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What Are The Experiences of Pet Bereavement?

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Abstract
On average, 80 million American households, or 34.8%, own one or more pet (American Veterinary Medical Association as cited in Cordaro, 2012, p.283). Despite the significant role pets play in their owner’s lives, the loss of a pet is inconsistently recognized as an authentic occasion for bereavement (Clements, Benasutti & Carmone, 2003). Research on pet bereavement focuses on pet and owner attachment, comparative studies examining differences in the child and adult pet bereavement, and pet loss via euthanasia. Despite the range of existing literature, there is a gap on the experience of pet bereavement; therefore, additional research is needed to understand the experience of losing a pet and how this loss is grieved by pet owners.

Introduction
Available research on pet bereavement ranges from the exploration of pet and owner attachment levels; comparative studies examining differences in the child and adult grief reaction, focusing on pet bereavement; and pet loss via euthanasia. However, there is little focus on the overall experience of pet bereavement. The goal of the current study is to gain a deeper understanding of pet bereavement through experiences of pet owners. Phenomenology is based on a shared experience and meaning making (Creswell, 2013), therefore it is well suited to this inquiry by allowing the voices of pet owners to describe their experiences in their own words. Furthermore, this research aims to identify and increase resources for those grieving the loss of their pet and help to inform social service providers how to better assist pet owners through the bereavement process.

Objectives
1. To explore the experiences of pet bereavement
2. To bridge the gap in the current literature and bring recognition to the pet bereavement process and the importance and meaning of pets to people.

Methods
Phenomenology
- Phenomenology is the proposed method, which is well suited for a study focused on a shared experience. Utilizing the participants’ own words, phenomenology focuses on describing what participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

Theoretical Frame Work
- Social construction relies on the participants’ lens informed by their experience, culture, values, and other influences that generate an understanding and assign meaning to the participant's experience and is well matched for a phenomenological study (Creswell, 2013).
- The second theory is Keith-Lucas Theory for Mourning which will assist in explaining the pet bereavement/grief process. The stages proposed by Keith-Lucas, as outlined by Harris (2015), are as follows: shock and denial; protest; and despair and mastery.

Participants
- Criterion sampling was used in this study. The criterion was eighteen years of age with the loss of a pet at least six months ago. The sample included ten participants from across the United States. There were eight female participants and two male participants, with nine participants experiencing the loss of a dog and one participant experiencing the loss of a cat.

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Morgan Wheeler, University of Southern Maine.
Mentor: Dr. Paula Gerstenblatt of University of Southern Maine.

Discussion
Previous studies have found that the bonds between a pet and its owner(s) are unique and, often times, a pet secures the role of a family member (Cordaro, 2012; Kaufman & Kaufman, 2006). However, current literature lacks to explore, analyze and understand pet owners experienced with the pet bereavement and grief process. The current research study explored the experiences of pet bereavement focusing five major themes: grief; illness, when your pet is sick; comparative studies examining differences in the child and adult pet bereavement, and pet loss via euthanasia. There was no formal grief support, only people who also lost their pets.

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<td>Significant Statement</td>
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<td>like I didn't ask for it, nor do I think that they had like a post like and after care plan. 1101 P.2</td>
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Acknowledgements:
I would like to thank Dr. Paula Gerstenblatt for mentoring and guiding me throughout this research process. I would also like to thank IRB for this opportunity and each of my participants.

References:

Significant Statement | Meaning Unit |
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<td>like I didn’t ask for it, nor do I think that they had like a post like and after care plan. 1101 P.2</td>
<td>There were no supports offered to me at the vet clinic and I assumed there weren’t any</td>
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It's minimized in our society quite a bit, you know, the loss of a pet. 2009 P.4 | There is not enough recognition around the loss of a pet |

Theme One: Grief
- **Sub-themes:** The Impact, Time Helps, Ready To Start Again; It Never Goes Away
- **Essence:** "We were with him when he was put to sleep it was very peaceful and the sun went down and we went inside and just bawled you know like uhh for hours I think in ways that I've never cried anybody or anything. I've lost a lot of friends and you know not only my parents are still alive but my grandparents have passed away and I've never felt like that kind of attachment to anything before" (Participant 1015)

Theme Two: Illness, When Your Pet Is Sick
- **Sub-themes:** The Shock; No Treatment, No Hope; Not Knowing Why; Making The Decision
- **Essence:** "I had to choose when to put her down which was hell" (Participant 1018)
- **"We probably couldn't have done anything you know it would have been just to let her be happy and let her be peaceful in her last months" (Participant 1019)

Theme Three: Supports Specific to Pet Bereavement (See Table 1)
- **Sub-themes:** Who Could I Turn To; Insensitivity From Providers; Difficult To Talk About; No Supports Specific To Pet Loss; Get Over It
- **Essence:** "I feel like people say they understand or uhm you know even other people who have lost pets but then it’s really not the same as when you lose a family member you know it’s sort of like you’re expected to get over it much more quickly and people don’t really check in on you at all like, it’s like ‘oh my gosh I’m so sorry’ and then after the event then it’s just over” (Participant 2025)

Theme Four: Lessons Learned
- **Essence:** “It’s not very easy for me to be in the moment so I think going for walks, going to the ocean, going to – we would go paddle boarding together -- and going for walks on a routine basis. I think she taught, her presence her personality taught me to be present in the moment um gave me the gift of a relationship just like reinforced the gift of a relationship and oh awaw to be patient” (Participant 1011)

Theme Five: What My Pet Meant To Me
- **Essence:** “It leaves that spot in your life because she was my constant companion, I’m on disability she was my first dog that I ever spent 247 with you know I didn’t have to go to work and leave everyday so we were very much she was very much a part of my everyday life so I was very very very lost for a while” (Participant 1301)