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Publication date:
2022

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Kitowska, A., H. Sørensen, M., Skødstrup, M. E., Danielson, N., Brandenburg, P., Langergaard, S., & Hansen, T. G. B. (2022). *Comparing grief over people and pets*. Poster presented at 30th anniversary conference of the International Association of Human Animal Interaction Organizations.

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Comparing grief over people and pets

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Introduction

Pets are psychologically important to many people, and some experience severe grief after losing a pet. This is now well established in the pet grief literature, with some suggestions that the level of grief may generally be similar to that after losing a human. Nevertheless, only a couple of studies have made direct empirical comparisons of grief severity after human and pet loss, respectively.

Lavorgna & Hutton (2019) surveyed 35 [human-bereaved \(HB\)](#) and 15 [pet-bereaved \(PB\)](#) participants for prolonged grief symptoms and did not find a significant difference in grief levels. However, the sample may have been too small to detect a difference.

With two bigger samples, Eckerd et al. (2016) found a small effect of higher grief in HB than PB participants. They measured grief by the Core Bereavement Items, CBI (Burnett et al., 1997) and the Pet Bereavement Questionnaire, PBQ (Hunt & Padilla, 2006). PBQ had some wording modified when presented to the HB group.

Both studies found correlations between grief and closeness to the deceased, but measured closeness rather crudely with a single-item responses. Since the finding parallels the attachment-grief level correlation often suggested by the (pet) grief literature, replication with an attachment-based measure of closeness would be interesting.

Method

The grief measures CBI (17 items) and PBQ (16 items) were translated into Danish with backtranslation checks for semantic fidelity. They were adjusted to species neutral language throughout (e.g., “the deceased”) and to retrospective use (please remember your life and emotions the first six months after the loss).

An attachment measure was derived from Kurdeks (2008) Secure Base (4 items) and Safe Heaven (4 items) dimensions. This was also phrased to be independent of species.

We recruited through social media with an invitation to participate if one had experienced loss of a person or pet. Participants were granted anonymity but no incentive was offered. Data were collected in SurveyXact, which the university subscribes to for guarantees of EU standard data protection rights. SPSS was used for analyses: independent t-tests, Pearson’s correlations and Cronbach’s α .

366 complete responses were received, of which 58% had lost a human and 42% had lost a pet. Mean age was 34 years, most participants identified as female (90%), 10% as male, and one as other gender.

Aims and hypotheses

The current study aims to replicate Eckerd et al. (2016) while extending it in two ways: (a) enhancing direct comparison by using identical wording for HB and PB in all measures, and (b) refining the measure of closeness by developing an attachment-based 8-item measure.

A secondary aim was practical: to find measures and results of relevance for our pet grief hotline or clinical settings.

We expected:

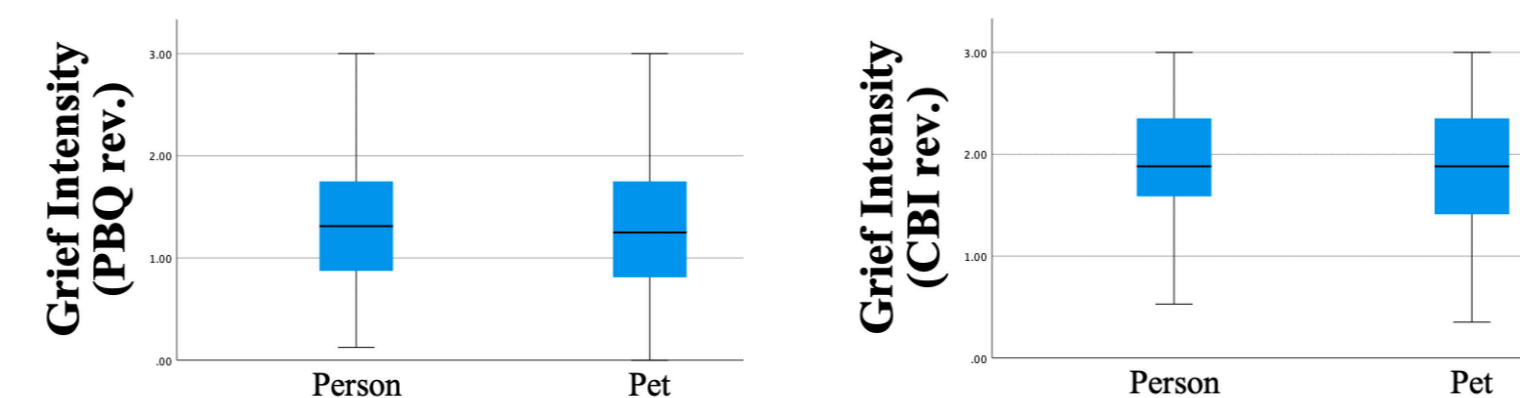
H1: More severe grief from losing a person than a pet

H2: Correlation between grief severity and attachment to the deceased

Results

All measures were internally consistent with Cronbach’s α > .89

H1 was not supported: [Grief did not differ by species](#)



As seen in the figure, both grief measures elicited very similar distributions for human-bereaved and pet-bereaved participants. Averaging across measures the figures are: HB grief $M=1.64$, $SD=.58$; PB grief $M=1.59$, $SD=.64$; $t(364)=.84$, $p=.40$.

H2 was supported: [The stronger attachment, the more severe grief](#)

	CBI rev.	PBQ rev.
Attachment	.53**	.39**
CBI rev.	-	.80**

Pearson’s correlations, $N = 366$, ** $p < .01$

Across species, positive correlations were found between attachment and grief measures as seen in the table. CBI correlated strongly, and PBQ correlated moderately.

Discussion and Conclusions

Very few studies have empirically compared grief intensity after losing a person or a pet, respectively. Neither our study in Denmark nor Lavorgna & Hutton’s (2019) Australian study provide evidence of a difference, and while Eckerd’s (2016) California-based study did find a difference, the effect size was small. Overall, this supports the pet grief literature’s general assumption of grief levels close to those after losing a human.

The relationship between attachment and grief is well established but complex, since attachment comes in types or dimensions, which may vary in implications and have demanding measurement. Eckerd et al. (2016) as well as Lavorgna & Hutton (2019) avoided the complication by only asking a single question of the type “how close were you...”. We opted for a theory-driven measure and found it to work. Thus, we replicated closeness to the deceased as correlate and probable predictor of grief (whether over human or pet) and substantiated it with the theoretical context of attachment theory. Attachment seems a better predictor of grief than whether the deceased was a person or a pet. This deserves further study.

Main limitations of this study are convenience sampling and gender imbalance.

Practical implications: The similarity of grief levels calls for social acknowledgement of pet grief and provision of support options. The attachment measure may have practical use in screening for support needs. Further study must determine this.



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