of another and figure out what, if anything, we are called upon to do” (Gruen, 2015, p. 77).

In a similar vein, the sociologist Vincianne Despret (2013) suggests that an “embodied empathy” goes beyond “feeling what the other feels” by “making the body available for the response of another being” (p. 70). Thus, Despret asserts that embodied empathy can become a scientific tool that attunes bodies and allows us to think with (as opposed to think about). Through this form of empathy, bodies become response-able (i.e. capable of responding) to each other and to make each other available for response. Thus, an embodied empathy, Despret argues, enables communication between beings who belong to different species and to different verbal and cognitive registers.

Of course, to quote Hayward (2010), “as we look for multi-species manifestations we must not ignore the repercussions that these unions have for all actors” (p. 592). The prevalent perspective surrounding therapeutic practices involving animals is often "what can animals do for us?", with little consideration as to how such relations may affect animals (Gorman, 2019; Hatch, 2007). Critical to a multi-species approach to care and caring then, is the opportunity to strive towards ways “to participate with care” and grasp for more ethical modalities of relationship with non-human others (van Dooren, 2014). Gorman (2019), for example, calls for resisting the anthropocentric coding of interspecies therapeutic practices and instead finding “ways of working and practising interspecies therapeutic interactions in ways that might provide opportunities for more-than-human benefit” (p. 321).

Less unconsciously anthropocentric frameworks such as these may enable those working within dementia studies to re-calibrate their understandings of who (or what) may be capable of care. Rather than seeing animals as possessions, props, or prostheses in the service of human wellbeing, consciously practicing a more embodied or entangled form of empathy may enable us to see animals as companions and co-producers of mutual benefit. This is not, however, to suggest that such frameworks are inherently benevolent, nor without limitations. Giraud and Hollin (2016), for example, highlight how response-able caring practices such as those employed within the Davis animal laboratory in the USA can serve as techniques for control and instrumentalisation, rather than offering a radical or more ethical approach to knowledge production.

However, whilst taking a more response-able approach to care is not a straightforward antidote to “forgetting” (Davies. 2012), it does require that we become “... subject to the unsettling obligation of curiosity, which requires knowing more at the end of the day than at the beginning” (Haraway, 2008, p. 36). This includes, we argue, an ethical obligation to ask controversial and unsettling questions, such as whether animal assisted care can itself serve as an instrument of social control; for example, by helping to render people with dementia less “challenging” and more accepting of a “bare life” (Capstick 2013) within institutional care settings.

## Illness experience and disease pathology

As we become increasingly entangled within the “four moments” of dementia studies (Bartlett & O’Connor, 2010; O’Connor & Nedlund, 2016), it becomes more-and-more difficult for Western researchers, scholars, policy-makers, and practitioners to conceptualise either dementia's illness experience or dementia disease pathology without recourse to human exceptionalism. Ever since Lockian understandings of the person - as “a thinking intelligent Being, that has reason and reflection ...” (Locke 1689 cited in Gordon-Roth, 2020) - became instrumental in defining dementia (as the “fourth species of mental derangement” [Pinel 1806]), our understandings of dementia as a neurocognitive condition have been predicated upon our understandings of what it means to be human.

Since the early 1990s, however, similarities in disease pathology have been observed between Alzheimer's disease in humans and Cognitive Dysfunction Syndrome in other mammals (e.g. Cummings et al., 1993; Dodart et al., 2002). Whilst this is a contested area of scientific knowledge, some studies even suggest symptoms similar to those experienced in Alzheimer’s disease (e.g. disorientation, memory loss and changes in behaviour) may be experienced by animals with Cognitive Dysfunction Syndrome. This has prompted researchers, such as Mihevc & Majdic (2019), to ask whether Alzheimer’s Disease and Cognitive Dysfunction Syndrome are, in reality, but 'two facets of the same disease'?

Exploring illness experience and disease pathology across species is something of a departure from dementia studies’ roots, as it involves attending to the social entanglements of humans and animals in shaping our evolving understanding of neurocognitive disorder. Within biomedical dementia research, for example, the potential for becoming affected by shared vulnerabilities is something that must be considered when exploring the relationships between people affected by dementia and experimental animal subjects, particularly given that ambitions to actively involve people affected by dementia in all stages of dementia research (and research funding) are growing rapidly (Charlesworth, 2018; Tamagnini et al., 2018). The use of transgenic animals (bred to share some biological similarities to human dementias) and animals with Cognitive Dysfunction Syndrome (who serve as “natural” models of dementia’s pathology) creates opportunities for animals to become companions to scientists, and to those with lived experience of dementia, in their unfolding understandings (Davies et al., 2020). For people with lived experience, approaching animal research can involve seeing one's embodied experience of dementia being reflected and embodied in other conscious beings, thus facilitating a sense of “somatic sensibility” (Greenhough & Roe, 2011) between human and animal participants. Whilst encounters between people with dementia and laboratory animals can alleviate anxieties and provide opportunities to witness the care involved in animal research (Davies et al., 2020), this can also be a challenging process. Masterton et al. (2014) for example, report that people can come to feel a sense of guilt in balancing increases in their quality of life against animal research - some people, perhaps, do not want to know about their intimate entanglements with the worlds of animal models of dementia. Yet, as Callard et al. (2012) note, there is growing recognition that “knowledge from the bedside” must feed back into the laboratory if the translational endeavour is to have any real success” (p. 390–391). Such leads to “new demands [for people affected by dementia] to care for and care about the many different bodies that make up the complex worlds of animal research” (Gorman & Davies, 2020, p. 15).

When it comes to researching dementia’s illness experience (as opposed to dementia’s disease pathology) animals have been largely excluded. As Arluke & Sanders (1996) argue, failure to attend to the embodied perspective of animals in qualitative research tends to rely more on anthropocentric ideology (e.g. the belief that animals are incapable of symbolic interaction) than on scientific evidence. Sceptics may argue, however, that attending to dementia experience amongst animals using the same tools, techniques, and conceptual apparatus used to explore dementia experience in humans, risks “animalising” people with dementia and (conversely) anthropomorphising animals. Such are understandable concerns, given the centuries of dehumanisation that generations of people affected by dementia have been subjected to, and ensuring difference is not erased within qualitative multi-species dementia research will likely require new thinking tools and new ways of knowing. In this context, emergent ontological, epistemological, and ethical frameworks, such as new materialism, may offer qualitative multi-species dementia studies some useful starting points from which to develop methodologies.

From a new materialist worldview, differences between species do not exist *a priori* but instead become observable (*a posteriori*) through processes of mutual entanglement; a process that Barad (2007) and Haraway (2008) refer to as *intra*-action. Rather than eliminating difference, notions of entanglement and of intra-action encourage researchers to attend to the ways in which difference is brought into being within the everyday experiences of dementia. Gender and racialisation, for example, affect the lived experience of dementia yet qualitative research has often failed to attend to the ways in which such differences matter in everyday life (see Bartlett et al., 2018; Hulko, 2004). By thinking with new materialist frameworks, entanglements of genetic variation, systemic racism, and patriarchal structures may be seen to create *Cuts* (Barad, 2007) that affect the lived experiences of people of colour and of women living with dementia. Applying this thinking to multi-species dementia studies, entanglements of genetic variation, care and of “speciesism” (Singer, 1975 / 2015) also create *Cuts* that affect the lived experience of dementia amongst humans and animals alike.

Ashall & Hobson-West (2017) draw upon the concept of entanglement, and intra-action, to describe the simultaneous and multiple connections and divisions between human and animal health which are encountered daily in the veterinary clinic. They argue that this unexplored empirical setting has value for researchers interested in both animal and human health, providing an example of how multi-species research might ultimately generate clinical impact for many species. Such an approach may help generate new understandings of the role care plays in shaping dementia’s illness experience, especially within clinical settings (Latimer, 2000). Whilst speculative studies of care are successfully crossing species boundaries (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017), the current healthcare systems for ageing humans and animal bodies are built on firmly entrenched species divisions. Yet, multi-species research has recently recognised the role of pets in improving understanding of human health and illness through the centrality of companion animals in illness narratives (Ryan & Ziebland, 2015). Further, they have also shown how the veterinary treatment of pets can provide physical opportunities for animal owners to explore, replicate, or resist anthropocentric understandings of clinical care (Ashall & Hobson-West, 2017). Using interspecies kinship (Charles, 2015) to frame the simultaneously “family like” and commodified role of pets in canine blood donation, Ashall and Hobson-West (2017) show how an animal owner’s desire to challenge or extrapolate their own healthcare experiences can influence veterinary treatment decisions, and even vice versa. Such work has potential to raise critical questions concerning the clinical care of human and non-human family members (Ashall et al., 2018). Similarly, Rock and Babinec (2008, p. 334) describe the experiences of a man who realised that their dog had diabetes “because he recognized the symptoms from his own experience as a person with type 2 diabetes”. Interest in the extent to which humans and animals share experiences of illness, for example, means that the treatment of companion animals with progressive neurocognitive conditions may ultimately represent a valuable (non- scientific) model of clinical care, which can be both influenced by (and function as) an affirmation or rejection of human healthcare systems.

Whilst multi-species approaches to illness experience and disease pathology present new opportunities within contemporary dementia studies, these (in-and-of themselves) are not capable of addressing the various ills and limitations that have traditionally been associated with anthropocentric research and scholarship. As Wiley (2016) argues, emergent frameworks such as new materialism may not be as “new” as their proponents argue, and the tendency within new materialist thinking to position material forces (such as sex or genetics) as existing independently of the knowledge systems used to understand them, inadvertently risks re-enforcing “the universality of the anthropocentric worldview that characterises Western scientific hegemon” (p. 997). It is imperative, therefore, that multi-species approaches to dementia experience and disease pathology recognise mutual connections and shared affinities with other traditions, including postcolonial, crip, and queer theories (amongst others). This may help avoid multi-species dementia research becoming positioned as a separate (sub-domain) of research into health, illness, and disease; one reserved exclusively for researchers and scholars who happen to “like” animals (Wolfe, 2010).

## Environment, self and sustainability

With the rise of psychosocial approaches, attending to the physical environments in which people live has emerged as a key consideration within contemporary dementia studies. How care facilities and other buildings are designed, for example, are understood to shape profoundly how people living with dementia experience their worlds and navigate within them. Recently, attending to physical environments has diversified within dementia studies, to include consideration of more “green” and “natural" spaces. Researchers, for example, have highlighted how relating with flora, fauna, and other non-sentient life forms can positively affect wellbeing in dementia (e.g. Cook, 2020; Gilleard & Marshall, 2011; Noone et al., 2015). Others have drawn on the “therapeutic landscapes” conceptual framework (Gesler, 1982) to explore the complexity of meanings and therapeutic possibilities of dementia care environments, focussing on the idea of spaces of care as intersubjectivespaces, where there is a relationship between the person and their environment (McLean, 2007). "Green care” initiatives, such as care farms, have also proliferated throughout Europe as a means of creating possibilities for “elderly people with dementia to be more actively involved in a wider variety of activities and to be more frequently outdoors and physically more active than those attending regular day care facilities” (De Bruin et al., 2009, p. 386).

Alongside recognising “nature’s therapeutic effects, attention is starting to be paid to engagement with the natural world using more critical lenses. Drawing on citizenship-based approaches to dementia, Noone (2018) argues that everyday acts of gardening can be a source of empowerment and a means of resisting disabling forms of discourse. Critical scholarship reminds us that there are important histories to be aware of when thinking about the dynamic relationships between dementia care and "nature". Parr (2007, p. 542) notes that within the 1800s, “although such activities were clearly deemed therapeutic, and may indeed have been beneficial to individual patients, the drive for economic and self-sufficient asylum systems would have also demanded that patients be utilised as cheap labour”. Parr (2007, p. 544) goes on to describe how it is unclear “as to whether and how such nature work per se made these people less difficult or demented, but it can be suggested that heavy physical labour was a useful means of silencing the deviant”.

In relation to selfhood, research from across the fields of biology, ecology, cybernetics, and systems theory has highlighted how relations with non-sentient life at the microscopic (intra-corporeal) level are central to the production of human selves. Horizontal gene transfer, for example, is an important aspect of the evolutionary process and, according to Crisp et al. (2015), the human genome is thought to house over 100 genes that have originated from other species. Less than half of all cells that come to constitute human bodies are thought to be human, the rest consisting of bacteria, fungi, protozoa, and viruses residing symbiotically on, or under, the skin (Gilbert et al., 2012). In keeping with this relational approach to selfhood, biomedical research is coming to explore the ways in which the human microbiome affects embodied subjectivity. Microbiomic relations within the gut and large intestine, for example, are increasingly thought to play important roles in brain function, influencing how affective states such as anxiety, agitation, and depression may be experienced (see Foster & Mcvey Neufield, 2013; Lach et al., 2018).

In light of such new understandings, affective states typically considered to be part of the sequelae of dementia disease experience may well be influenced by multi-species relations that occur *within* human bodies, in intra-corporeal space, as well as *between* bodies (in inter-corporeal space). Such ways of seeing embodied subjectivity, as Gilbert et al. (2012) argue, challenge Western beliefs in the individuated self. In so doing, they may lend support to alternative models of human selfhood that more closely align with non-Western understandings, such as Melanesian understandings of *dividual* persons (see Strathern, 1990) or buddhist notions of *inter-being* (see Nhat Hanh, 2017).

Attending to multi-species relations “under the skin” also presents important opportunities for understanding the social distribution of environmental pathogens and their (uneven) effects in dementia. The global pandemic which followed the emergence of the new pathogen Sars-Cov-2 in 2019 has brought into sharp relief the ways in which people living with dementia are vulnerable to marginalisation, devaluation, and discrimination in the midst of public health crises. Decisions to discharge older people from hospitals to care homes without testing for Covid-19 (NHS England & NHS Improvement, 2020) and to restrict access to life-saving ventilators to those infected, based on clinical assessments of “frailty” (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, 2020), have contributed to the disproportionately high rates of people with dementia dying from Covid-19; rates that are “truly shocking” (Alzheimer Disease International, 2020) and painfully consistent across rich nations (Suárez-González et al., 2020). Further, attempts by nation states to reduce deaths linked to Covid-19 have led to under-funded dementia care services and individual care workers becoming responsible for infection control, often by having to deny people with dementia embodied contact with others, whilst public health messages circulate that seek to encourage younger generations to adhere to social distancing measures by using the slogan "don't kill your gran" (Shirbon, 2020).

As the World Wide Fund For Nature (WWF) highlights, the emergence of Sars-Cov-2 may be linked to anthropogenic processes of global warming, declining biodiversity, and the destruction of natural habitats (de Wit et al., 2020). With this comes an increased urgency to situate people's experiences of health and disease in dementia within much broader biological-ecological-sociomaterial contexts. Prior to the global pandemic of Covid-19, studies had already highlighted how deterioration in air quality and increases in extreme heat events linked to the climate crisis, disproportionately affects the health of older people and those living with Alzheimer's disease (see Moulton & Yang, 2012; Schmeltz & Gamble, 2017). Thus, exploring how relations between organs, bacteria, viruses, and other pathogens become entangled with macroscopic processes of climate change and with sociomaterial processes of discrimination (including ageism, ableism, classism, patriarchy, and racialisation) is central to multi-species dementia studies.

Equally, and as McShane (2018) highlights, learning from the experiences of people affected by dementia may help societies cultivate new, collective ways of responding to the climate crisis. Such experiences, McShane argues, include learning how to positively recognise and grieve loss, how to respond with openness and curiosity to the new and unfamiliar, and how to acknowledge the ways in which our “coping process will be difficult, exhausting, and sometimes heartbreaking” (McShane, 2018, p. 11). Perhaps, in these uncertain times, people affected by dementia have much to teach the rest of human civilisation in the ongoing project of how we live and die well together on an increasingly damaged planet (Haraway, 2016; Tsing, 2012).

## Power, rights & social justice

Attending to the ways in which power shapes the social organisation of dementia has moved centre-stage within contemporary dementia studies. Formulations of people with dementia as “Persons” (e.g. Behuniak, 2010; Kitwood, 1997; Kitwood & Bredin, 1992) and latterly as “Citizens” (e.g. Baldwin, 2008; Baldwin & Greason, 2016; Bartlett & O’Connor, 2007, 2010) have been instrumental in challenging the pernicious effects of dehumanisation that mainstream dementia discourse rendered largely invisible. In recent years, *Human Rights Based Approaches (HRBA)* have emerged as key frameworks through which researchers, policy makers, disability activists, and practitioners have sought to advance social justice in dementia (e.g. Bartlett, 2014; Shakespeare et al., 2019; Thomas & Milligan, 2018). The rise of HRBA in dementia has led to tangible achievements including the creation of the *Charter of Rights for People with Dementia and their Carers* (Cross-Party Group on Alzheimer’s, 2008) and to formal recognition of people with dementia under the *UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (World Health Organization, 2017).

Similarly, in the field of animal welfare, the latter decades of the 20th century witnessed emerging interest in the language of “rights”. In the 1970s, the animal liberationist Peter Singer argued that the capacity for animals to experience suffering (and their desire to avoid it) makes animals equally deserving of rights as humans. Yet, Singer argues, our willingness to extend rights to human populations (including people with dementia) whilst withholding them from members of other species highlights a deeply ingrained and largely unconscious tendency towards "speciesism” across Western society (Singer, 1975/2015). Working from the Kantian tradition, the philosopher Tom Regan made a similarly seminal case for animal rights, arguing that members of other species who are “the subject of a life” should be granted equal moral consideration to that of humans (1987). As with dementia activism, such arguments have led to tangible gains. In 2008, for example, the Spanish Parliament voted to extend human legal rights to life and freedom (including freedom from torture) to non-human hominids including chimpanzees, bonobos, gorillas and orangutans, based on the extent to which the cognitive processes of these primates mirror those of “normal” humans.

Thinking with multi-species frameworks and concepts usefully prompts us to challenge the current emphasis on rights as vehicles for redistributing power in dementia. Whilst producing tangible benefits in its attempts to re-shape relations of power, since the 1980s, critics have been drawing attention to the limitations of rights-based thinking. Rose (1985) argues that “posing demands in terms of rights and entitlements as means of directing social resources” (p. 199) does little to disrupt Western notions of the persons as independent, autonomous, rational individuals, that have been invented by centuries of “Western social and political discourse” (p. 203). Further, and as D’Souza (2018) argues, the emergence of “human rights” across Europe and North America during the late-18th century was integral to the projects of colonialism, violent land acquisition, and forced displacement that took place during the post-Enlightenment period. O’Neil (2005) suggests that taking a normative approach to rights requires that certain institutions and/or individuals are held responsible for ensuring that rights (e.g. the right to life, liberty, food or healthcare) are upheld. Contrary to popular belief, O’Neil argues, this is typically not the State, which is instead entrusted with identifying *which* institutions will be held responsible (and how). This, according to O’Neil, leads inevitably to the creation of complex legal and bureaucratic landscapes within which those charged with procuring the resources needed to uphold rights (e.g. doctors, nurses, care home staff) become subjected to increased levels of surveillance, control, and (when things go wrong) blame.

In this context, multi-species scholars such as Wolfe (2003; 2010) and Braidotti (2013) have criticised reliance upon rights within both the disability movement and the animal welfare movement, both for inadvertently positioning people with disabilities as Other to the human ideal (Wolfe, 2003; 2010) and for anthropomorphising animals (Braidotti, 2013). As Braidotti, for example, argues:

Anthropomorphizing them so as to extend to animals the principle of moral and legal equality may be a noble gesture, but it is inherently flawed, on two scores. Firstly, it confirms the binary distinction human/animal by benevolently extending the hegemonic category, the human, towards the others. Secondly, it denies the specificity of animals altogether, because it uniformly takes them as emblems of the trans-species, universal ethical value of empathy (p. 79).

By offering alternative ("trans-species") frameworks upon which calls for social justice can be developed, multi-species frameworks may help us navigate the current impasse that the dominance of (human) rights-based thinking has created. In order to develop a multi-species approach to anti-oppressive social work practice (OAP), Matsuoko and Sorenson (2014) for example, draw upon Iris Marion Young (1949-2006) five faces of institutionalised oppression (exploitation; marginalisation; powerlessness; cultural imperialism; violence) as a framework for highlighting oppression may be experienced by humans and non-humans animals alike. Equally, established frameworks within dementia studies may be modified and expanded so as to make them more capable of application across species.

Behuniak’s (2010) seminal approach to power and personhood, as a case in point, may provide a framework for furthering trans-species approaches to social justice. Whilst, Behuniak argues, Lockian understandings of persons have historically exposed people with dementia to exploitative, manipulative, and competitive forms of power, rooting understandings of personhood in notions of vulnerability (as opposed to agency) may enable people affected by dementia to access positive forms of power, such as nutrient power (i.e. power for) and integrative power (i.e. power with). As Behuniak (2010, p. 237) argues, “... we all have the potential of becoming vulnerable and we all share in the responsibility of responding to the needs of vulnerable persons.” Neither vulnerability nor the pernicious effects of Lockian approaches of personhood are exclusive to the human condition. As Wolfe (2010) argues, humans and animals possess “a shared finitude ... that runs directly counter to the liberal model of the subject...” (p. 139). As such, rooting power in the capacity for vulnerability (as opposed to agency) has the potential to create a shared (trans-species) foundation, upon which people affected by dementia and non-humans may access *nutrient* and integrative forms of power.

## Discussion: Contours, contributions and controversies

... it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with... what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.

(Haraway, 2016, p. 12).

As Haraway (2016) highlights, concepts matter. The thinking tools we use to understand dementia and what dementia affects have consequences that shape the lives of humans and animals alike. In the preceding sections of this article, we have sought to refocus “the lens of the dementia debate” (Bartlett & O’Connor, 2007) by highlighting the value of multi-species concepts within contemporary dementia studies. In this final section, we seek to summarise our thoughts on the contours, contributions, and controversies that may come to characterise multi-species dementia work.

*Contours*: Thinking with multi-species concepts in mind has the potential to re-shape the landscapes of dementia research, policy, and practice. This is because multi-species perspectives can challenge settled assumptions(Ritvo, 2007) about how we identify, define, and respond to the challenges and the opportunities that dementia presents. In this paper, we have sketched some of the contours of multi-species dementia studies, focusing on key concepts in dementia such as care, illness experience, disease pathology, selfhood, environments, sustainability, power, rights, and social justice. These contours are not intended to be exhaustive, nor mutually exclusive. Care, for example, is not apolitical, but is intricately connected with projects of social justice. There are likely many more contour lines to multi-species dementia studies to be drawn, and re-drawn, in the years ahead.

*Contributions*: The promise of multi-species dementia studies, as we see it, rests in the ability to open-up ways of knowing that create new opportunities for living and dying well with dementia on an increasingly damaged planet (Haraway, 2016; Tsing, 2012). For over two centuries, dementia has offered researchers, practitioners, and theorists fertile ground upon which to put established concepts to the test - many of which (e.g. “selfhood”, “personhood”, “citizenship”) have been found wanting in the process. In this article, we have sought to introduce a selection of multi-species concepts that are themselves subject to considerable debate, both within and beyond the field of multi-species theorising. Entanglement, for example, whilst a key concept in multi-species work, has been the subject of detailed critique (e.g. Giraud, 2019; Wiley, 2016), as have notions of trans-species vulnerability and of shared finitude (e.g. Chew, 2014). Developing multi-species dementia studies requires not only that multi-species frameworks be applied within dementia studies, but that the field of dementia studies itself becomes fertile ground within which multi-species concepts can be refined. Whilst incorporating concepts from other disciplines inevitably poses a risk of “strange borrowings” (Papoulias and Callard, 2010), dementia studies offers a unique environment within which multi-species scholars and researchers can explore, test, develop, and refine their conceptual apparatus.

*Controversies*: As Wilkie (2015) highlights, multi-species work tends to attract controversy and multi-species dementia studies is no exception. We must accept that in connecting ageing studies with alternative theoretical approaches, we will connect dementia studies with the criticisms and controversies that these wider approaches tend to attract. Thorny issues such as the role of animals in biomedical dementia research, for example, tend to be sites within which strong fault lines emerge and such tensions, if not well-managed, risk leading to accusations that multi-species dementia studies is either indifferent to the exploitation of animals or, conversely, the latest manifestation of *woke* science. Following Robbins (2013), our hope is that multi-species dementia studies can navigate such controversies by furthering a “science for the good”; one that not only documents the shared experiences of dementia across species but also imagines a science that can work towards a way of “being well together” (Kirk et al., 2019, p. 75).

## Concluding thoughts

As with all emergent areas of inquiry, multi-species dementia studies is likely to face many challenges, not least in how such work is understood and valued across communities of practice. This article offers an attempt to twist the various strands of multi-species thinking about dementia together, in the hope that multi-species approaches can both advance the field of dementia studies and be advanced by the field of dementia studies. How multi-species dementia studies develops, however, will depend in large part upon the response-ability of researchers, practitioners, activists, and policy-makers alike when embracing the challenges, opportunities, and controversies that our more-than-human world presents.

##

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1. Therapets are dogs that visit care home residents as part of animal-assisted interventions [↑](#footnote-ref-1)