COMPLEXITY AND CONTINUITY IN THE HUMAN-ANIMAL BOND – A THEMATIC AND STORIED EXPLORATION OF COMPANION ANIMAL BEREAVEMENT

JOANA KRISTIN CZYCHOLL

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Abstract

The human-animal bond is receiving renewed attention from psychology researchers and practitioners alike, particularly in the context of our relationships with companion animals. This thesis explores the phenomenon of companion animal bereavement from the perspectives of those who have lost a companion animal. The thesis consists of a thematic analysis of data obtained through an online qualitative survey (n=31) and a narrative analysis of the stories of four participants who were interviewed with a view to obtain fuller accounts of companion animal bereavement and glean deeper insights into what has been described in the literature as 'disenfranchised grief' (Cordaro, 2012; Spain, O'Dwyer & Moston, 2019; Marr, Kaufman & Craig, 2022). The themes from the survey data give insight into the phenomenon of companion animal bereavement, specifically around the nuances and rituals of 'disenfranchised grief'. The narrative analysis of the interviews illustrates how people construct deep and meaningful inter- and intra-connected relationships with their companion animals prior to and after their death. Findings are discussed in relation to existing literature from psychology, psychotherapy, and anthrozoology, suggesting a greater need for the acceptability and sensitivity for the topic of companion animal bereavement in both, wider society as well as in a therapeutic context, and for greater accessibility for support. Practical implications for future research and contemporary therapeutic practice are examined in the light of counselling psychology's pluralistic framework.

Keywords: companion animal bereavement; pet loss; human-animal bond; narrative analysis; counselling psychology

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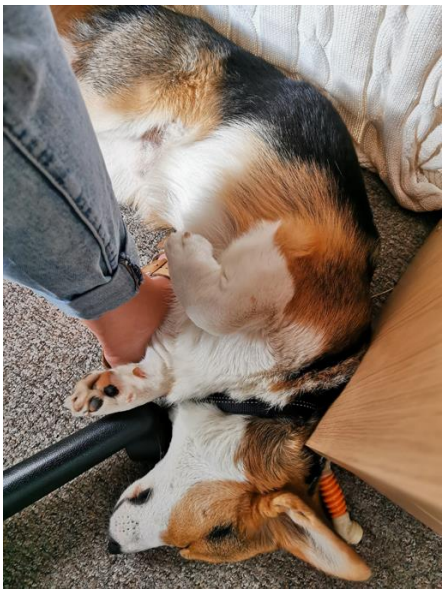

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1. Introduction: The story of this research

My first pet as a child was a charcoal black rabbit I got for my sixth birthday and named Dandelion, inspired by the horribly, beautifully sad novel *Watership Down*. He was my pride and joy and I loved him with all my heart. He lived in a hutch outside and was the first thing I would show new friends when they came to visit. At some point, he was joined by a guinea pig called Buttercup and they got along reasonably well. When I was about eleven, one afternoon I put them both in a pen on the lawn so they could roam and went to the playground with my friend. When we returned, only Buttercup was left in the pen and there was no sign of Dandelion. We went to search for him up the street where a neighbourhood friend told me she had seen a dog run past with something black in its mouth and my little eleven-year-old world crumbled. It has been twenty years since I first experienced companion animal bereavement, and I still well up writing about this moment.

Dandelion had indeed been killed by a neighbour's hunting dog that had got loose. For weeks after Dandelion's death, I prayed every single night that God would bring back my little companion, thinking that the sheer amount of sadness I felt for his loss would surely be enough to warrant a resurrection. This was not only my first conscious confrontation with death, but also the first experience that truly shook my faith, as God seemed simply unwilling to answer this, in my eyes very reasonable, request. I do not quite remember my parents' reaction to my devastation; I am sure they were sympathetic, but what I do remember is one of my best friends at school giving me a heart-shaped piece of cardboard with a picture of Dandelion glued to it which hung above my bed at least until I moved out of my parents' house. This simple act of kindness and empathy made me feel understood and validated in my pain.

I did not start my counselling psychology training thinking that I would be researching companion animal bereavement. Like many psychology students, my understanding of research was predicated on positivist assumptions; so, when I settled on this topic for my doctoral research, I searched for scales that operationally define bereavement and considered variables that influence it. Now, having written most of this thesis with my dog, Chomsky, lying at my feet, I marvel at the complexity and continuity of the animal-human

bond. I am acutely aware that the non-human companions we keep tend to leave us at some point, and I am more aware of the inevitability of this occurring than I was as a child. The knowledge that I will likely have to say goodbye to this dog is already painful and something I tend to try to keep out of my mind. But when the time does come, I hope I will be given the space to process the loss as if he were a human being. After all, he is the first living creature I have ever taken responsibility for on my own, and he is the being I spend most of my time with. To be honest, he is not one of those dogs that comes to comfort you when you cry; in fact, he tends to go sit at the opposite side of the room, which is one reason I realised he would not be the suitable therapy dog I had hoped he would be. He can be fussy and grumpy and demanding and when he does come for a cuddle, it feels like I have truly earned it. But he is someone I can share my life and feelings with without fear. I find it difficult to describe why I love him as much as I do and why the bond I have with him is unlike any I have with my human companions. Maybe it is because our relationship is relatively uncomplicated, straightforward, and not ambivalent. There is no walking around on eggshells, wondering whether the other person approves of you. He does not question anything about me (as far as I can tell). He is here and I am here and that is all.

Someone I spoke to about my research once told me that she remembers losing her dogs as some of the most painful experiences she has had, but that the pain faded much more quickly than it did following human bereavement. She mused that this may be because there was nothing left to resolve after her dogs' deaths, no arguments, no ill feelings, no broken promises. That was something I had not considered before, but it made a lot of sense to me. Of course, some people may disagree, and this research is meant to explore a range of people's experiences of the deaths of their animal companions. I am very aware that I am not 'neutral' coming into this piece of research, but rather bring my own personal thoughts, feelings and beliefs about companion animals and what it may be like to lose them. This was something I was conscious of throughout my research, especially when interviewing participants. While I will never be able to be 'objective', nor would I want to be, I still found it important to ensure that I hear all accounts and their nuances, not just the ones that align with what I believe or know to be true. As a therapeutic practitioner, I am endlessly curious about other people's experiences and perceptions. I think that one of the fascinating aspects of being human is that everyone comes with their own set of beliefs,

views and experiences and that the beauty of qualitative research is that we get to engage with them. These experiences may not be quantifiable, but they are no less valuable for practitioners and fellow humans. I think that learning more about how people feel about the losses of their companion animals can only aid us in helping others to navigate these events in the future, whether in a professional or personal capacity. That is why this study aims to explore how individuals experience, understand and make sense of companion animal bereavement.

In line with emerging research and changes in terminologies in anthrozoology and around multispecies and non-human others, I will mainly refer to the animals commemorated in the thesis as 'companion animals' (as opposed to 'pets'). This change in terminology aims to facilitate a re-evaluation of the status of the animal within the relationship and promote greater equality between humans and non-human animals (Shaw, 2012). In recent decades there has been rapid growth in the field of human-animal studies aiming to capture the richness and diversity in human-animal interactions and increasingly seeking to include the perspective of the non-human other (Taylor & Hamilton, 2014). While this piece of research focuses on the human perspective in the human-animal relationship, I nevertheless, hope to add to the trajectory of post-qualitative research in shifting the views from the inferiority of non-human species towards the importance of equivalent interaction and entanglement with other species (Price & Chao, 2023).

2. Literature Review

2.1 History of the Human-Animal Relationship

Animals have always been part of human life. Whether as predators, prey, livestock, protection or companions. While the type of human-animal interaction might have changed throughout the millennia, there has been a reliance on our animal companions from very early on in human history.

Animals have also played an important role in human development. Ancient peoples in different parts of the world expressed their interconnectedness with nature as well as the spiritual world through their relationship with animal forms (Serpell, 2006) and animals played a significant role in important rituals and shamanic practices (Campbell, 1984). In some cultures, animals were thought to lead the dead to the afterlife, in others, the year or month of one's birth is linked to an animal with specific characteristics and abilities (Walsh, 2009).

2.1.1 Domestication

A significant step in humans' longstanding historical relationship with animals was taken when animals were domesticated. Domestication was likely triggered by a change in climate about 21,000 years ago, which made it harder for humans to hunt and gather and introduced the necessity of food production. This forced humans to become less mobile, which also made it easier to keep livestock and created the necessity of protecting said livestock (McHugo, Dover & MacHugh, 2019). This, in turn, is hypothesised to have led to a co-evolution with surrounding animals due to a shared need for shelter, food and protection (Walsh, 2009).

It is hypothesised that the wolf (*Canis lupus*) was the first animal to be domesticated at least 15,000 years ago (Freedman & Wayne, 2017; Larson et al., 2012), with evidence of domesticated wolves living in human settlements at least 14,000 years ago (Serpell, 1996). The findings of small canine bones buried with human remains in several locations also suggest that, either, the spread of the domestication of the wolf/dog was very rapid, or that this domestication took place simultaneously across different areas and tribes (Zeder, 2012). One of the earliest findings pointing towards the domestication of canids was a fairly recent discovery of a human-animal burial in Saudi Arabia (Baker, 2021). In this instance, human and canine remains were discovered alongside each other in a tomb believed to date back to 4300BC. The canine bones were smaller than those of the wolves prevalent in the same area and showed signs of having reached an age that non-domesticated wolves would not have reached. This is consistent with the theory that dogs were most likely domesticated from less aggressive, potentially smaller wolf phenotypes which, due to occupying a lower rank within their pack, would search for food in the humans' refuse and which the humans would selectively breed from due to their more docile nature (Pruitt & Goodnight, 2014). An alternative theory is that a specific ecotype of wolves well suited to fit into the niche created by hunter-gatherer groups migrated and evolved alongside them and eventually became domesticated through further intensive human selection (Larson & Fuller, 2014).

Domestication of other species, like horses, cats and birds, is likely to have occurred in similar ways, although it is important to distinguish between two different phases when

discussing domestication (Bökönyi, 2017); 1) *animal keeping,* in which animals are captured, tamed and used for certain tasks but without any motive to alter their behaviour or enhance certain traits and 2) *animal breeding,* the eventual conscious control of an animal's traits and behaviour through selective breeding – as has been the case with many of the animals we now keep as companion animals.

2.1.2 Companion Animals

Evolutionarily speaking, taking care of non-conspecifics does not make sense as it will reduce fitness and take away resources from kin (Archer, 1997). There is some evidence that, historically, keeping animals solely for companionship was frowned upon. Being able to keep an animal that did not earn its keep in some way was seen as extremely extravagant and wasteful (Ritvo, 1987). One account tells of an English gentleman who wanted to provide for his dogs after his death but due to his fear of public opinion, hid this bequest in a secret codicil instead of the main body of his will (Harwood, 1928). Especially members of the upper classes of society were known for keeping animals solely for their amusement and companionship. One of the most notable examples is King Charles II whose special fondness for lapdogs led to him having his favourite breed of toy spaniel named after him (Ritvo, 1987). It appears that nunneries and convents, too, were often filled with pet animals such as dogs, rabbits and birds to whom the occupying nuns "gave more heed than the offices of the church" (Serpell, 1987). And, while historic pet-keeping is predominantly associated with Western societies, there are also records of mainly the ruling classes of non-Western cultures keeping animals for enjoyment (Serpell, 1987). Nowadays, keeping animals as companions is widely practised, transcends social, socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds and is generally seen as positive.

As has become evident, human-animal relationships and companionship are historically, and cross-culturally very common (Serpell, 1987) and even though the reasons may have changed, the human desire to surround ourselves with animals seems to be increasing. In the past ten years, the amount of UK households that keep pets has been averaging about 47% with a sharp increase in 2020/2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic, where this number jumped to 59% (Statista Research Department, 2021). In more recent years, too, there has been a shift in the conceptualisation of animals as companions that can contribute significantly to human well-being, and in people's attitudes towards them as sentient beings (Fox & Gee, 2016). Animals are more often viewed as "kin" or family members (Mason & Tipper, 2008) and the companion animal industry has been commercially expanded considerably (Greenbaum, 2004; Holbrook, 2008; Mosteller, 2008) focusing on people's desire to care for their companion animals. There also appears to be an increase in "pet

parenting", most commonly seen in (voluntarily or involuntarily) childfree adults who invest a significant amount of emotional energy, nurturing and financial resources into their animals, allowing them to form significant bonds while retaining more flexibility and financial power than would be possible with human children (Volsche, 2018; 2019).

The fondness and devotion for pet animals transcended death early on, for example, through humans being buried with animal companions. In Peru, burial sites of the Chirabaya, a Peruvian agricultural society that thrived before the Incas from around 900-1350AD were discovered which included dogs buried with blankets and food next to their human companions (Bagley, Contreras & Hays, 2006) suggesting their status as companions even in death. There are also many instances of monuments being erected by owners for their deceased animals (Ritvo, 1987). A more contemporary development of animal burial was the establishment of pet cemeteries. The oldest known pet cemetery in the Western world is the Hyde Park Dog Cemetery established around 1880 (Keane, 2013). Around the same time, pet cemeteries were also established in Paris (Cimetière des Chiens in Asnières-Sur-Seine) and New York (Hartsdale Pet Cemetery). At all these cemeteries graves and plaques can be found of humans mourning the death of their beloved animal companions alongside memorials for specifically heroic individual animals. For example, Barry the Saint Bernard who allegedly rescued several children in the Alps (Keane, 2013). There are also monuments to groups of animals such as those who fought alongside their human companions in World War II (Kean, 2013). When looking at the significance of funerals and burials across different religions and cultures (Parkes, Laungani & Young, 2015), the memorialisation of animals in this way going back to pre-historic times, suggests that they had a special purpose and were cared for by their human counterparts (Jennbert, 2003). Furthermore, the burial gifts such as blankets and food might suggest the belief in the animal transcending into the afterlife.

2.2 Companion Animals and Positive Health Effects

As the history of the relationship between humans and animals shows, there seems to be a longstanding bond between the different species. However, the nature of this relationship has changed from a functional one in which animals aided humans in a practical sense (hunting, protection, transportation, food source etc.), to one more akin to that of a companion. These animals, kept for social and emotional reasons, are commonly referred to as pets, stemming from the French word 'petit', meaning 'small' (Grier, 2006). While this research programme adopts the increasingly common and current Critical Anthrozoological approach of referring to these animals as 'companion animals', it is important to note that this term is often used interchangeably with 'pet' across a range of relevant literature. As discussed, taking care of a non-conspecific is generally thought to be a disadvantage and reduces resources (Archer, 1997), especially if the non-conspecific species does not add value in the form of a symbiotic relationship in which they aid in sourcing food or offering protection. This poses the question as to how the human-animal relationship has evolved from a functional companion to a more affective bond frequently seen in contemporary Western culture (Cohen, 2002; Greenebaum, 2004).

Of course, it can be argued that there is less resource pressure on individuals in modern times. Previous contempt for the pet keeping of the higher echelon of society who did not have to struggle for resources supports this (Ritvo, 1987). However, it is likely that there are further reasons beyond increased accessibility of resources that led to the rise in humans keeping animals for companionship.

One of the arguments made is that animals provide great comfort and that keeping animals has a myriad of positive health effects (Andreassen, Stenvold & Rudmin, 2013). While there is some contention (e.g. Herzog, 2011), there is a wide range of literature pertaining to a so-called 'pet effect' (e.g. Ghan & Rico, 2019; Janssens et al., 2020; Smith, 2012; Wheeler & Faulkner, 2015). Anderson, Reid and Jennings (1992) found that people living with an animal showed significantly lower risk levels of cardiovascular diseases such as systolic blood pressure and plasma cholesterol levels. In fact, even interaction with companion animals

alone has been found to reduce blood pressure (Stasi et al., 2004), can buffer cardiovascular reactivity to stress (Allen, Blascovich & Mendes, 2002) as well as increase the chances of recovery after a heart attack and subsequent surgery (Friedman et al., 1980; Friedman et al., 2011). Living with dogs has been found to reduce the impact of stressful life events and people living with a dog have also been found to have less frequent visits with their doctor compared to people who do not live with a dog (Heady & Grabka, 2007; Siegel, 1990). This might be connected to findings of a positive correlation between living with an animal and increased physical activity and a lower risk of obesity (Baumann et al., 2001; Cutt et al., 2007; Cutt et al., 2008; Kushner, 2008; Thorpe et al., 2006). However, there are also a range of findings regarding the stress reduction from petting and being around or even just watching animals (e.g. Shilo, Sorek & Terkel, 2003; Wells, 2005; Wheeler & Faulkner, 2015).

Besides the positive physical health effects, research has found that animals in general, and companion animals specifically, also offer benefits for emotional and mental health which may be at least partially explained by the non-judgmental support animals seem to provide, which tends to be less present in inter-human relationships (Sharkin & Knox, 2003). They offer social support to their human companions, as well as a sense of purpose, for example, for parents whose adult children have left the home (Turner, 2006) and who find purpose in being able to retain their role as caretakers or older adults who are otherwise living alone and have less social interactions (Sable, 1989, 1991; Siegel, 1990). Animals have also been found to generally increase social interaction and thus social capital (Cox, 1993; Winefield et al., 2008; Wood, Giles-Corti & Bulsara, 2005). They have been reported to reduce adverse psychological effects of social exclusion (Aydin et al., 2011) and are seen as 'social catalysts' (McNicholas & Collis, 2000) that provide a common ground and make it easier to establish connections with others.

For children and adolescents, Purewal et al.'s (2017) systemic review of twenty-two studies found that pet ownership during this life stage was linked to, for example, better self-esteem and less loneliness, increased social competence, social interaction and social play. It has also been found that children seek out their pets for emotional support when feeling sad, angry or happy (Covert, Whiren, Keith & Nelson, 2016; McNicholas & Collis, 2001) suggesting the potential for an increase in emotional health. In terms of physical health

it was found that frequent and prolonged exposure, especially early in life lowers the likelihood of developing allergies (Fujimura et al., 2010; Gern et al., 2004).

Regarding different aspects of mental distress, Searles (1960) found that individuals with a diagnosis of 'schizophrenia' felt it to be much easier to establish positive relationships with animals than with other humans and Levinson (1970) described companion animals to be a lifeline for especially vulnerable people for whom the acquisition of a pet was a way for them to preserve their 'sanity'. In fact, women affected by domestic violence frequently cited their companion animals as one of the reasons they did not end their lives (Fitzgerald, 2007), although it needs to be stated that companion animals were also described as one of the reasons women stayed in these relationships longer as they were worried about losing the animal. Overall it appears that, in line with previously mentioned research, people suffering from poor mental health can benefit from the connections and social support companion animals offer.

So while there is some contention about the underlying processes for the effects of companion animals on humans' physical and mental well-being, much of the literature suggests a positive effect on both. Furthermore, while it is beyond the scope of this literature review, it should be noted that there is also extensive literature on the positive effect of animal-assisted therapy in a wide range of settings and on a range of human distress (e.g. Ambrosi et al., 2019; Kamioka et al., 2014; Nimer & Lundahl, 2007).

2.3 The Human-Animal Bond: Theoretical Perspectives

Physiologically, human-human and animal-human interactions appear to have similar effects. Handlin (2010) found that oxytocin levels increased in mothers breastfeeding their babies but also in female dog owners when interacting with their animals and there are other studies suggesting an activation of the oxytocin system in human-animal interactions (Beetz, Uvnäs-Moberg, Julius & Kotrschal, 2012).

One lens through which the relationship between humans and their companion animals has been viewed in a large part of the academic literature is attachment theory (Cohen, 2002; Kurdek, 2008; Zilcha-Mano, Miculincer & Shaver, 2011b). There are several arguments as to why this may be an appropriate way of explaining the human-animal bond. A companion animal provides unconditional affection and comfort, emotional closeness and a safe haven, in other words, a place of security and comfort to turn to in times of distress (Zilcha-Mano, Miculincer & Shaver, 2011a). Security and comfort are achieved through attributes and relational qualities that companion animals offer, such as loyalty, tenderness, lack of judgement, stability and warmth (Hirschmann, 1994; Levinson, 1969; McNicholas & Collins, 1995). These attributes may then predispose humans to seek out their companion animals for comfort and to form close attachments with them (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011a).

The concept of attachment is primarily influenced by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth's explanation of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1988). Following observations in animal behaviour such as in birds (Lorenz, 1952) and monkeys (Harlow, 1958), and through his early interest in maternal deprivation and personality development in later life (Bretherton, 1992), Bowlby developed his theory of attachment. This was later aided by Ainsworth's methodologies and the addition of the concept of an attachment figure (Bretherton, 1992). At its core, attachment theory explains an infant's attachment-related behaviours to function as tools to seek proximity and safety with a caregiver in stressful situations (Bowlby, 1969, 1988), which increases their chances of survival (Prior & Glaser, 2006). Progressively, the caregiver or attachment figure is used as a secure base to explore their environment and to return to when unsure or distressed (Bretherton, 1992). With time, the

infant establishes an internal working model of what relationships look like based on those early experiences, giving them a blueprint for future relationships. As the child develops, their network of attachment figures widens, new attachments are formed and the attachment to the primary caregiver weakens (Hazan & Zeifman, 1999).

Attachment theory has been developed beyond its original intent of explaining developmental behaviours in childhood. Bartholomew and Horowitz (1991) broadened the idea of attachment into adulthood, developing a two-dimensional (anxiety and avoidance) model that attempts to explain behaviour exhibited in, predominantly romantic relationships. However, according to Hazan & Zeifman (1994) not all close bonds are attachment relationships, as attachment bonds require certain characteristics to allow them to be categorised as attachment: seeking proximity; resisting separation; the attachment figure functioning as a secure base and a safe haven in times of distress (Fraley & Shaver, 2000).

In anthrozoological literature, the human-animal bond is most commonly referred to as an attachment bond and this concept is often used in research to draw comparisons to inter-human relationships. For example, research has found that human-animal attachment can be roughly categorised into attachment styles similar to those described in interhuman relationships, namely secure, anxious and avoidant (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011a). In Beck and Madresh's (2008) study on attachment between humans and their companion animals, they not only found that their adapted measures reliably measured relationships with companion animals but also that relationships with animals were more secure on every measure when compared to romantic relationships, leading the authors to conclude that companion animals are a "consistent source of attachment security" (p. 43). Meehan, Massaveli & Pachana (2017) explored human-animal attachment and found that students saw their pets as a source of social support at similar levels to their partners, friends and family.

There are several studies that assert that they have found attachment characteristics in human-animal relationships, and a number of assessment tools seem to utilise attachment characteristics to evaluate human-animal bonds (Beck & Madresh, 2008). In a review of relevant research Sable (1995) concluded that companion animals provide companionship

and comfort and can serve as substitutes for human attachments. In two separate studies, Kurdek examined the relationship between humans and companion animals in college students (Kurdek, 2008) and in a community sample (2009) and found some aspects of attachment such as secure base, proximity maintenance and safe haven. However, some attachment characteristics were found to be more salient than others in human-animal relationships, with proximity seeking being the most salient and safe haven the least salient characteristic.

It is important to note there is some criticism about the lack of differentiation between 'attachment' and a care-giving bond, especially regarding Kurdek's studies (Kwong & Bartholomew, 2011). The former of which is thought to relate to seeking protection and security while the latter provides it. While this might be a simplified view with more nuance in reality, in the context of attachment theory, the parent-infant relationship is thought of as non-reciprocal. The attachment relationship from the infant towards the caregiver means that they seek out proximity in order to be provided with safety and comfort but they cannot provide this to the caregiver. On the other hand, the caregiver provides safety and comfort to the infant but does not seek to receive this in return (Bartholomew & Kwong, 2011). George & Solomon (1999), describe caregiving as a behavioural system complementary to the behavioural system of attachment. In the case of the attachment system, potentially dangerous, frightening or stressful situations trigger the infant to behave in certain ways (e.g. crying, proximity seeking etc.). In the case of the behavioural system of caregiving, potentially dangerous, frightening or stressful situations trigger specific behaviour in the caregiver (e.g. maintaining proximity, holding the child, reassuring the child etc.). The suggestion of caregiving as a behavioural system was made by Bowlby (1969, 1988) but has since not been extensively explored in the literature. In human-animal relationships, caregiving by the human is a large part of this relationship (Prato-Previde, Ricci & Colombo, 2022). Assuming the above definitions of attachment and caregiving, from what is suggested in research and literature, the relationships between humans and their companion animals might be more nuanced and not as clear-cut. Humans might seek comfort and safety from their animals but also provide caregiving depending on the given situation (Julius et al., 2012).

Taking into account the original theory of attachment and its focus on the infant-caregiver relationship, there are certainly questions to be raised about how suitable attachment theory is in explaining the human-animal bond. However, a relationship does not have to be a 'true attachment' to serve 'attachment-related' functions (Fraley & Shaver, 2000). For example, the expansion of attachment theory to include adult attachment between romantic partners (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) and between peers and siblings (Trinke & Bartholomew, 1997), does not include the same proximity-seeking attachment behaviours present in infant attachment, yet it still serves as a way to understand these relationships. So, while human-human relationships and human-animal relationships are certainly not the same, concepts situated within the framework of attachment theory still offer useful theoretical perspectives on the human-animal bond (Beck & Madresh, 2008).

Given that attachment theory cannot be seamlessly applied as a framework to human-animal bonds, let us explore some other theoretical terrain. Object relations theory proposes that during infancy, while trying to make sense of their world, babies develop internal representations of the people around them, most commonly their primary caregivers. These internal representations, or 'objects', will go on to inform the way in which the child understands their own self, others and their relationships. Animals, too are thought to function as objects and provide a way for their human companions to conceptualise the self. 'Animal objects' function in a way similar to that of important human relationships, scaffolding a person's sense of self and providing a mirror for the individual to view their strengths and flaws through the animal (Putney, 2013). Winnicott's (1956; p. 310) thoughts on the holding environment might also find resonance in the psychic configurations of the human-animal bond:

> *"One can discern a series – the mother's body, the mother's arms, the parental relationship, the home, the family including cousins and near relations, the school, the locality with its police stations, the country with its laws".*

The holding environment is, therefore, not limited to the relationship with the primary caregiver, but can play out in a broader context. A 'good enough' holding environment needs to be reliable, consistent and sensitive, all aspects of which tend to be present in the

human-animal relationship, suggesting the presence of holding that facilitates the development of good internalised objects (Putney, 2013).

Another theory adjacent to that of object relations is that of self-psychology coined by Heinz Kohut, which, similarly to object-relations theory, asserts that early relationships set the precedent for relationships in later life, with a strong focus on empathy as a way of understanding early developmental issues and mental health struggles (Brown, 2004). However, unlike object-relations theory, self-psychology does not conceive the actual person (for example the mother) to be a self-object, but rather for them to fulfil a self-object function (Wolf, 1988). For example, an empathetic mother who is able to calm her child consistently fulfils a self-object function for this child. The child may experience the mother as a positive self-object, when, really, the mother simply embodies a soothing self-object function for the child (Brown, 2007). Ultimately, self-psychology focuses on establishing and maintaining a sense of self through relationships (Brown, 2007).

There are thought to be three types of self-objects, mirroring self-objects, idealizable self-objects and alter-ego or twinship self-objects (Kohut, 1984; Wolf, 1988). The mirroring self-objects help maintain the self through recognition, confirmation and affirmation of the self as good and whole (Wolf, 1988). Idealizable self-objects maintain the self by having someone to look up to, admire and identify with for their positive attributes (strength, wisdom, calmness etc.) (Wolf, 1988) and alter-ego or twinship self-objects maintain the self by providing the experience of a likeness of another's self (Wolf, 1988). Like other humans, animals can fulfil self-object functions. For example, Alper (1993), provided an account of a dog functioning as a mirroring self-object for a little girl, whose parents were unable to respond with the same enthusiasm to the girl's poetry reading as her dog would show. This validated her creativity and allowed her to develop a sense of self as interesting and worthwhile (Alper, 1993). There is some contention about whether an animal serving as a self-object may be able to help create structural change or not, but at the very least, they have been found to maintain a sense of self (Brown, 2004). The importance and significance of the human-animal bond may, therefore, be explained by the opportunity it provides to humans to develop, or at the very least maintain, a positive sense of self through the animal.

From a counselling psychology perspective, there is nothing remarkable in the observation that humans form deep and reciprocal bonds of care with other sentient beings; humans are a social species and tend to depend on others for safety, security, reproduction and socialising (Milton, 2016). This should not prevent us from examining the literature in depth, in order to nuance the particularities of the human-animal bond. What is pertinent about this bond from a counselling psychology perspective is the emphasis on relationships as a therapeutic function. It is widely accepted that the therapeutic relationship, beyond modality or technique, is most influential in the efficacy of the therapeutic process (Lambert & Barley, 2001; Milton, 2016). Several of the factors commonly found in positive therapeutic relationships such as congruence/genuineness, positive regard/affirmation and alliance (Wampold, 2015) can be seen in the human-animal bond.

Upon reflection, it makes sense that no theory of inter-human bonds perfectly aligns with the human-animal relationship; they are different types of relationships, transcending species, language and the perception of the respective worlds humans and animals live in. They may also be more nuanced than any existing theoretical framework can account for, or than they are given credit for. Nonetheless, the aforementioned theories provide a glimpse into why these relationships are consistently reported to be significant, deep bonds with a largely positive effect on the humans in question - offering safety, purpose, and a source of meaning.

2.4 Loss in the Human-Animal Relationship

Considering the significance and depth of the bond between humans and their companion animals, we now turn to the psychological impact that might occur when this bond breaks. Since most animals' life expectancy is significantly shorter than human's, a human living with an animal will likely experience the loss of this animal sooner or later. The literature is not clear about the difference in severity of human versus companion animal loss. While there are several papers suggesting the two are comparable (e.g. Cleary, West, Thapa, Westman, Vesk & Kornhaber, 2021; Gerwolls & Labott, 1994; Lavorgna & Hutton, 2018; Lee, 2020; Lyons et al., 2022; Mariano, 2024; Planchon, Stokes & Keller, 2002), other research has found that grief following pet or companion animal bereavement is less severe than grief following the loss of another human (Eckerd, Barnett & Jett-Dias, 2016; Rajaram, Garrity, Stallones & Marx, 1993). Nonetheless, in a study conducted by Adrian & Stitt (2019), they found that about 3.4% of their sample of pet owners bereaved through euthanasia met the criteria for complicated grief, while 4.7% met the criteria for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder following the death of their companion animals. Furthermore, gender, animal species, cause of death, social support and strength of the bond are all variables associated with the severity of grief following a companion animal bereavement (Cowling, Sar, Isenstein & Schneider, 2020; Stokes, Planchon, Templer & Keller, 2002).

Grief, the experience of losing someone or something close or important, is an event most people will be affected by at some point in their lives. Freud first wrote about mourning in his book *Trauer und Melancholie* (Mourning and Melancholia) in 1917 where he described mourning and grief as the process through which individuals adjust to the loss they have suffered in order to disengage from the deceased and reinvest in other relationships. More contemporary theories of grief include Kübler-Ross' (1969) stages of grief and Stroebe & Schutt's (1999) dual-process model. Both of these focus on different stages the bereaved will experience while processing their loved one's death.

Grief and bereavement are commonplace and experienced by nearly everyone at some point in their lives and often resolve without additional support (Stroebe, Schut & Stroebe,

2007). However, in some cases, individuals may experience more prolonged distress. In these cases, the grief experienced may be classified as 'complicated grief' (Botella et al., 2008). Mason, Tofthagen & Buck (2020) identified common risk factors for complicated grief in caregivers, such as prior experience of anxiety or depression, poor physical health, maladaptive attachment traits as well as low perceived social support. In turn, factors such as high pre-bereavement spirituality were found to be protective factors for complicated grief. While not fully comparable, similar risk factors may be assumed for people caring for a companion animal. In her 2012 article, Cordaro concluded that the loss of a companion animal is processed in the same way as that of a human companion (e.g. Kübler-Ross, dual process model etc.) and that this loss often leads to depression and significant disruption in functioning (Sharkin & Knox, 2003).

Recently, there has been increased attention on the *continuing bonds* approach to grief (Klaas, Silverman & Nickman, 1996) regarding coping (Field & Friedrichs, 2004; Stroebe, Gergen, Gergen, & Stroebe, 1992), and adapting to a loved one's death. This paradigm focuses on the continued emotional bond to the deceased, despite their permanent physical absence (Field, Nichols, Holen, & Horowitz, 1999), and thus shifts the goal from detachment to a reorganisation of the relationship (Field, 2008). While it is recognised that under certain conditions a continued bond can be maladaptive (Field, 2008), it is generally understood that a continued bond is an important aspect of successfully adapting to a bereavement (Field & Filanosky, 2009). There have previously been similar concepts described concerning the death of a pet or companion animal (Cowles, 1985; Carmack, 2003; Podrazik et al., 2000), which more recently have been labelled as continuing bonds within companion animal bereavement literature (Carmack & Packman, 2011; Packman, Carmack & Ronen, 2012). Continuing Bond Expressions such as fond memories, dreams, rituals and the keeping of special items are often maintained as an ongoing link to a deceased companion animal (Packman & Carmack, 2012). These Continuing Bond Expressions seem to be universal, appear cross-culturally (Golbeck, 2024) and have, in interview-based studies, emerged unprompted with people frequently describing the feeling of a continued attachment to their animal such as the unconscious urge to look for them, the importance of rituals to memorialise the animal and a feeling of their continued presence (Carmack & Packman, 2021).

Similar to human bereavement, the strength of the bond to the deceased will impact the severity of grief the individual experiences. In several studies, the strength of the human-animal bond measured by a range of self-reported scale questionnaires, including *Comfort from Companion Animal Scale* (Zasloff, 1996), *Lexington Attachment to Pet Scale* (Johnson et al., 1992), *Animal Bonding Scale* (Poresky, Hendrix, Mosier & Samuelson, 1987), was found to affect and predict how and how much a person will grieve (Field et al., 2009; Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011a;). Generally speaking, the closer the people feel to their companion animals, the more severely they will experience the loss (Archer& Winchester, 1994; Bonilla Hernandez, 2024; Gosse & Barnes, 1994; O'Connor, Vonk & Compitus, 2022; Podrazik, Shackford, Becker & Heckert, 2000; Walshaw, 1981).

Other studies have focused not just on the strength but also on the type of bond between humans and their animals. As discussed, human-animal bonds can be roughly categorised into attachment relationships similar to those described in interhuman relationships, namely secure, anxious and avoidant (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011a). Zilcha-Mano et al. (2011a) found that the type of relationship humans have with their animals also impacts how they grieve and process their losses. For example, an anxious relationship in which the human is continuously worried about the animal's well-being was found to lead to more severe and long-lasting grief, while people who exhibited what was thought of as a more avoidant relationship with their animal did not appear to be as affected by their death (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011a). However, Lykins et al. (2023) also found that individuals classed to have "higher attachment anxiety" were not only associated with greater initial intensity of grief but also with a greater endorsement of continuing bonds which, in turn, partially moderated the severity of grief in individuals.

Besides the depth and type of bond, individual differences as well as sociodemographic variables will also affect the severity of grief. Age, for example, is a risk factor for more severe grief (Sharkin & Knox, 2003; Mariano; 2024), possibly due to the higher likelihood of older people living alone or having fewer social connections which have also been found to intensify grief (Gosse & Barnes, 1994; Planchon & Templer, 1996; Mariano 2024). Gender, too, is a predictor with women seemingly experiencing more intense grief following the

death of a companion animal (Gosse & Barnes, 1994; Margolies, 1999; Mariano, 2024) even though no significant differences are found in the strength of the human-animal bond between men and women. There also appears to be a difference in the intensity of grief depending on the type of animal as well as their age at the time of death (Cowling, Isenstein & Schneider, 2020). The species of an animal is sometimes described to affect grief, although there seem to be more complex factors at play. Remalm (2015) describes animals to be 'grievable' or 'ungrievable'. In this instance, the 'grievable' animal is irreplaceable and unique, often with their own personality, their loss is emotionally transformative meaning the individual might be changed by this loss and there is a sense of an 'embodied' or physical loss either in the sense of physical affection or through the animal's physical absence after their death. On the other hand, the 'ungrievable' animal is seen as 1) replaceable, because they are often not seen as an individual; 2) their loss is not seen as transformative, meaning the individual was not emotionally close enough to be affected and 3) there was no bodily empathy. The owners did not handle their animals much or kept them separated (e.g. in a cage or terrarium) and therefore did not physically feel the loss as acutely. These factors might be more common with certain species (e.g. fish, reptiles etc.) but they cannot be generalised to particular species.

Other factors such as the human companion's personality (Sharkin & Knox, 2003) or the occurrence of another loss, possibly resulting in a compound loss effect (Ross & Baron-Sorensen, 1998) can also affect how severely a companion animal bereavement is felt. At points, this can lead to 'displaced mourning', often an unresolved grief over a previous loss that becomes visible for the first time during the loss of a companion animal (Margolies, 1999; Ross & Baron-Sorensen, 1998). For children specifically, a displacement of their grief, onto an animal or even a fictional character is often a way for them to process a more complex loss (Sood, Razdan, Weller & Weller, 2006).

Bereavement and grief are always difficult but depending on the severity of these losses and how they are processed they can lead to more positive or negative outcomes. High levels of grief for the animal have been found to be associated with high levels of guilt and loneliness following the death (Cowling, Isenstein & Schneider, 2020). However, with adequate support and depending on circumstances and individual resilience, a bereavement can lead

to post-traumatic growth (Parks, 1985; Spain, O'Dwyer & Mosten, 2019; Packman et al., 2017), allowing the person to emerge stronger from getting through the experience of grief. But bereavement and loss have also been found to be the life events most often preceding a decline in mental well-being (Brown & Harris, 1978) and complicated grief has been found to have high comorbidity with depression, anxiety and PTSD (Simon et al., 2007; He et al., 2014). A lack of social support and understanding is one of the most common risk factors for challenges in processing grief.

There are different types of therapeutic interventions for individuals struggling to cope following a bereavement. This can be in the form of individual or group therapy. For complicated grief, 'complicated grief treatment' (Shear, Frank, Houck & Reynolds, 2005) is a common intervention that combines psychoeducation with the application of the dual-process model focusing on loss and restoration. Other approaches focus more on behavioural activation and therapeutic exposure (Acierno et al., 2012). Family therapy, as well as supportive or interpretive group therapy, are also common therapeutic interventions that people may seek out following bereavement (Mason, Tofthagen & Buck, 2020).

While there is a lot of literature, theory and therapeutic interventions in relation to human bereavement, when it comes to companion animal bereavement there is very little. Of course, some of the interventions and methodologies used in human bereavement may also be suitable for companion animal bereavement. Group therapy settings specifically for companion animal bereavement, for example, may be useful for people who do not have social support. Sharing their loss in a group of people experiencing similar situations may help to normalise their feelings and emotions. However, if the group therapy setting were to include other types of bereavement, individuals suffering from companion animal bereavement may experience invalidation of their grief which could have a detrimental effect. In relation, specifically, to therapeutic interventions for companion animal bereavement there is only Kogan & Erdman's (2020) book *Pet Loss, Grief and Therapeutic Interventions*. Most chapters focus on how to prepare for the loss of a companion animal, although Bussolari & Packman (2020), suggest the use of continuing bonds as a way to help explore and process companion animal bereavement.

Overall, however, it is important to note that the majority of therapeutic interventions for grief have been developed in relation to inter human relationships. As explored in a previous chapter, the human-animal relationship is not fully comparable, leaving a gap in the knowledge of suitable therapeutic intervention for companion animal bereavement. In their exploration of professional services in relation to pet loss, Morely & Fook (2007) write: "*By defining these relationships in terms of human relationships, the value of pet companionship has been devalued, causing additional stress to people at what is already a time of great loss*." This highlights the need for more in-depth exploration of the loss following companion animal bereavement to aid in the understanding of individual experiences and the development of more tailored support.

2.4.1 Disenfranchised Grief

While social support is expected and culturally sanctioned for human bereavement, bereavement from a companion animal is not met with the same recognition. This phenomenon is referred to as 'disenfranchised grief' and appears to be especially common in companion animal bereavement and is associated with challenges in processing grief (Stewart, Thrush & Paulus, 1989; Sarper & Rodrigues,2024)). Disenfranchised grief is understood as a type of grief which is not deemed to be as socially acceptable as other losses. Common examples of this are loss through suicide, miscarriages and abortions or the loss of a relationship that is not socially sanctioned (e.g. an extra-marital affair) (Doka, 1989; 2002; 2008; 2020). Doka (2020) describes four different types of disenfranchised grief, (a) the relationship is not recognised (e.g. in an extra-marital affair), (b) the loss is not recognised (e.g. during a miscarriage or loss of a companion animal), (c) the griever is not recognised (e.g. a child or person with mental disabilities) and (d) the death is disenfranchising (e.g. in cases of suicide or death through a disease like AIDS).

In any case of disenfranchised grief, the grief of the individual is not recognised in one way or another and research has found that the stigmatisation of the grief, for example in cases of suicide, can lead to severe complications during bereavement (Hanschmidt, Lehning, Riedel-Heller & Kersting, 2016; Kaufman & Kaufman, 2006). Hanschmidt et al.'s (2016) systemic review of papers on disenfranchised grief for suicide loss survivors (someone who has lost a loved one to suicide), found a much higher level of stigma compared to natural death survivors, linked to social withdrawal, grief complications and reduced psychological and somatic functioning. For parents experiencing perinatal loss, the disenfranchisement of their grief led to isolation, delayed grief and depression (Hazen, 2003). Unacknowledged grief has also been found to be more likely to lead to unresolved and complicated grief (Kaufman & Kaufman, 2006), which may last up to six months and can lead to significant functional impairment (Adrian et al., 2009) and has a high comorbidity with other mental health issues (He et al., 2014; Simon et al., 2007).

In regard to companion animal bereavement, disenfranchisement of grief seems to be a common experience (Brown, 2024; Mariano, 2024). This is supported by Park & Royal (2020)

who found that 74.7% of participants in their US based study found that individuals mourned their pets privately and increased social isolation and emotional distancing has been found to commonly occur following a companion animal's death (Park, Royal & Gruen, 2021). It seems that individuals experiencing the loss of an animal tend to be, overtly or subtly, discouraged from expressing their grief and feel that their loss is not worthy of acknowledgement and validation because they were 'just a pet' (Cordaro, 2012). This, in turn, might affect whether someone is able to process the loss of their animal fully, which may lead to complicated grief (Sharkin & Knox, 2003). Adrian & Stitt's (2017) study, for example, found that people who were not able to grieve their companion animals were more likely to experience higher levels of depression and anxiety and had more trouble processing their grief. In a therapeutic setting, too, the death of companion animals has largely been ignored in the past (Margolies, 1999), with a large number of counselling or therapy clients feeling they might be overreacting about their animal's death and thus suppressing their feelings and avoiding the subject in the therapy room (Rynearson, 1978).

A disenfranchisement of grief is also associated with a lack of posttraumatic growth (Spain, O'Dwyer & Moston, 2019). Posttraumatic growth is thought to occur following potentially traumatic events, such as bereavement and grief, presenting an antithesis to the negative impacts of Post-Traumatic Stress (Hurst & Kannangara, 2022). Research on posttraumatic growth suggests that traumatic experiences can lead to psychological growth and increased resilience through social closeness, heightened spirituality and reaffirmed beliefs (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1999) suggests a lack of social closeness which could at least partially explain the lack of posttraumatic growth associated with companion animal bereavement (Spain, O'Dwyer & Moston, 2019).

Of course, the effects of disenfranchised grief in other contexts cannot be fully compared to the disenfranchisement of companion animal bereavement. However, it still allows for inferences to be made about how the lack of acknowledgement and support may affect the bereaved, their willingness to discuss their loss and their ability to process their loss. Overall, it seems that negative reactions from the social environment correlate with stronger symptoms of grief (Hanschmidt et al., 2016, Johnson et al., 2009), while understanding and support lead to better outcomes. The potential for a lack of

understanding after the loss of an animal would appear to therefore risk disenfranchised grief and poorer outcomes. However, with the rise in people keeping companion animals, often in place of having children (Volsche, 2018, 2019), there might be a sense of normalisation around discussing the struggle of losing an animal.

2.4.2 Psychosocial Effects/Secondary Losses

Besides the actual loss of their companion animal and a possible disenfranchisement of their grief, people might also have to deal with further consequences of their companion animal's death (Toray, 2004), what in the literature is referred to as 'secondary losses' (Rando, 1984 , 1993) or the psychosocial effects of a loss. A secondary loss during bereavement is the loss of something not directly due to the death itself but one that coincides with or develops as a result of the initial loss (Rando, 1993). For example, the loss of a spouse or partner might not just be traumatic in itself but might bring with it financial struggles and the loss of social connections, among other things (Stroebe & Schut, 2010). In general, secondary losses often pertain more to the process of the bereaved person adjusting to the loss of their loved one rather than the loss itself. It often includes re-adjusting one's identity without the loved one (Lister, Pushkar & Connolly, 2008).

When losing an animal, the loss might not be financial (although it could be, depending on the animal and their function) but, especially with certain types of animals, could still lead to reduced social contact, physical activity or sense of purpose. For example, Searles (1960) found that individuals diagnosed with Schizophrenia experienced a significant increase in symptoms after the loss of a companion animal, meaning they did not just have to cope with the bereavement but also with an intensification of their struggles, which may or may not have been caused by the loss of their animal. Thinking back to the positive health effects discussed above, it must be considered how the majority of these effects will disappear with the death of the animal and how the individual's physical and mental health may be impacted by this. Consequently, while those aspects of loss and grief might be addressed in a therapeutic context when it comes to the death of a human companion, the disenfranchisement of companion animal bereavement as a whole will likely mean that any possible secondary losses may be ignored when working with individuals suffering from the bereavement of their companion animal.

2.5 Research Objectives

There is limited academic literature on the bereavement that occurs after the death of a companion animal (Adams, Bonnett & Meek, 1999, 2000; Archer & Winchester, 1994; Harrison & Harrington, 2001). However, given that the number of people keeping companion animals seems to be steadily increasing, with a commonly occurring anthropomorphisation of the animal to that of a child or at least a family member (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988; Belk, 1988, 1996; Gillespie, Leffler & Lerner, 2002; Greenebaum, 2004; Hirschman, 1994; Veevers, 1985) deeper insight into the impact of companion animal bereavement on the individual is likely to be valuable in therapeutic practice.

Given the relative paucity of literature relating to the human-animal bond and its implications for practitioners, this research will explore people's experiences of the relationship and the loss of their companion animal. Crucially, it will not only explore subjective experiences but, through a Narrative Analysis, also how people understand and make sense of these relationships and their losses. Narrative Analysis allows for the experiences of bereavement to be emplotted, meaning placed in the context of canonical stories that serve different functions and audiences. Besides giving insight into participants' experiences of the bonds and losses of their animals, their narratives allow the reader into the kinds of stories told of companion animal bereavement and what these stories do for the individuals, for example in identity formation, their worldviews or understanding of ethics. Learning more about how these experiences affect individuals and how they make sense of it will allow for an increase in knowledge and sensitivity by practitioners and wider society alike.

3. Methodological Overview

The approach to this research programme is qualitative, given that it intends to explore participants' lived experience of the attachment with, and the loss of, their companion animals. Analysis of the data was conducted from a critical-realist viewpoint, which adopts positions of ontological realism and epistemological constructivism (Maxwell, 2015). This viewpoint assumes that everyone has a unique perspective of the world informed by personal experience and interpretation, meaning that there is no one correct scientific way of understanding reality (Lakoff, 2008, p.265).

Given the aim of the thesis - to capture a relatively broad picture of grief experiences across a spectrum of participants, I decided initially to deploy a qualitative survey. An online qualitative survey seemed to lend itself well to the aims (Braun, Clarke, Boulton, Davey & McEvoy, 2021), especially considering the sensitive nature of the topic as well as the restrictions still in place following the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach allowed participants to take as much time as they needed and the anonymity offered greater accessibility (Braun, Clarke & Gray, 2017), and also offered advantages around the speed of data collection (Jowett & Peel, 1999).

Another aspect considered when designing the first part of the research was that the area of companion animal bereavement is comparatively under-researched (Adams, Bonnett & Meek, 1999; 2000; Archer & Winchester, 1994; Harrison & Harrington, 2001; Margolies, 1999). In this case, qualitative surveys are thought to be especially useful to gain insight into a broader range of participants with greater diversity (Braun, Clarke & Gray, 2017). It provides a more 'wide-angle lens' than other qualitative research methods, while still gathering participants' individual views and experiences (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004).

A further rationale for qualitative surveys related to the potential for the disenfranchisement of grief in companion animal bereavement identified in the existing

literature (Chur-Hansen, 2010; Cordaro, 2012; Doka, 1989; 2002; 2008; 2020; Laing & Mylea, 2018; Marr, Kaufman & Craig, 2022; Packman et al., 2014; Rosell, 2005). It may be assumed that this could impact participants' ability and desire to share their true feelings and experiences. Qualitative surveys provided a way for them to share anonymously without any fear of judgement and were thought to help them to be more open and honest about how they experienced their loss than they would otherwise have been. Specifically, around a topic such as companion animal bereavement, a qualitative survey provides an 'empathic bridge' for participants, offering them a safe way of sharing their experiences which makes them feel that they are being given the appropriate emotional space and that there is a genuine desire for their views to be heard and understood (Packman et al., 2014).

Lastly, I considered my own bias and preconceived beliefs about companion animal bereavement. While the qualitative nature of this research means there is no aim for researcher objectivity, I was nevertheless aware that my presence may lead to a change in participant responses due to their own beliefs about the topic or due to an element of social-desirability bias (Krumpal, 2024). The design of this survey allowed participants to have a space to respond without potential subconscious interference from me as the researcher in this part of the study.

Despite the strong rationale for qualitative surveys to explore the research question, upon analysis of the survey data it became clear that, while there was interesting and important data, it was not sufficiently rich to adequately address the research aims. On several occasions, it became evident that there were important opportunities to probe participants for further explanations of their answers, which the nature of the method did not allow for. The survey provided a broad insight into people's experiences of companion animal bereavement and allowed for the identification and exploration of a range of themes and subthemes. However, deeper questions emerged around how participants made sense of these experiences which was thought to be especially relevant to allow for implications to be made for a therapeutic context. Following this realisation, I decided to conduct a second study using narrative interviews to explore not only the experiences of people who lost their companion animals but also how they understood and made sense of these experiences for themselves. Both studies are reported below.

3.1 Qualitative Survey Study

3.1.1 Method

Data Collection Process

Participants were asked to complete an online questionnaire made up of six demographic questions (e.g. age, gender, species of companion animal) and seven open, long answer questions about the relationship with their deceased companion animal and their experience of the bereavement of the animal; 1. “Tell us a bit about your history and relationships with your companion animal. What did this relationship mean to you?”, 2. “How do you think your companion animal affected your life? What changed after their death?”, 3. “How do you feel the loss of your companion animal compared to that of a (close) human?”, 4. “When your companion animal died, how did the people around you react to your loss? Do you feel like you received the support you needed at the time? If not, what would you have liked to be different?”, 5. “Is there something you feel still connects you to your companion animal?”, 6. “Have you gotten another companion animal since? Why or why not?” and 7. “Is there anything else you would like to add about your relationship with your companion animal that has not been covered yet?” (see Appendix 4 for the full survey).

The survey was designed and analysed using Braun & Clark’s (2006) approach to thematic analysis. The survey questions were developed by evaluating the existing literature (Meadows, 2003) and designed to be as open as possible without being too vague. They aimed to provide the participants with enough guidance to be able to comprehend the questions while leaving space for them to answer freely (Meadows 2003). The questions were also piloted with a number of undergraduate students and changed according to their feedback and where any issues of clarity or understanding became apparent.

There were no exclusion criteria besides the participants' age. It was specified that participants would have to be over 18 years of age to ensure comprehension of the survey questions and avoid any possible ethical issues of including underaged participants. While

there were some considerations about possible exclusions criteria around the duration since the loss occurred as well as to whether there would be a requirement of how long the participant had lived with the animal, however, ultimately it was decided that it would be unethical to exclude participants who resonated with this subject based on these critera. Similarly, there was no specification of what type of animal participants would be required to talk about. The survey specified that questions were about 'companion animals' to avoid participants speaking about any pet they may not have had a companion animal relationship with, but this relationship was not defined in detail as the definition of a 'companion animal' is subjective and, in part, up to the individual's perception and interpretation.

Ethical Protocol

This study received full ethical approval from the UWE Bristol Faculty Research Ethics Committee (HAS.21.09.008). All participants provided their consent prior to taking part in the survey and were given the opportunity to withdraw at any point. Data were collected anonymously and any identifying information was redacted during data analysis. Furthermore, participants were provided with several resources for support should they feel the need for this after taking part and they were encouraged to reach out should they require further support or have any questions.

Participants

Convenience sampling was employed throughout this stage of participant recruitment (Rahman, 2023). Participants were recruited by circulating an email throughout the university's participation pool (an e-mailing list students and university staff can join to take part in research projects) as well as through the researcher's social media. There were several attempts to widen participation by utilising online forums and Facebook groups around the topic of animal keeping and animal bereavement but with limited success due to group policies and a lack of uptake in these online spaces. The pros of this convenience sampling were the relative ease with which the survey could be distributed to a diverse and geographically widespread group of people (Alvin, 2016), especially during and immediately following the COVID-19 pandemic. It was also a relatively fast and cost-effective way of sampling (Taherdoost, 2016) since there was no funding available to recruit or compensate participants. A downside was the challenge of obtaining sufficient data.

Complete responses were collected from 37 participants. There was a clear majority of female participants (n=27) over male participants (n=8), with two participants indicating they identified as non-binary. Indicated age ranges ranged from 18-29 to 50-59 with the majority of participants (n=14) indicating they belonged to the 30-39 age range. In the survey, most participants spoke about a dog (n=22) or cat (n=12) with one person each writing about their guinea pig, hamster and bird.

When it comes to suggested sample sizes for Thematic Analyses, there seems to be much contention about how the right sample size might be established. A review of Thematic Analyses (Baker & Edwards, 2012), has found samples ranging from 12 to 101, with a suggested mean of about 30 participants. Fugard & Potts (2015) devised a tool based on theme frequency. However, Braun & Clarke (2016) make it clear that a bigger sample size does not mean better or more accurate data. They suggest that bigger samples increase the risk of failing to notice nuance and emphasise the importance of conceptualising 'significant' patterns in the data. In the instance of this data set, themes were not defined simply by the frequency in which they appeared but by whether the patterns found in the data were felt to be 'significant' (Braun & Clarke 2016). Thus, despite the relatively small number of participants, the data gleaned was sufficient and the themes elicited were significant and meaningful.

3.1.2 Analysis

This qualitative survey study utilised thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2021) in order to analyse the collected data. The data was coded in stages in which I initially read and re-read the participants' answers which allowed me to familiarise myself sufficiently with the data to identify and consolidate codes into possible themes. For example, codes like “special attention from animal”, “animal senses struggle” and “animal as a source of comfort” were consolidated in the subtheme “Caregiving by Animal” which eventually fit into Theme 1: Provision and Receipt of Care”. Themes were generated not necessarily based on the frequency in which they were mentioned, but by identifying which themes appeared as threads that collectively pulled through the survey answers in meaningful ways. After several reviews, I identified participants’ quotes as fitting into these overarching themes which I plotted into a table (see Appendix 3) in order to have a more organised and visual representation of the themes and for easier access to quotes befitting these themes. Themes were then plotted into a mind map (see Appendix 1) and subsequently arranged into overarching themes containing sub-themes (See Appendix 2). This process was dynamic and the themes and subthemes were refined and renamed several times in an effort to accurately represent what I believed participants wanted to express in their statements.

The open-ended questions (see Appendix 4) aimed at providing them with enough structure to be able to answer them easily, while being open enough to ensure they could be answered however the participants saw fit. The analysis aimed to gain insight into how participants related to their companion animals before and after their deaths and how they experienced their passing. Throughout the analysis, four themes appeared to be frequently expressed by participants in one way or another and were therefore deemed to be most pertinent when analysing their statements. The themes were titled: Theme 1: Provision and Receipt of Care, Theme 2: Mementoes, Rituals & Tokens, Theme 3: Nuanced Disenfranchisement and Theme 4: Impact of Loss (see Appendix 2)

Theme 1: Provision and Receipt of Care

The theme of caregiving appeared across the data in several different ways. There were numerous and diverse ways in which participants described the provision of care within the relationship with companion animals. This included in physical ways such as during the animal's illness or old age. One participant described having to care for their cat saying:

> *"He also was a cat flu carrier so sneezed a lot and needed his face washed a few times a day. He became unwell later in life with pancreatitis and wasn't the easiest pet but everyone loved him." (R1)*

These accounts of physical caregiving align with the behavioural system of caregiving in an attachment behavioural context (Gillath, Karantzas & Fraley, 2016). Here, the human's caregiving system is activated by the suffering of their companion animal, prompting them to offer care and protection (Canterberry & Gillath, 2012). However, different accounts could be constituted as caregiving towards companion animals in other ways, such as Respondent 18 who said about their dog:

> "(…) we planned much of our lives around him, going for daily walks, dog-friendly holidays, etc. (…)"

This aspect of "caregiving" might not quite fit into the behavioural system of caregiving mentioned above (George & Solomon, 1999), in that it does not describe situations that trigger specific behavioural responses. However, it does demonstrate a level of care towards the animal and their sense of well-being in that their best interest is being considered and potential sacrifices are being made to their benefit.

In another vein, there were also a number of accounts and descriptions of companion animals providing emotional care and support to their humans. Respondent 11, for example, said about their childhood dog:

"(He was) the one who stood by me and was there for me to talk to, comfort and support (…) The fundamentals of giving, trust and love formed then for me."

There were a number of accounts of respondents describing specifically seeking out their companion animals' support, such as Respondent 21 who wrote:

"Even when I had problems with my family, I could always go and just be with my cat. (…) She helped me get through things and enjoy being at home".

There were also several respondents whose statements seemed to describe their companion animals as functioning as a secure base. Respondent 4, for example, stated:

"*She (dog) was there for every step of my life, every big event, every birthday celebration and also sad events. Many tears were shed as I burrowed my face into her neck. She was a constant in my life, she was a containment for my emotions."*

While these accounts could be seen to be consistent with attachment behaviours such as seeking proximity and the use of the animal as a secure base, many other accounts seemed to derive comfort and support from their companion animals in a more passive way. It appeared the animal was perceived to be the active provider of support towards their human, rather than the human seeking it out. The majority of respondents described their animal as having an innate ability to sense when they (the human) required comfort or support and went out of their way to provide this. Respondent 13 summarised these accounts well stating:

"He (dog) was very intuitive, he would know when I was upset"

While Respondent 16 described:

"He (dog) liked to sleep on your feet and give cuddles when he sensed that things were rough"

Overall, while aspects of an attachment relationship can be identified in the statements made by respondents, what appeared most clearly were indications of caregiving from the human towards their companion animal but also vice versa. Respondent 17 even stated:

> *"It felt like a two-way relationship of offering affection and care towards each other."*

What respondents seemed to communicate was not only their commitment to caring for their companion animals, sometimes including sacrifices made by them but also the care from their animal that they received, often unprompted. The effort they made in taking care of their companion animals was outweighed by the love, care and emotional support they received from their animals in return. The respondents' care and consideration for their animals across their lifespan indicates and communicates the value placed on these relationships. There is a great sense of responsibility that respondents felt towards the well-being of their animals. Some described this responsibility as an inconvenience, others valued the structure it gave their lives but all seemed to prefer taking on the burden of responsibility over not having their companion animal. This theme in particular provides insight into how participants experienced the relationship with their animals prior to their death.

Theme 2: Rituals, Mementoes & Tokens

Another common theme across responses centred around the ways in which participants processed the passing of their animals through finding ways of ritualising their deaths in meaningful ways or maintaining a connection through objects, places or memories.

There were a few accounts of ritualisation describing the animal's cremation. Respondent 17 wrote:

> *"I (…) found a pet cremation service, the woman was lovely, she gave me time to say goodbye, we chose an urn for her ashes, and the woman took a clip of her hair and stamped her (paw) print for me to keep. This really helped me to grieve as the process of saying goodbye felt more humanised, rather than just giving her to the vets and her going in a bin."*

In this instance, the respondent seems to communicate the importance of the ritualisation of their companion's death as a way to process their loss. Others described less 'official' rituals, such as Respondent 23 who described their own way of ritualising their animal's death in an effort to help process the loss stating:

> *"After she died, I slept on the sofa with her body for two nights as I'd heard this was one way to help with the grieving process."*

In both of these instances, respondents tried to process the loss of their companions through rituals in more or less 'common' ways.

Other respondents described rituals around burials or cremation that seemed to aid in maintaining a connection after the loss. Respondent 22, for example, wrote:

> *"She (cat) is buried in my garden under a plant pot she liked to sit in and whenever I go home and see it I am reminded of her."*

Or Respondent 1 who said:

> *“(…) We still feel his (cat) love and we have his ashes at home with us which I pat every day.”*

Patting the urn or looking at the gravesite are rituals that keep alive the memory of the deceased and offer opportunities to think of them. Similarly, several respondents described having jewellery made in memory of their animal, some including the ashes of the animal. Respondent 24, for example, said:

> *“I wear a ring with his (dog) ashes and a necklace with his name.”*

Other respondents had tattoos done in memory of their companion animals, like Respondent 20 who explained:

> *"I decided to immortalize each dog I have by tattooing their paw print or ear outlines. I also carry bracelet charms that characterize each dog I have, to ensure they are always by my side."*

Yet others described keeping objects that reminded them of their animals, such as toys, collars and pictures which they kept in dedicated spots as mementoes. Interestingly, several respondents explained that while they had pictures or videos of their animals, even years after their passing they found it difficult and distressing to look at them, like Respondent 7 who said:

> *"I have lots of photos and videos although I find it quite difficult to hear her meow on video.”*

While ritualisation following a death is important when processing grief (Cardoso et al., 2020; Norton & Gino, 2014) there are few accounts of ‘traditional Western’ ritualization of death that would be seen in human deaths, there does seem to be the need or desire for rituals, for example, evident through the account of Respondent 23 who decided to sleep

with the body of their cat for several nights. Overall it appeared, that any rituals such as burials and cremations were conducted in a much more private way when compared to what would be expected following the death of another human.

This apparent lack of 'official' ritualisation of the death of a companion animal could have different effects on the mourner. On one hand, literature around death rituals in the contemporary Western world criticizes the clinical and often impersonal and removed process around death (O'Gorman, 1998), which, for example, outsources the processing of the body to a third party. When it comes to the loss of a companion animal the involvement with death itself might therefore be much closer and respondents did seem to find their own ways of dealing with these deaths. While some did have the bodies of their animals processed by professionals, others completed the burial themselves. Respondent 23, too, found their own way of processing and ritualising the death of their cat in a way that would not have been possible or socially sanctioned following the death of a human. There were fewer restrictions around how to 'properly' ritualise and process the death.

On the other hand, being unable or having less opportunity to ritualise companion animal death in the same way as human death might lead to feelings of isolation and disenfranchisement. Respondent 17, who had their cat cremated, seemed to see only two options when it came to the death of their companion; the "humanised" ritualisation of their cat's passing through things such as being able to properly say goodbye at the crematorium and choosing an urn versus giving the companion animal to the vet to "go in a bin". While, in this case, there was an option for 'traditional' processing of the death and validation through the crematorium staff, the other option in this instance would have been likely to leave the mourner invalidated and disenfranchised in their grief.

The ritualisation, in whatever form, as well as the keeping of mementoes showed the desire of respondents to keep their connection with their companion animals following their death. Their descriptions of how they retain a bond with their animals speak to the importance this bond had during the animals' lifespan but also show how people process their loss not just through any ritualisation itself.

Especially looking at tattoos being done to immortalise a companion animal speaks to the status of the relationship people seemed to have with their animals and their desire to hold onto it after the animal's death. Even though it is possible to remove them, tattoos are notoriously permanent and across the literature it is noted that people often ascribe deep meaning to the motifs they get inked under their skin (Bell, 1999; Mun, Janigo & Johnson, 2012). Especially memorial tattoos are found to serve as tools for meaning-making in the grieving process (Buckle & Dwyer, 2021), providing structure during the chaotic period of bereavement (Schiffrin, 2009). Swann-Thomas, Fleming & Buckley (2022) found the five common features of memorial tattoos to be a) permanence, b) a tool for managing grief, c) a way to communicate, d) continuing bonds and e) a transformation of the self. The literature also describes the specific memorialisation of companion animals using tattoos, citing the deep meaning people tend to give to these personal expressions of their bond (Harris 2019; Hill, 2020). Tattoos of their deceased companion animals seem to serve as a way to keep their connection to the animal as well as pay tribute to them and ritualise their deaths. Jewellery, while maybe less obvious of a communication tool and less permanent, might serve similar functions to tattoos regarding continuing bonds and managing grief.

This theme indicates the desire for participants to maintain a relationship with their animals after they have died and helps to understand their experience of processing their grief.

Theme 3: Nuanced Disenfranchisement

It was interesting to note that the previously discussed disenfranchisement of companion animal bereavement was evident in the survey data. While this is a phenomenon routinely mentioned in connection with companion animal bereavement and in most of the relevant literature (e.g. Adrian & Stitts, 2017; Cordaro, 2012; Stewart, Thrush & Paulus, 1989 etc.), in this survey it did not present itself as unambiguously as existing literature would suggest. As mentioned in the literature review, disenfranchised grief is described as a socially unsanctioned and often dismissed or invalidated form of grief (Doka, 1989; 2002; 2008; 2020). Existing literature on companion animal bereavement does not tend to explore the phenomenon beyond this (e.g. Cordaro, 2012; Spain, O'Dwyer & Moston, 2019). However, the statements made by respondents in this survey suggest that the disenfranchisement in these cases is not as black and white.

Some respondents did describe a general lack of understanding or validation when it came to their grief. Respondent 19, for example, stated:

> *" (..) Anytime I bring up his (dog) name or mention anything about him it feels like they get annoyed or just don't want to talk to me about him. I am pretty much left to deal with this all alone with no support other than my other two dogs."*

While Respondent 13 said:

> *"I don't think all friends understood the depth of my pain. Even some with pets didn't quite understand my regret at not being with him."*

However, in most instances, it was not as clear-cut and seemed to be dependent on whom the individual was speaking to. Respondents described sufficient support and understanding from their immediate circle of friends and family, such as Respondent 24 who said:

"My partner did not understand as he never felt close to an animal before, but he was supportive. My family all understood how much he meant to me and was great about it."

At the same time, many people stated a lack or at least a perceived lack of support and understanding outside of this inner circle. Respondent 14, for example, said:

"Outside of my close friends and family, I did not feel as comfortable telling people what had happened. I returned to work as normal - I was working in a high-paced, high-pressure local authority role and I did not feel that my colleagues or managers would understand my loss. Thinking back, I feel that I should have perhaps handled this differently. I was very clearly impacted by what had happened and spent most of my lunch breaks alone, but due to my own preconceptions about the working world and its view towards pet bereavements, I felt it best not to share what I was going through."

There remained a sense of a lack of acceptability of the participants' grief by wider society. As Respondent 11 stated:

"It's far more socially acceptable to be upset about the passing of a dog when you are a child than grief when you are in your 30s."

A few people also described having to manage not only their own pain and grief but also that of other people. Respondent 3 said:

"There was no support for me but I didn't need and therefore didn't seek it. More so I had to support another family member."

And Respondent 28 stated:

"My mum was distraught which in turn made me an emotional wreck."

In both of these examples, the respondents themselves seem to be coping with the loss of their companion animals but are having to support and manage other people in their grief. While this may be the case in human bereavement as well, there is a question as to whether increased availability of general support would affect how much mourners have to lean on their family and friends in these times.

What was evident as well, however, was the appreciation respondents had for the small gestures of genuine empathy and understanding by the people around them. Respondent 17 who had their cat cremated in the crematorium seemed moved by the kindness and attentiveness of the crematorium staff in allowing her to take her time to say goodbye, choose an urn and make sure to take a paw print and fur clipping for the respondent to keep, which they stated helped them in processing their grief. Respondent 13, too described their appreciation for a friend's thoughtfulness and empathy saying:

> *"I don't think all friends understood the depth of my pain (…) Some did though and one friend painted me a beautiful watercolour of him (dog) which was so thoughtful."*

Respondent 4, too, described the genuine empathy and understanding of a friend:

> *"My best friend had just adopted a dog at the time, she understood immediately what I was feeling and she came to see me with her dog. It helped to talk about it, but I always feel like I have to play my dog's death down to people because not everyone understands."*

These moments respondents described in which they felt understood, validated and taken seriously in their grief come across as glimmers of light and lightness where they are not alone and solely responsible for carrying their grief.

Lastly, a few statements also showcased what could be identified as compound loss, meaning losses that occur simultaneously (Scheinfeld et al., 2022) or which build up following the lack of acknowledgement of a previous loss. Respondent 19, for example,

spoke about struggling with infertility for years but it was the loss of their dog that they identified as the cause of their intense grief, saying:

> *“I've decided I do not want to have children of my own anymore. I wanted children more than anything for 8 years and no luck. Now, I am not interested. I don’t think having a baby will make me happy.”*

It seems the ongoing grief through infertility struggles found its expression in conjunction with the loss of a much-loved companion animal which the respondent had envisioned to be a part of their child’s life growing up. In this case, the loss of their dog might have triggered a previously unacknowledged pain and grief for the child they wished for and could not have. Disenfranchisement of grief may have played a role here, too. Infertility and perinatal loss, like companion animal bereavement, are considered to be a disenfranchised form of grief which is often left unacknowledged due to stigma and lack of social acceptance of the topic.

Overall, there seems to have been nuance in how people wanted the outside world to react to their loss and mixed experiences in how others responded to the participant’s grief. Some stated they felt they did not need more support than they received, while others struggled with the lack of understanding they felt they encountered. Due to the design of the study, there were a few responses that were, unfortunately, unclear and which would have been interesting to explore further. Participant 21 gave one such answer in which they stated:

> *"I feel as if I did receive some support from friends and family but never thought it mattered enough to bring to counselling."*

In this instance, it is unclear whether the respondent did not think to share their loss in a counselling context because they did not feel the need for support because they felt the loss did not impact them as much, or because they felt it was not an important or valid enough topic to share with their counsellor, pointing to a fear of having their grief invalidated.

Taking into account the breadth of answers respondents gave, the disenfranchisement of their grief does seem to permeate their experiences, however, as previously stated, it is not always clear-cut and unambiguous. There were several accounts of people feeling sufficiently supported and understood by the people closest to them. Instances of genuine empathy and understanding, too, offered a reprieve from the heaviness of grief.

Theme 4: Impact of Loss

Despite the ambiguity around the disenfranchisement of grief respondents described, there still appeared to be a heavy impact of the losses they experienced. Whether respondents felt supported in their grief or not, the way in which they described their emotions around the loss of their animals was often visceral and communicated the intensity of these losses. While there was a spectrum of the apparent severity with which respondents described their losses, many of them painted a vivid picture of how the death of their animal impacted the individuals' lives.

Some respondents seemed to be less severely impacted, such as Respondent 3 who wrote:

> *"It did feel like a family member was gone though (but) it wasn't as dramatic as losing a close relative."*

However others, like Respondents 13, 16 and 19 who stated respectively:

> *"His death was agonising. (...) I haven't ever felt grief like it yet." (R13)*
> *"It was as though a piece of me had gone" (R16)*
> *"I still cry every single day. My heart physically hurts, I miss him so much and I think about him constantly and sometimes it just takes my breath away." (R19)*

While the above are only a few examples of the statements respondents made, each of them illustrate the respondents' pain in striking and rich emotional language which emphasises the impact their losses have had on them. Descriptions of "agony" and physical pain vividly describe the emotional turmoil respondents seem to have been thrust into following the death of their animals.

Another aspect of how the loss of an animal impacted the respondents was a recurring theme of fear of any further loss or grief. Respondent 4, for example, wrote:

“The first few years after the cat got sick and died I actually felt a strong resentment of owning pets in general. I questioned the purpose of connecting to something so strongly that doesn’t have a long life span.”

While Respondent 23 explained:

"Since her death, my fear of grief, which admittedly I already had has gotten worse. I’m so scared about my next pet dying (...)"

While some respondents later move away from their reluctance and do decide to live with another companion animal again, their initial reaction is indicative of the impact and severity of the loss people experienced following the deaths of their companion animals; a loss so painful that they are unwilling or feel unable to go through it again.

In a few cases, this moving on to another companion animal is combined with a sense of guilt towards the deceased animal. Respondent 26 said:

“(Dog) was a bit jealous of me giving attention to other dogs and I felt like getting another dog would have been disrespectful to her whilst still feeling the grief of her passing. I can remember when my mum first got another dog after (dog’s) passing (a few years later) and feeling similarly, that it was too soon and like it was replacing and maybe diluting the memory of her.”

This guilt, while not necessarily comparable, might be akin to that felt by parents having another child following previous child loss (Ünstündad-Budak, 2015) or the guilt felt by people remarrying following the death of a spouse (Moss & Moss, 2015).

Guilt also appeared in other aspects, often in relation to a perceived or real lack of care towards the animal prior to their death. In several instances respondents expressed a feeling of guilt and regret around spending too little time with the animal before their death, not being vigilant enough to notice their illness or decline or feeling they let them

down in some other way. Respondent 13 expressed regret about not having been with their dog when he died saying:

> *"I won't ever get over the fact I wasn't with him. He hated the vets. I promised him I'd get a vet to come to our home but I wasn't there to provide that. He was tired and I should have made the decision earlier but I wasn't able to let go."*

These experiences of guilt point to not only the impact of the loss but also link back to the desire to care for the animal and the sense of responsibility people feel for their animals' wellbeing. In relation to the processing of death and bereavement, it is important to note that guilt and shame surrounding loss have been found to positively correlate with measures for complicated grief and depression (LeBlanc et al., 2020) and higher levels of guilt are associated with higher levels of grief in companion animal bereavement, regardless of whether an animal passed away suddenly or following prolonged illness (Cowling et al., 2020).

There were a few mentions in the responses about potential secondary loss experienced by participants. A few people stated that the loss of their animal led to a decrease in physical activity and routine such as Respondent 14 who said:

> *"I quickly realised the negative impact that the loss of routine and companionship had on my mental health and general well-being and felt that the best way to combat that was to reintroduce the responsibility of pet ownership."*

However, there was less mention of the loss of companion animals affecting the individual's social interactions. While the lack of mention of secondary losses does not definitively mean that they do not exist, it seems that participants did not experience them to be particularly significant or impactful.

In summary, the survey fulfilled the research aim of exploring the experience of companion animal bereavement through several impactful findings told by the thematic analysis that give important insight into the experiences people have when losing their companion

animals. One of them is the nuanced way in which disenfranchisement presented itself in these experiences of companion animal bereavement, evident by the range of statements made about the sufficiency and insufficiency of social support participants received after the deaths of their companions. Another is the impact small gestures of understanding, validation and support seem to have had on the participants' ability to grieve. Participants also communicated a strong desire to maintain a close connection with their animals following their passing through rituals, mementoes and tokens. Lastly, participants' accounts strongly emphasised the emotional impact their losses had on them through vivid and visceral descriptions of their pain.

3.2 Interview Study

3.2.1 Method

Participants were initially approached informally through social contacts, letting them know about the aim of the research topic. The aim was to recruit at least three participants. There is no clear determination as to the recommended sample size in narrative analyses (Butina, 2015). Sample sizes may range from one to over twenty, however, since this analysis was added as a complementary part of the research to offer more depth into people's experiences, a minimum of three participants was thought to provide the desired insight within the available timeframe. Every person who was approached expressed interest in taking part and was sent a participant information sheet and consent form. The inclusion criteria were: resonating with the sense of companion animal bereavement, having lived with and/or cared for the relevant companion animal, and loss due to death (as opposed to going missing for instance). In addition, interested people were advised not to participate in the interviews if they were currently experiencing high levels of stress and believed that participation might negatively impact them. As for the online survey, there was no exclusion criteria as to the duration since the loss and the type of animal participants could talk about as long as they described the animal as a 'companion animal'. Ultimately four participants were interviewed for this part of the study. All four were women, two of whom discussed the death of their horse, one who spoke about the death of three of her cats, and one who spoke about losing her childhood dog.

Ethical approval was revised for this part of the study and all participants were given an information sheet and consent form amended for the purposes of this second part of the study. They all consented to this basic level of information about their circumstances being shared. To ensure confidentiality, participants were asked to create pseudonyms for themselves and their animals, which are being used throughout and no other personal information is revealed in the excerpts of their interviews or their analysis.

The interviews were conducted online via Microsoft Teams. Participants consented to the interviews being audio recorded and were offered to be sent a copy of their interview recording. Participants were sent the initial interview prompt (Appendix 5) and were

informed that interjections would be minimal to ensure they would have the opportunity for their voices to be heard with minimal interference. They were also told beforehand that they would be welcome to bring along an item or picture they felt connected them to their companion animal, which two of the participants did. This was done to offer participants a more accessible way to talk about potentially difficult or distressing experiences. Pictures of the deceased can often function as a tool to hold space and offer the opportunity of reflection (Price, 2019). However, there was no expectation for participants to bring items to afford them as much agency and choice as possible throughout this process.

3.2.2 Analytic Approach

As the first part of this study was done using Thematic Analysis, which gives qualitative insight into people's experiences, I felt that while it did capture a general account of how people experience and deal with the loss of their companion animals, it did not capture their stories sufficiently. Furthermore, in many instances throughout the online survey there seemed to be elements of a narrative, however, the format of data collection in that instance did not allow for full narratives to form, therefore, Narrative Analysis seemed to be an appropriate way in which to explore not just the content of people's accounts and experiences but how they construct meaning and make sense of what has happened to them.

Narrative Analysis (NA) is not associated with a particular academic field; rather it is interdisciplinary and borne of the limitations presented by realist assumptions of natural science when it comes to exploring social lives and constructs (Bruner, 1986; 1987; Sarbin, 1986). While natural science might argue the absolute objectivity of research, arguably any research tells a story of some kind. Even though the realist might believe themselves to be completely outside of the equation when it comes to collecting and interpreting their data, it is questionable whether this is even possible (Riessman, 1993). Narrative Analysis, on the other hand, tends to be based on a constructivist approach (Bruner, 1987). The aim is not to find an objective or even a subjective 'truth' but rather to explore and interpret how and why the participant has told their narrative in the way they did. How they give their experience a 'narrative form' and how they position it in time and space (Bamberg & Cooper, 2011). Due to this, the procedure for conducting Narrative Analysis is quite flexible and unstructured and varies according to the individual school of thought and how it defines a narrative (Riessman, 2005). While there are several different approaches to Narrative Analysis (e.g. Denzin, 2001; Polkinghorne, 1995; Riessman, 2008) which differ in what their analysis focuses on, there are two which will be mentioned in greater depth.

One of the first mentions of Narrative Analysis focused on oral narratives was by William Labov (Riessman, 2005). He identified basic components of narrative structure, namely the abstract (summary/point of story), orientation (time, place, characters, situation),

complicating action (event sequence/plot usually containing a crisis or turning point), evaluation (narrator comments on the meaning and communicates emotions), resolution (outcome of the plot) and coda (ending the story and bringing it back to the present) (Labov, 1972). This approach to NA focuses on a specific event and how this event may have affected the narrator.

Another early influential figure in Narrative Analysis was Jerome Bruner. His thoughts on narratives and their use in qualitative analysis are based on a functional approach. He explores the narrative's function in aiding the narrator to make sense of their life and experiences. Bruner suggests that the formation of random and chaotic events into a coherent narrative allows the narrator to give meaning to those events, which makes it easier for them to handle and process these experiences (Bruner, 1991). Bruner (1991) describes ten features of the narrative, including 1. *Narrative diachronicity* (how time moves in a narrative), 2. *Particularity* (how a narrative is connected to more general types or genres of stories), 3. *Intentional state entailment* (the importance of being aware of the character's intentions to understand their motives in how they tell their story), 4. *Hermeneutic composability* (how the individual parts of a story can be interpreted in relation to one another, as well as how the individual parts of the story form a whole), 5. *Canonicity and breach* (the idea that stories are about an unusual event breaching the 'normal' state of things), 6. *Referentiality* (the notion that any story references reality but not necessarily in a way that offers verisimilitude), 7. *Genericness* (the other side of particularity; the narrative can be classified into a story genre), 8. *Normativeness* (the conclusion that narratives presume a claim about how one ought to behave), 9. *Context sensitivity and negotiability* (the notion that a narrative requires negotiation of roles between narrator or listener in which the listener's experiences and assumptions affect the story) and 10. *Narrative accrual* (the thought that narratives are accumulative and that any story follows from a previous one).

The approaches of both Labov and Bruner overlap in several areas such as the ideas of a 'complicating factor' (Labov, 1972) and a 'Breach' (Bruner, 1991) which both describe an event disrupting the narrator's 'normal'. Labov's model, for example, is focused on the structure of the narrative and how the narrator is affected by their experiences (Esin, 2011).

While this model might be most useful for exploring the narrative of a major event, Bruner's model is more focused on the narrative as a way for the individual to create and share meaning (Bruner, 1991).

Different approaches to narrative analysis tend to focus on different aspects of a narrative, mainly the content and structure of it, what the story might be about and why it is told in a certain way (Figgou & Pavlopoulos, 2015). Commonly, there are thought to be four different forms of narrative analysis: structural, thematic, functional and dialogic/performance (Parcell & Baker, 2017). Structural narrative analysis focuses on the characteristics of a story such as different elements of the plot. Thematic narrative analysis examines the content of the narrative such as what 'genre' it may belong to and what the main motif is. Functional narrative analysis explores the purpose and significance of the story, meaning what the story might do as a result of how it is being told. Lastly, dialogic/performance analysis takes into account where and to whom the narrative is told and how it is situated in the wider discourse of any given culture or community (Riessman, 2008). Any narrative analysis might focus on one or several of these aspects, often dependent on what the researcher is trying to explore.

3.2.3 Rationale and orientation of this study

The rationale for using Narrative Analysis as a second method of analysis in this piece of research was, partly, due to the contrast in focus it provides to that of Thematic Analysis. While Thematic Analysis focuses on the coding and thus the breaking up of the data into categorizable and manageable pieces of data, Narrative Analysis focuses on the participants' stories as a whole (Smith, 2016). Furthermore, Narrative Analysis does not just focus on the content of the participants' accounts of their experience but also on its structure as well as how and why their story was told in a specific way (Riessmann, 2005). This way of exploring the human experience also offers a way for people to make sense of the movement and passing of time and of how their stories take shape in the past, present and future (Phoenix, Smith & Sparks, 2007). It allows the narrator to make sense of their individual experience in the context of time, of what else may have happened around that time which, in turn, may play a big role as to why a specific part of their story was more important to them. For example, the death of a participant's animal around the same time as another difficult experience in their lives may have amplified the effect that bereavement had on them.

Another aspect of Narrative analysis that makes it attractive for this research is that the structural analysis of the participants' narrative can explore the narrator's intentionality (Bruner, 1987). Whether consciously or not, the narrator will tell their story in the way that they want it to be heard by the listener which, in turn, allows for inferences to be made about these intentions. Taking into account the disenfranchisement of grief in companion animal bereavement, it seems especially pertinent to explore how the participants want their stories and experiences to be heard and understood. In a similar vein, Narrative Analysis provides the opportunity to explore what functions the narrative serves for the participant (Smith, 2016). The narratives one constructs can perform different functions, help or hinder. For example, the establishment of a new narrative moving someone from the 'victim' of violence or abuse to 'survivor' can lead to the emergence of a new, more empowering, self-understanding (Brosi & Rolling, 2010). On the other hand, the 'restitution' narrative of recovering from illness people tend to tell themselves when unwell, could

potentially be ‘dangerous’ if the patient fails to improve (Smith, 2016). Lastly, one more advantage of Narrative Analysis is its accessibility for the participants as well as the audience, giving participants the freedom to share the way they want to while also presenting information and knowledge in a narrative, storied way that is engaging to a wider audience compared to other types of analysis (Smith et al., 2015). Stories have always been part of human history and communication (Yılmaz & Ciğerci, 2019) and it has been found that readers are much more likely to engage with and act upon knowledge communicated through narratives (Sundin, Anderson & Watt, 2018; Greenhalgh, 2001; Downs, 2014), maybe because humans are ‘narrative-making beings’ who use narratives to create identities (McAdams, 1993).

In conclusion, Narrative Analysis is an analytic tool that is becoming more and more popular across all kinds of different disciplines because it allows a much more comprehensive and holistic exploration of individual experiences. In contrast to other types of qualitative analysis, it keeps the individual’s narrative intact during the analytic process, allowing for inferences to be made about the narrator’s intentions and giving them agency to tell their story the way they want it to be heard. It also allows their story and experience to be placed in the broader context in which their narrative takes place.

There are different ways of conducting a Narrative Analysis and different media on which to do it, such as looking at journals, viewing video footage or interviewing participants (Smith, 2016). The researcher might choose their preferred way of analysis depending on what they would most like to focus on and what type of data they are analysing. In any case, there needs to be a clear understanding of the method of analysis of Narrative Analysis. While the ‘prescriptive’ (Frank, 2010) or ‘codified’ (Chamberlain, 2011) model of analysis is more frequently used in Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), grounded theory and Thematic Analysis and based on a set procedure or steps, Narrative Analysis tends to be used with a much less rigid heuristic set of guidelines (Smith, 2016). Even though the codified model may be easier to learn and apply, it has limitations around the depth of analysis and often leads researchers to produce ‘what the method suggests they should’ (Chamberlain, 2012). The more heuristic guide to analysis, on the other hand, allows for much more ‘movement of thought’ (Frank, 2010). There is no clear consensus on what these

guidelines are (e.g. Denzin, 2001; Crossley, 2007; Riessman, 1993; Riessman, 2008) which is one of the reasons there is less rigidity in the analysis. As mentioned above, part of the ethos of narrative analysis is that the goal is not to uncover an objective reality, arguably an impossible feat, but to explore the individual's sense-making discursive resources.

The current analysis is based broadly on Labov's (1972) approach to Narrative Analysis, looking at the structure and intentionality of the story with an emphasis on the event of the companion animal's death. While participants' stories did not only navigate the specific event of their companion animals' deaths, this event was still the main focus of the stories they shared with me.

3.2.4 Analysis

Elaine & Ingrid, June and Alaska

Elaine is a white woman from the US who has lived and worked in the UK for many years. She lives with her partner and cats in the South West of England. For this interview, she was asked to speak about her cat Ingrid, however, Elaine also lost two other cats, one of them very recently, and it felt important to tell all of their stories. This means that our interview includes Elaine's stories with all of her cats and is not only focused on Ingrid.

Elaine's story of her and her cats is one of unconditional love and of Elaine's tireless pursuit to provide her 'babies' with the very best in life. Her story begins when she comes across a little black stray cat whom she takes home and names Ingrid. Elaine describes their relationship like this:

> *"There's a lot about her that is very much like me. A lot of my friends said, like, "She's just like her mom. This is you in cat form." She was a really, really great girl. Because of her, I ended up falling in love with cats."*

Ingrid was "wild", "passionate" and "chaotic" and had "such personality". Ingrid was only the first of many cats that captured Elaine's heart and took an important role in her story. The others include two kittens who were the only other cats Ingrid got along with.

> *"She didn't tolerate any of the other cats. I always had to keep them separate, but she could smell these kittens through the door and I guess it was this maternal instinct that she had. She really took to them I ended up adopting those two (…)."*

June, her "step-daughter", was brought into the family by her partner.

"[My partner] moved down to North Carolina with their cat, (June), and then we were a family with four cats."

And, lastly, Alaska, a "foster fail" who had been abused and took some time to warm up to Elaine and her partner but became a "lap cat" and "the perfect comfort".

"As soon as I got Alaska, there was just some-- Even though she was scared, there was just some bond between us. It was like I knew that day she was going to be ours."

Elaine's story with her cats begins with the appearance of Ingrid but also, arguably, towards the beginning of her adult life, during her time at university. Taking in this cat after not being allowed to have any pets growing up, despite her desire and love for animals, may signify an act of rebellion, adulthood and independence. Since the somewhat spontaneous decision to take in a stray (Ingrid), cats have been Elaine's constant companions and being part of the rescue cat community has been a big part of her life.

Elaine's life with her cats gets interrupted by June, originally her partner's cat, getting ill in 2016 and Elaine devoting much time and energy into taking care of her medical needs and reading up on the issues June is struggling with. When she does eventually die, Elaine describes her cognitive dissonance and grappling with existential questions:

"When she died, it was-- there was some part of me that was hard to believe because I recognize how irrational some of this was, but I was trying to read about all of her medical ailments and I was learning about all of these things and working with the vets and felt like there was a way to fix everything. I don't know, from a weird biological existential standpoint I struggled with what even causes death. Why is her body able to be alive in this moment and then not the next? What changes from one moment to the next?"

Ingrid and Alaska's deaths, too, are unavoidable despite Elaine's growing knowledge of feline biology and medicine. She seems to struggle to consolidate her strongly scientific and

seemingly positivist worldview with the existential questions about life and death thrown up by each of her cats' passing. She grapples with a sense of regret and hypervigilance after losing June, in an effort to catch any of the other cat's health issues earlier.

> *"I've thought about this a lot. I think guilt is a normal feeling. I think there is some element of guilt, but I don't know how much I'm convincing myself that I'm not guilty. I've really struggled with this. I've reflected on this a lot because I think part of me feared, and has always feared, and still does, being in any way responsible for our girls not having the best possible life and medical care that they can that I'm really, really hypervigilant about their health and their veterinary care and I'm always on top of things."*

Elaine's story also includes some of the other people in her life, including her partner, who shares her pain after losing their cats.

> *"I think [us] going through it together is helpful for each of us. What has happened with all three of the cats we've lost, (…) is that we almost not intentionally, but we took turns with the acute grief."*

Her friends, too, while not being able to share in her grief the same way as her partner could, seemed to be comforting, compassionate and supportive.

> *"Even all of my colleagues, all of my friends and colleagues were nothing but very, very supportive. Checked in on me, talked to me about it, asked me loads of questions about it. Really, really cared, sent us flowers, did all sorts of stuff, and were just really, really supportive and kind."*

The deaths of all of her cats seem to have been difficult for Elaine and brought with them the process of grief, acceptance and finding ways of keeping her "girls" close. The ritualisation of their deaths through having them cremated following a small funeral seems to have been another opportunity for Elaine and her partner to say their goodbyes.

"They laid her out beautifully for us to have that time with her in the garden room and we said our goodbyes."

Something that seems to be connecting Elaine with her cats to this day is the jewellery she had made from their ashes; a ring for June, a necklace for Ingrid and a bracelet for Alaska.

"I touch these pieces of jewellery every day and think about what the cats meant to me, and how from (Ingrid), I gained such passion and fearlessness, and from (June), I get that sense of peace and calm and serenity. When I touch my jewellery remembering (Alaska), I get kindness. The kindness that (she) showed to me and (my partner) despite what she had gone through."

Elaine's narrative of her life with her cats is full of love for her companion animals and a deep sense of appreciation for what each of them brought to her life. While Elaine did not gloss over the commitment and investment she made for her cats, these things clearly seemed to pale in comparison to how important her cats' well-being is to her and how much they add to her own life and well-being. Elaine does not seem to be second-guessing the sacrifices she makes like the time, money or emotions she invests into her cats. Elaine, her partner and their cats were a firmly established family unit and still remain so, not just with the two cats they still live with but also including reminders of the three cats that have passed away.

Throughout the interview, Elaine's narrative tone varies. Speaking of her cats and how they entered into her life, her tone appears to be excited, eager and full of enthusiasm for her feline companions. When speaking of the cats' illnesses she explains in a very factual and somewhat clinical voice, seemingly reverting to her professional/scientific self. Describing their deaths her tone of voice becomes much more quiet and emotional and she has to stop speaking a few times, getting tearful and being unable to continue. This variance in narrative tone indicates a richness and nuance of emotions present in Elaine's story and in the relationship with her animals, which I also felt deeply. Joy about their effect on her life and sadness about their losses go hand in hand, neither of which seems to outweigh the other.

What also seems interesting is the fact that Elaine did not just pick one of her cats to discuss but all three cats she considered to have been hers (i.e. not foster cats) and that have passed away in her care. While there was no clear instruction about picking only one animal, there seems to be a sense of Elaine needing to be fair to all of her cats and not picking a favourite even though from her narrative it might appear that Ingrid, her first cat and the one that she felt resembled herself, was the most important to her.

Elaine also seemed to be eager to point out the kindness and compassion shown by the people around her. She described a deeply shared grief with her partner, empathy and sympathy from her friends and colleagues and supportive interactions with strangers. She states that she has heard from others that this reaction may not be the norm and she suggests that maybe she is better at choosing her friends, however, it also appears that Elaine's unwavering and unapologetic attitude towards her cats and their importance in her life leaves little space for others to assume these losses would not impact her significantly.

Through her narrative Elaine conveys much about how she sees herself, what is important to her and how she perceives the world around her. Kindness and compassion towards animals, especially her cats, seem to be a pillar of her identity and purpose. She also positions herself as a very caring and responsible pet owner, pointing out in several instances how careful she is to ensure her cats have the best medical care and no access to anything that could be potentially harmful to them. While this is not something she states specifically, it can be inferred from her story that all her cats are kept indoors, a practice that is a divisive topic among animal lovers, some believing that keeping their feline companions strictly indoors keeps them out of harm's way of accidents, predators and disease, while others are sure that cats need to be able to roam in order to fulfil their natural hunting and exploration instincts (Foreman-Worsley et al., 2021). Besides personal preference, there also seems to be a cultural aspect to this debate. In the US 63% of domestic cats are kept entirely indoors, citing dangers of road traffic accidents and predation as well as the cats' predatory behaviour towards wildlife as the main reasons (Foreman-Worsley et al., 2021). In the UK, however, while there seems to be an increase in cats being kept indoors from 15% in 2011 to 26.1% in 2019 (Foreman-Worsely et al., 2021),

this number is significantly lower than it is in the United States. In light of Elaine's focus on her cats' well-being and the fact that she is US American and spent the majority of her life there, could be one explanation for her choosing to keep her cats indoors. However, her focus on keeping them safe and out of harm's way is equally weighing on this decision, considering her other efforts regarding their care. Elaine's clear position on science and medical research is also a part of her personality and identity that shines through in her narrative as something that appears to be important to her. At the same time, she seems to be grappling with her belief in science after she was unable to use it to save the lives of her cats, something she is eager to point out she knows is "irrational".

Another aspect that seems interesting when analysing the structure of Elaine's narrative is the involvement of other characters. Elaine mentions her friends and colleagues when discussing their reactions to her losses. She speaks about the cat's vet on several occasions and seems to be quite close and very appreciative of her. She appears to be the other scientific source of knowledge and expertise fighting for the cats' lives and well-being alongside Elaine. Elaine's partner, too features on multiple occasions, however, considering what seems to be very much a shared passion for their cats, their lack of presence in the story seems interesting. Her mentions describe them as supportive and loving of the cats, especially in relation to Alaska, whose affection both of them had to earn. But overall Elaine's account of her relationship with her cats seems to be quite dyadic and focused on her special and very personal bonds with each of the cats. She speaks little about the relationships among the cats other than Ingrid's dislike of June and fondness for the two foster kittens. Surprisingly, Elaine does not mention the impact of the cats' deaths on the remaining cats, who also lost a sister each time. It does not seem that this is due to a lack of thought or concern on Elaine's part, considering the level of care and consideration she awards her feline companions so the absence of this impact in Elaine's story is interesting. Elaine's narrative is also very linear. While she does jump back here and there to add to the story, the way she presents the lives and deaths of the three cats is very much sequential, which leads to weaving in and out of the narratives pertaining to the different cats. When speaking on the cats' personalities but also their illness and death, the narrative seems to slow down and become much more detailed in an effort to ensure my comprehension as a

listener and seems to fit with her scientific and somewhat clinical, yet not unemotional, approach.

Lilia & Edda

The following analysis is that of Lilia, who is a university student from Germany in her early twenties. The interview was conducted in German and the quotes and excerpts were translated by me, the researcher, to reflect the original meaning as closely as possible. Lilia's story about her life growing up with family dog, Edda, seems to, at least on the surface, vary quite significantly from Elaine's story with her cats. Lilia grew up alongside her dog, as such, there is less of a clear beginning to their story, as Lilia states that she can barely remember life before Edda, who joined their family when Lilia was only four years old.

> *"So, with us, it was that I was four years old when we got (Edda) and I can only remember that I was at my neighbour's with my brother. I think my parents then went to pick up (Edda) (…) and that was the first time I really understood 'Okay, we have a dog now'."*

For Lilia, Edda is a constant in her life, which she never questions.

> *"For me, it was just a part of it because those are my first-ever memories. And they just included a dog. I can't remember what it was like without a dog in my childhood. And just that feeling…same as my brother being there. He was just there and I think that's the way I saw (Edda), that it felt like she was a full family member."*

Lilia describes that part of having Edda in her life led to her having to take on a lot of caring responsibility at a fairly early age, such as looking after Edda when her parents were not around or taking her for walks, something she is more aware of now than she was as a child.

> *"As a child, you can't really evaluate it as well, how much responsibility it is. I'm just really thinking about this for the first time, through this responsibility since childhood, it's normal for me to be considerate of others because we always had to consider (Edda)."*

Growing up with a dog leads Lilia to have to take responsibility early on, but she clearly enjoys having Edda around as a child.

> *"All in all, from the view of a child, it was really lovely. Just being woken up by the dog in the morning, cuddling with her and just that there was someone who you didn't have to explain your feelings to but who just knew…when you would cry she would come over and…I don't know, just realising there is an animal or this being that realises you aren't feeling well and that will come and give you love that maybe you don't get from anyone else at that moment."*

However, she also remembers several moments which, in retrospect, could have been very dangerous and made Lilia panic.

> *"I was never really taught how to take care of a dog. (…) Because the dog was just there. I just did what felt right. Just because, to me, she was never an animal that needed to be trained because she was just there anyway. I just accepted that. And that brought its difficulties because sometimes she wouldn't listen or run off and then to feel this panic and realise the responsibility (…) at such a young age."*

When Lilia gets older and Edda starts to slowly deteriorate due to her age, Lilia has to take on even more responsibility in looking after her, often leading to her missing out on other experiences.

> *"This was the phase where I realised 'Okay it's not so nice anymore it's also stressful'. (…) At that point, I had to very actively look after her, often after school. So, for example, as a teenager, I wasn't able to make plans after school because I had to go home to look after the dog because nobody else was there who could do it."*

When Lilia was eighteen and had just finished school, Edda collapsed on a walk and was very unwell but Lilia had to travel to a different city to complete an internship.

"I basically left conscious that I don't know if…and that was really horrible (cries). I went home for a visit after a month. So that was the last time…that's where I could kind of say goodbye. And I think it was good that I was in (other city) so I didn't have to witness all the vet stuff. For me this was really horrible because it felt like…and it still does…that's why it doesn't matter how long it has been, it's like (losing) a sister, or that's how it feels to me at this point."

Following Edda's death, Lilia was still in the city she was doing her internship in, alone and separated from her family and friends, where she lived with two strangers in a shared flat.

"So I went back with the knowledge I won't see the dog again and then two days later I got a message from my mum and then I sat there in this strange (flat). (…) The guy (I lived with), he was 26. He was manipulative (…) in retrospect I would say he took advantage of me not doing well and he twisted it so that I would go out and party with him during the week."

While her family and friends were supportive, it seemed that the housemates did not seem as understanding.

"First of all, my close friends, who knew (Edda) as well, were quite affected by it themselves. I felt like the people in my environment, really suffered with us in a surprising way. (…) The flatmates said, 'Oh come on it's sad but it was just a pet'."

The housemates' behaviour seems to be, as Doka (2002) describes, an empathic failure on their part, more specifically at the level of "self with community" according to Neimeyer & Jordan's (2002) model, which positions disenfranchised grief into the four levels of (1) self with self, (2) self with family, (3) self with community and (4) self with transcendent reality. This broadly aligns with the phenomenon of disenfranchised grief (Spain, O'Dwyer & Moston, 2019) and supports accounts by respondents in the online survey, who seemed to feel understood and supported by their close friends and family but rarely beyond.

After Edda's death, Lilia seemed to find it difficult to process what happened and stated that she felt she shut herself off from the emotions that came with the death.

> *"She was a Christmas dog, her birthday was on Christmas Eve. So now every Christmas Eve for us is also…for me that was the most painful thing. For a long time Christmas Eve and Christmas time (was difficult). (…) The holidays had always been my favourite time and all of a sudden it was the saddest time. (…) (My) mum and dad had buried her in the garden and I couldn't even go there. They would sometimes light a candle for her but I had to almost ignore it. (…) Even still, I think about it and I could cry. (…) I couldn't look at pictures of her at the beginning*."

While Edda's death was a big event in Lilia's life, there is another aspect of her story, which feels like even more of a complicating factor. While Lilia is clear about her love and appreciation for Edda and their shared childhood, there seem to be feelings of ambivalence as well. Her retrospective awareness of her responsibilities as a child and how this has affected her.

> *"I'm happy to have grown up with the dog, even though it meant I couldn't always go to sleepovers and such. Always having to know…cause my mum and dad were away a lot (…) so early on I had to think 'Okay, they are gone so I am responsible for the dog' because I think I remember, I don't know 100%, but I think that was mainly my part and my brother only did it when he really had to or when I was away. (…) And this early responsibility, I don't know if that is the reason but I go to therapy now and I'm analysing things I find difficult and I'm always so focused on making it work for everyone and looking for my responsibility (in every situation). And only when I have completed that I can relax."*

Lilia also seems to feel ambivalent about Edda's death itself. She expresses gratitude for her life and the fact that she no longer had to suffer and being grateful she did not have to be present to witness her suffering in the last days of her life. However, she also questions her absence in these final days, both on behalf of Edda as well as herself.

"At this point, I'm thankful I wasn't there but on the other hand, I think maybe I would have needed that. (…) And at the end this feeling that I couldn't properly say goodbye or that I wasn't there and that I've…I abandoned her or something."

Lastly, Lilia also seems ambivalent about the new dog her parents adopted recently.

"When (my parents were) thinking about getting another dog it was (difficult) for me, the same breed as well. And it's nice and I actually don't compare them a lot. (…) But at the beginning, I was really resistant because I still had this pain in me. And I was trying to tell myself 'Okay, this is your parents' dog, this has nothing to do with you' but obviously that didn't work (…) and we're best buddies now. (…) (But) in the end, twice now I didn't choose this myself. It was lovely but I didn't choose this pain that comes at the end."

This lack of choice on Lilia's part seems to play an important role and appears to pull through her story from the beginning. While we can speculate that four-year-old Lilia may have been asked if she wanted a dog, she would have been unable to fully grasp what this would mean and how it would affect her life. While she does not express resentment at any point and is clearly grateful for her time and experiences with Edda as well as her parents' new dog, the inability to choose for herself whether the loss of another companion is something she can endure seems to affect her.

Listening to Lilia's story, she paints the picture of a lovely, almost idyllic childhood growing up with Edda. She describes the family dog as someone she could rely on and go to for comfort and safety. However, in retrospect, she also realises that there were instances that she, as a child, really was not equipped to handle. Alongside the feelings of safety and comfort in the dog's presence, there were moments of panic and terror in which Lilia felt responsible for Edda's safety and well-being without necessarily having the tools to facilitate this properly. There is debate about when children develop an understanding of biology, animals and animal care and welfare (Muldoon et al., 2009; Muldoon et al., 2016; Myers, Saunders & Garrett, 2004) and even though research suggests having pets in childhood promotes responsibility (Levinson, 1978; Meadan, H., & Jegatheesan, 2010) and a duty of

care (Muldoon et al., 2016) it is commonly suggested that children below the age of ten should not be responsible for an animal by themselves (Freed et al., 2019). Lilia recounts a story from when she was around six and tasked with walking Edda home from her grandmother's house by herself while her mum drove off to run other errands. At that moment Edda broke free of her harness and chased Lilia's mum's car down towards a busy road, leaving Lilia panicked and not knowing how to make Edda stop and come back, a situation Lilia describes, especially in retrospect as 'horrible' and one where, even as a six-year-old, she was aware of her responsibility and possible consequences of her failing to fulfil them. She highlights the lack of agency and choice she has had when it comes to making a decision that would inevitably change her life. Lilia notes the absence of agency she was given when decisions were made to get Edda, as well as her parents' current dog and about how much responsibility she would have to take on. With her narrative, Lilia seems to try to convey the importance of Edda as part of her life and how she shaped who Lilia is now. Having to take care of Edda has, in positive and negative ways, influenced how Lilia takes care of others, with a greater awareness of her sense of responsibility.

There also seems to be a certain parallel between Edda's death and the conclusion of Lilia's childhood. Just as Edda dies, Lilia has to deal with several aspects of harsh adult reality such as being lonely, away from friends and family and seemingly taken advantage of by the people around her. Edda, as Lilia's emotional and at times physical protector is now gone, closing a chapter in her life and while this is not something Lilia states herself, it does feel as if Lilia's childhood symbolically dies with Edda.

Something that stands out about the structure of Lillia's narrative is that it seems to jump all over the place. There is no linear timeline like in Elaine's narrative, instead, she goes back and forth between her childhood, the time around Edda's death and the present, including her experiences with her parents' new dog, almost as if she was currently trying to make sense of what happened. In several instances, she mentions her difficulty in processing Edda's death, finding it hard to look at pictures or see her grave. Shutting herself off emotionally from the pain that came with her passing and from the possibility of a similar pain if and when her parents' new dog will eventually die.

While Lilia and Edda are clearly the main characters in Lilia's narrative, there is mention of several other people, such as Lilia's parents and older brother, some of her friends, her neighbour and Edda's best dog friend. While these relationships seem to be happening in conjunction with others, it still seems that everyone has their own, personal relationship with Edda in a rather dyadic way and that Lilia, specifically had a very close and personal relationship with Edda, not least due to her responsibilities in taking care of her.

Eliza & Moonbeam

Eliza is a white woman living in South-West England. She grew up in the US until early adolescence when she moved to the UK. She has worked in academia for most of her career, with a focus on animal-assisted therapy, specifically horses. While she has kept and worked with many different horses throughout her life, she is telling her story with a grey mare called Moonbeam.

Her story with horses begins, arguably, before she was even born.

> *"I suppose I first started to work with horses when I was four. My mum had ridden before she was pregnant with me, and so horses were in my life for a lot of my life-- Well, pretty much all of it in some way, shape, or form."*

While horses seem to be ever-present throughout her life, they do not prominently feature in her narrative again until a 'period of change' in her life, in which she decides to move back to the US, where she grew up until the age of twelve. At this time she sells some of the horses she kept in the UK and also decides to put down two of her older horses for fear of not being able to find anyone who would adequately care for them, a first indicator of her strong personal beliefs around animal care and welfare.

Her first encounter with Moonbeam happens when she is in the US.

> *"We happened to drive past this field with this beautiful grey horse in it. (…) She was a lot younger, trotting in the field, and I thought, 'Oh, I wish there was a horse like this that was for sale.'"*

After this chance encounter, Eliza and Moonbeam's paths cross again.

> *"Then I happened to see this advert for this grey horse. (…) (I) contacted the person. When she described where she lived (…) I said, 'I think we drove past your horse'. (…) I was there, I have an 18-month-old baby, and this horse was literally bouncing on*

the end of the lead rope in the air. (…) The owner really wasn't ready to part with her. (…) I gave her some tips in terms of behaviour (…). I knew that in terms of safety, it wasn't going to be a situation I could take on. Time went on, we moved to another farm. (…) I happened to look and that mare was back up again for sale. I talked to the person and I said, 'I think we'll take her on.' "

Eliza and Moonbeam's lives seem to intertwine over and over again as Eliza explains that, a few years after Moonbeam initially came to stay with her, she had to give her up. Moonbeam was moved and a new owner was sought for her without any success, at which point Eliza was in a better financial position and decided to take her back. While with Eliza, Moonbeam had two rambunctious foals and started an unlikely friendship with one of Eliza's boarder horses.

While Moonbeam developed some health issues over the years, the first sign of real trouble was when she got choke, meaning the blockage of the horse's oesophagus. While this is not lethal as it does not block the windpipe, it can still be distressing for the horse, which, in this case, it was.

"There's nothing you can really do as they're choking. Hers was so severe that she had to have the vet out. She had to have a scope down her, so the stuff that had got stuck was removed."

Moonbeam had to be treated by the vet and was unable to eat solid food following this incident. This, alongside an increasing number of melanomas and bumps and Moonbeam seemingly becoming more forgetful pointed towards her advancing age, which led Eliza to make a decision.

"She had a really nice life in terms of quality of life, but also I knew I was not going to put her through another winter. We got all the way through the summer, no chokes, very happy and healthy. We had picked a date. We had picked a place in the back, behind her fields, up near the woods at the top of the hill. We had the neighbour come and dig a nice big hole. (…) She was able to walk all the way up to the fields to

the area with her best friend, her lovely horse friend. The vet gave her her first injection, which made her a little bit sleepy. Then, as we walked her into the field, the other horse was turned around, and then she got her final injection. (…) I was holding her to the end. (…) We arranged her down there and my son brought some flowers and different things. (…) It was just very, very special. "

At this point, Eliza's story contains a detailed description of the ritualisation of Moonbeam's death. Just as the decision to end Moonbeam's life, equal care and consideration seem to have gone into the planning of how this death should happen in a way that is most comfortable for Moonbeam while being considerate to the rest of the family taking part in the ritual as well as to nature as a whole, for example, by making sure that the right medication is used that will not endanger any of the surrounding wildlife. This careful consideration underlines Eliza's ethical and moral stance on how to positively and respectfully interact with nature. It also points to Eliza's remarkable ability to take into account everyone's needs, showing her empathy and the value she places on the people and world around her. The ritualisation of the euthanasia procedure also seems to have helped Eliza in processing the death, ensuring she gets to spend Moonbeam's last moments with her in a powerful and positive way.

She describes another significant event that seemed to have impacted Eliza's decision about planning Moonbeam's death was an experience with a potential new boarder keeping their very old and unwell horse at the farm for several weeks.

"We'd had a horse, literally in a horrific condition. It was an almost 30-year-old horse, pretty much skeletal when it arrived. (…) With that horse, it was absolutely horrendous, because (…) it took (a) month for the owner to decide, despite the fact that the horse, by the second week was having daily nosebleeds where there'd literally be a pool of blood. (…) I've seen so many animals, not just horses, where people want to keep the animal alive for them(selves). That, to me, is the most tragic thing, because when the animal asks and says 'I've had enough', we should honour and accept it. Yes, it's painful for the person, but what a gift you're giving that animal."

Throughout her story, Eliza positions herself very clearly regarding her beliefs about the treatment and ownership of animals. She strongly believes in the animal's right to make their own choices and in the responsibility of their humans to ensure this choice is being heard and respected, even if it means having to make a decision that might be painful. There is a sense of self-sacrifice giving up an animal that is loved and important, but that the animal is another being unto itself that deserves this self-sacrifice from the human they have had to entrust their life to. Eliza explains her stance very well:

> *" I don't necessarily believe in ownership, I more believe in stewardship with animals, and seeing the animals (…) have a really good fit with somebody, that, to me, is the direction they should follow in."*
> *"Again, it goes back to that sense of stewardship as opposed to ownership, and that our animals have the right of choice. They have the right to expect that we will be responsible for what is right for each individual animal. (…) It is about us accepting that while we might experience pain, we can't expect our animals to suffer."*

While the decision to have Moonbeam put down is clearly not one that Eliza made easily, it was one she is sure about and made with conviction and a clear belief in doing what is best for Moonbeam.

> *"I have a strong belief in a good death and really I see that there is a value in being responsible. (…) There's a double-edged sword of should I have done something different (…). I think I (…) felt that tremendous duty of care (…)."*

This 'good death' Eliza speaks of appears to be nuanced and complex in some ways, offering space for her to doubt herself about whether she has made the right decision at the right time. On the other hand, it offers the opportunity to diminish the pain of the animal as well as their human. In her case, having made this decision with such clear conviction seems to have made the process easier for Eliza.

> *"It was that we had planned it, we were prepared mentally for it, and it was that ability to give her a good death, and really provide her with the support that she needed to be able to live a great life and have that one moment where-- Yes, it wasn't so great, but it was a great transition. (…) I felt very privileged to have been able to give her a life where she had a lot of freedom. Yes, we did have a cry and I think it was good as well. Everybody had their goodbyes (…) but there wasn't that clinging on that sometimes comes for people at death."*

It appears that the intentionality of Moonbeam's death and, consequently, the acceptance and peace Eliza feels towards the event, changes the story from that of sadness and grief to one of gratitude and hope.

Eliza's relationship with Moonbeam seems extraordinary considering how many horses Eliza has worked with throughout her life. She describes herself as quite rational, yet she describes her relationship with Moonbeam as something transcending the rational.

> *"I'm a scientist (…) and I don't like the word magic so much, but there was. The fact that she kept coming back into my life (…) I think she was such a valuable part of my life and my journey. She taught me so many valuable lessons about patience and listening. (…) I hope researchers never figure out a way to quantify that because there is something (…) magical in an interaction with an animal. It's not quantifiable. It's not something we can reduce down. (…) I think there was something beyond, something spiritual about the experience that was very, very cool."*

Even now, Eliza's relationship with Moonbeam seems to be impacting her on a regular basis.

> *"I think it's tremendously influenced the way I teach. It's influenced the way I think. It's helped me question. (…) I think on so many levels, her story, her experience taught me about the power of letting go."*

Throughout her story, Eliza's narrative tone comes across as quite assured. While there are many rather pensive and emotional moments, Eliza's story seems to be less tinged with

sadness or grief and instead appears to be filled with gratitude for having been able to provide Moonbeam with a good life as well as with a good death. There is a deep sense of acceptance of the inevitability of Moonbeam's death and of a duty and responsibility to spare her as much pain and suffering as possible. While Eliza does grieve Moonbeam and is worried about how her passing affects the people and animals around her, her knowledge of having fulfilled her responsibility of listening to what Moonbeam was telling her seems to ease the pain of having lost her.

Across Eliza's narrative, there is a sense that while Moonbeam is a big part of her story, she also has her very own story such that both of their stories intertwine and overlap several times, yet Moonbeam retains her own narrative. This, however, by no means takes away from the importance of their relationship, instead, it makes Moonbeam a slightly more complex and enigmatic and in some ways a more rounded character since her story exists separately and not just in relation to Eliza. This goes in line with Eliza's clear stance against ownership of an animal and for their right to choice and autonomy. At the same time, Moonbeam seems to embody a specific chapter in Eliza's life; while she lives in the US. Their first encounter happens not long after her initial move, while Moonbeam's death occurs only shortly before Eliza moves back to England. Eliza states:

> *"I also reflected back to something a friend of ours from South Africa had said (…). In her culture, they had felt that when an animal that you loved died, it actually opened up a blocked pathway towards something for your future. That was very much what happened with (Moonbeam's) death."*

In many ways, Moonbeam's story fits very well into Eliza's beliefs around animal autonomy; Moonbeam retained her own narrative because that is how Eliza saw her, as her own 'person'. On the other hand, the relationship with Moonbeam challenges and adds to Eliza's identity as a scientist, allowing her to connect with a more spiritual, 'magic' side that is not easily explained or understood but which Eliza relishes.

Grace & Pokerface

Grace is a white woman from the US who now lives in the UK. She has spent most of her life, from late childhood onwards, working closely with horses in a personal and professional capacity. She is telling the story of her horse, Pokerface, whom she bought as a college student and who was her steady companion through different life stages and across different locations. Despite her parents' initial aversion to pets, Grace's enthusiasm for horses starts in her childhood, going to summer camps where she got to ride and eventually joining a riding stable where Pokerface is one of the lesson horses. Grace describes:

> *"We weren't friends, Pokerface and I. He didn't like his job as a lesson horse. (…) I knew at the time he had a job to do and that was being a lesson horse and if he didn't do his job then it made it difficult"*

When Grace goes off to university, the stable owner makes her a deal to take one of the lessons horses with her and sell him. Any profit would go to Grace.

> *"The horse at the time that I was absolutely in love with (…) had settled into being this really lovely lesson horse and they weren't ready to let him go. Whereas (Pokerface) was about to get fired, he had started chasing horses in the arena."*

So Grace ends up taking Pokerface to sell, however, things do not go as planned.

> *"My friend and I were both on this muck wagon and she's like 'Your horse is nickering* (low rumbly sound horses make, often thought to be akin to a greeting) *at you'. I was like, 'Don't be silly.' She's like 'No, no, he is.' He was (…) and that was it. He just needed to be a one-person horse. (…) I took him, put him up for sale and sold him to myself."*

It seems that from this point onwards, Grace and Pokerface are inseparable and he joins her wherever she goes.

"He's travelled all over the globe. (…) I was going to move to England and I said to my dad I'm not going unless (Pokerface) comes and my dad helped me to pay for him to come over."

When he is thirteen, Pokerface shows some signs of illness which means that after several attempts to treat him, Grace retires him from competitions.

"I had this money I was going to live on and genuinely about four months into his diagnosis it was gone, I had spent it all on him. (…) But it just wasn't fair on him. Why was I pushing him so hard? If his body was saying he is done then he should be done. (…) So I retired him to pasture."

After several years of being retired from competitions and growing older, Grace stops riding Pokerface altogether.

"I knew (he) wouldn't live forever, and being a really pragmatic horse person, I had a death plan in place for him. Because with horses, you can't just carry them out the door when they go. (…) (He) came in really, really lame from the field one day and it was just really classic laminitis. I couldn't relieve his pain. (…) I might have seen horses put down before. It's just different when it's your own."

In a common 'enemies-to-friends' narrative trope, Grace's relationship with Pokerface clearly is not love at first sight, however, after a little time getting to know each other, the two form a strong bond that lasts for well over a decade. Pokerface is Grace's constant companion and the only time they are apart is after she is forced to return to the US for a period of time.

"I had to leave the UK (…). My friend (…) took care of him, and honestly, I am forever grateful to her. She literally took care of the most precious thing in my life and she didn't even ask a question."

Throughout their story, the connection between Grace and Pokerface is undeniable. Grace describes their ability to communicate.

> *"He would try and signal to you about what it is that he needed as long as you listened. He had different nickers for whether or not he wanted water or hay. (…) I guess they're just like people, they just speak a different language and if you listen to them, most of them will try and signal to you about something. (…) I don't know, after a period of time, you just figure it out."*

Something else that seems important to Grace is to emphasise the uniqueness of Pokerface's personality.

> *"He's such a dude. He really liked people and he was incredibly quirky. (…) People, (…) they don't like you to anthropomorphise them but I was like 'You've never met my horse'. He'd do things just to get your attention. (…) He'd be like, 'No, no, no. You must now fuss over me or pay attention to me.' (…) He would watch you in the yard. (…) He knew my car and he would always, always…you could hear him nickering before I even got to the stable."*

There is a real sense of Grace's in-depth familiarity and understanding of Pokerface and his character.

> *"If he didn't like you, he would tell you. He was always really fair. (…) If he thought you were being too pushy (…) he's like 'You're treating me really unfairly'. Because he was such a trier. If you asked him to do something he would give it a go. (…) He was a bit sensitive (but) he would try really, really hard. (…)He liked to be told what to do. (When) my friend took care of him she said 'He ran into the corner and he ran into the wall' and I was like, 'Well, did you tell him to turn? (…) He rode straight because you told him to ride straight.' (…) He's like, 'I'm with you, I got you. Where do you want me to go? I'll give it a go.' (…) He was so generous. (…) With kids, he would stand so still. (…) You could just see he was just being careful. (…)"*

What seems to stand out in Grace's narrative of her story with Pokerface is the closeness and depth of their bond. There appears to be a connection that transcends species and allows the two of them to completely understand and trust each other. She describes Pokerface as her "heart horse" which, colloquially, describes a sort of soulmate horse, whose connection with their rider is something not easily understood by others (Boggan, 2018). This aspect of their relationship seems to impact how much Grace feels other people can empathise with her loss.

> *"There is pet loss and there is that relationship because you ride them. (…) They could kill you. (…) The intensity of that relationship that you get. (…) It feels like you're in sync. Your bodies are in sync. (…) People who haven't experienced that, they can't relate to what it's like to not have that anymore. (…) Horse people who've had it, you get that…the reaction from them matches the intensity of what you feel. (…) You get empathy rather than just sympathy."*

Another aspect Grace mentions here is the embodied part of her relationship with Pokerface. This very physical side to the bond they had adds another dimension and might explain not just her bond but also the type of magic Eliza describes in her narrative with Moonbeam. Horses are kept to be ridden and even though Eliza's and Grace's stories clearly show that they are much more than a piece of sports equipment, the physicality of a horse is a big part of the relationship people have with their animals. Their sheer size and power require communication and trust from both the horse and the rider. Grace describes their bodies as being 'in sync' and in her story she and Pokerface do indeed appear to be fully in sync, understanding each other and carefully listening to the other's needs.

Throughout the narrative, it becomes clear that horses are a very big part of Grace's life, both in a professional as well as in a personal capacity. This seems to lead to an interesting duality in which horses are, or at least used to be a tool of her trade. Grace describes that she stopped counting how many different horses she had ridden after 250 animals. At the same time, her description of the depth and intensity of the bond clearly shows that, at least Pokerface was something far beyond anything that could be equated to an object. This

apparent duality seems mirrored in Grace's account of Pokerface's death. The way she describes the situation is somewhat terse and matter-of-fact. She does not describe her decision process or much of her emotions in the moment, just that this is something she had planned for in advance. She also describes a sense of relief of now having the means to take on another horse that she can actually ride and compete with. At the same time, she is deeply affected by the loss of Pokerface. She is keeping his ashes in her office until she is able to find a place where she feels he would have been happy. She also seems to struggle to make a connection with her new horse saying:

> *"She is not (Pokerface). She just isn't. I don't know if that's inhibiting my relationship with her or not."*

There seems to be somewhat of a clash between Grace's professional attitude towards horses, including the rational knowledge that their health can be fragile and they often tend to die prematurely and her obvious grief for her "heart horse". Grace is aware that she has been lucky to have Pokerface for as long as she did and is very rational about the inevitability of his death. The way she conducts her narrative leaves out much of the more emotional side of her loss. It is not uncommon to omit emotional specificities in these stories, but it remains unclear whether Grace's intention here is to spare me, the listener, the intricacies of her emotional pain or whether she avoids delving into it for her own sake and thus not having to acknowledge her feelings to herself.

In general, Grace's narrative tone throughout her story is comparatively unemotional. The parts of her story focused on explaining contexts and timelines are matter-of-fact and rational with little embellishment. However, when she describes Pokerface and his personality, her tone becomes much more enthusiastic and her narrative seems to slow down and become more detailed. She often uses his voice to convey what she believes him to be thinking, for example:

> *"You can not ride him for three months and just be like 'Hey, do you want to go out?' and he'd be like, 'Yes, sure, fine. I want to go out.'"*

Her tone of voice when recounting anecdotes about Pokerface is warm and she often giggles or laughs when remembering his quirky antics. When speaking about his death Grace's tone does become more emotional, however, as mentioned above, she keeps her description of his death very short. She states that she does not 'beat herself up' about her decision to have him put down and comes across as very pragmatic, asking rhetorical questions about his quality of life and backing herself up by citing her research into consumer motivation around horse ownership. In this situation, she appears less assured and as if she is reiterating to herself, and in this instance me, that she did indeed make the right decision in having Pokerface put down when she did.

Other than in the previous narrative about Eliza and Moonbeam, Grace and Pokerface's stories seem almost synonymous with each other. While Grace is painting a vivid picture of his unique personality and character, he does not seem to retain his own narrative as much as Moonbeam does and there is less of a sense of his independent existence outside of Grace's life. While he, too, is very much his own 'person', his story and existence is woven into Grace's own story. In a similar vein, Grace does not mention many other characters outside of her parents and her friend who helped take care of Pokerface. Of course, this interview was specifically focused on her relationship with Pokerface, still, there seems to be a sense of them as a unit unrivalled by any other relationship.

When taking into account all four narratives, what stands out is how unique each of the experiences are, not just in their content but also in how the individual interviewee made sense of their experience and how they positioned themselves in the world as well as in relation to their animal. Each of them was clearly impacted by their animal during their lives as well as after their death, but in very different and unique ways; Elaine has found great fulfilment in taking care of and fostering cats but she is also being challenged in her identity and beliefs around science, Lilia has noticed her tendency to always take care of others first due to looking after Edda from a young age and is being confronted with her lack of agency in making decisions that have the potential to impact her life, Eliza is strengthened and validated in her belief around animal rights and welfare and Grace is having to consolidate her practical and professional attitude towards horsemanship with the reality of having lost her heart horse. Yet, despite all the differences, there are still parallels between the

experiences described in the interviews as well as in the survey, adding to the research aims of exploring the experience, understanding and sense-making of companion animal bereavement.

4. Discussion

This chapter will synthesise and discuss the findings gathered across both the qualitative survey and interview studies, relate them to previously discussed literature and explore the implications they have on the field of counselling psychology. I will explore the findings in the context of existing theoretical frameworks and consider implications for practice. Furthermore, there will be a reflection on the limitations present in this study, which will delimit the epistemological boundaries of the findings, in an effort to highlight the significance of this topic and the implications of this research, which might inspire further enquiry into the significance of the human-animal bond and the intricacies of its continuity beyond death.

4.1 Summary of Findings

4.1.1 Thematic Analysis

The data collection and analysis in this thesis have evolved and are the product of ongoing development. Starting out, I contemplated conducting a piece of quantitative research into the intensity of grief and bereavement people feel when losing a companion animal based on operational definitions of the human-animal bond. However, I quickly came to the conclusion that my scholarly interests and convictions did not align with quantifying grief in this way. My personal beliefs on grief and bereavement are that these experiences are both unique and complex and that previous life experiences will affect people's perceptions and views on future experiences. There is no one way to experience and process grief and it is impossible to generalise how anyone might be affected by the loss of a human or an animal. It might be possible to make inferences about what can impact the loss, such as the quality and depth of a relationship, but ultimately not even the person in question will be able to predict how any loss might affect them. The quantification of grief in this instance fails to provide insight into the complexities of the individual experiences of companion animal bereavement.

The aim remained, however, to capture a relatively broad picture of grief experiences across a spectrum of participants. The thematic analysis of an online survey seemed to lend itself well to this (Braun, Clarke, Boulton, Davey & McEvoy, 2021).

Following a thorough review of the literature, some of the themes that emerged through the analysis of the gathered data were unsurprising and somewhat expected based on existing literature and research, such as the significance people ascribed to the bond with their companion animal. The sensitivity and emotional care animals seemed to have for their human companions and the consequent emotional support people received was another aspect seen in previous literature. However, other themes were more surprising. For example, given the existing literature, the disenfranchisement of grief emerged in a way that was unexpected during the analysis. When I sat out to design this research project, I took for granted that companion animal loss constituted a form of disenfranchised grief. I was influenced by my own experiences as well as the literature I had read (e.g. Doka, 1989;

Cordaro, 2012; Sharkin & Knox, 2003, Spain, O'Dwyer & Moston, 2019 etc.) which suggested that grief for an animal is unsanctioned by wider society leading to a clear disenfranchisement of the grief. However, upon reviewing the survey data, I realised that participants were not communicating their experiences in a way that could be unambiguously categorised as disenfranchised grief; the data appeared to be calling for more nuanced conceptualisations. With some exceptions, people did feel genuinely supported and understood by their close family and friends. The disenfranchisement of their grief largely appeared to affect them outside of this inner circle, with acquaintances and at school or work and there was a loose sense of the disenfranchisement of grief in wider society. Participants also seemed to be able to classify which support came from a place of real empathy, understanding or an ability to relate to the loss and which reactions may have been supportive but unable to fully grasp the meaning of the loss. Essentially what emerged during analysis was that the disenfranchisement of companion animal bereavement, if experienced, was not as obvious and clear-cut as anticipated.

Another theme that had not emerged as a common aspect of companion animal bereavement during my review of the literature, but which featured prominently in participants' responses was that of rituals and tokens or memorabilia that represent the continuing relationship people have with animals they have lost. A number of respondents described something befitting this theme, with several people having jewellery, sometimes made from their animal's ashes or fur, or tattoos done in the animal's honour. In line with findings about grief being fully shared with the inner circle only, any rituals or memorabilia appeared to be quite private, meaning that in contrast to the ritualisation of human death which tends to include the wider community as a way to re-negotiate the bereft individuals' identity (Chénier, 2009) the ritualisation of animal death does not include the wider community. Still, the memorabilia, especially jewellery and tattoos, are not kept private in the sense that they are hidden or kept secret, they communicate the status the animal held in the individual's life but do so in a comparatively subtle way. Any burials that were described were done within the immediate family and often at home, none were announced publicly. These findings seem to correspond to the theme of disenfranchisement and the reluctance to share any grief outside of the immediate social network. It also speaks

to the need to ritualise death (Romanoff, 1998; Sas & Coman, 2016) as well as to the continuing bonds people keep with their companion animals (Lykins et al., 2023).

Overall, while there was a spectrum of intensity of grief, participants clearly felt deeply impacted by the loss of their companion animals, often using vivid and emotional language to illustrate their pain. Several people stated a reluctance of getting another animal for fear of having to go through further loss. Aspects of guilt were another theme that emerged related to the impact of the loss, often due to worry or regret about possibly not having taken good enough care of their animals. This aspect corresponded with the caregiving relationship that also emerged as a theme.

The main findings of the Thematic Analysis illustrate the often deep and significant relationships people had with their companion animals prior to their death as well as how their loss impacted them, pointing out the commonalities as well as the unique and individual experiences of companion animal loss.

4.1.2 Narrative Analysis

While there was a solid rationale in place as to the use of a thematic analysis of an online survey as outlined previously, upon analysis of the gathered data it became clear that while the data were important, it was not rich enough to sustain an in-depth exploration of participant experience. Furthermore, on several occasions, I wished I had the opportunity to probe participants for further explanations of their answers, which neither online surveys nor Thematic Analysis allow for. For example, the respondent who stated that they did not seek out any counselling support for the loss of their companion animal because they thought it was 'not important enough'. Considering this research wishes to add to the field of counselling psychology, it would have been immensely valuable to further explore this statement and clarify whether the respondent felt the topic was not important enough to them personally to mention in counselling or whether they felt that it would have been perceived as not important enough by the counsellor. This played a significant part in my decision to expand the research to include interviews. I decided to use narrative interviews to explore not just the experiences of people who have lost their companion animals but also how they story and make sense of these experiences for themselves and in the contexts of their lives.

The four interview participants were free to share their stories however they liked, and while I had wanted an opportunity to probe the survey data, in the case of the interviews there was much less need for probing than anticipated and my interventions were minor and infrequent probes for clarification purposes.

For Elaine's narrative what stood out was her unconditional love for her cats Ingrid, June and Alaska. Her narrative was comprised of three different stories about her three cats, which weaved in and out of each other and resulted in one big love story for her feline companions. Her devotion to her cats' wellbeing was abundantly clear with great commitment to keeping them healthy and investing in them emotionally and financially. Her need to educate herself about feline biology and health seemed to mirror that of a parent of a chronically ill child (Hummelinck & Pollock, 2006). The passing of her cats also seemed to raise existential questions about life and death and a sort of magical thinking Elaine seemed

to struggle with as something uncharacteristic and not in line with her general belief in science and her identity as a scientist. Elaine seemed profoundly affected by the death of her cats and there was a sense of duality in her understanding of life and the inevitability of death, tinged with a sense of injustice and incomprehension. Elaine's story constructs a strong, unambiguous, transcendental continuing bond with her cats, which carries on through mementoes she has kept of all of her cats as well a strong sense of community support she has garnered. Elaine's story clearly deviates from a 'disenfranchised loss' narrative and demonstrates how people might emplot beloved companion animals in existential concerns that matter to them beyond the specifics of those bonds.

While there was a clear caregiving aspect to the story of Lilia having to look after her dog Edda, especially later in life, their relationship was narrated in more reciprocal terms. Where Elaine saw her cats as her 'babies', Lilia described Edda as a sibling. The defining part of her story appeared to be the conflict between her love and care for Edda and the lack of agency and early responsibility that came with it. Compared to the stories of the other participants, Lilia's story seemed to be much less structured. This might have been due to her age and stage of life (Pratt & Robins 1991), being considerably younger than the other interviewees. But regardless of this fact, there was unprocessed grief in Lilia's story which may have contributed to the lack of structure in her narrative. Lilia did not bring any pictures or mementoes of Edda and stated that, even six years later she struggles to look at pictures and videos and avoids going to see Edda's grave which is in her parents' backyard. There seemed to be an avoidance of contemplating Edda's death and I had a sense that Lilia may not have processed Edda's death. Another thread that pulls through Lilia's story is the lack of choice and agency, both in regards to getting Edda and having to take care of her, as well as in her parents' decision to get another dog. Lilia described a reluctance to accept this new addition to the family and the fact that she will, most likely, have to eventually endure another loss. The duality of her love for both Edda and the new dog and the fear of further loss and grief was a core aspect of Lilia's story. In narrative terms, we might understand this story as an example of what gets co-constructed in the interview situation with a therapeutic practitioner: an account that holds ambivalence, perhaps belying concerns that are outside the scope of the research question, and which should be treated with the same

respect and scholarly attention as stories that conform more neatly with linear research agendas.

Eliza, only spoke about one of her horses (Moonbeam), despite having worked with and witnessed the death of several horses throughout her life so far. Her narrative conveyed her attitude and beliefs regarding animal welfare and autonomy, especially her belief in animal stewardship over ownership and in the animal's right to a good life as well as a 'good death'. Moonbeam's autonomy took centre stage in the narrative which saw Eliza and Moonbeam's stories overlap and intersect without ever fully merging. Moonbeam retained her own narrative, undefined by Eliza's stewardship of her. She was also awarded the right to a good death, following a decline in her health but before her quality of life suffered significantly. Eliza's description of Moonbeam's death, while not without sadness, was described as an overall positive experience in which the right decision for Moonbeam is a clear narrative orientation, despite the pain it caused Eliza herself. While the loss of Moonbeam was difficult and sad, Eliza's belief system appeared to allow her to come to terms with the death before it eventually happened, leading to less despondency or dejection surrounding the experience. Eliza seemed most at ease with the loss of her animal (relative to the other participants I spoke to), although there was no diminishing of the love and affection she felt for Moonbeam. Her description of the 'magic' that surrounded her relationship with Moonbeam and her hope to never be able to fully explain it are rendered even more intelligible through narrative psychology's claims that narratives are ongoing affairs without neat endings, and chime with Paul Ricoeur's (1991) idea that we learn to become the narrators of our own story without completely becoming the author of our life.

Lastly, Grace spoke about her 'heart horse' Pokerface. The relationship between Grace and Pokerface developed over time from initial antipathy to eventual love and fundamental trust. As opposed to Eliza and Moonbeam's story, Grace and Pokerface's narrative appears to be intrinsically linked with no way to disentangle their stories. It is a story of two creatures destined to meet and change one another. Pokerface is Grace's partner in crime, accompanying her across the globe and is a constant through shifting jobs and relationships. What comes across most acutely in Grace's narrative is the deep emotional and physical bond between her and Pokerface, as well as Pokerface's unique character. His personality is

visceral and the listener is drawn in to Grace's enthusiastic and vivid description of him. Following Pokerface's death, Grace seemed to feel ambivalent. His death made space for her to take on another horse, something she had wanted to do for a long time, yet she described comparing her new horse to Pokerface regularly and expressing a fear of never having the same relationship with the new horse that she had with Pokerface. Her loss seemed to mirror the longstanding and deep relationship she had with the horse that accompanied her for nearly two decades and whose absence she still feels acutely at times. The way in which Grace tells her story evokes a 'soul mate' narrative in which Pokerface is her one true love, irreplaceable and more constant than even a romantic relationship would be.

The narratives shared by the interviewees revealed much about the bonds with their animals, how they were shaped by these relationships and how they contextualised them in relation to their own sense of identity and beliefs. The way they are using their narrative to construct meaning from their experiences gives way to an exploration of their unique interpretations and understanding of the losses they endured.

4.2 Bringing the themes (TA) and narrative insights (NA) in dialogue

There are resonant links between the findings of the Thematic Analysis and the stories told in the narrative interviews as almost all of the themes identified during the thematic analysis can be discerned in the interviews. All participants describe deep and special bonds with their companion animals, often comparing them to other significant relationships such as children (Elaine) or siblings (Lilia). Companion animals are universally described as an important source of connection and comfort. There are several mentions of rituals (Elaine, Eliza), keeping mementoes such as pictures, ashes, etc. (Elaine, Grace) and descriptions of continuing bonds following the animals' deaths. Especially the nuanced experience of disenfranchised grief is being addressed in unique ways across the four interviews. Lilia's account seems to mirror the general experiences described by participants of the online survey, describing support and understanding by her friends and family but a clear lack of this from the acquaintances she lived with at the time. However, she also mentions a lack of communication and processing of Edda's death within her family, which could be attributed to the disenfranchisement of grief or to a general difficulty in discussing grief and loss within the family dynamic.

Grace seems to experience disenfranchisement in a similar way. She describes general support and empathy for her loss from the people around her but at the same time explains that she experienced a lack of genuine understanding from people outside of the equine world. Her disenfranchisement seems more linked to whether others can relate to the loss of her 'heart horse' which is something she feels only people who have shared this experience can fully relate to. While she does not describe disenfranchisement as a complete lack of understanding or a dismissing of her grief, she still only feels fully understood by a small subgroup of people.

Eliza and Elaine seem to fall into their own category when it comes to their grief. They appear to experience little to no disenfranchisement of their grief, although possibly for different reasons. In Eliza's case, her strong conviction regarding the welfare of her animals seems to have allowed her to process Moonbeam's death almost before it occurred, leaving

little need for her to share and process her grief with others. She shares her grief with her immediate family and the people boarding their horses on her farm, all of whom understand and empathise with her experience. Beyond this, there does not seem to be the need or desire for her to share her loss.

Elaine, too, does not describe any disenfranchisement of her grief. On the contrary, she describes her family, friends, the cats' vet and colleagues to be very supportive and understanding and even shares an experience of a stranger being very empathetic to her loss. In her case, it seems that her open and unapologetic love for her cats leaves no space for anybody to be dismissive about her pain. No part of her even contemplates people not being able to understand what she is experiencing.

While disenfranchisement of grief in companion animal bereavement is thought to be a common phenomenon, this research points to it being nuanced. Especially in a professional therapeutic context, this could be important for practitioners to keep in mind. It also poses questions about what makes people more or less likely to experience the loss of their animal to be disenfranchised.

4.3 Findings in the context of the literature

The themes that emerged through the analysis of the survey data as well as the stories constructed by interviewees can be linked back to existing academic literature across several different subjects and theoretical frameworks. The significance of people's bonds with their animals is apparent through both, the accounts shared by survey participants as well as through the narratives constructed in the interviews. Generally speaking, these relationships do seem to be bidirectional attachment relationships, exhibiting both, attachment (Kurdek, 2008; 2009) as well as caregiving aspects (Julius et al., 2012; Prato-Previde, Ricci & Colombo, 2022). There were accounts of individuals describing their animals as offering emotional care and support, seemingly of their own accord, suggesting the animal's function as a secure base. Lilia's narrative describes proximity seeking and the animal functioning as a secure base where she seeks out her dog Edda for safety, comfort and support as a child.

The caregiving aspect of these bonds also emerges as a theme in the Thematic Analysis and as an important part of the stories in the Narrative Analysis; people want to take care of their animals and want them to be happy and comfortable. Especially Elaine and Eliza's stories contain caregiving as a central part of their narrative, albeit in slightly different ways. Elaine's deep sense of care and responsibility for her cats is expressed in her tireless effort to keep them healthy and extend their lives where possible, while Eliza constructs an understanding of love, care and responsibility by embracing the opportunity to give Moonbeam a 'good death' and ending her life before any substantial suffering occurs in an effort to listen to what Eliza is sure Moonbeam is communicating to her.

Across both analyses, the way in which people show and give care to their animals is expressed in a multitude of different ways; taking care of them physically, ensuring their needs are being taken into account in everyday life and investing time, finances and energy for them. There is a sense of sacrifices being made for the animal, regardless of what and whether the humans receive in return, the humans' own needs often appear to come second to those of the animals they care for, not unlike a parent making sacrifices for their child.

Besides the bond between humans and their animals, the loss of it was another major aspect of this research. The Thematic Analysis gave insight into how people were affected by the deaths of their animals and the Narrative Analysis shared stories of how the interviewees made sense and understood their losses, how it shaped them as people and how it changed the way they related to their animals.

The disenfranchisement of these losses in wider society was mirrored in the survey data and, to an extent, in the narrative analysis. Most existing literature (e.g. Cowling, Isenstein & Schneider, 2020; Doka, 2020; Spain, O'Dwyer & Moston, 2019) does not discuss the nuance within disenfranchised grief. In both parts of the study, there was an overwhelming sense that individuals did feel understood by trusted people around them. This may be due to an increased acceptance of animals as important companions and family members (Pallotta, 2019) or because people feel able to anticipate the reactions of close relations more easily and accurately than those of their wider circle, not to mention that those close to the participants may have had a personal relationship with the animal themselves and were thus better able to empathise. Lilia's experience, for example, seems to closely mirror what emerged in the Thematic Analysis, namely that she felt supported and understood by her family and close friends but dismissed and invalidated by her housemates at the time. However, when reflecting on Elaine's narrative, it appears that her unwavering and openly expressed love for her cats left her as well as everyone around her unable to question the significance of her losses. Simply put, there did not seem to be any disenfranchisement present because Elaine did not allow for it. Across both analyses, there was a sense that people who did not understand the relationship participants had with their animals would also not understand the grief experienced following their deaths, however, in many cases this lack of understanding seemed to be assumed rather than experienced, leading to what might be understood as internal versus external disenfranchisement. In many cases participants described not feeling comfortable sharing their grief out of a fear of being invalidated (internal disenfranchisement) with only a few describing actual instances of others being dismissive or not understanding their grief (external disenfranchisement). This is a phenomenon recently described by Cesur-Soysal & Ari (2024) as 'self-disenfranchisement). It poses the question of whether the expectation of

disenfranchisement leads to disenfranchisement and, on a related note, whether sharing about the significance of the bond prior to the animal's death diminishes the likelihood of disenfranchised grief after the animal's passing.

This might be supported by another piece of literature that seems interesting and relevant when contemplating the ambiguity found in the disenfranchisement of grief. Robson and Walters (2012) paper on 'Hierarchies of Grief' questions the binarity of disenfranchisement of grief as either present or absent and suggests, instead, a hierarchy of social norms when it comes to grief, in which close friends and relatives are at the top, while companion animals, for example, are towards the bottom. Thus the (subconscious) assumption that their loss ranks comparatively low in the hierarchy might consequently lead to the assumption of disenfranchisement. This approach offers a slightly different angle on explaining disenfranchisement that seems somewhat more fitting than the binary description described in most of the existing literature.

Both parts of the research also gave insight into how participants processed the loss of their animals. With few exceptions, the loss of their companion animals was impactful and difficult for participants but what was fascinating were the ways in which people managed to hold on to their animals and the relationships they had with them even after death. People described visiting meaningful locations, keeping items or having jewellery and tattoos done in their animal's honour. Exploring the literature around continuing bonds, there is no clear-cut conclusion as to the impact of continuing bonds on the grieving process (Stroebe & Schut, 2005; Stroebe, Abakoumkin, Stroebe & Schut, 2012), with some studies suggesting that continuing bonds can be adaptive or maladaptive depending on, for example, the expectedness of death (Stroebe et al., 2012). In their systematic review of the literature Hewson, Galbraith, Jones & Heath (2023) conclude that while continuing bonds can highlight the painful absence of a loved one, most people feel comforted by the often dynamic continuing bonds they maintain with the deceased.

In the narratives, too, the description of the continuing bonds the interviewees keep with their deceased companions is not just interesting but gives insight into their grieving process. Elaine has several different mementoes she keeps for each of her cats which are

both meaningful but also give the impression that even after death she feels the love and responsibility for her 'girls' and needs to ensure they are all treated equally. Eliza's bond with Moonbeam is less tangible. She keeps pictures and memories and describes Moonbeam's influence on her views about animal rights and ethics and the way she teaches about these topics, ensuring Moonbeam's legacy beyond her death. In both cases, their continuing bonds seem to be helpful, offering ways to keep hold of the positive influences the animals have had in their lives. Lilia on the other hand, seems to have a somewhat reluctant continuing bond with Edda, one which might be classified as 'maladaptive' in the literature in the sense that she seems to struggle quite a lot to engage with anything that reminds her of Edda such as pictures or the place in her parent's garden where Edda is buried, although there is a sense that she expects to be able to engage with this more easily in the future.

The findings of this research support much of the existing literature, and vice versa, but also add nuance and greater insight into people's personal experience of companion animal bereavement and what losing a beloved companion means to the individual. While I believe that it is important that my findings match what has already been researched to give validity to my process, I am consciously stepping away from the aim of producing quantifiable 'objective' data and towards the meaningful description and exploration of subjective experiences.

4.4 Limitations and Research Recommendations

Despite my conscious decisions about the direction of this research as well as its continuous evolution, there were a few limitations that emerged throughout the research process. The evolutionary development regarding the methodology of this thesis and the addition of the narrative analysis was an attempt to mitigate some of the limitations that emerged early on, namely the need for further exploration beyond what the survey data allowed.

There may also be some limitations due to the type of participants that took part, in particular for the survey part of the study. Since this study was voluntary and participants were not compensated, it might be assumed that participants who took part did so due to a personal interest in the subject and the desire to share their experiences. This, in turn, means that people who did not feel the need to speak about the loss of their companion animals likely did not take part. While this research is qualitative and therefore does not aim to be representative of a population, this still suggests that there may be a large number of people out there who have lost a companion animal but whose experiences were not explored in this study. While this is to be expected it is still something that needs to be kept in mind when thinking about implications (e.g. not making assumptions about a person's experience of companion animal bereavement).

Following on from these limitations, the findings of this research, indicate several avenues that can be fruitfully pursued as further research. Further exploration of the disenfranchisement of grief and how any impact might be mediated by the support of the inner circle could be an important area of further study. If there is a mediating effect from inner circle support, where does this leave individuals who are more socially isolated and often lacking a close inner circle, a group already found to be at greater risk for more intense grief experiences (Gosse & Barnes, 1994; Planchon & Templer, 1996). Looking at the admittedly anecdotal account of Elaine and the absence of disenfranchised grief in her narrative, it may be interesting to explore how an individual's public attitudes towards a companion animal, while they are alive, might affect the perceived acceptability of grief after the animal's passing. Similarly, Eliza's belief in animal autonomy and their right to a

good death invites further exploration into how the individual's belief system concerning these topics might affect their attitudes and experiences of their companion animals' deaths. For example, does the belief of having been able to offer the animal a kinder, less painful death or decreased suffering affect how their human companions are able to process the loss?

Also, all of the interview participants for the narrative analysis were white women, three of whom were based in the UK and working in academia. Despite the qualitative nature of the research meaning that it does not claim to be representative of a population, it would still be interesting to explore narratives from other backgrounds. In this instance, participants were recruited to ensure at least a degree of familiarity with the researcher to allow for an environment in which participants felt comfortable enough to share the stories of their companion animals which often included very emotional aspects. Narrative analysis is a highly subjective form of analysis, impacted not just by the participant but also the researcher, meaning that a story may be told very differently depending on the listener. It is therefore never possible to draw conclusions from one narrative and apply them to another person. At the same time, it would be interesting for further research to look at companion animal bereavement through narrative lenses with participants from more diverse cultural backgrounds to explore how the phenomenon is understood and made sense of in a different cultural context. Especially the way in which people maintain a bond with their animals through death is something that would be fascinating to gain further insight into. There is scope for some cross-cultural research into the attitudes and experiences following companion animal bereavement, exploring what significance people attribute to these losses depending on their cultural background.

Lastly, as stated previously, there seems to be little to no research into whether companion animal bereavement is something people mention in a therapeutic context or specifically seek support for. An exploration of experiences regarding this may provide insight into whether people feel they are able to share their grief in this context and why they may or may not want to.

4.5 Implications and Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore the experiences of individuals who have suffered the loss of a companion animal. While the findings of this study are broadly consistent with existing literature, the narrative analysis, in particular, adds valuable insights to an under-researched yet increasingly relevant topic which allows for implications to be drawn in how to approach this subject in general and within a therapeutic context in particular. The thematic analysis produced valuable themes and, notably, found the nuance within participants' experience of disenfranchised grief, as well as showing the desire to hold on to the relationships with continuing bond expressions such as pictures, mementoes, etc. The narrative analysis provided unique depth and further emphasised the unique emotional bonds participants had with their animals. It gave expression to the difference in which people understand, make sense of and process their losses.

The importance of practitioners being aware of companion animal bereavement in a therapeutic context becomes clear when taking into account the possible negative effects individuals may experience following the death of their companion animals. While the extent to which people feel disenfranchised in their grief for their animal may differ, Sharkin & Knox (2003) found that a lack of acknowledgement of this loss in a wider context often leads clients to feel embarrassment associated with their grief. This leads to them minimizing or not acknowledging this loss in a therapeutic context, meaning it is important for practitioners to be particularly sensitive to this topic.

Practitioners tend to question a client about their relationships, but very rarely include their companion animals in these questions. Given the importance of the human-animal bond, it seems remiss not to hold these relationships in mind. In turn, this will give the client permission to discuss this topic if and when they feel the need to (Sharkin & Knox, 2008). For the practitioner to acknowledge and validate the loss of a companion animal gives the client permission to grieve, will counteract possible feelings of disenfranchisement and will likely have a positive impact on the therapeutic relationship (Sharkin & Knox, 2008).

Another aspect for practitioners to keep in mind is that companion animal loss may lead to 'displaced mourning', the emergence of unresolved grief after a previous loss (Margolies, 1999; Ross & Baron-Sorensen, 1998). Thus, the unacknowledged grief for the animal, in turn, means that there may be other losses that remain unacknowledged as well.

Lastly, even if the individual is not significantly negatively impacted by the loss of their companion animal, the lack of acknowledgement and inhibition of their grief still means that they are less likely to experience post-traumatic growth (Spain, O'Dwyer & Moston, 2019). This means that even in a case in which acknowledging companion animal loss is not needed to prevent negative outcomes, it may still be used to facilitate growth and a positive experience for the client.

The most fruitful implications to be drawn from this research for the field of Counselling Psychology related to working therapeutically with clients who have lost an animal companion. The accounts of participants in both parts of the study leave no doubt as to the effect the loss of their animal has had on them. Of course, there is diversity and nuance in their experience and the intensity of their grief varies, but in many cases, the language used to describe their feelings of loss is visceral and striking. In some instances, participants of both studies also shared unprompted gratitude for the opportunity to speak about the death of their animal companion, and, for example, stated that they found it cathartic to have been given a space to not only share their grief but also their love and fond memories. One stated that they had never been asked about how they felt following the death of their animal.

While there is a distinct lack of literature relating to treatment, interventions or practice models in relation to disenfranchised grief, Cordaro (2012) does make some recommendations about how practitioners can support individuals impacted by companion animal bereavement such as supporting clients to acknowledge their loss and validate their experience, assist them in exploring the depth of the bond they had with their animal as well as exploring how the possible disenfranchisement may impact their grief. Cordaro also emphasises the importance of offering opportunities to meaningfully mourn the animal. These recommendations are, of course, valid and important and will likely positively impact

the clients' experience and therapeutic outcomes. At the same time, they do not extend much beyond what would be expected of any good therapist when a client brings up a topic they are impacted by. As I will discuss below, they also do not address the issues that come with the disenfranchisement of this type of bereavement.

There are, in fact, a growing number of specialised Pet Bereavement Counsellors in the UK (Leonhardt-Parr & Rumble, 2022), however, considering the disenfranchisement of this kind of grief that, despite its nuance does exist, the problem remains that individuals may not seek out these specialised practitioners assuming they are aware of them. There is also a lack of lower threshold support specialising in companion animal bereavement (Cordaro, 2012). For people seeking therapeutic support in general or for reasons aside from companion animal bereavement, their perception of people's attitudes towards their loss might leave them feeling unable to broach the subject on their own even when in a therapeutic setting.

Thus, while specialised services are a great option and Cordero's (2012) suggestions are valid and useful, they leave us with the issue of requiring the client to seek out this type of support in the first place, which the nature of the disenfranchisement might make difficult. To mitigate this, one recommendation is for practitioners to be more vigilant and open to companion animal bereavement as a source of distress and as a focal point of a therapeutic conversation. This might also have a positive effect on the therapeutic alliance, considering the emphasis in counselling psychology on building a rapport and positive therapeutic relationship with clients (e.g. Lambert & Ogles, 2004; Nienhius et al., 2018). Openness and a non-judgemental attitude towards this topic might aid in expressing empathy, a core condition in Roger's (1967) therapeutic framework which underlines the therapist's ability to put themselves into the client's shoes in a genuine attempt to understand their experience. In regard to exploring continuing bonds, Bussolari & Packman (2020) even speak of the importance of 'Empathic Bridging' in order to offer clients suffering from companion animal bereavement a safe place to disclose their emotions. In this case, empathic bridging is described as an extension of the concept of unconditional positive regard by providing clients experiencing disenfranchised grief with the opportunity of self-expression through the acknowledgement of continuing bond experiences as common.

Ultimately, the practical implications and recommendations to be drawn from this study are two-fold. Firstly, ensuring openness about the subject when already in a therapeutic setting. This could be done through including companion animals in the assessment and initial exploration of relationships and family dynamics or through specifically asking about whether companion animal bereavement is something the client is or has been impacted by as a way to empathically bridge possible feelings of disenfranchisement. Building on Cordaro's (2012) suggestions of exploring ways to meaningfully mourn an animal, I would also suggest further exploration and open discussion of the use and function of mementoes and other means for continuing bonds, as there have been numerous findings linking continuing bond expressions to post-traumatic growth (Bussolari, Habarth, Phillips, Katz, Carmack & Packman, 2017; Packman, Bussolari, Katz, Carmack & Field, 2016; Tedeschi, Orejuela-Dávila & Paisley, 2018). Based on the findings of nuance in the disenfranchisement of grief, there might also be space for some challenge around the belief that other people will not understand the individual's loss. It will also be beneficial for practitioners to keep in mind which client demographics might be more likely to be negatively impacted by companion animal bereavement. For example, older people who are more likely to be isolated and therefore suffer more acutely from the loss of their companion animal. Also, while single people are less likely to keep animals, statistics based on the US population from 2018 suggest that about 45% of single-person households contain a pet (American Veterinary Medical Association, October 2018). This, in turn, suggests a higher likelihood for these individuals to consider their animal a primary companion and be more significantly impacted following their loss. However, as with any other topic that is researched with practitioners in mind, it is imperative for the therapist not to assume one way or another how a client might be experiencing and dealing with the loss of a companion animal. As could be seen from the survey responses in particular, the extent to which individuals are impacted by and want to share their experience of companion animal bereavement does vary.

Secondly, a practical suggestion would be promoting the acceptance of grieving an animal as valid and understandable to increase social acceptability and mitigate whatever disenfranchisement does exist in wider society. An example of this might be the inclusion of

companion animal bereavement as a possible area or focus of therapeutic work on a practitioner's advertising profile. Also, companion animal bereavement tends not to be part of the curriculum for most counselling, psychotherapy or psychology courses and is rarely mentioned as something a client may be struggling with (Leonhardt-Parr & Rumble, 2022). Integrating companion animal bereavement into curricula could therefore impact the acceptability of this subject in a therapeutic context and prompt practitioners to pay closer attention.

While there are certainly unique aspects to companion animal bereavement, at its core, the loss of an animal is still a loss that, for many people, is comparable to the loss of a human companion. It has been found that the process individuals go through when losing a companion animal is comparable in both cases of loss (e.g. Gerwolls & Labott, 1994; Lavorgna & Hutton, 2018; Lee, 2020; Lyons et al., 2022; Planchon, Stokes & Keller, 2002) and that bereavement theories such as Kübler-Ross' (1969) stages of grief and the dual process model (Stroebe & Schut, 1999), as well as the theory of continuing bonds (Cordaro, 2012), can also be applied to companion animal bereavement. In both cases of grief, these models, while possibly not universally applicable, still serve as a way to explain and normalise individual experiences. Similarly, while it is important to keep in mind that human and companion animal bereavement are not the same, I do not believe that practitioners need special skills to support companion animal bereavement as long as they are open to how an individual may be affected by it.

The one aspect that should be firmly kept in mind when working with people grieving the loss of a companion animal is the disenfranchisement they may be experiencing, as well as the disenfranchisement they are anticipating and may have internalised. However, this research specifically found nuance in the disenfranchisement people seem to be experiencing, suggesting that practitioners should not make assumptions about the individual's experience. This research hopes to increase practitioners' sensitivity to the phenomenon of companion animal bereavement and its nuanced disenfranchisement, adding to their repertoire when addressing this topic in therapeutic practice.

5. A Reflective Conclusion: Looking back on my journey with this research

When I first set off on the journey of conducting this thesis, I started out with the aim of producing a piece of research that was straightforward and using the methods of quantitative research I was familiar with. However, I quickly realised that the topic of companion animals and the bereavement people suffer when they die is not straightforward and that quantifying and generalising what people go through eliminates rich and important data. So while my research evolved from a quantitative idea to a qualitative survey to a narrative analysis, I, as a researcher evolved alongside it. While the findings I have produced might not be statistically generalizable, I strongly believe that they are just as, if not arguably more so, relatable to the reader. The experiences, stories and emotions shared by the participants are, in my eyes, much more powerful than a statistically powerful correlation, succeeding in the aims to explore participants' experiences of losing a companion animal and how they made sense of this for themselves and allowing for implications to be drawn for practice.

I myself feel very represented in what the participants have shared about their relationships with their animals. I can relate to the feeling of responsibility and care I have for my dog, sacrificing my time, money and emotional energy to make sure he is well and taken care of. I can also see a change in the way I relate to myself and others because of how I relate to him; he is part of my identity, for better or for worse. I often catch myself downplaying the role he plays in my life when speaking to others because, at least subconsciously I, too, worry about the social stigma of having a dog as my primary companion and may, therefore, be vulnerable to internalised disenfranchisement. However, at the same time, I seem to constantly come across instances of others sharing incredibly deep and significant bonds with their animals, whether in real life, on social media or in other content.

Throughout the process of completing this research, I was often struck by the reactions of others to the topic. Despite the evidence of companion animal bereavement being perceived as not as socially acceptable compared to human bereavement, there was no point in which I mentioned my area of research leading to people reacting dismissively,

neither with friends nor with strangers. Overwhelmingly people stated their support of this area of research, saying that they thought it was important and needed. I remember meeting an older gentleman while I was walking my dog. He told me about the two dogs of the same breed he used to have years ago and how much he missed them. He still had pictures of them in his wallet which he showed me and I got the sense that he was glad to have been able to share this with me. There have been many more interactions similar to this one, in which the mention of my thesis subject prompted friends and strangers alike to share with me their experiences of losing a companion animal. It seemed that as soon as they were offered the space and granted permission to speak about their experiences, they did so eagerly and with no further prompting.

Another memorable experience was presenting and sharing my research as part of a Community Psychology festival. After my brief presentation listeners were encouraged to get into groups and discuss the topic and it was fascinating to see how the conversation went along the tables with seemingly every person taking a turn in sharing their experience of companion animal bereavement. The majority of people in this group were therapists, psychologists or trainee psychologists themselves, yet their experience of the unacceptability and disenfranchisement of their grief was just as present. One psychologist who spoke of having lost her dog expressed surprise at her own assumption that people would not understand or want to listen to her grief. In response to this, another posed the important question, “if we as psychologists feel like we cannot speak about the loss of our animals, how can we expect our clients to speak about it?”.

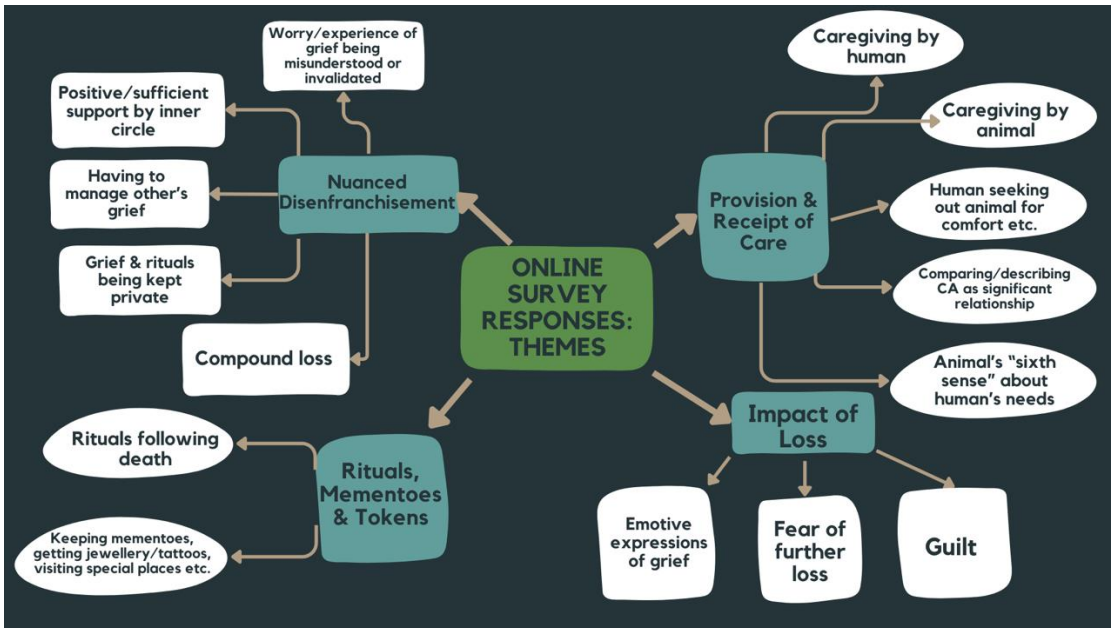
I believe what this research shows, is that, just like with interhuman relationships, the bonds people have with their companion animals are unique and often deeply meaningful and the loss of them can be devastating while people’s attempts at coping with these losses are as unique and rich as their relationships. I believe the bonds people have with their animals cannot be understood in the same way as the relationships we have with other humans because they are fundamentally different. This lack of understanding of what these relationships are in their essence might be part of why people struggle to share and explain their emotions, but what remains for me is something Eliza said during her interview:

> *“I hope researchers never figure out a way to quantify that (relationship) because there is something magical in an interaction with an animal. It is not quantifiable. It's not something we can reduce down, in terms of researching and saying, ‘Oh, it's that component.’”.*

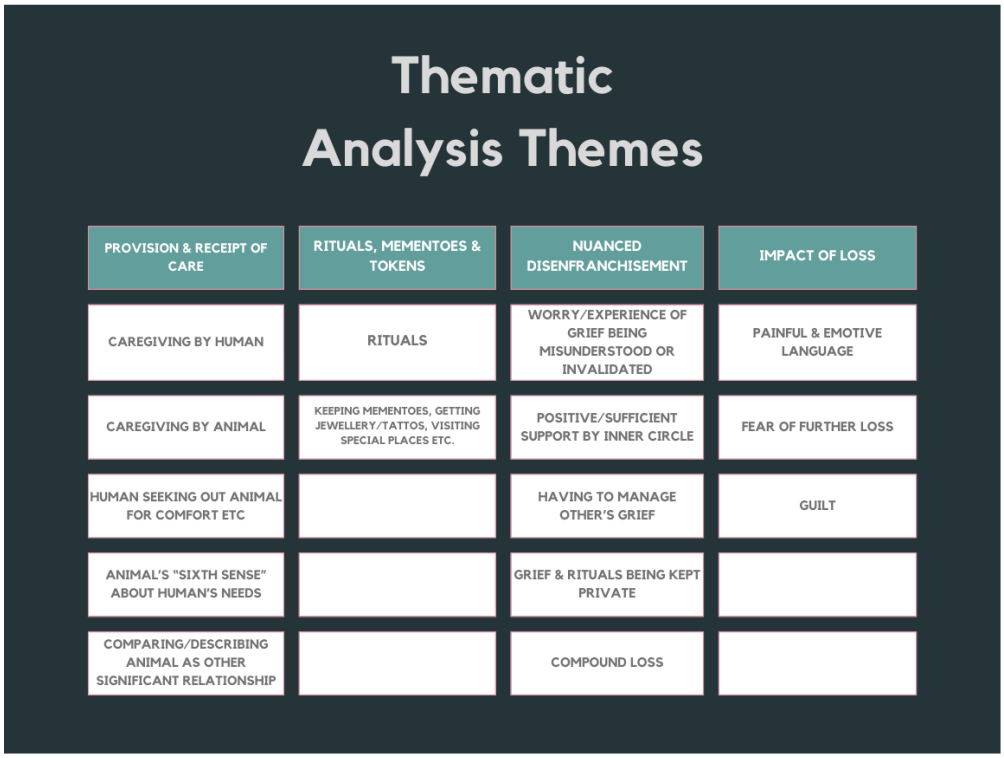
So as practitioners, while we might not be able to explain how human-animal relationships and companion-animal bereavement fit neatly into existing theoretical frameworks and while we cannot perfectly explain people’s love and grief for their animals, we can still offer and hold space for these experiences. What the research and my personal experiences throughout this process have shown me, is that people are grateful for the opportunity to share the fond memories and grief experiences of their animals in an environment in which they feel understood and listened to. I have also understood more deeply a foundational aspect of psychoanalytic practice: that speech is multiple and topics often signify concerns that are not immediately apparent to either the speaker or the listener. I believe that being open to this as therapeutic practitioners will add to our practice and has the potential to lead to better care for our clients.

6. Appendices

Appendix 1



Appendix 2



Appendix 3

Respondents/Themes	Respondent 1	Respondent 2	Respondent 3	Respondent 4	Respondent 5
Care	"He cuddled all day and constantly purred which was very soothing for our daughter", "He soothed my daughter after epilepsy seizures enormously" "He also was a cat flu carrier so sneezed a lot and needed his face washed a few times a day."	"The only living being you could trust who would never hurt you"."(He) gave me purpose in the sense that I was responsible for not just myself"		She was there for every step of my life, every big event, every birthday or celebration, and also sad events, "...she was a containment for my emotions"	"(CA) taught me to be very patient, gentle, to take your time and not rush... in a smell the flowers kind of way. She also taught me how big of a commitment it is, to care for another being. She taught me to love.", "I took a gap year and took care of her every day."
Rituals & Mementoes	" (...) we still feel his love and we have his ashes at home with us which I pat every day."	"Pictures and places"		"(I) was present throughout the process of putting her down virtually."	
Significant Bonds	"My daughter and step daughter both called him their best friend."	"(CA) was my best friend"			"She was one of my dearest friends"
Impact of Loss	"(Losing a CA) is exactly the same (as losing a close human). They leave a huge gap in one's life, especially if they have a huge	"For me it was the same as loosing a human, if not worse"	"It did feel like a family member was gone though (...) it wasn't as dramatic as losing a close relative.", "I actually felt a strong	"My dog was everything to me and still a year after her death I feel my eyes welling up writing about her.", "Both my	"After she died, my life at home got quiet. No more walks. Haven't had a pet since. I miss having a furry friend a
	personality and are always there. It gets easier with time but even now 3 years after his passing I still call his name occasionally and miss him. (...) Everyone missed him hugely."		resentment of owning pets in general. I questioned the purpose of connecting to something so strongly that doesn't have a long life span.", "I can imagine to have a dog on my own. (Although I'm already dreading the day of the future dog's death too)."	animal and close human deaths have left internal voids that are impossible to fill", "I feel (a lot of) empty space without her."	lot. I miss her and think of her often."
Disenfranchisement		"I am someone who likes distance and time to recover in my own way. So I feel I received that."	"There was no support for me but I didn't need and therefore didn't seek it. More so I had to support another family member."	My best friend had just adopted a dog at the time, she understood immediately what I was feeling and she came to see me with her dog. It helped to talk about it, but I always feel like I have to play my dog's death down to people because not everyone understands.	"Yes, I do feel like I received comforting support. I was living in London at the time, away from home & away from (CA). (...) My flatmate was very empathetic and handled me with extra care for the first few days."
Guilt					

Respondents/Themes	Respondent 7	Respondent 10	Respondent 13	Respondent 14	Respondent 30
Care		"Well, the fact is that (CA) made my life so much better. I never felt lonely again", "I always have felt that my connection with (CA) was special because in some way I feel like he chose me", "I had plenty of time (...) and I thought I could invest that time to educate a dog"	"He was very intuitive- he would know if I was upset", "He taught me a lot about care, patience, play and letting go"	"I felt the companionship between us that developed had a very positive impact on my wellbeing and mental health. I benefited from the routine and responsibility (...)", "Altogether she made my home a more welcoming environment to return to", "She (...) would seek contact and comfort from me"	"(He) protected me."
Rituals & Mementoes	"I have lots of photos and videos although I find it quite difficult to hear her meow on video. I have a framed photo in our bedroom"		"(...) one friend painted me a beautiful watercolour of (CA) (...)"	"I still have her collar - it sits on a shelf next to her photo and will continue to for the remainder of my days."	"I kept (his) lead and collar with (me) for a while after he died."
Significant Bonds	"She was my best friend, I loved her so much.", "She was my soul mate in cat form."	"I feel like he chose me. He was not my pet. I was his human."	"He was my friend"		
Impact of Loss	I feel just as sad and emotional - I think it's affected me just as much (as a close human's death).", "I still dream about (her) all the time and cry when I think of her (like now lol)."	"Before (CA), I had experienced two painful loses (...) and I felt I could die due to sadness both times. But the very worst moment in my whole life by far was loosing (CA).", "Both situations (human vs CA dying) are extremely painful, but being honest, (CA)'s loss affected me more deeply. I shared my day by day with (CA), so after his death I missed him continuously."	"His death was agonising. (...) I haven't ever felt grief like it yet."	"When I lost my dog, it completely destroyed me. I am perhaps not the most emotionally expressive person (I did not cry at any of my grandparents funerals) but I cried for almost a day when my dog passed."	"(After his death I) struggled to sleep alone; felt lost due to having no one to spend time with; was more tearful", "I've never allowed myself to be close to another pet as much!"
Disenfranchisement	"My mum was the only person who felt as strongly as me. My boyfriend had never had pets so was difficult for him to really understand but he tried. I called in sick to work but lied about why - my	"My closest persons supported me so much. Everybody knew my relationship with (CA) and I felt they were there at any time that I needed. But there were some people who did not understand my sadness and that was	"I don't think all friends understood the depth of my pain. Even some with pets didn't quite understand my regret at not being with him."	"Outside of my close friends and family, I did not feel as comfortable telling people what had happened. I returned to work as normal (...) and I did not feel that my colleagues or managers would understand my loss.	"(I) had no one I could open up to."

	boss at the time wouldn't have understood"	hard to handle sometimes. I hated some comments like 'it ls only a dog' or 'you should be worried about other things more important than this'. I would have appreciate more respect."		Thinking back, I feel that I should have perhaps handled this differently. I was very clearly impacted by what had happened and spent most of my lunch breaks alone, but due to my own preconceptions about the working world and it's view towards pet bereavements, I felt it best not to share what I was going through."	
Guilt		"I remember a strong feeling of guilt related to (current CA) after (CA)'s death. A feeling that I had had not experienced before: that I would not be able to love (current CA) at the same way I loved (CA)."	"I won't ever get over the fact I wasn't with him. He hated the vets. I promised him I'd get a vet to come to our home but I wasn't there to provide that. He was tired and I should have made the decision earlier but I wasn't able to let go."	" (...) I struggled with the idea of "replacing" her (...)."	

Appendix 4

Information Sheet

The Making And Breaking of The Human-Animal Bond –
A qualitative Exploration of the Relationship with, and Grieving Process for, Companion Animals

You are invited to take part in research being conducted by the University of the West of England, Bristol. The research is exploring people's relationships with pets or companion animals.

Before you decide whether to take part, it is important for you to understand why the study is being done and what it will involve. We would be grateful if you could read the following information carefully, should you have any queries or would like more information please do not hesitate to contact Joana Czycholl, Faculty of Health & Social Science, University of the West of England, Bristol, Joana2.Czycholl@live.uwe.ac.uk

Who is organising this study?

This study is being conducted by Joana Czycholl as part of a Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology. It is being supervised by Dr Chris Pawson, Head of Psychology, and Dr Miltos Hadjiosif, Senior Lecturer in Counselling Psychology.

What is the aim of the research?

The aim of the research is to explore the experiences people have around bonding with their pets and, more specifically, their experiences of losing a pet through ageing, injury or illness of the animal. The following survey is an initial study in which we will be asking you several open

A

ended questions.
Should you be interested to participate in a more in-depth interview later on, there will be an opportunity at the end of the survey to indicate this and to leave your contact information. We would like to ensure you that your answers will be anonymised for the purpose of analysis and will not be connected to your details if you wish to provide them for a follow up discussion.

The results of this study will be analysed and used as part of a doctoral thesis. They might also be used in conference papers and peer-reviewed papers. Should you wish to obtain a copy of said thesis, please contact the researcher at the above-mentioned email address.

Who can take part in this study?

We are interested in the views and experiences of people aged 18 and over who have lost a companion animal (cat, dog, horse, etc.) through death. Please carefully consider taking part if you feel the subject matter might negatively affect your mental well-being.

Do I have to take part?

You do not have to take part in this research. It is up to you to decide whether or not you want to be involved. If you do decide to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form. You are able to withdraw from the research without giving a reason up until the point at which the data is analysed, which will be one month after your completion of the survey. To do so, please write to Joana2.Czycholl@live.uwe.ac.uk and quote the code you will be asked to generate at the beginning of this study. We would like to reassure you that there is no consequence should you decide not to take part or to withdraw from the study in the timeline outlined above.

What happens if I agree to take part?

Should you decide to take part in this study you will be shown several open-ended questions and be asked to answer them as fully and descriptively as you can/are willing to. This will take approximately thirty minutes depending on how much you have to write. You will also be asked a few demographic questions about yourself as well as whether you would be interested in taking part in a further interview.

What are the benefits of taking part?

We are aiming to gather more information about people's experience with the bereavement of their pets and how this might have affected them. We hope this research will inform counselling practice and the way therapists, as well as the general public, perceive the struggle people face when they lose a trusted companion animal.

What are the possible risks of taking part?

We do not foresee or anticipate any significant risk to you in taking part in this study. If, however, you do feel uncomfortable at any time, please feel free to withdraw or skip a particular question. If you feel you need support after your participation in the survey, you will be given further resources at the bottom of this sheet. You are also welcome to contact the researcher who will be able to put you in touch with further suitable support agencies.

What will happen to your information?

All information we receive will be treated in the strictest confidence and will be anonymised once it is downloaded off of this service. No hard copies of the data will be produced and relevant files will be kept in secure and password protected folders which only the researchers will have access to in accordance with the University's and the Data Protection Act of 2018 and the General Data Protection Regulation requirements. Should you provide any identifying information during the survey, these will be deleted or anonymised immediately. Your anonymised data will be analysed and we will ensure that there is no possibility of identification or re-identification from this point. All data will be deleted upon the completion of this study

In the event you would like to participate beyond this survey, any personal information such as a name and contact details will be stored separately from any answers you provide as part of the survey.

If you have further questions about what happens to your data, please find our Privacy Notice as a downloadable file below.

Who has ethically approved this research?

The project has been reviewed and approved by the faculty of Health & Social Sciences at the

University of the West of England's University Research Ethics Committee. Any comments, questions or complaints about the ethical conduct of this study can be addressed to the Research Ethics Committee at the University of the West of England at: Researchethics@uwe.ac.uk

Who can I approach for support if I feel the subject matter is negatively affecting me?

If you feel you need support around grief, please see the following resources or contact the researcher who will be happy to help you find further sources of support.

Samaritans: If you need someone to speak to about how you are feeling you can call Samaritans at 116 123 any time in the day or night or send them an email at jo@samaritans.org. They will respond to your email within 24 hours.

Cruse: Cruse supports people who have been bereaved, including those bereaved by pets. You can call them on 08088081677 or 08456002227 (in Scotland). Alternatively, you can send them an email at helpline@cruse.org.uk

At a Loss: This is a signposting website for the bereaved. Visit ataloss.org to help you find bereavement services and counselling.

What if I have more questions?

As mentioned above, if you would like any further information or you have questions about this research, please contact Joana2.Czycholl@live.uwe.ac.uk

Thank you for considering taking part in this study.

Download a copy of the Information Sheet here: Information sheet human animal bond

Download a copy of our Privacy Notice here: Privacy notice

Consent Form

The Making and Breaking of the Human-Animal Bond - A qualitative exploration of the relationship with, and grieving process for, companion animals

This consent form will have been shown to you with the Participant Information Sheet. Please ensure that you have read and understood the information contained in the Participant Information Sheet and asked any questions before you sign this form. If you have any questions please contact a member of the research team, whose details are set out on the Participant Information Sheet

· I have read and understood the information in the Participant Information Sheet which I have been given to read before asked to sign this form;
· I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the study;
· I have had my questions answered satisfactorily by the research team;
· I agree that anonymised quotes may be used in the final Report of this study;
· I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time until the data has been anonymised, without giving a reason;
· I agree to take part in the research

◯ Yes
◯ No

In order to ensure you can withdraw from the study even after you completed the survey, please fill in a code you could quote back at a later date should you decide you no longer want to take part. The code should be the first two letters of your

mother's first name, the two digits of your birth month (e.g. 07 for July) and the last two digits of your mobile number.

Block 3

What is your age?

- ◯ 18-29
- ◯ 30-39
- ◯ 40-49
- ◯ 50-59
- ◯ 60-69
- ◯ 70+

What is your gender?

- ◯ Female
- ◯ Male
- ◯ Non-Binary
- ◯ Prefer not to say

Did you have pets as a child?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

What types of pets did you have?

What type of animal was your companion animal that you will think of when answering the following questions?

- ◯ Dog
- ◯ Cat
- ◯ Horse
- ◯ Bird
- ◯ Other

Please specify

How long did you live with your companion animal before it died?

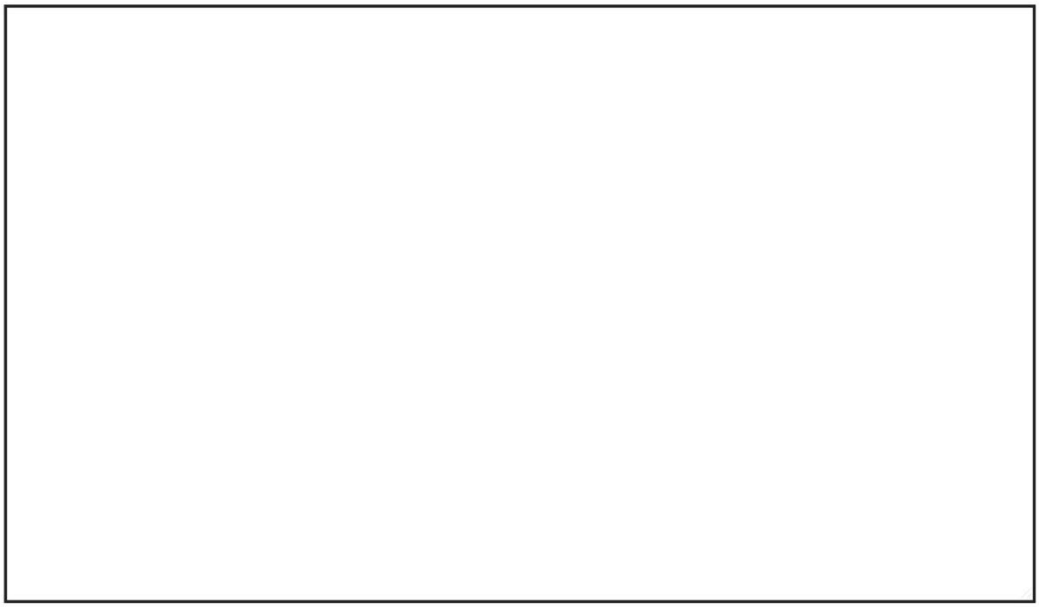
- ◯ 1-5 years
- ◯ 5-10 years
- ◯ 10+ years

Block 2

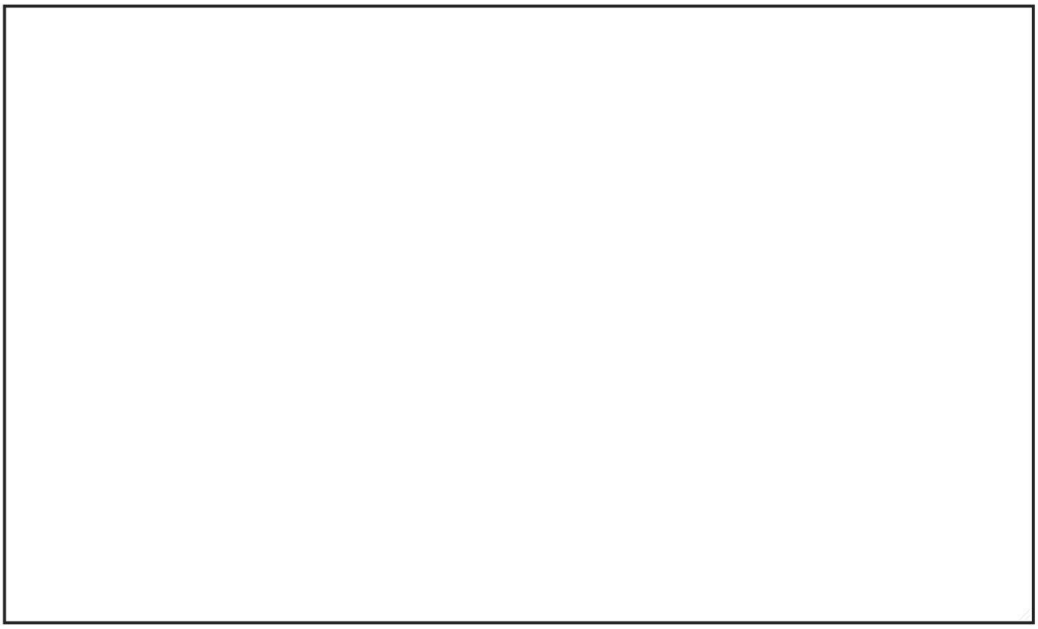
In the following section, we will ask you 7 open-ended questions about your relationship with your companion animal. We encourage you to take your time and answer the questions as fully as you are able to and give as much detail as you are comfortable with.

1. Tell us a bit about your history and relationship with your companion animal. What did this relationship mean to you?

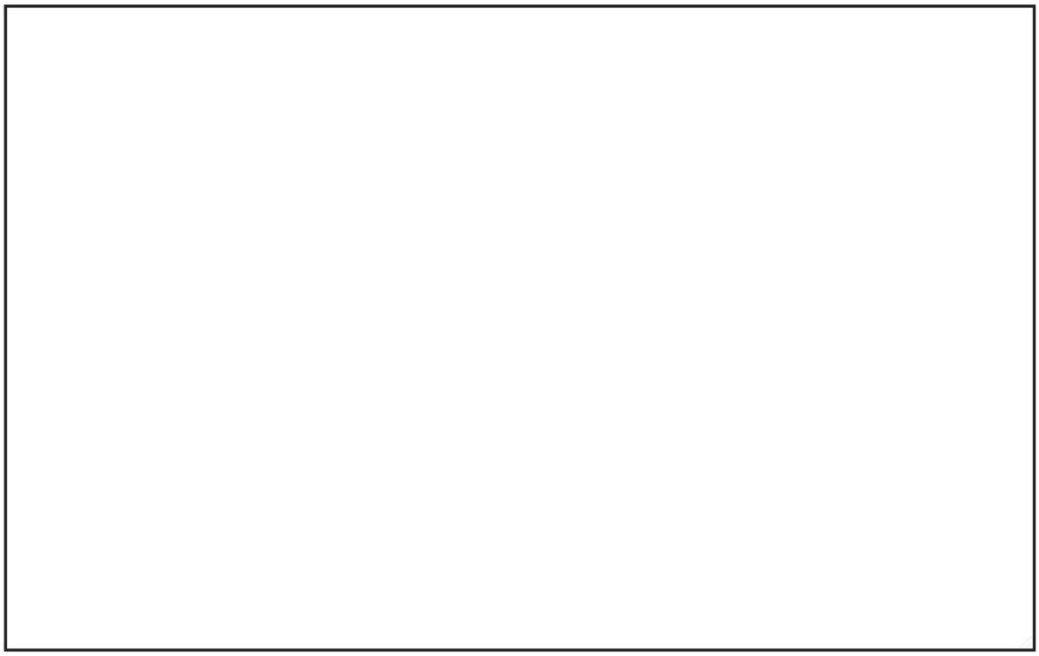
2. How do you think your companion animal affected your life? What has changed after their death?



3. How do you feel the loss of your companion animal compared to that of a (close) human?



4. When your companion animal died, how did the people around you react to your loss? Do you feel like you received the support you needed at the time? If not, what would you have liked to be different?



5. Is there something you feel still connects you to your companion animal?

6. Have you gotten another companion animal since? Why or why not?

7. Is there anything you would like to add about your relationship with your

companion animal that has not been covered yet?

Default Question Block

Would you be interested in taking part in a more in-depth interview about this topic?

*Note that even if you agree, this does not necessarily mean you will be contacted

- ◯ Yes, please feel free to contact me
- ◯ No, thank you

Please click this link to submit your contact details

Appendix 5:

Narrative Analysis Interview Invitation and Prompt

Dear X,

My name is Joana and I am a doctoral student in Counselling Psychology at UWE. I am looking into the bond people have with their companion animals and how they experience the loss and bereavement of these animals.

Your participation would require taking part in an interview with me. Since I am based in London the interview would most likely take place via Microsoft Teams and last around 1 to 1.5 hours.

I mainly would like to hear about your relationship with your animal. What were the two of you like when they were alive and how have you related to them after she passed away? I might interject at times but it is up to you to tell your story however you like.

If this is something you would consider taking part in, please let me know. I have attached the information sheet and consent form and please don't hesitate to ask any questions.

Thank you so much and kind regards,

Joana

7. Journal Article

Article Draft – Nuanced Disenfranchisement in Companion Animal Bereavement

The topic of the human-animal bond is receiving increased attention from psychology researchers as well as practitioners. This article explores the experience of companion animal bereavement, with a focus on what the literature describes as 'disenfranchised grief' (Cordaro, 2012; Spain, O'Dwyer & Moston, 2019; Marr, Kaufman & Craig, 2022). This article utilises parts of the research conducted for a doctoral thesis, consisting of a thematic analysis of data obtained through an online qualitative survey (n=31). Several themes emerged in the survey data analysis that allowed insight into the phenomenon of companion animal bereavement, this article specifically focuses on participants' experience of disenfranchised grief. The findings that emerged are analysed, contextualised and linked to existing literature before possible implications are made for therapeutic practice.

Introduction:

Animals have always been part of human life. Whether as predators, prey, livestock, protection or companions. While the type of human-animal interaction might have changed throughout the millennia, there has been a reliance on our animal companions from very early on in human history.

Domestication of animals is thought to coincide with a change in climate about 21,000 years ago that forced humans to change from hunting and gathering to a more stationary existence that necessitated the introduction of food production and keeping livestock which, in turn, required the protection of said livestock (McHugo, Dover & MacHugh, 2019).

With time and additional resources, animals were kept not just for their practical functions, suggesting an evolution from the animal as a tool to that of a companion (Cohen, 2002; Greenbaum, 2004). Animals have consistently been found to have positive effects on physical (e.g. Andreassen, Stenvold & Rudmin, 2013; Ghan &Rico, 2019; Janssens et al., 2020; Smith, 2012; Wheeler & Faulkner, 2015 etc.) as well as mental (e.g. Covert, Whiren, Keith & Nelson, 2016; Sable, 1989, 1999; Sharkin & Knox, 2003; Siegel, 1990; Wood, Giles-Corti & Bulsara, 2005 etc.) health. The bond humans establish with their companion animals is widely referred to as an attachment bond in the relevant literature (Cohen, 2002; Kurdek, 2008; Zilcha-Mano, Miculincer & Shaver, 2011b).

It follows that the relationships people establish with their companion animals are deep and significant and that the loss of the animal negatively impacts the human companion. While some research has found that grief following the loss of a companion animal is less severe than following a human death (Eckerd, Barnett & Jett-Dias, 2016; Rajaram, Garrity, Stallones & Marx, 1993), several studies have suggested that the loss of a companion animal is comparable to that of another human (e.g. Gerwolls & Labott, 1994; Lavorgna & Hutton, 2018; Lee, 2020; Lyons et al., 2022; Planchon, Stokes & Keller, 2002),

However, compared to the death of a human, the loss of an animal tends to be a less socially acceptable reason for grief (Doka, 2008). This phenomenon of socially unsanctioned grief is commonly referred to as ‘Disenfranchised Grief’ (Doka, 1989, 2002, 2008, 2020). It is thought to occur when the loss (e.g. miscarriage), the relationship (e.g. extra-marital affair)

or the griever (e.g. person with mental disability) are not recognised as such or if the death itself is disenfranchising (e.g. suicide) (Doka, 2020). The impact of a disenfranchisement of grief can be complications in processing said grief (Hanschmidt, Lehning, Riedel-Heller & Kersting, 2016; Kaufman & Kaufman, 2006) as well as a lack of posttraumatic growth seen in other types of bereavement (Spain, O'Dwyer & Moston, 2019).

This piece of research hopes to shed light on the phenomenon of disenfranchised grief following the death of a companion animal, exploring if or how people experience their grief as disenfranchised and allowing for conclusions to be drawn that can be utilised to suggest possible implications for therapeutic practice.

Methodology:

The approach to this research was qualitative, given that it intended to explore participants' lived experiences of the loss of their companion animals. Analysis of the data was conducted from a critical-realist viewpoint, which adopts positions of ontological realism and epistemological constructivism (Maxwell, 2015). This viewpoint assumes that everyone has a unique perspective of the world informed by personal experience and interpretation, meaning that there is no one correct scientific way of understanding reality (Lakoff, 2008, p.265).

Given the aim of the research programme - to capture a relatively broad picture of grief experiences across a spectrum of participants, a qualitative survey was employed. An online qualitative survey seemed to lend itself well to the aims (Braun, Clarke, Boulton, Davey & McEvoy, 2021), especially considering the sensitive nature of the topic as well as the restrictions still in place following the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach allowed participants to take as much time as they needed and the anonymity offered greater accessibility (Braun, Clarke & Gray, 2017), and also offered advantages around the speed of data collection (Jowett & Peel, 1999). Furthermore, the area of companion animal bereavement is comparatively under-researched (Adams, Bonnett & Meek, 1999; 2000; Archer & Winchester, 1994; Harrison & Harrington, 2001; Margolies, 1999). In this case,

qualitative surveys are thought to be especially useful to gain insight into a broader range of participants with greater diversity (Braun, Clarke & Gray, 2017). It provides a more 'wide-angle lens' than other qualitative research methods, while still gathering participants' individual views and experiences (Toerien & Wilkinson, 2004).

Participants:

Participants were recruited by circulating an email throughout the university's participation pool, an e-mailing list students and university staff can join to take part in research projects, as well as through the researcher's social media. There were several attempts to widen participation by utilising online forums and Facebook groups around the topic of animal keeping and animal bereavement but with limited success due to group policies and a lack of uptake in these online spaces.

Inclusion criteria required participants to be over the age of 18 years, had to write about an animal they considered to be a companion animal. There was no specification as to what species were considered companion animals as the definition of a 'companion animal' is subjective and, in part, up to the individual's perception and interpretation. Complete responses were collected from 37 participants. There was a clear majority of female participants (n=27) over male participants (n=8), with two participants indicating they identified as non-binary. Indicated age ranges ranged from 18-29 to 50-59 with the majority of participants (n=14) indicating they belonged to the 30-39 age range. In the survey, most participants spoke about a dog (n=22) or cat (n=12) with one person each writing about their guinea pig, hamster and bird.

Design:

The survey was designed and analysed using Braun & Clark's (2006) approach to thematic analysis. The survey questions were developed by evaluating the existing literature (Meadows, 2003) and designed to be as open as possible without being too vague. They aimed to provide the participants with enough guidance to be able to comprehend the questions while leaving space for them to answer freely (Meadows 2003). The questions were also piloted with a number of undergraduate students and changed according to their feedback and where any issues of clarity or understanding became apparent.

The research received ethical approval from UWE Bristol's ethics committee. All participants were given an information sheet and required to give their consent before completing the questionnaire. Participants were asked to complete an online questionnaire made up of six demographic questions (age, gender, childhood pets, species of companion animal, how long they lived with the animal in question) and seven open, long answer questions about the relationship with their deceased companion animal and their experience of the bereavement of the animal (see Appendix 3).

Analysis:

This qualitative survey study utilised thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun et al., 2021) to analyse the collected data. The data was coded in stages in which I initially read and re-read the participants' answers which allowed me to know the data well enough to identify and consolidate codes into possible themes. For example, codes like "special attention from animal", "animal senses struggle" and "animal as a source of comfort" were consolidated in the subtheme "Caregiving by Animal" which eventually fit into Theme 1: Provision and Receipt of Care". Themes were generated not necessarily based on the frequency in which they were mentioned, but by identifying which themes appeared as threads that collectively pulled through the survey answers in meaningful ways. After several reviews of these initial themes, I identified participants' quotes as fitting into these overarching themes. Themes were then plotted into a mind map (see Appendix 1) and subsequently arranged into overarching themes and sub-themes (See Appendix 2). This process was dynamic and the themes and subthemes were refined and renamed several times to accurately represent what participants seemed to want to express in their statements.

Results:

As mentioned above, this research was conducted as part of a doctoral thesis. During the Thematic Analysis of this data, four themes emerged: Theme 1: Provision and Receipt of Care, Theme 2: Mementoes, Rituals & Tokens, Theme 3: Nuanced Disenfranchisement and

Theme 4: Impact of Loss (see Appendix 2). Since reporting and discussing in detail all themes that emerged as part of this research would be too extensive, this article will focus on the theme of 'Nuanced Disenfranchised Grief'.

As discussed above, disenfranchisement of grief is a phenomenon routinely mentioned in connection with companion animal bereavement and in most of the relevant literature (e.g. Adrian & Stitts, 2017; Cordaro, 2012; Stewart, Thrush & Paulus, 1989 etc.), in this survey it did not present itself as unambiguously as existing literature would suggest. As mentioned in the literature review, disenfranchised grief is described as a socially unsanctioned and often dismissed or invalidated form of grief (Doka, 1989; 2002; 2008; 2020). Existing literature on companion animal bereavement does not tend to explore the phenomenon beyond this. However, the statements made by respondents in this survey suggest that the disenfranchisement in these cases is not as black and white.

Some respondents did describe a general lack of understanding or validation when it came to their grief. Respondent 19, for example, stated:

> *" (..) Anytime I bring up his (dog) name or mention anything about him it feels like they get annoyed or just don't want to talk to me about him. I am pretty much left to deal with this all alone with no support other than my other two dogs."*

While Respondent 13 said:

> *"I don't think all friends understood the depth of my pain. Even some with pets didn't quite understand my regret at not being with him."*

However, in most instances, it was not as clear-cut. Respondents described sufficient support and understanding from their immediate circle of friends and family, such as Respondent 24 who said:

"My partner did not understand as he never felt close to an animal before, but he was supportive. My family all understood how much he meant to me and was great about it."

At the same time, many people stated a lack or at least a perceived lack of support and understanding outside of this inner circle. Respondent 14, for example, said:

"Outside of my close friends and family, I did not feel as comfortable telling people what had happened. I returned to work as normal - I was working in a high-paced, high-pressure local authority role and I did not feel that my colleagues or managers would understand my loss. Thinking back, I feel that I should have perhaps handled this differently. I was very clearly impacted by what had happened and spent most of my lunch breaks alone, but due to my own preconceptions about the working world and its view towards pet bereavements, I felt it best not to share what I was going through."

There remained a sense of a lack of acceptability of the participants' grief by wider society. As Respondent 11 stated:

"It's far more socially acceptable to be upset about the passing of a dog when you are a child than grief when you are in your 30s."

A few people also described having to manage not only their own pain and grief but also that of other people. Respondent 3 said:

"There was no support for me but I didn't need and therefore didn't seek it. More so I had to support another family member."

And Respondent 28 stated:

"My mum was distraught which in turn made me an emotional wreck."

In both of these examples, the respondents themselves seem to be coping with the loss of their companion animals but are having to support and manage other people in their grief. While this may be the case in human bereavement as well, there is a question as to whether increased availability of general support would affect how much mourners have to lean on their family and friends in these times.

What was evident as well, however, was the appreciation respondents had for the small gestures of genuine empathy and understanding by the people around them. Respondent 17 who had their cat cremated in the crematorium seemed moved by the kindness and attentiveness of the crematorium staff in allowing her to take her time to say goodbye, choose an urn and make sure to take a paw print and fur clipping for the respondent to keep, which the respondent stated helped them in processing their grief. Respondent 13, too described their appreciation for a friend's thoughtfulness and empathy saying:

> *"I don't think all friends understood the depth of my pain. Even some with pets didn't quite understand my regret at not being with him. Some did though and one friend painted me a beautiful watercolour of (dog) which was so thoughtful."*

Respondent 4, too, described the genuine empathy and understanding of a friend:

> *"My best friend had just adopted a dog at the time, she understood immediately what I was feeling and she came to see me with her dog. It helped to talk about it, but I always feel like I have to play my dog's death down to people because not everyone understands."*

These moments respondents described in which they felt understood, validated and taken seriously in their grief come across as glimmers of light and lightness where they are not alone and solely responsible for carrying their grief.

Lastly, a few statements also showcased what could be identified as compound loss, meaning losses that occur simultaneously (Scheinfeld et al., 2022) or which build up following the lack of acknowledgement of a previous loss. Respondent 19, for example,

spoke about struggling with infertility for years but it was the loss of their dog that they identified as the cause of their intense grief, saying:

> *“I've decided I do not want to have children of my own anymore. I wanted children more than anything for 8 years and no luck. Now, I am not interested. I don’t think having a baby will make me happy.”*

It seems the ongoing grief through infertility struggles found its expression in conjunction with the loss of a much-loved companion animal which the respondent had envisioned to be a part of their child’s life growing up. In this case, the loss of their dog might have triggered a thitherto unacknowledged pain and grief for the child they wished for and could not have. Disenfranchisement of grief may have played a role here, too. Infertility and perinatal loss, like companion animal bereavement, are considered to be a disenfranchised form of grief which is often left unacknowledged due to stigma and lack of social acceptance of the topic.

Overall, there seems to have been nuance in how people wanted the outside world to react to their loss and mixed experiences in how others responded to the participant’s grief. Some stated they felt they did not need more support than they received, while others struggled with the lack of understanding they felt they encountered. Due to the design of the study, there were a few responses that were, unfortunately, unclear and which would have been interesting to explore further. Participant 21 gave one such answer in which they stated:

> *"I feel as if I did receive some support from friends and family but never thought it mattered enough to bring to counselling."*

In this instance, it is unclear whether the respondent did not think to share their loss in a counselling context because they did not feel the need for support because they felt the loss did not impact them that much, or because they felt it was not an important or valid enough topic to share with their counsellor, pointing to a fear of having their grief invalidated.

Taking into account the breadth of answers respondents gave, the disenfranchisement of their grief does seem to permeate their experiences, however, there were several accounts of people feeling sufficiently supported and understood by the people closest to them. Instances of genuine empathy and understanding, too, offered a reprieve from the heaviness of grief. While it does not always become clear whether people do not share their grief outside of their inner circle because they do not feel a need to or because they fear rejection and a lack of understanding, the accounts of people stating they felt well supported by their friends and family cannot be dismissed and suggest that the phenomenon of disenfranchised grief in companion animal bereavement is not as unambiguous and straight forward as previously thought.

Discussion:

As discussed in the results section, the way in which disenfranchisement emerged in the participants' responses was not what was anticipated when considering the existing literature. There was clearly a spectrum regarding if and how people were looking for their grief to be acknowledged, understood and supported by the people around them with some expressing they were happy to process their grief on their own, others were happy with the support they got while some obviously did feel misunderstood and unvalidated in their grief. But overall participants were not communicating their experiences in a way that could be unambiguously categorised as disenfranchised grief but appeared to be more nuanced. With some exceptions, people did feel genuinely supported and understood by their close family and friends. The disenfranchisement of their grief largely appeared to affect them outside of this inner circle, with acquaintances and at school or work. Participants also seemed to be able to classify which support came from a place of real empathy, understanding or an ability to relate to the loss and which reactions may have been supportive as such but who were unable to fully grasp the meaning of the loss. Essentially what emerged during analysis was that the disenfranchisement of companion animal bereavement was not as obvious and clear-cut as anticipated.

The literature and research that exists around disenfranchised grief, largely states that the phenomenon is a commonly found aspect in companion animal bereavement (e.g. Cowling, Isenstein & Schneider, 2020; Doka, 2020; Spain, O'Dwyer & Moston, 2019), without describing nuances of this phenomenon. However, Robson & Walters' (2012) paper on 'Hierarchies of Grief' is one paper that questions the binarity of disenfranchised grief. They argue that instead of viewing it as either present or absent, the acceptance of grief follows a social hierarchy in which close friends and relatives are at the top, while companion animals, for example, are towards the bottom. While this does not fully explain the findings in this piece of research, their approach offers a different attempt at explaining disenfranchisement that seems at least more fitting than the binary description present in most of the existing literature.

There also may need to be some consideration given to the depth of disenfranchisement that might exist where it is clearly present. While many participants stated sufficient support from their inner circle, it remains unclear whether they still would have liked some recognition of their loss outside of this circle or if they were truly satisfied being able to share their grief with friends and family. As one participant stated, while they felt supported by friends and family they did not share their loss at work even though they did not feel well enough to be at work. Thus there might be a question as to whether people feel they will suffer rejection or social sanctions outside of their trusted circle when it comes to their grief. While keeping companion animals in general is on the rise and seems to be more socially acceptable, there are also pop culture tropes such as that of the 'crazy cat lady' (Probyn-Rapsey, 2018) or the animal hoarder (Lepselter, 2011) which tend to portray people with a special fondness for their animals as weird and socially inept.

One potential reason for disenfranchisement to have been less present than anticipated could be due to an increased acceptance of animals as important companions and family members (Pallotta, 2019). Especially in recent years, there appears to be an increase in "pet-parenting" most commonly seen in (voluntarily or involuntarily) childfree adults who invest a significant amount of emotional energy, nurturing and financial resources into their animals, allowing them to form significant bonds while retaining more flexibility and financial power than would be possible with human children (Volsche, 2018; 2019). This, in

turn, is likely to increase the visibility and transparency of the bonds people form with their animals. Especially in the age of social media where many people are sharing their lives online, this allows others to understand the significant role an animal might play in an individual's life, demystifying these relationships. Another reason might be that people feel able to anticipate the reactions of close relations more easily and accurately than those of their wider circle, not to mention that those close to the participants may have had a personal relationship with the animal themselves and were thus better able to empathise.

While the findings of this study are consistent with existing literature, the data collected in the online survey led to the emergence of nuance in certain aspects of companion animal bereavement. The most fruitful implications to be drawn from this research for the field of Counselling Psychology are arguably those related to working therapeutically with clients who have lost an animal companion. Of course, there is diversity and nuance in their experience and the intensity of their grief varies, but in many cases, the language used to describe their feelings of loss is visceral and striking. In some instances participants shared unprompted gratitude for the opportunity to speak about the death of their animal companion, and, for example, stated that they found it cathartic to have been given a space to not only share their grief but also their love and fond memories. One stated that they had never been asked about how they felt following the death of their animal.

While there is a distinct lack of literature relating to treatment, interventions or practice models concerning disenfranchised grief, Cordaro (2012) does make some recommendations about how practitioners can support individuals impacted by companion animal bereavement such as supporting clients to acknowledge their loss and validate their experience, assist them in exploring the depth of the bond they had with their animal as well as exploring how the possible disenfranchisement may impact their grief. Cordaro also emphasises the importance of offering opportunities to meaningfully mourn the animal. There are, in fact, a growing number of specialised Pet Bereavement Counsellors in the UK (Leonhardt-Parr & Rumble, 2022), however, considering the disenfranchisement of this kind of grief that, despite its nuance does exist, the problem remains that individuals may not seek out these specialised practitioners assuming they are aware of them.

The practical implications and recommendations to be drawn from this study are therefore two-fold. Firstly, ensuring an openness about the subject when already in a therapeutic setting, for example through including companion animals in the exploration of the client's relationships or through specifically asking about whether companion animal bereavement is something the client is or has been impacted by. Although, especially considering the nuance of disenfranchisement that emerged in this research and the range in experiences people describe it is important for the practitioner to not assume one way or the other how a client might be impacted by losing a companion animal. Secondly, and more broadly, a practical suggestion would be promoting the acceptance of grieving an animal as valid and understandable to increase social acceptability and decrease disenfranchisement. An example of this might be the inclusion of companion animal bereavement as a possible area or focus of therapeutic work on a practitioner's advertising profile. Also, companion animal bereavement tends not to be part of the curriculum for most counselling, psychotherapy or psychology courses and is rarely mentioned as something a client may be struggling with (Leonhardt-Parr & Rumble, 2022). Integrating companion animal bereavement into curricula could therefore greatly impact the acceptability of this subject in a therapeutic context and prompt practitioners to pay closer attention.

There were a number of limitations that emerged throughout the research process. One is that the online survey format did not leave much space for further exploration. While it did capture interesting and important data, several responses remained somewhat unclear or were promising but not detailed enough, yet there was no way of gaining further insight.

There may also be some limitations concerning the type of participants that took part. Since this study was voluntary and participants were not compensated, it might be assumed that participants who took part did so due to a personal interest in the subject and the desire to share their experiences. This, in turn, means that people who did not feel the need to speak about the loss of their companion animals likely did not take part. This research is qualitative and therefore does not aim to be representative of a population, but this still suggests that there may be a large number of people out there who have lost a companion animal but whose experiences were not explored in this study. While this is to be expected

it is still something that needs to be kept in mind when thinking about implications (e.g. not making assumptions about a clients' experience of companion animal bereavement).

Following on from these limitations as well as the findings of this research, there are several areas that may benefit from further research. Further exploration of the disenfranchisement of grief and how any impact might be mediated by the support of the inner circle could be an important area of further study. If there is a mediating effect from inner circle support, where does this leave individuals who are more socially isolated and often lacking a close inner circle, a group already found to be at greater risk for more intense grief experiences (Gosse & Barnes, 1994; Planchon & Templer, 1996).

Another consideration regarding mitigating the effect of disenfranchised grief might be the level at which people share the relationships they have with their companion animals prior to their deaths. The lack of disenfranchised grief within the inner circle might, in part, be due to an openness about the significance of the bond people have with their animals among the people they are close to. An exploration of this in future research might be helpful in understanding the nuance of disenfranchisement.

Furthermore, as briefly mentioned above, there also seems to be little to no research into whether companion animal bereavement is something people mention in a therapeutic context or specifically seek support for. An exploration of experiences regarding this may provide insight into whether people feel they are able to share their grief in this context and why they may or may not want to.

Conclusion:

This paper aimed to explore the experience of individuals bereaved of their companion animals, specifically focusing on their experience of disenfranchised grief. Participants shared a range of different and unique experiences around the loss of their companion animals that showed that the experience of companion animal bereavement cannot be generalised. Especially when it came to their experience of support during their time of grief, there was a range of different accounts, from participants who did not want any

support to those who felt completely alone and would have liked much more empathy from their environment than they received. Overall, it appeared that people generally felt supported by their close family and friends but either did not share their loss beyond this inner circle or felt misunderstood by their wider network and society.

While there is, of course, scope for further exploration of this topic, this piece of research provided a good insight into whether and how participants experienced their grief to be disenfranchised. It showed that there is, firstly, no universal experience of disenfranchisement and secondly, that there is a nuance in the phenomenon that goes beyond disenfranchisement being present or absent. This nuance might be due to several reasons, that are likely as unique as the individual experiences. Still, several implications can be drawn from this research and applied to therapeutic practice, especially about how practitioners approach the topic of companion animal bereavement and how they may be able to communicate openness towards the subject to mitigate the sense of disenfranchisement individuals feel from wider society.

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