

PET BEREAVEMENT AND FAMILIES: A QUALITATIVE VIEW
(PROJECT HURRICANE D. PETRICH)

A Dissertation

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty of The University of Akron

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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August, 2008

PET BEREAVEMENT AND FAMILIES: A QUALITATIVE VIEW
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the loss of a companion animal/pet family member within the context of a family. In order to better understand the nature of bereavement upon the loss of a pet family member it was essential to first grasp the nature of attachment to the companion animal. Five families were selected to participate in this qualitative research study which examined the nature of attachment to the family member pet and the loss that was experienced when that pet family member passed away. These families were all unique in that they had all lost their pet which they had considered a family member within one month of their first interview, yet all families were also unique in how this loss affected the dynamics and structure in their respective families. The similarities and distinctiveness of these families, and their bereavement responses were highlighted in this body of work.

Attachment Theory, Marriage and Family Therapy Theories, and also various Bereavement Theories were addressed in this study in order to more fully understand the scope of the loss that was experienced by these families. Specifically, the nature of pet bereavement and attachment were investigated in order to better comprehend the familial loss of a pet family member. This information is valuable to many disciplines such as marriage and family therapists, counselors, veterinarians, scholars, and even laypersons struggling with the loss of a pet that they had considered to have been a family member.

DEDICATION

This dissertation study is dedicated to my father, ANDREW J. KOCJAN III, the person who has most influenced my life and the way that I look at life. As it is said, children learn by what they see, not by what they hear. My father, or Daddy as he is fondly called, provided an enormous amount to see, and to take notice of as I grew and now as a grown woman. His extreme respect for others, his commitment to hard work, sacrifice to family, and most of all the time and energy that he expended on his four children are all pillars of his constitution. Superheroes are not only in the movies, they are the fathers that are there when their children need them, regardless of the circumstance and irrespective of the sacrifice it takes to be there for that child. I do remember all the times that you have been there for me and I am still in awe of the love that you provided to me, as well as to your entire family and friends. How does one measure success? I would say that having four grown children who love you, respect you, consult you, and admire you must be a glowing reflection of all that you have done. You were right when you always answered my childhood questions with “Because I’m the father, and I said so”; you certainly are, and I am certainly blessed. I love you very much, Your eldest.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In undertaking an endeavor such as this there are so many people that have helped me to complete **Project Hurricane D. Petrich**. I owe much to those people and am humbly appreciative.

Firstly, thank you **Heavenly Father** for allowing me to commemorate my son, Hurricane D. Petrich, in such a fitting way. You made this all possible.

Jon, this project began with a simple card that read “To My Mommy, Love Hurricane.”

Without your trust that allowed me to become his Mommy, my heart would have never reached its full capacity. Thank you for being a great Daddy to Hurricane D., Tornado Jude, and Blizzard Leigh. . . . Your convictions of faith helped to make this a reality.

Hurricane, Tornado, and Blizzard: I am honored to be your Mommy and you make all of my days sunny and memorable. Thank you for stretching me to be a better person.

To my Girls, Lesa-Rae, Trisha, and Kathleen: Thank you for loving, caring, listening, supporting, and pushing me. Every woman should have best friends like you. Friend is a rather broad word but unquestionably means “I love you as sisters.” You are the wind beneath these proverbially moving wings.

Kandace and AJK IV: Thank you for being my towers of strength when I needed it most. I know that I could always turn to you both for a pep talk. I am proud to be your big sister.

Gale: Thank you for sharing your support, wisdom, and children with me. Friendship and professionalism make a great combination. You have proven that.

Daddy, Gram, Aunt Toots: You have all shown me the merit of love mixed with determination. Thank you so much for being my role models.

Brittany, Kurt, Chelsea, Joey, and of course, Anastasia: I hope that this labor of love projects the idea that a person can do anything they dream of. Being your aunt has been a role that has given me immeasurable pride and my best title. Thank you all for teaching me so much.

Dr. Patricia Parr: Every endeavor starts with someone who believes in you. This would have been impossible without the belief that I always felt from you in firmness, professionalism, and kindness. I know you put your heart into this and helped to take it from dream to reality. The UA marriage and family students are so fortunate to have you as their leader.

Dr. MacDonald: I know you went above and beyond to help me and I so appreciate it. Thank you.

Dr. Linda Perosa, Dr. Cynthia Reynolds, and Dr. Sandy Perosa: Thank you for your expertise, and guidance.

To my UA friends who were always there for me: **Bridget Weidenborner** and **Michele Hieberling**. Your friendship and support truly made the difference. Thank you.

Dr. Charles Moxley: Your help made this a great project that reflected your commitment to the field of veterinary medicine. I consider myself blessed for your assistance and for your dedication to Hurricane, Tornado, and Blizzard.

Mr. Nunzio Ventura: I so wish you were here for me to tell you that you could finally call me “Doctor.” I hope you know that I would never have allowed you to call me anything but your fourth daughter. We miss you.

Dr. Shannon Dermer: I know that you lit the fire under me to start this incredible journey. How fortunate I was to partake in your guidance and support. You truly embody the essence of a marriage and family therapist and educator.

To Sara and Santana: Thank you for listening to my first run defense speech, things only got better from there. Your support has been invaluable to me in so many ways.

To Janice and Darlene (From the University of Akron Counseling Department): I don’t think you both realize the amazing effect that your courtesy, professionalism, and thoughtfulness has meant to this project. I always knew I could count on you and that is a great feeling.

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CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM

Introduction

The small church was packed to capacity with mourners, the bereaved parents sitting in the front pew next to the urn holding the ashes of their beloved, while the priest recited the benediction in earnest. The family had received over 80 sympathy cards and numerous flower arrangements to signify the feelings of empathy about the loss of someone so dear. Two local newspapers had featured stories about the volunteer work of the deceased as well as a senatorial citation being posthumously awarded for that same outstanding volunteer work. The parents mused that he had been featured on the front of the newspaper next to presidential hopefuls George Bush and John Kerry and was recognized for being the first one to introduce pet therapy to a local university. The deceased was obviously loved, well thought of, dearly missed, and not so obviously happened to be a dog of 12 years of age. The picture of bereavement may appear odd to some given that the parents were grieving for their family member, a shepherd-husky mixture, who had been a both a beloved family member and a renowned therapy dog. The scenario is atypical in that many families do not receive the support or funeral rites that Hurricane D. did. Oftentimes pet owners are left to mourn in private because of the lack of compassion from others and also the deficient amount of societal grieving rituals set in place for pets. Indeed for those families who consider their pet to be a member of

their family, there is little bereavement protocol or understanding about how that loss affects the entire family.

The personal experience that I just shared moved me to examine the issue of pet bereavement and families as a dissertation topic. After my family lost our “son” Hurricane, we were astonished at the lack of customary grieving prodigals that were in place and the lack of societal understanding about how the loss had affected our family. We were fortunate in that Hurricane was a therapy dog and somehow managed to capture the hearts of our local community and subsequently we received more support than most families do when they lose a pet. This dissertation topic was spawned after our loss, and “Project Hurricane” as we refer to this study, is an intensive study meant to shed more light on the topic of pet bereavement and families.

The death of a family member changes the lives of all family members, as they struggle to readjust their positions in the family in reaction to the loss. According to Nichols and Schwartz (2001), families maintain their interactions within a fixed range in order to remain stable under environmental stress, with a dual nature of homeostasis and changing. The homeostasis of a family may be altered by the death of a family member due to family members attempting to readjust their roles according to the changing circumstances. Families are diversified, complex, and often very unique in their composition and manner of grieving. Bereavement may become even more complicated and confusing when the family member who has passed away is a pet.

Pet Loss and Families

With 44 million Americans caring for the nations 65 million owned dogs (Gingold, 2005) and 70 million cats (WorldNetDaily.com, 2005), it is becoming more

important to understand the condition of bereavement to families who treat their pet as a family member. As reported by Anderson (1994), the death of a companion animal can be just as devastating as the loss of a human significant other, while Sife (1993) contended that losing a pet can be as devastating emotionally as losing a human. Although the loss of a pet may be as intense an experience for the owner as the loss of a significant other, the loss may be minimized or even go unacknowledged by others (Sharkin & Bahrack, 1990). Clements, Benasutti, and Carmone, (2003) suggested that this gap may be due to society trivializing the bereavement of an animal. Society's message may be that "it's just an animal," but for many individuals, pets are significant members of their families.

With the intensity and care noted that people feel for their companion animals, "it is surprising that pet loss has been virtually neglected in counseling literature and research" (Sharkin & Bahrack, 1990, p. 306). Many therapists and psychologists remain skeptical about the importance of the potential role they can play in helping their clients deal with this loss (Sharkin & Knox, 2003). Americans are elevating the pet service industry into the seventh largest retail segment according to the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association (APPMA.com, 2005), spending \$14.5 billion on pet food, \$8.8 billion on supplies, and \$8.6 billion on veterinary care per year. In this vein, Cohen (2002) purported that some people make the same sacrifices for their pet that they would for their family members. Coren (1997) posited that 80% of people with pet allergies refused to give up their pets even when faced with adverse health problems. The implication for all mental health workers, but particularly marriage and family therapists, is that this type of loss has the potential to disrupt a family's functioning and structure.

Despite a client's reluctance at times to bring up the loss, or to acknowledge their feelings about the loss due to fear of being ridiculed, the pain of the loss may be intense (Gage & Holcomb, 2001). Clients may be experiencing the bereavement of their pet without the knowledge of their therapist, while a therapist may minimize the attachment that clients have to their companion animals. In addition, many counselors routinely solicit information about significant others, completely disregarding the client's connection to animals (Margolies, 1999). Humans often have an emotional bond or attachment to their companion animals that is not unlike what they experience with their family and friends, perceiving them as an actual part of the family (Planchon, Templer, Stokes, & Keller, 2002).

With ever increasing socio-cultural changes in society, such as child free couples, lifespan increases, and changing roles in families, the role of pets in people's lives is becoming more significant (Sharkin & Knox, 2003). The question of whether pets could actually serve as family members was addressed by Cohen (2002) with the following statement:

The aim of this study was to explore what people mean when they say, "My pet is a member of the family." The results of this study suggest that, at least for some urban dwellers, pets are firmly inside the family circle. Like human family members, pets provide comfort and companionship. Participants in this study report that pets give as much as receive, even if the support they provide cannot be plugged into standard social network categories. In contrast to others in the household, pets do not criticize. They allow people to express their deepest feelings of intimate connection and nurturing. (p.621)

Historically, it has been thought that pet owners were isolative and bereft of relationships with other humans, but this idea was refuted by Cohen (2002) and Archer (1997) who noted that pet ownership is widespread in many different societies and by

many different types of people. Pet ownership is complex, and cannot be represented by one family profile or one pet type.

With this ascension of pets into families a grief response is likely and often goes unrecognized or may be minimized by others. However, Brown, Richards, and Wilson (1996) asserted that it is common to experience a period of bereavement following the death of a beloved pet. Carmack (1985) reported that some people indicated that they would prefer to lose a spouse rather than their pet.

This particular body of work is not meant to represent all humans, nor all animals, but to project the parallel process of human and animal bereavement for some individuals who consider their pet a family member. Unlike losing a human family member, the grieving process for a pet may be inhibited as people may experience a feeling the loss not being acknowledged, or insensitivity from family and friends (Sharkin & Knox, 2003).

As clinicians, we may be less likely to address pet bereavement in a therapy session if a client is displaying disenfranchised bereavement for their deceased pet, due to lack of validation from society or a fear of embarrassment in talking about their grief. This is especially delicate for the grieving client if the therapist has never included inquiries about pets in their assessments, allowing the client to feel that pet loss is not a suitable or salient issue in therapy. Marriage and family therapists are given a unique opportunity to examine the family when they chose to process the family norms around death and the issues of loyalty and intimacy (Gage & Holcomb, 2001). Ignoring the loss of a valued companion animal may mean losing the trust and ongoing bond and treatment of a family in therapy. In examining the attachment that pet owners feel for their

companion animals, this research study will employ Bowlby's Attachment Theory. As the purpose of attachment is to feel secure with the function of attachment being a primary source of safety, Bowlby's Attachment Theory is relevant to this study in that it offers an underpinning as to why families may form an attachment with their pets.

Statement of the Problem

Although the process of pet bereavement is not a novel theoretical idea, it is still often minimized by therapists across different disciplines. This body of work examined the attachment to a companion animal as a family member and the effect of the pet's death on the family. Specifically, this research investigated the relationship between families, pets they considered to have been a family member, and the family's grief process when that pet dies. This study included Bowlby's Attachment Theory, a bereavement model for pets, and an analysis of the nature of bereavement for a pet that was considered a family member.

Significance of the Study

Determining the effects of the grieving process of a pet on a family system is an important integration of attachment theory, bereavement, and homeostasis in a family system. Family stress theory emphasizes that everyday family life events and transitions can be stressful to a family (Boss, 1987), with the loss of a family member considered to be among the most stressful (Holmes & Rahe, 1967, as cited in Gage & Holcomb, 2001). To ignore the effects of this family developmental process would be to demean the changes which occur in families who lose a pet. This study was particularly unique in that it addressed the phenomenon of pet bereavement in a systemic approach versus the adequate amount of literature that is available expounding on individual reactions to pet

loss. The depth of the attachment of the pet and family members was explored while also gathering data about the effects of loss on the family system. This body of work specifically focused on the family's response to the loss of a companion animal that had been considered to be a family member versus a pet that was viewed as utilitarian. For the purposes of this study, both cats and dogs were defined as pets, versus exotic or other types of animals.

Research Questions

Two in-depth interviews were conducted with five families focusing on their loss of a companion animal and the effects on the family. Two interview guides were utilized for these interviews with the broad question being: What is the nature of pet bereavement and pet attachment within the context of the family and their overarching response to the loss of the pet? Subquestions included: (a) What nature of attachment did the family members experience with the deceased companion animal? (b) What factors made the pet a family member? (c) What was the participant's unique experience of bereavement? These questions were meant to extract information about the nature of pet loss within the familial context.

Operational Definitions

Attachment Theory - According to Bowlby (1953), attachment is the affectional bond between two individuals over time, beginning with an infant and his/her mother and extending throughout a lifetime in various ways, serving as emotional security and physical protection.

Bereavement - The mourning process which occurs after the death of a human or pet and is usually experienced in stages which vary according to theory and theorist.

Homeostasis - A concept derived from general systems theory that describes families seeking balance between stability and change.

Systems Theory - Derived from both general systems theory, and cybernetics, it examines the relationship between elements versus viewing the elements in isolation. (Families represent one such system.)

Parameters of the Study

The subjects were families from the Northeastern portion of Ohio who had lost a pet in the past 2 months. These participants may not be a representative sample of families in bereavement for a companion animal from across the United States. Families who had lost a companion animal were represented by families with and without children, with the parameters of this study including subjects within the family who wish to participate. These families were identified by a local veterinarian or by various direct referrals to this writer.

Summary

This chapter began with an overview of the problem of pet bereavement and families, addressed the dearth of literature and research available on the topic, and further recognized the inattention that the counseling field has given to this phenomenon. To the extent that one can identify these families, treatment assessments, treatment plans, and methods of counseling may be derived from this research. Mental health practitioners will better be able to identify the potential stress that the loss may place on families, hence being able to provide the families with improved coping mechanisms. By explaining the nature and connection of pet attachment and pet bereavement, family therapists, as well as counselors in general may benefit from understanding this

phenomenon which is not uncommon. Gaining knowledge about these connections will also assist in understanding both the way in which homeostasis in families is affected by the death of a pet, and the way in which families react to this loss. As veterinarians are confronted with this issue daily, the understanding of families grieving for their companion animal will also benefit the discipline of veterinary medicine.

A qualitative, phenomenological approach befits the concept development and description of human experiences which this writer hopes to capture. As a marriage and family therapist it is crucial to examine the ongoing lived world of the family, and to value the experiences, meanings and perceptions of those families who lose a pet that they considered a family member. The arena of counseling will be enhanced with a clearer understanding and clarification of pet bereavement and families.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter is a review of the literature which pertains to the problem under consideration and shall examine the following phenomenon of interest: pet ownership, pet attachment, pet bereavement, individual grief processes, impact of pet loss on families, marriage and family therapists addressing pet loss, and implication for clinical practice with clientele. In order to more fully understand the nature of families and the loss of a companion animal the link between attachment levels to a companion animal and aspects of grief when the pet passes away will be explored. There was an emphasis on the available literature regarding the effects of pet attachment and pet bereavement on afflicted families. This review of the literature was inclusive of critiques addressing the material utilized to more fully facilitate an understanding of existing literature and areas not exhaustively investigated. A summary and possibilities for future research and counseling was also discussed.

Pet Ownership

We who choose to surround ourselves with lives even more temporary than our own live within a fragile circle, easily and often breached. Unable to accept its awful gaps, we still would have it no other way. We cherish memory as the only certain immortality, never fully understanding the necessary plan. (Greene and Landis, 2002, p. 31)

In the previous quotation from Townsend's book, *Separate Lifetimes*, he was referring to not only the ownership of a pet, but the phenomenon of pet bereavement which pet owners eventually face. Pet ownership is a multi-faceted, uniquely formed relationship which is not easily answered by research or a "What's in it for the pet owner?" probing question. With a survey by Horn and Meer (1984) confirming that for many people loving a pet is a profound experience, but not pinpointing the exact reasons for this response, one can see that there is not one specific reason that humans choose to own an animal. For some pet owners, it is difficult to explain the nature of their love and attachment to their pets as some relationships may defy typical classification. Pet ownership is as unique an experience to each owner as the abounding literature is regarding the nature of these kindred relationships.

In 2005 when Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans *USA Today* journalists Parker and Manning (2005) reported that pets had been a main feature of the devastating story, as owners had to make life and death decisions regarding their pets when shelters and hotels refused to accept animals in their dwellings. Heartbroken owners parted from their pets, while some families refused to leave their homes without their beloved companion animals. According to Parker and Manning (2005) the animal rescue operation had fanned across New Orleans and neighboring areas and continued nearly 3 months later to look for lost or desperate pets every day. If pets are merely possessions or social parasites who manipulate humans for their own survival (Archer, 1997), it seems implausible that pet owners would be willing to risk their life to save their companion animal. In watching the ongoing news coverage of the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, it is nearly impossible not to be inundated with the stories of human devastation connected

with pet owners being separated from their pets or later joyfully reunited with them. The myriad and complex ways in which humans view animals is astonishing in its breadth and diversity. The reasons why people choose to own a pet may be as varied as the choice of pet itself, with literature citing psychological/physical health benefits, advantages for children, and manipulation by animals as the possible reason that humans own and care for pets.

Literature concentrating on pet ownership is not a novel or singular concept, as research often focuses on pets bonding with humans in numerous bodies of work (Al-Fayez, Awadalla, Templer, & Arikawa, 2003; Cohen, 2002; Dew, 2000; Noonan, 1998; Paul & Serpell, 1996; Roth, 2005). Not only do various pet owners disagree on the status of pets, but the type of animal which can be called “man’s best friend” has also been hotly debated.

For the purposes of this study, both dogs and cats were used to address companion animals, attachment levels, and pet bereavement. Through examining Zasloff’s (1996) research with pets one can gather the significance of studying both dogs and cats. Zasloff (1996) reported that there were no significant differences between humans and cat and dog attachment levels, using six items common to interactions between both species. The primary purpose of Zasloff’s study was “to examine attachment in terms of the perceived level of emotional comfort that dog owners and cat owners report receiving from their pets” (p. 44). Respondents were given the self administered “Comfort from Companion Animal Scale” (Zasloff, 1996), and the researcher concluded that there were commonalities in the emotional experience of having a close relationship with a pet, irrespective of the animal’s species. The survey

was completed via a mail packet with only 19% of the participants being male. The author also concluded that the role of attachment is still not well understood. Another reason dogs and cats were both included in this body of work is dogs and cats are mammals whose emotions and moods are similar to humans (Archer, 1997). In addition, the amount of research material available was equally divided between dogs and cats.

Health and Psychological Benefits of Pet Ownership

In an attempt to understand why a human would make an emotional, physical, and financial investment with a companion animal, it may be hypothesized that humans own pets for the health benefits that one derives from this association. Friedmann, Katcher, Thomas, Lynch, and Messent (1983) correlated pet ownership with improved survival rates after a heart attack, while Anderson, Reid, and Jennings (1992) have associated lower lipid levels and reduced levels of other cardiovascular risks with pet ownership. However it seems unlikely that a human would elevate a pet to family member status merely to enhance their physical well being. Neither of the previously mentioned articles expounded on pets being elevated to family member status, while both accentuated only the health benefits versus the emotional rewards associated with nurturing a companion animal.

In an effort to examine the pet effect with people who had not acquired pets on their own, Allen (2003) conducted a study in which half the participants were randomly selected to adopt a cat or dog from an animal shelter. The participants were stockbrokers who lived alone, were diagnosed with high blood pressure, and rated the stress levels of their jobs as extremely high. All participants, including the half who adopted pets were administered a blood pressure lowering drug called Lisinopril. Results of the study

showed that those participants with adopted pets were less likely to respond to stress with higher blood pressure levels, and in addition the results showed that the resting blood pressure can be influenced by a drug, but adding a pet to the environment can alter stress responses (Allen, 2003).

Although this research is beneficial in correlating the relationship between pets and health, it does not include any mention of factors which center on the family. It also does not address the idea that physical health rewards may be due to many factors such as less time spent at work due to caring for a pet or more social inclusion with fellow pet owners. Allen (2003) investigated the effects of pets and blood pressure and found that participants in her study had lower blood pressure levels when asked to do mathematical tasks with their pets by their sides, versus an increase in blood pressure with a spouse by their side while performing the same tasks. The author considered the research clinically dramatic since the blood pressure changes had varied considerably with the pets and spouses present. Allen (2003) argued that the effect may be attributed to the idea that pets are clearly preferred as a social support. Allen's own criticism of the study remains accurate in that there may be other characteristics of pet owners that make them physically healthier, and that a bigger sample size would be needed to confirm or negate this.

However, when attempting to discover the connection between health benefits and pet ownership with children Paul and Serpell (1996) found that dog-owning children in their study were reported to suffer more ill health than non-dog owners after 12 months. The decision to own a pet appears too complex and multi-faceted to defer to only the health benefits an owner may reap.

Pet Ownership and Children

Literature focusing on the relationship between owning a pet and children has reported that there is a positive association between dog attachment and children's confidence levels (Paul & Serpell, 1996) while Corr (2004) emphasized the valuable life lessons that pets teach children as well as being an important source of unconditional love. Included in the research by Viovic, Stetic, and Bratco (1999) was the conclusion that children who had dog companions had more empathy and pro-social behavior than children who did not own dogs. Similarly Poresky (1997) found that children with a greater empathy toward pets also had greater empathy for other children. Historically, pets may have been chosen for a particular function such as hunting and protection, but with the advent of urbanization and increased social isolation, pets may now be less utilitarian and chosen for the satisfaction that they offer their owners, rather than a serviceable purpose (Roth, 2005).

The positive association between pets and children is not undisputed in the literature and appears to be a weak link when reasoning why people choose to own pets. Paul and Serpell (1996) offered their research as an argument that the improved behavior of children who own pets decreases or is equivocal after the baseline time study of one month. They proposed the explanation that children may be better behaved simply because they were expecting to soon own a pet, or they may have been better behaved before the study began. Families may own pets for a variety of reasons and pet manipulation is also proffered as a possible reason for this alliance.

Pet Manipulation

For those who would embrace a Darwinian perspective, which hails the survival of the fittest, caring for a member of another species may be a puzzling form of human behavior which offers no obvious benefits (Archer, 1997). In an attempt to understand the nature of human and animal connection, Archer hypothesized that this bond was an evolutionary problem, and that humans have become manipulated by pets in an effort for pets to benefit from this relationship at the expense of the pet owner. The companion animals were viewed by Archer as parasites and would allow fewer resources to be handed down to children, grandchildren, etc. His hypothesis was that a mutual relationship is most likely to be gained with a dog that is utilitarian in function and is able to offer a profit in the relationship with a human. According to the researcher, humans may respond to a pet's baby-like features while also attributing human-like mental processing to pets, believing that pets possess unconditional positive regard for their owner. Ultimately this is a relationship which the author feels is likely to be most advantageous to the pet by leaving the pet owner manipulated and over-attributing human qualities to an animal.

Although Archer (1997) attempted to draw on the disadvantages which await a pet owner, he offered the reader few reasons why a person would be willing to undertake the provisioning of a pet. He provided information gleaned from other researchers, but this body of work offered no evidence or cited research of parasitism or manipulation by pets, excluding his own insights and thoughts supporting this view.

This research has garnered many possible reasons why people may choose to own a pet, but like the myriad breeds of cats and dogs, the true motivation appears complex

and multi-faceted. After examining psychological/physical health benefits, advantages to children, and health rewards it is less plausible that humans choose to own a pet for those reasons. It is more probable that humans actually form an attachment with their pets that is satisfying and not unlike the attachments formed with other humans.

Attachment Theory

Before addressing pets and attachment it is essential to outline Bowlby's Attachment theory, from which the tenets of attachment are derived. It is also important to conceptualize the convergence that Attachment theory shares with Family Systems Theory, as Attachment Theory will be examined, as will the nature of attachment and bereavement within the context of the family. The philosophical differences between Attachment Theory and Family Systems Theory will also be investigated. Using an approach that was both prospective and observational, John Bowlby (1953) developed the modern Attachment theory. In the process, Bowlby utilized what he considered some of Psychodynamic pioneer Sigmund Freud's most valuable insights about human development and intimate relationships, while also deviating from Freud's accounts of the effects of early experience in terms of Psychodynamic structures and emphasizing the concept of mental models (Waters, Cromwell, Elliott, Corcoran, & Treboux, 2002). Mental models were thought by Bowlby to influence behavioral tendencies and were based on the person's cognitive, affective, and motivational experiences of the world (Von Sydow, 2002). Internal working mental models would be "based on prior history of attachment relationships plus current interactions between the self and the attachment figure when the attachment behavioral system is activated" (Von Sydow p. 80). Bowlby's 1953 work was influenced by Ethology, Systems Theory, Cognitive development, and

Psychoanalysis, with his deviation from Freud's Psychoanalysis viewed as heretical by some (Bretherton, 1992). In 1953 when Bowlby wrote *Maternal Care and Mental Health* (later re-titled *Child Care and the Growth of Love*), he was hoping to extend the database of Psychoanalysis while also believing that a more self questioning mode of thinking would benefit the discipline (MacDonald, 2001).

The purpose of attachment is to feel secure with the function of attachment being a primary source of safety and security. Although the means of accomplishing secure attachment change over a lifetime, the facet of security is believed to remain constant during the human course of life. In a childhood attachment scenario, the relationship with the caregiver is of a complementary nature with the infant usually seeking care-giving and the parent providing it. An infant will seek this security through a relational proximity to a special person, often a parent, and will display a form of separation protest if this proximity is threatened. In this system, a set point influences the distance from infant to mother and promotes proximity in case of distress or perceived danger with the attachment behavioral system interacting with the exploratory behavioral system (Sigling, Engeland, Gispén, & Spruijt, 1998). Among adults a romantic partner or friend is often found to be the primary attachment figure, and although less readily activated, a propensity to seek the attachment figure out exists throughout the lifetime (Main, 1996). Although Bowlby (1953) formulated the basic tenets of attachment theory, Mary Ainsworth extended his work empirically with her research which focused on the concept of an attachment figure as a secure base from which an infant could explore the world and the role of maternal sensitivity in infant-mother attachment patterns (Ainsworth, 1968). Shaver and Hazan (1988), while studying attachment issues with romantic love

and couples, identified three types of attachment styles in adults: Secure Attachment, Anxious Ambivalent Attachment, and Avoidant Attachment. Securely attached adults, according to Shaver and Hazan achieve intimacy easily and are able to commit to long term relationships, while Anxious Ambivalently Attached adults look to others for protection and to meet most of their psychological needs and avoidant adults express a rigid self-sufficiency. This working model was based on Bowlby's research on earlier attachment and notes that loss of an early attachment figure may have a profound effect on later attachment style.

Bowlby's research was not without controversy, and perhaps the most startling facet of his body of work was in his relating of Ethology, the study of animals in their natural environment, to Psychoanalysis and later to attachment theory (MacDonald, 2001). Two experiments which impacted Bowlby's research were those of Harlow (1958) and Lorenz (1935), conducted with animals and were previously discounted in Psychoanalysis due to the animal instinctual components (MacDonald, 2001). Bowlby became drawn to Harlow's (1958) work with infant monkeys, which showed that monkeys were more likely to attach themselves to a monkey covered with cloth versus a wire monkey who also had a feeding bottle (MacDonald). Bowlby later paralleled this with Konrad Lorenz's (1935) research which found that goslings would follow their mother or mother substitute without the promise of food MacDonald (2001). Hence, it was based on the study of animals that Bowlby brought forth a neo-Darwinian schema for understanding the primitive need for an animal to stay close to its mother. Food was no longer viewed as the only provision which would drive an animal to stay close or to seek proximity to a mother figure, striking a resonance with Bowlby's other research on

attachment, which focused on the importance of a warm, nurturing relationship with a mother figure (Bowlby, 1953). Similarly, both attachment theory and family systems theory are able to draw on the paramount importance of relationships with others and the effects of closeness and distance in familial interaction.

Attachment Theory and Family Systems Theory were developed at about the same time and according to Von Sydow (2002) have three aspects in common. One commonality is that each theory deals with interpersonal/family relationships while similarly each addresses normal as well as pathological development. Finally, both are a framework for thinking about relationships.

Conversely, there are pronounced differences in the approaches, such as the insistence of empirical consolidation with Attachment Theory versus speculative theory development with Family Systems Theory (Grawe, Donati, & Bernauer, 1994). Furthermore, Attachment Theory may be viewed as didactic in nature, focusing on the aspects of personality which are a product of the interactions of the mother and child, while Family Systems Theory focuses on complex interactions between three or more persons (Von Sydow, 2002).

As clinicians and researchers, it is important to understand the influence that theories and approaches may share and when they may diverge. The blend of Attachment Theory and Family Systems Theory may be very complimentary in examining the nature of pet bereavement in that both deal with complex relationships and family constellations, whereas clinical psychology may focus on individuals or perhaps dyads (Von Sydow, 2002). Byng-Hall (1991) also noted the relevance that Attachment Theory had with Family Systems Theory by pointing out that in 1949 Bowlby wrote one of the

first manuscripts about family therapy and was a steadfast supporter of it. Werner-Wilson and Davenport (2003) asserted that Bowlby suggested that attachment experiences with caregivers influence expectations about future familial relationships. As we begin to explore attachment and pets, research will be examined which focuses on companion animals and attachment with children.

Attachment and Pets

A pioneer in the field of attachment theory, Mary Ainsworth (1989) called for researchers to further examine certain friends and other companions as having components of attachments. Taking the gauntlet, Sable (1995) proposed that family pets have the potential to provide both security and a feeling a well being to family members. Further, Sable noted that “The bond with a pet becomes part of inner working models of attachment and family relationships” (p.336).

A factor analysis of 12 items from research by Albert and Bulcroft (1988) examined the psychological and emotional roles of pets in an urban area and highlighted that pets are seen as family members who provide attachment and affection, with dogs favored in the research, followed by cats. The conclusion that Albert and Bulcroft reached was that pets were capable of giving and receiving affection, may be emotional substitutes, while also contributing to maintaining morale when people may be enduring difficult times. Since attachment theory may be tantamount to a need for close affectional bonds with others, pets may fill this gap and are able to remain in constant proximity and reduce the feelings of aloneness. Recognizing the changes in family life, Sable also asserted that pets could serve as important attachment figures, reducing loneliness, giving purpose to life, and providing the comfort of proximity. Participants were asked to rate

the level of importance that their pet had to the family and asked about attribution of human traits that they applied to their pet. Melson (1989) referred to Sable's theoretical research and suggested that further studies to measure the human-animal bond needs to be completed with attachment theory as the framework.

Margolies (1999) addressed the issue of attachment and companion animals and emphasized that "pet ownership offers a unique resolution to the contradictory yearning for reconnection and heightened sensitivity to loss" (p. 297). The author maintained that a primary relationship with a pet offered security, with less fear of abandonment than one might fear with an adult peer. Margolies uniquely identified pets as being unconsciously experienced as mothers at times because they model ideal parenting, sharing many common elements with the symbiotic relationship of mother and child, such as devotion, forgiveness, affection, uncritical attitude, and availability. Pets, she claimed, were also able to function at times like children: may be held, remain dependent, allow the owner to offer maternal love with less anxiety than with children, and often permit them to feel competent in their role as parent. The author contended that companion animals may be ideal for women who form insecure attachments, but may cause excessive concern regarding the pet's health when the woman has a history of anxious-ambivalent attachment. Margolies's body of research may be extended into the theme of pet bereavement in that the symbolic relationship with the pet may determine the course and nature of grief when the companion animal passes away.

A study by Zasloff (1996) was conducted in order "to examine attachment in terms of the perceived level of emotional comfort that dog owner and cat owners report receiving from their pets" (p. 44). Using an instrument that focused on the emotional

aspects of human-animal relationships, the central hypothesis of the study was that no differences would emerge between dog and cat owners when only emotional factors were assessed. Consisting originally of 13 items, the Comfort from Companion Animals Scale (CCAS) was utilized to measure the perceived level of emotional comfort owners received from their pets, with the results showing that pet owners showed no specific interactive differences between cats and dogs. Items on the Comfort from Companion Animals Scale included such statements as: My pet provides me with companionship, having a pet gives me something to love, and I enjoy watching my pet. Subjects utilized a Likert type scale to rate their responses. Interestingly, the author emphasized that the role of attachment with pets is not well understood, and that although dogs normally participate in a wider range of activities with their owners, cats can be equally important in being a source of affection and companionship. Indeed, as I am working at my computer, my two-year-old shepherd-rottweiler, Tornado-Jude, has sat on top of my paperwork and given me the signal that it is time to take a break and play outside for a while.

Attachment may be distinctive to each pet owner and according to a survey by the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA, cited in Cohen (2002),

A wide majority of people report that they refer to themselves as their pets' parent, nearly three quarters of married respondents greet their pet before their spouse, and if stranded on a desert island, more than half of those surveyed said they would choose pets over people for company. (p. 622)

Cohen's work was conducted, according to the author, to explore the meaning of what people mean when they say that their pet is a family member. The author concluded that pets gave as much as they received, "even if it was not neatly plugged into standard

social network categories” (p. 633). Owners reported that their pets allowed them to express their deepest feelings of intimacy and connection, but one should not assume these outcomes mean that the owner believes their pet is human. The author reported that “pets seem to occupy an overlapping but different space from humans in the family” (p. 633). An obvious limitation of this particular study was the population who participated were largely female, Caucasian, highly educated, and living in New York City. The participants were all drawn from a state-of-the-art, upscale veterinary clinic, which might affect their responses and resources.

Pet Attachment and Pet Behavior

In examining the attachment levels of pet owners and their companion animals, Serpell (1996) researched the correlation between pet behavior and owner attachment level, in an attempt to explain the relationship between a pet’s behavior and the level of attachment achieved by the pet owner. Serpell specifically looked at the role that the pet’s personality and behavior might play in molding the owner’s perception of the pet and attachment level. He also included statistics (Serpell, 1996) of relinquishment of pets to a shelter and indicated that behavior problems were the second most common reason that pet owner chose to surrender a pet. Serpell (1996) initially hypothesized that an owner would have stronger attachment to a pet that was well behaved and ideal and able to fit the owner’s perception of what a well behaved pet was like. Ultimately, “the people’s ideal conceptions of dog and cat behavior in this study bore no relation to their level of attachment for the animal” (p. 57). Apparently pet owners were as willing to attach to a pet that was different in manifestation of absolute levels of behavior than they would ideally prefer. Serpell (1996) suggested that dog owners may have a higher expectation of

standard of conduct for their pets and may become dissatisfied when the pet falls short of the ideal, versus cat owners who may have lower expectations of their cat. In an attempt to understand the attachment to a pet, this body of work denied that the attachment would occur due to the pet mimicking an ideal behavior to their owner in order to gain attachment and affection. Although small in sample size (37 dog owners, and 47 cat owners), this research work was significant in that it was able to control confounding variables: source of pet, and length of pet ownership, which have been shown in past studies to influence strength of people's attachments to their pets. Serpell's 1996 research examined the idea that pet owners were more attached to well behaved pets, which was found to be an incorrect hypothesis after completion of the statistical analysis. Authors, that we will address next, have hypothesized that it is not the behavior level which causes a person to attach to a pet, but that dissociation may be a factor in the attachment to a companion animal.

Pet Attachment and Dissociation

According to Brown and Katcher (2001), dissociation may be an important component of pet attachment which has been previously overlooked in research. Dissociation, a protective form of detachment or disconnection which may leave a person emotionally numb, may be a reason that pet owners form a reparative relationship with companion animals and turn away from human relationships after trauma. The authors began by citing work from Bowlby (1982), which had addressed a child's propensity to be attached to a stuffed animal when the actual object of attachment is not available, and the tendency for this object to become very important in meeting attachment needs. The bridge that the authors offered between Bowlby, attachment, dissociation, and pets is that

those people who have suffered a trauma may be offered a “more stable and trusting relationship” (p. 29) by companion animals than with humans. Hence, the authors proposed that this relationship could possibly enhance eventual relationships with other humans after the trauma.

The research by Brown and Katcher concluded with their statistical analysis positively correlating higher levels of dissociative symptoms with people who were highly attached to their pets. This report was contradictory to a report by Stallones et al. (1991) who were unable to pinpoint the nature of human and pet attachment to one factor such as dissociation. The limitation of the Brown and Katcher study was that the participants were all veterinary students, and the results may not be comprehensive enough to represent the public in general. The authors ultimately conclude that “there are many pathways to pet attachment and having dissociation may characterize one distinctive subset of people” (p. 38). Although interesting, Brown and Katcher’s research failed to draw a tangible parallel between dissociation and pet attachment, leaving the factors as mysterious as other studies have purported.

Pet Ownership and Attachment: A Summary

In attempting to answer the overarching question “what causes people to become attached to their pets?” possible explanations have been examined such as health benefits, emotional and physical gains for children, pet manipulation, emotional security, pets functioning as children, pet behavior, and dissociation without gleaning one variable which is the key to why a person ultimately is attached to their pet. Just as no two pet owners choose to own a pet for the same reasons, it would be irresponsible to validate pet attachment with one certain benefit. Pet bereavement is also a complex and diverse

process which manifests itself differently with each person, each family, and certainly with an individual pet. The literature in pet bereavement is tantamount to that in pet attachment in that the reasons, duration, and outcomes of grieving for a pet are multifaceted and not easily garnered.

Pet Attachment and Bereavement

Although a lifetime member of the British Psychoanalytic Society, Bowlby disagreed with Freudian Anna Freud who contended that bereaved infants cannot mourn because of insufficient ego development and will experience nothing more than separation anxiety when an adequate substitute caretaker is not available (Bretherton, 1992). Bowlby (working with Robertson), noted that “grief and mourning processes in children and adults appear whenever attachment behaviors are activated but the attachment figure continues to be unavailable” (Bretherton, p. 763), and added that an inability to form deep relationships with others may occur when too many substitutes have been utilized. This controversial work by Bowlby was later used by Colin Parkes, who studied adult bereavement and used Bowlby’s body of work on infant and childhood mourning and parlayed it into the study of adult grief (Bretherton). Later Parker and Bowlby wrote a joint paper and expounded on the four stages of separation response described by Robertson for young children into four stages of grief into adult life, including: numbness, yearning/protest, disorganization/despair, and finally reorganization (Bowlby & Parkes, 1970). The reverberations of Bowlby’s attachment work, Bowlby’s and Parke’s grief research and also Roberson’s work with mourning were to extend into Kubler-Ross’s landmark work with the stages of grief included in her “On Death and Dying” (1970), a resource frequently quoted in this dissertation. Finally, Bowlby

introduced Parkes to Cicely Saunders, who collaboratively used attachment theory in helping to develop programs to address the emotional care of the dying (Bretherton). The extension of attachment theory into bereavement work is monumental and owes much to John Bowlby, who was consistently attacked by his fellow psychoanalytic thinkers for his views on bereavement (Bretherton, 1992).

Pet Bereavement

According to Sharkin and Bahrnick (1990) the topic of pet bereavement has been a neglected topic in the counseling literature and research, with the authors citing Cowles' (1985) assertion that the loss of a pet is often as intense as the loss of a significant person to many people and noting that people experiencing pet loss may not receive much sympathy or support from others. Given the number of individuals and families who adopt pets, it is astonishing that the topic of pet bereavement has been addressed with so little vigor, while also maintaining a place outside of professional consultation. The nature of pet bereavement will be addressed hereafter and will form an academic composite of what the literature has noted about the topic. Firstly, we will examine individuals and the phases of bereavement as delineated by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross.

Humans and Bereavement: Kubler-Ross

Many who have attempted to understand the pattern of grieving have turned to the work of grief pioneer Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, who in 1969 outlined a five stage model for bereavement which included the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Basing her stage model theory on interviews with people suffering from terminal illnesses, Kubler-Ross examined the way that people cope with their pending death and the stages that they proceed through. The author stated that she was not

attempting to write a textbook on “how to manage dying patients” (p. 11), but to refocus on the patient as a human being (Kubler-Ross, 1969). Not all researchers have converged to agree that Kubler-Ross’s information on grief and death is succinct with authors such as Podrazik, Shackford, Becker, & Heckert (2000) arguing that her stage model “minimizes the importance of the dynamics of the individual, the environment, and any previous experiences with death that the bereaved may have had” (p. 370). Podrazik et al. also contends that Kubler-Ross tends to normalize the grief process rather than allowing it to be representational of an individualized process.

Despite some opposition to Kubler-Ross’s stages of grief, this writer has chosen to utilize it to globally diagram what stages of bereavement may appear like for some individuals due to the familiarity most clinicians have with Kubler-Ross’s body of research. The first distinctive stage which Kubler-Ross identified with dying patients was denial and isolation, which she posited was a healthy, temporary response if eventually replaced by partial acceptance. Individuals may fluctuate in their expression of denial depending on the scenario and the person in which they are interacting with. Isolation may be a part of this process as the person responds to their diagnosis and life situation.

Eventually the denial stage may not be able to be maintained and often leads to Kubler-Ross’s second stage of grieving, anger. Anger, rage, envy, and resentment may all be handmaidens to this second stage, and the target of this anger may be medical professionals, family members, counselors, etc. The author notes that this may be a difficult stage for professionals who often do not attempt to place themselves in the person’s situation and understand how appropriate anger might be given that their patient’s life’s activities have all been interrupted (Kubler-Ross, 1969). The anger is

neither always rational nor easy for the interloper interacting with the patient to cope with. The next stage, bargaining, is less well known but equally important according to Kubler-Ross (1969).

Bargaining is referred to as the stage where the dying patient may attempt to make an agreement with God, or a higher power to change their fate. Kubler-Ross (1969) uses the example of children first demanding, and then later asking for a favor:

They may not accept our 'No' when they want to spend a night in a friend's house. They may be angry and stomp their foot. They may lock themselves in their bedroom and temporarily express their anger by rejecting us, but will also have second thoughts and may consider another approach. (p.93)

The request of the dying patient may be similar and may use the same maneuvers in order to prolong the inevitable. The stage which follows bargaining may be more familiar to therapists and recognized more readily. When a person can no longer deny the existence of their illness or loss, they may become less stoic and begin to realize the extent of their status, triggering the next stage in Kubler-Ross's grief process, depression. Although Kubler-Ross (1969) views this stage as necessary in the procession of grieving it is often difficult to watch someone with symptoms such as losing interest in their life, tearfulness, sleeplessness (or oversleeping), etc. She is adamant in her exertion that a person should be allowed to express these feelings and not forced to look at the brighter side of things if they are to reach the final stage of grieving, acceptance.

Acceptance, according to Kubler-Ross, is not to be confused with being a time of happiness, but of peace and not struggling to change the inevitable. The person will have mourned the past losses and also losses of future time and may appear more introspective and need less time with others, while not being either angry or depressed. Although this

is the last listed stage, it should not be assumed that all people reach this stage in loss or in pending death. Having reviewed Kubler-Ross's stages of grief, we will now examine the stages which have been addressed in the literature about loss of a pet, beginning with the bereavement process as viewed by Jamie Quackenbush.

Stages of Pet Bereavement: Quackenbush and Graveline

In reviewing the stages that Kubler-Ross associates with the grieving process five stages were addressed: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance. In an attempt to understand the bereavement process that a person might experience in grieving for a companion animal, it is helpful to look at the stages outlined by Quackenbush and Graveline (1985) and note the similarities and differences found in Kubler-Ross's work.

Jamie Quackenbush and Denise Graveline (1985), who have written extensively on the topic of pet bereavement, did not discount the work of Kubler-Ross, but rather asserted that there are differences between pet bereavement and human bereavement which change the facets of the process and add an additional component which will be addressed below.

The first stage in pet bereavement, according to Quackenbush and Graveline (1985), is guilt, the feeling that you are the caretaker for your pet and have let them down in either an emotional, physical, or financial way. Pet owners who have lost a pet to death often look at the things that they did not do for their pet and the methods they might have used to help their pet. When an animal dies, the owner may see the pet as helpless and berate themselves for their lack of action or decision to euthanize the pet. Although these feelings may not be realistic, the bereaved owner may feel these emotions because of the

inability of the pet to talk or offer their own sentiments about their condition or status.

The next stage, anger, often emanates from shock, and is the second stage listed by Quackenbush and Graveline (1985).

Anger, the feeling that someone or something is responsible for your pet's demise, is a natural feeling according to Quackenbush (1985), and may leave the owner feeling out of control and angry at the veterinarian or a loved one. Because of the frightening and frustrating aspects of death, anger often arrives when there is a lack of ability to control a situation or to change the outcome. This may be compounded due to the helplessness of a pet, as in the first stage of guilt. Quackenbush also notes that owners may feel both guilt and anger when their pet dies of an accident, such as being hit by an automobile, seeming so senseless and unavoidable. The next phase may be a delaying tactic, which allows the person to delay thinking about the reality of what has occurred.

Denial, as with the bereavement process in losing a human being, is usually fleeting and immediate, to be followed by the next less numbing phase of grieving (Quackenbush & Graveline). Clinging to the hope that there has been a mistake or putting off feeling of sadness are common forms of denial and tend to dissipate when the bereft pet owners allows themselves to admit that the pet is gone and that the loss has occurred. However, the next phase is not unlike the depression that Kubler-Ross addressed in her landmark work in 1969.

Depression characterized by listlessness, guilt, melancholia, and lack of motivation is the final phase that Quackenbush and Graveline noted in their bereavement process, emphasized that

it is inevitable from the loss and is a normal part of the process, while this pervasive, helpless, and hopeless reaction serves a positive purpose in your bereavement. It gives you time to think about your pet's death and to put it in realistic perspective - a perspective you'll require to fully come to grips with the death. (p. 47)

As with the other stages of grief they noted that this amazing process is not predictable in its sequence, duration, or intensity, and is an individualistic process. Ultimately the anger should lead to an acceptance of sorts, but acceptance is not listed in Quackenbush and Graveline's stages of pet bereavement and is mentioned only as the goal of stage four, depression.

Not all researchers who have studied pet bereavement are in concurrence with the assessment of grief stages that Quackenbush and Graveline offer. Podrazik et al. (2000) asserted that these stage models overlook the social, spiritual, familial, and physical domains of the experience, while disregarding the individual's own experience. Further, Podrazik et al. noted that stage models offered imprecise definitions while ignoring the dynamic processing that is characteristic of grieving. This group of researchers emphasized the importance of looking at the individual variables of the loss and how it uniquely affects them. In order to more fully understand the grieving process with pets Podrazik et al. (2000) recommended the more fluid work of Cowles and Rodgers (1991) who addressed the grieving process more subjectively by the degree of significance, the kind of attachment, the relationship, the age of the lost person, and the conditions around the loss. Podrizak et al. argued that Cowles and Rogers (1991) offered a nonlinear approach to bereavement and illuminated the complexities of the individual more clearly than a stage model allows. Addressing pet loss as a fluid process, the authors suggested that the degree of loss is based on the significance of the loss to the owner. The age of the

deceased, conditions around the loss, and the type of attachment is also addressed by Cowles and Rogers. According to Cowles and Rogers (1991), “Understanding the individual variables of the loss is crucial to understanding how normal the grief process is for that particular individual” (p. 371). Podrazik et al. argue that this Cowles and Rogers nonlinear approach allows the unique aspects of the individual to be projected and to better increase the understanding of the nature of the bereavement.

Unique Aspects of Pet Grieving

Research by Archer and Winchester (1994) was based on the hypothesis that “the personal meaning of what has been lost is a good predictor of the intensity of subsequent grief” (p. 260). In this study, participants were asked what the pet meant to them, with the researchers classifying these answers according to emotional importance, such as the adjective “baby” or “loved” being rated as high and “pet” being rated lower, with the term “friend” being in between the two. The results showed that the degree of affective attachment, based on the questionnaire, showed the highest correlation with overall grief score, predicting that the highest level of grief would occur in cases where there is the most emotional involvement in a relationship. The authors cited Doka’s (1989) research and noted that pet loss is a form of disenfranchised grief, where either the relationship or the loss is not recognized by others, as with miscarriages, and may not be recognized by society or offered social support. The study may have a loss of universality in that the participants were pooled from a local veterinarian and other sources and may not be representative of the actual community. My Shepherd-Beagle mixture, Blizzard Leigh, has just sleepily nodded approval in response to my verbal report of this last statement.

Not all people grieve in the same manner, and researchers have begun to address the paucity of information available regarding pet bereavement (Clements et al., 2003).

Researchers often tend to evaluate in terms of statistics and empirical measure which is not always applicable when the concept is not tangible, such as love for a person or pet. Clements et al. (2003) noted the immense contributions animals bring to a relationship and the death of a pet being one of the most difficult times in a person's life. According to Clements et al., it is clear that humans and pets are becoming significantly attached to each other, and pets assume their own personality in a family, becoming sorely missed when they pass away. Despite this manifestation of love and attachment, pet loss is often not recognized because it may not be seen as authentic or significant to friends, family, or acquaintances. Pets, like people, assume various roles and also different levels of loss to each family, with the age of the animal, and the nature and intensity of the relationship possibly affecting the grief reaction. With the number of pet owners in society it would appear incongruent that the literature is scarce when approaching this topic. This may, according to Clements et al., be reflective of the fact that society trivializes the bereavement of an animal, and ultimately affects how a person feels about publicly displaying their grief.

In a quest to legitimize companion animals and their place in society, Planchon et al. (2002) examined the grief process which a pet owner may face when their companion animal passes away. This particular study found that attachment to companion animals was associated with greater grief following the death of cats or dogs versus other types of exotic pets. The study was said, by the authors, to have importance to not only

veterinarians who came in contact with grieving clients, but mental health professionals who also meet clients with similar profiles of grief.

Using college students and veterinary clients, the 63 companion guardians came from two local veterinarian hospitals and were male and female, and ranged from the ages of 9-85, with African Americans, American Indians, Asian Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Caucasians participating. The Pet Loss Questionnaire, which noted symptoms of depression and anger associated with grieving, and the Pet Attachment Survey, which studied human-animal bonding, were both administered to the participants. The study concluded that higher levels of attachment to a companion animal were associated with greater grief levels, along with death by accident and death by euthanasia causing increased levels of grief. The conclusions of this study were upheld in the next investigation.

Noting pets as a “touchstone in an increasingly urbanized” civilization” (p. 60), Dunn, Mehler, and Greenberg (2005) examined the loss of a bond that is broken through a pet’s death, and the reactions which follow. The authors cited a quotation by Voith (1985) to illustrate their findings, “the strength of the attachment of humans and animals can be understood by the biological attachment systems that exist to bond parents and children” (p. 60). In this study the importance of offering counseling to grieving pet owners was examined, via a social work support group in a veterinary study, while also emphasizing the importance of a social worker as an advocate for the client, as well as a resource for the veterinarian.

Predicated upon the idea that an animal’s death can produce a grief reaction, which is often overlooked by others, the researchers in this project used classic resources

such as “When Your Pet Dies: How to Cope with Your Feelings” (Quackenbush & Graveline, 1985) and “On Death and Dying” (Kubler-Ross, 1969) to form a program to help ease the suffering of people who have lost a companion animal. (Incidentally, these are two of the resources which I found to be compelling in my dissertation work and are often quoted in this body of work.) The spine or conclusion of this research was evaluated by the participants who voluntarily elected to join the group after losing a pet. One aspect of comfort which was reported by the members was the loss of a feeling of a stigma which many previously felt for the loss of their pet and an easing of guilt. In conclusion, the authors reported that the members were able to talk and process their loss, without embarrassment, and to seek closure with their loss. The role of attachment in bereavement was considered in the next article we will spotlight.

Both the severity and length of symptoms were observed in a study by Wrobel and Dye (2003) that investigated the grief over the loss of a pet. Surveying individuals who had lost a cat or dog, the specific symptoms which owners experienced after the death of a pet were studied. Quoting the often referred to Cowles (1985), “This lack of universal social mechanisms for dealing with grief impairs the resolution of grief and isolates the grieving owner” (p. 386), the authors asserted that although the grief reaction to the death of a pet was similar to loss of the death of a significant human, the mourning process was different due to the absence of sanctified mourning processes such as funerals. The 174 adults who participated in this study were administered the Pet Attachment Survey, measuring the degree of attachment to their pet, and the Pet Death Survey, monitoring 12 dimensions of grief with loss of a pet. The research concluded that there was a positive correlation between degree of attachment to one’s pet and level and

duration of grief. Again, the absence of the effect of the loss on families is difficult to ascertain with no inclusion or mention of families in the investigation.

Margolies (1999) addressed pet bereavement from the stance that a pet's death may reactivate a woman's unfinished mourning over the loss of her mother and could heighten early maternal loss while forming an anxious attachment to companion animals. The author addressed the human-animal bond while also looking at the companion animal as an internalized parent/child figure. Margolies asserted that pet bereavement is a disenfranchised form of grief, with the attachment to a pet being viewed as insignificant and replaceable by society at large. She maintained this position while also noting that a seminal article on pathological attachment to pets used women exclusively as participants while the studies did not question why the women were more attached. Referencing Ainsworth et al. (1994), Margolies stated that unresolved mourning in every instance has led to children with attachment styles that are anxious and disorganized. Furthermore, Margolies contended that pet ownership offered a unique resolution to the contradictory feelings of reconnection and sensitivity to loss with pets being loyal and not venturing far from the comfort zone of their owner. She finally added that companion animals may offer intimacy, connection, and possible healing for women who have a heightened fear of loss. Riveting in presentation, Margolies' research lost statistical integrity in that it is based on one long extensive case study of a 42-year-old woman who had lost her companion animal. The article lacked the depth that may have been found in a larger population size or less focus on only one participant over time.

Conclusions of Pet Bereavement Literature

Although we have profiled the array of literature that is available on pet bereavement up to date, it is interesting to note the lack of material available on pet bereavement and families. The field of marriage and family therapy is not in its infancy, yet there is little information published to guide a therapist who is attempting to ease the suffering of a family in the midst of grief for their companion animal. Alas, as this writer looked for relevant material a marriage and family classic, *Spiritual Resources in Family Therapy*, edited by Froma Walsh (1999), no mention of pet bereavement was found, despite mention of many familial aspects of dealing with death. The available information regarding pet attachment exceeded what is available on pet bereavement and had been direct in explaining the complex, yet undeniable, attachment that pet owners may feel for their companion animal. However, it is inevitable that the fragile lives of these pets will end, with the research focused on pet bereavement being meager and insufficient. We will now focus on how this inadequacy of information on pet bereavement manifests itself in the counseling arena.

Implications for the Field of Counseling

Despite the inclusion of pets into many families, the realm of counseling has been slow to include pets into their assessments, bio-psycho-socials, and family structure evaluations. According to Mertens (1991) attachments to pets may begin as early as 18 months of age and from infancy on 98% of children and adolescents studied indicated that they loved their pets. A majority of adults, according to the American Veterinarian Medical Association (2000), refer to themselves as their pet's parent, and 63% of dog owners and 58% of cat owners have a pet that sleeps on a family member's bed

(AVMA). With so many families including pets in their daily lives, it is natural to assume that there will be a time of bereavement when the pet passes away, and according to Adams, Bonnett, and Meek (2000), the bereavement is often severe. A therapist need not be an expert in pet attachment or bereavement to make inquiries as to the inclusion of a pet in the home, or to ask about the number of hours that they spend per day with their pet. Sharkin and Bahrack (1990) maintained that if a person were to lose a member of their family that grief would most likely be the center of a number of therapy sessions, and it is no less essential to include pet bereavement in the sessions if the pet has ascended into the family as a member. As therapists, we can not afford to profile certain people, such as the elderly or the lonely, and identify only these groups as possibly suffering from pet bereavement, as pet companionship is often seen in tandem with other healthy relationships, and not in isolation (Sharkin & Bahrack, 1990). Given the lack of social support, it is not uncommon for people to not talk about their feelings of loss when grieving for a pet, which adds to the necessity of an inclusion of pet inquiries when evaluating a client. A person in the midst of grief is unlikely to broach the subject of their pet loss if their therapist has not ever attempted to glean information about a pet relationship. Discussing pet loss and bereavement is also an opportunity for a therapist to discuss other losses in the client's life and their response to those losses. Indeed there are some therapists who even include animals in therapy sessions to provide greater empathy, focus, rapport, and physical contact. Therapy dogs are another avenue of approaching issues with a client in a nonthreatening manner, with the therapy dog offering unconditional support to the client.

The implications for a marriage and family therapist may be more overarching with pet bereavement if the deceased pet is considered a family member. As Margolies (1999) has stressed, minimizing the loss of a pet often is emphasized by not routinely obtaining initial information about pets in the family and can be reactivated when the therapist is cold or insensitive when addressing pet bereavement

Implications for Marriage and Family Therapists

Sharkin and Knox (2003) posited that a pet is able to affect the dynamics and functioning of a family system with communication, interaction, coping, etc. leaving a significant impact on the family when the pet has died. The authors further asserted that this may be especially difficult with families, as all people do not grieve in the same manner, and the anticipated loss may vary from family member to family member. Changes in life cycle may also affect the bereavement process along with amount of time spent with the pet and family size. Ranking among the most stressful of family events is loss of a family member, which is addressed by Gage and Holcomb (1991) who discussed family stress theory, which defines normative family events and transitions as stressors.

Murray Bowen (1978), a pioneer in family therapy, identified pets as a component in family systems and also included a symbol for pets in his widely known genogram, an assessment tool used to identify a family and their previous generations. Cain (1991) noted pets being triangled (a term used in Bowenian family therapy) into a family system to alleviate tension, and to divert from family conflict. Gage and Holcomb (1991) refer specifically to family practitioners when they note that “family practitioners assessing stress levels among their clients may need to be alert to the potential stress of pet loss

since clients may be reluctant to acknowledge their feelings for fear of being ridiculed” (p. 104). There may be disparity in a couple’s perception of the stressfulness of the death and a family whose social support does not view the loss as significant may cause a family to lose their usual support systems. Consequences in a family may pile up to the point that there is an increased risk of disorganization and disequilibrium (Gage & Holcomb, 1991). Anticipation of these events may be as ordinary as including pets in a genogram, or evaluation tools, which acknowledge the pet as a member of the family. This is also an excellent time to evaluate family norms which are centered on death and loss, and the ways in which a family copes with stress. The opportunities are ample for the marriage and family therapist and need not be complicated or different from the assessment and treatment of other families which are coping with loss. Appropriate inquiry, evaluation, and compassion are initial ways for a therapist to begin the journey into exploration of pet bereavement with a family. As Winingaards-de Maij et al. (2005) asserted in their study of grief with couples, “screening for risk level raises the chances of the intervention leading to positive results” (p. 622). Counselors need not forecast the needs of their clients, but embrace the idea that death is a part of our client’s lives, and pet bereavement is a theme in our client’s stories and histories which we must address rather than ignore.

Summary

In examining the topic of pet bereavement, we have studied pet ownership, pet attachment, and pet bereavement in order to gain a more clear understanding of how a family grieves when they lose a pet who was considered to be a family member. Reasons that a family might own a pet such as: health benefits, benefits for children, manipulation

by pets, and finally attachment to the pet were scrutinized to formulate connections between the human and the desire to own a pet.

Pet attachment was investigated by highlighting Attachment Theory and expounding on its similarities and differences to Family Systems Theory. In order to more succinctly understand pet attachment, Attachment Theory was emphasized while Family Systems Theory was introduced to better conceptualize the nature and complexions of families.

Attachment theory and bereavement were woven together to synthesize the theory and topic studied, with both human process of grieving and pet bereavement viewed as paramount to the nature of pet bereavement and families. Dissimilarities were noted as well as resemblances with human and pet bereavement.

The implications for therapists and marriage and family therapists was highlighted and the breadth of this phenomenon was underscored in an effort to emphasize improved screening, assessment, and counseling tools to therapists working with clients. Without these tools a therapist cannot collect the necessary information to counsel a family who has experienced pet bereavement. No book can be judged by its cover and the text of a book may be uniquely enriched by having included a pet as a family member. Noting that the bulk of these studies have been quantitative in design, this particular research study will utilize a qualitative design to better understand the personal experiences of the participants who have lost a companion animal.

CHAPTER III

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Restatement Purpose

The purpose of this study was to gain conceptual clarity regarding how families experience the loss of a pet whom they have considered to be a member of their family unit. Clinicians, academia's, theoreticians, and laypersons may benefit from data which are rich, detailed, and contextualized in forming, assessing, and evaluating current treatment protocols which address the topic of pet bereavement. Prior research had primarily elaborated on the effects of pet loss on individuals, rather than families. This study attempted to bridge the deficient amount of literature which is available focusing on pet bereavement and families by exploring the nature and process of pet bereavement in a familial context. A qualitative analysis examined the experience of the family when a pet dies who had been elevated to the status of a family member.

The qualitative research methodology utilized was comprised of two in-depth interviews with five families who had lost their family pet/family member, and a general background questionnaire. The primary research question was "what is the nature of pet bereavement and pet attachment within the context of the family and their overarching response to the loss of the companion animal"? Subquestions included: (a) what nature of attachment did the family members have with the deceased companion animal? (b) What

made the pet a family member? (c) What was the participant's unique experience of bereavement for the pet?

These research questions were designed to extract information that examined the nature of attachment family members felt for their pet and the corresponding grief level they felt when they lost their pet. These open-ended questions allowed more information to be gathered about pet loss and attachment within a familial context.

Methodological Framework

In selecting a phenomenological approach, whose roots are philosophical, an attempt is made "to extract the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this person or group of people" (Patton, 2002, p. 132). The emphasis of this design was collaborative with an underscoring of the subjective meanings of the participants being validated. A conversational style was the manner in which stories were shared and discussed with the participants in order for the researcher to gain a fuller understanding of the phenomenon of bereavement with families who had lost a family member pet. Family interviews were utilized, with all family members present who wished to participate, maintaining a familial framework throughout. The type and inclusion of family members will depend on the interpretation of the participant and their inclusion or perception of family membership. Individuals were interviewed while in the family setting to include their thoughts, perceptions, feelings, and constructions of pet bereavement. In this particular study participants under the age of 18 were included in the family interview provided a parent or guardian was present.

According to Wertz (2005), the descriptive research which is phenomenological in nature "investigates the intentional relationship between persons and situations, and

provides knowledge of psychological essences...” (p. 170). These essences are the “structures of meaning imminent in human experience” (p. 137). The structures of these meanings should provide the researcher with information which has not been gleaned by former preconceptions or knowledge. Collecting meanings from the perceptions of the participants will enable the researcher to gain more validity for the study, along with being able to “transcend even what the participants themselves think or know about the topic” (p. 171). The collaboration with the subjects is critical to this body of work, to establish the appropriate information garnered from participants.

Sample

Parameters for this study are outlined below and are addressed with each potential participant.

Participant Definition

1. Families were included who had lost a pet who was considered to be a family member. The pet loss had occurred within 2 months from the time of the first interview.
2. For the purpose of this study, only cat and dog owners were considered.
3. Families may not be participants in counseling for any reason at the time of this research to prevent overlap or confounding issues.
4. Family members under the age of 18 were included in this study directly, with parents or guardians present throughout the interviews, and Children’s Assent forms signed.
5. The sessions were audio-taped and then later transcribed by a professional transcriptionist who had signed an agreement of Confidentiality.

Participant Recruitment

Families were recruited through a local veterinarian who had been consulted as to the nature and parameters of this study. The veterinarian was contacted in person by the researcher and asked if he was willing to recruit clients for participants in this study. Personal referrals to this writer which meet the above criteria will also be considered. When the referral was made via the veterinarian, he made the first contact with the family member about this project at which time Appendix C was presented to the potential participant. The researcher then made an initial contact with the potential participant and inquired as to their willingness to partake in this study. The families were issued a self-addressed, pre-paid envelope containing Appendix C and asked to contact the researcher via telephone or mail to indicate their willingness to participate.

If the families agreed to participate, they were contacted via telephone by the researcher to confirm willingness to participate, to provide a more concentrated overview of the study, and also to assess the feasibility of the family's participation weighed by the sampling criteria in Appendix D. At that time an interview time and designation were arranged if the family was selected and had agreed to participate. Potential participants were able to discern their own fit for the study after a description of the study was provided at which time they could have declined the opportunity. It was the responsibility of the researcher to decipher any concerns of self-harm, homicidal ideation, emotional discomfort, or excessive tension with participants who had decided to partake in the study. Any of the above types of concerns were evaluated by the researcher as they could have manifested into more distress during the research study. All participants were given a \$20.00 gift certificate at a local retail store as a gratuity for their participation in the said

study. If there were any difficulty in recruiting a population sample for the research, other veterinary clinics were asked to recruit participants.

Family One. Jane (67) and Tom (66) were a Caucasian, heterosexual couple who had been married for 46 years and had three grown children who no longer lived at home. Jane was retired from a semi-professional job, while Tom still worked full time at his semi-professional job, which had required college training. Both were contacted by the said veterinarian and were eager to participate in this study, as their 12-year-old Golden Retriever, Shiloh, had died one week earlier. They were reflective, well spoken, emoted well, and were enthusiastic during the interviews to share the feelings of their recent loss. Both agreed that the interviews had been very cathartic to them and seemed hesitant to stop the process, as Jane noted that the interviews had helped them to better sort through their feelings of loss.

Family Two. Family number two consisted of Mary (61), her daughter Tori (39), and Tori's daughter Darla (10) who all resided in the same home along with Tori's husband and son, who did not participate in the study. In the past month they had lost their 16-year-old dog, Leslie, who had originally been adopted by Tori when she was single. Living together in a large home, Mary was an active participant in her daughter's family's life, while still maintaining her own personal space and pursuits. Mary was a retired semi-professional, while Tori maintained a professional position which required a Master's degree and was currently attending college to obtain an additional Bachelor's degree. Darla was enrolled full time in a private school and was a very articulate, keen participant. Their close bond to each other was demonstrated throughout the interview as

they sat very close together, at one point all three persons sitting on a love seat along with two dogs.

Family Three. Rob (54) and Helena (48) had been married for 25 years and were very vocal in saying that they had made it their decision to have their pets as children and were fervent in their desire to rescue stray dogs. Rob was retired from a manufacturing position, while Helena had her Master's degree and worked in a professional position. They had recently made the decision to euthanize their two dogs that were elderly and ill, and struggled with the loss of their pets, while feeling they had been merciful in their decision to euthanize. They were a family who readily laughed and clearly enjoyed each other's company, while making it clear that their dogs, including the three that remained, were a significant part of their life. Rob did not mince words and tended to curse at times while also displaying his kindness in the way he treated his wife and pets. Helena clearly was amused at her husband's choice of words and did not attempt to edit or censor his vocabulary, but rather clarified some of his word choices to point out his intent.

Family Four. Fiona(35) and her mother Susan (58) were mother and daughter who shared many things including a love of animals. Susan and Fiona appeared to have easy dialogue together and also could correct each other's speech when they felt it appropriate. They had decided to euthanize their cat, Sheppy, after he had suffered debilitating health for a protracted period of time. Susan's's son, Tommy, was also mentioned during the interview as he apparently loved Sheppy and was a part of the euthanasia process. It was clear that this family maintained a closeness with each other and that their cat, Sheppy, had also been a loving, integral part of their family. Pictures of

Sheppy remained in the home as we spoke during the interviews with the family members looking at the framed photographs often.

Family Five. Linda (60) and Victor (61) were a couple married for thirty-eight years with two grown children who lived away from home. The couple had decided to euthanize their twelve year old Golden Retriever, Lester, after Lester became ill and they felt “he was still in pain.” Both Linda and Victor appeared to talk easily to this researcher, but had apparent difficulty in maintaining dialogue with each other. The home appeared tense and the interviews also tense as the interviews took place within two weeks of Lester passing away. Linda and Victor appeared to have been devoted to Lester and were very succinct in re-telling their stories of devotion with regard to Lester.

Data Management

This section discussed the method of data collection and the steps taken to analyze the findings.

Data Collection

Families that had been identified were contacted via telephone by the researcher and further evaluated as to their fit for the study. At that time the would-be participants had the opportunity to ask questions about the study, inquire about the informed consent procedure and for the researcher to determine their willingness to be a part of the interview phase of the research study. A time was arranged between the researcher and participants that was convenient for the interview to be conducted at the participant’s home. If the home was not a secure location or was uncomfortable for the participants, an alternate location was named in order to conduct the interviews. At that time the family

was informed about the process of the study including: taping of interview, transcription of interview, and uses for research and publication.

Interview guides (Appendix E) were utilized which facilitated “a more systematic and comprehensive . . .” (Patton, 2002, p. 344) process by outlining the areas to be covered in the interview. A basic line of questioning was shared by all participants and highlighted certain pre-arranged subjects of interest. According to Patton,

the interviewer remains free to build a conversation within a particular subject area, to word questions spontaneously, and to establish a conversational style but with the focus on a particular subject that has been pre-determined. (p. 343)

The descriptive stories of the participants were allowed to direct the parameters of communication with the researcher. A phenomenological approach allowed participants to voice their perception of the experience of pet bereavement and how their construction was framed within the family.

Time constraints are a part of the interview process and limited the time available with the participants, thereby creating the necessity for an interview guide. The interview guide was crucial in working with families as “A guide is essential in conducting focus group interviews for it keeps the interactions focused while allowing individual perspectives and experiences to emerge” (Patton, 2002, p. 267). An interview guide for the second interview was composed after the series of first interviews in order to gain clarity with the topics addressed. Concepts included pet bereavement, pet attachment, and the family’s response to the loss of the pet.

An etic approach was utilized as the classification system for research which denotes “a category created by anthropologists based on their analysis of important

cultural distinctions” (Patton, 2002, p.267). The etic approach allowed the researcher to examine a culture or phenomenon at a far enough distance as to be able to see similarities and differences without fully immersing themselves into the culture. The family members were interviewed conjointly in order to glean a richer understanding of family grieving with pet bereavement. All family members were asked to complete a demographic questionnaire at the end of the second interview. This process allowed the respondents to provide background and demographic information.

In approximately 2 weeks after the family interview the researcher met again with the family for a second interview which attempted to tease more descriptive, rich information about themes discussed in the first interview. The interview lasted approximately one hour and had the same family members present as the first conjoint interview. The second interview utilized an interview guide constructed of questions which assisted the researcher in gaining more insight and clarity about the first interview. This guide was initiated after the series of first interviews had been completed.

Data Analysis

After the first interview, the researcher harvested the material to gather any meaningful clusters which were further expounded on during the second interview. After completion of the second interview, the researcher reviewed the transcripts and further drew any patterns or themes that emerged from the participant’s lived experience. Transcripts of the interviews conducted were reviewed by the researcher, committee chairperson, and methodology committee member. Any modifications for material or subject matter were made at that time. Completeness, appropriateness, and fullness of

topic were addressed at that time with any deemed changes made to more abundantly explore the research.

In order to gain fresh, rich, in-depth patterns, it was important to not presuppose the outcome of the material that was to be derived from the study. This research project utilized inductive analysis to which allowed the data being studied to “emerge from patterns found in the cases under study without presupposing in advance what the important dimensions will be” (Patton, 2002, p. 56). Most succinctly, inductive analysis involved patterns, themes, and categories to surface while the researcher was interacting with the data, allowing the researcher to develop a codebook for content analysis. Phenomenological research highlighted the experiences of the persons’ own perceptions of their lived world, and inductive analysis underscored the data, featuring how the subjects had made sense of their experiences and world, while inventorying and defining key phrases.

Inductive analysis was done utilizing Moustakas’ (1994) format for phenomenological studies. The steps used are outlined as follows:

1. Epoche - The researcher took on the perspective that they needed to be aware of their personal bias and to eliminate personal preconceived ideas about the subject matter in order to more fully let ideas flow without personal judgment (Patton, 2002). The researcher maintained a journal which allowed for personal feelings and beliefs to be observed and monitored for personal preconception of ideas.

2. Phenomenological Reduction - After examining the data and suspending any preconceived ideas about the material, a tentative statement about the phenomenon was reached and horizontalization occurred. Horizontalizations of data-transcripts were

reviewed and participants' accounts of their lived experience were ordered in a non-hierarchical manner as to pronounce each as equally important.

3. Imaginative Variation - Various views of the themes were gathered which allowed "a description of an experience that doesn't contain the experience" (Patton, 2002, p. 486). Meaningful clusters were produced with repetitive or irrelevant information removed. The main task in imaginative variation "is to describe the essential structures of the phenomenon" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 98). This stage was reflective in nature and enabled the researcher to look at the various possibilities with the presented information (Moustakas).

4. Synthesis of texture and Structure -synthesizing meanings and essences of the experience. The clusters were examined by the researcher in order to glean perspectives on the data and to garner themes which later fused structure with the meaning which subjects assign to the phenomenon of pet bereavement. This essence was pulled from a particular time and place from which the researcher was working and from the vantage point of his/her research.

In reference to thoroughness, the researcher also paid attention to the unremarkable and to "seemingly uneventful descriptions and events, as well as the strikingly different . . ." (Harding & Gantley, 1998, p. 79) information presented in order to further contribute to and understand the phenomenon of pet bereavement.

Chapter IV outlines the outcome of this data analysis with Chapter V addressing the inferences of the data.

Measures of Soundness

When using an observational technique in research, Sapsford and Abbott (1992) recommend two methods to ensure validity: triangulation and reflexivity. In delineating how a researcher has arrived at a conclusion it is also paramount to establish trustworthiness, a qualitative terms which denotes reliability, validity, and includes closeness to meaning and lived experience (Gilgun, 2005). Triangulation and reflexivity may be utilized to enhance trustworthiness and highlight the “lived world” (Wertz, 2005, p. 169).

Triangulation may be described as the use of multiple research methods in the same study designed “to increase the information obtained from participants and to provide a more holistic view of their world” (Begley, 1996, p. 688). In-depth interviews with the participants will be supplemented with a participant background questionnaire (after second interview) and members’ checks (during second interview) which allow the participants to comment, modify, or expound on information or the process of the study. According to Begley, triangulation may include interviewing one’s own subjects as well as observing them, hence giving them a chance to explain their actions. This allows others to evaluate the completeness and applicability to their own interpretation. Both the committee chairperson and committee methodology member reviewed the raw data for thoroughness and contextual application as deemed necessary by the dissertation committee chairperson.

Reflexivity is the reflection back from the researcher of what their understanding is of the subject’s perception of the phenomenon at each step of the report process. According to Pyett, (2003) these steps may include “checking our method, our analysis,

and our own interpretation not only with the academic literature but also with the population we are researching” (p. 1171). This particular study demonstrated reflexivity by working collaboratively with participants to ensure that the appropriate information was teased from interviews by conducting member checks with the subjects. All participants were asked about their initial responses during the second interview as a way to use members’ checks and also for clarification of meaningful clusters. The trustworthiness of the study was enhanced by checking the analysis and interpretation with the critical reference group, therefore allowing the participants to verify the appropriateness of their meanings and to further provide credibility and authenticity. In providing a “coherent and illuminating description of perspective on a situation that is based on and consistent with detailed study of the situation” (Ward-Schofield, 1993 p. 202), it was critical for the researcher to maintain empathic neutrality (Patton, 2002) not becoming enmeshed in the data, but also not distancing to the point of losing its meaning.

Risks, Benefits, and Ethics

In that bereavement may include emotional and cognitive responses to the loss, it was vital that participants understand the boundaries of the research process. Richards and Schwartz (2002) propose that “The potential for distress to participants can be minimized by the researcher/practitioner being clear about his or her role boundaries and by ensuring that appropriate information and support are available” (p. 137).

Risks to Participants

Since pet bereavement may also be a socially disenfranchised grieving process, a participant may hesitate to solicit information about support or counseling. Counseling referrals telephone numbers were made available to all participants during the entire

process. In the event that the interview, at any time, became too traumatic or distressful for the participant, the interview was stopped by the researcher. Although suicidal or homicidal ideation/plans are unlikely to emerge, the interview would have stopped immediately if this assessment were viewed likely by the researcher and the researcher would have assisted the subject in obtaining the appropriate help at that time. In order to address the anonymity issues, all subjects were contacted directly by the researcher only, and participants were made aware that names were omitted from the research, and that all transcription tapes were to be destroyed at the completion of the research, via magnetic erasing at the University of Akron.

Benefits to Participants

Pet bereavement may be socially isolating for families given that the loss may not be recognized by family and friends. Participants may feel empowered by talking about the loss with the researcher and feel the loss is less disenfranchised due to the recognition of the process of pet bereavement. The participants had the opportunity to decrease potential feelings of helplessness by offering their personal perspectives “rich and deep with data . . .” (Gilgun, 2005, p. 169).

With the focus of “the lived world” (Wertz, 2005, p. 169) at the core of the phenomenological research, the subject had the opportunity to have their subjective experience voiced, valued, and recorded by the researcher. Phenomenology’s primary criterion, fidelity to the phenomenon (Giorgi, 2002) allows the examiner to “to be fully and critically present to situations where the desired experiences take place” (Giorgi, p. 9). This interaction enabled the participants to feel that their input was recognized by the

researcher. A participant who felt that he was the focus of the researcher's attention had the opportunity to feel valued and that their experience was significant.

Ethical Issues

The participation in a research study is not without risk and had been noted by social scientists to lead to anxiety (Richards & Schwartz, 2002) for the subjects. The risk to participants to feel re-traumatized about their loss was a potential possibility and needed to be evaluated by the researcher throughout the research process. Boundaries were clearly drawn with participants by the researcher so that they did not feel that the researcher's status as a therapist would translate into the research project.

Informed consent is a prerequisite for all research involving identifiable subjects, except in cases where an ethics committee judges that such consent is not possible and where it is felt that the benefits of the research outweigh the potential harm. (Richards & Schwartz, 2002, p. 137)

An informed consent form was discussed with the participants before they began the process, and limitations of the study were also addressed at that time. All subjects or potential subjects were provided with appropriate referral sources if they felt they needed services beyond the capacity of this researcher.

Given that this research is qualitative, and phenomenological is approach, "the goal is not to try to eliminate subjectivity, but rather to try to clarify the role of subjectivity when correct knowledge is attained" (Giorgi, 2002, p. 8). The researcher, along with the committee chairperson and committee members, made subjective decisions throughout every portion of this research study. The subjects were asked about the themes to clarify the perceptions and patterns of this research and to assess for appropriateness. With various perceptions being synthesized the researcher was able to

obtain a more integrated view of the topic, along with inbred safeguards providing the necessary safety for a deep, rich qualitative study.

Pilot Study

In order to gain more clarity with the nature, content, and thoroughness of the interview guide, a pilot study was conducted in which a family was interviewed about the loss of their companion animal, Ralph, who had died 6 weeks earlier. Ralph, a 12-year-old Dalmatian had been considered to be a valued family member, and the family members were “devastated at our loss,” and wished to participate in this pilot project.

After meeting with this family, which consisted of 42-year-old Greg and 33-year-old Geena, the interview guide was re-evaluated to calibrate it more succinctly to the needs of this study. Appendix E, the family interview guide for the first interview, reflects the changes made after the pilot study. The questions were modified after receiving feedback from the participating family members in the pilot study in order to clarify the questions derived from the interview guide.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

In this chapter I reintroduced my research questions, provided a detailed view of the participants, provided an overview of the core themes, addressed the core themes in detail, and expounded on related literature as relates to the core themes. The material is presented with rich dialogue gleaned from the narratives of the participants thus allowing the reader to better understand the application of the methodology utilized, the global connections of these families, and their overall distinctiveness.

Review of Research Questions

The primary research question in this study was “what is the nature of pet bereavement and pet attachment within the context of the family and their overarching response to the loss of a companion animal.” Subquestions included: (a) What nature of attachment did the family members have with the deceased companion animal? (b) What made the pet a family member? and (c) What was the participant’s unique experience of bereavement for the pet?

These questions were designed to extract information about both pet attachment and pet bereavement. In order to better understand the nature of pet bereavement it was crucial to more thoroughly comprehend the attachment that these families had formed with the pet/family member. Hence, this research study was divided into two dovetailed sections that are complementary to each other. Firstly, we examined the core themes of

pet attachment that were gleaned from the participant's rich testimonies and later reviewed the core themes of pet bereavement. Understanding the attachment that the families shared with their pet is a pivotal component of unearthing what their bereavement responses would be upon losing their pet. Chapter IV reviewed the four core themes of pet attachment while Chapter V introduces the four core themes of pet bereavement.

Overview of Research Study Participants

Since the heart of phenomenological research is based on the richness of the participant's narratives, I provided an overview of the families who shared their stories for this study. In a phenomenological body of work, the voices of the participants are able to shine, thus allowing them to become "experts" in their respective stories.

Family One: Tom and Jane

Tom (66) and Jane (67) had made the decision to euthanize their 12-year-old Golden Retriever, Shiloh, after she had been ill for a long period of time. This was a particularly hard decision as Shiloh had been a major source of comfort through Jane's bout with cancer and her depression. Tom and Jane were so emotional during the interviews that I had asked if they wished to take a break on several occasions. They were emphatic about being participants as they felt very strongly about the contributions that Shiloh had made in their lives. They did have three grown daughters but felt that they shared a more personal bond with Shiloh at this time in their lives as she traveled with them, slept with them, and kept loneliness at bay on many occasions.

Because of the closeness that they had shared with Shiloh, Jane wanted another dog after Shiloh's death. Tom disagreed with this during the first interview, and Jane

explained that it was similar to being a widow, in that when your husband died, you “get another husband.” By the next interview Tom had “softened” a bit and was beginning to embrace the idea that they look for another dog to adopt. Jane wanted to re-start her exercise regimen which had stopped after Shiloh died as she did not have Shiloh to accompany her to the park. Tom felt that his neighbors had been more attentive with Shiloh around and more likely to stop over if they saw Shiloh in the yard with him. It seemed likely that they would be introducing a new member of the family soon.

Family Two: Mary, Tori, and Darla

Mary (61), her daughter Tori (39), and Tori’s 10-year-old daughter, Darla, provided rich dialogue and visuals to this research study. They had been through numerous surgeries to ease their dog Leslie’s pain in her legs and had “nursed” her back to health after each of these surgeries. Recently they had lost Mary’s mother who had also lived in the same home with Mary, Tori, Darla, and of course, Leslie. All felt that Leslie had comforted them in their time of loss and was able to offer them her own special brand of love and warmth. Tori’s husband did not take part in the interview process, nor did her younger son, but was a part of the dialogue through Tori and Darla. This family was heartwarming in the way that they described the devotion that Leslie had offered great-grandmother, Mary, Tori, and Darla, in terms of acting as sister, daughter, friend, and companion. Apparently, great-grandmother had difficulty emoting at times and on occasion only talked about her genuine feelings regarding Leslie and not other family members.

In euthanizing Leslie this family used words like traumatic and devastating. They offered texture in their descriptions of how they tried to comfort each other but not

always in a conventional way. Tori admitted that she could not comfort her “inconsolable” children after Leslie died and left this to her mother. Mary discussed needing to grieve on her own but attempting to hold her family together in this time of loss. They had two other puppies at the time of Leslie’s death and were adamant that it made things a bit easier but was not a mechanism for sidestepping the grieving process for Leslie.

Family Three: Rob and Helena

Rob (54) and Helena (48) were the most colorful and animated of the families I interviewed in that Rob’s brash speech sometimes covered his rather soft spot he had for Harmacy and Muffie,(both age 11) the dogs they had rescued and had later decided to euthanize because of their deteriorated health. It appeared very emotionally draining for them to have to euthanize these elderly dogs together, vacillating between their cognitive knowledge of the dogs’ ill health and their desire to not lose the dogs.

Rob was clear in his discussion that their decision to rescue dogs had not been an easy one and that having to lose two at one time was even more difficult. Rob had recently retired and admitted that at times he became overwhelmed caring for five aging dogs but also referred to his dogs in very endearing names such as “Princess.” He and Helena discussed his having difficulty expressing anger well and admitted that he was only at his best when he was with his dogs. Their home was very relaxed and its accommodation to the dogs was apparent in the broken screen door used to let the dogs in or give them more cool air, or the dogs’ comforters on the floor for extra warmth. Both Helena and Rob offered no apologies for their dedication to their canines and clearly felt the family member pets were just that, family members. Rob self-reported that he had

attended therapy for his angry responses to others and found that the only thing that really calmed him was time with his pets/family members. The touchstone for his relationship with Helena appeared to be their mutual love for Harmy and Muffie and the other pets they had adopted. The love felt in their home appeared very comfortable and genuine.

Family Four: Fiona and Susan

Fiona (35) and her mother Susan (58) were so apparently close that they would finish each other's sentences, could disagree quickly, and then reconnect easily and seamlessly. Fiona would assume a leader role at times during the interviews and then Susan would emerge in that role. Both were avid in their devotion to their pets. Their home reflected them in that it was comfortable, rural, and oriented to family time, which cats and dogs were a distinctive part.

A third person who was an invisible part of the interviews was Fiona's brother, Tommy, who had, according to Susan, wanted to be a part of the study but felt he would be too emotional. Susan and Fiona brought his reactions and responses into the interviews of which he was never a part. The family was devastated at the loss of Sheppy, and Fiona compared the feeling to a death of a family member or a loss of a marriage or a significant relationship. Susan was in agreement that this emotional response to losing Sheppy was both a singular experience and also a time when the family joined together to grieve.

Throughout the interviews both Fiona and Susan appeared to be rather cognitive in their responses. This was in direct contrast to the visual picture they painted of the days leading up to Sheppy's death and the day Sheppy died. Relaying the events in that period of time, they recalled everything in sentimental emotional terms. Fiona recalled

the misty Gordan Lightfoot song that was playing the night Sheppy died, while Susan relayed the heaviness of the rain and fog that matched their mood on that fateful day. They both relayed the importance of the softness of the blanket that they had wrapped Sheppy in, emphasizing the importance of that memento for them. The importance that Fiona and Susan placed on these emotional memories tended to be at odds with their cognitive- based answers. This added to the richness of their testimonies in both a verbal and visual way synthesizing and completing their experiences.

Family Five: Kathy and Clويد

Linda(60) and Victor (61) had been married for 38 years but appeared united only in their sadness in losing their 12-year-old Golden-Retriever, Lester. Lester appeared to be the “glue” that held the family together in that she was a tension reliever and independently and jointly had relationships with both Linda and Victor. Before Victor walked in the room Linda had divulged that Victor had been emotionally very upset when he was present at the time Lester had been euthanized. However, Victor did not betray these feelings at the time of the interview and appeared to have difficulty exposing any feelings during our interview sessions.

Although cooperative with me, Linda and Victor appeared tense with each other and looked at me while not looking at each other. Both alluded to the way that Lester had been a part of everything they did and how she extended into their children and grandchildren’s lives. The posh comfort of their home was in direct contrast to the discomfort that I felt with their lack of emotional contact with each other. It was apparent to me that Lester’s assimilation into this family had eased tension, which resurfaced upon Lester’s death.

In interviewing Linda and Victor it reiterated to me the stark differences that individual family members may have in their responses to death. Linda and Victor did not appear to have a harmony in their responses nor did they resonate at any time in their testimonies. However, what did stand out was their mutual love for Lester and the difficulty they both had in regaining a homeostasis in their home without Lester's presence.

Overview of Core Attachment Themes

The four core themes of pet attachment are crucial in comprehending the nature of the family's relationship with the deceased pet and to further garner the understanding of what it meant for the pet to be considered a family member. This information helped to provide clarity to the first two research questions of this study and also to present the springboard from which to explore pet bereavement and families. The themes of pet attachment are paramount in later understanding the feelings of grief that families felt when faced with the loss of a companion animal. The said themes of unconditional acceptance, comfort, mutualism and inclusion are representative of the participants' relationship with the family member pet.

The first attachment theme, **unconditional acceptance**, is the feeling projected by the participants that they had experienced a feeling of being accepted by their pets in an uncritical, nonjudgmental manner. Strewn densely throughout the narratives of the families was testimony that reiterated the feeling that the family member pet was able to offer a feeling to the family members that they were loved and authentically cared for, without pretense, by their companion animal.

In being unconditionally accepted it is essential that a person feels understood, yet not judged or maligned for who they are. Emotional safety is made possible when a person feels that they are able to disclose their feelings without critical judgment or condemnation. In this manner, pets also help to relieve stress in a household when family members are able to depend on a pet to understand their feelings and emotional constitution. Even if the companion animals were not able to emotionally or physically offer conventional support, the families were united in their beliefs that their pets did foster feelings of being nurtured along with emotional bonding.

The second theme gleaned from the experts in this study was **comfort**. Comfort can be perceived as being offered in many ways and in various capacities. The comfort offered to the families in this study from their family member/pet was delivered in the form of the family members reporting that they had received reassurance from their pets while the family members were physically ill, emotionally upset, or even angry with the outside world or someone in their family unit. The participants were well aware that the pet was not human and did not attempt to assign human comfort mechanisms such as hugging to their pets, but universally viewed the pets as being able to reach past some type of distress and offer them a feeling of being consoled. This was universally true of the participants albeit married, single, or youth. This leads to the third core theme which focused on a circular relationship with the pet.

The third theme of pet attachment, **mutualism**, centered on the reciprocate reliance that pet owners and pets shared with each other. Given that pet owners and pets shared a mutual dwelling it is not difficult to believe that their schedules and daily rituals would converge. What was striking was the reliance that not only pets had on their

owners, but the reciprocity that extended to pet owners also relying on their pets. In lasting familial relationships stable interaction patterns are developed and fused by reciprocal reinforcement. A circular view of interaction patterns emphasizes the dynamics and effect that all family members have on the other. Relationships can then be understood as enduring interactions.

Throughout their testimonies, participants voiced the essence of the mutualism that existed between themselves and their pet. The relationships were interactive, complex, and dynamic with an emphasis on the mutual way that the pets and family members engaged in daily tasks that were beneficial to both the pet and family members. The dependence was not one sided but always evolving and inclusive of the needs of family members and pets alike. Although the companion animals were not able to speak, offer financial benefits, or express emotions in conventional ways, the families recognized that their pets offered a common system of structure, security and support in daily rituals. In order for this to occur, the pets would have to be viewed as being included in the infrastructure of the families.

Inclusion, the fourth core theme, refers to the role that participants voiced that they had inferred upon their companion animal. This theme focuses on the ascension that pets had made into being family members and the recognition of the family hierarchy which was inclusive of the pets' role in the inner folds of the family. All participants identified their pets as their children and themselves as their pet's parents while also incorporating the pet into extended family member's lives such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, friends and neighbors. Inclusion underscores the universal truth for these families

that their pets were not included in the family in a periphery manner but in the nuclear family.

In order to gain a clearer understanding of these pet attachment themes each theme will now be discussed in more detail, research relevant to the themes will be addressed and rich narratives from the participants presented.

Core Theme One: Unconditional Acceptance

“The companionship that Harmy offered was a true friendship with no ulterior motives.” (Rob)

All participants revealed that they had experienced a feeling of being accepted by their pets in an uncritical, nonjudgmental manner. Agnes Reppelier’s (1993) quotation “our dogs will love and admire the meanest of us with their uncritical homage” (p. 37) exemplifies the unconditional acceptance that family members expressed about their pet’s reflections of them. Embedded in the participants’ narratives was a thread of universal acceptance that they felt from their pets. Family members reflected on the importance of being listened to and acknowledged by their family member pet without an ulterior motive and the pet “always” being there for them. A component of being unconditionally accepted is a feeling of being listened to with a feeling that one is being understood in a consistent, uncritical manner. This is highlighted by Fiona’s reference to the unconditional acceptance she felt from her cat Sheppy:

F: Sheppy came out to greet me, like I am home and sitting there and he didn’t give me any grief. You’ve had a bad day and you come home and see the cat’s little face.

Researcher: So are you saying he actually interacted with you?

F: Oh, yeah. I am not saying he actually did.

Researcher: Could you express your feelings to Sheppy?

F: You could tell in my eye if there was nobody there. If you are yelling or screaming I think he knew I never really yelled. If I had a bad day and came home and I was by myself and I wouldn't necessarily talk to him like "hi", just give him a pet. It's just seeing him. It's all it took. (2/7)

Jane reiterated this type of communication that she shared with her dog, Shiloh.

Similarly to Fiona she voiced that the action of listening offered an acceptance which did not require active communication to feel understood:

J: I used to talk to Shiloh like she was a human being and I felt better when I got it out of my system. It was much better, especially if Tom and I had a misunderstanding or something. I had someone to talk with about things. (2/11)

The participants were united in their belief that their family member pet did not need to talk or nod in order for them to feel understood, and unconditionally accepted. The universal feeling that the pet was there for them, listening, and empathic appeared to be very important to the family members. An aspect of being unconditionally accepted appeared to be the purity of the pet's concern and a lack of ulterior motive in offering their presence. Rob and Helena addressed the acceptance they felt from their elderly dogs, Harmy and Muffie:

H: It's like they (Harmy and Muffie) actually showed they were concerned.

R: Yeah, they want to be around you but it's not like they want to be around you to get something. They just want to be around you to make you feel better, because they know you don't feel good or you are emotionally upset and they'll just curl up next to you and lay down or just sit there and look at you like it's okay. And I know they sense when I am angry, and not at them, just angry. But the girls (dogs) will just try and kiss you to death.

Researcher: Now is that a positive thing? Does it make you feel less angry?

R: Yeah. It does. At first it doesn't, but after you think about it for a few minutes they are still licking your face and blowing that stinky breath and you are pawing at them. It made me giggle a little bit.

H: The head in the window looking out for you. They are always glad, they can care less how bad your day was. They are just happy to see you. (2/2)

Participants reflected on the array of emotions they could display with their family member pet and not have to censor their feelings in order to feel loved. Rob, in an exchange which made his wife giggle, explained:

R: You know it didn't matter if you were pissed off, if you wanted to commit genocide on the world. The dogs were there, you know they were nonjudgmental about it, about you. Everything was right with the world with them. (1/12)

The research participants asserted that their pets were available to not only listen to them in a noncritical manner but also that the pet truly could extend unconditional positive regard for them. Tori discussed talking to her dog, Leslie, during a transitional time in her life:

I would say talking to Leslie was just kind of like using a diary, you could tell, you knew Leslie would listen to anything I had to say, not judge or whatever, crying this or that when I was pregnant . . . how special. (1/9)

Linda discussed the impact of being understood by her Golden Retriever, Lester and the confidentiality that Lester offered:

Researcher: Now do you feel that you could express your feelings to Lester?

L: Yes. You just talked to her. You know she wasn't going to say anything but can understand. (2/7)

A component of being unconditionally accepted appeared to be the consistency of the emotional and physically availability along with a feeling that the nonjudgmental attitude of the pets was never withheld. Tori's daughter, 10-year old Darla, described how she felt when expressing her feelings to Leslie. She was the fourth generation of females to enjoy the benefits of Leslie's's unconditional acceptance:

Researcher: Do you think you could express your feelings to Leslie?

D: Yeah, like when I was sad she would sit there and try and make me happy.

Researcher: Was Leslie helping? Did she make you feel better?

D: Yeah. (1/10)

As conveyed by Darla, the relationship with Leslie was such that Leslie not only sensed her sadness but also attempted to make her happy. Darla's mother, Tori, added succinctly that:

T: Leslie would never deny you.

Researcher: It sounds as though you are saying that Leslie loved you without reserve.

T: Correct. (1/9)

Tori expounded on her feelings when she noted that:

T: Leslie wasn't moody; when you called her, it was unconditional love. (1/9)

In gleaning the aspects of pets being available to their owners and offering unconditional acceptance it was voiced by all five families that their pet "was **always** there for them." A strong factor in feeling unconditionally accepted was the idea that the pet was there for their family members, rather than just taking from the family. When Linda and Victor were asked about what stood out in their relationship with their family member pet, Lester, the couple emphasized:

L: Lester was always in our presence. (1/6)

Since pets are somewhat dependent on their owners for survival, it may be tempting to infer that the nature of the relationship between pets and their owners is one of giving by the owners and taking from the pets. This line of thinking was strongly disputed by the expert's testimony in this research study in that all five families were

specific in the use of the word “always” when they addressed their pet being available for them. Rather than the pet being a distant presence in the home, the participants wholly reported an overall feeling that there was a consistent availability offered by their pets extended to them. Rob and Helena, like Linda and Victor, reiterated this theme:

H: The dogs are always with us.

R: Yeah.

H: The dogs are our lives.

R: You can anticipate everything about them.

H: Our dogs are with us all the time.

R: This is my family, Helena, and my animals are my family.

H: This is it.

R: Nobody else matters. Now I mean I have a goddaughter, nieces, and nephews, and I love them and stuff, and would be devastated over it if I got a phone call that said Lena, my goddaughter, got killed in a car accident. . . . I’d be sad and cry but would I be as devastated as putting Muffie or Harmacy to sleep? No, and I will be honest, no I wouldn’t and maybe there is something wrong with me or I am shallow, but I see them. I go to sleep and I see the dogs, and I lay there at three a.m. listening to this one snore and that one dreaming and I am laying there with them. (1/23)

As seniors, Jane and Tom had addressed the time alone that they faced at times.

The proximity that Shiloh offered was something that made Jane feel her time alone did not have to evolve into loneliness:

Researcher: Jane, is there something that stands out in your mind about your relationship with Shiloh?

J: Very close relationship. Shiloh went everywhere I went. When I sat in the chair she was always right next to me. She listened to me. (1/1)

Fiona, and her mother Susan offered this about the effect of their cat, Sheppy, always being there for them:

Researcher: Would you say that your cat, Sheppy, reduced loneliness?

F: Oh, yeah.

S: Yeah.

Researcher: How so?

F: Sheppy was a tiny presence in our home.

F: When we come home, he is like a presence in our home. Like a person would be. . . . He was just someone to come home to. He was always there for us. (2/12)

Unconditional acceptance encompasses pets being available for their owners in an uncritical manner emotionally and physically. The narratives reflect that the families universally believed that their pets listened to them, understood them, were nonjudgmental of the family members, and were always there for them, albeit in unconventional ways. As demonstrated from these testimonies pets have the ability to offer emotional availability and physical proximity to their owners, hence being available to the family members. Other family members, especially those outside of the household, may not have the emotional saliency that a pet can share with their owner as they do not criticize or condemn but offer a consistent presence with a demonstration of unconditional acceptance. We will now examine the information presented on the theme of unconditional acceptance with current available literature.

Unconditional Acceptance: Literature Comparison

A family's attachment to their family member pet and the bereavement that they feel when the pet dies is part of the systemic process that occurs when the attachment occurs between the family member and the pet. As a circular unit the motions of one family member affects the others in the unit, even in death. This is congruent with what

we understand in the discipline that is Marriage and Family Therapy emphasizing that a family member does not stand alone. Cohen's (2002) research revealed that "pets give as much as they receive, even if the support they provide cannot be neatly plugged into standard social network categories." He further reported that "in contrast to others in the household pets do not criticize. They allow people to express their deepest feelings of intimate connection and nurturing" (p.633). This dovetails with the vignettes of experience that the experts in this research study described about their life with their pets.

Margolies (1999) may have framed unconditional acceptance in a succinct way when she offered "pets are devoted, forgiving, affectionate, uncritical, and available. Their love is given unconditionally. The relationship between a mother and infant is essentially nonverbal. Pets offer their owners an opportunity to receive unconditional maternal love again" (p. 298).

This underscores the statements by the family members in this study in that they were unanimous in their belief that the pets were indeed available to them and consistent in offering a nonjudgmental, understanding presence to them.

The core theme of unconditional acceptance stands in stark contrast to Archer's (1996) statement that "from a Darwinian perspective, it is a puzzling form of behavior (to parent a pet) as it entails provisioning a member of another species, in return for which there are no apparent benefits connected to human fitness" (p. 237).

Apparently, the experts in this study believed that their pets did offer benefits to them in the form of unconditional acceptance. This would be an apparent benefit even if it was offered in an unconventional package. Sable (1995) underscored this idea in stating

that “attachment relationships foster continuing proximity and they have potential to meet emotional provisions in other categories” (p. 336).

Bowlby (1973) theorized that over the course of a lifetime humans have a vital need for interpersonal relationships that will provide emotional security. The core theme of unconditional acceptance provides a connection to the emotional security that was offered by the family member pets despite their status as animals rather than other humans. The family members globally reported that their pets offered them understanding, availability, a nonjudgmental attitude without an ulterior motive present. For the participants in this study, the demonstration of unconditional acceptance was of considerable importance to the bond they felt with their family member pet. What a pet has to offer in the way of emotional connection with their owner is also a consideration in the next core theme of comfort.

Core Theme Two: Comfort

“It was companionship, love; she gave love. It was not that she was just sitting there looking pretty or something like that. She would just nuzzle you.” (Tom)

The ability for a pet to provide emotional and physical comfort to their owner tethers the attachment of owners to their pets. The experts in this study consistently noted the derived comfort they felt from the pets and the profound effect it had on their well being. Strewn throughout the statements of the participants were illustrations of how their family member pet had provided a level of comfort to their owner/family member and the importance and reliance on the pet for this role.

Pets are in a unique position to offer comfort to their owners in that they share a close physical proximity and are often viewed as affectionate and understanding in ways

that another family member might not be able to penetrate. Comfort was delineated by the families as being both emotional and physical depending on the need of the family member. Participant's reiterated the love, companionship, affection, and consolation they received from their and family member pets and described how their pets were able to comfort them when they were physically ill just by their presence. Tom discussed the impact that their dog Shiloh had on Jane when she was battling cancer;

Researcher: Tom, is there something you noticed between Jane and Shiloh when Jane had cancer?

T: Yes, there is no question. And I think Shiloh calmed Jane down a percent, several percentages. If Jane was hyped up, worried, and in pain, you could see the difference when Jane was with Shiloh. She calmed her down. You could just feel the love there. Yes, you could just feel the love there. (2/4)

Jane added her own feelings about this time with Shiloh:

Researcher: Can you describe to me how, what it felt like for Shiloh to be there with you when you had cancer?

J: It was just comforting and just having a warm body near you, close by you, even though Shiloh was on the floor; but yeah, she'd recognize you by wanting to be petted or to lick your hand or something like that.

R: She was reassuring to you?

J: Oh, Yeah. (2/4)

Tom expounded on the Shiloh's impact on Judy even recognizing that Shiloh was able to comfort Jane in ways that he could not at the time she battled cancer, even if it was unspoken:

Researcher: Tom, were there ways that Shiloh was able to comfort Jane that you were not able to?

T: Well,sure. Just the fact with her lying right next to her and Jane's hand down rubbing her. Judy rubbed the heck out of Shiloh.

J: Oh, Shiloh was here. It was 24 hours, it was. Tom would be gone part of the day.

R: Shiloh would be next to you for those hours?

J: Oh, Yeah. She didn't leave my side. (2/4)

Linda and Victor discussed their dog, Lester's reassurance and presence to Victor after a double hip surgery:

L: Lester was always there when he had both hips replaced. In general she was always well behaved in this house and I think she sensed that something was different.

V: Yeah, she knew something was different.

Researcher: Do you think she offered you comfort by lying next to you?

V: Either directly or subconsciously or whatever, I don't know.

L: Then you'd put your hand down and go "how ya' doing"? with your hand. (2/6)

Victor had noted that although he didn't consciously understand why Lester was able to comfort him when he was ill, he did believe she was able to impact him at that vulnerable time. This feeling was also reiterated by 9-year-old Darla when she spoke of her 16-year-old dog, Leslie, comforting her at various times when she was ill:

Researcher: Darla, is there something that stands out in your mind about Leslie?

D: Leslie would lay with me a lot when I was sick and she was just really, like when I was sick or anything like that; when I wasn't feeling good, she would be next to me. (2/12)

Darla offered more specific details about Leslie's ability to comfort her:

D: Leslie would lick my mosquito bites.

Researcher: She thought she was helping you?

D: Leslie was a healing dog. (1/4)

Transgenerationally Leslie was able to comfort four generations of women in Mary's family including Mary, Mary's mother, Mary's daughter, TLori, and Mary's granddaughter, Darla. Mary and her daughter Tori recounted Leslie's interaction in the family when someone was ill:

Researcher: Mary, you mentioned that Leslie would seek out your mother?

M: Yeah.

Researcher: When your mother was sick?

M: Yeah. Leslie would sit by my mother. If she wanted Leslie, she would be right there.

T: Leslie could just tell that something was out of the ordinary or how you were feeling or acting. Whoever was sick, that's who she would be next to. (2/2)

Tori further addressed Leslie comforting her when she was pregnant with 9-year-old Darla:

T: I know when I was pregnant both times, Leslie would, if you were sick, she would not leave your side and when I was pregnant, Leslie would lay in whatever little space was left on the couch and she would lay in the nook of my stomach even when Darla was kicking inside. (1/4)

When asked about their dogs, Harmy and Muffie being present when they did not feel well, Rob and Helena were able to note the comfort that they offered:

Researcher: Are there times when you don't feel well that you notice that Harmy and Muffie add something?

H: Oh, yeah. They always add something to me.

R: Harmy and Muffie will come and lie with you.

H: Yes, they both will come and lie with me. (2/8)

Throughout the rich descriptions that the family members offered was the comfort that the family member pets had given when the family member was ill or physically

vulnerable. Symbiotically the emotional support that the pets offered was also discussed by the families. Although the emotional trials may have been different throughout the families, the comfort that the pet offered resounded throughout. The notion that one could share their personal emotions or secrets with a pet may appear odd to some given that a pet, on the surface, may not present as being able to offer comfort in a traditional way.

Tom described the impact that Shiloh had on Jane when Jane experienced bouts of depression:

Researcher: How did Shiloh keep morale up around the house? Can you give me an example?

T: Well, if Jane is down, Jane takes medication, different medications, and sometimes she's down and I know darn well that Shiloh had to pick her up. It's just if you are in a bad mood, Shiloh would pick you up. (2/8)

The emotional composition of family members helps to maintain the emotional homeostasis in the family and is crucial to a family's circular balance. The emotional health of one family member affects all members, and a pet decreasing symptoms of depression, anxiety, or stress is of paramount importance to a family avoiding an emotional crisis. Mary related her own battle with depression and Leslie's attempts to ease Mary's mood. Mary's daughter and granddaughter also commented on Leslie's role in the family:

Researcher: Do you feel that Leslie helped to offer a purpose in life?

D: Yes.

M: Many times. I have trouble with depression.

T: I don't think my mom would have got out of bed if she didn't have to take care of Leslie.

M: And I always got up with Leslie, even if I didn't want to.

D: Like when Leslie would lick my mosquito bites.

M: She would just keep moving until she was next to me and look at me with those eyes. You'd know she cared.

T: She gave you something to concentrate on other than the way you were feeling.

M: And then you felt you weren't alone.

T: Right. (2/12)

Apparently pets offer their own brand of compassion that evokes a healing emotional response to other family members. As therapists we may use a myriad of techniques to offer relief of emotional symptoms to a client. Whether it is through compassionate listening, active response signals, or comforting remarks, therapists learn to both sense symptoms of emotional distress and to alleviate them. The families in this study richly described their own examples of how their pet had emotionally responded to them, albeit without training.

Consider Linda's reflections on how Lester was able to help her lower her frustration level:

Researcher: Did Lester help to relieve stress in the household?

L: Yes. A lot of times you are just frustrated and she would come over and put her head on your lap and you start petting her and it just relaxes you more. I think animals are just very purposeful, and that she was good for my nature. A lot of times she just made me a kinder person. (2/11)

Sometimes pets are even able to penetrate a person's heart that has been emotionally unavailable to other family members. Mary had described her mother's disconnect from other family members, yet her mother's affection for Leslie:

T: She (great-grandmother) was never that close. She would never let any of us get that close to her as she would let Leslie.

Researcher: How do you think Leslie made her feel?

T: My mom loved Leslie. I think my mom was pleased that Leslie was affectionate toward her.

T: How you were talking is how Leslie would react. If you were crying then she would lie there and let you talk to her and pet her and she would kiss you.
(1/10)

The families etched a landscape in their homes of the family member pet being in a pivotal place in the affection and consolation of their family's emotional hearth. Even though there has been an apparent decrease in community and extended family, and an increase in urbanization, the family members in this study were able to address the physical and emotional bridge that their pets offered to them in time of need. All families in this study had rated their social support as average or above average but still relied on their pets for comfort at different times.

Comfort: Literature Comparison

As Sable (1995) had noted "attachment research and theory have shown that emotional well-being is in large measure affected by personal relationships, not only in childhood but throughout life. People need a combination of relationships from close affectional attachments to broad social circles" (p. 339). What Sable does not emphasize is that the source of the personal relationship needn't be with another human in order to be successful. In defining the human to pet bond as a "mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and other animals that is influenced by behaviors that are essential to the health and well being of both" (p. 1), Shore, Douglas, and Riley (2005) accentuate the core theme of comfort that was yielded by the testimonies of the experts in

this study. Physical and emotional reassurance may be effectively given and received by pets as underscored by the research narratives.

Considering that Bowlby's Attachment Theory suggests that a person is more likely to feel valued if their attachment figure provides comfort and protection, the value of comfort provided by a pet appears to be very profound on a family. Katz (2006) described the comfort that pets may offer to their owners:

This yearning is what I hear of so often from dog lovers. It's part of our lives from our earliest years. What begins as a potent, comforting fantasy later ripens. Dogs now at our sides, we escape from loneliness and solitude finding faithful love and unswerving devotion. We find rightly or not, as if we share complete understanding: certainly we have a secret language. Our love goes beyond words; we've finally found our beloved companions. (p. 157)

The increase in using therapy dogs in hospitals, nursing homes, and in palliative care highlights the core theme of comfort. According to Collins (2008), "We know that dogs provide emotional support and help alleviate social isolation" (p. 18), adding that patients often forget about their illnesses, sit and smile without talking, and face death with the help of therapy animals. Interestingly, the comfort that this particular service of animals uses is also of great importance to the staff that service this physically compromised population. Alas, I first hand see the impact that my therapy dogs, Hurricane D., Tornado, and Blizzard have on the emotional and physical complaints that clients present. Without speaking or professional training they offer clients a feeling that they care about them with patients reporting much comfort from them.

Comfort is not derived in the same manner for each person but the families in this study were able to project the emotional and physical comfort that their pets offered them. The available literature is compatible with what our experts reported in this study

with an emphasis on the untraditional way that pets are indeed able to offer assurance to their families. Now the core themes of mutualism and inclusion will be explored in order to better understand what constitutes the pet being made a family member.

Core Theme Three: Mutualism

“Leslie had a different thing with each person, she was so smart. We woke up at the same time, played together, and even ate at the same times.” (Mary)

Families engaging in daily rituals can help to reinforce emotional and physical closeness and may also explain how they spend the precious commodity of time.

Renowned family therapists, Nichols and Schwartz (2001) emphasized the usefulness of studying rituals in family therapy in reporting that studying rituals in family therapy has become a prominent interest for family therapists. Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2000) noted that rituals help to “provide clarity or insight into their roles and relationships” (p. 444).

The research participants involved in this study uniquely expressed the lyrical ways that their family member pets not only were a significant part of their day but how they were also a considerable part of their pet’s day and life. When discussing their daily lives and the lives of their pets, it is vital to note the mutual reliance that the families and their pets shared. Rather than it being a relationship based on their pets needs, the family members emphasized the extraordinary amount of time shared and the effect this had on their relationship with their pets. Tom tearfully recounted the time that he shared one on one with his Golden Retriever, Shiloh:

Researcher: Can you tell me about an average day with Shiloh?

T: I remember an important thing and I am going to miss it terribly. I used to sit out in the driveway at my chair with the Sunday paper; Shiloh would come up next to me and love me. (1/3)

Tom's wife, Jane, also spent quality time with Shiloh which she emotionally discussed several times:

Researcher: Were there times that you guys played as a family with Shiloh?

J: Well, we used to throw a ball back and forth in the family room and Shiloh would run and try and get it and then we'd throw it. Everybody played with her. She was a person. You know even the grandkids played with her. (1/7)

Tom and Jane appeared to be more united and animated in their conversations when they discussed the time they had spent with Shiloh as a family:

J: We would be working in the garden or the lawn, or something, and then we'd go to the backyard. We wouldn't say a word to her, but Shiloh went and realized we're not there anymore and come around looking for us.

T: When I'd cut the grass or did yard work, Shiloh would be right there with me.

J: We used to sit out in the driveway every night in the summer time. When Tom came home from work, Shiloh always stayed with us. We each had our own time with her; he had her at night and I got her in the day time.

Researcher: That was something special for you?

J: Yeah, it was. (2/7)

Jane and Tom were very tearful as they discussed the ordinary time that they had spent with Shiloh, the time that makes up an average day and that can be so meaningful when it is no longer available. Shiloh may not have scheduled time with Tom and Jane as humans tend to do, but she was nonetheless an active part of their daily lives and comprised in many of their rituals.

Daily tasks may be mundane but are a significant part of how we spend every day. The family members in this study were explicit in noting the give and take in their

relationships with their pets and the idea that it was a benefit which contributed to the wholeness of their family context. Fiona and her mother, Susan, addressed the inclusion of their cat, Sheppy, in their family dynamics:

Researcher: When you picture your family being together would Sheppy be a part of that mix?

S: Oh, yeah.

F: Yes, especially around the house. Shiloh was always there, he was by you.
(2/16)

Fiona further addressed the routing in her day which she centered on her pets and included in her family routine:

F: Sheppy comes in here in the morning and I feed the animals before I go to work the cats all know to come in her because they have this little internal clock.

Researcher: Are you saying that Sheppy was part of your daily routine?

F: Yes, yes.

S: Oh, yeah. (2/7)

Fiona's memories of time spent with Sheppy were significant in that she did not present time spent doing grand things, or luxurious locales, but commonplace activities that centered on time spent between Fiona and Sheppy. Events such as meal times, walks in the woods, and family time were intermingled with Yeller and the family. This is similar to the memories that Mary and her family recounted to me about their time with Leslie when an average day with the family and Leslie included a mutual rising time, eating at similar times, and an exercise regimen that involved the family members and Leslie:

M: Leslie had her different things with each person and she was very smart.

D: She also got Mommy out of bed in the morning when the alarm went off.

T: Yes, Leslie would get me out of bed.

D: Yeah, because Mommy doesn't like to get up early and neither do I. (2/10)

Ten-year-old Darla chatted about the rapport she shared with Leslie on an average day:

D: If I would be sitting on the couch, Leslie would come and hit me with her nose, just like trying to skooch me over and lay down with me. (1/7)

Darla's grandmother added:

M: And when we went to bed and I spent that time with her was special. I think Leslie always looked forward to that. She certainly didn't want the other puppies in bed with us. (1/11)

Mary's daughter, Tori, also described the times when Leslie would sleep in bed with her:

T: I loved Leslie to sleep in bed with me. My husband traveled a lot so it was just nice to have Leslie there with me as security and I am a deep sleeper so I know that she would hear something long before I would. I liked her to sleep with me even when I was first married, even though my husband is not a dog lover. We got bunk beds so that Leslie could have her carefree sleeping area. ((1/10)

In describing where their pets slept, it helps to delineate some of the daily rituals that took place with pets and their owners. In illustrating how the families retired for the night, all five families stated that their pets slept in their bedroom. The nighttime rituals of who slept where and what time they went to sleep were inclusive of their pets. Dogs and cats alike were lovingly included in this intimate component of family life. Rather than the family pet sleeping in a cage, or outside they were included in the "together time" that precedes sleep and waking.

As families navigate their way through the days and nights that comprise life, daily rituals become the skeleton and backbone of these days. In speaking to the family members they were very emotional recounting the times that they ate, played, loved, and exercised with their family member pets. Linda and her husband, Victor were very tearful as they recounted the times that they had spent with their Golden Retriever, Lester, especially noting how symbiotically their days and rituals meshed:

L: Lester would always come and sit with us.

V: If someone came, Lester was right there.

L: She was right there.

V: She always came and hung out with us.

Researcher: Can you describe an average day with Lester?

L: Sure I can. I always got everything checked out. I'd take her for a walk and then we'd come back and eat. Then we would always go out on the street there and hit tennis balls and she would run and we'd play tennis. Or the neighborhood kids would come over and we'd hit tennis balls and play baseball and Lester would catch the balls. Then we would nap and lay around until dinner. But I would always take her out. Every time she went out she did not even need a chain because she always listened to me. All the kids in the neighborhood always liked to play with Lester. (2/1)

Linda and Victor appeared very proud as they explained how Lester was included in the neighborhood play group and her intelligence in not needing a chain as Lester listened so well to them. The feeling I had as they spoke was of listening to someone talk about their child and actually watching them show me pictures of Lester as they were recounting their joint life experiences. Rob and Helena also described their lives being blended with their family pets, Harmy and Muffie. They also produced pictures and photograph albums of the dogs as they were talking about their daily rituals:

Researcher: Were there certain rituals that you did during the day that were special for you and Harmy and Muffie?

R: Everybody had their own special thing. Like their food downstairs, that was strictly for Muffie.

H: His “somethin’, somethin’ . But they all had special treats all the time.

R: I’d go downstairs to work out or something and he would follow me downstairs and lay under the stairs or at the bottom of the stairs and I’d give him a handful of dog food. So he knew the stairs meant special somethin’ somethin’.

R: Also, Helena talked to our dogs. We don’t have kids but all of our bookcases are filled with children’s books. “The Problem with Halitosis” is about the dog that has bad breath and has a green cloud. Helena would sit and I’d watch her and all the dogs, all five of them, all five dogs would gather around and she’d read to all of them and they would all sit and listen.

Researcher: Is that something that you both looked forward to?

R: Yeah, I get, I don’t do the reading or anything but I sit back and like you know a fly on the wall would just laugh, I’d giggle to myself, you know watching this woman with a master’s degree reading children’s books to our dogs.

Researcher: So this was something the whole family did?

R: Yeah, it is a family thing. (1/9)

Fiona and Susan discussed how their cat’s (Sheppy) affection would include the whole family:

F: Sheppy loved to go person to person and everyone would let him.

S: He wanted to get on your lap.

F: He would get on your lap then he’d start drooling and purring for us.

S: Even on Tommy. He called him the little bulldog cat.

Interestingly, all five families discussed the positive effect that exercising with their pets had on both them and their pets. When one sees a pet being walked by their owner or a cat walking in the woods with other family members, it is instinctive to

believe that the pet is receiving the benefits of the exercise and that the owner is simply with the pet as a duty. However, the families I spoke with discussed their exercise routines and the positive impact of the pets being a part of this daily routine. It became apparent to me that exercise was not just physically beneficial but also emotionally.

Jane discussed the exercise regimen that she shared with Shiloh and how she had not exercised since Shiloh passed away:

T: Jane and Shiloh would walk in the park every day.

J: I'd put the car in neutral and the car would creep along slowly and we'd go around the park like that. It was the funniest darn thing. But it was great for me.

T: That would have to be closeness. (1/7)

Rob and Helena discussed walking all five of their dogs and the fact that they liked walking with the dogs "come hell or high water."

H: I used to walk all five of them every day.

R: You walked all five dogs every day?

H: Good exercise. I did it in the morning and at night. Even if it was raining, I would take all five for a walk.

R: So you schedule your time around theirs?

H: Pretty much. When Rob was working, the dogs were here by themselves for eight hours and we changed our schedules after the fact he was home. When he worked we had to change things. Absolutely! (2/14)

Mutualism: Literature Comparison

Given that "attachment research and theory have shown that emotional well being is in large measure affected by personal relationships" (Sable, 1995, p. 25), it is not surprising that the experts in this study recollected the communal time that was spent with their family member pets. Archer (1996) noted that pets and humans being in one

another's company can lead to these interactions actually being reciprocal and mutually satisfying, rather than only advantageous to only the pet or the human family members.

The family members in this study were explicit in noting the give and take involved in their relationship with their pets and the pets contributed to the wholeness of their family life.

Wilson and Davenport (2003) cite two factors that are associated with a secure family base: caring for others as a priority in the family and also the family members supporting each other in the care of one another. They also contended that these two factors are important in order for the family to serve as a secure family base. The experts in this study were forthright in their reflections in how their pets were there for them as much as they were there for their pets.

As McDonnell (2005) noted, the feelings that we harbor for our pets may be a mixture of "the perfect storm" that conspire to cause humans to feel such intense feelings for their pets and to intertwine our lives with theirs (p. 244).

The above richly strewn testimonies from the participants in this study bring to light the mutualism that exist between the pets and their human family members, in a way that is reciprocal and highlights the common denominators between these family members. In family therapy the emphasis of circular behaviors is underscored with a discussion of the theme of mutualism and also recognizes the importance of the structure of the family. The next core theme of inclusion addresses the ascension of pets into the nuclear family.

Core Theme Four: Inclusion

“I can’t speak for others but I would go way more clips for my animals than I would for anyone else in the world”. (Rob)

Participants were unanimously in agreement when they addressed the contributions that their pet family member had added to their family structure. The pets were identified as not only being involved in the inner sanctum of the family core but were recognized by all participants as being designated as their child, while universally all owners noted that they also referred to themselves as their pet’s parent. Accordingly, the family participants were explicit in noting that sacrifices were made by themselves for the pet and the pet as a family member. Inclusion of the pet in the family structure and role in the family system will now be addressed.

Throughout the research process it was understood that all participants had considered their pet to be a family member; however, the title or position assigned to that pet was not a preconceived designation that I had automatically assumed or thought would be a unanimous part of the study. Rather, the nature or specific role designated to the pet was gradually unfolded by the participants and their beliefs about the pet’s specific role in the family.

Indeed the experts in the study noted that their structural role for their family member pet was that of child. This is an important distinction in not only the view of how the families perceived the pet but is essential in later understanding the bereavement process of losing a pet that was considered a child. This is also an important consideration in the study of Attachment Theory in that “the nucleus of Attachment Theory is that there is an innate tendency to form an attachment, with a specific other,

usually the mother” (Sigling et al., 1998, p. 169). From a systemic point of view, it is important to understand the nature of how a pet is included into the inner folds of the family and where the pet is assigned in the family profile. Rather than having a periphery role in the family, the pets were viewed to be important family members within the family structure.

Mary and her daughter, Tori, noted that respectively they considered their dog, Sara Lee, to be their granddaughter and daughter, despite the fact that they were fully aware that Leslie was not a human being. This was a topic that arose during the interview in which Mary’s granddaughter, Darla, also vocalized her opinions:

Researcher: Mary, you mentioned that you babysat for Leslie?

M: Yes, just like my grandchild.

T: Yeah, I’d drop Leslie off in the morning before work and then pick her up on the way home from work. (1/2)

Darla delineated her own relationship with Leslie in the following way:

Researcher: Darla, how did you look at Leslie?

T: (To Cara) Friend?

D: Like a friend?

Researcher: Like a friend?

D: Sister, because she would sit with me when I was little. (2/12)

When asked further about the connection that Leslie had as the “child” in the family, Mary and Tori discussed the extensive role Leslie played in the family:

T: You could just say “here Leslie”, and she’d come, no matter where you were.

Researcher: Would you say that the bond was there when you needed her?

T: Yes, yes, Leslie would never deny you. (12/4)

Interestingly, inclusion in the family does not mean that the child role is only that of a “taker” but also “giver” as demonstrated in the above statement. However, the pet was viewed as needing care, as with a child and included in the needs of the family, even trans-generationally as Tori noted:

Researcher: You mentioned that Leslie was like your child. How did you consider her to be a child in your home?

T: Well, I didn't have any children at the time and so really a dog requires a lot of care, you have to feed and babysit them, like I said my mom would babysit her so I would make certain Leslie was taken care of. (2/70)

This idea of protection was continued as Tori recalled Leslie's care for Darla:

T: Leslie was very protective of Darla in the bassinet.

D: Oh, yeah.

T: And Leslie would lie by Darla when Darla was a baby. If the baby was laying on the matt on the floor, Leslie would be right beside her.

Researcher: Leslie would protect Darla?

T: Leslie was very good, not jealous, she would come and get me if Darla cried. (1/10)

Mary was quick to emphasize that Leslie was very devoted to Tori:

M: Leslie loved her and always looked out the window for Tori. (1/12)

It is not a novel idea that pets may be viewed as children in the home, nor that many people refer to themselves as their pet's parents. The insertion of a pet as a family member/child would also indicate a level of inclusion, such as a pet being embraced in intimate family time, or as previously noted, a pet sleeping in bed with other family members:

Tori noted the special time that they felt when Leslie slept in bed with her:

T: I loved for her to sleep with me. My husband traveled a lot so it was just nice to have her here with me. (1/10)

M When we went to bed and I spent that time with Leslie was special. I think Leslie also looked forward to that. (1/11)

Victor and Linda noted that Lester was considered a child in their home and even the grandchildren felt the same way:

Researcher: You mentioned that Lester was like your child. Did you actually consider her to be the child in your home?

K: I would say more of a family member, like one of our children.

Researcher: What about Lester made her a member of the family?

L: She was always in the house. She was really good. You could trust her. (1/10)

Linda relayed that after several weeks of losing Lester the local school bus driver stopped the school bus near Linda's home and inquired as to Lester's whereabouts.

Apparently, some of the children on the bus were saddened because they were accustomed to seeing Linda playing with Lester on their way to school. Not only was Lester included in the family Christmas picture every year—Lester had also been included in their neighbor's Christmas card picture because of their fondness for Lester. All five families interviewed mentioned that they had pictures of their family member pet included in their photograph albums, and all five families had a framed photograph of their pet in their home. Similarly, Tom and Jane addressed the role of Shiloh in their household:

Researcher: We talked about Shiloh being in the role of child in your home. What was your role as parents?

T: Well, loving her, rubbing her, playing with her, we had our “fight-time.” There were times when Shiloh would initiate our fight time.

J: When Shiloh was better, I exercised her daily; I walked her every day. (2/2)

Conversely, I asked Tom and Jane what made them consider Shiloh a child in their home:

T: Shiloh would seek our love. She would always come to us at different times and actually demand to be petted. Especially Jane more so than me.

J: I was proud of Shiloh.

T: Yes, we were proud of her, there is no question.

J: We both loved that dog and I think a lot of it was her size because she would sit beside you and she was like a child.

T: Oh, yeah. (2/1)

In his discussion Tom struggled with his description of Shiloh as his child:

T: The loss was like a child. But that is a dumb statement. (2/16)

Despite their knowledge that Shiloh was not their actual child, Tom and Jane underscored her inclusion in the emotional climate of their home:

Researcher: Would you say that Shiloh helped to maintain morale in the house?

T: Sure, Sure.

J: Oh, yeah. No question about it. I mean she was our child. No question about it.

T: Our life was around hers.

J: Yeah.

T: Well, her life was around us too.

J: Yeah. (2/8)

The discussion that Jane and Tom had about Shiloh's role in their home exemplifies the complimentary nature of their parental role and Shiloh's filling the child role in their home. Despite this intimate relationship, Tom still noted his feelings of loss as being "dumb," and perhaps not noteworthy in a societal view.

Rob and Helena explained that they considered their dogs to be their children and themselves as parents:

Researcher: You said you refer to your dogs as your children?

R: You want the truth, I mean they are my kids. We don't have kids, I don't have family—all my family is in the ground and Harmy and Muffie were my family. I look at it as if you do something to them it is like you are doing something to my kids.

Researcher: Do you refer to them both as your kids?

H: Oh, God, yes.

R: Hell, yeah. If you do something to any one of my animals, you'd best wish you were never born, because I will burn your house down.

MJ: We do call ourselves Mommy and Daddy. (1/4)

The inclusion that Rob and Helena felt was expressed as follows:

H: The dogs are always with us.

R: You know when they want a goodie, when they want to be loved, when they want to go out. It is like second nature to us. Everything about them.

Researcher: So, you consider them to be your children?

R: Oh, yeah.

H: Oh, yeah.

Researcher: How so?

R: We were consumed by them.

H: Everything we did or had, we didn't go places or whatever if we knew we were going to be too long. Kind of always the same way parents have to do with their children's schedules. (1/23)

Helena further discussed the difficulty of going on vacation destinations that were not dog friendly with accommodations for their dogs. She stated that she and Rob would hire a live-in babysitter for their dogs that cost more than the actual vacation. Their decision to not kennel their pets was based on their family philosophy that they would provide the same level of care for their pets as they would for a child.

Fiona and her mother focused on the role that their cat, Sheppy, assumed in their home:

Researcher: You mentioned that Sheppy was like your child. How did you consider him to be your child?

F: Well, really they all are. He was just like the rest of our pets. They all are, they have their own place, you know they are like our little kids.

S: Maybe we are as close to them because we don't have little kids.

F: Sheppy was just like a standard, always here.

Researcher: So are you saying that Sheppy was like a mainstay in the house?

F: Oh, yes. Sheppy was here all the time. He would go lay out in the sunshine and come in and just lie in the corner.

Researcher: Like part of the family?

F: Yeah, yeah.

S: Yeah, if he was alert and looking around, he was trying to get close to somebody. (2/5)

Fiona and Susan emphasized the idea that Sheppy was included in the nucleus of the family, but they did not have to draw him in, he also sought them out, along with pursuing other family members.

Another aspect of inclusion with our family member participants highlights the aspect of sacrifice that the families made for their pets. Each family noted at least one surgery and some as many as three, that they had paid for when the pet needed it. Costly surgeries, medications, special foods, physical therapy, medical procedures, and baby sitting services were only some of the ways that these families showed their care for their pet being included in the nuclear family. The level of care was very similar to that which would be exercised for a child or other family member in the home.

Inclusion is one the core themes that emphasized the ascension of the pet into the family status, and the ways that the pets were lovingly cared for. Rather than in a utilitarian capacity, the family member pets in this study were offered a rank that afforded them an emotionally vital position in the family. Now we will examine the literature reports that address pet inclusion in the family.

Inclusion: Literature Comparison

Archer (1996) had asserted that “despite any perceived benefits people may obtain in terms of the loving and pleasant feelings they derive from interacting with animals, such feelings themselves provide no benefits in a “Darwinian sense” (p. 248). This statement is refuted by the responses of the experts in this study, with the pets being assigned roles as children in this study rather than a utilitarian title. Similarly, Archer had viewed pets as parasitic but also noted that “there is convincing evidence that people usually view their relationship with their pets as similar to those they have with their children” (p. 244). This would underscore the information that our participants richly described in the above narratives.

However, identifying oneself as a parent, or the pet as a child, does not denote that the participant was unable to see that the pet was not human. According to Cohen (2002), “this is not to say that even the most bonded person believes his or her pet is human. Pets seem to occupy an overlapping but different space from humans in a family. Even people who think of their pets as their children know this is now literally true” (p.633). Because the family members identified their family member pets as their children it does not distinctly say that they are not aware that the pets were felines or canines. However, the role that the pets had assumed was as children, and the species appear to not matter to the participants in their designation of familial position.

In Attachment Theory the responsiveness that may be complementary with a pet acting as a child and the owner as the parent may serve as a self-maintaining feedback loop according to Cook (2000) who asserted that not all attachment variance can be explained in one’s head or intellect. Perhaps the inclusion of pets into one’s family is emotionally charged and also congruent with the cognitive feedback one has as behaviors of the pet align with those of the other family members. Whatever the reason, a firm place had indeed been established for the pets inside the intimate nucleus that comprises a family. Noonan’s (1998) research substantiated this in his assertion that this familial role may be secured by pets because of “eliciting and satisfying basic biological needs to love, to nurture, to be important, to be loved, to talk, to smile, and to laugh” (p.21).

Summary

In order to examine the nature and extensiveness of pet bereavement it was first essential to understand the core themes of pet attachment and what linked the pets to these grieving families. In gleaning the core themes of unconditional acceptance,

comfort, mutualism and inclusion the research process is better able to connect attachment of the pet family members and the family participants and their bereavement process. As part of the course of comprehending pet bereavement it is now necessary to observe the core themes of pet bereavement as related to our participant families.

CHAPTER V

RESULTS

In the previous chapter the core themes of pet attachment had been introduced in order to better understand the nature of the families' relationship with the pet, highlighting the familial attachment to the pet. In this chapter I introduced the core themes of pet bereavement that are essential in answering the primary question of this research study, "What is the nature of pet bereavement?", and the subquestion "What was the participant's unique experience of bereavement for their pet?" The core themes of pet bereavement were addressed in order to better understand the families' grief response to the loss of their pet family member.

Overview of Core Pet Bereavement Themes

Like the four core themes of pet attachment, the four themes of pet bereavement are crucial in comprehending the grief response that occurred when the families faced the death of their family member pet. In exploring the pet attachment themes it was apparent that the families had a genuine, deep, enduring relationship with their pets and that losing that pet would evoke bereavement responses which the core themes attempted to capture. The said pet bereavement themes of guilt, emotional distress, individual grief process, and attempts at consolation are now addressed.

The first pet bereavement theme, Guilt, is the feeling displayed by the families that they had not done enough for their pet, either in their life choices for the pet, or in

their end of life choices for this same family member pet. Questioning themselves and sometimes each other, the families reflected on what could have, should have, or might have been different in the life and death of their pets. Although this is not uncommon in responding to the death of a human or a pet considered to have been a family member, it was nonetheless a painful and reflective process in which the families provided rich, textural dialogue that led to this theme.

The next pet bereavement core theme, Emotional Distress, refers to the array of poignantly sad feelings that the families displayed upon the death of their family member pets. Although the feelings were pronounced in a myriad of ways, the emotional responses to losing the family member pet were centered on the melancholy, sadness, and sorrow that are the apparent hallmarks for losing someone that one loves. Although we are familiar with the emotional responses that we experience when we lose a human family member and expect to feel sadness, the emotional distress upon losing a pet was viewed as intense and sorrowful. How a family experiences these range of feelings lead to the next core theme of individual grief processing.

The third pet bereavement core theme, Individual Grief Processing, describes the independent way that the family members experienced their grief responses to the loss of their pet. Although collectively the members comprised a family, they also moved through their grief process in an individual way inside the universal responses as a family. As each family member had a unique relationship with the pet and shared individual experiences with the pet, their grief responses also reflected the distinctive relationships that were formed with the family member pet. Because grief can be

uncomfortable and reflective in nature, the next core theme encompasses the response to grief that family members made.

Attempts at Consolation is the core theme that focuses on the families experiencing the loss of their family member pet and their efforts to re-establish a balance in their family's emotional and physical composition after their loss. The family members, both individually and collectively, displayed a desire to soothe themselves after the familial loss. This is sometimes displayed as attempts at guilt reduction after a decision to euthanize a pet or even emotional comforting of oneself or other family members made to allay pronounced distressful feelings. One of these primary feelings is guilt which is the first core theme which we examine.

Pet Bereavement Core Themes

“Yeah, I really wasn’t sure. I still keep thinking how could we have avoided putting her to sleep, what more could I have done, what more could I have done for her.” (Fiona)

The death of a pet is a stressor that occurs at a familial level and can add significant stress to a family system causing family system stress and pile up with an increase for risk of disorganization (Gage & Holcomb, 2001). Hence, it is imperative to examine the relevant core themes of pet bereavement to better understand what occurs in a family after the death of a family member pet. The intensity of that grief is highlighted in the first core theme of guilt.

Core Theme One: Guilt

The core theme of guilt was both a profound and significant thread that was raised throughout the participants' stories in this research study. Since a pet is often viewed in a

childlike and helpless way, it is often left to their family members to make important life or death decisions about their pet, including medical attention and euthanasia. The confusion that pet owners often feel when they elect for euthanasia or medical treatment can promote guilt, even when a pet dies a natural death that did not involve a decision made by the pet's owners, such as an accident. Given that loving a pet would imply that there is never a good time to lose them, it appears natural that one might experience a sense of guilt when the pet depends on their owners for many of their needs. The participants in this study were unanimous in discussing their feelings of guilt in losing their pet.

Although unrealistic, pet owners often feel that they are responsible for every aspect of their pet's lives and that they are omnipotent in protecting their pet from harm. When a pet passes away, the pet owner may have guilt about the decisions they made for the pet in life and death. Rob and his wife Helena discussed the feelings of guilt that they harbored after the loss of their dogs, Harmacy and Muffie, who had been euthanized:

R: You are supposed to take care of your friends, your family, and I felt like I was setting Harmacy and Muffie up to get them. 'Cause they didn't want to go into the vet's office that particular day, especially Harmacy. I had to pick her up and carry her and it might have been because of the floor is tile and you could hear she didn't want to walk on the tiled floors. We tried to touch on the high points with them and it would give you a good feeling before you went.

H: I think we kept saying to each other kind of almost like excuses to each other, don't you think?

R: Yeah. Especially about Muffie because there was no question. The fact that she couldn't hardly get up anymore and all she did was wander from place to place and she'd get stuck in corners and her bladder problems and we knew.

Researcher: So are you saying that you were trying to reassure each other?

H: Pretty much.

R: Yeah, it was, yeah. (1/14)

Rob and Helena elaborated about having to make the plans for the euthanasia and the emotional toll of guilt:

H: But, yeah we never had to make an appointment like this. You know how you call and go “Can we come in right now?” and they will say “Yes”, not like I made an appointment two weeks in advance. That was weird.

R: An execution.

H: That was weird.

R: Well, I thought more along the lines of do they think I’m selling them out, or do they know what is about to happen to them or are they thinking that I’m a Judas son of a bitch. (1/27)

The deliberation and reflections that Rob and Helena addressed are not uncommon with guilt responses to a pet’s death and may be made more difficult by having to make decisions about euthanasia but are not exclusive to pet owners who euthanize, as I personally can testify to in the death of our dog, Hurricane. Although Jon and I did not have to make any decisions about euthanasia, the guilt of what could have been was looming almost immediately after Hurricane passed away, as we had allowed him to have the routine dental surgery. Mary and her family addressed the guilt they experienced upon the death of their family member pet, Leslie:

Researcher: Do you feel you let Leslie down in any way?

M: Well, I felt I did. Because I wished that maybe there was something else I could do but I realize now there really wasn’t.

Researcher: At that time did you feel that there was something more you could have done?

M: Yes, because I wasn’t really sure. I kept trying to think how can we avoid putting her to sleep, what could I do, what more could I do? Um, but there wasn’t anything.

T: Yeah, I mean anytime you put a dog to sleep you have that feeling like well how much longer would she have made it or you know, was her pain as bad as we thought. (2/14)

Even though Mary was able to admit that she had done everything she could possible do to help Leslie, she still noted feelings of guilt which belied her rational beliefs that she had done everything she could to rally around Leslie:

M: I think there was guilt in there, the way you feel because you wish you could have done something and maybe it would have made things different. I mean I pampered her and babied her and like I said I found her baby food so that she would have the best life she could and I had to take her to the vet because of the vomiting with the dog food and they gave me something that made her so bad she was just like this. I just wish I could have done more, you know. (1/14)

As with Mary and her family, Fiona and her mother Susan reflected on the health status of Sheppy and their guilt with the decision to euthanize their family member cat:

F: I don't think Sheppy was in pain. But he wasn't happy.

S: Well, you don't know though.

F: Well, maybe we should have taken him two days earlier.
We did the right thing because he was just wasting away. Except maybe we should have taken him earlier.

S: But, well, he was drinking and still purring.

F: After months of finally trying to rationalize and trying to figure things out we finally had to take him down there. (2/9)

As the first emotion that possibly appears after the pet's death, guilt is often emotionally based and may not respond to logical or cognitive thinking patterns or assertions. This is noted as one reflects on the months of rationalizing that Fiona and her mother Susan did as they deliberated about the end of life decisions they made for Sheppy. Even after Sheppy died, the dialogue about what might have been continued as we see in the above dialogue.

Jane and Tom discussed the feelings that surrounded their guilt, with wondering and second guessing their decision to euthanize Shiloh, despite the fact that Shiloh had been sick prior to that day:

J: I just wondered if we were doing the right thing, that maybe we were doing it for the wrong thing. I don't know.

T: I didn't know if I was doing the right thing or the wrong thing and just don't know. I was trying to tell myself that we were right in what we did, I just kept telling myself that. (1/17)

Jane and Tom had explained how sick Shiloh had been and the necessity of euthanizing her because of their belief that they did not want her to suffer. Even after they had clarified their reasons for not wanting Shiloh to endure suffering, Jane and Tom were still offering reasons to each other as to why they felt it was appropriate to choose euthanasia for Shiloh. This need to alleviate guilt is not uncommon with human family members or canine/feline family members and is underscored again with Linda and Victor:

L: Maybe we shouldn't have done it (euthanize Lester). If the vet would have tried to change my mind, I couldn't have done it. (1/10)

Clearly, the families in this study displayed the first emotional response that Quackenbush had listed in his grief process for pet bereavement and is complicated by the fact that these families were in a position to have to make life and death decisions for their pets, including whether to euthanize their pet. All five families mentioned the importance of the reassurance of their veterinarian at this crucial time, as we shall see in the core theme of attempts at consolation. After experiencing the emotional response of guilt, it is imperative to examine the next core theme that underscores how families

experienced guilt and the effect the grieving process has on the family unit. The literature that surrounds pet bereavement and guilt is now addressed.

Guilt and Literature Comparison

According to Sable (1995), the death of a beloved pet is the loss of a special relationship of attachment, potentially evoking strong emotional responses from the family members left behind when their pet dies. Gage and Holcomb (2001) noted that family members may have intense guilt when their pets die given that they bombard themselves with questions about what they might have done differently to enhance the lives of their pets and/or any decisions about the end of their pet's lives, as with euthanasia.

According to Greene and Landis (2002) "drowning in guilt" (p.51) is not an unusual phenomenon after losing a family member pet, especially when making a decision to euthanize your pet. Listing a loose process of grief stages in pet bereavement, Quackenbush and Graveline (1985) also noted guilt as the first response that family members may experience after losing their pet.

As Katz (2006) reported, dog owners do understand cognitively that their pet's death is inevitable. However, this does not delay or stop the emotional response of guilt which was so prevalent in these research participants' stories of their pet's death. The families in this study were well aware that they had provided safe, loving homes for their pets and that the pets were well taken care of. These cognitions did not stop the guilt that they assumed after their pet passed away and was universal to all the participants.

Wolfelt (2004) suggested that the dependent status of pets may contribute to the illogical feelings that guilt might provide. Families often reflect back to what things could

have been done to make their pet's life better, or how they might have displayed their love to their pet more often leading to feelings of guilt. Wolfelt further noted that people may not have any boundaries of responsibility with regard to their care for their pet, leading to more guilt when the pet passes away.

Kay (1984) noted that feelings of guilt are often not directed at others in these instances but directed inward, as anger at oneself about the pet's death. "The pet owner will use a 'retroscope' to ferret out any shortcomings in the care of the pet, leading the pet owner to ruminate at times about the events that they feel they should have handled differently in the life or death of their pet" (p. 124). Quackenbush (1985) also reiterated that the level of attachment to the pet will affect the quality and depth of the reaction to the pet's death and the guilt response. The participants in this study had displayed high levels of attachment to their pets and subsequently would be vulnerable to intense amounts of guilt after the loss of their pet. Alas, guilt was a pronounced part of every family's story about the loss of their family member pet. After experiencing the emotional response of guilt, it is imperative to examine the next core theme which underscores how family members experience different emotions after losing a family member pet and the emotional distress that is part of that loss.

Core Theme Two: Emotional Distress

"I don't think my kids had ever seen me so upset, even with the death of my grandmother". (Tori)

Given the intimacies that the pets and other family members and the participants shared it is not surprising that the level of bereavement displayed for the death of the pets would be high. Bowlby's tenants of Attachment Theory denote that the closer the

emotional bonds that someone has shared with a loved one the more likely they will experience grief when that someone passes away. This would be accurate in recounting the experiences of the participants in this study.

As reviewed in the attachment core themes in this study, the familial members' subjective degrees of attachment did play a role in determining the grief that would affect the family. In families, the interactions, functioning, and stability of a family might be compromised when a family loses a pet family member. Understanding the core theme of emotional distress is essential in understanding the circular nature of experiencing grief and how the emotions of family members affect each other. Jane and her husband Tom described the emotional distress they experienced when they lost their Golden Retriever, Shiloh:

T: We just lost a friend but I couldn't compare that to this.

J: No, it is not an attachment like this. You are so worrying and you miss them for a while, but it is not the same.

Researcher: Are you saying that the attachment for the person wasn't the same as you had with Shiloh?

J: Yes, for the simple reason that we didn't live with these people, our parents or whatever. His sister-in-law died recently. We didn't live with them. We only saw them occasionally and both my parents were so far away that I saw them once a year, maybe. So it's not like if a person lives with you or lives in the same town where you see them a lot and you get that miss them type of feeling. I didn't have that with others.

Researcher: So are you saying that the grieving process with your parents was different than your grieving process with Shiloh?

J: To be honest, I grieved more over Shiloh than I did my parents now that you say that.

T: It was almost like a child, but we haven't lost any of our children, but to me it was almost like losing a child. That is a dumb statement.

Researcher: Tom, you just mentioned that losing Shiloh was like losing a child and then you said that was a dumb statement. What would be dumb about that?

T: Because I've never lost a child. I don't know how I would grieve over a child compared to a dog, but Shiloh was a child. One of our children. (2/14)

The hesitancy that Tom displayed when describing his grief over losing Shiloh is not uncommon given that people may also experience shame in their grief for an animal versus a human. This shame could compound the feeling of sadness and loss in the grief process. Despite this, Jane and Tom were very forthright in their pronouncement of the distress they felt upon losing Shiloh. Rob and Helena also addressed the grief they felt upon losing Harmacy and Muffie:

Researcher: Has the mourning process for Harmacy and Muffie been like losing anyone else in your past?

H: Not people.

R: Not people.

H: Our other dogs.

R Yeah, just like our other dogs.

Researcher: Not like other people?

H:I don't know, it's weird. We have closer bonds with our dogs than we do with people. And that sounds terrible.

R: Maybe because we're with them 24/7 and only with those people every few weeks or months.

Researcher: What did your grief look like on the day that Harmacy and Muffie died?

R: Like saying any member of anybody else's family died.

H: I have to say I have more grief when my pets die than when family members die.

R: Oh, hell. They are so much a part of us that it is; it is more devastating than anything.

H: You know you pick your friends; you don't pick your family. The dogs are much more devastating. I totally agree. (2/22)

As demonstrated by the reflections that both Jane and Tom and Rob and Helena presented, the loss of a pet can present the same type of grief responses that are common when one loses a human family member such as emotional distress. Clearly, given the affectional bond and physical proximity that the pet/family members and the participants shared, the core theme of emotional distress being excavated is not surprising. Perhaps the nature of the dependency of a pet compounds the nature of grief and the impact on emotional distress.

Family Therapy pioneer, Murray Bowen, recognized pets as a part of the family emotional system and as such, the death of pet can evoke emotional distress in the family system. The participants in this study highlighted their belief that their family member pets functioned as children in their family and that they functioned as the pet's parents in a reciprocal functioning relationship. As with losing a child or another family member, the grief can be devastating and disrupt the equilibrium in a family. A family may become accustomed to the valuable role that their family member pet assumes in the household, albeit reassurance or support which helps to diffuse tension and anxiety in the household. When this role is lost, the tension in a household may begin to escalate, changing the dynamics and stress level in the home. A family may be unaware that their pet had been brought into the family structure in this role and may not recognize the immense loss when the pet can no longer fulfill their familial role in the home. Hence, it is important to recognize that emotional distress may look different for each family and

may affect them differently, even affecting family members within a family in unique ways. Tori described losing Leslie as one of the hardest times in her life:

T: Um, just the extreme sadness. Like the loss of a companion. I would say the only other time I was this sad was when I was 20 and I had a bad break up with someone I was dating for 3 years. It ranks right up there with that.

Researcher: So, is there something about losing Leslie that brought up the mourning process that was similar to losing anyone else in your life? You said a break up.

T: Yes.

M: Yes, it is just, you know, that emptiness and that stage that whatever they filled is no longer there. (2/20)

Tori recounted her 10 year-old daughter, Darla's response to Leslie's death:

T: And Darla, as soon as my mom told her we were going to put Leslie to sleep she was inconsolable.

M: Uh-huh. (2/23)

Mary, Darla's grandmother, discussed her own attempts at easing Darla's heartrending response to the loss of Leslie:

M: I guess their dad talked to the kids because the next day when Tori took Leslie I comforted both children. I tried to explain to them, you know you got to do what's best for Leslie and that she would be with Granny, which is my mother.

T: Darla, she was very upset.

Researcher: Darla was upset?

T: Yes, for days.

R: Researcher: Darla, did those words from your grandma help you?

D: A little bit. I was still sad, really sad.

Researcher: Still really sad?

D: Sniff. (Darla became tearful at this time in the interview and her mother and grandmother comforted her). (1/17)

In describing her own grief, Tori noted that prior to Leslie's death she usually had been a private person and had been less emotional than her own mother, Mary:

T: It was deep sadness because you are never going to have her running around again or playing with you. She was gone. I just came home and cried and had company here and you know just couldn't hide it.

Researcher: How would you describe the grief that your family had on that day? (The day that Leslie died)

T: Just overwhelming grief. You can't really describe it. It is always on the front of your mind. No matter what you do it is just like always there. (1/13)

The richness of the raised feelings that Tori and her family discussed is trans-generationally dynamic in that three generations of females in the family were able to offer some semblance of relief to each other with the sadness they experienced. Since pets may serve in a variety of roles in a family from facilitating communication and relieving tension, to outward expressions of affection, the loss of a pet can bring to the surface emotions that encompass the core theme of emotional distress. Consider Fiona and her mother's response to losing their cat, Sheppy:

Researcher: Can you describe your feelings about losing Sheppy?

F: It is always hard. That is bad, when that day comes it is so anguishing, you know.

S: Stress, anguish, and you know, sadness. I don't know if you could compare it to losing your mom, but it's right up there with it.

F: Yeah, the same as losing my grandma, as she should still be here, too.

S: Yeah.

F: She can't be gone. I should be able to open the door and Sheppy just come in. She can't be gone. It's like this little person, this animal is gone and how can he be gone after all these years. Even when I lost my other cat, Molly, 7years ago, to me it was the worst day of my life that I have ever had. (1/18)

F: I was hysterical when she died, I cried forever for that little cat.

Researcher: How would you describe your grief?

F: The worst day of my life.

Researcher: Would you compare it to the loss of a human?

F: It ranks right up there. It was just that he was with me during some rough times and he was just my little baby.

S: And that was just heartbreaking to take. It is hard for anyone to take. You know you just have to deal with it. It is anguishing and grueling to lose them.

F: It is heart wrenching and heart breaking. (1/23)

Linda and Victor shared the emotions that they felt when they lost their dog, Lester. Despite the stoic appearance that they both maintained throughout the interview their sadness was apparent in this dialogue:

Researcher: Can you describe your grief in losing Lester?

L: Well, we all go to the box but it was traumatic, intense. A great sense of loss.

VI: I was sad.

L: I was just bad, sad. A great sense of loss. (1/12)

In meeting with Linda and Victor, she relayed that she felt her husband was not being very vocal during our interviews about losing Lester in contrast to how upset he had been at the veterinarian's office when Lester was euthanized. Yet, Linda also related that her own ability to talk about the loss was compromised by her own loss of words about the experience:

L: Well, I just couldn't talk. I'd been crying. I was just sad, very sad to lose a member of your family. (1/12)

As with noted with Linda and Victor, the loss of a pet does not denote that the family will necessarily grieve in the same manner or in the same sequence of emotions. Families often experience the intense feelings of loss in different ways, in various spectrums of emotions, and in a myriad of time frames. As we explore the nature of pet attachment and pet bereavement in a systemic manner it is essential to note that although families are a circular unit, their emotional responses to grief do not necessarily dovetail or mirror the family members' feelings. This can be seen by the myriad of adjectives that the participants used to describe their emotional state including: traumatic, intense, horrifying, and anguishing.

Emotional Distress: Literature Comparison

Losing a pet can induce complicated grief responses and cause suffering to those who have lost their pet family member according to Donohue (2005). Indeed sadness and depression are two types of emotional distress that may occur after the loss of a pet that was ascended into the family as a family member (Sharkin & Knox, 2003). This is congruent with the rich information that our participants shared as they talked about the loss of their family member, while they appeared sad, pained, and tearful about their pet who had passed away.

Clements, Benasutti, and Carmone (2003) suggested that the response to losing a pet is often similar to losing a human family member and can lead to a similar grief response. As noted in the narratives of the participants, it cannot be assumed that the response to the death of a family member pet will be less intense than that of a human

family member. Wroebl and Dye (2003) reported that the grief and emotional response to the loss of a pet can be significant and intense. Indeed the response to losing a pet family member may exceed the level of grief associated with losing a human family member (Clements et al., 2003).

Despite the fact that “humans appear to have an emotional bond or attachment to their companion animals that is not unlike what they experience with their family and friends” humans may have an additional amount of distress in their grief process given that their loved one was an animal (Wroebl & Dye, 2003, p. 385). Sharkin and Knox (2003) emphasized that “people appear to experience a grief response to the death of a pet similar to the response to the loss of a significant person” (p. 415). The grief that one experiences after losing a pet is letting go of an established relationship; hence the grief can be very anguishing to those who have suffered the loss of the pet (Archer, 1997).

The sadness that the participants described in losing their pet family member is accentuated by Rubin’s (1999) assertion that

the combination of our inability to control fate, together with permanent severance of contact with a loved one, simultaneously attack two foundations of human strivings: the wish to be with one’s significant relations and the wish to be able to influence one’s surroundings. Deprived of those we love, and deprived of the ability to affect the world we live in, it is no wonder we suffer the loss of a loved one with such devastating impact. (p. 681)

Although a family may share many feelings and responses of upon losing their pet family member, the next core theme of individual grief processing describes the singular path that grief takes at times.

Core Theme Three: Individual Grief Processing

“It was just the worst loss, Lester meant so much to me , and ultimately I had to make that decision to euthanize him alone, me.” (Linda)

As a result of a death of a family member, families often collapse in the shape of divorce, separation, emotional estrangement, and familial structure changes. Despite the fact that families are a unit and movements affect each other and the unit, not all family members grieve in the same manner and may find their grief processing to be an individual journey, which, nonetheless, affects the entire unit.

The family members in this study were able to demonstrate that the grief process which they journeyed through was an individual emotional response, without necessarily alienating from their respective family members. However, the response to their pet's death may have brought about a reaction that was unique to their own emotional composition. All of the participants in this study confirmed that their pets were considered to be family members, but this should not be interpreted to mean that family members would grieve at the same pace or that they would depend on each other to journey through their bereavement.

As the referents in this study were all participants who had elected to euthanize their pets, this may have increased the nature or dynamics of the grief they experienced, as well as how they interacted with other family members who may have interpreted a pet being euthanized in different perceptions. The complications that euthanizing a pet may present sometimes extend beyond guilty feelings. Family members may have different emotional responses to the actual process of the pet being euthanized and subsequently

potentially affecting their grief response. Consider Jane and Tom who had previously agreed on the need to euthanize Shiloh but who handled it in different ways:

T: I didn't go because I couldn't go (to euthanize Shiloh).

Researcher: You said you couldn't go.

T: I couldn't see Shiloh anymore. I said goodbye to her in the family room, because I knew she was going. When I said goodbye to her, Jane wasn't around. I held her head and talked to her.

Researcher: Would you say that you drew into each other closer or did you go your own path of grieving?

J: I think we went our own way. (1/10)

Researcher: Now would you say that you grieved in the same way as your spouse?

T: I don't know how my spouse grieves.

J: Well, we both cried a lot but outside of that we went our own ways.

T: I don't know what went through her mind.

J: I don't know what went through his mind.

Researcher: Now one of the things you mentioned in the other interview is that you both went different ways in your grieving. Do you feel that way?

J: Yes, I think so.

J: To ourselves, we kept our thoughts to ourselves pretty much. (2/15)

The individual path of grieving that families may pursue does not mean that family members ostracized themselves from other family members. Nor does the core theme of individual grief processing mean that the participants were completely isolative as some aspects of grief may be personal while other times family members united for

support. Rob and Helena discussed the differences they experienced after the death of their dogs, Harmy and Muffie:

Researcher: Do you feel that you and your spouse grieved in the same way?

H: Yes and no.

R: She got mad.

H: He actually cried more.

R: I'm getting misty now just talking about all of this.

H: I think it goes back to the fact that Rob has been with them day in and day out, you know during the winter months for sure when I wasn't as much.

T: You don't have as much time to dwell on it when you are working because you have obligations at work and you know just bullshitting with people at work even if you don't like them and you just don't sit and dwell on it.

H: He is absolutely right. He is. Because I have to go to work and I have to deal with problems at work.

R: And you can't be worrying about your grief. You have to worry about work.

Researcher: So the diversion would be something that helped Helena?

R: Oh, yeah. (2/25)

This idea that the "diversion" of work helped to ease the pain of grieving was also reiterated by Tom. In grief we may turn to others outside the family for comfort or resolution:

Researcher: When you dealt with losing Shiloh, who were the people that you turned to about your loss?

T: I have a group of women I eat with at work every day and a couple of men, and I told all of them. They had met Shiloh and they knew and every one of them gave me a hug you know, friendship. Then my supervisor told me she was very sorry about Shiloh.

Researcher: What made you feel that they understood?

T: The affection that was given to me and I know several others. A couple of them even cried. They had all known Shiloh. When Jane used to go for her treatments, Shiloh used to come and I'd be on break and they'd see her. (2/12)

The emotional attachment which humans form with their pets is often complex and not easily pigeonholed into a singular experience. This feeling transcends a simple definition and also obscures the overlapping of grieving styles that family members would make within one household. Tori described the frustration she felt when coping with her husband's perceived dismissal of her grief in losing their dog Leslie:

T: I mean my husband was the one who really didn't get it.

Researcher: Do you feel he minimized Leslie's death in any way?

T: Um, yes. Especially when it came to like when we were discussing the burial or so on. I pretty much had to put it to him in I don't want to say a nasty way, but like he asked if he had to go out in the cold and dig a grave for her, and I said "when you put it that way" you know it's a little different. You know it made me feel like he just didn't get it. Maybe he never had that kind of loss. Until it happens to you maybe you just don't get it. I guess it's like that with everything in life. (2/18)

Although Tori felt that her husband did not fully acknowledge the loss of Leslie, she nonetheless felt that she did want to share her feelings of loss with him at some level; she also felt that her mother, Mary, was more competent in comforting Tori's two children after the loss of Leslie. Although there were three adults and two children in the home, they all grieved in their own matchless way. Mary relayed her feelings about the experience she shared with her grandchildren, ages 7 and 10:

M: I tried to comfort the kids and explain when I was already feeling bad myself. I tried to explain that you have to do what is best for Leslie. (1/14)

I asked 10-year-old Darla how it felt to be comforted by her grandmother when Leslie passed away:

Researcher: Darla, did you feel that grandma talking to you helped you? Was there something grandma or mommy said or did that you remember was important to you?

D: They would, I don't know how to say it, spend time with me and stuff.

T: It helped me that the kids were hugging my mom, just the feeling that I could cry. We were all crying. There is, it is comforting to be able to do that. Part of the reason is my mother is my mother is more of a comforter than I am and so the best place for my kids to be was with my mom. Because, like I said I am usually very emotional and it is hard for me to express and understand to comfort the kids as well as my mother does and she does the same for me. I wish I was better at that, but I'm not. (1/16)

Within the family it was crucial to note that although Tori felt her husband did not fully recognize her loss of Leslie, she did turn to him, nonetheless, and also felt she could not fully comfort her own children and believed her mother could console them more effectively. A family may be united in their overall feelings of grief and loss but may be emotionally fragmented within their own family entity. Indeed as I was interviewing this particular family, it was apparent that the three females were close and very connected to each other, along with their two remaining dogs. The family continued to sit huddled together on a love seat, despite it being rather small to accommodate all of them. Prior to talking about the loss of Leslie the family members had been seated at different chairs throughout the room. Despite the fact that each family member had grieved over the loss of Leslie differently, they were still apparently united in their uniform feelings of loss and also their love for each other.

Tori and Mary had attempted to prepare Darla and her brother, Jeffrey, for the impending euthanasia of Leslie. During the interview 10-year-old Darla displayed various affective emotions such as tearfulness, withdrawing, and passive acceptance of the loss. Even with children, family members may each have individual crisis, personal

stressors, and even their own distinctive reaction to a pet being ill, euthanized, or involved in an accident. With the pet passing away, the anxiety that the pet may have reduced can be left to simmer without resolution. With the recognition of the role that the pet plays in a family and their inimitable relationship with each family member a counselor or veterinarian may be better able to understand and cope with a family's grief response. The participants in this study displayed through their stories that individual grief is also a strong ingredient in the overall grief that makes up familial response to loss.

Linda and her husband, Victor, discussed the differences in their responses to Lester's death, beginning with their responses to her being euthanized:

Researcher: Is there any part of the euthanizing experience that was different for you than you thought it would be?

V: That was just something we had to do.

L: It was more emotional for him being there than not. But he didn't stay and wait in the room.

V: Oh, yeah. Being there sucks.

Researcher: Were you two comforting each other?

V: It was like we were on our own path basically.

L: He and I have different ways, like he couldn't be there, but I had to be there. I mean he went out of the room. And I had to be there.

Researcher: So you both cared for Lester but reacted differently?

L: Right. (2/9)

As with other emotional responses to trauma, each person, despite being a member of a family unit may have an individual and also a collective response to the

death of a family member pet. As with the above vignette, Linda and Victor were united in their decision to euthanize Lester, but their actual involvement and emotional reaction to her death was decidedly different and each person coped individually within the collective family entity.

Interestingly, even Linda appeared confused by Victor's stoic response to Lester's death since it was so at odds with his rather hysterical response at the veterinarian's office. As I mentioned earlier, Victor appeared very rigid during the interview process which was surprising to me given that the veterinarian had also mentioned that Victor appeared very upset at the time Victor was euthanized. Regretfully, I chose not to explore this with Linda and Victor at the time of the interviews, as the interviews were not a therapeutic milieu.

As family members attempt to cope with the loss of their pet family member, their responses may appear odd or disconnected with other family members. Family members may appear to isolate, have internal dialogue, or even turn to others in this time of grief. As was noted with the core theme of guilt, there may be discomfort in understanding how fellow family members handle their own unique grief. Participants reflected their own attempts at consoling themselves although the methods were varied from person to person and family to family. The next core theme, attempts at consolation will be discussed after the review of literature.

Individual Grief Processing: Literature Comparison

Gage and Holcomb (2001) reported that when pets are elevated to the rank of family member or are viewed as child family members, the pet can be triangled or brought into the emotional folds of the family with the pet actually reducing anxiety or

stress in the family. Hence when a pet passes away, the increase in anxiety or stress may be handled differently by each family member. An example of how people may handle grief in their own unique manner is brought to light by examining the way that children approach the loss of a family member pet. Children especially may react to grief in ways that seem odd or strange to adult family members. According to Quackenbush (1985) it is not uncommon for children to vacillate in their feelings and appear sorrowful at times and yet buoyant at other times. Parental grieving may have an effect on a child's grief response and in meeting with 10-year-old Darla I did note an exaggerated response at times which was also passive at other times. This is not unusual, according to Quackenbush, when parents are emotionally responsive to their child's grief, the child may vacillate in their grief responses. Hence, it is wise to notice that, like adults, children may respond to grief in their own unique way and timeline.

Wolfelt (2004) noted that the grief one feels over the loss of their family member pet is distinctive to that person and is never precisely the same as another person's grief, not even someone living in the same household. The uniqueness of this grief may be based on such factors as the nature of your relationship with the pet, your individual personality, other crisis in your life, or even level of support systems in one's life. Despite that loving your dog means knowing they will eventually die, each person may attempt to resolve these feelings on their own in the context of a family setting (Katz, 2006).

Quackenbush (1985) emphasized that the degree of grief response may be correlated with the degree of attachment to the pet and may be singular as each person bonds with the pet differently in the family and in a unique capacity. This would

undoubtedly cause a singularity in how each family member feels and expresses the loss of a pet family member. Although the participants in this study reported average to high social supports, those persons who have difficulty establishing close relationships with other people may have an extremely difficult time in their grief response which may appear disproportionate and excessive to onlookers. This is extremely important to therapists, as it may be tempting to treat the grief of all family members in the same way. A clue to the level of grief may be the attempts at consolation that someone is using to alleviate their feelings of distress. At this time we examine the next core theme of attempts at consolation.

Core Theme Four: Attempts at Consolation

“Even the veterinarian did not argue with our decision to put Leslie to sleep; he must have felt we were doing the right thing.” (Mary)

Families in times of crisis will attempt to reconcile the lack of homeostasis, or balance, which occurs in time of family disruption, such as death of a pet family member. This resolution may be sought individually but nonetheless affects the family’s balance or lack of balance. The families in this study were not unique in that they also made attempts at consoling themselves in both familial and individual ways. With the advent of guilt involved in the loss of a pet, families often attempt to reassure themselves in a myriad of ways, such as comforting themselves with reflections that their decisions in the pet’s life and death were well founded, that their pet is out of pain, that the pet lived a good life, or even that the pet is in heaven where they will eventually reunite with their family member pet.

Oftentimes the attempts at reconciliation are manifested through remembering words that a trusted veterinarian offered about euthanizing the pet or recalling the pet's quality of life. Because all of the participants in this study had euthanized their pet, it may be especially salient that the veterinarian's role in consoling them or affirming their decision appeared resoundingly important to all five families. Mary and her family reflected on their veterinarian's words which they felt were comforting in their time of crisis and were also nonjudgmental in nature:

Researcher: Now, Tori, when Mary had mentioned guilt you nodded.

T: Yes, I think that Dr. Martin did a very nice job trying to allay that. Because you have that feeling like when you go there and their "hello", almost like you have to tell why you are bringing the dog. Like it is not hard enough for you to make that decision. Then to go there and plead your case almost about why you are putting the dog to sleep.

Researcher: Are you saying that the veterinarian helped with that?

T: He was very...

D: Comforting.

T: Comforting, thank you, Darla. He said "you know, all I can say is you made the right decision at the right time. You know Leslie better than anyone after 16 years and there should be no feelings of guilt now".

Researcher: Did those words help?

T: They did help. I really felt they did. Because in the past, you know, like you would come home with those feelings of "well, they obviously don't feel I am making the right decision." Whether they came right out and said it or not, it just, just the way they make you feel. Like you couldn't be bothered anymore and that is not the case.

Researcher: That wasn't the case for that particular dog?

T: I mean I have had dogs since I was wee little. It is heart wrenching. And to go there after you have made a heart wrenching decision and then have to explain it to someone else.

Researcher: So they did a good job?

T: Yes.

M: I was thinking to prepare yourself. Try not to blame yourself. (1/15)

I further asked Mary and her family about the effect that the veterinarian's words and gestures had on their own feelings:

Researcher: How about the veterinarian's, is there any words of advice you would like to offer them?

T: I think the appeasement of guilt; you know not having to explain your reasoning. That you feel guilty enough. That is an unnecessary burden, I could see if you just got a dog and you know where it was more like a nuisance. But you know, when you have brought this dog to them for how many years and she has gotten all her shots and you have taken special care of her, they should know that it is a heart wrenching decision without making it worse.

Researcher: Are you saying that you feel it would be good for the veterinarian to not show judgment?

T: Exactly. (1/25)

Tori, Mary, and Darla had addressed the difficulty in making life and death decisions for Leslie and also comforted themselves with even the end of life reflections that made them feel some comfort or consolation:

T: The way they have it set up now, with Leslie, it was different than with our other dogs, where they have a separate room with a nice poem about the rainbow bridge and they allow you as much time as you want afterwards and you can leave out your own personal door and not have to face the people in the waiting room. I think it was extremely helpful. So you know, other vets don't have that, they have a cold steel table.

Researcher: That was helpful in comforting you?

T: Yes, they even have the tissues. It was just nice to have that and you didn't feel like the people in the waiting room knew what was going on. (1/26)

Further, Mary described her own reflections and her attempts to try to reassure herself that she had done the right thing:

M: Like I said, the guilt, nobody wants to put an animal down. Now I know the vets don't like to do it either. But sometimes it just can't be helped.

Researcher: Is there a feeling today about the loss of Leslie that is different today than the day that she passed away?

M: I am a little more okay with it now because I realized that when it came time I was still iffy and this and that, was I doing the right thing and all that, but now I know I did the right thing that needed to be done. (1/27)

Mary offered further attempts at consoling herself in the form of stating she had made the right decision:

M: Leslie never would have made it through the blizzard that week. She wouldn't have been able to get out to go to the bathroom (Mary crying and blowing her nose).

T: Just on the cold days her feet froze and she'd have to lift them up and we'd have to get her.

M: Right. I think there was guilt in there, the way you feel because you wish you could have done something differently and maybe it made things different but age is something you can't change. I mean I pampered Leslie and babied her and like I said found baby food for her so that she would have the best life she could and I had to take her to the vet because of the vomiting. (1/28)

Mary and her family had previously discussed the guilt that they felt in having to make decisions for Leslie. In the second interview, they appeared to be offering themselves consolation that their decisions had been the right ones:

M: I tried to do everything with my mother and her, everything I thought would make their life better. Um, I have no regrets really. I just wish that there would have been something I could do the more I think about it. What I know is I did everything I could think of.

T: And at 16 you think she outlived most dogs. And when you think about the quality of her life and how it was from the time she was little until now. It's not fair to make her suffer, just because we wanted her around a little longer.

Researcher: Mary, when we first spoke you said you felt guilt about Leslie passing away, what might have changed that?

M: Well, after it was all over with I realized that was what needed to be done and that nothing I could have done would have changed things. Like I said, when you are looking at the dog and you are trying to make a decision, it's I don't know. You want to prolong things. But later, I knew there was nothing I could do for her. She was, age just caught up with her.

Researcher: Do you think that because you've had a chance to think it over that you came up with this conclusion?

M: Yes, yes. I realize now that is what, I realized it then too, I just maybe wanted to wait a few weeks.

T: Even another day.

Researcher: Are you saying there is guilt in the process of grieving?

M: Yes. But not anything I did. (2/15)

Jane and Tom highlighted the impact that their veterinarian's words brought to them in their time of grief:

J: Dr. Martin (the veterinarian) was very sympathetic.

Researcher: Do you think that changed how you felt in that he and the staff were sympathetic? Do you think that was helpful?

J: Yes.

T: Well, you have always admired Dr. Martin.

J: Yes, and he has a golden retriever himself. He told me when I got her. (1/20)

Tom and Mary also used the intra-family dynamic of attempts at consolation when Tom offered reassurance to Judy about the decisions they made for Shiloh:

J: I just wondered if I was doing the right thing, that maybe I was doing it for selfish reasons.

T: Well, you weren't. (1/17)

As with Mary and her family, Tom and Jane described how their feelings of guilt began to transform with time:

Researcher: How would you describe the loss of Shiloh in terms of being difficult in your life?

J: Very difficult.

T: Yes . . . (tearful).

J: Losing any pet.

T: But afterwards I understand it is the way it should have been or it is supposed to be, the fact of putting her down, I am talking about. It was for her own good.

J: Yeah. (2/12)

Although Mary and her family and Tom and Jane had unique relationships with their pets and with each other, both families were able to offer testimony that confirmed that a veterinarian's words were very important as part of their attempts at consolation and were a part of their attempts at consolation in their own internal dialogue. Rob and Helena also confirmed the importance of the veterinarian's attitude and spoken words on their decisions, guilt, and reflections about losing Muffie and Harmy:

Researcher: Do you feel that you let Harmy and Muffie down in any way?

R: I do.

H: Yeah, Ill say that only because we weren't sure if we were doing it all too fast. Dr. Martin said again and again that he never questioned our decision.
(2/17)

Helena also offered her own attempts at consolation for herself and her husband:

R: I thought more along the lines of "do they think we're selling them out?"

H: So all that day that is basically kind of almost telling ourselves "well, yes, we have to do this".

Researcher: So are you saying you tried to reassure each other?

H: Pretty much.

R: Yeah, it was, yeah. (2/17)

Rob later offered another type of attempt at consolation in describing his views on the afterlife for pets:

R: And people who dismiss other species, whether it is a dog, a cat, a goat, you name it, that somehow we are superior to them...

H: That bothers Rob a lot.

R: I don't want any part of a person like that. Because if there is a heaven and if these guys aren't up there waiting for me, then it's not heaven. (1/30)

Despite Rob admitting earlier that he felt he was an agnostic, he still hoped there was a heaven where he could meet with his beloved pets again. In trying to mitigate the thick haze of guilt which often accompanies the loss of a pet, it is not uncommon to hope for a reconnection with a pet in the afterlife. Fiona and Susan addressed their own feelings about losing their cat/family member and the appeasement of guilt that they received from their veterinarian:

S: We felt bad 'cause we had to do it but it was the right thing to do.

F: But with Dr. Martin, that's what I'm saying, he really helped up. He helped me anyway.

S: Yeah.

F: I feel like that was the only thing to do because he was never ever going to recover and have a quality of life. That's it. That says it all.

Researcher: Do you think that helped to eliminate some feelings that you might have had otherwise by him being kind and reaching out like that and saying the quality of health?

S: Yes.

R: But having Dr. Martin, I have always respected Dr. Martin and pretty much everyone down there I go to, which is Dr. Scath. But when it comes to something like this, uh Dr. Martin has always told you the way it is. I really like that with him because he doesn't beat around the bush at all.

S: Dr. Martin came in and it was like he was just really different. And I can't tell you how many times we've done this before because we've had so many animals over the years. But Dr. Martin made it different. He just made it like there was no other way.

Researcher: So his words, are you saying, made it different by discussing quality of life?

S: Yes, because I always say what would you do if it were your cat, because I was thinking what can we do to save this cat. Dr. Martin looked right at me and said "he is 17 years old" and you knew he cared but this is what has to happen.

F: He totally agreed with us.

S: You can't let them go on and we just won't do it.

Researcher: So you felt that Dr. Martin had empathy for what you were going to do?

S: Empathy, yes, yes.

F: Yes, it definitely helps to have, especially someone you respect like that, even though you know you are doing the right thing. (1/17)

This lengthy exchange with Susan and her daughter, Fiona, highlights the core theme of attempts at consolation that this family made, with their veterinarian's words being crucial in their appeasement of guilt, in affirming that they had made the right decisions. Susan and Fiona also noted that having the extended family around after Sheppy's death, "made it easier" and that the family understood their position and implicitly agreed with their decision to euthanize Sheppy. Reflecting on their decision to euthanize Sheppy, Fiona also made an attempt at consoling herself by reinforcing the fact that she felt that Sheppy had lived a happy life:

F: Yeah, it was like enough is enough and that is the one salvation I think is when you had the them that long and it is awful to make that decision but Sheppy was as happy as he could be and he was, you know, him laying in the sun and playing. He took walks in the woods, and he laid a lot in the leaves.

Researcher: So that was a comfort to you that he had a long life?

S: Oh, yeah.

F: Yes, and that he was happy. (2/6)

In making attempts at consoling themselves and each other, family members are attempting to reconcile the guilt and “should have” thoughts that often accompany the euthanizing of a pet, or the guilt or reflections that occur when a pet is killed in an accident, or a choice is made to not proceed with a medical procedure due to financial concerns.

Given that the families interviewed for this research study were interviewed within 2 months of the loss of their pet, it is not unusual that they would have been experiencing some hindsight reflections or guilt about the decisions they had made. If a family is to eventually reach an acceptance level or a level where they are able to find resolution in the bereavement process, it is crucial that they are able to resolve the feelings of guilt in some capacity in order to be able to live with the decisions they made about their pet/family member.

Lack of synchronicity in this process does not mean a family is not moving toward acceptance, but that they may be traveling at both an individual and familial pace. Family members need not be in complete harmony with each other’s bereavement styles, but being respectful of each other’s differences is bound to diminish the guilt that appears to be a part of the bereavement process.

Attempts at Consolation: Literature Comparison

Archer and Winchester (1994) noted that many people who lose a pet utilize mitigation strategies to help allay the guilt that is prominent in losing a pet. Podrazik et al. (2000) stated that “although death is one of the most natural and frequently occurring life processes we encounter, we receive little preparation to handle it” (p. 387). Since the participants in this study were left to make life and death decisions about their family member, with little or no preparation, it is not surprising that they would attempt to console themselves and each other once that choice was made.

Although each pet in this study was considered by their families to be a member of their family, pets still represented something different to each family and to each family member (Clements et al., 2003). This distinctiveness would also play out as each family member reflects on the quality of life their pet had and any life or death decisions they had been forced to make.

Dr. Charles Martin (personal communication, 2008), the veterinarian who made the family referrals for this research project, was not surprised that the families relied on him for consolation or for validation of their difficult decisions. He did relate the emotional difficulty that this posed for him and added his thoughts and feelings in the following letter he sent to be included in this project:

Euthanasia of sick and dying pets is a reality of veterinary practice. Veterinarians are asked to counsel, educate, and in some cases, encourage clients to end the lives of their pets. This issue is an emotionally draining experience for pet owners and veterinarians. An underestimated aspect of euthanasia is the chronic long-term effect it has on the practicing veterinarian. While pet owners may have to endure this experience several times throughout their lives, the veterinarian must undergo the experience almost daily. While these pets are not directly owned by the professional; the veterinarian is still emotionally attached to the pet and the suffering family members. The recurrent and cumulative nature of

veterinary euthanasia is a major factor in professional "burnout," depression, and suicide.

The ethical questions surrounding this issue can be daunting. After devoting all energy to treating and improving the quality of a pet's life, the decision to end that life frequently does not make sense. Issues of life, death, religious faith, animal rights, suffering, and terminal illness, all enter into the decision-making process undertaken by the owner and veterinarian. Additionally, previously experience with pet euthanasia or the death of a loved one will influence the pet owner's decision to end the pet's life. Resolution of these issues is the responsibility of the veterinarian while trying to contend with raw client emotions. Frequently the veterinarian is asked by the pet owner "What should I do?" As I have progressed in my career, the answer to this question always returns to the pet's quality of life. The question I pose to all clients is, "would you want to lead your pet's life?". If the answer is yes, then treatment should proceed. If the answer is no, then the question becomes, "are we keeping a suffering pet alive for the owner's benefit?" This approach is what has evolved in my career. It is by no means always correct, nor should this approach be utilized by all professionals. Communication methods, approaches, and philosophies vary widely across the profession. Each should be considered and carefully explored in this important and highly emotional issue.

Summary of Pet Bereavement Themes

In reviewing the core themes of pet bereavement (guilt, emotional distress, individual grief processing, attempts at consolation) it is evident that the families involved in this study were all moving at different strides in their bereavement process but shared several hallmarks of losing their pets. The families all shared guilt, emotional distress, an individual processing of grief within the family, and attempts at consoling themselves and each other in the face of this very difficult period in their lives. This does not mean that the complexion of grief was identical with each family member but did share some universal truths.

These themes underscore the individual and familial processing of grief and also the necessity of allowing every family member to grieve at their own pace. As illustrated by the rich dialogue which comprised the participant's narrative, the core themes of pet

attachment and pet bereavement were intertwined in reaching the themes of pet bereavement. Without a clear understanding of pet attachment, it would have been impossible to assess what the bereavement process represented to the participants in this research study. Only by understanding the value of someone's loss can it be ascertained what that loss actually means and how it transpires.

CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND DISCUSSION

The last chapter of this research study enabled me to summarize the findings we have discussed in order to answer the research questions previously posed concerning pet attachment and pet bereavement, while also comparing these themes to the existing literature. It also allowed me to look at the implications of this study, make recommendations for further studies, and also offer an explanation of impact to the researcher. Outlining the steps which I utilized to collect the data and to analyze that data assisted the reader in gaining a clearer understanding of how I reached the conclusions that this research study offers.

Summary of the Study

The research questions posed at the start of this project focused on the overarching response that participants elicited when their pet/family member passed away. In order to glean this delicate information the bereavement response was delineated first into the examination of the attachment these families shared with their pet. To truly comprehend the feelings that would be exposed in studying pet bereavement it was essential that the subquestions focusing on the nature of the attachment to the pet first be explored in order to better understand what qualified the pet as a family member. Hence the research was merged together with an understanding of these families attachment to their pet and the loss that they felt when their family member pet died. The

second portion of this statement focused on the research question of “what was the participant’s unique experience of bereavement for the pet,” while globally affiliating these families grief responses together.

A phenomenological study attempts to profile the essence of the feelings that the participants shared with the researcher. Teasing the core themes from the narratives which the participants provided in response to the research questions provided the essence of this study and allowed the similarities and nuances of each family to be illuminated. The Moustakas’ (1994) method of phenomenological research allowed the process of inquiry and analysis to blend with garnering and adhering to the integrity of the participant’s experiences. Specifically, Moustakas’ method for execution of the study with planning, design methodology, organization, analysis, and reporting of findings allowed me to move through the steps of phenomenological research and also consulting my “gut” feelings as the researcher. Establishing the phenomenological questions in Chapter III allowed me to explore the essence of the experience of pet attachment and pet bereavement within the process. In finding the horizons of the experience, establishing invariant constituents from these horizons, and later using imaginative variation to compose descriptions of the experience, I was able to tease out the textural and structural qualities and establish universal qualities of the participants’ lived experiences. This allowed me to adhere to the Moustakas’ phenomenological process and also test it on my own and later finding it to be a valuable tool for phenomenological research study.

The intention of this study was to gain a clearer understanding of the attachment that family members shared with their pets and how that attachment was related to the feelings of loss that families felt when they lost a family member pet. Five families

whose compositions were all unique took part in two in-depth interviews per family and allowed me to ask questions, listen, and observe the process of grief that they were experiencing since their pet/family member had passed away. It was especially meaningful to me that these families would allow me to enter their homes and their passages of fresh grief given that the pets had passed away within a one month span of my meeting them. Emotions that were normally only viewed in a private sense were shared with this very grateful researcher. The process of grief had begun for these participants which poignantly allowed them to be the “experts” in this study. The emotions, stories, and reflections that they offered comprised the spine of this body of work. It is obvious in the recollections that grief in some ways is immeasurable yet shares some common denominators with the rich details these families shared.

Families shared the unique experience of losing a pet that had assumed a role as a family member. The families were able to reflect not only on the grief they felt currently but also the level of immersion that the pet had assumed in their families. All of the families recalled the collaboration that they had experienced of their pet lives with their own. The pet was not a periphery part of the family but an active member whose contributions were recounted by these participants. Interpersonally the themes that were gathered in this study represent the structure that the textural emotional testimonies provided. The core themes of attachment and bereavement assist in offering structure and meaning to the interpersonal changes which occurred in these grief responses.

Overview of Methodology: Collection and Analysis

Two interview guides were used during the initial and follow-up interviews with these families which had been approved during the proposal portion of this research

process. After the referral from the veterinarian, the potential subjects were contacted and interviewed while on the telephone to ensure appropriateness for the study and also to screen for participation criteria. If they were found to meet the established criteria, an initial interview was set up and later followed by a second face-to-face interview. In all five families all of the participating members of the family were present for both interviews therefore allowing the flow and integrity of their narratives to remain intact.

After collecting the data I used inductive analysis to extract these statements from the narratives to become equally weighted horizons. Journaling throughout the process helped to ease personal judgment from permeating the data and to minimize my own views from restricting the data. As a researcher, I was very aware of the need for my own personal biases to not color this body of work and journaling allowed me to pour forth my reflections and any preconception of ideas.

These horizons were later deemed invariant constituents (following Moustakas' guidelines) if they were viewed as containing a clear expression of the participant's experience and were not too vague in presentation. These invariant constituents were then grouped into clusters of meaning. Listing various views of the material produced various meaningful clusters to assist in describing the essential structures of the phenomena of pet attachment and later pet bereavement. These clusters of meaning were the themes that were extracted from the participants' testimonies and represented the essences of the experience of pet attachment and pet bereavement. Lastly, I was able to synthesize these structures and textures to explain the "what" and "how" of pet attachment and pet bereavement. Exposing the universal essences of the experiences of the participants allowed the themes to move from a textural description to a global connection with an

understanding of how these phenomena moved and were constructed. The essence of these reflections was naturally pulled from the vantage point of a certain time and place in the bereavement process.

The four core themes of pet attachment and pet bereavement were meant to respond to the primary research question of “what is the nature of pet bereavement and pet attachment within the context of the family and their overarching response to the loss of the companion animal?” In order to more succinctly understand the nature of pet attachment I was able to glean the four attachment themes from the gathered material while also addressing the subquestions: (a) “what nature of attachment did the family members have with the deceased companion animal?” and (b) “what made the pet a family member?” Outlining these core themes allowed the research to be divided into two separate sections of pet attachment and pet bereavement which eventually dovetailed into the other.

Later in this chapter we examine the four core themes of pet bereavement which respond to the research question “what is the nature of pet bereavement and pet attachment within the context of the family and their overarching response to the loss of the companion animal?” The bereavement themes also speak to the last research subquestion of “what was the participant’s unique experience of bereavement for the pet?”

Overview of Attachment Core Themes

At this time we examine the four core themes of pet attachment which respond to the to primary research question.

Unconditional Acceptance: Core Theme One

In exploring the nature of pet attachment within these families the core theme of unconditional acceptance was exceedingly pronounced in the emotions that family members reflected in their stories. The days and years which they shared with their pets were not devoid of emotion but rather filled with a deep acceptance which the family members felt they derived from the pets, hence labeling it unconditional. The intensity that participants placed on feelings of being loved without judgment was pronounced in their testimonies of lives intermingled with their pets. Participants emphasized the value that they placed on the uncritical emotional responses they received from their pets and the loving feelings they reciprocated with. These exchanges with their pets allowed them to feel that their pet's feeling for them was untainted, without judgment, and safe.

Repeatedly, participants were able to express the value that they derived from this unique, pure attention and love they received without solicitation. Given these rich stories from participants it is not surprising that the unconditional acceptance they received from their pet appeared to only increase the attachment levels toward the pet. Pets were viewed as truly listening to their owner's problems, and being consistently available, rather than out of proximity. The unconditional acceptance that the experts reflected on would uphold Sable's (1995) assertion that "attachment relationships foster continuing proximity, and have potential to meet emotional provisions in other categories" (p.336). Although the pets did not speak or offer customary feedback, the participants were

universal in their feeling that they felt unconditionally accepted by their family member pet. This is consistent with the necessity of availability and proximity that is a pronounced component of Bowlby's Attachment Theory as Bowlby concluded that this was "as important for mental health as vitamins and proteins were for physical health" (MacDonald, 2001, p. 63). The unconditional acceptance that the participants derived from their relationship with their pets is highlighted by the core theme of comfort which the testimonies provided in detail.

Comfort: Core Theme Two

Comfort would normally be viewed as a benefit which an owner would provide to a pet but was manifested in the relationships which these participants shared with their pets. The emotional and physical closeness which was a hallmark of these relationships was only a starting place for the comfort which these pets provided. Living with someone, even in close quarters, does not necessarily mean that they will offer emotional comfort or engage in any attempt to comfort the other. However, the participants in this study were steadfast in their recognition that their family member pet consistently offered them comfort without reservation or need for retribution.

Participants were unified in their stories about the family member/pet offering them emotional comfort despite varied themes of this amongst family members and also between families. While Jane noted the comfort that Shiloh offered her when Jane battled cancer, her husband, Tom, reflected on the comfort Shiloh offered him with regard to loneliness. The comfort was designated to be offered in many different ways but nonetheless was a feeling of reassurance that did not wax and wane from the pet to their owner.

Given the rich stories displaying unconditional acceptance and comfort that the families shared, it is not surprising that these participants' reflections do not support Archer's (1996) claim that there are not apparent benefits to owning a pet, or to his claim that pets apparently manipulate their owners to receive benefits. The experts in this study repeatedly addressed the consistency of the comfort they were given by their pets, rather than the parasitic behavior that Archer offered as typical pet behavior. Participants' narratives were full of the emotional and physical offerings that were typical of the pet's contributions to the family. As comfort is exemplified in a myriad of ways, it was also diversified in its displays in these transcripts. As pets offered comfort to individuals within the families, they also offered comfort in a familial pattern with relief of tension and stress within the family. This information substantiates what Cook (2000) had stated in his research in that the participants in this study did view pets as being efficacious in their ability to consistently offer comfort. The triangulation that included pets being drawn into family dynamics also offered a decrease in stress in the family, hence offering an overall comfort to the overall family and their members. Hence, pets offered comfort in an overt and also covert way with both an active and passive role in the family. The addition of the pets in the family was reflective of the core themes mutualism and inclusion.

Mutualism: Core Theme Three

All participants were able to offer examples of the reciprocity that was unique to their family and also universal to the other families. It would be inaccurate to say that because each family considered their pet to be their child and themselves the pets' parent that they each had the same relationship with their pets. Rather the demonstration of this

mutual faithfulness was both distinctive and global to the participants and their family member pets. Families were universal in the sacrifices they had offered their pets whether it was from costly “baby-sitting” to medical attention, and the emphasis that this was something that would be done for any member of the family, albeit human, canine, or feline.

Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2000) substantiated the idea that rituals can be useful in providing clarity into the roles that family members assume. Our experts were able to delineate the myriad ways that their pets’ lives were intertwined with their own, reinforcing an element of attachment. Even Archer (1996), whose literature appeared to argue the parasitic nature of pets’ was able to note this point of mutualism that the pets offered when he wrote about the mutually satisfying role that pets can play in a family’s life. The rituals that allowed the pet to be included in the family were unique from family to family, as Rob and Helena discussed the enjoyment they shared when Helena read to their dogs, while Fiona voiced the connection she felt when her cat Sheppy joined her in walks in the woods. Clearly every family engaged in diverse activities and the pets were included in these rituals leaving their owners with a feeling that the pet was a part of the details rather than on the periphery.

From mutual tasks, such as eating at similar times, to exercising together, or sleeping in the same beds, pets and owners alike shared time, rituals, and traditions. Archer (1996) had reinforced this theme in his work when he noted that pets and humans being in one another’s company can lead to these interactions actually being reciprocal and mutually satisfying, rather than only advantageous to only the pet.

Inclusion: Core Theme Four

The integration of the pet's involvement with their families was illustrated by the inclusion that was richly described by the experts in this study. The theme of inclusion is shaded differently than the core theme of mutualism in that inclusion highlights the designation of membership which the pets were offered by these families, in that they were universally referred to as "children" and the pet owners as "parents." The participants universally noted that their pets were recognized not only by their own nuclear family as being family members but also by their friends, neighbors, and work colleagues. Five of the five participants acknowledged that the pet was a participant in family holidays and they even received gifts or secured a place in the family holiday pictures. This does mean that all families behaved the same way at the holidays or even on a daily basis. Jane noted how she hurried home from time with her human children to be with Shiloh, even to the chagrin of her daughters while Rob and Helena admitted to planning their vacations around their pet's comfort.

The five families stated that their pets slept in their beds, with an interpretation of the pet truly being considered to be allowed into the inner sanctum of the family folds. The return that the pet offered was richly illustrated with Jane and Tom tearfully discussing how Shiloh had helped Jane through her bout with cancer, Linda describing how Lester had been a constant companion and force in Victor's recovering from hip surgery, and 10-year-old Darla recounted how Leslie had been there for her when she was sad or lonely acting as a sister.

Attachment is not always an even distribution of give and take between family members but is a secure base from one person to the other. This may be true of infant to

mother, or adult to adult. Children may need a close proximity to feel secure to a special person, but as we age this may change to seek protection from danger or a decrease in anxiety (Margolies, 1999). Pets were exemplified as being both close in proximity to their pet owners, as well as offering physical protection and diffusion of anxiety. Hence, the time spent with the pets was not as important as what occurred during that time and quality of time.

The focus on these four attachment themes was able to draw out the close, personal relationships which these pet owners felt with their pets. At the start of this research project, it was hypothesized that pet attachment might be due to health advantages to pet owners, benefits to children in the family unit, dissociation of pet owners, or pets manipulating their owners. While factors such as health benefits to pet owners and benefits to children were substantiated in this body of work, pet parasitism and owner dissociation were disproven. Clearly the pets had a high level of attachment with their families with an emphasis on the pet being an integral part of the family rather than serving in a utilitarian or strictly one-sided relationship. Prior to this study the level of inclusion in the family had not been well documented in the available literature. It is noteworthy to state that pets have been a vital part of many families' daily lives and relationships, and broadened our knowledge base of the extent that family members considered the pet to be involved in their family dynamics, daily lives, emotional comfort, and emotional acceptance.

Clearly this does not mean that one size fits all, but rather each family was able to express the pride in the pet being included in their family profile, without it meaning the same to each family. This study allowed the reader to better understand what made the

pet a family member and also precluded the level of grief that might take place when the pet passes away.

Overview of Bereavement Core Themes

The bereavement process is not uncomplicated when a researcher attempts to understand the nature of a loss that a human feels when they lose a human family member. The circumstances are not mitigated when we seek to comprehend the loss that families feel upon losing a pet family member. Uniformly the participants in this study had lost a pet within one month of partaking in this study, most being within 2 weeks of their loss of their pet. Their emotions were able to be observed in a close up manner when feelings may have been rawer, and less censored than a longitudinal study of grief might offer with possible retrospective views of loss. Obviously, attachment may also be affected or heightened, as bereavement may be, when the loss occurred so closely to the time of my interviewing the participants. In order to maximize this timeframe of loss all participants were seen within one week of their first interviews, protecting the integrity of feeling that was addressed in the first interview.

Guilt: Core Theme One

All of the participants had chosen euthanasia with their pets, which circumvented them to this study in a specific manner via their veterinarian. The compounding feelings that accompany euthanasia therefore become part of the study and the participants' narratives. The guilt that families eventually alluded to became a structure to frame the emotional outpouring that these families offered in their stories. This does not mean that the guilt was uniform nor does it mean that the timeframe or intensity of guilt was homogenous. Guilt is not necessarily uniform in that the individuals and families

experiencing it do so in their own unique way and time constraints. The guilt was universal, distinctive, familial, and individual. Therefore, the individual grief processing which took place would be inferred with an understanding that emotional composition is globally diverse and yet may be shared by many.

The research question of the participants' unique experience of bereavement was exactly that – unique. The familial response was dovetailed with the individual response and could be teased apart but was best understood with the understanding that grief may be shared together but also must be also individually processed. The response of guilt with this particular loss espouses the current literature that notes the guilt that is often omnipresent with the loss of a pet in a family. Although the gradients of guilt were emanating from different sources, such as decisions of euthanizing the pet, past behavior, or even pondering what others might think, the guilt was a barometric certainty as an emotional response to the loss in this study.

Emotional Distress: Core Theme Two

Emotional distress is not a core theme that would appear unexpected given any type of bereavement. What was unanticipated was the level of intense emotional distress that these families felt and shared with each other. Often times the literature is erroneous in portraying people who love their pets as lonely and naturally grief stricken when they lose their pet. This was not an accurate description of the family members that I interviewed who appeared dynamic and animated while also self-reporting above average social support. These families reported medium to high social support systems and were not isolative and bereft of other relationships. The demonstrations of emotional distress were varied from devastation, sadness, tragic, to subjects reporting being inconsolable.

Although the narratives were colored with loss, emotional distress was not only one particular strain of emotion, but laden with many perspectives on emotional response to loss. As losing another family member may have ricocheted feelings of loss, all of the participants in this study had not lost another family member for at least one year prior to the interviews. With this in mind, all five families had experienced the loss of a family member at some time in their life and noted this loss as being as high or higher than that human loss. Hence, the family members did not report that this was of a diminished capacity as compared to the loss they had felt for a human family member. As Jane noted

We didn't live with those other people, our parents or whoever. His sister died recently. We didn't live with them. I think I grieved more over Shiloh than I did with my parents now that you say it. (2/14)

Individual Grief Processing: Core Theme Three

The theme of individual grief processing was initially born out of the visual imagery that was available to me as I watched these families emote about their loss. I repeatedly noticed the pattern of families responding to the loss of their pet in much the way they responded to their life with the pet. Family members had spent collective, family time with the pet as well as individual time with the pet which appeared to correlate with the grief pattern as well. Tori had reflected on her desire to grieve for Leslie alone, with her husband, and later with her mother and children. She also emphasized that she felt unable to comfort her children after the loss and felt more at ease allowing her mother to do so. Her mother, Mary, had emphasized that she too needed time and space to grieve alone, in addition to comforting the children. As families related the activities and memories they shared with their family member pet, they also relayed familial memories made collectively.

As Tom tearfully recounted,

Well, I know one thing I did and my wife doesn't know about this. When I go to my little area, I'll have snacks down there and Jane told me not to give her any snacks, but toward the end I would sneak her, shall we say, an extra one or two snacks such as potato chips, pretzels, or whatever, even though I knew I was doing the wrong thing. (1/15)

Tom had engaged in a grief ritual which he did not disclose until the interview for this research study commenced. Jane appeared surprised by this admission but also stated she had said goodbye, and grieved in her own way for Shiloh.

This is not uncommon in grieving as Greene and Landis (2002) had reported that there is a wide range of grieving styles. Being a family does not necessitate that a family grieve in unison but remain respectful of other's feelings of loss potentially being different than one's own. As Tom had noted about his spouse's grief response "I don't know how my spouse grieves" ((2/15)). He later noted the importance of also sharing his loss with his wife, Jane, "Well, there was a lot more hugging going on and some tears together" (2/16). A response to death may be like a relationship in life, personal and familial without being exclusive to either.

Attempts at Consolation: Core Theme Four

The experts in this study were similar in the way that the animals had passed away because all of the families, for different reasons, had been referred to me after they had euthanized their pets at the same veterinarian's office. As described earlier, the families may have experienced some pronounced guilt because of the manner of death of the pet and also because of the view that pets are helpless and childlike. Another offshoot of the guilt and emotional distress that the participants described is the core theme of attempts at consolation.

After the loss of a family member it is not uncommon to examine what could have been different in that pet's life. Given that the attachment level for a pet may equal or more pronounced than for a human (Cowles, 1985), this transcended attachment may cause the bereft person or persons to console themselves as to the past being justifiable. Perhaps because of the intensity of the nature of the loss, all of the families discussed the reasons why they chose euthanasia, the veterinarian's reassurance that they had made the right decision, the ill health of the pet prior to death, and finally even "bouncing" the above rationale off each other to harvest more reassurance. Even though the families were globally different, they each had unique ways to "re-hash" the events of the death and validate that they had made the right decisions in life and death for the pet. This implication is extremely important for therapists and veterinarians to comprehend because the participants clearly were looking for reassurance and may not have been able to ask for this in clearer terms.

Another component of this particular theme that was unanimous with all five families was their belief that eventually adopting another pet would alleviate their grief, while still realizing this would not resurrect their deceased pet. The families discussed their realization that adopting another pet would not replace their lost pet but also helped to restore a balance in the home and allowed the family members to focus on something positive, without negating what the family members felt for their pet.

Clearly grief is a complex, inimitable, yet comprehensive occurrence that families face and that all of the participants were able to share with this writer. Amongst family members and between families there were common denominators with distinctive nuances that each family offered in their narratives. As with a house, the structures may

look similar in construction, but in making a house a home, the decorating, emotional stamps, and personal touches that one makes is the very definition of a home.

Implications for Clinical Practice

As clinicians who work with both individuals and families it is essential that we better understand the role that pets play in the clients' lives that we treat. It may be very easy to overlook a pet and miscalculate their role in a family as being remote or insignificant. When a pet dies and a therapist does not acknowledge the pet or the loss, it may further exacerbate the feeling of shame that pet owners already feel for this unique, possibly disenfranchised grief they feel when their pet passes away. Wrobel and Dye (2003) emphasized that the loss of a pet needs to be legitimized in our society, which is an especially sensitive subject when the attachment to the pet was strong. They also entreated that as health care providers, in general, we need to be more aware of the implications that this bereavement may cause.

This line of thinking was reiterated by Gage and Holcomb (1991) who stressed that "the death of a pet is a stressor at the family system level that adds significantly to total family system stress and pile-up with consequent increased risk of disorganization" (p. 104). A family is not individuals who just cohabitate together, but individuals interacting together affecting each other in a circular manner. When a pet has been included into the family structure, they become part of the family's dynamics, such as being able to reduce anxiety or stress, as in triangulation. For instance, if a married couple were upset with each other they might utilize the family member pet to talk with or to express their emotions to, thereby reducing the anxiety level in the home. If we as clinicians do not acknowledge the death of a family member, because that member was a

pet, we are not only in a position of possibly losing the trust of our clients, but watching pile up consequences occur because we did not intervene when the pet was alive, by including them in our therapeutic dialogue, or in death my diminishing the importance of the pet in the family composition.

As Eckstein noted (2000) “pets reduce fear and loneliness, help minimize anxiety during times of stress, promote good mental and physical health for both children and adults and provide noncontingent, unconditional love and opportunities for affection” (p. 192). This mirrors the core themes that were clarified in this research study and underscores the experience of the participants. Eckstein also accentuated a socially acceptable attachment object form of attachment for children, which the 10-year-old participant highlighted when she discussed being able to talk, offer affection, and feel emotional safety from her “sister”, her dog Leslie.

Clearly, the importance of the attachment themes that were revealed in this study are crucial in better understanding the attachment that one feels toward a family member pet. This is emphasized by Brown, Richards, and Wilson (1996) when they encouraged therapists and researchers to “explore the depth of the bond that existed with the pet to better understand the grief being experienced” (p. 505). Their insistence that a major component of their research was the idea that it is essential that counselors “treat pet loss and the grief loss engenders seriously—as seriously as loss of a family member. This too merges with the findings in this research study. Rubin (1998) also reported this in his study of death and bereavement when he reported that the loss of a close relationship has a significant impact on the bereaved.

Podzirak et al. (2000) noted the myriad of stressors that may occur with the death of a pet including “physical, social, emotional, and spiritual changes” (p. 388). This concurs with the information that was garnered from the families in this study who noted the complexities of bereavement that their families experienced when they lost their family member pet. As they noted, the relationships with a companion animal can be “expansive” and may be traumatic when death occurs. Indeed as marriage and family therapists it is crucial to note that family member pets have distinctive roles in the family and their death may be viewed as harrowing as human family member death, divorce, or marriage departure (Gage & Holcomb 1991).

Although the participants in this study did not report a feeling of shame in discussing their grief process, it is still very important that therapists monitor any minimization of a pet/family member’s death by other family members, friends or society since it is not uncommon for this to occur. Inadvertently, a well meaning therapist could also promote feelings of shame by not including a pet in the dialogue of a therapy session.

Since some may view marriage and family therapy as a rather novice theoretical and philosophical stance in therapy, it is not unusual that what constitutes a family is still troubling to those who attempt to define it. Hence, it is vital that we as pioneers in this field are comprehensive in our views of what makes up a family. It is not enough to be politically correct, but to also be globally minded about a pet’s role in the family. We can expect to see more families arrive in our offices that have lost a pet, and may or may not bring this issue into the therapy room, depending on what we as clinicians have done in the form of assessment and dialogue in including a possible vignette for a pet being a

family member. All participants voiced that they would discontinue a therapeutic alliance with a counselor who did not inquire about their pet or their pet's death. However, some clients may continue with a decreased trust level and significant changes in the family that a therapist would find baffling if they were unaware of the attachment and loss of the pet.

Implications for Veterinarians

The voice of veterinary news, *DVM NewsMagazine* (May, 2008) reported that an occupational threat to veterinary medicine is the suicide rate that "is proportionally four times that of the general population and twice that of other health professionals" (p. 18). As reported in this particular study, the participants reported that their veterinarian was the biggest factor in helping them to console themselves with the choice of euthanasia for their pet. However, this may also contribute to the "constant interaction, performance, and support of euthanasia in the animal population" that affects veterinarians' attitudes on death in general and also their own lowered inhibitions toward suicide as a possible solution to their own problems." *DVM* (May, 2008) also notes that factors like poor coping strategies, curriculum, and the ready access to lethal drugs may also contribute to the exceedingly high suicide rate of veterinarians. Alas this compassion fatigue may take a heavy toll on the veterinarian who is forced to deal with death and euthanasia on a daily basis. Clearly, curriculum that includes a more thorough understanding of pet bereavement would be a benefit to veterinarians and veterinary students, in addition to gaining a global forum for discussion of this vocational hazard and its effect on morale. This study has intended to shed light on the nature and outcomes of pet attachment and

bereavement that cut across the disciplines of psychology, medicine, and veterinary science with respect to all.

Limitations

A qualitative study is rich with participants' narratives and deep with the emotion that the dialogue provides. The families in this study were of various socio-economic backgrounds, different religions, but all of Caucasian descent. Although the veterinarian made the referrals to this writer, and they were not solicited by this writer directly, the veterinarian's practice may not be globally represented in this study. Since the participants were all clients of the veterinarian, it could be deduced that these participants were more pro-active in their care of their pets and possibly more financially solvent. That is not possible to address within the confines of this limited study. Also, by virtue of the fact that these participants were willing to be a part of this study, there may be something significant in this status, their desire to partake in a study about pet bereavement. Again we cannot substantiate this within the goals and structure of this particular study, and may or may not be of a substantial value for examination.

As a measure of credibility triangulation was used in the form of a second interview which was a member check by allowing the participants to expound on the narratives that they shared during the first interview. The participants in this study were used as part of the triangulation process as they expounded on the tenets of the first interview with their responses in the second interviews. They were all observed by this researcher in their own homes while the interviews were being conducted. Observation was keenly used as I was able to both listen and observe while conducting this research study in the participants' homes. Background questionnaires were completed by all of the

members and all participants were interviewed two times with all the same family members present for both interviews, helping to maintain the integrity and consistency of the interview flow. The committee members conducted checks on the material to enhance thoroughness and contextual application.

Reflexivity was the other measure of credibility that was also used to enhance the clarification of this study. I worked collaboratively with all of the experts in this study and was able to glean any answers to questions I had by using an initial telephone interview, a first interview, and later a second interview. This allowed the members to be the critical reference group by clarifying and sometimes re-clarifying something that they had said or done in the interviews. These measures, however critically performed, still allowed the subjectiveness of a qualitative study shine but it still has remnants of the author's many complexions.

A component to this study may be that all of the families in this study had chosen to euthanize their pets for various health concerns/ reasons. All of the participants were referred by one veterinarian and these pets had all been euthanized. Since euthanasia is only one way for a pet to die, it is a unique facet of this study that there were no families who had experienced the accidental loss of a pet or loss by an illness or disease. Euthanasia may produce some feelings that may not be inherent in other types of bereavement. This study may have had different distinctions had the manner of death been more varied or consistent in a different direction. Given that these families were consistently interviewed within one month of their pet's death, the timeline of bereavement may look different if a longitudinal study format were utilized.

Implications for Future Research

In order to better understand the nature of pet bereavement it is essential to more clearly understand the complicated attachment that we form with our pets. Previous studies have been small in sample size and gender-biased with studies of primarily women and few families represented. There is little information available that specifically focused on the dynamics of a family and possible family transformation after the loss of a pet. There is little existing information for therapists to tap into that specifically addresses possible questionnaires or assessments that include a pet, and we as clinicians may have to be imaginative in seeking these tools out, or more inclusive in our interviewing techniques.

As always, when a researcher chooses a method of research, he or she is limited to the invisible confines of that method. I was very pleased with the quality of the Moustakas' phenomenological research process and found it to be both painstaking and faithful to the realm of phenomenological research. A qualitative researcher is the eyes and ears to the participant's rich testimony, and the research is therefore driven by certain assumptions about the researcher, mainly that they are tuned into the participant's true renditions of emotions. A quantitative study offers more volume and could also attest to a participant's own account of the experience. I found the Moustakas' methodology guidelines to be organized, clear, and well respected in the available literature.

By virtue of this study, it would behoove further researchers to examine a family and its members separately and then together to help delineate how their emotions and responses overlap into the family and its roles and dynamics. As was noted in this study, the reactions of family members helped to change the family as a whole. As addressed in

this body of work much attachment and bereavement growth occurs within the individual and then is nurtured within the nucleus of the family.

As marriage and family therapists it would be beneficial to better understand the nature of pet bereavement from the perspective of various marriage and family philosophies. As we are of one discipline the cyclical nature of family interaction is comprehensive and understood by marriage and family therapists. However, the nuances of each philosophy would undoubtedly leave its indelible mark on any research that would focus on pet attachment and bereavement. I look forward to this occurring in the future as our discipline continues to grow and flourish.

Lastly, the science of veterinary medicine would benefit from the outcome results of this research study. In speaking with Dr. Charles Martin, the esteemed veterinarian who worked closely with me on this project, the stress level for a veterinarian is very high when he/she is involved in the loss of a pet, albeit through natural causes, euthanasia, or an accident. He further explained that veterinary students are ill prepared to face the bereavement process that both they and their clients will experience. As a veterinary student he had not been offered any curriculum on grief, yet found himself in a position of dealing with it on a daily basis. This information would be very beneficial in helping the field of veterinary medicine deal with the familial grief responses which they obviously routinely encounter.

Researcher Transformation

As I have previously expressed, it was an honor to be a part of these families' grief process and their momentarily moving away from their private grief to allow me to interact with them. I was moved emotionally from the time I was granted permission to

enter the private sanction that was their bereavement journey. The family's allowance for me to enter their private worlds was something that produced both gratefulness and respect from my inner being. As I had lost Hurricane, I knew how difficult these times could be and was aware that I was entering their homes within a week or two of their loss. However, what I found was much hope within these families and a vital need to talk about their loved one, much as we do when a human loved one passes away. I am grateful to have been a part of their grief and healing process.

The themes that I found helped to both clarify and de-bunk ideas that were previously held and expounded upon in the existing literature. I can only hope that the existing literature is enriched by this endeavor and perhaps will be a catalyst for future work.

In Homer's classic work, *The Odyssey* (Homer,), the main character Odysseus returned home after being away for many years to find that no one recognized him. However his dog, who had aged and also been mistreated while Odysseus was away, immediately knew him and greeted him with a hero's welcome:

An old hound, lying near, pricked up his ears and lifted up his muzzle. This was Argos, trained as a puppy by Odysseus . . . abandoned there, and half destroyed with flies, old Argos lay. But when he knew he heard Odysseus' voice nearby, he did his best to wag his tail, nose down, with flattened ears, having no strength to move nearer his master. And the man looked away, wiping a salt tear from his cheek. (p. 319)

Perhaps Odysseus' knew that in some way your pet may be the first one to truly recognize who we really are.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

INFORMED CONSENT TO ACT AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

TITLE: Pet Bereavement and Families: A Qualitative View

INVESTIGATOR: Deirdre K. Petrich, MS,PCC,LIMFT,LICDC,LSW
Doctoral Student
University of Akron
Department of Counseling and Special Education
Akron, OH 44325
(330) 856-1714

DISSERTATION Dr. Patricia Parr
ADVISOR: University of Akron
Department of Counseling and Special Education
Akron, Ohio 44325
(330)972-8151

DESCRIPTION:

This research project is a phenomenological qualitative study which will examine pet bereavement and families in order to help clinicians, families, and theorists to better understand the needs of families who have lost a family member pet. The participants who take part in this study will be asked to address their feelings and thoughts about the loss of a pet who was considered to be a family member. Initially the families will be contacted by either the participating veterinarian or the said researcher, Deirdre K. Petrich, via telephone or letter, and an initial interview will take place to assess for appropriateness to the study. Subjects may participate under the age of eighteen with parent or guardian present and Informed Consent must be signed by said parent or guardian along with the Children's Assent Form. Participants may not be involved in therapy for any mental health condition as a criterion of this study.

The veterinarian will provide prospective subjects with a letter which outlines the nature of the study. After the prospective subject notifies Deirdre Petrich of their desire to be a participant in the study, she will use a brief telephone interview guide to determine if the participant meets the criteria for the study. The potential subject may ask any questions or voice concerns at this time. If they are chosen an interview place will be discussed with the participants, being either their home or possible public place where they feel comfortable.

All selected participants will be interviewed by the researcher, Deirdre K. Petrich, and will also be asked to complete a demographic questionnaire at the end of the second interview. The time frame for the first interview will be approximately one hour, and will be audio taped to enhance reliability. A second interview will take place in approximately one to two weeks and will focus on clarifying any themes from the first interview which arise. The time frame for this interview is approximately one hour, and will also be audio taped. The participants may also ask any questions which have surfaced since the first interview. A professional transcriptionist will transcribe audio tapes and will sign a Confidentiality agreement.

RISKS AND BENEFITS:

There may be risks in taking part in any research study in that mild distress may occur after the participant's addresses their feelings about the bereavement process. Any feelings or thoughts about distress may be discussed with the researcher, and if necessary a referral to a mental health counselor will be provided. All participants will be provided with a list of counselors at the beginning of this project. In addition to risks, there may be benefits to the participant in this study, with the participant may have the opportunity to discuss their feelings about their loss, and to realize that others may benefit from information and know

COSTS AND PAYMENTS:

No cost will be incurred by the participants, and each family will receive a \$20.00 gift certificate for their participation in the study. If a family should decide to end their participation in the study before the completion of the second interview they shall receive a \$10.00 gift certificate for their participation.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

All information shared in this research study will be confidential with actual names of participants being protected, and a pseudonym (a fake name) name being utilized for all participants. All informed consent forms and assent forms will be kept separately from actual research information and transcripts and demographic information. All signed consent forms will be kept at the Counseling department at the University of Akron in a locked, secure location. At the end of ten years all research all audiotapes will be magnetically erased.. The findings of this research study may be utilized in further published scientific journals or books.

RIGHT TO REFUSE OR END PARTICIPATION:

A participant is not compelled to remain in this study and may stop at any time. The researcher or committee chairperson may also choose to stop the study at any time if it is indicated.

LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCHER RESPONSIBILITY:

The researcher is not responsible for any counseling services to the family, either directly or indirectly as a result of the study. If the participants do not have a therapist,

appropriate referrals will be given, along with telephone contact numbers, to all participants.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT FOR TWO INTERVIEWS, COMPLETION OF ONE SELF-REPORT FORM AND TAPE RECORDINGS:

Researcher, Deirdre K. Petrich, has explained all of the above said information and has sought to answer all questions pertaining to this material and the research study. Deirdre K. Petrich may be contacted at (330) 856-1714 if any questions should arise. All participants may also contact Dr. Patricia Parr, doctoral advisor with any questions or concerns at (330) 972-8151. A participant who further wishes to address their rights as a participant in a research study may contact M. Sharon McWhorter, Interim Director, Research Services at (330) 972-7666 or toll free at 1-888-232-8790. The participant agrees to take part in this study by signing this form.

Signature of Participant

Date

INVESTIGATOR'S CERTIFICATION:

Researcher, Deirdre K. Petrich, certifies that she has explained to the above participant the nature, purpose and potential risks and benefits associated with participating in this study and has answered all questions that have been posed by the participants. Deirdre K. Petrich witnessed the above signature.

Signature of Investigator

Date

Signature of Advisor

Date

APPENDIX B

LETTER TO VETERINARIANS

Deirdre K. Petrich
8619 E. Market Street
Warren, Ohio 44484

Veterinarian Name:
Veterinarian Address:

Dear (Veterinarian/Referral Source):

I am writing to request your assistance in the completion of my research study for my doctoral dissertation from the University of Akron in Akron, Ohio. I am a doctoral candidate in the marriage and family program and am working with Dr. Patricia Parr on this project which examines the nature of pet bereavement and families. The title of my dissertation is *Pet Bereavement and Families: A Qualitative View*, and examines the phenomenon of families losing a pet that had been considered a family member. Although there is a fair amount of research about pets, pet bereavement and individuals, and grief and humans, there is a dearth of information expounding on families and pet bereavement. I will be talking with various families, of various compositions, who have experienced this in their lives, in the hopes of adding to the literature and available knowledge base about this grief process. This will enable me to help both the counseling and veterinary field to have more options to treat these families.

I will be conducting a qualitative study which will explain the attachment process and bereavement process which families experience with the pet, and how these changes affect the family. Families who have lost a pet (cat or dog) within the last two months, and who considered the pet to be a family member may possibly qualify for the study, along with the criterion that they can not currently be active in counseling for that or another problem, as to confound the study. I have enclosed several self-addressed, stamped envelopes, along with flyers explaining my research project, as well as consent forms.

My curriculum vitae are also enclosed so that you may be more familiar with my professional, employment, and academic history.

I would be very willing to meet with you to further answer any questions you may have, or to clarify any aspect of this research project. I will telephone you next week to confirm delivery of this material and to meet with you if desired.

Thank you,

Deirdre K.Petrich, MS, PCC, LIMFT, LICDC, LSW

APPENDIX C

FLYER TO RECRUIT PARTICIPANTS

Pet Bereavement and Families: A Qualitative View

Deirdre K. Petrich, A doctoral student in The University of Akron in the Marriage and Family Program in the Counseling and Education Department is seeking participants to complete a research study on pet loss and families.

Information gathered in this study will be used to help families, counselors, and veterinarians who face the task of coping with the loss those families feel when they lose a pet whom they considered to be a family member. The participants will be asked to take part of two interviews, each approximately one hour long, and to answer questions in a brief questionnaire. A \$20.00 gift certificate will be given to each family who participates. A participant may choose to stop being a part of the study at any time without penalty.

The families can not currently be involved in mental health counseling, and the death of the pet must have occurred within the last two months. Anyone under the age of eighteen is also eligible to be a part of this study providing their parent or guardian is present at all times. If you should decide to be a participant in this study, the researcher will conduct a brief telephone interview with you beforehand to ensure that you meet the criteria for the study. This study is not to be considered counseling for the participants.

To find out more information please contact the veterinarian who directed you to this study or contact the researcher, Deirdre Petrich at (330)856-1714. You may also contact Dr. Patricia E.Parr at the University of Akron (330) 972-7779 if you have questions about the study guidelines.

Thank you,

Deirdre K. Petrich, MS, PCC, LIMFT, LICDC, LSW

APPENDIX D

INITIAL TELEPHONE INTERVIEW GUIDE

Thank you for interest in this research study and for contacting me. Firstly, I would like to introduce myself and then briefly describe the project I am completing. My name is Deirdre Petrich and I am a Doctoral candidate studying at the University of Akron in the Marriage and Family Program, which is a part of the Counselor Education Department. As part of this course of study I am completing my dissertation, a research project that I hope to learn more about the nature of families and the loss of a pet. My supervisor is Dr. Patricia E. Parr, who is the head of the Marriage and Family Program at the University of Akron and may be reached at (330) 972-7779.

As part of this study I will be meeting with families who have lost a pet and hope to better understand what the family members experience when they lose a companion animal. Potentially I will meet with each family for a first interview and then a second interview, each lasting approximately one hour. If it is agreeable to you, I am willing to conduct the interview at your home, or at a public place if that is better for you. I will meet with the family members together, and ask that all immediate family members who live in your home take part in the interview if they so chose. Are there any questions that I may answer for you at this time?

May I ask you some initial questions at this time?

1. Has your family lost a cat or dog in the last two months whom they considered to be a family member?
2. What makes you feel that your pet was considered a family member?
3. Has your family experienced sadness and adjustments due to the death of your pet?
4. Are any of your family members currently receiving counseling for this loss?
5. Do you anticipate any emotional discomfort in talking about this loss?
6. Has this loss affected your daily routine as a family?
7. Has your family lost another family member within the last year?
8. Are you or any member of your family currently involved in mental health counseling?

After reviewing the participant's responses I will examine selection criteria for the study and if it meets the study's parameters I will arrange a time and location to meet for the first interview. I must emphasize that these are not counseling sessions and if therapy is desired I can refer you to several therapists in the area. All sessions will be audio-taped, and tapes will be destroyed at the end of the research as all participants are to remain anonymous.

APPENDIX E

FAMILY INTERVIEW GUIDE (FIRST INTERVIEW)

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study. It is my hope that this project will help therapists, veterinarians, and laypersons to better understand the process of grief which a family experiences when they lose a companion animal.

At this time I am going to ask family members to share with me some background information about your relationship with your pet and also the experiences and feelings you have had since the pet passed away. I will ask you to be as open as you feel comfortable with in response to some specific and general questions which I will ask. If the question is not clear, please feel free to ask me to clarify it for you. As I had mentioned earlier, I will be audio-taping this interview so that I do not have to write our entire interview down, and so that I may later review the tapes.

Questions about your pet:

Sub-questions a and b: Attachment

- 1.) **Tell me about your pet.**
 - a. What stands out in your mind about your pet and his/her *relationship with your family*?
 - b. Can you tell me what an *average day* was like with your pet?
- 2.) **Were there certain *rituals* during the day that were special for you and your pet?**
 - a. Could you give me an example of times when you felt *bonded (a connection)* with your pet?
 - b. Did you have certain *names or terms of endearment* for your pet that represented something special you felt for him/her?

Sub-question c: Bereavement

Questions about your pet and his/her death:

- 1.) **Can you tell me about the day your pet died?**
 - a. Describe *communication* between family members on that day.
 - b. Does *something about your pet stand out* on that day?
 - c. What did the *grief of your family look like* on that day?
 - d. Is there anything about your *family interaction* that stood out to you on that day?
 - e. Was there *something you did with your pet* before he/she died that was important to you?

- 2.) Is there any advice you would like to offer to others about the experience with losing your pet?**
- a. To other *families*?
 - b. To *veterinarians*?
 - c. To *counselors*?
- 3.) Is there a feeling that you have now about the loss which is different than the feelings you had the day of the death?**

APPENDIX F

CLIENT CODE _____

1. What is your date of birth? _____
DAY MONTH YEAR

2. What is your sex? (Please Circle) Male Female

3. What is your race/ethnicity?

_____Caucasian _____Native American
_____African-American _____Asian or Pacific Islander
_____Hispanic _____Other

4. What is your current marital status?

_____Married _____Separated
_____Living with significant other _____Never married
_____Divorced _____Widowed

5. What is the highest grade in school that you have completed?

_____Less than high school _____Master's degree
_____Some college _____Doctoral degree
_____Bachelor's degree _____Other (please specify)

6. What is your current work status?

_____Full time paid employment _____Disabled
_____Part time paid employment _____Retired
_____Full time employment from home
_____Unemployed
_____Homemaker

7. Counting all sources of income, what is your family's total income before taxes?

_____Under \$10,000 _____\$30,000 to \$34,999
_____ \$10,000 to \$14,999 _____\$35,000 to \$39,999
_____ \$15,000 to \$19,999 _____\$40,000 to \$44,999
_____ \$20,000 to \$24,999 _____\$45,000 to \$49,999
_____ \$25,000 to \$29,999 _____\$50,000 or more

Survey continues on next page

8. If you are a parent, please list each of your children by age and gender. (For example, Female, age 7)

_____ Not applicable	_____ Gender, Age _____
_____ Gender, Age _____	_____ Gender, Age _____
_____ Gender, Age _____	_____ Gender, Age _____

9. Religion

_____ No affiliation	_____ Jewish
_____ Protestant	_____ Christian
_____ Catholic	_____ Other

10. Has your family had other pet's in the past? If so, please list the pet, their breed and life span.

(For example, Fluffy, Siamese cat, lived 10 years)

_____ No other pets

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

11. Have you lost someone close to you in the past five years? If so, Please list your relationship to them and how long ago they passed away. (For example, Mother, 2 years ago, or Grandfather, 5 years ago)

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

12. Have you had grief counseling, either individually, as family, or in a group format for a loss in the past?

_____ Yes For what loss? _____

_____ NO

13. Has any member of your family had counseling for an issue other than grief or loss?

_____ Yes

_____ No

14. Is there anything else which you would like to share with others who have lost a pet, counselors working with families who have lost a pet, or veterinarians about your experience? _____

APPENDIX G

CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT WITH TRANSCRIPTIONIST

I, _____, in agreeing to transcribe the audio-tapes for the dissertation of Deirdre K. Petrich, *Pet Bereavement and Families: A Qualitative View*, hereby agree to maintaining complete confidentiality with regard to any information associated with the tapes I am transcribing. Any information within the tapes will only be addressed with author Deirdre K. Petrich, and tapes will be returned to said author.

Signature of Transcriptionist _____

Date _____

Signature of Author _____

Date _____

APPENDIX H

COUNSELOR REFERRAL LIST

If any participant shall request or need the services of a therapist due to associated distress with this study or other said distress, this list of local therapists is provided to all participants to select a therapist of their choice. The below therapists are not endorsed nor services paid for by writer, Deirdre K. Petrich, nor the University of Akron.

- 1.) Stanley Palumbo, Ph.D: Telephone number, (330) 759-0943
- 2.) Douglas Crush, Ph.D : Telephone number, (330) 856-6663
- 3.) Judith Fink, PCC : Telephone number, (330) 758-0101

APPENDIX I

CHILDREN'S ASSENT FORM

I will be talking with a writer, Deirdre Petrich, along with my family, who will use this information to learn more about what happens to a family when they lose a family pet who they thought of as a family member. If I am sad or upset during or after the meetings, I will let my parents or the writer, Deirdre Petrich, know so that we can talk about my feelings or to talk with a counselor about these feelings. I do not have to be a member of this study, and I can stop at any time by telling my parents that I want to stop. I can either talk or not talk during the meetings and do not have to talk if I do not want to.

Child's Signature_____

Parent's Signature_____

Researcher's Signature_____

APPENDIX J

IRB APPROVAL LETTER

Page 1 of 1

Subj: **PETRICH IRB APPROVAL 20061108**
Date: 12/11/2006 8:41:56 A.M. Eastern Standard Time
From: mary6@uakron.edu
To: PhDeirdre@aol.com
CC: ppatr@uakron.edu

Ms. Petrich:

Your protocol entitled "*Peer Assessment and Families...*" (#20061108 has been approved and the approval letter is in the mail to you.

THE APPROVAL WILL EXPIRE December 11, 2007.

If at that time you intend to renew the project, an application for continuing review must be in our office and approved by the expiration date. There is no grace period.

- *If changes are made to the protocol before the expiration date, you must submit an application for continuing review for IRB approval of the modifications. (Present only the form which is in current use. * Old forms will not be accepted.)*
- *When the project is completed, you must submit a final report form to complete the IRB file. (Present only the form which is current use. Old forms will not be accepted.)*

*Please see: http://www3.uakron.edu/orsp/public_html/irbmain.htm

You may send the form to Research Services and Sponsored Programs -2102.

Please call if you have questions. (So that we may maintain contact with you, forward change of mailing address, phone number or e-mail address to this office.) Thank you.

Mary Samardzides, IRB Secretary
Research Services & Sponsored Programs
The University of Akron
Akron, Ohio 44325-2102
Phone: 330-972-7666
FAX: 330-972-6281