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Multispecies Homelessness An Exploration of Inclusionary and Exclusionary Practices in Human-Animal Companionships in Vienna

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This thesis is dedicated to those who navigate life's challenges alongside their animal companions and express the deep bonds that transcend species.

Abstract English

This research explored human-animal companionships in the context of homelessness in Vienna, where such relationships are marked by exclusion and inclusion. Through restricted housing access, social stigmatisation, and structural barriers to financial stability and daily navigation, but also vital sources of belonging and emotional support. These processes shaped this research's topic on inclusionary and exclusionary processes in both institutional settings and everyday social life. The focus was set on low-threshold services within Vienna's homelessness support system: spaces promising accessibility for anyone with minimal barriers. Following a posthumanist lens, the thesis engaged theories of more-than-human relationships, social exclusion, the making of space, and humanitarian rationales. Methodologically, data were drawn from a long-term field involvement and combined qualitative approaches of multispecies ethnography and analytic autoethnography. This included observations, informal conversations, interviews with institutional actors, and field notes. The findings revealed that while partial inclusion of companion animals is recognised, institutional practices remain largely grounded in anthropocentric understandings of homelessness. Services showed inconsistencies and discretionary practices in supporting interspecies companions, while interactions with the public exposed ambivalent dynamics, where animal companionships can increase empathy but also reinforce stigma and marginalisation.

Abstract Deutsch

Diese Forschung untersuchte Mensch-Tier Beziehungen im Kontext von Obdach- und Wohnungslosigkeit in Wien, wobei solche Beziehungen sowohl von Exklusion als auch von Inklusion geprägt sind. Ausschlussmechanismen zeigen sich durch eingeschränkten Zugang zu Wohnraum, soziale Stigmatisierung und strukturelle Barrieren hinsichtlich finanzieller Stabilität und Alltagsbewältigung, während die Beziehungen gleichzeitig wichtige Quellen von Zugehörigkeit und emotionaler Unterstützung darstellen. Diese Prozesse bildeten den Schwerpunkt der Untersuchung von inklusiven und exklusiven Dynamiken sowohl in institutionellen Kontexten als auch im alltäglichen sozialen Leben. Der Fokus lag auf niedrighschwelligen Angeboten der Wiener Wohnungslosigkeit: Räume, die versprechen mit minimalen Barrieren für alle versprechen. Aus einer posthumanistischen Perspektive greift die Arbeit Theorien zu mehr-als-menschlichen Beziehungen, sozialer Exklusion, der Raumproduktion und humanitären Rationalitäten auf. Methodisch stützt sich die Forschung auf eine langfristige Felddbeteiligung und kombinierte qualitative Ansätze aus Multispezies Ethnographie und analytischer Autoethnographie. Dazu gehörten Beobachtungen, informelle Gespräche, Interviews mit institutionellen Akteurinnen und Feldnotizen. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass zwar eine partielle Inklusion von tierischen Begleitungen anerkannt wird, institutionelle Praktiken jedoch weitgehend auf anthropozentrischen Vorstellungen von Obdach- und Wohnungslosigkeit basieren. Die Angebote weisen Inkonsistenzen und Ermessensspielräume in der Unterstützung von Mensch-Tier Beziehungen auf, während Interaktionen mit der Öffentlichkeit ambivalente Dynamiken offenbaren: Tierische Begleitungen können Empathie erhöhen, gleichzeitig aber Stigmatisierung und Marginalisierung verstärken.

List of Abbreviations

WWH = Wiener Wohnungslosenhilfe (Viennese Assistance Programme for Homeless Persons)

FSW = Fonds Soziales Wien (Vienna Social Fund)

FEANTSA = Fédération Européenne d'Associations Nationales Travaillant avec les Sans-Abri
(European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless)

ETHOS = European Typology of Homelessness and Housing Exclusion

BAWO = Bundesagentur Wohnungslosenhilfe (Federal Association for Organisations Working
with the Homeless)

BZWO = Beratungszentrum Wohnungslosenhilfe (counselling for funded housing)

“Having a companion animal is a privilege, not a right, but prohibitive companion animal policies should be reformed if as a society we do not want to restrict animal adoption and responsible guardianship to only the most affluent socioeconomic classes” (Palotta, 2019: 69).

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1 Introduction

I still don't know exactly how to prevent homelessness. But I would like to give the operators of shelters some good advice: companion animals should be allowed. They are already used in various areas for therapeutic reasons. In addition, an animal is a responsibility that many people urgently need in order to regain a bit of structure in their daily lives. (Judendorfer, 2011: 215, translated by the author¹)

Housing is a basic human need. Accordingly, the “Lisbon Declaration on the European Platform to Combat Homelessness” was born in 2021 with a central theme to work towards ending homelessness in EU member states by 2030. Also, Austria has been among the member states and signed the declaration to commit to this aim. In order to achieve this, the work on preventing and ending homelessness is being expanded, together with improvements on the currently inadequate data around the phenomenon of homelessness (Bundesministerium Arbeit, Soziales, Gesundheit, Pflege und Konsumentenschutz, 2025). Regarding the latter, it is difficult to determine how many people in Austria are actually affected by homelessness, housing insecurity, or precarious living conditions. According to the existing statistics, in 2023, Austria registered a total of 20.573 homeless individuals, and Vienna accounted for 55% with 11.400 recorded cases, drawing from registration offices and homelessness facilities. While these figures provide the most reliable orientation as of today, they remain an estimated representation. Unregistered and concealed cases are not included in these records, which implies a much larger number (Statistik Austria, 2025: 98).

With a specific focus on Vienna, a broad network of diverse homelessness support services (*Wiener Wohnungslosenhilfe, WWH*) aims to improve the situations of homeless individuals together with their multifaceted challenges (Beeck, Grünhaus, & Weitzhofer, 2020: 20). These services are adapted to suit the specific needs-based groups, who are distinguished by age, gender, health conditions, migration from within Austria and abroad, etc. (ibid. 44ff). This demonstrates an aim to include various specific experiences and occurrences of homelessness in the institutional frameworks.

As I have worked in the field of homelessness in Vienna for many years, one specific form of experienced homelessness came to my attention, one largely overlooked: namely, individuals

¹ Ich weiß zwar noch immer nicht genau, wie man Obdachlosigkeit verhindern kann. Aber den BetreiberInnen von Heimen möchte ich zumindest einen guten Rat geben, und zwar sollten Haustiere erlaubt sein. Aus therapeutischen Gründen werden sie schon in diversen Bereichen eingesetzt. Außerdem ist ein Tier eine Aufgabe, die viele Menschen dringend brauchen, damit sie wieder ein bisschen zu einer Tagesstruktur finden. (Judendorfer, 2011: 215, original quote)

in the company of animals. These human-animal relationships occur across all of the aforementioned needs-based groups and create unique realities, obstacles, and opportunities for those involved. For instance, aggravated conditions may arise in that regard, such as accessing services, obtaining housing, and achieving financial stability. At the same time, positive aspects can be identified, with persons experiencing processes of socio-emotional inclusion and benefits. These include psychological and emotional support, protection, social interaction, and acceptance. However, especially the socio-emotional aspects leave room for ambivalent experiences. For instance, these aspects are named to contest processes of marginalisation and isolation, something often experienced by homeless individuals (Kerman, Gran-Ruaz, & Lem, 2019: 107). However, it is often these relationships that lead to further processes of stigmatization and consequently reinforce social exclusion, due to constant scrutiny of whether homeless individuals are capable of taking responsibility or caring for others (Irvine, 2013a: 47f.).

Following these premises, this thesis aims to explore exclusionary and inclusionary practices surrounding homeless interspecies companionships in Vienna, across social and institutional scales. One specific focus of my research concerns how these interspecies relationships are shaped by, and in turn shape, processes of inclusion and exclusion within social interactions and institutional arrangements. Along this line of enquiry, this research seeks to shed light on these lives on the margins, including forms of recognition, ways of navigating everyday life, experiences in obtaining essential resources, encounters with others, and the mutual effects they have on one another.

1.1 The Field

Unfortunately, feasible numbers and institutional or formal data on homeless interspecies companionships in Vienna are nonexistent. However, the Viennese veterinary facility *neunerhaus*² has provided medical treatments to 440 animals of homeless individuals in 2023 (neunerhaus – Hilfe für obdachlose Menschen, n.d). Certainly, these records cannot account for accurate numbers, as not all individuals with animals accessed or were able to access this facility. Based on estimates from the North American context, it is assumed that between 5 and 25% of all homeless people are accompanied by animals (Kerman, Gran-Ruaz, & Lem, 2019: 106). However, others estimate that the figure is around 10% (Irvine, Kahl, & Smith, 2012: 28).

² The neunerhaus veterinary practice offers free medical care for animals of homeless individuals. Their services range from preventive care and basic treatments to minor surgical procedures. Up to this day it remains the only facility of its kind in Austria (neunerhaus – Hilfe für obdachlose Menschen, n.d).

The inconsistency in this regard points to a structural invisibility regarding homelessness and coinciding companionships with animals. However, if these figures could be applied to the context of Vienna, this would correspond to approximately 570 to 2,850 people out of a total of 11,400 homeless people living in Vienna in 2023. For comparison, to make these numbers even more tangible: in 2019/20, around 22% of all households in Vienna had animals in their domestic spheres and spent an average of 75€ per month on their animal companions (Statistik Austria, 2023).

Following these estimations, one can assume that animal companionship and homelessness are frequently co-occurring phenomena and most likely deserve more attention. However, it needs to be emphasised that many services in Vienna show visible attempts to include animal companions along the human-centred systems. Yet, such inclusion may be conditional and inconsistent across services. This creates an intriguing field of research. Not only how animals are incorporated into service provision, but also under what terms, with what limitations, and how these conditions shape the daily lives of both human and nonhuman companions.

Importantly, the *WWH*, with its facilities and services, is versatile, and so are the individuals concerned. Therefore, my research field is not limited to a single physical site but is rather composed of a network of spaces: day centres, emergency accommodation, and street work encounters, with each having its own approaches, regulations, and practices towards animal companionships. Accordingly, this research is specifically situated within the context of low-threshold homelessness services in Vienna. As “easily accessible” services, low-threshold services mean an increased degree of accessibility (Haj Ahmad, 2022: 149f.). This guiding principle makes them especially relevant for individuals experiencing acute forms of exclusion, such as those sleeping in public spaces or those without social payments and legal permits in Austria. Because of my own involvement in one of Vienna’s low-threshold facilities, my insights and understandings of these situational processes are particularly relevant in the constitution of the field.

Consequently, this research examines how interspecies companions affected by homelessness co-navigate along an institutionalised system that allegedly poses hardly any barriers in its accessing criteria. It further examines whether animals become a threshold themselves and if this alters accessibility to support, visibility in public spaces, and how individuals are perceived and treated by staff, institutions, and society at large.

Following this, in the research process, a mixed method approach has been applied, combining methods of multispecies ethnography and analytic autoethnography. With these tools together, an in-depth exploration of entanglements between the species, as well as a constant introspection of my own positionality, allowed for unique insights and a diverse set of data.

1.2 The State of Research

In recent years, academia has shown growing attention to the lives of people experiencing homelessness, together with its associated multifaceted phenomena. Yet, the presence and roles of companion animals remain largely overlooked. Therefore, this research responds to a significant gap in the literature. While multispecies anthropology has increasingly explored the bonds and boundaries between human and nonhuman lives (Helmreich & Kirksey, 2010; Haraway, 2008; Tsing, 2015), homelessness research has remained largely centred around analysis of human experiences. A growing but still limited body of work has begun to investigate the relationships between homeless individuals and their companion animals, although largely in contexts of North America (Irvine, 2013a; Irvine, 2013b; Irvine, Kahl, & Smith, 2012; Kerman, Gran-Ruaz, & Lem, 2019; Labrecque & Walsh, 2011; Rose & Wilson, 2019) and exceptions in contexts of Australia (Laing, 2020) and the UK (Scanlon et al., 2021). However, none of the above have focused in depth on the role of institutional frameworks as a regulating force of interspecies companions. Although frequently but peripherally mentioned in these works, the question of *how* exclusions within social services come into play and how attempts and situations of inclusions occur was largely ignored. Additionally, there remains a notable absence of research in European settings. Especially within the institutional frameworks of cities like Vienna, where homelessness services are formalised and state-coordinated. With this thesis, I aim to provide an essential engagement to close empirical and theoretical gaps. While homelessness reveals diverse forms of exclusionary practices, this research looks at the understanding of how realities are shaped for those experiencing homelessness in multispecies relationships. This should not imply a hierarchy of suffering or deservingness but serves to shed light on a group that has been relatively invisible in the discussion so far.

Therefore, giving insights into the entanglements of human-nonhuman realities in homelessness, this thesis contributes to the field of multispecies anthropology from a posthumanist perspective. Although “‘the human’ moves a bit to the edge of this work, the discussion remains legibly anthropological – addressing questions of relatedness, exchange, governmentality, and significations” (Helmreich & Kirksey, 2010: 554). While previous research on multispecies homelessness has not been confined to social and cultural

anthropology solely, my focus on power relations, everyday navigations and relations, and ethnographic methods contributes directly to core anthropological debates. In addition, theories of exclusion, space-making, and humanitarian practice constituted the research design from an inductive approach. Beyond academic justification, this engagement also challenges anthropocentric service designs and moves towards practices that genuinely reflect the relational realities of homelessness, human and nonhuman.

1.3 The Research Question

From everything discussed above and to include various experiences, while also approaching the field as impartially as possible, an open question is chosen at the outset. The following research question is this thesis' guiding focus:

“How are interspecies companionships between homeless individuals and companion animals shaped, negotiated, and governed through social perceptions and institutional practices in Vienna?”

This key question is intended to illustrate that the perspectives of various actors should be taken into account. Namely, service users, animals, and institutional actors. However, various spatial concepts should also be considered, such as institutional premises and public spaces. Finally, it should be demonstrated that these aspects interact and influence each other, with entanglements being viewed as relational situations, with specific implications and outcomes for interspecies companions experiencing homelessness.

Based on this, a more detailed confrontation with the topic at hand required further and more nuanced research questions to contribute to the research process. Therefore, in addition, the following sub-questions should serve as further guidance:

- To what extent are nonhumans considered in low-threshold organisational and institutional decision-making?
- What emotional and practical roles do animals play in the lives of homeless individuals, and vice versa?
- How do animal companionships influence public perceptions of homeless individuals and their social interactions?

These questions highlight the triangular relationship among institutional practices and involvements, the expressions of human-animal relations, and direct contact with housed populations. Taken together, these questions prompt a rethinking of inclusion, cohabitation, and responsibility, not only across species but also across social systems and structures.

1.4 The Structure

Building on this introductory data, in Chapter 2, I explore the terminological backgrounds to define central concepts for my topic. In particular, the understanding of “companion animals” and “homelessness” will be thoroughly examined as guiding terms throughout the thesis.

Chapter 3 elicits the theoretical frameworks of my work. By adopting a transdisciplinary approach, I integrate key perspectives from anthropology, sociology, and philosophy. First, I examine posthumanist theories and human-animal entanglements. Next, I explore inclusion and exclusion as social processes and connect these to more-than-human realities. Lastly, I outline the politics of space, with a special focus on institutional configurations, spatial exclusions, biopolitics, and humanitarianism. Although many of the central scholars in these fields are not explicitly anthropologists, their works contribute essential insights to anthropological perspectives on multispecies life and institutional governance.

In Chapter 4, I outline the methodological approaches of my research. This includes a reflection on my own positionality during fieldwork as well as the key epistemological elements around data collection and analysis. Therefore, I discuss and critically examine my approaches to multispecies ethnography, analytic autoethnography, and grounded-theory analytical frameworks.

After this, my empirical chapters provide insights into my ethnographic findings. Chapter 5 introduces the structure of the *WWH*, with a focus on low-threshold services. It identifies how these services regulate the presence of companion animals through exclusion, tolerance, and informal negotiation, and how structural ambiguity shapes decision-making regularly.

Chapter 6 explores the identified occurrences of roles and dynamics in interspecies relationships between unhoused human-animal companions. Here, I discuss how and under what circumstances companionships are joined, the common and uncommon relationships, their temporal aspects, the roles of family members, friends, commodification, and protective measures. Building on this, the aspects of care and co-dependency illustrate practices and meanings of emotional support, proximity, control, and responsibility across the species.

Chapter 7, the final empirical chapter, looks at the situated interactions involving humans and animals in both institutional and public spaces. These explorations analyse how staff, peers, and domiciled people perceive and respond to these relationships.

Finally, in the concluding Chapter 8, all results are compiled and presented in a reflective manner before an outlook on further research is outlined.

2 Terminology and Backgrounds

To provide a clear conceptual framework for this research, it is essential to define the underlying key terms. In this chapter, I will provide a theoretical analysis of the concepts of “companion animals” and “homelessness”. These concepts should not be understood as solely descriptive terms, but as socially, politically, and culturally constructed. Their meaning can vary depending on the context, which is why it is even more important to embed their meanings in this research’s framework. This provides the necessary clarity for the interpretation of empirical material as well as broader theoretical and political debates.

2.1 Companion Animals

Throughout this research, I refer to animals living closely with humans as “companion animals” or “animal companions”. Many scholars use the terms “pets” and “companion animals” interchangeably (e.g., Grier, 2020; Haraway, 2003; Irvine, Kahl, & Smith, 2012; Overall, 2017; Palotta, 2019; Power, 2008). Some authors reason that the preference of the word “pet” in its provision of tangible, familiar understandings, since it is a culturally embedded term with connotations graspable for anyone (Overall, 2017: xviii). The distinction between the two, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of each term, will be laid out in this section to illustrate that the two are not mere synonyms. While the more common term “pet” likely transfers more associations of the roles and relationships established from the human-animal entanglements, it is exactly these understandings I aim to challenge, and therefore introduce an alternative terminology for this research. Moreover, I would argue, while there are attempts to distinguish the terms, the actual separation is not always clear and perhaps not quite established yet. Nonetheless, the conceptualisation and interpretations of the words matter.

The domestication of animals and the relationality between animals and humans have a long history. While the term “pet” has been a common description to define those animals living closely with humans in domestic spheres and refers to “tame animals” in its literal utility (Overall, 2017: xxiv), the term “companion animal” is a relatively new way of describing the complex roles animals may play in humans’ lives. Compared to other domesticated animals that are kept in proximity because of their economic benefits and service provisions, companion animals are primarily regarded as such because of their socio-emotional services (Grier, 2020: 292; Serpell & Paul, 1994: 129). However, so far, the same understanding is attributed to the term “pet”, which is why the investigation has to be deepened.

According to Grier (2020: 292), companion animals can be understood as specific occurrences of pets. They are considered *companions* because they are ascribed a role similar to a human individual. Some pets are particularly incorporated in domestic spheres because of their appearance, behaviour, status, exclusivity, or are maintained as a hobby, showing that not all animals incorporated in human proximity serve the same socio-emotional function. The term “companion animal” thus highlights a deeper relationality, where animals are less likely to be treated as objects but rather as a partner in shared lives. A “pet” on the other side may still carry more instrumental or ornamental connotations.

Therefore, the term “companion animals” describes a relational conception in which animals are “species in obligatory, constitutive, historical, protean relationship with human beings” (Haraway, 2003: 11f.). This understanding only comes into life with the involvement and equal contribution of both animal and human actors. Because of this relational mutuality, I will refer to the homeless human actors in interspecies relationships as “human companions”; not only to highlight the intersecting species but also to contribute to an understanding of reciprocity between the species.

Furthermore, companion animals are often defined as horses, dogs, cats, or various other species that participate in shared social lives, for example, as service animals, family members, or partners in interspecies activities. Generally, animals defined as companions are not considered a source of food, which contrasts with the positions of other nonhuman animals (ibid.: 14; Serpell & Paul, 1994: 130). This consumption differentiation is mainly defined in the perception of companion animals being “family members, the beings who share our homes and lives” (Overall, 2017: xix). These statements reveal, first, the cultural taboo of consuming one’s close animal companion, a dynamic rigidly embedded in the Global North, and second, the unique and diversely occurring social roles. The latter will be elaborated further down.

On a terminological scale, the differentiation between the two terms lies in the deconstruction of human exceptionalism and its comorbidities. In this context, “companion animal” highlights the aspect of relationships that is established between human and nonhuman actors, while simultaneously abandoning the hierarchical connotation that the term “pet” has inherent (Overall, 2017: xxii). Referring to animals as companions implies “a relationship where the traditional hierarchy between owner and animal is blurred and where the animal is entitled to make claims on the owner” (Grier, 2020: 298). Furthermore, although this concept practices a human-animal binary, it shows an approximation to a multispecies mutuality.

Lastly, the notion of “pets” is usually only regarded if the animals remain in an in-house constellation (Overall, 2017: xix). This, in turn, would mean that relationships between humans and animals are effectively dismissed if the component of the domestic sphere does not exist. This becomes even more feasible when looking at the German translation of the word “pet”: *Haustier*, with its literal translation of “house animal”. This aspect presented a significant motive for me to abandon the term “pet”. The context of homelessness usually means a lack of domesticity. Yet, it should not mean that interspecies relationships are different in their experience and practice compared to those of domiciled populations, or that they are not present at all. It is a clearly unsuitable notion regarding the realities of homeless individuals and would therefore be incorrectly positioned within the context at hand.

However, the terminology of “companion animal” also has some critical standpoints inherent. It may facilitate a degree of soft-washing of the intrinsic inequalities between the species and therefore imply an “equivalence” that does not match reality. In human interactions, a “companion” means individuals who choose to be around others voluntarily, which (usually) cannot be accounted for when we speak about animals such as dogs or cats. Which is why a morally virtuous entanglement with companion animals and a “consciousness” for their interests, needs, and liabilities should be sought to level out the inequalities in the relationships, as said imbalances cannot be bridged altogether (Overall, 2017: xxif.) but can be understood as “otherness-in-connection” (Haraway, 2003: 45).

Lastly, I briefly want to tap on the notion of “companion species” (Haraway, 2003) as I see it as a strong conceptual alternative to what has been discussed so far. The term describes a broader and more diverse way of the co-constitution of social worlds, as it includes all species beyond the human animal, such as animals, plants, and microbes (ibid.: 15). While I agree with the theoretical value of this concept, I believe that it presents itself as rather abstract for the purposes of my research. I mention it here nonetheless, because of its deconstructive aims of hierarchies between life forms. However, applying this concept to my research may distract from the specific species entanglements my research addresses. My focus lies on nonhuman animals in close entanglements with human animals, which is why I chose the more tangible terminology of “companion animal/animal companion”. Lastly, I aim to use an epistemological language that aligns with the empirical findings and stems from them. Interlocutors generally referred to the nonhuman participants as “animals”, “pets”, or more specifically as “dogs” and “cats”. Therefore, with all the flaws and benefits of the term “companion animal”, I find it to

be the most suitable term for my context. This does not mean that it should be seen as an uncontested way to describe the research subjects or the dynamic relationships between them.

2.2 Defining Homelessness

While the term “homelessness” provides a generic understanding, it usually lacks precision and distinctions between individual circumstances. Moreover, “homelessness is neither an internally valued group identity nor an authentic choice, but instead a tragic condition” (Van Leeuwen, 2018: 587). Therefore, simply referring to the term “homelessness” generically may lead to misinterpretations of the specific target groups with their diverse experiences and realities. Especially regarding inclusionary and exclusionary practices on political, institutional, and social scales, it is inevitable to provide clear boundaries between the various occurrences. I will therefore elaborate my approaches with the terminology at hand and how a sensitive comprehension will be used in the context of my research. First, I start by approaching the broader term “homelessness” and how it is defined, before getting to the categorial distinctions of the phenomenon.

Looking upon historical processes in Austria³, in the late 19th and early 20th century, “vagrancy” used to be a common way to describe phenomena of nonexistent permanent residences and unemployment. This used to be a legally embedded term and was tightly connected to processes of marginalisation, criminalisation, and consequently frequent penalties (Wadauer, 2011: 34ff). Generally put, those individuals defined as “vagrants” were deemed “prototypical outcasts” (Althammer, 2016: 188). With the criminalisation of vagrancy, an emergence of policies led to institutional “relief systems”, where the “unemployed wanderers” could be accommodated, which was primarily seen as a benefit for domiciled citizens by making the affected individuals invisible, but also functioned as control mechanisms of movement, work ethics, and social structures (ibid.: 194ff). The term “homelessness” was established in the second half of the 20th century with an aim to move away from stigmatising and criminalising understandings and to instead describe the essential common characteristic of those affected in a rather outward and neutral way to respond to formations of prejudices. While these seemingly neutral terms are intended to avoid stigmatisation, they also conceal the social power relations that constitute homelessness (Haj Ahmad, 2022: 22f.).

³ I will not go into the depths of Austria’s historical processes of understandings around homelessness and priorly used terms. For further discussions of this topic, see e.g. Wadauer (2011) for Austrian embeddings and, for a wider European context, Althammer (2016).

In contemporary understandings, homelessness presents as a social phenomenon that is neither homogeneous nor rigid in its origins or its significance for an individual's situation. It should not be regarded as something that is biologically or individually determined, as it often may be framed, but instead, as an expression of a social condition that results from multiple forms of exclusion (ibid.: 23f.). The acknowledgement as a social phenomenon with specific historical processes, current dynamics and circumstances (ibid.: 21), and cultural dimension is essential, since it depends on the particular regional context and its society to define what the minimum standards of adequate housing conditions are, and below which people are considered homeless (Edgar, Meert, & Doherty, 2004: 5).

The causes of homelessness and housing insecurity are diverse. A distinction is usually made between structural and biographic (individual) causes (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2010: 12; Snow & Anderson, 1993: 233ff; Van Leeuwen, 2018: 587). Structural aspects include political-economic conditions (Van Leeuwen, 2018: 587), which are the dynamics of supply and demand in the housing market, income development and labour market conditions, poverty, discrimination, cuts to social welfare benefits, and legal frameworks (such as tenancy law). Individual causes include mental health issues, psychological stress, addictions, traumatic histories, family crises, and unemployment. In most cases, multiple causes interact with one another, mutually reinforcing and compounding each other (Gutleiderer & Zierler, 2020: 12; Van Leeuwen, 2018: 587). FEANTSA (European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless), on the other hand, identifies four broad risk factor categories for the causes of homelessness: structural factors, institutional factors, relationship factors, and personal factors. Additionally, triggers also need to be included in the discussions, which present specific events that may facilitate the path into homelessness (Busch-Geertsema et al., 2010: 51). From these, three core factors have been identified to be among the largest facilitators of homelessness: poverty, housing shortages, and social exclusion. The loss of income security is often the starting point of a process of mutual circumstances. Nevertheless, the actual reasons why someone effectively becomes homeless are far more differentiated and complex. These demonstrate the variety of *potential* pathways into homelessness. Although a person might be affected by one of the numerous factors described, these circumstances are not guaranteed causes of homelessness. Therefore, homelessness arises in diverse and complex ways and cannot be resolved by applying or searching for universal solutions (Schoibl, 2011: 19f.).

FEANTSA aimed to develop a transnationally comparable framework of homelessness. They implemented the ETHOS (European Typology on Homelessness and Housing Exclusion), a

framework constituted of four categories to summarise the occurring forms of homelessness. This should implement a shared terminology across the countries and languages. Drawing from this, homelessness can be distinguished into “rooflessness”, “houselessness”, “insecure housing”, and “inadequate housing” (FEANTSA, 2006: 1).

Conceptual Category		Operational Category		Generic Definition
ROOFLESS	1	People Living Rough	1.1	Rough Sleeping (no access to 24-hour accommodation) / No abode
	2	People staying in a night shelter	2.1	Overnight shelter
HOUSELESS	3	People in accommodation for the homeless	3.1 3.2	Homeless hostel Temporary Accommodation
	4	People in Women's Shelter	4.1	Women's shelter accommodation
	5	People in accommodation for immigrants	5.1 5.2	Temporary accommodation / reception centres (asylum) Migrant workers accommodation
	6	People due to be released from institutions	6.1 6.2	Penal institutions Medical institutions
	7	People receiving support (due to homelessness)	7.1 7.2 7.3 7.4	Residential care for homeless people Supported accommodation Transitional accommodation with support Accommodation with support
	8	People living in insecure accommodation	8.1 8.2 8.3 8.4	Temporarily with family/friends No legal (sub)tenancy Illegal occupation of building Illegal occupation of land
	9	People living under threat of eviction	9.1 9.2	Legal orders enforced (rented) Re-possession orders (owned)
INSECURE	10	People living under threat of violence	10.1	Police recorded incidents of domestic violence
	11	People living in temporary / non-standard structures	11.1 11.2 11.3	Mobile home / caravan Non-standard building Temporary structure
INADEQUATE	12	People living in unfit housing	12.1	Unfit for habitation (under national legislation; occupied)
	13	People living in extreme overcrowding	13.1	Highest national norm of overcrowding

Figure 1: The ETHOS categories (FEANTSA 2006: 1)

While this provides a comprehensive overview, the ETHOS categories are not a one-directional linear system or “a hierarchy of living situations – all these forms of housing exclusion are interlinked” (ibid.: 8). Importantly, these categories are not static in their occurrence; with changing circumstances, a houseless person may become a roofless one or vice versa.

Because definitions usually intertwine the relations of homelessness and housing circumstances, an elaboration of “home” is due at this point. To be homed means the following three domains: (1) the physical dimension, an understanding of spatial possessions for individuals and their families. (2) The social domain, to have a space in which privacy and relations can be maintained. And (3) the legal domain, meaning the legal legitimacy to dwell in a space. Homeless individuals are usually excluded from these, albeit to different degrees (Edgar, Meert, & Doherty, 2004: 5).

The ETHOS categories and the three domains of homelessness and housing exclusion are depicted together in the following (Figure 2).

	Conceptual Category	Physical Domain	Legal Domain	Social Domain
Homelessness	1 Rooflessness	No dwelling (roof)	No legal title to a space for exclusive possession	No private and safe personal space for social relations
	2 Houselessness	Has a place to live, fit for habitation	No legal title to a space for exclusive possession	No private and safe personal space for social relations
Housing exclusion	3 Insecure and Inadequate housing	Has a place to live (not secure and unfit for habitation)	No security of tenure	Has space for social relations
	4 Inadequate housing and social isolation within a legally occupied dwelling	Inadequate dwelling (unfit for habitation)	Has legal title and/or security of tenure	No private and safe personal space for social relations
	5 Inadequate housing (secure tenure)	Inadequate dwelling (dwelling unfit for habitation)	Has legal title and/or security of tenure	Has space for social relations
	6 Insecure housing (adequate housing)	Has a place to live	No security of tenure	Has space for social relations
	7 Social isolation within a secure and adequate context	Has a place to live	Has legal title and/or security of tenure	No private and safe personal space for social relations

Figure 2: The theoretical categories of homelessness (Edgar, Meert & Doherty, 2004: 6)

Although this second illustration shows a condensed version of the FEANTSA conceptual categories and can therefore be viewed as outdated, I included it here anyway, because it depicts the conceptual dimensions of homelessness together with the experienced exclusionary dimensions coming with them.

The two conceptual categories “rooflessness” and “houselessness” are commonly used as synonyms (Haj Ahmad, 2022: 23), although, as illustrated in the figures, they mean different access opportunities for affected individuals. Rooflessness is considered one of the most vulnerable states of homelessness. It is the only conceptual category to exclude the corresponding individuals from all three domains of housing. This population faces a lot of stigmata due to constant exposure to the public as well as exclusions in institutional accommodations (Rose & Wilson, 2019: 412; FEANTSA, 2006: 6). In contrast, people experiencing houselessness receive far less negative attention because they are largely absent from the public’s perception (Gutleiderer & Zierler, 2020: 11). This leads to vastly different experiences with and exposure to stigma, discrimination, and prospects of exiting homelessness (Kerman, Gran-Ruaz, & Lem, 2019: 106). Due to my topic’s focus on low-threshold services, a distinction between the two becomes even clearer. These services are often the only option for roofless individuals, indicating that the majority of my research interlocutors could likely

be placed in the category of “roofless” individuals. However, the separation is not always clear. Not every person seeking low-threshold services necessarily falls in the definition of a roofless individual and hence should certainly not be assumed to be. Consequently, combining all these findings in the context of my thesis, the term “homeless” is used in cases when the categories are grouped or when distinctions cannot be accounted for. However, I explicitly refer to “rooflessness” when I want to emphasise the situation of a person, for example, sleeping on the streets.

3 Theoretical Framework

The following section explores the theoretical framework of this thesis. The integration of diverse theoretical social science research serves to address and support the main points of this work and provides a comprehensible discussion for the empirical explanations in the later part of this research. These embeddings do not serve as a rigid framework, but rather as a dynamic analytical model within which I can situate and contextualise my empirical material as it is strictly derived from my ethnographic findings. To underline my focus on interspecies homelessness with its co-occurring phenomena, the following theoretical elaborations draw the circle to my empirical findings. This includes discussions on posthuman relationships, inclusion and exclusion, social and institutional spaces, and humanitarianism. Although many of the referenced academics do not strictly present the discipline of anthropology, their contributions and close disciplinary intertwining present essential lenses to anthropological debates on power, space, and social belonging, and for analysing and understanding this particular phenomenon of homelessness regarding animal companionship and their embeddings in social and institutional systems.

3.1 Posthuman Relationships

Regarding a more attentive understanding of multispecies co-existences and entanglements, it is essential to first provide an understanding of what a posthumanist approach is and how this employs an inclusion of nonhumans in anthropological research while simultaneously acknowledging the importance of distancing the discipline from anthropocentric views.

[Posthumanism] is a theoretically-powered cartographic tool that aims at achieving adequate understanding of these processes of undoing the human. It does not define a dystopian future condition, but provides a frame to understand the ongoing processes of becoming-subjects in our fast-changing times. (Braidotti, 2019: 34)

With this, posthumanism in the context of interspecies homelessness, promises a critical exploration of power relations on multiple levels and an orientation for justice, for human and nonhuman actors alike (Rose & Wilson, 2019: 412), through “subtler and more complex analyses of powers and discourses” (Braidotti, 2019: 36). Posthumanism, as an emerging theoretical lens, has entered the scientific arena in response to growing concerns around humanist thinking and anthropocentrism. These critiques have not only arisen in academic debates but also in the present era often referred to as the “Anthropocene”, a period of spatial-temporal socio-cultural and ecological challenges (ibid.: 36). It means “the transformative effects of human activities on the earth” (Haraway, 2010: 44). This epoch builds on the preceding understandings of an omnipresent dominating force, the “Holocene”, in which

natural forces have stirred planetary changes. These activities have been taken over by the human species, the *Anthropos*, in a destructive sense, but also in the conception of how the world is thought about. This concept is meant to show underlying and inherent power structures, although self-ascribed to the human species (ibid.: 44ff). Suggestions to move beyond a generic and causal understanding of all humans contributing to global transformations to the same extent led to the introduction of the “Capitalocene”. It aims for a shift in responsibility and power, by directing towards capitalist systems, causing the earth’s changes in unequal ways (ibid.: 47ff). Lastly, a contribution to a less cynical and more posthuman understanding of the current geological era, the “Chthulucene” is fully moving beyond the centralism of the human species. This concept believes humans to be still too central in the discourse, whether they are to be blamed or made responsible for fixing ongoing processes, which is why the “Chthulucene” sees a mutual embedding and transformative power of all beings (ibid.: 51ff).

By following a posthumanist discipline, assumptions of human exceptionalism are contested and deconstructed. The commonly understood hierarchy of the species can be seen to be grounded in our understandings of “linear progress” (Tsing, 2015: 21). Considering this, humans experience a conditioning in which “we learn over and over that humans are different from the rest of the living world because we look forward—while other species, which live day to day, are thus dependent on us” (ibid.: 21). Therefore, posthumanism can be seen as an ontological framework presenting an explorative approach to subject-making that is not uniquely assigned to human capability but is shaped by a cooperation transcending species (Braidotti, 2019: 33).

Within social and cultural anthropology, scholars have picked up posthumanist critiques, although often in altered but still related vocabularies. For instance, “multispecies ethnography” (Kirksey & Helmreich, 2010) or “anthropology of life” (Kohn, 2007) introduce ways of paying attention to interlinked human-nonhuman entanglements by moving beyond anthropocentric framings. In turn, these notions embody and reflect a posthumanist turn in the discipline of anthropology through practical ways of implementing this attentiveness within research and representation. In short, posthumanism and its related vocabularies aim to move humans from their position of exceptionalism in theory and practice. Simultaneously, a recognition of nonhumans as significant co-creators of human lives becomes a central theme.

Additionally, not only is the deconstruction of humans as the superior species, supposedly freed from other species’ impacts, a necessity in posthumanism, but also the disruption of the categorisation of “human” and “animal” itself. These present and result from associations (Fox

2006: 532) that are constituted from dependences on other nonhumans. The mere act of thinking about ourselves is tightly connected to the recognition of other species beyond the human animal, or in other words, what we think is “human” is reliant on nonhumans (Fudge, 2008: 7). The binary “human–animal is not an opposition at all but actually a form of inter-reliance in that the human needs the animal to be human. [...] It is by “disavowing” animals that we construct ourselves” (ibid.: 7). This shows the complex ways in which human and nonhuman actors relate in the constitution of the world.

However, particularly human-animal relationships in contexts of care challenge debates around the species binary. “[T]he intimacy of human and animal, by showing that intimacy is other than a freely chosen bond between two sovereign (and thus presumably human) subjects, does not only explode the species divide. Intimacy also reintroduces and stabilizes that chasm” (Dave, 2014: 445). This paradox describes moments of proximity, which require a simultaneous awareness of difference. Human caretakers may direct their sense of human self to sympathise with animals. This depicts situations of momentarily “becoming” the other through acts of deep connection. Yet, this practice demands a reinforcement of human distinctiveness at the same time, since the human individual has to utilise their human position to “give voice” and advocate for the animal, something understood as a uniquely human trait. This transcending of species boundaries by de- and reconstruction demonstrates the constant negotiations of multispecies entanglements, in which intimacy and boundaries, as well as similarities and distinctions, continually shape their practices (ibid.: 445f.). In Haraway’s words, “[s]pecies interdependence is the name of the worlding game on earth, and that game must be one of response and respect” (2008: 19). I take this notion of response and respect as an acknowledgement to the multispecies entanglements, in which respect and response can only be performed when the human species is decentralised from its platform of exceptionalism.

In relation to companion animals, the binary concept of human and nonhuman can be ambivalent and liminal. Nonhuman animals in roles of companions do not necessarily move beyond a humanist take. Humans sometimes assign them a human role and sometimes one of an animal; they are placed somewhere in between and making their recognitions conditional (Charles 2016: 3). However, Haraway (2003: 8, 25) argues that “significant otherness” is the defining aspect in companion species entanglements and what remains are “partial connections”. Although lives may be shared, a complete understanding and merging across the species is not feasible without fully comprehensible communication. However, human and nonhuman actors may not be seen as opposite parts either. Haraway, albeit, urges to work

through the differences rather than erasing or ignoring them and to find ways for multispecies cooperation, despite their differences and without attempts of merging into one harmonious being. In short, “specific difference is at least as crucial as continuities and similarities across kinds” (Haraway, 2008: 67).

Posthumanism, specifically within the circumstances of homelessness, urges us to observe how lives across the species mingle and co-contribute to one another to grasp how these may navigate precarious environments. Human and Nonhuman beings forge relationships that contest the normative, progress-driven structures of capitalist societies (Tsing, 2015: 2). This provides a crucial aspect in understanding multispecies homelessness. Homeless individuals and their nonhuman animals experience similar marginality on a social level, where their companionships are rarely recognised, while they engage in in “collaborative survival” (ibid.: 2). Interspecies assemblages do not always align with stability or predictability, but transformation and adaptation (ibid.: 20). Instead, human-animal relationships in a context of homelessness may not fit normative societal expectations of living arrangements but navigate precarious worlds together, presumably interdependently. And, following this, these companionships may not be viewed as deviations but as responses to social and environmental precarity.

To move towards more specific explorations of relationships between humans and animals, aspects of proximity and care are essential assets. These relationships mean “a bond demanding from the person a life of responsibility. That event is uniquely intimate because it occurs between two singular beings” (Dave, 2014: 434). Although this highlights the assumption that responsibility is a one-sided practice, presumably from a human actor, it also shows the involvement of two-sided intimacy, a practice implying agency beyond the human. However, not all species have been included in this consensus. Usually, only a handful of mammals are perceived as “equals”, mostly cats and dogs, because they are said to have similarities to humans that other species do not have. This comes hand in hand with broad social acceptances, as well as social expectations of how and with what animals should be interacted with or even lived with. Thus, reptiles or animals that cause fear or feelings of repulsion may be hardly accepted to have close bonds and relations with (Fox 2006: 533).

Although I do not necessarily want to go into processes of domestication in depth, I believe it is a crucial aspect when the dynamics of multispecies relationships in proximity are explored. In the context of companionships, domestication can be understood as a mutually beneficial evolutionary strategy. It is shaped through shared histories and entanglements between the

species. Rather than a linear and one-sided process, it describes the emergence through still ongoing practices of cohabitation, in which various forms of agency across the species occur and create relational and persistent interactions. Humans and other animals have evolved together dynamically and always in response to one another (Haraway, 2003: 29f.). This mutual influence shows the aspect of agency in which adaptation is negotiated continuously between the species and by each actor. This also demonstrated that, other than commonly assumed, specifically companion animals experience a process of “serious, historically specific kind of freedom” (Haraway, 2003: 46) through their unique positions they inhabit in humans’ lives. Often, companion animals are ascribed with humanised roles in our cooperations. Many scholars explored the particular understanding of animals as kin-like companions (Boulin, 2013; Fox, 2006; Fudge, 2008; Haraway, 2008; Irvine, 2013; Laing, 2020; Overall, 2017; Palotta, 2019; Power, 2008; Scanlon, et al., 2021; Serpell & Paul, 1994; Shir-Vertesh, 2012). Labrecque and Walsh (2011: 82) identified companion animals to be considered even closer than family, which creates its own categorial sphere. This recent embedding of companion animals within family spheres can be explained through neoliberal rationales and defines them as heavily commodified, capitalised, and socially stratified (Haraway, 2008: 51; Palotta, 2019: 67f.). One could argue that particularly homeless individuals, a group continuously experiencing social exclusion and criticism because they do not align with capitalist ideas of societal values, are regularly contested for incorporating animals into their lives (Irvine, Kahl, & Smith, 2012: 31). Extending this thought, if homeless individuals are perceived as lacking the material means to provide the resources and care according to capitalist standards, their capacity to forge familial structures with animals would be equally denied.

They are not companions whom we see only intermittently, friends from whom we part at the end of the day. Instead they are companions who go home with us, or who greet us when we come home. For that reason, many people think of their dogs and cats as not just companions but members of their family. Since they are not biologically related to us, these animals are like the relatives we acquire through marriage or marriage-like relationships (parents-in-law, siblings-in-law, stepchildren), or through the process of adoption. Indeed, we use the term “adoption” to describe the process by which many dogs and cats enter our lives. (Overall, 2017: xxiii)

While this statement describes the underlying emotional intimacy that creates family-like dynamics across the species, it also reveals that definitions around animal companionships fail to include those without stable housing. Tying animal companionship and “home” in such a way cannot describe the experiences and relationships of my research participants in a context of homelessness. However, if “home” can be seen not as a spatially fixed location, but rather as shared presence and routines between human and animal, these illustrations of the bonds

remain equally important. Further issues arise within the family narrative in which humans often align themselves in the parental role and companion animals in the role of a child-like figure. Yet, while there is a child-like emotional attachment and care to them, they are not seen as “complete” children (Fudge, 2008: 4). Animals are considered family, and yet their positions of not-quite-humans remain in place. However, this inconsistency often does not seem to matter for those involved. “The inherent paradox here – of a member of a different species also being perceived as a member of the family – is, in many ways, unimportant to those who live with animals” (ibid.: 15f.). Nonetheless, a certain conditionality emerges from these aspects.

Pets are treated as loving and loved members of the family, very similar to small children. At the same time, long-term ethnographic research reveals that many loving relationships with animals do not endure: when life changes and unexpected situations pose obstacles to the human-animal love, the people involved may redefine or terminate it. Pets are treated as “flexible persons” or “emotional commodities”; they are loved and incorporated into human lives but can at any moment be demoted and moved outside of the home and the family. (Shir-Vertesh, 2012: 420)

Nonhuman animals as kin can be defined as relative constructs here, but it also shows the precarity and conditionality in which they are incorporated, a dynamic that is not accorded to human kin.

At this point, anthropomorphism can be emphasised as a large factor in the companionships between humans and nonhumans. It can be seen as an extension of anthropocentric ideas (Charles, 2016: 3), which in turn challenges posthumanist ideas. Companionship between humans and animals “is merely an extension of humanism and does not challenge human superiority because whatever is included within the category 'human' is superior to the excluded 'other'” (ibid.: 3). This often leads to these relationships to be seen through “paternalistic images” (O’Key, 2024:22) that may facilitate in the anthropomorphist narratives of familial positionality.

Within the family rationale, the relationships remain ambiguous, yet foremost diverse:

There can be many kinds of relationships—ranging from exploitive, domineering, uncaring, and unjust, to supportive, loving, sensitive, and fulfilling. Like human-human relationships, animal-human relationships are complicated, and they can exemplify contradictory characteristics. Nonetheless, it seems safe to say that all human relationships with companion animals are unequal, [...] we have almost complete power over the animals who live with us. (Overall, 2017: xxi)

These power hierarchies represent a conditional position for animals, in which humans determine everything from the life and death of individual animals. This self-attributed status can also be revoked at any time at the sole discretion of humans. This imbalance is further

illustrated by terms and concepts such as “owner”, something still defined by law and continuously reinforcing these imbalanced positionalities (Palotta, 2019: 50ff). That is why all these commonly used terms for companion animals should be seen in a critical manner. Narratives of family, together with other notions, such as “guardian-ward” and “owner-property”, can be viewed as misfitting and could be rejected altogether (Haraway, 2008: 51). I would argue that, while an aspiring practice, it may be difficult in its practicality because of the self-subjecting task, as discussed above.

Three occurring forms can be identified of how humans incorporate animals into their lives as companions: “humanistic”, “protectionistic”, and “dominionistic”. Importantly, these described orientations among interspecies companionships may overlap, change over time, and must be regarded as generic categories that may fail to consider unique circumstances (Blouin, 2013: 289). However, I include these here because they provide an understanding of how different relationships between humans and animals are played out, a significant aspect for my later empirical engagements.

The humanistic understanding means a deep emotional attachment to animals. In this, they are seen as exceptional and highly valuable individuals and are shifted into understandings of personhood, usually equated to children or close friends. Accordingly, in this position, anthropomorphism is an often-occurring effect. Following this perspective, companionships with animals can be as important, or even more important, than relationships with other humans. Nonetheless, the humanistic relationship with pets primarily highlights what humans want and need. Accordingly, a relationship is commodified to a certain extent, with the human as the commodifier and the animal as the commodity. Only rarely are assessments of what the animal wants or needs coming into consideration (Blouin, 2013: 282ff). Therefore, humanistic perspectives uphold anthropocentric rationales by bringing the human’s desires of the relationships first, although the nonhuman actors are perceived as persons with specific roles and assigned responsibilities, making the social transaction a leading aspect.

Similarly, the protectionistic orientation describes a solid bond with animals, although not only with one considered to be a close companion, but also with animals beyond the personal connection. Other than the humanistic view, the protectionistic stance values animals as beings comparable to humans, not because they are viewed as persons, but because of their intrinsic qualities. This often comes hand in hand with activism and participation for animal rights, welfare, and protection. Animals in this orientation are recognised as subjects, not in anthropocentric rationales but biocentric ones (ibid.: 287). Through this dynamic of “acquiring

quasi-human status, pets can also serve as ambassadors; nonhuman representatives of the interests and moral claims, not only of their own species, but of animals in general” (Serpell & Paul, 1994: 140).

Lastly, the dominionistic orientation emphasises a distinct hierarchy in which animals are considered subordinate to humans. Those following this perception may express affection for their animals but simultaneously consider them as possessions rather than sentient companions. This aspect experiences justification by reinforcing the binary concepts of human-animal or culture-nature, in which animals are perceived to not be comparable to humans, or to be lacking a soul, an attribute, in this understanding, to be ascribed only to humans. Nonetheless, in this position, animals are still considered valuable beings with special positions and status within the familial sphere, although usually rather in utilitarian ways (e.g., providing relaxation, protection, hunting, etc.) (Blouin, 2013: 285f.).

3.2 Inclusion and Exclusion: The Context of Homelessness

From the 1990s onwards, homelessness was increasingly recognised within the broader context of social exclusion when EU discussions emerged on poverty and its multiple exclusionary aspects regarding access to social, economic, and public participation. Accordingly, explorations of social inclusion have been instrumental in revealing the broad and complex dimensions of homelessness as a “multifaceted social issue”. Homeless individuals are understood to be among the most excluded populations, with widely absent capitals of stability in housing, employment, income, and social and family networks. In more recent debates, this perspective has expanded to address wider questions of inequality and how these intersect with welfare policies and housing insecurity (Anderson, Filipovic, & Finnerty, 2016: 1f.).

Kronauer (2002: 146ff, 151) defines exclusionary mechanisms within a context of highly capitalist societies and remarks that exclusionary processes on legal, institutional, and social scopes must be considered as inseparable categories. Yet, processes of exclusion must be explained from a perspective of societal inequality, while recognising it as a unique outcome from other manifestations of inequality. In other words, exclusion is not just a result of inequality, but a special occurrence of inequality as a unique phenomenon. In a capitalist understanding, experiences of exclusion are multidimensional and mean (1) marginalisation or complete exclusion from the labour market, (2) limitations of social relationships or complete isolation, and (3) impeded participatory opportunities of societally normed life chances and standards of living.

The first two dimensions are defined as the mode of “interdependence”, meaning the scale of social relationships and economic roles that connect individuals to society. The latter refers to the mode of “participation”, including material, cultural, and political-institutional aspects. Participation, therefore, means the ability to afford a standard of living considered normal in a society, to pursue personally meaningful or socially valued life goals, and to (at least partially) access institutions. In short, exclusion does not only mean being left out economically, but also being limited in accessing meaningful relationships, opportunities, and institutional participation (ibid.: 151f.). This can also be paralleled to what Bourdieu (2006: 355ff) defines as the “social space”. This means the relational position of individuals and groups, constituted by their principles of differences, in particular regarding economic and cultural capital. These positions create hierarchies, distances, and proximities (depending on the positionality within the social space) that define individuals’ opportunities and chances in life.

It needs to be emphasised that welfare states and their programmes of poverty support in capitalist societies maintain exclusionary dimensions through provisions of minimum support, instead of eliminating the underlying conditions. The results are power shifts, in which a one-sided dependence on the state and its programmes is the outcome. In these cases, even practices of exploitation are exceeded and excluded individuals are simply deemed “redundant” in the according system (e.g., the labour market) (Kronauer, 2002: 148f.).

Interdependency and participation on political, institutional, and social scales bring ambivalent experiences for those affected, especially in a context of interspecies companionship. This means that on a participatory level, people in companionship with animals may be materially excluded not only through poverty, but also by being denied access to shelters or services if animals are prohibited. Consequently, their ability to achieve standard living conditions or institutional support is obstructed in these cases. Yet, the interplay of social and institutional exclusionary mechanisms also creates thresholds in another sense. Through social stigma as well as territorial stigmatisation of certain facilities and services, institutional thresholds establish which may hinder both access and the acceptance of support. These layers of social and spatial stigma influence who feels able or willing to engage with institutional support (Diebäcker & Reutlinger, 2018: 32). Deep structural, seemingly invisible processes of stigma and social exclusion therefore determine access and inclusivity to a large degree.

Exclusionary practices may also show on an interdependence level. “Easily accessible services”, or as I refer to them throughout this research, “low-threshold services”, claim to present inclusive access (Haj Ahmad, 2022: 149f.), yet the presence of companion animals often

poses impediments. Homeless individuals may experience spatial exclusion or restricted and conditional access while also facing social isolation, but find strong emotional and social bonds through their companion animals (Kerman, Gran-Ruaz, & Lem, 2019: 112; Scanlon et al., 2021: 78f.). This juxtaposition shows that individuals are often confronted with having to choose between conditions. Either having the opportunity to be accompanied by animals (social inclusion) or being denied access to support services (institutional exclusion). Or the opposite scenario could occur, with individual social exclusion (to give up an animal companion) but institutional inclusion (heightened access to institutional spaces). What can be drawn from this: the two seem difficult to reconcile. Moreover, with these perspectives, inclusion and exclusion are revealed not to be binary conditions, but complex and relational processes that have effects on realities in the context of interspecies homelessness.

In this context, inclusion and exclusion are created and regulated through homelessness support systems. To begin with, access to “easily accessible” services, contrary to expectations, is not equally available to all service seekers, but deviates by differentiated access rules (Haj Ahmad, 2022: 150). Exclusionary practices may therefore be tied to institutional rules or legal groundings that define access to specific facilities and social dynamics alike. Social facilities and services are meant to address issues of homelessness. Yet, they are only considered to act inclusively if the “whole person” is incorporated in their approaches. Only with an individualist practice of all multi-faceted aspects of homelessness can a successful increase of welfare, social capital, and eventually social inclusion be guaranteed (Anderson, Filipovic, & Finnerty, 2016: 2). This makes animal companionships complex multidimensional occurrences in the discourse of exclusion. Animals not only accompany marginalised individuals and become marginalised in the process, but also increase the processes of marginalisation. However, because these exclusionary dynamics follow structures of human-centred systems, companion animals represent a potential risk factor to exclusion but not facilitators, I would argue.

Among all the possible conditions and circumstances that can lead to stigmatization, which can be numerous, homelessness is the most prominent one (Irvine, 2013a: 44). Goffman’s concepts of “in-group” and “out-group” alignments (Goffman, 1975:140ff) are worth exploring in the context of social exclusion. This framework helps to explain how shared evaluations of stigma and social positioning can create feelings of belonging (in-groups) or alienation (out-groups) among homeless individuals. In-groups describe the navigation of stigma experiences by aligning with a group of individuals with similar experiences of stigma. In this sense, shared experience of exclusion, discrimination, and marginalisation may create a sense of belonging

among the “members” of this affiliation. Out-groups, on the other hand, mean those individuals who do not share these experiences and represent normative ideas (ibid.: 143ff). In this context, I see the presence of companion animals to have a special position within these alignments, either by facilitating social bonds or intensifying processes of isolation as dually positioned actors in social interaction and the navigation of stigmas. From an in-group perspective, in a practical sense, animals share the marginalised position with their human companions, for instance, by sleeping rough, facing service restrictions, or complete denial of accessing public or institutional spaces. One could further argue that animals, similarly to homeless individuals, experience marginalisation, although not through discrimination but anthropocentric practices. In this way, they share experiences of exclusion in similar ways. This reinforces a form of solidarity and belonging, although not as implied by Goffman as human-human connections, but one of multispecies manifestation. The emotional and practical support animals offer reflects the mutual recognition and trust typical of in-group relations. For example, homeless individuals are often only noticed negatively by others or even made virtually invisible (Anderson & Snow, 2001: 398), something Goffman (1975) calls a “nonperson”. Companion animals however can interrupt this exclusion by offering the stigmatised human being attention without judgement, transmitting feelings of mattering, and present a contrast to the neglect they otherwise face (ibid.: 100). However, this also emphasises the animals’ roles as out-groups, since they do not face the same social exclusion, however they may act as navigators to out-groups, through recognition; either through gestures of “goodwill” or confrontation (Irvine, Kahl, & Smith, 2012: 28).

Homeless individuals are possibly the only people who experience criticism and stigmatisation from domiciled populations because of their companion animals (Irvine, 2013a: 49). “If homeless pet owners simply agreed with the accusation that they could not provide for their companion animals, then they would accept the social identities imputed to them, which cast them as incapable of caring for themselves and therefore unworthy of animal companionship” (ibid.: 61). Because of this, a stigma management strategy may involve assuring that the animal companion conforms to public expectations or that food is always provided for. This can be seen as an attempt to challenge prevailing stereotypes or to gain acceptance and understanding from out-groups. This ambivalence shows the roles of companion animals as facilitators of social belonging in different ways: shared marginality, stigma management, and controlled outward presentation.

Anderson and Snow (2001: 402ff) have identified four common strategies among stigmatised individuals to avert these encounters: (1) attempts to pass as unstigmatized persons, (2) concealing the social status, (3) acting defiantly, and (4) collective action. They emphasised that the second attempt, covering, is among the most common approaches in homeless populations. This is where companion animals may present a strategy to initiate attention and interactions through the nonhuman actor, which otherwise would have remained unfeasible.

Conclusively, interspecies companionships in contexts of homelessness present effective strategies of social inclusion at times and depending on the situation at hand. However, at the same time, they might also present a reason for criticism and stigmatisation because of the circumstances of homelessness.

3.3 Institutional Spaces and their Implications

To understand how homelessness and interspecies companionships are regulated, one large aspect in this regard is institutional spaces, and even more specifically, the makings of low-threshold institutional spaces within the *WWH*.

Institutions are understood in various ways. Institutions are primarily understood as enduring patterns of social relations that are upheld and legitimised by shared normative frameworks of order. They are commonly understood as societal forms or organisations, such as the state, judiciary, education systems, families, and concrete service facilities. Regarding the functionalism of institutions, there are two different ways to understand their constructions: (1) the “institutional dimension”, the subordinate structures of aims and objectives, which form the stabilising and normative constitutions of institutions. (2) the “institutionalising dimension”, with situated practices within the frameworks of institutions. They emphasise how institutional actors apply and negotiate the overriding structures and rules. Importantly, the dimensions should be understood as interrelating processes, but the goals of institutions and their actors within may not necessarily be equivalent (Diebäcker & Reutlinger, 2018: 24f., 29).

Institutions of the *WWH* can be explored within Goffman’s framework of “total institutions”. These are characterised by the different areas of life: sleeping, playing, and working, which all take place in one and the same space and authority. Individuals who are dependent on such institutions conduct all phases of their daily routines in the immediate company of a large group of peers, all of whom receive the same treatment and perform the same activities together. In addition, activities are set by a system of explicit formal rules and functionaries, and the various compulsory activities are united in a single rational plan that supposedly serves to achieve the

official goals of the institution (Goffman, 1973: 16). Further, Goffman describes, how these spheres of daily life are usually incompatible with familial relationships (ibid.: 22). Following these findings, the integration of animal companions into formal goals of a total institution can be difficult because of their constitutional frameworks. Companion animals would not practice daily routines in the same ways as human peers, which poses them as outcasts within institutional spaces, especially regarding their familial positions, as discussed above.

Foucault describes institutions as spaces marked by separation through distinct outwardly boundaries and specific societal functions. His notion of “heterotopia” describes real spaces, which appear in diverse forms and are simultaneously physical and symbolic. These spaces present spaces of inclusion and exclusion alike to those who are “put” there due to deviations from normative ideas. Access to them provides experiences of inclusion in a spatial sense, but isolation from other societal spaces is a consequential outcome. Further, access needs to be granted to utilise the spaces (Foucault, 2006: 320ff). Institutions contribute to the attributions of “normal” lives and simultaneously accumulate individuals with ascribed characteristics of otherness. With this aspect, they represent hegemonic positions within societies and fulfil socially assigned roles, for instance, by making certain populations invisible. Besides, they are deeply embedded within political structures. Institutional frameworks, with the relationships, functions, norms, boundaries, and spatial arrangements, are never neutral but rather express underlying asymmetrical power and governance structures (Diebäcker & Reutlinger, 2018: 28).

The concept of biopolitics (Foucault, 2004) offers valuable understandings of how the state and institutional systems practice management and control of populations. Modern governments and institutions can be understood to practice “the politics of living and dying” (Braidotti, 2019: 33). This control of life itself, with governing bodies, health, birth, death, and reproduction, this framework focuses on populations, not just individuals. Through this, political systems direct wellbeing and who is left out of these processes. This helps frame how life itself is valued or neglected through such systems (Foucault, 2004: 239ff). These explorations are closely connected to Foucault’s concept of Governmentality, meaning how the state and modern institutions (like shelters, schools, or hospitals) implicitly direct how people live (Foucault, 1991: 93ff). If a homeless person cannot enter a shelter because they are in the company of an animal, decisions about whether animals are included in services (and therefore also their human companions) or even given attention at all exemplify how certain lives are prioritised while others are excluded or seen as less valuable. The results have direct impacts on lives. Although, Braidotti (2019:33) claims that the concept of biopolitics is not a suitable application

in regards to posthumanist frameworks, as it does not give enough space to nonhuman actors, I see the context of my research as a fruitful way to expand the framework onto companion animals, since regulations and (lacking) attentions to interspecies companionships in homelessness reveal how these relationships experience control over their behaviour and participation.

While the facilities of the *WWH* are formally framed as voluntary, in their practicality, many individuals turn to these institutions not out of voluntary preference but due to the pressures and structural exclusions in public spaces and the broader welfare system. This portrays an interplay between push and pull factors. On the one side, dynamics such as policing, exposure to the elements, or the lack of access to basic needs are factors in the dependence on institutions. On the other side, institutional settings offer access to immediate needs, which draws individuals there. In this sense, institutional space is shaped less by free choice than by necessity. These dynamics demand a more critical reflection on how autonomy is framed and experienced within social support systems (Diebäcker, Sagmeister, & Fischlmayr, 2018: 154).

In cases of strict institutional regulations, individuals often face the necessity of adaptive requirements to not lose access to institutional settings. These strategies can be viewed as direct survival strategies to navigate and even benefit from the system. Among them are appropriations of niches, uncontrolled spaces, peer networks, or limited solidarities. These oftentimes concealed efforts of recognition, status, and situated improvements result from processes shaped by informal hierarchies and social control among service users themselves (Goffman, 1973: 59ff; Diebäcker & Reutlinger, 2018: 31f.). Formal rules exist to define “acceptable behaviour” and sanction deviations. Power asymmetries allow staff to determine norm violations, while service seekers also contribute to shaping order through their own behaviours and social boundaries. This may lead to the emergence of informal standards. Thus, institutional spaces are marked by hierarchies and processes of inclusion and exclusion, both from professionals and among service visitors themselves, and sometimes create discretionary practices (Diebäcker & Reutlinger, 2018: 29f.).

Especially in contexts of Viennese low-threshold facilities, adaptive behaviours show in interplays between the institutional expectations and regulations and the experiences and needs of service users. A “culture of tolerance” can develop between staff and visitors, shaped significantly by the users’ ability to adjust to the rules of the institution, particularly due to their dependency on the services and spatial infrastructure provided. Staff members play a crucial role in practicing situational sensitivity and responsiveness to individual needs, which often

results in a flexible or pragmatic handling of institutional rules, often constituted in the facilities' house rules. These function as a system of sanctions and rewards, guiding users' behaviours and leading to varied forms of adaptation. Thus, what may appear as tolerance is often the outcome of negotiated practices that balance institutional order with the circumstances of the individuals who rely on them. This implies varying practices across the different *WWH* facilities. Although a common goal is pre-existent, deviations occur in house rules, for example, in alcohol bans or prohibitions of companion animals, but also in the lived individuality of institutional staff. This may lead to ambiguity among the target groups, which enforces the needs of situated adaptive strategies (Goffman, 1973: 59ff; Diebäcker, Sagmeister, & Fischlmayr, 2018: 159f.).

Goffman's (1973: 59ff) concepts of primary and secondary adjustments describe how individuals navigate constraints within institutional frameworks. Primary adjustments refer to behaviours and roles that conform entirely to the official expectations and rules of the institution. They involve the subject's full compliance with the institutional structure by doing what, when, and how it is expected. Secondary adjustments, on the other hand, are informal strategies used to gain autonomy or resist complete compliance, without directly challenging the system. These behaviours could be viewed as marginal rule-breaking or bending. Regarding animal prohibitions in formal institutional arrangements, individuals may choose primary adaptive strategies, resulting either in rejecting the spatiality of the institution or the companion animal, or secondary adjustments, aiming to preserve interspecies relationships through finding flexibility in the rigid-seeming frameworks.

Anderson, Filipovic, and Finnerty (2016: 2) call out the roles of institutions providing services for homeless individuals, to have inherent capabilities to influence performed policies, even in periods of economic precarity. However, Lipsky (2010) sees this power in the mentioned discretionary practices from employees, which he defines as "street-level bureaucrats". These mean public service workers, such as teachers, health workers, social workers, police officers, judges, and any workers who are in direct contact with the public and govern over services and the access to them. This makes them representatives and extensions of the government and its programmes and services. In this sense, public service workers have direct impacts on people's lives and can be described as policy makers and deliverers (Lipsky, 2010: 3f.; Fassin & Gomme, 2012: 33). "They socialize citizens to expectations of government services and a place in the political community. They determine the eligibility of citizens for government benefits and sanctions. They oversee the treatment (the service) citizens receive in those programs" (Lipsky,

2010: 4). According to this, those working with the public, or in the case of this research with homeless populations, hold power and control by constituting people's access to governmental participations and manage and negotiate the services, treatments, and participation of services alike.

Considering nonhumans and particularly animals in this, it becomes immanent employees have the most direct impact on human and nonhuman actors; in what ways, if at all, they are considered in services, which in turn shows in policies or the lack of them. Especially the homeless populations, due to their usually economically precarious circumstances, are considered dependent on governmental services and programmes, meaning a heightened dependency on street-level bureaucrats and the institutional facilities they function in. While access to services can be widely considered a positive thing, it reinforces the dominant position of public service workers, together with the asymmetrical power they hold (ibid.: 6). An incorporation of animals in street-level bureaucracy, or in low-threshold institutions, can be a defining factor in their inclusion in policy-making.

From everything elaborated thus far, animals do not play a central role in total institutions of the *WWH*, as their agency is generally not acknowledged and they are therefore deprived of practical autonomy (Palotta, 2019: 67). However, one hopeful take shows that animal incorporations in institutions may be practiced through institutional employees as “de facto” makers of policy. Practicing discretion and individual actions as immanent aspects of the work realities means a necessity to bend “rigid” frameworks frequently. In this regard, tight frameworks, generic rules, and supervision at all times fail to live up to the interactions with service seekers (Lipsky, 2010: 13ff).

In short, to a degree the society seeks not only impartiality from its public agencies but also compassion for special circumstances and flexibility in dealing with them. [...] The search for the correct balance between compassion and flexibility on the one hand, and impartiality and rigid rule-application on the other hand presents a dialectic of public service reform. (ibid.: 15f.)

While this poses a delicate balance, in individual cases, companion animals may be granted attention, support, and inclusion. It remains a situated, flexible, and uncertain terrain, but it bears the potential to provide hope for those affected, that their unique situations are perceived and taken seriously. However, important to highlight in this regard, the personal moral beliefs of deservingness cannot be left out of the discussion. Individual employees may have competing standards, whether with management or other “lower-level” workers. Discretion, therefore, is largely dependent on personal relations with the target group (human and nonhuman) and the

work environment, and how situated ascriptions of deservingness are managed and applied (ibid.: 22f.).

3.4 Humanitarian Rationales

The outlined discretion from institutional staff, as well as the moral sentiments of deservingness, are deeply rooted in “humanitarian reason” (Fassin & Gomme, 2012). This is an important aspect, specifically since low-threshold services of the *WWH* run under a narrative of humanitarian programmes (Guttederer & Zierler, 2020: 14). Humanitarianism can be defined in simple terms as “the drive to alleviate inhumane suffering through humane interventions” (O’Key, 2024: 21). The question of what “humane” or “inhumane” means, is left to broad interpretations and individual practicability. However, certain notions fall into the understanding of humanitarian practices and how they are approached. “On both the national and the international levels, the vocabulary of suffering, compassion, assistance, and responsibility to protect forms part of our political life: it serves to qualify the issues involved and to reason about choices made” (Fassin & Gomme, 2012: 2). Humanitarianism therefore presents a framework with a dominant moral logic, which justifies state and institutional interventions in the name of alleviating suffering. It applies compassion, although arguably selectively, which has become a form of governance itself; a way in which modern states exercise power not through coercion alone, but through care, pity, and moral evaluation. This leads to the argument that compassion as a conditional construct directs precarious individuals, which happens from “above” and reflects inherent asymmetrical moral power (ibid.: 4). Life itself becomes politically valued or devalued, which in turn creates an inequality in the assessment of lives and the aims of assistance and responsibility. The suffering of some is recognised and addressed, while others are rendered invisible or less worthy of intervention. Furthermore, in a humanitarian rationale, suffering gets ranked, leading to decisions around whose pain is legitimate and urgent, and simultaneously assessing whether it is fixable or not. It inevitably leads to the creation of inclusionary and exclusionary categories (ibid.: 4ff).

Animals are not per se excluded from humanitarian ideas, yet this concept in theory and practice follows anthropocentric beliefs in which humans are regarded as exceptional (O’Key, 2024: 21). This becomes evident when looking at the previously mentioned hierarchies and the notion of gradual assessments of suffering, which gives little space to every being beyond the human in humanist thinking. Yet, it can also be argued that nonhumans cannot be excluded from the concept altogether, although they can rather be regarded as humanitarians themselves.

[O]nce we realize that humanitarianism is always already multispecies, we can glimpse not just how humanitarian organizations conscript animals into their efforts to reduce human suffering, but also how this conscription troubles the very premise of human exceptionality upon which this humanitarian conscription is grounded. (ibid.: 20)

This underlines the aspect that nonhumans may contribute to humanitarian efforts to reduce suffering, while simultaneously contesting anthropocentric ideas. Companion animals in a context of homelessness could be seen as instrumental in fulfilling the very goals that humanitarian interventions pursue, which in turn resonates with the missions of many social service providers. This reveals a paradoxical position: while they are not formally part of institutional support and its frameworks, their presence often facilitates the intended humanitarian outcomes.

Acknowledging nonhuman animals as humanitarians brings them to an elevated social position, generally contesting humanist rationales. However, I would argue that humanitarian practices usually foster asymmetrical relations between the receiver and giver of care. Embedding animals in this system of care makes them once again commodities in utilitarian interactions. A new way of embedding animals in care practices is due. Animals performing “tasks that make them de facto humanitarians, then humanitarianism is less coherent as a putatively human endeavour. Humanitarianism, now animalized, might yet be revolutionized as multispecies care” (ibid.: 23). This statement draws the circle back to multispecies relationships and how care is performed across the species. Multispecies care, I would argue, is the more suitable term for the context of companionships between human and animal and the transferred associations of *mutual* interdependencies and moves away from humanist-shaped vocabularies.

4 Methodology

In this section, I discuss the applied methods, the tools that I used in my research to obtain and produce empirical material. This constituted the core of this research, under constant reflection on them and my own positionality alike. For the data generation, I chose a qualitative inductive approach. For this, the research combines a diverse selection of approaches, a mixed-methods research on the basis of methodological triangulation. Through this, numerous methods promise to level out the weaknesses of each single method and consequently lead to deeper and holistic explorations of the research questions (Turner, Cardinal, & Burton, 2017: 244).

This research was conducted in a period between September 2023 and June 2025. However, my involvement with this topic and field reaches back even further, which makes the duration of the research process and field work not as distinct. These underlying circumstances anchor this research in a manner of patchwork ethnography (Günel & Watanabe, 2024). Due to my multiple involvements and responsibilities in and with the field, flexible and “patchy” methods needed to be implemented. It made the combination of field research, professional responsibilities, and my personal circumstances possible. This led to engagements in segmented periods of “active” research (ibid.: 131ff). This approach, moreover, guided me to adapt my particular research focus numerous times until it reached a satisfying solidity.

4.1 Positionality

To begin with, the empirical data generation process for this research, I needed to start exploring my own point of reference. Since choices on the applied methods and all steps taken in the course of this research depended on my subjective means and prior experiences, this chapter initiates a discussion around my positionality in the field. Notably, this aim will stretch over the entirety of this paper, as continuous introspective steps were not only required with the sensitivity of the research topic, but also presented important findings to be included in my analysis process.

My methodology may challenge the traditional understanding of separating the “field” and “home”. In my context, the notion of “home” refers to my proximate engagement with the *WWH*. This suggests a shift in attention, rather than location, for my ethnographic knowledge production (Günel & Watanabe, 2024: 132ff). On the institutional investigation, this constituted an emic research, although with reflexivity on many ends. This approach of “anthropology at home” was a clear choice. In some ways, of a pragmatic nature, with me being based in Vienna,

in others, a clear and justifiable choice, with Vienna's unique and broad plethora of services, which makes it an especially interesting field to explore.

It is essential to highlight at this point that in my research context I am not, and never was, an “autonomous outsider who can enter and leave a field site without relational entanglements” (ibid.: 135). With my prior engagements in the field, I did not enter my research as a “person without history”, but someone familiar with many of its actors and structures. This enabled me, for example, to draw on established contacts for inquiries. The decision on where to begin my fieldwork was shaped by a critical reflection on my own positioning within this field (Haj Ahmad, 2022: 54). My unique role required balancing my experiences and practices as researcher and employee simultaneously, while at the same time juggling the positions of being an insider and outsider to the field and the interlocutors (Koot 2018: 53f.). To some degree I embodied an insider position to processes regarding homelessness, however they are relational and not structurally. Being involved with service users in Vienna daily offered me unique insights into daily routines and experiences that I had because of my employment in the *WWH*. However, structurally, I remain an outsider from the target group by having entirely different socio-spatial and economic experiences and realities. With this, the degree of immanent power dynamics needs to be stressed, especially considering that homeless service users represent a particularly marginalised group.

This degree of power left me to question and point out numerous aspects of ethical concerns, especially in regard to the methodological approach to this research. In this context, I started to view the method of participant observation critically. Participation implies mutuality in interactions, immersion into lives under study, and joined activities and routines (Madden, 2023: 76). Because of my socio-spatial-economic separation from homeless individuals, I did not dare to start describing processes of participation. I therefore see it in a way that although participant observation is a core method of social and cultural anthropology, if our intended investigations do not allow for it, it can take a back seat and open space for further methods. This does not make research less anthropological or significant (Nader, 2018: 28) but instead raises awareness for adaptation and flexibility within our discipline and a required introspection. Following this, “‘going native’ is not ethnography. The ethnographic manner of being with people is to find a way to get close” (Madden, 2023: 77), but I believe it does not have to require becoming a “participant” with all shared aspects of life. My approaches to the research field have proven to come with a proximity, which allows for observant and conservational methods, but not a full immersion.

This proximity and observations in the field inflicted introspection that never stopped. It led me to ethical considerations that have remained a constant concern up to this very moment, writing these lines. These reflections also raised one central aspect: how can I avoid misusing the insights I gained within the complex web of existing power relations? When and how to disclose my role as a researcher, and how to handle knowledge gathered in situations where my position was not made explicit, have been among the most pressing questions. A potentially exploitative dynamic inherent in the process of research needed to be acknowledged. Collecting and analysing the data generated in the field, I gained intellectual and professional value, used to produce an academic thesis (Haj Ahmad, 2022: 61), yet, these ethical conflicts with my positionality and academic responsibility has led me numerous times to distance myself from the field, to take breaks from my “active” research, to reconsider my approaches and intentions, and to adapt my methods if needed. Since I inhabit a position of power with direct influence on the target group, I thereby continuously reproduce the exact structures that were repeatedly critically highlighted in the course of this research. As a result, I continually encountered self-critical confrontations, which could not necessarily be overcome, but generated a growth in perspective on a personal level.

However, my involvement also bore positive aspects. For instance, my research topic most likely would not have come into existence if my positionality had not provided the insights into and understandings of the complex institutional processes and interspecies companionships in the context of homelessness. Further, it was easy to find access to the research field and to have open conversations with interviewees. I was met with a lot of trust and openness due to my prior engagements and knowledge of the sensitivity within the homelessness systems. With my preceding knowledge and experience, statements from actors were implemented and understood in ways that my “insider” positions made possible. This gave my dual role in the end the strength and core of this research.

Nonetheless, my employee status caused hesitations multiple times, for example, on how to address institutional practices in my thesis. In the process of interpreting the data, I was unsure to what extent it was acceptable to criticise the attitudes or actions of actors (myself included), systems, and regulations. Since even now, after finishing this research, I remain an employee of the *WWH*, which meant a delicacy to be true to scientific practice, while still being dependent on my professional relations.

4.2 Multispecies Ethnography

To understand the lived experiences of interspecies companionships in homelessness in their full complexity, it was necessary to move beyond methods that placed humans at the centre of investigation and animals at the periphery. Further, the research demanded an approach that could account for the relational and affective entanglements between species. From this necessity, my engagement with multispecies ethnography emerged. It opened a recognition of rethinking homelessness not as a mere human experience, but as a more-than-human one. While these entanglements are embedded in anthropocentric systems, namely institutional configurations, I aimed to find methodological attempts to explore these relationships.

Ethnography, as the key instrument of the discipline of social and cultural anthropology, typically focuses on humans as interlocutors. Multispecies ethnography, on the other hand, aims to challenge this exact practice (Kirksey, Schuetze, & Helmreich, 2014: 1). For instance, Kohn (2007: 6) calls the multispecies approach an exploration “beyond the uniquely human”. In a practical sense, multispecies anthropology can be understood as an expansion of a “classic” ethnographic fieldwork, as it moves away from a lens of human exceptionalism and methodological centrality. Like “classic” ethnography, multispecies ethnography includes various methods in the qualitative research; however, multispecies fieldwork aims to involve nonhuman actors for holistic understandings of interconnectedness (Ameli 2021: 79ff). This relatively new genre within our discipline is defined as an anthropological lens that does not give all attention to human actors but instead focuses on the various effects of the sociality between human and nonhuman beings. The emerging entanglements in this sense are given more prominence because of the reciprocal impacts on all interlocutors (human and nonhuman) (Kohn, 2007: 4). Therefore, multispecies ethnography means an approach that considers both human and nonhuman actors as co-constitutive agents of social life. More explicitly, those conducting multispecies ethnographic research “are studying the host of organisms whose lives and deaths are linked to human social worlds” (Helmreich & Kirksey, 2010: 545). Therefore, for my context, companionships between humans and nonhumans needed to be recognised as interconnected.

My research is inherently a multispecies ethnographic piece of work, because it acknowledges the centrality of the entanglements between homeless humans and companion animals; in analysing interactions, recognitions, different aspects of shared lives, emphasising how one companion shapes and affects the other, and what possible consequences may emerge. Moreover, focusing on the question of “[w]ho benefits, *cui bono*, when species meet?”

(Kirksey, Schuetze, & Helmreich, 2014: 2), the research process for this paper also began with an approach to focus on the navigation and regulation of the investigated multispecies relationships to understand their underlying implications.

Regarding distinct methods, it becomes a bit more difficult to pin down. While clear toolkits for multispecies ethnography remain interpretative, some scholars imply innovative writing, representation, and interdisciplinary engagements to be multispecies ethnographies in qualitative fieldwork (Helmreich & Kirksey, 2010). I followed Tsing's suggestion to follow a more intuitive approach that results from a situated process. "The point of ethnography is to learn how to think about a situation together with one's informants; research categories develop with the research, not before it." (2015: ix). For this research, it meant thinking of ways to include animals and humans alike, as both presented informants. Therefore, in pursuing a multispecies ethnography, I drew on the "arts of noticing" (ibid.: 17ff), which encouraged paying attention to the often-overlooked relationships between homeless individuals and their companionships with animals. to find creative and innovative ways of producing knowledge. For this, observational fieldwork presents a central tool to capture nonverbal, affective, and embodied interactions. In my case, this served to overcome limitations of verbal exchanges, which would solely focus on human interlocutors in the data generation (Ameli 2021: 118). With this, my fieldwork relied not only on verbal data of conversations and interviews, but also on observing subtle interactions beyond the spoken. This included the recognition of routines, gestures, and various forms of interactions.

The utility of field notes, another highly valuable instrument in ethnographic research, but I would argue, even more important in a multispecies one, has been an essential asset for my data generation. Field notes mean written down events from the field to "systematically, reliably and efficiently record factual information upon which they can base later analyses, interpretations and conclusions" (Madden, 2023: 110). This writing down of events has presented reliable data as part of observing the field. It is simultaneously systematic and subjective, yet provides a strategy to comprehend the sensual experiences in the research process (ibid.: 111). Within my note-writing, a continuous semiotic engagement and interpretation was implemented to interpret the interspecies relationships in their environments and their affective doings (Kohn 2007: 18).

4.3 Analytic Autoethnography

My insider employee status allowed me to access moments, practices, and relationships that are not readily visible to external observers. This role as a researcher who is "a complete member

in the social world under study” (Anderson, 2006: 379) allowed me an analytic autoethnographic approach, for which I incorporated my own memories, experiences, and emotional responses into the empirical material as data that is systematically reflected upon and theoretically analysed. Because of my inherent relational position, even if I had tried, I could not simply detach information and knowledge from my research that I collected and still continuously gather through work. It is an inseparable interplay of my positions because of my experiences over time. “The gist of experience is that it goes beyond the situation at hand, with past, present, and future mutually determining one another as parts of a whole” (Desjarlais, 1997: 22). One could therefore argue that my experiences never left a choice whether my involvements at work should be included to my research, as they simply cannot be taken away. Moreover, “my multiple identities and related affective dispositions and involvements in the field were simultaneously subjective and scientifically relevant” (Rocca, 2019: 59). In my case, being employed in the *WWH* gives me a full submergence into processes, colleagues’ actions, and structural settings. Especially the latter, I have internalised and therefore required constant introspection (Anderson, 2006: 382). I am an employee working in a team of numerous other similarly engaged colleagues. My co-workers encouraged me throughout the whole process of my research, and I was generally met with curiosity and support. However, in contrast, I had to juggle different demands in my duality of employee and researcher (Günel & Watanabe, 2024: 131ff), which sometimes occurred simultaneously, alternately, and sequentially, and sometimes blurred the lines of the two altogether.

Building on the analytic autoethnographic method, elaborating my retrospectivity as a main asset within it is essential. Since many of my experiences were made long before the idea for this research was born, I faced uncertainties about how these could or should be implemented in this research. However, since they shape my present understanding of homelessness support services, I could not progress this research while excluding these insights (Koot, 2018: 61f.). Including experiences from years ago, that I had not written down in a detailed, interpretative manner until then, can be seen as manipulated and flawed, since memories and therefore also the method of retrospectivity are “inevitably clouded” (ibid.: 62). I started to reflectively approach this weakness as soon as I was aware of this imbalance by writing a memory protocol that eventually was incorporated in my research diary. This included memories of observations, conversations, and experiences from previous years before my research began. Although one could argue that this data is deficient in its details, it still contributed to my contemporary lenses and perceptions. I found memories to sometimes be even more valuable than field notes (ibid.:

63) that limit me, and the research aims at a specific time and space. In this sense, retrospectivity provides a broader angle of included data, which I view as a strength rather than a deficiency.

Another important asset in analytic autoethnography is the broader inclusion of perspectives, besides the experiences of the self. “Unlike evocative autoethnography, which seeks narrative fidelity only to the researcher’s subjective experience, analytic autoethnography is grounded in self-experience but reaches beyond it as well” (Anderson, 2006: 386). Following this, given the complexity and diversity of the field, the analysis cannot rely on my individual experiences and perspectives solely; instead, the incorporation of other actors in the institutional framework of the *WWH* was crucial, meaning employees and management positions of diverse facilities and services and service users, human and nonhuman.

4.4 Interviews

Interviews present valuable tools in ethnographic research. This includes all kinds of conversation with interlocutors, from casual small talk to formal (Madden, 2023: 65). To remain in a multispecies fashion, it is also important to raise the inequality in methodological distribution. Regarding interviews, not only are questions raised on whether I could speak for nonhumans and how this could do justice to their realities (Helmreich & Kirksey, 2010: 554), but also how a disbalance in verbal interaction with human companions can contribute to a multispecies understanding of knowledge production. Interviews primarily reflect what human individuals think and speak. Nonetheless, they can still help to understand how broader social-political environments are experienced and especially in how humans and animals (but also other nonhumans) relate to each other. It needs to be emphasised that multispecies methodological aims do not actually rely too much on the applied method itself, but on how approaches like interviews or observations are used in a new way that centres humans and nonhumans as equally important parts of the relationships (Rose & Wilson, 2019: 417). This was achieved by focusing on multispecies entanglements within conversations with human informants. Further, I aimed to elaborate my research aims thoroughly before interviews were held. With this, the conducted interviews and conversations largely focused on questions around all beings, human and nonhuman alike.

4.4.1 Formal

I conducted six formal, recorded interviews with various actors of social facilities in Vienna. These were held in semi-structured layouts by providing a small number of open-ended questions (Madden, 2023: 66). This benefited from a broad but clear focus while simultaneously giving the informants agency to explore further angles and directions and might not have been

covered by my questionnaire beforehand (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021: 1360). In practice, all conversations have deviated from the initially prepared structure, which has brought valuable data that I often have not thought about earlier. I would argue that these deviations ultimately shaped my entire research outcome. Because formal interviews were held with institutional actors of various facilities and responsibilities, I benefited from broader understandings of how regulations around interspecies companionships are navigated in other facilities than my own. Through this, I expanded my own understanding I previously had and found new grounds to further reflect on my internalised perceptions.

For delicacy reasons and at the request of all interviewees, the names of interview participants and facilities have been anonymised. This primarily serves to avoid identifications of service users and their animal companions, but also the politically charged arena of the *WWH*. The formal interviews were between 30-90 minutes long and were recorded in order to transcribe them later on in the process. These interviews occurred over a period of 3 months (April 2025-June 2025). These conversations with actors from various institutional settings revealed regulations around human and nonhuman actors to be very distinct. However, one weakness occurred in the outcomes, namely a primary focus on institutional structures, the employees' actions within them, and most pressingly, the realities of homeless people were reflected from the perspective and experience of the institutional employees (myself included), which again raises critical questions of representation.

Although homeless individuals are the principal experts on their lived realities, I chose not to conduct formal recorded interviews with them, despite recognising the value their direct voices could add to this research. This decision was shaped by ethical concerns, although I am aware that the decision against it poses just as many ethical apprehensions, foremost, a participation in marginalising processes. This choice was reasoned to a large degree within my positionality in the research field, individuals' apprehensions to be recorded, and my research's embedding as posthuman.

Firstly, I deliberately decided against formal interviews with individuals I encounter through my professional role, as I did not wish to compromise the sense of safety they associate with the facility I work at. In the context of the *WWH*, low-threshold facilities and services are limited and interlinked. This meant that even individuals who have not yet been service seekers to my work site might be in the future. Therefore, I did not want to introduce new thresholds that might discourage any individual from accessing these services in the future. Secondly, while I conducted informal conversations with some homeless individuals about my research,

I often felt a reluctance to be recorded. I interpreted this as concerns of traceability and potentially negative experiences and associations with state or institutional authorities in the past. The trust and autonomy of the interlocutors were therefore prioritised over formal data collection. Finally, applying a posthumanist approach required treating human-animal companionships as relational units, rather than privileging human narratives. For the incorporation of homeless interspecies companions into my data collection, I sought a methodological balance that placed observations, situational interactions, and reflexive field notes at the centre. However, this did not mean that I erased the voices of those human actors affected by homelessness, as this would jeopardise to being complicit in marginalisation and significantly diminish my data value. To avoid this, informal conversations have been a strength of my methodological means.

4.4.2 Informal

Within ethnographic research, informal and spontaneous interviews can be great approaches to generate deeper insights into processes and personal stories, to get to know individuals, and to even access further in-depth conversations with others. Also, if the situation feels coherent, they sometimes even lead to formal and recorded conversations, although this must not be the goal. One strong asset with this approach lies in the reduction of hierarchies (Swain & Spire 2020: 4f.) that may be a result of formal instruments such as recorded interviews. Conversation as a form of informal interviewing can be described “as one that will exchange information, fill in time, entertain, enthrall and be of everyday relevance, without being burdensome or causing obligations or responsibilities to be created” (Madden, 2023: 64). With this, it becomes clearer what the strengths of this approach are, namely a created environment in which informants do not feel pressured into a one-sided informational intimacy. Instead, it presents a mutual and “organic” way of information gathering.

In my application of informal conversation, I found informal interviews to be effective tools, especially regarding interactions with marginalised persons. Since these conversations were not recorded by an audio device, I retrospectively wrote down the contents in my research diary to include them in my analysis. With this, these conversations were treated as all other ethnographic data. Additionally, their incorporation into this thesis has been marked clearly as sources of my research diary.

Early on in my research, it showed that certain circumstances, such as the spatiality and linguistic context in the form of language barriers, sometimes limited possibilities for recorded, formal interviews with service users. Those interlocutors willing to talk to me about my

research topic in an informal way were informed about the purposes and directions beforehand, if it was possible. This being said, a conversational format is usually marked by spontaneity, which makes it not always manageable to get consent from interlocutors to participate in a research setting. Also, the researcher might not always know before a conversation whether the person is a participant of the research at that time and whether this conversation would be included in the research later on (Swain & Spire, 2020: 7ff). This dynamic is something I have regularly found myself in, especially regarding the retrospective approach, as discussed above. In these cases, information was gathered long before I could ask for consent (Koot, 2018: 62). Once I learned something relevant for my research, it could not be forgotten; it automatically became a piece of information that shaped my ways of seeing and understanding. Therefore, in these cases, I was confronted with the question of how to manage the generated material and whether it could be implemented in the thesis if the interviewee did not know my “ulterior” motives. I therefore chose to abstract these data collections in this final product of my research to a degree in which humans and nonhumans could not be traced back. This included not mentioning names, ages, genders, or whatever other indications that could indicate an informant in any way.

4.5 Data Analysis: Grounded Theory

For the analysis process, I drew on the methodology of Grounded Theory, as it allowed me to connect underlying processes, inductively define categories, and subsequently receive theoretical insights. For the analysis process, all data generated during my field research were incorporated. In particular, the transcribed formal interviews and my field notes, which were constituted from informal conversations, observations in the field, and memories. The analysis tool served as a guide to find my theoretical embedding without losing sight of inconsistencies and apparent contradictions. This analytical approach not only supported the interpretation of my existing material but also guided the direction of further research (Haj Ahmad, 2022: 55f.).

According to Grounded Theory, the development of theories does not follow a linear process. Methods of data collection, analysis, and theory formation alternate continuously and in parallel. This process intends to mutually inform each step along the research process. Furthermore, this methodological approach assumes that the processes of theory-building can never be fully completed (Strübing, 2021: 15ff).

All qualitatively collected data were transcribed and coded into emerging categories. This involved a continuous interplay between data collection, analysis, and theory development, in which the written materials were examined through open, axial, and selective coding. With each

step, the categories became more refined and saturated, eventually aiming to produce the most comprehensive and coherent theoretical framework possible. The theoretical framework was established from my gathered and analysed empirical data, which made my approach an inductive qualitative research. In short, this is what defines the analysis process of Grounded Theory (Flick, 2002: 257ff).

Furthermore, Grounded Theory is based on a process of coding, which is understood as the process of developing concepts through engagement with empirical material. Coding should not be abandoned in favour of analysis, but rather maintained and made explicit as a step towards the systematisation of theory generation. Grounded Theory insists on systematically coding the material; however, using codes based on theoretical concepts and categories must be gradually developed through the continuous comparative analysis of the data (Strübing, 2021: 15ff).

5 Institutional Responsibility and Structural Ambiguity

This chapter explores the extent to which nonhuman companions are considered within the framework of Vienna's low-threshold homelessness services. It begins with an exploration of the structural organisation of the *WWH*, before examining factors that complicate access for individuals accompanied by animals. The chapter further highlights institutional efforts towards heightened inclusivity of companion animals within institutional spaces. Finally, it turns to the "grey zone", which represents a space of ambiguity marked by inconsistencies, informal practices among the actors, and uncertainties in responsibilities across facilities.

5.1 Die Wiener Wohnungslosenhilfe (WWH)

To provide an understanding of the structures of Vienna's homelessness support system (*Wiener Wohnungslosenhilfe*) with its aims to combat homelessness, it is necessary to explore the different sectors that constitute a diverse landscape with different target groups, purposes, and accessibilities. Drawing a broader understanding of who finds access to what services and facilities is necessary to be able to catalogue the overall complexity at hand and to explore the mechanisms of institutional inclusion and exclusion, apart from and within the context of interspecies companionships.

The *WWH* provides a heterogeneous landscape of services in Vienna with different access criteria and focal points for individuals. A diversity in services intends to provide tailored support for particular needs. In the most recent published report of *FSW*, concerning the year 2023, the *WWH* was constituted of 33 partner organisations with 145 facilities, ranging from temporary shelters and accommodations, day and night centres, to street work programmes and counselling centres, to assisted long-term housing and mother-child services. According to the provided numbers, 12.750 individuals sought the *WWH* services that have been funded with 142,5 Mio. € (Fonds Soziales Wien, 2024).

Ambulante Angebote/ Nachtquartiere	Mobile Wohnbetreuung 1.028 Plätze	Betreute Wohnangebote 5.065 Plätze
Vergabe von Nachtquartier-, Betreuungs- und Wohnplätzen <i>P7 & bzWO</i>	Housing First 4 Einrichtungen, 356 Plätze	Sozial betreutes Wohnen (Dauerwohnen) 20 Einrichtungen, 1.150 Plätze
Nachtquartiere und Akutunterbringung 9 Einrichtungen, 503 Plätze	Mobile Betreuung in der eigenen Wohnung 5 Einrichtungen, 320 Plätze	Übergangswohnen 5 Einrichtungen, 711 Plätze
Ambulante Angebote – Tageszentren 7 Tageszentren, 530 Plätze	Leistbares Wohnen mit Betreuungsangebot 8 Einrichtungen, 352 Plätze	Übergangswohnen Zielgruppe 12 Einrichtungen, 532 Plätze
Ambulante Angebote - Beratung, Straßensozialarbeit 7 Einrichtungen		Übergangswohnen - Mutter- Kind-Einrichtungen 11 Einrichtungen, 393 Plätze
Gesundheitsförderung 7 Einrichtungen		Betreutes Wohnen in Wohnungen (Übergangswohnen) 21 Einrichtungen, 2.279 Plätze
Winterpaket Notquartiere, Wärmestuben, Straßensozialarbeit, Beratung		

Stand: März 2019

Figure 3: The different services within the WWH divided in three main pillars (Gutlederer & Zierler, 2020: 13).

In general, there are very few legal frameworks or regulations concerning homelessness and homelessness assistance in Austria, which also applies to Vienna. The system largely functions through contractual agreements between *FSW* and the various partner organisations. Within these agreements, specific service scopes are defined, which may include a particular focus of support services, for example, for adults, families, individuals with companion animals, etc. (I4). Appropriate conditions are established to enable adequate support for each target group within the homelessness support system. Each organisation creates and maintains structural and spatial conditions that guarantee adequate assistance within the framework of Vienna's homeless support system. This infrastructure should be tailored to the respective target group, the client-specific needs, and the services offered by the organisation (I4; Dachverband Wiener Sozialeinrichtungen, 2024: 17). However, there are no official mandates or published quotas, such as a required number of beds for individuals with animal companions, that would ensure

consistent provision across the *WWH*. At least, figures of that kind are not publicly known (I4; I6).

The *WWH* is generally split into two main operating systems: first, low-threshold services that grant temporary access to facilities without or only a few bureaucratic administrations on the clients' ends, and second, long-term services that require an individual's "eligibility", which is determined by institutional social policies and is reviewed through an application process. For this, an application form needs to be submitted at *Beratungszentrum Wohnungslosenhilfe (bzWO)*, a counselling centre functioning as the central post for long-term housing assignments in Vienna's homelessness support system (Gutleiderer & Zierler, 2020: 15; Fonds Soziales Wien, 2022: 2f.). *FSW* states in their funding guidelines that their funded long-term services (housing formats with on-site or floating support) are adapted to the individuals' unique psychosocial needs, where they can stay for an extended period with ongoing support from social workers, healthcare workers, and sometimes therapeutic professionals. The aim is the implementation of achieving or regaining individualised and autonomous living (Fonds Soziales Wien, 2022: 1).

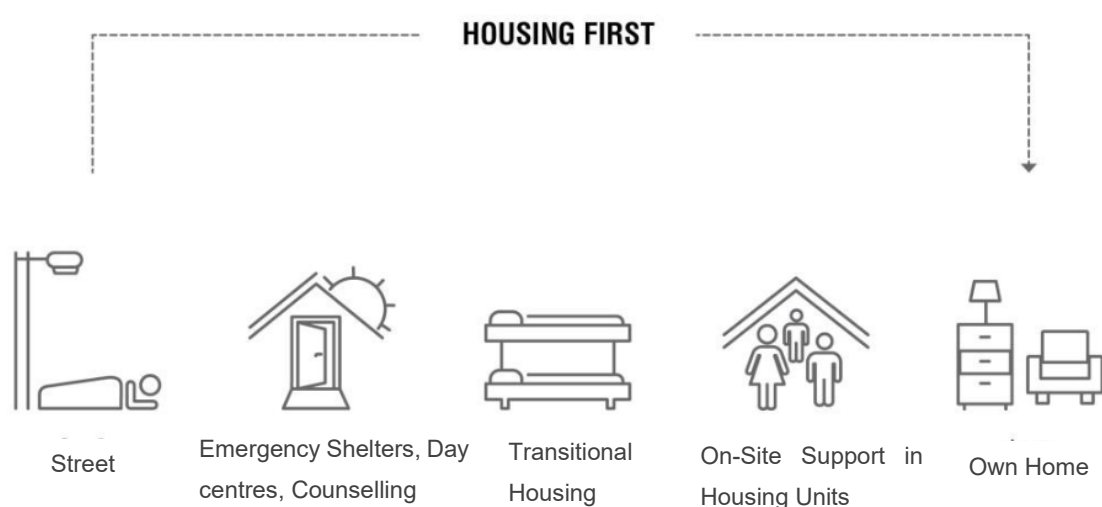


Figure 4: Housing First model (Gutleiderer & Zierler, 2020: 14, translated by the author)

What can be taken from Figure 4 is opposing models of homelessness support services. The *WWH* restructured its approach over the past few years considerably. Until today, there are strong variances in the support services and their approaches in Austria, differing from each federal state. A staircase approach to differing shelter and housing services is still commonly implemented in most parts of Austria (I4). This model has experienced broad criticism as it commonly leads to a reinforcement of institutionalisation, due to its rigidity and oftentimes loss

of autonomy skills of service users (Gutleiderer & Zierler, 2020: 14). However, Sahlin (2005: 128) on the other hand claims that “the model has developed into an institution [...] and therefore is no longer vulnerable to fundamental criticism”. Staircase services often caused service users to become “stuck” due to rigid progression requirements and strict rules, raising concerns that the expectations placed on them are unrealistic (Pleace, 2016: 14). The staircase model has proven ineffective in reducing homelessness and may, in fact, undermine individuals’ chances of attaining stable housing outside of institutionalised shelter and transitional accommodating (Sahlin, 2005: 115, 118f.). Also, Vienna used the staircase model as a guideline for combating homelessness until 2010. This meant that over a period of several years homeless persons were meant to “ascend” from their positions as (threatened) rough sleepers to using night shelters to living in transitional housing and eventually be able to move into a long-term housing or even their own home (Gutleiderer & Zierler, 2020: 14). Since it is believed that certain “survival skills” for self-determined housing gets lost after living in institutionalised shelters and accommodations over a long period of time, the approach of “Housing First” has been successfully co-implemented instead. It aims to provide homeless individuals with stable housing from the beginning (ibid.: 14f.; Pleace, 2016: 12). The model was first introduced in the 1990s in the US and has now also been implemented in Canada and several countries in Europe. The success rate of Housing First is undeniable as it ended homelessness sustainably for at least eight out of every ten people (Pleace, 2016: 12f.). Not only is housing provided, but it also aims to improve psychosocial circumstances that strengthen social inclusion. “Social inclusion is centred on actively avoiding the kinds of institutionalisation that can be experienced by homeless people” (ibid.: 82). Housing First services are valuable steps towards ending homelessness by representing a successful tool of “deinstitutionalisation” and fast autonomous living (Gutleiderer & Zierler, 2020: 15), yet, in the Viennese context, its operability ends with those who fulfil the eligibility criteria of subsidised housing. Those who cannot account for social security claims, the status of permanent residence or primary residence in Vienna, continuously rely on low-threshold services within the *WWH*. In those cases, ineligible persons would remain on the first pillar of *WWH*-services (Figure 3) or the first two depicted steps within the staircase system (Figure 4).

Based on the eligibility criteria for subsidised housing facilities, *bzWO* evaluates whether the person is entitled to a funded programme by assessing several formal and psychosocial criteria. Formal assessments for eligibility include primary residence in Vienna, a legal residence status in Austria, and entitlements to social welfare benefits (*Mindestsicherung*) or an income that

does not exceed specific thresholds established by municipal guidelines⁴. Additionally, a psychosocial assessment contemplates the causes of homelessness, the occurrences of complex physical or mental health issues, levels of debt, addiction histories, and the individual's overall (in)ability to live independently (Fonds Soziales Wien, 2022: 2ff). The group of ineligible individuals is therefore determined by the various accessing criteria. This regulation may result in further situations of manifested precarious housing, such as extended periods of rooflessness, dependencies on low-threshold accommodations with limited capacity, stability, and duration of stays, or reliance on informal networks (I4).

This especially affects migrants, and specifically EU-migrants from Eastern European countries who account for a large number among low-threshold service users, who often also lack perspectives in their countries of origin and therefore hope for prospects in Austria (I6). Under the “Act on the General Freedom of Movement for EU Citizens”, Austria may be entered without restriction for anyone from a member State. However, with the frequent lack of required residence status, claims on health care insurance, or governmental financial support, it often results in the solidification of poverty, precarious legal residence, and homelessness among this demographic group⁵. This means that newly arrived individuals experiencing homelessness face prolonged ineligibility within the *WWH*. In those cases, the only pathway out of homelessness would be through finding labour work and regular private rental housing markets (I2; I4). However, here it is important to stress that “[p]et owners, along with their animal companions, may also face discriminatory and exclusionary practices in relation to making a home, as competitive private rental markets make it difficult for multispecies households to rent” (Cudworth, 2022: 171). This lack of immediate perspectives leads to further precarious circumstances and chronic homelessness (Beeck, Grünhaus, & Weitzhofer, 2020: 60), consolidated in the staircase model. Not finding access to long-term housing options makes the people concerned, besides the institutional dependencies, also more vulnerable to interpersonal reliance and may lead to exploitation or violent relationships (Homerberger & Güntner, 2022: 28). Thus, the framework of (in)eligibility not only determines access to specific services but

⁴ The income should at least equal to the minimum standards according to the provisions of the Vienna Minimum Welfare Support Act and/or benefits according to the Vienna Minimum Welfare Support Act (Fonds Soziales Wien, 2022: 2).

⁵ With the “Settlement and Residence Act” (*Niederlassungs- und Aufenthaltsgesetz*, in short NAG) EU-migrants must demonstrate economic self-sufficiency, typically through (self)employment, after three months of entering Austria in order to achieve legal residency. After this, and only after contributing to the social insurance system, a minimum of five years of residence, and approved permanent residency, can they gain full access to social welfare services. Without this, they are at risk of losing future social and health benefits and may face deportation. (Beeck, Grünhaus, & Weitzhofer, 2020: 8).

also actively produces exclusionary practices that shape the future and everyday realities of the people concerned.

The raised aspects, lacking immediate prospects of finding work and housing, pose a threshold for many individuals with animal companions, since the structural barriers to finding work with an animal are considerably higher. Observations showed that many individuals would rather lose a job than an animal companion (I2; I3; I5). This potentially leads to labour refusals and resignations or a lack of existing offers that are compatible with animal guardianship. In addition, one interview participant stated that the absence of formal eligibility in combination with companion animals means that the possibility of succeeding in finding a suitable housing format in which both human and animal feel comfortable, finding work, and maintaining these resources, depends largely only on great luck (I2).

The question of whether interspecies companionships pose a barrier to accessing funded long-term housing opportunities through *FSW* could not be sufficiently clarified. Particularly with floating support services (*mobile Wohnbetreuung*), landlords have a fundamental impact on the authorisation or prohibition of animals. This could pose a barrier to finding suitable formats. However, the provided objects are usually municipal and charitable housing formats, which tend to have looser access criteria in their definition of “social housing” (I4). Once someone found access to a funded long-term format, “where everyone has their own housing unit, having companion animals is probably a much simpler matter. Because then you are [...] just like anyone else who lives somewhere. In that case, it’s really not an issue at all” (I6, translated by the author⁶). It is assumed that long-term assisted housing provides more stability and privacy within the facilities (I2; I6) and, if needed, even an unlimited duration of stay, compared to low-threshold accommodations, which only ever offer temporally limited shelter. This gives individuals the opportunity to plan long-term and to establish goals and security (I4). On the other hand, it is stressed that accessing long-term housing (e.g., on-site or floating support) is already connected to long waiting periods until a suitable option is found. The company of animals may aggravate this even more, as the criteria of suitability are more specific, which follows the assumption that capacities for these requirements are significantly lower. Longer waiting times for availabilities in the aspired housing formats consequently lead to longer periods in low-threshold shelters or even rooflessness (I2). As discussed above, the staircase model of homelessness services has been named to be outdated due to its mostly ineffective

⁶ „wo ja jeder eine eigene Wohneinheit hat, da ist das mit den Haustieren wahrscheinlich eine einfachere Geschichte. Weil dann bist du [...] wie alle anderen, die irgendwo wohnen auch. Da ist es sowieso kein Thema“ (I6, original quote).

approach to combat homelessness. The system itself is flawed with exclusionary practices along the stairways, which anchor individuals in institutionalised spaces or push them even more into the margins. In this regard, companion animals may simultaneously pose a barrier to finding housing, as many interlocutors reported (I2; I4; I5; research diary), yet the system of ascending and step-by-step requirements may be the larger factor that has people stuck in low-threshold facilities.

Lastly, nonhuman companions carry the consequences of potential elongated processes or exclusionary principles as well. If stable long-term housing does not pose a prospect, the disadvantages not only show on the human's expense. The lack of suitable housing may manifest in the humans' experiences in acute or chronic physical and mental illness and even shorter life expectancies (Scanlon, et al., 2021: 78; Kerman, Gran-Ruaz, & Lem, 2019: 106). Cases in which said negative effects occur because of the lack of further housing perspectives could lead to the loss or abandonment of an animal (I3; I6). Inherently, these impacts have direct impacts on animal companions as well. This proves a deep entanglement transcending the species and will be furtherly explored throughout the next chapters.

5.2 Low-threshold Services

Due to these restrictions caused by the complexities on the level of social policy, this section introduces the concept of “low-threshold services” more thoroughly, together with its various services in Vienna, while elaborating on their adaptation of multispecies inclusion and exclusion. As low-threshold services are processes of “institutionalisation”, their structural make-ups need to be examined to understand the operating implications on multiple levels.

Low-threshold services aim to provide fast support as unbureaucratically as possible. This help is aimed at emergency needs and is not intended to overcome homelessness in principle. The services are often characterised by the fact that they can be used anonymously and are only limited by a few rules of conduct (Haj Ahmad, 2022: 149). Furthermore, and are open to all homeless people, regardless of their social security entitlements and residence status. In a broader sense, low-threshold social work meets clients “at the threshold” and gradually accompanies them across various thresholds. The aim is to reduce clients' fears of facing barriers to a degree where they can either access the more specific services of higher-threshold institutions or find a sustainable solution within the low-threshold context itself. The services are directed towards an immediate improvement of existential needs, and accessing them should not require any behavioural adaptation on the part of the client. Importantly, the utilisation is voluntary and does not entail any sanctions if offers are refused (Stark, 2011: 201).

Additionally, future perspectives are developed progressively, particularly regarding housing options and from the very beginning of the process, the aim is to ensure few and seamless transitions within the *WWH* (Gutleiderer & Zierler, 2020: 22). In doing so, creative solutions tailored to individuals' needs and situations are necessary at all times and define the field of low-threshold services (I2; I6). These services' primary operation plans include temporary premises and services in which basic needs are provided. In short, access to food, beverages, and resting possibilities is provided. In addition, the goal is the prevention of immediate harm of all kinds that homeless individuals typically experience regularly, such as death, exposure to violence, police examinations, etc. (Beeck, Grünhaus, & Weitzhofer, 2020: 63f.). Importantly, the term "low-threshold" can be seen to have problematic effects, as it often conceals complex accessing barriers (Haj Ahmad, 2022: 149f.), a perspective that will be explored further on in this chapter. It could also be argued that homelessness support services, and especially low-threshold facilities, contribute to a manifestation in precarious circumstances. The systems are often designed in a highly transient way, causing many individuals to fluctuate between services. Therefore, facilities can be argued to foster ineligibility (for those who would be entitled, but also those who might be entitled in the future) of social benefits and stable housing facilities because of their temporal offers (Anderson & Snow, 1993: 140), although under an imperative of support and relief of suffering. This suggests that national social benefits are a key instrument in overcoming homelessness, but also the social exclusion that goes hand-in-hand. Access to these benefits is closely linked to EU freedom of movement regulations, and access to social benefits is not only legally, but also politically controversial and morally charged (Haj Ahmad, 2022: 63f.).

The following section provides an overview of the diverse low-threshold services in Vienna⁷. *FSW* defines them as: emergency accommodation (*Notquartiere*), day centres, street work counselling centres, and health support (Fonds Soziales Wien, 2024).

⁷ Houses of Opportunities (*Chancenhäuser*) a form of temporary housing with an aim on developing future prospects are also sometimes considered as low-threshold facilities. Yet, pragmatic barriers can exclude individuals without clear future prospects or stable legal statuses and access and length of stay are handled individually (Beeck, Grünhaus, & Weitzhofer, 2020: 24f.). Operating staff are given discretionary powers in the admission process and duration of stays, making access an internal, selective, and non-transparent assessment. Additionally accessibility depended largely on availability (Diebäcker et al., 2022: 30ff). While they may fulfil some structural criteria of low-threshold services, there are concealed exclusionary dynamics beneath a rhetoric of accessibility, which is why I will not include them in the category of low-threshold facilities.

5.2.1 Low-threshold Accommodation (*Notquartiere*) and Winter Emergency Programme (*Winterpaket*)

Vienna provides short-term, low-threshold accommodation for individuals experiencing homelessness who cannot immediately access more stable housing. These facilities offer a temporary solution, aiming to stabilise individuals in crisis and serve as a bridge towards more suitable housing options. Access to night shelters is coordinated by P7 and other counselling facilities, which issue overnight stay permits (*Nächtigungsscheine*). These permits differ in the durations of stays; sometimes only a single night, other times several weeks are granted and depend on individual cases and situations. Some facilities also provide highly limited “immediate access” beds, providing crisis intervention apart from formal admission. However, those beds are usually limited to one overnight stay (Beeck, Grünhaus, & Weitzhofer, 2020: 24; I6).

During the winter months (Start of November to End of April), Vienna coordinates and funds the Winter Emergency Programme “*Winterpaket*” since 2009⁸. This humanitarian emergency programme offers emergency shelters each winter to those in need of immediate accommodation, such as rough sleepers or anyone who cannot (yet) access long-term housing, regardless of social welfare entitlements. As part of this initiative, not only emergency night shelters open, but also day shelters (*Wärmestuben*) and additionally employed staff in counselling centres and street outreach programmes (Diebäcker, Sagmeister, & Fischlmayr, 2018: 150; Gutlederer & Zierler, 2020: 14). In 2023, an additional 1.080 low-threshold shelter beds⁹ were provided through this initiative (Fonds Soziales Wien, 2024: 4). The *Winterpaket* was justified by the humanitarian obligation to save people from dying of cold temperatures, while at the same time, the city and its residents “benefit” from the increased network of facilities because of a reduced visibility of and encounters with homelessness in the public sphere (Homberger & Güntner, 2022: 24). While the emergency shelters until recently used to be only open at night times, they now operate in a 24-hour setting, an adaptation that was made due the Covid-19 pandemic (Homberger & Güntner, 2022: 24; I6). This adjustment impacts the service users, as they now can leave valuables in the facilities and have the opportunity to also rest during the day, which consequently also benefits animal companions (I4). Another adaptation has been that some services remain open over the summer months, providing

⁸ This programme initially started from a university protest “Uni brennt” in which roofless individuals appropriated the occupied lecture rooms as sleeping facilities. Only through social movements and heightened public attention, did the state provide funding for additional sleeping capacities, that additionally also include uninsured individuals from other EU-countries (Diebäcker, Sagmeister, & Fischlmayr, 2018: 150).

⁹ The numbers differ with each year, but rose significantly over the last few years (I6)

additional capacities in terms of sheltered beds for especially vulnerable individuals whose lives would otherwise be threatened if they slept on the streets (I6).

Some low-threshold accommodation facilities in Vienna provide a limited but noteworthy number of beds that allow companion animals. The overall number is not strictly set and differs each year, depending on each facility and overall resources (I6). Some interlocutors found the existing numbers to be reasonable for the demand (I2; I6), while others stated that the numbers could not possibly cover the needs of this target group (I5). While occurrences of companion animals within the WWH are not monitored, reasons for rejecting a *Notquartier* are. It was stated that about two cases per year arise in which individuals could not be accommodated anywhere because there were no capacities for animals in any shelter (I6). Yet, more frequently, interlocutors reported that individuals did not sleep in facilities because the spaces are not deemed suitable for their animal companions and therefore rejected them (I1; I5; research diary).

5.2.2 Day Centres

Vienna operates day centres spread throughout the city for people experiencing homelessness or precarious housing. These centres provide daytime shelter, access to address registrations, social work counselling, areas to rest, access to laundry facilities, showers, hygiene products, lockers for valuables, free or low-cost meals, and assistance with job applications, activities to strengthen routines and community aspects, and whatever else can be offered (Diebäcker, Sagmeister, & Fischlmayr, 2018: 153; Beeck, Grünhaus, & Weitzhofer, 2020: 25; I2; I5). This means that services largely rely on individual capacities and staff engagement. In principle, the employees have a broad focus to assist and work on housing and securing basic material needs, but also all other concerns that might come up (I5). In interviews, it was highlighted that in all of the current day centre establishments, companion animals are permitted, under the condition that animals wear muzzles and/or leashes indoors to prevent incidents with other service users and employees (I5; I6).

5.2.3 Street Work

Street work teams visit unsheltered individuals in public spaces and provide essential supplies like sleeping bags, clothes, food, and information material on diverse matters. Building trust and relationships by maintaining consistent contact is central to their work. Oftentimes, the public can report people in need of shelter or other requirements, prompting teams to visit and possibly provide assistance (Beeck, Grünhaus, & Weitzhofer, 2020: 25). As these services operate in public spaces and in direct approaches, it is assumable that these amenities function

as the most accessible services in the *WWH*, and especially concerning interspecies companions who sleep in public spaces, the presence of animals does not underlie any institutional regulations. Yet, animals in this case may inhabit ambivalent roles: while they significantly ease the approach and getting into contact with the individuals (I5; I6), they might also act as a barrier to contact at the same time; in cases of protective behaviour, and sometimes they may even distract from the human companion altogether (I5).

5.2.4 Health Support

Since many homeless individuals in Vienna lack health insurance or face systemic exclusion, accessibility to specialised health services is a central aspect in the implementation of low-threshold services in homelessness support systems. Staff are trained in the specific realities and needs of people experiencing homelessness. The offers range from consultations and medical treatments at various health centres, including general medical treatments to dental care and psychiatric services, to access to mental health professionals and psychotherapists (Beeck, Grünhaus, & Weitzhofer, 2020: 25) and on-site visits in the various facilities to guarantee even lower thresholds for the users. Yet, there is a huge shortage of mental health care on-site (Homberger & Güntner, 2022: 28). Especially on-site operating services act in a low-threshold way and ease access in particular for those in companionship of an animal (I1).

5.3 Impeding Aspects of Nonhuman Inclusion

After the exploration of existing low-threshold services in Vienna, this section will more thoroughly focus on exclusionary processes in interspecies companionships in the context of institutionalised homelessness services. Regulations and expectations on how individuals should act and interact in the system prove an undeniable degree of institutional power. Although in the Viennese setting, not all existing low-threshold services permit access for nonhuman companions, it is not necessarily rigidly dismissive (I6). With at least a partial official inclusion, and more unofficial solutions (which will be explored further on), the *WWH* presents instances of institutional inclusion and multispecies considerations. However, even within partial inclusions, there are several structural impeding factors that need to be elaborated to see the success or failure of reducing barriers for those accompanied by animals.

Across all interviews and informal conversations, companion animals were never described as facilitators of accessing housing. Rather, interlocutors consistently emphasised that the presence of an animal does not serve as an encouraging criterion in finding housing or accommodation. Animals may be permitted under specific circumstances, but they do not ease

the path to housing; in fact, they more often introduce additional barriers (I2; I4; I5; research diary) as one interviewee underlined:

The potential benefits are probably really only visible on the level of the human-animal relationship itself. That animals can help structure the day, that they can provide emotional strength, that they offer a sense of responsibility, or, who knows, that they might sometimes make it easier to connect with others. So on this social-emotional level, I can imagine that having an animal companion can be meaningful and supportive. But on the structural level, and when it comes to actually ending the emergency situation, I believe that having an animal is more often a challenge (I4, translated by the author¹⁰).

The beneficial aspects of animal companionship were placed primarily in psycho-social realms. These dimensions will be further explored in the following sections. Yet, the aspect of reinforcing emergencies was also underlined by Scanlon et al. (2021: 79), who stated that animal companionships may manifest the state of homelessness even further. However, they reasoned it within a common reluctance of shelters and facilities to open access for animals. In Vienna, however, some facilities demonstrate tolerance or even an institutional recognition of the human-animal bonds, yet this is better understood as an act of acute necessity rather than a structurally inclusive mechanism (I1, I6).

Within the *WWH*, the regulations around accessibility of companion animals in social service facilities are not centrally defined by *FSW* or by organisational guidelines of the partner organisations themselves. Instead, the decision-making authority regarding whether animals are permitted is usually constituted by the individual facilities and is additionally significantly impacted by external structural conditions. As a result, the inclusion or exclusion of companion animals is not determined by a uniform city-wide policy, but by specific arrangements (I2; I4; I6). One interview participant described a general exclusion as a paternalising act towards the service users, as those who depend on certain services and would like to have an animal companion in their lives are directly affected by impeding regulations. In this sense, institutions make decisions about someone else's lives (I5).

However, one of the most influential factors in institutional exclusion of animals is the role of the property owners who rent out spaces to the partner organisations operating the facilities. If property providers prohibit animals on the premises, even facilities with an otherwise inclusive

¹⁰ Chancen sind wahrscheinlich wirklich nur auf dieser Ebene der Tier-Mensch-Beziehung zu sehen. Also dass Tiere einen Tag strukturieren können, dass es emotional einen stärken kann, dass es eine Aufgabe ist, dass es, keine Ahnung, dass es leichter fällt, vielleicht manchmal in Kontakt zu treten mit irgendwem. Also auf dieser sozial-emotionalen Ebene kann ich mir vorstellen, dass Tierbegleitung sinnvoll sein kann und dass das unterstützend sein kann. Eher also auf der strukturellen Ebene und auf der Ebene der Beendigung der Notlage glaube ich, dass es oftmals eher eine Herausforderung ist, ein Tier zu haben. (I4, original quote)

orientation towards animals are not able to freely and formally allow individuals to be accompanied by animals (I2; I6). In this way, private property rights and contractual terms, rather than care ethics or institutional missions, become decisive factors of accessibility and inclusion for homeless interspecies companionships.

Another aspect, I would assume, a largely overlooked but structurally significant issue in the accommodation of companion animals, is the question of insurance coverage. Animals are not necessarily formally registered or insured under existing facility agreements. This lack of coverage means that institutions could face legal and financial risks if incidents involving animals occur on-site. Those permitting animal access on their premises might have liability insurance, covering the estimated number of dogs, meaning that every animal above the formally granted amount would not be insured and might therefore be dismissed (I2). An unofficial tolerance of animals without the formal infrastructure and legal protection in cases of property damage or even incidents of attacks may end lethally for both the institution and the person bringing the animal. As such, the lack of insurance coverage for animals functions as a subtle but prevailing institutional barrier, limiting the development of truly inclusive interspecies care within the *WWH*.

Another impeding asset in the practice of existing services in Vienna is deeply ingrained within the purpose of the *WWH*. All aims of support primarily serve *humans* affected by homelessness, which was stressed throughout the research multiple times. The inclusion of nonhuman companions is a factor sometimes considered, yet not always implemented, and usually more so only peripherally (I1; I2; I3; I4; I5; I6). One interlocutor highlighted the conditional recognition of animals within institutional care because of anthropocentric processes:

Animals are considered, because they are a part of the human's life, but not because of the animals, if this makes sense. The human remains the central focus in homelessness services. After all, it is the human who is homeless, not the dog. Well, of course, the dog is homeless because the human is homeless [...]. That means the animal is always somewhat secondary to the human. And in that sense, one has to acknowledge that animals are probably not considered often enough, because the person is so clearly at the centre of attention. (I1, translated by the author¹¹)

¹¹ „Dass die Tiere berücksichtigt werden, weil sie halt auch Teil des Lebens des Menschen sind, aber nicht nur wegen der Tiere, wenn das Sinn macht. Also es ist trotzdem halt im Mittelpunkt der Mensch in der Wohnungslosenhilfe. Und weil es ist ja der Mensch wohnungslos und nicht der Hund. Also schon, der Hund ist wohnungslos, weil der Mensch wohnungslos ist [...]. Das heißt, das Tier wird ja immer ein bisschen an den Menschen angeordnet. Und insofern muss man sagen, dass das Tier wahrscheinlich nicht häufig genug mitgedacht wird, weil der Mensch so sehr im Zentrum, im Fokus der Aufmerksamkeit steht“ (I1, original quote)

The aims within low-threshold services are clearly set on the support of basic needs and finding perspectives in housing matters. Animals in this regard do not present as priorities and are therefore easily dismissed within these processes, as another research participant claimed:

But I do believe that there is an effort to provide the possibility [to include animals]. However, it's certainly [...] not something that is strategically at the forefront of homelessness services. Especially in the low-threshold sector [...], the focus is on initial support, emergency care, and delivering assistance as effectively as possible. (I6, translated by the author¹²)

Excluding animals from homelessness services or permitting access to facilities while simultaneously ignoring their presence in the human's lives raises important considerations on how these structures "delegitimise their crucial bond and overlook their unique needs" (Laing, 2020: 187). Not only does this mean that the socio-emotional scale would not be acknowledged as an important resource to work on stability and perspectives, so are the acutely faced demands for individual cases, potentially deviating from other realities within homelessness.

This positionality of centralising the human as an active participant and animals to remain as passive attendants has been observed and reasoned within deeply rooted societal processes of human exceptionalism by an interviewee: „Animals are not as important in the hierarchy as [...] people in general" (I3, translated by the author¹³). Other justifications revolved around stabilisation and rehousing as be primary matters in emergency support. The ability to attain some form of stable accommodations necessarily means that animals tend to be considered last in the process (I6). What can be taken away from these takes is that the focus within homelessness services, human-centred topics around housing and may seem more pressing from institutional perspectives. However, because of the tightly interspecies entanglements, animals should not be ignored in the process, as support services with holistic care approaches could gain deeper insight into people's social networks and offer more tailored assistance that fosters a sense of belonging and connection (Kerman, Gran-Ruaz, & Lem, 2019: 112). Nonetheless, steps towards multispecies thinking have been elaborated by one interview participant, although as perhaps more peripheral processes than conscious ones: "In principle, the focus is on the human we are working with. But in practice, it is often difficult to separate the two" (I5, translated by the author¹⁴). Following this, interlocutors stated that a human-

¹² „Aber ich glaube schon, dass das Bemühen da ist [Tiere zu inkludieren], die Möglichkeit zu bieten. Aber es ist sicher, [...] nichts, was strategisch in der Wohnungslosenversorgung jetzt megamäßig im Fokus ist. Also gerade im niederschweligen Bereich [...], ist der Fokus auf Erstversorgung, Notversorgung, möglichst Unterstützung zu liefern". (I6, original quote)

¹³ „Tiere sind schon einmal in der Rangordnung nicht so wichtig, wie [...] generell Menschen" (I3, original quote).

¹⁴ „An sich ist der Fokus der Mensch, mit dem wir arbeiten. Aber das lässt sich halt oft schwer so auseinanderdividieren" (I5, original quote).

shaped system is the structural status quo, while noticing that multispecies inclusions are not only partially implemented, but they also prove to be a form of assistance that fully acknowledges and addresses humans' unique issues. Assisting with and considering the challenges that arise from animal companionships are necessary matters to adapt a successful anthropocentric support system. Multispecies involvements directly serve the human's wellbeing (I2), which in its core is the aim of the *WWH*. This creates a paradox: although an inclusion of animals is driven by a human-centred logic, it effectively transforms the services into more-than-human ones; they simply seem not to be considered as such. In this sense, I would argue that a successful humanitarian initiative is only feasible through a more-than-human operating system.

Lastly, not only the focus on human-centred services and the existing external barriers have been named as possible nonhuman exclusions. The perceived quantity of these relationships was cited as one possible reason for not considering animal actors as much within the institutional landscapes, although these reports were contradictory. One institutional actor claimed that "companion animals are naturally considered only partially, because they are hardly, it is hard to believe, they are actually not that present. There really aren't that many of them" (I6, translated by the author¹⁵). In contrast, another interviewee perceived animal accompaniments to be very frequent occurrences that require more attention and services to meet their needs accordingly (I3). Of course, at this point, a subjective attitude towards animals as well as the actual positionality within the institutional landscape may influence someone's perception immensely and therefore accounts for differing observations. However, other interview participants also confirmed that occurrences of companion animals in acute homelessness seem to have declined, with higher numbers a few years ago (I2; I5); however, no one else perceived fewer occurrences to be justifications of the lack of consideration regarding nonhumans within institutional settings. On the contrary, in an informal conversation, an interlocutor phrased that the demand should not determine the availability of services. Rather, accessibility should be created for all kinds of marginalised groups to demonstrate a form of visibility and *raison d'être* within the system (research diary). Notably, numbers could very much differ in urban spaces away from institutional observations, which makes it even more difficult to get insights into these spheres (I6). Following this, one could interpret this in a way that individuals with animal companionships might consciously avoid institutional spaces, as they might be considered an incompatible spatiality for the interspecies needs. I

¹⁵ „Haustiere denkt man da natürlich nur bedingt mit, weil sie eigentlich auch kaum, also, und man mag es kaum glauben, so dermaßen präsent sind sie gar nicht. Also es sind auch gar nicht so viele“ (I6, original quote).

would argue, with non-existent numbers around the actual occurrences and rather limited insights into facilities only, institutional actors simply may not consider the range of this complex field. This can present a critical threshold for those accompanied by nonhuman companions. An emphasis on what is defined as “low-threshold” within the *WWH* may vary depending on individual circumstances, as in this case, the circumstance of nonhuman companionships. Inclusion and exclusion can also have an individual and subjective dimension, besides structural and institutional ones, in which humans ascribe interpretations of what their animal companions deem good or bad. Human companions tend to “readily mix and match different interpretations of their animals in the everyday practices” (Fox, 2006: 535), which in turn emphasises the complexities of multispecies relations and, in particular, in the complex field of homelessness.

5.4 Attempts at Nonhuman Inclusivity

The consideration and involvement of nonhumans in services are important assets in the debate around homelessness support, as these steps impact human companions and their particular demands in the most direct way. It was voiced in an informal conversation that everyone would benefit from a heightened consideration of animals (research diary). Also, institutional staff have emphasised that they would like to centralise animal-related matters more or even try to implement some steps in such a direction, besides a lack of policies supporting such efforts. This section will look closer towards existing services, recognitions, and even situations of centralising animals to be active actors in institutional settings.

Some actors within the low-threshold facilities recognised the realities and implications of interspecies limitations. For instance, individuals declining opportunities for accommodations if it meant a separation from their nonhuman companions (I5; research diary). Empathy was raised by one institutional employee for those being confronted with such decisions: “It simply shouldn't be the case that a person has to choose between offers to improve their condition and staying with their animal. It must be possible to go hand in hand” (I1, translated by the author¹⁶). This statement illustrates the moral implications coming with incompatibilities between the homeless support service and interspecies companionships. The socio-emotional importance of animals in the lives of homeless persons is not only acknowledged at this point but also claimed as non-debatable. Providing both access to services and an acknowledgement of these entanglements offers continuous support and facilitates the sustainability of these relationships.

¹⁶ „das darf halt nicht sein, dass eine Person zwischen Angeboten für eine Verbesserung ihres Zustandes und der Begleitung ihres Tieres wählen muss. Das muss Hand in Hand gehen können“ (I1, original quote).

One statement reflected that these demands are already common practice, with clear attempts shown regularly to accommodate animals together with their human companions: “In the emergency shelters, everyone generally tries to find a solution, despite everything. I believe we even found a solution for a parrot last year” (I6, translated by the author¹⁷). This shows a general institutional engagement to find individually suitable solutions for service users. Another interlocutor highlighted the increased attempts to fit different needs in their offers:

There is already such a strong effort to adapt the facilities and services to the needs at hand. I think that animals are not given much space in that regard. That could perhaps still change. And perhaps, if change starts at the bottom, in all the low-threshold facilities, then it can eventually be carried upwards [through the system]. (I2, translated by the author¹⁸)

A degree of hopefulness towards broader considerations of more-than-human adaptations can be taken from this, yet it is not clear how these changes would be implemented and who the responsible actors would have to be. However, it suggests that desired changes would not come from above, from political and uniform regulations, but instead must be implemented and justified from the bottom, the institutional staff, to demonstrate the importance of inclusive steps. This raises important considerations in the attempts to broaden inclusivity. It has been shown that facility employees often have a strong personal interest in expanding offers around animal care and inclusion, and therefore sometimes invest time and energy outside their working hours or areas of responsibility to arrange material resources or services within the facilities. These acts happen regardless of, or rather exactly because of, a lack of financial support and political attention to interspecies entanglements within a context of rooflessness and houselessness (I3; I5; I6; research diary). These attempts beyond the expected responsibilities imply that nonhuman inclusivity might not be feasible or even considered at all, if it were not for the actors in the field to make the services and resources available, as one employee elaborated:

There aren't many specialised services that specifically target the animals of homeless individuals. We've repeatedly tried to organise such offers ourselves. For example, we've had veterinarians come in on a pro bono basis, and dog groomers who provided free grooming services. We also offered first aid courses for dogs. At times, there was quite a lively range of services for people's animals. However, this has somewhat faded, there's not as much going on now as there used to be, as some of the veterinarians and

¹⁷ „Es sind eigentlich in den Notquartieren immer alle bemüht, trotz allem eine Lösung zu finden. Ich glaube, wir haben letztes Jahr sogar eine Lösung für einen Papagei gefunden“ (I6, original quote)

¹⁸ „Man ist eh schon so bemüht, die Einrichtungen, die Angebote an die Bedarfslage anzupassen. Ich glaube, dass den Tieren da nicht so viel Platz gewidmet wird. Das könnte sich vielleicht auch noch ändern. Und vielleicht, wenn sich das ganz unten, also in den ganzen niederschweligen Einrichtungen ändert, dann kann das dann auch nach oben getragen werden [im System]“ (I2, original quote).

dog groomers, for various reasons, could no longer or no longer wanted to continue. (I5, translated by the author¹⁹)

This illustrates clear attempts at animal acknowledgements implemented in the past. These efforts were largely driven by the commitment and initiative of individual team members, which in turn depend on personal networks and external voluntary contributions. Additionally, the temporality of services was highlighted together with the lack of financial funding, which indicates a reliance on services free of cost. This highlights both the potential and the fragility of animal-directed support within the current institutional framework. To contest these fragilities, the teams continuously raise awareness to interspecies service users by discussing individual cases and situations in their team meetings and, if necessary, involve external resources (I2; I3; I5; I6; research diary). This emphasises that, besides individual engagements, an intact institutional network across Vienna is a necessity to accommodate services beyond the human. The various facilities, social workers, stakeholders (veterinary or animal welfare actors), and authorities work together tightly to find individual solutions if needed (I3; research diary).

Another large aspect that has been raised in the attempts to include and sometimes even centralise animals in the institutional settings is the cases in which animal welfare needs to be addressed (Laing, 2021: 194). Ethical considerations between humanitarian aid and animal welfare are crucial points to explore and understand institutional attempts at nonhuman inclusivity. One interviewee shared their ethical concerns in their everyday work and interactions with humans and nonhumans:

I think sometimes certain ethical components come into play that are not necessarily our explicit mandate, but that still cannot be entirely left out. So, when one says how a person is allowed to treat or care for the animal [...]. It is, I believe, often one's own standards or personal ideas about how it should be handled that are difficult to completely set aside. And yes, this can often overshadow the human-to-human relationship, which should be the priority. (I5, translated by the author²⁰)

¹⁹ Es gibt nicht besonders viele spezialisierte Angebote, die sich ganz klar an die Tiere von wohnungslosen Personen richten. Wir haben da immer wieder versucht, das selbst auf die Beine zu stellen. Wir hatten einerseits immer wieder Tierärzt*innen da, die das so pro bono gemacht haben. Wir hatten auch immer wieder Hundefriseur*innen da, die gratis Hundefriseur-Tätigkeiten angeboten haben. Wir hatten auch schon Hunde-Erste-Hilfe-Kurse. Da gab es auch immer wieder ein recht aufgestelltes Angebot für die Tiere der Besitzer*innen. Es ist ein wenig eingeschlafen. Es ist nicht mehr ganz so viel, wie es mal war. Weil manche der Tierärztin und die Hundefriseur*innen das irgendwie dann, aus welchen Gründen auch immer, nicht mehr machen konnten oder wollten. (I5, original quote)

²⁰ Ich glaube, vielleicht kommen da manchmal einfach so gewisse ethische Komponenten mit dazu, die jetzt nicht zwingend unser expliziter Handlungsauftrag wären, aber die man halt trotzdem nicht ganz außen vorlassen kann. Also wenn man sagt, wie darf die Person mit dem Tier umgehen oder das Tier versorgen [...]. Es sind, glaube ich, schon die eigenen Ansprüche, die man hat, oder das eigene Bild davon, wie das gestaltet werden soll, komplett

Following this, occasionally, human individuals do not act according to animal welfare standards. Whether it is neglect or physical abuse, institutions may find themselves in a situation in which staff need to intervene. The usual steps for action then involve conversations with the human companions, and only as a last resort, initiating animal removals or a house ban for the pairs (I1; I2; I5; research diary). Scepticism was raised on whether this step of exclusion from services promises improvement for both human and animal; instead, it is assumed that it only dislocates the issue while relieving the facility environment (I4). However, these interventions create a field of tension between staff and human clients. The latter is said to take criticism of animal care very personally, which can be a potential for conflict or a breach of trust (I5). As a possible outcome, human clients may learn to reject institutional facilities as a result of intervening actions. While they may still depend on specific services, penalties may break trust in facilities and services to some extent. Trust between homeless individuals and support providers is closely tied to how nonhuman companions are treated within these systems. Institutional efforts towards nonhuman inclusivity can significantly strengthen trust, while signalling respect for the relational realities and emotional bonds of service users. One interlocutor stated that one inclusive mean could be to “take away the fear from the target group that, as a result of this cooperation, their animal might be taken away in an emergency.” (I2, translated by the author²¹). However, I would argue it remains unclear whether a situation of intervention is an act of inclusion or exclusion for humans and/or animals. Institutional actions can reproduce power imbalances and penalising dynamics between a homeless person and institutions, if social support and dialogical engagement with the human companion are not provided in those situations. Another interview participant pointed out that this moral dilemma often arises when it comes to the priorities of welfare. “For example, is it more important that the person can remain in the facility, even if there is, say, an animal welfare concern? And which interest is rather prioritised” (I4, translated by the author²²)? When animal welfare becomes the only motivation for intervention, without addressing the structural issues that led to the neglect in the first place, these measures risk isolating rather than empowering the human. Additionally, there are also critical points to consider. Interventions that result in the removal of animals due to neglect or abuse could also be interpreted as a form of nonhuman inclusivity, as they acknowledge animals as sentient beings with needs and rights independent of their

außen vor zu lassen. Und ja, das überschattet ja dann auch oft eigentlich so die Mensch-zu-Mensch-Beziehung, um die es vorrangig gehen soll. (I5, original quote)

²¹ „Zielgruppe auch die Angst wegzunehmen, dass halt als Folge dieser Zusammenarbeit das Tier abgenommen wird im Notfall“ (I2, original quote).

²² „Ist es zum Beispiel wichtiger, dass die Person in der Einrichtung bleiben kann, auch wenn es zum Beispiel eine Tierschutzgefährdung gibt oder so? Und welches Interesse überwiegt eher?“ (I4, original quote)

human companions. These instances reveal that institutional action may disrupt the common anthropocentric hierarchy by prioritising the welfare of the animal over the emotional and psychosocial needs of the human. This reflects a shift in moral recognition that aligns with critical posthumanist approaches that involve “confrontations with ethical dilemmas, the resolution of which ensures the most vulnerable family members can access the care” (Laing, 2021: 194). This highlights an understanding in which animals are no longer seen solely as property or therapeutic tools, but as actors with claims to protection and care. In this sense, one could argue that the intentions are animal-inclusive, yet whether a shift in interspecies hierarchies constitutes true inclusion depends on whether they are embedded in holistic and supportive frameworks that respect and address both human and nonhuman vulnerability, not one at the expense of the other.

Another aspect that supported the elevation of animals in the construction of the human-animal dichotomy, are assigned responsibilities on account of the human. If interventions lead to exclusions of the companions, or an imposed separation of human and animal, it is claimed to be in the best interest of the animal (I2; I5; I6). In these cases, humans are usually framed as the responsible actors within the constellations. While separated paths may have several reasons, whether material, time, or psycho-social causes (I4), an incompatibility is usually assigned to the human’s accountability, as one institutional employee stated:

In principle, every animal has so far been compatible with the facility. In some cases, [...] it was not the animals, but the animal guardians who were not compatible with their animals, those who may have overestimated themselves when deciding to acquire an animal, underestimated or downplayed the animal's needs, or willingly chose to ignore them altogether. (I2, translated by the author²³)

Stating that every animal has been “compatible” with the facility, the underlying message is that animals do not pose an issue; rather, it is the people caring for them who are seen as having made poor choices, misjudged their capacity, or ignored the needs of their animals. This reflects what Charles (2016: 3) calls the “precarious incorporation” of companion animals into human social systems; animals are emotionally significant, yet their continued presence depends on the behaviour and perceived competence of their human guardian. This creates a situation where institutional exclusions are presented as individual failures, masking the institutional and social restrictions that shape multispecies lives on the margins.

²³ Grundsätzlich mit der Einrichtung war bis jetzt jedes Tier kompatibel. Punktuell sind das eher, waren es nicht Tiere, sondern die Tierhalter*innen, die nicht kompatibel mit ihren Tieren waren, die sich vielleicht bei der Entscheidung zur Anschaffung eines Tieres überschätzt haben, die Bedarf eines Tieres unterschätzt haben, bagatellisiert haben oder einfach ganz auch wissentlich nicht sehen wollten. (I2, original quote)

What can be taken away from this, nonhuman inclusivity is a recognised and practiced experience in some institutional spaces within the *WWH*. However, oftentimes, animal inclusion sometimes leads to practices of centralising animals, while simultaneously concealing the human as an entangled participant in interspecies companionships. This dynamic reveals how a grade of equality is still negotiated and, for now, often acts in favour of either animals or humans, presenting that entanglements of the two are not yet fully recognised or practiced.

Lastly, two clear interspecies institutional attempts with clear aims directed towards animals have been raised in connection to the *WWH*. The first one, “*neunerhaus Tierarztpraxis*” (neunerhaus veterinary practice) represents an institutional monopoly in Austria (I3). This facility aims to provide veterinary care for companion animals of homeless individuals and has been named as a crucial resource (I3; I4; I5; I6). Notably, this institution not only operates free of charge for service users, but its focus also rests specifically on roofless, houseless, and precariously housed individuals, or in short, any individual without their own housing (neunerhaus – Hilfe für obdachlose Menschen, n.d.; I3). This narrowed target group is also necessary since this programme is not funded by the city, but public donations only, and relies largely on volunteer work (I3). While their tight entanglements with the *WWH* and all interlocutors’ expressions showed the significance of these services, the presence of this institution has not yet been widely acknowledged by political involvement²⁴.

Another important resource regarding animal inclusion, which has been named several times, is “*A G’Spia fürs Tier*” (a sense for the animal). This organisation accompanies individuals with their animals and focuses largely on supporting interactions and relationships within interspecies companionships (I6). Training and temporary fostering are among the offers and are directed towards individuals with low-income physical, psychological, or social restrictions or burdens (Volkshilfe Wien, 2025). However, individuals sleeping rough or in shelter settings cannot draw from these services because of the unstable conditions, which is why interlocutors did not consider this a low-threshold service (I3; I4; I5). However, the unique aspect of focusing on the entanglement of human-animal relationships has been emphasised as on great step towards animal inclusivity (I6), although perhaps not yet on a low-threshold level²⁵.

²⁴ For further information on the neunerhaus veterinary practice: <https://www.neunerhaus.at/ueber-neunerhaus/unsere-arbeit/tieraerztliche-versorgung/>

²⁵ For further information on A G’Spia fürs Tier: <https://www.volkshilfe-wien.at/angebote-services/beratung-psychosoziales/a-gspia-furs-tier/>

5.5 The Grey Zone

As mentioned above, in Vienna's low-threshold services, the accompaniments of animals are not regulated uniformly but instead differ with each partner organisation and their according facilities. The decision-making and given arrangements at the ends of each facility create a degree of inconsistency across the service landscape. Moreover, through this, employees of these facilities are brought into a position of informal decision-makers. With a lack of legal frameworks or institutional guidelines, decisions about animal-related accommodation are often made pragmatically and orient around individual cases (I1; I2; I6). While this necessity may benefit specific service users if these result in their favour, particularised decision-making depends heavily on the attitudes and judgements of a few operating employees. It was stressed by one interviewee that this practice may contribute to uncertainty among staff and service users. "For example, when does an issue become an animal welfare concern, and who needs to be notified? How is that determined, and so on? In my opinion, this is very much a grey area in many facilities" (I4, translated by the author²⁶). This interview participant emphasised this dynamic by describing that the lack of guidelines leads to misconceptions about responsibilities. In situations involving animal welfare, client safety, or conflicts, a lack of clear handling becomes perceptible (I1). However, approaching issues in a spontaneous, flexible, individual, and creative manner is inherently ingrained in low-threshold services. A guideline "template" was said not to do justice to the problems of the target groups and the chaotic work environments. Notably, this need for flexibility goes beyond the group of interspecies companions and involves all users of facilities with diverse and unique issues (I2; I6).

This need for informal solutions to accommodate companion animals due to the lack of formal ones highlights moral negotiations within this space of the grey zone. For instance, when a service user cannot afford animal food, staff members are left to decide whether and how the institution should respond (I4). Such questions highlight the everyday dilemmas when navigating both the well-being of human clients as well as nonhuman ones, without a systemic direction for the latter. A research participant explained it as such:

There are very few actual quality standards for this. Meaning, there aren't really any clear guidelines on what needs to be considered when an animal is being cared for within

²⁶ „Ab wann ist es zum Beispiel ein Tierschutzthema und wen müsste man da verständigen? Wie klärt man das ab und so weiter? Also aus meiner Sicht ist das durchaus ein Graubereich in vielen Einrichtungen“ (I4, original quote).

a homelessness support facility. And probably, there's also not always clarity within the facilities themselves about what their responsibilities are. (I4, translated by the author²⁷)

These blurred boundaries challenge staff capacity and institutional consistency, revealing how the inclusion of animals introduces new layers of responsibility that are often unaccounted for in service frameworks. This underscores a broader issue within the *WWH*; while efforts towards multispecies inclusion exist, it is often a result of irregular services and flexibility and moreover, a need of abilities to recognise when intervention is needed, as well as the skills to care, even if peripherally, for a target group that is not central to the system. As elaborated above, the *WWH* operates in an anthropocentric demeanour, with the competence revolving around housing and immediate basic material security (I5; I6). An ambiguous extension of services and resulting disruption of responsibilities may cause inconsistency in the system, and as stressed in an interview:

At the very least, there probably needs to be niche services, meaning there needs to be some resources, somewhere that I can draw upon. I don't believe that all of social work or all of homelessness services need to be trained in dealing with animals or that this has to be a core competence, but it would probably be necessary to do justice to the lived realities of the target groups. (I4, translated by the author²⁸)

While it may not be necessary for staff or homelessness services to be comprehensively trained in dealing with animals, there is a clear need for specialised resources to respond adequately to the realities of clients with animal companions. This perspective reflects a broader institutional ambivalence: animals are not fully excluded from the system, but at the same time, their presence is not systematically accounted for either. Without uniform systems, the support of interspecies companionships remains a peripheral matter. Neither systematically included nor explicitly excluded, but continually negotiated at the intersection of social policy, private property, and informal staff practice.

Operating staff find themselves regularly in ambiguities regarding their responsibilities and interventions. This was illustrated, for example, in the regulation of limiting the number of companion animals per person²⁹ and its resulting deviations. Liability insurance was named as a large factor for this, yet exceptions to this rule are occasionally granted based on pragmatic

²⁷ „Es gibt wenig richtige Qualitätsstandards dazu. Also dass es jetzt wirklich so Leitfäden gäbe, was ist alles zu berücksichtigen, wenn ein Tier in einer Einrichtung der Wohnungslosenhilfe mitversorgt wird? Und auch wahrscheinlich nicht immer Klarheit in den Einrichtungen, wofür man zuständig ist“ (I4, original quote).

²⁸ „Es braucht wahrscheinlich zumindest Nischenangebote, also dass es zumindest irgendwo Ressourcen braucht, die ich hinzuziehen kann. Ich glaube jetzt nicht, dass die ganze soziale Arbeit oder die ganze Wohnungslosenhilfe auf den Umgang mit Tieren geschult sein muss und dass das eine Kernkompetenz sein muss, aber wahrscheinlich wäre es schon notwendig, um eben der Lebensrealität der Zielgruppen gerecht zu werden“ (I4, original quote).

²⁹ It depends on the facility, but typically it is expected that only one animal should accompany a human.

considerations, such as the animals' species, physique, breed, and behaviours (I2; I6). For example, two small, calm dogs may be tolerated, especially if they do not disrupt within the communal settings (I2). These case-by-case flexibilities reflect the judgment varying with the operating teams on duty (I1; I2; I6) and especially the head of facility (I6), as well as the practicalities of the shelter environment.

The reliance on informal negotiations to accommodate human-animal constellations is emphasised as a necessary step for inclusionary practices, while still maintaining the safety and comfort of other service users and staff (I6). Therefore, institutional inclusion of companion animals is often conditional. Much like broader societal debates framing who is defined as an “acceptable” homeless person or a “deserving” migrant, similar selection biases can be observed in the treatment of animals within homelessness services. The perceived compatibility of an animal, which could be based on behaviour, appearance, or breed, can influence access in a facility. In turn, this could reflect implicit hierarchies of worth. These judgements depend heavily on the compassion and biases of institutional staff, which grants them a large degree of power. This dynamic matches the human companion's experiences. Norms and prejudices can define what lives are considered manageable or desirable and shape who receives support and, consequently, how inclusive that support truly is (Lipsky, 2010: 6).

In one interview, an outstanding case was mentioned: a person sought shelter at the facility, accompanied by seven cats, shortly after an eviction from their flat. Despite their apparent need for shelter, the facility was unable to accommodate them due to both the number of animals and the absence of appropriate infrastructure to support such a situation. Consequently, they were turned away. While the outcome of this case was not accompanied by any further action, it was assumed that the human had to give up their animals, as they presumably lacked possibilities of accommodation in any immediate shelter (I2). This illustration highlights the limits of institutional capacities and the handling of complex multispecies constellations. However, while minor deviations from internal policies (e.g., allowing two small dogs) might be informally tolerated, more-than-human arrangements that fall too far outside normative expectations possibly result in exclusion. Lastly, the lack of further offers for rare cases like this generates pressure on frontline staff, who must navigate the tensions between house rules, spatial constraints, morality, and their implications.

Since many low-threshold services in Vienna incorporate animal accessibility, the attitude and need for interactions coming from employees cannot be dismissed in the discourse. Many interlocutors highlighted their enthusiasm for animals and how much they enjoy sharing a

workspace beyond humans (I1; I2; I3; I5; I6; research diary). This raised the importance of communicating the interspecies contact zones in the facilities as early as in the job interviews. It was raised that the interactions and direct care for animals are not expected, because these remain in the responsibility of the companion human. However, it was mentioned numerous times that close contact and interactions with animals are regular circumstances. In my case, I get in contact with animals regularly. To avoid the nonhuman inevitably means to avoid the human client as well. If employees lack affection for animals or even fear them, interlocutors agreed, that it would make the work environment significantly more difficult (I1; I2; I5; I6). But communicating the presence of animals was also mentioned to be important when it comes to other service users, which is usually handled in continuous communicative manners (I2; I5).

In conclusion, the institutional handling of interspecies companionships in the *WWH* often unfolds in what can be described as a “grey zone”. It is marked by unclear responsibilities, customised decisions, and limited structural guidelines. In this regard, besides institutional frameworks, inclusion relies on interpersonal flexibility and the availability of external supports. An ongoing tension between humanitarian frameworks and the relational realities of service users is the outcome.

5.6 Conclusions

Conclusively, this chapter examined how the *WWH* navigates the presence of animals within its services. It therefore shows to have large impacts on the human companions alike, as these often prioritise the companionships. After outlining the structure and aims of the *WWH*, it further explored the role of low-threshold services, including accommodation, day centres, street work, and health support. These services reveal structural and practical barriers in the inclusion of animal companions. Among the reasons for potential exclusions, a lack of guidelines and frameworks has been named as a large factor, together with safety concerns and resource limitations. Yet, oftentimes, instances of conditional or partial inclusion revealed institutional flexibility alongside persistent constraints. These practices, summed as the “grey zone”, revealed moral ambiguities, informal allowances, and individual discretion from institutional staff. In this grey zone, human-animal companions must navigate around inconsistent rules. Moreover, this chapter has shown that the *WWH* operates primarily under a narrative and logic of humanist practices. However, some of the informants showed posthuman attitudes, which in turn led to contradictory statements and practices. The chapter argues that the everyday realities and service access of homeless individuals accompanied by animals is both enabled and limited through structural ambiguity.

6 Interspecies Relationships

After uncovering the numerous difficulties, ambiguities, and aims within institutional settings in Vienna's homelessness support systems, this chapter will explore how interspecies companions manage and organise their lives together in a context of homelessness. Through my empirical research, several occurring relational entanglements were analysed, including how animals are incorporated in humans' lives as well as the resulting psycho-social impacts for both humans and animals. Therefore, this section will explore the various roles, together with the direct beneficial implications that can be interpreted as meaningful lifelines.

Due to a lack of existing data around homelessness in Austria generally, and likewise for animal companionship in relation to homelessness, it is not possible to state which group of homeless persons tends to have interspecies relationships in their lives. However, Kerman, Gran-Ruaz, & Lem (2019: 106) account that it is more probable for roofless persons and individuals who experience homelessness for the first time to be accompanied by companion animals than it is for those sleeping in low-threshold facilities or who are affected by chronic homelessness. They also claim that among homeless individuals, it is more common for women or married couples to incorporate animals in their lives. Although I cannot verify whether this also accounts for the Viennese context, and some of these connections seem contradictory to me, it shows a tendency of the circumstances that make the companionships durable and sustainable. While the aspect of low-threshold facilities and chronic homelessness as facilitated dependencies on institutional spaces has been discussed above, the other occurring groups will be explored in this chapter.

6.1 Companionship in(to) Homelessness

Various factors come into consideration around the question of why humans like to include animals in their spheres. It is essential to mention that the reasons for including animals in humans' lives are various but do not necessarily differ between the demographics of housed and unhoused populations (I2; Kerman, Gran-Ruaz, & Lem, 2019: 106). However, for homeless individuals "the roles animals play often differ from those they play in the lives of the domiciled" (Irvine, 2013b: 6). The realities and experiences of those experiencing homelessness are undeniably different compared to housed populations and consequently, so are the relationships that establish within this context (I2, I4, I5, I6, research diary).

To some humans, animals have been companions in a domiciled past and continued to be so with the loss of their homes, while in other cases, the situation of homelessness has been a factor before and the companionships established later on (I2; I3; I4; I6; research diary). This

distinction and how these different biographies are perceived and governed became a central theme within the research process. Whether interspecies companionships became a choice made within the circumstance of homelessness or not, are considerable aspects in reflecting the environments and impacts they have on the lives of the concerned groups. While it implies that housed and unhoused populations choose to have companion animals in their lives regardless of the economic and material circumstances, it also gives space to scrutiny and concerns from public and institutional actors. This discourse will be discussed in this section.

It has been shown that interlocutors found the case of existing companionships that were established in a housed past to be the “ideal scenarios” (I3; I4; I6). This judgement was justified in different ways. While one interlocutor stated that for someone losing a domicile, together with all their material resources and belongings, losing an animal as well can be a very tough psychological impact. It is assumed that animal companions would be last on the list of resources to be given up, and the established relationships simultaneously bind someone to a lost past and self-determination that wants to be sustained (I4). A larger reasoning mentioned was the perspective of “self-inflicted decline” if animals are acquired after moving into a temporary or long-term housing format (I4; I5; I6). Through an institutional perspective, the distinction between entering homelessness with an existing animal companion and acquiring an animal during the state of homelessness has been described as follows:

I am also aware of these concerns in practice, for example, that people acquire animals while they are homeless. And homelessness is not really a situation in which it is possible to get an animal for the first time, so to speak. It's more about maintaining an animal, this relationship, if it already existed before, but not about making it structurally possible for people who are homeless to get an animal, for precisely the reasons I mentioned, that it is so much more difficult to end the emergency situation. (I4, translated by the author³⁰)

As reflected in this statement, there is a prevailing concern that homelessness does not offer the structural stability someone requires to initiate and sustain a new animal. From this viewpoint, the act of acquiring an animal while homeless is seen as potentially irresponsible or short-sighted, given the heightened precarity of housing, finances, and access to care. In contrast, maintaining a pre-existing bond with an animal is more likely to be viewed as legitimate, even meaningful, from an institutional logic. Such distinctions reveal how value and legitimacy to

³⁰ „Ansonsten kenne ich schon auch diese Bedenken aus der Praxis heraus, zum Beispiel, dass Menschen sich Tiere anschaffen, während sie wohnungslos sind. Und da ist eigentlich kein, also Wohnungslosigkeit ist kein Zustand, in dem es gut möglich ist, sich ein Tier erstmals zuzulegen quasi. Es ginge eher darum, ein Tier, also diese Beziehung zu erhalten, wenn es die vorher schon gab, aber es nicht jetzt strukturell zu ermöglichen, dass Menschen, die wohnungslos sind, sich eben ein Tier zulegen können, aus genau den genannten Gründen, dass es eben so viel schwieriger ist, die Notsituation zu beenden“ (I4, original quote).

companionships are assigned, not just based on need or emotional significance, but on perceptions of stability, temporality, and social norms. At the same time, it highlights the awareness of the structural barriers coming from institutional actors that are faced when individuals are accompanied by animals. These may be interpreted as conflicting with the personal goals of stabilisation, financial recovery, and (re)establishing autonomy.

In some cases, acquiring a new companion animal during a stay in transitional housing has even led to the loss of the accommodation, usually under the rationale that personal limited resources should first be directed towards the human's needs (I6) or that the capability to care is generally dismissed among the service users (I5). These occasions, although not commonly practiced, reveal a tension between the needs of the individuals concerned and the logic of facility obligations, tending towards deprioritising an expressed desire for animal companionship unless it existed before entry. It could be considered plausible that individuals in homelessness have pressing matters that might need prioritising. Yet, Sahlin (2005: 128) highlights that these hierarchies of significance become effective particularly in institutionalised spaces. Social authorities use housing and their control over accessibility as a tool to navigate clients in a certain direction and to consequently adapt their lifestyles. This dynamic of institutional control and threat of losing accommodation is a subtle but persisting tool and has been emphasised in interviews as well: "I don't think it's really about the facility's unwillingness to have a dog there, but to make it clear to people where the focus is now and what the primary concern must be" (I6, translated by the author³¹).

Drawing from these perceptions, more empathy has been expressed for those who had existing companionships before their condition of homelessness. In such cases, the additional responsibility for an animal was there from the beginning, which makes the support a matter of course, rather than supporting a practice that could be considered even more harmful to the precarious situation. What might not have been a scrutiny in the past of housing security, all of a sudden becomes another factor of stigmatisation. "In most [domiciled] people's everyday lives, the right to animal companionship and the ability to provide care are uncontested. The homeless are likely the only group criticized and stigmatized for having pets" (Irvine, Kahl, & Smith, 2012: 31). However, this statement has been met with opposing perspectives. In particular dogs of roofless individuals are often perceived as "better behaved" than any other, because of the constant and close interaction in everyday life. This unending physical

³¹ „Da geht es jetzt dann, glaube ich, gar nicht darum, um den Nichtwillen der Einrichtung, einen Hund da zu haben, sondern den Leuten auch einmal klarzumachen, wo ist der Fokus jetzt und worum muss es jetzt in erster Linie einmal gehen“ (I6, original quote).

proximity, exposure to various social situations, whether it is in crowded institutional settings or public spaces, regular mobility, and amplified shared routines, appears to result in heightened attentiveness and responsiveness and simultaneous serenity in animals that oftentimes cannot be provided from housed individuals (I5; I6; research diary; Rose & Wilson, 2019: 411f.).

6.2 The Diversity of Human-Animal Companionships

The relationships between humans and animals in the context of homelessness are far from uniform. Stereotypes are said to persist in a narrative that homeless people are accompanied only by dogs (I2). While this is certainly the most observed occurrence, a diverse form of interspecies companionships was identified. Moreover, occurrences in which animals do not take such a clear position in a human's life have also been shown to be common practices. While some companionships are marked by their temporality, other cases have shown that not all animal cohabitations are considered companionships but still bear significant aspects for the involved. This section focuses on the detailed descriptions of the various animal companions that appeared in this context and how these were incorporated into the specific circumstances and situational needs.

6.2.1 (Un)usual Companions

While all kinds of different animal species appear in the lives of the homeless, it has been crystallised that dogs present the majority of animal companions among these individuals (Scanlon, et al., 2021: 78; I5; research diary). This differs from a domiciled population, where cats are the most common companion animal in Austrian households (Statistik Austria, 2023). Other species are rarely considered when imagining interspecies companionships among roofless individuals (I2). This has also been reflected in the interviews, in which interlocutors have tried to report specifically in referring to animals, yet in all conversations, sooner or later, interlocutors have always discussed dogs in particular (I1; I2; I3; I4; I5; I6; research diary).

Looking at reasons why this species seems to be preferred over others, one could assume that one large aspect is the broad societal acceptance of dogs and cats. They are expected to share close social and emotional bonds with humans. Other animals, on the other hand, are perceived as more distinct to humans, such as reptiles or rodents, which consequently shapes their emotional incorporation with humans (Fox, 2006: 533; Overall, 2017: xx). Mammals are generally more likely to be assigned anthropomorphist interpretations, which in turn aligns with more positive attitudes towards them (Serpell & Paul, 1994: 128).

Importantly, this perception of dogs as the “ideal models” can also be connected to expectations around institutional spaces. Individuals who rely on low-threshold facilities are aware that an “disobedient” animal could jeopardise their ability to enter facilities. As a result, many human companions, perhaps not always intentionally, train and cultivate their animal’s calmness and obedience as a form of preventive measure to institutional constraints (I6). Here, I would like to expand this aspect to public spaces as well, in which consequences regarding animals may be even more severe. It was often reported that state authorities intervened in encounters with homeless interspecies companions, often resulting in fines or even the loss of an animal if the welfare was in doubt (research diary). This reflects a subtle yet powerful dynamic, wherein the pressure of normative ideas around animal behaviours and movements directly shapes human and animal. The interspecies relationships, therefore, follow an anticipated logic of exclusion. The animal’s behaviour must align with human norms of order and control for the multispecies pair to sustain access to public spaces. Because of this underlying dynamic, it was assumed that homeless individuals, more than other populations, have to ensure that their animal obliges to expectations of the ideal animal encounter, while it was subtly implied that other animals, such as cats, could not account for that (I6).

This aspect follows an assumption for general adaptive skills ascribed to dogs. Transient lifestyles as an inherent trait of dogs were emphasised. As roofless individuals are often challenged with displacement, dogs show easier adaptation to fluctuating circumstances than other species (I6). Yet, it was raised that the individual circumstances matter fundamentally, which impacts the companion species accordingly. First, whether or not an animal has been raised in homelessness or not has been brought up as a potential concern for (in)compatibility. It was stated that species apart from dogs require more stability in their spatiality. For example, cats are not considered very adaptable animals in comparison to dogs, yet, if they have never known other circumstances than a fluctuation in their day-to-day practices, it is assumed that they may also present a compatible companion in the context of homelessness (I6).

In low-threshold facilities, interviewees stressed that they initially, when they first opened, expected to only accommodate dogs as companion animals, but quickly learnt that they may appear to be cats, rats, rabbits, mice, reptiles, and birds (I2; I3; I6). Another interview participant underlined this aspect, stating that while dogs are the majority of companion animals, they also had cases in which people brought cats or rats along (I5). This illustrates a degree of adaptability to diverse realities beyond the societal expectations around the dog as the only emerging companion. However, a willingness to open spaces to diverse species does not necessarily make

them more attractive offers. Some individuals reported actively choosing against institutional spaces and instead picked outdoor areas to sleep, precisely because of their animals (I5; research diary).

Considering that oftentimes the majority of a day may be spent outdoors, animals that are typically kept in cages or cannot be trained to stay with or near the human companion could potentially pose issues on various levels with passersby or authorities. But also, practical reasons of impediments occur with companion animals outside the expected norm, like accessing public transport, shops, or public buildings (research diary).

One individual experiencing rooflessness resided in secluded, forested areas of Vienna. Their interspecies companionship not only included the more commonly observed dog, but also the inclusion of rats. The rats were typically kept in a cage, most likely to ease transportation or to avoid them running away. Preventing public disturbance could also be a factor, as I assume, free-roaming rats might regularly generate discomfort or fear among other people. However, within the spatiality of their tent, the animals moved freely, and interactions between the dog and the rats were reported to be without any problems. The human companion often expressed frustration with the practical limitations that came with their constellation, for example, travelling to the city centre or elsewhere. Managing a leashed dog in one hand, a rat cage in another, and only minimal storage on their back caused logistical challenges that restricted their ability to carry other belongings, such as valuables that might otherwise be stolen if left behind. Despite the emotional bonds, the individual referred to these aspects of companionship as “annoying” and “inflexible”, presenting them as burdens that shaped everyday mobility. After the death of the rats, the human decided against acquiring rats again, as the impracticalities of maintaining such an arrangement under these specific conditions were limiting. However, they stated that they would most likely consider it again in the future. (research diary)

This ethnographic vignette illustrates how interspecies companionships impact the spatial, material, and social realities of life in rooflessness. It also highlights how other species, beyond the more commonly occurring dogs, are negotiated in situational circumstances and could be perceived as a practical burden (I6). A dog in this regard presents a convenient companion as they (usually) do not inflict negative responses, such as repulsion, in other humans (Fox, 2006: 533ff), nor do they necessarily require being carried around, and, in the right circumstances, they could roam around freely.

Regarding the aspect of mobility, poor individuals are generally highly affected by restrictions. The combination of animal companionship and dependence on public transport usually heightens this dynamic. Policies around animals on transportation (among others) and the hardship to coordinate these are often reasons for isolation and loneliness. Also, regularly named discouragements potentially result in not adopting animals. This is explained as

“responsible foresight”, in which individuals prove to be selfless by not incorporating a companion into their lives because of hardened circumstances (Palotta, 2019: 69).

6.2.2 Partial and Temporary Companions

Partial companionship occurred in diverse ways. Some practiced this through shared care and responsibility, occasionally or regularly. Others formed unions fully by chance and circumstances. The first one is what I describe here as shared custodianship. These often emerge within low-threshold service environments or street-based networks and point towards formations of informal support systems (I2; I3; I5; I6; research diary). This means that in the context of homelessness, companion animals are not always cared for by a single individual alone. These arrangements reflect a form of collective responsibility in animal care and may arise out of a necessity under sometimes uncertain circumstances. Through these networks, peers may support tasks if they cannot be accomplished alone. This may include dog-walks or even temporarily taking over guardianship (I2; I5; I6; research diary). In some cases, this support becomes essential, particularly when the primary human companion faces unexpected hospitalisation, important appointments, or obligations that cannot be attended with an animal (I4; I5; I6). Such informal networks of care reflect the adaptability of social relationships but also challenge ideas around “animal ownership”. While these dynamics reveal the presence of solidarities through flexible and situational arrangements, shared care can present challenges from an institutional standpoint. Staff may find it difficult to determine who holds responsibility for the animal if legal ownership and emotional attachment do not align (I2; I5; I6; research diary). Social support networks among homeless individuals may therefore present blurred and ambivalent lines of accountability: social benefits for the human actors on one side but complicating normative ideas of care on the other, specifically in the navigation of institutionalised spaces.

Roofless individuals sometimes argue to choose outdoor areas to avoid institutionalised spaces with their lack of privacy or the expectations to adapt to regulations and spatiality. Some claim that their companion animals do not get along with other animals or service users, which makes sleeping outdoors often a more attractive option (research diary). Sleeping rough may also bring stimulating environmental interactions, as one research participant has elaborated:

The person always preferred to stay in a forested area of Vienna all year round. While this brought certain difficulties, they spoke fondly of the quiet moments when animals would pass nearby. Watching a deer graze or seeing a badger moving silently at night were described as rare and meaningful encounters. These moments were not only perceived as special but also as *gifts*. First, these animal species are considered to be very shy around humans, and second, these interactions did not arise from human

control but rather from the animals' own will. The person reflected that such encounters likely remain inaccessible to housed and sheltered individuals. The presence of these nonhuman visitors offered a brief and profound disruption to the solitude of rooflessness, one marked not by fear or intrusion, but by a sense of unexpected connection. They mentioned that the forest not only presented itself as a place of survival, but also one of encounter. (research diary)

These kinds of interactions are not the typical occurrences of animal companionship and usually may not be defined as such. Yet, the way this person expressed these situations as meaningful and unique encounters within rooflessness, are important reality to consider. A similar elaboration has been shared by another roofless person, who also highlighted the more negatively perceived consequences of sharing those spaces with partial companions.

A central challenge, they explained, was managing their dog's instinct to chase wildlife, which required constant caution. For instance, encounters with passersby, hunters, or other animals posed a degree of constant worry. Yet, these encounters were not only fields of tension, but they also offered opportunities for brief social exchanges. Moments of shared smiles between strangers, brief conversations, or playful moments between dogs were highlighted as similarly meaningful disruptions in their routines. Despite the constant lookouts for unwanted encounters, the individual expressed a preference for this way of life over emergency shelters. These were described as overcrowded and stressful, especially due to the presence of other dogs and restrictions. They voiced their appreciation for watching the seasonal changes in vegetation and the day-night rhythms, describing them as rewarding for both human and dog. However, insects, especially mosquitoes, were noted as a persistent annoyance, but one they seemed to accept as part of the trade-off for living outdoors. (research diary)

These multispecies encounters are a form of "becoming with" (Haraway 2008: 3) the environment. While some roofless individuals chose against a companion animal generally, they still highlighted the joy of occasional companionship. These "world-making entanglements" (ibid.: 3) in looser multispecies ties underline a diversity of relational arrangements and a gratitude even for precarious living conditions.

6.3 The ascribed Roles

Although this thesis largely regards the roles between animals and humans as companions, some additional roles and meanings have appeared in the context of homelessness. This section will explore in what ways these entanglements have been described and interpreted by involved actors as well as external observers. These role distributions contribute to the navigation of everyday life and could even be regarded as direct survival strategies of precarity.

6.3.1 Friends and Family

Before and during my research, I anticipated encountering a more diverse and clearer distinctions between the notions used for animal companions and therefore the implicit roles

associated with them. However, terms used by participants to describe their animal companions were all found within a consistent framing of family and friends. The terms of friends and family are often used interchangeably, blurring the two concepts in a multispecies understanding. I would argue that references to family members are understood as more stable and unconditional, which could often suit the social aspect of continuity and proximity better than the narrative of friends.

Interlocutors used references such as my animal is “like a daughter” or “like a son”, which has been mentioned frequently when attempting to explain the depth of relationships with companion animals. Notably, titles such as “parent” or “sibling” were never mentioned (research diary), which may reflect the asymmetrical aspect of care within these relationships. One interview participant confirmed these narratives of animals as kin-like by their description of animals as being “the most important thing in the world to them, that their dogs are like their children” (I5, translated by the author³²). Another interlocutor highlighted the special roles of animals as chosen kin with an emphasis on the importance of recognising these social dynamics between human and animal: “One simply must not forget that companion animals are also part of the family and are also social partners for humans” (I3, translated by the author³³). Interestingly, statements like these reveal that not only human companions within interspecies constellations consider human-animal relationships as embedded in family constellations, but also external actors, as in this case, institutional staff, perceive and acknowledge these dynamics in the same way. These descriptions point towards long-term stability of these relationships, as notions of family members are consistent, uncontested, and unconditional and are not given to casual acquaintances (Irvine, 2013a: 85). However, placing animals in the domains of family is not only explained by shared emotional and spatial spheres, but “the party with greater social power—the human caretaker—defines the identity of the less competent actor, in this case, the dog. Quite often, guardians create rather simple-minded, albeit lovable, identities for animals” (Irvine, 2013b: 21). The statements of companion animals as kin-like companions, or more specifically as children, are closely connected to practices of caretaking and responsibility. In turn, however, it also reveals dynamics of dependencies, in which the companion animal is said to be reliant on the human companion (Irvine, 2013a: 68ff). This aspect of showing responsible acts to another being, coupled with perceiving a dependency on the self, may reinforce

³² „[...] dass ihre Hunde das Wichtigste auf der ganzen Welt sind für sie, dass ihre Hunde wie ihre Kinder sind“ (I5, original quote).

³³ „Aber man darf einfach nicht vergessen, dass Haustiere eben auch Teil der Familie sind und eben Sozialpartner sind für die Menschen“ (I3, original quote).

anthropomorphist practices, in which humans ascribe human traits or practices to animals. One interview participant emphasised this aspect: “It is this family-like thing. We also had cases where the dogs were somehow quite humanised. Dressing them up and feeding them from a plate with a knife and fork, and so on. So that was really a bit weird” (I5, translated by the author³⁴). This form of anthropomorphism could be argued to ease the destruction of the human-animal divide, while self-evidently placing the nonhuman in a familial constellation that otherwise might seem unruly. Humanising an animal assigns them with subjectivity and participation, instead of regarding them as a passive actor in the relationships (Fox, 2006: 532). In this regard, the human-animal dichotomy proves to be not as relevant as the more pressing search for social connection that can be found within animals. In other words, “elements of stability and predictability within an unstable, unpredictable lived experience. [...] the relationship with one’s animal companion provides a refuge from uncertainty” (Fudge, 2008: 81). Stability and long-term certainty of social and emotional support are described as traits rarely found in the circumstances of homelessness (I5; research diary), which is why relationships regarded as kin-like are desired attributes in the lives of homeless individuals.

In an interview (I6), it was stressed that many homeless individuals have human families, implying that social reliance sometimes is within reach and perhaps does not need to be sought in an extended kin-making. Yet, those lacking the social components of a family may compensate for this by expanding their social network elsewhere, as one interlocutor explained: “You inevitably build a social network around you, if you don’t have a family” (I6, translated by the author³⁵). This accounts for human-human and human-animal relationships alike. Yet, I would argue that animals may present a social aspect often more easily accessible, since rejection can be expressed in more direct ways coming from humans. This is why self-attribution and social positioning of the self are significant factors. “When a homeless person describes an animal companion as a friend or family member, the teller becomes a moral actor, someone worthy of friendship and family ties” (Irvine, 2013a: 83). According to this, ascribed social connection fills a longing for acceptance and valued perceptions that otherwise are contested and threatened under unstable and precarious life experiences.

³⁴ „es ist dieses sehr Familiäre. Wir hatten auch Fälle, wo die Hunde durchaus irgendwie recht vermenschlicht wurden. Mit Einkleiden und vom Teller essen mit Messer und Gabel die Hunde füttern und so. Also das war echt total ein bisschen schräg“ (I5, original quote).

³⁵ “Du baust zwangsweise ein, wenn du keine Familie hast, ein soziales Netzwerk auf” (I6, original quote).

6.3.2 Source of Income

Animals inhabiting a role as a source of income were mentioned by a few interlocutors (I1; I2; I3; I5; research diary). While the need for creative economic survival is recognised by institutional actors, the moral implications of animals are commodified, for the income generations are perceived more critically. The statements around the economic commodification of animals were rather vague, yet what stood out were the various forms of animal-related sources of income. Panhandling is named as the most common practice among them (I1; I2; I5). Facility staff often perceive and perhaps even tolerate this instrumentalization of companion animals, but do not want to explicitly enable the purchase of companion animals for these matters (I2; I3). It is not necessarily due to the act itself, but rather because of the underlying motivations and potential consequences it bears (as discussed above). Interview participants expressed concern that some individuals may acquire animals primarily as a means of generating income, rather than out of a genuine interest in long-term companionship. This is especially problematic when the economic demands and responsibilities of animal care are underestimated, leading in some cases to neglect or rejection. From an institutional standpoint, this is seen as a cycle to be disrupted. Usually not by dismissing individuals with these animals, but by raising awareness of the implications that come with animal guardianship within the context of housing precarity (I2). At the same time, such critical perspectives also showed some ambivalences. Interviewees recognised that animals that accompany activities of panhandling often benefit from constant closeness and attention, being with their human companions all day (I3), indicating reciprocal benefits. This would barely be possible in a normative employment and unravels a juxtaposition of complex entanglements between economic survival strategies and institutional ideals around what is considered responsible care.

In rare cases, some homeless individuals engaged in intentional dog breeding. Whether or not necessary legal permits or responsible infrastructure are provided in these practices remains unresolved. The motivation appeared to be partially economic, with puppies either sold or exchanged informally, sometimes at extremely low prices or even given away for free (research diary). The prospects for these animals were often ambiguous. Some institutional actors, as well as my own experiences, showed that many of these puppies eventually ended up in shelters. Usually, in cases in which the human companions were unprepared or unequipped to meet the responsibilities of a young and energised dog (I2; I3; research diary). This points towards a form of short-term arrangement where those who participate in breeding activities and pass on animals thoughtlessly, prioritise immediate economic needs over ethical and sustainable companionship-matchings. The unusual prevalence of certain breeds and the uncertainty around

the origin of some puppies raised scepticism in institutional actors about informal supply chains and breeding practices (I3; I5; research diary). There have not been enough insights into these practices of breeding or reselling to evaluate whether they need to be considered as unethical or irresponsible. However, these under-the-radar sales are oftentimes the starting point of complex processes concerning a tight facility network within the *WWH* as well as the involvement of various stakeholders such as animal shelters, authorities, and informal social networks (I3).

These dynamics of economic instrumentalization show the emergence of role shifts. In these cases, the presence of companion animals becomes more than emotional companionship. They transform into an asset for economic survival. One interlocutor expressed their concern about the visibility and public appeal of dogs in panhandling contexts, since this potentially leads to a strategic acquisition of animals among this target group that is not motivated by long-term commitment (I3).

This intersection of companionship and (economic) survival strategy is not always clear, yet it represents a significant dynamic for those facing homelessness. For instance, it was stated numerous times that companion animals can be a financial burden, even with supportive infrastructure such as the *neunerhaus* veterinary care (which has been mentioned above). This involves costs for food, equipment, transportation, and emergency care, which usually remain largely uncovered. (I2; I3; I6; Kerman, Gran-Ruaz, & Lem, 2019: 107). To be able to bear these costs, I would dare to state that companion animals enforce economic precarity and push their human companions further into informal or unstable income-generating activities, such as panhandling. This presents a complex, reinforcing dynamic in which the maintenance of the relationships, although valued for their psycho-social benefits, can present exclusion on several levels. Due to care responsibilities and a lack of spatial capacities, humans face impeded access to a regulated labour market, which in turn aggravates the necessity to turn animals into commodities to maintain the relationship and their perception as subjects. These blurred boundaries in human-animal relationships between care and exploitation, companionship and commodification, and between subject and object are how Haraway (2008: 52ff) explains animals to be actively ingrained in capital systems; not as passive beings, but active participants shaping humans' lives dynamically. In turn, this illuminates the reciprocity within the relationships. However, the commodification of animals is not something exclusively practiced among homeless individuals but across all capitalist systems. In this sense, "in lively capital

markets, value-added” dogs aren’t just familial co-consumers [...], dogs are commodities, and commodities of a type central to the history of capitalism” (ibid.: 52).

As discussed above, a job is much more likely to be given up than an animal companion (I2; I3; I5). While employment certainly can be an aspiring aspect to combat homelessness and to (re)gain stability, it can be contemplated replaceable, something a unique social bond is not. Following this, the desire for social resources through animals often outweighs the economic pressures. Correspondingly, combining all these needs and barriers, meaning the maintenance of an animal companionship while making money in ways that also do not require documents and legal status, can be seen as an adaptive strategy to evade having to decide between one or the other. This is what Tsing (2015: 4) has described as an “exemplification of precarious livelihood, without security”. The precarious embeddings, together with few other choices to make an income, result in creative survival strategies and, moreover, reflect these in multispecies attempts.

6.3.3 Protection

Among homeless populations, experiences with violence, and specifically incidents with hate crime, are commonly reported, and in particular roofless people bear higher risks of verbal and physical attacks. Animals, or rather specially dogs, often inhabit the role of a protector (Irvine, 2013a: 109); An essential role in the lived experiences of rooflessness (Kerman, Gran-Ruaz, & Lem, 2019: 106). Interestingly, this role was not declared as a central aspect in interviews; it was rather mentioned as a peripheral and beneficial effect. However, while it may not have been verbalised as much, it was regularly observed as a central aspect in the shared lives.

One interlocutor stated that animals, besides their constant companionship, also pose “[...] a factor of safety, and a matter of protection. Regardless of whether your dog would actually defend you, but it will be attentive in a threatening situation” (I4, translated by the author³⁶). The indication that some dogs might not actually actively protect their human companions implies that their protective means have a symbolic meaning. It is the function ascribed to the animals that operates as the buffer for violent assaults. Yet, whether this role is a fabricated idea projected on the animal or not, it gives a feeling of tangible security, which at least poses a psychological relief. In addition, the aspect of attentiveness indicates that an amount of stress does not need to be carried by the human companion. This reflects again the interdependencies

³⁶ „[...] ein Sicherheitsfaktor auch, ein Schutzhema. Also unabhängig davon, ob jetzt dein Hund zum Beispiel wirklich wen verteidigen würde, aber er wird aufmerksam in einer Gefährdungslage“ (I4, original quote).

in these relationships with humans bearing the obligations of responsibility around care, and animals inhabiting the role of protective implement.

The role of companion animals becomes particularly evident in cases where individuals experience heightened vulnerability because of their absence. One case I witnessed emphasised this dynamic very clearly.

Due to limited shelter availability during the warmer months, it becomes significantly more difficult to access low-threshold accommodation. Over the summer, they are usually reserved for “especially vulnerable” individuals whose lives would be threatened if they had to sleep on the streets. One human-animal pair received a spot in a shelter due to the human’s high age. It turned out, they were unable to make use of the accommodation due to their elderly dog’s limited mobility. The dog could not climb the stairs to the assigned dormitory, which effectively led to their decision to sleep outdoors. Recently, the dog passed away. With no immediate shelter bed available at the time, the person could only continue to sleep outdoors until eventually capacities in a shelter would open again. One night, while sleeping in a park, they were physically attacked. They later described feeling significantly more exposed and vulnerable in their daily lives since the death of their animal and remarked that this would not have occurred if the dog had been alive and present. They stated that the lack of protection, besides the longing for another companionship, was reason enough to consider another companion dog. (research diary)

The absence of their animal companion was not only experienced as emotional loss, but as the disappearance of a protective matter. This loss of security was a central reason for considering adopting another dog, which underscores how animals can serve not only as emotional anchors, but also as perceived or actual preventions against harm in public space. The symbolic protective assignment to the dog is especially striking in this case since the dog’s lack of mobility leads to assumptions that interventions in situations of threat were most likely unachievable. Yet, the sheer presence of the animal proves to be an effective resource of safety, functioning as informal protectors in precarious conditions.

In addition, more subtle situations of protection were observed. The case described above, in which an individual restricted their dog's autonomy and mobility, in a broader sense, could also be interpreted as a protective means. The dog posed a physical barrier between the human and any other being potentially coming too close to their personal space. The individual also found a physical grounding in the animal to calm down in situations of heightened stress or aggression. Protection in a perhaps more philosophical and psychological sense does not only include security from physical harm, but protection in this sense would also include all practices that bear negative consequences for human individuals.

6.4 Care and Co-Dependency

As the diversity of interspecies relationships in the context of homelessness revealed, underlying and intersecting processes of emotional support, physical intimacy, control, and responsibility were among the most important aspects defining their social worlds

6.4.1 Emotional Stability

The emotionally stabilising role was by far the most frequently mentioned aspect in interviews and conversations when it came to animals and their impact on the lives of their human companions. Interlocutors repeatedly highlighted how animals often serve as the only constant relationship in the lives of homeless individuals. This was seen as a two-sided process through unconditional presence, nonjudgemental companionship, and emotional grounding in otherwise uncertain living conditions (I2, I3; I5). One interview participant summed up this significance as a life-sustaining facilitator:

[Animal Companions have] a truly central role, because many people simply have nothing left. And beyond having nothing, most carry challenging life stories with them, heavy ones. And animals give stability then, they give a reason to master each day, only give and are there, they love humans unconditionally and accept them as they are. No matter whether addictions, mental health issues, or perhaps not properly dressed, or whether they have housing or not, they do not care. I think that is an incredible support for people during this time. It gives them immense strength and helps them regain energy. Many clearly say: without my animal, I would not exist anymore. And that really is the case. I often see that it is not an exaggeration. When you have no one and nothing left in the world, you are glad if in that case you have your dog by your side. (I3, translated by the author³⁷)

Here, multimorbidity is briefly mentioned and implied to be a commonly accompanied phenomenon within experiences of homelessness. In these cases, animals provide a form of security and predictability that is often absent elsewhere. Moreover, this described stability also translates into daily routines, self-regulation, and motivation, as humans are compelled to maintain some degree of structure and care not only for themselves but for another being (I2). In this way, the emotional bond becomes both a protective factor and a source of resilience, helping individuals navigate the psychological and social toll of marginalisation. Oftentimes,

³⁷ [Tiere haben] eine ganz große zentrale Rolle, weil die Menschen oft einfach nichts mehr haben. Und abgesehen davon, dass sie nichts haben, die meisten eine ordentliche Lebensgeschichte mit sich herumtragen, die nicht ohne ist. Und Tiere einfach hier Stabilität geben, einen Grund geben, um seinen Alltag zu meistern, nur geben und einfach da sind und bedingungslos den Menschen lieben und so akzeptieren, wie er einfach ist. Ganz egal, ob der eine Suchthematik hat, eine psychische Thematik oder eben vielleicht nicht ordnungsgemäß gekleidet ist oder eine Wohnung hat oder nicht hat, das ist ihnen völlig egal. Und ja, also ich glaube, das ist ein unglaublicher Halt für die Menschen in der Zeit. Es wahnsinnig viel Kraft gibt und dass sie auch Energie schöpfen können. Und viele auch ganz klar sagen: also ohne meinem Tier würde es mich auch schon nicht mehr geben. Und das ist tatsächlich so. Also ich merke das immer wieder, das ist kein Überdramatisieren, wenn du niemanden und nichts mehr auf der Welt hast, bist du froh, wenn du in dem Fall deinen Hund an deiner Seite hast.

this dynamic is a form of support that could be seen as unconditional and reliable (I1; I2; I3; I5). This aspect of unconditionality can be argued to be interpretative attributions rooted in humans' desires and expectations, and impossible to measure objectively or accurately. However, "In "speaking for" animals, narrators also construct their identities, for themselves and for others within the interaction" (Irvine, 2012: 21). In other words, when individuals describe their animals as unconditionally loving or accepting, they are not only communicating the perceived characteristics of the nonhuman companion, but simultaneously create and assert a narrative of self, which often is opposing to how they are perceived by society. Haraway (2003: 33) claims in this context that "people, burdened with misrecognition, contradiction, and complexity in their relations with other humans, find solace in unconditional love from their dogs". This dynamic is particularly relevant in the context of homelessness, where such narratives can affirm a person's capacity for care and moral worth through the relational lens of the animal (Irvine, 2013a: 83).

The emotional benefits, in turn, also show in health-related improvements and motivators for avoiding risk. Companion animals contribute to decreasing loneliness, isolation, depression, substance use, and criminal activity (Kerman, Gran-Ruaz, & Lem, 2019: 108; Scanlon et al., 2021: 77), which have large impacts on suicide preventions (Irvine, 2013b: 10; Irvine, 2012: 19; Scanlon et al., 2021: 77). Also, in terms of physiological health, companion animals pose positive impacts for psychosomatic disorders and the cardiovascular system (Labrecque & Walsh, 2011: 82). The humans concerned regularly mention that the multifactorial emotional support is a lifeline that anchors them in a state of ability to keep going in the face of uncertainty and precarity. Nonetheless, the health impact also shows in the accessibility of health care facilities, as the presence of an animal may hinder the utilisation of those services. The relationships may therefore show ambivalent impacts on the overall health. The effects can be identified as improvement of some aspects of well-being, usually grounded in psychological support that shows in broader health benefits, while sometimes impeding access to health care that could prevent manifestations of other illnesses.

Blouin (2013: 282ff) highlights that the emotional services constitute humanistic orientations around the human-animal relationships (see chapter 3.1 "posthuman relationships").

Those with a humanistic orientation cherish their dogs in large part because of what the dogs offer them emotionally. They value their dogs because their dogs do not judge them, they are fun to be with, they offer unconditional love and support, and because they enjoy doting on or spoiling their dogs. (ibid.: 283)

This highlights a perspective that moves away from the common narrative and implies a “conditional love” altogether. It implies an almost market-based relationship. Haraway describes these dynamics that “the value—and life—does not depend on the humans’ perception that the dogs love them. Rather, the dog has to do his or her job” (2003: 38). While I would agree that provided services, whether from human or animal, can be seen as jobs and these are the primary facilitators of these relationships, I also want to emphasise the specific context of homelessness. It became clear that the emotional stability, which feeling loved is a large part of, is among the largest associations of the relationships’ benefits. Therefore, while this “duty” may be interpretative and reeks of anthropomorphism in practice, those who lack social relationships and stability in their situational environments may consider an animal companion in their lives for that exact reason: to fulfil this one job of providing love and emotional stability. While this may cloud the romantic lens of the “unconditional love” narrative, I argue that both participants of the relationships draw their purpose and benefit from the unions, albeit these may vary depending on the corresponding involved being.

6.4.2 Physical Proximity

Another highly important aspect that was identified was the one of physical touch and intimacy between the interspecies pairs. The relationships are defined by their close physical interactions that develop into reciprocal tactile affections and expressions. This produces deeply entangled social worlds, while opening up spheres that may not even be shared within relationships with other humans (Fox, 2006: 532; Laing, 2021: 187). Admitting to these intimate dynamics is often connected to feelings of embarrassment since sharing such proximity to animals can provoke fear of stigmatisations and disgust within social boundaries, although the boundaries can vary dramatically from each case (Fox, 2006: 532f.). In the context of homeless populations, some individuals display their physical intimacy with companion animals publicly and openly, as for example revealed in the quote above, which illustrated the perceptions of shared meals from the same dishes and cutlery (I5).

In other cases, proximity was not only coming from a place of emotional longing, but it was also named to have practical reasons. For example, in contexts of rooflessness, benefits from sleeping closely with an animal can be interpreted as direct strategies of survival. A dog, for example, is a great source of warmth at night in temperatures that may be critical (I1). Therefore, physical proximity might not only have emotional benefits, but in some cases, it may present a necessity of survival, especially if tents or sleeping bags are not feasible. In institutional settings, on the other hand, it is expected, if not even necessary, to keep the

companions nearby. With facility rules around mandatory leashes, or dedicated rooms and areas where dogs are (not) allowed (I2; I4; I5; I6 research diary), proximity becomes unavoidable. However, this aspect was also met with a certain scepticism or worries for the animals, as it is assumed that this brings a lack of privacy for companion animals and could potentially pose inescapable stress (I4).

Shared proximity between humans and companion animals was often connected to the aspect of long-term socio-emotional stability (I4; I5; research diary). It is the shared spatiality and routine practices that define the social interactions that are the making of an interspecies family (Fox, 2006: 532). A reliance that an animal is always nearby and shares all routines and paths together is considered a support and acceptance that many homeless individuals otherwise would not have (Kerman, Gran-Ruaz & Lem, 2019: 106). Many human relationships within circumstances of homelessness are observed to break apart (I5), which cannot be initiated by animals due to deeply ingrained asymmetrical hierarchical structures that define these relationships.

6.4.3 Control

An underlying dynamic of control and power expressions, although not explicitly verbalised, is an important aspect in understanding the complex relationships between humans and animals, especially in a context of homelessness. “Pets can support a hierarchy that reassures us of our status in a world in which status can seem so fragile and changeable” (Fudge 2008: 20f.). I would argue that attributes of status and hierarchy are especially uncertain for homeless individuals, making this aspect an even more significant one. A degree of human control within reach, that additionally can be disguised as or established into acts of care and responsibility could be seen as noteworthy motives of interspecies companionships, or at the very least, for the allocation of roles across them. While control over an animal is often a subtle interplay, in some cases, the autonomy of an animal is regulated drastically and very perceivably. One particularly striking case involved a person with a small dog who was visibly and inseparably bonded to their animal companion.

A consistent physical closeness to the animal was maintained at all times. The dog was either carried in the person’s arms or held on a very short leash, significantly restricting its ability to move or engage independently with its surroundings. Additionally, the human companion would get enraged very quickly if anyone else touched the dog apart from themselves. Only when a relationship of trust was built with another human were interactions with the dog permitted, or rather tolerated. I had some understanding of this behaviour, considering that someone had to interfere in the human’s personal space to approach the dog, since they were so close at all times. Without a doubt, restrictions on the dog were observable to bring a degree of emotional resilience to the human

companion. Yet, the carrying around took autonomy and sensual engagement away from the dog and showed an undeniable degree of control from the human's side. In contrast to most other observed cases, this was the only situation in which a dog's autonomy was so heavily constrained, both physically and socially. (research diary)

The carrying of the animal may have served as a coping mechanism for the person, providing reassurance, stability, and perhaps even a physical barrier to unwanted social interactions with others. At the same time, it also highlighted the asymmetry in the partnership, with the animal's role more closely aligned to a protective extension of the human than an independently acting companion. This reflects interdependencies within relationships; while human companions depend on physical and emotional connections, the animal's part needs to rely on their companion to be granted sensory explorations. This intense physical closeness, while often rooted in mutual comfort and protection, can also reveal underlying dynamics of control and human-centred decision-making. Charles (2016: 3) argues that companion animals are only conditionally included within family structures, and that this precarity reflects underlying power asymmetries and reinforces ideas of human exceptionalism even further. While this practiced superiority could be interpreted as an intrinsic motivation for interspecies companionships, within the specific context of homelessness, this degree of control and hierarchy may give a sense of meaning that they often do not experience otherwise, making it a more complex dynamic.

6.4.4 Responsibility

The dynamics of asymmetrical power and dependencies within interspecies relationships also illustrate a distinct sense of responsibility. "As dependent others, animals encourage a sense of responsibility" (Irvine, 2013b: 3). This notion emphasises the interdependence between the interspecies pairs. Animals are traditionally seen as dependent on humans for care, food, and safety. Yet in the context of homelessness, this dependency becomes mutual. For many individuals, companion animals offer emotional grounding, daily structure, and even life-saving motivation, acting as anchors in moments of psychological crisis and contributing to their will to survive. This mutual dependency deepens the sense of responsibility within the relationship: caring for an animal becomes a practical obligation but also a commitment that provides meaning and direction. In turn, the responsibility towards the nonhuman companion reinforces the human's own survival strategies, in which care is a reciprocal structure of emotional and existential support. This aspect of reciprocity is also highlighted by Haraway, who states that "[t]o be kin in that sense is to be responsible to and for each other, human and not" (2010: 54).

Practiced responsibility has been acknowledged by external individuals as achievements that are not always self-evident in the circumstances of homelessness. One institutional employee stated in an interview that companionships with animals prove that “one takes responsibility for another living being and, I believe, experiences a sense of self-efficacy, realising that they are capable of caring for another being, even if their own life is not always going smoothly” (I5, translated by the author³⁸). Another interviewee also expressed this dynamic as a considerable factor for broader systemic processes. “If someone manages the responsibility of caring for an animal while in such a precarious situation of acute house- or rooflessness, in itself that is already a good qualification of their ability to manage many other things. Perhaps, that needs to be acknowledged more” (I2, translated by the author³⁹). These reflections give important insights into narratives besides the more common framing of animals as additional burdens or liabilities. Here, they are recognised as meaningful resources regarding commitment, planning, and routines. In addition, the interviewees highlighted the circumstances of homelessness as vulnerable contexts in which it cannot always be expected that someone is capable of taking responsibility for someone else.

This aspect of responsibility is often tied to understandings of sacrifice (Irvine, 2013b: 20ff). Sometimes it shows in providing food rather to the animal than to the self (research diary), other times sacrifices are made in terms of rejecting shelter (I1; I5; research diary) or work (I2; I5). All these acts can be argued to come from an understanding of responsibility for care, although sometimes not for the self but for the dependent other. These sacrifices are justified as long as a perception remains in which animals express unconditional love to the human, which functions as a reward system, even if it is only within the human’s understanding and attribution (Irvine, 2013b: 22). And in yet again other cases, human companions cannot provide the expected and necessary care and responsibility for an animal, which as elaborated above, can result in institutional settings, and in other cases more informal solutions are found (which will be explored in the next chapter).

6.5 Conclusions

To sum up this chapter, an exploration of the various forms and meanings of human-animal companionships in the context of homelessness was sketched out. Cases where animals were

³⁸ „man übernimmt Verantwortung für ein anderes Lebewesen, erlebt da zum Teil dann auch, glaube ich, so die eigene Eigenwirksamkeit, dass man das schafft und sich um ein anderes Lebewesen kümmern kann, auch wenn es im eigenen Leben vielleicht gerade nicht immer so rund läuft“ (I5, original quote).

³⁹ „Wenn man in dieser prekären Situation der akuten Wohnungs- und Obdachlosigkeit die Aufgabe der Tierhaltung meistert, ist es eigentlich schon eine super Voraussetzung, auch vieles andere zu meistern. Das gehört da vielleicht auch mehr anerkannt“ (I2, original quote).

part of a person's life before homelessness were found to be the desirable occurrences in institutional rationales. These relationships were commonly framed as deeply meaningful. Deviances from these led to scrutiny and an assumed lack of responsibility. Further, the diversity of companion species has been shown to exceed the "usual" companions like dogs and cats, although significantly scarcer. This was interpreted to result from societal expectations around animal companionship and species hierarchies among animals. Some cases have portrayed temporary or partial arrangements in which human individuals did not consciously decide to incorporate an animal into their lives but enjoyed occasional encounters or shared responsibilities. The latter is a strong facilitator of social networks among human peers and helps to strengthen a sense of community. Further, the companionships were given different roles, which sometimes overlapped or alternated in a specific context. The most common one appeared to be the role of a close friend or family member. These were described as deeply emotionally intertwined and contesting the common understandings of the human-animal divide. Animals as commodities were not unusual occurrences, although external individuals showed regular scepticism towards these practices, also contesting rigid images of animals and their roles in human lives. The role of protectors was seen as a mutual understanding. Although verbally not often highlighted as a dominant role, observations revealed it to be a significant aspect in the lives of roofless individuals. The chapter also examined the intertwined dynamics of care and co-dependency, highlighting emotional stability, the importance of physical proximity, and control. Responsibility emerges as a central theme, with many companions prioritising their animals' needs over their own. These dynamics revealed a mutual interdependence on the socio-emotional level, in which each actor in the relationships contributes meaningful resources to one another. However, depending on the context, anthropocentric themes could be uncovered as well, where human companions acted less in a reciprocal dynamic but rather on human exceptionalist understandings.

7 Situated Interactions: Interactions and Perceptions in Institutional and Public Spaces

Visibility and interactions play important roles in the shaping of experiences among homeless individuals, influencing how they are perceived and supported within Vienna. As Labreque and Walsh put it, interspecies companionships “can be understood as a way to connect with the social environment (peers, service providers, the general public, and the housed) for homeless individuals who typically have limited social networks and low levels of social support” (2011: 83). These mentioned participants of social spheres shall be examined in this section together with their approaches towards homeless human-animal constellations. Some may view the interspecies companionships with empathy and observe the emotional bond between humans and animals; others may perceive such companionships as irresponsible or problematic, which consequently alter the reinforcements of inclusionary or exclusionary practices. Due to this constant back and forth between both positive and negative attention, this section dives deeper into empirical findings regarding interactions through multispecies companionship in institutional and public spaces.

7.1 Institutional Interactions: Staff and Service users (Human and Animal)

One large factor in the interactions between interspecies service users and institutional staff has been identified to be easy conversation-starters. This aspect of animals as “ice breakers” is something I frequently notice in myself. Approaching service users can become significantly easier when an animal can be the topic of conversation at the beginning, and then, oftentimes, transitioning into other pressing matters (research diary). Also, other interlocutors supported this aspect but also mentioned that this also bears the risk of potentially distracting from the human companion at times (I1; I5). Additionally, it could also have the opposite effect in cases where animals are perceived as potentially threatening or reactive and a distance would have to be maintained (I5), or if colleagues have a general respect or even fear of dogs (I1). While it was stressed that interactions between facility staff and animal companions are not expected or necessary (I2), it showed that interactions between them have direct impacts on how the work with human clients is continued or whether a contact is even established in the first place. I would therefore argue that companion animals, if access to facilities is permitted, can be facilitators of attaining support, although it may also depend largely on the characteristics of the interspecies pairs (Scanlon et al., 2021: 78). One of my colleagues once stated that they were not afraid of one specific dog itself, nor hesitant to approach it directly. Rather, what caused uncertainty was approaching the human client. Not because of the person per se, but

because the dog's reaction to someone entering their companion's personal space was deemed unpredictable (research diary). This highlights how an animal's potential protectiveness can create a relational barrier, in which the dog acts as both guardian and gatekeeper. In such cases, the presence of the animal adds a layer to human interaction: one that influences how professionals navigate proximity, trust-building, and engagement in the facility environments. Therefore, employees most certainly interact differently with interspecies companions compared to those without animal accompaniments. However, it is not necessarily a more positive instance and usually depends on various factors. For example, how admirable or threatening is the nonhuman perceived? What are the personal experiences towards dogs/animals of individual employees? To what degree does the human companion seek the attention of the employees? And so forth.

The extent to which proximity between interspecies companions and staff is permitted is also reflected in the practices of care. One observed dynamic showed how acts of care relied largely on the dependency of services and the established relationships between all actors.

One human service user had an inseparable bond with their companion dog, and they would rarely be seen apart. Although the human companion did not have any income, they would regularly bring fresh meat from the supermarket. Without direct access to a kitchen, they regularly asked if we could prepare the meat in the oven. This marked an anthropomorphist act of care, since the dog most likely would not have minded consuming the meat raw, but the human companion deemed this form of consumption to be better. Since the person always had to ask for support in preparing the dog's meal, the capacities of the employees' side had a big impact on the care practices for the dog; if there was no time to prepare and feed the meat, the human companion could not give their act of service to their dog. In some cases, this dynamic could have ended in a simple dismissal of the requests, since some persons might have found this act unnecessary; however, the service user was a long-term visitor and was therefore well known and had unique relationships with the staff. (research diary)

This seemingly mundane example shows many intertwined processes within a broader pattern of institutional dependency, relational history, and normative expectations. Institutional dependency shows through acts of care and their mediations to be shaped by availability, willingness, and perceptions of staff. In this case, the relational history between the human and staff played a crucial role. The request was potentially perceived as excessive or unnecessary, yet the wish was regularly fulfilled due to the established trust and familiarity between the client and the employees. I would argue that the compassion expressed by the human companion through their regular acts of care exceeded normative expectations of responsibility. Their positively perceived acts of care towards the dog, I assume, made the support from facility

employees more likely. Another observed situation showed how increased care and support were given based on a long-established relationship.

In some cases, humans visit the facilities for many years, and if they are part of an interspecies entanglement, both human and animal are well known to the staff. Once, a long-known companion dog passed away due to old age. In cases of death, and specifically of well-known visitors, memorials are placed on the walls of the common room to show respect and give the opportunity to mourn for anyone coming to the facility. In this case, the team hung a memorial for the dog to give their honours. The photo showed the dog on its own, although there would have been pictures of both companions together. (research diary)

This choice made by the staff showed the dog as an individual, not a mere companion to a human, but an equal to all the other visitors. This illustrates a process of autonomising and even anthropomorphising the dog, since they were elevated into a sphere that usually only included human service users. Although an arguably minor gesture, it showed a conscious choice of equivalence-making that transcends the species of visitors. Yet, this act was performed due to the relational history between the team and the specific companionship and can be said to be an exception rather than a general step towards increased recognition of animal mutuality. Nonetheless, what can be drawn from these examples is the impact of social integration within institutional frameworks. Whether a person is liked and well-known and/or perceived as deserving determines the extent to which gestures of care are shown towards that person and, consequently, also towards the animal.

Another circumstance showed that interactions and perceptions from institutional actors towards interspecies service users are not always marked by recognition and positive associations. Entanglements between human and animal may be delegitimised, paternalized, and an individual's agency withdrawn because of the performed scrutiny inherent in social services.

During my fieldwork, a situation arose in which a service user had recently acquired a large-breed puppy despite having limited physical mobility. Staff expressed concern over whether the animal's needs could be adequately met, especially given repeated incidents where the dog was left unsupervised, ran through staff areas, and missed necessary veterinary visits. While the client was verbally informed of institutional expectations, they struggled to meet them. Eventually, one staff member arranged for the dog to be taken to a shelter without informing the client in advance, believing it to be the least distressing option for the animal. This was only possible because the animal was not yet formally registered as the human's "pet", marking this case as a clear exception. (research diary)

This incident, while intended to reduce stress for both parties, highlighted how institutional decisions around interspecies care can be shaped by paternalistic logics, particularly when

clients are perceived as incapable of care and responsibility. As a researcher working within the facility, this case presented an ethical tension between professional responsibilities, institutional norms, or rather the deviations from them, and the critical reflection required in anthropological research. It also underscored how animal well-being may be prioritised in ways that inadvertently marginalise human clients' agency.

In a few exceptional cases, situations perceived as animal neglect or mistreatment by clients led to informal rehoming within the institutional team itself. In these involved cases, animals were re-homed with a staff member who already had a bond with the animal, as it was believed to offer a more stable environment for the animal. These interventions were framed as protective acts carried out in the animal's best interest, but were not sufficiently and transparently discussed with the human service user beforehand. These interventions were only possible in cases in which the human companion had not acquired the legal guardianship (yet). This not only made the intervention possible but also allowed it to be trivialised (I6; research diary). While such practices were sometimes seen internally as pragmatic or even compassionate, they also raised critical questions around institutional authority and agency. Ambivalence towards these actions was occasionally voiced by team members themselves, acknowledging that while the emotional motivations were understandable, they operated in ethical conflicts (research diary). Institutional spaces present processes of constant evaluation of individuals' actions; if considered negatively by an institution's actor and adaptation cannot be achieved, it may end in exclusion, spatially or concerning an individual's agency. This power hierarchy between institutions and service users often remains uncontested, especially if the homeless individuals do not want to lose access to the respective facility.

Interspecies interactions among peers occur diversely. In institutional settings, human-animal companions are perceived as ordinary service users (I2; I3; I5), but there may be an occasional potential for conflict between peers. For example, persons without companion animals would feel disadvantaged in their received attention from facility staff, since they believe that animals, and consequently also their human companions, would be favoured in service settings (I1). While this shows signs of envy and desire, it also turns out that others perceive humans and animals as a clear unity, whether it is associated positively or negatively. In some cases, others deem the human companions to be reckless in their care for an animal and might even bring this to the staff's attention. In such cases, conflicts are common because of emotionally charged dynamics and fear of negative consequences (I5). One interlocutor explained it to be a delicate balance between acceptance and aversion:

Every now and then, there are also visitors at our facility who are afraid of dogs or who are annoyed by dogs [...]. This is definitely a field of tension, I would say. On the one hand, the handling of dogs, because some visitors, who do not have dogs or to whom the dogs do not belong, are concerned perhaps about how dog owners treat their animals, or they feel disturbed when dogs are off-leash or not wearing muzzles, because they have just eaten, or if they are in the way. But I believe, overall, there is a shared understanding among the people who come to us that dogs are part of this facility, somehow have their space, and that there are certain house rules that guide the treatment of dogs. (I5, translated by the author⁴⁰)

However, conflicts between nonhumans were often observed or raised in interviews. Some interlocutors voiced their worries for animals because of the hectic spaces of day centres, emergency shelters, or highly frequented streets. It was said that these spaces and circumstances may contribute to stress for the animal with heightened movements and noise, and was named to be one reason for potential conflict between animals (I4; I6; research diary). Usually, human companions diffuse such disputes and quickly learn if particular animals do not get along. They deal with this by simply keeping a distance from one another or leashing and muzzling the animal companions (I2; I3; I5; research diary). One interlocutor explained that pragmatic solutions are necessary to find a good outcome for all parties involved:

Naturally, there are also animals that don't get along, just like there are people who don't get along, and sometimes it gets a bit loud. But from what I have observed, everyone understands that it is in the best interest of all four parties, meaning two dogs and two human companions, that things work out peacefully. So, they try to go their separate ways, or one takes their dog for a walk or does something else with the animal. (I2, translated by the author⁴¹)

This can be taken as an attempt at preventative conflict avoidance and a simultaneous marker that animal companions are not only given a justification of presence, but also a mutuality to some extent (I2; I5). This illustrates a convincing point in the implementation of inclusive

⁴⁰ Also, es gibt auch innerhalb der Besucher*innen bei uns, immer wieder Leute, die auch dann Angst vor Hunden haben, oder die genervt sind von Hunden, wie auch immer[...]. Und es ist schon ein bisschen ein, es ist durchaus ein Konfliktfeld, würde ich einmal sagen. Der Umgang mit Hunden einerseits, weil manchmal Besucher*innen, die keine Hunde haben oder denen die Hunde nicht gehören, darüber besorgt sind, wie die Hundebesitzer*innen mit ihren Hunden umgehen vielleicht, oder sich davon gestört fühlen, dass die Hunde gerade nicht angeleint sind, oder gerade keine Maulkörbe oben haben, weil sie gerade gefressen haben oder so, oder irgendwo im Weg herumliegen. Aber ich glaube, im Großen und Ganzen ist es so der Konsens auch innerhalb der Personen, die zu uns kommen, dass Hunde zu dieser Einrichtung dazugehören, irgendwie da ihren Platz haben und dass auch gewisse Hausregeln im Umgang mit Hunden gibt. (I5, original quote)

⁴¹ „Ja, natürlich gibt es auch Tiere, die sich nicht mögen, logischerweise, so wie es auch Menschen gibt, die sie sich nicht mögen und manchmal wird es etwas laut. Aber da, soweit wie ich das wahrgenommen habe, verstehen alle, dass es im Interesse von allen Vieren, also wenn ich jetzt zwei Hunde und zwei Tierhalter sehe, dass es im Interesse von allen Vieren ist, dass das miteinander funktioniert und sie schauen, dass sie irgendwie getrennte Wege suchen. Dass, wenn ein streitsuchender Hund da ist, dann geht der andere Gassi oder wird halt etwas anderes unternommen mit dem Tier.“ (I2, original quote)

practices among peers to create a space in which all species can co-exist without restricting someone else's access.

However, another significant point is that conflicts between human service users are often initially started by a preceding conflict between their animal companions. An attack from another dog, even if it would not result in physical harm, can sometimes be taken very personally (I2; I5; research diary). I would interpret this as a deep worry and care for the emotional and physical well-being of their companions that, in turn, may cause accusations of deliberate altercations. These acts of multispecies care reveal one outstanding dynamic in the relationships between interspecies companions: Companion animals, while dependent on their human guardians for care and survival, hold a large amount of relational agency. They serve as social facilitators, enabling or restricting interactions with other humans and nonhumans, and influence when and under what terms social proximity is permitted. As such, they co-constitute social networks and function as affective gatekeepers. Observations and conversations showed that animals express clear preferences towards certain people or animals while demonstrating avoidance or even aggression towards others. In situations like these, distancing from the respective human or animal is usually the only possibility (I2; I3; research diary). From this perspective, it could be argued that nonhuman companions have considerable agency in social decision-making. Following this, they can shape how relationships and spatiality are navigated and governed. This potentially makes their presence also a cycle of social isolation in which human companions find themselves in a progressively shrinking social environment, because an animal's presence and comfort might be prioritised over other social networks. Therefore, what begins as mutual companionship and sometimes leads to broader social networks can sometimes evolve into a closed unit.

Lastly, another prominent aspect that was named and observed in interactions between peers with and without animal companions was the establishment of informal social networks. Some human companions might have difficulties regularly walking their dog, to keep an appointment where animals cannot be brought, some might have underestimated the temper or energy of a young dog, and in some cases, a sudden death of a human companion presents difficulties of continuous adequate care for the animal. In these cases, a formed care network among peers often counters these challenges. For instance, support is provided through alternating dog walks, dog sitting, or escorts to appointments (I5; I6; research diary). While these strategies are significant strategies to maintain the well-being of both human and nonhuman companions, these dynamics are usually not liked to be seen within facilities. Primarily due to the fear that

human companions might abandon their companions. If practices of care become fluent and the responsible guardian is unclear, institutional staff face uncertainty on who to hold accountable if needed. Under unpredictable circumstances, such as unexpected hospital stays or imprisonments, ambivalent perceptions become apparent. While it is deemed a good outcome for an animal to stay with someone else they already know, the lack of legal responsibility in such cases is feared to potentially result in abandonment by the temporary or new guardian. Therefore, multiple caretakers are considered a certain risk for the animal but also the employees who might have to find solutions for such situations of neglect (I4; I6). However, in some cases, employees also help with the practices of care and responsibilities. Although it was stressed numerous times that human companions carry all responsibilities for their animal companions, the informal care networks sometimes extend to the staff. For instance, if the human companion cannot take an animal to work (I2), or if imminent neglect is observed from the facility teams (I6).

These informal care networks can also present complex moral confrontations. This includes instances where individuals appear to have exchanged their dogs (I5), acquired them from unregulated sources, or animals disappear without clear explanations (I3; research diary). These occurrences of informal rehoming can prompt concerns among employees regarding an animal's well-being and the human's accountability. At the same time, it is necessary to recognise these situations as embedded in broader structural constraints within homelessness. Limited access to housing for individuals with animals, overall financial insecurity, and the lack of further formal support services are only a few among many factors that might lead to the listed occurrences (I2; I3; I5). Rather than assuming intentional neglect or misconduct, it is important to recognise how structural exclusion and individual survival strategies intersect to understand those complex and perhaps morally questionable situations. Animals may be temporarily or permanently shared, rehomed, or cared for collectively. This fluctuation of companion animals draws attention to unique social dynamics. Recognising the complexity of such arrangements allows for a more nuanced understanding of both human-animal relations and the social solidarities that emerge at the margins (Irvine, 2013a: 73ff).

7.2 Public Interactions

The presence of companion animals in public spaces not only influences the daily routines of individuals experiencing homelessness but also shapes how they are perceived by others. Increased positive interactions have been linked to individuals accompanied by animals (Kerman, Gran-Ruaz, & Lem, 2019: 109; Laing, 2021: 190; Scanlon et al., 2021: 78). The

presence of nonhumans may act as a conversation opener or prompt passersby to engage with them more frequently. Simultaneously, negative experiences are also part of the everyday experiences due to judgement from strangers, specifically because of their animal companionships. Visibility is a large factor when people engage in public spaces, and for those experiencing rooflessness, the presence of animal companions can significantly alter visibility⁴². Some may view the interspecies companionships with empathy and observe an emotional bond between humans and animals; others may perceive such companionships as irresponsible or problematic (I1; I2; I4; I5; research diary).

This juxtaposition of how interspecies companions are perceived in public spaces has been mentioned by numerous sources (I1; I2; I4; I5; research diary; Irvine, Kahl, & Smith, 2012; Kerman, Gran-Ruaz, & Lem, 2019). An interviewee noted that companion animals often act as social mediators in public spaces by encouraging interactions with passersby. They assumed that empathetic responses can be evoked by the sheer presence of an animal that may not otherwise be directed at the human alone (I2; Irvine, Kahl, & Smith, 2012: 27).

In this way, the animal can become a vehicle for recognition, allowing moments of connection or brief suspensions of social stigma. It is stressed however, that these social facilitations depend largely on the animal's and human's characteristics, whether they are perceived as "likeable" or not (Scanlon et al., 2021: 78). Moreover, also an ambivalence in recognition was emphasised, stating that in many of these interactions the care and well-being of the animal becomes the primary focus of public concern, often overshadowing the needs or visibility of the person accompanying it. Support, attention, or donations may be directed at the animal, while the human companion remains marginal in the interaction (I2). This dynamic exposes a complex hierarchy of empathy, in which the nonhuman companion elicits compassion more easily than the human, potentially reinforcing the social exclusion of the latter. While positive visibility concerns the animal companions rather than the human individuals, negative attention from the public seems to address the human actors (I2; I3; I4). Moral judgement is a common practice when it comes to visibility of roofless individuals (I1) and particularly the combination of both homelessness and animal companionship is regularly contested through assumptions of whether a person experiencing homelessness is capable to care for an animal or not (I2; Irvine, 2013a: 56; Irvine, Kahl, & Smith, 2012: 31). This dynamic shows that attention directed

⁴² Importantly, not all individuals who are seen panhandling or sleeping rough are necessarily without housing. Physical appearance, behaviour, and spatial visibility often shape assumptions about someone's housing status, leading to false ascriptions. These assumptions are often based on deeply rooted societal ideas of what a roofless person is supposed to look like (I6).

towards the nonhuman subject may even reinforce marginalisation through critiques on the human companions.

This field of tension was noted as a hierarchy of well-being and needs in which the animal is often prioritised and the human companion considered only secondarily (I2). This observation indicates an inversion of the usual human-animal hierarchy. In most social contexts, the importance of animals is symbolically and materially positioned below humans (I3). While such interactions may appear positive in terms of public attention and short-term benefits, with momentary reductions in stigma or increased visibility, the practical and emotional consequences reveal a far more ambiguous experience. The hierarchy of empathy becomes disturbed, producing complex effects for those whose needs are partially acknowledged but not fully addressed. An occurring assumption on why companion animals may receive more empathy than their human companions may be the aspect of situated and projected complexity. As one interviewee stated, “the issues concerning animals are usually not as complex as those concerning humans. You don’t have to deal with questions on individual and structural levels. It can simply be reduced to: an animal needs food, a bed, a harness, and maybe a muzzle” (I2, translated by the author⁴³). Facing animals’ needs and practically realising them may seem more feasible than those of a human. This overall assumption that a dog only needs some food, water, and some material necessities does not account for humans. Here, the visibility of multiple perceptible issues (e.g., economic despair, hygiene, health-related issues, etc.) may cause feelings of helplessness in other humans. By focusing on the animal companion rather than the human one, immediate consequences of confrontation with a homeless individual can be avoided. For example, an animal cannot voice or express associations of guilt as humans might. Conversations with roofless humans may evoke feelings of having to give money or kind words, or may even be actively asked for. By avoiding conversations, eye contact, greetings, etc., altogether, the complexity must not be engaged with (I1).

Although these avoidance rituals and segregative measures are not as overtly demeaning as the more active and immediate kinds of negative attention the homeless receive, they can be equally stigmatizing, for they also cast the homeless as objects of contamination. This, too, constitutes an assault upon the self, albeit a more subtle and perhaps more insidious one. (Anderson & Snow, 1993: 199f.)

⁴³ „Natürlich ist die Tierproblematik meistens nicht so komplex wie die Menschenproblematik. Man muss sich da nicht mit den Fragestellungen auf individuellen und strukturellen Ebene auseinandersetzen. Man kann das einfach nur vereinfachen auf: ja, ein Tier braucht Futter und ein Bettchen und ein Geschirr und vielleicht einen Beißkorb.“ (I2, original quote)

Just as common as avoidances are interactions in which the homeless individuals experience criticism for the companionships for not being able to adequately care for the animal and implying them as unworthy of such companionships (Irvine, Kahl, & Smith, 2012: 36). Donations of animal food and other commodities could be subtle but effective forms of such criticism, implying that individuals cannot provide the necessary resources to feed them. However, it could also be argued that food donations offer individuals a way of stigma resistance, since one large factor of possible criticism is eliminated (Irvine, 2013a: 61).

One roofless interlocutor told me that they had such an abundance of dog food that they offered to donate some to a facility instead, after they were constantly offered dog supplies. However, they reported that human food was a much more pressing need (research diary). This, although concealed as acts of “goodwill”, could also support the assumption that empathy is rather expressed towards animal companions than humans. Another informant, however, showed appreciation for dog food donations but firmly declined anything they considered poor quality. They noted that they would not feed their dog anything they would not consider “best quality” (research diary). In this sense, agency in regard to donations can define the boundaries of whether these acts are considered positively or negatively. This highlights an important nuance: not all charitable offerings are automatically welcomed, especially when they are perceived as misaligned with the animal’s needs. This aspect has also been perceived by an interlocutor as acts of overstepping boundaries by explaining that “one is repeatedly in a situation in which passersby act invasively, for example, towards the animals. For instance, by giving them food because they think it is appropriate, although that is obviously not the case” (I4, translated by the author⁴⁴). Such actions could be considered patronising practices; what is intended as care for the animal can, in some instances, cross the boundaries of the human companion, reproducing power dynamics that imply incompetence or lack of discernment.

Yet, one institutional interview participant also raised the positive perspectives associated with these donations: “I know a few people who often have their dogs with them while panhandling, and they regularly receive dog food or gifts from passersby. And yes, I believe this is generally viewed positively” (I5, translated by the author⁴⁵). These insights point to a form of conditional

⁴⁴ „dass man immer wieder in der Situation ist, dass es übergreifiges Verhalten von Passant*innen zum Beispiel gegenüber der Tiere gibt. Also dass sie zum Beispiel einfach Futter geben oder so, weil sie denken, das wäre jetzt angebracht, was aber halt natürlich nicht der Fall ist“ (I4, original quote).

⁴⁵ „Es gibt auch sehr, sehr positive Wahrnehmungen dazu. Also ich kenne zum Beispiel ein paar Leute, die dann beim Schnorren schon öfter mal ihre Hunde dabei haben, die dann auch regelmäßig Hundefutter bekommen von den Leuten oder irgendwas geschenkt bekommen. Und genau, wo das, glaube ich, gutgeheißen wird“ (I5, original quote).

or redirected inclusion with underlying reinforcements of social exclusion for homeless humans. The animal opens a space for interaction that otherwise might not be initiated, but the recognition remains fragile on the perceived innocence (Irvine, 2013b: 21) or likeability of the nonhuman companion (Scanlon, et al., 2021: 78). Still, such visibility can offer brief relief from stigma and perhaps functions as a small but meaningful social resource for navigating urban spaces.

7.3 Conclusions

In conclusion, this chapter examined how interspecies companionships are perceived and negotiated within institutional and public spaces. These situated interactions highlighted the fluidity of social encounters and relationality. But all interactions, outsider perceptions, and institutional encounters collectively shape the lived realities of homeless interspecies relationships, whether positively or negatively. In all interactions, visibility has been a large aspect. Animal companions are makers of visibility by drawing attention from others, whether staff, other human service users, or other animals. This had both positive and negative impacts on the interspecies companions. In some cases, it meant tensions or conflict because other humans, staff, and peers showed scrutiny if differing views on welfare emerged. Positive aspects showed in interaction and perceptions through easy conversations and approaches in institutional settings, as well as in public spaces. However, it was revealed that especially the animals' personalities have been the dominating factor in how the companions are perceived by others. A reactive or threatening dog led to keeping distance from other humans, animals, and institutional spaces. Yet, the humans' demeanour had an impact on the human-animal relationships and their practices of care. In cases of dependencies on others or material resources, the human's personality and network with other humans were shown to impact how willing others were to provide the desired resources. But more so than in institutional spaces, specifically public spaces showed varying degrees of acceptance and stigmatising practices. While animals attracted positive attention, resulting in increased visibility, gestures of goodwill, and contact with others, they equally served as facilitators of reinforced stigma and often resulted in social exclusion at large.

8 Conclusions

This chapter serves to bring together the results that have been collected and discussed. This research has aimed to explore how interspecies companions in situations of homelessness are embedded in inclusionary and exclusionary systems of both institutional and social landscapes in Vienna. Through multispecies ethnography, observational fieldwork, analytic autoethnographic insights, and informal and formal interviews, it became clear that these relationships are not peripheral occurrences to homelessness. Instead, they present central aspects of the lived realities of many individuals navigating homelessness together with animal companions.

Finally, I would like to return to the research question to outline it in detail and link all chapters to one another, together with their complex discussions. The guiding key question was:

"How are interspecies companionships between homeless individuals and companion animals shaped, negotiated, and governed through social perceptions and institutional practices in Vienna?"

Based on the reconstructed individual cases, it can be illustrated that interspecies companionships in the context of homelessness in Vienna are diverse in terms of their occurrence, role distribution, and navigation of their daily lives and circumstances. Nevertheless, by comparing and analysing them, it was possible to reconstruct not only differences but also similarities between them.

In interviews and conversations, it was noticeable that the roles of animals were always perceived as deeply emotionally valuable. Not only by those involved in the relationships, but also outsider perspectives have confirmed this. In these understandings, animals offer their human partners emotional stability, proximity, protection, social recognition, a sense of purpose, and, in some cases, also financial flows. Sometimes these occur in temporary and unexpected ways, established out of a domiciled past or later on in the immediate state of homelessness. Many individuals attributed their continued survival and motivation to care for themselves to their animal companions. These roles often pointed to a broader understanding of “family” constellations and exceeded normative, anthropocentric ideas, but primarily highlighted the emotional centrality of these relationships. This aspect was seen as a strong indicator of social inclusion. Many interlocutors and scholars reported that the homeless, and especially roofless individuals, experience situations of stigma and marginalisation more

frequently than any other group. Companion animals, therefore, provide a strategy to counter such exclusionary experiences through their acts of socio-emotional belonging.

This dynamic of emotional entanglements emphasised the circumstances of spatial exclusion. Although rare, some individuals decided to stay with an animal rather than enter animal-prohibited housing without them. These cases sometimes led to sleeping outdoors or even complete disengagement from formal service systems. However, some individuals have also declined low-threshold accommodations or other services because they deemed them unsuitable for the animal, even in cases when access could have been possible. Therefore, while companion animals often serve as sources of emotional support, security, and relational continuity, they can also represent a threshold to shelter, one that could only be crossed if individuals were to part from their animal. Consequently, in some cases, a companion animal not only complicates or limits access to accommodations and services but also becomes a direct contributor to a person's extended homelessness. However, the animal is not the "cause" of homelessness in an essential sense but rather becomes a symbolic marker of conflicts between relationality and loyalty as well as institutional compliance and dependency.

All interviewed institutional actors stated that the presence of an animal does not have any benefits for the human companion besides the socio-emotional ones. However, they all agreed that these are valuable ones. Instead, they all claimed that companion animals would impede access to many accommodations through the *WWH*, as well as finding secure work. This usually leaves individuals only with the private rental market as an option for stable housing, if finances were not a barrier. Therefore, they all showed little confidence in actual success. What the data further revealed, animals are only ever *tolerated* companions, meaning in their relationality to their human companion, and never as beings with agency. And even in cases of obtaining a more stable housing format, animals were ideally expected to have existed before entering them, as later acquisitions even led to exclusions from the accommodations altogether, usually under a narrative of expected priority setting.

Presumably, companion animals do not experience many negative consequences from their living arrangements in homelessness. Sometimes worries were expressed regarding their stress levels or humans' incapability to care for them, yet it was largely considered a good and healthy lifestyle for an animal. Some informants even highlighted that this may present better conditions for animals than life under housed conditions could. However, a distinction was made between the species, with implications that every other species but dogs would not be suitable for a transient and sometimes fully exposed (to climate, humans, and other animals) existence on the

streets. One negative point raised regarding animals in the context of homelessness was the dependency on human actors. Not in the humanist understandings of care, but rather regarding the consequences of a lack of private space. In instances of unexpected absences, such as hospital visits, arrests, or deportations, animals may be brought to animal shelters or get rehomed, which has caused worries in many interlocutors.

In Vienna, institutional structures have been shown to sometimes fail to account for the presence and needs of nonhuman actors. This was reasoned in an underlying human-centred system that does not thoroughly acknowledge interspecies entanglements as reciprocal beings and unique resources. Although some low-threshold facilities offer access for interspecies companions, proving inclusivity in their institutional frameworks, it remains inconsistent and highly dependent on staff discretion, spatial constraints, and even rental contracts. This creates a city-wide institutional ambiguity in which animal-inclusive support is neither uniformly regulated nor promoted.

Nonetheless, the said inconsistencies across the social service landscape in Vienna have not always shown to be negative for the affected companions. Individual decision-making was found to be an important tool within low-threshold service provisions and, in some cases, brought inclusive practices. Moreover, clear attempts at including companion animals have been identified, for example, through offering limited numbers of beds for individuals with animals, cost-free animal food supplies, veterinary access, or even on-site dog hairdressers. Other times, the means have been more implicit, by informally providing support of care. All of these largely rely on the individual commitment of staff members, sometimes even outside their working hours. And in certain cases, attempts have shown to even result in centralising companion animals in a position in which it was the human whose needs were dismissed or overlooked. This illustrated the constant challenges of multispecies companionships, where the relationships are governed by institutional staff.

However, the structural exclusion, meaning feasible opportunities for individuals to combat homelessness, has been an essential aspect. An institutionalised homelessness support system, such as low-threshold services, often operates through an understanding of the staircase model. This has been widely critiqued for its limited effectiveness in sustainably combating homelessness. In the context of interspecies companionships, many interlocutors pointed out that animals can pose practical barriers to accessing housing, particularly due to restrictive policies and landlord refusals. However, it was argued that it is the staircase model itself, with its rigid progression and conditional criteria, that more profoundly limits mobility within the

system. Rather than viewing animals as the sole barrier in low-threshold services, it is often the social policy framework that demands stability and compliance and traps individuals in a cycle of exclusion. While animals present as additional barriers, an ascent within the staircase model would be difficult to achieve either way.

Interactions between institutional staff and homeless interspecies companionships identified regular sites of judgement. In some cases, perceived irresponsibility or lack of capacity to care for an animal has led to exclusionary practices, ranging from refusing to provide services to severe interventions of informal rehoming or even removals of animals without transparent communication. These interventions, while often well-intended for the animals' end and rooted in animal welfare concerns, raised important ethical questions about paternalism and external power hierarchies in interspecies care. However, in cases where the relationships were perceived positively, informants even highlighted that a proven capacity for care and relational responsibility should be acknowledged as indicators of deserving an exit out of homelessness, because these practices may point towards ambition and stability. These ambivalent perceptions of the relationships showed that, depending on the staff's discretion, the companions may experience praise or scrutiny for their entanglements, with the results showing in subtle forms of inclusion or exclusion.

Furthermore, it was found that animals play an active role as social facilitators. Their presence can foster community building, with their entry points for social interaction, and enable visibility in public spaces. However, it was found that this recognition is usually regarding the animal solely, which could also be argued as nonmutual understandings of the companions. And on top of that, animals might even be brought more empathy and "positive attention" than their human companion. While humans peripherally benefit from these encounters, it may further support marginalisation on a broader level. Yet, it was shown that this dynamic also presents barriers. Cases have been analysed in which interactions with other humans or animals were constrained because of the presence of one's own animal. This showed that not only humans exercise control over mobility and everyday life. Animals may determine who is included or excluded from one's existing or future social network.

Drawing from this, interspecies companionships are both supported and structurally and situationally constrained. In this, the relationships with animals can become an arena of both inclusion and exclusion on social and institutional levels. The realities of interspecies homelessness in Vienna remain largely invisible in institutional, academic, public, and policy domains. These entanglements additionally challenge conventional understandings of

homelessness as a solely individual or economic condition and reframe it as relational and through a multispecies lens. This research shed light on these realities, not to offer rigid solutions, which were found to be unsuitable for the context of low-threshold services, but to foreground the relationships and negotiations that too often go unheard. Further, this research argued for a rethinking of social services and housing practices: one that recognises animals not only as companions, but as co-clients, co-navigators, co-workers, and co-residents. As long as homelessness is framed as a mere human phenomenon, the relational experiences will remain on the margins, overseen and misunderstood.

8.1 Outlook

Since I am continuing to work with homeless individuals, including interspecies companions, this research was personally valuable in that it allowed me to incorporate new perspectives and insights into my practical work. Unlike most other ethnographic research, I am not breaking clean from the field. Rather, my commitment is now deepening and will not end at this point. This is why, as a final act of this research, I would now like to clear the stage and point out other important areas of focus related to my research that did not receive enough attention in this research.

First and foremost, as for my purposes, this simply would have gone beyond the scope of this research: other nonhuman entities would make for an interesting expansion of this research. This could mean, if remaining in the nonhuman animal lens, to include animals apart from companions. As implied briefly, wildlife, insects, therapeutic animals, and consumed animals could present as meaningful entanglements with homeless human lives. But also investigating beyond the animal, for instance, the inclusion of microbes, plants, technological tools and machines, water, material worlds, and so many more.

Additionally, the lack of public numbers in Vienna around interspecies companionship in homelessness has confronted me as an issue numerous times and left this research with assumptions around the phenomenon under study. The sheer extent of this target group is not known, and it has left me with inconsistent statements. This presents an important finding in itself, but also urges the collection of broad and penetrating data on these relationships. This could present an important and inclusive attempt at recognising unique needs.

Further, with my first attempts at providing insights into the Viennese context, broader comparative studies across different national homelessness policy systems could be valuable findings. For example, whether companion animals are (or are not) accounted for in other

welfare systems. This could reveal policy blind spots and consequently inform transnational frameworks.

While my ethnographic explorations have already been embedded within the institutional landscape of the *WWH*, I believe a different theoretical approach could additionally contribute to this topic. For example, a more legal-anthropological approach or one of organisational anthropology could investigate some aspects that did not find their rightful existence in my research. For instance, explorations of legal personhood, status, or protection of animals in homelessness-related services, and how legal frameworks reinforce or challenge institutional exclusion.

Of course, one must also point to intersectional experiences of exclusion that not only accompany interspecies companions in homelessness but can also be considered together. With this, future research could address more structural forms of discrimination in this context. For instance, how migration, gender, and its coinciding assumptions of care, disabilities, or racialised stereotypes intersect.

And lastly, since I could not get my hands on interviews with facilities beyond the *WWH* that still intersect with this field, exploring the boundary between homelessness services and animal protection infrastructures (e.g., animal shelters, veterinarians, and veterinary offices) as parallel or conflicting systems could add deeper and representative understandings.

While many other possible directions of research could be mentioned in this regard, all the above highlight the complexity of the realities of homeless lives on the one hand, and on the other hand, the multispecies interconnectivity. Focusing attention on marginalised lives remains a major component of cultural and social anthropology (even if this is equally open to criticism), which is why bringing attention to this population on social, political, and institutional scales is an essential step towards social justice at large.

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Appendix

Interview Transcripts

Interviews	Date	Interviewee	Premises	Duration	Abbreviation
Interview 1 transcript semi- structured	22.04.2025	Employee of a social facility	Premises of the facility	00:45:25	I1
Interview 2 transcript semi- structured	15.05.2025	Employee of a social facility	Premises of the facility	00:52:50	I2

Interview 3 transcript semi- structured	02.06.2025	Employee of a social facility	Premises of the facility	00:49:26	I3
Interview 4 transcript semi- structured	11.06.2025	Member of BAWO	online	00:32:04	I4
Interview 5 transcript semi- structured	16.06.2025	Employee of a social facility	Premises of the facility	00:45:08	I5
Interview 6 transcript semi- structured	17.06.2025	Person with a Connex to the <i>WWH</i>	Café	01:36:44	I6