

Multispecies family: state-of-the-art and future directions in the Ibero-American context

Familia multiespecie: estado de la cuestión y futuras direcciones en el ámbito iberoamericano

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Abstract

Although, in recent years, the concept of a multispecies family has been the subject of intense scrutiny by professionals in different fields, to date no documentary reviews that offer a structured view of their research have been published. Therefore, this review aimed to identify peer-reviewed articles on multispecies families to determine the state of the art and its future directions. A documentary review was carried out using five databases to select the articles published in Spanish until 2023. Thematic analysis of forty-six investigations yielded four emerging dimensions that reflected the areas of discussion with the greatest growth in recent years: (a) legal recognition; (b) family dynamics; (c) physical and mental wellbeing; and (d) human-animal bond. Findings suggest that the integration of the “companion animal” into the family system improved the wellbeing of its members. The importance of creating institutional tools that identify human-animal violence as domestic violence in these families is discussed.

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Keywords

Multispecies family; Legal recognition; Family dynamics; Physical and mental well-being; Human-animal bond.

Resumen

Aunque en los últimos años el concepto de familia multiespecie ha sido objeto de un intenso escrutinio por parte de los profesionales de diferentes campos, hasta el momento no se han publicado revisiones documentales que ofrezcan una visión estructurada de las investigaciones. Por tal motivo, esta revisión tuvo como objetivo identificar los artículos evaluados por pares sobre familia multiespecie, para delimitar el estado de la cuestión y sus futuras direcciones. Se realizó una revisión documental utilizando cinco bases de datos con el fin de seleccionar los artículos publicados en español hasta el año 2023. El análisis temático de cuarenta y seis investigaciones dio como resultado cuatro dimensiones emergentes que reflejaron las áreas de discusión con mayor crecimiento en los últimos años: (a) reconocimiento jurídico, (b) dinámica familiar, (c) bienestar físico y mental y (d) vínculo humano-animal. Los hallazgos sugieren que la integración del “animal de compañía” en el sistema familiar mejoró los niveles de bienestar de sus miembros. Se discute la importancia de la creación de herramientas institucionales que identifiquen la violencia humano-animal como violencia intrafamiliar en estas familias.

Palabras clave

Familia multiespecie; Reconocimiento jurídico; Dinámica familiar; Bienestar físico y mental; Vínculo humano-animal.

Introduction

In recent years, State institutions have shown a growing interest in documenting the presence of pets within Colombian households; for instance, the surveys of the National Statistics Department (DANE by its Spanish acronym) have inquired about the presence and number of dogs or cats. According to 2021 statistics, in Bogotá, 40.2 % of families interacted daily with one or more domesticated species; 65.8 % with dogs and 43.7 % with cats (DANE, 2022).

The Judgments of the Constitutional Court and the legislative activity of Congress have also promoted the special protection of animals as sentient beings in the Colombian legal system by penalizing and criminalizing any form of cruelty or mistreatment. This legal approach was published in the ruling of October 13, 2023, issued by the Superior Court of Bogotá, which, as part of a lawsuit for the joint custody of a companion animal, determined that “animals can occupy a place as members of human families, a situation susceptible of protection as a social reality” (Tribunal Superior de Bogotá, 2023, p. 10).

However, despite the increase in information from these institutions, their analyses have provided little information on the human-animal bond established between species, as well as the forms of positive interaction where caretakers integrate sentient beings into their family nucleus. As a result, factors associated with the social and emotional benefits of multispecies families have gone unaddressed.

In addition, documentary dispersion, which characterizes the field of human-animal interaction, has limited researchers in the use of an epistemological demarcation criterion of the multispecies family as a new form of family arrangement. Although there are theories that identify companion animals as a source of mental and physical health, fundamental when establishing social support networks, for example, Díaz (2015), McDonnell et al. (2019) and Videla et al. (2019), we know little about the shared functions of companion animals integrated into the family system.

In other words, since various studies have shown the benefits of companion animals in situations of gender violence (Aragunde Kohl et al., 2021), social loneliness in older adults (Rubio et al., 2011), restrictive male roles (Videla et al., 2018) or emotional development in early childhood (Córdova-Cando et al., 2021), determining the state and evolution of knowledge in the field of the multispecies family could enrich and inform future practices and research of professionals who work to build and strengthen families' wellbeing in the context of the social changes that our societies currently experience.

Therefore, this documentary review has been conducted with the purpose of examining studies on multispecies families, nationally and internationally, that have investigated the integration of companion animals into the hierarchies, routines, and interaction patterns of the family system.

In this context, the category of multispecies family was specifically delimited to the literature related to dogs or cats, given that the animal demography of the region supports the prevalence of the dog and cat population in households. In Chile, the results of the 2022 canine and feline population survey revealed that there were a “total of 8,306,650 dogs, 4,176,029 cats and a total of 4,916,792 homes with pets” in the country (Subsecretaría de Desarrollo Regional y Administrativo, 2022, p. 7). In Ecuador, the Census of the National Institute of Statistics (INEC by its spanish acronym) established that, in 2022, more than two million children lived with domesticated animals (INEC, 2022). And, in Mexico, the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI by its spanish acronym) estimated that, in 2021, 69.8 % of households had some type of pet (INEGI, 2021).

This trend of the animal population in domestic environments poses current and future challenges to professionals and institutions that research and work in family studies because multispecies families have become a forum for discussion of the changing nature of family arrangements in the 21st century, when legal regulations, parenting roles, and bereavement processes are redefined.

Nevertheless, as with research trends, in social sciences, the debates and challenges faced by family studies reflect the social changes of their own historical context. Factors such as the demographic transition and its effect on the size of families (Arriagada, 2004) and activism in favor of animal rights that, since the second half of the 20th century, have problematized the way we treat sentient beings morally (Sarmiento, 2020), have favored the adoption and popularization of the multispecies concept. In fact, it was conservation ecology that established the multispecies concept with the aim of creating a “bridge between humanities and natural sciences” (Aisher & Damodaran, 2016, p. 293).

In the field of family studies, the history of the multispecies concept has its theoretical roots in the United States in the early 1980s. In that period, family science researchers, with a clear influence of symbolic interactionism, used the concept of analysis frameworks of Erving Goffman (1974) to understand how family members reconfigured the meaning of pets by recognizing them as members of family life (Huang et al., 1982; Irvine & Cilia, 2017).

Although, since 1960, psychology had explored the benefits of human-animal interaction throughout the life cycle, with research such as that of Borin Lenvison (1969), a pioneer in pet-oriented child psychotherapy, these studies were still discussed within the dominant fra-

mework of speciesism, which granted animals an inferior status by subordinating them as tools of scientific research (Vega & Ortiz, 2021). In the words of Singer (1975/1999), speciesism can be understood as “a prejudice or partial attitude favorable to the interests of members of our own species and against those of others” (p. 42).

It is important to note that, as family studies tried to systematically organize as a discipline, they found that people behaved with their pets as if they were members of their family: they celebrated their birthdays, increased expenses for diets and care, and related to them as loved ones within the household. The need to understand what kind of frameworks families used to organize and attribute new meanings to these interactions found a solid conceptual basis for those claims in Goffman’s (1974) theoretical work.

It should also be said that the central features of the multispecies family do not yet have a coherent theoretical matrix that provides professionals with the potential attributes of their traits. The definitions of the fields of law, social work, psychology or sociology, far from being exhaustive, have only identified some of their attributes and main characteristics, which reveals that their conceptualization process still lacks a systematic theoretical basis that effectively integrates the domains of the concept.

Since conceptual precision is imperative for the theoretical development and epistemological progress of any discipline, professionals have been adopting the meaning of a multispecies family that best fits their scientific community. This is the case of researchers in law such as Sáez et al., (2023), who define it as a “family typology characterized by inter-species coexistence and emotional union, reinforced by the legal recognition of animals as sentient beings and not mere objects” (p. 8).

From the perspective of social work, it is conceptualized as a set of individuals or groups that coexist under the same roof and are linked by ties of affectivity between its members, in addition, one of their characteristics is the inclusion of more than one species (Human/animal)” (Pérez et al., 2019, p. 87). Another definition includes sociology, where authors such as Laurent (2021) describe it as “significant social actors who, in agreement with human beings, have the ability to transform family structures into different forms of family with unique requirements” (p. 6). As research into multispecies family progresses, the formation of its concept will include new attributes and characteristics.

Method

A literature review was carried out following the four-step methodological framework proposed by Booth et al., in 2016, which was clarified by Codina, in 2020. Based on this proposal, the following actions were taken:

Search

A comprehensive search for peer-reviewed articles published until 2023 was carried out in the following databases: Redalyc, Google Scholar, Scopus, Dialnet, and Scielo. The term multispecies family was searched using the Boolean operators “AND” and “OR” to optimize the results. The entry of the term multispecies family remained constant in the different search engines. Studies had to address the characteristics of the human-animal relationship in this family typology or the benefits that this would bring for the physical and mental health of its members. Also, Spanish was set as language of publication; the urban environment as a research space; and the Ibero-American countries as a geographical region. These were considered as inclusion criteria.

Evaluation

The criteria considered to evaluate the basis of the evidence were (a) peer-reviewed article; (b) relevance of the topic or research for the analysis of the multispecies family; (c) clarity in the research design and its level of adequacy with the objective of the review; (d) clarity in the theoretical and methodological orientation; (e) detailed explanation of the process by which the findings were obtained; (f) sufficiency in the data that support the conclusions and interpretations of the study; and (g) appropriate and duly explained method of analysis.

Analysis

A coding scheme was applied to make sense of the elements of the selected studies. We used, specifically, the analysis scheme proposed by Bloomberg and Volpe (2008), which enabled a systematic review of the information in the articles. The following steps were followed: (a) general description of the theories or concepts related to the multispecies family; (b) identification of the main premises related to human-animal interaction in the family system; (c) type of evidence that supported the claims; (d) implications for research in the family area.

Synthesis

Recurring themes and patterns were identified in the retrieved articles. To this end, descriptive codes were created based on the conceptual saturation of the research. Key concepts were identified through comparison of results.

Results

Forty-six articles were retrieved from the five databases consulted. Four dimensions were identified that emerged in the thematic analysis of the investigations: (a) legal recognition, (b) family dynamics, (c) physical and mental wellbeing, and (d) human-animal bond. Among the 46 articles, theoretical and descriptive studies stood out. The countries of origin of the studies covered a wide geographical diversity, including Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Spain, and Mexico. In terms of disciplinary fields, research came from various areas, including law, social work, psychology, and veterinary medicine.

Table 1

Legal recognition of multispecies families

Dimension	Study type	Author, date of publication and name of article	Keywords	Number of articles
Legal recognition	Comparative	Suárez, P. (2017). <i>Animals, disabled people and multispecies families.</i>	Animals, family law, multispecies family.	13
	Monographic	Disconzi, N., Jardim, A. C., & Silveira, V. (2017). <i>The pet from the perspective of the multispecies family and its insertion into the Brazilian legal system.</i>	Multispecies family, affectivity, conjugal litigation, pet.	
	Socio-legal	Marino González, I. (2019) <i>The phenomenon of multispecies families and the challenges it poses for the Law.</i>	Family, multispecies family, companion animals, family breakdowns.	
	Socio-legal	Sánchez Jaramillo, J.F. (2020). <i>The non-human animal (NHA) in the Colombian Civil Code. The need for a new category in the Code proposed by Universidad Nacional de Colombia.</i>	Rights subject, non-human animal, animal interest, food, custody, visitation regime, succession, multispecies family.	
	Historical-Legal	Zúñiga Benavides, S. D. (2021). <i>The concept of multispecies family and its treatment in the Colombian legal system.</i>	Family, multispecies family, animals, fundamental rights, core of society.	
	Analytical	Sáez Olmos, J., Caravaca Llamas, C., & Molina Cano, J. (2022). <i>The custody of pets: a new scenario in family mediation.</i>	Mediation, family, conflicts, separation, divorce, pets.	
	Comparative	Bonilla & Neira. (2022). <i>Analysis of the feasibility of recognizing the multispecies family in the Ecuadorian legal system.</i>	Multispecies family, human-animal relationship, recognition of animals within the family, animal rights, animal protection.	
	Analytical	Esborraz, D. F. (2023). <i>The new legal regime for animals in the civil codifications of Europe and America.</i>	Animal law, unreify, sentient beings, tertium genus, multispecies family.	
	Socio-legal	Orellana Carrera, C. C., & Romero Lavay, M. E. (2023). <i>Legal analysis on the recognition of the multi-species family in the Ecuadorian Civil Code.</i>	Rights, family, multispecies family, animals, recognition.	
	Socio-legal	Truyenque, M. C. (2023). <i>Multispecies family. Protection of pets from the protection of human rights</i>	Family, animals, multispecies, autonomy.	
	Reflexive	Gallo Gil, A. D. P., & Moreno Ospina, J. F. (2023). <i>Pets as beneficiaries of the survivor's pension within the general retirement system.</i>	Social security, survivor's pension, sentient being, multispecies family, pet, bond financially dependent.	
	Theoretical	Ezquerro, J. C. S. (2023). <i>Pets or family members? New perspectives in kinship studies. Analysis of the canine-human relationship in coexistence nuclei in Spain.</i>	Family, kinship, multispecies, dogs, human-animal studies, pets.	
	Analytical	Bastos, T. G., & de Carli, A. A. (2023). <i>Non-human animal rights in Brazil: a reality under construction.</i>	Animal rights, environmental ethics, Brazil, non-human animals, legal entity.	

A total of thirteen articles related to the legal controversy raised by the multispecies family in the field of law were recovered. Most of the studies were published between 2020 and 2023, and 92 % corresponded to low- and middle-income countries. The methodologies used by the authors ranged from socio-legal analysis of family regulations to comparative studies of the different verdicts that have recognized that companion animals belong to the family system (Bastos & De Carli, 2023).

It was found that all the articles lacked references to previous documentary reviews, which suggests the recent evolution of the discussion of the multispecies family in family law. This also reflects the challenge faced by legislators in providing a clear concept of the type of family that, at present, must be recognized and protected by law, as well as the legal procedures related to custody and support agreements for companion animals, in cases of dissolution of the conjugal bond.

Most of the literature analyzed addressed the controversy over the legal recognition of the multispecies family. Truyenque (2023) highlights the importance of establishing a legal framework that respects diverse conceptions of family and different ways of building emotional bonds. In this line, several authors propose specific reforms: Orellana and Romero (2023) argue the need to grant social and legal recognition to animals as members of the family nucleus, while Esborraz (2023) emphasizes the importance of extending animal protection to all branches of law, including the constitutional scope. Additionally, González (2019) proposes the implementation of a custody and visitation system for cases of family separation, and Sánchez (2020) suggests establishing legal guarantees that ensure the wellbeing of non-human members after the death of their caregivers.

There seems to be a generalized progressive position on the part of legal science professionals towards the multispecies family, with the aim of keeping pace with social change and developing new perspectives that incorporate the presence of pets in the lives of families. This is consistent with the symptoms of the mismatch between the recognition of new ways of making families and normative conceptions of family enshrined in legislation that were reported in most of the reviewed articles.

Specifically, authors highlighted the idea that companion animals, as sentient beings, have been the catalyst for the paradigm shift against the inclusion and recognition of the human-animal relationship in family dynamics. According to Videla (2017), the use of the expression companion animal highlights the affective exchange and the recognition of rights and obligations of those who make up the multispecies relationship, in contrast to the term pet, which emphasizes the hierarchical and asymmetric disposition of power in the human-animal relationship.

Likewise, the analysis of the approval and implementation of legislation carried out by Orellana and Romero (2023), in Ecuador; Ezquerro (2023), in Spain; and Disconzi et al. (2017), in Brazil, suggests that the legal recognition of the multispecies family has become one of the most controversial issues of law at the beginning of the 21st century. An example of this was the technical session on the study of the legal status of pets, held on November 10, 2023, by the Constitutional Court of Colombia.

In this session, the legal implications of recognizing companion animals as members of the family, the possible effects on animal welfare due to the dissolution of conjugal society, and the impact that the separation of their domestic canine would have on human beings, especially in the child population were discussed (Corte Constitucional de Colombia, 2023, Order 2564, para. 46).

In this controversy, those who argue in favor of recognizing the multispecies family, as is the case of Truyenque (2023), affirm that the changing trends of family structures and the diversity of our affective lives reveal the increase of families by choice, in contrast to consanguineous biparental families. This explains the reconfiguration of the limits of the family and the inclusion of companion animals as one of its members. The implications of this view are important for professionals who work with families, since it requires “recognizing the multispecies family as one more form of family for legal purposes” (Truyenque, 2023, p. 232).

Although most of the recovered articles argued in favor of the multispecies family as a new legal reality, Zuñiga (2021) collects an argument that departs from the consensual vision. From a natural law conception, he suggests that the recognition of the multispecies family is an excess in the legal system, since “from rationalism, it has been emphasized that the recognition of rights is linked to concepts of autonomy and moral agency, for which they could only be preached from human beings” (p. 9). These approaches add to the literature on the legal personality of non-human animals and the nature of the cases that reach the courts, showing that the debate is still open in many Western countries.

An important point of the review is that most of the thirteen recovered articles informed the responses of legal systems to the demands introduced by multispecies families. Saez et al. (2002) used an analytical approach to jurisprudence to identify new family mediation scenarios where pets are present. The authors considered cases of separation and divorce, in which animals cease to be mere furniture or divisible goods and are recognized as sentient beings. While the other articles did not characterize the dissolution of affective relationships with the presence of companion animals as an opportunity for family mediation. These authors found that the regulation of the custody and welfare of animals in cases of separation is an unexplored scenario on the part of professionals in the family field, in which they can incorporate principles of mediation sensitive to the presence of animals into their standards.

This is particularly relevant because the main trends in mediation and conciliation in the family field do not make visible the importance of companion animals in the emotional and psychological wellbeing of family dynamics. For example, Rodríguez and Díaz (2020) have questioned this academic invisibility with the inclusion of animals in the preparation of the family genogram, with the aim of providing a framework of the human-animal bond that does not focus attention on the supposed superiority of human beings at the expense of the “relevance of these animals to understand and solve family problems” (p. 12).

Another theoretical orientation consistent with bio egalitarian perspectives in the family was proposed by Gallo and Moreno (2023), who associated the legal recognition of companion animals with the need to recognize the survivor’s pension to sentient beings, in the event of the death of the caretaker. The authors positioned the premise that the affective bond and the emotional dependence developed between companion animals and their caregivers require that protection and care be guaranteed in cases where the death of the caretaker threatens their minimum subsistence conditions.

From a historical approach, they suggested that the survivor’s pension “needs to expand the base of beneficiaries who can claim the recognition of this benefit, since society itself has chosen to transform the concept of family over time” (Gallo & Moreno, 2023, p. 4). The consequences for legislators and policymakers are evident, since the entry of the companion animal into the primary social system of the family would demand the legal protection of its specific needs.

Table 2

Family dynamics

Dimension	Study Type	Author, date of publication and name of article	Keywords	Number of articles
Dynamics Family	Conceptual Theoretical	Díaz Videla, M. (2015). <i>The non-human member of the family: pets through the family life cycle.</i>	Companion animal, family life cycle, family, human-animal interaction, pet.	10
	Conceptual Theoretical	Moreno, L. & Cantor R. (2019). <i>Multi-species family in Colombia.</i>	Affectivity, multispecies family, pet, kinship, family type.	
	Empirical-analytical and cross-sectional	Arboleda, Y. V., Vallejo, L. M. E., Lopera, L. E. M., Márquez, I., & Salazar, J. A. A. (2019). <i>Family functionality and quality of life in families with and without dogs.</i>	Dogs, quality of life, family dysfunction, family, family functionality.	
	Conceptual Theoretical	Narváez, C. A., & Ruiz, P. A. R. (2019). <i>The historical evolution and the new concept of family.</i>	Concept, evolution, family, models, society.	
	Conceptual Theoretical	Videla, M. D., & Ceberio, M. R. (2019). <i>Pets in the family system. Legitimacy, formation and dynamics of the human-animal family.</i>	Companion animal, family dynamics, family, pets, systemic theory.	
	Descriptive	Pérez, E. C., Puerta, M. Z., & Pulgarín, S. E. L. (2019). <i>Multispecies family, significance and influence of pets in the family</i>	Family and pet dynamics, multispecies family, significance, social work.	
	Bibliographic	Lora, J., Maciel, I., Nadal, Z., Ferrari, M., & Díaz, M. (2020). <i>Human-animal family dynamics during social confinement due to Covid-19.</i>	Companion animal, COVID-19, confinement, family, pandemic.	
	Transversal descriptive	Reyes Plazaola, P., Albornoz, A., Fernández, N., Ferrari, M., Podestá, A., Rizzuti, A., & Díaz Videla, M. (2020). <i>Pets in family dynamics: Comparisons of triangulations of couples with children and with animals.</i>	Companion animal, family dynamics, pet, triangle.	
	Evaluative	Videla, M. D., & Olarte, M. A. (2020). <i>Companion dogs as substitute members of the family and the compensation hypothesis.</i>	Anthropomorphism, companion animals, emotional closeness, family, dogs.	
Conceptual Theoretical	Sáez Olmos, J., Caravaca Llamas, C., & Molina Cano, J. (2023). <i>Multispecies family: a multidisciplinary issue and challenge</i>	Family, multispecies, inter-species, human-animal bond.		

Recovered studies on family dynamics provided widespread evidence of the positive influence of companion animals on the roles, functions, and routines of family members. Most of the articles analyzed agreed that the quality of the bond and the emotional support established between caretakers and companion animals benefited the functioning of family dynamics. 10.45 % of the investigations were studies focused on families linked to sports groups (Pérez et al., 2019), couples with and without children (Reyes et al., 2020), families with and without dogs (Arboleda et al., 2019), and adult population in custody of an animal (Videla & Olarte,

2020). The other articles analyzed the key characteristics of the human-animal relationship in family dynamics, identifying the contextual, sociocultural and disciplinary factors that have shaped the phenomenon.

As Narváez and Ruiz (2019) suggest, family dynamics can be understood as the “fabric of relationships and ties crossed by the collaboration, exchange, power and conflict generated between family members” (p. 40). Seven of the recovered studies highlighted the role played by companion animals in improving indicators of wellbeing in family life. This was the case of Pérez et al., (2019) who observed that the animal’s entry into the family system had improved communication between parents and children, mediation in family conflicts, interactions with the external environment and the shared assignment of responsibilities.

Evidence also comes from the studies carried out by Reyes et al. (2020) on the triangulation of couple tensions that incorporate children and animals, who determined that “companion animals participate in a similar way to human family members” (p. 339), especially when it comes to childless couples, where the companion animal acquires a mediating effect of relational anxiety. This perspective is consistent with the data presented by Arboleda et al. (2019), who revealed that “aspects such as mental health, emotional role, social functioning of the members and perceiving that they have vitality and good general health were greater in families that have dogs” (p. 112).

For their part, the research of Videla and Olarte (2020) supported the bi-directional welfare relationship established in households with the presence of human-animal bonds, especially because “caretakers seem to treat their dogs in human terms, regardless of whether they have a partner and/or children, regardless of the age of the children, and regardless of whether or not they live together as a couple or with their children” (p. 11). This confirms companion animals as an important source of social support within the different stages of the family life cycle. In almost all studies, interaction and reciprocity within families were strengthened by the presence of companion animals, including the development of meaningful relationships, better management of emotions, and a reduction in tensions due to the assignment of responsibilities.

An examination of the recovered studies allowed to identify the theories used to analyze the characteristic functioning of the multispecies family. Four of the eleven authors consciously or unconsciously adopted a systemic approach, incorporating their units of analysis into the study of interactions between caretakers and their animals. This was the case of the investigations of Pérez et al. (2019), Arboleda et al. (2019), Videla (2020), and Videla and Olarte (2020), whose results focused on different areas of family functioning given the interactive and bidirectional nature of the human-animal bond of family members.

The analyses of Moreno and Cantor (2019) and Videla and Ceberio (2019) also found that the attachment theory of John Bowlby (1969) has allowed researchers to expand the understanding of the deep and lasting bond established in multispecies families. In particular, Videla and Ceberio (2019) reported that companion animals “can help to fulfill the two basic functions of the family system: increasing cohesion while favoring the development and socialization of members” (p. 55). This perspective supports the findings of previous research carried out by Díaz (2015), who, using the definitions of family structure of Minuchin (1977) and the theory of roles of Merton (1927), stated that “the inclusion of companion animals, their participation in the establishment of rules and practices of family life, and their functions will be part of the structural coupling from which functionality will result” (Díaz, 2015, p. 95).

A similar perspective was reported by Sáez et al. (2023), who argued that “companion animals are part of the family emotional system because of the role they play in family dynamics” (p. 20), clearly referring to the systemic theory, which provides multispecies families with an explanatory model of their interactions. Aspects of the human-animal bond in family dynamics were also analyzed by Lora et al., (2020), who found that, during social confinement due to the covid-19 pandemic, there was an increase in the adoption of pets worldwide. This phenomenon was associated with the resilience and protective effects that companion animals had in the face of emotional distress and isolation generated by the health crisis. The findings of this study led researchers to conclude that the presence of companion animals during the COVID-19 pandemic positively impacted the following aspects: capacity for resilience and adaptation during confinement, communication of emotions, family cohesion and social support.

Most of these studies followed a deductive research logic, generalizing theoretical models to analyze the dynamics of multispecies families. This would explain that the theory of Bowlby (1969) is an accessible reference point when it comes to conceptualizing the emotional connection established between the pet and its caretaker, thus turning the idea of attachment into a highly generative explanatory model.

Table 3

Physical & Mental Wellbeing

Dimension	Study type	Author, date of publication and name of article	Keywords	Number of articles
Wellbeing physical and mental	Exploratory	Gutiérrez, G., Granados, D. R., & Piar, N. (2007). <i>Human-animal interactions: characteristics and implications for human wellbeing.</i>	Human-animal interactions, pets, wellbeing, health.	14
	Conceptual Theoretical	Gómez, L. F., Atehortua, C. G., & Orozco, S. C. (2007). <i>The influence of pets on human life.</i>	Animals, benefits, affective relationship, mental and physical health, zoonosis.	
	Field study	Cruz Vázquez, C. (2009). <i>Pets: Medicinal Friends?</i>	Animal-assisted therapy, bonding, benefits.	
	Statistical	González Ramírez, M. T., & Landero Hernández, R. (2011). <i>Differences in perceived stress, mental and physical health according to the type of human-dog relationship.</i>	Perceived stress, human-dog interaction, physical health, mental health.	
	Exploratory descriptive cross-sectional	Hugues, B., Álvarez, A., Castelo EC, L., Ledón, L., Mendoza, M., & Domínguez, E. (2015). <i>Perception of the benefits of owning companion animals in people with homoerotic and transsexual sexual orientation.</i>	Companion animals, homoerotic sexual orientation, transsexual.	
	Descriptive, correlational and comparative	Videla, M. D., & Olarte, M. A. (2020). <i>Companion animals, human personality and the benefits perceived by caretakers.</i>	Anthrozoology, companion animal benefits, pets, personality.	
	Descriptive	Hugues Hernandorena, B., Álvarez Álvarez, a.m., Castelo Elías-Calles, L., Ledón Llanes, L., Mendoza Trujillo, M., & Domínguez Alonso, E. (2018). <i>Owning companion dogs. Benefits for the psycho-emotional health of patients with Type 2 Diabetes Mellitus in middle age.</i>	Ownership of companion animals, physical health, physical activities.	
	Logical Phenomenon	Londoño-Taborda, M., Lemos, M., & Orejuela, J. J. (2018). <i>Impact of pet adoption on perceptions of physical and emotional wellbeing.</i>	Animals, health, role, relationship.	
	Conceptual Theoretical	Hernandorena, B. H., Álvarez, A. Á., Llanes, L. L., Trujillo, M. M., Elías-Calles, L. C., & Alonso, E. D. (2020). <i>Beneficial effects of companion animals for patients with cardiovascular diseases.</i>	Companion animals, Cardiovascular diseases.	
	Observational descriptive	Cartolin, X., Herrera, P., León, D., & Falcón, N. (2020). Emotional impact associated with the loss or death of a companion animal. <i>Revista de Investigaciones Veterinarias del Perú</i> , 31(3).	Mourning, loss, companion animal, feelings	
Descriptive	Ceberio, M. R., Daverio, R., Agostinelli, J., Calligaro, C., Nicolas, F., Biragnet, C & Videla, M. D. (2020). <i>Pets to therapy! Attitudes of therapists towards incorporating pets into family assessment.</i>	Attitudes, companion animal, family assessment, pets, psychotherapy.		
Descriptive	Kohl, Ú. A. A., Hernández, I., Torres, Y. C., Rivera, J. I. M., & Pérez, G. M. R. (2022). <i>Interaction and emotional connection with companion animals in the lives of many in Puerto Rico.</i>	Human-animal interaction, companion animals, animal-assisted intervention, human-animal bond.		
Exploratory	Hernandorena, B. H., Llanes, L. L., Trujillo, M. M., López, M. A. T., & Álvarez, C. V. B. (2022). <i>Ownership of companion animals during the COVID-19 pandemic in Havana, Cuba.</i>	Companion animals, personal satisfaction, psycho-affective health, covid-19, Cuba.		
Bibliographic	Hugues Hernandorena, B., Ledón Llanes, L., Mendoza Trujillo, M., Torres López, M.A., & Berovides, V. (2023). <i>Ownership of companion animals in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic: review of studies.</i>	Covid-19, One Health, Ownership of companion animals		

Fourteen articles related to the physical and mental health benefits in families living with pets were identified; 83 % of these studies looked at the positive influence of dogs and cats on the health of caretakers. Research originated in the fields of psychology, medicine, and veterinary medicine. The populations considered in the investigations included patients with cardiovascular diseases (Hernandorena et al., 2020), university students (Cruz, 2009), middle-aged patients with diabetes (Hernandorena et al., 2018), population with homoerotic and transsexual sexual orientation (Hugues et al., 2015), men and women with infertility (2015), and men and women between 18 and 65 years of age (Londoño et al., 2018).

It is important to clarify that numerous investigations in the field of animal-assisted therapy show the benefits of animals in different population groups; however, most of their findings do not include references to the multispecies family. For instance, studies on animal-assisted therapy in attention to diversity (Martínez, 2008), which analyzed the benefits of this type of therapy on the quality of life of people with special educational needs, or those of Ramírez and Hernández (2013), which reported the effectiveness of dog-assisted therapies in women with negative thoughts. Although these investigations associate human wellbeing with animal interaction, they do not relate their findings to the family system.

This review identified that studies associated the psycho-emotional benefits of human-animal interaction with “improving mental health and human quality of life by reducing stress, promoting relaxation, recreation, and distraction, and alleviating depression, fears, distress, anxiety, and feelings of loneliness” (Hugues et al., 2015, 2023). Despite the methodological heterogeneity of the research and the diversity of the participants, results of the reports have an important heuristic value to explain the physical and mental benefits of multispecies families.

Hugues et al. (2015) conducted studies with infertile couples, from which they reported the positive effects on psycho-emotional health and personal satisfaction. It is reflected in the feeling of companionship and wellbeing of those who interacted with companion animals in their homes. The results highlighted the improvement in family communication and the protective factors against tensions and health problems provided by interspecies contact. This was similar to what was reported by people with homoerotic and transsexual sexual orientation because ties with companion animals favored their interpersonal relationships and family union (Hugues et al., 2015).

Wellbeing factors have also been associated with relaxing and socializing effects in middle-aged patients diagnosed with type 2 diabetes, who reported that their relationship with dogs was a driving engine for physical activity (Hugues et al., 2018). Another consistent finding in patients with heart disease was identified by Hernandorena et al., (2020), who found benefits in the reduction of depressive symptoms, anxiety, and other psychological manifestations.

It is important to note that most of this research offers an empirical basis for documenting the wellbeing of the human-animal relationship in urban contexts. Therefore, the benefits of the interaction between family and the companion animal in rural environments is a line of research with high possibilities of development.

This documentary review also identified literature that examines the benefits of the human-animal relationship for mental health. This research *corpus*, although heterogeneous, allows us to synthesize the lines of research that have been developed. The studies of Gómez et al. (2007) and Londoño et al. (2018) documented the deep emotional connection that caretakers establish with their companion animals and their implications for human wellbeing. Their research has highlighted the social and emotional support mechanisms that strengthen meaningful relationships in the family system. In most cases, dogs and cats acted as uncalculated family vertebrae of the level of participation and interactions between their members, thus strengthening the protective factors against social isolation. This fact is directly linked to the human-animal bond and its ability to affect healthy behaviors in family dynamics.

Similarly, Cartolin et al. (2020), in a study of 100 people who experienced the loss of their companion animal, found that feelings of nostalgia, grief and sadness were related to the fact that “companion animals within a family transmit, in addition to a feeling of companionship, values such as unconditional love, fidelity, joy and discipline; which are taught to both children and adults” (pp. 2-3).

The studies of Videla and Olarte (2016) also reinforce this perspective. They analyzed the benefits perceived by 549 dog and cat caretakers and established that 81.2 % fully considered their companion animal as a member of their family. This reinforces the idea that the quality of interactions between humans and animals has the potential to improve quality of life in areas such as perceived happiness, reduction of anxiety, and social support.

These findings expand on previous research, such as that conducted by Cruz (2009) with 50 university students from Mexico City. He found that “52 % of the participants considered their pets as part of the family” (p. 55). This is of particular importance for the research agenda of family wellbeing, since we can expect that in the coming decades, the rejection of the position of human exceptionalism and the hierarchization of species will increase. Those approaches have excluded non-human animals from the sphere of physical and mental wellbeing, which will give way to bio egalitarian models, sensitive to human-animal interaction.

Table 4

Animal-Human Bond

Dimension	Study type	Author, date of publication and name of article	Keywords	Number of articles
Animal-Human Bond	Bibliographic	Samó, L. M. M. (2014). <i>The human-animal bond and its implications for psychology in Puerto Rico.</i>	Human-animal bond, human-animal interaction, pets, companion animals, animal abuse, animal-assisted therapy, psychology.	9
	Descriptive	González-Ramírez, M. T., Vanegas-Farfano, M., & Landero-Hernández, R. (2017). <i>Mexican version of the Monash scale of the owner's relationship with their dog (MDORS-M).</i>	Dogs, companion animals, human-animal interaction, human-animal bond, animal companionship.	
	Ethnographic	Aguilar, M. A. (2019). <i>That special relationship with dogs and cats: the multispecies family and its metaphors.</i>	Human-animal relationships, human-animal studies, anthrozoology, companion animal, multispecies family.	
	Conceptual Theoretical	Ríos, J. F., García, E., Darder, P., Argüelles, J., & Bowen, J. (2020). <i>The bond with dogs and cats during the state of alarm due to the Covid-19 pandemic in Spain.</i>	COVID-19, Human-animal bond, Anthrozoology, Canine behavior, Feline behavior.	
	Ethnographic	Zapata-Herrera, M., Sanmartín-Laverde, C. M., & Hoyos-Duque, T. N. (2021). <i>Understanding the elderly-pet bond as an alternative for health promotion.</i>	Elderly, pet, understanding, human-animal bond, health promotion.	
	Descriptive	Córdova-Cando, D. J., Gaona-Cueva, L. A., Vivanco-Luzuriaga, F. F., & Cando-Jiménez, D. H. (2021). <i>Dogs and emotional connection in childhood.</i>	Affection, attitude, dog, coexistence, encouragement, experiences.	
	Descriptive	Barrera, G., & Bentosela, M. (2022). <i>Dogs and their close bond with people. What makes them unique?</i>	Dog-human bond, sociability, docility, synchronization.	
	Conceptual Theoretical	Mangas, J., & Ferrari, H. R. (2022). <i>Human-domestic cat relationship in the household and its impact on animal welfare.</i>	Education, animal welfare, multi-species coexistence	
Descriptive	Marmolejo-Martín, J. A., Moral-Cuadra, S., Aguilar-Rivero, M., & López-Guzmán, T. (2023). <i>Analysis of family attachment when traveling with pets. A perspective from tourist demand.</i>	Tourist demand, pets, destinations, attachment, travel.		

The search recovered nine articles related to the human-animal bond in multispecies families. The studies included in the review analyzed the bond between animals and older people (Zapata et al., 2021), families with dogs and cats in domestic contexts (Aguilar, 2019), children with dogs (Córdova et al., 2021), and families that travel with dogs (Marmolejo et al., 2023). Most of the articles provided information about their methodological approach and participating population. Theoretical-conceptual and descriptive studies stand out; 80 % of the studies were published between 2019 and 2023.

The main findings supported the idea that the human-animal bond and human wellbeing are positively correlated. This bond has been conceptualized as “the intimate relationship that people establish with animal species such as dogs and cats” (Zapata et al., 2021, p. 194), taking into account that the “bond concerns the affective implications that arise in some of the relationships” (Acero, 2019, p. 162). This definition contrasts with utilitarian relationships, in which the possession of a companion animal responds to the positioning of the identity of the caretaker or the recognition of its status.

Findings revealed that the key element of the human-animal bond is the dynamic and mutually beneficial relationship it provides to both species. The study with dogs conducted by Barrera and Bentosela (2021) and, with cats, by Mangas and Ferrari (2022), reported that the inclusion of the animal as part of a multispecies family, in the case of cats, and the formation of positive and significant bonds between dogs and their caretakers, significantly increased family support resources.

The dynamic and beneficial relationship of the human-animal bond within families has also been associated with the promotion of health in the elderly. The study carried out by Zapata et al. (2021) on fourteen people (between 60 and 85 years old), who lived with a companion animal for a minimum period of six months, revealed that the established bond “is an adjuvant for the promotion of the health of older people in their family and community environment” (p. 200). Results highlighted that the formation of emotional bonds between species encouraged physical activity, communication and mediation at home.

In addition to reporting benefits related to tranquility and the management of negative emotions, the analyses of Córdova et al. (2021) on the links that children and their dogs establish also reported the decrease of feelings of loneliness and anxiety, in contrast to the increase of self-esteem, confidence, and empathy. This study, carried out on ninety children (between 4 and 12 years old), established that the presence of dogs in the family allows children to learn to “be responsible; it also helps them to manage their emotions, to understand love, care and protection, and, of course, to create healthy emotional bonds” (p. 774).

For its part, in fields such as tourism, the importance of the bond between pets and their caretakers has also been documented. This was the case of the study carried out by Marmolejo et al. (2023), who reported on the predisposition of families to travel with their pets, in this case, with their dogs. This increase in travel experiences that include humans and animals highlights what is proposed by authors such as Russow (2002), who has suggested three conditions that significantly shape the human-animal bond and are fundamental when explaining interactions in multispecies families.

First, Russow (2002) considers that the bond established between the human being and the animal must be individual, which implies the recognition of unique attributes and attitudes of the companion animal *vis-à-vis* other members of the same species; that is, the bond is only built from the differences attributed, as unique individuals endowed with a name, instead of thinking of the animal collectively or generically as belonging to the species of cats or dogs.

Secondly, this author argues that there must be multiple interaction and a reciprocal and persistent recognition; there is evidence of “greater trust on the part of the animal and greater care and understanding of the needs of the animal by the human being” (Russow, 2002, p. 34).

And, thirdly, the human-animal relationship must promote an increase in wellbeing for both parties through relationships of recognition and mutual support. These three elements are fundamental to understanding the different degrees of success that emotionally close relationships between family members who share bonds with dogs and cats can achieve.

Discussion

Until a few years ago, the idea that a companion animal was just another member of the family was simply unacceptable to many people. Today, academic literature shows that dogs and cats are fundamental parties in family life. This has not only challenged the normative ideas of family and its speciesist assumptions, but also the paradigm that only human beings have moral value in household dynamics.

The way families live and relate to their companion animals has changed significantly since the second decade of the 20th century; however, experiences of multispecies family have rarely been the subject of disciplinary investigation. This documentary review identifies four cross-cutting issues that stand out in the approach to the multispecies family and structures the current controversies around the legitimization of this family typology: (a) legal recognition; (b) family dynamics; (c) physical and mental wellbeing; and (d) the human-animal bond.

According to the findings, during the first two decades of the 21st century, the number of cases that have reached courts and involve companion animals as recognized members of the family is increasing. It has led to a rapid growth in the number of rulings aimed at conferring legal status on animals in the family context. This is supported by the works of Disconzi et al. (2017), González (2019), Sánchez (2020), Truyenque (2023), and Ezquerro (2023), who focused on the need to adapt the current regulations to the new social reality of the multispecies family, thus recognizing the contribution of the human-animal bond to the wellbeing of its members.

Essentially, literature seems to indicate that the number of families that share their home with a companion animal is increasing worldwide, and this trend is likely to remain in the coming years. This would imply the adaptation of legal culture in the family field. However, studies highlighted that the multispecies family as an emerging reality has posed new problems and questions to legal professionals: How to regulate the care of the companion animal in cases of dissolution of conjugal society? How to reconcile the tension between the naming of companion animals as sentient beings and movable beings? These questions challenge existing legal frameworks and demand new approaches in legal practice. In three out of the fourteen studies recovered, the intersection between legal entity and the recognition of animal rights is the implicit argument of the debate; this perspective would have its roots in understanding family from a speciesist and anthropocentric approach.

Regarding family dynamics, the findings of the review supported the argument that the presence of the companion animal in the family had a positive influence on patterns of family relationship and interaction. From different perspectives, all the articles added weight to the idea of Videla and Ceberio (2019), who express that “the family must be conceived as an emotional and relational system composed of multispecies elements, where all actively contribute to the dynamic balance of the system” (p. 60). It was recognized that the bidirectional nature of the human-animal bond favored emotional support in families, their effective communication and cooperation in household responsibilities, which, in turn, had lasting impacts on the different dimensions of family life.

Focusing on thematization during the analysis, it is possible to affirm that several articles observed a protective factor of family functioning in the companion animal due to its ability to strengthen the positive interaction of the members. This perspective was strongly influenced by the systemic approach, which offers researchers of the multispecies family a conceptual framework to analyze the transactional dynamics established between species.

Regarding physical and mental wellbeing, most of the findings are similar: companion animals constitute a significant attachment figure in families. They not only provide physical, psychological and social wellbeing to their caretakers, but also contribute to the development and stability of family relationships in the short and long term. These findings are consistent with articles that examined the positive attributes of companion animals and the quality of life of family members.

When examining the positive effects of companion animals, a significant association was found between interaction with dogs and cats and the promotion of human health. The most common physical and mental wellbeing outcomes reported in the articles were stress reduction (Gómez et al., 2007), psychosocial wellbeing (González & Landero Hernández, 2011), increased social interaction (Hugues et al., 2014), and intimate emotional connection (Aragunde Kohl et

al., 2022). This suggests that the human-animal relationship not only increased the quantity and quality of the interaction, but also reinforced vital support bonds when facing adverse events in the life cycle of families.

The literature recovered on the human-animal bond also suggests that relationships within the multispecies family favor empathy and support among members. A starting point to understand this phenomenon is that, in this type of relationship, it is possible to “maintain proximity with another animal and restore it when it has been interrupted; and second, the specificity of the other individual, which implies its recognition” (Gutiérrez et al., 2007, p. 169).

Future directions

The accelerated transformation in the demographic composition of families and the increase in companion animals in households have eroded traditional conceptualizations of family life. This transformation has not only generated emerging areas of study, but also future directions for research. It is expected that, in the coming years, the presence of domestic animals will continue to impact family structures, with important implications in two directly interconnected areas: animal abuse and domestic violence.

A significant number of investigations have identified animal abuse as a predictor of violence against people, which has repercussions for multispecies families. Authors such as Bernuz (2015), Buompadre (2013) and Herbert (2020) have analyzed the correlation between cruelty against companion animals and domestic violence, finding that, sometimes, aggressors instrumentalize abuse against dogs and cats to hurt or produce psychological suffering in children and partners.

Their findings also confirm that beating the animal, its isolation and the deprivation of its basic needs, are used as a family control strategy by the aggressors. This is consistent with the statement that households with a higher prevalence of domestic violence and child abuse have higher numbers of animal abuse, compared to households not exposed to these forms of violence.

Although the evidence on the relationship between dog and cat abuse and domestic violence is increasing, most institutional formats that record events of violence and abuse in families are not designed to identify the coexistence of domestic violence and animal abuse. These instruments do not allow professionals to associate mistreatment between species as an indicator of domestic violence.

This not only represents a barrier to the coordinated response by the authorities, but also reflects that the psychosocial intervention of professionals is still strongly influenced by the speciesist bias that has dominated the social sciences, which makes the suffering of animals invisible for the sake of human benefit.

In countries with a high prevalence of domestic violence, such as Colombia, where the National Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences (INMLCF By its spanish acronym) reported that, “during 2021, 18,043 medico-legal assessments were conducted for domestic violence” (Forensis, p. 169), future research efforts should include the design of tools to detect domestic violence between species.

This would make it possible to adequately evaluate the interconnected forms of human-animal violence and identify the risk and protection factors associated with this type of family. It is expected that, in the coming years, the increase in single-person households, couples without children and families made up exclusively of older adults will be accompanied by greater coexistence with pets. Therefore, it is important to eliminate any barriers in the instruments to detect human-animal polyvictimization in domestic violence. To date, professionals only work with standardized instruments that identify events of domestic violence as phenomena exclusive to human families.

At a time when dogs and cats are an important part of our lives, it is possible to imagine that the human-animal bond will be one of the forces shaping family studies. Therefore, the design of preventive strategies will improve wellbeing indicators by identifying domestic violence between species early.

Conclusions

This literature review has taken the first step in the analysis and categorization of existing research articles related to the multispecies family. Current data on the decrease in family size, aging of the population, growth of environmental sensitivity, and the increase in women roles in the labor market seem to confirm that the human-animal bond will be more frequent in the family system.

This phenomenon will not only accelerate the paradigm shift in the way we relate to sentient beings, but also position the multispecies family as a legitimate form of family arrangement. The importance of this process lies in the fact that it invites professionals who work with families to develop new concepts and question the speciesist conceptions of family that they still take for granted in their approaches.

This review also suggests that the growing presence of companion animals in households and the recognition of the human-animal bond as an integral part of family dynamics has driven a generalized tendency in the social sciences to adopt a progressive position towards the recognition of the multispecies family. It aims at keeping pace with social change and developing new perspectives that explore the benefits of the interaction between the family system and the companion animal. Despite the continued growth in publications, more studies that investigate, from different perspectives, the dynamics established between companion animals and their caretakers are necessary.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest with an institution or association of any kind.

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