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# *THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF BEREAVEMENT: AN APPLICATION TO PET LOSS*

by

PATRICIA SIMINO BOYCE

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Sociology
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

1998

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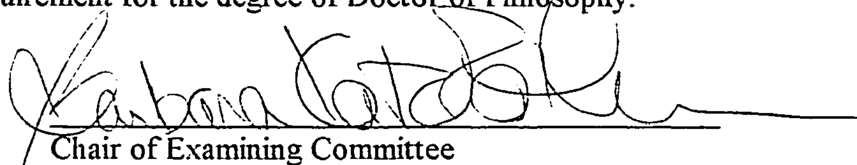

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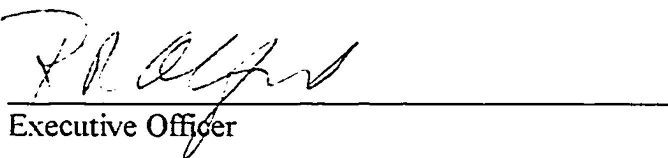

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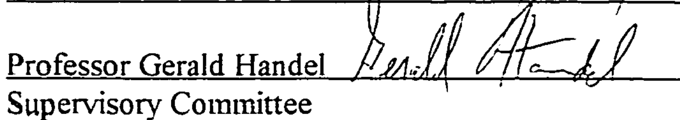

Professor Gerald Handel

Supervisory Committee

THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

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ABSTRACT

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF BEREAVEMENT:
AN APPLICATION TO PET LOSS

by

Patricia Simino Boyce

Adviser: Professor Barbara Katz Rothman

A grief reaction following the death of a cherished pet has been noted in the media, case studies by psychiatrists, surveys of veterinarians, and reports by practitioners who specifically counsel people bereaved due to pet loss. Yet, loss of a companion animal is seldom recognized by friends, acquaintances or other intimates of a bereaved person's life as an important and/or authentic occasion for bereavement. Despite the critical role pets serve in the lives of so many in our society, and the theorized impact the death of a companion animal can have on an owner's life, few studies have systematically examined the impact of the bereavement process of a companion animal on its owner.

The primary objective of this study was to explore the topic of death and bereavement, specifically as it applies to the death of a pet. In the tradition of qualitative research, the analysis of the topic was based on participant observation of bereavement support groups, focus group discussions with pet owners, and individual interviews with pet owners, grief counselors, and pet funeral workers. The analytic frame was broadened to include analysis of the historical context of human-animal relationships; current beliefs and practices of death and bereavement; and the values of society which contribute to the

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social construction of bereavement following pet loss.

The findings concur with the literature on the social construction of grief and mourning and demonstrate that pet loss appears to mimic, if not surpass the usual social distancing experienced with human death. In summary, the findings suggest that those suffering the loss of a pet report the following societal constructs of the bereavement experience: lack of information or knowledge of the dynamics of human-pet relationships and the experience of grief; a general lack of social permission, or the ability of others to encourage expression of the reactions to grief; and, limited access to traditional social supports throughout the mourning process.

The significance of this work is that it provides a rich context of variables to fully identify social constructs of bereavement, specifically as they apply to what Doka (1989) refers to as "disenfranchised" losses, such as pet loss. In doing so, the study demonstrates both the concrete significance of a cultural constructionist view and suggests a possible alternative to currently prevailing practices on the larger topic of death and bereavement for other disenfranchised losses as well as the greater population of bereaved.

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# DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to the following:

My parents, who lit the spark of inspiration for higher education and kept the flame burning throughout my life.

My brother, Harry, who is a constant source of love, companionship and support with all life's endeavors--big, small, good and bad.

My husband, Don, whose patience, understanding, and unlimited love, helped me realize this dream along with all the other dreams he makes come true for me.

My daughter, Lily, who is the light of my life and encourages me to keep learning and growing as a person with every passing day.

And last, but not least, my beloved cat, Morkey. It is he who inspired the early work as I struggled with my own bereavement for his loss. It is for Mork, Tighe and all the loving pets in my past and future with which I dedicate myself to the continuing awareness of the richness of life with pets.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my thanks to the following:

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Dr. Robert Alford for providing the valuable education and ongoing support with the logics of inquiry.

Dr. Barbara Katz Rothman for her teaching, understanding, and patience; for her expertise as a researcher and writer, for encouraging the original exploration into pet bereavement and for being an excellent mentor through this process.

I owe a special note of gratitude to the subjects who participated in all phases of the research, even though it was an emotionally taxing experience. I feel privileged to have had the opportunity to share the unforgettable loving and poignant memories of their special relationships with their pets.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

A grief reaction following the death of a cherished pet has been noted in the media, case studies by psychiatrists, surveys of veterinarians, and reports by practitioners who specifically counsel people bereaved through pet loss. Yet, loss of a companion animal is seldom recognized by friends, acquaintances or other intimates of a bereaved person's life as an important and/or authentic occasion for bereavement. Despite the critical role pets serve in the lives of so many in our society, and the theorized impact the death of a companion animal can have on an owner's life, few studies have systematically examined the impact of the bereavement process of a companion animal on its owner.

The primary objective of this study was to explore the topic of death and bereavement, specifically as it applies to the death of a pet. In the tradition of qualitative research, the analysis of the topic was based on participant observation of bereavement support groups, focus group discussions with pet owners, and individual interviews with pet owners, grief counselors, and pet funeral workers. The analytic frame was broadened to include analysis of the historical context of human-animal relationships; current beliefs and practices of death and bereavement; and the values of society which contribute to the social construction of bereavement following pet loss.

The major theoretical perspective employed for this research is symbolic interactionism. In short, from this perspective we can understand bereavement only in the context of the definitions and assumptions we attribute to it. By examining the thoughts, feelings, and actions of those affected by the death of a pet, greater insight into the subtle relationships these factors have with each other and, moreover, bereavement will be

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gained.

This study attempts to fill at least two voids in the discipline of sociology. First it will answer many questions about the construction and treatment of the bereaved, specifically for New York City pet owners. To my knowledge, it is the first and only ethnographic account of pet bereavement that includes the perspectives of the bereaved as well as grief workers and representatives from the current industry surrounding pet death. Secondly, this study will cast some light on the subject of the social construction of bereavement for disenfranchised losses, or those losses and relationships which may not be recognized as significant by society in general. Bereavement is rarely discussed without exploring the nature and influences of the dying on the bereaved, except in instances where the dying are not socially sanctioned or acknowledged for purposes of formal bereavement periods; i.e., unborn fetuses, many nonkin relationships, and companion animal relationships.

The findings yield an account of the influences and various experiences of bereavement following the loss of a pet. The analysis is conducted through a separation of grief behavior and mourning rituals, which collectively define the experience of pet bereavement. Included is a discussion of construction codes for the bereaved, the specific experiences of those grieving a pet, and social support structures for the bereaved and how these are shaped by common sense definitions of grief behavior and mourning rituals as they apply to pets and other "disenfranchised" losses. An interesting aspect in the literature that was borne out in the research is the concept of "social value." I will provide examples of this in terms of pets, death and social support for bereavement. This will include a discussion of the social dynamics affecting death rituals, caretakers and the

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funeral industry surrounding pet death.

Relying on descriptive field notes and focus group discussions, the findings include: the impact on definitions of death and dying, the social constructions of death-related behavior, adjustment variables following the loss. and reflections on wider social values.

Background

*Death and Social Values*

The meanings and actions of individuals affected by death are viewed in relation to the social worlds in which they occur. What death means and how it is handled in everyday life reflect the larger society. The subjective dimension of death reveals the influence of society as individuals construct meanings of death and death-related actions.

This construction is an active process developed out of interpretations of experience, and interpreting experience in various contexts regarding pet loss will be a central concern in this study. This research will review the existing values surrounding death and dying in American society including the prescribed fear and denial associated with death and dying, the medicalization of death and bereavement, the varying views of the social reality of death in modern life, the construction of death-related rituals specific to pet loss, and the isolation of the bereaved. This background will help clarify the experience of pet bereavement as analyzed in the larger conceptual context of human bereavement.

Any sociological exploration into the social reality of death and bereavement must come to grips with societal values. Whether values are fixed and stable within a group or are open to reinterpretation, they give rise to the construction of the reality of death. Put

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simply, death does not occur in a vacuum. Rather, it is a dimension of human existence shaped by values. In particular, values built on the Protestant Ethos still have a pervasive but subtle effect on death and dying on significant parts of the population although cultural diversity and biographical experience may give rise to other effects. In that sense, values not only give rise to meanings of death but also to the everyday practices through which death is handled (Charmaz 1980, 12).

Values such as privatism, independence, hard work, and individual achievement are part and parcel of the Protestant Ethos; furthermore, they become evident in a critical analysis of American views and practices surrounding death. The relation of the individual's death to his or her uniqueness and separateness is, of course, consistent with values of the Protestant Ethos. Like Charmaz (1980), Aries (1974) and Gorer, Alf, and Vornborck (1965), I maintain that the dominant views of death in Western society are built on the vestiges of the Protestant Ethos, in which the individual is paramount. Further, the tendency to view each death as uniquely the bereaved individual's problem is consistent with wider social values, although interpretations of that uniqueness may vary considerably.

Values and practices are not always blindly accepted by individuals. Instead, they are acted upon, reinterpreted, and sometimes transformed through thought and action. The ways in which wider values and practices correspond with the social world and views of individuals shape their specific actions. The individual is, therefore, an active participant in whatever scenes unfold. This is clearly understood by reviewing the social, cultural and historical influences on the denial and isolation experienced by the dying and bereaved in American society.

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*Fear and Denial of Death*

Garfield (1978), among others, has noted that historically Western civilization has been predominately a death-defying culture. Kubler-Ross (1969) and Feifel (1977) point to the shift of the United States from a death-defying culture to a death-denying culture (Parkes and Weiss 1983, 47). First, the denial of death is used to indicate disbelief in the possibility of death of self. Second, it is used to describe a negation of death as a part of human existence. Third, it is used to depict a cultural stance toward death. In all contexts, it is typically compared unfavorably with "acceptance of death," a term with equally elusive meanings (Charmaz 1980, 89).

There were a number of influential reasons for the denial and fear of death in modern society. One was 17th-century Western individuals' transfer of their intellectual inquisitiveness and libido from theology to science. We witnessed a shift from spiritual mastery over self to physical conquest of nature. A major consequence was that we became impoverished in possessing religious or philosophic conceptual creeds, except nominally, with which to transcend death. Death became an endpoint or "wall" rather than a transition or "doorway" into something greater. A taboo of considerable measure was placed on death and bereaved persons. Death and its concomitants were sundered off, isolated, and permitted into society only after being properly decontaminated (Feifel 1990, 537).

In this context, several social and cultural circumstances made the topic uncomfortable to deal with. First, were the industrial expansion and impersonal technology that steadily increased fragmentation of the family from kinship groups with more or less homogenous values to dismantled rooted neighborhoods and--what

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sociologists call a change from *gemeinshaft* to *gessellschaft*--thus depriving us of emotional and social support with which to cushion the impact of death when it intruded into our lives. Second, was a spreading deritualization of grief, related to criticism of funerary practices as overly expansive, baroque, and exploitive of the mourner's emotions. Third was a gradual expulsion of death from the familiar, everyday common experience; death has developed into a mystery for many people, increasingly representing a fear of the unknown, and has become the province of the "professional," whose mastery, unfortunately, is more technical than human these days. Lastly, in a modern society that emphasizes achievement, productivity, and the future, the prospect of no future at all, and loss of identity, has become an abomination. Hence, death and mourning have invited our hostility and repudiation (Feifel 1977).

American attitudes toward the aging process and the aged are often believed to be part of a stance of denial. The logic goes: since our society is action and youth-oriented, we do not like to have visible reminders of inaction and death. Researchers emphasize the importance of age-segregated communities for reducing the impact of death on the wider society. One researcher sees such efforts as ultimately designed to avoid direct confrontation with death (Charmaz 1980).

In his analysis of American values and social structure, Slater (1974) addresses the fear of death. According to him, the rise of individuality with the illusion of self-sufficiency heightens consciousness of self while fostering an emergence of the fear of death (Slater 1974, 203). What Slater implies is that in societies where individuality is a high cultural priority, the fear of death logically follows. He theorizes that community and privatism are mutually exclusive goals and, while a given group may support one

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goal, it cannot support both equally (1974, 221). From Slater's perspective, people in industrial societies lose the "connectedness" based on the idea of community provided in other societies (Slater, 1974, 244). Dying becomes an ultimate fear of loneliness, and the perception of the depth of that loneliness may become merged with the fear of death. From this line of thought it becomes clear that the fear of death may be a price paid for living in a society whose ideology rests on the type of individualism experienced in America. Given Slater's argument, the fear of death would logically be related to social, cultural, and historical conditions.

The denial of death has a significant impact on the social construction of bereavement in this society. It is this perpetual denial of death in this culture that discourages the creation of unity and support necessary for those grieving from a loss--be that of another human or a cherished companion animal. Although death is a biological universal, everything human about it--meanings, rituals, customs, and institutions--consists of social realities defined and made real through thought and actions.

*The Public Absence--Private Presence of Death*

In line with the prescribed denial and avoidance of death, are the avoidance and isolation of the dying and bereaved. A common dilemma of intimates of the bereaved is to act involved is to be intrusive; yet not to act is to foster further withdrawal and isolation of the bereaved (Carter 1989, 5). Such concerns, predicaments, and dilemmas shape the reality of death, a reality constructed from social meanings and actions.

Social scientists, the original formulators of the thesis that death is the taboo of the twentieth century, are now having second thoughts. Meanwhile, however, popular pundits are identifying death as a "new" taboo, and it seems that many dying and

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bereaved people agree with them. So what is exactly happening to how death, and in particular how the dying and bereaved, are treated in our society? There are several modifications and critiques to account for the complexity of current attitudes and practices toward the handling of death.

One variation, seeing culture as a response to social and demographic structures such as the low death rate and the hospitalization of the dying since 1945, perceives modern death as not so much forbidden as hidden. This approach locates the experience of seeking out bereavement organizations as untypical, the implication being that it is as misleading to generalize from their experiences as it is important to assist those who suffer these untypical, and hence doubly difficult bereavements.

The conventional sociological wisdom emerging during the past decade is that, in Mellor and Shilling's (1993) phrase, death is publically absent but privately present. Variations on this theme have been proposed, each identifying the structural location of people who are dying or who have been bereaved within contemporary Western society.

The most influential writer on this theme has been the historian Philippe Aries. He originally claimed that death is "forbidden" in modern society because of the high value placed by twentieth century Western culture on happiness and on romantic love, both of which are profoundly undermined by the death of someone you love (1974, chapter 4). At the same time Aries noted that in America social scientists and "grief therapists" were encouraging people who had been bereaved, and people who were dying, to speak about their feelings.

Only a few years later, however, Aries (1981) was speaking of death more as "invisible" or "hidden"--hidden in particular from public view. People know they are

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dying or that their loved one has died; the "sin" is to let this awareness penetrate the public realm or even in some cases to mention it to their intimates. People who are dying are relegated to a side ward so as not to disturb the other patients and so as to maintain the idea that hospitals cure. In a third book on images and death, Aries claimed that the twentieth century is the first in Western civilization to have abandoned a public visual iconography of death "Relegated to the secret private space of the home or the anonymity of the hospital, death no longer makes any sign" (1985, 266).

Giddens (1991) has touched upon this subject only briefly but continues the theme that death is hidden in modern society, though he prefers the word "sequestered." Phenomena such as madness, criminality, sexuality, nature, sickness and death, all of which threaten the rationality and social management of modernity, are institutionally repressed--not psychologically repressed, but removed from the major arenas of modern life. Hence the prison, the mental hospital, the wilderness nature reserve, and the hospice are relegated to the shadows and recesses of the public domain.

Against this dominant sociological view that death has been dismissed to the private sphere is the argument that death is very much present in the public sphere. Parsons and Lidz argue that "American society has institutionalized a broadly stable, though flexible and changing, orientation to death that is fundamentally not a "denial" but a mode of acceptance appropriate to our primary cultural patterns of activism" (1967, 134). Much of public life from the actuarial basis of pension funds to health care planning, to the local aerobics class, is premised not only on an acceptance of human mortality but also on scientific assessments of the mortality risk of specific populations. This is public life based on a realistic assessment of when death is likely to come.

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A second perspective argues that personnel in medicine and the media, the two institutions with the most power to interpret death today, have unusually strong anxieties about death. It is important therefore not to confuse such anxieties with those of the public at large. Rather, there is a more complex relation between the feelings of these personnel, the information they propagate, and public attitudes. A third perspective identifies disparate frames within which death is handled, their incompatibility often leading to unease and embarrassment. This approach points to confusion, rather than taboo or invisibility, as the hallmark of modern handling of death.

In summary, unique socio-historical conditions emerging during the latter half of the twentieth century create a situation in which bereavement takes on new, problematic dimensions. Western values give rise to the scientific institutions that manage death and bereavement in contemporary American society; moreover, these values lead to the problematic situations confronting individuals who face the experience of bereavement.

Clarification of Terms

There is general agreement in the literature of philosophy, and in that of many of the social sciences, that concepts play an important role in inquiry and in the development of knowledge. Conceptual problems, such as those that result from vague or ambiguous concepts, frequently are recognized as presenting considerable barriers to knowledge generation and, therefore, to scientific progress. This has been evident in the application of the concept of bereavement. Because of the vagueness and ambiguity, the application of the bereavement concept frequently requires ad hoc, individual interpretations.

This situation has a pronounced effect on efforts to gain a greater understanding of the bereavement experience of individuals. For example, the instruments that have been

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designed to describe and measure grief have addressed, almost exclusively, grief that is associated with human death, while the literature also includes discussions of grief as a response to multiple other significant losses such as those experienced as a result of divorce, chronic illness and disability. The absence of a means to measure grief as it occurs in situations other than human death may be partially related to the lack of a clear conceptual definition of grief that reflects its contemporary use. Without a clear conception of grief, it is difficult, at best, to generate a clear understanding of this phenomenon.

According to Demi and Miles, research has been based primarily on relatively early conceptualizations of bereavement, more specifically grief, many of which have been derived from psychoanalytic and crisis theory (1989, 107). Although there have been attempts by authors to identify and describe variables that affect bereavement and their interrelationship, a clear, conceptual definition of the concepts surrounding bereavement that would help to identify and link these associated variables do not exist.

Bereavement may be separated into parallel experiences. The first is known as grief and the other as mourning. In recent years there have been attempts to distinguish these terms. Demi and Miles defined bereavement as "the state of having experienced the death of a significant other" (1989, 105). Other authors point out the presence of bereavement as an antecedent to grief. Mourning is often used interchangeably with grief, and may be defined more specifically as "the social expression of grief" (Demi and Miles 1989, 12). Yet, some authors specifically define mourning as the rituals or activities, frequently prescribed by religious and cultural beliefs, that are carried out as a public display of the grief response (Parkes and Weiss 1983).

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Additional related concepts of bereavement concern specific types of grief that display the variation from what are considered "typical" or "expected" responses. Such concepts are identified as ways to characterize grief responses that exceed the usual "normative" boundaries. Such concepts include morbid grief, pathological grief, and absent grief as the most frequently cited related terms. Also noted, but with less frequency, was unhealthy grief, disabling grief, and conflicted grief, as other concepts bearing a close relationship to grief. The addition of descriptors to the term "grief" resulted in a substantial change in definition for authors who used these concepts. Although the precise nature of the relationship between these concepts and the concept of grief is not evident, it is apparent that a variety of terms are available for use in situations involving an individual response to loss. Further analysis would be of benefit in determining the exact nature of the relationship among these concepts. Consequently, it is apparent that bereavement, grief and mourning actually can be considered as distinct concepts, closely related, but with obviously different attributes (Rodgers and Cowles 1991, 454).

Bereavement is an objective, social fact. For purposes of this study, bereavement will be defined as the adjustment process which a person passes through when a part of oneself that is held dear is lost. Specifically, it refers to the actual fact of having sustained a loss. Bereavement will be understood as the general experience of loss and deconstructed into the parallel components of grief behavior and mourning rituals for further examination of their social constructions relative to pet loss.

The concept of grief will be defined as the highly personal and subjective set of responses that an individual makes to a real, perceived, or anticipated loss. Grief is a

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dynamic process that is highly individualized and strongly influenced by existing norms. In the application to pet loss, grief can best be described as the internal or private response of individual pet owners. Grieving tends to be psychological and emotional in nature, primarily affecting how pet owners think and feel when a beloved pet dies.

Mourning will be used to define the public set of behaviors pet owners may go through to show respect to their dead pet, for example, the funeral rituals as well as seeking out social supports or bereavement interventions. These actions are for the benefit of owners and help them feel that the death of their pet occurred with some dignity and caring. Mourning behavior is seen in rituals such as burial and cremation. Mourning is the way in which a bereaved person handles ultimate grief. It denotes a culturally defined style of expression. It is a process that, literally and figuratively, puts a special pet to rest. Mourning can be very critical to the resolution process for some pet owners, for if they are not able to mourn the death of their pet, they may not be able to fully accept the reality of that particular death experience.

In essence, grief refers to what is felt, mourning to what is done. It is important to note that this analysis of the concepts of grief and mourning does not determine what bereavement actually is. Instead, analysis results in identification of the way in which interested individuals view the experience or phenomena. Similarly, the analysis reveals the way in which perceptions of bereavement, as deconstructed through grief and mourning, are affected by current thought and the state of knowledge concerning this significant and universal experience.

In this study, the term companion animal, family pet, beloved pet and pet will be used interchangeably to identify the specific nature of the subject examined. According

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to Fogle (1983), a companion animal is an animal which is considered a member of the family and provides companionship to the family member(s). A bond has been established between the human family member(s) and the companion animal.

Pet loss refers to the unwanted and/or unanticipated separation of the companion animal from its owner. For the purposes of this study, this most often refers to the death of a pet, but also includes kidnaping and murder of companion animals by persons other than the pet owner.

Finally, support will be defined as the accessibility of a person, or persons, who will listen without judgment and with intensity, will openly give emotional support, and will permit the bereaved to express true pain and feeling.

In sum, this research is concerned with how the bereavement process is constructed for the loss of companion animals. This paper will first provide a review of the theoretical framework and discuss the methods with which this research project was conducted. This is followed with a review of relevant literature along with pertinent findings of the study. This includes human-animal bonding and the social construction of bereavement as it applies to grief behavior and mourning rituals for human and pet loss. The study will conclude with a discussion of the significant findings and implications for future research.

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# CHAPTER II

# CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

## Theoretical Framework

In the area of bereavement, as in any study of the human condition, concrete circumstances are known and understood by conceptualizing them into a coherent body of ideas. Whatever perspectives are brought to bear on death and bereavement, whether they are scientific theorizing, philosophical interpretation, or common sense reasoning, they give shape and meaning to the reality of it. For purposes of this study, the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism is utilized in the discussion of bereavement. Symbolic interaction is a theoretical perspective in sociology, which assumes that society, reality, and selves are socially created through interactive processes. Hence, what we know, how we define situations in the world, and who we are, are all built through interaction. In addition, theories and empirical studies of bereavement are provided as further background to the present investigation of pet bereavement. The objectives, research questions, and conceptual model were formulated from research findings and theoretical information presented in this review.

In the study of bereavement the symbolic interactionist perspective informs us that our conceptions of bereavement, our images of the social worlds where grief and mourning take place, as well as the everyday actions that constitute the process of "grief," are socially constructed. Although death is a biological fact, what it means to us results from our socially shaped ideas and assumptions. For example, bereavement has varied definitions such as loss, transition, or peace, depending on the assumptions one has about it (Charmaz 1980, 16). Essentially then, from this perspective, meaning shapes

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experience and experience shapes meaning allowing people to choose to create new modes of action instead of merely following the dictates of the wider culture. Consequently, the ways in which we treat death in this society represent certain types of choices that have become part of institutionalized patterns of handling death.

Although the grieving process tends to be invasive and spellbinding, the bereaved can choose whether to indulge in the imposed stages and isolation normally associated with the bereavement process in this culture, or choose to openly express the emotions they feel for the loss of a beloved pet without shame or fear. As the findings demonstrate in the study of pet loss, these choices are significantly influenced by cultural norms and social values.

An underlying assumption of this perspective is that social reality consists of process and change. These changes are predicated upon the shared understandings that come with a common language and culture. Some of the shared meanings about death and bereavement may lead to actions contradicting the "objective" of those that hold them. For example, as the findings demonstrate, some lonely, elderly persons accept the notion that death is something one ultimately handles alone even though they themselves would prefer social support. Under this kind of circumstance when individuals set beliefs and actions into motion by accepting some general conception of what has to be done, they, in effect, perpetuate situations that adversely affect them.

The symbolic interactionist position has several notable strengths that are of particular import in the study of bereavement, specifically for pet loss. Obviously, studying bereavement from a point of view that highlights the thoughts and ideas of the interacting individuals is very useful. What death means to people cannot be taken for

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granted or assumed. Thus, the symbolic interactionists' approach takes the actor's meanings as the starting point of inquiry and analysis, which is how greater insight may be obtained on the pet bereavement process. The general perspective is useful at both the micro-level, when considering the individual interacting with others, and the macro-level, when considering the relationship between societal features and broadly shared meanings.

Thus, the reality of bereavement is ultimately a social construction given an "objective" character through thought and action. Because this is a social construction, it is subject to wider social values as human beings transform their social conditions and are in turn transformed by them. The beliefs, values, norms and practices constituting the reality of death and bereavement are constructions of interacting persons who shape both society and history. Thus, the nature of their emerging thoughts and actions around the moral status of pets, as well as the nature of death, gives shape to accepted bereavement for pet loss in our society.

Models of Grieving

Although no single, universally accepted theoretical perspective on the phenomenon of bereavement exists, several perspectives have been popular in the literature. Established models of grieving have emerged predominately from psychodynamic, physiological, sociological and cognitive models. Because the psychodynamic perspective has dominated the study of death, it is important to explain briefly some of its major tenets and the assumptions supporting them. Freud (1957) differentiated between "mourning," which he considered a natural process, and "melancholia," which he considered pathologic. Lindemann (1944) postulated that a distinct set of phenomena results from traumatic loss, including increased susceptibility to

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physical illness, with responses following a typical sequence that are exaggerated variations of normal responses. Bowlby (1969, 1980) extensively described human behavior in separation and loss.

Kubler-Ross' five-stage model of dying has been widely used to explain the process of grief. Her model includes a predictable step-by step sequence: (a) denial and isolation, (b) anger, (c) bargaining, (d) depression, and (e) acceptance. The stages are said to vary in length of time and to "replace each other or exist at times side-by-side" (1969, 136). This and other models of grieving (Engel 1964) generally describe a normative response to loss, which proceeds in predictable stages. While to some extent variable, in these views, the stages must either unfold within the described parameters or be considered abnormal (Cody 1992, 66).

Grief has been variously defined as an adaptive response (Bowlby 1969), an acute crisis or a series of crises (Lindemann 1944), and a syndrome (Lindemann 1944; Parkes 1972). It also has been characterized by multiple listings of observable symptoms; yet even those authors who have subscribed to the definition of grief as a combination of symptoms have differed in their discussion of the degree, frequency, and duration of those symptoms (Cowles 1985, 187).

It has been persuasively argued that it is a sickness and should be treated as such (Engel 1964, 95). After all, grief is a very painful condition that impairs the ability of the afflicted individual to function effectively in everyday activities. It produces a range of somatic symptoms: heaviness in the limbs, sighing, restless apathy, loss of appetite and weight, sleeplessness and languor, with pangs of acute distress. It is the occasion for sympathetic friends and relatives to gather around and speak in hushed tones just as they

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do at the bedside of the seriously ill. Yet there are also grounds for regarding bereavement as the "normal" accomplishment of a major loss. Indeed, it is also stated that the absence of grief in such a situation has been regarded as a "sickness" (Deutch 1937, 22). Therefore, we can conclude that the two extremes of the bereavement process are considered, by some, a malady.

The definition of grief as a disease is somewhat enhanced by observations of increased morbidity and mortality of survivors. Because grieving survivors often suffer a great deal of stress, they are especially vulnerable to disease and death. The potential physiological effects of grief cannot be denied or underestimated. Although these physiological effects may result in disease, grief itself should not be categorized as a disease. Rather, the physiological effects may be intensified due to the ways in which grief is socially defined and structured, contributing to the stigma of the "sick role" often associated with bereavement.

More recent research, however, has shown evidence refuting the conceptualization of bereavement as a mere progression of stages or a disease process. Instead it is seen as an oscillatory process in which the bereaved can experience a variety of feelings and emotions, both positive and negative, simultaneously. For instance, individuals may feel anger about the death of their spouse, but at the same time feel proud of how well they have managed and be confident about their coping abilities (Lund, Caserta, and Dimond 1986). Some of the problems associated with stages are that the demarcations from one stage to the next are frequently not distinct boundaries. Rather, the grieving person typically moves back and forth, depending on the context and his/her own disposition, as opposed to following the clearly demarcated steps proposed in the "staged" models of

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bereavement (Trunnel, Caserta, and White 1992, 277).

Less time-bound theories include those of Schneider (1984) and Rosenblatt (1983). Schneider presents a "holistic" model of grieving which addresses grieving in relation to all significant losses. Schneider emphasizes the centrality of abstracting meaning from a loss experience. Rosenblatt advances theories of "grief work" and "reminders," which hold, respectively, that grieving is a process of struggling to become free again, and that the struggle may be brought to the fore by "reminders" long after the loss.

In sum, studies have demonstrated that institutionalized patterns force survivors to handle intense grief independently giving rise to increased disease and death rates among them. Furthermore, as indicated throughout this paper, more recent studies recognize that the cultural view of grief as an illness to be "worked out" and "gotten over" does not reflect the actual experiences of many bereaved. For them, life may never again be the same, grief may never be wholly "resolved," and they may never quite recapture the selves they had been before the loss.

Empirical Studies of Grief and Bereavement

Clinicians and researchers have subsequently sought to operationalize the ideas purported by major theorists. It became important not only to discuss the etiology of pathological and nonpathological grief, but also to define terms, to describe the various aspects and types of grief and their manifestations, and then quantify results based on representative samples.

Studies have been conducted on descriptive empirical approaches to grief. Lindemann (1944) for example, studied the bereaved survivors of the Coconut Grove

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nightclub fire for which he compiled profiles for both normal and morbid grief. He cites normal grief as comprising the following features and behavioral manifestations: somatic distress, avoidance of thoughts of the deceased, guilt for the lost one's death (due to minor omissions in survivor's behavior), irritability and anger toward others, disruption of patterns of normal self-preserving behaviors, and the tendency to adopt traits of the deceased. Morbid, or pathological grief tends to be characterized by delay or denial of the grief response and an exacerbation of many of the features associated with "normal" grief: onset of psychosomatic diseases, hyperactivity as overcompensation, denial of affect, social isolation, acquisition of symptoms directed to specific people, and agitated depression (with tension, insomnia, self-accusation, desire for punishment, and suicidal tendencies). Lindemann's (1944) distinction between normal and morbid grief would appear to differentiate primarily along the dimensions of intensity and duration, and subsequent researchers in the field support this distinction. However, the study does have certain methodological flaws. The author is not citing, a priori, his criteria for normalcy; he studied only acute grief. Therefore, because there was no long-term follow-up study, one cannot really extrapolate about chronic, prolonged grief. Also, his sample, though large in number, was quite specific, so lack of generalizability is also an issue.

In Marris' study (1965), subjects were interviewed approximately two years after their loss. The study was comprised mainly of interviews, which together with the time elapsed since the loss, could eventuate in limited data (i.e., purely qualitative and subject to specific memory attenuation). Additionally, the study dealt only with women (widows less than 60). Thus, there is a gender and age bias, as well as the fact that persons widowed in mid-life (i.e., when the loss is unprepared for and may be subjectively

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experienced as premature) may tend to exhibit more atypical and pronounced grief symptoms simply by virtue of this fact. Thus, Marris' study is also flawed in terms of generalizability. Still, the study does appear to support the basic tenets of Lindemann's work and has often been referred to by subsequent researchers. In the study, Marris delineates frequencies of occurrence of grief symptoms, many of which were postulated by Lindemann. The two most salient findings were that of the 72 subjects, 100% reported feeling depression or anxiety, almost 80% cited insomnia as a common occurrence, and 61% stated they experienced apathy.

Parkes (1965), relying to some extent on the findings of Lindemann and Marris, conducted a study in which he attempted to systematize various types of reactions following a major loss. He compared the behavior of bereaved "normals" or bereaved inpatients he was treating at Bethlem Psychiatric Hospital whose presenting symptoms occurred at some time during the illness or within six months of the death of a deceased loved one. He defined "normal grief" primarily in terms of Marris' formulation and matched frequencies of occurrence of symptoms to the "normal" subjects' reporting in Marris' work. He found that, basically, the frequencies in his study and Marris' coincided. In addition, Parkes was able to further state that the inability to accept the deceased as actually being dead and ideas of guilt and self-blame were the prevailing salient features in pathological grief. Although Parkes eschewed any formal reference to psychodynamic theory *per se*, his findings support the Freudian constructs of denial/repression and the self-accusatory intropunitive aspect of the critical agency in melancholia. Parkes asserts that heightened intensity and duration of grief augment the degree of pathology. In this respect, then, Parkes correlates grief with other medical

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syndromes/diseases in which these two factors indicate more severe pathology.

Indeed, the factors influencing grief (in all its manifestations) are myriad. Paterson (1987) contends that some people are predisposed to intense grief reaction either by personal history and/or personality traits. According to Paterson, the predispositional influences leading to extreme disturbances during bereavement are: loss of a significant person in childhood, a pre-existing mental disturbance, other major life stressors during the year prior to bereavement, difficulty expressing emotion, social withdrawal (as in some personality disorder syndromes), and absence of social support systems. Vachon et al. (1982) attempted to identify variables to discern vulnerability in the bereaved. They found that certain personality variables were predictors--e.g., being emotionally less stable, more worrying, anxious, and apprehensive. Maddison and Walker (1967) and Raphael and Middleton (1987) both emphasize that poor outcome in bereavement is correlated with perception of one's social network as unsupportive or nonexistent.

Social support, or lack thereof, in bereavement, is a major area of study. According to many theorists, the bereaved person's coping mechanisms are directly influenced by their interactions with others. Maddison and Walker (1967), in their study of widows, found that subjects who viewed social support network interaction as accessible and positive (i.e., bereaved were able to express emotion and review the lost relationship) tended to have a better outcome in mourning (as measured by minimal health problems at a 13-month follow-up) when compared to subjects who perceived their support systems as deficient. Vachon et al. (1982) in their exploration of how the bereaved are affected by various factors such as social network, life situation, and personality, also concur that support systems are integral to the mourning process.

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Theorists in the field of social support networks maintain various ideas about why these networks are important in grieving. The most widely held assumption is that social interaction provides the bereaved with a channel for catharsis. Hofer (1984), using a more biologic approach, posits that relationships are regulators throughout life, being responsible in part for maintaining the efficient functioning and equilibrium of bodily processes. When a loved one dies, an important source of regulation is lost. If the grieving person is able to rely on other sources of interaction, biological equilibrium is more likely to be maintained. That is, social interaction has an important restitutive value in mourning.

There is now a large body of evidence attesting to the physiological aspects of mourning, These aspects may be, as Hofer (1984) speculated, partly attributed to lack of social support systems or they may be stress-related as Parkes (1965) would suggest. Thus, one of the chief aims of researchers in this field is to assess which alterations in functioning (e.g., bereavement) are causal factors in physiological symptoms and which are nonspecific. Consequently, studies have been conducted on the effects of bereavement on immune, autonomic, cardiovascular, and endocrine systems.

Researchers Brown and Harris (1977) propose a three-factor causal model of depression. They claim that vulnerability factors comprise a predisposition to depression and symptom formation factors which influence the form and severity of the depression. In a sample of 458 subjects in Camberwell, England, they found loss to be the primary vulnerability factor in a predisposition to depressive states. When the subjects had incurred loss, other more enduring, or earlier, losses seemed to exacerbate the current grief (e.g., lack of a spouse or other in whom to confide, loss of a mother before age 11,

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absence of employment outside the home, lack of self-esteem). When these vulnerability factors are present, Brown and Harris maintain that loss leads to a pervasive sense of hopelessness and subsequent depression. The authors believe that the generalization of hopelessness emerges as the precipitate of the loss, which in itself is a deprivation of sources of value or reward. In such a state of helplessness, the individual is incapable of generating good thoughts about herself, her life, or those close to her. This, they claim, is the central core of depressive disorder following loss.

Using personal construct theory, a cognitive model, Viney, Benjamin, and Preston (1989) concur with Brown and Harris (1977) on at least one point: loss and bereavement constitute a major disruption in people's ways of constructing and living in the world. The authors state that when people experience loss, the cognitive constructs they usually utilize to predict, confirm, or interpret life events become virtually ineffectual. Thus, while psychodynamic theorists postulate bereavement as a time of emotional readjustment, Viney, Benjamin, and Preston (1989) define bereavement as a period during which the survivor attempts to reinstate continuity in his or her cognitive constructs. They view intense emotional states as by-products of shifting cognitive states, rather then vice versa. Within this model, the phases of grief are also based in cognitive terms: numbness and shock constitute the bereaved's attempts to preserve pre-existing construct systems; guilt and consolidation of loss represent the cognitive discrepancy the bereaved now see between their core constructs about themselves (e.g., "I said mean things, and now he's gone"). Validation of one's core constructs at this time eventuate in the consolidation of the loss, with the implication that construct system invalidation or an inability to revise hinders the restorative process (i.e., can lead to pathological

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symptoms).

In additional to psychodynamic, physiological, sociological, and cognitive models of bereavement, there is also a cultural/ritualistic model. According to this model, people mourn, to a great extent, based on how they are expected to mourn (i.e., social prescription). In turn, the mourner affects the way others will react to his or her mourning. Rosenblatt, Walsh, and Jackson (1976) compared 80 different anthropological studies of bereavement rituals and delineated common elements. For example, each culture provides "rites of passage" (Van Gennep 1961) and these are separated into three types: induction rites to encourage manifestations of grief (e.g., tears), liminal periods during which those "in transition" (i.e., bereaveds) may withdraw from the social sphere and are exempt from obligations, and a final ritual, after which the survivors(s) are expected to adopt new social roles and accept a new social status. Osterweis, Solomon, and Green also note that culture exerts an influence on the way loss is perceived (i.e., there are basic cultural prescriptions about who is defined as bereaved, the coping mechanisms that are sanctioned, what constitutes legitimate social support, and how distress may be manifested), but that in all cultures, "grieving everywhere must be experienced" (1984, 17). Rosenblatt, Walsh, and Jackson (1976), particularly stress that, compared with most other cultures, Western culture constricts the manifestation of grief and thereby engenders pathology.

Averill (1968) studied the roles of societal prescription in mourning from which he asserts that societal mores and customs influence mourning, which is a conventional behavior. He further maintains that grief has a biological origin and is highly adaptive because it provides for the cohesion of the species (i.e., cohesion is ensured because,

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among all animals, those who choose to separate from the group are those who become isolated as a result of the rupture and must be "punished"; human grief and bereavement are biologically and socially proscribed as "punishment" in a prototypical manner). Thus, for Averill, grief is purely a reaction to the loss of a group member, with the most characteristic feature being depression.

In all species, the loss of a group member engenders bereavement phenomenology. This was, no doubt, observed from earliest times, but was actually catalogued by Charles Darwin when he remarked that "the crying of grief is different from the crying of passion" (1872, 137). He described the initial frantic movements followed by "flaccid faces with heads hanging down, slow and feeble respiration and deep sighs and . . . grief stricken faces with oblique eyebrows and downturning corners of the mouth . . . from the grief muscles" (Darwin 1872, 138).

This response, noted across cultures and with some modification across species, may indeed ensure group cohesion or it may be a more purely personal response. In any case, whether it is at the level of the individual survivor, the group, the culture, or the species, we are imperiled by loss when the loss has meaning, when it is perceived as a severing of what was once attached.

<u>The Social Shaping of Emotion</u>

Surely death is a universal experience that demands of survivors some awareness and accommodation to its reality. But that awareness and accommodation may take varied forms. Most analyses of grief and mourning take for granted that it is a singular type of response that is part of the universal human condition. Yet as Volkart and Michael (1977) point out, the extent to which loss is subjectively felt and expressed

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differs widely among cultural groups who experience death under different social conditions. They argue that the view of death as an inevitable loss of life is a peculiarly Western notion. Moreover, in some cultures, Volkart and Michael find that death "represents a gain for the deceased and an improvement in his prospects and status and that grieving for his loss is inappropriate" (1977, 126). They suggest that it is a cultural definition that makes death a loss and grief prescriptive. Thus, culture-bound grief expectations develop that have two significant dimensions. First, the survivor "should" feel grief for the "loss" of the deceased. Second the "feel" of grief should be expressed and "worked out" in order to preserve the mental health of the survivor (Volkart and Michael 1977, 197).

Taking Volkart and Michael's (1977) argument one step further, Lofland (1985) argues that culture does not simply give rise to the patterned ways of handling grief, but instead implies that the subjective interpretation of cultural meaning in conjunction with the backlog of personal experiences of the bereaved give rise to the very feelings that are defined as "grief" by society at large.

Scheff's (1979) theory of catharsis strongly supports this interpretation and is based on modern society's strong inhibition of the release of negative emotions. Adopting more of a psychodynamic perspective, Scheff assumes that the discharge of distressing emotions, such as grief, is a biological necessity. Because individuals learn to repress distressing emotions, bodily tensions accumulate and cause rigid or neurotic behavior patterns. Sheff asserts that the “safe” discharge of collectively held, distressing emotions is achieved through rituals. To the extent that these rituals allow, individuals are able to discharge repressed emotions and restore

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physical and emotional well-being.

The most sophisticated rendering of this point of view is to be found in the works of scholars concerned with the relationship between grief and mourning and critical of the deritualized character of much modern public mourning. Aries (1974) and Gorer, Alf, and Vornborck (1965), for example, argue that among modern Westerners, the decline of well-developed death rituals has pathologically extended grief's "normal course." Humans in other times and other places knew the same grief feelings that modern humans know. But because of effective public ceremonies, these feelings persisted for a much shorter period of time.

Scholars like Scheff (1979), Aries (1974), and Gorer, Alf, and Vornborck (1965) would certainly agree that grief experience is affected by social conditions. Their arguments about the relation between grief and mourning, however, imply that the effect is limited to grief's onset and duration. Lofland (1985), in contrast, argues that social shaping is of a profound character, potentially rendering all aspects of the experience – its symptoms or texture, its shapes or phasing, as well as its onset and duration – highly variable across space and time.

Lofland (1985) bases these claims on the following components of social history: (1) the level of significance of the other who dies; (2) the definition of the situation surrounding the death; (3) the character of the self experiencing a loss through death; and (4) the interactional setting/situation in which the three prior components occur. From an interactionist perspective, Lofland asserts that as these components vary, so will human feeling. The difficulty, as Lofland points out, is lack of data on the experience of grief from an emotional perspective, especially historically. Clinical observations, interview

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studies, and first-person accounts are available only in recent history and Western cultures.

While psychiatrists and counselors have consistently argued the need for free expression of "inner" feelings--sadness, anger, grief, guilt--social scientists have begun to query the universal nature often imputed to human emotion (Lofland 1985; Sarbin 1986). Sarbin's discussion is particularly relevant here. He argues that contemporary academic theories of the emotions tend to detach them from their contexts and to describe them as irrational. Furthermore, "emotion is generally discussed in the abstract, not unlike vision or digestion" (Sarbin 1986, 84). To mourn, to be in grief, is therefore an experience which Sarbin understands in terms of a social role, one which the individual enters into, informed, albeit unconsciously, by the range of culturally specific myths, fairy tale stories or soap operas available to them. Sarbin refers to both dramaturgical and dramatistic roles, or forms of emotional expression. In the former case, individuals are consciously seeking to disguise a mismatch between what they actually feel and what they are meant to feel. In the latter, individuals are still following a role but are doing so unconsciously, in that they are being guided by one of a whole repertoire of culturally available scripts or stereotypes. Either the structure of the ritual has been clearly built around "natural" responses to death, or, in being structured, the emotions displayed are on some level contrived, a show of strength or solidarity. In both cases it is the transmittal of intensity which is understood to be either accommodated or artificially reproduced (Sarbin 1986).

Emotions, as understood from the symbolic interactionist perspective, are the joint product of generalized arousal and specific socio-cultural factors (i.e., definitions of the situation and cultural labels). The same stimulus may be experienced as joy or anger,

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depending on available situational cues (Schachter and Singer 1962). Because situational definitions and emotion labels vary across time and cultures, so must emotional experiences, according to symbolic interactionists (Thoits 1989, 320). Put another way, the key determinants of emotional experience are not physiological but socio-cultural. Thus, by extension, as many different emotions exist as are distinguished within a culture and between cultures.

Overall, these descriptive analyses suggest that changes in emotional culture follow from certain large-scale institutional changes. Unfortunately, the relationships between antecedent institutional changes and subsequent cultural changes have not been documented empirically in the literature. Instead, implicit in much of this work are the particular emotions that result from structural arrangements, emotions that then become encouraged or discouraged by norms, as particularly evident in the case of grief for pet loss.

There are circumstances, however, in which a person experiences a sense of loss but does not have a socially recognized right, role, or capacity to grieve. In these cases, the grief is disenfranchised (Doka 1989). Western industrial society is achievement oriented and individualistic, and in these norms tend particularly to disenfranchise in two broad categories. First, the individualistic nature of society tends to disenfranchise those who do not have recognizable kin-based relationships. Second, the allowance of grief often reflects an underlying utilitarian bias. The extent to which grief is recognized reflects both the perceived social value of the deceased as well as the bereaved. Doka defines disenfranchised grief as grief that a person experiences when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, and/or socially supported

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(1989). In such cases, the socially prescribed scripts may not be available to the bereaved. The concept of disenfranchised grief recognizes that societies have sets of norms--in effect, "grieving rules"--that attempt to specify who, when, where, how, how long, and for whom people should grieve. In any given society, these grieving rules may not correspond to the nature of attachments, the sense of loss, or the feelings of survivors. In our society, this may occur for three reasons: (1) the relationship is not recognized, (2) the loss is not recognized, or (3) the griever is not recognized (Doka 1989, 148).

Until recently, there has been little research touching directly on the phenomenon of disenfranchised grief. Focusing on the issues, reactions, and problems in particular populations, a number of studies have noted special difficulties that these populations have in grieving. For example, Kelly (1977) and Kimmel (1978, 1979), in studies of aging homosexuals, have discussed the unique problems of grief in such relationships. Similarly, studies of the reactions of significant others of AIDS victims have considered the isolation of the bereaved (Heinemann et al. 1983; Geiss, Fuller, and Rush 1986). Other studies have considered the special problems of unacknowledged grief in prenatal death (Corney and Horton 1974; Wolff, Neilson, and Schiller 1970; Peppers and Knapp 1980; Kennel, Slyter, and Klaus 1970; Helmrath and Steinitz 1978), ex-spouses (Doka 1986; Scott 1985), therapists' reactions to a client's suicide, and pet loss. Finally, studies of families of Alzheimer's victims (Kay, Nieburg, and Kutscher 1984) and mentally retarded adults (Lipe-Goodson and Goebel 1983; Clyman et al. 1980; Edgerton, Bollinger, and Herr 1984) also have noted distinct difficulties of these populations in encountering varied losses which are often unrecognized.

Others have tried to draw parallels between related unacknowledged losses. For

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example, in a personal account, Horn (1979) compared her loss of a heterosexual lover with a friend's loss of a homosexual partner. Doka (1987) discussed the particular problems of loss in nontraditional relationships, such as extramarital affairs, homosexual relationships, and cohabiting couples.

The findings of this study provide further evidence for the difficulty in grieving for disenfranchised losses, as frequently noted by pet owners suffering the loss of a companion animal. This study considers both the nature of disenfranchised grief and its central paradoxical problem: the very nature of this type of grief exacerbates the problems of grief, but the usual sources of support may not be available or helpful.

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# CHAPTER III

# METHODOLOGY

## Objectives and Research Questions

This study had two primary objectives. The first objective was to examine the effect of pet death on bereavement experiences among those whose pet had died within one year of the participant contact. The second objective was to examine, through qualitative analysis methods, the factors associated with the social construction of bereavement for pet loss. As previously discussed, for purposes of this study, the concept of bereavement is analyzed through practices of grief behavior and mourning rituals for those suffering the loss of a pet.

A third, exploratory objective of this study involved an underlying discussion of pet bereavement practices set in the context of human bereavement. Three research questions were formulated from these objectives.

1. What are the grief experiences for persons suffering the loss of a pet?
2. What social and death rituals are utilized for pet loss?
3. What are the implications for the experience of human bereavement based on the evolving practices of pet bereavement?

## Research Approach and Design

The emphasis of the research is on learning what subjects experienced and how they interpreted the experience of bereavement following the loss of a companion animal. This is an interpretive piece that blends information from the bereaved, from literature and theory, and from those involved with death work for pets. The research for this study includes use of participant observational studies, individual interviews, and focus group

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discussions. The nature of this combined method of field research contributes to a broader perspective, which provides information on the social experience of a group with similar circumstances and experiences as well as individual experiences of grief for the loss of a pet. Thus, each method complements the other and precipitates a richer and more substantive appreciation for the experience of pet bereavement including the historical, social, psychological, and emotional influences on the events surrounding the experience. The comments on human bereavement are based on both published reports and anecdotal evidence supplied from study participants when asked to compare their reactions, feelings and sense of loss in a variety of situations involving both pets and humans.

The geographic region of subject selection was the New York metropolitan area. The participant observational studies were conducted at pet bereavement support group meetings at The New York Animal Medical Center. Individual interviews were conducted with pet owners, pet grief counselors, pet funeral workers, and an author on the subject of pet loss. Focus group discussions were held at various sites in Brooklyn and consisted of various groupings of pet owners suffering the loss of a pet.

*Participant Observation*

At an earlier stage in this project, participant observation was performed through a pet bereavement support group conducted biweekly on Saturdays at the New York Animal Medical Center in Manhattan for a total of 2.5 hours per session. Six meetings were attended from February 11, 1995 through April 22, 1995 with each meeting consisting of 9-15 participants. In total, there were 36 participants, including the group leader and myself, with 20 of the 36 participants attending two or more meetings. The

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gender breakdown of the group was 27 women and nine men. Participant ages ranged from 20 to 70 years. The socio-economic class of participants ranged from working class to upper middle class.

*Interviews*

The interview materials significantly supplemented the ethnographic data gathered though participant observation in the pet bereavement support group meetings. The interviews of pet owners were solicited through postings placed on bulletin boards in all eleven buildings within Tudor City, a residential community in midtown Manhattan in Spring, 1995. These interviews were conducted by telephone using a standardized data collection tool and lasted from 20 to 60 minutes. The 10 participants consisted of six women and four men ranging from 26 through 55 years of age.

In-person interviews were conducted during the Summer, 1997 with three grief counselors who provide general psychotherapeutic counseling in human bereavement, with an additional area of practice specializing in pet bereavement. In addition, interviews were conducted during the annual celebration of pet memorials, September 14, 1997 at a pet funeral home in Brooklyn. These interviews included the two directors of the funeral home and three pet owners who brought their animals to the event.

*Focus Groups*

In addition to the participant observation and interview research, six focus groups conducted in Spring/Summer, 1997 aimed at capturing a greater representative sample of New York City pet owners, including those with families and various social supports and a great array of variables across pet ownership and pet bereavement experiences. The focus groups were held at sites in Brooklyn including: a recreation room at a nursing

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home in Cobble Hill, a family center in Brooklyn Heights, and a community room in a Carroll Gardens public housing development. Participants were recruited by sign postings similar to the interview solicitations and placed on bulletin boards and lobbies of local buildings advertising for those who have lost a pet within one year of the posted date. The recruitment was generic at first with three advertised dates. Telephone confirmation for attendance was requested and confidentiality assured by accepting only the name of the pet for each participant. Each focus group included three to six participants. The initial group compositions were diverse to capture the full essence of the pet bereavement experience.

Based on results from the initial three focus groups, subgroups of the population were identified for further exploration and analysis on the topic. The remaining three focus groups consisted of: parents of children experiencing pet loss, elderly people living alone, and owners of various pet types.

The main advantage of the focus group for this study was the opportunity to observe a large amount of interaction on a topic in a limited period of time. Though focus groups are fundamentally unnatural settings for specific discussion, they allow control for setting up the homogeneity of the participants, thus eliciting more specific information on defined concerns around a given topic. The very nature of the focus group explicitly implies some level of social support. Thus, the focus group effect resulted in the production of data or ideas previously uncovered. This confounding variable will be identified and analyzed further with those who have participated in other types of bereavement intervention.

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Sample Characteristics

The study sample includes a total of 81 pet owners: 36 pet support group participants; 10 telephone interviews with individual pet owners; 32 focus group participants; and three in-person interviews with pet owners. In addition, the research included interviews with three grief counselors and two pet funeral directors.

The majority of the 81 pet owners in this study had lost their pet within six months of their participation (82%), but a few had suffered losses several months to several years prior to participation in the study (18%). The pets consisted of: 41 cats, 30 dogs, 6 birds, 2 rabbits 1 guinea pig, and 1 hamster. The length of time the owner had the pet varied, with a fairly even spread up to 21 years (median 11 years), with 37 of the total 81-sample population currently owning other pets. The death had been sudden in 26 of 81 cases; it involved illness or euthanasia in 60 cases, an accident in five cases, and a pet lost or stolen in three cases. Forty-seven members of the study population were single, widowed, or divorced and living alone.

The sample group does not attempt to represent the general population of pet owners, but may represent urban pet owners. The limitation of the sample is that it does not represent the bereavement of a child who loses a pet, except from the perspective of the parent. This is significant since the role of the pet in a family may be quite different for each family member and the family as a unit. The family unit may also provide the social support and define death for the child in ways not easily interpreted by the parents or others involved in the loss. Thus, the study aimed at capturing a reasonably representative sample of pet owners, yet due to a small study population, was limited in its ability to reflect the full experience of pet bereavement upon the bereaved.

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Measures

The tools employed for this research include a 40-item questionnaire used for pet owner interviews, a moderator's guide for the focus group discussion and informal question guides for the grief counselor and pet funeral worker interviews.

The 40-item questionnaire designed for this study attempted to gain general knowledge on the individual experience of pet ownership and the subsequent bereavement following the pet loss. The questionnaire was used to introduce topics for discussion, rather than a preset list of response categories, with a few face sheet items such as age, marital status and number in household. All participants were current or previous pet owners and responded to a flyer requesting participation from pet owners who had suffered the loss of a pet.

Information was obtained from the pet bereavement support group by actively, and anonymously, participating in the group. Notes were taken briefly during each meeting and extensive summaries were written immediately following each session. The field notes consisted of descriptions of the conversations and content of the meeting. Data was also collected tracking group membership and types of pets.

There is a great deal of overlap in the results of both the participant observation and the interviews. The bereavement support group allowed identification of trends and patterns of the combined experiences of those who had lost a pet. The interviews, on the other hand, helped obtain the substance of the experience in greater detail. For example, the interviews allowed for specific questions on the individual experience of loss, impact of the deceased pet on the pet owner's life, and the reasons why some pet owners didn't participate in or seek out bereavement support groups or professional counseling.

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The focus group discussions utilized a moderator's guide, which was designed to provide direction for group discussion. A list of general questions was developed by modifying the interview guide and then transforming questions into appropriate groupings of topics to guide the discussion from the general to the more specific. The guide addressed issues of social values and experiences of pet ownership, the experience of pet death, reactions from others, comparison of the bereavement experience of pet death to other deaths, and the social context of participants' bereavement experiences. This information provides a contextual basis for further analysis of the individual and collective experiences of pet bereavement.

The goal of the researcher as moderator was to create a nonthreatening environment in which group members felt free to express themselves openly and without concern of ridicule or criticism. Reassurances were offered regarding participant anonymity; respect for all opinions, regardless of how different and unusual; and empathy for the respondents was paramount. The groups were informed that the sessions were tape recorded for note-taking purposes only. Anyone uncomfortable with being recorded was encouraged to voice their concern and offered the opportunity to leave. None of the participants had concerns with being audio taped. An overview of the agenda/issues for discussion and the purpose of the group discussions for the research study were provided. I also described my role as moderator as helping to guide discussion and provide all group participants an opportunity to contribute. Ground rules for discussion were reviewed and included: limiting individual discussion to short intervals, only one person to speak at a time, and discouragement of negative comments or replies to other participant's responses. All logistical questions and comments were addressed prior to

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the beginning of the formal discussion.

Background Variables

*Demographic Information*

Questions requesting information on age, gender, marital status, and number of individuals in the household, etc., were assessed in interviews of bereaved pet owners and through focus group discussions.

*Pet Information*

Age of deceased pet, cause of death, type of pet, the number of additional pets in the household and the relationship with the pet were also assessed during bereaved pet owner interviews and focus group discussions.

*Social Support Systems*

Information on the role of confiding, access to support groups or significant relationships in which the bereaved pet owner could confide, the role of family support and prevalence to seek out formal counseling during time of bereavement were assessed through interviews and focus group discussions, as well as with interviews of grief counselors.

*Funeral Practices*

Types of funeral arrangements, if any, were assessed, along with interviews of those in the pet funeral industry to examine the issues surrounding the rituals and rites of passage available and utilized by bereaved pet owners.

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# CHAPTER IV

# ATTACHMENT & BONDING

## The Moral Status of Animals

In our society, there is a tendency for human grief reactions subsequent to the loss of a pet to not be taken seriously as a legitimate, non pathological phenomenon. This tendency fails to acknowledge a fundamental understanding people often share but few articulate: that legal and social practices notwithstanding, animals are far more than mere property (Kay, Nieburg, and Kutscher 1984, 22).

Philosophical debate on the moral status of animals is not new. Many illustrious names, from Aristotle through Descartes to Bentham in the nineteenth century, have considered this issue (Singer 1990, 24). The contemporary debate, however, differs in two principal ways. In the first place, the volume of literature available has increased dramatically. The treatment of animals is now taken seriously as a mainstream branch of applied ethics to be examined along with other moral questions such as abortion and euthanasia in academic and legal settings as well as in popular literature.

Secondly, much of this recent literature has challenged the widespread assumption that animals have an inferior moral status to humans. Since the nineteenth century, most legislation affecting animals has assumed that, while humans have an obligation to avoid inflicting unnecessary suffering on animals, we are entitled to use them for our benefit. This itself was progress since before then there was a widespread belief, influenced by the Christian tradition of Man's dominion over nonhuman nature, that animals existed for the use of humans and that we owed no moral obligation to them (Singer 1990, 185-210). Such a view sanctioned what we would now regard as unbelievable acts of cruelty.

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Gradually, through the work of intellectuals such as Bentham and Darwin, humanitarian activists, and a general change in the social climate, some of the worst excesses of animal abuse were eliminated. Indeed, by the early part of the twentieth century, the framework of modern animal welfare legislation was in place. The animal protection movement remained active but, with few exceptions, the debate was largely constrained within the framework provided by the moral orthodoxy. That is, there was no sustained challenge to the view that only unnecessary suffering should be avoided, only occasional disputes as to what constituted unnecessary suffering (Singer 1990).

We are only beginning to understand the protean variety of ways in which companion animals contribute to our lives. Once seen as little more than misplaced sentimentality, the pet-human bond is now being understood as a powerful tie that is explained in surprising ways. The value of companion animals for human physical health, mental health, emotional health, and social health are well understood. Through these new insights, we are gaining a new and much deeper appreciation of what philosophers call the instrumental value of animals in society.

It is often forgotten that animals, and most dramatically, companion animals also enjoy a moral status, possess intrinsic value, and are legitimate objects of moral concern and attention. It is well understood that it is easy to recognize the moral status of animals intellectually, and even artistically. But it is much harder to give a philosophical and rational expression of this sense of animal value, which seems to be simply sloppy anthropomorphic sentimentality to many people. This is something humans feel intuitively, and which is poignantly felt and expressed emotionally when humans grieve for pets. It is the expression of the bond between people and their pets, and the

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subsequent grief over its loss, that is the essence of this research on the social construction of bereavement. Thus, this study focuses on the legitimacy of the pet owner as bereaved and attempts to explore how the social practices of death and bereavement fit current moral intuitions of human-pet relationships.

Defining a Bond

The concept of forming attachments or bonding is not exclusive to people. In fact, a large body of literature exists on attachment theory as it applies to both humans and animals. Attachment was first investigated by studying the relationships between mothers and infants in humans, nonhuman primates, and other species of animals (Lagoni, Butler, and Hetts 1994, 6). Further studies have shown, however, that social attachments also form between individuals other than mothers and infants. For instance, attachments form between members of the same species (conspecifics) as well as between individuals of different species (heterospecifics).

The basis for comprehending the dynamics of human bereavement after the death of a pet lies in one's understanding of fundamental notions about relationships and relationship behavior. Hinde (1986) has suggested that relationships can be best understood as a series of interactions--verbal, social, emotional, and behavioral. Such interactions have meaning, most of which are based on one's perceptions of the relationship. Relationships are also characterized by commitment, involve both social and emotional intimacy, and are reciprocal in nature (43).

Bereavement, then, is perhaps most cogently delineated by attachment theory, and for this we refer to the ethological model of John Bowlby. Bowlby's model (1980), initially rooted in a psychoanalytic paradigm, extended in time to include the socio-

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cultural perspective, the cognitive model with its links to information-processing and control theory, developmental theory and neuropsychology, and the physiological components of species-specific behaviors. As such, it is, in this writer's estimate, the most all-encompassing and salient purview of the human condition and of the particular aspect of that condition known as loss.

In <u>Attachment and Loss: Loss, Sadness and Depression</u>, Bowlby outlines the conceptual framework of attachment theory. He states that attachment behavior is "any form of behavior that results in a person attaining or retaining proximity to some other differentiated and preferred individual" (1980, 39). These behaviors, under optimal conditions, may consist of only glances and greetings, but when there is threat of loss, may also be accompanied by following, clinging, calling, and crying. All such behaviors are at least as important to the individual as feeding and sexual behavior, and this appears to be true across species. It is instinctive and highly goal-oriented behavior, mediated by other behavioral systems in a homeostatic structure. When there is a discrepancy in the homeostasis (e.g., threat of loss), goals are corrected or intensified based on the "feedback loop" (Bowlby 1980, 42). Bowlby maintains that "many of the most intense emotions arise during the initiation, the maintenance, the disruption, and the renewal of attachment relationships . . . [and that] the psychology and psychopathology of emotion are found to be in large part the psychology and psychopathology of affectional bonds" (1980, 40).

According to Bowlby, certain variables or conditions affect the course of mourning. One such important variable is the identity and role of the person lost, i.e., if the relationship with that person is exceptionally close and the emotional quality of the attachment creates anxiety. When the prospect of loss or separation seems imminent, the

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bereaved is more likely to experience intense grieving. The causes and circumstances of the loss are other important variables. These include such factors as whether the death was expected, whether it necessitated a prolonged period of nursing by the bereaved, whether the death resulted in bodily distortion or mutilation, how information regarding the death reached the bereaved, and the relationship that existed between the deceased and bereaved in the days and weeks immediately prior to the death (Bowlby 1980).

As an ethologist, Bowlby is, of course, interested in the interplay of genetics, environment, the neurophysiological, and the intrapsychic. His interest in attachment behaviors and affectional bonds is not restricted to the species homo sapiens, but extends to encompass other species as well. This study reviews Bowlby's work on effects of attachment from the human and animal perspective. Thus, with Bowlby's theories we come closest to the possibility of cross-species attachment, of unique bonds, as with humans and pets.

There are several ways to conceptualize how attachments form as they relate to the human-animal bond. For example, one theory has suggested that attachment is influenced by the length of time people spend with their pets as well as the activities they share with their pets, affect toward pets, knowledge about pets and their care, and behavioral responsiveness toward pets (Melson 1990). Miller and Lago (1990) hypothesized that attachment is based on affectionate companionship, equal family-member status, mutual physical activities, and dominance and submissiveness factors. Ainsworth et al. (1978) defined attachment as an affectional tie that endures over time, and the Templer Pet Attitude Inventory focused on love and interaction, pets in the home, and joy of pet ownership as factors indicative of attachment (Templer et al. 1981). Estep and Hetts

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(1992) postulated that an attachment forms when an individual acts to maintain proximity to the attachment object and shows signs of separation distress at involuntary separation.

The attachments felt between pet owners and animals vary widely. Those who own animals for purely practical reasons; i.e., protection, may accept the pet's death without great sorrow. Their animals filled important needs, but the emotional bonds may not have been particularly strong. At the other extreme are people who, perhaps because of the extent of personal experiences with companion animals, or the limitations of their social networks, have what may be considered "strong" attachments to their pets. These people frequently see their pets as extensions of themselves, and project their own attitudes and feelings onto the animal. Their pet's death may represent their own demise, or it may signal the end of one of their most meaningful life relationships, thus the grief reactions can be extreme and may require counseling in order to heal.

Therein lies one of the more important issues in understanding why pet owners often behave as they do when a beloved pet dies. In effect, the impact of the death of a pet on an owner may be experienced as similar to the impact of the death of any other family member or significant other. As expressed repeatedly in the research, the behavior of the survivor after the death of a human being and the behavior of an owner after the death of a pet may be virtually indistinguishable. This comparison may be offered by pet owners because of the intensity of the feelings of grief at the time of pet loss, or loss of a significant human may be the only point of reference for most bereaved people in general.

A History of Companion Animals

It is commonly assumed that the use of animals for companionship is a relatively modern Western phenomenon. In reality, this form of pet-keeping is of considerable

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antiquity and may pre-date the development of farming or the true domestication of animals. In many subsistence hunting and gathering and simple horticultural societies, young wild mammals and birds were captured, tamed, and kept as pets. These animals appear to have served little or no utilitarian purpose and, although they often belonged to species that were regularly hunted for food, they were never, in the normal course of events, killed or eaten (Companion Animals in Society 1988).

There is no direct means of establishing whether the hunting cultures of the Stone Age kept wild animals as pets. But, since their overall lifestyle was essentially similar to that of their more recent counterparts, this is likely to have been the case. That man's earliest relationship with species such as the domestic dog was an affectionate one is also suggested by at least one important archaeological discovery. In 1978, at a late Palaeolithic site in northern Israel, a tomb was uncovered in which the remains of a human and a dog had been buried together roughly 12,000 years ago. Whoever presided over the original burial appears to have arranged the dead person's hand on the animal's shoulder, as if to emphasize the bonds that existed between these two individuals during life. Several archaeologists and anthropologists have also speculated that Stone Age pet-keeping provided the base from which animal domestication and husbandry subsequently evolved (Zeuner 1963, 14).

Reports of pet-keeping among aboriginal people date back to the earliest days of European colonialism. Explorers and missionaries who visited the New World during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries described the Indians keeping pet racoons, monkeys, peccaries, tapirs, wolves, bears, moose, various small rodents, and innumerable species of wild birds for companionship. Although offered substantial

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payment, the Indians often refused to part with their pets, and sometimes became distraught with grief when the animals were forcibly taken away from them. The vast majority of these early accounts express amusement or astonishment at the degree of affection demonstrated by these people for their companion animals; a clear indication that in Europe at this time such profound attachments between people and animals were rare or nonexistent. Indeed, in England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, pet-keeping among the general population seems to have been regarded with some suspicion, and it was even used, on occasions, as the basis for allegations of witchcraft. Many of the individuals who were brought to trial and executed in England for the crime of witchcraft were incriminated by the fact that they kept, and were seen to display affection for, one or more animal companions or "familiars" (Companion Animals in Society 1988).

The nobility at this time were largely immune to this degree of public censure, and many of them kept companion animals--chiefly birds and small lap dogs--in profusion. Nevertheless, their extravagant pet-keeping habits were sometimes the subject of caustic remarks by writers and commentators of the period. This association between pets and the aristocracy is part of a long historical tradition which dated back to the great civilizations of antiquity. The murals and papyri of ancient Egypt, for example, indicate that the Pharaohs and many of their high-ranking officials kept dogs, cats, and various tame wild animals for company. These animals were given personal names, treated royally, and evidently regarded with affection. The wealthier citizens of ancient Greece and Rome were also ardent pet-lovers, and classical literature abounds with sentimental eulogies to favorite dogs, birds and horses (Kay, Nieburg, and Kutscher 1984, 185). In

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China, during the twelfth century A.D. pet dogs became an Imperial obsession. Pekinese or Lion dogs were the principal objects of this infatuation, and at the height of their popularity during the eighteenth century Ch'ing dynasty these animals enjoyed a status unrivaled by any variety of pet before or since. Puppies were suckled at the breasts of Imperial wet-nurses; adult dogs were given princely rank and were permanently attended by a retinue of palace eunuchs (Serpell 1986).

Pet-keeping never appears to have gained much favor outside the ruling classes in China. In Europe, however, toward the end of the seventeenth century, companion animal ownership began to spread into the newly emergent urban middle-class. This expansion of the pet population coincided with the so-called Age of Enlightenment, during which the anthropocentric and exploitative attitudes toward living creatures that had dominated medieval and Renaissance thought were gradually replaced by a growing sympathy and enthusiasm for animals and nature. It is probable that the close, affectionate relationships that existed between seventeenth and eighteenth century moralists and their pets played a part in bringing about this change of heart (Companion Animals in Society 1988).

Within the last century the growth in popularity of companion animals has continued and accelerated, and this historical trend probably reflects demographic and social changes. Although companion animal ownership is clearly not just a product of material affluence, it is likely that rising standards of living over the past fifty or so years have helped to encourage the growth of Western pet populations. It is also possible that the decline in birth rate and family size over the same period has created a need for alternative outlets for parental nurturance and care. Above all, important changes

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resulting in positive attitudes toward pets seem to have developed. During the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the vast majority of people lived and worked in rural settings, and were involved daily with the management, exploitation, and slaughter of domestic animals. Animals were regarded as the servants or slaves of humanity, and sentimental concern of affection for animals was strongly discouraged. During the last three hundred years, however, the bulk of the population has moved into towns or cities, and perhaps only 2 to 3 per cent still work on the land or have any direct involvement with livestock production or slaughter. This shift from rural to urban life seems to have cultivated a less utilitarian and more sympathetic attitude to animals in general, and to pets in particular (Serpell 1986).

Factors Influencing the Formation of the Human-Animal Bond

People can become attached to any animal, whether domestic or wild. The most common companion animals include dogs, cats, horses, pigs, goats, birds, fish, snakes and other reptiles, as well as small mammals such as guinea pigs, rabbits, mice, and hamsters. The strong attachments that people form with these animals are due to several factors including anthropomorphized behaviors, companion rather than utilitarian roles, easily misinterpreted communication signals, and living conditions which allow animals to share daily routines and leisure time activities with humans. Thus, no one factor accounts for attachment strengths. For example, although most birds are kept in cages, some can mimic human speech, a factor which gives, at least, the perception of shared communication. Also, although horses are historically thought of as utilitarian animals, they have the longest lifespan of any companion animal, thus creating the potential to increase the development of strong attachments.

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The following factors were identified by study participants and help provide a better understanding of the influences on human-animal attachment. They include anthropomorphism, neoteny, allelomimetic behavior, social support and the role of the pet in the family.

*Anthropomorphism*

Attachments between species are more likely to form when each specie is familiar with the communication systems of the other, thus creating opportunities for mutual communication, social interaction, and influence on one another's behavior. These conditions potentially increase the degree of mutual attachment. Familiarity occurs when either the communication signals between two species are similar or humans are very knowledgeable and well informed about the species-typical behaviors and communication signals of another species.

A seeming paradox is suggested by the fact that strong attachments often form between people and companion animals, even though the communication systems of humans do not closely resemble those of dogs, cats, birds or horses. This apparent contradiction may be explained, in part, by the fact that many pet owners, who are not well informed about the species-typical or normal behavior patterns of their pets, tend to anthropomorphize their companion animals and thus perceive that mutual communication occurs. When people anthropomorphize, they give nonhumans or objects human-like characteristics and traits. Human emotions, thoughts, and behaviors are thus often attributed to animals despite the fact that little or no scientific evidence exists to support the presence of such characteristics. Anthropomorphism may be an important variable in the formation of the human-animal bond.

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Anthropomorphism was evident in most of the interviews and support group discussions, as people often identified the human-like characteristics of their pets. This was demonstrated by one woman who said "my baby was so upset when she had to stay in the hospital" and "when he barked like that, it meant he was upset and needed to be loved." Another woman referred to her cat as her "catchild" since her cat was "not just an animal, but really a person."

In another instance, a support group member who had postponed an out-of-town business trip for weeks, due to a serious illness of her elderly cat, was finally forced to leave town. Ironically, the day she left, the cat died. She remarked during a session that it was typical of her cat to wait to die until after she was not around. She felt that the cat knew his death would be easier for her to bear if he waited until she had gone. She spoke of her cat as "considerate" of her feelings. In reality, however, no scientific evidence has suggested that animals, or humans for that matter, choose the time of their death.

I observed and heard many accounts of owners ascribing human characteristics to their pets, attributing a level of understanding, empathy, and mutuality one almost never finds in human relationships, except under ideal circumstances, for in a person, such qualities would be superhuman. Anthropomorphism extended to disposition of the animal's remains. As a rule, ashes were kept, or the pet was buried in an animal cemetery, sometimes with prayers, religious medals, and ceremony. Some owners speculated about the afterlife of their companion animals and wondered whether their pets might return in another form.

*Neoteny*

Babies of many species (even humans) possess physical features called "neotenic"

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or infantile characteristics. These characteristics make all young animals appear "cute" and elicit care-giving responses from some human adults. Neotenic characteristics common in puppies, kittens, and other infant animals include large, round eyes; rounded foreheads; and shortened muzzles or noses. For some breeds of dogs (e.g. Pomeranians) and cats (e.g. Persians), neotenic characteristics persist into adulthood. Humans have, either consciously or unconsciously, selectively bred domestic dogs and cats (to some degree) for these neotenic characteristics (Lagoni, Butler, and Hetts 1994, 12).

Some animals also possess neotenic behavioral characteristics. Compared to their wild ancestors, for example, domestic dogs are often described as neotenic wolves, in large part because of their easily elicited play behaviors and frequent or relatively high-pitched vocalizations. In adulthood, cats display fewer neotenic characteristics than do dogs, possibly contributing to the widespread, but not altogether accurate, belief that cats can "take care of themselves."

There were several examples of pet owners ascribing these "childlike" qualities to their pets throughout the study. One woman who described her attachment to her deceased dog by giving details of the dog's "baby-like" qualities, e.g., "crying (whining) when he wanted to be held" and "preferring to be spoon-fed like a baby." Another pet owner described her Persian cat who had recently passed away from a terribly long bout with cancer as frail and "tiny--just like a real baby" with "big baby-blue eyes." A bereaved cat owner described her older cat's behavior during his final months as "even more childlike than when he was a kitten"; "very demanding, always wanting to be held; he even 'cried' when he wanted attention." The majority of pet owners identified their pets as more of surrogate children, rather than companion animals.

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*Allelomimetic Behaviors*

Many of the species of social animals who live in groups find it advantageous, in some situations, to mimic the behaviors of other group members. For example, if one individual senses danger and begins to flee, another member will probably follow. This behavior frequently occurs even if the animal has not yet become aware of the danger. For example, because the human family constitutes the domestic dog's social group, dogs sometimes at least appear to mimic human behavior. When this mimicking occurs, it contributes to people's tendencies to anthropomorphize their companion animals. When pet owners believe that a great deal of mutual communication and understanding is occurring, their attachments tend to be strengthened. In this research, dogs were cited most often by pet owners as showing allelomimetic or mimicking behaviors.

Specific examples of allelomimetic behavior among study participants include a few pet owners who described their dog's "singing" (howling) to music on the radio. Others discussed how their pets would respond to them by "talking back" (barking or meowing) when spoken to. The most interesting aspect of allelomimetic behavior was noted among the few bird owners in the study. These pet owners expressed a deepened sense of attachment with their pets due to the bird's ability to "speak" to them. They claimed to be very aware of what their birds were trying to "tell them" with their mimicking behavior, and one pet owner described how her bird used "certain phrases" for specific times or events. These owners felt that not only did they miss the physical presence of their pets, but they perceived the "verbal communication" as an enhanced benefit to pet ownership, and felt this increased their sense of companionship, and subsequent feelings of loss.

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One woman in the support group described her dog as very "polite" because he would only eat when she sat down to dinner. This behavior, the owner believed, showed that her dog was "caring and gentle." Because she found these qualities so endearing, they contributed to her love and attachment to the animal. In reality, however, species of social animals are likely to do what the rest of their social group is doing. Thus, the dog's eating behavior may have been socially facilitated by her own eating behavior and unrelated to the human concept of politeness.

*Pets as Social Support*

Katcher and Beck (1983) have proposed that humans have had a long association with all living creatures in the environment, but that only recently such interactions have been sharply curtailed because of rapid industrialization. Furthermore, as previously discussed, opportunities to nurture fellow humans have also declined as households have become smaller and more isolated from extended family members. Companion animals help relieve some of these deficiencies by providing contact with nature and the chance to nurture living creatures. Brickel (1979) has proposed an explanation consistent with social learning theory, which is that interaction with companion animals is mutually reinforcing, and is thus sustained.

Many factors contributing to the formation of bonds between people and their pets are related to social support. As one interviewee stated, "pets give an oasis of unqualified love and acceptance in an otherwise demanding and critical world." Study participants frequently claimed that pets can be "truer friends than people." As one regular member of the support group stated at each meeting, "My dog was the only true source of love in my life." Often, obedience and respect from a pet provide a pet owner with an increased sense of self-worth, adding new meaning to people's lives. This bond has a dimension that transcends interpersonal

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transcends interpersonal relationships, as wonderful as they can be. Pet owners reported opening up completely to their pets, and receiving an inner sense of "joy and strength" at being so adored in return.

Bowen (1978) conceptualizes the family as a system in that family members are all interrelated and comprise, by their relationships as well as by their individual existence, a system or a whole. As early as 1965, he wrote that the family emotional system "at times . . . may include members of the extended family network and even nonrelatives and pets" (Bowen 1965, 59) It has been very evident that pets have a very significant role in the family system. Relationships with pets can be close, enduring relationships that are highly valued by family members. An affinity for pets usually begins in childhood and tends to grow stronger over time (Poresky et al. 1989). Pets serve many other useful purposes in family life: as a source of fun, recreation, exercise, or physical security and protection, as a catalyst for establishing human contact and interaction with others, and as a means of teaching children responsibility and a respect for life.

Apparently, well over half of all American homes have at least one pet in residence, and in a study of 1,500 pet owners, 99 percent considered their pets to be members of the family (Voith 1985). This phenomenon is not limited to small companion animals. Eighty percent of horse owners queried also consider these pets to be a part of their family. In light of these findings, it is not surprising that some families will continue to own a pet which exhibits serious behavioral problems, in spite of the extreme inconvenience (Voith 1981b).

One woman in the focus group identified her pets as her "true family" referring to

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her seven male cats as her "boys" and her six female cats as "girls." She told the group that she was "happily divorced for twenty years and she "lives with seven guys now and never sheds a tear over any of them." She then asked the rest of the female focus group members "How many of you can say that?" The group members laughed in agreement with her. From all the observations and research related to pets in the family, it is clear that pets serve a variety of emotional needs of family members from childhood through old age.

People and their pets, as one woman said, "eat, sleep, and breathe" together. In other words, like human family members, pets and their owners live and recreate in each other's company, a fact substantiated by the research. Evidence of this was expressed as follows: pet owners took their pets on local errands and long-distance trips, exercised daily, and often played with toys with their pets. Research, in fact, has shown that frequent contact may be the only requirement for the formation of attachments between people and animals (Beck and Katcher 1983, 94). In fact, pet owners in the study tended to make friends with neighbors and others who are also pet owners. Dog owners in the study remarked how they missed their "dog-walking friends" since their dogs have died. Other study participants developed friendships by sharing pet-sitting responsibilities with other pet owners.

Some pet owners associate their pets with relaxation and the "good times" in life, others feel attachment to companion animals based on the "bad times" they have endured together. For example, many study participants credit their companion animals with getting them through a time of divorce, the death of a friend or family member, a serious illness, moving, and/or turning points in their lives and lifestyles. It was common for pet

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owners to make comments such as "I wouldn't have made it without Fluffy," or "Shadow was my reason for getting up in the morning." These comments allow one to look into the private lives of pet owners and view the historical significance of their human-pet relationships. One interviewee stated that "companionship is an underestimate" of the relationship she shared with her cat; she "didn't have any words to adequately describe it."

Many other life circumstances tend to bond animals and people together in significant ways. One example is people who are attached to animals that they believe they have rescued. Examples of rescued pets among study participants included strays who were given homes, seriously ill or injured animals who were nursed back to health, and unwanted pets who were saved from death at shelters through timely adoptions.

Other examples from the study include the elderly pet owners who usually had a particular pet for many years. The pet has often "suffered" through old age with them. As pets become older, and often when they are approaching death, pet owners claim that their pets become more affectionate and their relationship grows considerably. In return, people elevate them to positions of great personal value. One older woman commented on how her cat "grew old with tremendous dignity." With the inevitable death of the pet, this personal oasis disappears, causing the feelings of vulnerability, extreme loneliness, grief and extended bereavement. Frequently the pet is a final link with significant others in the pet owner's life. Perhaps the animal was the pet of a spouse or significant other and thus represents an emotional link with the deceased. When this pet dies, the emotional link dies with it. Losing such a bond, as discussed earlier, can intensify the grief experience, especially when that person relates this loss to other significant losses in

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his or her life.

Consequences of the Formation of a Human-Animal Bond

Assessing pet owners' level of attachment to pets, based on stereotypes such as age or gender results in grossly, and probably embarrassingly, incorrect conclusions. The pet owners with whom I had contact through the bereavement support groups, interviews, and focus group discussions included men and women of all ages and walks of life. Pet owners run the gamut from the stereotypical elderly woman living alone with several cats to a middle-aged, strongly independent and successful businessman, who considered his 14-year-old dog to be his "God-given child." No matter who the pet owners are, it is certain that the dynamics of their particular human-animal relationship influence both the pets' and the pet owners' lives. Sometimes this influence is positive, and sometimes it has more negative effects.

*Consequences from the Human Perspective*

The relationship between people and their pets has become a popular subject for scientific study. The work of Boris Levinson, which began in the early 1960s, is often cited as the impetus for serious inquiry into these relationships. In 1961, Dr. Levinson, a child psychiatrist, presented a paper on the benefits of a dog's presence in a counseling setting. He found that several of the more withdrawn children, who had difficulty communicating with him during counseling sessions, easily made friends with his dog, Jingles, to the point of ignoring Levinson during their sessions. After this discovery Levinson began to make use of Jingles presence as a social "icebreaker" and to provide a therapeutic basis for more open communication (1961).

In the ensuing years since Levinson's pioneering work, a myriad of studies have

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been conducted. The primary goal of these studies has been to examine the effects of companion animals on various aspects of human psychological and physiological health and well-being. The rewards of this research have been encouraging. The physiological benefits of pet ownership that have been discovered for some human populations are well documented.

Physiologically, greeting an animal, speaking to it, and stroking it is known to decrease humans' heart and respiratory rates (Gantt 1972; Lynch, Fregin, and Mackie 1974). Decreases in blood pressure while petting animals have also been noted, as have increased survival rates of persons discharged from coronary units (Katcher 1981). Further, pets have been shown to decrease depression in the elderly (Brickel 1979; Corson, Corson, and Gwynee 1977), to increase interaction with the environment in autistic children, and to provide consolation, reduce stress, and expedite adaptation to traumatic events in adolescents who use pets as transitional objects (Poresky et al. 1989).

Bowlby (1980) outlines the core basis of attachment, but other writers, primarily veterinarians, have explored the question: Why are animals so important to us? Friedmann et al. (1983) identify at least seven functions of animal companions which decrease morbidity in humans: "companionship, something to care for, something to keep one busy, something to touch and fondle, a relaxing focus of attention, safety, and exercise."

Thus, from both physiological and psychosocial perspectives, animals enhance the human experience. Children enjoy meaningful exchanges with pets (Beck and Katcher 1983). Pets also "exhibit a preverbal attachment attitude that satisfies the human's repressed need for nurturance and trust" (Stewart et al. 1985, 192). Furthermore, in

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accordance with Bowlby's attachment theories, pets are cited as "unconditionally receptive as objects of attachment" (1980, 392), and as possessing the nonevaluative nature which provides assurances for stable object relationships in humans (Stewart et al. 1985).

Rynearson concurs with Bowlby in asserting that the human-animal bond is "based upon our commonality as animals and our mutual drive for attachment . . . it has a neurophysiologic basis and is expressed through the predictable behaviors of caretaking and relational proximity . . . it is shared by all social animals" (1978, 143). Poresky et al. (1989) maintain that animal companion bonding refers to a relationship that parallels Ainsworth et al. concept of interpersonal attachment as an affective tie that one person forms to another, binding them together in space and enduring over time, often creating valuable life experiences (1978).

A common theme among support group members and interviewees is the valuable experience of pet ownership. When interviewees were asked what effect their pet had on their lives, or the experience of bereavement, the answers were enlightening. One woman who went to great lengths caring for her dying kitten said she felt she would make a wonderful mother since she "realized how loyal, dedicated and selfless she could be to someone else."

Another woman described her relationship with a blind cat she adopted. She said it was "a wonderful experience to learn how to develop a relationship when the other member of that relationship couldn't communicate or see you." Despite these limitations, this cat turned into a very special and loving companion. She said she learned how to "appreciate disabilities and how to share a meaningful relationship with another on a very

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basic level." One man described how he learned how "short life is and how every day is a gift." He learned not to take time for granted, "especially the limited time we have with our pets."

Some support group members described how their pets taught them about sacrifice, responsibility, loyalty, and most important, unconditional love, "something they never experienced in other adult human relationships." Others spoke of how life with their pet helped them never feel lonely and how difficult it was to deal with the loneliness of life after they were gone. First time pet owners were often surprised to discover the wonderful experience of pet ownership. Many expressed a greater awareness and a new appreciation of other animals.

As one interviewee described, pets can provide a "dress rehearsal" for dealing with issues of aging and death for themselves and others. Parents of children grieving the loss of their pets claimed that the death of a pet gave them the opportunity to teach children the meaning of death and religion as well as help support their children in their own experiences of grief. It is interesting to note that young married couples in the study group often identified getting a pet as a precursor for parenthood, as a way of testing their abilities to learn responsibility for providing nurturance, kindness, affection, and real concern for another living being. Pets also respond eagerly to care and attention and provide a socially acceptable outlet for touching, a crucial human need.

In addition to the affection that pets readily accept from their human companions, many study participants discussed how their pets also gave them affection and love. One elderly woman interviewed described how her cat would come to her bed each morning and gently stroke her face with her paw to wake her. Another support group member

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discussed how his dog would "roll up" in his lap when he was saddened through his wife's recent illness, showing him "tremendous care and comfort." Many pet owners described the "affections" of their pets, including bird owners who would teach their birds to repeat words of affection, such as "I love you," and claimed the birds always said "the nicest things when they really needed it."

As all participating pet owners repeatedly testified, the gains of ownership exceed any deficits or detractions. When pet owners were interviewed regarding the difficult aspects of pet ownership, they all cited the work involved with caring for pets, but immediately followed that by saying that it really was no trouble and they would gladly do it again. This included the self-sacrifices made during pet illness, as well as the financial and emotional expense.

Sacrifices made for pets exceed personal needs when a pet is in danger or ill; there is a great dedication to pet's welfare. One male member of the support group said he "considered it a privilege to care for his special cat that had given him 14 years of so much happiness." This man described how he left work for 2 weeks to care for his dying cat and didn't sleep or eat well in order to be available for his cat's needs "24 hours a day." Pet owners in this study also commented on how committed they were to animals, and animal welfare. They often have friends who are animal lovers and pet owners, with whom they share their feelings/beliefs. Thus, pets are active members of human social systems, contributing to the ongoing social dynamics of their owners and, to varying degrees, influencing the social equilibrium and stability of each pet owner's life.

Studies indicate, then, that a reciprocal relationship exists between people and animals, with animals satisfying human needs in several areas (e.g., physiological,

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psychosocial, religious). Beyond that, it has been shown that attachment behaviors are exhibited by both species in many human-animal bonds, even when these bonds are "conventional." Harris (1983) claims that many clients in his veterinary practice exhibit "nonconventional" human-animal bonds which may be "defined as, but not limited to, insistence on a special relationship with a companion animal or over dependence on a companion animal . . . (Such) bonds comprise 35-40% of clients" (2).

The human-animal bond can have various outcomes for those involved in the relationships, especially for those pet owners exhibiting "nonconventional" bonds. The term "human-animal bond" in the literature is most often used to connote a positive, mutually beneficial relationship. It implies that the behaviors of individuals who are bonded to each other are always friendly or affiliative in nature. When attachments form between individuals of different species, however, each individual responds to the other as though it were a member of its own species (conspecific), thus, not all interactions between conspecifics are positive and friendly. Conspecifics may compete for resources such as food, territory, mates, and social rank and often display aggressive behavior toward each other as a result of this competition. Thus, problems such as dominance, possessiveness, or intermale aggression directed toward humans by animals such as dogs are also realistic aspects of the human-animal bond.

In their studies, Voith (1981a) and Serpell (1986) provide a wide variety of examples in which pet ownership results in negative outcomes for owners. These include the destruction of property and several physical injuries to family members. For pet owners in the study, some of the most common and exasperating negative outcomes of pet ownership are animal behavior problems. Dogs often become destructive, soil the

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house, or vocalize excessively when they are left alone. These behaviors are not the result of "spite" or "revenge" (another example of anthropomorphism frequently noted by study participants) but rather of separation anxiety. Cats can also display behaviors symptomatic of separation anxiety but usually do so less frequently than dogs. Separation anxiety in cats is usually in response to prolonged absences (a weekend or longer) from the owner. Problem behaviors are negative consequences of the human-animal bond.

Separation anxiety occurs when social animals are involuntarily separated from the individuals to whom they are attached. During the separation, they show signs of separation distress. This distress is, in fact, a sort of evidence that an attachment exists. Animals who become anxious and distressed when separated from their owners often manifest anxiety in the form of previously mentioned problem behaviors.

Other physiological and psychologically negative outcomes of pet ownership have been identified in the research. Stallones et al. (1990b) found that people between the ages of 21 and 34 who are strongly attached to their pets are at risk of having fewer human social supports. In the same study, it was found that when strong attachments to pets existed in the absence of human support for people between the ages of 35 and 44, the attachment was associated with emotional distress. In other studies, Grossberg (1988) could not reproduce the positive effects on blood pressure in stressful situations that had been reported earlier by Friedmann et al. (1983). Miller and Lago (1990) found that pet attachment had no effect on the psychological or physical well-being of elderly women. Also, in a sample of elderly women, those who were not attached to their pets were more likely to report being unhappy than were those who were attached to their pets or those

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who were not pet owners (Ory and Goldberg 1983). Although pet ownership can provide various benefits to children, such as an enduring and self-enhancing source of affection, potential costs to children include "getting into trouble" as a result of interactions with, or lack of interactions with, their pets and distress when their pets die or are given away.

Among study participants, the negative aspects of pet ownership was often expressed by pet owners who identified limited social networks resulting in an increased dependence on their pets. One woman claimed to "give up her old friends who were so critical, relying instead on her cats for companionship." This placed her, as well as others with the same claims, at greater risk of acute grief and difficult adjustment upon the loss of their pets. Thus, pet ownership does not guarantee beneficial outcomes.

*Consequences from the Animal Perspective*

The relationships between companion animals and humans are symbiotic, which means that different species of animals live in close association with each other. Clearly sufficient evidence has indicated that most of these relationships are mutualistic, that is, that both species benefit from the association. Other possible outcomes of the relationship, however, include commercialism, in which one species benefits and the other is unaffected, and parasitism, in which one species benefits and the other is harmed. The emergence of the animal rights and animal welfare movements have forced closer examination of the outcomes of human-companion animal relationships.

Very little research has been done to identify the effects that the human-animal bond has on animal companions. Organizations with an interest in this area, such as The Delta Society, have focused their efforts on the effects of human-animal relationships on human health. Similarly, animal-oriented groups, such as the American Veterinary

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Medicine Association (AVMA) have been more interested in the physiological, rather than the psychological, health problems of companion animals and have concentrated their efforts there. Thus, the psychological effects of the human-animal bond on companion animals is an area of research that seems to have "fallen through the cracks" and is in need of further study.

Objective data on the effects of people's strong attachments to their companion animals are not available. Clinical evidence suggests, however, that most of these companion animals receive high-quality care. As previously noted in the work with study participants, I have encountered numerous animal owners who spare no expense in obtaining quality medical care for their animals. This care frequently includes state-of-the-art treatment for cancer and other life-threatening conditions.

However, some research has been conducted on the effect of bereavement on animals. Some animals, like people, grieve. Lorenz (1952) observed this in a greylag goose, which had lost a mate. The goose was anxious and restless, flying ever-greater distances in search of the mate, visiting places where the mate might have been found, incessantly calling with a long distance call. Bowlby (1961) described bereavements in jackdaws, geese, domestic dogs, orangutans, and chimpanzees. Each species sought to recover a lost loved object and did all in its power to achieve this. Frequent hostility, withdrawal, rejection of a potential new object, apathy, and restlessness figured in the animals' responses to their losses.

There are examples in popular literature of pets who manifest at least some of the behaviors we call grief. One such example, Hechi, is the most celebrated dog in Japan. A Tokyo University professor obtained Hechi when he was a pup. Before long, the dog

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began accompanying the professor to the railroad station in the morning and awaiting his return there in the evening. Together, they would walk home. Two years later, the professor died, but the dog still came to the railroad station each day, even though the family had moved to another part of Tokyo. Hechi continued to make his daily sojourns to the station until he died ten years later. A memorial statue established at the railroad station for Hechi was melted down during World War II. But following the war, a new one was erected (Parkes 1974).

Among the study participants, several had stories of how their former pets reacted to human deaths in their immediate family. One pet owner described how her mom's dog mourned her death several years ago. The dog would sit by her mom's favorite chair for hours each day and whine. This lasted for several days following her mom's death. Another pet owner told of her bird who used to wait for her husband in the afternoons by perching himself on the coat rack by the door and calling out her husband's name. When her husband died, the bird would sit there each day shrieking her husband's name. After several weeks of this behavior, the bird stopped speaking altogether. This silence lasted for months afterward.

There were also several descriptions from study participants on how their pets grieved over the death of other pets. One focus group member told the story of how her elderly cat had gotten sick along with her elderly dog and died within days after the dog dies. She said it was caused by a "broken heart." It seems that the dog was diabetic and had grown very weak through the years. When the dog could no longer walk upstairs at nighttime, the cat would stay downstairs with him and they would sleep curled up on a blanket together. When the dog was taken to the vet to be euthanised, the cat stayed on

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the blanket for days, slowly deteriorating herself, until she also had to be euthanised.

Quite a number of animals other than dogs and cats manifest unusual behavior following the loss of a close associate, whether it is a person or another animal. Such animals include birds, sheep, goats, and especially nonhuman primates. Pollack (1961) related an observation concerning the death of a large infant in a troop of baboons. The mother had left the dead infant, but the largest male of the troop refused to leave it and began screaming and barking that ceased only when the mother returned to retrieve her baby. This scene was repeated several times before they reached their sleeping trees. It was probably difficult for the mother to carry the baby, for she had to walk and run on three legs while holding the dead baby. This would be uncommon for baboons since a baby of such size usually jumps on the mother's back and hangs on when the troop is on the move.

The denial of death in nonhuman primates as observed in the confined facilities of the London Zoo has been described by Zuckerman (1932). He concluded that some nonhuman primates react to a dead companion as if it were alive but passive. He suggested that this reaction may be a primitive denial of death and related to the separation anxiety seen in the early stages of human bereavement.

In addition, some cases of psychogenic, behavioral, and physiological problems in companion animals have been documented. Serpell (1986), for example, reported a case in which a pet owner induced an ulcerated colon in her German Shepherd by forcing it to sit on a char at the dinner table while she spoon-fed it. Savinshinsky (1983), an anthropologist, stated that having companion animals assume myriad complex roles in families (including that of children, parents, or best friends) and making them be "an all-

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purpose person . . . in a single household and in a single lifetime" may be stressful for the animal. One study participant described the "nervous ticks" her dog displayed and told of how her vet commented to her that her dog was "as nervous as it's owner!" Other focus group members offered examples of how they also felt they made their pets "as crazy" as they were. Thus, as the research demonstrates, the attachments between people and their animals are influenced by a variety of factors and serve a myriad of functions in people's lives.

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# CHAPTER V

# GRIEF BEHAVIOR

## The Situational Context of Grief from Pet Loss

Losses of all sorts – for example a possession or of physical well-being or abilities – are assumed to engender similar, if perhaps not so intense, emotional outcomes of those studied in human grief. Similarly, it is thought that the severing of any relationship, even when the severance is voluntary (as through divorce) or remedial (as through geographical separation) may trigger a grief-like response (Charmaz 1980; Weiss 1972). In fact, Marris (1965) among others, has suggested that humans always experience some level of grief whenever they encounter significant life changes – whether defined as positive or negative.

Over the past fifty years, a considerable literature on grief has emerged. From clinical evidence, interview guides and first-person accounts, we know a great deal about the internal experiences and private actions of people who have suffered the death of someone close. The population on which this knowledge is based is quite diverse in terms of class but admittedly limited relative to nationality and in terms of the relation between the deceased and the survivor. Most descriptions come from studies of British and American widows, bereaved parents and widowers. As discussed earlier, the picture that emerges from the literature is a consistent and convincing one: grief is an emotional experience that is both searing and long-lasting. As previously noted, its "symptomatology" (varying somewhat from individual to individual and within individual from time to time) includes such diverse physical and mental feelings and activities as: sleeplessness, restlessness, loss of appetite, frustration, hallucinations,

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"irrational" behavior, shortness of breath, heaviness in the chest, nausea, headaches, uncontrolled weeping, sadness, despair, hopelessness, apathy, and irritability. What is generally agreed upon is that over time the symptoms of grief generally subside and while they may never completely disappear, they usually become sufficiently mild for the individual to experience herself or himself as "normal" once again. Current assessments of how long this takes range from one to three years and during this period, the bereaved seem to be especially vulnerable to physiological and psychological disorders.

In sum, the literature tells us that the normal grief experience--normal at least for a significant number of modern Americans and British--is painful, debilitating, and relatively long-lasting. It is in the assumption of the "normal course" that grief is revealed as a universal of the human condition, for the "course"--like the course of disease--is biologically grounded. What will "trigger" the onset of symptoms is assumed to be variable, but once triggered, the "normal" internal experience is everywhere and always considered the same--at least for the loss of humans (Lofland 1985, 173).

As with any attachment bond, the bond between human and pet can be and often is broken. The life span of most species of pets is relatively short, making separation by death a more frequent occurrence than is usually experienced in the human-human bond. In addition to the loss of an animal through death, pets also run away or become lost. In addition, some individuals are forced to give up their pets for many reasons, including a move to housing where pets are not allowed or a previously undetected allergy of a family member. Whatever the cause of the separation, the loss of a pet as a loved being can be a profoundly disturbing experience for the pet owner(s).

The death of a pet may represent many different things to different persons,

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including an initial separation experience, a lessening of reality contact, or the loss of an otherwise unobtainable recipient of care and unconditional companionship (Levinson 1972; Nieburg and Fischer 1982). For children, the death of a pet may be their first encounter with a permanent separation. Because the young child often thinks of the family pet as similar to him/herself, the death of the animal can be confusing and frightening (Levinson 1972). For adults and the elderly, time takes on a new, often less important meaning after the death of a pet. The pet's role as companion and recipient of care is indeed an important one, and it is the loss of this animal that can arouse the most intense grief responses in the owner.

In order to discuss pet bereavement, the closest and most relevant point of reference is that of human death. Thus, this research is framed against the more extensive theoretical and empirical studies of grief and bereavement following human loss. From this conceptual framework, we attempt to gain insight into the experience of pet bereavement as it may be universally applied to the subject of death and bereavement.

This study attempts to explore just how deeply social arrangements penetrate into private emotion; just how molded by culture and history even internal experiences may be. Grief--defined here as a response to the involuntary loss through death of another and viewed as significant by the actor of reference--offers an especially strategic case for considering such matters. It is, at least in what we know of its modern form, intensely felt and of long duration. Of equal import, grief seems linked to some very basic processes of human attachment (Lofland 1985, 172).

The Grief Response to Pet Loss

Grief is not debilitating for all. Dealing with the death of a pet for many is

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uncomplicated, unencumbered, and at times a relief; not a major obstacle accompanied by years, months, weeks, or even days of difficulty. Certain aspects of recovery apply to any form of significant loss (death, divorce, loss of limb), and are observed in minor and acute grief reactions. The focus here is on loss through death, specifically on grief reactions following the loss of a pet.

Categorically, the course of grieving for a pet for study participants did not differ much from that documented in the literature for human death. Searching, pining, loneliness, pangs, flashbacks, guilt, and emptiness occurred regularly. Many continued their pet rituals after their pet died. For example, one woman spoke of how she woke up every morning at 4:00 A.M., just like she did when her dog was alive and needed to be walked. Others spoke of how they talked to pictures of their pets. Others even confessed to still saying hello and goodbye to their pets as they entered and left their homes.

While the methodology employed makes it impossible to draw definitive conclusions about the grief process for pet loss, some observations can be made from the information and experiences of the bereaved pet owners in the study. The grieving process is multidimensional, and generally can include many aspects of the typical human grief experience such as: shock, acute awareness of loneliness and longing for the deceased, a period of social withdrawal, and healing and renewal (Sanders 1989).

Initial shock, with corresponding states of confusion, disbelief, and a sense of being overwhelmed were common experiences reported by those who had been attached to their deceased pets, and concurred quite nicely with the documented expressions of human grief (Averill 1968; Bowlby 1980; Sanders 1989). The feelings of sadness, loss, and depression expressed by the bereaved subjects are consistent with those who have

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suffered a human death and signal a state of awareness of the loss (Sanders 1989). Ongoing feelings of distress, hurting, and missing the companion animal are common and can be seen as coinciding with the "pining" (Klein 1940) and "pangs" of grief (Parkes 1972) described as integral components of the grieving process. These themes reflect the anxiety and psychological pain, which is so much a part of the experience of grief during this process. Guilt and anger, which are also common themes in the experience of grief, were present in the bereaved pet owners as well. One focus group member described her immediate reaction as "not knowing if I can survive this." She talked about how she "doesn't give a damn about anyone or anything . . . just don't want to be bothered." She said that her friends would call and ask how she was feeling and she didn't know how to respond since she felt "different every moment . . . sometimes I feel absolutely terrible and other times I feel OK."

Another interesting aspect of pet death is the perceived "gap" left by the loss. Although the human bond develops with presence, the intensity of the bond is not dependent on continual presence. For example, parents and children living apart except in highly dependent child-parent relationships experience a continued sense of an established bond. For companion animals, though, the bond is mostly associated with presence. Animals are usually on the premises or accompanying their owner (obviously, they do not go off to school or work but are there when the humans return). This constant, all-pervading presence makes the gap more obvious when the animal dies. This was noted by many of the study participants who explained why it was more difficult to deal with this loss often not finding peace or solace in their home, since that is where they shared their life with their pets. Many cited this as a reason for their depth of grief and

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feelings of loss.

Factors Influencing Grief from Pet Loss

The intensity and resolution of the grief response depends upon many variables. The type of relationship, as well as its length and intensity, are thought to be important components in the grief experience (Parkes 1972; Rosenblatt 1983; Beck 1984; Keddie 1977; Rynearson 1978). As with human deaths, certain demographic variables may also influence reactions to the death of an animal companion (Antelyes 1981; Albert and Bulcroft 1987; Holcomb, Williams, and Richards 1985; Paulus et al. 1984; Stewart et al. 1985). The interpretation of guilt and blame is also a considerable factor influencing the grief response and adjustment process, as well as the presence of additional pets in the household (Quackenbush and Graveline 1985b).

*Human-Pet Relationships*

Quackenbush (1988), in an intervention model for human grief following animal companion loss, cites different types of animal-owner relationship patterns which predispose the pet owner to intense grief. According to the author, grief tends to be most intense when the owner has experienced the death of at least one significant other within the last two years (11%), when the pet was owned or cared for by that significant other person (i.e., the bereaved pet owner may have denied the human loss as long as the pet of the deceased person was alive), when the death-causing disease in the animal has been or is present in the owner (9%), when the pet is considered a surrogate child--especially female owners who never had children of their own (7%). Additionally, 64% of owners experienced intense grief upon the death of the animal when the pet/human relationship had been strengthened as a result of the occurrence of significant periods of events in the

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owner's life during the ownership of the pet.

Thus, when for a myriad of reasons the human-animal companion bond is one of interdependency and shared experience, the incidence of intense grieving upon the death of the animal is more frequent. Studies now support the fact that not only the intensity, but also the duration of grief is heightened. One support group member described how she was a recovering addict with an eating disorder and her cat "still loved her unconditionally with all her imperfections." Another pet owner discussed the unusual relationship she shared with her dog. She described her history of being an incest and rape survivor who had great deal of difficulty in her relationships with people, and trusted "only her dog" who had also been abused before she adopted him.

Persons most vulnerable to grief following pet death are those whose pets served as a major source of affection, intimacy, companionship, and nurturance. For those at greatest risk, a pet's death results in a void in otherwise pleasurable and meaningful daily activities, especially for people living alone and/or the elderly. The absence often results in a severe sense of loss. There is a resulting emptiness in the person's life that nothing else can fill. It may be argued that many of the study participants are in this category of higher risk due to their limited social supports or other previously identified factors contributing to the significance of the attachment between people and their pets. A study with owners of deceased dogs with limited social supports show that for many pet owners it takes two to three years after the animal's death for grief to be resolved (Katcher and Rosenberg 1979). For example, many of the support group participants were elderly women living alone in New York City who continued to participate in the group for months and even years as it provided a social setting to meet and discuss feelings with

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peers. Among this group, common themes included:

"there is no longer the sense of being needed"
"there is no one to care for"
"there is no source of affection and companionship"
"there is no warmth in the home; no one to talk to, sleep with, feel important to"

The social system is disrupted, the structure and regular patterns of interaction are missing. The grief is experienced not only in feelings of sadness and mourning, but also in the void and emptiness left by the death of a beloved companion animal.

In addition, pet owners who lost more than one pet in their adult life said "the subsequent experiences of grief are "much worse" and they "could never go through it again." Therefore, as previously stated, it may be that the death of a pet is often symbolic of other life events and relationships. For those pet owners without clear reasons for the illness or death of their pets, grief was very pronounced, they often claimed they "needed answers to feel better"; a need to know "why" their pet was taken from them.

*The Pet's Role in the Family*

The pet's role in the family may also influence the grief process of it's members. In a randomly selected study of 1200 subjects, Gage and Holcomb (1986) found that the importance of the death of a pet varied among different members of the family unit, thereby creating more stress within the family. Weissis (1988) corroborates the notion that the death of an animal disrupts family relationships. Using the concept of the "emotional triangle" purported by family systems, family units suffering the death of a pet often "triangulate" the pet in much the same manner as they would a "symptomatic child" (Caine 1970; Entin 1981). These authors assert that the animal may function to defuse/deflect conflict, and maintain equilibrium within the family system. Thus, when

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the animal dies, family homeostasis is disrupted, boundaries need to be realigned, and immense role confusion may prevail. Consequently, the death of the pet not only affects the primary owner, but often the entire extended family, thereby exacerbating the primary owner's grief and perhaps diminishing the potential for social support within the family system.

Levinson (1984) also discusses how the death of an animal companion may cause a shifting in family roles. In his exploration of "Grief at the Loss of a Pet," the author states that the particular meaning given to a pet (e.g., companion, toy, protector, confidante, child) as well as the developmental stage of the bereaved owner will affect how she or he will mourn (Levinson 1984).

Study participants discussed how grief was often more complex when the loss was a family pet. Parents of children commented how they felt their grief was compounded since their primary role after the loss of the pet was helping the children deal with the loss. This often postponed and intensified their own grief regarding the loss. One interviewee described her mother as suffering from a "real empty nest syndrome" following the death of the family's 23 year old cat. She said her mother "didn't react this way when all the children had left, but now that Smokey was gone, Mom felt that all her duties and life as Mom and caretaker had finally ended, causing deep sadness."

*Gender*

There may be gender differences in the response to the death of a companion animal. Studies have shown that women are more likely than men to be caregivers for family pets and also to develop more intense attachments to their companion animals (Albert and Bulcroft 1987; Holcomb, Williams, and Richards 1985). Although there is

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some evidence that women may feel more free to express their emotions when a pet dies, a belief that condescension underlies the tolerance for their emotionality may simply add to the problems they experience (Quackenbush and Graveline 1985b). Most of the bereavement support group participants were women who often commented how they needed this forum to help them discuss and "vent" their feelings since their husbands or male significant others didn't "listen or discuss their own feelings."

On the other hand, this grief experience may be more isolating for men. One man in the support group, a fire fighter, discussed how he would hide his affections for his cat from "the guys at the firehouse" who didn't understand his relationship; "it wasn't considered macho." He would often lie to co-workers when he needed to leave work emergently to care for his diabetic pet. Another male group member felt that it was "more acceptable for him to have bonded to a dog rather than a cat" and he felt that people were more sympathetic to his loss for this reason.

*Guilt and Blame*

As Lindemann (1944) discussed in his work on the *Symptomatology and Management of Acute Grief*, it is common for the bereaved to search the time before the death for evidence of failure to do right by the lost one. This is further described by Rando (1984) as a complicating factor of grief, rendering the grief as prolonged or conflicted when not resolved. The review of memories is thought to be an important part of grief work (Parkes 1972; Rosenblatt 1983) and focus group discussions and interviews revealed that bereaved pet owners thought of the times they had shared with their animals and reviewed the past relationship. Part of such a review, for some, involved a second-guessing of decisions that were made, and a wish for an alternative outcome.

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In fact, bereavement support group members spent a great deal of time in each session helping each other sort out the source of each others guilt and helped reassure, whenever possible, that everything possible was done for their pets. One man from the support group claimed that he "just decided to let go of the guilt; it was too negative and held him down." Others seemed to never let go of their guilt, even after several years. Guilt was also discussed by the interviewees as influenced by "not doing enough" for pets during their lives, "getting upset with the cat when he urinated on the floor"; "I should have given her behavior modification when she was young"; "I shouldn't have given my second cat away, it made my other cat sick."

Another aspect of the responsibility over death is that of blame. Since one cannot blame death, one often blames themselves or others in the midst of painful coping with grief. One woman interviewee described the case of having her dog groomed at a new pet shop, which resulted in an infection in her shitzu's ears. This infection went undiscovered for a few weeks which resulted in a systemic infection, ultimately leading to the dog's demise. This woman was overcome with grief and guilt. She could not see past her "poor" decision of a new groomer and her "failure" to detect the slight symptoms which lead to her dog's death, thus prolonging her acceptance of the death of her "baby."

Of the bereaved owners who mentioned the vet, some were very comforted by the vet's attitude to both the animal and themselves, but more often, they were distressed or upset by the way the vet handled the situation. They sometimes felt that the vet was disinterested, even callous and a few even blamed the vet for their pet's death:

> "My veterinarian told me I shouldn't be there when they put my cat to sleep and I figured she knew best, but now I feel guilty for not being there. Most of all, I feel suspicious of the vet. What did she do to Max that she didn't want me to see?"

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Another woman had a gruesome story of how her dog was treated by the vet, claiming the experience left her with tremendous guilt and unresolved grief. The woman noticed that her dog wasn't breathing normally and took him to a new vet on Long Island since she was ill and unable to bring the dog into the New York Animal Medical Center, as she normally would. The vet and assistant were very cold toward her and told her the dog would just need to stay overnight for oxygen therapy. When she called in the morning she was told that the dog was doing well and she needn't rush to pick him up.

When she arrived at the vet's office later that morning, they told her the dog had died "a minute before she arrived" and they had tried to revive him twice and "wouldn't try again." She was distraught to see the dog with his tongue hanging out of his mouth and with diarrhea as he took some last gasping breaths. When she pleaded with the vet to do something, he told her that the dog "wasn't really breathing" and he "wouldn't do anything else" at that point. The woman then called Hartsdale Pet Cemetery to pick up the dog, but the vet rushed her out of the office claiming they were closing, so she had to wait outside for Hartsdale to pick up her dog. This woman was burdened with terrible guilt for not being more sensitive to how ill her dog was, not going to her usual vet for care, and not being there for her dog's "final moments."

Guilt is also associated with other, nonpreventable reasons for pet death. For example, some participants felt guilty when their pets were diagnosed with terminal illnesses such as cancer or congestive heart failure because they felt that they "should have noticed" their pets' symptoms earlier. One woman was preoccupied by recently discovering she had breast cancer and she "wasn't paying enough attention" to her dog.

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In addition, many pet owners' felt guilty after electing to stop treatment or for euthanising their pets, even if their decisions were clearly in their animals' best interest. One pet owner described this as a feeling of breaking a "contract" she had with her cat--a contract that focused on keeping her pet "alive, safe, and healthy."

One of the most common regrets expressed by both interviewees and support group members was not being with their pets at their time of death. A few pets were at the veterinarians office and died unexpectedly. One woman's cat was stolen by a disturbed family member and another woman's dog died when locked up in a garage by someone else. Those people who weren't with their pets felt extreme guilt that their pets were either alone, or not with their owners at the time of death, and they all wished that they could change this.

> "I thought the veterinarian would think I was sick or morbid that I wanted to be with Toby when she died. By now I don't know what death was like for Toby. I find myself wondering, was it peaceful or did she suffer?"

Guilt is a pervasive theme in any analysis of grief. Sometimes guilt has an objective basis, such as when the deceased are adversely affected by the action of the bereaved. Or guilt may be manifested because the bereaved had rejected the deceased before the death occurred. More often, perhaps, guilt arises out of subjective definitions or events that outsiders would easily discount. For example, a pet owner might feel guilty for deciding to have his pet undergo extensive medical treatment, if the pet succumbed while undergoing the treatment. This may be particularly relevant for pet owners since they, by position of their status in the relationship, are always the decision-makers for the dying pet, unlike most dying humans who are more likely to influence their own course of treatment, and even exercise their choices over a terminal prognosis. Regardless, guilt

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elicits ruminations about the past and self-blame for the role one has played in it. Thus, the role of pet owner ascribes complete responsibility and representation for a pet's life, therefore contributing to the wide range of self-doubt and blame exhibited by pet owners upon the death of companion animals.

*Psycho-Social Factors*

Various factors were presented by study participants that appeared to have a significant impact on their bereavement experience. The psychological factors include: the general mental and emotional health of the pet owner prior to the death of the pet; exposure to overwhelming loss, including previously unresolved losses, multiple losses, serial losses, and concurrent losses; the pet owners experience with previous life situations, and maturity; circumstances surrounding the death of the pet, including cause, degree of preparation, location, and age of pet at time of death.

One interviewee described the initial impact:

> "At first I felt restless, disorganized, an overwhelming sense of not knowing what to do or what I was expected to do. Time took on an unusual dimension and I felt a void, longing to be with my beautiful baby (dog) again, a numbness, and total inability to concentrate on everyday things. Slowly, people continued to expect things of me, but I could not deliver. I was beginning to meet my own needs. I began to accept the fact that my life had changed, and I'm not the same person anymore."

There were several examples of the above mentioned psychological influences on the grief response among study participants. One focus group participant discussed how dealing with pet death was harder for her since she had sustained many prior losses, and felt more alone without her pet. One of the women interviewed reviewed her mental illness as a handicap for her grieving since her pet gave her a reason to stay healthy, and now, with her depression, she didn't have the same incentive to take her medicine. The

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age of the pets at their time of death did not appear to be relevant in the intensity of grief. One couple said they had never been so distraught as when their new puppy had died. They waited so long to get a pet and were finally ready when their new puppy died at 3 months old from congenital heart disease. They said they were "unprepared and felt so sad to have had such a short time with him."

The social factors found to influence grief include: philosophical, religious background, social and cultural acceptance--or the degree of permission from society to grieve the loss of a pet; funeral practices and rituals performed on the pet; uncertainty of the loss--as when the pet owner was not with the pet at time of death, or when the pet is lost or stolen; social status of the bereaved; and availability and quality of support systems.

An interesting phenomenon observed in this investigation was the overall sadness experienced by those who had lost pets longer than 6 months prior to their participation in the groups. This is difficult to explain, and might be an artifact of subjects being painfully reminded of their loss by participation in the study. Another possibility would be that there is actually a later resurgence of grief, such as that which occurs over a greater time span in grief for the death of a child (Rando 1984; Sanders 1989). Such recurrences of grief can continue for years after the death, and underscore the fact that we really do not know the length of time necessary to complete the bereavement process, and that certain of these aspects did not occur for some of those who had other living pets or acquired a new pet.

*Other Living Pets/Pet Replacement*

Findings of this study suggest that the presence of other pets in the home did not

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facilitate adjustment to the death of a beloved pet. This is very interesting, and contradicts the view of single pet ownership as a risk factor for a more intensive bereavement experience (Quackenbush and Glickman 1983). This finding lends strong support to the hypothesis that each pet is perceived as unique, and that other pets cannot be expected to effectively fill the role of one that is lost. Probably for some pet owners, the presence of other pets in the home might actually prove disturbing, prompting feelings of anger, especially if the companion that died was a particular favorite (Quackenbush and Graveline 1985b). Many pet owners attribute unique and special bonds with each of their pets, thus having different reactions to the death of each pet, similar to how they would grieve for various humans in their lives. One woman celebrating the fourth anniversary of her dog's death spoke of how this dog was more special to her than any of the other pets she presently has, even though she "loves them all."

The responsibility of caring for other pets places a tremendous burden on the already grieving pet owner. Members of the support group often spoke about their conflicted feelings concerning their living pets. They asked other group members how they handled this situation. They found it hard to be emotionally available to their grieving pets. Sometimes, owners felt that they should obtain new pets to help their surviving pets cope with the loss. They were usually advised by other group members not to adopt unless they had the "commitment, time, and patience" for a new pet.

Some pet owners in the study expressed that they never wish to have another pet, in order to avoid such a painful experience. Such reactions to grief can prevent future acquisition of new pets. The literature suggests that successful resolution of grief requires

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that the bereaved move past this stage so that they may again become willing to risk emotional attachment with another (Fox 1981; Katcher and Rosenberg 1979). For other owners (e.g., those who need a service dog), a wish to avoid future hurt may hamper the transition to a new helping relationship (Murphy and Driben 1986). It would seem useful, then, to delineate methods to facilitate coping in those individuals struggling with the adjustment process.

While obtaining a new pet did not seem to be insurance against a more intense grief process, it appeared to be associated with a less outward display and verbal expression of grief for those who lost a pet more than six months prior to their participation in the study. It could be that the comfort of a new companion had a beneficial effect on mood, or that those with less initial disturbance than others were ready to obtain a new pet. Those who did not acquire a new pet actually appeared to have higher initial levels of sadness and it may be that other factors, such as dependency on an animal for socialization, were also affecting the decision not to obtain a new companion animal.

One focus group member discussed having a new puppy poodle who she is "trying to love, but was having a hard time getting to know." She was trying to get adjusted to life without her favorite pet poodle that died after 15 years with her. Another couple in the focus group discussed their recent experience of trying to adopt a new cocker spaniel. The husband described their trip to a breeder and how he fell in love with all the puppies. He said that he "feels so much love that he wants to share it with a pet; he doesn't want to deny himself the experience of that special love and relationship." His wife described how she also loved the puppies at first, but then felt numb and afraid to

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commit herself to loving a new dog. They left the breeder to think about their decision, but decided not to adopt at that time.

Another woman described her recent adoption of a dog as a "very confusing decision in her life." She expressed her joy with the new dog but said she had "pangs of disloyalty" to her deceased pet. She discussed how she felt concerned and worried about this new dog and how she couldn't "just relax with it." She also spoke of her happiness to share her life again and feel the love from this new pet as she once did with her deceased pet. She didn't want to "deny herself of that special relationship." Pet owners who did get new pets, even after waiting several months, still voiced their conflict over disloyalty toward their deceased pets. The intensity of their feelings for a new pet often makes them feel disloyal to the pet that has died. Pet owners also expressed guilt that they are once again happy and enjoying life when the pet they loved is no longer able to do so, creating more personal conflict.

Fear of loss is considerable with the decision to adopt a new pet, or especially with other pets living with the bereaved at the time of a pet's death. One woman interviewee spoke of how she feels so frightened about losing her new kittens. She said she feels overprotective of them and fearful of them getting sick or having an accident. She recently experienced the death of an aunt and felt unusually upset, considering she didn't have any significant relationship with that aunt. She spoke of feeling very vulnerable and having a "heightened fear of losing pets and people she loves and cares about."

All too often, however, pet owners adopt new pets in an attempt to avoid or distract themselves from fully experiencing the sadness and loneliness of grief. Pet

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owners are often motivated to adopt new pets as a way to circumvent the grieving process. They made comments like:

> "I want another golden retriever just like Bear."
> "I'm going to get a black, male kitten and name him Jonas too."
> "I'm going to get another bird who will sing to me all afternoon."

I found it especially interesting that when others who had adopted new pets discussed their experiences in the support group, those members resistant to new pets asked the most questions and seemed very interested at the prospect. In fact, the group leader often commented on how alive and happy group members became when discussing the subject of new pets. It helped foster similar memories of lost pets and appeared to bring a level of comfort to other bereaved pet owners. Some spoke of how they were slowly preparing themselves for a new pet. One interviewee described her preparation for a pet: "a new cat carrying bag, a few cat toys, window guards." She talked of how she was preparing her "home and heart" for a new pet in the future.

How to deal with other living pets and when to adopt a new pet after a much-loved pet has died is a dilemma for many bereaved pet owners. For many, the processes of grieving and bonding are diametrically opposed; therefore, many pet owners find it difficult to grieve fully for one pet while attempting to "get to know" or bond with another. Thus, this is clearly an individual decision influenced by several variables.

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# CHAPTER VI

## MOURNING RITUALS

The literature agrees that modern American society has little patience for mourning rituals and misunderstands the usual responses of grief. When a person dies, our society has very explicit sets of behaviors and expectations for the survivors. Social standards dictate mourning behaviors based on generally accepted funeral customs and practices. Tradition and social acceptance may outweigh the personal choices and needs of the bereaved and often color many decisions regarding death rituals. In fact, just as with grief, if one does not mourn the death of a family member and/or close friend, it may be seen as inappropriate and deviant--that is, one is expected to grieve and mourn when a "special" person dies. Socially sanctioned rituals allow for people to feel bad and to spend money to bury and cremate the dead. All of this accommodates what is constructed as the bereavement process.

Modern scientists have many theories on the value of ritual. Rituals are perceived as: confirming social bonds; assisting in reestablishment of personal relationships; and facilitating new identities for survivors (Rando 1984). They also give meaning to loss and provide structure for recovery. Researcher and psychoanalyst Melanie Klein (1940) observed that the absence of ritual in loss situations can result in a poor outcome of the grief process. Another psychoanalyst, Otto Fenichel (1945), described ritual as an obsessive, compulsive defense against anger. The ritual provides structure to control the anger, and the anger is often a defense against the survivors' fear and feeling of impotency due to the death that occurred (Fenichel 1945). The value of ritual at time of death is emphasized by researchers Stroebe and Stroebe (1987), who believe that modern

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America is a culture which has become "deritualized" leaving the bereaved helpless to know what to do after a death. Strobe and Strobe suggests, "adherence to rituals moderates bereavement in a positive way" (1987, 50).

From the perspective of Durkheimian functionalism (1955), ritual behavior is a duty imposed by the group. Through the rites, collective sentiments are renewed, moral unity reaffirmed, and cohesion reestablished. In this way, the mourners are protected and preserved. Moreover, the rites serve to reintegrate the group, so a feeling of order may be imparted to the bereaved. These rites simultaneously define and dramatize the separation of the living from the dead by marking the end of the dead person's life.

For some, the commercialized funeral of today stands as perfect testimony to an alienated society supported by the everyday actions of alienated human beings who passively and unquestioningly perform their expected tasks. Hence, from this viewpoint, death rites symbolically reflect the alienated consciousness of the bereaved, who embrace the reified symbols of the funeral industry. They perceive dignity as purchasable in the form of a specially designed casket, social worth as demonstrated in a large formal viewing, and status as established by interment in a mausoleum. Such symbols are often particularly compelling to those who are powerless and impoverished (Charmaz 1980).

Spiegel (1977) stated that one of the functions of the funeral ritual for humans is to reduce anxiety for the bereaved. He believes it is the structure of the ritual itself that helps in reducing anxiety. "Because the ritual is limited in time, it shows that mourning will not last forever" (Spiegel 1977, 130). Although Levinson (1972) commented on the bereavement similarities between pet loss and human loss, and even though mourning rituals for humans are somewhat defined in our society, we have no ritualized way of

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mourning for a good friend, and certainly none for socially unrecognized relationships, such as pets. Pet owners have few formal ritual traditions, therefore contributing to the uncertainty of how to mourn for their special pets.

The History of Pet Death Rituals

Historically, concern for death and use of mourning rituals precede written history. Neanderthals more than 50,000 years ago, for example, were believed to bury their dead with several items such as stone objects and ornaments indicating future use, as in an afterlife (DeSpelder and Strickland 1986).

Egyptian cultures in 2500 B.C. had elaborate funeral practices, including burying treasures in tombs in pyramids and using embalming and mummification techniques. It is interesting to note that embalming was a highly-developed art in 2500 B.C. (Habenstein and Lamers 1963). The Roman culture, 753 B.C. - 476 A.D., had regulations on preservation and embalming, as their dead were embalmed while in state (prior to the funeral) (N.F.D.A. 1967). Embalming, as we know it in America today, has its roots in the Civil War, when large numbers of soldiers died far from home. It became necessary to sanitize and preserve dead soldiers so they could be returned to their homes and families for burial. Medical embalmers emerged on the battlefields to perform these tasks (Pine 1975). Today, embalming is not legally required. However, it is used by licensed funeral professionals for three reasons: sanitation, to prevent bacterial infection from spreading to the public; preservation, to allow viewing over extended times; and restoration, to help create a more comfortable "picture" or final viewing of the deceased (Pine 1975).

There are historical tracings of pet death rituals as well. The Greeks' attachment

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for their pets was so intense they expressed sorrow at a pet's death by writing an epitaph. In the Odyssey, Homer describes the death of Argos, the old and sick loyal dog of Odysseus. He could finally die in peace and with grace after his master returned and he recognized him before anyone else. There was a subtle link between an animal and a human in this story that is unique to relationships between humans and animals. The dog Argos was thought to have held onto life until his master Odysseus returned home (Kay, Nieburg, and Kutscher 1984, 186). It is interesting to note that today's approach to death focuses on "let me go" and "I'll let you go" between the dying and the survivors.

The Romans, breaking away from the Greek tradition, had funerals and erected tombs when a pet died. During the reign of Tiberius (A.D. 36), a raven chick flew down from the temple of Castor to the nearby shop of a cobbler. The little bird was welcomed by the owner as a religious symbol. The creature soon learned to talk and flew every morning to the Forum where it greeted the Emperor. It performed the same feat for several years and gained great renown. A tenant in a neighboring shop became envious of the cobbler's success as a result of the remarkable bird. One day the bird befouled his shoes with its droppings, and the man killed the animal in a sudden fit of anger. This aroused such a storm of indignation that the killer of the bird was driven from the neighborhood and murdered. The dead bird was given a funeral similar to those bestowed on the people of that day. An enormous crowd attended the rite, and the draped bier was carried on the shoulders of two Ethiopians. The procession was led by a piper and wreaths were put around the pyre erected on the Appian Way (Pollard 1977, 136).

Stories of modern pet death rituals and experiences of the bereaved are available in current media and literature. Thus, historically, then, it appears that pets have been

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given a special place in society, as least by select subgroups of the population over time. The person who feels the need of a non-critical companion has often looked to animals for what they offer. These inner qualities are expressed in different ways and with characteristics common among all living creatures, especially the wish to give one's best for the benefit of those whom one loves. Though, as with all relationships, the nature and extent of human-pet bonds are vastly different.

Final Decisions

Pet owners, in addition to dealing with the many aspects of grief, have to deal with the option and ultimate decision regarding euthanasia for their dying pets. They must then deal with all the attendant thoughts and feelings before, during, and after having their pets euthanised. According to Fogle (1983), "Some pet owners, especially the ill and the elderly, look on their pets as part of themselves. A decision to euthanise is taken personally. A parallel is drawn with their own situation in life" (Fogle 1983, 341). As previously discussed, these decisions contribute to the guilt and blame experienced by the bereaved pet owner, thus impacting on the experience of grief for that individual.

Some of the study participants discussed, in great detail, the events surrounding the death of their pet and the actions and preparations made. Many of the pet owners who chose euthanasia made arrangements for it to occur at home, and they spoke of how they spent the hours prior to the vet's visit with their pet. They also discussed their participation in the final act, for example; holding their pet and "telling them how much they were loved." Pet owners often spoke of how they continued to hold their pet until the body became stiff and even walked to special places in their home to rekindle fond memories.

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Most of the study participants did not have the luxury of this planned and intimate setting with their pets. Many spent days, weeks, or even months deciding on the right time and choice of death, often without having those choices fulfilled in the end. This was always a part of the discussion for those group members who had not yet lost their pet, but were anticipating the loss. A frequent question of those anticipating the death of their pet was how one would know when is the right time to euthanise--or stop medical treatment? Some owners discussed using alternative medical therapies as a means to keep their pets alive, without undergoing "too much medical intervention." The concerns were based on preserving the animals' "dignity" without acting too hastily. Other group members encouraged those in need of advice to work with their vet, but more importantly, to follow their instincts since they knew better than anyone the "signs" from their pet when the decision regarding time of death is appropriate.

One member claimed that her dog's loss of appetite was a "sign" for her. The other group members replied that this might not always be a "sign" since many of their pets were often eating until the very end. Another member said that the last time she saw her cat, she knew it was the "end" when he didn't reach his paw out to touch her. Still another said she knew it was "time" when she looked into her cat's eyes and saw that his "spirit was fading." One woman described her turmoil about her final decision to ask the vet to come to her house and euthanise her dog, Ringo. On that last day she "prayed and begged God for a miracle or a sign" that she was doing the right thing. About three hours before the vet arrived, "Ringo raised his head and sat up looking regal. He then picked himself up using his front paws, with his hind legs dragging behind. This was quickly followed by his final collapse." The pet owner felt tortured by this response. She was

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confused whether this was "a sign for her not to continue with the euthanasia," or possibly he was "rallying one last time before the end." The final answer for most was based on quality of life. Each person had their own definition of quality for their pet's life--and death.

The literature makes brief comments about the comparison/contrast of human ethics and morality as it affects pet euthanasia versus human euthanasia. Specifically, many humans think it immoral to let a pet suffer, and so laws allow for veterinarians to have procedures for euthanasia. However, humans do not afford themselves this same "moral" and/or "ethical" sensitivity and oftentimes use "heroic" means to maintain human life--even when that human "life" exists only in a vegetative state.

Death is sometimes thought to be more easily accepted if it is expected, since some anticipatory grieving may have taken place (Doyle 1980; Lundin 1984; Parkes 1972; Rosenblatt 1983). This was not found to be true for study participants experiencing the loss of a companion animal and was consistent with Gosse's (1989) investigation of bereaved pet owners, which may indicate that this is an effect which does not occur in companion animal death, perhaps due to the normally abbreviated nature of the process. These results may also be confounded by the fact that in many of the cases where the pet's death was expected, the animal had also been nursed at home for extended periods, thus placing the owner(s) at great risk for intense grief and mourning. It is also the case with companion animals that knowledge of the animal's impending death may involve a euthanasia decision, which could serve to further cloud the issue of preparation for death. If the anticipation of a death really is not helpful, but the shock of a sudden death is extremely disturbing (Glick, Weiss, and Parkes 1974), then this would suggest the

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necessity for a more careful comparison of sudden, violent death, as from accidents, as opposed to deaths which, while unanticipated, did not come as a shock. The present study was unable to probe such a distinction. In this study it was not how the pet was lost that mattered, but the experience of bereavement following the loss.

Likewise, there were no differences in the bereavement experience associated with different types of final arrangements made for the companion animal. Perhaps owners consistently chose a treatment of their pet's remains in accordance with their own belief system, and therefore this aspect of the death did not appear to impact the mourning and bereavement process itself. Another possibility is that, in general, owners were unaware of the options available and merely acceded to the suggestions of the attending veterinarian, if offered. A more careful inquiry into individual reasons for the type of final arrangements made would be helpful.

Funeral Practices

Though few studies exist on bereavement and pets, the involvement of people with their pets and their reactions to the loss of a pet is evident in the community. There are pet mortuaries and cemeteries in almost every large city, and there are small graves for pets in the backyards of many families in almost every town in the United States. "Pet funerals have become quite common among owners who find it crude and heartless to allow pickup of their dead pet's body by the town garbage truck" (Levinson 1984, 59).

Mourning can be very critical to the resolution process for some pet owners, for if they are not able to mourn the death of their pet, they may not be able to fully accept the reality of that particular death experience. Pet mourning rituals include burial and cremation, as well as the general reaching out to others in their time of sorrow. It is a

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process that, literally and figuratively, puts a special pet to rest.

Veterinarians, pet owners and nonpet owners have scoffed at funerals for companion animals. It is, however, important to point out that, in our society, funerals serve as primary facilitators of grief. Not only do funerals provide socially sanctioned ways to part with a loved one's body, they also acknowledge that death has occurred. Funerals provide a setting in which both private and public sorrow can be expressed and shared, thus serving as an important way for grievers to garner much-needed social support. In fact, one study indicated that people's grief responses are positively affected when they realize, or even imagine, that others are also mourning for their loved ones who have died (Lagoni, Butler, and Hetts 1994, 269).

The pet cemetery has become a familiar American institution and popular way for pet owners to mourn the death of their pet, with many advertising in the pet directory of daily newspapers as well as in breed specialty journals. The shorter life span of dogs and cats virtually ensures that human survivors will be around to mourn. Most pet cemeteries today are located, perhaps unsuprisingly, in the United States. The International Association of Pet Cemeteries (IAPC) was founded in 1971 and has its headquarters in Land O'Lakes, Florida. The IAPC lists a hundred pet cemeteries nationwide, from the Dearest Pet Memorial Cemetery of Manahawkin, New Jersey to the Paws Awhile Pet Crematory, Funeral Home and Gift Shop in Lincoln, Nebraska. There are three Pet Havens, three Pet Lawns, three Pet Rests and a Pets Rest, a Noah's Ark, a Noah's Garden of Pets and a Noah's Gardens Pet Cemetery. The Rosa Bonheur Memorial Park of Baltimore Maryland is the only cemetery in the country that permits pets and their owners to reside in adjacent plots. Most states outlaw this practice, though they do permit the

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ashes of owners and pets to be buried side by side. Meantime, for those who can't arrange to get to one of these sites, the Virtual Pet Cemetery is one of several memorial parks for pets on the Internet. Eulogies for dogs, cats, turtles, and snakes are posted there (Garber 1996, 270). The costs of a pet funeral and burial service depends upon the degree of ceremony desired. A country burial (that is, a mass grave for pets) can cost less than $50; cremation ceremonies cost on average $100 to $200; and an individual burial site, casket, and marker can run $30 to $1,500.

Many of the study participants chose to commemorate their pets by conducting some sort of funeral or memorial service. These services run the gamut from simple, private ceremonies designed to honor pets' memories and pay tribute to their lives, to elaborate, public goodbye rituals, sometimes costing hundreds (or even thousands) of dollars. Some people conducted their own memorial rituals, whereas others took advantage of the funeral services offered by pet cemeteries. An interesting aspect of pet funeral rituals is that it, by nature, is a more isolating experience than for humans since the pet has no family, it is dependent on the social network and supporters of the pet owner to participate.

This aspect of bereavement was considered later in the study, and for this reason, the aspect of commercialization of pet death was further explored. As more pet owners are exposed to various methods of pet burial rituals, these practices continue to flourish. I sought out one such example of this ritual--a pet funeral home located in the Carroll Garden section of Brooklyn, New York. This funeral home called "All Pets Go to Heaven" which, at least in title, serves as a panacea for grieving pet owners. Upon an extensive interview with the two directors, the owner/manager and his wife, I discovered

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many issues that are beginning to affect the nature of the pet bereavement experience. This service allows a formal ritual for death and burial, including a viewing of the pet with options for customized coffins, urns, pillows, and monuments. One of the most interesting options available to bereaved pet owners is a formal memorial service with viewing and ceremonial tribute to the pet, similar to human funeral rituals.

The owner of the pet funeral home is happy to confirm that it is the only one of its kind "in the world" and has received worldwide notice and publicity since its opening in April 1997. The owner said he is a "big pet lover" who is "famous" in his neighborhood of South Brooklyn for conducting all types of burials for a variety of pets since his childhood. He decided to open the pet funeral home since no formalized services were available for pet funerals. He then compared the opening of the pet funeral home to his first year in the human funeral home business. In his first six months of operation in the pet funeral home he conducted "about thirty" funerals and received "dozens" of requests for information. In contrast, his first year in the human funeral home business yielded only eleven services. He is confident about the success of this new "industry" and plans to open more pet funeral homes in the foreseeable future.

The pet funeral director and his wife identified the "selling point" of their business as the opportunity to do "one-stop shopping" for the bereaved pet owners' needs. This includes funeral services, burials or cremation arrangements and even referrals to pet bereavement counselors, books and related literature on suffering the loss of a pet. They welcome and advertise for free advice and referral services and 24 hour-a-day availability to answer any questions related to pet death and access to services.

This may have both positive and negative effects on the overall construction of

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bereavement as it applies to death today. It may serve to open the discussion and need for recognition of the grief and significant bereavement experienced for the death of a pet. But, it may also create a distancing from the death of a pet as sometimes experienced for the death of humans. Presently the death of a family pet is often celebrated through some sort of intimate funeral and/or burial in a yard or park, with the intimates of the bereaved. It is often a simple, yet dignified expression of sorrow and love for the deceased pet. Moving this expression of grief to the funeral home may serve to distance the bereaved from the intimacy of the setting of the relationship, and ultimately bring more distance and isolation to the bereaved through the basic commercialization of this private and very personal experience, similar to what has occurred with human grief and bereavement.

As Charmaz (1980) asserts, for some, the commercialized funeral of today stands as perfect testimony to an alienated society supported by the everyday actions of alienated human beings who passively and unquestioningly perform their expected tasks. Such enterprises are founded in the profit motive and are perpetuated by individuals whose world view supports having their "glimpse of death tempered by the fantasies of the planners" (Harmer 1971). Still, it is clear that some who seek out the services of these establishments, as in the case of pet death, believe that they have unquestionably demonstrated their regard for the deceased (besides living up to their own self-conceptualization by choosing an "appropriate" course of action). Consequently, any analysis of the social meanings of death must also examine the subjective beliefs of participants.

The Material Remains

In our culture, grief over death of an intimate shakes the foundation on which the

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self is constructed and known. Also, the self is situated in a structure of relationships in which the deceased intimate had played a central role. Since roles are usually reciprocal, the one on which the self had been largely predicated may no longer be possible. One cannot view oneself as a parent without a child or pet owner without a pet. Consequently, the death causes a fundamental loss of meaning and structure. Marris (1974) succinctly states, "The fundamental crisis of bereavement arises, not from the loss of others, but the loss of self."

Underlying the "resolution" of grief is the commonly held notion that the bereaved must gradually relinquish the symbols and actions that represent significant dimensions of the prior shared relationship. More important, relinquishing symbols and actions means relinquishing parts of oneself. Marris (1974) argues that in order to reconstruct meaning, the bereaved must reestablish continuity with the past without the deceased. This may be initiated by remaining connected to the physical representations of the deceased as a first step in the process of reconstructing meaning.

Some pet owners described how inanimate objects served to spiritually connect them with the pet after the pet's death. These objects were often referred to as a "pet's possessions." These objects may be something that belonged to or were used by a deceased pet, such as a collar, a cat's toy mouse, a bed, a special blanket, or even a food or water dish. The object may be part of the actual animal, such as a piece of fur, or even a paw print set in clay or stamped in ink. One woman in the bereavement support group wore a lock of her cat's hair in a heart locket around her neck. Another women wore a small locket with a picture of her dog in it. Several group members discussed how they were uncomfortable spending time at home with the painful memories of their pets,

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although they liked having these objects representing their pets close to them.

Pet owners were often advised by friends, co-workers, and family members to put away anything that belonged to their pets because keeping such items is thought to be representative of a morbid connection to the dead. Contrary to this, a common subject in the support group was how most people couldn't put certain things away (e.g., favorite toys, a food bowl). Another example is one young woman who made her dog's licence tags into a necklace and wore it as a good luck charm during her track meets. Another woman clipped some fur from her cat and slept with it under her pillow for months. Because her cat had slept beside her in bed for seventeen years, she found that having tactile access to some of her fur helped her to complete her grieving process. Obviously the symbols associated with the pet had strong meanings for pet owners, while the pet was alive and especially upon the pet's death.

One typical event of the bereavement support groups was sharing pictures of pets. Participants were invited to bring pictures of their pets, and at various times during each meeting, usually when group members shared intimate moments and memories of their pets, pictures came out. These pictures were of pets in various settings, with costumes, with their owners, and usually at some of their cutest moments. One member shared pictures she took of her and her cat when he was sick and dying in the hospital. I was struck with how happy she looked with her cat, and quickly reminded of the pain in her face as she spoke of him during the group meetings. She captured everything with her cat on film and displayed, at various meetings, a chronology of her cherished cat's life through photographs.

At one of the support group meetings, the group leader discussed the recent death

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of her childhood cat that lived with her parents. This cat had significant meaning for her. It represented a meaningful part of her childhood, and her family. Her family insisted on passing on the deceased cat's toys to her present pets. They felt this was the best way to share the memories of their deceased pet.

Mourning Expectations for Pet Loss

As many pet owners in the study have surmised, when confronted with any type of death, we are reminded of our own mortality and that of our loved ones. It has been suggested (Grollman, 1974; Rando, 1984) that when we attend a funeral we have mixed feelings of sadness for the deceased and family, and also of relief that it is not us, that we are still living. For many, the presence of the bereaved is a deadly reminder of our own vulnerability.

Following the initial period of death, a common theme among study participants is how they felt misunderstood, at a loss for support and very isolated. Several factors account for this: family and friends have returned to their own lives and personal concerns, with less time for the bereaved; those who offer support are anxious to see the bereaved feel better and have little patience for the continued pain and depression; and finally, society generally misunderstands the ebb and flow of the healing process, believing that within a few days or weeks after the death, recovery should occur. Society expects them to be "doing better," and the bereaved also believe this should happen. Bereavement behavior is influenced by expectations of others. They may want to feel better, worry about not feeling "normal," and believe they must behave as others expect. This causes them to repress the pain, mask their true feelings, and often to withdraw rather than risk being misunderstood, or respond that they are "fine" when internally they

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are "screaming in pain." They often avoid others and isolate their pain. One of the interviewees commented:

> "I've given up trying to be around others right now. I put on a mask, smile, swallow my tears and fears and go home more empty and lonely than ever. They just don't seem to understand. Nobody seems to understand."

Instead of meeting the needs for healing the pain of grief, which is necessary for recovery, the bereaved tend to meet the needs of others. Understanding this concept is understanding the needs of the bereaved. To go a step further, providing "permission" for the bereaved to meet their own needs, may facilitate recovery. Thus, pointed out earlier in the discussion of grief behavior, Lofland (1985) suggests that social norms penetrate and even direct, the experience of human emotions.

In rare cases, exceptions were noted among study participants: condolence cards, cemeteries, and bequests for animal care. One such example was a pet owner who discussed how her friends had given her a tremendous amount of support upon the death of her dog, Josh. On the final day of Josh's life, several friends came to her house to see her and Josh. These visitors included her ex-husband, who she said knew how she felt about the dog, a friend who she referred to as Josh's aunt and another male friend who she called Josh's father. Another focus group member described how his friend came to his apartment the last day of his cat's life to take pictures of him and his cat and to say "good-bye." Most often, however, the reactions of others, especially nonpet owners, were negative, thus contributing to the social stance of denial of death and subsequent isolation of the dying and bereaved. That is why the parameters of grief must be examined within the context of the actual experience.

One common theme of the companion animal grief experience, which takes on a

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different form in human bereavement, was the topic of "replacement." Although well-meaning, others may suggest that one remarry, make new friends, or have another child; such suggestions are usually met with anger or considered most inappropriate by humans in mourning for other humans. However, some bereaved persons attempt to cope by "letting go" (Schneider 1984) and by professing that it is better not to become involved with anyone again. This strategy was taken up by the bereaved pet owners as well, when they expressed intentions of never acquiring another pet.

Unfortunately, many grieving pet owners get used to hearing various versions of:

> "Are you still upset about Tiger? After all, he was only a dog and there are plenty of dogs that need homes. Let's go out right now and you can get another one! That will make you feel better."

Support group members often spoke of this and how angry it made them. One woman responded to a neighbor who offered this type of advice by saying he "should go out and get a new wife as soon as his present one dies." There was much discussion on the lack of understanding by most people when a pet dies, including stories of how people hid their pet's death from co-workers who wouldn't understand their need for time off.

Support group members discussed friends who had not been supportive of them during their grieving. One woman explained how she was considering ending a twenty-year friendship because her friend failed to recognize the grief she felt over the loss of her much loved dog. She felt that her friend didn't meet her expectations regarding support and consolement. Study participants often repeated comments they received from others such as: "How can you be upset over a cat," or "It's just a bird anyway." This type of reaction may cause more difficulty in an already beleaguered set of circumstances. One of the clinical psychologists interviewed reported that he had two patients who were

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trying to cope with the unexpected news of rapidly advancing cancer in a much-beloved pet. They were ashamed to admit to friends, co-workers, and initially even to him how much they felt, fearing to be mocked or considered "weird." He had to stress repeatedly that their reactions were completely appropriate.

A discussion ensued during one of the focus groups on how people fail to adequately respond to human death. Other group members discussed how people often don't know how to offer consolation to the bereaved; what to say, how to lend support, independent of whether the deceased is a pet or a person. A male member of a focus group discussed how he felt that "people avoid discussions of death, even when they are other pet-owners, because they don't want to deal with the eventual death of their own beloved pets, or themselves." The support group leader even commented that when she mentioned to her classmate that her cat had died, he responded with "people don't really feel bad after a pet dies." She then told him that she ran a bereavement support group for pet owners and people were very much affected by the death of their pets. He then apologized and said that he himself would also be devastated if his pet died and just didn't want to think about it. Clearly, the subjective experience of grief defies what might seem to be a logical response from outside of that experience. Thus, the social norm of not recognizing such a loss is even enacted by those who themselves are disenfranchised in their relationships, but may not want to be socially recognized as such.

In his practice as a grief therapist, Herbert Nieburg recognized the ache that pet loss can trigger in many people and the tendency to suppress it (Nieburg and Fischer 1982). He also recognized that such repression of grief had an adverse effect on his clients' well being. By not dealing with their feelings, they were allowing the pain to

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remain unrelieved, like an untended sore that never quite heals and interferes with normal functioning. He discovered that when pet loss is repressed in childhood--by parents, for example, who minimize their youngsters' feelings over a cat or dog--it often comes back to interfere with the adult grieving process. Unrealized grief stays with us. When we suffer a later loss of a loved one (where it is acceptable to grieve), all the pain we held down from the loss of a pet "rises to the surface." We are, in effect, carrying a double load, mourning both the present and the past unresolved losses (Nieburg and Fischer 1982, 76).

Pets mean different things to different people. But when the idea that people should let themselves grieve over the loss of their pets was discussed in *The New York Times*, in an article written by Arlene Fischer ("When a Pet's Death Hurts Its Master," May 8, 1980), the response was swift and surprisingly strong. Herbert Nieburg, who was interviewed in the article because of his publicized work in pet loss, received nearly two hundred requests for help with anticipated loss, actual loss, the euthanasia dilemma, children's reactions and other problems. Pet owners were obviously reaching out for reassurance and guidance on a matter of significance for them--which is often not available to them (Nieburg and Fischer 1982, 68).

Of course, not every owner is affected equally by the death of a pet. Many study participants discussed other family members and significant others who did not have the same feelings or reactions to the death of their pet. This may signify that the majority of study participants experienced what was previously defined as "nonconventional" bonds with their companion animals. Or, it may imply that grief is manifested in a variety of ways by various people, being stronger for some more than others, or influenced by other

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factors specific to the individuals involved.

The grief experience and expectations of others significantly affect the rituals for mourning, especially as evidenced in the case of pet loss. Hence the tendency to keep grief suppressed and private is not an isolated psychological response. It is usually part of a larger social process in which grief is the final conclusion of events. And, as noted, it is certainly related to widely held values concerning what we are and how we appear to others. Given the dominant cultural emphasis on stoicism, on handling things alone, and making the "best" of a situation, the bereaved pet owner is well socialized into treating his or her situation as private (Charmaz 1980). It is not surprising, then, that when death actually occurs, some survivors may not seem to express much depth of feeling or disclose personal concerns. Their socialization has been too effective for that.

The stoicism and individualism displayed in the grieving process are also important because they become the "yardstick" upon which the bereaved's self worth is measured. When people manage grief with equanimity, without unburdening the depth of it to others, those individuals are permitted to see themselves as "strong." To break down in tears or show anxiety publicly may be taken as a sign of "weakness," particularly when continued over time.

That there is something wrong with sorrow is implied by Howard Becker who called sorrow the emotion of "weakness" rooted in the wish for security and at that, an appeal for help (1969, 116). The grief, however, that gives rise to this "weakness" points dramatically to a human need for communication and interdependence. Since that type of interdependence is antithetical to American cultural ideals rooted in Puritanism, it is not surprising that Becker castigates it. Correspondingly, it can be anticipated that the

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dominant theories in psychiatry and psychology echo the prevailing cultural ideals. Since Becker, in his clinical point of view, assumes that grief elicits the underlying weakness of the person, the logical extension of his concept is that grief is something to overcome and conquer. Still, this type of reasoning which assumes that grief elicits an underlying weakness is a cause of personal concern to some newly bereaved individuals who become fearful that they might totally "fall apart" or become "too dependent" upon others. Thus, the expectations for the bereaved pet owners' mourning behavior appears to be an important variable in the quality of the survivor's grief.

Bereavement Interventions

An important consideration in the resolution of grief is the method which one chooses to endure their grief. As previously stated, common norms for handling the distress elicited by grief are related to the underlying values of individualism and stoicism and repression, rather than expression of grief is more apt to be encouraged by others when the bereaved is in direct contact with them. When families are isolated in their communities, little support is available unless there are formal organizations developed specifically to serve the bereaved. However, in contrast to the individualistic way of handling grief in the dominant culture, values emphasizing social support and expression of loss are encouraged in subgroups of the population and by those organizations or systems designed to support those disenfranchised groups.

As previously defined, support is the accessability of a person who: will listen without judgement and with intensity, will openly give emotional support, and will permit the bereaved to express true pain and feelings. Support may be as simple as a caring neighbor with a warm heart, taking a few minutes to lean over the back fence, nodding in

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understanding and chatting with a bereaved neighbor. At the other end of the spectrum, support may be as complex as a long-term psychotherapeutic process.

The prevalence of psychotherapeutic intervention in American society is a concept of important social and cultural relevance, especially when applied to bereavement. It also represents the changes in American culture in the twentieth century. While people have attempted to control and understand death throughout time, it is perhaps the cultural/socio/economic developments of the recent decades (compared with society in the early 1900s) that have created a role for caregivers in thanatology.

The psychological exploration of death started in the 1950s and the succeeding years saw a burst of activity in the field. The 1960s and 1970s were characterized by the introduction of workshops and courses on dying, death, and mourning in various universities and professional schools. There were also noteworthy pioneering books and research by psychiatrists, sociologists, philosophers and anthropologists, among others. Thus, grief work came into being as a means of dealing with death as the field began to recognize the distancing of death and the subsequent isolation of the bereaved as a means of psychotherapeutic intervention.

In addition, the death and dying movement has its origins in a stance combining general psychiatric conceptions with views and techniques from the human potential movement, a direct predecessor in the field of popular psychology. The psychiatric influence emphasizes the fear and denial of death, anxiety, and the patient's motivation. The human potential movement influence is displayed in the priority of feeling over thinking about death. With its emphasis on spontaneous, immediate expression of feeling, proponents of this perspective view the confrontation of death as a prerequisite to

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realizing human potential. The sector of the movement that most directly reflects the human potential orientation gives it the character mentioned above and noted by several observers (Gutmann 1977; Lofland 1977).

Though the initial impetus of many death and dying movement proponents was to advocate expression of personal concerns about death, increased emphasis is now placed on the creation of organizational forums that deal with death. The emergence of a hospice movement, is one example. The development of community sponsored bereaved support organizations to help the bereaved is another. However some of these forums are primarily designed to provide an organizational setting for expressing personal concerns. Others are designed to fundamentally change the form of the dying and grieving process. Thus, from the perspective of these psychologists, the "problem" of death is currently defined as largely psychological in nature. That is, facing up to death, remaining aware of it, and accepting it are thought to be key issues. Attitudes and behaviors surrounding death are held to be amenable to change through such trendy techniques as encounter group exercises and self-explorations of "death" and "rebirth." As Gutmann (1977) suggests, death has become the latest, (but undoubtedly not the last) arena in which lay psychologists wage the struggle for "inner liberation." In this case, they struggle against the fear and denial of death. Thus, the confrontation of self with death has become a necessary part of human development for seekers of "personal growth." Even though they may not reflect fundamental changes in the American stance toward death and dying. All of the trends discussed above have clearly contributed to the current interest in death. Many of them have arisen as a direct response to the "ordinary" treatment of death by silence, pretense, and concealment.

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One of the most thoroughly explored influences of the social construction for pet bereavement was the variable of social support. Intervention, in the form of grief counselors, bereavement support groups, and more commonly, generalized societal recognition of death as a significant loss, has been addressed periodically throughout the study, and in the words of Stroebe and Stroebe: "It has become well accepted that others can help the bereaved to alleviate their physical and psychological suffering" (1987, 224). The variable of social support was examined through the bereaveds participation in any formalized counseling or organizations for the bereaved. The following are the findings on this social construct.

*Support Groups: Joiners and Non-Joiners*

This study looks at those who sought help from a support group setting and those who chose not to seek out support groups or simply were not aware of them at the time of their loss. The proportion of those who actually joined such support groups appeared to be small relative to the incidence of bereavement. Given their potential benefits, particularly for pet loss, it is interesting to question why the bereavement support group's utilization rate was not much higher.

The support group at The Animal Medical Center is the only free group of its kind in Manhattan and there were never more than 15-20 participants at each session. There is little research that can be drawn upon to answer the question of support group utilization, but several reasons present themselves. Perhaps the most parsimonious explanation would be that the utilization, while apparently low, may be just what it should be. For one reason or another, it may be that many bereaved individuals do not need what this support group has to offer.

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This was further explored through the focus group discussions and the interviews with pet grief counselors. The majority of focus group participants claimed to "not feel comfortable" with discussing their feelings in this type of setting. When this issue was further examined, it appeared that the basis for these feelings is that the participants didn't feel comfortable with discussing their feelings in public, especially those feelings associated with their pets. When they were reminded that they were discussing their feelings with the focus group, they said they felt that they were "supporting research" and this information may be useful for "other people and other purposes for pets"

Based on discussions with each of the people interviewed who didn't participate in bereavement support groups, the following may provide some explanations. Some of those interviewed stated that they had adequate sources of social support, friends and/or family who are pet owners/lovers, or that they made use of other forms of (professional) help, and therefore felt little need for the assistance provided by support groups. Another reason stated is that bereavement did not necessarily lead to serious distress; some bereaved, although saddened, were not so distressed as to feel the need for "special" help. Other reasons include the opinion that these prospective members had about support groups and what they had to offer. Two of those interviewed felt that groups such as these primarily foster expressions of grief and other emotions, which they fear, would only exacerbate their own grief. A few did not join because they believed it would be a sign of "weakness"; they should be able to cope with their loss "by themselves." One woman attended one group meeting and said the group participants were "fanatics" so decided not to go back. One middle-aged man did not know these groups were available and regretted not having the opportunity "to share, and possibly help someone else." For

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the interviewees who did not attend bereavement support groups, they all admitted finding greater comfort in speaking to other pet owners upon the loss of their pet, even though, as one woman said, "no one really understands unless they experience the loss of a pet themselves."

Everyone in the bereavement support group usually participated, including the group leader who came to one group meeting claiming a need to discuss the recent death of her childhood pet. Some people came to the support group anticipating the death of their pet, and looking for support for their sorrow over the impending death, and for help with decisions on euthanasia. Many members had discussed other instances when they had participated in counseling, support groups, or "12-step" programs. One man claimed the need to speak out in this type of setting, just as he had done "in many church basements for other troubles in his life." Thus, the willingness to participate or seek out such support is often the reflection of other norms in an individual's life or identities of social support mechanisms. One woman in the support group commented on how she "listened to all the negative comments made by group members on how others reacted to their pets death" and didn't speak to anyone "outside the group" about her feelings of grief over the loss of her pet. Thus, the support group influenced how others expressed their grief and mourning and often influenced or reinforced the social distancing of pet owners from society, therefore reinforcing their status as disenfranchised.

Those who had attended the support group for many months, or years, were very supportive of each other and treated each other as good friends who cared and listened. They were often very friendly with each other and stayed after the meeting to talk. There were often references made to personal telephone conversations between meetings. For

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many, this group was a social occasion, especially for the elderly or longtime group members. Group members often encouraged each other to remember positive, happy memories instead of only the final hours or days of their pets lives; "remember how happy and lucky the pet was to live with such loving people." One of the most important benefits of the support group is how the members remind each other that grief is not an individual phenomenon--everyone experiences it. One man told the "parable of the mustard seed" from the bible which discusses the universality of grief and how one is never alone in that experience.

Some people who came to the group for the first time were in a lot of pain and often sat quietly sobbing as others shared their grief and experiences of loss. Of the new members, some never returned while others came back and slowly began to express their feelings of grief, commenting on how "safe" the group was and how encouraged they were to share their feelings. Most bereavement group members commented on the lack of support they received from family and friends. A few spoke of very supportive friends, but most discussed how "no one outside of the group understood how they felt." When members decided not to continue with the group, they often ended the meeting by thanking others for their support and claiming their successful passage through their bereavement process. One woman said she "can finally see that she will recover from this."

One woman described her "journey" to seek support. She described the support group as the "one place" she could go "where you didn't have to wear a mask." She found it helpful mostly because there were few places she could go and not "pretend." "If you laughed, it was okay, and if you cried, everyone understood and let you cry." Everyone

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else in her life said "get a hold of yourself, stop crying, and cheer up." At the group she could behave as she felt, not as "others expected." After several months with the group, she decided to stop going for a while. It took great energy, she was feeling acute grief and she needed to step back from it. The problem was that very few outside of the group understood her pain, nor allowed her to behave as she needed to. Her husband, two sons and close relatives were each grieving in their own way.

In addition to its influence on the expression of grief, gender was also a factor contributing to support group participation. One of the few male participants reflected on his experience of "recovery." Things that did not help: many did not respond to him, family and friends did not understand what he was going through. Attending the same church was not helpful, so he changed churches. Things that did help: finding people who understood and listened. He became extremely active in the bereavement support group, first as a newcomer needing support, counseling, friendship, later as a "core" group member.

> "Men have both similar and different issues. They find it difficult to express emotion. In the support group, though, gender is not an issue, we are all in the same boat. It's very helpful."

Among those studied, the course of bereavement was sometimes short and other times protracted, not an unexpected finding considering that there is no known norm for the duration of grief. In some cases, the bereavement became manageable after a single visit to the bereavement support group, which combined catharsis with education about the normality of their grief. Others went to the group for months, and even came back sporadically for years at difficult times or on anniversaries of their pet's death. Some went to the group for months, not getting better but rather learning to become accustomed

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to the absence of a loved one, whether or not they adopted a new pet.

Several of those who participated in the focus groups discussions or interviews voiced the opinion that "groups aren't for everyone." One interviewee expressed her attempt at attending a support group, but found herself leaving the meetings feeling even more lonely and confused. Some people expressed being "very private" and find support "in other ways." What was noted to be helpful for those who didn't seek out support groups or counseling was: "filling empty space with things to do," "spending time in some of the special places" they may have shared with their pet, enjoying a new pet or friend's pets, or reading and reflecting on the lives shared with their own special pets.

Perhaps the availability of social support is only helpful when it is accompanied by appropriate opportunities for openly confiding and sharing the experience of grief and mourning. In fact, the present study found an association between social support and the tendency to naturally confide in others as expressed by those support group members who claimed to participate in other types of "group" therapy or counseling. What remains unclear is whether those who confide in others invite such support, or whether the increased support encourages more confiding. Although, as this research demonstrates, it has been found that social support, even if potentially valuable, may not be experienced, if an individual's coping mode is such that significant others do not know how to respond or don't consider the opportunity as an option due to socially unacceptable reasons (Dunkel-Schetter, Folkman, and Lazarus 1987).

*Pet Bereavement Counselors*

Carmack (1985) suggested that the degree of intimacy shared with a pet is rarely, if ever, shared with parents, spouses, or siblings. As Bernbaum (1982) suggested, since

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one of the biggest differences between grief for a human and grief for an animal is the lack of support systems for the bereaved, there is implication that professional support people are needed to help bereaved pet owners with their grief.

Jamie Quackenbush, who was the first full-time pet bereavement counselor in the United States, wrote with great sensitivity and thoroughness about practices and procedures for dealing with pet bereavement. He began his work at the Veterinary Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania (VHUP). In 1979 a social work service was begun at the Small Animal Hospital in the School of Veterinary Medicine, University of Pennsylvania (Quackenbush 1988). This is just one of the methodologies employed by bereavement counselors working with pet loss. It is interesting to note that some veterinary schools offer bereavement courses that encompass the viewpoints of the veterinarian and the pet owner. The literature on pet bereavement has pointed out the need for more counseling, whether it is in the form of a specific support group, individual counseling, or recommendations to ministers and other counselors who would benefit themselves and their clients by learning as much as possible about human/animal bonding and how the breaking of that bond affects the lives of those who loved their pets, whose lives were enriched by that bond, and whose death affects them deeply. This recommendation is based on open acknowledgment of the grief experience of pet owners, recognizing the acuteness of these feelings, as well as the lack of social support for this grief.

The three grief counselors interviewed in this study often obtained clients from direct solicitation from animal clinics or from referrals by veterinarians and other pet owner clients. Again, they found that people often seek them out through an

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intermediary. All three counselors felt that there was considerable social stigma associated with discussing feelings about death, especially with respect to pets. One counselor even described instances where his clients would come to discuss the loss of a "friend" before feeling comfortable enough to admit the loss was really a pet. The therapists agreed that there is a tremendous need for open awareness of the grief of pet loss, but it is often kept "in the closet" making the bereaved very vulnerable.

An interesting aspect of intervention raised by all three therapists interviewed is the opportunity for exploitation of those suffering pet loss. Apparently, there are a multitude of healing strategies offered through various pet networks including: crystal healing, spiritual contacts, and various forms of herbal and alternative therapies for grief and mourning specific to pet death. Each of the three counselors interviewed were traditionally trained psychotherapists and were very wary of these methods, even though they had witnessed many "recoveries" by patients using these alternative therapies. In fact, one of the interviewees described how she went to a "pet psychic" who helped her "connect" with her deceased dogs. She claimed that her dogs told the psychic that they didn't want her to suffer and the psychic predicted that the woman would adopt a pet in the very near future. This brought a great deal of relief to this bereaved pet owner.

The grief counselors also admitted the risk of exploitation of pet owners through various means of traditional counseling. It seems that many therapists who provide counseling specifically for pet owners charge exorbitant fees and often keep people in their care for protracted periods of time. One of the grief counselors interviewed is also a respected author on the topic of pet loss. He has suggested that some form of certification specific to pet bereavement be developed by professional psychotherapy associations.

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This idea has received little to no support from the other traditionalists. He feels their resistance is a reflection of their caution to legitimize or expose their methods of treatment. It is believed that most of the existing pet therapists use a multitude of methods to treat patients, and do not want to be subject to standardization, and the possible loss of an estimated sizable income from this type of work.

Unlike many forms of traditional counseling for humans, pet counselors often do not have any formal training. In fact they run the spectrum of educational and socioeconomic backgrounds. This has positive and negative implications for those in need of emotional support for the death of a companion animal. Although this may increase the accessibility to support systems for those suffering the death of a pet, it may also offer questionable feedback on the social expression of bereavement and coping, serving to encourage the conflicting messages associated with the practices of death and bereavement in our culture.

Thus, much of the literature supports a strong link between perceived social support and the mourning process. For example, Maddison and Walker (1967) and Raphael and Middleton (1987) both found that subjects who viewed social support as accessible and positive tended to have good outcomes in mourning when compared to subjects who perceived their support systems as deficient. Vachon et al. (1982) cite social support systems as integral to recovery from mourning. It is worth noting here that the literature on social support is almost entirely based on human loss. The effect of social support on animal loss requires further study. Social support scales typically do not query the respondent about the duration of support. It may be that in human loss the duration of support extends for a longer period of time (i.e., bereaved animal owners may

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cite several sources of support, but support may be proffered only for a day or two, at best, rather than months, and this might negate the effect of a difference between support/no support as a measurable perception).

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# CHAPTER VII

# CONCLUSION

## Discussion of Findings

The intent of this study was to refine and illuminate what already exists in the study of bereavement, and applies this information to the social experience of bereavement for pet loss. The significance of this work is that it provides a rich context of variables to fully identify social constructs of bereavement, specifically as they apply to what Doka (1989) refers to as "disenfranchised" losses, such as pets. Some general patterns have been identified in the research findings. To illustrate the nuance and depth of normal grief as it applies to pet loss, the study has incorporated the actual experiences of bereaved pet owners, grief counselors and funeral workers, providing critical perspective, detailed illustration and practical example. In summary, the data obtained may be grouped into the main categories of human-pet attachment, and the social construction of bereavement as deconstructed into the parallel experiences of grief behavior and mourning rituals for pet loss.

The significance of human-pet bonding illustrated in the literature is strongly supported through the empirical findings of this study. Pet owners display strong attachments to their pets including identifying them as surrogate children, significant life companions and family members. Thus, people exist in multiple relationships and have a tremendous capacity to form meaningful relationships outside of traditional kin networks. Consequently, the course of bereavement among study participants did not differ much from other personal experiences of human death or that documented in the human death literature.

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Information from the review of literature demonstrates the vital impact of culture and society on grieving behavior and mourning rituals. Further, the literature outlines data and research on bereavement, suggesting that grief is a normal, necessary reaction to loss. The findings from this study suggest various expressions of grief and mourning, often with psychological and emotional distress experienced upon the death of a beloved pet.

The grieving process for pet death is multidimensional and generally can include many aspects of the typical human grief experience. Common grief themes among study participants include guilt and blame, fear of loss, issues of replacement, and protracted feelings of sadness. Characteristics of the grief experience for pet loss were quite similar to that documented in the literature and expressed by study participants. The exceptions to this include the nature of the relationship between people and pets, coping strategies most often utilized by pet owners, and final decisions for pet death. For example, the nature of the human-pet relationship is one of ongoing dependency and care taking duties, therefore imposing tremendous responsibility on the pet owner for the nature, extent and choices for medical treatment. This responsibility is often extended to the method and time of death, something often not available to family members or significant others in most human deaths. Thus, many, if not most, of the pet owners in this study discussed the burden of the responsibility for these choices as well as the strong obligation to adequately and humanely represent their pets in the difficult decisions of life and death.

Issues of replacement are a unique, yet common theme among pet owners. Replacing a deceased loved one is not a frequent topic among the bereaved in general. This is not so in the case of pet loss. Pet owners appeared to have resented and felt

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isolated by the response and encouragement of others to replace their pet in attempts to solve their "problem" of grief. For many owners, the process of grieving and bonding are diametrically opposed, just as with human bereavement, therefore the suggestion of replacement is not only insensitive, but often is not very beneficial to bereaved pet owners.

The social construction of mourning and death rituals are also significant in the process of pet bereavement. As with human death, funeral practices, if utilized, are most likely practiced in accordance with the bereaved's individual belief system and customs for death behavior. As witnessed among study participants, the absence or exclusion of pre-death or formalized funeral rituals doesn't preclude participation in personalized, significant, and meaningful therapeutic or post-funeral rituals.

An interesting aspect of rituals for pet death is the widely expanding industry and resources surrounding it. This includes cemeteries, funeral homes, and grief workers dedicated exclusively to the death of pets. Thus, the nature and commercialization of pet death are contributing to how the bereaved construct meaning to the event and influences the shaping of norms and mores around human-pet relationships and furthermore, the nature of death in general.

Most of the study participants discussed the social isolation or lack of support following the death of their pets. These findings concur with the literature regarding the social construction of grief and mourning and demonstrate that pet loss appears to mimic, if not surpass the usual social distancing experienced with human death. The case of pet death reflects those circumstances where an individual suffers significant object loss but, because of the disenfranchised bereavement, does not have a socially legitimized channel

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through which to express grief. Given the dominant cultural emphasis on stoicism and handling things alone, the bereaved pet owner is well socialized into treating his or her situation as private. The way(s) in which the bereaved pet owner handles the death of his or her pet reflects larger issues of self worth, i.e., a person being viewed as strong or weak in the response to the death of a beloved pet. A central theme in the bereavement experience of the disenfranchised is the need to validate their loss which is often not socially recognized. There is a strong agreement in the thanatological literature that a major factor influencing the resolution of grief is the presence of social support--though this literature is almost entirely based on human loss. If society is to recognize human grief reactions to the loss of a pet animal as legitimate and non-pathological phenomena, illustrative of the fact that human-pet bonds reflect more than property management, the enfranchisement of grief in caring communities becomes increasingly necessary.

Research Implications

While this study has provided important preliminary data on the social construction of bereavement due to the loss of a companion animal, there are many additional issues which need to be addressed in future research. There should be an enhanced focus on more homogeneous sampies of companion animal owners in order to compare the bereavement process for pet owners with different levels of attachment and different social support systems. Results of these comparisons would have implications for which interventions might be necessary or effective with regard to the impact of certain individuals in various situations.

As this research only investigated individuals over the age of eighteen, future research should include children, adolescents and a larger number of elderly individuals.

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There may be meaningful differences in the social construction of bereavement for those groups. Due to the nature of the study, the sample was self-selected, therefore, limiting the generalizability of the results to the larger population of pet owners.

Women were disproportionately represented in the current sample and therefore men should be the focus of additional studies in order to determine whether gender differences exist in pet bereavement, and what special problems may apply to their experience of pet bereavement. Since it appears that women differ in their grief response and their tendency to seek out support, reasons for these differences should be explored.

As grief and mourning for human loss is thought to vary from different ethnic and cultural groups, the impact of pet loss should also be investigated in this context. Possible differences in patterns of attachment among various subcultures may also affect the social construction of bereavement for a companion animal.

Another special population group should include those who have used animals in work, such as in the military and law enforcement. These groups usually develop a significant bond with their animals since their relationship is often based on life safety and trusted loyalty in times of ultimate need. These populations often have complete personal and professional responsibility for the animal, thus compounding issues of attachment. It would be particularly interesting to examine the grief and subsequent bereavement experiences of these groups, especially with regard to the social support provided by personal and professional contacts.

While the present study looked at all kinds of pets, future studies might compare species to determine differential effects on the course of grieving, as it may be easier to have closer relationships with some pets than with others. Some research has suggested

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that pet owners differ in their patterns of attachment for example to birds as compared with dogs, which could also be reflected in the social construction of the bereavement process. This was not the case in this study, however personality correlations associated with the keeping of particular types of pets may also play a role in adjustment to the death of a companion animal, as well as social reaction to that loss.

Finally, longer term follow-up is necessary to be able to compare the death of pets to human losses over various time periods. Some grief research has indicated that even after initial symptoms level off, there are higher levels of grief at later points. As this study demonstrates, grief reactions can be long lasting and later triggered by various events. It would be interesting to know if such phenomena exist in companion animal grief, and if so, under what circumstances.

## Conclusion

The issues of death and bereavement are complex and multifaceted. The present study explored the dimensions of one particular area of concern in the topic of bereavement--reactions to the loss of a companion animal, and the associated processes of grieving behavior and mourning rituals. In so doing, this study demonstrates the concrete significance of a cultural constructionist view and suggest a possible alternative to currently prevailing practices on the larger topic of death and bereavement for the greater population of bereaved as well as other disenfranchised losses.

Despite the shortage of research on and attention to the issue of disenfranchised grief, it remains a significant issue. Millions of Americans are involved in losses in which grief is effectively disenfranchised. It is likely that bereavement counselors will have increased exposure to cases of disenfranchised grief. In fact, the very nature of

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disenfranchised grief and the unavailability of informal support make it likely that those who experience such losses will seek help from formal support systems. Thus, there is a pressing need for research that will describe the particular and unique reactions of each of the different types of losses; compare reactions and problems associated with these losses; describe the important variables affecting disenfranchised grief reactions; assess possible interventions; and discover atypical grief reactions, such as masked or delayed grief that might be manifested in such cases. Also needed is education sensitizing people to the many kinds of relationships and subsequent losses that people can experience and the affirmation that where there is loss, there is grief. In fact, the study of disenfranchised losses, such as pet loss, strongly supports the positions held by Sheff (1979), Sarbin (1986), Lofland (1985) and others who argue that culture does not simply influence the patterned ways of handling grief and displaying mourning behavior, but the subjective interpretation of cultural meanings and personal experiences give rise to the very feelings defined as "grief."

In the preceding, I have suggested that the modern emotional experience of pet bereavement, as documented by the research and supported by considerable literature, may not be a universal constant of the human condition. It seems likely that since humans everywhere and always form attachments, and they will everywhere and always know grief. But it seems equally likely that the character of that grief--its shape and texture and length--is quite variable.

Perhaps the single most impressive fact about death today--independent of the unchangeable truth that death can never be circumvented--is how much (and in how many different ways) various aspects of death and dying are currently undergoing dramatic

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changes. The ethics, sociology, psychology, and morality of death have not been exempt from these culture-wide changes. This study attempts to reflect these changes in relation to death--changes that have led us to new, and often startling, insights into the very process of dying; into the intricate interactions between the dying and those with whom they interact; into the impact of death on those left behind; and even into the need for reexamining such fundamental questions as, how death occurs and how death should occur.

A serious pursuit of grief's possibly changing visage is worth the effort because, as said at the outset, bereavement is an especially strategic case for considering many issues of concern to the sociology of emotion, the sociology of death as well as the broader discipline itself. It is an experience, however much based in biological capacities, which touches directly on the mutual interdependence of selves and societies. Losses arising out of merely "normal" levels of mortality may tell us more about the diverse patterning of that interdependence, about the varieties of human attachment, and about the many different ways of being that we call "the human condition."

Although sensitivity to culturally constructed components of grief behavior and mourning rituals is increasing, the relevance to specific practices around death is far less apparent. What implications do viewing death behavior as culturally and historically contingent have for matters of daily practice and policy development within the social sciences and health professions? Are caregiving strategies and therapeutic practices subject to historical and cultural limitations? Does each new generation require new forms of support and/or treatment? If people of one subculture or generation consider a given form of action appropriate and acceptable, are those who fail to share their views

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justified in viewing such action as a problem in need of attention? All such questions gain focal significance in this context.

When imminent death of an intimate directly confronts one, problematic issues become much more visible, are more difficult to ignore, and attempts to gloss them over them are considerably less successful. Importantly, fundamental issues and questions regarding life in contemporary American society are raised. As clearly evident in the study of pet bereavement, the nature of the issues facing the bereaved reflect several fundamental issues in everyday life. To experience loss raises the issue of possessing crucial information about another. To control treatment raises the issue of individual autonomy and social responsibility. To make choices about handling the dying process raises the issue of action by decision or default. To elect death for oneself, or another, raises the issue of individual choice and social coercion. To desire emotional support raises the issue of intimacy or isolation. By looking at these and related issues, we gain insight, not only into the plight of the dying, and bereaved, but also into our own values on death.

Thus, the reality of bereavement is ultimately a social construction given an "objective" character through thought and action. Because the reality of bereavement is a social construction, it is subject to changes as human beings transform their social conditions and are transformed by them. The beliefs, values, norms and practices constituting the reality of death and bereavement are constructions of interacting persons who shape both society and history. Similarly, the form given to dying, conceptions of death, and the experience of bereavement for companion animals will all be constructed in ways that are uniquely consistent with American traditions. Thus, the nature of their

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emerging thoughts and actions around the moral status of pets as well as the nature of death will give shape to accepted bereavement for pet loss in the future.

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# APPENDIX A

## INTERVIEW GUIDE

INTERVIEW GUIDE STUDY: PET BEREAVEMENT

I am doing a survey of pet owners and am particularly interested to talk with people who have ever lost a pet. Have you had that experience? If so, I'd like to speak with you for a few minutes.

DATE: TIME: LOCATION: ID#:
NAME: SEX: AGE:
MARITAL STATUS: 1) Married 2) Separated 3) Divorced 4) Single (NM)
5) Living with others (specify)
WHERE DO YOU LIVE:

PETS:

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Dog(s): | Yes No | # ____ | Age(s): ___________ | Years with you: _______ |
| Cat(s): | Yes No | # ____ | Age(s): ___________ | Years with you: _______ |
| Bird(s): | Yes No | # ____ | Age(s): ___________ | Years with you: _______ |
| Other(s): _________ | | # ____ | Age(s): ___________ | Years with you: _______ |

1. I'd like to start by asking you about your experience(s) with pet(s)?

2. What are some of the best things about having a pet(s)?

3. What are some of the worst things about having a pet(s)?

4. What types of pet(s) do you have/have you had in your lifetime? (refer to table above on pets, ages, and years)

5. How did you get your pet; e.g. adopt, from a friend?

6. Did you consider the pet yours or did you share it with someone else?

7. What role has/have your pet(s) played in you life?

8. There are different ways of sharing their lives with pets. Some people set aside time for pets, others always take their pets wherever they go. How would you describe your experience?

9. Did you ever find yourself doing things your pet wanted or needed you to do. For example, visit with people or go to certain places, drive in the care, clean up after certain pet habits, etc.

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10. What are some special times, activities, or places you have shared with you pet?

11. Do you have friends who are pet owners?

12. Have you made friends through your pet(s), or talk with neighbors who are pet owners?

13. What do you do with your friends and your pets, i.e. pet birthday cards, go to the park together, etc.?

14. Have you ever suffered the death of a special pet or someone else's pet? What were the circumstances surrounding the death - accident, illness, euthanasia, etc.?

15. How long after you pet was sick did he or she die?

16. When was this experience?

17. Were you with your pet when he or she died?

18. Where was your pet when he or she died? Was he or she alone?

19. Have you ever lost a pet(s) or had a pet(s) taken away for any reason? What were the circumstances surrounding that event?

20. Was the loss of this pet different/same as other losses?

21. Did you find yourself doing things differently at the time of the pet's death or dying than you ordinarily do? What were they? Please explain.

22. How did you feel during this time? What did you feel personally?

23. How much did you discuss your feelings with others? Were these people other pet owners?

24. Did people ask you about your pet or discover that your pet had died?

25. Did you find yourself seeking out friends that had pets or experienced the death of a pet?

26. What kinds of things did you share/hold back?

27. How did other people respond to your loss?

28. Were the responses different from pet owners vs. non pet owners?

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29. Approximately how long did it take you to get over your grief?

30. When you reflect back on that experience, what memories stand out?

31. If you could have changed anything about that experience - with yourself, your pet, the circumstances surrounding the event - or others - what would it be?

32. Did you get another pet after the death of this pet?

33. How long after the death of your pet did you get another?

34. What kind of pet did you get?

35. What made you decide to get another pet?

36. Did you have any difficulty adjusting to a new pet, i.e. comparing the new pet to the one you lost?

37. If you didn't get another pet, why?

38. Do you think you will every get another pet? When?

39. When you think back on your pet, what impact did he or she make on your life

40. What effect has this loss had on your life?

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# APPENDIX B

## MODERATOR GUIDE

1. General introduction to study, focus group format

2. Role of moderator

3. Ground rules for discussion

4. Introduction of participants

5. Basic feeling about and experiences with pets: pros & cons, life style, activities with pets

6. Social networks re. pets: living relationships, friends with pets

7. General experience of pet's death: illness, length of time before death, death experience, euthanasia decisions

8. Description of grief: initial response, comparison of grief response to other losses

9. Mourning practices: funeral practices, discussion with others, responses from others,

10. General thoughts about the experience of pet loss

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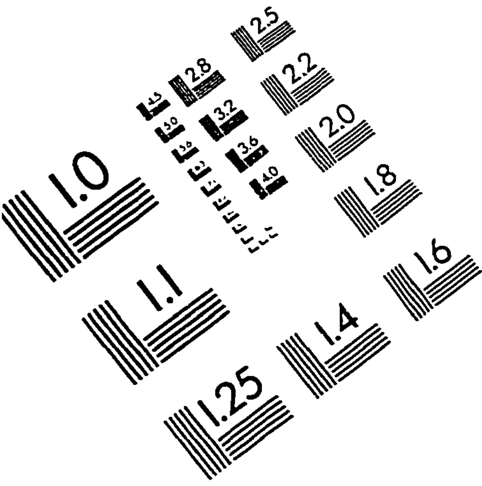
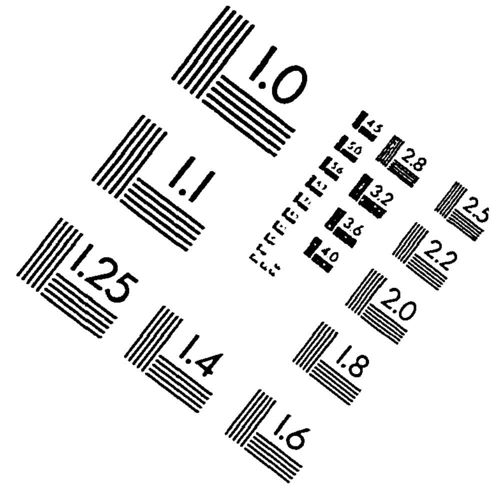
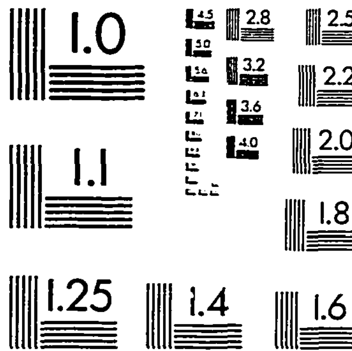
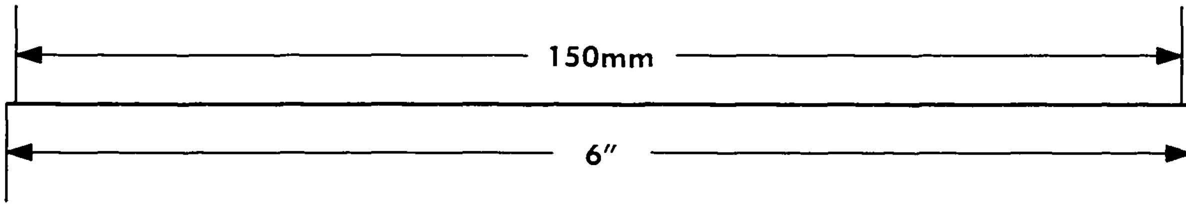
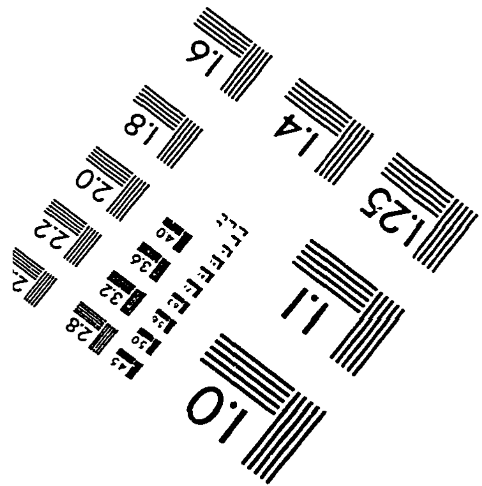
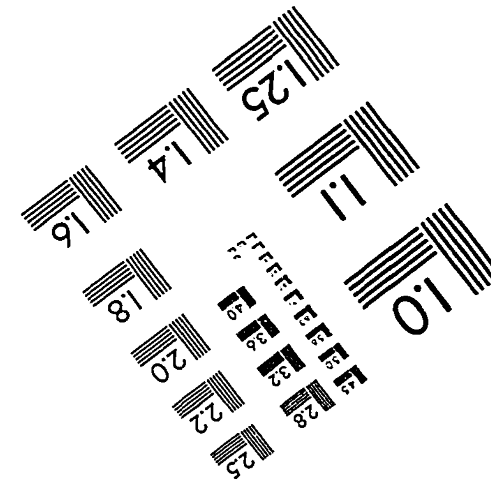
# IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)

APPLIED IMAGE . Inc
1653 East Main Street
Rochester, NY 14609 USA
Phone: 716/482-0300
Fax: 716/288-5989

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