

2008

## The benefits of pet ownership for single adults in midlife

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The Benefits of Pet Ownership for Single Adults in Midlife

Lauren McGillivray

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A Report Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Award of Bachelor of  
Arts (Psychology) Honours, Faculty of Computing, Health and Science, Edith Cowan  
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Submitted October 2008

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Table of Contents

Title Page.....i  
 Declaration.....ii  
 Acknowledgments.....iii  
 Table of Contents.....iv

**Literature Review**

Title Page.....1  
 Abstract.....2  
 Introduction.....3  
 Understanding Midlife.....4  
     Relationship Transitions.....6  
         Challenges Associated with Loneliness in Midlife.....8  
         Divorce and Separation.....9  
         Childlessness in Midlife.....11  
 Pet Ownership.....12  
     Pets and Wellbeing.....13  
     Vulnerable Populations.....15  
     Attachment to Pets.....17  
 Conclusion.....20  
 References.....22  
 Guidelines for Contributions by Authors.....30

**Research Report**

Title Page.....34  
 Abstract.....35  
 Introduction.....36  
 Midlife Development.....37  
     Loneliness in Midlife.....38  
     Generative Concern.....39  
 Pets for Psychological and Physical Wellbeing.....40  
 Attachment Theory.....41

The Present Study.....	43
Method.....	44
Research Design.....	44
Participants.....	44
Table 1: Demographic Information of Participants.....	45
Materials.....	45
Procedure.....	46
Analysis.....	47
Findings and Interpretations.....	49
Table 2: Categories of Emergent Themes and Sub-Themes.....	49
Security and Attachment.....	49
Security and a Sense of Acceptance.....	49
Private Relationship and Bond.....	51
Balance.....	54
Time Out from People.....	55
Fill Gaps in Life.....	55
Conclusions.....	57
Limitations of Study.....	58
Implications.....	58
Future Research.....	59
References.....	60
Appendix A: Interview Schedule.....	68
Appendix B: Information Sheet for Potential Participants.....	69
Appendix C: Demographic Sheet.....	70
Appendix D: Letter of Consent.....	71
Appendix E: Counselling and Support Organisations.....	72
Guidelines for Contributions by Authors.....	73



**Pets for Loneliness in Midlife**

**Lauren McGillivray**

## Pets for Loneliness in Midlife

### Abstract

Pets are shown to enhance quality of life through support and companionship. Midlife is a time where pets may be most valuable, since it is a time that involves critical changes to intimate relationships, roles and status. In this article a critical review of the literature on midlife development and demographic trends was carried out. Further, the psychological literature on human-pet relationships was reviewed and integrated with midlife research. Evidence for the psychological and physical benefits of pets is examined and the implications and potential benefits for middle aged adults are discussed. Findings suggest that pets may help to reduce the loneliness and stress associated with critical transitions in midlife. This has significant implications for middle aged adults who are single and/or who live alone. There are considerable gaps in research concerning pets, particularly with regards to midlife. This article holds the potential for gaining new insight into human-pet attachment, its benefit for adults in midlife, and for investigations into broader applications of pet therapy programs.

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Submitted: August 2008

### Pets for Loneliness in Midlife

Midlife is a critical period of transitions during which there is an increase in the changes amongst the number and nature of roles and statuses for middle aged adults (Gordon, Beatty, & Whelan-Berry, 2002; Helson & Soto, 2005; Klohnen, Vanderwater, & Young, 1996). Common transitions include changes in career and social status, preparing for retirement, post parenting, caring for one's ageing parents, and the re-evaluation of intimate relationships (Degges-White & Myers, 2006). Despite the extensive literature on development over the life course, midlife is an area that is poorly defined and understudied. There is still no universally accepted range to define middle age. However based on common developmental trends and the ageing population, 40 to 65 years may be the most appropriate range. This range is reflected in Erickson's work (1963), which is the most widely referenced theoretical framework for life stage development to date.

Middle aged adults are at higher risk of loneliness compared to the younger population. A primary contributor to loneliness is change to intimate relationships. These changes, such as divorce and separation, living alone, and childlessness (including post-parenting) are prominent at midlife (Gordon, et al., 2002). Within the literature on life course transitions there has been a focus on the positive influence that pets have on physical health, stress and coping, and general quality of life (with particular interest on child development and health in old age [Martin & Farnum, 2002; Siegel, 1990]). However there is a clear gap in this literature concerning midlife: a time that is clearly shown to involve critical transitions and consequences for later life. The psychological benefit this cohort may gain from pets is unknown, especially with regards to stress management and reducing loneliness.

Although the psychological and physical benefits of pet ownership are a relatively new topic within the health sciences pets are gaining increasing acceptance and

acknowledgment as a therapeutic tool. Pets are a valuable source of affection, companionship, support, and security, especially for vulnerable people, such as those who are lonely and/or who have intimacy and relationship issues (Beck, 1999). Pets may help people adapt to their change of roles and status in midlife. For the purpose of this review there will be a focus on the most predominant developmental transitions and demographic trends at midlife. Included in the review will be a discussion of relationship changes and challenges associated with loneliness, such as divorce, the loss of a partner, and being or becoming childless. Finally, there will be a review of the literature on pet ownership and human-pet attachment for the potential benefits to middle aged adults.

Due to the gap in research concerning pets in midlife, a central goal of this review is to make pets and the middle aged population more visible within the health and social sciences. Studying the effects that pets have on health and wellbeing for adults in midlife generates valuable knowledge about midlife transitions and the benefit pets may have for this population. This review holds the potential for gaining new theoretical insight into human-pet attachment and its relevance to loneliness in midlife.

### *Understanding Midlife*

Despite vast amounts of research over the past two decades that have been undertaken to understanding midlife, there remains great confusion and variability as to how midlife is defined and represented (Gordon, et al., 2002; Lippert, 1997). Firstly, researchers have used a variety of ages to define midlife development, ranging from 30 to 75 years, and there is still no commonly accepted range to define middle age. Erikson (1963) provides a widely accepted range, based on his theory of life stage development, which is 40 to 65 years. Secondly, midlife has been depicted as a shift from an outwards to an inwards orientation: a period of re-evaluation and personal growth (Degges-White & Myers, 2006), where one can

start to focus on themselves (Gordon, et al.; Robertson, 1978). It has also been depicted as a period of stagnation weighted by unresolved crises (Erikson, 1963), albeit there is no recent evidence of a 'midlife crisis' per se (Lynch, 2000). Current literature connects these views with a more balanced understanding of midlife and represents it as a period of transition rather than a period of prosperity or crisis.

Midlife is a critical transitional period during which there is an increased probability for changes in the number and nature of roles and statuses (Helson & Soto, 2005; Klohnen, et al., 1996). It involves accepting and adjusting to social, psychological, and physiological changes (Gordon, et al., 2002). For instance, recent research has explored factors that influence the way adults experience transitions at midlife, which include family characteristics (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007; White & Edwards, 1990), age and physical health (Barrett & Robins, 2008), and generative needs (Grossbaum & Bates, 2002). For example, it has been theorised (Targ, 1979) that women who do not anticipate and plan for an empty nest (alternatively known as the post-parenting period) experience more distress during this time compared to women who do prepare by taking on alternative roles, such as volunteer work and education (Borland, 1982). This highlights the significance of adjustment and acceptance of change at midlife.

Furthermore, anxiety about declining health peaks at the beginning of middle age (Stewart & Ostrove, 1998). During this time, the first signs of physical ageing become apparent (Barrett & Robins, 2008; Degges-White & Myers, 2006) as people become witness to serious health declines in their parents (Barrett & Robins). Having positive relationships with friends, family, and one's spouse reduces anxiety about declining health (Barrett & Robins; Wickrama, et al., 2001). Barrett and Robins (2008) suggest that positive relationships indirectly influence the perceptions of one's ability to manage future challenges and generally enhance projections of oneself. Having positive relations with one's family was felt to be the

most important aspect of successful transitions in midlife (Gordon, et al., 2002), supporting previous research regarding the significance of social support for psychological wellbeing and life satisfaction in midlife (Dykstra, Van Tilburg & De Jong Gierveld, 2005; Schnittker, 2007). These findings further highlight the importance of adjustments for women in midlife, with specific regard to the psychological adjustment to physical changes and how perceived social support can help with the acceptance of ageing.

Finally, adjusting to alternate ways in which generativity can be achieved is vital for healthy adult development. The role that generativity plays in adult psychological wellbeing has received widespread attention (Shin An & Cooney, 2006) and is considered a key contributor to personal and social worth for middle aged adults (Grossbaum & Bates, 2002; McAdams, Aubin, & Logan, 1993; Shin An & Cooney). Generativity involves caring for and contributing to the next generation with a focus on the 'need to be needed' (Erikson, 1963) and is most commonly achieved through parenting and domestic investments (parental generativity). However, for childless adults generativity can be achieved through altruistic activities such as volunteering, mentoring, and public investments (societal generativity) (McAdams, et al.; Shin An & Cooney). This is an important finding, not only for childless adults, but for adults who are divorced and/or have limited access to their children, and for those who have problematic family relationships.

#### *Relationship transitions.*

In order to better understand midlife, previous research has attempted to identify common transitions over the life course, which has been difficult due to individual and broad cultural differences (Miner-Rubino, Winter, & Stewart, 2004). Nevertheless, common midlife experiences include changes in career and social status, preparing for retirement, lessening of responsibilities, children growing to be independent and leaving the family home (empty

nest), caring for ones ageing parents, generative concern, and changes in or termination of intimate relationships (Degges-White & Myers, 2006).

A central issue for people at midlife involves relationship dynamics, such as being single, delaying or never entering marriage, and in particular, divorce and separation. Approximately 33% of Australian marriages are estimated to end in divorce: an increasing demographic trend that has been well documented in Western countries (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007; Yodanis, 2005). These statistics, however, are believed to be under stated (due to permanent separation or long-term divorce proceedings not resulting in official divorce reports [Hewitt, Baxter, & Western, 2005]), and as a result the readjusted estimates show a likelihood of 50% of marriages ending in divorce or permanent separation (Yodanis). More than 51% of these high divorce rates can be attributed to middle aged adults (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1999). People are divorcing at older ages, with an average age of 36 years in 1986 compared to an average age of 42 years in 2005 (ABS, 2007). Overall divorce rates are found to be highest for people in middle age compared to all other age groups (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2005; ABS, 2007).

Divorce is one of the most critical life course transitions (Sandfield, 2006), which may result in short-term crisis or long-term strain and effect on psychological wellbeing (Terhell, Broese Van Groenou, & Van Tilburg, 2004). These patterns of stress are thought to be related to the reorganisation of social networks following divorce (Terhell, et al.). The literature highlights a decline in the availability of supportive relationships and social interaction following divorce (Kalmijn & Broese Van Groenou, 2005; Sandfield; Terhell, et al.). Many divorcees find themselves socially removed from former circles of married friends (Sandfield) and support and interaction between mutual friends and family of the former spouse are likely to decline (Kalmijn & Broese Van Groenou; Terhell, et al.).

For example, Kalmijin and Broese Van Groenou (2005) conducted a study on more than two thousand married, divorced, and remarried Dutch adults to look at the effect of divorce on social integration. They found that, among their participants, approximately half of the relationships made during marriage were lost within two years following divorce. These included neighbourhood contacts, church attendance, outdoor recreation, and social clubs. Furthermore, a 12 year longitudinal study conducted by Terhell and colleagues (2004) supported the findings by Kalmijin and Broese Van Groenou and further found that the 50% decrease in their social network persisted over the 12 year study. Only half of the divorcees in the study compensated for the network losses in the long term. However, despite these discouraging conclusions, there is also evidence to show that while half of divorcees recuperate their network losses over time to pre-divorce levels, a large percentage of divorcees who do not increase the quantity of their network do increase the quality of the relationships within their remaining network (Kalmijn & Broese Van Groenou, 2005; Terhell, et al., 2004). The quality, rather than quantity of social networks acts as a preventative factor in determining loneliness (Dykstra, Van Tilburg, & De Jong Gierveld, 2005; Flood, 2005; Pinquart, 2003). Still, loneliness in midlife is not uncommon.

### *Challenges Associated with Loneliness in Midlife*

Loneliness is the perception of a deficiency in one's social network (Flood, 2005). Prevalent within current literature is the distinction between two types of loneliness, which is founded on Weiss's theory of relational loneliness (1973). Social loneliness and emotional loneliness are shown to be independent constructs with different underlying factors (De Jong Gierveld & Van Tilburg, 2006; DiTommaso, Brannen, & Best, 2004; Green, Richardson, Lago, & Schatten-Jones, 2001). For example, social loneliness is associated with deficits in social integration and meaningful relationships, whereas emotional loneliness is associated with an absence of an attachment figure, such as a romantic partner (DiTommaso, et al.;



Green, et al.; Van Baarsen, Snijders, Smit, & Van Duijn, 2001; Weiss, 1973). The middle aged population is at risk of both social and emotional loneliness.

Studies show that a major risk factor for loneliness, in addition to losing a partner, is living alone (Flood, 2005). Emotional isolation is not only an issue relating to divorce and widowhood but is applicable to single people and/or people who live alone. The number of people living alone in Australia is on the rise, with a higher increase among people aged over 45 years (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004; ABS, 2005). This trend is predicted to increase dramatically, in Western countries, for people aged over 55 years, who will make up 90% of all people living alone in 2026 (ABS, 2004). Not only is there an increase in people living alone but there are higher numbers of older people who are single and living alone than ever before (Mahay & Lewin, 2007), with over a quarter of people aged between 35 and 59 years living without a partner (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2003). With more adults living into old age, and more middle aged adults living alone and without partners, there should be increased concern about the quality of these later years, specifically with regards to the psychological wellbeing and healthy adjustment into middle and late adulthood.

#### *Divorce and separation.*

De Jong Gierveld & Van Tilburg (2006) found emotional loneliness to be correlated with general feelings of loneliness much higher than social loneliness. In their study, participants without romantic attachment were more likely to report loneliness than people with romantic attachment. Therefore the loss of, or separation from, a partner increases one's vulnerability for emotional isolation and for further feelings of general loneliness (De Jong Gierveld & Van Tilburg, 2006; DiTommaso, et al., 2004; Green, et al., 2001; Dykstra, Van Tilburg, & De Jong Gierveld, 2005; Weiss, 1973). As previously reviewed, adults in midlife

have the highest rates of divorce compared to any other age group, attributing to more than 51% of all divorces in Australia (ABS, 1999). Adults in midlife are therefore at higher risk of emotional loneliness than their younger counterparts.

The effects of friends, family, and supportive networks on psychological wellbeing and life satisfaction are well documented (Cummins, et al., 2004; De Jong Gierveld & Van Tilburg, 2006; Dykstra, et al., 2005; Flood, 2005; Schnittker, 2007). Specifically, marriage is found to have positive influences on social networks, health and wellbeing, and life satisfaction (Barrett, 1999; Mahay & Lewin, 2007). Marriage generally improves social integration, the involvement in social relationships and social contexts (Stephens & Westerhof, 2006), and protects against social loneliness. However following from transitions, such as children leaving home and retirement, intimate relationships need to be renegotiated (Klohnen, et al., 1996) as partners refocus their attention on one another. The long-term consequences of this renegotiation process can result in renewed intimacy or terminations of stagnant and/or unfulfilling relationships (Klohnen, et al.).

In addition to increasing divorce rates, the time people spend divorced has risen from 18 years in 1986 to 24 years in 2002. People are now less likely to enter into a formal remarriage and more likely to live alone after divorce (Sweeney, 2002). This is especially true if the divorce occurs in mid to later life (Sweeney). However divorce isn't the only determinant of living alone or being single in midlife. Four percent of adults aged 45 to 64 are widowed compared with six percent of the total population (the highest rates being in ages above 65). Furthermore, people who are widowed are less likely to remarry compared to people who get divorced (ABS, 2007), increasing their risk of emotional isolation and loneliness. Still, the risk of loneliness in midlife is more commonly associated with divorce than with the death of a spouse (AIFS, 2003). Another prevalent transition at midlife involves living without children.

*Childlessness in midlife.*

There are three primary reasons for being childless in midlife, namely voluntary and involuntary childlessness and the transition to an empty nest. Childless adults are a cohort grossly overlooked in the literature. Parenthood is known to contribute to social integration independently of marriage (Dykstra, 2006). The risk of loneliness is thus heightened for middle aged adults who are also divorced or living alone. Furthermore, although childlessness is known to negatively impact emotional support and connectedness in midlife, and especially in later life (Dykstra; Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007), little is known about the developmental impact it has in midlife.

Midlife is the most common time for one's children to gain their independence and move out of the family home. This is referred to as the 'empty nest', while 'empty nest syndrome' refers to the symptoms of loss and stress surrounding this event (Borland, 1982). The term 'empty nest' has seen much resistance, with researchers regarding it as a sexist and ageist account of the stress many women feel when they lose their motherly role (Lippert, 1997; Oliver, 1977). It is therefore often referred to as the 'post-mothering conflict' (Oliver). Despite its rather dated terminology, the empty nest continues to be mentioned in research (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007; Grossbaum & Bates, 2002; Shin An & Cooney, 2006) and the meaning and concept associated with this conflict are still seen as relevant factors in determining wellbeing in midlife (Lippert; White & Edwards, 1990) even though there have not been advances in this area since the late 90's.

The research that found post-parenting to be a time for relief and freedom from responsibilities (Harkins, 1978; Spence & Lonner, 1971), and an improvement in marital happiness (resulting in a second honeymoon period) and life satisfaction (White & Edwards, 1990) is outdated. In addition, conflicting research that suggests this transition to be a time of

stress and/or crisis (Lippert, 1997; Oliver, 1977) is also outdated. However a more recent study by Wickrama and colleagues (2001) also found evidence for parental stress due to children leaving the family home for example. In this study parental stresses lead to adverse health outcomes. The study is limited, however, since the sample is restricted to rural families with traditional nuclear structures. This limitation highlights an overall shortcoming within the literature on midlife. The focus on traditional families is unusual considering the rise in non-traditional family structures over the past two decades. Further research should fill this gap by conducting studies on middle aged adults who are single, childless, disabled, homosexual, and who belong to ethnic minorities.

Current demographic trends have not been considered in post-parenting research.

Today there are more working mothers and sole parent families than ever before (ABS, 2005; Gordon, et al., 2002), with over 41% of middle aged adults living in sole parent families.

These trends may alter the post-parenting impact on midlife development and possible relevance to developmental research. While the post-parenting period is still a major source of adjustment and role change for some adults (Borland, 1982; Oliver, 1977) there needs to be more current research looking at its impact on middle aged adults in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Possibilities for future research may involve a reassessment of the issues surrounding post-parenting and identity formation in middle adulthood, the effects of post-parenting for sole parents, and the impact of children returning home: a trend observable from the late 90's to date (Hiedemann, Suhomlinova, & O'Rand, 1998).

### *Pet Ownership*

Adults who are lonely and/or who have intimacy and relationship issues may benefit from other forms of companionship and interaction (Beck, 1999; Shin An & Cooney, 2006). This may involve the simple companionship offered by a pet. Pets may also help to reduce

the stress associated with middle age by supporting generative needs and giving people an opportunity to increase social contact, morale and laughter. Research shows that it is generative concern (the conscious preoccupation with the wellbeing of the next generation), more so than generative behaviours (acts of nurturance), that are associated with generative achievement and wellbeing (Grossbaum & Bates, 2002). This suggests that it may be the conscious and explicit meaning people attribute to their behaviours that determines generative achievement. Therefore caring for a pet (acts of nurturance) and identifying this behaviour as generative (showing generative concern through identifying a preoccupation with the wellbeing of another) may aid in the achievement of generativity. This is an important finding, particularly for childless adults and for adults who live alone (Shin An & Cooney).

Pet ownership is a widespread Western custom, with approximately 60% of households owning a pet (Cummins, et al., 2004). The literature to date has focused on the influence pets have on physical health, stress and coping, and general quality of life across various transitional periods in the life course (with a particular focus on childhood development and health in old age). Pets offer one of the most accessible enhancements to a person's quality of life, improving physical and mental health, and increasing happiness and general wellbeing (Beck, 1999). Adults in midlife are frequently confronted by loss and change; pets that provide companionship, attachment, and security may help people adapt to their change of roles and status in midlife. Yet there is no specific research looking at the effects of pets on transitions in midlife.

### *Pets and wellbeing.*

The bulk of the literature on the benefits of pets for wellbeing centres on stress (Allen, Blascovich, Tomaka, & Kesley, 1991; Siegel, 1990; Spence & Kaiser, 2002): More

specifically, the stress associated with declining health (the physiological impact) rather than the stress associated with transitions over the life course (for example the psychological and/or developmental impact). There have been several studies looking at physiological responses in the presence of pets. Blood pressure and other autonomic responses to stress are reduced by the presence of a pet dog (Allen, et al., 1991; Connell, Janevic, Solway, & McLaughlin, 2007; Siegel, 1990). Even watching fish swim around an aquarium can have the same relaxing effect (Edwards & Beck, 2002). A study by Allen, Blascovich, Tomaka, and Kesley (1991) found that the presence of a pet lowered an individual's physiological reactivity to stressful tasks better than the presence of a close friend. Allen and colleagues reasoned that individuals feel less threatened by the presence of their pet compared to their friends: an explanation that is supported by several studies (for example see Geisler, 2004; Spence & Lonner, 1971). Pets provide a non-evaluative social support that is needed to minimise physiological responses to severe stresses, whereas the presence of people can induce heightened evaluation anxiety or feelings of judgment (Allen, et al.; Cohen, 2002; Geisler; Spence & Lonner). This research has implications for the health benefits of non evaluative social support or companionship.

For instance, a study by Seigel (1990) found that the most common reported benefits of pet ownership are companionship, followed by security and feeling loved. The same study also found that, after controlling for covariates (such as age, gender, and income etc), people with pets report fewer doctors' visits compared to those without pets. More specifically, there was less contact made with doctors for people who owned a pet in times of stress (results supported by Headey & Grabka, 2007). The most common stress involved the loss of companionship, such as the loss of family and friends (Siegel, 1990). Seigel concluded that the higher rate of doctor contacts for people without pets was due to the doctors' contact

satisfying the need for companionship and/or that the loss of companionship lead to a greater decline in health.

The non-evaluative social support that pets provide may be of particular benefit for people in midlife who have been through divorce or separation or for people who are single and/or live alone. As reviewed, the availability of supportive relationships following divorce decline (Kalmijn & Broese Van Groenou, 2005; Sandfield, 2006; Terhell, et al., 2004) and many people find themselves socially excluded from former social circles (Sandfield). Furthermore, adults who are single and/or who live alone in midlife are vulnerable to social stigmas (Dykstra, 2006). Pets may help to reduce feelings of evaluation and judgment that result from these experiences.

#### *Vulnerable populations.*

A number of studies have focused on the psychological benefits of human-pet interaction. 'Pet visitation therapy' programs are used in conjunction with mainstream therapies to help improve quality of life. These programs have been implemented and have had successful outcomes with improving the quality of life in hospice care (Geisler, 2004), the reduction of perceived pain in children (Sobo, Eng, & Kassity-Krich, 2006), aiding in the support, stress reduction, and coping of children with chronic illnesses (Spence & Kaiser, 2002), reducing stress and increasing nutritional intake of individuals with Alzheimer's disease (Edwards & Beck, 2002), and re-socialising individuals with schizophrenia (Kovacs, Kis, Rozsa, & Rozsa, 2004) and children with developmental disorders (Martin & Farnum, 2002). These studies illustrate the widespread acceptance and acknowledgment of the benefits of pets in the healthcare system for people of all ages.

In addition, one innovative study (Libiri & Cohen-Mansfield, 2004) recognised the psychological benefits of human-pet interaction and implemented a robo-cat (robotic-pet)

visitation program to patients with dementia (robo-cat being a robotic pet). Robo-cat was found to decrease agitation and increase pleasure and interest among the residents at the nursing home (Libin & Cohen-Mansfield). One may assume that the peaked interest and pleasure gained from the robo-cat would be rather short lived compared to a living pet. On the other hand, given the practicality of a robo-pet, compared to a living pet (in terms of cheaper maintenance, no allergies, no problem behaviour, etc), it may be worthwhile conducting further research to see if the benefits are significant for a variety of samples and whether these effects are long lasting.

An Australian survey by Cummins and colleagues (2004) revealed several interesting factors surrounding pet ownership. Firstly, insecure people are more likely to own a pet, suggesting that one reason for owning a pet is for both physical and emotional security. However whether they would be more insecure if they did not own a pet is unknown. Second, vulnerable people (such as people living alone, the elderly, low income earners, the retired/semi retired) express higher levels of caring for their pet compared to people who live with family, earn mid to high incomes and who are employed. Finally, people who live alone feel the strongest levels of attachment to their pet, while people who live with their partner and children feel the lowest levels of attachment. This reflects the role of the pet as a focus of affection, with this focus being less intense when affection is also shared with a partner and children (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988; Cummins, et al., 2004). These results suggest that the human-pet bond is perhaps stronger for individuals who lack intimate relationships or who are socially vulnerable. This includes middle aged adults who are single and/or live alone.

Pet ownership may benefit different groups of people in different ways (Headey & Grabka, 2007; Melson, 2003). As reviewed, older and lonely people may gain the most benefit from companionship, pets may help to relax people with high blood pressure and stress, inactive people may be inspired to become more physically active, and young children



may be socialised to care for others (Headey & Grabka). Common to people who benefit from pets may be the level of attachment to their pets. High levels of attachment are associated with greater mental and physical health (Dewitte, De Houwer, & Koster, 2007; Siegel, 1990), suggesting the possible significance of human-pet attachment for vulnerable people. Attachment is just one theory that accounts for the relationships formed between humans and their pets.

### *Attachment to pets.*

Since the majority of pets are dogs (Cummins, et al., 2004), most of the literature on human-pet interactions involve studies on dogs. In fact, research shows that dogs provide greater companionship and better attachment figures than any other pet (Cummins, et al.; Siegel, 1990). They also buffer stress better than other pets (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988; Siegel). One explanation for this may be that people spend more time with their pet dogs than with any other pet (Siegel). The increased time spent outdoors with dogs may develop physical or mental strength in owners and in turn improve health and decrease stress. In addition, frequent contact often leads to the formation of stronger attachment bonds (Trinke & Bartholomew, 1997) and it may be these stronger feelings of companionship and attachment that helps to buffer stress for dog owners. Nevertheless, greater attachment is associated with greater mental and physical health when human companionship is inadequate (Knight & Edwards, 2008; Siegel). This suggests the importance of human-pet attachment for people with limited social networks, such as for people in midlife.

Attachment theory was originally developed to explain child-parent attachment behaviours, however research has extended this theory and it has now become one of the principal theoretical frameworks for studying intimate relationships in adulthood (Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Klohnen, Weller, Luo, & Choe, 2005; Sheperis, Hope, & Ferraez, 2003).

Research also demonstrates that we form multiple attachments (as opposed to the once hypothesised sole child-parent attachment) and that there is a continuation of attachments made throughout life (Overall, Fletcher, & Friesen, 2003). Also, that individual attachments consist of different relationship categories (friends, family, and romantic) that serve distinct attachment functions (Overall, et al.; Trinke & Bartholomew, 1997); and finally, a study by Trinke and Bartholomew (1997) found that we form a hierarchy of our attachment figures, with romantic partners being the highest, followed by parents, family and then friends. Interestingly, when partners became attachment figures they repositioned other figures to lower places on the hierarchy (Trinke & Bartholomew). This finding suggests that the lack of certain attachment figures (such as a partner or parents) would reposition the remaining figures (such as friends) higher on the hierarchy, which may lead to a strengthening of this attachment. This finding has implications for pet owners who have limited social networks or vulnerable family relationships.

Due to the redevelopment of attachment theory there is now an increasing body of literature on human-pet attachment. Dogs have been shown to exhibit the features and fulfil the criteria of an attachment figure (Brown, Richards, & Wilson, 1996; Holbrook, Stephens, Day, Holbrook, & Strazar, 2001; Knight & Edwards, 2008; Kurdek, 2008; Roth, 2005; Sable, 1995). According to Ainsworth's (1991) normative attachment framework, attachment relationships must fulfil three criteria: secure base and safe haven functions, proximity maintenance (wanting to be around the figure), and that the loss of the figure would cause distress (separation anxiety). Harzan and Zeifman (1999) support these criteria in their study on attachment bonds and add that one must also report an emotional connection with the figure and that there should be physical or psychological health benefit from having the bond.

For example, a study by Kurdek (2008) examined the extent to which dogs serve as an attachment figure for their owners and found that although dogs rated lower than humans on

attachment features, over 22% of the sample gave their dogs the highest rating or equal to their romantic partner and parents. It is common for people to report that, unlike humans, pets offer unconditional love and affection; they never hurt or abandon you, and seldom go out looking for new owners (Allen, et al., 1991; Cohen, 2002; Sable, 1995). It may be possible for pets to be placed on Trinke and Bartholomew's (1997) attachment hierarchy, particularly for people who have limited human relationships.

The bond people share with their pets can resemble that of human relationships (Holbrook, et al., 2001). Some challenge the boundaries of the human-animal distinction through anthropomorphising pets: a common practice among many pet owners (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988; Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007; Hirschman, 1994). Anthropomorphism is the tendency to ascribe human characteristics to non-human entities, such as animals. This practice is highest among the never married, separated/divorced, and childless adults (Albert & Bulcroft) suggesting a heightened level of human-pet attachment for individuals who do not have primary attachment figures.

Finally, a common theme is emerging within the literature on human-pet relationships, namely, pets as family members. Pets are firmly inside the family circle occupying a similar space to humans within the family (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988; Allen, et al., 1991; Cohen, 2002; Shell, 1986). Individuals identify their pets as family members in reference to the contributions they make to the family, by the way they function within the household or in reference to the pet's role in the family (Albert & Bulcroft; Cohen; Holbrook, et al., 2001); the most frequent role being a child or baby (Risley-Curtiss, et al., 2006). This theme has implications for research on childless couples or people with small or no families.

The human-pet bond is stronger for individuals who lack intimate relationships, making pets particularly important for middle aged adults who are single, divorced, and who

lack intimate relationships. Pets may be a valuable source of affection and support. Moreover, given current demographic changes, such as the rise in living alone and remaining single, pets will increasingly be an important family member in the future household.

### *Conclusion*

There should be an influx of scientific interest into midlife development given current increases in divorce, remaining single and living alone among middle aged adults. Yet there is a gap in current research exploring these trends. Loneliness has become a leading concern among middle aged adults: through both the social isolation associated with being single and living alone and, more significantly, the emotional isolation associated with a lack of intimate relationships.

In addition to divorce, which is a primary contributor to loneliness in midlife, childlessness and the transition to post-parenting have a great impact on loneliness. The risk of loneliness for middle aged adults who are childless and who are also divorced and/or living alone is great, yet childlessness is a topic that is grossly overlooked in the literature. Furthermore, most of the literature on the post-parenting transition is outdated. Current demographic trends have not been considered, such as the increase in working mothers and sole parent families. These trends may alter the post-parenting impact on midlife development and possible relevance to developmental research.

The stress and isolation common to transitions in midlife may make the affection and companionship provided by pets invaluable. However, through reviewing the literature on pets and the associated health benefits through various life course transitions it is clear that the transitions involved in midlife are overlooked. There is a gap in research on the potential that pets may have for improving the health and wellbeing of adults in midlife, particularly for those adults who are single and/or live alone. Pets offer one of the most simple

enhancements to a person's quality of life: improving physical and mental health, supporting developmental trends (generativity) and increasing happiness and general wellbeing.

Pets are found to reduce blood pressure and other autonomic responses to stress. They provide a non-evaluative social support, not offered by human friends, that is needed to buffer physiological responses to severe stresses (Allen, et al., 1991). This non-evaluative social support may be of particular benefit for people in midlife who have been through divorce or separation or for people who are single and/or live alone. Pets may help to reduce feelings of evaluation and judgment that result from these experiences. Furthermore, research suggests that the human-pet attachment is stronger for individuals who lack intimate relationships (Dewitte, De Houwer, & Koster, 2007; Siegel, 1990) and thus the potential psychological and physical health benefits for middle aged adults are great.

In conclusion, the literature reveals a gap in research concerning current demographic and developmental trends in midlife and the psychological benefits of pets; in particular, pets as a strategy for preventing and reducing loneliness. If these issues can be recognised then it may stimulate new investigations into the diverse benefits pets offer for middle aged adults and possibly into broader applications of pet therapy programs. This review highlights potential for gaining new theoretical insight into human-pet attachment and its relevance to loneliness in midlife.

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The Benefits of Pet Ownership for Single Adults in Midlife

Lauren McGillivray

## The Benefits of Pet Ownership for Single Adults in Midlife

### Abstract

This qualitative study explored the perceived relationship between eight single middle aged adults and their pets to gain insight into the psychological importance of this relationship. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted and interpreted using phenomenological methodology and attachment theory. Findings revealed that a sense of security and acceptance provided by pets was valuable, especially during and following transitions, such as divorce and living alone. The role of pets was found to be highly adaptable: providing stress relief during time away from people, increasing social networks, fulfilling generative concerns, and serving as a substitute for social interaction and emotional support. The findings have implications for understanding the complexities of attachment bonds, particularly with regards to human-pet attachment and the dynamics of human-pet relationships.

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Supervisors: Dr. Deirdre Drake and Dr. Elizabeth Kaczmarek

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### The Benefits of Pet Ownership for Single Adults in Midlife

Pet ownership is a widespread phenomenon, with approximately 60% of Western households owning a pet (Cummins, et al., 2004). While the psychological and physical benefits of pet ownership are relatively new topics within the health sciences, pets are gaining increasing acceptance as a valid form of therapy (Kovacs, Kis, Rozsa, & Rozsa, 2004; Sobo, Eng, & Kassity-Krich, 2006). Pets offer one of the most accessible enhancements to quality of life, improving physical and mental health, and increasing happiness and general wellbeing. For many, they are a valued source of affection, companionship, support, and security, especially for people in vulnerable situations, such as those who are lonely and/or who have intimacy and relationship issues (Knight & Edwards, 2008; Siegel, 1990).

The bulk of the literature on the benefits of pets for wellbeing centres on the positive influence that pets have on physical health and stress associated with declining health (the physiological impact; Allen, Blascovich, Tomaka, & Kesley, 1991; Siegel, 1990; Spence & Kaiser, 2002). In particular, the health benefits of pets for people in old age have been a focus (Libin & Cohen-Mansfield, 2004; Seigel). The influence that pets have on the stress associated with transitions over the life course, however, (the psychological and/or developmental impact) is an area that is relatively understudied. The literature that does focus on the developmental impact of pets is primarily concerned with pets and early childhood development (Melson, 2003; Endenburg & Baarda, 1995).

There is a clear gap in literature on the benefits of pets for wellbeing during midlife: a time that is recognised as one involving critical transitions and consequences for later life (Gordon, Beatty, & Whelan-Berry, 2002). Leading social concerns for middle aged adults involve increasing rates of divorce, living alone, and remaining single (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004; Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007; Yodanis, 2005), all of which have

implications for loneliness in mid to later life (DiTommaso, Brannen, & Best, 2004; Flood, 2005; Terhell, Broese Van Groenou, & Van Tilburg, 2004). Further, the implications of loneliness on psychological wellbeing are great.

The psychological benefit single middle aged people may gain from pets is unknown; pets that provide companionship, attachment, and security may help people adjust to and accept transitions in midlife. Given the demonstrated psychological and physical benefits of pet ownership for various other populations, the present study will serve to investigate the perceived relationship between single middle aged people and their pets to gain insight into the psychological importance of this relationship.

#### *Midlife development*

Despite an abundance of research being undertaken over the past two decades into understanding midlife, there remains a lack of consensus as to how it is defined and represented. In particular, the age range of midlife is highly debatable (Gordon, et al., 2002; Lippert, 1997). However Erickson (1963), whose work is the most widely referenced theoretical framework for life stage development to date, suggests that midlife ranges from 40 to 65 years. According to Erickson, midlife brings with it many challenges but also opportunities for greater self-direction and self-understanding.

Current literature portrays a more balanced understanding of midlife than it has in the past (Helson & Soto, 2005; Klohnen, Vanderwater, & Young, 1996; Lynch, 2000) and represents it as a period of transition rather than a period of prosperity or crisis (Gordon, et al., 2002). Midlife is no longer defined by the 'midlife crisis' or post-parenting honeymoon period (Lynch, 2000), but rather another transitional period in the life course. Midlife is a critical time and involves the need to accept and adjust to social, psychological, and physiological changes (Gordon, et al.). Some of these transitions include adjustments to or

termination of intimate relationships (Degges-White & Myers, 2006), children growing to be independent and leaving the family home (empty nest), and generative needs (Grossbaum & Bates, 2002). The constant companionship and support pets provide may be highly valuable to people during midlife, just as it has been during other transitional and challenging periods that involve loneliness or strains on supportive networks (for example, through fighting cancer [Johnson, Meadows, Haubner, & Sevedge, 2003]).

### *Loneliness in Midlife*

Divorce, separation, and essentially being single or alone are primary concerns for many middle aged adults. Overall divorce rates are found to be highest for people in midlife compared to all other age groups (ABS, 2005; ABS, 2007). Although some studies have shown strengthening and increasing qualities of social networks following divorce, the majority of studies show declines in the availability of supportive relationships and social interaction following divorce (Kalmijn & Broese Van Groenou, 2005; Sandfield, 2006; Terhell, et al., 2004). Support and interaction between mutual friends and family of the former spouse are likely to decline (Kalmijn & Broese Van Groenou; Terhell, et al.) and many divorcees even find themselves socially removed from former circles of married friends (Sandfield). Supportive relationships are seen as a protective factor against loneliness and other stresses that can occur in midlife (Gordon, et al., 2002).

In addition, with a current increase in people living alone there are more middle aged adults who are single and living alone than ever before (Mahay & Lewin, 2007). The literature identifies the middle aged population as being at risk of both social and emotional loneliness (Mahay & Lewin). Many studies indicate concern for middle aged adults' adjustment into late adulthood (Barrett & Robins, 2007; Dykstra, Van Tilburg & De Jong Gierveld, 2005; Grossbaum & Bates, 2002).

The distinction between social and emotional loneliness is founded on Weiss's theory of relational loneliness (1973). Social loneliness is associated with deficits in social integration and meaningful relationships, whereas emotional loneliness is associated with an absence of an attachment figure, such as a romantic partner (DiTommaso, et al., 2004; Green, Richardson, Lago, & Schatten-Jones, 2001; Van Baarsen, Snijders, Smit, & Van Duijn, 2001; Weiss, 1973). Loneliness is found to be more evident among single adults who do not have a partner/romantic attachment figure (Cargan, 1981; Peters & Liefbroer, 1997). Emotional isolation is more highly correlated with general feelings of loneliness, than is social isolation (DiTommaso, et al.; Weiss) and therefore the absence of an attachment figure increases middle aged adults' vulnerability for emotional isolation and further feelings of general loneliness. The attachment pets provide may be of particular benefit to middle aged adults during these times of loss or absence of attachment relationships.

In addition, another challenge associated with loneliness in midlife is the post-parenting period or empty nest. Midlife is the most common time for one's children to gain their independence and move out of the family home. There is conflicting research on the psychological outcomes of post-parenting for middle aged adults, with some studies reporting an increase in life satisfaction (Harkins, 1978; Spence & Lonner, 1971) while other studies find it to be a time of stress and crisis (Hiedemann, Suhomlinova, & O'Rand, 1998). Despite this, most research recognises this event as having a significant impact on generative needs (McAdams, Aubin, & Logan, 1993; Shin An & Cooney, 2006) especially amongst sole parents (Hiedemann, et al.).

### *Generative Concern*

Generativity is considered a key contributor to personal and social worth for adults in mid to late life (Grossbaum & Bates, 2002; McAdams, et al., 1993; Shin An & Cooney,

2006). Generativity involves caring for and contributing to the next generation with a focus on the 'need to be needed' (Erikson, 1963). Generativity is most commonly achieved through parenting and domestic investments, however altruistic activities, such as volunteering, making donations, and mentoring have demonstrated equal success in achieving generative satisfaction (McAdams, et al.; Shin An & Cooney). Therefore, engaging in altruistic activities can be of great importance for adults who are childless, have limited access to their children, are living alone (Shin An & Cooney), are divorced, and for those who may just have problematic family relationships.

Pets may help to reduce the negative impact associated with midlife transitions, particularly with regards to generativity needs. Research shows that it is generative concern and not generative behaviours that are associated with generative achievement and wellbeing (Grossbaum & Bates, 2002). This suggests that it may be the conscious and explicit meaning people attribute to their behaviours that determines generative achievement. Therefore caring for a pet (acts of nurturance) and identifying this behaviour as generative (showing generative concern through identifying a preoccupation with the wellbeing of another) may aid in the achievement of generativity; once again demonstrating the potential importance of pet ownership for middle aged adults who are childless or who have limited access to their children.

#### *Pets for Psychological and Physical Wellbeing*

Research on the benefits of pets for wellbeing centres around physiological benefits (Allen, et al., 1991; Siegel, 1990; Spence & Kaiser, 2002). In particular, blood pressure and other autonomic responses to stress are known to be reduced while in the presence of a pet dog (Allen, et al.; Connell, Janevic, Solway, & McLaughlin, 2007; Siegel). Pets are often more effective for relaxation and stress-reduction than human friends (Allen, et al.; Geisler,



2004; Spence & Lonner, 1971). Allen and colleagues (1991) reason that individuals feel less threatened by the presence of their pet compared to their friends. Pets provide a non-evaluative social support that is needed to reduce physiological responses to stress, whereas the presence of people can induce heightened evaluation anxiety or feelings of judgment (Allen, et al.; Cohen, 2002; Geisler; Spence & Lonner).

The non-evaluative social support that pets provide may be of particular benefit for people in midlife who have been through divorce or separation and for those who are single and/or live alone. Furthermore adults who are single and/or who live alone in midlife are vulnerable to social stigmas (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007; Lippert, 1997). Pets may help to reduce feelings of evaluation and judgment that result from these experiences (Allen, et al., 1991).

Many studies that have focused on the psychological benefits of human-pet interaction involve 'Pet visitation therapy' programs, which have been used successfully in conjunction with mainstream therapies to help improve quality of life (for example, see Edwards & Beck, 2002). In this type of therapy patients engage in supervised interaction with animals, which include petting, grooming, and playing with the animal (Sobo, Eng, & Kassity-Krich, 2006). One of the proposed reasons behind why pets provide psychological and physical benefits lies in the attachment that is formed between the owner/client and the pet.

### *Attachment Theory*

Although simple contact with animals has been shown to have profound benefits for health (for example see Edwards & Beck, 2002) it is a high level of attachment to pets that is associated with greater mental and physical health (Dewitte, De Houwer, & Koster, 2007; Siegel, 1990). For example, it is proposed that the strong feelings of companionship and

attachment to pets help to buffer stress for pet owners (Trinke & Bartholomew, 1997). Human-pet attachments can be so strong that they often resemble human relationships (Holbrook, Stephens, Day, Holbrook, & Strazar, 2001). Moreover, pets are frequently considered integral members of the family (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988; Allen, et al., 1991; Cohen, 2002; Shell, 1986). The potential benefits of pet-attachment for individuals who may be lacking attachment figures are significant.

Attachment theory was originally developed to explain child-parent attachment behaviours, however research has extended this theory and it has now become one of the principal theoretical frameworks for studying intimate relationships in adulthood (Fraley & Shaver, 2000; Klohnen, et al., 2005; Sheperis, Hope, & Ferraez, 2003). It has also been suggested that attachment theory provides a useful framework for studying intimate relationships in general (Hazan & Shaver, 1994), and has thus been applied to the literature on human-animal relationships.

Within the past decade psychological research has redeveloped the way attachment relationships are viewed. For example, it is now known that people form multiple attachments (and not just a sole child-parent attachment), that there is a continuation of attachments made throughout life (Overall, Fletcher, & Friesen, 2003), and that individual attachments consist of different relationship categories (friends, family, and romantic) (Overall, et al.; Trinke & Bartholomew, 1997). In addition, attachment figures are ordered in a flexible hierarchy, which is reorganised with the addition or removal of an attachment figure (Trinke & Bartholomew). Finally, greater attachment is associated with improved mental and physical health when human companionship is inadequate (Knight & Edwards, 2008; Siegel, 1990). Given some middle aged adults' threatened social networks and risk of isolation due to divorce and living alone, these redevelopments suggest a possible importance of human-pet attachment for single people in midlife experiencing such transitions.

Since the redevelopment of attachment theory there is now a growing body of research on human-pet attachment. Dogs, in particular, have been shown to exhibit the features and fulfil the criteria of an attachment figure (Brown, Richards, & Wilson, 1996; Holbrook, et al., 2001; Knight & Edwards, 2008; Kurdek, 2008; Roth, 2005; Sable, 1995). In fact, research shows that dogs provide greater companionship and better attachment figures than any other pet (Cummins, et al., 2004; Siegel, 1990). It has been shown that frequent contact often leads to the formation of stronger attachment bonds (Trinke & Bartholomew, 1997) and, in general, people spend more time with their pet dogs than with any other pet (Siegel).

### *The Present study*

Gaps in the literature on human-pet relationships highlight a need for an inquiry into the benefits of pets for people in midlife, particularly for vulnerable middle aged adults at risk of social and emotional isolations (such as those who are single). Given current demographic trends, such as the rise in divorce and remaining single amongst middle aged adults, the psychological benefits that pets may provide are worth investigating. Therefore, the proposed study aims to explore the perceived relationship between single middle aged people and their pets to gain insight into the psychological importance of this relationship.

The results from this study will enrich the psychological literature by generating valuable knowledge about midlife transitions and the benefit pets may have for this population. It is hoped that the benefits of pets for the middle aged population become more visible within the social sciences so that practical intervention, prevention and therapies may be modified to address the specific needs of vulnerable populations, such as single middle aged adults. Furthermore, this study has potential for gaining new theoretical insight into human-pet attachment and its relevance to single middle aged adults and loneliness in

midlife. Therefore, the following research question was developed: "How do single middle-aged people perceive their relationship with their pet/s and what is its' psychological importance?"

## Method

### *Research Design*

This study examined single middle aged adults' perceptions and experiences of their relationship with their pets. Qualitative phenomenological inquiry as proposed by Hein and Austin (2001) framed and guided this study. Phenomenological inquiry is an interpretive methodology, which takes an explorative approach to its subject matter; studying the lived experiences and subjective meanings of psychological phenomena that make up an individual's reality. While there are numerous methods within phenomenological psychology (Hein & Austin, 2001), empirical phenomenology was chosen to guide the study since it allows for a reliable systematic reduction of data whilst preserving the 'essence' of phenomena (Klein & Westcott, 1994).

### *Participants*

Eight single middle aged adults, one male and seven females participated in the study.

Participants were between 42 and 65 years of age ( $M = 54.25$ ,  $SD = 8.24$ ). In a qualitative phenomenological study, a minimum of six participants was considered adequate to reach saturation; the point at which no new information is obtained (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Participants were initially recruited from the researcher's social network using a snowballing technique whereby an initial group of participants were asked to suggest other willing participants (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005). Snowballing is useful for participants who are well networked or for participants who are difficult to

approach directly (Liamputtong & Ezzy). Criteria for participants consisted of anyone between the ages of 40 and 65 years of age (based on Erickson's definition of middle age), who was single and who owned a pet or pets. The time participants had been single (not married or in a relationship) ranged from 11 months to 24 years, with an average of 11 years (SD = 7.8) (see Table 1). Two of the participants had never been married (one participant had been single all of his life) and the remaining six of the participants were single due to divorce.

Table 1

*Demographic Information of Participants*

Pseudonym	Age	Time single	Pet/s
Martin	64	All of life	One dog
Claudia	48	14 years	Two cats
Giselle	42	20 years	Two dogs
Ava	54	4 years	One dog
Helena	55	11 months	One cat
Cleo	59	8 years	One dog
Gloria	65	24 years	Three dogs
Julia	47	8 years	Two cats

*Materials*

A semi-structured, open-ended interview schedule was used in this study (Appendix A). The interviews followed a conversationalist style, which allows the researcher to further develop and expand upon the participants' perceptions and experiences of a particular topic

and allows flexibility for the participant to expand the conversation with what they consider pertinent (Winget, 2005). At the same time, the schedule provides the structure to ensure consistency across interviews (Winget). The interview questions were developed based on theory from phenomenological literature with the aim of exploring single middle aged adults' perceptions and experiences of their relationship with their pet. The schedule consisted of 11 questions that were developed to investigate the research aims. Examples of the questions include, 'Tell me about the role your pet/s play in your life?' and 'Do you feel as though you have a relationship with your pet?' A tape-recorder was used so that the exact content of the interview was retained for reliability of data collection.

A demographic sheet (Appendix C) was used to collect information about age, whether they were single and for how long, and whether they had a pet/s. Finally, a pilot study was conducted with two single middle aged pet owning participants, who were not included in the final study. The pilot study was conducted to assist in the development of the research questions and to ensure the comprehensibility and appropriateness of the questions (Van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001).

### *Procedure*

Following approval from the Edith Cowan University Human Ethics Committee, potential participants were approached and provided a package containing information about the study. These packages included an information letter (Appendix B), introducing and outlining the purpose of the study, with contact names and phone numbers for additional queries. Participants also received a demographic sheet (Appendix C) and a letter of consent (Appendix D) was given to participants to read and sign before the interview process so that they were aware of issues such as confidentiality and anonymity and to obtain permission to proceed. Finally, contact details of relevant veterinary, support and counselling services were

given to participants (Appendix E) in the event that they experience distress over any issues that may surface during the interview.

Upon receiving the signed consent forms from participants an appropriate time and location was arranged for the interview. For the purpose of privacy and comfort all interviews were conducted in the participants' homes. Due to the personal nature of the interview process Liamputtong and Ezzy (2005) suggest that the home is often a place where the participant feels more relaxed and comfortable. Prior to the interview process, the researcher offered to answer any questions and address issues or concerns. The participants were also reminded that their participation was voluntary and they have the right to refuse to answer any questions or to withdraw from the interview at any time, without consequence. Verbal and written consent to tape-record the interviews was obtained from all participants prior to commencement.

The interviews lasted between 23 and 56 minutes, with the average being approximately 35 minutes. Immediately following the interview, participants were given the opportunity to ask questions or readdress any comments deemed necessary. Finally, participants were reminded of the support numbers should they experience distress following the interview and they were thanked for their participation in the research. A journal was used immediately following interviews to record participant comments and relevant personal reflections by the researcher. This was done in order to support the analysis through further definition of participant responses to the interview questions.

### *Analysis*

Tape-recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy of each participant's responses and all identifiable information was changed (e.g., pseudonyms

were used) to adhere to the confidentiality agreement. Following transcription, the researcher followed phenomenological reduction guidelines outlined by Moustakas (1994). The researcher became immersed in the transcripts by first reading them all the way through to obtain an overall impression. Repeated readings of each of the eight transcripts allowed for identification of significant statements relating to the phenomenon. These significant statements were then clustered into 'essences' or 'meaning units' for each participant, remaining in their own words.

Moustakas (1994) and Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest involving the meaning units in a multi-step process that included: repeated readings and reflection of each meaning unit so that an essence could be obtained, integrating these units into broad categories or themes, searching for underlying meanings and sub-themes, and clarifying each unit by relating them to each other and the themes. The frequency of meaning unit was noted to see how many participants contributed to the themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). These themes were then interpreted by the researcher.

Methodological rigour was established through verification and validation (Meadows & Morse, 2001). Verification was achieved through adhering to the phenomenological method, using a reflective journal to note any biases, and achieving saturation through immersion in the data (Guest, et al., 2006). Validation was achieved through triangulation to address confirmability and transferability (The data collected was examined by multiple people so that the findings could be supported, reducing the impact of potential biases). Two associates of the researcher revised the content and developing themes for reliability and interpretation, and then member checking was conducted, as suggested by (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Member checking involved taking the tentative findings back to a minimum of three participants to check for accuracy and authenticity of the researcher's interpretations.



Findings and Interpretations

The aim of this study was to explore the perceived relationship between single middle aged adults and their pet/s. Phenomenological analysis revealed a diversity of positive and meaningful experiences, particularly with regards to the attachment individuals share with their pet and feelings of life enrichment they have gained from pet ownership. Two major themes were generated from the data, both containing two sub-themes, (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Categories of Emergent Themes and Sub-Themes*

Themes	Sub-Themes
Security and attachment	Security and a sense of acceptance Private relationship and bond
Balance	Time-out from people Fill gaps in life

*Security and attachment*

Many participants discussed having a strong bond with their pet/s, which was often expressed as a sense of security and acceptance.

*Security and a sense of acceptance*

Many of the participants who owned dogs initiated discussion about the reasons for choosing their breed of dog. For example, Giselle stated, *“The house had been broken into*

and I'm on my own and everyone in this area knows I'm a single woman...I particularly got breeds of dogs that people know bite" and similarly Martin stated, "I wouldn't live here without a dog because it's just too dangerous". Although it was only dog owners who identified their pets as a source of physical security and protection, the majority of participants found their pet as a source of emotional security and acceptance. Out of the eight participants interviewed, six spoke about the importance of their pet being non-judgmental, non-threatening, and allowing them to express and be themselves. For example, Ava stated, "You don't have to pretend, you don't have to put on, you can just be yourself...you can just express yourself without any concern of being judged". Similarly, Julia expressed her feelings of safety being with her pet compared to people: "They're not like people because people, you know sometimes they can upset me more (if) something they say is not right, but they (pets) don't do anything to hurt me or to harm me apart from killing birds!"

Helena spoke about the constancy her cat provides: "It's something that's continuing in your life...a permanent part of your life whereas you don't actually have permanent people in your life all the time". The sense of permanence pets provide can act as a 'secure base' for people to come back to. Attachment theory holds that secure attachments provide a secure base from where one can feel safe in exploring their environment (Bowlby, 1969/1988). Human-pet attachment provides this secure base from where owners can feel safe in exposing and expressing their most private emotions and behaviours; in effect they are exploring themselves. One participant spoke of being able to express her emotion without having to contain herself: "If you feel like crying you can cry without, like if you're with someone you might not want to do that...you can express whether you're sad or happy or whatever (with a pet) without any holding back" (Ava).

Moreover, Allen and colleagues (1991) hypothesised that people feel less threatened by the presence of their pet compared to their friends during challenging times. This is

because pets provide a non-evaluative social support that people do not. For instance, one participant shared that she felt less judged by her pet than her children and that she preferred the company of her pet during times of stress: *"I can be myself with the cat but I can't be myself with my children... they're all teenagers and they're a bit judgmental of anything outside of a very narrow field"* and *"If I'm extremely upset or something's made me very sad then I'd rather be with my pet than a person"* (Claudia). Individuals may feel more emotionally secure and accepted in the company of their pets when they are feeling insecure (Allen, et al., 1991).

Many of the participants felt that maintaining a relationship with their pet was easier than with a person: *"My pet is more predictable than a person and um it's much easier...you don't have to put as much effort in to keep the relationship as it is, it's very simple to please a pet"* (Claudia). The ease of the relationship between the participants and their pet/s is associated with a felt sense of emotional security and acceptance: the relationship is easy to maintain because there are no barriers or pretences like there can be in human relationships. *"There's that simplicity and honesty because he's himself (pet) and I'm myself and we're just both accepting"* (Ava). The simplicity or ease of maintaining a relationship with one's pet may stand out for single middle aged people due to a challenging relationship history (as it did for many participants), or there may just be a heightened appreciation of an uncomplicated relationship due to midlife transitions and associated stress (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988). Current or past relationships may have been viewed as a challenge or a source of stress, however with pets there is no challenge. This may be evident for Martin: *"They follow you without question, he doesn't question any of my judgments, he's got total trust in me"*:

*Private relationship and bond*

According to Overall and colleagues (2003), individual attachments consist of different relationship categories (friends, family, and romantic) that serve distinct attachment functions. So, for example, a pet may be viewed as a friend for one person but as family for another. The different relationship specific attachments alter the representation and uniqueness of the relationship. Many participants acknowledged this unique bond or personal relationship with their pet as a relationship that may not be shared with other people: *“Well lots of people don’t like dogs in the house and I insist on the dog being inside...you’d find that the other person would have a considerably different opinion of him”* (Martin), *“You know if it was a person you’d say it was more intimacy...she’s (pet) always paying attention to me and her behaviour changes to respond to me and I’m able to notice that, so she’s very connected that way in the way that she’s thinking about our relationship and I can tell she’s doing that and I like that”* (Giselle) and *“I just like them both (pets) and understand about their personalities...It’s just like I can feel like I’m related to them...I can feel like I can see inside their personalities, like what they want and how they react”* (Julia).

The unique attachments people have with their pets can sometimes be perceived as more important than their attachments with people. For example, Giselle stated, *“That’s the most difficult thing you know, more than leaving family, more than leaving friends, more than leaving my house...the dogs are the most important difficult thing to leave, to break up with”*. Research by Kurdek (2008) supported the finding that the perceived closeness one has with their pet may equal or be even greater than the perceived level of closeness one has with humans. Although most of the participants did not perceive their attachment to their pet as greater than attachments they had with people, all of them established their pets as having enriched their lives in some way, supporting numerous studies (Hirschman, 1994; Holbrook, et al., 2001). Ava shared, *“It just feels like another heart beat in the house...another living creature in the house so when I get home it’s not a dead house”* and when asked how

different it would be without her pet she replied, *"It would be like a part of me that's missing"*. Furthermore, *"Pets add to the atmosphere of the family and your life...they're a caring warm part of your life"* (Helena) and similarly, *"I like it when people come here because then everyone's here: the dogs are here, I'm here, my friends are here and it's just a very sort of complete circle...they just add another dimension really, another layer to your life"* (Gloria).

The private relationship and bond they share with their pets now, that enrich their lives, may be related to changes in life circumstances. For example, Claudia discussed her heightened appreciation of her pet now due to life changes: *"I've had a lot of time on my own because I'm unemployed, so that last year there's been a lot more time where it's just been me and the cat and it would have been a lot worse without her even though she's just a cat...I'm just more grateful that she's here"*. Similarly for Ava: *"Well I depend on my dog more for companionship and um in a way security as well...yeah living on my own there's more weight on his importance"*. Martin discussed how different his relationship was with his pets when he was young compared to now: *"It didn't really mean much in my younger times really, it was just the dog was around and you just have to walk it, it wasn't the same relationship at all...never sorta paid that much attention to it you know"*. These findings support various research that show the importance of supportive relationships in times of transition or stress (Barrett & Robins, 2007; White & Myers, 2006), especially for people in midlife (Gordon, et al., 2002).

The strength of human-pet relationships and bonds can be seen when people commonly describe their pets as functional family members (Cohen, 2002). For example, from Claudia: *"She's (pet) like a strong personality that's an integral part of the family"* and Helena: *"They were all part of the family and all had a special role"*. Albert and Bulcroft (1988) found that pets are viewed as more important family members by divorced, never

married, childless, and post-parenting individuals compared to families with traditional family structures (married couple with children). In addition, pets are seen as being so important that they are often related to as people, as is evident in high levels of anthropomorphism (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988; Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007). Some participants even included their pets in family traditions and rituals such as birthdays and dinner: *"He's just part of the family...we have a birthday party for him every year"* (Cleo) and similarly, *"They're just like my children, I regard them as my children...I always cook extra for them"* (Julia).

Finally, many participants expressed their enjoyment in having something to care for. In particular, Helena expressed using her pet to fulfil generative behaviours: *"When kids move and grow up that part of you is, not frustrated, but you still want things and people to care about"* (Helena). When Gloria's son was moving out of home she told him, *"Oh Mickey you're going away. I have to have something to worry about and care about so I want you to get me a dog to replace you"*. Furthermore, both Helena and Gloria (respectively) made a connection between their pets and children: *"You can still be a mum I suppose to the cat...A substitute child perhaps"* and *"It's like a mothering relationship"*. Generativity plays an important role in personal and social wellbeing for adults in mid to late life (Grossbaum & Bates, 2002; McAdams, et al., 1993; Shin An & Cooney, 2006). These responses show that caring for a pet may be generatively significant for some adults in midlife, particularly women. Pets therefore not only act as members of the family but may help to lessen negative impacts associated with generativity needs (Shin An & Cooney).

### *Balance*

Heiman (1965) viewed pets as helping to maintain psychological balance: providing an alternative source for socialisation, interaction, and stress-relief.

*Time out from people*

Some participants were appreciative of the opportunity that pets provide for interaction and a calm environment that is separate from people. *"I feel like the difference from people (is) because (with) people you talk and chat and then somehow you're still thinking in your mind (about) what they've said and what's happening, what they've done. So I just watch TV and they (pets) sit on my lap and I feel relaxed and its very relaxful you know it's just calm"* (Julia).

Having greater personal space away from others (with the exception of meaningful or intimate interactions) is theorised to assist in protection against stress and emotional threats (Evans, Lepore, & Allen, 2000; Greenberg & Firestone, 1977). It is a functional cognitive construct, which allows people to balance stress levels and control aggressive behaviours (Evans & Howard, 1973). Pets allow individuals time for introspection and stress-relief away from other people: *"If people had animals when they come home from their stressful situations, if they could unwind and get away from human beings for a while...I think man has to get away from other people for a while and have a, at least I do, and just sit down and think I suppose. It's funny with people all the time you just don't get time to think, its action reaction all the time"* (Martin). This may be of particular importance for people in midlife during times of transition or stress (Barrett & Robins, 2007; Gordon, et al., 2002; White & Myers, 2006).

*Fill gaps in life*

Pets are often used to fill a combination of emotional and social needs: sometimes substituting human interaction or expanding the range of relationships and social networks (Weiss, 1974). The latter is especially true for Martin, who stated, *"He's very handy in the other way in that he does attract people...and then on the dog walks you'd meet all sort of*

*people it's amazing. People from the lowest to the highest, it's really great, and I think that's one thing a dog does, it helps open up your social scene a lot more".* Claudia and Julia spoke of their pets as substituting human interaction: *"I suppose I count on her to talk to when nobody is home"* (Claudia) and *"When I'm alone they are my companions, like a friend as well...It's not the same like during the day and my friends come over. It's like ok; you can do what you want"* (Julia).

Moreover, pets provide an added source of entertainment and a motivation to exercise and get out of the house: *"I also appreciate that pets are very amusing...the entertainment value is definitely very high up on the scale"* (Claudia) and *"Yeah for exercise, or it's really good to get out of the house"* (Julia). Martin spoke, at length, of the personal importance of pets for stress-relief and an outside interest: *"You'd get all the stress out of your system and you'd come back and the next morning you'd still see everybody stressed up...I was probably the only guy who had any really outside interest every day. They'd come back over the weekend and they'd be alright but when I'd come back the next morning I could start going again coz I had unwound and I think a lot of the other didn't unwind...I the biggest part of the dog was the de-stressing, I think it helps you de-stress a lot, it really does because with humans you're not going to get that de-stress situation".*

---

People need a balance of relationships, from intimate affectional attachments to broader social contacts (Levitt, 1991). Pets contribute to this balance. In some cases, pets may fill the gap of a primary affectional attachment: *"I love them so much, they're the main affection in my life and they give me affection...it's the care and the affection and you've got the love there but when you're with someone you've got that person that's got those things happening and I think it's those things you have to keep in your life and you have to keep happening and having pets is one way to have it"* (Giselle).



## Conclusions

The aim of this study was to explore the perceived relationship between single middle aged adults' and their pet/s. Guided by a phenomenological framework the study revealed that the relationships between these single middle aged adults and their pet/s were positive, enriching, and meaningful in many ways. An important part of this can be attributed to participants' recognition of the security and acceptance their pets provide. Many participants experienced recent transitions, such as unemployment, divorce, and living alone (Barrett & Robins, 2007; White & Myers, 2006), all of which contributed to an appreciation of the constancy, non-threatening and non-judgmental companionship provided by their pets.

The classic attachment and bonding the participants felt with their pets is consistent with many studies (Brown, et al., 1996; Hirschman, 1994; Kurdek, 2008), with participants acknowledging a unique bond or personal relationship with their pet/s. The secure base pets provide for self-expression and exploration of private emotions may be of significance to single people in midlife, especially due to the absence of a romantic attachment figure (Trinke & Bartholomew, 1997). Furthermore, previous relationships may have been viewed as challenging or a source of stress (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988) and thus the simplicity or ease of maintaining a relationship with ones pet may be highly valued for single middle aged adults.

In support of Cohen's findings (2002), most of the participants felt their pets were integral members of the family. Their importance is evident in their inclusion in family traditions and rituals and in the high levels of anthropomorphism (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988; Epley, et al., 2007). Caring for pets was even generatively significant for some participants (particularly women), highlighting the importance of generativity for wellbeing in mid to late

life (Grossbaum & Bates, 2002; McAdams, et al., 1993; Shin An & Cooney, 2006) and showing that pets can be an effective source of generative fulfilment.

The most interesting finding of this study was the adaptable role of the pet. Pets were found to serve as a substitute for social interaction and emotional support (Weiss, 1974) and as an effective alternative source of stress-relief and time away from people. Pets are a catalyst for exercise and getting out of the house, and for increasing social contact during times where these things may be lacking or absent. The gaps in life that pets fill are especially valuable for people in midlife as they appear to maintain psychological balance (Heiman, 1965; Levitt, 1991).

#### *Limitations of the Study*

There is a potential limitation concerning the uneven genders of the participants. One of the participants was male and seven were female. The meaning of a perceived relationship with one's pet may be generally different for men than it is for women, creating bias within the study. The uneven gender sample may have been a result of sampling bias. Snowballing techniques are most useful when participants are well networked (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005), however this technique impedes random sampling, and hence may have influenced the sample and lead to the greater proportion of females in the study.

#### *Implications*

The study contributes towards enriching the psychological literature by generating valuable knowledge about single middle aged adults, midlife transitions and the benefit pets provide for this population. It has provided further theoretical insight into the complexities of attachment bonds, particularly with regards to human-pet attachment and the dynamics of human-pet relationships. By recognising the benefits of pet ownership for single middle aged

adults, both pets and single middle aged people become more visible within the social sciences, encouraging further investigation into the area. Moreover, clinicians may find this study useful for examining and modifying pet therapy programs for people at different life stages. Finally, this study provides a basis for adapting and incorporating knowledge about the benefits of pet ownership and attachment bonds with current therapeutic strategies when treating vulnerable populations.

### *Future Research*

This study provides a conceptual framework to conduct a more comprehensive qualitative and/or quantitative investigation into the perceived relationship between single middle aged adults and their pets. The present study has implications for intervention and prevention for people who lack or have limited intimate relationships (for example, for people who are divorced, living alone, sole parent families, and widows). Therefore, it may be interesting to investigate the benefits of pets as a non-evaluative social support for vulnerable people or minority groups (e.g., unemployed, mentally ill, low-income earners, disabled, and childless adults). Further studies could investigate gender differences, particularly with regards to coping strategies employed by single middle aged men. Increased effort should be made, theoretically and empirically, to explore the psychological benefits of pet ownership and human-pet attachment for people during times of critical transition. Finally, there needs to be an emphasis on how to integrate pet ownership and the knowledge of human-pet attachment into a broader therapeutic setting.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Schedule

#### **Tell me about your relationship with your pet?**

- How important is this relationship to you?
- How have they changed or impacted your life?
- Are there situations when you prefer your pets company to that of people?

#### **Tell me about the role your pet/s play in your life?**

- Could you imagine your life without your pet?
- Do you think the relationship would be different if you weren't single?

#### **Did you own your pet before you became single?**

- If so, how do you think your relationship with your pet as changed?
  - How has the role of your pet changed?
  - Do you think your pet is more important to you now?
-

## Appendix B

## Information Sheet for Potential Participants

Dear Potential Participant,

My name is Lauren McGillivray and I am an Honours student studying Psychology at Edith Cowan University. It is a requirement of my course that I carry out a research project. This project has been approved by the Edith Cowan Faculty of Computing, Health and Science Ethics Committee.

I have chosen to research single people and pets. More specifically, I intend to explore the perceived relationship between single people and their pets, the importance of this relationship, and the meaning of pet ownership for single people. **Therefore, to be included in this study you must be single and own a pet.**

If you are interested and agree to participate in this study, I will arrange a convenient time and place to conduct an interview with you. The interview will be carried out in an informal and relaxed way and should take approximately 40 minutes of your time. The interview will be tape-recorded, however, it will not begin without your permission. Please note that there are no right or wrong answers and that anything you have to say regarding the topic at hand is of interest.

Communications throughout the interview will remain strictly confidential between my supervisors and myself, with any identifying information being erased from my final project. Once the interview has been transcribed the tape-recording will be erased. You have the right to refuse to answer any questions during the interview and may withdraw from the research at any time without consequence. Participants are encouraged to view the completed project at the end of this year.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please complete the attached demographic sheet and either email or contact me through the email address and telephone number provided and we can arrange a meeting time for the interview to take place.

If you have any questions or concerns please feel free to contact me on [REDACTED] or [REDACTED] or email me at [lmcgilli@student.ecu.edu.au](mailto:lmcgilli@student.ecu.edu.au), or my supervisors; Dr. Elizabeth Kaczmarek and Dr. Deirdre Drake on (08) 6304 5193 and (08) 6304 5020 respectively. Alternatively, if you wish to contact someone who is not connected with this study, please call Dr. Justine Dandy on (08) 6304 5105. Thank you for reading this information sheet and I hope you can participate in my study.

Lauren McGillivray

Appendix C

Demographic Sheet

Dear Potential Participant,

This demographic sheet has been prepared to help me ensure that the requirements of the study are met. After you have read the information sheet, please complete this form if you are interested in participating in this study. To complete the form simply answer in writing where a question has been asked or circle the appropriate answer for the 'YES and 'NO answers.

Please keep this completed sheet with you as it will be collected at the time of the interview.

Your Name:

Age:

Do you have any pets?    YES        NO

Are you single?        YES        NO

If yes, how long have you been single for?

---

Your contact number:

Your email address:

Appendix D

Letter of Consent

**Please read the following statements and sign the section marked below if you agree to participate in this study.**

- I have read and understood the information sheet.
- I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.
- I understand that the interview will be tape-recorded and that the recording will be erased after transcription of the interview is complete.
- I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and that I am free to withdraw from the process at any stage without consequence.
- I understand that I can refuse to answer any question and do not have to give a reason for my refusal.
- I understand it is not anticipated that there will be any risk, discomfort or distress associated with being interviewed.
- I understand that if I do experience any discomfort or distress I will be provided with the details of support services.
- I understand that any identifying information will be erased from the final project, that I have the right to view the final project, and that the study may be published.

**Participant's signature** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

**Participant's Name** \_\_\_\_\_

**Contact Number** \_\_\_\_\_

**Researcher's Signature** \_\_\_\_\_ **Date** \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix E

Counselling and Support Organisations

***Centrecare***

Confidential Counselling Service

Ph: 08 9325 6644

***Crisis Care***

Confidential Counselling Service

Ph: 08 9223 1111 (24hr)

***Lifeline***

Confidential Telephone Counselling Service

Ph: 13 11 14 (24hr)

***RSPCA Western Australia***

Malaga W.A.

Ph: 08 9209 9300

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## Guidelines for Contributions by Authors

### Journal of Social and Personal Relationships

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Submissions should be made by logging in and selecting the Author Center and the 'Click here to Submit a New Manuscript' option. Follow the instructions on each page, clicking the 'Next' button on each screen to save your work and advance to the next screen. If at any stage you have any questions or require the user guide, please use the 'Get Help Now' button at the top right of every screen. Further help is available through ScholarOne's® Manuscript Central™ customer support at +1 434 817 2040 x 167.

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Review your submission (in both PDF and HTML formats) and then click the Submit button.

You may suspend a submission at any point before clicking the Submit button and save it to submit later. After submission, you will receive a confirmation e-mail. You can also log back into your author centre at any time to check the status of your manuscript.

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(1) the title of the article

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