

The importance of pet loss and some implications for services

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Understanding the meaning of companion animals and their loss in peoples' lives has major implications for the way professional services are organized and delivered. There is much research and literature which argues for the major social, emotional and physical benefits of animal companionship, and the widespread nature of pet ownership. Yet ironically, much of the professional service literature has tended to marginalize or pathologize the human-animal bond, often dichotomizing it against human relationships and assuming its inferiority. We argue that this reflects a tendency to individualize what should be a major social concern. Therefore service design and delivery needs to reflect a recognition of human-animal relationships as a significant part of normal experience. Services and policies need to factor in both the inclusion and loss of these.

Introduction

How important is the loss of a companion animal? The answer to this question partly hinges on the meaning of pets in our lives, and consequently how we understand and approach their loss. We approach these questions from the point of view of professional social workers, for whom our sociological understandings of personal experiences are crucial in influencing the directions of service delivery and professional practice. Therefore, answers to our second question are an integral part of our quest—what are the implications of this understanding for health services generally—the types of services which are offered, and for models of professional practice? In social context, these questions are important given the rising pressure regarding responsible pet ownership in increasingly urbanized conditions, at a time when pet ownership is also on the increase (Sheldrake, 1999). Are our services and responses keeping up, especially in an era when, for example, an increasingly aged pet-owning population also face less housing options? (Lippmann, 1995; Waanders, 2000) It is timely to review our current thinking, with a view to revising the ways in which we might need to understand and approach the loss of companion animals.

In this paper we argue that much of the literature regarding companion animals and their loss tends to pathologize or minimize the experience, and professional services have tended to be based on this approach. Yet there is much evidence to indicate that the ownership and loss of pets ought to be viewed as a much more mainstream experience. In this case services need to be developed based on a more normalized approach.

In this paper we begin by discussing some major research regarding companion animals and their loss: specifically the benefits of animal companionship; the loss of companion

animals; and social reactions to this loss. Using the elderly as an example, we argue that human relationships with companion animals and their loss is often problematized, and constructed as inherently inferior to that of relationships between people. We finish by examining the implications of these for the ways in which services are provided, and by making some broad suggestions for future service provision.

Given our professional background and interest we focused primarily on health and human services literature. Our searches were confined to literature from the English speaking world (primarily Australia, Canada, the UK and the USA). Much of the literature we unearthed came from the USA, perhaps indicating a larger body of research on this topic from that country. It might be argued that conditions in the USA are sufficiently different from other parts of the English speaking world so as to make its research material difficult to generalize. However there are reasons we believe that these issues may nevertheless sufficiently shared across the Western world. For instance, Sheldrake (1999) provides figures which show the high rate of pet dog ownership in many English speaking countries. This is supported by other sources: for example, 64% of Australian households have a pet (*The Age*, 2004) and 39% of USA households have at least one dog (*USA Today*, 2004). In addition, the health and human service professions in the English speaking world share a broad body of common literature, indicating that there may be some common discourses about these issues.

The benefits of animal companionship

There is quite a deal of research which provides a very comprehensive overview of the benefits the human/animal bond holds for the pet owner. In acknowledging this, Hogarth-Scott (1982) has asserted that the human/animal bond is “an important quality of life factor” (p. 2). Benefits fall roughly into three main categories: physical health; emotional health; and social interaction and responsibility. Obviously the three areas of benefits are intertwined, but specific studies tend to focus primarily on only one or two areas, depending of course on the disciplinary background of the researchers.

Physical health

Some studies have presented a type of medicalized justification of human health benefits created by the human/animal bond. For instance, the calming effect of an animal’s presence “might have considerable public health importance because psychologic stress is a recognized comorbidity factor of myocardial infarction or angina pectoris” (Wiklund *et al.*, cited in Glickman, 1992: 850).

Yet other studies have actually shown that medical measures support the idea that pet owners are healthier than their non pet owning counterparts. For instance, pet ownership reduces the incidence and risk of coronary heart disease (Slovenko, 1983; Patronek & Glickman, 1993; Rowan & Beck, 1994), cardiovascular disease (Rowan cited in Rowan & Beck, 1994) and lowers systolic blood pressure, plasma cholesterol and triglyceride values (Anderson & Reid, 1992; Rowan & Beck, 1994). Pet ownership is significantly related to the owner’s survival one year after coronary surgery (Friedmann *et al.*, 1980; Glickman, 1992; Rowan & Beck, 1994; Hart, 1995). Other researchers have found that dog owners have fewer physician visits (Seigel, 1990; Rowan & Beck, 1994) and experience fewer minor health problems (Serpell, 1991). Paralleling this research, Akiyama *et al.* (1986–7) found that pet owners have fewer symptoms with psychogenic components and use less medication. Other physiological health benefits have been identified as including: reducing

blood pressure (Friedmann *et al.*, 1983b; Katcher, 1983; Slovenko, 1983; Haggerty Davis, 1991; Manor, 1991; Glickman, 1992; Hart, 1995) lowering heart rate (Manor, 1991) stimulating production of endorphins, and moderating stress (Haggerty Davis, 1992).

In addition to these physical health benefits, ownership of companion animals has been linked to promoting physical activity (Salmon *et al.* in press cited Hogarth-Scott 1982; Hogarth-Scott, 1982; Manor, 1991; Rosenkoetter, 1991) and independence (O'Donovan, 1997; Manor, 1991) among pet owners. Similarly, some authors have made overall reference to the human/animal bond creating general benefits for human physical and mental health such as psychological wellbeing, psychosocial function (Schultz, 1987; Francis, 1991; Hart, 1995), reducing susceptibility to disease and suicide (Hart *et al.*, 1990; Glickman, 1992). This supports the assertion that having the responsibility to take care of a pet can motivate and provide incentive for people to take better care of their own health (Carmack, 1991; Glickman, 1992).

Emotional benefits

Various studies have shown how the role of the companion animal in providing some physical safety to the owner, can also create a sense of security (Katcher, 1985; Seigal, 1990; Manor, 1991; Glickman, 1992; Rowan & Beck, 1994; Hart, 1995), and protect humans by acting as alertants by providing warnings of environmental hazards.

There is a range of emotional benefits that emerge from pet ownership. These include: social support, companionship, affection, a sense of being loved, and unconditional acceptance (Hogarth-Scott, 1982; Salmon *et al.*, in press cited in Hogarth-Scott, 1982; Stewart *et al.*, 1985; Hart *et al.*, 1990; Seigal, 1990; Manor 1991; Weisman, 1991; Glickman, 1992; Rowan & Beck, 1994; O'Donovan, 1997). Other studies report emotional responsiveness (Hogarth-Scott, 1982; Salmon *et al.*, in press cited in Hogarth-Scott, 1982; Beck & Katcher, 1983; Salmon & Salmon, 1983; Carmack, 1991; Manor, 1991), promotion of trust (Levison, 1969; Salmon & Salmon, 1983; Gonski, 1985; Stewart *et al.*, 1985; Lapp, 1991), facilitation of learning (Rosenkoetter, 1991), a sense of play, humour and entertainment, and sensory stimulation through touch (Manor, 1991).

Other emotional benefits include: mediating stress over the different developmental stages of the family cycle (Haggerty Davis, 1991); decreasing the incidence of depression (Garrity *et al.*, 1989; Francis, 1991; Hart, 1995); facilitating passive benefits such as relaxation and anxiety reduction (Manor, 1991; Wilson, 1991; Glickman, 1992; Rowan & Beck, 1994) and promoting comfort and pleasure (Kidd & Kidd, 1985; Haggerty Davis, 1991; Hart, 1995). Additionally, it is argued that pets increase mental function (Francis, 1991). As Manor (1991) states, "Animal's stimulate the patient's long term memory . . . help sustain and promote reality orientation, and enhance intellectual functioning" (p. 33).

Social interaction and responsibility

Pets have also been identified as being generators of communication between humans and animals (Bustad & Hines, 1983; Carmack, 1991; Manor, 1991) social interaction between staff and service users in residential settings (Salmon *et al.* in press cited in Hogarth-Scott, 1982; Hogarth-Scott, 1982), and between owners and others (Adell-Bath *et al.*, 1979; Friedmann *et al.*, 1983; Messent, 1983; Mugford, 1985; Manor, 1991; Rosenkoetter 1991; Hart, 1995). Similarly, Francis (1991) hypothesized that pets promote social competence and social interest, which improves self-concept and self-esteem (Stewart *et al.*, 1985; Serpell, 1986; Davis, 1987; Manor, 1991; Rosenkoetter, 1991; Hart, 1995). Other

researchers have emphasized how pets provide a sense of responsibility and purpose, a sense of being needed and bring structure and organization to the day (Kidd & Feldman, 1981; Bustad & Hines, 1983; Robb, 1983; Melson, 1988; Carmack, 1991; Manor, 1991; Rosenkoetter, 1991; Weisman, 1991; Hart, 1995; O'Donovan, 1997). Additionally it has been asserted that pets teach children a sense of responsibility, nurturing, loyalty, empathy (Slovenko, 1983) whilst also educating them in social subtleties (Guttman *et al.*, 1985).

Loss of companion animals

The nature of the relationship between humans and companion animals, and therefore the meaning of their loss, is the broader topic of relevance in this article. Davies (1997: 164) posits that because of the closeness between people and animals, with pets sometimes treated as substitute humans, it is not surprising that the death of a pet affects a person both privately and publicly. However because of the focus of this paper primarily on service implications, we have tended to pay most attention to health service-oriented literature, and so have not conducted a review of the entirety of literature regarding pet bereavement. Nevertheless it is important to note one landmark 1990 British study by Laura and Martyn Lee *Absent Friend: Coping with the Loss of a Treasured Pet* (quoted in Davies, 1997), which surveyed over 900 dog and cat owners, and which indicated that the vast majority of respondents (three quarters) felt that the death of their pet revived memories of past bereavements, both human and animal (Davies, 1997: 166). Interestingly, in some follow up research conducted by Davies (1992) (Davies, 1997: 172) a significant majority of the group indicated a need for bereavement support, and for professional support if available.

However, given the nature and diversity of the benefits of pet ownership outlined above, it is pertinent to focus on the specific types of losses sustained by these pet owners when they are separated from their companion animal. While most of the literature which discusses the severance of the human/animal bond refers to the death of the animal, other literature makes reference to different circumstances that result in the separation of the pet and its owner. The main factors referred to include: divorce or dissolution of human relationships and the resultant loss of custody of an animal; the cost of maintaining the animal; (Committee on the Human/Animal Bond [CHAB], 1995) and entering into new living arrangements which preclude pets (Cantanzaro, 1984; Lago *et al.*, 1985; CHAB, 1995; Hart, 1995). As Hart (1995) states, "The convention of not allowing pets in apartments strikes harshly at individuals who live alone and who might be expected to welcome and benefit particularly from animal companionship" (p. 173). The other major factor identified in the literature that could cause the severance of the human/animal bond is the pet owner's terminal illness or disability (Ross & Baron-Sorenson, 1998) which renders the owner unable to continue caring for their companion animal.

Some research (Quackenbush & Glickman, 1983) has documented the practical indications of the difficulties owners experience following separation from their companion animals. This research includes a study where the overwhelming majority of respondents (93%) stated they experienced some disruption to their daily routine such as disturbed sleeping patterns and loss of appetite. Over half the respondents indicated that they had deliberately reduced their usual participation in social activities, and 45% indicated they had experienced job related difficulties, following separation from their pet (Quackenbush & Glickman, 1983). Other studies have emphasized the emotional responses that pet owners experience after the loss of their companion animal. These include: problems with social systems function, a loss of motivation, stress (Carmack, 1991), potential for self harm, intense depression (Hettis & Lagoni, 1990) anxiety and worry (Bikales, 1975). Another study

(Weisman, 1991) found that “searching, pining, loneliness, pangs, flashbacks, and emptiness occurred regularly” (p. 245) in owners following the loss of a companion animal.

In acknowledging the depth and intensity of the loss of a bond with a companion animal it becomes obvious that such emotional reactions are legitimate and justified. As Carmack (1991) indicates, the loss of a companion animal results in severe unstabling of the owner’s entire domestic arrangements.

The absence is severe. There is a resulting emptiness . . . There is no longer a sense of being needed, the social system is disrupted. The structured and regular patterns of interaction are missing. There is not the care to give; there is not the source of affection and companionship. There is not the warmth in the home; there is no-one to talk to, to sleep with, to feel important to. 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. (Carmack, 1991: 84)

Additionally, it is argued that other issues in the pet owner’s life may intensify the emotional upheaval created by the loss of a companion animal. One of the issues identified in the literature was the possibility of the animal representing an embodiment of a human relationship. For example, the pet may have been perceived by the owner as constituting the only remaining link to a deceased spouse (Hart *et al.*, 1990; O’Donovan, 1997). Another intensifying factor was the depth and length of the relationship with the animal. It was proposed that the greater the length of time the owner and animal had been together, the stronger the bond would be (Quackenbush & Glickman, 1983). If the pet owner had experienced other recent losses, it was asserted the loss of a companion animal could also compound these losses and exacerbate overall feelings of grief and sadness (Hart *et al.*, 1990; Hetts & Lagoni, 1990). Another factor identified as potentially intensifying the grief process is the owner’s sense of responsibility for severing the human/animal bond (Hetts & Lagoni, 1990).

The decision to euthanize a companion animal arguably compounds this grief and distress. As Ross and Baron-Sorenson (1998) assert, “feelings of anger, guilt and failure will continue to interfere with the resolution of the loss of the pet” (p. 48). Similarly, one author commented, “Almost without exception, owners at first regretted giving consent for euthanasia . . .” (Weisman, 1991: 246).

They were deeply aware of their animal’s trust and dependence, and seemed to know that the animal wanted to live. The power of life over death, and the choice of death, particularly killing something you love, caused much consternation that sometimes continued. (Weisman, 1991: 247)

Similarly, other authors refer to the multiple and conflicting feelings that emerge from giving consent to perform euthanasia (Stewart *et al.*, 1985; Hart, 1995). Stewart *et al.* (1985) state common responses arising from this decision are “sorrow, anguish, dejection, sadness, depression, anger, disappointment, and guilt” (p. 391).

When the decision to euthanize or relinquish a companion animal to a shelter is involuntary, resulting from the owner’s inability to continue caring for the animal, the sense of guilt, betrayal of trust and dependence is heightened and acts to crystallize the resultant grief. As Ross and Baron-Sorenson (1998) comment,

Most pet owners who are planning to adopt out a pet (knowing of the possibility that it may be euthanized if an appropriate home cannot be found) do so sadly and with

reluctance. They feel a sense of failure in their ability to provide the proper environment for their pet. They also feel a sense of loss at the breaking of bonds they have shared with the pet. (Ross & Baron-Sorenson, 1988: 47)

Often the difficulty in making such a decision arises because it is out of the pet owner's control. Pet owners experience "guilt, psychological trauma and other emotional reaction following the forced separation from their pets" (Ross & Baron-Sorenson, 1998: 47). Bustad (1980) describes one set of circumstances that could result in this predicament and outlines the potential implications.

One of the worst things we do to old people who are living alone is to remove them to a convalescent nursing or other retirement home, or an apartment where pets are not allowed. They are denied their companion animal, which is about the only thing that gives them unconditional love and affection. (quoted in Hogarth-Scott, 1982: 4)

Similarly O'Donovan (1997) comments, "older people who need to be rehoused or admitted to hospital or residential care also sometimes see no choice other than to have their beloved pet taken to an animal shelter or put down" (p. 2). The pressures involved in coping with such a situation compound the grief and difficulties associated with major, often involuntary life changes.

Additionally, the owner's uncertainty about the fate of their companion animal, but the certain impending loss of a unique relationship triggers anticipatory grief. "Faced with the choice of finding a new home for a pet or authorizing euthanasia for it, the client may experience a deep sense of inadequacy and a loss of self-esteem" (Ross & Baron-Sorenson, 1998: 87). Whilst the concept of anticipatory grief is contested by some scholars, Hetts and Lagoni (1990) indicate that "Veterinarians who are unaware of the very real phenomena of anticipatory grief may describe their clients as 'overly emotional,' 'hysterical,' 'too sensitive,' or 'difficult'" (p. 881).

Social reactions to companion animal loss

How do other people, particularly professionals, react to a person's loss of a pet? Interestingly, the unwillingness to acknowledge the validity of such grief is reflected in the reasons veterinarians provided for making referrals to bereavement counselling services. These reasons included: concerns for the owner's stress and anxiety; difficulties in communication effectively with the pet owner; and the owner creating 'problems' for the vet (Quackenbush & Glickman, 1983). This possibly suggests a pervasive trend to invalidate feelings of loss and grief exhibited by bereaved pet owners. In recognizing this, Milani (1991) is critical that veterinary teaching regards the human/animal bond as "little more than a condiment, something they drag out periodically for sentimental PR attempt[ing] to humanize the profession . . ." (p. 1707). Conversely, the social work recipients of these referrals perceived the purpose of the service users accessing the service as very different. Their perceptions included: difficulties making a decision about euthanasia for a companion animal; the owner's reaction to medical diagnosis and/or treatment; and issues pertaining to prolonged grief (Quackenbush & Glickman, 1983).

Despite the legitimacy of the emotional responses identified in the literature which addresses the termination of the human/animal bond, it is argued by several authors that there is still a broad societal tendency to trivialize grief resulting from the loss of a companion animal (Stewart *et al.*, 1985; Hart *et al.*, 1990; Weisman, 1991; Kellehear & Fook, 1997; O'Donovan, 1997; Ross & Baron-Sorenson, 1998).

Several authors are critical of how the dominant discourse around pet bereavement is constructed in this marginal way. It has been referred to as “an unqualified occasion for bereavement” (Weisman, 1991: 245).

The mourning rituals surrounding the loss of a human loved one often encourage the expression of grief . . . pet loss does not initiate similar mourning rituals. Consequently, the bereaved pet owner generally must work out their feelings in isolation and without a support system. (Stewart *et al.*, 1985: 392)

Carmack (1991) similarly acknowledges, “In our culture, there is no socially approved way of grieving for a pet” (p. 85). Additionally, it contended that grief resulting from the loss of a companion animal is an issue that counsellors do not take seriously (Weisman, 1991). In parallel to this, it is argued that veterinarians generally underestimate the value and importance of pets to their owners (Hart *et al.*, 1990). In recognition of this, it is asserted that among those affected by the loss of a companion animal, there is a “general reluctance to tell others about their bereavement because they feared criticism, condescension, or curt suggestions, such as “Get another cat,’ ‘After all, it’s only a dog” (Weisman, 1991: 243).

Some perspectives offered in the literature appear mindful of these issues: first, in recognizing they highlight significant implications for health professionals (Stewart *et al.*, 1985; Carmack, 1991); second, in advocating the establishment and maintenance of support groups, where pet owners can grieve without societal judgement (Carmack, 1991; Ross & Baron-Sorenson, 1998); third, in acknowledging the importance of counselling approaches which normalize and validate services users’ grief resulting separation from a companion animal (Stewart *et al.*, 1985; Weisman, 1991; O’Donovan, 1997; Ross & Baron-Sorenson, 1998); and lastly, in identifying the value of professional guidance and referral to access appropriate services (Quackenbush & Glickman, 1983; Hart *et al.*, 1990; Jorgenson, 1997). Despite this, however, there is evidence to suggest that discourses which minimize and delegitimize the complexity of issues that arise from the loss of a companion animal have even infiltrated the literature which is supposedly celebrating and justifying the human/animal bond.

This is demonstrated by Quackenbush & Glickman (1983) who discuss the establishment of a pet loss bereavement programme to study a population of grieving pet owners. The authors describe social work interventions that were offered to service users after the loss of their companion animal. They state that follow-up of service users was conducted two–four weeks after the death of their companion animal. At this stage, it was indicated that 13% of the sample were “still emotionally and psychologically paralyzed from the death” (Quackenbush & Glickman, 1983: 388). It was concluded, “they had become fixated and unable to move from the denial phase of the grief process . . . and they were displaying obvious signs of deepening clinical depression” (Quackenbush & Glickman, 1983: 388). Given that the importance of animal companionship on medical, emotional and social grounds has been well established, to label a short period of two–four weeks of intense grief in this pathologized way devalues the significance of the pet loss.

Similarly, another author (Weisman, 1990–1991), in documenting her experiences at a pet bereavement counselling service, appears to be providing a justification for the grief resulting from the death of a companion animal. She is highly critical of the societal tendency to minimize and dismiss such grief. Yet she also makes reference to clients “for whom the pet loss is only a most recent loss, and who showed signs of more serious personality problems” (Weisman, 1990–1991: 243) when their reactions to the loss of a companion animal were intense. This implies that a strong grief reaction is only justifiable

when compounded by other distressing circumstances or multiple losses. It could be argued that these grief reactions are pathologized precisely due to the same patterns which characterize some professional reactions to other forms of grief. For instance, it has been argued that professionals and clinicians pathologize grief in order to render it a clinically treatable commodity (Kammerman, 1988) and so turn it into something which can be controlled in the professional's own terms. It is the grief experience itself, in this sense, which is pathologized. Nevertheless, it still appears that pet death is still marginal within the broader grief field given the relative lack of social recognition of the social and emotional importance of pets.

Constructions of animal companionship

This tendency to trivialize and minimize the grief resulting from the loss of a companion animal may also be related to a dominant, unquestioned trend to dichotomise human/animal relationships by comparison with the relationships between humans. That is, animal companionship is understood, and defined, solely in terms of human companionship, rather than in its own terms, and suffers in the comparison. It seems the majority of the literature inadvertently juxtaposes the human/animal bond against human relationships, even when attempting to justify or value the bond. Weisman (1990–1991) for example, comments that the human/animal bond is characterized by “a level of understanding, empathy and mutuality almost never found in human relationships (p. 246). Similarly, Manor (1991) asserts, “Unlike humans, the companion animal is consistently there, always loving, and willing to give and accept affection” (p. 33). Likewise, Salmon and Salmon (1983) argue that “It may well be that the [human/animal] bond arises because of limitations in normal human human relationships” (p. 253). However, when the human/animal bond is valued in relation to or comparison with human relationships, human relationships are constructed as the normative measure, while human/animal relationships are defined by virtue of their difference from this dominant way of understanding relationships.

This is often explicitly expressed (Cain, 1983; Barker & Barker, 1988; Hart, 1995; Stern, 1996). Additionally several writers make reference to the fact that animals are regarded as family members (Slovenko, 1983; McKee, 1989; Haggerty-Davis, 1991). However, if human/animal bonds are described and valued only in comparison to purely human relationships, then the human/animal relationship is essentially devalued, and we are prevented from appreciating what unique and different attributes such companionship might bring. Whilst the implicit and dominant assumption is that human/human relationships are the ideal, then all other relationships must, by implication, be of lesser value and importance, in comparison.

This theme is also reflected in the reasons theorists provide as to why people have developed links with animals. Several writers, for example, have asserted that changing societal conditions have prompted humans to seek animal companionship (Slovenko, 1983; Stewart *et al.*, 1985; Hetts & Lagoni, 1990). Stewart *et al.* (1985: 384) argue that the “‘empty nest’ phenomenon,” combined with “high geographic mobility” and the “occupational and economic demands of our society” may lead humans to seek relationships with animals. Hetts and Lagoni (1990) meanwhile emphasize changes to the family structure, “Companion animals become integral parts of these family structures, serving as confidants, ideal parents, surrogate helpmates, children or best friends” (p. 883). Slovenko (1983) offers a more generalized analysis: “Contemporary men and women are estranged both from nature and from their fellows, they are surrounded by concrete and machines, and so they are turning to animals” (p. 278). These analyses

which emphasize changing societal conditions undermine the suggestion that animal companionship offers intrinsic merit for humans.

Part of this devaluing involves the assumption that the value of the human/animal bond lies only in its possibilities as a substitute for human contact. Hart (1995), for example, interprets Salmon and Salmon's (1983) research as indicating that dogs satisfy the needs of widowed and divorced people, because, she asserts, the family network plays a less significant role for these people at that stage of their life. While some authors refer to a companion animal serving as a substitute for human relationships as a "non-conventional" bond (Carmack, 1991; Stern, 1996: 1707), characterized by over-dependence, much of the other literature documents this as a natural and normal phenomenon. The application of this however, only extends to marginalized groups in our society, who, according to the literature, presumably ought to prefer human contact, but must instead settle for animal companionship due to the circumstances of being elderly, ill or incapacitated.

Numerous authors document the benefits of the human/animal bond for specific groups. In doing this, however, stereotypical images are evoked, which not only pathologize the groups concerned, but also undermine the value of the human/animal bond. The limitations of age, illness and disability are often referred to which suggests that the human animal bond can only benefit those who are socially disadvantaged and marginalized, and whose lives are constructed in terms that imply they are in some way lacking or unfulfilled. These images are implicitly juxtaposed against 'normal' or 'mainstream' people, who are unaffected by age, illness or disability, and who consequently do not require compensation in the form of a companion animal. Glickman (1992) for example, documents the immediate supportive benefits of the human/animal bond to people who are ill, incapacitated, institutionalized, or have limited social contact. Another article refers to the benefits of the human/animal bond to "immunocompromised clients," hospitalized for "the criminally insane clients, physically disabled clients, hearing and visually impaired clients (CHAB, 1995), while Serpell (1983) investigated the benefits of companion animals to alcoholics, the elderly, cardiac patients, disturbed children, blind persons and the mentally disabled" (cited in Rosenkoetter, 1991: 44). Such a focus arguably ignores the important benefits the human/animal bond may offer to the rest of the community.

A minority strand of commentary within the literature also acknowledges the dominant trend to associate the human/animal bond with disadvantaged groups who are affected by age, illness or disability. Weisman (1991) contends "the relationship offered by companion animals is not confined to the lonely and purposeless" (p. 246). Stewart *et al.* (1985) make similar assertions in arguing that the human animal bond is not perceived by owners as a compensating substitute for human relationships, to contend instead that pet owners strongly value their relationships with their companion animals in their own terms.

This tendency we have unearthed to marginalize or pathologize the animal companionship relationship is perhaps an artefact of our focus on health or human services literature. It may be that this literature is based on the tendencies of professionals to problematize the populations and issues with which they normally deal. This is a commonly cited criticism of professionals, and professional discourse (Dominelli, 1997: 196–197). Alternatively, it may be that literature which takes a more explicitly historical (e.g. Thomas, 1983) or social science (e.g. Davies, 1997) approach to the study of the human relationship with animals, may take a more normalized perspective, or may posit yet another way of understanding the complex interplay involved.

Marginalizing the experience of pet loss

A major example of how pet loss is marginalized as a problem can be seen in relation to the elderly. While a diversity of disadvantaged groups have been targeted for research on the human/animal bond, the elderly have by far received the most attention. As Stewart *et al.* (1985) state: “The significant role that pets play in the affectional system of elderly is often raised in conjunction with the image of the elderly as being both detached from significant others and inferent networks” (p. 390). Despite this, the same authors simultaneously participate in the dominant discourse of which they are critical, by discussing the reduction of opportunities for people at retirement age which, they contend, is characterized by a loss of status, roles, relational supports and social interaction networks. It is these circumstances which they assert may result in attachment needs being “directed toward an unconditionally receptive pet as a source and object of caring” (Stewart *et al.*, 1995: 384).

Other authors emphasize the importance of the human/animal bond to elderly people due to their social isolation (Hart *et al.*, 1995; O’Donovan, 1997), limited social contact and emotional withdrawal (Manor, 1991). Similarly Bustad (1980) states companion animals are “the only thing that gives them [the elderly] unconditional love and affection” (quoted in Hogarth-Scott, 1982: 3).

Carmack (1991) also discusses the importance of the human/animal bond for the elderly and refers to other studies that describe functions that pets offer to the elderly specifically. These include: Blake (1980) who discussed the importance of pets to the psychosocial wellbeing of the elderly; second, Beck and Katcher (1983) who refer to the visual and emotional responsiveness of “deprived older people to animals; third, Lago *et al.* (1985) who explores the importance of pets to older people living alone; and lastly, McCulloch *et al.* (1983) who explores the importance of pets to elderly people who are chronically ill or disabled. Epitomizing the dominant tendency to construct the human/animal bond as something that is only of value to humans, who are in some way marginalized, and supposedly deficient in human contact, Cusack and Smith (1984) state:

For the elderly person who lives alone and is no longer a working and active member of the community, the world can seem a bleak place indeed. An animal friend however, can do much to provide companionship, love, affection, and a sense of being needed. (Cusack & Smith, 1984: 176)

Similarly, Francis (1991), in discussing the benefits of animal assisted therapy for “elderly discharged chronic psychiatric patients” (p. 82) describes, in a patronizing way, the process of these woman deriving therapeutic benefits from their contact with the animals in the terms of “Peculiar-looking little old ladies, set in their ways, having food, shelter and clothing provided for them” suddenly getting up, moving off “dead centre”, going “outside into the sun and breeze” to “smile and wave” at the approaching puppies (Francis, 1991: 40).

The minimizing of grief, devaluing of the human/animal bond that occurs through comparison to human relationships and the inference that relationships with companion animals may only benefit marginalized groups with specialized resultant needs, reflects a strong paradox in the literature which often, conversely indicates the stated intention to value and legitimize the human/animal bond. The paradox contained within these constructions of the human/animal bond is also expressed in other forms by articles which appear superficially to honour the bond, but actually problematize it by simultaneously constructing it as a “complicating factor” (Rosenkoetter, 1991: 50).

Pet ownership has been constructed as problematic in being identified as precluding owners from accepting better housing opportunities which disallow pets on the premises (Netting *et al.*, 1987). Additionally, Friedmann *et al.* (1983a) indicate the belief that the responsibility of pet ownership may result in people neglecting their own health for fear of how their hospitalization would impact on their companion animal. Carmack (1991) also discusses this issue by quoting pet owners' concerns, "If I get sick and have to go to hospital, or if I die, who will look after my pet?" (p. 83) implying that the fear of becoming sick and/or dying, and thus not being able to continue caring for a companion animal may lead pet owners to avoid necessary medical treatments. This parallels McKee (1989) who offers an anecdotal account of an elderly, terminally ill woman's experience with her companion animal. McKee (1989) states the woman "had refused all treatment for her cancer in the past because she had no-one to look after the dog" (p. 57). Similarly, Rosenkoetter (1991) asserts that "hospitalization or some other unforeseen event" may prevent some owners from providing ongoing permanent or temporary care for their companion animals. It is at this point that the author problematizes the bond in asserting, "The owner may worry about the pet . . . even to the point of interfering with his or her own care" (Rosenkoetter, 1991: 50). Such statements partly negate earlier assertions about pet ownership motivating owners to nurture their own health (Carmack, 1991; Glickman, 1992).

By problematizing the human/animal bond and pathologizing the specific groups who are said to benefit from it, we therefore further pathologize its loss, and construct problems with it as purely individualized or private concerns. These marginalized groups are presented in the literature as having quite specific needs as a result of their disadvantage, which supposedly differentiates them from the rest of the population. There is therefore a related tendency to dismiss and minimize the issues that emerge from the loss or separation from a companion animal as not being a "mainstream" concern. And while such issues are understood as not impacting on mainstream members of society, this dominant way of thinking operates to exonerate the broader society from taking responsibility for responding to the loss of companion animals to be on a broader scale.

Given the fact that 38% of homes in the USA, 32% of Canadian households, 27% of homes in the UK have dogs (Fogle, 1994), and one in every three homes in Melbourne (Australia) has a dog (Salmon & Salmon, 1983: 246) it is clear that the issues surrounding a pet owner's inability to provide ongoing care for their companion animal may in fact constitute a significant social issue, affecting rather a large number of voters and ratepayers. When numbers of cat owning households are added to these figures, the percentages of pet owning households increase significantly. Percentages of cat owning households are only slightly lower than that of dogs, an average of 5% less for most countries (Fogle, 1994 in Sheldrake, 1999: 10). If we add these percentages together, and perform a rough average, allowing for some overlap of households which might have both cats and dogs, we are still left with a rough figure of between 30–40% of households in major Western countries which are pet owning. The most recent figures from Australia estimate that two thirds of Australian households own pets (Goding, 2003). The reasons, therefore, that pet loss is marginalized, appear to have more to do with the way we choose to construct our understanding and value of animal relationships, rather than their actual social significance.

In dealing with the issues of the various circumstances preventing an owner from continuing to care for a companion animal, several approaches are evident in the literature. Maintaining consistency with the dominant trend to individualize problem definition, a number of individualized solutions have also been offered. These include being critical of pet owners who do not have clear plans for their animal in case they predecease it (Smith *et al.*, 1992), or by locating responsibility with owners for "Arrang[ing] in advance a

permanent home for the animal in the event that [they] can no longer keep it” (CHAB, 1995: 970). No community or social responsibility is implied by these individualized solutions, and we therefore raise questions about their appropriateness. For instance, pet owners come from all different classes, backgrounds and social circumstances. They do not always have the personal resources available to them to create alternative care arrangements for their companion animals. For example, terminally ill people may be unable to make plans for their pet’s future beyond their own death, or may find that others do not care about the fate of their beloved animal as much as they. It would seem therefore that there are many circumstances in which we cannot expect that individuals will be able to provide adequately for the care of their companion animals. It is clear that social provision needs to be made in order to provide better options.

Addressing the problem

What suggestions have been made to address the issue of the continuing care of, and contact with, companion animals, given the vicissitudes of life? Several types of responses have been identified in the literature. Carmack (1991: 85) suggests “foster[ing] an animal” as a solution, while Haggerty Davis (1991) refers to intermittent pet visitation. While these approaches are clearly better than having a companion animal destroyed, they are brief and vague in terms of their workability.

A second approach is to have services provided and initiated by volunteers. Hart (1995) suggests that the community should improve support to pet owners by providing volunteer programmes for pets when their owners are ill. In addition to this, Ross and Baron-Sorenson (1998: 50) also describe organizations which help preserve the bond between HIV + people and their pets by providing practical assistance and a future home for the pet.

McKee (1989) also describes a scenario where responsibility was taken, at an organizational level, for recognizing the importance of a companion animal. A hospice was able to preserve the relationship between an elderly, terminally ill woman and her dog, by allowing the dog to remain with her in residential care. The author concluded:

Having observed the relationship between mistress and dog, we realized that we would not have achieved the same level of peace and calm for Mrs Brown had they been separated. We learned how important pets can be to their owners, and as a result, we are now open to family pets visiting the hospice. (McKee, 1989: 58)

O’Donovan (1997) also refers to a belief that professionals need to take responsibility in assisting pet owners with the difficulties that surround being unable to continue caring for a companion animal.

Nurses should think very carefully about the consequences of killing a companion animal in order to facilitate admission to care. We should do our utmost in such situations to find alternative care arrangements for an older person’s pet, with opportunities to the person to see or visit the pet on a regular basis. (O’Donovan, 1997: 63)

Similarly, Friedmann *et al.* (1983a) conclude with the assertion that pet ownership should become an important concern for hospital staff, contending that greater awareness of this issue could alleviate pet owner’s anxiety towards hospitalization.

These organizational approaches are certainly an improvement on approaches, which assume solely individual responsibility. Additionally, other authors have extended these

arguments to advocate the need for a broader societal response to provide services in an even more formalized way, so that pet owners can maintain their bond with their companion animal during difficult periods.

For instance, Netting *et al.* (1987) advocate the need for agencies to be available that can assist in locating residential or hospital support services that include pet care. They state:

Social workers are discovering the need for temporary and permanent foster home programmes so that older persons who are hospitalized do not worry about what will happen to a valued pet during their absence . . . if a client becomes ill and has to leave town temporarily, having options available for a pet's care may ease the burden associated with illness of change". (Netting *et al.*, 1987: 62)

They advocate the need for social workers to be aware of policies that affect ownership of a companion animal, and lobby for change in restrictive policies such as housing leases that preclude pet ownership.

Similarly, Bikales (1975) describes how one elderly woman's explicit worry and anxiety for her pet while she was hospitalized, motivated the social worker to incorporate the dog as a prime focus of intervention. There is, of course, little to indicate the representativeness of this account but the author states "the patient's fate was linked to, perhaps even determined by, the fate of the dog. No efforts to help would succeed if they [other health professionals] did not take that into account" (Bikales, 1975: 51). The author describes her advocacy with various services to keep the woman's companion animal alive while she was in hospital. The author also describes her difficulties in trying to convey the justification of the need to do this with different agencies. She states that ultimately the animal was euthanized and in response to this, the woman died shortly after.

Conclusion

In this paper we have discussed the importance of companion animals in peoples' lives and outlined the main benefits: physical, medical, emotional and social. We have argued that, given the incontrovertible evidence regarding these benefits, and the fact that a significant proportion (30–60%) of households in the Western world have pets, that the loss of these animals can constitute a major social concern for the mainstream population. Yet the research literature in the health and human services indicates a tendency to marginalize and pathologize pet loss. We see this as an essentially individualized orientation to what should be a major social concern.

Because of the relatively short lives of companion dogs and cats, most pet owners can expect to experience the loss of an animal companion several times during the course of their own lives. In addition, most of the pet loving population, will at some stage in their lives be at risk of losing their pets: either through contracting a disability, through the ageing process, or a terminal illness, or of encountering some other changed social circumstances in which it is not possible to continue to live with and care for a companion animal.

What are the major directions we should take in responding to the loss of these important companions? How can our responses reflect a more social orientation? Our foregoing discussion has shown that there have been some moves to recognize this importance, and develop services and programmes to support the continuation of the pet relationship in circumstances of illness. Furthermore, clinical approaches have been called for which are sensitive to the role of companion animals in patients' lives. We would argue, however, that whilst these moves are worthwhile, that there are still clear limitations inherent in the way

relationships with animal companions have been understood. By defining these relationships in terms of human relationships, the value of pet companions has been devalued, causing additional stress to people at what is already a time of great loss.

Some radical changes in thinking are needed in order to revalue the significance of animal companions, and in order that our social responses to the loss of these friends adequately reflects their social importance.

In closing, we suggest the following directions in revising our approaches to professional practice. There needs, first and foremost, as an underlying philosophy, to be a reconfiguration of the way we value and understand the role of pets in people's lives. Relationships with companion animals need to be understood and valued as a significant part of normal mainstream human experience, and that similarly loss of these friends is an experience likely to be encountered by a major proportion of the population. Services and programmes therefore need to be developed based on this assumption, with responsibilities for supports taken at community and social levels. For example, pet lovers should be connected with each other, for support, recreational pursuits or other interests. Whilst many such forums already exist (e.g. pet play groups, dog obedience classes, animal showing competitions) many are restricted to particular venues because of other regulations controlling animals in public places. Whilst this is obviously necessary, there needs to be a better balance struck between the social needs of pet lovers and those less animal-friendly.

Therefore, social and public policies must be developed which enable pet-friendly environments. Above all, for example, the needs of pets should to be factored into accommodation and living arrangements, from the design stage onwards. This should become an issue in designing all living arrangements, whether institutional, communal or private.

In relation to clinical practice paradigms these should be developed assuming the importance of animals in people's lives. Professional approaches should therefore seek to render as much assistance as possible to continue this bond, particularly in times of crisis, to ensure that the distress over loss of a pet is minimized or is not an additional stress. In some instances an empathic attitude may be all that is required. In other instances, practical solutions (such as pet fostering and visitation as already suggested) may be necessary. Other practical assistance might take the form of pet minding or respite, or assistance with feeding, cleaning and walking pets. Some pet therapy programmes already provide some occasional pet contact, but more thought needs to be given as to how the relationship with one's pet can continue when practical and social circumstances work against keeping the pet in the owner's home.

Pet friendly policies, pet valuing attitudes, and additional pet care practices can go a long way in ensuring that our social and communal environments are more healthy and compassionate towards pet loss, and may in fact prevent other traumas with their attendant social consequences.

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