Pets, Attachment, and Well-Being across the Life Cycle

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Using an ethological framework of attachment developed by Bowlby and the social provisions of relationships delineated by Weiss, this article explores the ways in which family pets, in particular dogs and cats, provide certain components of attachment that contribute to emotional and social well-being throughout the life cycle. Pets may supply ongoing comfort and reduce feelings of loneliness during adversity or stressful transitions such as divorce or bereavement. They can also provide an opportunity to nurture others. In clinical practice it helps to be aware of how significant a pet may be to a client. Implications are identified for social policies that will protect and maintain this bond for particular populations, such as elderly people in nursing homes or retirement communities and individuals going through a life transition.

Key words: attachment; life changes; pets; well-being

There were 117 million dogs and cats in the United States in 1991 (Mason, 1991). Over half of all families own at least one pet, and many perceive the pets as members of their family (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988; Cain, 1885; Cowles, 1985; Cusak, 1988). Research is beginning to support what every pet owner knows: Having a family pet enhances and enriches quality of life. Although Keddle (1977) wrote that it is difficult to assess this benefit in scientific terms, there is now evidence that animal companionship reduces loneliness and contributes to a general sense of well-being throughout life (Cusak, 1988; Muschel, 1984). Pets have proved effective in reducing blood pressure (Katcher, 1982) and promoting survival in a study of coronary artery illness. In a follow-up study of 93 patients who returned home after heart attacks, only 6 percent of those with pets died, compared with 44 percent without a pet at home (Friedman, Katcher, & Meislich, 1980). These results occurred independent of the existence of other social relationships, leading the researchers to conclude that the presence of pets influenced people in ways that were different from and in addition to human relationships.

Similarly, in a large telephone interview study of Medicare enrollees, Siegel (1990) found that elderly pet owners reported less psychological distress and fewer visits to physicians over a one-year period than respondents who did not own pets. She also noted that 58 percent of the sample did not live alone; thus, pets were not necessarily their only relationships. And in another study of individuals 65 years or older, pet ownership was inversely related to depression (Garrity, Stallones, Marx, & Johnson, 1989).
Pet therapy has proved successful with children (Levinson, 1965), medical patients suffering depression (McCulloch, 1981), institutionalized mentally ill patients (Corson & Corson, 1980; Siegel, 1962), and elderly people living alone or in nursing homes (Brickel, 1984; Bustad & Hines, 1982; Cusak, 1988; Mugford & McComisky, 1975). A pet therapy program for cancer patients and those close to them concluded that pets can help individuals in ways people may not be able to. Though based on a relatively small sample, a follow-up survey revealed that 12 of 15 patients felt that animals lessened their fears, despair, loneliness, and isolation, thereby increasing their adaptation to a most difficult situation. The researcher attributed the positive effects of contact with the animals to their quiet, accepting, and nurturing manner. They neither intruded on nor avoided dying patients (Muschel, 1984).

Other reasons given for the influence of pets on people include the friendship and unconditional love and affection they both give and receive and their ability to provide affection when other people cannot. The presence of pets increases feelings of happiness, security, and self-worth and reduces feelings of loneliness and isolation on a daily basis and during separations or transitions such as spousal bereavement (Gerwolls, 1990; McCulloch, 1981; Rynearson, 1978; Sable, 1991; Stewart, 1983). Lorenz (1952) equated a need for the companionship of his dog to a bond with nature, and Heiman (1965) saw pets as helping to maintain psychological equilibrium.

Despite findings suggesting that companion animals contribute to physical, emotional, and social well-being, and although there are now social workers and social work students working in veterinary hospitals (see Cohen, 1985), the social work literature has given little attention to the psychological role of pets. In particular, there is a lack of research or theoretical explanation of the dynamics of the human–animal bond (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988; Keddie, 1977; Melson, 1989; Rynearson, 1978; Siegel, 1990). Moreover, the loss of a pet may precipitate not only grief and mourning, but also intensified anxiety, depression, and anger, which are the reason for much of clinical practice (Cowles, 1985; Keddie, 1977; Rynearson, 1978).

Using a framework of attachment developed by Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980), this article explores aspects of the relationship between people and their pets, specifically dogs and cats. It discusses how conceptualizing this bond in terms of attachment expands our understanding of human social behavior and suggests issues for prevention, social policy, and future research. Based on psychoanalytic object relations theory, attachment theory adds concepts from ethology (animal behavior), cognitive psychology, and control theory to explain an intrinsic capacity for forming lasting emotional bonds with others and to account for the effects disrupting these attachments has on mental health. Furthermore, affectional bonds with pets are examined in the context of Weiss's (1974, 1978, 1982b) concept of the social provisions of relationships.

**Attachment Theory**

**Ethological Framework**

Within Bowlby's (1969, 1973, 1980) ethological framework, the affectional bond between two individuals over time, beginning with the infant and his or her mother figure, serves the biological function of protection as well as security. If a person is threatened with danger or the disruption of a bond, he or she exhibits attachment behaviors with the goal of making contact with an attachment figure (Ainsworth, 1989; Bartholomew, 1990; Bowlby, 1980). In some circumstances, mere proximity brings comfort, even if the attachment figure cannot do anything. Also, once it is formed, attachment is exclusive and persistent and is not easily relinquished or redirected to others (Marris, 1982; Weiss, 1982a). However, the capacity to make an affectional bond generalizes to others. This phenomenon explains how a securely attached child is reassured by a friendly and familiar teacher if upset while at school. And this characteristic, which recognizes that exposure facilitates attachment, could explain why individuals who are not exposed to pets are less interested in them.

In looking at the continuity of attachment feelings and behavior beyond childhood, Bowlby...
(1988) conceived an inner psychological organization he called "working models" of the self and attachment figures that are both cognitive and emotional, conscious and unconscious. These internal models are used to integrate experiences, appraise situations, and determine plans of action (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1988; Bretherton, Ridgeway, & Cassidy, 1990).

**Provisions of Relationships**

Weiss (1982a, 1991) specified some criteria of adult attachment that distinguish it from childhood attachment and also from other relational bonds. Just as children do, adults seek closeness and security from attachment figures at times of stress; attaining and maintaining proximity reduces fear and insecurity. Also, any threat to accessibility of the attachment figure evokes protest, distress, and other measures to ward off separation or loss (Weiss, 1982a). Whereas a young child tends to regard the attachment figure as stronger and wiser, adult bonds are more flexible, accommodating a variety of relationships as well as alternating patterns of caregiving behavior. Moreover, it seems the inner sense of security is a more prominent property of adult attachment because of an adult's more sophisticated way of thinking, greater self-reliance, and ability to tolerate separations for longer periods of time (Weiss, 1991).

Weiss (1974) considered attachment one of a variety of social provisions of relationships that adults require for well-being. The others are social affiliation, opportunity for nurturance, and obtaining of help and guidance. Individuals maintain relationships to gain these social provisions, which can fluctuate at various times of life. Also, a particular bond may provide more than a single social provision. For example, because attachment relationships foster continuing proximity, they have the potential to meet emotional provisions in the other categories.

**Pets and Attachment**

There are elements of attachment in a variety of close adult relationships, such as adult committed partnerships. Scharlach (1991) and Ainsworth (1989) identified a type of attachment between adults and their parents, and Ainsworth called for further consideration of certain friends and other companions as having components of attachment. The author proposes that family pets, in particular dogs and cats, also have the potential to provide an emotional bond of attachment that promotes a sense of well-being and security.

In terms of Weiss's (1974) social provisions of relationships, pets can provide opportunities for attachment and the nurturance of others and more broadly offer extended social networks and social interaction. Pets can uniquely fill a combination of emotional needs, sometimes substituting for an absence of human attachment and at other times expanding the range of relationships and social contacts that add to the pleasures of life and give a feeling of comfort and companionship in times of difficulty. Moreover, separation, threat of separation, or permanent loss of a pet will lead to separation anxiety, grief, and mourning (Cowles, 1985; Gerwolls, 1990; Stewart, 1983) because the loss of a beloved pet is the loss of a special relationship of attachment.

Gerwolls (1990) presented evidence that dogs and people formed bonds many thousands of years ago and suggested the protective value of early doglike wolves and, thus, the adaptive nature of this relationship for actual survival. Although we do not generally rely on our pets to physically protect us, Melson (1989) posited that the bond with a pet becomes part of inner working models of attachment and family relationships.

Evidence that pets are seen as family members who provide affection and attachment came from a telephone interview study of 612 adults conducted by Albert and Bulcroft (1988) to examine the psychological and emotional roles of pets in an urban area. A factor analysis of 12 items related to loving relationships among humans revealed nine items that were identified as pet attachment:

1. I feel closer to (pet's name) than to many of my friends.
2. I like (pet's name) because he/she accepts me no matter what I do.
3. (Pet's name) makes me feel loved.
4. (Pet's name) gives me something to talk about with others.
5. I feel closer to (pet's name) than to other family members.
6. (Pet's name) keeps me from being lonely.
7. I like (pet's name) because he/she is more loyal than other people in my life.
8. (Pet's name) gives me something to take care of.
9. There are times when (pet's name) is my closest companion. (p. 547)
The responses revealed that pets were considered important family members, with dogs the favorite, followed by cats. The authors suggested that this preference may have been based on the greater affection demonstrated by dogs toward their owners and that the way dogs and owners interact may have resulted in a higher level of attachment.

Albert and Bulcroft (1988) also found that changes in pet ownership at different times in the life cycle affected feelings of attachment. They concluded that pet attachment was particularly important among divorced, never married, and widowed people; childless couples; newlyweds; and empty-nesters. Because pets both give and receive affection, they can be emotional substitutes and contribute to maintaining morale when people are alone or going through difficult periods of transition.

Muschel (1984) explained that transitions sometimes make people feel like outcasts of society, a complication avoided with a pet. This was apparent to the author (Sable, 1989, 1991) in an interview study of 81 women widowed one to three years; the study explored variables related to adjustment following the loss of their spouse. In contrast to comments such as “I feel they patronize me” and “I’m a dropout of society” given by two women describing how they perceived the support of their friends, women referred to their pets in a positive, affectionate way. Women who had pets, in particular dogs, and then cats, also reported significantly less loneliness in response to a specific question about feeling lonely. The following statements appeared at various points in the interview and not always in response to the question inquiring if they owned a pet. The warmth and caring of the comments attest to the fondness the women felt for their pets and also shows how pets are felt to allay loneliness:

[I] hug my dog every day. Hug for you [husband] as well as myself. [It is] good to have an animal.

* * *

I love dogs. They’re very comforting. They’re my good friends. Maybe they are man’s best friend.

* * *

I adore her. She’s the first thing I hug every morning and again at night. I’ve transferred a lot of my . . . feelings towards her.

When asked if she had had other recent losses, one woman reported the loss of her husband’s dog. She went on to say how she felt when she had to euthanize it: “[It was] awful. The last tie to him.” Of her current dog she said, “[You] need a place to put your love.” A young woman responded that her sister and the company of her two dogs were the most helpful in dealing with her loss and difficulty with anxiety: “[When I had] panic at night, my dogs [were the] only things that helped. I sat on the floor with them. [They’re] just being there.” In response to a question about whether a person lived alone, one woman said, “Yes, but I have two dogs.” Another woman also answered that she lived with her dog, going on to explain: “If it weren’t for the dog, I wouldn’t have gotten up at first. That poor dog. After I started to cry, he’d get up and comfort me. I don’t know how he knew.” This quotation illustrates the importance of caregiving as well as the sense of meaning she derived from her dog.

Albert and Bulcroft (1988) observed that companion animals in the modern urban world make no economic sense and furnish no financial profit, and yet owners spend vast amounts of time and money on them. Pets behave in ways that foster a sense of being needed and are dependent on their owners for physical care (Stewart, 1983), which may explain the tendency of pet owners to call them “baby” or “child.”

A veterinary oncologist (personal communication with A. Cardona, Los Angeles, February 1991) reported that pets’ attachment behavior intensifies and they show increased proximity to their owners when the pet develops cancer. The owners’ response of caregiving reflects a distinct behavioral system that Melson (1989) identified as a dimension of attachment. Although her study was limited to investigation of the relationship between pets and children, she outlined four dimensions of human–pet attachment that equate with several elements of attachment and caregiving: time spent with and activities directed toward the pet, interest in and affect toward the pet, knowledge about the pet and its care, and behavioral responsiveness to the pet and its needs.

Siegel (1990) measured affectional attachment in elderly pet owners with a question about how important the pet was to the respondent. Owners of dogs showed the most attachment and referred to their pets more frequently, especially to mention that their pets gave them love and security.
Noting that only certain bonds are effective buffers against stressful life elements, Siegel claimed that dogs provided their owners with companionship and attachment more than other types of pets.

One very unique aspect of pets is their constant proximity. A complaint of bereaved spouses, for example, is that social support tends to be mobilized at the time of loss but then quickly ends (Glick, Weiss, & Parkes, 1974; Sable, 1991). Parkes and Weiss (1983) noted that if social support is to be effective, it must continue throughout the period of mourning. Pets may help fill this gap and reduce the feeling of aloneness that comes with the loss of a close loved person, especially for elderly people or those living far away from relatives.

Attachment theory highlights the lifelong requirement for close affectional bonds with others. Because the substitute attachment of a pet provides closeness, touching, and a chance to feel worthwhile and needed (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988; Keddie, 1977; Muschel, 1984), it may have special value for elderly people, who are apt to experience disruptions in relationships with familiar people, places, and things, as well as declining health, physical incapacity, and limited financial resources. The loss of a pet may compound distress. For instance, one woman in a bereavement study (Sable, 1991) replied to an inquiry about other recent losses that she was forced to give her pet away. That she mentioned that event indicates that losing her pet added stress to an already difficult time. This bond can be protected by advocating for policies that ensure that pets be allowed in housing facilities, whether nursing homes, retirement communities, or individual apartments. Pet restriction policies are becoming a more pronounced social problem as the population ages (Monahan, Green, & Coleman, 1992), and the growing numbers of elderly people make it imperative to discover and use effective attachment substitutes (Bock & Webber, 1972).

**Social Work and Pets**

The profession of social work deals with the interaction between people and their social environment, between an individual’s inner self and the outer world. Interventions help people negotiate a range of systems, depending on the problem and its possible solutions (Saleebey, 1992). If pets are seen as family members and attachment figures, there are implications for intervention, prevention, and social policies. In counseling, clients should be encouraged to discuss pets, for example; they should be asked about them as attachment figures when taking an inventory of family relationships (Rynearson, 1978). Showing interest in the animal allows for discussion of issues such as euthanasia or loss of a pet that may arise during treatment or may actually be a precipitating reason for seeking help. Unless it is clearly permitted, clients may be reluctant or embarrassed to reveal how important their pets are to them. Or, clients might worry that they are overreacting if they feel pain and anguish at the loss of a pet and may suppress feelings that need to be examined and expressed (Rynearson, 1978). Moreover, dealing with these feelings may lead to deeper understanding about themselves and other relationships. Cowles (1985) found, in a small bereavement study of adults who had lost a pet, that the loss reminded them of earlier losses. Discovering unresolved grief or other feelings connected to their animal may be an entry into other feelings and attachments (Rynearson, 1978), including an opportunity to clarify that attachment forms over time and that protest and distress at disruption are natural responses when bonds are in jeopardy or lost. Thus, pets can be a vehicle to facilitate awareness of clients’ intimate attachments and attachment behavior, and these should not be misconstrued as overdependency.

Another usefulness of pets for social work practice is the discovery of patterns of personality organization and relation to others that may be observable in the pet relationship. Rynearson (1978) identified anxious attachment and insistent caregiving in the treatment of pet owners with pathological reactions to the loss of their pets when these reactions were related to an early history of insecure attachments. These two categories would be comparable to a distortion of two categories of Weiss’s social provisions, attachment and opportunity to nurture others.
Veterinarians are clearly aware of how deeply people feel about their pets and how intense the grief and mourning are when their pets die (Cohen, 1985). The development of pet loss support groups, generally under the auspices of veterinarians, reflects awareness of this grief and is a type of prevention against maladaptive adjustment. Social workers could be involved in such groups both to detect psychological disturbance and to educate the public about the place of pets in people’s lives. They can affirm the emotional importance of a companion animal and promote societal sympathy and support for bereaved owners, for example, by recommending that friends and family spend time with the owners, call, or send flowers.

**Attachment Needs of Pets**

Although this article discusses the value of pets to humans, attachment theory has several implications for the welfare of pets. Like human infants, animals need attachment for protection and survival (Rynearson, 1978) and, therefore, are affected by separation and loss. Solnit (1990), in a review of Bowlby’s (1988) book *Secure Base*, noted that human studies should be used to enable better understanding and care for animals. For example, children need their parents with them in the hospital. Veterinary practice should give more attention to keeping a pet with its owner during medical procedures whenever possible. Allowing pets to visit humans in hospitals could benefit both the pet and its human companion and may help speed recovery. A colleague of the author told how she stood outside a hospital with the dog of a friend dying of cancer while the patient looked down longingly from five flights above. This was the last time the woman ever saw her pet. Finally, disrupting a pet’s attachment by hurting or neglecting it, or randomly abandoning it, is not only cruel but undermines a foundation of attachment.

**Conclusion**

Attachment research and theory have shown that emotional well-being is in large measure affected by personal relationships, not only in childhood but throughout life. People need a combination of relationships from close affectional attachments to broader social contacts (Levitt, 1991; Weiss, 1991). There is now reason to include pets among significant attachment figures, not only for treating disturbed populations but also for promoting general mental health (Cowles, 1985; Rynearson, 1978).

Weiss (1991) and Levitt (1991) wrote that we still have a lot to learn about attachment relations in adulthood, and O’Hare (1991) noted the need for social workers to consider research findings in their techniques of practice. One direction research could take is to explore components of attachment in the relationship between pets and people. Melson (1989) suggested attachment theory as a framework for more precise measurement of the human–animal bond, and Katcher (1982) recommended that questions on pets be included in studies on psychological and social factors in health and illness.

Pets benefit their owners psychologically, physically, and socially (Kale, 1992). The changing landscape of family life will increase the importance of pets as attachment figures for reducing loneliness, giving purpose to life, and providing the comfort of proximity. Social workers need to recognize and respect the importance of pets in clinical practice and to work toward social policy that does the same. Pets have a place in our intrinsic desire for close and caring affectional bonds with others. As a woman who owned cats simply said, “Animals are so important for people.”

**References**


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