

## ABSTRACT

### THE IMPACT OF COMPANION PETS ON THE WELL-BEING OF OLDER ADULTS

By

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The ownership of companion pets has increased steadily among the older adult population. This qualitative study examined the impact of companion pets on the well-being of older adults. The researcher developed the interview guide used in this study. Twelve older adults were interviewed.

Companion pets encouraged pet owners, who had at least one dog, to walk more. Companionship and a decrease in loneliness were two of the common themes in regards to the positive impact of pets on psychological well-being. More than half reported that their companion pets improved their social well-being by increasing their opportunities to meet new people. Almost half of the respondents reported that a decline in their own health was the main challenge they faced in taking care of their companion pets in older adulthood.

More research is needed on the impact of companion pets on the well-being of older adults.



THE IMPACT OF COMPANION PETS ON THE WELL-BEING OF OLDER ADULTS

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
TABLES.....	vi
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION .....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	1
Purpose Statement.....	2
Definition of Terms.....	3
Social Work and Multicultural Relevance.....	3
2. LITERATURE REVIEW.....	5
Background.....	5
Human-Animal Bond .....	6
Impact of Companion Pets on Social and Psychological Well-Being..	8
Impact of Companion Pets on Physical Well-Being.....	10
Pet Loss .....	13
Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT).....	16
Multicultural Issues .....	18
Conclusion .....	20
3. METHODS.....	22
Research Design.....	22
Sampling Plan .....	22
Data Collection .....	23
Instrument .....	23
Data Analysis Plan .....	24
4. RESULTS .....	26
Demographic Characteristics.....	26

CHAPTER	Page
Social Activities of the Participants .....	27
Background Information of Companion Pets .....	31
Physical Impact of Companion Pets on the Participants.....	37
Psychological Impact of Companion Pets on the Participants.....	39
Social Impact of Companion Pets on the Participants.....	40
Human-Animal Relationships and the Impact on Quality of Life.....	42
 5. DISCUSSION.....	 45
Purpose of the Study.....	45
Summary of Findings .....	45
Limitations of the Study .....	47
Implications for Social Work Research.....	47
Implications for Social Work Practice .....	47
Conclusion.....	48
 APPENDICES.....	 49
A. RECRUITMENT FLYER.....	50
B. INTERVIEW GUIDE.....	52
C. INFORMED CONSENT FORM.....	56
D. ORAL SCREENING SCRIPTS.....	60
E. ORAL SCRIPT FOR BEGINNING CONTACT.....	62
 REFERENCES.....	 64

## TABLES

TABLE	Page
1. Demographics of Participants.....	27
2. Social Activities of the Participants.....	29
3. Background Information of Companion Pets.....	33
4. Physical Impact of Companion Pets on the Participants.....	37
5. Psychological Impact of Companion Pets on the Participants.....	39
6. Social Impact of Companion Pets on the Participants.....	41
7. Impact of Companion Pets on Quality of Life of the Participants.....	42



## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

#### Statement of the Problem

The ownership of pets has been growing steadily in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Currently, over two-thirds of U.S. households are pet owners, and these owners often refer to their pets as family members (Herzog, 2011). Based on the survey of 47,000 households, a U.S. Census Bureau (2012) report indicated that there was an average of 1.7 dogs, 2.2 cats, 2.5 birds, and 3.5 horses owned per household in 2006. The older adult population in America is also drastically increasing due to the number of baby boomers reaching the age of 65 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The population of those who are 65 years or older increased by 9.7% from 2000 to 2010 with a total of 308,725,538 older Americans living in the United States in 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010).

In the United States, pet owners spend about 30 billion dollars annually on their companion pets, and “there are more than 68 millions pet dogs and at least 75 million pet cats” that increases the responsibility of pet ownership and research to explore the effect of companion pets in people’s lives” (Allen, 2003, p. 236). Pets play an important role in providing social support to older Americans. For example, Friedmann, Thomas, Cook, Chia-Chun, and Picot (2007), in a study of 11 community-living older adults, found that all reported that dog ownership had positive health benefits.

Older adults typically experience a decline in their physical health, major life transitions (e.g., retirement), and loss of spouse (Gillath, Johnson, Selcuk, & Teel, 2011). Because most of older adults are no longer working, it limits their involvement in social activities; for this reason, older adults often turn to their pets as a source of companionship. The attachment to pets promotes genuine, consistent unconditional love and acceptance that those people sometimes have difficulty sustaining in human relationships (Sharkin & Knox, 2003). This is particularly true for older adults who are constantly facing loss of relationships as they outlive their friends, siblings, and partners.

Turner (2013) stated that pet ownership may cause distress for older adults when they grieve over pet loss. Furthermore, Turner described pet loss as disenfranchised grief because the loss is not publicly recognized, which makes it difficult for pet owners to process their grief. Researchers believe that the attachment to the companion pets continues after the death of the pets as it is similar to human loss (Packman, Field, Carmack, & Ronen, 2011). Despite the hardships older adults face due to pet loss, Knight and Edwards (2008) stated that previous research has found that companion pets promote physical, psychological, and social well-being in older adults. Understanding the role of pets in people lives can help social workers better assist those who are in need and enhance their quality of lives (Risley-Curtiss, Holley, & Wolf, 2006).

### Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to explore how companion pets impact the well-being of older adults. From the perspective of the older adults, this study addressed the following research questions:

1. What is the impact of pet ownership on the physical well-being of older adults?
2. What is the impact of pet ownership on the psychological well-being of older adults?
3. What is the impact of pet ownership on the social well-being of older adults?

#### Definition of Terms

*Companion pets:* Chur-Hansen (2010) defined pets, or often known as companion animals, to be dog or cat in current psychological and human animal bond literature, but it is not limited to that; other species include rabbits, fish, horses, rodents, reptiles, miniature pigs, and livestock like lambs, sheep, goats, alpacas, cows, or bulls especially for farmers.

*Older adult:* The World Health Organization (2014) defines an older adult as someone who can begin to receive pension benefits. In this study, a person is considered an older adult if he/she is 60 years or older.

*Quality of life:* Theofilou (2013) defined quality of life as “a multidimensional concept consisting of a number of social, environmental, psychological and physical values” (p. 150).

#### Social Work and Multicultural Relevance

The older adult population is growing in America due to the Baby Boomer generation reaching the age of 65 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Older adults are a vulnerable population due to their limited income, declining health, and loss of social relationships. Companion pets play an important role in the lives of many older adults.

Therefore, social workers need to gain a better understanding of how companion pets impact the well-being of this vulnerable population.

There has been a rapid growth in the number of ethnically diverse older adults (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Ownership of companion pets has increased among all older adult populations. This study sought to recruit an ethnically diverse sample to increase the multicultural relevance of this study. Additionally, the literature review examines the cultural differences regarding the ownership of companion pets.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Background

There were 40.3 million older adults living in the United States in 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). With the rapidly growing rate of this population, there are many factors that put this population at risk, such as the loss of a spouse, friends, independence, and social status (Smith, 2012). As people age, the prevalence of loneliness increases with 50% of people who are 80 years or older reported that they experience moderate or serious loneliness (Dykstra, Van Tilburg, & De Jong Gierveld, 2005).

Smith (2012) examined the meaning of loneliness and the daily activities to cope with loneliness in community-dwelling older adults. The study consisted of 12 participants, between the age of 74 and 98 years of age, who were recruited through the distribution of 300 flyers to local senior centers. The participants were asked to complete the Short Blessed Test, Geriatric Depression Scale (short form), and lastly, the UCLA Loneliness Scale (version 3). There were four major themes about loneliness that emerged from the study, which included declining health, giving up one's automobile, retirement, and widowhood. Themes emerged that were daily practices used by participants to deal with loneliness were reaching out to others, volunteering, and seeking companionship with pets (Smith, 2012).

The study of pet ownership has been extensive and ongoing since the 1990s. Researchers have studied to examine the effect of pet ownership and owning a pet would

be beneficial to the psychological health. For example, Antonacopoulos and Pychyl (2010) studied the potential role of pet ownership, human social support, and pet attachment in the psychological health of individuals who lived alone in terms of depression and loneliness level. The participants in the study included 66 pet owners and 66 non-pet owners who were asked to complete a 15-minute online survey. The results revealed that individuals who had high level of human social support benefited the most from dog ownership and were less likely to be lonely compared to individuals who had low levels of human social support. Secondly, the study also found that individuals who lived alone had a higher level of the interaction between companion pets and human social support compared to those who lived with others.

#### Human-Animal Bond

Research on the use of Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) has been growing over the past four decades (Zilcha-Mano, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2011). Based on Bowlby's (1982) attachment theory, researchers have explained the human-animal relationship and the role of pets as an attachment figure (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011). Bowlby's theory of attachment provided support for the benefits of the human-animal bond and how companion pets can promote the well-being of humans.

The human-animal bond is a growing focus for researchers in social work and is divided into two subject areas of study: naturally occurring pet ownership, also known as having an animal in the home, and animal-assisted interventions, such as animal-assisted psychotherapy (Putney, 2013). The human-animal bond is similar to the human attachment relationship in which people develop an emotional attachment toward their pets. Companion pets promote genuine, consistent unconditional love and acceptance

(Sharkin & Knox, 2003). Many emotional benefits arise from animal companionship as it reduces the effect of loneliness, social isolation, anxiety, and depression and stimulates self-esteem to cope with stressful life events (Sharkin & Knox, 2003).

In a cross-sectional study to examine the well-being of 191 older adults who owned a dog or a cat, the ownership of a pet was found to be an important coping mechanism, which significantly decreased the feeling of loneliness (Krause-Parello & Gulick, 2013). Many people openly talked about their love for their companion pets and considered their companion pets as members of the family (Crawford, Worsham, & Swinehart, 2006). There are many health and psychological benefits that are derived from the effect of companion pets (Crawford et al., 2006).

In a study conducted by Eshbaugh et al. (2011), the researchers examined the relationship between pet attachment and loneliness in the elderly in regards to the preference of choosing to have a dog present or absent during the experimental session. The study consisted of 68 older adults who lived in two local retirement communities and were age between 55 and 94 years old. The mean age of the sample was 79.74 years. Participants were told that the interviewer would be waiting in the room with the dog, and they could choose to conduct the interview with the present of a small (Shitzu) dog or not. Participants who decided to have the dog in the room were asked to hold it on their lap while the interviewer conducted the background information questions. After collecting the background information, the interviewer took the dog and held it while the participants completed the survey. Eshbaugh et al. found that 67 out of 68 participants chose to have the dog remain in the room. This study found that people who owned pets experienced less loneliness compared to older adults who did not own a pet.

### Impact of Companion Pets on Social and Psychological Well-Being

Knight and Edwards (2008) conducted a qualitative study of older adults ( $n = 65$ ) to better understand the physical, social, and psychological benefits of dog ownership. All of the participants were recruited from 12 different dog walking sites in the Hampshire countryside of England. The participants were between the age of 28 and 85 years old, with an average age of 60 years. There were a number of themes identified in the focus group when participants shared their interaction with dogs. These themes included health benefits from walking and exercising with dogs, promoting social interaction and conversation with others, and providing a sense of safety and security at home. Knight and Edwards found that all the participants reported that the physical benefit of dog ownership was as a motivator to exercise. The participants reported feeling better when they were with their dogs. Lastly, participants reported that the loss of a pet as the most difficult aspect of dog ownership.

Chur-Hansen, Winefield, and Beckwith (2009) conducted a qualitative study of 11 older women who all were 65 years or older. The goal of this study was to explore the association between companion pets and physical and psychological health in older adults. Nine participants discussed their dogs, and two participants talked about their cats. Attachment was the central theme that emerged from the interviews, with participants identifying their pets as a significant other. Two other themes that emerged from the interviews were a desire to maintain close physical contact with their pets and discussion of the hardship of experiencing grief due to pet loss. Chur-Hansen et al. found that all of the participants considered their pets as family members and all of them agreed that companionship was an important psychological reward for pet ownership.



Participants reported that their pets gave them the ability to care for someone and a sense of responsibility. Ten (or 83.3%) reported that taking care of their pets encouraged them to walk and gave them a reason to go out. Participants did express anxiety and concern over the welfare of their pets in the event they would be no longer able to take care of their pets. The fear of pet loss was also shared by all participants during the interviews.

McColgan and Schofield (2007) studied the importance of companion pets in older adults by examining the case of Bruce. Bruce was a 70 year-old male who lived with his wife, Mary, and his dog, Ozzy. He and his wife had been married for 45 years but did not have any children. Bruce considered Ozzy to be a part of the family and reported spending more time with Ozzy than with his wife. Questions were asked during the interview to better understand the relationship of their dog in the family. Bruce shared that Ozzy was treated like a family member and that he ate the same food as Bruce and Mary and had his own chair in the house. When Mary was diagnosed with dementia and had to move into a care home, Bruce reported that Ozzy provided support during this difficult time.

Putney (2013) studied the importance of the human-animal bond to better understand the inter-dependence between humans and their companion pets among older lesbian women. The study consisted of qualitative interviews with 12 lesbian women whose ages ranged between 65 and 80, and the mean age was 71. Participants were recruited from diverse experiences related to age, sociopolitical background, socioeconomic status, health, and relationship context. The study revealed that the human-animal bond promoted feelings of love and attachment, provided challenges and rewards of caregiving, and aided in the preparation for death. The participants in this

study considered their companion pets as family members. Furthermore, the participants in the study reported that the companionship with their pets eased the pain of loneliness and grief during life transitions. In addition, the majority of the participants revealed many challenges they faced when it came to the loss of their own pets.

Furthermore, Putney (2013) found all the participants shared that caring for their pets could be both challenging and rewarding at the same time. The caregiving challenges included cost, limited transportation, and any other health related factors in the participants' lives. On the other hand, all the participants reported that caring for their pets gave them a great sense of responsibility and meaning in their lives. Lastly, the fourth theme was related to the participants preparing for the end of life. While most of the participants reported the fear of losing their independence in the future, they also reported that their pets helped them focus on the present.

#### Impact of Companion Pets on Physical Well-Being

One of the first researchers that studied the effect of companion pets and physical health was conducted by Friedmann, Katcher, Lynch, and Thomas (1980). The study consisted of 92 European-American or White patients with a diagnosis of heart disease. The study revealed that companion pets acted as a facilitator to recovery from ill health. In addition, the study reported that 28% of non-pet owner patients died comparing to 6% of pet owner patients within 1 year.

Allen, Shykoff, and Izzo (2001) studied the relationship between pet ownership, blood pressure, and mental stress. The study consisted of 48 volunteers who were hypertensive patients with a high-stress occupation (e.g., stockbrokers). All the participants had uncomplicated stage II hypertension. Half ( $n = 24$ ) of the participants

were randomly assigned to a control group without a pet and the other half ( $n = 24$ ) were in an experimental group with a pet. After 6 months, the experimental group (i.e., those with a pet) showed a lower increase in blood pressure compared to the participants who were in the control group (i.e., those without a pet). While some studies have found pet ownership to positively impact quality of life, Friedmann et al. (1980) concluded that more research is still needed to better understand the impact on the overall well-being of older adults.

A study by Utz (2014) examined data from the National Health and Nutritional Examination Survey to explore whether pet owners have better physical health outcomes. The study consisted of non-institutionalized American pet owners ( $n = 2,474$ ) who lived alone. Of the total number of pet owners ( $n = 496$ ), 291 were dog owners, 141 were cat owners, and 64 were other pet owners, such as reptiles, birds, or fish. The results revealed that pet owners were more likely to self-report excellent health. The study also showed a relationship between dog and cat ownership and physical health in which dog and cat owners were less likely than non-pet owners and other pet owners to suffer from obesity, congestive heart failure, and arthritis. In addition, the study also reported that pet owners were more likely to suffer from asthma and allergies compared to non-pet owners. The study concluded that pet owners were more likely than non-pet owners to walk, jog, and perform other outdoor exercise activities, such as bicycling, swimming, and gardening.

In the report by Wells (2009), the researcher explored the effects of animals on human health and well-being based on previous research. The report revealed that companion pets can benefit the short and long term health of the individuals.

Specifically, stroking or petting an animal was found to decrease blood pressure and/or lower heart rates (Wells, 2009). In addition, the effect of being in the presence of animals was found to lower the nervous response in the event of moderate stress. Finally, the participants showed lower blood pressure and/or heart rates in the presence of an animal when they were exposed to stressors (Wells, 2009).

There are a few studies who have found no health benefits of pet ownership among older adults. For example, Pluijijm et al. (2006) conducted a study to identify community-dwelling older adults who were at a high risk of recurrent falls. The sample of the study consisted of 1,365 community-dwelling older adults living in Amsterdam, including 667 men and 698 women, aged 65 years and older. The participants were asked to record their fall and fracture events every week for 3 years. The study revealed that 55.3% of the participants fell within the 3 years follow up period. Moreover, 24.9% of women and 24.4% of men were identified as recurrent fallers who fell at least twice within a 6 month period. The study found that the presence of dogs/cats in the household was one of the strongest predictors of a fall history.

In another study conducted by Parslow, Jorm, Christensen, Rodgers, and Jacomb (2005), the researchers identified the health benefits of pet ownership associated with older community based Australian residents. Data were collected from 2,551 pet owners and non-pet owners, aged 60 to 64 years old, who lived independently in the community. The study also measured the physical and mental health of the participants in the past month. Almost half of the sample size reported that they owned various types of pets and 95% of them owned a dog or cat. Parslow et al. found that pet owners and pet's care takers experienced more depressive symptoms compared to non-pet owners. In addition,

female pet owners reported poorer physical health compared to non-female pet owners. Also, participants who cared for a pet were more likely to take pain medications. Lastly, there was no positive health benefits associated with pet ownership because participants who had pets reported poorer physical and mental health compared to non-pet owners.

### Pet Loss

Companion pets make up of 30–60% of households in the Western world making it a significant social concern to acknowledge the loss of these animals (Morley & Fook, 2005). Due to the short life expectancy of the companion pets, many pet owners are expected to experience pet loss in their lives (Morley & Fook, 2005). In addition, Morley and Fook (2005) stated that pet owners are also at risk for losing their companion pets due to the owner's aging process, decline in health, and changes in their living situation causing them to not be able to continue to care for their companion pets.

Pet loss is considered to be disenfranchised grief, in which the grievers are not being openly acknowledged or supported by other people and allowed to mourn openly about the death of their companion pet (Turner, 2003). In addition, some people have difficulty coping with the loss of their pet because their support system, including family and friends, does not view pet loss as a remarkable event that needs time to grieve (Turner, 2003). Pet loss affects many people, but many counselors view pet loss as insignificant and are skeptical about their roles in helping people cope with pet loss (Sharkin & Knox, 2003). It is important for professionals to understand the importance of pets in people's lives and be responsive in helping the clients grieving with pet loss because it is often underestimated by people and the impact of its place on pet owners comparing to the death of loved ones, such as a spouse (Sharkin & Knox, 2003).

People are afraid of the stigma and the rejection from others when it comes to pet loss because people often feel that they are “crazy” or “silly” for experiencing a strong grief reaction toward the death of their companion pets (Turner, 2003). Professionals can provide support and assistance, especially in times of crisis, to minimize the distress over the loss of a companion pet, and in some cases, showing an empathic attitude may be all that was required (Morley & Fook, 2005). After losing a pet, Chur-Hansen (2010) suggested that encouraging pet owners to replace their deceased companion pets immediately might have a negative impact on the clients because it implies that their animals were worthless and easily replaceable. Counselors can best help people cope with the emotional impact of pet loss through grief counseling, consultation with animal health care professionals, and community outreach (Sharkin & Knox, 2003).

Packman et al. (2011) conducted a study of 33 participants ranging from 25 to 79 years of age who lost their companion pets due to major illness within 12 months from the date of data collection. The total sample consisted of 57.6% ( $n = 19$ ) who lost their dogs and 42.4% ( $n = 14$ ) who lost their cats. Packman et al. found that 85% of participants reported having fond memories of their deceased companion pets, and other expressions included 79% using belongings of deceased pets for comfort, 79% reminiscing, 76% lesson learned/positive influence, and 18% making everyday decisions based on the deceased pets' preferences. To show the relative similarities in the different type of continuing bond expressions between pet loss and human loss, the study compared the results with a spousal loss sample involving the loss of a husband between 1 and 2 years previously. The results revealed similarities with both groups showing high levels of reminiscing with others about the deceased, fond memories, and the use of the

deceased's belongings for comfort. Furthermore, both groups showed low levels of everyday choices based on the deceased's preferences and intrusions, such as mistaking other sounds or signs for the deceased.

Another study conducted by Field, Orsini, Gavish, and Packman (2009) examined the effect of the strength of the attachment bond to the companion pets following pet loss and the role of continuing bond to the deceased pets. The sample consisted of 71 pet loss survivors who were recruited through an Internet flyer that was sent to pet loss support counselors and other pet loss agencies, such as humane society, crematoriums, and hospitals. The participants, all of whom lost a dog or cat due to death or separation within 12 months from the date of the data collection, were 18 years of age or older, with the mean age of 44.48. Field et al. found that the average time since the death of the deceased companion pets was 5.40 months. The researchers also used four items from a measure of continuing bond expressions, which included fond memories of the deceased, legacy of the deceased, use of photographs or pictures, and positive influence of the deceased. The researchers compared the results with a database of human loss within the first year of bereavement to examine the relationship and similarities between the human-animal bond and human-human relationship. Field et al. found that attachment to pets continued after the death in a similar way found for human deaths. In addition, the study found that those who lived alone experienced greater grief compared to those who were not living alone, and participants who had higher anxiety scores experienced greater grief. Lastly, the participants' social support, attachment bonds, and continuing bonds to the companion pets did not show any relationship between the ability to cope with grief and attachment style.

### Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT)

In the United States, the first suggested use of animals in a therapeutic setting was introduced by the Secretary of the Interior, F.K. Lane, in 1919 who suggested dogs to the Superintendent of St. Elizabeth Hospital in Washington, DC to be used as companions for psychiatric patients at the hospital (National Institute of Health, 1987). Animals were not widely acknowledged and used in therapeutic settings until psychotherapist Boris Levinson talked at the American Psychological Association in 1961 about the positive effects and the willingness to speak in his unresponsive child patients when he brought the dog to his private practice (Levinson, 1982).

According to Knisely, Barker, and Barker (2012), “animal assisted therapy (AAT) is practiced globally and is typically provided by community volunteers who have trained their dogs, or other pets, and have met the requirements for therapy dog certification by an external credentialing organization” (p. 33). A study conducted by Knisely et al. explored the benefits of canine-assisted therapy for adults in various health care and business settings. Knisely et al. assessed the impact of AAT for hospitalized patients with heart failure. Seventy-six patients were randomly assigned to one of the three groups that consisted of 12 minutes AAT visit, 12 minutes volunteer visit, and 12 minutes treatment visit. The results revealed a significant decrease in pulmonary artery and pulmonary capillary pressure after the AAT visit comparing to the other two groups. In addition, participants in AAT group showed decreases in epinephrine and norepinephrine which were related to muscle and stress hormone during and after AAT visit. Additionally, the level of anxiety showed a significant decrease for the AAT group.



Knisely et al. (2012) also studied the benefits of AAT in adults in inpatient psychiatric settings or under stressful situations. A hospital in Virginia was used to study the effect of AAT on a sample of 231 acute psychiatric patients. Patients were offered to participate in one session of traditional recreation therapy (RT) in the presence of a therapy dog and also to participate in an AAT intervention. The study showed that the level of anxiety was reduced only for patients in RT group. In contrast, reduced anxiety was shown for participants with mood disorders, psychotic disorders, and cognitive and other diagnoses in AAT group. In addition, another study reviewed by Knisely et al. was conducted to measure the effect of AAT on 69 psychiatric patients for 4 weeks. The study found an increase in social behaviors and the ability to respond to the surroundings in AAT group.

Knisely et al. (2012) also investigated the effect of AAT on Alzheimer's and other dementia patients. They found an increase in social behaviors, an increase in the ability to develop interest in self and the environment, and a decrease in verbal aggression and anxiety when the patients were exposed to pets. Lastly, Knisley et al. stated that including animals in the workplace should become more common.

Lutwack-Bloom, Wijewickrama, and Smith (2005) examined the effect of visits by pets versus people with nursing home residents. The study randomly selected 68 residents living in two nursing homes. The sample consisted of 58.2% females and 41.8% male, with the mean age of 69.9 years old. The experimental group consisted of 42 participants, and the control group had 26 participants. The experimental group had visits from volunteers who were accompanied by dogs. The study utilized the Profile of Mood States (POMS) and Geriatric Depressive Scale to assess changes from pre-test to

post-test. This study found a significant decrease in the POMS score of the experimental group compared to control group. Additionally, there were no statistically significant differences in the GDS scores. Lastly, there was a significant reduction in all six mood dimensions of the POMS test for the experimental group, while the control group showed no significant reduction on any of the scale items. The researchers included that companion dogs can have positive impact on the well-being of skilled nursing facility residents.

In a study conducted by Banks and Banks (2002), the researchers examined the effect of AAT on loneliness in long-term care facilities. The study consisted of 45 residents in three long term care facilities in Mississippi for 6 weeks. The residents were randomly assigned to three groups, which consisted of 15 residents in each group, including three 30 minutes AAT sessions per week, one 30 minutes session a week, or no AAT. One of the study instruments was the UCLA Loneliness Scale, which was used as a pre- and post-test. Specifically, the use of AAT was conducted in the resident's room, accompanied by a pet attendant, but the pet attendant had neither interaction with the pet nor the resident during the intervention. The resident was allowed to fully touch the pet, stroke it, hold it, groom it, and play or talk to the animal. The study revealed a significant reduction in loneliness scores for participants in both AAT groups compared to no AAT group.

### Multicultural Issues

There is limited research that explores the human-animal bond and ethnic diversity. Risley-Curtiss, Holley, and Wolf (2006) examined the beliefs and practices of companion pets among different ethnic group. A survey was administered by phone to

587 participants who were randomly chosen using the Genesys database that contained all the listed telephone numbers in the United States. In the sample, 78.4% identified as White, and 12.3% as Hispanic/Spanish origin. Risley-Curtiss et al. found that 63% of the participants had companion pets at the time of the study, and a dog was the most common choice among pet owners. The majority (77.2%) of participants with companion pets were White. Respondents of Hispanic/Spanish origin were less likely to have veterinary visits for their companion pets than other ethnicities. Nevertheless, regardless of ethnicity, 97% of pet owners considered their pets as family members. In addition, those who identified as Hispanic/Spanish origin were 3.41 times more likely to not to neuter or spay their animals. Finally, participants who identified as Asian were more likely to get income from breeding animals.

Risley-Curtiss et al. (2006) conducted a qualitative study to explore the human-animal relationship among women of color. The sample size consisted of 15 women who identified as women of color, including Latina, Asian, Indigenous, and African American. The study consisted of a variety of companion pets of the participants including, dogs, cats, birds, hamsters, fish, and rabbits. Risley-Curtiss et al. found a general theme of reciprocal relationships that emerged from the study. Thirteen of the women described the reciprocal relationships as providing love, attention, playing with their pets, and meeting the needs for foods and veterinary care. Other themes included friendship ( $n = 7$ ), fun and entertainment ( $n = 5$ ), and loyalty ( $n = 2$ ), while four participants expressed the contribution of companion pets as a sense of relief of stress or comfort, love, consistency, and protection. Most ( $n = 13$ ) of the women talked about the meaning of family when they referred to their companion pets as boy, child, baby,

brother, or grandchild. Furthermore, Risley-Curtis et al. also found the changes in human-animal relationship over time. A majority of women ( $n = 12$ ) reported viewing their companion pets differently in their adulthood as they got older. These changes included spending more time with pets, handling them carefully, and allowing their pets to stay inside the house.

Brown (2002) conducted a quantitative study to explore ethnic variations in pet attachment. The study consisted of 133 students at a Southern school of veterinary medicine. A total of 104 (or 78.2%) of participants were female and 29 (or 21.8%) of participants were male. Of 133 students who participated, 76 (or 57.1%) of them were African Americans, and the remaining 67 (or 50.4%) of the participants identified as White. Participants were asked to complete a set of questionnaires including background, question about their pets, and pet attachment. The study found that White students scored higher for pet attachment. In addition, White students reported owning more pets than African American students and were more likely to let their pets sleep in their bedrooms. Female students scored higher for pet attachment and were more likely to allow their pets to sleep in the bedrooms compared to male students.

### Conclusion

The review of literatures has clearly supported the benefits of companion pets improving the quality of lives of older adults. The human-animal bond provides companionship and it decreases loneliness by promoting social interaction in older adults. People often consider their companion pets as a part of the family and use them to cope with stressful life events. In addition, pet loss was found to be a concern for pet owners due to the short life expectancy of companion pets. Pet loss is viewed as disenfranchised

grief because the loss is not widely acknowledged by others. Lastly, more research is needed on the impact of companion pets on the well-being of older adults

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

#### Research Design

An exploratory design was used to explore the impact of companion pets on the quality of life of older adults. Specifically, a qualitative approach was utilized to gather in-depth information on the impact of companion pets on the psychological, social, and physical well being of older adults. An interview guide was used to gather data.

#### Sampling Plan

The subjects in this study were chosen using a non-probability, purposive sampling and snowball sampling techniques. The criteria to participate included older adults who were: (1) 60 years or older, (2) lived in their own residence, (3) owned a companion pet, and 4) spoke English. The researcher obtained a written permission letter from the director of Social Services Department at SeniorServ to provide a 10 minute presentation on the study and handed out the flyers to the seniors at the Congregate Lunch program. The flyers (Appendix A) contained the purpose of the study, the eligibility criteria, and contact information of the researcher. Also, snowball sampling was done through contacting older adult participants personally known to the researcher and inviting them to participate in the study. The sample size of this study consisted of 12 older adults.

### Data Collection

The researcher contacted potential participants to confirm their interest and scheduled either an in-person interview or phone interview depending on the comfort level of the participants. Of the 12 participants, 8 participants agreed to conduct the interview at their residence. Only 1 participant requested to meet at a public place to be interviewed. The remaining 3 participants were interviewed via phone per request of the participant. Before the interview, the participants were asked to read and sign the informed consent form (Appendix C) and were asked for permission to audiotape the interview. For the 3 participants who requested to be interviewed by phone, the researcher mailed the informed consent form (Appendix C). All interviews were conducted after the informed consent was signed.

All but one of the participants gave consent to audiotape the interview. For the one participant who declined to be audiotaped, the researcher took handwritten notes during the interview. The interview took an average of approximately 45 to 60 minutes in length. The participants were informed that the information provided in this study was confidential and was only to be used for the purpose of this study. To increase the privacy and confidentiality of the interview, only the researcher and the participant were present at the interview.

### Instrument

The study used a semi-structured interview guide developed by the researcher as its instrument. For the purpose of the study, the researcher divided the interview guide (Appendix B) into four sections to better assist the interview process. The researcher also

used open-ended questions to allow the participants to describe in-depth their experience with their companion pets.

The first section of the interview guide consisted of questions regarding the participants' background information, such as how they spend their free time. Example questions included: Who are the important people in your life? and What types of social activities are you currently involved in?

The second section invited the participants to talk about their pet(s). Example questions included: What was the main reason at that time when you decided to get the pet(s)? and How would you describe your relationship with your pet(s)?

The third section asked questions about the roles of their pet(s) in their physical, psychological, and social well-being. Example questions included: Have you experienced any changes in your physical health after getting your pet(s)? and What kind of impact has your pet(s) made on your quality of life?

Lastly, the fourth section of the interview guide contained questions about demographics, such as age, marital status, ethnicity, and level of education. The researcher carefully formulated the questions of the interview guide based on the theoretical and empirical literature about this topic to increase the content validity.

#### Data Analysis Plan

The researcher transcribed the audio-recorded information to analyze the data obtained from the interviews. The researcher then looked for themes or patterns that emerged from the interviews. For each variable related to physical, psychological, and social well-being, the researcher developed the categories to code the participants' responses. The research also counted the number of times a pattern was repeated for each



response and put it in the appropriate category. After the themes and patterns were identified, researcher then compiled tentative conclusions.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESULTS

This qualitative study utilized an exploratory design to examine pet ownership in older adults and the impact of companion pets on the well-being of older adults. The researcher used an interview guide to explore background information of the participants, human-animal relationships, and the role of companion pets on the physical, psychological, and social well-being of older adults who were 60 years and older.

#### Demographic Characteristics

The sample of this study consisted of 12 participants who were 60 years or older, lived in their residence, owned a companion pets, and spoke English. Ten (or 83.3%) of the participants were female, and 2 (or 16.7%) of the participants were male (see Table 1). Of the 12 participants, 11 (or 91.7%) of the participants were White, while 1 (or 8.3%) participant was identified as Hispanic. The mean age of the participants in the study was 68.8 ( $SD = 6.17$ ) years old, ranging from 62 to 78 years old. Five (or 41.7%) of the participants reported being married, 3 (or 25.0%) of the participants were divorced, 3 (or 25.0%) of the participants were widowed, and lastly 1 (or 8.3%) participant reported being single. Four (or 33.4%) of the participants had a master's degree, while 1 participant (or 8.3%) had a doctoral degree.

TABLE 1. Demographics of Participants ( $N = 12$ )

Characteristics	<i>f</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<b>Gender</b>				
Female	10	83.3		
Male	2	16.7		
<b>Age</b>				
60-65	6	50.0	68.8	6.17
66-70	2	16.7		
71-75	1	8.3		
76-80	3	25.0		
<b>Marital Status</b>				
Single	1	8.3		
Married	5	41.7		
Divorce	3	25.0		
Widowed	3	25.0		
<b>Ethnic Group</b>				
Caucasian	11	91.7		
Hispanic	1	8.3		
<b>Highest level of Education</b>				
High School	1	8.3		
Some College	3	25.0		
Bachelor Degree	3	25.0		
Master Degree	4	33.4		
Doctoral Degree	1	8.3		

### Social Activities of the Participants

The study gathered data about the type of social activities that the participants engaged in their leisure time. All (12) of the participants reported having a support

system from immediate family, extended family, or friends when they were asked to identify the important people in their lives. There were many responses that emerged addressing different activities that the participants spent in their free time. The two major themes were the participants' involvement in social clubs or volunteer work (50.0%) and traveling (50.0%). Six (or 50.0%) of the participants reported that they were involved in some form of social clubs in the community (see Table 2). Also, half (6 or 50.0%) of the participants reported dedicating their free time to travel. To capture the authenticity of the life experience of the participants, the researcher integrated quotes throughout the study. One participant shared how she utilized her free time.

Retirement is a wonderful thing...prior to that, I enjoy traveling, enjoy cruises, and going to Europe for the first time, Australia, spending time with family is the best...I also involved in two book clubs, women's club, social club, and investment club for teachers.

Another participant commented on many different social clubs and volunteer work in which she partook. She said, "I volunteer with the...Police Department, recycling club, rotary international dinner club, social club and go out to lunch with friends."

One participant was excited and enthusiastic talking about the bonding time between she and her dog when they traveled. She said,

We have been on the Pacific and the Atlantic. We camp on the Columbia River in Oregon. She (her dog) went to Virginia. That is what I do in the free time...In May and June we took a 10 days trip in Yosemite. We visited friends in Reno and Sacramento. One thing I want to do with travel is not to get from point A to point B but to explore.

Of the 12 participants, 2 expressed that they loved to travel with their dogs. For instance, 1 participant said, "I went on road trip with my dog to several places up to Oregon. I take her whenever I can take her." Another participant shared, "I do a lot of traveling with the dog. I took her to dog camp in Lake Tahoe for 1 week, and we did

hiking, swimming, and dog games.” In addition, another theme revealed in the study was spending time with family and friends. Five (or 41.7%) of the participants responded that they enjoyed spending free time with their families and friends when they were asked what they would do in their free time (see Table 2).

TABLE 2. Social Activities of the Participants ( $N = 12$ )

Activities During Free Time	<i>f</i>	%
Social clubs & volunteer work	6	50.0
Travel	6	50.0
Spend time with family and friends	5	41.7
Take classes	4	33.3
Walk/Exercise/Work out	4	33.3
Do things at home	4	33.3
Volunteer work with pet(s)	4	33.3
Church activities	3	25.0
Watch TV	3	25.0
Participate in competition and dog show with pet(s)	2	16.7

Note. More than one response is possible.

The following responses help to capture this theme:

I enjoy visiting my friends. We talk about each other family, talk about which body part hurts. That is what you do when you get old. We also talk about the books we read and talk about the movies we have recently seen.

I get together with my friends to go shopping, movies, play, bird watching, and nature walk.

I like to spend time with friends who I met during the time I taught at the school...My dog friends and I go out to a movie or eat...We meet at Starbuck every Saturday morning and we walk.

I enjoy playing cross word puzzle, going to concert, and play Bridge with a group of ladies every Tuesday.

In addition, four other themes were found in the interview as 4 (or 33.3%) of the participants reported taking classes, walk/exercise/work out, do things at home, and volunteer works with their pets. One participant reported, “[She has been] a marathon runner and loves to exercise.” Another participant said, “My husband and I work out. We exercise and go on walk together with the dog. We like to go to different beach communities and do different walks. Recently, I feel better from the back issue and have started doing yoga now.”

Two participants’ responses below capture the type of things at home that the participants enjoyed to do in their free time.

I enjoy being at home. I sit and enjoy my coffee in the morning and wine the evening in my backyard. I sew and quilt also...When I am not in school, like in the summer, I stay home to work on my backyard and foster the dogs from Pup and Pound.

I am retired. I hang out around the house a lot and do things in the garage. I do not go out often but stay home because most of my friends still work but most of people come to visit me.

Of the 4 (or 33.3%) participants who did volunteer work with their companion pets, 3 of them had dogs that were certified as therapy dogs (see Table 2). These participants and their therapy dogs visited nursing homes, hospitals, and libraries to provide social support for others. They were also a member of Beach Animals Reading with Kids (BARK), a program which encourages children to read out loud to therapy dogs to improve reading skills and self confidence.

The following responses illustrate the remarkable and rewarding work that they did with their therapy dogs:

Now that I am retired with the dog as the therapy dog, we go to the library, different schools during final weeks to de-stress the students. With the BARK program, we go to one school for 8 weeks and work with certain specific students to improve their reading skills and attitudes... We had the little areas where they read to the dog. It takes about 10 to 15 minutes. They read to the dog and I give them the book mark so they have something to look forward to... Reading to the dogs there is no judgment. I do that twice a week at a school in Tustin and the weekend we go to many different libraries... The dog likes the attention and I feel needed and rewarded.

I did volunteer work with my dog to visit the hospital, one school in the BARK program in Santa Monica working with a first grader who has difficulties with reading. Students read to the dog because the dog is not judgmental and children improve quite nicely. We also visit nursing homes. We go to the hospital with the dog twice a week. For the BARK program, we go once a week.

I enjoy the service work that Lola and I do. For the BARK group, we go to an elementary school every Tuesday and kids read books to her... We also go to... a nursing facility in Seal Beach and go to the hospice floor and late stage Alzheimer's.

My biggest volunteer experience was at a local care facility where I work with the residents at..., which is a memory care facility for those with Alzheimer's and dementia. I am planning to come back and help out because it is very rewarding.

A few other participants involved in other social activities including church (25.0%), watching television (25.0%), and competition and dog show with their pets (16.7%).

#### Background Information of Companion Pets

The interviewees were asked to talk about the type of companion pets, the reasons for getting them, where to get them, any challenges as pet owners in older adulthood, and whether they would get other companion pets if the current pets die. Table 3 provides information on the background characteristics of companion pets, and the participants' responses to pet loss. A majority (7 or 58.3%) of the participants had dogs, while 3 (or 25%) of the participants had dogs that were certified as therapy dogs (see Table 3). Three (or 25%) of the participants had the combination of dog and cat or dog, cat, and turtle. Two (or 16.7%) of the participants had only cats. The data revealed that the most

common theme regarding the reason for getting companion pets was companionship.

More than half (7 or 58.2%) of the participants expressed that companionship was the main reason when they decided to get their companion pets.

The following responses illustrate this theme of companionship:

My husband recently passed away, and I need some company for companionship. Two cats are better, especially when I am not home. They can exercise with each other instead of lying around.

Lucky was there not because I wanted to replace a dog but mainly because I needed a friend. My wife works most of the time, and I am home all the time, so it is mainly for companionship.

Sadie was a gift for my mom for her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday. I told my mom that she needed a dog because she was homebound at that point. I was living in the back house, and we made a deal that we would share a dog and when my mother was gone, Sadie would be my dog. Sadie gave my mom the companion, and my mom said she was the most loving dog before she passed away.

My son jokingly said I heard that dogs are good for the elderly. I thought it would be great to have a dog, too. I am gone most of the time in the day time. You can see I am involved with many social clubs. I thought it would be good for my husband to have a dog because I am gone most of time in the day. However, my husband's attitude was that it would be good for me to have a dog that I can take care of. Things turned out that we both adore this dog, and he owns us.

Well, I have had a previous dog before, and it affected me very much when the dog passed away. Banjo is the first dog for me after 30 years because it was so depressing for me to see the dog die, and I did not want to go through that. The gap between previous dog and Banjo was probably more than 30 years, which was a mistake...Now that I am retired, I felt that it is a good time to have a dog in our life again...so we got Banjo.

When the participants were asked about the reasons for getting their companion pets, the participants reported the loss of recent pets (4 or 33.3%) and the lack of ability to find a shelter for the pets or that they did not want the pets to die (4 or 33.3%).



TABLE 3. Background Information of Companion Pets ( $N = 12$ )

Companion Pets Information	<i>f</i>	%
Type of companion pet(s)		
Dog(s), not therapy pets	7	58.3
Dog(s), therapy pet(s)	3	25.0
Dog(s) & cat(s) or dog(s), cat(s) and turtle	3	25.0
Cat(s)	2	16.7
Reasons for getting companion pet(s)		
Companionship	7	58.2
Loss of recent pet(s)	4	33.3
Didn't want animal to die/cannot find shelter	4	33.3
Got companion pet(s) from:		
Rescue/Adoption programs	10	83.3
Got from someone	7	58.3
Stray animals	3	25.0
Challenges as pet owners in older adulthood		
Declined health as getting old	5	41.7
Hard to travel	4	33.3
Financial hardship (vet bills)	3	25.0
Getting another companion pet(s) if the current pet(s) die		
Yes	11	91.7
No	1	8.3

Note. More than one response is possible.

The following responses help to capture the reasons that the participants decided to get their companion pets due to the loss of recent pets:

My dog just passed away, and I was anxious to have another one. I had a Weimaraner before, so I was given higher status to adopt her. She just melted my heart.

My other dog died 2 months later, so I had Calie and Buddy. When Buddy died, I just had Calie. I thought to myself, gosh, I really wanted to have another dog. That was when I decided to get a yellow Labrador retriever. I just cannot be without dogs.

I had just lost one dog, and I cannot leave my other dog alone because she was too sad. Gracie has a personality that she needs another English setter dog. Gracie could not handle being alone...and I always have two dogs. When I lost a dog, it is hard on me, and I do not want the dog to be lonely.

Also, the responses below portray the reasons for having the companion pets because the participants did not want the pets to die or they could not find a shelter for them.

I found the dog at the Heartwell Park in Long Beach and named him as Heartwell. Heartwell was 5-6 months old at that time. I took him to the shelter, went around the houses nearby, and posted ads in the neighborhood but no one claimed him. I could not see giving him to the shelter, and he was just so appealing and he probably needed a home.

Lucky was a stray cat at St. Pedro Marina, where my cousin fed him, when she walked. My cousin bought the cat to the Long Beach shelter, but they could not promise that someone would take the cat home. So I decided to take him in. I did not want Lucky to die...I have been a vegetarian for 9 months because I do not believe in eating animals of any kind.

We got Louie from one of my clients who could not keep the dog anymore. Dulce, the cat, was from my client because she passed away. Lee, the turtle, was found walking outside of the house in the dessert...I cannot say no to animals.

I got Ferrari because he needed a foster home. My responsibility was to take him to an adoption event once a month. No one showed interest in him, and I cannot have him look at me like "why do you drop me off." So I took him.

The majority (10 or 83.3%) of the participants adopted their companion pets from a local rescue or adoption program. More than half (7 or 58.3%) of the participants got their companion pets from family or someone they know. Three (or 25.0%) participants took on the responsibility to have their companion pets because they were stray animals.

The study also measured any hardship and challenges that pet owners experienced in their older adulthood. Five (or 41.7%) of the participants experienced some

difficulties in caring for their pets as their health declined (see Table 3). One participant said, “The biggest problem that I have related to my back and my age. I cannot pick my dog up as I used to...Five months ago, I was able to do it, but it is hard for me now. I am getting physical therapy, and hopefully, I can carry him.” Another participant talked about the physical challenge that limited her ability to do things with her dog. She said, “I cannot run with my dog due to my health problem, which I would enjoy. I used to bike in the neighborhood with my previous dog, but I did not have the strength in my left leg as I get older.” In addition, one participant who had a cat shared, “I have back problem and I cut down from four cats to two cats...My back problem sometimes can be a problem to feed them and change litter.”

There were several responses expressing the difficulties of traveling with their pets. Four (or 33.3%) of the participants responded a certain degree of accommodation needed which influenced their decisions to travel with their companion pets.

The following responses capture this image:

During my travel, I have learned that sometimes it is difficult because some places are not pet friendly...I have to take out my Ipad and search if it is pet friendly like Mount Rushmore. Because Sadie has been around me, my lifestyle choices center on whether I can accommodate Sadie and all of my pets. If my pets are not welcome, I will not come, especially when we travel long distance. I will forgo a Thanksgiving dinner if my dogs are not welcome such as going to Reno which is a long distance. It leaves a negative feeling because people with children were not treated like that.

It is hard to go camping. You either have to take them or find someone.

I do not travel a lot because of the dog. It is hard to travel. I have friend/neighbor who can take care of the dog for me but I feel much attached to my dog because I cannot explain to my dog [that I] will be back in a while.

There was a small number (or 25%) of participants who talked about financial hardship when it came to take care of their companion pets. One participant responded,

“I cannot afford teeth cleaning for my cats, and I cannot afford wellness test for the cats as often as possible.” Another participant shared a similar experience as she said, “I have been concerned about vet bills like some shots. I am concerned about having a lot of vet bills and that is why I get younger cats, so I do not have to worry about vet bills...It is a concern financially.” Another participant who had dogs said,

It would be medical issue of the dogs and financial issue because they mean so much to me...I get acupuncture \$80 per dog for both of them. There were times I go once a week or several times a month...Gracie gets laser about \$40 for her back pain. Those kinds of things are not covered by insurance. It is a housework effort.”

The study described the attachment between the participants and their companion pets when the participants were asked about pet loss. Almost every (11 or 91.7%) of the participants reported that they would get other companion pets if their current companion pets die (see Table 3). One (or 8.3%) of the participants decided that she would not get another companion pets due to her physical health and financial issues. In addition, there was a common theme from the responses that some of the participants might consider getting a smaller dog as they get older because it is easier to manage.

The following responses illustrate the decisions from the participants when it comes to pet loss:

If God forbids something happens to my husband and I am by myself, I think I would be absolute to get another dog. I need a companion, and I need someone to talk to.

When she passes, I probably will wait about 1 year or probably not because I want to do extensive traveling and then I will get a puppy, my last puppy...I just trust that the right dog will fall in my lap somehow.

I would not definitely start with a puppy all over again because of the time it requires. There are very good golden retriever agencies, and I might consider rescuing an older dog and stick with a golden retriever.

I always have two dogs in my life. In many ways, it is simpler to have one. As I get older and with balance issues, I might transition to get a smaller one, but I always want large dog. Henry, my dog, gets along with any dog, so I might consider getting another breed.

I probably would have another one because I always love having cats as companions. I doubt that I would be without one. Well, it depends on my health, but I could not imagine [being] without one.

I will definitely get another dog but probably a smaller dog because as I get older it will be easier.

#### Physical Impact of Companion Pets on the Participants

To examine the physical impact of companion pets, the participants were asked to talk about their experience and any changes in their physical health after getting their companion pets. A majority (8 or 66.7%) of the participants who had dogs only or dogs and cats reported a tremendous and positive change in their physical well-being as their pets encouraged them to walk more (see Table 4). There were 2 (or 16.7%) of the participants who had dogs, cats, and turtle reported no change to their physical health.

TABLE 4. Physical Impact of Companion Pets on the Participants ( $N = 12$ )

Physical Impact of Companion Pets	<i>f</i>	%
Yes, change		
Participants with at least 1 dog encouraged to walk more	8	66.7
No, change		
Participants with multiple pets, including dog	2	16.7
Participants with cat(s)	2	16.7

The following responses illustrate the impact of companion pets on physical well-being of older adults:

Since I have Sadie, there are lots of physical changes. We eat together. Yes, it encourages me to exercise more. We do walking in the evening. There are many times that I want to chill, but I know it is not good for them, and they need exercise. I know [how] to be a good parent, and I need to do it for them. I will get it together and say, come on we need to do it, and afterward, I am glad that I did it. Sadie and I move at slow pace these days, but we do it for our own health. We see the Christmas lighting and see couple of people in the neighborhood that we can talk to. It is a social time.

With Yoda, we do an additional walk every day. We walk an extra 20-30 minutes with him...I run around the house with him, which I did not do without him.

Yes, we walk every day with Banjo, and I take him to the park most days. He is very into playing ball in the park. We walk 45 minutes every day. We go hiking sometimes.

It absolutely encourages me [to walk] and that is why I have English setter dogs. They need a good long walk every day for half an hour. It gets me out because Gracie becomes very bored walking around my neighborhood.

He encourages me to walk more twice a day. We walk an hour every day...He does not mind walking in the rain.

I love to exercise. I took her for training races. I took her for 12 mile runs when she was younger. I would say I am motivated anyway and I love running with all of my dogs. Especially at night when I take her out, I would never do this kind of walking without her. I go down to the beach...and it gets me out.

While there was a great impact in term of the physical benefits of having companion pets for those who had at least one dog (8 or 66.7%), there was no change in physical health for participants with multiple pets including dogs (2 or 16.7%) or for participants with cats only (2 or 16.7%). Participants with cats only (2 or 16.7%) reported some limitations and challenges in their physical health as a result of having pets. One participant said, "My back problem sometimes can be a problem to feed them and change the litter. I cannot put the litter box in the house anymore but put it outside." Another participant shared a similar experience taking care of her cats. She said, "Not in

my physical health. The only thing I realized was I am older than I was when I first got the first set of kittens. The litter bag was heavier for me...Cats are easier than dogs because you do not have to walk them and they can stay by themselves.”

Psychological Impact of Companion Pets on the Participants

The study found many significant benefits that companion pets made on the psychological well-being of the participants. The emotional impact was broken down into six different categories based on the responses from the participants (see Table 5). The researcher found these common themes, including companionship (7 or 58.3%), not lonely anymore (6 or 50.0%), happiness (4 or 33.3%), comfort during difficult time of illness or grief (4 or 33.3%), miss them when they are not around (2 or 16.7%), and lastly a sense of responsibility (2 or 16.7%). The two most common themes were companionship (7 or 58.3%) and not lonely anymore (6 or 50.0%; see Table 5).

TABLE 5. Psychological Impact of Companion Pets on the Participants (*N* = 12)

Emotional Impact of Companion Pets	<i>f</i>	%
Emotional Impact		
Companionship	7	58.3
Not lonely any more	6	50.0
Happy	4	33.3
Comfort during difficult time of illness or grief	3	25.0
Miss them when they are not around	2	16.7
Sense of responsibility	2	16.7

Note. More than one response is possible.

The following responses convey the significant emotional impact that the participants experience from their companion pets:

I laugh and smile a whole lot more...It has enhanced our marriage because we always talk about Yoda and little silly things that Yoda does. He just made us laugh. I just smile more...he made me smile even when no one is in the house. When I have back trouble, he was my snuggler. He seemed to know that there was something going...He was the perfect companion pet to lay with.

I am not lonely when I have her...I miss her when I am not with her. I do look forward to spending time with her...It is like a child.

I know I feel happier. I feel needed. If something is wrong, I have them to think of not just myself. It helps me to establish a routine in my day. I live alone, and I have to feed them and walk them at certain times. Absolutely, I feel a sense of responsibility. We all need to care for someone or something. If the storm is scary and has lightning and you have someone to care about, you will know how to respond to the storm.

I was so lonesome when my husband was gone. They just provide company in the house. I just feel that I have someone again. My neighbors notice that I am happier and my friends all know about my kitties because I show them pictures. They give me a lift in my sad time.

Yes, I feel less lonely and see changes in my emotion and mood after getting them. I told Sadie, the dog, you are the best thing I ever bought home in my whole life. Sadie likes to sit with me during the grief of my mother...No matter where I go, I do not feel lonely when I am with her. She is incredible companionship...She taught me that our heart stretches, and there is room for the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> child, that I can have other dogs like Sophie and Ferrari just like Sadie...It is stimulating psychologically and emotionally...I talk to them when I have bad day in class, and it is a best thing I could have done.

#### Social Impact of Companion Pets on the Participants

The interviewees were asked whether having companion pets increased their chances to meet new people. The question regarding how the pet had impacted their ability to meet new people was used to examine the impact on the social well-being of the participants. More than half (7 or 58.3%) of the participants responded that their pets definitely promoted social well-being and increased the opportunity to meet new people (see Table 6). It was also an “instant ice breaker,” as one of the participants stated.

The following responses help to capture this theme and how companion pets improve the social well-being of older adults:



I would say the dogs are 90% of how I meet new people. That is why I like English setters too because they are so unusual that people would want to talk about them... When I am sad and started walking the dog, people would stop by and ask about the dog.

On Halloween, I dressed up Lola as bumble bee, and everywhere I went even if I just walked around down town, all the kids wanted to talk to her and pet her... We ask them about their family and if they have dogs... It is an instant ice breaker.

Well, that is the easiest thing in the world because he is such a handsome dog. We go walking and people would stop. We go to the park, and the nannies will bring their young children over to see him and pet him. Everybody likes to talk about his/her dogs.

The dog makes a lot of impact on the ability to meet new people. I met a whole group of friends because of the dog. When I walk the dog or with the dog, people talk to you and they would want to come and pet her.

It opens up conversations whether it is pet owner or non-pet owner. It makes you more approachable in a way. I may not strike up conversations if I am by myself. Sometimes, it is a short conversation, and sometimes, it can be longer.

TABLE 6. Social Impact of Companion Pets on the Participants ( $N = 12$ )

Social Impact of Companion Pets	<i>f</i>	%
Meet new people		
Absolute yes	7	58.3
Slightly	3	25.0
No change	2	16.7

Three (or 25%) of the participants expressed that there was only a slight impact regarding to their ability to meet new people (see Table 6). One of the reasons was the personality and nature of the pet as one participant responded that her dog did not feel comfortable around other dogs. She said, “Yoda is not real social and he is afraid. When we take him on walks, people might want to come over and see him, but he is not

inclined to be around them. We will cross the street when people are coming to protect him.” Additionally, there were 2 (or 16.7%) of the participants who reported that there was no change in their ability to meet new people. One participant who had a cat reported that she had not experienced the impact of companion pets in meeting new people. Furthermore, one participant reported that “[he] stayed at home all the time and was not able to walk the dogs anymore.”

#### Human-Animal Relationships and the Impact on Quality of Life

The last portion of this research study asked the interviewees to talk about their relationships with their companion pets and the overall impact of companion pets on their quality of lives. Table 7 describes the human-animal bond and how the participants viewed their companion pets in their lives. All (12 or 100%) of the participants reported seeing their companion pets as family members or best friends, and all 12 participants reported an incredibly positive impact that their companion pets had made on their quality of lives.

TABLE 7. Impact of Companion Pets on Quality of Life of the Participants ( $N = 12$ )

Impact on Quality of Life	<i>f</i>	%
Relationship with companion pets		
Companion pet(s) as family members/best friends	12	100
Positive impact of companion pet(s) in quality of life	12	100
Feel terrible thinking about loss of current pets	3	25.0

Note: More than one response is possible.

The following responses help to convey the participants’ thoughts:

Well, he is my little boy. He is absolutely a family member...He just enriches our quality of life tremendously. He just brings joy to our life every day. There is somebody new for me to love.

I would say that she is probably my best friend. She is so much fun...I take her whenever I can take her. I would say we are close friends...Because of the therapy work I do with her, there will be things that I will miss if I do not have her...It is a big part of my life doing this with her, and it increases my quality of life because I have a sense of purpose, especially the service work that we do.

They are like an extended part of the family...They are just nice to have around, and I think everyone should have that.

Yes, I consider them as my family members. They sleep with me and are very close to me. They sit with me every night on the couch, and we follow a routine. I sat on the couch and Sally sat on my shoulder, and I sing a lullaby every other night. Lucky Boy just puts his head on my shoulder...They make a very positive impact on my quality of life. I talk to the cats all day...

I think they improved my life tremendously. I have a tendency of depression, and it gets me out of feeling sorry for myself. I meet new people and feel needed especially when I was first retired because it was a life transition. I look forward to seeing my dogs and feel like I am making a difference.

Oh, I just love them to death. I love them like children...I would be so lonesome if they are not here. I am lonely in the house anyway, especially in the evening and dinner time and Sunday afternoon, because I am missing my husband so much. I cannot imagine not having them. They make a huge difference, and they are big companions. Yes, I feel that having them give me a sense of purpose and responsibility. I have somebody to take care of.

100% better in my quality of life. I do not want a life without pets for sure...They are my children...I am bonded and intertwined. They are my little companions. They gave me joy and laughter. They gave me something to focus on and be responsible, for which I think it is all healthy. When they have a good day like going to the park, going for a walk, going for a ride, it is just a great day for all of us, and it is a wonderful thing.

Additionally, 3 (or 25.0%) of the participants reported feeling terrible to think about the loss of their current pets. One participant said, "I cannot think about it because it is horrific to image life without Yoda." Another participant shared her thought about pet loss.

I absolutely terribly worry about pet loss. I actually asked my vet if he knows a specific counselor that deals with pet loss because Gracie will not live forever...It

will be hard for the dog, and I might have to take him out more, so he is not so depressed because I always have two dogs in my life.

## CHAPTER 5

### DISCUSSION

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the physical, psychological, and social impact of companion pets on the well-being of older adults. The researcher conducted in depth face to face or phone interviews with 12 participants living in their homes who owned a companion pet. All 12 participants were recruited through personal contacts, flyers, and referral from other participants who participated in the study. All the participants were fluent in English.

#### Summary of Findings

A majority of the participants were female. The mean age of the participants was 68.8 ( $SD = 6.17$ ) years. All but one of the participants was White. Just over half of the participants were dog owners, one quarter owned multiple pets, and the remainders were cat owners. Half of the participants reported that they were involved in social clubs or volunteer work and traveled in their leisure time.

Two-thirds of the participants, who had at least one dog, reported a positive change in their physical routine as their companion pets encouraged them to walk more than usual. These findings are consistent with research conducted by Utz (2014), which found a positive benefit in the physical health of participants with companion pets. Specifically, Utz found that pet owners were more likely than non-pet owners to walk,

jog, and be involved in other outdoor exercise activities. Also, Knight and Edwards (2008) found that dog owners reported an increase in their motivation to exercise as a result of owning a pet.

Half of the participants expressed that companionship was the primary reason for them to get the companion pets; while one-third reported getting the current companion pets due to the recent loss of pets. Additionally, just over half of the participants reported an increase in social interaction and meeting new people when they had their companion pets. All of the participants reported viewing their companion pets as family members or best friends and expressed a significant increase in their quality of lives. These findings are consistent with Chur-Hansen et al.'s (2009) study. Specifically, Chur-Hansen et al. found that a majority of pet owners described their pet as a family member.

More than half of the participants reported that their companion pets provided a reduction in loneliness. One quarter of the participants stated that their companion pets were there for them in times when they were not feeling well or were grieving over the loss of loved ones. Similarly, Eshbaugh et al. (2011) explored the relationship of pet attachment and loneliness among 68 older adults and found that pet owners experienced less loneliness compared to non-pet owners.

Almost half of the participants experienced challenges in pet ownership as their health declined. One third of the participants reported that it was hard to travel with their companion pets and one third reported having financial hardships with veterinary expenses. The findings are consistent with the study of Putney's (2013) research, which found that most pet owners experience some challenges, with the most common being the cost of caring for their companion pets. One quarter of the respondents reported fearing

the loss of their pets. The finding is consistent with the previous research by Chur-Hansen et al. (2009) and Knight and Edwards (2008), which found pet owners to report similar fears.

#### Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations of this study. The major limitation is its small sample size. The participants in the study were active and thus well-functioning older adults. Also, the lack of ethnic diversity limits the generalizability of the results. In addition, there is a high degree of subjectivity associated with qualitative research. Although the researcher made the best of efforts to interpret the respondents' comments as accurately as possible, there is always the possibility that personal biases that may have influenced the interpretation of the results. Finally, the fact an experimental design was not used means that causal inferences cannot be generated from the study's findings.

#### Implications for Social Work Research

The older adult population continues to grow, with 40.3 million in 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Many of these older adults own companion pets. Some studies have found mixed results of the effects of companion pets, particularly regarding physical health. As such, more research is needed to better understand the physical impact of companion pets on older adults. Also, more research is needed about companion pets and the well-being of ethnically diverse older adults. In addition, there is a need for future studies to examine the effects of AAT in long-term care facilities.

#### Implications for Social Work Practice

Due to the growing number of older adults and the importance of the human-animal bond in pet ownership, social workers need to understand the effects of

companion pets on the well-being of older adults. Social workers should incorporate companion pets in their care plans as a tool to decrease isolation and loneliness in community dwelling older adults. Also, pet loss also needs to be addressed by social workers, since older adults are at risk for experiencing disenfranchised grief when their pet dies. Social workers should also assess for the existence of pets when older adults have to be admitted to health care facilities. Lastly, social workers should advocate for therapy pets to be included in long-term care settings to promote the well-being of older adults.

### Conclusion

As indicated by both the findings of this study and the current body of literature available on the subject, companion pets can improve the well-being of older adults. While there are some challenges to owning a companion pet in late-life, the benefits appear to outweigh the challenges. Geriatric social workers need to be aware of the importance of companion pets for older adults and include them as part of the care plan. Geriatric social workers also need to be aware that older adults who experience a pet loss are at risk for experiencing disenfranchised grief and may need help in coping with this type of loss. Further research is needed on the impact of companion pets on the well-being of older adults.



## APPENDICES

APPENDIX A  
RECRUITMENT FLYER

***The Impact of Companion Pets on the Well-Being  
of Older Adults***

RESEARCH STUDY

You are invited to participate in a study conducted by Kim Than, a thesis student, in the Master's of Social Work Program at California State University, Long Beach.

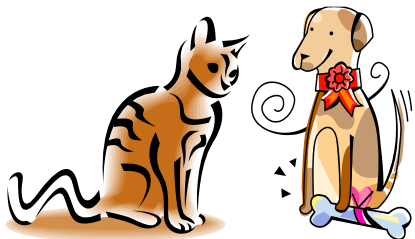
The purpose of the research study is to examine the impact of pet ownership on the well-being of the older adults.

**Your participation or non-participation is voluntary and confidential.**

Your participation will provide social workers with useful information to understand the important role of companion pets on the well-being of the older adults.

To participate in this study, you must be an older adult who is 60 years of age or older, live in your residence, and own a pet.

If you would like to participate, you can contact me at XXX-XXX-XXXX and we can set up a time to conduct the interview.



Thank you for your time and consideration.

APPENDIX B  
INTERVIEW GUIDE

## *The Impact of Companion Pets on the Well-Being of Older Adults*

### Interview Guide

*I would like to begin the interview by collecting some background information.*

1. Who are the important people in your life?  
Probes:
  - a. Family?
  - b. Friend?
  - c. Partner/Spouse?
2. How do you like to spend your free time?  
Probes:
  - a. Doing things on your own?
  - b. Doing things with others?
3. What types of social activities are you currently involved in?  
Probes:
  - a. Volunteering?
  - b. Church/Temple/Mosque?
  - c. Social Clubs?
4. When you are spending time with other people, what do you enjoy doing?  
Probes:
  - a. Going to the movies?
  - b. Shopping?
  - c. Going out to dinner?

*Next, I would like to ask you about your pet(s).*

5. How many pet(s) do you have?
6. What kind of pet(s) do you have?
7. How long have you had your pet(s)?
8. How did you come about getting the pet(s) that you currently have?  
Probes:
  - a. Did someone give it/them to you?
  - b. Pet adoption program?
9. What was the main reason at that time when you decided to get the pet(s)?  
Probes:
  - a. Companionship?
  - b. Safety/security reason?

10. How would you describe your relationship with your pet(s)?  
Probes:
- Do you consider your pet(s) like one of your family members?
  - Do you look forward to spend time with your pet(s)?
  - Have you ever felt that you wished you didn't have the pet(s)?

***The next set of questions will ask you about the role of your pet(s) in your physical, psychological and social well-being***

11. Have you experienced any changes in your physical health after getting your pet(s)?  
Probes:
- Getting more exercise by walking your pet(s)?
  - More allergy problems?
12. Have you experienced any changes in your emotions or mood after getting your pet(s)?  
Probes:
- Less lonely?
  - A sense of less freedom?
13. How has your pet(s) impacted your ability to meet new people?  
Probes:
- When walking your pet(s)?
  - Veterinarian visits?
14. What types of challenges have you encountered as a pet owner in older adulthood? Probes:
- Financial difficulties related to pet medical expenses?
  - Pet loss?
  - Hard to take care of pet(s) and take care of self?
15. What kind of impact has your pet(s) made on your quality of life?  
Probes:
- Better?
  - About the same?
  - No change?
16. If something happens to your pet(s), would you consider getting another one?  
Probes:
- Why or why not?

***Lastly, I would like to ask some demographic questions about you.***

17. What is your age?

18. What is your current marital status?
19. What ethnic group do you identify with?
20. What is the highest level of education that you have obtained?
21. Gender (observed by interviewer)

*Thank you so much for your participation in this study.*

APPENDIX C  
INFORMED CONSENT FORM



## **CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

### ***The Impact of Companion Pets on the Well-Being of Older Adults***

You are asked to participate in a research study conducted by Kim Than. I am a candidate for a Master's of Social Work, from the school of Social Work at California State University, Long Beach. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are an older adult who is 60 years of age or older, live in your own residence, and own a pet.

#### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of the study is to examine the impact of pet ownership and explore how companion pets impact the well-being of older adults.

#### **PROCEDURES**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will do the following things: Agreeing to participate in this study requires you to participate in an interview. If you choose not to be audio taped, I will take handwritten notes. I will meet with you in your home or conduct a telephone interview that will last approximately 45 minutes depending on your preference.

#### **POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

You may experience discomfort or sensitivity due to the personal nature of the questions related to your personal life experience. Potential risks include psychological well-being/comfort of the subject, breach of confidentiality, and potential perceived coercion. If you are uncomfortable with the interview questions, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

#### **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

Although you are not expected to benefit directly by your participation, it is hoped that the results will help social workers to gain a better understanding of the importance of pet ownership and how companion pets impact the well-being of the older adults in social work practice.

#### **PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION**

There will be no monetary or other compensation for participating in this study.

#### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Even when the study results are reported, your name will not be revealed.

Consent forms will be kept separate from data at all times. Audio tapes will be destroyed immediately after they are transcribed and analyzed. I will keep consent forms, transcripts, and handwritten notes for three years from the date the study is completed and then they will be destroyed.

You will not be allowed to review, edit, or erase the tape. My thesis advisor and I will be the only individuals who will have access to the data collection materials.

### **PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. Participation or non-participation will not affect your benefits or any other personal consideration or right you usually expect. Your participation is completely voluntary and that nothing adverse will happen if you refuse, fail to answer all questions, or withdraw entirely. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer and still remain in the study. The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances arise which in the opinion of the researcher warrant doing so.

### **IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact me at XXX-XXX-XXXX or my thesis advisor, Dr. Molly Ranney, at [mranney@csulb.edu](mailto:mranney@csulb.edu).

### **RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS**

You may withdraw your consent at any time and discontinue participation without penalty. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, contact the Office of University Research, CSU Long Beach, 1250 Bellflower Blvd., Long Beach, CA 90840; Telephone: (562) 985-5314 or email to [ORSP-Compliance@csulb.edu](mailto:ORSP-Compliance@csulb.edu).

### **SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH SUBJECT (AND) OR LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE**

I understand the procedures and conditions of my participation described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

---

Name of Subject

---

Signature of Subject \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Consent for Audio-taping:

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Signature of Subject \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

**STATEMENT and SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR**

In my judgment the subject is voluntarily and knowingly giving informed consent and possesses the legal capacity to give informed consent to participate in this research study.

---

Signature of Investigator \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX D  
ORAL SCREENING SCRIPTS

## ORAL SCRIPT FOR THOSE I APPROACH IN MY SOCIAL LIFE

Hello. My name is Kim Than, and I am a graduate student from the Master of Social Work Program at California State University, Long Beach. As part of the Master's program, I am writing my thesis, and my topic is "The Impact of Companion Pets on the Well-Being of Older Adults." I am interviewing older adults who are 60 years of age or older, live in their own residence, and own a pet. The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of companion pets on the well-being of older adults. Are you interested in participating?

### **If they say yes:**

Thank you so much for your time and consideration to participate in this study. I would like to set up an interview date with you.

### **If they say no:**

Thank you so much for taking the time to listen to me. Have a great day!

APPENDIX E

ORAL SCRIPT FOR BEGINNING CONTACT (THOSE WHO CONTACT ME)

Hello. Thank you so much for responding to my flyer. My name is Kim Than, and I am a graduate student from the Master of Social Work Program at California State University, Long Beach. As part of the Master's program, I am writing my thesis, and my topic is "The Impact of Companion Pets on the Well-Being of Older Adults." I am interviewing older adults who are 60 years of age or older, live in their own residence, and own a pet. The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of pet ownership on the well-being of older adults. Are you interested in participating?

**If they say yes:**

Thank you so much for your time and consideration to participate in this study. I would like to set up an interview date with you.

**If they say no:**

Thank you so much for taking the time to listen to me. Have a great day!

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