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Keywords

qualitative research

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Our New Children: The Surrogate Role of Companion Animals in Women's Lives

by
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Abstract

As the rate of pet ownership increases, companion animals are fulfilling a variety of roles in the lives of their humans. This article provides insight on the role that companion animals play in the lives of women. The women in this study showed stronger attachments to those animals that either preceded the birth of their children, or followed the children leaving home. This finding has potential implications for services provided to women by various helping professions.

Introduction

The rate of pet ownership in the United States has skyrocketed with more than 50% of households including at least one companion animal (AVMA, [1993](#)). It is estimated that there are more persons today who have pets than there are persons that have children (Lagoni, Butler, & Hetts, [1994](#)). Along with these increases in pet ownership have also come changes in the role of companion animals in human lives. People are seeking relationships with animals for companionship and love. Although most pet owners consider their animal to be a member of the family, this author postulates that for many women, the companion animal becomes a surrogate child.

This article gains its insights from a qualitative study that focused on issues surrounding the euthanasia of companion animals (Turner, [1998](#)). This study examined, in-depth, the experiences of women who had euthanized a companion animal. One significant observation in the research is that the women in this study appeared to be more attached to the animals that they had prior to having children and following their children leaving home.

The data in this study were rich and many significant themes emerged involving issues of grief and loss (Turner, [1998](#)). However, this article will focus only on the animals' roles as surrogate children in the women's lives. The data from this study suggested several preliminary observations. The purpose of this article is to discuss one of these: women who do not have children living with them appear to be more likely to develop strong bonds with their companion animals.

Literature Review

In reviewing the literature involving women's attachment to companion animals, issues involving the human-animal bond must first be examined. The human-animal bond is a phenomenon that

has existed for centuries. It is widely known that ancient Egyptians had strong relationships with animals (Taboada & Brackenridge, [1994](#)). Today people continue to emotionally bond with their companion animals. One study found that 80% of those surveyed considered pets to be members of the family (Katcher, [1981](#)). In addition, most pet owners cite companionship as the primary reason for owning pets (Lagoni et al., [1994](#)).

The human-animal bond has been shown to provide both physical and mental health benefits for humans (Friedmann, [1995](#); Haynes, [1991](#); Levitt, [1988](#); Netting, Wilson, & News, [1987](#)). The use of companion animals in therapy decreases depression (Haynes, [1991](#)). The Joseph Harp Correctional Center in Lexington, Oklahoma, which is a medium security prison, developed a pet therapy program that used dogs with inmates who were depressed. Not only did the pet therapy program decrease the depression among the inmates, but the rates of aggression decreased among those incarcerated persons as well (Haynes, [1991](#)).

Research also shows that cardiac patients who own pets have a higher survival rate than those patients who are not pet owners (Friedmann, Katcher, Lynch, & Thomas, [1980](#)). Studies show that petting a companion animal can lower blood pressure (Friedmann, Katcher, Thomas, Lynch, & Messent, [1983](#); Levitt, [1988](#)), providing one of the numerous benefits of pet ownership for the aged. Elderly individuals also benefit from the companionship that animals can provide. Often elderly persons are socially isolated, and the animal is the only friend or companion with whom that person maintains regular contact (Nieburg, [1984](#)).

Symbolic interactionism provides a strong rationale for the existence of the human-animal bond. Symbolic interactionism is a theory that evolved from the work of George Herbert Mead (Charon, [1979](#)). The emphasis in symbolic interactionism is on the importance of both perspective and interaction. One of its main ideas, which came from the philosophy of pragmatism, is that "objects we encounter are defined according to their use for us" (Charon, [1979](#), p. 29).

Applying this theory to the human-animal bond, one can see that different individuals will have different perspectives on relationships with animals based on how the individual defines that animal and that animal's use to the human (Turner, [1998](#)). The animal could be defined as "guard dog" or "best friend" based on its use to the human. Because of the wide range of perspectives individuals have on animals, the animal can fulfill a variety of roles. One role that companion animals frequently serve is that of surrogate child (Nieburg, [1984](#)). According to Nieburg, "more and more childless couples are choosing animals as surrogate children" ([1984](#), p.67). As increasingly adults are delaying childbearing until a later age, companion animals are becoming a more integral part of the adult's life.

Research suggests that women have even greater bonds with companion animals than men (Margolies, [1999](#)). Women report greater feelings of despair following the death of a companion animal (Gosse & Barnes, [1994](#)), and seek services for pet loss more often than males (Margolies, [1999](#); Turner, [1997](#)). Research has also suggested that women are more actively involved in animal rights (Jamison & Lunch, [1992](#)). Some have postulated that this is due to women's tendencies toward nurturing and caregiving (Kellert & Berry, [1987](#)), while others speculate that

it is women's own experiences with oppression that lead to their concerns regarding animal rights (Peek, Bell, & Dunham, [1996](#)).

Methodology

This study utilized a qualitative research methodology, using in-depth interviews as the primary means for data collection. This research was aimed at understanding the person's experiences with companion animal euthanasia. The qualitative methodology was most appropriate because of the exploratory nature of the study, and because there was little previous research or theory to guide the research.

Eight women were selected for the study using non-probability, purposive sampling. Participants selected for the study had experienced the euthanasia of a companion animal at some point in their adult lifetimes. Participants were recruited through a local veterinarian and through snowball sampling. Participants signed a release of information prior to being contacted by the researcher.

It was the researcher's intention to have as heterogeneous a sample as possible, which would have included male participants. However, the resulting sample was very homogeneous. The researcher was not able to obtain any men who were willing to participate in the study, nor was she able to obtain any ethnic or cultural diversity. All eight participants were middle-class, professional, white women. There was some variety in age, however, with participants ranging in age from early 20's to mid 60's.

Through unstructured, in-depth interviews, the women told of their experiences euthanizing a companion animal. The interviews were unstructured, although some common questions were asked in order to gain basic demographic information. These interviews were audiotaped and later transcribed by the researcher. Names of the participants and their companion animals were changed in order to protect the participants' confidentiality. Copies of the transcripts were given to the participants for member-checking in order to promote trustworthiness. Prior to data analysis, participants were asked to review the transcripts and make any changes that they felt were important prior to data analysis.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is defined by Wolcott ([1994](#), p.24) as "systematic procedures followed in order to identify essential features and relationships." The data that were analyzed in this study were the text in the transcripts of the interviews during which the participants told of their experiences with euthanasia. As the interviews were transcribed verbatim, the transcripts contained the actual words the participants used to tell of their experiences.

In exploring these women's experiences with euthanizing a companion animal, the researcher looked for common themes that appeared throughout the different stories. Richards and Richards ([1994](#)) outline a data reduction technique called Code-and-Retrieve. This technique involves labeling data based on content and developing a method for gathering other analogously labeled passages (Richards & Richards, [1994](#)). This technique was employed primarily for the cross-case

analysis in order to code data and organize into themes, or data reduction. Cross-case analysis was used to identify and code commonalities, which were then used to generate themes that occurred across each of the participants' stories. Quotes from the women that demonstrated the various themes or contained the codes were pulled from the transcripts and grouped together, based on the common theme.

Although codes were primarily found from reading and re-reading the transcripts, a computer word-processing program also assisted with locating these codes. Once codes were noted in one participant's interview transcript, the researcher utilized the word-processing program's text-search feature to locate those various codes within the other participants' transcripts.

Trustworthiness

One of the key goals of qualitative research is to establish trustworthiness. Several techniques were used to ensure trustworthiness of this study. This first of these is the technique of peer debriefing. One of the main purposes of peer debriefing is to assist the researcher in recognizing his or her biases in interpretations. The debriefing also provides an objective look at the feasibility of the methodology (Lincoln & Guba, [1985](#)). The second technique used by the researcher for improving the credibility of the study was member checking. This involves allowing the participants to review the data that has been collected. In this study, the participants were provided with copies of the transcripts of the interviews. This gave the participants the opportunity to provide additional information that they did not reveal previously (Lincoln & Guba, [1985](#)). A third technique that was used to improve the transferability of this study is thick description. Although it is not possible in qualitative research to suggest external validity, the thick description can "enable someone interested in making a transfer to reach a conclusion about whether transfer can be contemplated as a possibility" (Lincoln & Guba, [1985](#), p. 316). The final technique that was used by the researcher to establish trustworthiness was maintaining a reflexive journal throughout the research process. This reflexive journal was also made available to the peer debriefer for review.

Participant Profiles

Personal profiles of each of the women are presented for the reader to understand and know something about each participant in the study. This also helps add to the thick description used to promote trustworthiness of the findings.

Profile #1 - Sue

Sue is a retired schoolteacher who is very active with the local humane society. She has several dogs and cats and is married with grown children. The dog she focused on in the interview was Dudley, who had been euthanized two and a half months prior to the interview. Sue remained present during the euthanasia, talking to Dudley throughout the procedure. She stated afterwards she cried the entire day, but that she felt very relieved.

Profile #2 - Michelle

Michelle is a young woman in her early twenties. She is working in a veterinary clinic while attending nursing school. The dog that she discussed was Alex, a female Dalmatian who was six years old and had been euthanized one week prior to the interview. Although the dog belonged to the family, Michelle referred to Alex as her mother's dog. Alex had become aggressive and had bitten someone. Michelle's mother was taken to court and asked to have the dog euthanized. The family fought the decision, but eventually Michelle persuaded her mother to allow the dog to be euthanized. Michelle's sister was pregnant at the time and she feared how the dog would behave around the baby.

Profile #3 - Gloria

Gloria is a middle-aged woman who works at a veterinary clinic. The dog she discussed was CoCo, a Shepherd-Husky mix who was euthanized three years from the time of the interview. Gloria had moved out of state and left CoCo to live with her son. While Gloria was home visiting, CoCo suddenly experienced something similar to a stroke. CoCo was paralyzed, and the decision was made to have the dog euthanized. CoCo's death was very difficult for Gloria, and she became very emotionally distressed during the interview. She states that she still misses CoCo deeply.

Profile #4 - Leslie

Leslie is a young woman in her early twenties who was engaged to be married. She had a dog euthanized nearly two years prior to the interview. Cody was a five-year Siberian Husky who had cancer. Since the euthanasia, Leslie has struggled with feelings of guilt. The veterinarian told her that Cody's tumor had probably been present for two to three years. She feels badly that he had to suffer for as long as he did. Leslie adopted another Siberian Husky a few months later; however, she states that she has not bonded to the new dog the way that she bonded with Cody. She believes she did not wait long enough after Cody's death before getting another dog. She feels that she was trying to replace Cody because she missed him so much.

Profile #5 - Ruth Ann

Ruth Ann is a social worker in her early forties who has an adult daughter. Nearly five years prior to the interview, Ruth Ann had euthanized her seventeen year-old cat, Kitty, because of multiple age-related health problems. Although Ruth Ann has friends and family that also have animals, she did not have many social supports in dealing with the euthanasia of her cat. She attempted to discuss the cat's death with her brothers, but they did not know how to respond. Ruth Ann states that she grieved privately, but does not like "public displays."

Profile #6 - Janie

Janie is a medical assistant in her mid-forties who is married with two grown children. She has had three dogs euthanized in her adult life, but has never been present during any of the procedures. The dog that Janie was closest to emotionally was Ginger. This was the only dog that she referred to as "hers." The other dogs she considered family pets. She and her husband acquired Ginger shortly after they were married, and before they had children. Ginger developed

cancer and was euthanized at the age of five. This was over twenty years ago, yet it was still obvious during the interview how much Janie missed Ginger.

Profile #7 - Catherine

Catherine is a physician in her thirties. She had her six-month old Siamese cat, Fred, euthanized one year ago because he was infected with Feline Infectious Peritonitis (F.I.P.), a terminal disease in cats. She had two other cats at home, and her veterinarian feared that the sick kitten would infect the other two. Unfortunately she later discovered that the other two cats had already been infected. Catherine's social supports were very poor. She was new to her community and had not developed many close relationships yet. Her husband was not very supportive either. Most distressing to Catherine was her feeling that the veterinarians were not being very sensitive to her emotional needs.

Profile #8 - Mary

Mary is a woman in her late fifties who works in a medical office. Over ten years ago, Mary had the family's miniature poodle, Muffin, euthanized at the age of fourteen. The dog had renal failure and other geriatric health problems. Shortly after Muffin's death, Mary adopted two dogs that she still has. Her husband died one year ago, and Mary says that it will be much more difficult for her when her current dogs die because she is so much closer to them emotionally than she was to Muffin. She states that the dogs are, "all I have now."

Findings

The data in this study were very rich and nine significant themes emerged. These themes were: 1) Rationale/Decision-Making, 2) Participant's Presence during Euthanasia, 3) Social Supports, 4) Memorializing/Pet's Remains, 5) Comparison to Human Death, 6) Anthropomorphism, 7) Replacement, 8) Coping Mechanisms, and 9) Complicated Grief. As stated previously, this discussion focuses only on the theme that involves animals fulfilling the role of surrogate children in the women's lives. This theme is entitled, "Anthropomorphism" because it involves the application of human-like characteristics to non-human beings. The participants either discussed the animals within a human context, or they described the animals as having human characteristics.

None of the women in this study currently had children living at home. Three of the women did not have children, and the other five had adult children. These five each described having stronger relationships with companion animals before having children, or after the children had left home.

In seven of the eight interviews, the women directly referred to the animals as serving in human roles in their lives. The women frequently described the animals as members of the family:

Gloria: She (the dog) was family. A family member...

Sue: They're (pets) part of the family.

Janie: I know a lot of people get very, very attached to their pets, and I can see that our pets have been like family members...she (the dog) was a member of the family.

Ruth Ann: We always said that the cat kind of ruled the house.

Although many pet owners consider animals to be family members, the women without children in this study described the pets as being like children. Following are quotes from those women who referred to the companion animals as being like children:

Catherine: Well, I don't have children, and I probably won't. So, they (cats) were a lot like my children. You know, I talk to them, and well-when I was single-they used to eat with me. They'd sit on the table.

Leslie: You know, an animal is almost like having a little kid. There's always that third person and then when they're gone, there's that emptiness...I feel like he (dog) was my child...It left a hole in us. It was strange because it was like losing a child.

The women who have children described having very different relationships with the companion animals they had while the children lived at home, than the relationships they had with pets prior to the children or following the children leaving home. One participant had discussed during the interview how the dog she had euthanized was "the family pet." She went on to explain how she has a very different relationship with the two dogs she got after her children were grown.

Mary: They're both very special, and I'm probably closer to these two. It would be much harder, it will be much harder on me when these two, when something happens to these two than it was with the first one...My husband passed a way a year ago, and you know, so that's all I have now. You know, so I'm real close to them.

One woman who participated in the study discussed the euthanasias of several dogs over her adult life course. The first dog had been obtained shortly after she married, and prior to adopting her first child. That dog developed cancer and was euthanized at the age of five. Although that was over twenty years ago, this woman had a more difficult time discussing that death than she did telling of the euthanasia of the "family's dog" that they had owned for nineteen years. This suggests that she was more strongly attached to an animal prior to having children.

Conclusions

The findings of this research suggest that women who do not have children living with them are more likely to develop strong bonds with their companion animals and to develop "mothering" relationships with these pets. It is widely believed that many women have a strong desire to nurture and care for living beings (Kellert & Berry, [1987](#)). This urge is typically met by motherhood. When that desire cannot be fulfilled by mother hood, women can develop parent-child relationships with companion animals.

Margolies ([1999](#)) offers several reasons why women develop these relationships with companion animals. She cites helplessness of the animal as a strong reason. The animals' total dependence upon a human caregiver makes them "perpetual children" (Margolies, [1999](#)).

The preliminary findings of this research have potential implications for helping professionals, such as social workers, nurses, or psychologists, who work with women. Helping professionals who are unfamiliar with the human-animal bond may be unaware of the importance of the companion animal in the female client's life. This is potentially harmful in situations of pet loss in which the female pet owner is not only grieving the death of an animal, but is also possibly mourning the loss of her mothering role.

Family and friends often do not understand or appreciate the loss that a pet owner experiences when a companion animal dies. Bereaved pet owners frequently hear comments such as "It was just a dog, get another one." This is painful when it is coming from a friend or family member, but can potentially be even more damaging when it is coming from a helping professional. Regardless of one's personal view of animals, helping professionals need to be aware of the relationships their clients have with animals. Applying symbolic interactionism, individuals will have different perspectives on relationships with animals based on how the individual defines that animal and that animal's use to the human (Turner, [1998](#)). If the woman views that animal as a child and perceives herself in a mothering relationship with the animal, the loss that she would experience would be equivalent to the loss of a human child. Treatment approaches by helping professionals would need to incorporate an understanding of the type of relationship the woman had with her companion animal and the role that the animal played in the woman's life.

The findings of this study suggest women without children or whose children are grown have stronger relationships with companion animals than those women with young children. Further study looking at the relationships of male pet owners and of female pet owners with children would be necessary in order to validate this hypothesis. In addition, the homogenous nature of the sample, small sample size, and the use of non-probability sampling methods make generalizability difficult; however, this information can be used as a foundation for future research in this area.

Understanding the theory of symbolic interactionism and listening to the stories of the women in this study, suggests that women who do not have children living with them are more likely to develop strong bonds with their companion animals. These preliminary observations need to be investigated further to provide helping professionals with a better understanding of the relationships women have with their companion animals.

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