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## The psychological Impact of Companion Animals for Older Adults who Reside Alone

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Running head: COMPANION ANIMALS AND OLDER ADULTS

**The Psychological Impact of Companion Animals for Older Adults who Reside  
Alone**

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## USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

**Abstract**

Companion animals have been identified as improving the physical and emotional health of some older adults (Collis & McNicholas, 1998). This qualitative study explored the psychological impact of owning a cat or a dog for persons aged 65 or older who resided alone. Nine participants, two male and seven female, were recruited through local media advertisements in the Guildford area to participate in a semi-structured interview about their relationship with their pet. Following transcription the semi-structured interviews were analysed using thematic analysis (Aronson, 1994). Four major themes emerged with participants reporting their pets provided satisfaction that impacted on several areas including companionship, social support, affectionate bonds and as a combat against loneliness.

**Declaration**

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate, without acknowledgement, any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

**Signature**

**Date: 23 October 2003**

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**Table of Contents**

<b>Introduction</b>	1
<i>Quantitative studies of bonding with pets</i>	2
<i>Attachment</i>	3
<i>Attachment Theory</i>	3
<i>Affectionate bonds and human-animal bonds</i>	4
<i>Social Support</i>	5
<i>Social support of animals</i>	6
<i>Companionship</i>	6
<i>Social support as a direct effect or buffer</i>	7
<i>The role of Social support and companionship</i>	8
<i>Loneliness</i>	10
<i>Theories of loneliness</i>	10
<i>Loneliness and pet bonding</i>	12
<i>Alone, loneliness and Depression</i>	12
<i>Disengagement</i>	13
<b>Method</b>	17
<i>Research Design</i>	17
<i>Participants</i>	18
<i>Materials</i>	18
<i>Procedure</i>	19
<b>Analysis</b>	19
<b>Finding and Interpretations</b>	20
Table 1	21
<i>Companionship</i>	21
<i>Being a confidante</i>	22
<i>Facilitating expression through touch</i>	23
<i>Enabling communication exchange</i>	24
<i>Social support</i>	25
<i>Sense of belongingness</i>	25
<i>Positive social comparison</i>	26
<i>Unconditional love, loyalty and acceptance</i>	26
<i>Feeling of security</i>	27
<i>Stress buffer</i>	28



<i>Affectionate bond</i> .....	29
<i>The expected role of the pet</i> .....	30
<i>Substitute for a child</i> .....	30
<i>Substitute for a partner</i> .....	31
<i>Combat against loneliness and being alone</i> .....	32
<i>Facilitator of social interaction</i> .....	33
<i>Sense of purpose</i> .....	34
<i>Socio-emotional selectivity</i> .....	34
<i>Provide a role for the pet owner</i> .....	35
<i>Fill a void</i> .....	36
<b>Conclusions</b> .....	36
<b>References</b> .....	40
<b>Appendix A</b> .....	45
<b>Appendix B</b> .....	46
<b>Appendix C</b> .....	47
<b>Appendix D</b> .....	48
<b>Appendix E</b> .....	49

## Introduction

A research report by the Queensland Government suggests that during the years 2012 to 2028 the number of people aged over 65 is expected to grow four or five times faster than the total population (Hooper & Skeffington, 1999). Life expectancy in Australia is now amongst the highest in the world with the median age of death in 1998 being 77.4 years of age (Australia's Ageing Population, 2000). In 1996, 28% of people aged 65 and over were living alone (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2000). These statistics suggest a need to study the requirements of Australia's ageing population, considering amongst other things, the psychological well being of this rapidly expanding group.

A report by Wesley Mission (1999) revealed that many older Australians reported a sense of "deep loneliness". On average Australians aged over 65 spent 12 hours alone each day representing 79% of their waking hours. Almost one in ten elderly Australians have contact with other people less than twice a week and a further 14% were classed as being at risk of becoming isolated. It was suggested that the increase in social isolation had led to an increased risk of depression and suicide and that approximately one in ten people aged 70 and over, living in the community may be suffering from depression. Furthermore the authors reported that an examination of suicide notes of different age groups revealed that older person's suicide notes contained more references to isolation and loneliness than any other group. Within the psychological literature there is very little research that been aimed at reducing the impacts of loneliness, social isolation and depression.

Life changes in later life including loss of intimate human companions such as spouses and friends, separation from children and work associates and changes in social roles, have been suggested by Suthers-McCabe (2001) to diminish social support networks for older adults. Pet ownership and pet attachment has direct enhancement to health and well being according to Suthers-McCabe and buffers the impact of stressful events, much like human social support. Collis and McNicholas (1998) also claimed that companion animals or pets have been identified as improving the physical and emotional health of some people and suggest there has been widespread acceptance of positive relationship between pet ownership and health.

According to Wilson (1998) the strongest associations of pet affection and high morale were found in those person's who lived alone and had fewer social networks than they deemed necessary. Suthers-McCabe (2001) suggested the human-animal bond

is perhaps stronger and more profound in later life than at any other age and claims that research evidence has shown that humans, and especially older adults, consider their companion animals to be members of the family. These companion animals offer the most accessible enhancements to a person's quality of life, increasing happiness, decreasing loneliness and improving emotional health and physical functioning.

Researchers have had difficulty defining the human-animal relationship with some arguing that parallels between human to human relationships and human-animal relationships are irrelevant, however very little alternative research exists to define human-animal relationships. The remainder of the literature that follows critically reviews contemporary literature regarding issues of attachment, social isolation, loneliness and depression amongst others. The research filters through a broad spectrum of material as these issues are comprehensive and complex. However for the purpose of this review the content has been restricted to research relating these areas to companion animals.

#### *Quantitative studies of bonding with pets*

A study by Albert and Bulcroft (2002) involved a telephone interview of 612 participants to examine the psychological and emotional roles of pets. Their factor analysis of 12 items related to loving relationships among humans and pets and revealed nine items that were identified as pet attachment. Examples of these items are; "there are times when (pets name) is my closest companion" and "I feel closer to (pets name) than to many of my friends". Albert and Bulcroft suggested attachment theory highlights the lifelong requirements for close affectionate bonds with others and concluded that pet attachment was particularly important among divorced, never married, widowed, childless couples, newlyweds and empty-nesters. This suggests that pets can provide a substitute for human attachment and that pets are beneficial stabilisers for people going through difficult periods of transition.

A large telephone interview study conducted by Siegel (1990) concluded that elderly pet owners reported less visits to physicians and less psychological distress over a one-year period than participants who did not own pets. This was regardless of the fact that 58% of the sample did not live alone and pets were not necessarily their primary relationships. This finding suggests that pet companionship offers something that is unique from human companionship, however this phenomenon is yet to be defined as a scientific construct. Furthermore pet attachment is not only useful as a

substitute for human attachment, it appears to have its own capacity to improve the psychological well being of older adults.

### *Attachment*

The concept of the social provisions of relationships as proposed by Weiss (1974) suggested that pets can provide opportunities for attachment, fulfilling a combination of emotional needs, sometimes substituting for an absence of human attachment. Albert and Bulcroft (2002) acknowledge that older adults are more likely to experience ending of, or disruption to relationships with familiar people, places and things. In such instances the substitute attachment of a pet can provide closeness, the chance to feel needed and continuity of attachment throughout changing circumstances. Margolies (1999) suggests that pets offer a secure attachment with less fear of abandonment than might be experienced with adult peers. Moreover pets are often perceived by their owners in the role of their "children". This suggests pets enable substitution of lost attachments such as that of a spouse or offspring.

Evidence of attachment, between pets and humans is provided by Cowles (1985) who claimed that separation, threat of separation or permanent loss of a pet lead to separation anxiety, grief and mourning. This was explained by suggesting that the loss of a pet represented the loss of a special relationship of attachment. It seems logical to conclude that there could be no experience of separation anxiety or grief and mourning, unless there had been the development of an attachment. However Collis and McNicholas (1998) refute these types of links as attempts to imply evidence of attachment theory to the concept of pet-human attachment when other explanations are also plausible. For instance Ainsworth (1989) suggests grief is characteristic of affectionate bonds in general rather than being specific to attachment as denoted by attachment theory.

### *Attachment Theory*

Attachment theory has been used as a basis for several studies of pet ownership (Collis & McNicholas, 1998; Sable, 1995; Suthers-McCabe, 2001). However, Bowlby's (1988) theory of attachment was a broad concept developed for humans. Bowlby described attachment as an enduring social-emotional bond between two individuals over time. The term "individuals" referred to humans, with attachment beginning with an infant and their mother figure. The attachment relationship has since been extended to pets by some researchers, as outlined above, although no pet specific attachment theory exists.

Collis and McNicholas (1998) argued that the classic formulation of attachment (Bowlby, 1988) is about social benefits accruing to the less cognitively sophisticated individual. Thus it is the child, who is attached to the parent. In pet-human attachments it is the cognitively sophisticated human who is seen as attached to the less sophisticated animal, with the psychological benefits accruing to the person. One of the fundamental principles of Bowlby's original ideas on the mechanisms of attachment discussed by Collis and McNicholas was that attachment was controlled by a biologically based motivational system whereby the presence of the attachment figure enhanced a feeling of security. Again this is the opposite to the workings of pet-human attachments where the human is seen as feeling enhanced security in the presence of the pet. These differences clearly demonstrate that whilst a pet-human attachment exists it does not fall within Bowlby's model of Attachment Theory.

*Affectionate bonds and human-animal bonds*

A supporting argument was offered by Ainsworth (1989) who stressed that not all affectionate bonds are attachments. An important criterion of attachment must be present, namely the reduction of felt insecurity in the presence of the attachment partner. Collis and McNicholas (1998) claim that to date, attempts to quantify people's relationships with pets have not been able to tap feelings or attitudes that could be identified as attachment as denoted by attachment theory. Rather more they suggest most pet human relationships are characteristic of generalised affectionate bonds rather than specific attachment in particular. These affectionate bonds are of no less importance than attachments, they are merely derived from a criterion other than the one underlying attachment theory.

It is useful to ask whether a particular category of person-person relationships will help explain the characteristics of person-pet relationships according to Collis and McNicholas (1998). Attachment and parent to childcare giving are the prime relationships referred to in literature on companion animals. These types of generalisations can be useful as a starting point that can then be defined more accurately as a separate and specific construct. For instance, Keil's (1998) term of human-animal attachment is defined as a hierarchical relationship between a human and an animal. This includes any living thing other than a plant or another human and is a more specific term that describes more accurately the affectional bond that may exist between human and animal. This indicates that whilst parent and child relationships, amongst others, may help to illustrate the relationships between humans and pets', a different hierarchy

exists within human-animal relationships. A pet is usually chosen for its ability to initiate and respond to attachment responses in humans. Another attraction towards relationships with animals is the view that they are mutual and reciprocal but less complicated than human to human relationships (Brodie & Biley, 1999).

In summary the term attachment is used loosely throughout research on the relationships between pets and humans, without strict adherence to the underlying principles of attachment theory. A more accurate term would be affectional bond or Keil's (1998) term of human-animal attachment. Affectional bond denotes a generalised close and affectionate relationship. Evidence of affectional bonds between pets and humans has been established through the literature reviewed. It is accepted as a psychological impact of pet ownership that can be a substitute for human bonds, but also provides its own unique benefits.

Kale (cited in Sable, 1995) predicts that the changing landscape of family life will increasingly promote the importance of pets as attachment figures for reducing loneliness, providing comfort of proximity and giving purpose to life. This view is supported by Suthers-McCabe (2001) who suggested that for people who no longer have close relationships with other people in their lives, animals provide the chance to nurture another being. There are other conceptualisations that help to explain the relationship between humans and pets, namely social support and companionship, each having subtle differences.

### *Social Support*

An early conceptualisation of social support was suggested by Cobb (1995) who described social support as information that led to one or more of three possible outcomes: first the sense of belonging to a reciprocal network; second feelings of being cared for and third the belief that one is loved, esteemed and valued. Cobb believed that social support provided accelerated recovery from illnesses and protection from pathological states by acting as a buffer during times of crisis.

Collis and McNicholas (1998) suggested that a pet lends itself well to the function of a social support because they are perceived as always available, predictable in their responses and non-judgemental. Pets can give tactile comfort, recreational distraction from worries and they provide a sense of esteem due to the perception that pets not only care about their owners, but also need their owners. This view was also noted earlier by Weiss (1974) who claims the opportunity to provide nurturance is a form of support because it can be seen as increasing one's sense of worth and

competence. The extent to which older adults can participate in valued tasks in the absence of occupational pursuits or raising families is a critical component of well-being (Harlow, 1996). In this view, a pet's perceived helplessness and need for support from their owner may in turn support the owner by creating a sense of value.

#### *Social support of animals*

The companion animal-human bond appears to spring from a pre existing paradigm according to Garrity and Stallones (1998). The paradigm relates human social support to aspects of human well-being. It seemed a natural progression to study the existence, extent and nature of the benefits of animal contact for humans. In this perspective, animals are viewed as a non-human social support. Garrity and Stallones suggested that literature about animals in supportive roles uses more rudimentary conceptual and operational definitions of support than in the more advanced human support field. They suggested a better approach would involve objective and subjective measures of types of support represented by animal ownership or simple animal contact. Moreover effort should be aimed to identify types of support gained from animal contact and possible benefits these might offer humans.

Whilst the possible benefits of animal interaction is still being quantified there is already evidence of increased numbers of pet visitation programs such as The Delta Pet Society and organisations that promote the health benefits of companion animal ownership such as The Australian Companion Animal Council. These organisations have been created in response to the increased awareness of the benefits of pets over the past few decades and their popularity and growth have been fostered by the demands of the community.

Despite the popularity and growth of such organisations, there is still a lack of psychological studies exploring the psychological impact of pet ownership for older adults. This is echoed by Sable (1995) who claimed that the social work literature has given little attention to the psychological role of pets, particularly on the theoretical explanation of the dynamics of the human-animal bond.

#### *Companionship*

Further to recommendations to establish more specific definitions and explanations of animal support, Rook (1986) suggested that social support is theoretically distinct from companionship. The distinction between companionship and social support being that companionship does not offer extrinsic support, but provides intrinsic satisfactions such as shared pleasure in activities such as recreation, relaxation

and acts of spontaneity. Some physicians now recommend, "Pet prescriptions" to some patients who live alone and are in need of companionship. Moore (2002) quote's veterinarian Marty Becker as claiming, "We're just tapping into the power they (pets) possess in helping us heal emotionally, physically and mentally". A study by Purina (2000) cited companionship as the most frequent benefit of pet ownership for older adults. Collis and McNicholas (1989) suggested companionship might be more important in fostering positive mental health, whereas social support may be more important in buffering threats to mental health from stressors. For the purpose of this study the term companion animals is used, however this label is not intended to suggest the role of a pet is limited to that of a companion as opposed to the theoretically distinct role of social support.

Research by Depner and Ingersoll-Dayton (1988) suggested that older adults have less opportunity to provide support such as confiding and reassurance than younger people. For some time the gerontology literature has recognised the negative effect of extreme isolation, with particular concern for the observation that many elderly people spend a high proportion of their waking hours alone. Regardless of perceptions of support, a minimum level of companionship and social activity were found to be key elements in maintaining a sense of well-being (Thompson & Heller, 1990).

*Social support as a direct effect or buffer*

Garrity and Stallones (1998) reviewed 25 articles of benefits of companion animals for humans and found that 17 employed the direct effects model of social support. This model portrays social support as having an unmediated, direct impact on aspects of human well-being. The alternative model is referred to as the buffering model by Cohen and McKay (1984) which has a basis in stress and views social support as an intervention to protect the human from damage to well being when they are under siege from stressful life events. Only six of the 25 articles reviewed by Garrity and Stallones included a buffering perspective. Neither conceptual approach is deemed superior, however the inclusion of both models is suggested to enrich studies. Research of studies by Garrity and Stallones suggested that pets are capable of providing social support in both a direct and buffering capacity. An example of the direct effects of pet support can be found in the study by Straede and Gates (cited in Garrity & Stallones, 1998) who demonstrated that pet owners reported fewer symptoms of psychological ill health. In contrast, an example of the buffering effect of pet ownership was reported by



Siegel (1990) who found that participants with more stressful life events had less contact with their doctor if they were pet owners.

*The role of Social support and companionship*

Collis and McNicholas (1989) suggest a useful way to determine if pets, as opposed to specific support animals like guide dogs, provide buffering support or companionship is to look at stressful events. If pets were a source of buffering support then their benefits would become apparent only during times of stress when such support may relieve or act as a buffer against stress. However if pets were a source of companionship then enhanced well-being through pet ownership should be evident even when there was no experience of stressful events.

To conduct such a study would mean monitoring the types of experiences and perceptions that owners have of their pets. Empirical evidence of the buffering effect of pets is offered by Allen, Blascovich, Tomaka and Kelsey (1991) who conducted a complex experimental design where adult female owners of dogs worked on stressful mental arithmetic tasks in laboratory settings and at home. At home some participants were assigned to work on the tasks in the presence of their dog, some in the presence of their best female friend and some only with the experimenter present. Results showed that pet presence reduced the physiological consequences of stress and to the contrary the presence of human support in the guise of female friend increased the physiological strain. The authors explained these results as being due to the non-evaluative nature of pet support as opposed to human support. This indicates that the mere presence of a pet can provide physiological benefits that are based on the human's psychological perception of the pet.

It has been suggested that the presence of an animal can reduce stress responses as a direct effect of their support. Studies that focus on the role of an animal in ameliorating cardiovascular responses to stress such as Friedman (cited in Collis & McNicholas, 1998) suggest as much. However Collis and McNicholas (1998) suggest at least two other possibilities. First the animal might be acting as a social catalyst in smoothing the social encounter between experimenter and participant, thereby reducing the level of stress in the human to human interaction. If this were the case the effect would be an indirect causal effect, a buffering effect.

Second the interaction with the animal might be the factor, however Collis and McNicholas (1998) argued that this cannot be interpreted as social support, suggesting that emotional and esteem support are thought to depend on a relationship where mutual

understanding exists, rather than just supportive communication during the stressful experience at hand. Whilst studies have shown animals can moderate cardiovascular response to stress, what is still unsubstantiated is the how or why this occurs.

There is some evidence that supports the Collis and McNicholas (1998) argument that can be interpreted from the beneficial effect of robot pets in Japan. The robot dogs bark, whine and wag their tails but do not need feeding or cleaning. According to Kakuchi (2002) the Japanese culture encourages people not to display emotion to one another so the role of the robot dog becomes something special as people can easily express their emotions to a dog. Kakuchi suggested in one particular nursing home robot animals were used as therapy for the elderly to help them deal with loneliness and illness. Kakuchi further claimed that a two-month trial showed a marked decrease in stress levels among seniors who interacted with a robot pet. This suggests it may be the ability to express emotions towards a perceived companion that may result in moderating cardiovascular response.

These robotic devices, that are not animals, are being claimed to reduce stress levels. This suggests at least three possibilities, first the device is perceived as an animal in the role of offering support. Second it is the effect of the senior's exchange with the robot device that is providing that individual with a reduction in their stress level. Third the device provides a distraction from worrying about one's problems, resulting in lower stress levels. Further research is required to determine the underlying psychological process involved and its link to the physiological responses.

One of the positive benefits of pets as stated by Moore (2002) was their effect of raising the "good" chemicals associated with feelings of happiness and bonding. The chemicals were measured in blood tests of participants following 30-minute interactions with pets, regardless of whether those pets were theirs, unknown or robot dogs. Once again the inclusion of robot pets in the equation clouds the issue, suggesting the effects are less the result of the impact of the pet itself and more the result of the human's own internal processes and perceptions of the impact of the pet.

In summary the term social support denoted for humans is implied in animal research. Social support is considered useful in buffering against stress whereas companionship is more useful in fostering positive mental attitude. The effects of support are refined to be direct or buffering, with neither being superior. Empirical evidence of animals as companions appears to be lacking. Evidence of animals and robot pets as both direct and buffering supports exists however explanation as to how or

why interaction with animals, including robot pets, can moderate cardiovascular response to stress is lacking. However Keil (1998) has reported that when stress levels and loneliness increase, levels of pet bonding also increase.

### *Loneliness*

Whilst loneliness and ageing are not mutually exclusive, Donaldson (1996) suggests there is a relationship between ageing and loneliness. This may be due to the fact that the situational causes of loneliness most frequently referred to according to Killeen (1998) are those that involve loss, through disruption to relationships and friendships. Older adults are likely to experience higher levels of loss due to their position in the life cycle. The most extreme form of loss being bereavement, which can lead to profound loneliness (Killeen, 1988; Russell, Cutrona, De La Mora & Wallace, 1997). Loneliness can be defined as "an enduring condition of emotional state that arises when a person feels estranged from, is misunderstood or rejected by others, and/or lacks appropriate social partners for desired activity, particularly activities that provide a sense of social integration and opportunities for emotional intimacy" (Rook, 1990, p.953).

The development of theories of loneliness has been hindered by the fact that loneliness is often masked by other clinical syndromes according to Donaldson (1996) who suggested syndromes such as depression and anxiety mask loneliness, rather than it being recognised as a distinct problem. This view is supported by Russell, Cutrona, De La Mora & Wallace (1997). According to Donaldson four distinct theories of loneliness prevail: psychodynamic, existential, cognitive and interactionist.

### *Theories of loneliness*

The psychodynamic theory of loneliness is derived from the Freudian approach to loneliness where interpersonal, infant and childhood attachments and dilemmas are considered to provide a personality base which predicts future coping strategies. Donaldson (1996) suggests a deficiency of this approach is that it always views loneliness as being pathological and that it ignores the social world of the elderly person, the effect of ageing and the person's culture.

In contrast the existential theory of loneliness is supposedly "Christian" according to Tillich (cited in Donaldson, 1996), stemming from human's alone-ness whereby the pain of being alone could be considered the beauty of being alone, a confrontation or encounter with oneself. Donaldson (1996) suggests this theory does

not appear to differentiate in a useful way, the objective nature of being alone and the subjective feeling of being alone.

The cognitive theory of loneliness offers a more structured framework by recognising the contribution of social factors as well as the way in which a person responds to or "feels" about his or her loneliness according to Peplau and Perlman (cited in Donaldson, 1996). Donaldson (1996) suggests it is the way in which people feel about their loneliness that is the determining factor in their experience of loneliness and this is a state that can be manipulated according to the cognitive theory of loneliness. Moreover empirical evidence that the cognitive theory of loneliness may apply to elderly people has been provided by Anderson (cited in Donaldson, 1996). Anderson challenged the stereotypical image of loneliness in elderly people and found that accepting responsibility for loneliness correlated positively with life satisfaction and a perception of control over loneliness was associated with positive health attitudes and decreased loneliness. Weeks (cited in Donaldson, 1996) suggested that loneliness occurs when people evaluate their social relations against a standard and decide that they are deficient against this self imposed standard. The cognitive theory of loneliness has been the basis for several studies (Cacioppo et al., 2002; Hawkey, Burleson, Berntson & Cacioppo, 2003). Based on the cognitive theory of loneliness, lonely people were less likely to cope with daily activities and were more likely to feel anxious and threatened than non-lonely people according to research by Cacioppo et al. (2002).

The interactionist theory of loneliness is based on Bowlby's (1988) attachment theory and Donaldson (1996) emphasises that it consists of two elements namely: emotional loneliness due to a lack of an attachment figure, and social loneliness created by the lack of a social network. This theory has received criticism, specifically by Wenger (1993) who suggests that the types of loneliness described are not necessarily negative conditions.

Younger (cited in Killeen, 1998) suggested that loneliness is a point along a continuum between alienation from others and connectedness to others. Rokach (cited in Killeen, 1998) suggested that people can feel self alienation, a sense of detachment from themselves and alienation from their identity.

*Loneliness and pet bonding*

Studies conducted by Von Rossum (cited in Donaldson, 1996) to manipulate the social environment of elderly people in an attempt to alleviate loneliness have found that increasing visits alone has no effect, but that increasing stimulating activities and social interaction did alleviate loneliness. This suggests that pets may be able to moderate loneliness for elderly people because they can facilitate social interaction i.e., acting as a confidante and provide an avenue for increased activities such as exercise and play according to Katcher and Friedmann (cited in Brodie, Biley & Francis, 1999).

A descriptive study was conducted by Keil (1998) to explore the role of human-animal bonding in older adults, specifically the relationships among pet bonding, loneliness and stress were evaluated in 275 participants. Participants were recruited from three community programs for older adults. Participants were aged 60 or older or were the spouse of someone aged 60 or older. All participants were pet owners with 96% of the sample basing their responses about a relationship with a dog or cat and the remaining 4% responding about a bird, fish, horse or cow.

Pearson correlation's measures of pet bonding, stress and loneliness indicated that as loneliness and stress increased, pet bonding increased. The correlation between loneliness and pet bonding was higher for participants lacking human attachments. Keil suggested that this indicated animals could become supplementary attachment figures for older people.

*Alone, loneliness and Depression*

An empirical study by Steiner, Raube, Stuck, Aronow and Draper (1996) of community dwelling, mainly Caucasians aged 75 or older found no significant relationship between living alone and depression or living alone and a perceived worse quality of life. This suggests that living alone does not have a negative impact, moreover it may be the perception attached to living alone that determines its influence on well-being. The researchers had anticipated that living alone would be positively related to depression and speculate that the lack of this finding may be due to living alone representing greater independence which may outweigh potential feelings of isolation. This finding suggests that as a single factor, living alone does not impact negatively on quality of life or depression. Moreover, it is possibly living alone, in conjunction with other factors, i.e. lack of human contact, lack of social support that may reduce one's perception of quality of life.

A study by Garrad, Rolnick, Nitz, Luepke, Jackson, Fischer, Leibson, Bland and Walle (1998) found that approximately half the community based elderly people (65 or older) with self-reported indications of depression through the use of the Geriatric Depression Scale by Sheikh and Yesavage (cited in Steiner, Raube, Stuck, Aronow & Draper, 1996) had not been diagnosed clinically depressed by their health providers, suggesting a failure to recognise the possibility of depression amongst elderly people. Garrad, Rolnick, Nitz, Luepke et al recommended periodic screening for depression of all elderly patients in an attempt to reduce health care costs and improve quality of life for elderly patients who may be suffering from depression and are not receiving treatment.

Whilst studies have highlighted that self-reported measures of depression are high amongst older adults, there is a lack of evidence to suggest that companion animals have an ameliorating effect on this condition. Clinical depression is a complex condition that is usually treated with medication, cognitive therapy or a combination of both (Kail & Cavanagh, 1999). It appears that the mere presence of a pet is unable to alleviate this condition. This may suggest that the psychological impact of a pet is founded on a person's perception of the pet. When in a negative state of depression, people may have difficulty perceiving a pet as beneficial and may disengage from their pet.

### *Disengagement*

The basic premise of disengagement theory by Cumming and Henry (cited in Carstensen, 1992) suggests there is a mutual withdrawal between society and old people that represents a symbolic preparation for death. This contrasts with the basic premise of activity theorists that views older people as psychologically unchanged, but impacted by physical and social obstacles that are responsible for their declining levels of social interaction. The basic propositions of disengagement theory have not been supported by empirical evidence and contentions of emotional withdrawal remain unsubstantiated (Carstensen, 1992).

To the contrary, people invest much effort developing social networks, however the premise of socio-emotional selectivity theory suggests the rewards of socialising are different for adolescents and older people. For adolescents the emphasised rewards for social exchange were information gain and future contact whereas for older adults the rewards were the potential for affective gains through emotional support. This theory suggested that the reductions in social activity commonly affecting older adults are a

reflection of discriminating choice for emotionally supportive relationships over less meaningful relationships rather than disengagement or a lack of social opportunities. Interactions with more casual social contacts that provide fewer emotionally supportive rewards become less satisfying and less frequent as one ages (Carstensen, 1992). Whilst social engagement suggests that the maintenance of many social connections and a high level of participation in social activities prevents cognitive decline in older adults, older persons are unlikely to report multiple social connections compared to other age groups (Bassuk, Glass & Berkman, 1999). The social worlds of older people are characterised by a high density of contact with emotionally meaningful social partners. It is the emotional ties that are maintained and which become increasingly exclusive because other relationships are not present (Lang & Carstensen, 1994).

In summary this suggests that being alone, does not mean that someone is necessarily lonely. Loneliness doesn't always have negative consequences. It would appear that loneliness in elderly people poses an impact on the government health system that could be partially reduced through intervention. Loneliness is an emotional state that can be manipulated by increased stimulating activities and social interaction. Loneliness should be considered from the perspective of socio-emotional selectivity theory that suggests older adults choose less social activity over more meaningful and supportive relationships. From this perspective, companion animals can provide a basis for psychologically supportive relationships for older adults (Cartensen, 1992).

This literature review has addressed a number of pertinent issues relating to the psychological impact of companion animals for older adults. Specifically the constructs of attachment, social support and loneliness have been discussed, providing some insight as to how and why animals may provide a psychological impact for older adults.

Evidence of the effects of pet contact on human beings has been found on physical, social, behavioural and psychological levels according to Garrity and Stallones (1998). However Sable (1995) claims there is a lack of research or theoretical explanation of the dynamics of the human-animal bond, suggesting that further study in certain areas is warranted. According to Garrity and Stallones (1998) research progress in this area continues to be slow with few studies adopting quantitative methodology to explore the nature of the relationship between companion animals and humans.

This lack of quantitative research is expected, given this area of research is still in its infancy and quantitative research is likely to follow once a greater body of knowledge in this area has been developed. Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor and

Tindall, (2001) suggest qualitative research allows elaboration and systematisation of the significance of an identified phenomenon.

In psychological research it would appear that models of attachment theory and social support are still being endorsed, although these models were designed on studies of human to human interaction. There is a lack of specific research examining the animal-human interaction. Without evidence of the importance of companion animals in psychological well being it is unlikely that the topic will continue to receive growing interest in the area of research moving onto more quantitative studies. Most of the evidence to date is descriptive and anecdotal (Siegel, 1990). Well-designed empirical studies are limited and further exploration of this area of research is justified.

The purpose of this study is to explore the psychological impact of pet ownership for adults who live alone and are aged 65 or older. This age group will be referred to as older adults for the purpose of this study. Developmental psychologists often refer to different age groups and describe them in different ways. The age group of 60 to 80 is referred to as young-old adulthood by Kail and Cavanaugh (1999) and it denotes a time of the lifespan when people are likely to experience a variety of changes in their social support network such as retirement, loss of a spouse and/or friends, role changes and increased physical limitations. The age group of 80 years and beyond is referred to as old-old adulthood by Kail and Cavanaugh (1999) and it denotes a time of the lifespan when people are likely to experience a deterioration of health that may affect their ability to be independent.

The age span of 65 or older has been chosen specifically, in order to study the psychological impact of pet ownership for older adults challenged by any of the issues likely to be facing people of this rapidly growing age span. Adults who live alone have been specifically chosen to study as it is this environment where the impacts of pet ownership are likely to be most prominent.

The purpose of this research is to advance the current body of knowledge in this area by conducting an in depth qualitative study into the psychological impact of owning a pet for older adult participants who reside alone. Thus, this research will not only add to the existing literature it will provide new knowledge on these issues. By doing so, this research will generate useful information for improving the psychological well being of older adults and highlight the important psychological benefits of pet ownership for older adults.

The three questions this research will address are:



1. What are the experiences of pet ownership for older adults?
2. Do any of those experiences have a psychological impact for the pet owner?
3. If so, what are those psychological impacts?

## Method

### *Research Design*

Qualitative research is useful for studies involving complex themes such as social support as it enables the researcher to gather data on an individual's personal experiences of events. Garrity and Stallones (1998) suggest it would be wrong to conclude that experimental designs are more scientific than qualitative designs as carefully conducted and theoretically informed descriptive research can make important scientific contributions. Moreover poorly conceived and conducted quasi-experiments can be scientifically worthless.

A semi-structured interview format was used for the study as Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest it enables the researcher to probe topic areas in depth with each participant and respond to participant's individual needs and differences. Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor and Tindall (2001) suggested there are four main reasons for conducting interviews. First it allows for the subjective meanings the participants accord to the topic of the interview to emerge rather than eliciting responses from within a standard format for comparison with other individuals or groups. This supports the view that qualitative research allows divergence and variety, rather than convergence and replicability. Second, interviews allow exploration of issues that may be too complex to investigate through quantitative means. Third, the researcher must confront his or her own participation within the research and fourth the researcher must consider the power relations between the participant and the researcher in research.

A research interview sets up and is conducted within power relationships and we should consider the purpose of the interview for both the researcher and the participant. In consideration of this, the "new paradigm" interview approach discussed by Reason and Rowan (1981) was adopted. The ethos of this approach is to value what people say, treat it as meaningful and informative. The interview should be viewed as a collaborative enterprise that involves full participation of the participant but also views the interviewer as accountable to the demands of the participants.

Burgess-Limerick and Burgess-Limerick (1998) note that interviews are a way of gaining access to an individual's interpretation of their personal experiences. Semi-structured interviews are time consuming due to the method of collecting, processing and coding data. As such only a limited number of participants could be managed successfully. Semi-structured interviews are dependent on the skills and biases of the researcher with Miles and Huberman (1994) suggesting the researcher is essentially the

measurement device. As such an independent researcher also coded the data to provide inter-rater reliability. Thematic analysis as outlined by Aronson (1994) was utilised for analysing the data. Thematic analysis focuses on identifiable themes and patterns of living and/or behaviour according to Aronson, who claims that the coherence of ideas rests with the analyst who has rigorously studied how different ideas or components fit together in a meaningful way. The audit trail of the thematic analysis and independent coding provide the reliability of the study by offering a measure of consistency that can be followed. The process of triangulation provides validity of the study by taking the data and interpretations to the sources from which they were derived and seeking verification as to the plausibility of the results.

### *Participants*

This study involved nine participants who resided alone and owned a cat or a dog. The type of pet owned was limited to cats and dogs due to their more tactile qualities as opposed to such pets as fish and birds. The age range of participants was 65 to 89. There were two male and seven female participants.

The participants were recruited through an advertisement in the Swan Shire local newspaper, *The ECHO* (Appendix D), and word of mouth. Prior to the commencement of the study the participants were provided with an information sheet (Appendix B) about the study being undertaken and consent form (Appendix C) to sign if they chose to participate in the study.

### *Materials*

The materials used included:

1. An information sheet that outlined the research project topic and how it would be conducted. The information sheet also provided contact phone numbers of the researcher, supervisors and a person independent of the project for the reader's reference. (Appendix B)
2. A participant consent form that stated that the information sheet had been read and understood and that the participant had been able to ask questions and had voluntarily signed consent to participate in the study. (Appendix C)
3. A list of questions to guide the semi-structured interview; for example,  
What does owning a pet mean to you?  
How would your life be different if you didn't have a pet? (Appendix A)

4. An audio tape recorder and tape to record the interview.

#### *Procedure*

Following approval from the ethics committee to conduct this research, the researcher placed a free media advertisement through the local community newspaper, The ECHO (see Appendix D). Seven participants were obtained from this advertisement. Two further participants were recruited through word of mouth from the other participants. To meet the ethical requirements of the research participant's names were not noted on the Semi Structured Interview Schedule sheet (see Appendix A). All letters to participants were required to be on ECU letterhead paper and records relating to the research were required to be stored at the university in a locked cabinet to maintain confidentiality.

Participants were asked to phone the researcher if they were interested in participating in the research. During this initial conversation the researcher explained the procedure involved and provided the potential participant with a brief introduction to the study as explained on the information sheet (Appendix B). Following verbal consent, a date and time was arranged for the researcher to visit the participant where a copy of the information sheet was provided (Appendix B) followed by obtaining written consent (Appendix C).

The semi-structured interview commenced following written consent and took approximately 60 minutes to complete for each participant. The interview was guided by the developed questions (Appendix A) and aimed at exploring the impact of pet ownership for each participant.

#### *Analysis*

Following the completion of the interviewing process the researcher transcribed the interview for each participant prior to erasing the audiocassette recording. Upon completion of the transcription the researcher identified patterns of experience within the transcripts using thematic analysis as described by Aronson (1994). The researcher then aimed to identify all the data and develop themes that reflected the nature of the information. Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor and Tindall (2001) suggested that thematic analysis is a coherent way of organising or reading interview material in relation to specific research questions. Once themes were classified for all transcripts they were scanned for common and recurring sub-themes.

An independent co-analyst cross-checked the reduced data of summary statements against a list of themes and sub-themes to ensure against researcher bias and corrupting the data. Consultation with the co-analyst ensued and the themes were traversed to test the assumptions for duplication. Several categories were combined to reveal four final themes, each containing several sub-categories. The relevant participant statements were listed within these final themes and sub-categories.

Further authentication of the data was achieved using a process of triangulation i.e., converging, completing and crosschecking. A participant was randomly selected to member check the researcher's interpretation of their interview data. This was achieved by the participant reading a summarised version of their transcript and responding to questions related to the data (Begley, 1996).

Once the themes had been isolated they were related to the exploratory research being conducted. To build a valid argument for the selection of themes, related literature was reviewed to allow inferences to be made from the interviews.

### **Finding and Interpretations**

The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of pet ownership for older adults and in doing so, find out if those experiences have a psychological impact for the pet owner and if so, identify the psychological impacts?

Psychological impact in this cohort was explored using the participants' accounts of their experiences and perceptions of pet ownership. Four themes emerged that were related to the impact of pet ownership for the participants.

Table 1 contains the four major relational themes and sub themes identified from the analysis of the participants' responses: companionship, social support, affectionate bond and combat against loneliness.

Table 1

*Psychological Impact of Pet Ownership for Older Adults Residing Alone Relational Themes*

Main themes	Sub-categories
Companionship	Being a confidante Facilitating expression through touch Enabling communication exchange
Social Support	Sense of belongingness Positive social comparison Unconditional love, loyalty and acceptance Feeling of security Stress buffer
Affectionate bond	Expected role of the pet Substitute for a child Substitute for a partner
Combat against loneliness	Facilitator of social interaction A sense of purpose Socio-emotional selectivity Provide a role for the pet owner Fill a void

*Companionship*

Participants' perceptions of the companionship provided by their pet were contained within three context related sub themes. These sub themes reflected some of the participant's perceptions of the beneficial factors of owning companion animals, which included being a confidante, facilitating expression through touch and enabling communication exchange. In a study by Purina (2000) companionship was the most frequently cited benefit of older pet owners and was mentioned by 70% of pet owners aged 65 or over. With increasing likelihood of living without human companionship, social interaction of some sort becomes increasingly important for maintaining health and a sense of well-being according to Suthers-McCabe (2001). The companionship of

animals can provide the comfort and intimacy that might otherwise be absent for older adults residing alone. Examples of participant's view of pet companionship were:

"Oh it's just a fulfilling feeling to have a dog...No he's a living creature, beautiful little fellow and part of my life".

"It's one of the most enjoyable things of being alone, to have an animal that you like...you go out, the dog is always there to welcome you when you come back. They'll keep you company at night, they'll sit and listen to television with you...owning a pet means firstly you've got a friend. Ahh you've got a companionship and...I think most people, particularly people on their own make a companion of a pet and they treat them as part of the family".

Several participants' responses illustrated the reliance on their pet for companionship in the absence of contact with other human beings. In these instances a substantial portion of the participants' time was spent alone, except for the company of their pet. For example:

"I spend from five pm through to about nine or ten in the morning with Penny.

We are alone here because once it's dark no one wants to venture out of their homes these days...that means I am spending all of that time with Penny...".

"I'd say that on average I'd spend 75 percent of my time on my own with my dog. I've lived alone for 22 years".

There is evidence that suggests humans have a basic desire to form friendships and social attachments. With findings suggesting that friendships can form just simply by being exposed to each other frequently. People need frequent, pleasant or positive interactions with the same individuals and those interactions need to occur in a framework of long-term, stable, concern and caring with people who can satisfy both components of this need being the most satisfied (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Pets offer opportunity for long term, frequent interaction in the absence of other people. Lang and Cartensen (1994) suggested the social world of older adults is characterised by a high density of contact with emotionally meaningful social partners with these emotional ties becoming increasingly exclusive due to the absence of other relationships.

#### *Being a confidante*

A confidante can be defined as one to whom secrets or private matters are disclosed (Delbridge, Bernard, Blair, Peters & Butler, 1995). The increased likelihood of lost companionships as one ages results in a decrease in available confidantes,

robbing the individual of opportunities to both receive and provide emotional support. A measure of emotional support includes confiding and talking over upsetting matters (Depner & Ingersoll-Dayton, 1988; Thompson & Heller, 1990). Several participants' suggested that their pet was a companion who could be relied on as a confidante. One participants' view suggested:

"...someone I can talk to and he doesn't tell a soul, you don't have what you say repeated. Even with close friends you have to be very careful what you say sometimes but with Billy I know I can tell him anything and he just listens and he doesn't judge me and he can keep secrets".

This perception supports research analysis of recently bereaved older adults who had minimal confidante support. Results suggested that both pet ownership and strong pet attachment were associated with lessened depression according to Garrity, Stallones, Marx and Johnson (1990). These results were supported by Baumeister and Leary (1995) who suggested that older adults that have a confidante maintain higher morale at times of stress, such as spousal death, than older adults who lack confidantes. Francis (cited in Brodie & Biley, 1999) reported that domestic animals offer an ever present ear in a world of increasing alienation and fragmentation. Pets offer non-judgemental acceptance according to Brodie and Biley (1999) providing an outlet for expression that might not be displayed in the presence of other human beings. For example:

"If you want to swear, well you can, you just swear at them".

*Facilitating expression through touch*

For older adults who reside alone, expression through physical touch is generally limited. The availability and affectionate nature of most pets provides immediate opportunity for physical interaction. Participants noted:

"...dog's definitely always respond to your affection".

"When I'm out in the garden Billy cavorts around and I love that and when they push against you that's a pussy cat kiss...I just love the feel of his little body...he's used to being held like that and I give him cuddles. It's the warmth and yeah he gives it back to me, it would just be cold without Billy..."

Another participant expressed the time shared with their pet as providing a multitude of opportunities for physical expression of their affection for their pet stating:

"I give him cuddles, take him for walks, give him baths".

Some of the health promoting benefits of pets discussed by Katcher and Friedman (cited in Brodie & Biley, 1999) suggested that pets are a comfort to touch and



pleasurable to watch, providing pleasurable activity, play and laughter. Research by Katcher (cited in Brodie & Biley, 1999) found statistically significant decreased blood pressure of participants who interacted, talked and petted their dog when compared to individuals who read aloud or a resting control group.

*Enabling communication exchange*

The majority of participants made reference to communicating with their pet. For several participants there seemed to be a need just to have someone to talk to. Participants stated:

"We have conversations although I'm not quite sure he understands everything I say". "It's a good idea having a cat cause it's something to talk to. People couldn't say you were talking to yourself".

"This is an absurd statement but I'll get my drink of water to take to bed and I'll say to him are you coming to bed with me now and he just carries on..."

Social rituals such as farewells and greetings serve as an assurance of continuing relationships according to Baumeister and Leary (1995) who suggested that these rituals maintain belongingness. Other participants expressed a perception of mutual exchange and understanding from communications with their pets with participants suggesting:

"I frequently talk to my pet and I really think she knows everything I say"

"We're all stupid and talk to the damned things and you just get that look ah but ah you know you're getting reward from them from the way they respond to you".

Talking to a pet was noted as a companionship function by Siegel (1990) who found that dog owners reported more time talking to their pet than owners of other types of pets. Participants also appeared to create their own interpretation of their pet's communication with many "quoting" their pets. Participants offered the following examples:

"...I was on the telephone he'd brush past my leg as if to say get off there, I want your attention".

"To meet me and say where have you been and you've been so long...those big eyes look at you and say oh gees you've left me again I hate stopping home on my own"

Across all relationship types, including acquaintanceships and close friendships there is a tendency for people to perceive a view of themselves in the eyes of others that is akin to the view they hold of themselves (Murray, Griffin, Rose & Bellavia, 2003).

Thus these inferred "thoughts" of the pets are most likely a mirror of the thoughts the pet owners would have themselves if they imagine themselves in the position of the pet.

### *Social support*

Social support is characterised as being extrinsic, and providing a feeling of being cared for, loved, valued and belonging to a reciprocal network (Cobb, 1995). Participants' responses were categorised into five related sub-categories of social support, labelled: sense of belongingness, positive social comparison, unconditional love, loyalty and acceptance, feelings of security and a stress buffer. One participant expressed:

"After a few weeks, you know, little kitten antics, he was the best therapist I could have had. I recommend animals for therapy. You can reach out for them, no, he's been my biggest support".

Research by Pierce, Sarason and Sarason (1991) found that perceptions of available support from specific relationships could be used to independently predict loneliness, suggesting that a perception of support is a buffer against loneliness.

### *Sense of belongingness*

A sense of being accepted, valued and belonging to a reciprocal relationship are important elements of social support as one ages according to Depner and Ingersoll-Dayton (1988). Suthers-McCabe (2001) suggested that self-worth in older adults can be enhanced or restored by the feeling that the pets that they care for, love them in response. Cookman (1996) noted that older adults are particularly vulnerable to declines in competences and increases in environmental stressors such as the loss of a spouse and that attachments are particularly important for adaptive functioning. For example, participants expressed a sense of being valued stating:

"It makes me feel wanted when he's excited to see me when I come home, not that I feel unwanted".

"...we do everything together...she just regards me as hers and that's it you know. I'm the main thing in her life...dogs depend on you. Everything, you know, for emotional comfort as well as everything else I suppose".

Much of what human beings do is done in the service of creating a feeling of belonging. Moreover people seek to have their achievements validated and valued by others over solitary achievements, suggesting an interpersonal component to the need for achievement, with the need for approval being a prerequisite for forming social

bonds (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). This suggests that the presence and perception of a pet validating and valuing their owner helps to fulfil a basic need for belongingness.

*Positive social comparison*

In the gerontology field social comparison processes have been considered possible contributors to successful aging (Baltes & Baltes, 1990). In a sample of elderly women experiencing community relocation, how the women felt they compared with others and were viewed by others, significantly predicted multiple aspects of their mental health. Some participants' comments suggested a comparison to others in their community with a sense that their pet provided them with a perceived benefit over those without pets. For example:

"...she does get a lot of attention around here amongst the people. See a lot of them haven't got pets at all, because they shifted in here and they weren't allowed to have pets and they've never pushed it any further you see"

"...well the woman in the front unit, she's older than I am; she hasn't anything at all. She goes out every day and that's why...because she's got nothing to hold her there".

*Unconditional love, loyalty and acceptance*

Loyalty can be defined as a feeling or attitude of devoted attachment and affection (Delbridge, Bernard, Blair, Peters & Butler, 1995). Murray, Griffin, Rose and Bellavia (2003) suggested humans have a need to find signs of continuing acceptance and positive regard directed at them from others. Several participants expressed perceived feelings of loyalty and acceptance demonstrated towards them by their pet. For example:

"Dogs exhibit tremendous loyalty...these two have been very loyal to me...you always knew I was their master...and both of them showed be a lot of affection in their own ways and were loyal

"he's another living creature within these walls and a very loving one".

Another participant expressed their experience of becoming aware of the value of pet loyalty, stating:

"When I was a little girl...we had a cat...called Dumpy...when Dumpy died, I couldn't understand why everyone was upset until I had faithful pets of my own, but they were my own...I think a pet is more faithful and more loyal and more loveable (than a male companion)...quite often a pet is more valuable than a human being because in many cases they're more faithful".

"...it means love, it's unconditional love as everyone says..."

These views are supported by Friedmann (cited in Jorgensen, 1997) who suggested that relationships between humans can be charged with ambivalence and negative emotions with love and attention being earned only with difficulty and sacrifice, if it is available at all. However the comfort of pets can be scheduled on demand, without bargaining and in any quantity. Self report data of female dog owners collected by Allen, Blascovich, Tomaka and Kelsey (1991) stated their relationships with their dog was different and special from other relationships because dogs never withhold their love, they never look for new owners and they never get angry and abandon their owners. Several divorced participants of their study claimed that husbands come and go, children grow up and leave home but a dog is forever. This supports the participant's responses of this study who expressed feeling unconditional love and loyalty from their pet.

#### *Feeling of security*

Feelings of physical security through pet ownership were limited to dog ownership. The majority of dog owners made some statement regarding the benefit of pet ownership providing a feeling of security. This supports the results of Siegel (1990) who found that dogs were considered more beneficial pets due to the feelings of security that they offered their owners. In most cases security was physically tangible by the pet's behaviour and the security offered by the pet was mainly against threat of external intruders. For example:

"In many cases having a dog as a pet gives you security and they'll usually let you know when there's somebody around or the doorbell rings".

"Cause he's a really good protector...when we were up at Centrepont and someone came up behind me and put his hand on my shoulder and he (the dog) started going mad and he practically leapt out of my hands at him...someone's car got broken into so I was able to tell police what time the dog had been barking you see so he's good security to have around

"She doesn't like strange men...so I'm not really upset about that. Living on my own I'm quite happy if she barks at any time a man comes around".

Serpell (cited in Jorgenson, 1997) found that dog owners had improved self esteem and were less afraid of being victims of crime. One participant suggested their pet offered a feeling of security, not against an external threat, but as a source of support and aid in the absence of human support during a time of personal danger, stating:

"He saved my life. Last year I had a stroke...I felt funny and that's the last thing I remember...10'o'clock the next morning...the dog barked at him but he was used to that. But he said the dog sounded frantic...like the dog was literally throwing himself against the door and the man knew something was wrong...when he came in I was lying on the floor in the bathroom...I'd been there all night".

For this participant dog ownership offered a source of aid during a time of incapacity that has fostered a sense of security for the participant, that the dog will be able to provide assistance during times of danger or distress. There is much evidence of the benefits of pet facilitated therapy and assistance dogs in providing independence for people with impairments (Allen & Blascovich, 1996; Brodie & Biley, 1999; Guay, 2001; Jorgenson, 1997; Sachs-Ericsson, Hansen & Fitzgerald, 2002).

#### *Stress buffer*

There is evidence in support of the direct and buffering effects of social support and in particular the impact that pets offer as a buffer against stressful events (Allen, Blascovich, Tomaka & Kelsey, 1991; Cohen & McKay, 1984; Collis & McNicholas, 1998; Garrity & Stallones, 1998; Kakuchi, 2002; Suthers-McCabe, 2001). One participant who purchased their pet one week after the death of their husband acknowledged the buffering impact of their pet, stating:

"No, life would have been a lot harder without Billy, I would have made it through without him, but he was a big help, he was a softener, someone to come home to, someone to care for, to love...no, he's been my therapist, I'd say that and I was offered, silver chain offered me bereavement counselling and I thought no, I've got to do this myself".

Another participant noted the comfort offered by their pet's presence during a time of personal distress, stating:

"I had a stroke...I can remember every now and then I'd sort of come to and I could feel him licking me and he stayed with me the whole time I'm sure of that, I could feel him".

Results by Siegel (1990) suggested that owning a dog provides a stress buffer. Participants in this study have suggested that cats also provided a stress buffer, however to date there has been no empirical study of the stress buffering effect of pet cats.

*Affectionate bond*

Gerontologists have proposed that peoples' psychological and social needs remain unchanged as they age. This is particularly difficult for older adults who have expressed that the richness of long-term friendships are difficult to replace because of their multiple losses and changes in areas such as their mobility, senses and mental health. In such instances animals can become supplementary attachment figures for older people (Keil, 1998).

The participants' responses indicated a number of factors that contributed to their overall sense of affectionate bonds with their pet. These sub categories have been categorised as: expected role of the pet, substitute for a child and substitute for a partner. The role of attachment changes from infancy to adulthood according to Margolies (1999), with adult attachments and bonds more likely to be reciprocal in nature. The formation of an affectionate bond was evident in the comments of several participants:

"I depend on him, he depends on me, it's mutual".

"...somebody that you know is there to care for you but you're also there to care for them...".

Bowlby (1988) suggested a need to form and maintain relationships, regarding an adult's need for attachment to be an effort to recapture the intimate contact the individual had with their mother when they were a child. Several participants' comments expressed a critical level of importance of their bond with their pet:

"I wouldn't be without him at all. I dread to think he'll go before me. I'm hoping it will be me that goes first".

"I think losing him would be the only thing that would make me think that I should move from this place".

"Some nights in the summer time he hasn't come in at night and I've been quite upset, worried that something's happened to him".

Several studies have claimed that dogs provide greater opportunity for attachment formations than cats or other types of animals (Albert & Bulcroft, 2002; Siegel, 1990). This view was supported by the results of this study with most references to affectionate bonds being limited to dog owners. One participant stated:

"Dogs bond with you much more than cats do I'm quite convinced".

Keil (1998) described attachment to animals as an innovative resource to help disadvantaged older people remain in reciprocal relationships, promote activity and maintain quality of life and is a strategy that warrants further exploration. However

Tucker, Friedman, Tsai and Martin (1995) remind us that the mere presence of a pet has little effect on psychological well-being, it is only when one has attached to a pet that significant beneficial effects on psychological well-being occur.

*The expected role of the pet*

Pets may serve a surrogacy function for people who may be without mates, friends or children according to Wells and Perrine (2001). Older people who stay active and find substitutes for their work and replacements for lost friendship were found to be most satisfied with life with the emphasis being on the quality of the relationships they held rather than the quantity (Keil, 1998). Pets are usually chosen for their innate capacity to display and respond to attachment according to Rynearson (cited in Cookman, 1996). This view was supported by Suthers-McCabe (2001) who suggested companion animals can mitigate the effects of loss and ease transitions that may be stressful. Evidence that pets fulfilled a role was found in the statements of several participants. There was particular insight by several participants who expressed a change in the role of their pets across their life span. One participant observed:

"I know that they mean more to me now. I know when we were farming; farmers don't worry too much about cats and dogs. They're just like part of the machinery...Pets are companions now...she's company...it gives me companionship and independence".

This supports the comments of Brodie and Biley (1999) suggesting that pets can perform a number of different roles for humans. Another participant echoed this perception of their pet being in a different role to other dogs:

"On the farm they were working dogs and if a dog has to be shot, because they'd been injured or something like that but it wasn't like a housedog, because they were part of the farm. They weren't really like a part of the family; they were part of the working part of the family".

These statements and the supporting literature suggest that companion animals are able to fulfil a role, such as that of companion, when the need arises. These participants suggested that there was a change in the emotional attachment assigned to specific animals in order to fulfil a need for companionship.

*Substitute for a child*

Pet ownership offers the opportunity for split identification in the same way as parenting a child by being both a source and object of nurturance. There are several ways that pets can function symbolically as children for their owners. For example

helplessness of the pet encourages the kind of love that is felt for a child, the non verbal nature of the relationship and the dependence of a pet remains their entire life, offering a perpetual childlike quality (Margolies, 1999). Participants expressed the likeness between child rearing and pet ownership in several instances:

"A dog's got to be fed, it's got to be kept clean and beddings got to be cleaned you know and it's just like looking after a young child without the worries really you know".

"There's good and bad in having pets, I mean, it's the same as having a child really, in that concept. I love my son and its part of bringing up a baby that you're going to have good times and bad times. You just hope that the bad times aren't all that often and that you can control them".

These participants suggested that some of the patterns and activities of caring for their pet were the same as those they had used in caring for their children. For older adults, restructuring life by adding new activities and patterns that are consistent with previous activities has been associated with healthy aging (Goldberg, 2002). Stewart, Thrush, Paulus, and Hafner (cited in Cookman, 1996) suggested that older adults experiencing the empty nest syndrome have unmet attachment needs that can be directed toward a receptive pet as a source of caring. Moreover pets permit the elaboration of the activities of nurturing beyond child rearing which can have favourable consequences Katcher and Beck (cited in Cookman, 1996).

#### *Substitute for a partner*

Loss is a common occurrence for older adults with 26% of participants experiencing the death of someone close to them within the last 6 months in a study of older adults by Siegel (1990) who suggested that life events may arouse a need for alternative companionship. Pet ownership offers a unique resolution to the heightened sensitivity of loss and the yearning for reconnection. Forming a primary attachment relationship with a pet offers the possibility of a more secure relationship than might be experienced with an adult peer (Margolies, 1999). Pets may serve a surrogate function for people without partners according to Wells and Perine (2001). One participant expressed the attainment of their pet in relation to the loss of their spouse, claiming:

"I got Billy a week after my husband died...so I got Billy and I bought him home and he made me laugh...it was one of my dearest wishes that we'd go into old age together but it never happened so I'm left here with Billy".



Other participants expressed the importance of their pet since the loss of their partner stating:

"I've never been without a pet...it's a very important part of my life. Particularly since my husband died".

Another participant expressed a much more obvious choice in pet ownership over the companionship of a partner by expressing:

"Much better than a man, much more faithful and certainly much cleaner. A lot less demanding than a man...I'm seventy four years old, some of my friends prefer a male companion to a pet but I think that a pet is more faithful and more loyal and more loveable".

Another participant suggested a similarity in the level of importance of the loss of their partner and the loss of their pet by suggesting:

"...it would be a huge gap in my life if I didn't have one. It's just like losing my husband, that left a huge gap. It's the same sort of situation but not quite as emotional".

Specific relationships can contribute to personal adjustment according to Pierce, Sarason and Sarason (1991). People appear to recover best when a social bond is broken if they are able to form a new one. Whilst particular, special relationships such as a marital bond are not easily replaced, evidence suggests that humans conform to motivational patterns of satiation and substitution. People only need a few close relationships. Forming additional bonds beyond a few has less and less impact on health and happiness, suggesting a critical reliance on our most close relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). This suggests that additional bonds are only likely to be instigated in the event of a loss of an existing bond.

#### *Combat against loneliness and being alone*

Loneliness has been identified by some researchers as a particular problem for older adults (Donaldson, 1996; Killeen, 1998). Loneliness is considered an innate part of the human psyche that cannot be solved, only alleviated. It can leave people feeling useless and without purpose and can direct people to finding other things to fill their life. The most frequently cited reasons for loneliness are disruptions to relationships and friendships with other people (Killeen, 1998). Four sub-themes relating to the main theme of combat against loneliness and being alone were identified. These sub-themes are: facilitation of social interaction, sense of purpose, socio-emotional selectivity, providing a role for the pet owner and filling a void. Several participants made

statements that suggested their pet ownership provided protection against loneliness, for example:

"I have never been lonely and I'm not even lonely now because here of a night I've got my dog and she never lets me be lonely...then hearing the doggy door go flip flap...and I know I've got someone living with me. Yes it's just knowing that there's somebody else around".

Another participant's comment suggested their pet provided more than just a combat against loneliness but also offered protection from disengagement.

Disengagement theory suggests that older adults interact less as they age, that they become more individualised and embraces these changes, disengaging more and more from roles and relationships (Bee, 1996). The participant suggested:

"Without having another living creature around me I think I'd very quickly retire into myself".

Prolonged loneliness can result in poor self image and in older adults it can create an inability to cope with losses that occur in later life, an inability to concentrate and lower levels of activities which culminate in a driving restlessness and dissatisfaction with life (Donaldson, 1996).

#### *Facilitator of social interaction*

Two researchers (Moore, 2002; Suthers-McCabe, 2001) acknowledged that pets can be a social lubricant just by their mere presence, offering an entry point into conversation, attracting people to you and helping you to engage in the present rather than dwelling on past mistakes and misfortunes. Several participants noted the social interaction that was facilitated through their pet ownership. Participants stated:

"You find you're drawn to people who have got animals themselves so of course you see them more because you've got more in common".

"They're quite a gateway, to meeting other people. When I walk Bassie, we encounter other people with dogs and they usually enter into a conversation".

"There's one person that makes a fuss of him so we stop and have a little talk for five or ten minutes...Talk about attention he got, kids were saying "can I stroke your doggie" yes you can I'd say, he won't bite".

These findings support those of Edney (cited in Jorgenson, 1997) who found that compared to people without dogs, those with dogs received more social greetings and acknowledgements, smiled more and were more likely to engage in conversations, supporting the view that some pets can facilitate social interaction. A study by

Lockwood (cited in Brodie & Biley, 1999) found that pictures of people that included animals were perceived as friendlier and less threatening than pictures that did not include an animal. The conclusion being that animals promote positive images and facilitate interaction.

#### *Sense of purpose*

A purpose can be defined as something that a person sets the mind to intentionally, an aim to which direction is aimed or intended (Delbridge, Bernard, Blair, Peters & Butler, 1995). The routines associated with caring for pets help to restore order to lives that are disrupted by loss and change as the pet becomes an external focus that places demands on the owner but also offers rewards of companionship and affection (Suthers-McCabe, 2001). Participants expressed a sense of purpose derived from pet ownership for example:

"Oh it keeps me, it's another occupation. It makes me go for walks; well you have to go for walks. Well she has to have walks sometimes as small as she is...I generally have to care for her so it's another job that keeps me occupied and keeps me going. That's why I think having a pet is so important. Without a pet you haven't got the automation to get up and do things and people without pets have a tendency to sit in front of the TV and just sit there and do nothing else or sit and read and do nothing else".

"They definitely add meaning to your life and they give you a purpose because they've got to be looked after, well they've got to be fed".

"Well they give you a responsibility...even when I was sick just recently I knew I had to look after Billy".

"A dog's got to be fed, it's got to be kept clean and bedding's got to be cleaned you know...".

"she's seeking gratification of having somebody around that responds to her affection".

#### *Socio-emotional selectivity*

Several participants expressed the option for greater social interaction if they chose, however in line with socio-emotional selectivity (Cartensen, 1992); their pet seemed to provide them with sufficient levels of social activity with evidence of a discriminating choice not to seek further social opportunities. For example:

"Today I'll probably spend all day by myself, if I wanted I could go and visit other people...I could go down to another neighbour...I don't like to stay

long...I'm quite happy to sit and read...no I don't want a lot...I don't mind my own company".

Cartensen (1992) suggested that social interaction requires energy and places people in situations where they are at risk of receiving negative emotions and threats to their self concept. People make discriminating choices in their social partners to optimise the gains from social contact. Pet contact provided participants with an already proven, safe opportunity for positive social interaction with minimal risk to their self concept.

*Provide a role for the pet owner*

A role can be defined as a function or position an expected social behaviour of an individual (Delbridge, Bernard, Blair, Peters & Butler, 1995). Pet ownership appeared to provide some participants with a role that balanced the demands and individual needs of the pet, within a framework of consideration for the wider community, fulfilling a social obligation that has been self imposed. One participant said:

"I had a lot of trouble with her barking when I was away...neighbours told me she barked...the only way I could find out was to leave a tape recorder...she never stopped for an hour...I got pet behaviouralists...it cost me money, but it was worth it".

Changing social structures and increasing useful social roles for older adults increases the likelihood of more normal social engagement. It enables older adults to maintain a view of themselves as an active contributor to their society and increases the likelihood of them appearing as more interesting companions to family and friends. Their conversations can extend beyond their past glories and body aches to varied discussions about their current happenings (Thompson & Heller, 1990). This is supported by a participant who stated:

"I have to keep him in at night...cause he's a warrior...he had another fight so it's important to me that he's in at night so I cut out the dried food about mid day so I can make sure he comes in at night...sometimes he comes in about four o'clock and I say you're grounded..."

Maintaining meaningful roles protects older adults from perceiving themselves as incompetent and ensures psychological adaptation according to Kuypers and Bengston (cited in Heidrich & Ryff, 1993). Participants suggested:

"it gives me...independence".

"...the only time I don't appreciate him needing me is during a thunderstorm. He's absolutely terrified and I can't pacify him. We do our best don't we Bass?"

At a stage of life where many social roles such as that of employee/employer, partner, friend and parent are removed or diminished the opportunity to fulfil a role of primary caretaker for a pet can provide opportunity for continuing life and work patterns into retirement which has been associated with greater life satisfaction (Goldberg, 2002).

#### *Fill a void*

The dependence on pets was often expressed as filling a void of some sort that was undefinable. However several participants expressed a belief that their lives would have an element of emptiness or coldness in the absence of their pet. Suggesting their pet offered a sense of fulfilment that could not be quantified. This can be illustrated by:

"It would be a huge gap in my life if I didn't have one".

"People that don't have pets are definitely missing something in their lives".

"... I believe an animal, a pet, sort of fills a vacuum that probably isn't there anyway but it does sort of fill a vacuum in your life and in your home...I certainly missed Tangles when he died...certainly um that vacuum that he left, I was very fond of him...I just felt it had to be filled and as I said ah virtually all my life where it was ever possible I've always had a pet".

"Well I feel as though I've got to have something. You've got to, if you're not a mixer, you don't mix with people, you definitely need something..."

"without him I'd be completely lost". Yet another said: "...it would be cold, cold, that's the way I feel about it...it's the warmth...it would just be cold..."

The above statements suggest several possibilities. First, the vacuum or coldness that participants referred to may be describing their interpretation of loneliness. Second, Rokach (cited in Killeen, 1998) suggests self alienation can be described as a feeling of inner void. This concept is characterised by a detachment from oneself and an alienation from one's core and identity. It may be that these participants prefer the distraction of a pet to remove focus from their sense of inner void.

#### **Conclusions**

This qualitative study aimed to explore the psychological impact of pets for elderly residents who reside alone. The findings of this study contribute to a valued understanding of older adult's perceptions of the impact of their pets. The overall

purpose of this research was to examine possible mechanisms by which pet ownership is reported to maintain or improve psychological well-being despite the difficulties associated with aging.

Results of this study suggest that for some older adults, pet ownership is a positive and rewarding experience. Pets impact the psychological well being of their owners in four main areas including: providing companionship and a combat against loneliness as well as being a source of social support and facilitating the development of an affectionate bond between pet and owner.

Findings of this study suggest that pets can provide a buffer against loneliness through increased opportunity for social interaction and creating a sense of purpose and responsibility for their owners. This supports the findings of Brodie and Biley (1999) that animals appear to improve social interactions and promote social harmony. Moreover interactions with animals appear to result in decreased loneliness and improved morale.

Results suggested that participants experienced a sense of value and belonging, and several participants compared themselves favourably against peers without pets. The nature of the pet is important, dogs in particular provided their owners with a feeling of security. Moreover dogs provided more opportunity for social interaction due to the exercise that can be part of a regime for dog owners as opposed to cat owners. Pets provided their owners with feelings of loyalty, unconditional love and provided a buffer against stress.

In many instances pet ownership created not only a responsibility but also a role for the pet owner. These roles appeared to enhance feelings of value and purpose for some participants. This supports the findings of Heidrich and Ryff (1993) who found that elderly women who had meaningful and valuable roles and reference groups and normative behaviours had multiple benefits of psychological well being in terms of decreased psychological distress, positive relationships, autonomy and an increased perception of life satisfaction, emotional support, balance and personal growth.

All participants in this study claimed a long history of pet ownership. Participants had discovered the benefits of companion animals earlier in life, however some participants' acknowledged that the role of their pet had become one of greater support and companionship at this time of their life. However the benefits of pets comes not merely from pet ownership, but appears to offer greatest rewards to pet owners once an affectionate bond has been formed with the pet. For the pet owners

involved in this study, the decision to own a pet appeared to stem from a belief that pet ownership provided them with benefits. This supports findings of Tucker, Friedman, Tsai and Martin (1995) who suggested that the positive relationship between people who chose pet contact actually being healthier than those who did not choose pet contact was due to the human-pet interaction itself and not the results of healthier humans choosing pet contact.

The value of pets has been stressed by Rowan and Beck (cited in Jorgenson, 1997) who claim it was proposed in the final presentation of the National Institute of Health technology assessment workshops that all future studies of human health should consider the absence or presence of a pet in the home and the nature of the relationship with the pet. Moreover they recommended no future study of human health should be considered comprehensive if it doesn't include the animals with which they share their lives. This claim acknowledges the impact companion animals can have on those who form affectionate bonds with them.

Notwithstanding the limitations, this study contributes to an understanding of the psychological impact of pet ownership for older adults who reside alone. Utilising a qualitative research methodology, it has demonstrated that some older adults have the capacity to explain the value and importance of owning companion animals, as well as the impact on their life if they did not own a pet. This research has contributed a comprehensive framework of the psychological impacts of pet ownership for older adults. This information may assist future research that aims to address and combat the psychological well being of older adults.

Whilst this study yielded valuable information a number of limitations were noted. The method of recruitment was non-random, producing a sample of convenience. All participants responded to a newspaper advertisement requesting volunteers to participate in a study about the benefits of pet ownership. Participants were therefore restricted to pet owners who perceive a benefit of pet ownership.

Although it was desirable to have five male and five female participants for comparison purposes, it proved difficult to recruit male participants aged 65 – 80 years who live alone and own a cat or a dog. The study is therefore biased towards a feminine perspective of the psychological impact of pet ownership. Sample size was limited due to the qualitative nature of the study. Future studies should aim to address these limitations, for example a larger qualitative study may address the small number of male participants.

Research in the area of companion animals is still relying on human to human relationship constructs to interpret human to animals' relationships. Future research should be aimed at defining the constructs of human to animal relationships. Quantitative studies may be limited because there is no natural control group that can be utilised and creating a control group has ethical repercussions.

Future research should involve a quantitative study comparing the satisfaction of social support networks, affectionate bonds and the levels of companionship and loneliness of older adults who live alone and own pets versus those who live alone and do not own pets. Such research will facilitate further exploration of the benefits of companion animals.

By collecting a range of demographic information, quantitative studies may reveal that companion animals might offer greatest psychological benefits to older adults who fit a particular category, i.e. those who have been used to living with others. The inclusion of a personality test of participants may identify a correlation between particular personality types and beneficial effects of pet ownership, suggesting that a particular type of personality predisposes some people to dependence or reliance on a companion animal. Ultimately this is an area that warrants further exploration.



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## Appendix A

**Semi-structured Interview Schedule**

**Research Project:** Psychological impact of companion animals for the elderly who reside alone.

**Demographic Information** (this information will not be tape recorded)

**Date of interview:** .....

**Time of interview:** .....

**Interviewer:** .....

**Participant Details**

**Gender:** .....

**Date of Birth:** .....

**Marital Status:** .....

**Address:** .....

**Number of Pets:** .....

**Type of Pets:** .....

**Number of children:** .....

**Number of visitors per week:** .....

**Number of outings per week** .....

**Questions** (this information will be tape recorded)

1. Can you please tell me how long you have lived on your own and how long have you owned your pet?
2. Can you tell me about your experience in owning a pet?
3. What does owning a pet mean to you?
4. Finally, how would your life be different if you didn't have a pet?

Appendix B

**Information Sheet**

To the volunteer participant,

My name is Tess Reed and I am a fourth year Psychology student from Edith Cowan University. I am conducting a research project to investigate the benefits of pet ownership for people aged over 65 and who live alone. This study has been approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Community Services, Education and Social Science at Edith Cowan University.

Participation in the study is voluntary and you are free to withdraw, without prejudice at any time. A consent form will be available if you are willing to participate in this research project. Upon contacting me I will arrange a time to meet you at a suitable place and time. All information provided is strictly confidential and no identifying names will be used. The study involves your response to a series of interview questions, which should take approximately 60 minutes to complete. This interview will be tape recorded and used to complete a written report of the study. The tape recording will be destroyed once the transcript has been completed.

A copy of the final report will be made available to you on request. My contact numbers are (08) 9273 5302 during office hours and (08) 6278 1701 after office hours. Please contact me if you require any further information about this study, or issues about your involvement as a participant in this study. If you would like to obtain additional information regarding this study you can contact my supervisors Dr Elizabeth Kaczmarek on 6304 5193 or Dr Lynne Cohen on 6304 5575. If you prefer to speak to someone independent of this study, you can contact Professor Alison Garton on 6304 5110. Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet, which should be retained for your records.

Kind regards

Tess Reed

Appendix C

Consent Forms

Consent Form for Participant

I .....agree that I have

- Read the information sheet provided.
- I have been given an opportunity to ask questions.
- I understand the information, and that the interviews will be taped.
- I voluntarily sign the consent form to state that I wish to participate in this study.
- I allow the results of this study to be published in a report, as long as no names or identifying features are revealed.

Signature of participant

.....

Signature of researcher

.....

Date

.....



Appendix D

**Newspaper Advertisement**

**Pet owners Wanted**

**Are you aged over 65 and own a cat or a dog?**

A psychology student from Edith Cowan University is appealing to pet owners who meet the above criteria to participate in a research study to find out the benefits of pet ownership. The study would involve an informal interview that would take approximately 60 minutes. If you would like to be involved in this study please phone Tess on 6278 1701.

Appendix E

**Radio Advertisement**

A fourth year psychology student from Edith Cowan University is conducting a study about the benefits of pet ownership for people aged 65 or over who live alone. If you fit the criteria and you live in the Guildford/Bassendean/Midland areas and would like to get involved in this study, please call the switchboard on (phone number) after nine am.