



The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 40

Issue 4 December - *Special Issue on Animals:
Redefining Social Welfare: Connections Across
Species*

Article 5

2013

Relational Ecology: A Theoretical Framework for Understanding the Human-Animal Bond

Jennifer M. Putney
Simmons College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>

 Part of the Human Ecology Commons, and the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation

Putney, Jennifer M. (2013) "Relational Ecology: A Theoretical Framework for Understanding the Human-Animal Bond," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 40 : Iss. 4 , Article 5.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol40/iss4/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by
the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more
information, please contact maira.bundza@wmich.edu.



Relational Ecology: A Theoretical Framework for Understanding the Human-Animal Bond

JENNIFER M. PUTNEY

Simmons College
School of Social Work

This qualitative study investigated the perceived impact of companion animals on the psychological well-being of lesbian women over age 65. Twelve women, ranging in age from 65-80, were interviewed with a semi-structured interview guide. Four thematic findings are highlighted: love and attachment, animals in transitional spaces, challenges and rewards of caregiving, and preparation for death. The author offers the term "relational ecology" to explain how animals contribute to well-being. This integrates the growth task model of human development, object relations theory, liminality, and deep ecology.

Key words: human animal studies, psychological well-being, grounded theory, lesbian, older adults

This paper draws on the findings of an exploratory, qualitative study of older lesbian adults to introduce the term "relational ecology" as it pertains to the interaction between the well-being of humans and their companion animals. The term "relational ecology" bridges psychodynamically informed theory and an ecological perspective to explain how animals help shape humans' identities and foster well-being. Human-animal relationships can be illuminated—albeit with proposed extensions—with a combination of constructs and theories, including the growth task model of development, object relations, liminality, and deep ecology.

The Administration on Aging (1999) estimates that one in five Americans will be 65 or older by 2030, and an estimated 6% of those (four million) will identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Bailey, 2000, as cited in Grossman, 2008). Research on lesbian elders is scarce. A report on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) health by the Institute of Medicine (2011)

suggests that the field of gerontology rarely incorporates lesbian elders in its research. Furthermore, inquiry into LGBT health often excludes older adults. The limited available information indicates a complicated matrix of risk and protective factors related to health status and wellness among lesbian elders. Research suggests that compared to their heterosexual counterparts, older lesbian adults have an elevated risk for poverty (Albelda, Badgett, Schneebaum, & Gates, 2009), depression, psychological distress, and suicidality (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2011; Wallace, Cochran, Durazo, & Ford, 2011).

How do we explain these disparities? The evidence suggests that the disparities correlate with the stress of living as a disenfranchised minority subject to discrimination and victimization (Green & Feinstein, 2011; Meyer, 2007). This is a phenomenon referred to as minority stress (Brooks, 1981). On the other hand, analysis of evidence suggests that a majority of older lesbian adults think that “coming out” has uniquely prepared them for aging. This is a phenomenon termed “crisis competence,” whereby managing the adversity of events such as family disruption and alienation helps prepare one for adapting to the crises of later life (Clunis, Fredriksen-Goldsen, Freeman, & Nystrom, 2005; Kimmel, 1978 as cited by the Institute of Medicine [IOM], 2011).

Lesbian elders are less likely to have children and tend to rely more on social networks and families of choice (Clunis et al., 2005). However, the role of families in the lives of older lesbian adults is not well understood. It appears that lesbians’ primary concerns related to aging are about loss of independence, loss of mobility, and declining mental health or cognitive ability (Hughes, 2009). Many expect discrimination from healthcare providers and believe that providers’ awareness of participants’ sexuality would adversely affect the quality of care (Hughes, 2009). The IOM (2011) identifies a strong need for research on lesbian aging, with a particular focus on family life, including the experiences of families of choice, experiences of grief and loss, end of life issues, mental health, and the experience of later life. This paper explores these issues as they pertain to a particular relational context—also overlooked and under-researched in social work—the human–animal bond.

Why the human–animal bond? Approximately 62% of

American households include a companion animal (American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, 2003; PET AGE, 2008). In the previously mentioned landmark study of older LGBT adults, Fredriksen-Goldsen and colleagues (2011) found that 44 percent of participants have one or more companion animals, although the researchers have not yet analyzed how measures of well-being might vary by presence of an animal in the home.

Broadly stated, animals seem to help people (Walsh, 2009). In a review of the literature about the relationship between dogs and human health, Wells (2007) showed that dogs can prevent illness, detect illness (such as cancer), help facilitate recovery from ill health (such as myocardial infarction), help ameliorate the effects of stressful events, alleviate anxiety and depression, and enhance perceptions of autonomy. "There is well-documented evidence to show that animal companionship can have significant positive effects on people's emotional, social, psychological, and physical well-being" (Sharkin & Knox, 2003, p. 415). Companion animals seem to affect the physical and psychological health of certain populations, such as the elderly (Enders-Slegers, 2000; Hecht, McMillin & Silverman, 2001; Raina, Waltner-Toews, Bonnett, Woodward, & Abernathy, 1999; Siegel, 1990), people living with HIV/AIDS (Castelli, Hart, & Zasloff, 2001; Siegel, Angulo, Detels, Wesch, & Mullen, 1999) and those with cardiac disease (Allen, Blascovich, & Mendes, 2002; Friedmann, Katcher, Lynch, & Thomas, 1980; Friedmann & Thomas, 1995).

Older adults appear to benefit more than other populations from companion animals (Headey, 1999). Cohabiting with animals may promote health among older women by mediating stress and loneliness (Krause-Parello, 2008). One study, conducted with a national probability sample of adults age 65 and older, showed an inverse relationship between pet ownership and depressive symptoms (Garrity, Stallones, Marx, & Johnson, 1989). Data from the same study demonstrated an association between stronger pet attachment and better physical health among respondents who reported low levels of human social support. Among those who were socially isolated, those who felt more attached to their pets reported better physical health. Similarly, data from a prospective study of physician

utilization among the elderly illustrated that respondents with pets had fewer doctor visits over a one year period of time than those respondents without pets (Siegel, 1990). A qualitative study found that community dwelling older adults perceived their animals as providing social support (Enders-Slegers, 2000).

The mechanisms underlying these benefits remain less well understood. Scholars have postulated that: companionship is the mechanism by which animals promote well-being (Antonacopoulos & Pychyl, 2008); animals act as a buffer against stress (Serpell, 1991); animals provide social support that alleviates the effects of stress (Enders-Slegers, 2000); animals reduce their guardians' isolation and loneliness (Raina et al., 1999); exercise, via dog walking, prevents illness (Brown & Rhodes, 2006); and pets, specifically dogs, act as catalysts for social interaction (McNicholas & Collis, 2000).

The human-animal relationship is a young and growing focus of scholarly inquiry in social work. In literature pertaining to human services, it is divided into the investigation of two distinct subject areas: naturally occurring pet ownership (such as having an animal in the home) and animal-assisted interventions (such as animal-assisted psychotherapy). This study aimed to expand knowledge on naturally occurring animal companionship among a population not yet represented in the human-animal bond literature: older lesbian adults. The study had four goals: (1) explore how companion animals may support psychological well-being; (2) understand the needs of older lesbian adults with respect to providing care for their companion animals; (3) create an opportunity for older lesbian adults to make their experiences more visible; and (4) illuminate shared themes that may have implications for building theory about lesbian women in later life, the human-animal bond, and general human behavior (LaSala, 2005). What do older lesbian adults perceive as the rewards and challenges of their relationships with companion animals? How do older lesbian adults perceive the impact, if any, of companion animals on their psychological well-being?

Methods

Given the purposes of this study, grounded theory methodology was the best fit. Grounded theory is intended to inductively develop an abstract conceptualization that explains a phenomenon (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Instead of merely describing a pattern, grounded theory aims to offer an explanation about why or how a pattern happens (Glaser, 2001; Holton, 2007).

This was a non-probability sample gathered through purposeful and snowball sampling techniques. Eligible participants were female, age 65 or older who self-identified as lesbian, lived in a non-institutional setting, had any kind of companion animal, and self-identified as the primary caregiver of their pet(s). Individuals who had lost an animal within the past six months, or whose animals were seriously ill or dying, were excluded. The sample consisted of 12 women whose ages range from 65-80, with a mean age of 71. Seven of the respondents were either married, cohabitating with a partner, or in a civil union. Five of them were single or divorced. The respondents' marital status was partially determined by the states in which respondents reside and the policies governing access to marriage. Seven participants were previously married to men, and five of them had children, all of whom are adults now. Given the goal to include varied data and develop theoretical saturation, efforts were made to iteratively recruit women with diverse experiences related to age, sociopolitical context, relationship status, socioeconomic status, and health.

The interview guide consisted of open-ended, semi-structured, exploratory questions and probes. Content areas of the interview included benefits and challenges of having an animal, reasons for adopting an animal, importance of animals over the life course, experiences of aging, and descriptions of the nature of the relationship with an animal. Data were collected specifically for research purposes through interviews of approximately two hours in length that were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. Each respondent was interviewed once. The Simmons College Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the study proposal and all material related to study recruitment and consent procedures.

Constant comparison data analysis allowed for simultaneous immersion in the data collection and analysis. This data analysis approach lends itself to the inductive generation of plausible themes and patterns that represent the stories of the phenomenon under study (Strauss & Corbin, 1994), requiring systematic examination of similarities and differences across the data. Analysis began with open coding, which led to the development of a preliminary list of codes and thematic categories. The data was reviewed multiple times for comparison. New codes were established until the data confirmed existing themes and subthemes. Memos functioned as a vehicle for shaping the emerging analysis by conceptually linking data into themes and making comparisons. They also served as a reflexive process for maintaining self-awareness about biases and assumptions so as to reduce threats to trustworthiness. Glaser (1978) defined a memo as:

the theorizing write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding ... it can be a sentence, a paragraph, or a few pages ... it exhausts the analyst's momentary ideation based on data with perhaps a little conceptual elaboration. (p. 83)

The memos provided a record of how the analysis took shape, and this supports the transparency of the process.

To further enhance the rigor and trustworthiness of the analysis, I debriefed at least monthly with the dissertation committee and shared portions of the data, as well as the theme codebook as it developed, to check for biases, assumptions, and flawed logic (Maxwell, 2005). Two members of the committee independently coded transcripts. In addition, analysis included rigorous searches for discrepant data and for tensions in the data.

Findings

The findings of this study invite us to recast our understanding of human–animal relationships. This close examination of human–animal interaction provides insight into how this respondent group engaged with existential questions such as: Who am I? How do I want to live? How do I

want to die? What purpose might my life serve? The subjective experiences of the human–animal bond, as shared by the respondents, deepen and broaden our understanding about older lesbian adults' ultimate concerns: end of life, love, survival, and purpose. Five main themes materialized in the data analysis: attachment, animals and transitional spaces, caregiving, preparation for end of life, and trauma. This paper will highlight the first four to lay the empirical groundwork for introducing the term “relational ecology.”

“Souldog:” Attachment

A prominent thematic finding is that this respondent group perceived their companion animals as beloved family members of choice. One respondent referred to her animal as her “souldog.” All but one used the word “love” to describe their feelings about their animal. A majority of respondents identified that a particularly meaningful aspect of this love is that they perceived their companion animals as non-judgmental. One respondent remained closeted throughout her career in order to preserve her employment. She had a valid fear that she would be fired if she disclosed her lesbian identity, and she spoke directly about the non-judgmental quality of animals. She said, “I think that’s what animals are. They’re non-judgmental. They don’t care if I’m a lesbian. They never have.” Every respondent identified that another aspect of the relationship—companionship—was a particularly rewarding aspect of having an animal.

A majority of participants suggested that they experienced their best selves in relationship with their animals. One respondent observed:

She is my souldog ... The love that she has given me, and the love that she has taught. I could say I don’t deserve that. But I know I do. And the look in her eyes tells me that she’s giving me that love, and that I deserve her love ... She’s part of me. She makes me more than I am without her, by myself.

Animals also helped connect people to community and sources of social support that might not otherwise have been possible. This was particularly important for the respondents

who lived in politically conservative states in which they felt more invisible and marginalized.

"A Horrible Time:" Animals in the Space Between

A second major thematic finding is that the human–animal relationship took on remarkable salience while participants navigated transitions and losses, which can be described as liminal periods. A liminal period is a gap, a crack, a transition, or an in between time (Turner, 2008) when one is in a psychosocial space that consists of loss, tension, and presence on a threshold between here and there (Kelly, 2008). The companionship of animals assuaged loneliness and grief during life transitions. However, the loss of an animal precipitated a threshold experience for a majority of respondents, a liminal period in which individuals underwent substantial disorganization to their sense of self, sense of purpose, connectedness, and daily routine. Some respondents coped with losing an animal by creating rituals that resemble customs of mourning when human loved ones die. In retrospective and prospective ways, the grief associated with losing an animal can be dreaded, sustained for years, and/or attenuated. A few participants subjectively experienced such grief as more intense than losing parents or a spouse.

A respondent with terminal cancer reflected on the importance of her companion animals in three liminal periods: as she prepares for death, in the immediate aftermath of her cancer diagnosis six months prior to the interview, and in the wake of her partner's traumatic death twenty years ago:

She's good company for me. Especially since I'm not quite homebound, but I spend a lot more time at home than I used to spend at home. ... Basically, I see her, really, as a companion animal. She keeps me company here. Otherwise, I'd be here alone. ... I really have loved having companion animals. I really have. They have gotten me through some really hard times. Just being there for me, I think. I went through a horrible time when my partner died. Here. That was horrible. I mean, I was really out of it for a number of weeks. I was really not functioning too well. I was—the shock of it was so horrendous, because it was so unexpected. And I was left dealing with a lot of rather complicated issues. And I surprised myself, how well I handled

it. Because up 'til then, I had never had to deal with anything like that before. But I really think that some of my animals helped me through that period. And she certainly has been, you know, a constant here for me. When I was a zombie for three months last summer, she was at least, you know, here to cheer me up.

"A Lot of Work:" The Challenges and Rewards of Caregiving

All respondents shared that caregiving for their animals conferred both challenges and rewards. Caregiving was highly demanding, costly, restrained freedom to travel, was particularly stressful when combined with other burdens, and could exceed the abilities of the respondents. Also, work associated with providing for a companion animal alleviated some respondents' physical pain, fostered a sense of purpose and self-efficacy, and cultivated the human-animal bond.

Respondents described caregiving as a meaningful responsibility, the fulfillment of which helped respondents feel skilled and capable. One respondent felt that protecting animals from harm is a kind of duty inherent to being human. She perceived animals as sentient beings:

Abuse towards animals of any kind, it hits me with the same intensity as abuse to children, because there is just no call for it. And, so I think as, you know, because we have, are so dominant as humans we have a certain stewardship over the environment and animals that we should pay particular attention to.

Put another way, four respondents felt that caregiving for their animals was meaningful in that they needed to attune to something beyond themselves. Furthermore, they felt rewarded by believing that they were uniquely well suited to rescue their animals from harsh conditions and provide for them in a particular way that no one else could.

Nine respondents recounted the difficulties of animals' medical problems. In the case of two participants whose impairment in mobility made it especially difficult to provide for their animals' care, they needed help on a daily basis. In both cases, the caregivers were present for part of the interviews, because they had arrived at the respondents' homes to take the dogs out. The interaction between the respondent, the caregiver, and me was recorded in the transcripts and became a data

source. What became clear was twofold: the respondent and her animal were highly dependent on the dog walker, and the dog walker's presence was beneficial to both dog and respondent. For example, for the respondent with terminal cancer who was largely homebound, her friend visited her twice daily to care for her dog. If she did not have a dog, she would have less frequent human contact.

"There are Times to Die:" Preparation for End of Life

The fourth main thematic finding relates to the respondents' experiences of later life and preparation for end of life. An overwhelming majority of respondents talked about developing wisdom with age, and this entailed feeling more present in the moment, caring less about others' approval, feeling more creative and relaxed, and gaining clarity about—and acceptance of—one's identity. Animals contributed to this vitality by helping respondents socialize, exercise, tolerate stress, and feel purposeful.

Many respondents, however, experienced a combination of freedom, fear, and dread. The most clear and liberated articulation of self in later life was juxtaposed with fear related to injury, intractable pain, loss of abilities to care for oneself, loss of freedom to express oneself, and the possible transition to dependency on others before dying. At a time when many of them made peace with mortality, they also feared losing themselves to health decline that would render them unable to manage their activities of daily living, unable to live as they wish, and unable to have an animal. This fear was expressed by two respondents who disclosed their thoughts of suicide if faced with the loss of freedom and capacity for self-care. One respondent stated,

I'm a big believer in ending your life if you're too miserable. And I do try to work up the courage to end my life if I get too bad off. ... I would just have to make sure somebody could take the animal. And if they couldn't, I'd have to stay alive until they got older.

These fears were also articulated by two other respondents who were experiencing medical problems and associated difficulty with animal care. They felt distressed by the possibility of moving into a living situation that disallows animals. Those

who were ill and could benefit from the companionship of an animal were also the most challenged in their efforts to keep them.

Across the sample, respondents did not fear dying; they feared pain and suffering. They feared, in other words, a bad death. The respondents brought this fear of suffering to bear when making decisions about euthanasia of companion animals. Although they faced decisions about euthanasia with varying degrees of distress, they sought to compassionately ensure “a good death” for their animals. Some respondents wanted the option of euthanasia for themselves. This insight unsettles how we approach end of life for human beings and contributes to ongoing discourse about death and dying in the United States. Consistent with existing research about what most Americans consider a good death, the respondents shared that a good death consists of: acceptance of death, embracing silence, effective pain management, maximized self-determination, peace of mind in knowing that loved ones (including animals) are taken care of, and a death at home in the company of loved ones—including animals.

Discussion

The stories of these 12 women unsettle commonly accepted ways of thinking about identity development, love, family, and well-being. Lived experiences are more complicated than any single theory or conceptual framework can adequately capture. Therefore, the author draws on existing theories to illuminate pieces of the respondents’ stories, extends the theories to further understand human–animal interaction, and highlights how the data troubles certain claims to knowledge. The respondents’ perspectives invite us to question widely held beliefs about the relationship between humans and companion animals, relational spaces in general, aging, and sexuality. To shed light on this intersection, it is useful to consider lifespan development theory, object relations theory, liminality, and deep ecology.

Relational Ecology

I offer the term “relational ecology” as one way of thinking about the human–animal bond. The concept of relational

ecology integrates and applies several theories and perspectives to understand the inter-dependence of humans and their companion animals as they exist in the context of an individual's many relationships (with other people, with the environment, with communities, and with institutions). It is a term that bridges developmental theory (growth-task), psychodynamically informed relational theory (object relations), and anthropology (the concept of liminal spaces) with the science of ecology, which investigates the human and non-human worlds with a particular focus on dynamic relationships between organisms and/or species, and their environment. This is in keeping with the long-standing social work practice orientation of understanding individuals as being in a dynamic and reciprocal relationship with their environments across micro, macro, meso, and exosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Lifespan Development Theory

The developmental themes voiced by the respondents resonate with existing lifespan development theory. Weick (1983) challenged the epigenetic view of sequential adult development according to age-related stages and argued that conceptualizing adult development in the framework of age-related stages is biased by the socio-cultural expectations and norms that govern when adults should adopt social roles (such as entering into marriage and parenthood). The epigenetic view of adult development is particularly problematic for lesbian individuals, who may be subject to different societal expectations and who are excluded in some states from marriage and parenting via heterosexist policy. Lesbian individuals' adult development may therefore be poorly represented by a stage model and better represented by the growth-task model.

The growth-task model suggests that humans experience a continual striving toward growth, and that change is constant. Instead of valuing homeostasis and balance, this model focuses on adaptation to disruption and crisis, which is defined as maintaining a core of stability and simultaneously being prepared for shifts in that core. Furthermore, this model recognizes that change is affected by social roles. Weick (1983) argues that developmental tasks form cyclical, non-linear themes:

the capacity for intimacy, the capacity to nurture, engagement in productive activity, establishment of

balance between dependence and independence, and the capacity to transcend personal concerns. (p. 134)

Instead of mastering each task and then moving on, the growth-task model posits that throughout life, new challenges require that a person refines old resolutions. Weick eloquently states that “the aim of adulthood is not to ‘grow up’ or ‘get it right’ (perfect marriage, perfect job, perfect children) but a free-flowing exploration of self in relation to others” (p. 136).

The findings suggest that these developmental themes apply to older lesbian adults, and that the construct of “others” needs to expand to not only human family, friends, and chosen family, but also companion animals. Each respondent reported continuous identity development throughout their lives that defies simple categorization or monolithic description. In relationship with their animals, this respondent group explores the capacity for intimacy, nurturance, and transcendence of personal concerns; they also engage in productive activity and navigate dependence and independence. They continue to delight in growing.

Object Relations

Quantitative and qualitative research has generated empirical support for the construct of companion animals as attachment figures, consistent with attachment theory as proposed by Bowlby (1973). Building on this existing research, researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 elderly women and argued that animals function as attachment figures and furthermore, that “extreme attachment may result in less desirable health outcomes” (Chur-Hansen, Winefield, & Beckwith, 2009, p. 290). They hypothesize that there is a curvilinear relationship between pet ownership and health, whereby extreme attachment, on one hand, and lack of attachment, on the other, might correlate with psychopathology and negative health outcomes.

Although attachment theory may provide an empirically supported construct for conceptualizing human–animal interaction, it might lead to an overly determined and inflexible conceptualization that can include judgments about what is and is not psychopathological or otherwise unhealthy. The hypothesis Chur-Hansen et al. (2009) propose is problematic because of the way it lends itself to pathologizing individuals

and their subjective experiences. It also seems to fall short of acknowledging two critical elements: one, an intricate understanding of well-being; and two, felt attachment to animals is one part of a person's life that might include trauma, discrimination, oppression, and resilience. I hesitate to categorize any of the respondents in this study as having either a healthy or unhealthy relationship with their animals, given the complexity of their lives, their felt attachments to their animals, and the meaning they made of those attachments. The research trajectory that logically flows from Chur-Hansen's hypothesis leads to another conceptual problem: the operationalization of "extreme attachment" and "lack of attachment" and all that falls in between. I propose that we pull the lens back to the theoretical tradition that attachment theory came from—object relations theory—and include animals in how we define objects, self, and relationship.

Object relations theory asserts that human beings develop internal representations of external people and interactions with those people (termed "objects"). Consistent with social constructionism, I acknowledge that words used to describe phenomenon also shape and constitute the ways we think. Specifically, the use of the term "object" can be problematic because of the way it could further objectify and devalue women and animals. I use the term "object relations" with a cautionary stance and note that I do not intend to contribute to the objectification of women or animals. Rather, its use is consistent with the theoretical tradition of object relations theory.

Internal representations ("objects") become a crucial part of an individual's psychological development and inform, to a great extent, how one develops an understanding of self, of other, and of the relationship between the two. "What is 'outside' often gets 'inside' and shapes the way a person grows, thinks, and feels" (Flanagan, 2011, p. 122). As an illustration, one respondent said in reference to her dog, "She's part of me. She makes me more than I am without her, by myself." A companion animal can function as an object. Animals can become internally represented and important to a person's conceptualization of self and other.

Other researchers have noted that individuals often perceive their companion animals as family members (Cohen,

2002; Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006). Although this is consistent across the literature and with this current research, this study broadens and deepens our understanding of the how the human–animal bond renders importance in some individuals' psychological development and well-being. The relationships between humans and companion animals function similarly to impactful and sustaining human relationships: they help inform and nurture an individual's sense of self and a sense of social connectedness that may not otherwise be possible. Animals provide a kind of mirror whereby individuals can cultivate self-efficacy and accept their strengths and flaws. Companion animals provide a non-judgmental presence that can be internalized in ways that help shape how an individual defines and experiences herself. Animals have helped respondents develop their best selves and experience confidence, self awareness, and self acceptance. One significant contribution of this research is that the inter-species connection can shape and transform identity and community via internalization of animal as object. This concept is illuminated further with an examination of the holding environment as a metaphor for the human–animal bond, as described next.

Holding Environment

Based on extensive research with infants and their caregivers, Winnicott (1956) identified various processes that he described as "holding." He conceptualized the holding environment in two ways: "to describe the biopsychosocial context in which infants are sensitively tended to by their caregivers; and as a metaphor for the silent, sustaining therapeutic functions—the relational matrix—of effective helping efforts" (Applegate, 1997, p. 8). Consistent with the social work practice orientation to the ecological model, Winnicott (1956) offered a broad understanding of the holding environment. He wrote, "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" (p. 310). Therefore, the holding environment is not limited to the caregiver-infant dyad.

Optimal development seems to rest on "good enough" caregiving, which includes attuning to an infant's needs,

failing, and amending for failures in ways that help infants begin to experience love and develop stable internalized representations of others and self (Applegate, 1997). Good enough caregiving includes sensitivity, consistency and reliability, through which being “seen” is a reciprocal, partnering process between infant and caregiver.

The holding environment is a robust metaphor for human–animal interaction. The respondents suggested that in some cases, animals helped provide a holding environment in childhood that was not otherwise available. Such a holding environment was also experienced by the respondents in adulthood, which became evident in the way that they described mirroring by animals, the consistency of animals, animals’ attunement to respondents’ affective states, the way animals provided protection and perceived safety, and also in the ways that animals “failed”—they ran away, did not listen, and had accidents in the house. Individuals can internalize representations of their animals in a way that aids in the development of a sense of self, ego function, stability and safety.

Liminality

The term ‘liminality’ derives from the Latin word ‘limen,’ which means ‘threshold’ (McCoy, 2009). Based on the ethnographic research of van Gennep (1960) and Turner (1964), the concept of liminality emerged in anthropological discourse, when it was associated with rites of passage. Turner (1969) suggested that rites of passage include three phases: separation, transition, and incorporation. Liminality refers to the middle, transition stage, when one is in limbo—when one has experienced loss and has not yet reconstituted. The concept has grown as a salient perspective in several fields of study, including sociology (Broom & Cavenagh, 2011), education (Meyer & Land, 2005), psychology (Kelly, 2008), and social work (Irving & Young, 2004; Thompson, 2007), among others. The reader can imagine a liminal space as a gap, a crack, a transition, or an “in-between space” (Turner, 2008), whereby people experience disequilibrium and disruption of self (Broom & Cavenagh, 2011). Liminality represents a transitional space that can be experienced as psychologically troublesome, anxiety-producing, and transformative. It is an existential state of being and a

psychosocial space that defies categorization and “becomes a useful lens to grasp a subjectivity that refuses to stand still and be named” (Thompson, 2007, p. 334).

One of the significant contributions of this study is the conceptual marriage of liminality and the human–animal bond within a particular context of aging and adversity. The respondent group described several rich and meaningful threshold experiences. Such experiences include: living in the space between what is known and unknown, living through the loss of loved ones, preparing for death, and discovering ways that the bonds between humans and animals can intensify in both depth and complexity during times of transition and loss.

The concept of liminality is a useful lens with which to apprehend several aspects of the human–animal bond and aging. First, animals might help people cope with liminal spaces through their steady, consistent presence. Second, the loss of animals might precipitate disruption of self that characterizes liminality. Third, if we think about liminal space as a kind of borderland, as a space between two entities, then human–animal interaction might be represented as a borderland place where species meet and change each other. Fourth, end of life may be a liminal period, in which people experience loss, dislocation of self, growth, anticipation, and transition from life to death. The quiet, steady comfort of an animal’s companionship might be especially helpful during this time.

In the liminal space, people experience a state of disruption, disorganization, of being neither here nor there, and living loss (Kelly, 2008). The resolution of the liminal stage is evident by incorporating a new social role. For those respondents who came out in mid or later life, this was described as a second adolescence, to which many adapted and incorporated a new social identity. It is curious that the concept of liminality has not been employed as a lens with which to think about “coming out.” An extensive search of the literature suggests that no one has done so. Furthermore, this study suggests that the concept of liminal spaces can help us understand a particular phase—the between place—of coming out. It is in this most disrupted, albeit essential, phase when individuals might need the most psychosocial support. Given how important animals were during various liminal periods in respondents’

lives, the steady, non-judgmental presence of animals might also help individuals manage the stress that can be associated with the coming out process. That being said, Turner's conceptualization of rites of passage broadly and liminality, specifically, might limit our understanding of coming out into a stage-based process. It could lead us to reductively and falsely categorize a process that respondents suggest is recursive, life-long, and multi-dimensional.

Deep Ecology

The social work profession has a long-standing practice orientation to the ecological model, and as such conceptualizes individuals as being intertwined with multiple contexts. Bronfenbrenner (1979) provides the following definition of the ecological model:

The ecology of human development involves the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are imbedded. (p. 21)

Within this model, the relationship between human and companion animal is understood as a "developing organic unit" (Bronfenbrenner, 1944, p. 75) that is reciprocal and changing.

Feminist and postmodern scholars have criticized Bronfenbrenner's model as descriptive and largely failing to consider values, oppression, and power dynamics embedded in transactional processes between systems. Deep ecology provides a mutualistic and emancipatory conceptualization of the ecological model (Ungar, 2002). Deep ecology is concerned with symbiosis, the interdependency between all aspects of an ecosystem, and the intrinsic value of all parts of an ecosystem. Ungar (2002) explains that "thinking about the world ecologically allows human beings to look more critically at human communities and, like the deep ecologist, to proclaim that diversity, complexity, and symbiosis are in our own best interest" (p. 486).

Relationships with companion animals share many qualities with conventionally understood attachments between people, yet these are relationships with living, non-human beings. Drawing heavily on the philosophy of Descartes and the Enlightenment, Western culture often separates humans from the non-human world, endorses a dichotomy between man and animal, devalues the non-human world, and effectively reduces animals to a category of “other” that have value only to the extent that they serve humans’ needs (Macaulay, 1996). Humans often define themselves by drawing contrasts between themselves and animals and staking a claim that human beings—or certain human beings—are superior because they are not like animals (Oliver, 2009). Categories of oppressed people, such as people of color and women, have been likened to animals as a way of justifying their exploitation (Oliver, 2009). LGBT individuals have also been likened to animals as a way of justifying their oppression; as such, animals and lesbian women, especially older lesbian women, are similarly rendered “other.”

As Oliver (2009) argues, “the animals who escape from these [Western] philosophies force us to re-think notions of humanity, animality, pedagogy, and kinship in ways that will have significant consequences for reconceiving our relationships to the earth, the environment, animals, and ‘ourselves’”(p. 22). To consider how animals might be both similar to and different from humans, and yet no less valuable, demands that we think about ourselves and our relationships with companion animals in ways that unsettle us.

Conclusion

This study explored the lived experience of older lesbian adults in a particular relational context, historically overlooked in social work—the human–animal bond—and contributes to two small and growing bodies of literature in the field of social work: LGBT aging and human–animal studies. The fact that the respondents identify as lesbian does not, in and of itself, confer special meaning on the human–animal bond. Clearly, however, the human–animal bond can help older lesbian adults develop ways of being and seeing themselves that might help buffer against the chronic strain of living in a heterosexist culture. What the respondents shared helps deepen our understanding

of the ways that animals can contribute to humans' development and psychological well-being regardless of sexuality.

This study introduces the concept of "relational ecology," which integrates and extends multiple existing theories that cross several disciplines. The respondents' life stories resonate with themes that emerged in prior research on the human-animal bond, for example, animals as family members. That being said, this respondent group has been subjected to an oppressed social status and varying levels of associated, chronic stress. The findings suggest that animals contribute meaningfully to the lives of this respondent group, that animals can help assuage emotional and physical pain, that people can internalize animals into an ever-developing sense of self, and that major developmental themes can be explored within the context of the human-animal bond.

Acknowledgements: The author would like to thank Drs. Stefan Krug, Dana Grossman Leeman, and Christina Risley-Curtiss for their sage mentorship throughout the study described in this article.

References

- Administration on Aging. (1999). *Profile of older Americans, 1999*. Retrieved from http://www.aoa.gov/AoARoot/Aging_Statistics/future_growth/future_growth
- Albelda, R., Badgett, M. V. L., Scneebaum, A., & Gates, G. J. (2009). Poverty in the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community. Retrieved from <http://www.law.ucla.edu/williamsinstitute/pdfLGBPovertyReport.pdf>
- Allen, K., Blascovich, J., & Mendes, W. B. (2002). Cardiovascular reactivity and the presence of pets, friends, and spouses: The truth about cats and dogs. *Psychosomatic Medicine*, 64, 727-739.
- American Pet Products Manufacturers Association. (2003). *Leading trade organization releases finding pets owned by more than half of all U.S. households*. Retrieved from <http://media.americanpetproducts.org/press.php?include=135746>
- Antonacopoulos, N. M. D., & Pychyl, T. (2008). An examination of the relations between social support, anthropomorphism and stress among dog owners. *Anthrozoös*, 21, 139-152.
- Applegate, J. S. (1997). The holding environment: An organizing metaphor for social work theory and practice. *Smith College Studies in Social Work*, 68(1), 7-29.

- Bailey, R. (2000). *Out and voting II: The gay, lesbian, and bisexual vote in congressional elections: 1990-1998*. New York: Policy Institution of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1944). A constant frame of reference for sociometric research: Part II. Experiment and inference. *Sociometry*, 7, 40-75.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Brooks, V. R. (1981). *Minority stress in lesbian women*. Lexington, MA: Heath.
- Broom, A., & Cavenagh J. (2011). On the meanings and experiences of living and dying in an Australian hospice. *Health*, 15(1), 96-111.
- Brown, S. G., & Rhodes, R. E. (2006). Relationships among dog ownership and leisure-time walking in Western Canadian adults. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 30, 131-136.
- Bowlby, J. (1973). *Attachment and loss*. New York: Basic Books.
- Castelli, P., Hart, L. A., & Zasloff, R. L. (2001). Companion cats and the social support system of men with AIDS. *Psychological Reports*, 89(1), 177-187.
- Chur-Hansen, A., Winefield, H. R., & Beckwith, M. (2009). Companion animals for elderly women: The importance of attachment. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 6(4), 281-293.
- Clunis, D. M., Fredriksen-Goldsen, K., Freeman, P. A., & Nystrom, N. (2005). The lives of lesbian elders. *Gay & Lesbian Review Worldwide*, 12(1), 25-28.
- Cohen, S. P. (2002). Can pets function as family members? *Western Journal of Nursing Research*, 24(6), 621-638.
- Enders-Slegers, M. (2000). The meaning of companion animals: Qualitative analysis of the life histories of elderly cat and dog owners. In A. L. Podberscek, E. S. Paul, & J. A. Serpell (Eds.), *Companion animals and us: Exploring the relationships between people and pets* (pp. 237-256). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Flanagan, L. M. (2011). Object relations theory. In J. Berzoff, L. M. Flanagan, & P. Hertz (Eds.), *Inside out and outside in* (pp. 118-157). Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.
- Fredriksen-Goldsen, K. I., Kim, H. J., Emler, C. A., Muraco, A., Erosheva, E. A., Hoy-Ellis, C. P., Goldsen, J., & Petry, H. (2011). *The aging and health report: Disparities and resilience among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender older adults*. Seattle, WA: Institute for Multigenerational Health.
- Friedmann, E., Katcher, A. H., Lynch, J. J., & Thomas, S. A. (1980). Animal companions and one-year survival of patients after discharge from a coronary care unit. *Public Health Reports*, 95, 307-312.
- Friedmann, E., & Thomas, S. A. (1995). Pet ownership, social support, and one-year survival after acute myocardial infarction in the cardiac arrhythmia suppression trial. *American Journal of Cardiology*, 76, 1213-1217.

- Garrity, T., Stallones, L., Marx, M., & Johnson, T. (1989). Pet ownership and attachment as supportive factors in the health of the elderly. *Anthrozoös*, *III*, 35-44.
- Glaser, B. G. (1978). *Theoretical sensitivity*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B. G. (2001). *The grounded theory perspective: Conceptualization contrasted with description*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Green, K. E., & Feinstein, B. A. (2011, November 7). Substance use in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations: An update on empirical research and implications for treatment. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*. Advance online publication. doi: 10.1037/a0025424
- Grossman, A. H. (2008). Conducting research among older lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, *20*, 51-67.
- Headey, B. (1999). Health benefits and health cost savings due to pets: Preliminary estimates from an Australian national survey. *Social Indicators Research*, *47*, 233-243.
- Hecht, L., McMillin, D., & Silverman, P. (2001). Pets, networks, and well-being. *Anthrozoös*, *14*, 95-108.
- Holton, J. A. (2007). The coding process and its challenges. In A. Bryant and K. Charmaz (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of grounded theory* (pp. 265-289). Los Angeles, CA: Sage.
- Hughes, M. (2009). Lesbian and gay people's concerns about ageing and accessing services. *Australian Social Work*, *62*(2), 186-201.
- Institute of Medicine (2011). *The health of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people: Building a foundation for better understanding*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.
- Irving, A., & Young, T. (2004). Perpetual liminality: Re-readings of subjectivity and diversity in clinical social work classrooms. *Smith College Studies in Social Work*, *74*(2), 213-227.
- Kelly, A. (2008). Living loss: An exploration of the internal space of liminality. *Mortality*, *13*(4), 335-350.
- Kimmel, D. C. (1978). Adult development and aging: A gay perspective. *Journal of Social Issues*, *34*(3), 113-130.
- Krause-Parello, C. A. (2008). The mediating effect of pet attachment support between loneliness and general health in older females living in the community. *Journal of Community Health Nursing*, *25*(1), 1-14.
- LaSala, M. C. (2005). Queering ideas: The descriptive and theory-building potential of qualitative research with lesbian and gay families. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, *18*, 61-72.
- Macauley, D. (1996). Introduction: Greening philosophy and democratizing ecology. In D. Macauley (Ed.), *Minding nature: The philosophers of ecology* (pp. 1-24). New York: The Guilford Press.
- Maxwell, J. A. (2005). *Qualitative research design: An interactive approach*. (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

- McCoy, B. (2009). "Living between two worlds": Who is living between those worlds? *Australian Psychiatry*, 17(Supplement), 20-23.
- McNicholas, J., & Collis, G. M. (2000). Dogs as catalysts for social interactions: Robustness of the effect. *British Journal of Psychology*, 91, 61-70.
- Meyer, I. H. (2007). Prejudice and discrimination as social stressors. In I. H. Meyer & M. E. Northridge (Eds.), *The health of sexual minorities: Public health perspectives on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender populations* (pp. 242-267). New York: Springer.
- Meyer, J. H. F., & Land, R. (2005). Threshold concepts and troublesome knowledge (2): Epistemological considerations and a conceptual framework for teaching and learning. *Higher Education*, 49, 373-388.
- Oliver, K. (2009). *Animal lessons: How they teach us to be human*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Pet Age (2008). *Pets are more popular than ever*. Retrieved from <http://www.petage.com/news030801.asp>
- Raina, P., Waltner-Toews, D., Bonnet, B., Woodward, C., & Abernathy, T. (1999). Influence of companion animals on the physical and psychological health of older people: An analysis of a one-year longitudinal study. *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society*, 47, 323-329.
- Risley-Curtiss, C., Holley, L. C., Cruickshank, T., Porcelli, J., Rhoads, C., Bacchus, D. N., et al. (2006). "She was family": Women of color and animal-human connections. *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work*, 21, 433-447.
- Serpell, J. (1991). Beneficial effects of pet ownership on some aspects of human health and behavior. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 84, 717-720.
- Sharkin, B. S., & Knox, D. (2003). Pet loss: Issues and implications for the psychologist. *Professional Psychology, Research, and Practice*, 34, 414-421.
- Siegel, J. M. (1990). Stressful life events and use of physician services among the elderly: The moderating role of pet ownership. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 58, 1081-1086.
- Siegel, J. M., Angulo, F. J., Detels, R., Wesch, J., & Mullen, A. (1999). AIDS diagnosis and depression in the multicenter AIDS cohort study: The ameliorating impact of pet ownership. *AIDS Care*, 11, 157-170.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1994). Grounded theory methodology: An overview. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 273-285). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Thompson, K. (2007). Liminality as a descriptor for the cancer experience. *Illness, Crisis, & Loss*, 15(4), 333-351.
- Turner, E. (2008). Exploring the work of Victor Turner: Liminality and its later implications. *Suomen Antropologi: Journal of the Finnish Anthropological Society*, 33(4), 26-44.

- Turner, V. (1964). Betwixt-and-between: The liminal period in rites de passage. In J. Helm (Ed.), *Symposium on new approaches to the study of religion*. Seattle, WA: Proceedings of the Annual Spring Meetings of the American Ethnological Society.
- Turner, V. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
- Ungar, M. (2002). A deeper, more social ecological social work practice. *Social Service Review*, 76, 480-497.
- van Gennep, A. (1960). *The rites of passage*. London: Routledge Press.
- Wallace, S. P., Cochran, S. D., Durazo, E. M., & Ford, C. L. (2011). *The health of aging lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults in California*. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Center for Health Policy Research.
- Walsh, F. (2009). Human-animal bonds I: The relational significance of companion animals. *Family Process*, 48(4), 462-480.
- Weick, A. (1983). A growth-task model of human development. *Social Casework: The Journal of Contemporary Social Work*, 64, 131-137.
- Wells, D. L. (2007). Domestic dogs and human health: An overview. *British Journal of Health Psychology*, 12, 145-156.
- Winnicott, D. W. (1956). *Primary maternal preoccupation*. London: Hogarth.