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# Working The Companion Animal in the Context of New Interpersonal Relationships

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# Introduction

- The National People and Pets Survey (Australian Companion Animal Council, 2010)
  - 63.3% of Australian households owned a pet
  - 92% of respondents felt “very close” to their pet
  - 86% of respondents found comfort with their pet during times of stress,
  - 62% of respondents felt their pet made for a friendlier environment and helped with conversation between humans

# Rationale for Study

- Given that companion animals in our society:
  - Have high prevalence (ACAC, 2010)
  - Are often viewed as family members (Albert & Bulcroft, 1987)
  - Provide potential psychological and physiological health benefits (Barker, Knisely, McCain, Schubert, & Pandurangi, 2010; Souter & Miller, 2007)
- There remains limited psychological literature exploring the roles companion animals play within families (see Walsh 2009)

# Rationale for Study

- One of the most important family adjustments is the formation of new romantic relationships (Mikulincer, Florian, Cowan P.A., & Cowan C. P., 2002).
- An important factor in satisfying interpersonal relationships includes engagement in common activities and recreation, whilst maintaining individuality and personal freedom (Gottman & Levenson, 2000; Mikulincer et al., 2002).
- If a companion animal behaves as an attachment figure to one person in the couple, then an interesting dynamic is expected to develop (Walsh, 2009).

# Psychological Literature

- There are polarised views in literature:
- Some suggest companion animals are social pariahs, displacing other human relationships and taking advantage of in-built human desires to nurture to further their own evolutionary success (Archer, 1997).
- Others believe that companion animals are complementary to human families and society as a whole, and provide important social benefits (Serpell, 2009).
- Three main frameworks have emerged to describe the human-animal bond

# Three Psychological Frameworks

- Attachment theory
  - Companion animals meet all the criteria for psychological attachment (Beck & Madresh, 2008; Zilcha-Mano, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2011)
- Family Systems theory
  - Companion animals form relationship triangles within families (Cohen, 2002; Tannen, 2004)
- Biophilia hypothesis
  - Companion animal relationships fit within a 'genes eye' view of human families, even affecting oxytocin and cortisol levels in humans (Gorelik, Shackelford, & Salmon, 2010; Handlin, Nilsson, Ejdebäck, Hydbring-Sandberg, Uvnäs-Moberg, 2012; Nagasawa, Mogi, & Kikusui, 2009)

# Method

- Qualitative research embedded in a social constructionist framework (see Crotty, 1998),
- Psychological attachment in humans is a subjective and intensely personal phenomenon (Smith, 2004).
- Interpretive phenomenology (IPA) has been successfully used to approach adult human attachment through narrative in past research (Meyer & Pilkonis, 2001).



# Method

- There is evidence that human-companion animal attachments can be viewed similarly to interpersonal attachments (e.g. Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011) and thus;
- IPA was also chosen as the methodology to explore human-pet bonds from the perspective of another human with whom an interpersonal attachment has formed.
- Rich detail is emerging with themes emerging that correspond to theoretical frameworks.

# Participants

- Eight people, four male and four female who fit the following criteria
  - Recent interpersonal relationship (approximately two years)
  - Partner had a pre-existing companion animal bond
- Age range 21-50 years
- Companion animals include five dogs and three cats
- In-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face, with one video conference interview
- Preliminary data to date

# Emergent Themes – Nurturing

- Male partners in particular felt there was an element of motherhood, where the pet will take on a child-like role:
  - “I think she... um enjoys that sort of maternal sort of caring role for Charlie (the dog), it’s sort of part of her life.”
  - “My partner speaks to him (the cat) in baby sometimes, ‘come to mamma’ she’ll say.. She calls him her son.”
  - “In serious discussions she’s sort of acknowledged that yeah it’s almost a bit of a child substitute for her.”

# Emergent Themes – Protection

- Participants expressed feelings of safety for their partner when they were not physically present
  - “It’s like.. somebody to come home to every night I suppose, because she lives by herself.”
  - “I’m really glad that he (the dog) is there, it’s a protection for her when I am away with work.”

# Emergent Themes – Competition for Attention

- Participants noted that there were moments of conflict with the companion animal
  - “...and it was father’s day. So she’d rather spend father’s day with the cat.. rather than me.”
  - “I felt I had to be best friends with the dog to be fully accepted in the relationship with him (partner).. I guess I struggled with that for a bit”
  - “...sometimes I get frustrated.. I’m trying to talk to him about something important and suddenly the dog takes over... ”

# Emergent Themes – Proximity Maintenance

- Participants both male and female noted their partners strong desire not to be away from the companion animal for long periods
  - "...she raced home 'I haven't seen him, I haven't spent time with him today' and we are due to go out..."
  - "We can't go away for too long without her (the dog) – I know he misses her and doesn't like anyone else taking care of her."

# Discussion

- Themes that correspond with aspects of attachment theory are emerging (Zeifman & Hazan, 2008)
  - desiring close physical proximity,
  - use of the attachment figure for comfort and to alleviate stress (safe haven),
  - distress and anxiety if there is separation from the attachment figure

# Discussion

- Themes that suggest companion animals take on roles that are described in human-like terms (anthromorphism, see Archer, 1997)
- The bond with the companion animal can provide a common interest for the interpersonal relationship
- The pet also provides moments of tension: competition for attention, as the new interpersonal relationship develops



# Conclusion

- Research to date has focused on pet owners, rather than their romantic partners
- Partners spoke of themes reflecting psychological attachment to the companion animal, and spoke of the pets having human-like qualities
- Future research could investigate in quantitative terms the attachment style within the relationship, and compare with the human-animal relationship
- Participants expressed that the human-animal bond was a salient part of their interpersonal relationship, requiring negotiation.

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