

Cross-Cultural Encounters With Free-Living Dogs as Epistemic Disruption in Western Dog Training Expertise

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ABSTRACT

Debates about canine welfare and behavior in Western settings are often shaped by professional expertise grounded in pet-centered assumptions about care, control, and risk. While often presented as evidence-based and welfare-oriented, these frameworks are culturally situated, drawing heavily on knowledge derived from dogs living under conditions of confinement and intensive human intervention. In contrast, free-living dogs comprise most of the global dog population but remain peripheral within dominant epistemic frameworks, despite offering a different context for understanding canine behavior and welfare. This study examined how cross-cultural encounters with free-living dogs in India disrupted and reconfigured interpretive frameworks of Western dog-training experts and behavior professionals. Drawing on qualitative data from 45 participants in structured observational tours, we analyze how first-hand exposure challenged preexisting assumptions and prompted reflection on their own professional practices toward companion dogs. Participants came to describe and interpret dogs in India as behaviorally competent, socially embedded, and capable of regulating conflict and arousal without close human control. These encounters led many to question welfare models that equate good care with confinement, obedience-focused training, and intensive management. Rather than proposing free-living dogs as a universal model, the findings show how cross-cultural encounters can expose the cultural specificity of dominant training paradigms and open space for more reflexive, context-sensitive approaches to companion dog welfare and practice.

KEYWORDS

Human–animal interaction; interpretive frameworks; knowledge transformation; multispecies relations; professional expertise; relational welfare

Debates about canine welfare and behavior in Western countries are increasingly shaped by professional expertise grounded in training, behavioral assessment, and risk-oriented governance (Weber et al., 2026). Across policy, research, and everyday practice, expert-led frameworks define what counts as normal, desirable, or problematic canine behavior, and in doing so establish the parameters through which canine wellbeing is interpreted and

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managed (Hunt et al., 2022; Stephens-Lewis et al., 2024; Sulkama et al., 2022). These frameworks are typically presented as evidence-based and ethically progressive. However, the knowledge that informs them is overwhelmingly derived from dogs living under conditions of ownership, confinement, and intensive human management (Cudworth, 2024; Verbeek et al., 2024), reflecting the socio-cultural conditions of Western pet-keeping systems rather than the broader diversity of canine lives globally. As a result, dominant understandings of canine welfare are not epistemically neutral, but culturally situated, shaped by assumptions about control, care, and human–dog relationships.

Free-living dogs, who comprise most of the global dog population, remain largely peripheral to these epistemic frameworks. Despite extensive evidence that free-living dogs navigate complex socio-ecological environments, maintain social relationships with both humans and conspecifics, and display behavioral flexibility in the absence of ownership or formal control (Bhattacharjee et al., 2018; Bhattacharjee & Bhadra, 2020; Srinivasan, 2019), they are frequently framed within Western discourse as welfare deficient, public health concerns, or management problems. Cross-cultural work on free-roaming dogs similarly shows that negative public perceptions often coexist with more affirmative human–dog relations, where reimagining dogs not as pests but as participants in situated social worlds can promote stronger community ties and less antagonistic forms of coexistence (Arluke & Atema, 2017). Despite evidence that dogs may occupy liminal and shifting positions between street animals, community companions, or household pets in public perceptions and practice (Arluke & Rowan, 2020), their marginalization is not simply empirical, but epistemic: free-living dogs are rarely positioned as legitimate sources of insight into canine behavior, welfare, or social organization (Blenkuš et al., 2025; Capitain et al., 2024; Hansen Wheat & Wynne, 2025). Instead, they are interpreted through frameworks developed in relation to pet dogs, reinforcing assumptions that canine wellbeing is contingent on human ownership, oversight, intervention, and regulation.

Dog trainers and behavior consultants occupy a critical position within this landscape as epistemic intermediaries, translating scientific knowledge, cultural norms, and regulatory expectations into everyday canine lives. Their expertise, training, and professional practice are primarily embedded within Western, pet-centered paradigms that privilege predictability and compliance to minimize risk (Cudworth, 2024). As such, examining how these practitioners encounter alternative forms of human–dog coexistence provides a powerful lens through which to interrogate the cultural grounding of dominant welfare models and the assumptions embedded within professional expertise. From a transdisciplinary perspective, moments in which established interpretive frameworks are confronted with unfamiliar or contradictory forms of animal life are significant because they generate epistemic disruption, unsettling taken-for-granted knowledge and opening space for reflexive engagement across partially connected knowledge systems, reinterpretation, and transformation (Ludwig & Charbel, 2025).

This study examined such a moment of disruption via a cross-cultural learning intervention. In 2025, 45 Western-trained dog behavior professionals participated in structured observational tours of free-living dogs across multiple Indian cities, representing their first sustained, direct engagement with dogs living without ownership or containment. We conceptualize these tours not as opportunities to generate behavioral data about

dogs but as structured cross-cultural encounters that surface and challenge the assumptions underpinning professional expertise. Using qualitative analysis of participant reflections before, during, and after these encounters, we investigate how established interpretive frameworks were reinforced, unsettled, and reconfigured. Specifically, we ask (1) how expectations about free-living dogs are formed within Western training paradigms, (2) how these expectations are challenged through first-hand experience, and (3) how such encounters reshape professional understandings of canine welfare, behavior, and human–dog relations.

By focusing on the transformation of expertise, this study contributes to debate on the cultural constitution of animal knowledge, the limits of pet-centered welfare frameworks, and the role of cross-cultural, multispecies encounters in expanding the epistemic and ethical horizons of human–animal relations (Fox et al., 2023). More specifically, it shows how transdisciplinary methods can create structured opportunities for reflexivity within Western dog training and behavioral knowledge systems by bringing professional assumptions into contact with alternative canine social and ecological worlds, cultural practices, and forms of care. In this sense, the value of the encounters examined here lies not only in what they reveal about free-living dogs but in how they make visible the historical and cultural contingencies of Western expertise itself (Ludwig & Charbel, 2025), opening space for more self-critical, context-sensitive, and agency-attentive approaches to canine welfare and human–dog coexistence.

Methods

This study adopted a reflexive qualitative research design to examine how professional knowledge and interpretive frameworks among Western-trained dog behavior practitioners are disrupted and reconfigured through cross-cultural encounters. Rather than seeking to generate behavioral inference about dogs, the study focused on processes of epistemic transformation, treating participants' interpretations, expectations, and reflections as the primary object of analysis. The structured observational tours of free-living dogs in India were conceptualized as experiential interventions that create conditions for encountering alternative multispecies arrangements, thereby surfacing and challenging taken-for-granted assumptions embedded within pet-centered expertise. Data were generated through facilitated group discussions, pre- and post-tour reflections, and participant-produced materials capturing evolving interpretations across the duration of the tours. Analysis was directed toward identifying shifts in how participants understood canine behavior, welfare, and human–dog relations, with particular attention to moments of disruption, reinterpretation, and the rearticulation of professional practice.

Ethics Statement

This research was approved by the University of Technology Sydney's Human Research Ethics Committee (ETH24-10233) and was conducted according to the Australian National Statement of Ethical Conduct in Human Research (National Health and Medical Research Council). All participants consented to being part of this research project.

Tours and Participants

The Dog Study Tours were organized by Caesar Pet Academy, Pune, India, an organization engaged in the care of free-living dogs and in community-based outreach. Caesar Pet Academy is affiliated with the USA-based Family Dog Mediation Education Center (<https://www.familydogmediation.com>), which delivers an Applied Ethology training program (L.E.G.S.: Learning, Environment, Genetics, Self) for dog trainers and behavioral consultants. The program emphasizes canine-centered interpretations of behavior, with attention to welfare, environmental context, and behavioral needs. At the Center's annual conference in 2023, several course participants indicated interest in attending observational tours to India to allow them to observe free-living dogs. Forty-five participants elected to take part in the first round of tours in 2025, organized by Caesar Pet Academy. Participants joined one of four separate but identical tours, each lasting 11 days and visiting five cities (Mumbai, Pune, Calangute, New Delhi, and Agra).

Participants were self-recruited and were comprised of Western-educated dog trainers, behavior consultants, veterinary assistants, applied ethologists, and professionals working in pet care and welfare sectors. Two participants also had formal training in human psychology and law. None had previously engaged in sustained, first-hand encounters with free-living dogs. As noted by Weber et al. (2026), practitioners' expertise, ethical orientations, and training backgrounds can shape how canine behavior and welfare are perceived, making this group analytically relevant to the study aims.

Participants were primarily from North America ($n = 39$), with additional representation from Germany ($n = 1$), the Netherlands ($n = 2$), the United Kingdom ($n = 1$), and Australia ($n = 1$). Only two participants had visited India previously. Tour group sizes ranged from four to 16 participants, comprised of six men and 39 women, ranging in age from 31 to 66 years old.

Tour Program

The tours were conducted between January and March 2025, with the four groups traveling sequentially across through the same itinerary. Each tour followed an identical 11-day program, moving between Mumbai, Pune, Calangute, and New Delhi, with a day visit to Agra. On the first day of each tour, participants received a briefing on Indian cultural contexts relevant to human–dog coexistence. They were also provided with guidelines for observing dogs that were explicitly designed to minimize human intrusion and to support canine agency. Participants were instructed to not initiate interactions to invite approach (e.g., calling, whistling, making eye contact, or altering body posture). When encountering dogs in public spaces, participants were asked to wait at a distance and observe quietly, avoiding behaviors that might arouse vigilance or encourage approach.

If a dog initiated an interaction, participants were encouraged to respond in a reciprocal and non-directive manner until the dog indicated disengagement. A three-second consent rule was applied during any physical contact, whereby participants paused after three seconds to assess whether the dog wished to continue interaction or move away. Participants were not permitted to carry food that might attract dogs. Each day, participants spent approximately 2–3 h observing dogs in the morning and 2–3 h in the

evening, across streets and other public spaces. During each observation session, between 10 and 30 dogs were encountered, with observed group sizes ranging from solitary individuals to packs of up to eight dogs. Encounters were typically unplanned: dogs were not actively sought out but were encountered along predetermined walking routes (e.g., routes to train stations, restaurants, markets, or tourist sites). Upon encountering dogs, participants stopped at a safe distance to observe behavior.

Research Design

This study employed a reflexive qualitative design to examine how professional knowledge is constituted, challenged, and reconfigured through cross-cultural encounters (Ludwig & Charbel, 2025). Rather than positioning the research as an intervention designed to modify participant behavior, the tours were conceptualized as structured experiential contexts that generate conditions for epistemic disruption by bringing Western-trained dog behavior practitioners into sustained contact with alternative multi-species arrangements (Fox et al., 2023). Within this framework, the research design was oriented toward documenting how participants articulate and transform their interpretive frameworks in response to these encounters.

Data generation was embedded within the ongoing activities of the tours and centered on collective processes of reflection and sense-making. Facilitated group discussions were conducted on four of the 11 tour days, providing iterative opportunities for participants to articulate expectations, register moments of surprise or dissonance, and reinterpret their observations in dialogue with others. Prior to any observations, participants were invited to externalize their existing assumptions about free-living dogs, thereby making implicit knowledge frameworks explicit and available for examination. All discussions were structured around open-ended prompts designed to foreground reflexivity, including participants' interpretations, emotional responses, and perceptions of human–dog relations across contexts. These sessions were conducted as collaborative dialogues, prioritizing shared inquiry, mutual learning, and non-judgmental exchange (Bohm & Weinberg, 2004), consistent with a transdisciplinary emphasis on engaging multiple forms of expertise (Hoffmann et al., 2017).

Following the tours, additional online group meetings were held within one month of participants returning home to capture post-encounter reflections and to trace how initial disruptions were being incorporated into ongoing professional thinking. Participants also generated written reflections (e.g., blogs and professional materials), social media posts, and continued discussion within tour-specific communication platforms, providing further insight into evolving interpretive frameworks beyond the immediate encounter context.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2021) to examine processes of epistemic change across the course of the tours. Focusing on exploring trainer expertise, analysis was directed toward participants' underlying assumptions and the sense-making practices they employed to interpret their encounters. This

approach prioritized how participants described and evaluated their encounters, paying attention to shifts in the conceptual frameworks used to understand canine behavior and welfare, and therefore human–dog relations.

Analysis was guided by three overarching questions: (1) how expectations about free-living dogs are formed within Western training paradigms; (2) how these expectations are disrupted, challenged, or destabilized through cross-cultural encounter; and (3) how these disruptions are rearticulated into revised understandings of practice, welfare, and ultimately expertise regarding companion dogs. These questions oriented the analysis toward identifying patterns of continuity and change across pre-tour assumptions, in-tour reflections, and post-tour reinterpretations.

Initial coding was descriptive and focused on expressions of expectation, surprise, tension, and reinterpretation evident across group discussion notes and participant-generated written reflections. Coding was iterative and reflexive, with ongoing movement between data and interpretation to trace how concepts such as autonomy, agency, deficit, and resilience were mobilized, and if contested, reformulated. Through this process, descriptive codes were cross-checked among the team and consolidated into higher-order themes that captured stages and dynamics of epistemic transformation, including the articulation of prior knowledge frameworks, moments of disruption, processes of reframing, and the reconfiguration of professional perspectives.

Researcher Positionality

Given the reflexive and transdisciplinary nature of this study, researcher positionality is understood as integral to the production and interpretation of knowledge rather than as a source of bias to be bracketed. The research team comprised an Indian street dog behavior practitioner (KVP), who led the tours, shaped the unfolding of trainer–dog encounters, and facilitated all group discussions, and two Australian researchers (DR and RSC) with backgrounds in animal behavior, ecology, and human–animal interactions. This combination of practitioner and academic expertise, situated across Indian and Western contexts, influenced both the design of the encounters and the interpretive lenses through which they were analyzed. The framing of research questions, development of analytical categories, and interpretation of findings were collaboratively undertaken, informed by the disciplinary backgrounds and research commitments of the team. To maintain analytical integrity, the analysis prioritized participants' own words and interpretations, while recognizing that these accounts are co-produced within specific socio-cultural and relational contexts.

Results

Preexisting Interpretive Frameworks

Prior to the first day of street observations, participants articulated a set of preconceived culturally and professionally shaped assumptions about free-living dogs (locally referred to as “Indies”) that together formed the interpretive framework they brought to the tours. These expectations combined idealized notions of autonomy and resilience with

deficit-based assumptions about welfare, revealing the coexistence of admiration and concern within Western imaginaries of dogs living outside human ownership. Participants commonly expected that freedom from confinement would enable dogs to meet their basic needs, avoid conflict, and regulate their own behavior more effectively than companion dogs. Some suggested that access to space would allow dogs to disengage from threatening situations and thereby reduce behavioral problems. Several participants also assumed that free-living dogs would not require “training” in the Western sense because they would have developed practical competencies through everyday life.

At the same time, these expectations of autonomy and competence were accompanied by assumptions of compromised welfare. Participants anticipated that most free-living dogs would be poorly treated by people, would lack access to medical care, and would experience shorter lifespans due to untreated illness or injury. Many expected dogs to be unsterilized and that females would face heightened reproductive burdens and competition for resources. Thus, even where participants imagined free-living dogs as more behaviorally free, they also understood them through frameworks in which welfare remained tied to human protection and management.

Despite these concerns, participants also expected Indies to display emotional and behavioral resilience. They anticipated dogs would be calm, relaxed, and independent, capable of sleeping in a wide range of environments, and less fearful than Western pet dogs. Conversely, participants predicted that food insecurity would lead to resource guarding and competitive behavior. Participants further attributed high levels of cognitive and social intelligence to free-living dogs, expecting them to be adept communicators with conspecifics, skilled at reading human behavior, and effective problem-solvers. Indies were anticipated to exhibit broad behavioral repertoires, diverse personalities, and what participants described as “common sense.” These pre-tour accounts did more than describe expectations about dogs; they made visible the prior knowledge structures through which participants were prepared to interpret what they would encounter.

Encounter, Dissonance, and Reframing

As participants engaged in direct observation of free-living dogs, many of their initial assumptions were unsettled through sustained encounter. The tours generated repeated moments in which previously held expectations did not fully account for what participants were seeing, producing forms of dissonance that promoted reinterpretation (Figure 1). Group discussions documented a shift away from expectations of widespread hardship, as participants frequently noted dogs that they interpreted as physically robust, behaviorally stable, and socially integrated within their environments. They also became more attentive to the varied forms of care provided by local communities, including informal and systematic feeding, tolerance, and everyday coexistence. Rather than simply confirming prior beliefs about autonomy or deprivation, encounters required participants to reconsider how welfare, competence, and care might be differently configured in a setting not organized around ownership and control.

One recurring site of disruption concerned reflections on the behavior of dogs within highly stimulating urban settings. Participants repeatedly interpreted the dogs they encountered as calm, settled, and selectively responsive rather than hyper-vigilant or



Figure 1. Photographs depicting encounters tour participants had with free-living dogs in a variety of contexts during the tours (with participant consent). **A.** Tour group visiting local dogs at the Shree Ballaleshwar Ganapati Temple, Pali. **B.** Tour group posing for a group photo in Pune, with a dog sleeping in the foreground. **C.** Tour participant being attentive to a dog looked after by the Stray Buddy program (<https://straybuddy.in/>). **D.** Tour group walking with dogs in parkland in Pune. **E.** Group discussion over morning chai joined by a resting dog in Pali. **F.** Tour group and dogs resting on the beach in Goa. All photos copyright KVP.

overwhelmed. They described and interpreted dogs as filtering out constant background noise such as traffic and crowds while reacting primarily to novel or salient stimuli. They came to characterize perceived thresholds for arousal as high, with few instances of rapid escalation. For participants whose professional experience was grounded largely in Western pet dog contexts, this was especially striking. Many contrasted these interpretations with what they described as the more frequent “spiking” of arousal among companion dogs living under conditions of confinement and sensory restriction. What had initially been imagined as a chaotic or inherently stressful environment was therefore reinterpreted by many participants as one in which dogs demonstrated significant adaptive capacity.

Participants also remarked upon a reworking of assumptions about sociality and communication. They interpreted interactions as involving proportionate play, efficient conflict resolution, and the frequent use of ritualized aggression, such as posturing, growling, or snapping. Participants framed this not as evidence of dysfunction but as a communicative strategy that enabled de-escalation. When unfamiliar dogs approached established groups, participants came to describe corrections and subsequent learning as brief and non-dramatic, suggesting a social system organized through negotiation rather than intervention. When they observed dogs initiating contact with people voluntarily, participants interpreted this as seeking social interaction rather than food, disengaging without escalation when they chose to do so. Participants used these observations to disrupt assumptions that dogs require close human management to interact safely or appropriately, and instead foregrounded autonomy, timing, and self-regulation as central features of social competence.

As encounters accumulated over the course of the tours, participants increasingly interpreted these dynamics in relation to broader differences between Indian and Western human–dog relations. They contrasted their observations with what they described as Western patterns of over-handling, heightened anxiety around dogs, and intensive management of everyday behavior. Local people were often perceived as relating to dogs through casual familiarity, non-intrusive presence, and occasional care rather than constant supervision or control. For some participants, this produced an unexpected emotional response. Rather than feeling pity for free-living dogs, they reported concern or sorrow for companion dogs in their home contexts. This shift was significant not simply as an affective response but as an indication that the encounter had begun to destabilize underlying assumptions about what grounds training expertise and what best supports canine wellbeing. By the end of the tours, many participants summarized this transformation in terms of a changed guiding question: from “How do street dogs survive?” at the outset, to “How do pet dogs survive us?” by the end.

Reflection and Reconfiguration of Professional Expertise

If reflections during the tours captured moments of disruption and reinterpretation, post-tour reflections revealed how those disruptions were consolidated into broader critiques of Western pet-keeping and professional practice, encompassing key dimensions of canine welfare, behavior, and human–dog relations (Table 1). After returning home, many participants described experiencing what they characterized as a form of reverse culture shock. The contrast between the dogs they had observed in India and the dogs they encountered again in Western domestic settings sharpened their critical awareness of the norms governing companion dog lives. Participants increasingly came to describe pet dogs as living under conditions of restriction, over-management, and reduced behavioral possibility. In this context, several reframed the contrast not as one between “pets” and “strays,” but between “captives” and “free agents.”

Participants also reflected on differences in canine body language, interpreting the broader and less compressed signals of free-living dogs as further evidence that behavioral expression is shaped by environmental conditions and social structures. Many

Table 1. Summary of participant interpretations and reframing of canine welfare, behavior, and human–dog relations across free-living dogs in India and companion dogs in Western settings, including their reflections on how these observations may transform training expertise and practice.

Theme	Interpretations of companion dogs	Interpretations of free-living dogs	Reflections on Western training expertise and practice
Autonomy and agency	Interpreted as having limited choices and being confined to homes; walking on a leash perceived as the norm; behavior understood as highly managed by people.	Interpreted as having high autonomy and freedom of movement; perceived as able to choose when to approach, interact, avoid, or withdraw, and to regulate their own needs.	Greater emphasis on choice, reduced micromanagement, and less default reliance on control.
Arousal and regulation	Interpreted as struggling with arousal regulation; behavior often perceived as hyper-reactive.	Perceived as calm and patient; interpreted as managing arousal effectively even in busy environments, with few instances of rapid escalation.	Rethink whether reactivity is partly produced by confinement, overstimulation, and restricted agency.
Behavioral possibility	Interpreted as limited to obedience commands and restricted behavioral expression.	Perceived as exhibiting a broad behavioral repertoire, including roaming, play, scavenging, and social negotiation.	Expand opportunities for species-typical behavior beyond obedience routines.
Behavior and communication	Interpreted as exhibiting compressed and high-intensity signals associated with limited space and time.	Perceived as exhibiting slower, more nuanced body language and a broader communicative repertoire.	Value subtle communication more and avoid training systems that compress behavior into obedience signals.
Cultures of care and control	Interpreted as embedded within systems of heavy micromanagement and control; dogs perceived as having limited choice in interactions; managing human expectations seen as central.	Interpreted as occurring within contexts of ambivalence and informal care; interactions perceived as consent-based, with dogs initiating and ending engagement on their own terms.	Shift toward consent-based handling and less intrusive models of care.
Conflict and negotiation	Interpreted as having limited opportunities for self-regulation due to leash use and spatial restriction; conflicts perceived as more likely to escalate.	Interpreted as having access to open spaces enabling avoidance; conflicts perceived as rare and often resolved through ritualized signaling that supports de-escalation.	Allow more opportunities for de-escalation and dog-led social regulation.
Morphology and selection	Interpreted as shaped by selective breeding, with traits perceived as sometimes compromising welfare.	Interpreted as shaped by natural selection, with phenotypes perceived as functional and adapted to context.	Question breeding practices prioritizing appearance over function and welfare.
Relationality and dependency	Interpreted as approaching people for food due to dependency; affection perceived as expected or conditioned.	Interpreted as seeking affection and social connection more than food; interactions perceived as voluntary and mutual.	Question training models that presume dependency rather than voluntary engagement.
Sensory filtering and responsiveness	Interpreted as over-responsive to minor or low-level stimuli.	Interpreted as selectively responsive; perceived as habituated to background noise while reacting primarily to novel or salient stimuli.	Question whether responsiveness is being misread through pathologizing frameworks.

reflected on whether micromanagement, restriction of movement, and lack of choice contribute to anxiety and reactivity commonly pathologized in pet dogs. This process also fed directly into participants' thinking about practice. Several reflected on intervening less, trusting dogs' capacities for self-regulation more, and accepting behavioral diversity rather than treating compliance as the primary marker of success. Autonomy and choice increasingly emerged as central concepts in participants' reevaluation of both welfare and practice. This led participants to reflect on spatial intelligence, territoriality, and self-restraint. Participants interpreted dogs as moving through space in predictable and respectful ways, even in the absence of fences or leashes. Observations made during the tours took on renewed significance once participants returned to Western contexts structured by enclosure and surveillance. These memories functioned as comparative reference points through which participants questioned assumptions that control must be externally imposed to produce safety and order.

Participants also contrasted their assessments of phenotypic consistency and apparent functionality of free-living dogs with the selective breeding of many companion animals, questioning the welfare implications of artificial selection oriented toward appearance and market preference. At the same time, they reconsidered expectations surrounding obedience, emotional regulation, and domestic comportment. Several expressed frustration with professional and client expectations that dogs remain calm, quiet, and compliant despite being offered few opportunities for choice, movement, or species-typical behavior. Post-tour insight crystallized into a critique of the conceptual and ethical commitments that structure Western canine expertise.

Discussion

This study examined how cross-cultural encounters with free-living dogs in India disrupted and reconfigured the interpretive frameworks of Western-trained dog behavior professionals. By conceptualizing these encounters as sites of epistemic disruption rather than opportunities for behavioral inference, the findings shift attention from who dogs are to how knowledge about dogs is produced and normalized. In doing so, encounter functions as a transformative methodological device that illuminates the limits of dominant expertise, enabling participants to interrogate their professional understandings of canine welfare, autonomy, and human–dog relationships. This contributes to broader academic and professional debates on the cultural foundations of training practices and welfare assessment, and how they shape the governance of dog behavior (Bekoff & Pierce, 2019; Fraser, 2024; Horowitz, 2019; Meyer et al., 2022; Weber et al., 2026). Embedded Western assumptions of dogs as domesticated beings, dependent on human care and control, can inhibit attention to alternative contexts and more-than-human possibilities (Srinivasan et al., 2019, 2024). By bringing these assumptions into sustained contact with dogs living outside of regimes of ownership and containment, the study shows how central these assumptions are to the establishment of norms describing what is considered healthy or problematic behavior (Cudworth, 2024), opening space to interrogate the cultural construction of pets in Western contexts (Shapiro, 1990).

Disrupting Pet-Centered Expertise

Participants entered the tours with interpretive frameworks shaped by Western, pet-centered paradigms in which canine welfare is closely tied to control and confinement. Pre-tour expectations combined deficit-based assumptions that anticipated free-living dogs to be neglected or compromised, with romanticized notions of autonomy and resilience. These expectations reflected the cultural and epistemic conditions under which the professional knowledge of the Western-trained experts was formed, where normative models of “good” dog lives are anchored in supervision and behavioral regulation. Crucially, these assumptions were not presented by participants as provisional interpretations but as largely taken-for-granted truths about canine wellbeing, illustrating how expertise can normatively instill socio-cultural knowledge.

Participants’ direct and sustained encounters with free-living dogs generated moments of epistemic tension in which these assumptions were unsettled. Participant observations were interpreted in relation to their prior expectations, which then produced forms of dissonance that destabilized established categories of welfare, behavior, and care. Rather than observing anticipated signs of deprivation, dogs were frequently interpreted as displaying behavioral competence, an ability to negotiate complex social conditions and contexts, and employing freedom, resilience, and social intelligence through their everyday functioning (Bhattacharjee et al., 2020, 2017; Nandi et al., 2025). By disrupting participants’ interpretive expectations of vulnerable and unhealthy dogs, as reflected within Western narratives that frame free-living dogs as welfare management problems (Bhalla et al., 2021), encounters functioned as epistemic interventions that destabilized training paradigms and preexisting assumptions.

These interventions were not just cognitive; they were also affective experiences. Participants described strong emotional responses that inverted their prior assumptions, including feeling concern for companion dogs rather than pity for free-living dogs. For many, this shift emerged through reflection on the possibility that environments organized around safety, control, and predictability may inadvertently diminish wellbeing by restricting autonomy and behavioral diversity (Horowitz, 2019; Serpell, 2016). These emotional expressions and reflections signal deeper shifts in moral and conceptual orientation, revealing previously unexamined or latent assumptions about welfare and care. That participants reported fundamental professional and ethical re-evaluation, rather than just incremental adjustment, underscores the extent to which dominant training paradigms are culturally situated rather than inevitable (Charles et al., 2021; Fox et al., 2023). Such moments of intervention are important because they create opportunities for reflexive engagement with established knowledge systems, making space for new observations across different ways of knowing and sense-making (Hoffmann et al., 2017).

Reframing Key Concepts

Over the course of the tours and subsequent reflections, participants began to rearticulate key concepts underlying their professional practice. These shifts should not necessarily be viewed as the adoption of new beliefs but as the reconfiguration of interpretive frameworks through which canine behavior and welfare were made meaningful. Concepts

such as autonomy, agency, and environmental affordances moved from peripheral considerations to central organizing principles in how participants interpreted canine behavior and wellbeing. Rather than equating welfare with predictability and submission, participants increasingly framed it in relation to choice, social embeddedness, and context-dependent functioning. This led participants to critically reassess Western training frameworks that prioritize confinement and obedience-oriented control, recognizing how these may contribute to heightened reactivity, anxiety, and reliance on human mediation (Meyer et al., 2022; Stephens-Lewis et al., 2024).

These interpretive shifts were further structured through cross-cultural comparison. Participants increasingly foregrounded the role of human culture in shaping canine experience, using encounters in India as a lens through which to reinterpret Western pet-keeping systems. Distributed forms of community care, ranging from informal feeding and guardianship to benign ambivalence, were not simply noted as different practices but reinterpreted as arrangements that enable autonomy without constant supervision or ownership (Adda, 2024; Srinivasan & Pearson, 2023). In contrast, Western practices were reevaluated through this emerging framework, with participants associating anthropomorphism, intensive handling, and rigid obedience expectations with conditions that may constrain behavioral expression and contribute to heightened stress. These comparisons did not produce a singular alternative model of “good” dog lives; rather, they exposed the cultural contingency of welfare concepts and prompted a shift toward more relational, context-sensitive, and agency-attentive interpretive frameworks (Fijn, 2018).

Participant reflections also reoriented how behavioral evidence itself was interpreted, as participants were drawn to concepts that connected their observations to broader theoretical claims about welfare, place, and behavioral expression, including the importance of access to valued conditions (Dawkins, 2008) and the ethical implications of spatial constraint (Shapiro, 1990). Empirical insights into low levels of escalated aggression and the communicative function of ritualized signaling in free-living dogs (Bonanni et al., 2017; Pal et al., 1998) were incorporated not as confirmatory evidence but as resources for reinterpreting previously pathologized behaviors. In this way, encounter facilitated a shift from interpreting behavior as a symptom to be managed toward understanding it as emerging from particular socio-spatial conditions (Hunt et al., 2022; Sulkama et al., 2022). Participants subsequently questioned whether Western training and enrichment practices address underlying structural constraints or instead focus on managing their behavioral manifestations (Hansen Wheat & Wynne, 2025). This reorientation invited renewed attention to space, movement, and environmental affordances as central components of welfare and practice.

Implications for Expertise, Practice, and Research

The implications of these reinterpretations extend beyond individual learning to the structure and foundations of professional expertise. As educators and consultants, dog trainers function as epistemic intermediaries, translating scientific knowledge and cultural norms into everyday human–dog interactions (Cavalli & Fenwick, 2025; DeLeeuw & Williams, 2026). By reconfiguring the interpretive frameworks through which canine

behavior is understood and managed, cross-cultural encounters have the potential to generate downstream effects across training communities, client engagement, and broader public discourse. Participants described actively sharing and negotiating these shifts within their professional networks, illustrating how transformations in interpretation can propagate beyond the encounter itself. Participants' reflections also extended to system-level critique. Suggested reforms included stronger recognition of the interests of dogs beyond property status, critical engagement with breeding practices prioritizing esthetics over function, and attention to urban environments that enable movement and choice. In training and education, participants advocated movement away from obedience-centered paradigms toward approaches that foreground consent and diversity of behavior, enabling reduced micromanagement.

At the same time, it is important to avoid replacing one totalizing account with another. The aim of this study was not to position free-living dogs as a universal model of canine flourishing, nor to invert Western welfare paradigms. Rather, the findings underscore the plurality of human–dog relations and the limits of treating any single system as normative (Chambers et al., 2020). What the encounters make visible is that welfare concepts are culturally contingent and that interpretive frameworks must remain relational and sensitive to socio-ecological and cultural context (Fijn, 2018). The tours functioned as experimental spaces in which assumptions held by experts were brought into sustained contact with alternative multispecies realities, enabling forms of learning that are difficult to achieve through abstract reasoning alone (Fox et al., 2023). In this sense, cross-cultural, multispecies encounter operates as a methodological device that generates reflexivity by exposing the partiality of any single knowledge system. Such approaches have relevance beyond dog training, offering potential pathways for engaging entrenched debates in conservation, animal welfare, and human–animal relations where conflicting epistemologies and values are often in tension (Rathwell et al., 2015; Veit & Browning, 2021).

While the encounters contributed to consistent and stable reflections across the tour participants, several limitations of the study should be noted. The study drew on a self-selected group of participants who were predisposed toward professional development and reflexive engagement. The encounters were structured and mediated, and the analysis relies on participant accounts that are themselves situated and interpretive. Although these characteristics align with the study's focus on epistemic transformation rather than generalizable behavioral inference, they also constrain the scope of the claims that can be made. Future research could examine the durability of these epistemic shifts, their translation into practice over time, and the design of encounter-based methodologies across different cultural and species contexts.

Conclusion

Juxtaposing Western and Indian narratives of canine wellbeing reveals important tensions in how responsibility toward dogs is conceptualized within multispecies societies. While the findings highlight how Western practices of confinement, control, and selective breeding may contribute to behavioral and welfare constraints, it would be equally reductive to assume that free-living dogs universally experience flourishing. Duties of care

remain complex, culturally situated, and shaped by diverse histories and infrastructures of human–dog coexistence. Rather than advancing a singular model of “good” dog lives, this study demonstrates how cross-cultural encounter can function as a site of epistemic disruption and learning. By bringing Western professional expertise into sustained contact with alternative multispecies arrangements, the research reveals how assumptions are culturally produced and professionally reinforced. In doing so, it shifts the analytical focus from describing dogs to examining how knowledge about dogs is established and transformed. Foregrounding the transformation of interpretive frameworks, therefore, highlights the value of encounter-based approaches in expanding the conceptual and ethical horizons through which human–dog relations are understood, and it supports existing calls for more reflexive, pluralistic, and context-sensitive approaches to canine welfare and practice.

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