FAMILY COMMUNICATION ABOUT COMPANION ANIMAL DEATH AND DYING: A SYSTEMS APPROACH

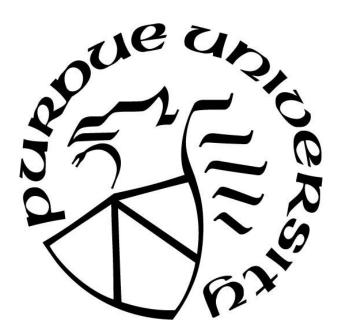by

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ABSTRACT

Humans and domesticated animals have lived alongside one another for thousands of years, yet scholars have only recently begun to examine how companion animals, or pets, influence human lives (Knight, 2005). Today, 67 percent of United States households contain companion animals (APPA, 2019-2020) and many people consider their pets as family (Irvine & Cilia, 2017; McConnell et al., 2019). Given this, the death and dying period for pets can bring about distinctive concerns and difficulties for individuals, such as guilt, uncertainty and frustration, many of which have been well-documented in the literature (Adams et al., 1999; Spitznagel et al., 2020) Death and dying can also bring about a variety of challenges within the family system, yet little is known about how individuals navigate the pet end-of-life period within the family, and how family communication manifests in this context.

This study aimed to understand the interactional challenges for families communicating about the end-of-life period for their pets. Guided by family systems theory (FST) as an analytic framework, the goal was to better understand these dynamics using qualitative methods to address two main research questions. First, what are the challenges families face during the companion animal death and dying period? And second, how do families respond communicatively to these challenges? This qualitative study used a grounded theory approach to analyze 27 in-depth interviews with individuals who had experienced a death of their pet in the prior year and centered on how families described the place of their pets within the system. Of those participants, 14 individuals consisted of family dyads (51%) in various subgroups of partners, parent-child and siblings.

Analysis affirmed some of what is known from the literature (such as feelings of guilt and financial worries associated with pet end-of-life) but also extended what is known by documenting family decision-making dilemmas, such as the dialectic tension between holding on and letting go, as well as noting the reverberations through the family of avoiding talk about death and disruptions to family communication after death. This manifested in primarily a decrease in talk about the pet or talk with family members (both in-person and mediated channels) or an increase in talk following the death. These findings suggest that pet death has the potential to disrupt a family's regular communication patterns.

These findings affirmed that supportive communication after a death loss is important to individuals and particularly helpful from others with prior pet loss experience. Along with social support, participants indicated that the artifacts left behind after the death of their pet provided comfort and were also elements of tension and cohesion within the system. As scholars suggest, companion animals are liminal creatures, existing as kin and "other" within the family (Irvine & Cilia, 2017; Sayers et al. 2022). Indeed, participants described their pets as existing in a space at the edge of true family member whose fate was exclusively in the hands of the family, particularly in the context of euthanasia, which contributed to some of the communicative challenges identified.

Given limitations of a mostly regional and homogenous sample and the conceptual limitation of extrapolating from two individuals in a family to the whole system, this study was still able to take the next step needed for understanding the communicative challenges faced by families in confronting pet death. Findings extend the concept of pet-as-family, in that pets were found to be an element of the "family tapestry" serving the role of both emotional support and kin for some family members. In that manner, they were also discovered as integral to the family timeline, a catalyst for connection between family members, and thus worthy of further study from a communication and family system perspective.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this project was to explore the interactional challenges for families communicating about the end-of-life period for their pets. Humans and animals have always coexisted; however it is only recently that scholars have begun to examine the role of pets in human life (Knight, 2005). Companion animals are increasingly an important part of the family system in the United States, and pets fulfill important roles in family life (Turner, 2005). As an unavoidable part of the lifecycle, death and dying bring a variety of challenges, and death of a companion animal can engender distinctive concerns and difficulties. Scholars have called for a systems approach to examine the impact of companion animal death and dying within the family, including the impact on relational dynamics (Walsh, 2009b).

Contemporary families are diverse, take multiple forms and encompass different cultural and socioeconomic structures. Single-parent families, stepfamilies, gay and lesbian partnerships, committed partners, communal groups and intentional families are just a few forms that families take within modern society (Galvin et al. 2015). In fact, the variation of families indicates that "there is no longer a majority family form in the United States" (p. 9). The family as an idealized form, or "natural family" in the form of a nuclear family has been found to be more myth than reality. Indeed, Baxter (2014) asserts that family is a cultural creation rather than a natural state, and that this cultural conception of family is held up against all others as inferior.

As outlined above, prior literature has found that many people consider their pets to be family (Cain, 1985; Irvine & Cilia, 2017; McConnell et al., 2019b; Shir-Vertesh, 2012). In the context of this study, the definition of the family is meant to be inclusive and broad. There are varied conceptions of kin, family and couple relationship in contemporary society, which can include chosen family, and non-blood relationships (Braithwaite et al., 2010; Galvin et al., 2015;

Nelson, 2013). This study did not define family for participants, and those who chose to participate in interviews provided their own conception of couple and family relationships. Therefore, this study takes the view as Galvin, Braithwaite, and Bylund (2015) of family:

> Networks of people who share their lives over long periods of time bound by ties of marriage, blood, law, or commitment, legal or otherwise, who consider themselves as family and who share a significant history and anticipated future of functioning as a family (p. 8).

The following section will provide an overview of Family Systems Theory, the analytic framework for this study. It will cover the origin, principles of family systems theory and some critiques of the theory.

1.1 Analytic Framework: Family Systems Theory

This chapter provides an overview of Family Systems Theory and how it was used in this study. I will provide an overview of the traditions of the theory and how communication scholars have utilized it, the features that characterize the theory, and review how it can be used to understand pet death and dying in the context of the family. The concepts of family systems theory provide a heuristic frame to understand the impact of a pet on the family system, as well as the communication that families produce during times of stress, such as pet death and dying. Historically, families face many situations that have the potential to strain and challenge family life, including illness contexts, genetic diagnosis, and substance abuse (Crowley & Miller, 2020; Galvin & Young, 2010; Ginter & Braun, 2019) as well as end-of-life concerns.

The death and dying experience in particular can challenge the rules of family relationships, goals, and boundaries (Yang & Rosenblatt, 2007) A systems analysis can provide an understanding of the relational nuances that are unavoidably present within and across

families during end-of-life period, such as in the context of final conversations with dying individuals (Keeley & Generous, 2015). Indeed, the communication between family members has been found to be an important consideration in human end-of-life contexts (Generous & Keeley, 2020) and although family members cannot communicate directly with a pet who is dying, individuals certainly communicate about this context within families. Although 67 percent of United States households contain pets (APPA, 2019-2020), little is known about how family members navigate the pet end-of-life period through a family systems perspective, and how family communication manifests in this context.

1.2 Origins of Family Systems Theory

The analytic framework for this study is Family Systems Theory (FST). FST was built from General Systems Theory (GST) which was first proposed by biologist Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1968). He drew upon intellectual traditions within biology and physics to understand principles that apply to systems with interacting components. Although originally conceptualized as a theory that drew from the sciences, social scientists and family scholars developed elements of this theory according to their area of study. Family therapist Murray Bowen (1978) conceptualized Family Systems Theory and "envisioned the family as an emotional unit enacting complex interactions" (Yoshimura & Galvin, 2017 p. 165).

Bowen used FST primarily to understand mental health, specifically young adults with schizophrenia in clinical practice. Bowen concentrated on issues of relational triangles, differentiation of self and multigenerational transmission processes. Clinical professionals began to look outward, and beyond the individual to examine the family relationships, extended family and the environments that surround each family subsystem, and the communicative behavior maintained by family interactions (Bavelas & Segal, 1982). Later, family therapists used FST in

their work understanding family interactions and patterns both functional and dysfunctional (Yoshimura & Galvin, 2017), and further, researchers found that taking a family systems perspective requires looking at all family members, biological and nonbiological (Galvin & Young, 2010). Interestingly, Bowen noted that nonrelatives and pets can be a part of the emotional system of the family, echoing out through the network of relationships (Walsh, 2009b). A systems theory approach can be useful to understand complex family dynamics, such as the communication strategies within stepfamilies (Golish, 2003).

Because the family is an interacting and complex social system (Broderick, 1993), mediated through and shaped by communication, systems theory offered a framework for communication scholars to understand those dynamics. Communication scholars suggest that communication is not simply a feature of family life, but it is rather the way in which families are legitimized and co-constructed (Braithwaite et al., 2017). Family systems therefore depend upon the discourse of the family to create, maintain and terminate an identity. "From a systems perspective, the ongoing process of creating family identity depends upon both the communication patterns that identify individuals as members and participants in ongoing life experiences with an identifiable long-term interpersonal system" (Yoshimura & Galvin, 2017, p. 168). Communication scholars have used family systems theory to understand a range of communication and family interactions such as estranged parent–child dyads, relationships between mothers' and adult children's psychosocial problems and social support needs of breast cancer patients (Arroyo et al., 2016; Ginter & Braun, 2019; Scharp, 2020). As systems theory gained traction in psychiatry and therapy, communication scholars also drew on a systems approach specifically studying how communication maintains, defines and changes the relationships of family members (Bavelas & Segal, 1982). Further, Bavelas and Segal note that

families are not closed systems. They are situated within larger extended family groups and within varied cultural contexts, and form relationships with non-members outside the family. All of these contexts have been rich ground for study within the communication field.

1.3 Principles of Family Systems Theory and Critiques

Yoshimura and Galvin (2017) describe the eight key principles or features that characterize family systems. (1) interdependence, (2) wholeness, (3) self-regulating patterns, (4) openness, (5) feedback, (6) hierarchy/subgroups, (7) interactive complexity and (8) equifinality. The first overarching principle is that the elements of the system are interconnected. Therefore, *interdependence* suggests that what affects one member of the family, affects all members to varying degrees. Interdependence indicates that the family "operates as a highly connected web of personal relationships where each family member depends on every other family member to sustain the family system" (Schrodt et al., 2008, p. 192). If a change occurs within the family, such as remarriage or adoption, every family member is affected including their communication. Interdependence can also be thought of as "mutual influence" (Scharp, 2020). *Wholeness* suggests that interactions between family members create and display characteristics of both dyadic relationships and family as a whole. Families may characterize themselves with family descriptors such as "competitive" or "charitable" even if all individuals do not fit this description. Families generate messages and rules that are used to govern the system.

Family members maintain cohesion by coordinating their interactions which create *self-regulating patterns.* These can include communication rules such as not talking about subjects. Families for the most part are affected by outside societal and cultural structures and are subject to outside norms. Therefore, families are involved in negotiation of change and the degree of *openness* is dependent on the norms of the system itself, and how information comes into and

leaves the family system. FST suggests that families strive to maintain homeostasis and generate *feedback* which specifies when members are following the rules of the family or interacting in appropriate ways.

Ultimately, much of the feedback within family life preserves ongoing family patterns. When change-promoting feedback occurs, family members can either endorse the influence of that feedback or resist it. Families are arranged in *subsystems*, most commonly dyads and triads. Couple, sibling, and parent subsystems are commonly studied within their own groupings, or as parts of the larger system. "Boundaries (both literal and metaphoric) are drawn through family communication to establish in-group and out-group status at various levels within the hierarchy of family subsystems" (p. 167). *Interactive complexity* refers to the nature of families as intricate systems where patterns of communication are rarely tied to one person or event. Rather interaction patterns are jointly and collectivity constructed and if family members are to change these patterns, it requires working together to do so. Finally, *equifinality* suggests that family systems attempt to maintain stability and can achieve goals through multiple means. This can mean that families create predictable responses to stressors which can include collective responses to illness (Galvin & Young, 2010).

As with any analytic approach, there are critiques of family systems theory. First, that within families there are hierarchies and power differentials (Yoshimura & Galvin, 2017). Not all family members have an equal voice, and more specifically, patterns that are created and sustained by one individual with power cannot necessarily be attributed to all individuals. "Systems theory encourages a focus on what is created through overall patterns; causality and/or individual responsibility are not often pinpointed" (p. 170). Therefore, if one member of the family is dysfunctional, Yoshimura and Galvin note that assertions about conjoint influence can

be problematic. Similarly Yerby (1995) states that systems theory does not consider gender bias, cultural difference, and economic disadvantages and, as it is currently utilized by most scholars, family systems theory originates from a White, Western, heteronormative perspective.

Next, I will review the significance of animals in human life, particularly in the family system, highlighting the potential impact of companion animal death and dying for that system. From this review, general research questions will follow and the methodology for addressing those questions will be explicated.

1.4 Literature Review

Significance of Animals in Human Lives

The significance of animals in human lives has been well documented by historians and anthropologists. Before humans could write, they drew pictures of animals on cave walls. These drawings, primarily representing animal figures, can be regarded as the first expressions of human art (Alves & Barboza, 2018). Due to the close relationship between humans and other animals throughout history, all cultures have used animals to reflect the nature of humanity, symbolize societal and individual human characteristics and have been subjects of human communication since humans could communicate (Klingender, 1971).

Not surprisingly, there has been interest in examining the role of animals in human life, not just as symbols of human society, but as parts of it, including pets' place in human interactions and relationships (Knight, 2020). Recently, scholars have started to examine the role of animals kept by people primarily for companionship.

The term "companion animal" is generally distinguished from the term "pet" to describe domesticated animals that live with humans kept for companionship rather than entertainment

(Irvine, 2004) and that have no apparent economic function (Serpell, 1989). The term pet is now often used mutually with companion animal to describe this category of non-human animal. As both of these terms are used reciprocally across disciplines, both terms will be used within this study. Similarly, there have been calls to refer to pet "guardians" rather than "owners" to emphasize that companion animals are not possessions, but rather beings deserving of respect and correspondingly, emphasizing a commitment of care toward them (Carlisle-Frank & Frank, 2006). However, opponents such as the American Veterinary Medical Association argue that a change to "guardian" could undermine protective care, create legal problems and complicate the options of euthanizing, vaccination or spay-neutering (AVMA, 2001). Thus, both guardian and owner will be referred to interchangeably in this study.

It should be noted that the practice of pet-keeping has been pathologized (Walsh, 2009a) with a common misconception that people who keep pets are deficient in appropriate human relationships or interactional skills (Irvine & Cilia, 2017). However, the highest rates of pet ownership are among households with children, and the best predictor of pet ownership in adulthood is simply pet ownership in childhood. Regardless of the characteristics of people who choose to bring a companion animal into their home, the practice of pet keeping is currently widespread with 84.9 million homes containing pets in the United States (APPA, 2019-2020).

Indeed, pet-keeping is common in most human societies with the practice varying widely by culture (Herzog, 2014). Gray and Young (2011) completed the only review of cross-cultural patterns of pet keeping from a probability sample of 60 societies. They found that species ranged from pigs to birds and monkeys and that these animals served roles that included pest removal and hunting along with use as playthings. The most common species kept were dogs in 53 societies followed closely by cats in 32 societies, reflecting a similar distribution of the kinds of

pets present in the United States. Such cross-cultural prevalence has generated a number of hypotheses as to why people keep pets, from an evolutionary by-product, to an adaptation or social learning (Herzog, 2014). For example, the biophilia hypothesis offers that people are innately attracted to other animals and living things; from an evolutionary perspective, attending to their presence contributed to our survival because they could alert us to danger or threats (Wilson, 1984). The biophilia hypothesis has been used in studies that have shown that just looking at animals or nature can reduce anxiety and stress (O'Haire, 2010).

A second hypotheses as to why people keep pets is the social support hypothesis, which offers that animals contribute to a sense of well-being, due to their nonjudgmental support and constant availability to us in our homes. Both the biophilia and social support hypothesis suggest a positive connection between human health (either mental or physical) and proximity of animals. Considering the pervasiveness of animals in human lives and culture it is not surprising that researchers have examined links between human health, well-being, and companion animal ownership.

Although not yet conclusive, in a review of the effects of animals on well-being and health, Wells (2009) details various studies that demonstrate pets can contribute to both short term and long term physical health benefits. For example, research has demonstrated that petting an animal can decrease both blood pressure and heart rate, and early studies have demonstrated that pet ownership can be a factor in increased survival rates of people who have suffered a heart attack (Friedmann & Thomas, 1995). Epidemiological research has also associated pet-keeping with greater health with a study that found that among 11,000 Australian and German adults, those who owned pets were in better physical condition than non-owners (Headey & Grabka, 2011). Further, in terms of emotional and mental health, Nieforth and O'Haire (2020) establish

that people have found animals as complementary sources of social support in times of stress such as during the COVID-19 pandemic (2020) and also that pets can offer emotional support to breast cancer patients without partners (Ginter & Braun, 2019). However, Herzog (2011; 2014) contends that various studies examining the impact of companion animals on human health have in actuality, sometimes produced inconsistent findings, and that a "pet effect" on human health is a hypothesis for which there is support, but is not yet an established fact. Regardless of any direct link between pet ownership and human health, it is evident that people procure, care for and house animals for reasons other than directly improving their health. In fact, many pet owners share that companion animals provide benefits in the form of "affectionate attachments" known as the human-animal bond (Beck & Katcher, 2003; O'Haire, 2010).

Beyond physical health effects (and the degree of effects), as well as evidence of the human-animal bond, there is support that the co-existence of humans and companion animals can be fraught with ambivalence. For example, although people spend more than US $95 billion on pet products and veterinary care (APPA, 2019-2020), approximately 6.3 million companion animals enter United States animal shelters every year, and 920,000 shelter animals are euthanized each year (ASPCA, 2022). This suggests that the relationships people have with their companion animals is both paradoxical and complex (Herzog & Burghardt, 1988; Shir-Vertesh, 2012). An ethnographic study by Belk (1996) found that pets were characterized as both pleasures, problems, members of the family and parts of self. Pets as "a part of self" implies an attachment, or an incorporation of the pet into person's life.

Like other interpersonal relationships, people vary in their degree of attachment to their pets. An attachment to a companion animal can depend on a number of personal and individual factors (McCutcheon & Fleming, 2002) but has been found to equal or transcend an emotional

attachment that is formed with fellow humans, as well as be a reserve of safety, comfort and stability (Colleran, 2014). This attachment identified has been shown to serve as a source of emotional support in times of need (Zilcha-Mano, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2011), with one study finding that individuals are more prone to turn to their pets in times of emotional distress compared to others beyond their romantic partners (Kurdek, 2009). Overall, this attachment has been found to be significant at different stages throughout the family life-cycle (Turner, 2005).

As shown above, companion animals are prevalent in many human cultures around the world, notably the United States. There is support that their presence can play a part in both physical and mental well-being, and emotional attachments such as the human-animal bond are important for many people. For individuals who have pets, evidence suggests that many also had them in childhood, suggesting that the animals' presence in family life was impactful into adulthood. The role of pets within families will be detailed within the following section.

Companion Animals in Families

As noted above, companion animals are increasingly recognized as an important part of the family system (Mueller et al., 2015) with 67 percent of United States households containing a pet and expenditures on pets exceeding US $95 billion (APPA, 2019-2020). It is suggested that pets can be significant in the lives of diverse families including military families, low income families and vulnerable populations such as the elderly (Anderson, 1985; Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006; Stewart et al., 1985). Scholars in fields such as animal studies, social and cultural geography and social work have examined animals within the family and home. Although early research into pets and family life found that animals were viewed in some households metaphorically as children or grandchildren (Belk, 1996), research that sought to understand how companion animals shaped the practices of family and home found that efforts were made to

include *dogs-as-dogs* rather than confining dogs to specific child-like roles (Power, 2008). Likewise, companion animals can be described as "liminal animals" in that they are sometimes treated as people, and other times family (Sayers et al., 2022; Schuurman & Redmalm, 2019). However, if pets are considered family, their status as family member has been shown to be flexible, with their position both as a "person" and "nonperson" as fluid when changes occur within family life (Shir-Vertesh, 2012). However, Sayers et al. (2022) note that most people understand that their companion animal is not human, and are therefore less anthropomorphized within families as is sometimes asserted.

There are various suggestions for why people consider pets as family, ranging from families becoming smaller in size, people increasingly living alone, or choosing to raise pets before, or instead of, having children (Galvin et al., 2015). Further, the definition of family, for many people, increasingly includes non-blood relationships. These relationships considered as being "like family" have been termed "fictive kin," or "voluntary kin." This can be a friend who is considered family, or an individual who becomes "like" a mother, or brother, or a non-blood relative who takes on a role of godparent for example. These are contexts in which people re-create characteristics of family such as intimacy, psychological support and caregiving with individuals who are not related by blood. Although these relationships take on similar obligations, joy and trouble; their survival is dependent on consensus and mutual agreement (Nelson, 2013). Pet-human relationships contain obvious differences from the definition of voluntary or fictive kin as a pets' inclusion into the family are typically not voluntary, at least on the part of the animal. However, it is worth underscoring these relationships as they are examples of the constant evolution of the modern family.

In both home and professional settings, humans "speak for" animals by voicing what they believe or want to project as the animal's experience (Arluke & Sanders, 1996; Roberts, 2004) and animals are often included in domestic rituals, from the mundane to celebrations within family life (Irvine & Cilia, 2017). Further, Tannen (2004) demonstrates that by framing pets as family members, dogs in particular can be used as interactional resources, helping to reinforce the "bonds among individuals who live together by exhibiting, reinforcing and creating their identity as a family" (p. 417). For example, Power (2008) found that dogs both shaped human expectations of family life and also broadened the family itself by efforts to include dogs within practices and routines. In this example, "belonging is not definitively contingent on human status, or on similarity to people, but is instead forged through close interaction, cohabitation and engagement with another" (p. 552).

As companion animals are recognized as a part of the social life of households, they have been found to play different roles, and people tend to develop expectations for the animals in that role. For example, Walsh (2009b) notes that pets can provide a sense of security and important companionship for children at home with many parents engaged in the workforce. For older children, pets can help prepare children for later life experiences. At the life stage of a family with adolescents, it is a popular time to acquire a new animal and pet ownership has been found to have a positive effect on adolescent well-being. Further, a companion animal can take on the role as a "confidant" to the adolescent, assuage a feeling of loneliness and bestow responsibility (Turner, 2005). Pets can prepare young adults for parenthood and help people in midlife to fill the void of the departure of adult children. They can provide a source of unconditional affection during important life transitions such as divorce and remarriage and as a buffer against the difficulties of adjustment during these occurrences (Albert et al., 1988). However, the role of a

pet, and status as family member has been shown to be flexible, with their status both as a "person" and "nonperson" as fluid when changes occur within family life such as a new job, home or a new baby (Shir-Vertesh, 2012).

As companion animals are increasingly integrated into the structure of human family life, researchers particularly in social work have asserted that the dynamics of how caregivers interact with animals and children can be reflective of broader family functioning (Mueller et al., 2015). For example, there is a demonstrated link between animal maltreatment and a poorly functioning family system (DeGue & DiLillo, 2008) including interpersonal and intimate partner violence (Ascione & Arkow, 1999). Within the family context, severe physical violence has been found to be a significant predictor of pet abuse, with one study finding that women reported concerns for a pet's welfare prevented them from seeking shelter from their abuser sooner (Ascione et al., 2007). Further, Irving and Cilia (2017) claim that "Abusers target pets not because they are 'pretend' family members, but because they are family members…this prompts us to reflect on what 'family' means, in light of the importance of animals" (p. 7).

Scholars within the field of social work have therefore encouraged practitioners to take the link between interpersonal family power dynamics and animal treatment seriously, encouraging social workers to include questions about pets during the course of family assessment.

> Their stories can reveal important information about how the family system is organized, couple relationships, communication and problem-solving processes, and coping strategies with stressful situations. Learning about deliberate harm to pets, or seeing their neglect in home visits, may suggest risk or undisclosed abuse or neglect of human family members, because they so often coexist (Walsh, 2009, p. 492).

As can be seen, companion animals are increasingly recognized as part of the family system, particularly drawing attention from fields such as social work to understand the roles they play in family dynamics as well as a signal of trouble within families. Pets appear to fulfill various roles depending on the family member, and stage of the family lifecycle. As death, illness and other interruptions are unavoidable components of family life, families may communicate about these various challenges and disruptions. These disruptions, and how they are handled communicatively within families will be discussed next. First, however it is necessary to delineate how families will be defined moving forward for this study.

Defining Family and Communication in Families

The study of communication within families was born from interpersonal communication and has been a part of various disciplines including but not limited to psychology, education and counseling to understand and improve the well-being of families (Braithwaite et al., 2017). Family communication scholars typically take the approach that communication is not simply an aspect of family life, but "the central process by which families are literally talked into being, that is, how families are co-constructed, negotiated, and legitimized in discourse" (Braithwaite et al., 2017, p. 4). This study used the definition of family offered by Galvin, Braithwaite, and Bylund (2015) "Networks of people who share their lives over long periods of time bound by marriage, blood, or commitment, legal or otherwise, who consider themselves as family and who share a significant history and anticipated future functioning as a family" (p. 8). This definition of family is broad in order to encompass the diversity and breadth of form that modern families can take in the United States, which can include pets.

Furthermore, as the view of the family has evolved, there have been calls to recognize that the family does not operate within a vacuum, and that the world in which families go about

their lives includes various non-human elements (Haraway, 2003). Irvine and Cilia (2017) suggest that families have always been more-than-human and should be examined through a multispecies perspective. They assert that this does not mean abandoning the current conception of family, but simply expanding the understanding of what it means to do family. "Considering families as more-than-human reveals the intertwining of humans and animals without decentering humans, who maintain responsibilities, establish rules, and provide care for other beings" (p. 8). This study brought together this broad conception of family, inclusive of other beings such as pets, in the system with the importance, and centrality of human communication at its core.

Communication scholars recognize that human communication can take many forms. On a basic level, the communication message processes of everyday talk, nonverbal and mediated messages (text-based/social media) vary in frequency and quality. All of these have the potential to shape, affect and be a part of communication within families (Stamp et al., 2013). These processes can also play a part in end-of-life talk, coping and grief before and after a death (Generous & Keeley, 2020; Manusov, & Keeley, 2015; Walter et al., 2011). It has been demonstrated that families navigate talk about end-of-life which will be discussed next.

Families Communicate About Death and Dying

Families face various disruptions, tragedies and challenges that impact individual members or the family as a whole. The literature points to evidence that disruptions in individuals' lives both large and small are usually not navigated alone, but interpersonally with others, including within the family system. Communication scholars have examined the ways in which families work through challenging times by examining communicative processes, strategies and forms. Through communication, families construct resilience during difficult and

often unexpected life experiences, as well as navigate changes to the family structure such as divorce, remarriage and drug addiction (Buzzanell, 2010; Crowley & Miller, 2020; Golish, 2003; Polk, 2005). The dying and end-of-life period can also be fraught with difficulties within families. Concerns such as medical decision making, lack of social support or financial concerns for example have been identified as potential stressors and could impact how families communicate about the death and dying period for a pet.

As referenced earlier, the prevalence of companion animals in human families is widespread. Numerous studies suggest a link between pet ownership and human health and well-being, and close attachments like the human-animal bond are found to be significant for many. Death and dying can be particularly difficult events often navigated communicatively within families, therefore pet death may pose a set of particular challenges for families. Currently, although the literature demonstrates that families do communicate about end-of-life concerns, it is not known what the particular challenges are for families facing the death of a companion animal, and how they navigate these challenges.

Potential Impact of Companion Animal Death and Dying in Families

Research has found that pet death can cause stress within family life. Indeed, the death of a pet is perhaps one of the more common sources of family stress, occurring almost two times more frequently than stress associated with children leaving home (Gage & Holcomb, 1991). Death in particular can be a challenging disruption for families because individuals are navigating their own response to loss as well as potentially trying to understand the perspective of others in the family. Further, with death "the problem by which the experience is defined cannot be fixed" (Pangborn, 2019, p. 96). This can make navigating communication about death and dying within families particularly difficult.

In her study of how bereaved parents communicated with people in their social network, Toller (2005) found that although parents often wanted to talk about their loss with family, many were hesitant to do so out of fear of negative reactions, or that this discourse would place a burden on family members. Similarly, in their study of family communication about end-of-life decisions, Ohs et al., (2017) found that various uncertainties during end-of-life can be complicated by relational dynamics, such as who should participate in the decision-making process, or not knowing what their loved one would have wanted at the end-of-life. Uncertainties about care often occur within the framework of the desire to both hold on to a loved one and the willingness to let them go (Ohs et al., 2017).

Families face challenges that can revolve around decision-making that can ultimately impact family emotional health. For example, (Abbott et al., 2001) found that cooperative decision-making and support from other family members can be helpful in the medical decision-making process. Likewise, communication among family members, particularly with the dying during the end-of-life period is beneficial. For example, in her research on family communication at the end-of-life, Keeley (2016) found that final conversations with the dying can help contribute to positive psychological outcomes for family members following a death. As briefly outlined above, research has demonstrated that families communicate about death and dying, and various challenges can be faced during this time. The following section will discuss some specific challenges related to medical decision-making, relational dynamics, social support and grief. Each of these will be elucidated next with what is known in the literature about both human and companion animal death and dying.

Medical Decision-Making

Making end-of-life decisions for a pet can be associated with anxiety about the death itself and also considerable financial and ethical considerations (Kerrigan, 2014). Most veterinary transactions for example are based upon a fee-for-service model and health insurance for pets is not in widespread practice (Bauer & Roberts, 2015). Owners may therefore have to weigh the cost of treatment in relation to the life of their pet, rarely a consideration in the context of human medicine. Another consideration is that of euthanasia. Owners have reported guilt surrounding their decision to euthanize, struggling if the decision was "reasonable" (Morris, 2012). Guilt can stem from regret when people believe they contributed to the medical problem that resulted in the decision to euthanize, or when the euthanasia was based on financial considerations. Further, euthanasia is often replaced by euphemisms and there can be limited opportunities for owners to talk about the euthanasia event itself, further complicating a challenging interpersonal dynamic within a culture that may trivialize animal loss.

Finally, these ethical and financial considerations can be overlapping decisions and strains faced at the same time. These concerns can be heightened due to the fact that unlike human end-of-life decisions, the pet has no direct input and the responsibility for decision-making is left to the caregiver, or caregivers, creating issues related to human responsibility for the death of the pet (Dawson & Campbell, 2009 p. 100).

Relational Dynamics, Social Support and Grief

Literature suggests that the death of a pet can often alter relational dynamics within the family. Walsh (2009b) notes that "When a pet has served a critical function in couple or family dynamics, the loss of the animal can destabilize the relational system" (p. 489) particularly when family stressors have been cushioned by the presence of a companion animal. Likewise,

additional interpersonal and social stressors can lead to challenges for individuals facing the

companion animal death and dying period. For instance, in many cultures including the West, it

is not entirely acceptable to publicly grieve the death of animals (DeMello, 2016); therefore,

individuals may grapple with the contradictions between feelings for their animal and the

absence of a protocol for grief (Adams et al., 1999). Rituals such as funerals, prayer, and an

opportunity to find meaning in the death loss can help grieving individuals express their

emotions in a way that is both personally and socially acceptable (Aksoz-Efe et al., 2018;

Romanoff, 1998). However, this is not always available to people facing the death of a

companion animal. Additionally, people who might have had an adequate social support network

following the death of a human significant other may not fare as well when the death is a

companion animal (Pilgram, 2010; Turner, 2005). The discourse within families therefore could

contribute to social support or conversely, inadequate social support.

Social support is the process of communication as well as a symbolic and transactional

process of mutual influence that can alter and affect both cognitive states and behavior (Albrecht

& Adelman, 1987). Supportive communication has been described as both verbal and nonverbal

behaviors that influence how both recipients and providers of support view the support situation,

one another and their relationship (MacGeorge et al., 2011). However, researchers have found

that the messages others provide to the bereaved in the context of a human loss can be both

helpful and also potentially hurtful. Servaty-Seib and Burleson (2007) found that the least helpful

messages were those that minimized the significance of the loss or provided advice to the

bereaved and found support providers favorable who listened and expressed concern. However,

unwanted help can invade privacy and even impose the help-providers "interpretations and

beliefs on the recipient" (p. 32). For example, Toller (2011) found that when faced with someone

who is perceived to be coping poorly as a result of a death, people may attempt to provide advice to encourage the bereaved to cope in a way that is considered more appropriate and positive that ultimately was considered unhelpful by the support recipient. It is currently not known what messages are particularly helpful or hurtful within the specific context of companion animal death and dying or what optimal supportive communication looks like within the family system. It is known however, that grief can be associated with pet death which will be discussed next.

As mentioned previously, the death of a pet can have a significant psychological impact and attributed to feelings of anger, despair and guilt (Pilgram, 2010) with the process of grief similar to that of the loss of an important human relationship (Gerwolls & Labott, 1994). Grief over the loss of a companion animal can be severe. Morris (2012) found that 86 percent of adults whose pet recently died experienced at least one symptom of grief while 35 percent continued to experience a symptom at six months and 22 percent at one year. Animal lifespans are significantly shorter than human lives and people can care for more than one animal at a time, and potentially several companion animals over a lifetime. Although families can include different animals, each is typically considered a unique individual (Irvine & Cilia, 2017). As over half of United States households have at least one companion animal, millions of people potentially communicate about pet death and dying at some point in their lives. The literature points to evidence that individuals can encounter feelings of guilt, financial worries and uncertainties surrounding the process of companion animal death. These concerns could also potentially be discussed in the context of family and among family members, or not communicated at all, as little is known about this communication.

Considering the relevance of pets in family life it is reasonable that the death of a companion animal could affect those individuals bonded to a pet and potentially other family

members as well. In her discussion of the roles of companion animals within families, Turner (2005) asserts that the death of a pet can occur at any stage in the family life cycle and can affect family members in different ways. These concerns could also be discussed in the context of family and among family members, or not communicated at all, however little is known about this communication. Scholars have called for a systems approach to examine the impact of companion animal death and dying within the family. "The literature on companion animal loss and bereavement has been predominantly individually focused. A systems perspective is needed to appreciate the reverberations of pet loss in the family system and relational dynamics" (Walsh, 2009b, p. 487).

As reviewed thus far, recent scholarship has recognized that companion animals are relevant in human lives, including the family system. The literature has also demonstrated that disruptions and challenges such as a chronic illness or death can be events that families navigate communicatively together. And further, the death and dying period for companion animals can harbor particular challenges and stressors. All of these challenges, such as financial concerns or feeling responsible for the death or illness, a lack of social support, or uncertainties surrounding medical decision-making may manifest within, and be a part of communication within families. Thus, research questions for this study were: **RQ1**: What challenges do families face during the companion animal death and dying period? **RQ2**: How do families respond communicatively to these challenges? This study used interviews as a methodology to provide detail and depth of the participants' experience and interpretation of events surrounding a pet's end-of-life.

CHAPTER 2: METHODS

2.1 Overview

Before detailing specific methods used in this study, I will outline the metatheoretical assumptions that underlie the research process. Broadly speaking, within the communication discipline, there are four predominant philosophical approaches to researching human social and communicative life: post-positivist, interpretive, critical and feminist (Craig, 1999). Scholars generally identify with one of these four philosophical approaches to inquiry, with overlapping affiliation with others. This research follows an interpretivist orientation.

Interpretivist research operates under the assumption that the realities that we create are culturally situated. This means that humans are involved in the production, reproduction and repair of reality as an ongoing process, and the messages that people exchange represent shared belief systems (Carey, 1989). Therefore, interpretive researchers approach inquiry with the idea that meaning is both contextual and emergent, and researchers are "interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 6). Interpretive research is focused on the examination of social processes to understand human meaning systems (Gergen, 1985) and involves the use and collection of a variety of data that describe both the "routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005 p. 4).

In contrast to feminist or critical approaches, an interpretivist approach places emphasis on the participant's own understandings of their experience and does not employ an activist orientation to research or interpretation of findings. Thus, the goal of this study is primarily descriptive and aims to gain a deeper understanding of how family members view the communicative challenges of managing pet death and any related decision-making or effects on

the family system. In order to address the research questions posed, this study used qualitative research methods, specifically grounded theory as an analytical framework to parse constructs and themes that may be abstracted to better understand and develop insights about participants' orientations to the phenomenon of pet death.

Grounded Theory, developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) is a methodology that builds theory from data. Indeed, the grounded theory methodology was discovered by Glaser and Strauss in their work with *The Awareness of Dying* (1979) to understand the experiences of death and dying within hospitals. Within this approach, data collection and research analysis are interrelated. The researcher constructs analytic categories and codes from data rather than using preconceived hypotheses (Charmaz, 2006). This approach to data analysis has been used by communication researchers to investigate various topics, including those related to illness and end-of-life (Ledford et al., 2016; Scott et al., 2011). Grounded theory uses the method of constant comparison where the researcher breaks down data into pieces with each piece compared for differences and similarities (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). The data are then grouped together and provided a name which becomes a category with the goal of identifying patterns. These are then compared with one another at each stage of analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The analytic procedure of constant comparison aims to move from the study of concrete reality to a conceptual understanding of the data and is well-suited when little is known about the phenomenon of interest, providing a way of systematic investigation (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007; Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012).

A number of data collection methods can be used within grounded theory, interviews being one common approach. As a data collection method, interviewing is well-suited to a grounded theory approach because "both grounded theory methods and intensive interviewing

are open-ended yet directed, shaped yet emergent, and paced yet unrestricted" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 28). Interviews are used to understand how people interpret and orient to a phenomenon of interest and also when researchers cannot observe behaviors first-hand or are interested in events that have occurred in the past (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Interviewing can be characterized as a modified extension of ordinary conversations as researchers are interested in the knowledge, understanding and insights of the interviewees (Rubin, 1995). Interviewees therefore are often treated as "*partners* rather than objects of research" (p. 10) and require sensitivity and attending to the way in which the interview process can shape data (Richards, 2014). Focusing on the detail and depth of the participants' experience and meaning, qualitative interviews can range from highly structured, semi-structured or unstructured/informal, all of which can yield data that provide insight into the beliefs and understandings of participants. Interviews online or via video are also options for researchers, particularly in cases where face-to-face interaction is not possible or desirable.

Data analysis within qualitative research, is a "systematic search for meaning" (Hatch, 2002, p. 148) and a way to ask questions and process what has been learned in the study in order to communicate this knowledge. As previously mentioned, when using grounded theory, concepts are derived from an initial analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Analysis was completed along with interview data collection as a simultaneous process. For this analysis, after transcribing the first six interviews, I engaged in reading and re-reading, as well as recording memos after each interview. After transcription, all 27 printed interview transcripts were read through at least twice, and I created hand-written notes on each transcript to record initial thoughts about the data. I first manually conducted open coding (Tracy, 2019) which included using colored highlighters to capture excerpts that became initial codes which I then transferred

to an excel spreadsheet. This spreadsheet included the de-identified participant, code and corresponding verbatim quotation from the data. First cycle coding resulted in 24 open, or initial codes, and 352 lines of coded data.

In order to organize initial findings and understand which codes were related, I created a theme book which listed each code, a description from the data for each, and an example from the data of that code. This provided a structure to my initial codes. I engaged in secondary cycle coding which revealed further refined themes. Each new data was compared to the previously coded data sets in order to examine any patterns that appeared to occur throughout the interview transcripts. Codes were revised and modified as they were more precisely applied to the range of data. For example, a first cycle code of supportive and unsupportive communication was refined during secondary cycle coding to understanding and supporting loss. Although I had aimed for at least 30 interviews, after 27 interviews, there was no new information revealed within the data. Saturation is defined as when "continued data collection produces no new information or insights into the phenomenon you are studying" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 199).

As part of the data collection process, I wrote memos throughout all stages of the research process in order to reflect on the context and substance of the gathered data, and how they relate to the broader theoretical framework. Within qualitative research, memos are not simply descriptive, serving the purpose of immediate reflection and documentation, but are also analytic so as to add to the dataset (Jones et al., 2013). Memoing allows researchers to be reflexive, and can perform pragmatic functions of an audit trail, extracting meaning from the gathered data, continuing research momentum and finally, used to open up communication in order to allow the researcher to record thoughts as the research process progresses (Birks et al., 2008). These analytic functions also allow the researcher to examine data at a "greater level of

abstraction" (p. 25). I recorded dated memos during the entire data collection, analysis and writing process beginning with the first interview. Memos resulted in over 22 pages of double-spaced text in Word. The content of memos ranged from recording initial thoughts or general observations at the conclusion of each interview, to thoughts recorded during the process of initial and secondary cycle coding. Several of these memos became initial codes.

2.2 Recruitment and Participants

To answer the research questions, 27 people who met the inclusion criteria were recruited to participate in interviews. 14 of the 27 participants were individual members of some form of family dyad (51%) in various subgroups of partnered spouses, siblings and parent-child (Table 3). Participants needed to be at least 18 years old, living in the United States, and to have experienced the death and dying period of a pet within the prior six months. This study limited participation to at least six months past the death of a pet as the interviews asked people to recall information in the recent past. Interviewing participants within this timeframe ensured that this experience was relatively recent in their minds. Three family members in the researcher's personal network participated in a pilot interview to test the interview protocol and the video chat function via the video meeting platform Zoom.

After receiving approval from Purdue University's Institutional Review Board, participants were recruited using the researcher's personal and professional networks and snowball sampling. As the context of this study is families, the goal was to recruit at least two individuals from the same family. The recruitment materials contained a summary of the study, participant payment information ($20 US) and researcher contact information (Appendix A).

Qualitative research typically utilizes nonprobability sampling, or purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling is used to obtain a sample of participants from which the most can be

learned, and provide information-rich cases (Patton, 2015). A purposeful sample should be

drawn from a set of criteria, directly reflecting the purpose of the study (Merriam & Tisdell,

2016). In this case, criteria for study inclusion were that adult participants must be living in the

United States who had recently experienced the death and dying period for a companion animal.

In order to establish these base criteria, interested participants were asked to fill out a brief non-

leading, pre-screening questionnaire before formal inclusion in the study in order to ensure that

they met the study parameters (Appendix C).

Next, a common form of purposeful sampling, "snowball" sampling, was used (Patton,

2015). Snowball sampling involves asking existing participants to connect the researcher with

other interview participants who meet the study criteria and can be used when a population is

hard to reach. It should be noted that this method can produce a narrow sample due to the fact

that this technique is based upon participants' social connections and a potentially higher number

of participants who have characteristics or outlooks that are similar to initial participants (Etikan,

2016). However, this can be mitigated by ensuring that the "initial set of respondents is

sufficiently varied so that the sample is not skewed excessively in any one particular direction"

(p. 1).

Recruitment was accomplished in three ways over a 7-month period: through personal

networks, Purdue University registrar, cultural centers and physical flyers. To initiate the

snowball sample, an email describing the project and eligibility criteria was sent to the

researcher's personal contacts. The email included a short Qualtrics survey to ensure respondents

met the eligibility requirements. As one of the aims of the study was to conduct dyadic

interviews within families, participants who responded to the initial Qualtrics survey were asked

in the follow-up email sent by the researcher if they could think of any family members who

might be interested in participating in a future interview. Participants were also recruited through a professional contact at the Purdue University School of Veterinary Medicine.

Additionally, the study announcement was sent via email on behalf of Purdue University Registrar's office to randomly selected undergraduate and graduate students at Purdue University. This random sample included 1,000 students on the West Lafayette, Indiana University, Purdue University and Fort Wayne campus. Physical flyers with the study information and Qualtrics survey link were also posted in public areas around campus (Appendix B). Third, participants were recruited through an announcement in the Purdue Graduate Student newsletter with the approved recruitment language. In order to increase diversity in the recruitment sample, a request for study distribution was also sent to the cultural centers on the Purdue campus, which included the Asian American Cultural Center, Black Cultural Center, Latino Cultural Center, Native American Cultural Center and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer Center.

Table 1

Participant Dyads in Family Subsystem

Subsystem	Husband-Wife	Sister-Sister	Sister-Sister	Stepdaughter-Stepfather	Husband-Wife	Husband-Wife	Brother-Brother
Pet Type	Dog	Dog	Dog	Dog	Dog and Cat	Cat	Cat

2.3 Recruitment Sample and Interview Procedure

Participants ranged in age from 18 to 61 years old ($M = 35.7$; $SD = 16.4$) and included 17 females and 10 males. Twenty-two participants identified as white, two identified as Latino or Hispanic, one identified as Middle-Eastern and White, and one as South Asian. All participants

reported living in the United States at the time of the interview. The semi-structured interviews ranged in length from 20 to 89 minutes. Together, interviews lasted a total of 987 minutes and filled 225 pages of single-spaced transcribed data in Word.

Individuals who responded to the recruitment materials were contacted by the researcher to schedule a day and time for the video interview. Video (Zoom) interviews were conducted for 24 participants. Three interviews were completed via telephone at the request of participants, placed on speaker mode and recorded through Zoom with the transcription function enabled. The recordings were initially deposited locally on the researcher's computer directly from Zoom and then transferred to IRB-approved Purdue University cloud storage, *Box*. Only audio data were transcribed in order to protect against voice and visual identification. In-person interviews are preferable in qualitative research because mediated means can potentially pose challenges such as technology access and limited availability of visual cues or non-verbal expressions. However, for the safety of both the researcher and participants, it was necessary to conduct interviews virtually due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Every interview started with a description of the study, a short personal introduction and informing the participant of their consent to participate (Appendix D). I also obtained verbal consent from every participant to audio record the interview. As outlined in Chapter 1, the research questions for this study were: **RQ1**: What challenges do families face during the companion animal death and dying period? **RQ2:** How do families respond communicatively to these challenges? To answer these research questions, semi-structured interviews were conducted using an interview guide that included 15 open-ended questions in order to address the research themes and linked to constructs in the literature, as well as three demographic questions (Table 2).

Table 2

Research Questions and Constructs from the Literature

RQ1: What challenges do families face during the companion animal death and dying period?
RQ2: How do families respond communicatively to these challenges?

Interview Question	Research Question Addressed	Salient Constructs from Literature
1. I'd like you to tell me about (pet's name), your pet who died earlier this year. a. How long did you have (pet's name)?	Background	Pets as "part of family"

2. How did (pet's name) die?
    a. Was this the first death of a pet you've experienced?
    b. Tell me about what they were like?
    c. What role or roles do you think (pet's name) played within your family?
	Background	Pets as "part of family"
		Roles of pets in family
		Family Dynamics
		Family Systems

3. Tell me about who lived in your house when (pet's name) was alive?	Background	Family Dynamics Family Systems
4. With those household members in mind, how do you typically talk with each other?	RQ2	Family Dynamics Communication patterns/type/form
5. Leading up to (pet's name) death, what kinds of challenges or difficulties did your family experience? a. Were there any conflicts during this time?	RQ1 & RQ2	Challenges/Problems Decision-making Communication patterns/type/form
6. Were there any challenges or difficulties that you think you personally experienced that your family did not?	RQ1	Challenges/Problems Family Dynamics
7. Were there any decisions about (pet's name) that you made as a family?	RQ1 & RQ2	Decision-making
8. Leading up to (pet's name) death, how did you talk about the death and dying period with your family? a. What did you talk about?	RQ2	Family Dynamics Challenges/Problems Communication patterns/type/form
9. Before pet's name) death, what kind of support did you receive from your family?	RQ2	Family Dynamics Family Systems Social Support

10. After (pet's name) death, what kind of support did you receive from your family?	RQ2	Family Dynamics Family Systems Social Support
11. What kinds of support from (friends/family/others) do you think would have been helpful during this time?	RQ2	Family Dynamics Family Systems Social Support
12. Did you or your family have any remembrances, rituals or ceremonies for (pet's name)	RQ2	Family Dynamics Family Systems

The nature of this project was exploratory, in that there were revisions to interview questions and ordering as the project developed. The first two questions were broad in order to make the participants comfortable and served as prompts to recall their pet. "I'd like you to tell me about your pet who died earlier this year" and a sub-question of how long they had their pet if it was not included in their answer. The second question asked participants to "tell me what [the pet] was like?" The next question asked what part or roles the respondent thought their pet played within their family. This question originally included "role" but several participants asked a clarifying question as to what I meant by role, therefore I added "part or role" to this question. The next two questions asked who lived in the house when their pet was alive, and "with those household members in mind, how do you typically talk to each other?" This was asked in order to attain participants' understanding of how their family communicated.

The next three questions asked if there were challenges or difficulties that their family experienced leading up to their pet's death, as well as "if there were any challenges or difficulties that you think you personally experienced that your family did not?" These two questions were included to understand the participant's understanding of any collective challenges the family faced, as well as any perceived individual challenges. Two questions asked how participants talked about their pet before and after their death with their family and what was talked about. The final questions asked if they received support from their family, as well as from people

outside their family. They were also asked "what kinds of support from friends, family or others would have been helpful?" My final question asked each participant if there was something that they would like to add or thought that I had missed in my previous questions, or in our discussion.

The interview guide initially included questions that asked how participants felt when they talked to their family members about the end-of-life period. This question did not yield any new or novel responses, and I sensed that it was causing participants undue stress, so I removed it from the interview guide after about the third interview. Some questions in the semi-structured interview guide were reordered early in the study to improve the logic of the question order and improve the flow of the interview. For example, the question asking if participants thought there were "challenges they faced that other family members did not?" was moved up in the sequence to follow general family challenges.

Three demographic questions were also asked at the conclusion of the open-ended questions that asked participants their race/ethnicity, age and with what gender they identified. At the end of the interview, if they had previously indicated that they could think of a family member who might be interested in participating, I asked them to forward my study materials to them, if that family member indicated they were interested in taking part in an interview. And, if they were interested in participating, that they could fill out the Qualtrics survey and I would reach out to them separately.

Many of the questions included follow-up prompts that were designed to further understand the area of interest and serve as clarification. For example, if participants stated that they did not talk to family members and friends about the death of their pet, I asked if they had done so recently, or how they approached that conversation. To understand the role or part the

pet played in the family, if they mentioned a role or part but did not elaborate, I asked how they would describe that role or part. As the interviews continued, some participants mentioned that they had spread the ashes of their pet, buried them, or completed an act of remembrance. Therefore, I added a question to the interview guide that asked, "Did you or your family have any remembrances, rituals or ceremonies for your pet?"

After each interview concluded, participants were sent a follow-up email thanking them for their participation that included a copy of the study information sheet which they were asked to forward to others in their personal network. Because the interviews were potentially emotional, the contact information for the Purdue University Veterinary Hospital social worker was included at the end of the follow-up email. Permission to include this information was granted by the social worker prior to data collection. Each participant was paid $20.00 in the form of an electronic Amazon.com gift card emailed to them after the interview had concluded.

Interviews were recorded and initially auto-transcribed by the transcription feature in Zoom and placed on the researcher's computer before being transferred to IRB-approved cloud storage. Each auto-transcribed interview text document was copied to an individual word document, and I listened to and reviewed each recorded interview a second time. First, this was done to correct any errors made by the auto-transcription feature, of which there were few. Second, this served as an initial look, or pass at the interview data. All identifying information was removed from transcripts and names were replaced with participants' first and last initials, the date of the interview, and a pseudonym for both participant and pet for inclusion into the final study. All interview transcripts were stored in the Purdue University secure cloud service Box.

My unique positionality as a researcher likely played a role in the process of interviews for this study. I am a doctoral candidate earning a PhD at Purdue University in Communication. I am a married, 41-year-old, Mexican and White woman. I have personally experienced the death of pets in the past and have been engaged with the study of animals in human social life for several years. These identities may have influenced who agreed to participate in this study as well as the identities and personal information participants opted to disclose. During the interview process, two participants asked me if I had experienced the death of a pet, or if I had pets myself.

Table 3

Companion Animal Features and Demographics

Type	Length of time in family (Years)	Cause of Death
	20	Euthanasia
	18	Euthanasia
	16	Euthanasia
	16	Euthanasia
Cat	15	Euthanasia
	13	Illness
	11	Accident/Injury
	10	Euthanasia
	10	Illness
	2	Illness
	15	Euthanasia
	15	Euthanasia
	13	Euthanasia
Dog	13	Euthanasia
	11	Unknown
	11	Euthanasia
	8	Euthanasia
	8	Euthanasia
	1	Euthanasia
Goat	9	Euthanasia
Total: 20	*M* 11.8	

Pilot Interviews

In preparation for this study, I conducted exploratory interviews with three members of one family engaged with the subject of interest. The family members individually sat for interviews with the purpose of exploring and refining the draft open-ended interview guide. Although this was not an entire pilot study, the interviews helped to revise and improve the interview questions and eliminate those that appeared confusing or did not elicit data. The interviews revealed potential questions that I had not initially considered. For example, after the pilot interviews, I included a question in the interview guide about individual experiences with pet death and dying that may be perceived to be experienced on an individual level rather than the family level (Appendix E).

A preliminary theme emerged of the family as a dynamic system of moving parts, influenced by each family member's individual experiences with illness, prior pet death/illness and pet ownership. For example, family members at different stages of life described their own experience of pet illness and aging and this impact on other family members, as well as decision-making within the family. Moreover, the interviews revealed that all three pilot participants (similar to other participants in the study) were engaged with the subject of companion animal aging and end-of-life and appeared to be receptive to discussing their experiences, knowledge and understanding with the subject of interest.

CHAPTER 3: FINDINGS - PET IN THE FAMILY SYSTEM

This chapter will provide an overview of how the pets focused on in this study fit into the family system, as understood through interviews with members of the family system. This overview will reinforce as observable in this sample some of what is known about companion animals (the sense of support, the sense of kinship) but will also highlight how companion animals provide an avenue of human connection and communication. In some respects, there is nothing particularly surprising or new in this sample of pet owners; for example, through language choices, they express a sense of kinship with the companion animal. They are also describing the family pet as providing some form of emotional support. These observations are in line with research by, for example Haraway (2003), Irvine (2004) and Mueller et al., (2015). And it should be noted that these references to pet as family member were unprompted. The interview (and related research questions) were not framed in a way that would seek such commentary, other than to ask what role or part the pet played in the family. So, although there was a presupposition that the pet had some place in the family, participants could have described that pet's role in any number of ways.

Overall, interviews indicate that the pet is part of the "relational fabric" of the family, often described in kinship terms and as part of the emotional support system of the group. Beyond those (somewhat) expected observations, participants also perceived and reported the pet fitting more deeply into the family as part of its historical and event timeline, and as a catalyst for connection for family members. For catalyst for connection, I mean pets were described as part of a routine for regular family life, served as subjects of talk, reasons for face-to-face visits and topics of mediated communication among family members. They were also described as a "connector" or a unifying element within the family system.

The remainder of this chapter provides verbatim transcript excerpts that serve as exemplars and grounding for the themes of *pet as element of relational fabric*, and two subthemes: *pet as component of family timeline and pet as catalyst for family connection.*

3.1 Pet as an Element of Relational Fabric

The pet in this study was found to be a part of the relational fabric of the family, or an element of the family tapestry. The tapestry metaphor, one that I am superimposing on these data, is intended to capture the sense of a woven cloth created from individual threads to form a complete scene. Some "pet" threads within a family can be thought of as larger or smaller depending on the importance, depth of bond or connection to family members. For example, as is true with human familial relationships, some participants indicated they (or other family members) felt a connection with some pets and less of a connection with others. However, regardless of individual connection, companion animals are sentient beings that when alive, contributed to a larger whole that left varying impressions on family relationships and dynamics. Participants named their companion animals in kinship terms and described them as playing a range of supportive roles within the family.

Pets as "Kin"

Echoing previous research that has found that many people characterize their pets as family, participants in this study characterized their pets as a part of the family as well, and many referred to them in relational kin terms such as *friend*, *child*, or *brother*. Lisa, for example, described her family's dog of 13 years as, ". . . just kind of like the fourth kid of the family." Similarly, Jessica noted "Well, for me, you know, we don't have children so my cat…my cats are my children." One participant, Jack, described that for him and his partner, their dog was a

"pseudo-child" in their relationship as his children were now adults, and his partner did not have children herself. Similarly, Iris described their family dog in relational terms and their dog's role within the family as "just another one of the kids." Iris continues:

> You know, I mean it was nice for my kids, because, you know, especially my son who's a little bit introverted, I think he really, you know, just got a lot of comfort and just really friendship, companionship, you know, kind of whatever you want to call it, support, you know from the dog.

Other participants described their pet as a "friend or "best friend." For example, Mark described his cat as a "friend." "I mean, you can say a friend as well. It's always nice to, you know, wake up in the morning and, go say hi and have him say hi to you." Stephanie recalled "We could all definitely sit here and say that there was nothing...that wouldn't make him a best, not a best friend to all of us." Katrina also described her spouse's relationship with their family pets in kinship terms as well. "He loves all animals, and his pets are his life. Really, I mean they're more than family. So, yeah, he's like, best friend, family, brother, or sister. Everything rolled into one for him is how I look at it." Regardless of familial terms or references to pets as family, companion animals are not agentive, in that they do not decide what happens to them, their care, or when or how they die. In this way, family members appeared to understand that their pets had limited agency of their own; and the often juvenile terms, such as "child," or "little sister" or "friend" chosen for them may have reflected this status.

Pets as Emotional Support

Participants also described their companion animal as fulfilling a specific role within the family and were talked about in individual, distinct terms. For example, pets were described as providing distraction, support, comfort, therapy and happiness. Jessica said that "They're such a good a distraction for all the bad things in life, you know they definitely bring a lot of joy."

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Participants described the role of their pets within the family as "support," "emotional support," or "therapy animal." Bridget described her family's dog: "He was just kind of like for me like an emotional support thing, and I think for a lot of people he was just like a very supportive figure." Although pets were often described in human-relational terms, they did not appear of equal importance to all family members. Bridget continued in her memories of her family's dog:

> A lot of the older members of my family didn't really like pay a lot of attention to him. I think it's because back home, my parents are really busy all the time. So I don't think they had enough time to like, give attention to him. So I think for them, he was just kind of there, I guess which is kind of sad to say.

Like other close (human) relationships, one participant said that their feeling of attachment to their cat changed over time. He described that this was due to the fact that his cat wanted to be left alone more frequently as she aged. Similarly, other participants described that they (and also observed other family members) grew closer or less close to their pets over time. Ruby remembered "My dad has always hated cats and [had] never been an animal person, but Valdi was definitely his cat." In the same way, participants also indicated that some animals were known within the family as "their" pet, a "favorite," or another family member's pet, such as their "stepfather's dog." These were characterized as such due to factors ranging from an expressed feeling of personal attachment to the animal, or acknowledgement that the pet "belonged" to another family member.

Pet as Special Being

The pet in question was often compared to other pets that also lived in the house during their lifetime or to previous pets. For example, the pet that had died was often held up as "different" from other pets, or previous pets, in that their pet possessed characteristics of sociability, or similar behaviors that indicated they wanted to be close to participants or interact

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with family members. Eric recalled of his family's 8-year-old dog "She was the one who cheers us up, was not similar to the other dogs. The other dogs when we pet them they are also friendly; but she was different because she just stayed beside us wherever we go." Ruby also compared her cat who had died to their dog, in that "I think [their dog] just usually wanted to like get walks, get pets, get treats he [their cat] was just more so like, "I'm here," like was the presence in the house. Similarly, Victor recalled of his 11-year-old cat "He's different from all of our other animals because he was, well he was the oldest. He was the first animal that we had ever decided to, you know, keep as a pet." Charlotte described of her cat who died:

> She was a very personable cat. So she liked everybody. She wasn't like some cats that run if somebody comes, you know? Or like my daughter's cat who only wants my daughter and doesn't want anything to do with-- she was like an equal opportunity cat.

> Alison also described "connecting" with her cat more than other family members

appeared to.

> He's not a lap cat he doesn't want to be touched by humans, but then when he feels like a human needs him, like me, he would just come to you and sit beside you, and even one time he like put his paw out on my lap. And I remember telling my family about that and they were like, "that's not true" and he did it, like several times. He's wanting to connect with me.

> Other participants described feeling a sense of closeness to a pet more than other family

members. One participant described they felt close to a pet because they had spent time with them as the pet neared the end of their life, and others indicated the pet themselves "took an interest" in them from the beginning of their time in the family. Amelia also mentioned that she felt closer to her companion animal than others, and that their death felt different.

> That really impacted me the most because there were definitely some animals we've had in the past that I just wasn't close with, so it didn't hurt like quite as much.

Overall, this designation further served to individualize the pet as distinctive from others and worthy of remembrance after death. Other participants noted that the animal who had died was close to all family members and was an element in common that they shared as a family. This finding will be explained later in this chapter in more detail, under the theme of *pet as catalyst for family connection.*

3.2 Pet as Integral to Family Timeline

Participants reported that they had their companion animals between 1 to 20 years, with the mean length of time 11.8 years, or the majority over a decade (Table 3). Several participants noted that pets joined the family when they were children, and these adult children often described "growing up" with the pet.

> And the whole goal, like my parents wanted to get her when we're all really young and their whole goal, like was for us to grow up, be able to grow up with her and for her to be with us all the way until all of us made it to college (Julie).

Similarly, parents described that they associated the memories of their companion animal with their children growing up. One participant described the death of her cat as an "end of an era" for her daughter's childhood, and one adult daughter described the death of their cat of 14 years as, "a kind of a goodbye to that period of my life." Iris said "He was really part of the family. You know, on our wall we have the kids' graduation pictures, and I've got a son, a daughter and then the dog's pictures at the bottom. So he's one of them." Similarly, Julie also mentioned that her dog is "...in every family picture. She's in every first and last day of school pictures, she's in like every vacation we went on, we tried to take her, every time we would drive to our grandparents, we took her." As noted by others (Belk, 1996; Irvine & Cilia, 2017; Larsen et al., 1986) it is not unusual that pets are included in the life of the family in material ways, such as in displays of photos.

As mentioned previously, participants often described their pet in kinship terms, a relationship for which Martin evolved as both he and his dog grew older together. "And I feel like yeah, as an integral role at least from my perspective, she was my little sister. Although I would say towards the end of her life if I'm counting dog years, she was my elder sister." Similarly, another participant noted the change in their relationship with their companion animal as they grew up together. Stephanie described of the relationship with her dog:

When I was younger, I was like "Oh my gosh, I have a dog now, like this is the best thing ever like I love him so much" like best friends. And I think that as I got older, I still thought that way but I would say that my role, kind of became more of like a responsibility role than just a best friend role.

In partnered relationships, pets were also connected to the beginnings of dating relationships and marriages. For example, two participants interviewed for this study described that their pet was significant in the origin story of their relationship.

He always jokes that um, in the beginning, when we first were friends and sort of moving towards maybe dating, that, you know, he would say "Hey can I come over and walk Paige with you?" And he was like, I was really after your dog and then I got involved with you (*laughter*). So yeah, so she was really right in the middle of things (Samantha).

Relatedly, Sean described meeting his partner at the dog park they both frequented, and part of the attraction to her was that he recognized they had a similar approach and philosophy to dog training and said, "I could tell she really, really cared for her dog." Another participant, Katrina noted that their dog was a gift to her husband on their first anniversary. Katrina continues, "So, that was like his baby. Yeah, besides his real baby (*laughter*)." Katrina's partner Adam echoes this memory in their family's timeline in his interview, noting that:

And these animals that we got, this is going back to when I was first dating Katrina and getting married in 2006-7-2008 those years and those animals are now, like 15, 13, 14, 15 years old and they're starting to pass away now.

Participants also talked about the connection the animal had to the history of the family. For instance, one participant described that the reason they had moved to a larger house was because they had wanted a bigger dog. After their dog died, the memories of both the dog and the house appeared to serve as connected memories for the family. For other participants, the pet in the family was a kind of signpost, marking a specific time, and connected with events in the family timeline. Alison said, "We always use our pets as like time periods in our life sometimes, so we'd say, oh that was before Cira died. Or that was after Cira died. That was before Cira got sick, or after Cira got sick."

3.3 Pets as Catalyst for Family Connection

Many participants noted that the pet was a catalyst of connection for the family. This included relational connections beyond a memory of a pet marking a family timeline. Companion animals for participants served as catalysts of connection for family members. Participants described their pets as part of routines, communication, and described as a "connector" between family members. For example, Jack noted that when their dog was alive, she was a part of a routine for their partnership. "She was part of our regular routine, our emotional connection with each other." Relatedly, several participants described that they lived apart from their family and also their pet during the pet's end-of-life. One participant described how asking about their dog helped them talk to other family members during this time period.

> We just spoke a lot over the phone and were just constantly checking up on the dog and then you're checking up on each other's lives a little more because there's more of a connection. And, I mean, my parents are like "it's good you're talking" because I hardly talk and hardly communicate (Martin).

Relatedly, Iris notes that as their dog was nearing his end-of-life, her adult son would stop by to visit their dog, "He used to come when Quinten was still here, he came every single

day to see the dog. And now he'll come over usually every couple of days." Other participants stated that although they felt an attachment or an affinity for the pet, they described that other family members may have not felt similarly attached. Lori described, "He's really not a cat person. So, I think he accepted her because he knew that she meant a lot to me."

Ruby described that her family would share photos of their cat on the multimedia instant messaging app Snapchat. "Yeah, we always send those Snapchat memories to each other with the cat and then I'll remember oh my god that was that September so and so. And I remember that happened in my life during that time." Martin also talked about sharing media of their family's dog on the instant messaging app the family used. "We communicate on WhatsApp and I always [was] like 'post a photo, post a video' [of their dog]."

Other participants described their companion animals as something family members had in common, as "unifying" and as part of the family dynamic. Amy describes of her family's 18-year-old cat:

> I think she was genuinely like a connector between the family. She was something we always had in common. She was always a comforting animal for literally anyone in the household and everyone likes, I mean being around her so she was almost like having a therapy animal at the time, right? Because she was so comforting. And she was like that for everybody. So, I think it just kept the family dynamic a little bit happier."

Likewise, Julie described a sense of delight that her dog brought to the family, as well as a way in which the dog was a unifying element. "Not like unity because our family does not need a dog to be like close, but like, because she's like the only family dog they we ever really knew. She was just a common factor of like, joy within our family."

Amelia described her family's pet goat "...he was like, our one true like, family pet even though we had like other goats and we had horses and other things, he was the one that like we all equally loved." Amelia continues:

But honestly, he was super unifying in that, like even members of my family who weren't very interested in like the farm animals are going out, like they would always still go out and say hi to Pavlov, like we always, we all kind of united over that."

Another participant, Ruby said of her 14-year-old cat, "So he definitely was really a part of the family dynamic. Which was probably even harder when he passed because usually animals form like bonds of one or two people sometimes, but he truly loved everyone"

3.4 Chapter Summary

In this overview of participants' orientation to their recently deceased pets, we have seen that, unprompted and perhaps unsurprisingly, the companion animal was viewed as part of the "relational fabric" of the family. The "tapestry metaphor" noted at the outset provides a visual analog to the fact that pets were threads woven through each family's history and during the pet's life in the family, featured as distinct, visible, animate parts of the relational dynamics: participants interacted with them and formed attachments to them (to varying degrees).

Specifically, participants described their pets in human kinship terms and indicated that some pets fulfilled supportive roles within the family. Essentially, participants were describing their own or other family members' feeling of connection to the pet. And some described how certain pets were choosing to be physically near family members, perhaps reflecting a belief among some that pets were reciprocal in their attachment to the family or to certain family members. Regardless of what may or may not have been reciprocal attachments, pets did serve as integral beings in family life and as "signposts" for significant, memorable family experiences. Finally, companion animals also served as catalyst for connection among family members. In this way, companion animals were the subjects of talk, both face-to-face and through mediated

channels like instant messenger, and described as a unifying element or a "connector" within the

family system.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS - ANTICIPATING DEATH

This chapter will provide an overview of how participants experienced the period of time prior to the death of their companion animal including tensions and reverberations of end-of-life on family dynamics. Families faced several challenges during this time: dilemmas of decision-making around euthanasia, tensions around treatment costs, and navigating any perceived changes to existing family dynamics. Data suggest that many families anticipate the death of their companion animal, which is not surprising given a rise in options for veterinary care in the United States (Bir et al., 2020); diagnoses may arise well in advance of a more "natural" death. This anticipation of death results in a number of decisions that families may need to make related to pet end-of-life in relation to euthanasia and costs of potential treatments. These tensions are experienced both at the individual and relational level, as will be exemplified. The main themes that will be explored in this chapter are: *holding on and letting go, financial strain, and avoidance.*

4.1 Decision-Making Dilemmas

End-of-life (EOL) can bring with it myriad decisions for family members. In a human context, decision making can include decision-making to withdraw from or continue a life-sustaining treatment that may result in a significant reduction in the patient's quality of life, either on behalf of a patient via a legally authorized surrogate, or by the patient themselves (Hines, et al., 1997). Clearly, there are considerable differences between the process of caring for a dying animal and a dying human. Most importantly, there is the potential for dying humans to participate in their own care, communicate last wishes and have final conversations with family (Keeley, 2016). However, animals are not able to communicate the desire to die or to live.

"...This creates a massive power differential and issues of human responsibility for the death" (Dawson & Campbell, 2009 p. 100). As people cannot have similar conversations about a pet patient's desires at the end of life, human caregivers are making decisions for them in all cases.

Decision-making for participants in this study primarily encompassed how and when to seek treatment for their companion animal and the decision to euthanize. Participants talked about uncertainty about the correctness of the decision, a feeling of "flying solo" in the face of veterinary openness, but also resistance when a clear recommendation is made to euthanize. In what follows, using quotations from participant interviews, this dilemma will be examined.

Carrie recalled that her 10-year-old cat suddenly appeared ill but she did not know if taking him to the vet was the correct course of action at that time. "I kept debating over whether or not I should take him, bring him back....and if they will kind of do anything. So, I basically just watched him get worse and worse." Similarly, another participant, Amelia recalled discussing with her family how long they should wait to seek treatment for her family's 9-year-old goat.

> There was lots of challenges with kind of like waiting, how long we could wait, and more specifically like how that would impact his quality of life, and whether it was selfish of us to, to keep putting him through that pain.

For participants in this study, the euthanasia decision in particular could be fraught with both emotion and indecision. Although pet guardians sought, and were provided advice from veterinary professionals, the decision was typically still up to the family, or individual family members which proved challenging for some participants. Julie recalled that as an adult child, it was difficult to observe her parents making the decision to euthanize their dog. "And so that was really rough for my parents to hear because they had to make the decision. It wasn't like the vet was like you should put her down -- so that was hard." In contrast, Lori recalled feeling better after a conversation with her vet about treatment for her cat.

...you know [you] have a cat that's 17-18, you just kind of wonder who you're doing it for, you know, doing it for me or am I doing it for her? So, the vet helped make it clear that probably the right thing to do under the circumstances was to let her go.

For other participants, even if euthanasia was recommended as an option, it was still not an easy decision for families. Jessica recalls coming to the decision with her partner to euthanize her 15-year-old cat after receiving advice from their veterinarian. They were restricted from entering the veterinary clinic due to the COVID-19 pandemic, so their decision was made outside the office in their car.

We had to wait in the car and when we found out what our choices were we both just started crying. And we talked about it like he just said, "How are we supposed to make this decision?" And I just said you know we, "because we have to. I mean, it's part of owning an animal you know that day is going to come. At some point that's the bargain you get for loving an animal."

Jessica later continued her memory of this event.

He was an older cat, he was going to continue to have problems, even after the surgery. And, yeah, I think a lot of it was just sitting in the car going okay we're going to do this and we just talked about how much we loved him and how special he was, and how fucked up it was that we had to do it.

Jessica's dilemma was an exemplar of the tension many participants expressed throughout their interviews. Namely the desire to let their pet die and at the same time wanting to hold on to their pet.

Holding On and Letting Go

Participants in this study expressed a tension between understanding at some point they would need to let their pet go and at the same time, wanting to "hold on." This theme emerged from personal recollection or as a report about other family members' perceived experience. In other words, participants appeared caught in their decision-making, and these dilemmas were often recalled by participants as conversations between family members. Feeling caught has been

conceptualized as a "loyalty conflict" that exists after individuals form alliances with another person (Scharp, 2020). In this case, feeling caught appeared to manifest in participants' expression of often distressing indecision, frequently in the face of euthanasia. This appeared to be a feature of the tension of *holding on and letting go*. Many participants recalled their own tension in "holding on and letting go" in reference to euthanasia. For example, Amelia reported that she felt caught between her emotions and the decision to euthanize her family's pet goat.

> It was a very emotionally challenging decision for me to like, actually separate my emotions from logical thought, because I was fully aware that euthanasia was the best option like I knew that, but it was very hard for me to not get-- not to really fight for us to keep taking measures for him.

Although most participants in this study were faced with the decision to euthanize due to pet illness or age, Sean was faced with the agonizing decision to euthanize his recently adopted dog as the result of aggressive behavior (he had consulted behavioral experts and trainers on his situation). He reports talking extensively with his partner about their decision. "Over that month we kind of thought well, what can we do to like say we've done everything, because we don't want to give up on Echo." Sean continues, "I didn't want to do anything, but I was just kind of caught in having to make that decision."

Similarly, other participants recalled discussing this tension over a period of time with other family members, which implies that *holding on and letting go* was in some cases, experienced over a period of time and was a tension experienced between family members.

Ryan, for example, recalls talking with his partner about their dog's end-of-life and the struggles within those conversations.

> She kept on asking me how I know-- you know when is enough, enough? When or how long are you going to let him suffer? You know, I know he's hurting but I just don't want to do it right now.

Several participants expressed and acknowledged their own struggles with end-of-life decision-making in contrast with their partner or other family members. For example, Adam described a divergence in his attitude and his partner's regarding treatment for their 13-year-old cat. Adam recalled of his partner Katrina, "She's more realistic. Like she knew and accepted. I did not accept it. I did not accept it. And I did everything I possibly could until the end." Similarly, Lori acknowledged that her partner had a different approach to treatment at the end-of-life. "But, definitely for my husband is-- he doesn't believe in letting them go gently, he believes in fighting 'til the end. Similarly, Ryan recalled the difference between his attitude and his partners' on the decision to euthanize their 15-year-old dog.

> Well, if it was up to my wife --- it would have happened, we would have put him to sleep sooner. But I was kind of like, nah, not ready to say goodbye yet, but even though it was definitely time.

Iris recalled a disagreement with her partner about their aging dog who she primarily cared for at the end of his life.

> And my husband was like yeah, no I can't do it. He's like "I, you know, I think he still has quality of life." So, you know, we kind of, I wouldn't say we argued about it, but I was just like, "Well, you know...I'm home with him all day, I'm not going to be able to, you know, watch him, you know just, dwindle"...So we kind of, you know, we really did disagree there and that was, I don't know if that was a week before we made the decision, but really Quinten helped us make the decision in the sense that he quit eating.

As discussed above, euthanasia is a consideration unique to companion animal ownership. Most people who are faced with end-of-life care for a dying human companion or family member are not faced with this exact decision. The closest equivalent may be a family or individual making the decision to end life support for a human patient with physician guidance. Some similarities can be drawn between pediatric end-of-life cases and companion animal cases in that a parent or caregiver may feel intense responsibility over the decision-making. However,

most parents expect their children to outlive them, but most pet guardians understand that their pets will not be with them forever.

In the context of companion animal end-of-life, euthanasia is a decision that can be difficult for guardians and related to a variety of emotions such as frustration, anger, guilt and uncertainty (Adams et al., 1999; Spitznagel, et. al., 2020). Typically, the decision to euthanize was rarely one that was undertaken alone and talked about within the family system, either between partners or across family subsystems. Not only did participants express the tension of holding on and letting go, this particular decision revealed family interpersonal dynamics which will be illustrated below.

For instance, for some families, the decision to euthanize was democratic. Eric reported that his family took a vote on what they should do. "So, we have three, me, my brother and my mother and I voted against it." The rest of the family voted to euthanize. In other families, particularly adult children recalled that it was difficult for them to observe parents making the decision for a familiar pet. Ruby recalled that it took time for her father to make the decision to euthanize their 14-year-old cat, as well as a discussion about the timing of the euthanasia itself.

> ...at the time like he was very, very like in the moment he's like 'he could recover, he could start eating again. He could get better.' And it was hard for him to accept that was not going to happen. He's like 'no matter what you have to take him like back, you can't let them put him down.' We're like, 'well we can't, we can't do much about that, we can't override like their medical decision or medical expertise.' And we ended up taking him home but I think if it was my mom's decision completely, we probably would have put him down that night.

Ruby also reported that she remembered that the experience was particularly difficult for both her father and her brother due to their closeness with their cat. Ruby continues, "so definitely one of those situations where they were both holding on to him and like not really taking the time to grieve." This example illustrates the interpersonal challenges that euthanasia

can pose within the family system and subtle negotiation of power that can happen within family subsystems, particularly among family members with differing levels of decision-making.

Most participants denied that there was outright conflict between family members regarding the euthanasia decision, but some participants did recall that they had at times disagreed with family members. For example, Bridget talked about her family's decision to euthanize their dog while she was living apart from them.

> I wanted him to go to the vet to get better. And I felt like it was a hasty decision to put him down in my opinion but thinking about it now, maybe not. He was very old, but in the moment, I was very like, why are they just suddenly doing this?

Lori recalled the conversation with her partner after taking her 18-year-old cat Ariel to the veterinarian after a series of seizures.

> And then with Ariel because, I think when I called my husband from the vet, and he said are you doing this right now? And I think if he had been there, he would have argued with me a little bit more and I said yes, they have taken her there and giving her the sedative, this is happening now.

Eric described a conversation he had with his family in relation to finding the money for treatment for their sick dog.

> I keep thinking I need to like convince my other family members of not doing the euthanasia. Like, I don't know maybe find money to pay for other kinds of treatments and, something like that...I actually discussed it with my mom and brother.

Similarly, other participants described financial concerns as a specific challenge which will be discussed in greater detail below.

Financial Strain

Although euthanasia was a dilemma faced by participants and managed within the family, this was not the only aspect of decision-making. It has been noted in the literature that concerns for guardians can be the cost of care or treatment for a pet near the end of their life

(Applebaum et al., 2020; Spitznagel et al., 2020). The cost of care can be particularly

burdensome for vulnerable populations, and/or those with a limited income or who face a sudden

financial crisis (Muraco et al., 2018). This section will discuss how participants talked about

weighing treatment costs against reality of what they were willing to pay for care and tensions

with other family members.

Alison described that she had discussions about how to care financially for their cat

whose diagnosis was unclear, but it had been determined she was ill and would likely die in the

near future. She recalls talking with her mom and sister about finding another home for their cat

with someone who could provide better medical care.

> We also thought about giving him to an animal shelter nearby, because we just
> can't take care of him anymore. And that also caused tension within the family
> because, like, "No, Cira's gonna die anyways. Let him die with us."

Alison also described the double-bind of caring for a pet who serves as a source of

comfort during difficult life events like financial struggles, and at the same time not being able to

afford to care for the pet that provides comfort.

> I remember my sister saying, rich people are lucky because they can have all the
> pets they want without worrying about medical costs, and it's kind of like when
> you're struggling financially you need someone that's comforting like a cat or a
> dog or something or a pet. But one of these barriers is how am I going to support
> my pet? If I lose my job?

Participants also described weighing the costs of treatment for their ill companion animal

and the reality of their financial limits. Jessica described the reasoning behind euthanasia for her

cat.

> We took him in and they're like he's really sick and the operation to fix him would
> be like $10,000, that it's an unusual operation. And I'm like, I'm not-- I can't do
> that. So, you know, I'm not a movie star...so that's why we ultimately decided to
> put him down...And we might have sat and talked about it for an hour in the car,
> because we were crying and we didn't want to do it and so we knew we had to.
> We didn't really have a choice. It's not like we, you know, we're not starving but

we certainly didn't have 10 to $11,000 to spend on a surgery. So, for a 15-year-old cat, you know?

Similarly, Amelia remembered her family assessing their financial situation before calling out a veterinarian to their farm for their sick goat.

> It's expensive and you have to consider there's farm call costs so there's an extra price for them simply to come out and it was on a weekend...so there's an extra emergency fee for being weekends. So, we're like can we wait this out 'til Monday?

As outlined above, participants described that these financial decisions were often discussed between family members which could result in tension. Lori recalled a discussion between her and her partner regarding treatment for her 10-year-old cat.

> He thinks money is not an issue and I do think that it's something to be weighed, you know in a world where there are people who can't eat, how can I justify you know, $2,000 for the kitty cardiologist?

This quotation above reflects differing perspectives among family members regarding care and treatment. Participants also recalled discussions between family members about costs for treatment in relation to whose pet it was. Kara remembered her grandparents "staying out of the financial situation" as her cat was viewed by the "immediate" family as their cat.

> And my parents kind of oversaw that. And we talked about that as well. Since it was us kids' cats, they kind of were like hey, this is our financial situation we know that you're in school, we know that your sister's working this is what we can afford right now, because we've always been the type of family that kind of 'hey we're in a stressful financial situation can you guys like not buy like $100 worth of, you know, whatever that's not needed right now' kind of thing."

Financials and discussions about money within families can potentially be stressful conversations on their own. When this is compounded by decision-making for a companion animal at their end-of-life, this resulted in often difficult conversations between family members.

4.2 Reverberations of End-of-life on Family Dynamics

Prior research has found that companion animals can play a role in the emotional system of the family (Leow, 2018; Melson & Fine, 2010). Gage & Holcomb (1991) found that pet death is in fact, one of the more common sources of stress that families experience, occurring almost two times more frequently than stress related to children leaving home. In this study, such tensions from the impending death of a pet were apparent from participant reports of their experiences. In this section, relationships among family members will be highlighted.

Data analysis revealed participants engaged in two primary interpersonal challenges, or tensions that they had to manage that reverberated out into family interactions. First, this included ways in which they negotiated animal care and emotions; both their own and other family members during the pet end-of-life period. Second, that participants often engaged in topic avoidance with family members or avoided talk of the impending death of their companion animal. Ways in which participants were involved in negotiating animal care and human emotions will be discussed first, and how participants engaged in avoiding death will be outlined second.

Negotiating Animal Care and Human Emotions

At pet end-of-life, participants described taking on both physical and instrumental care for sick/aging pets and also negotiating the various emotions that contributed to challenging family dynamics. Several participants indicated they were primary caregivers for sick pets or pets who were experiencing physical challenges due to advanced age. Participants described coordinating day and/or overnight care between partners or establishing a care routine with other family members. Iris recalled a memory where she described as a challenge the amount of care

required for the family's elderly dog and asserted that she should continue this care despite her

son's offer of help.

> I would even say "you know I can't keep doing this" and my son would be like, "I'll come and stay I'll do it" and I'm "you know you can't go to work, you know you won't be able to work the next day if you're, you know up all night." So that was a challenge, just the amount of care that it took to, you know, take care of him.

Similarly, Samantha described having to manage care for her ill dog with her partner and

recognizing that it was causing stress for her partner to change a bandage on their dog's leg. "He

wasn't really acknowledging it first, how hard it was on him. And then I started recognizing him

getting a little short tempered around it... until finally I figured out "Oh this is because it's really

stressing him out."

For other participants who identified as primary caregivers, having more experience with

animals or knowledge of veterinary medicine presented a challenge to existing family dynamics.

Kara recalled several moments of frustration when she had to assert herself with both her parents

as she provided advice on care for their family's sick 16-year-old cat. "I guess it was like

frustration, of me having the knowledge so I understood more than what my parents did *(crying)*.

And then the pressure from that as well. Trying to get them on the same page." Another

participant, Carrie with a degree in veterinary medicine recalled feeling internally conflicted in

her decision-making as others in the family looked to her for animal care expertise.

> My husband always just looks to me for animal care because I'm a veterinarian, even though not practicing and I probably don't make the best decisions, but you know because I've got more experience with things, you know, he just kind of defers to me.

Katrina noted that she felt she had to be strong for her partner as their family was

experiencing the end-of-life for their cat (and also dog who had died suddenly earlier that year).

> My husband is very, very, like, I can't even describe how very attached to animals in general so this definitely made a much larger impact on him. Not that it didn't

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impact me, but very upsetting for him. You know, so I kind of feel like I had to be the stronger one to kind of help him get through things.

Other participants talked about recognizing and also discussing the concerns of others in the system as the family approached the euthanasia decision.

That was my husband's fear, was that if I said we have to do this or "it's time," and everybody wasn't on board, he was really concerned about ---- our daughter. She's a little more high-maintenance, and he was just really concerned that if you know we were going to euthanize Quinten, kind of by my, you know, demand that you know ---- would never forgive me. So you know...I wanted everybody to feel like it was the right time and to be on board (Iris).

Other participants described circumstances in which an aging or sick animal impacted an existing family dynamic. Stephanie described that she lived apart from her family during the time her 15-year-old dog Bryce was nearing the end of his life. She recalled observing her family's occasional frustration with their dog's incontinence and found it difficult to see him with mobility issues, for example watching him struggle to get up. "I would say kind of coming from like an outsider standpoint, like coming home from school and having to deal with that, it made me not want to come home."

These quotations above illustrate two challenges that families confronted that reverberated out to impact family dynamics. Participants described both physical burdens of caring for ill/aging companion animals as well as managing human emotions, both their own and that of other family members. Rarely did these exist apart from one another, and instead were frequently woven together to be negotiated by participants.

Avoiding (Talking About) Death

The second way in which companion animal end-of-life reverberated out to impact family dynamics was through the ways in which family members avoided the topic of death. Avoiding (Talking About) Death was categorized as participants personally stating that they did

not talk about their pet end-of-life or death with others or observed that other family members did not discuss their pet end-of-life. Topic avoidance, particularly about end-of-life and death is common (Goldsmith et al., 2011; Keeley, 2016). Most participants noted that they had talked about pet end-of-life with their family, but that it remained a difficult subject. For example, Jack said "We had conversations about that but it was really hard because neither of us wanted to talk about her end of life." Amelia also recalled that her family members avoided the topic of death.

> There's definitely like a tension there of nobody wants to say, like, this isn't going to end well. But we all kind of have this understanding, and we speak in this tone of like this probably isn't going to end well. We never really explicitly would come out until we're told by the vet of that like "Hey, we recommend euthanasia." We never will ever be like "Oh well, you know he's gonna pass away or he's gonna die or we're going to enter into this period." We all understand it, but it's more of like it's something in the air, like we were talking about it in a sense of, none of us ever really want to face it until we absolutely have to.

Participants recalled specific family members avoiding talking about death. For example, Ruby recalled that her father did not want to talk about the illness of the family's 14-year-old cat.

> At first his biggest thing was just avoidance, like every time you'd bring it up he would just basically say "Oh Valdi's fine. It's okay, like maybe if I give him this food he'll eat it." And he just kept incessantly trying. And he was eternally optimistic. So the conversation, never really went anywhere with him until the very end, it was kind of one of those situations where it was just-- [He] didn't want to talk about it and didn't want to acknowledge it.

Carrie recalled that her young son's previous experience with death had an impact on how he reacted to their ill cat's end-of-life.

> But my kids, so my son, in particular, he lost his grandfather when he was four. And he has a lot of memories from that. And because of that, I would say he doesn't handle death very well. And so, when he realized the cat was sick, you know he immediately thought it was for the worst. Ended up being right...he copes by just not-- he shuts down. He doesn't want to communicate about it.

In addition, Carrie described a distressing instance before taking their cat to the vet and asking her children to spend time with him.

Before I brought him up...for the last time, that Monday I did try to get the kids to love on him because I explained to them you know he's really bad, he's really sick, he may not come home and they just…they didn't want to deal with it, they didn't they just-- they don't even want to come and love on him.

Other participants revealed that they themselves avoided the subject of death for their companion animals. For example, Julie was living away from her family at college and recalled that she was nervous about knowing if her family's dog had passed away and asked her family to not reveal this news to her if it happened.

I asked them specifically not to tell me if Ella died because I didn't know we were going to be putting her down. I initially thought that she was gonna die like on her own. Like in her sleep or something.

Eric also described that when talking with his family, he expressed that he did not want to be there for his dog's euthanasia.

My brother asked us if we, before the euthanasia thing. He asked us if we want to go there and say goodbye to her, something like that. And me and my mother didn't have the guts to go because that will be very, very sad, and I'm not a goodbye person. Actually, I just mindly said my goodbye.

Stephanie also said that she did not want to be present for her pet's euthanasia.

I was not there. I didn't want to be there. I know a lot of people are like "Oh my gosh like why did you not want to be there?" [for the euthanasia]. I just, I know it's just not, not my thing.

As mentioned above, topic avoidance surrounding death is common (Planalp & Trost, 2008). Discussing the possibilities of death can bring about communication challenges (Repass & Matusitz, 2010) and people may engage in topic avoidance for a variety of reasons.

4.3 Chapter Summary

This chapter examined how participants experienced the period of time prior to the death of their companion animal. Findings included tensions and reverberations of end-of-life on family dynamics. Families also faced several challenges, particularly, dilemmas of decision-

making surrounding euthanasia, tensions concerning treatment costs, and navigating any

perceived changes to family dynamics. The following chapter will outline how participants

experienced the aftermath of pet death.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS - AFTERMATH OF LOSS

This chapter will provide an analysis of how participants experienced the aftermath of pet death. Data suggest that pet loss had an impact on the family system as a whole, as well as on an individual level. Along with the felt absence of the pet, there was also an absence of communication within the family which included not talking about the death or the pet. Individuals also described guilt or a personal responsibility for the death of their pet. After the death of their companion animal, families sought comfort in one another, in the objects and artifacts left behind, and in spiritualty and in the idea of an afterlife. The main themes that will be examined in this chapter are *absence of pet* and also *disruption in human communication, understanding and supporting loss* and *spirituality and afterlife.*

5.1 Impact of Loss on Individual and Family System

Absence of Pet in the System

Participants talked about the impact of pet loss on the family system. Several participants described the loss of their pet as leaving a hole, a vacuum, or noted that some aspect of their family had changed after the pet's death. Others described that they had talked about their pet's death immediately following the death, but later talk about the pet appeared to fade both within the family, or in some cases, individuals were reluctant to talk about the pet to others outside the family.

Martin recalled a conversation with his mother, in which she used the word "vacuum" to refer to the absence of the dog his family had for 11 years. "And she's like, you know, there's that vacuum, you're expecting someone to be there but they're not there. She's been telling me that

when she's gardening, she always just looks to see if she's there, but she's not there." Martin's reference to the death loss as a "vacuum" indicates that it is understood that death absence in general results in a void or vacuity and pet death is no different. Samantha also shared that she talked with her partner "acknowledging that there was this loss and you know the house feels empty." Similarly, her partner Jack described "We thought about that actually quite a bit after she's passed, because it left this big hole." Similarly, Victor described "a change" in the family after the death of the family cat. "I think, we all loved Bennett and it's like with him gone, it feels like, definitely an aspect of our lives has left, or just kind of like changed. Cause he's just, you know, he's not there anymore."

Disruption in Communication

In addition to participants describing that an aspect of their family dynamic had "changed" or was absent, other participants revealed that since their pet had died, they did not talk about the death with their family, or in some cases to people outside the family. Jack remembered:

> You know, we didn't actually talk about it a lot. There was some, you know, details of, we'd already planned for her to be cremated and so we had to go through some processes of transportation and cremation and collecting the ashes and once that was done, I think we both just sat with the loss for a while. We'd kind of talked it all through, and it unfolded as best as we thought it would. I think I said we were avoiding taking walks, particularly together. Just because that was, we did other things for exercise because you know that was a hard place to be, take a walk without her.

Similarly, Victor reported that after his family's 11-year-old cat died, "We just kind of, you know, spread the news and accepted it. And aside from that, we didn't really, we haven't talked much about it." Lisa also said "To be honest, we haven't really talked about it much. Since it's happened." Samantha also remembered that "We didn't stop talking to each other we just sort

of stopped talking about Paige. Amelia also described that she was still processing her own

emotions directly after the death, and that her family did talk about the death. However, it

appeared to take some time.

> I think, a little while after like we've had some more conversations, after it settled,
> kind of about how we were feeling and, and some internal struggles and things,
> but I think in the moment it was just too fresh, to have that conversation.

Amy recalled that her relationship with her mom changed briefly after they euthanized their 18-

year-old cat.

> We did talk about like...about how good of a pet she was, and how much part of
> the family and she was when we were talking about it. But then we went through
> a time period when not only could we not really talk about the death itself, we
> couldn't really talk. So we went through a time period where we were both just so
> sad that we couldn't, like even talk on the phone.

Martin, who was living apart from his family at the time of his dog's death, recalled that the

pictures of the dog that used to be sent via instant messenger by family members when she was

alive appeared to fade after her death.

> We communicate on WhatsApp and I always like "post a photo, post a video" and
> now it's pretty, it's, it's not dead per se *(laughter)* but it's very rare. There's like
> hardly any communication, hardly any media picture, on the platform.

> In contrast to other participants in this study, Eric described that his family "got a little

closer" immediately following the death of their dog and talked about the memories connected to

the family.

> After that especially in the first three days...I remember she was the topic for the
> whole weekend...that change a little bit was, was a good thing, I think, and was
> nice, I guess, to, like, it reminded us of why we moved to the first place...when
> Rori passed, so we keep like remembering, all this stuff from some of, like, from
> the very beginning of our first dog in the moving from an apartment to the house,
> why we decided that. So...one of the main decisions about that was because we
> could have a dog.

> On an individual level, participants also revealed that they had not told people outside of

their immediate family or friend group about the death of their pet. Victor said that he had not

told his friends and would do so only if he was specifically asked about the subject. "I don't plan

on telling, but I also don't plan on keeping it a secret." Similarly, Lori recalled instances in which

she indicated she would tell others outside her immediate family that her cat had died but did not

volunteer this information to others.

> It's kind of strange I mean, I know she's dead. I understand this, but it's still hard
> for me to look someone in the face and say that. So I think that's why to the extent
> that they don't ask me. One day somebody's going to say, "Hey, how's your cat
> doing? and then `I'll have to have that conversation...My husband was a little
> surprised because I had dinner this week with my mother and my sister and I
> didn't tell them. And if they had said specifically "how is the cat?" but I just, I
> haven't really talked about it very much.

> Still, other participants revealed protecting others' feelings as reasons for not telling

others. For example, Charlotte described that at the time, she did not want to make her daughters

feel bad if she told them about the death of her cat.

> My girls are having a good time. They're in college, they're having a great time,
> it's not affecting them that much. Should I break down in tears so that they feel
> bad and they're not there you know? And you don't want to do that to people, you
> know? So I felt really, I was kind of alone, you know? When it happened.

Similarly, Amy mentioned wanting to talk about the death of her cat, but also afraid that her

expression of sadness would make people uncomfortable.

> I guess what would closure look like right? Being able to talk about it, maybe.
> Yeah, being able to be sad about it without feeling guilty about being sad I guess
> right? Because you're making other people uncomfortable when you're really sad.[1]

Feeling Guilty and Responsible

Participants talked about the aftermath of loss on the family system, but also brought up

the guilt they personally felt in relation to their pet's death. This was evidenced in many explicit

references to "guilt" over the manner of their pet's death, but also that they were still "beating

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[1] A dominant discourse is that grief is something that is to be recovered from, or for the bereaved to find closure in.
However, it is generally understood that after a death, individuals instead experience an adjustment (or
maladaptation) to their changed reality. See Stroebe et al., 2005

themselves up" or thought they were negligent for not picking up on signs that their companion

animal was sick. Jessica recalled feeling this responsibility when she thought she had not picked

up on signs of her cat's illness before he died.

> And I didn't know that he had [been] throwing up blood like a month before he
> had a little episode and I thought it was food, and then it happened again and I
> looked closer and it was blood and I was like, oh that's- "oh man." I felt like such
> a bad mom.

Carrie also talked about feeling guilty about the death of her cat. "It happened really fast. And

unfortunately, I didn't catch it as early as I probably should have, and I'm still kind of beating

myself up over it." Similarly, Katrina acknowledged their cat's illness happened quite suddenly,

however she still felt guilt.

> Unfortunately, it happened very rapidly so I believe she had some type of stomach
> cancer or something to that effect...but she seemed in good spirits and everything
> like that and the guilt just piles on because we didn't take her to the vet soon
> enough.

Lori also mentioned talking with a friend after her cat died, and the guilt she felt, and that she

should have "fought" for her cat.

> I was talking with a friend afterwards saying you know it was so hard to make
> that decision, even with the vet supporting me. I don't know what it would be like
> to have to decide to unplug a family member. But, you know, guilt as to whether
> you know should I have fought harder?

> Sean described that he was still carrying the responsibility for the death of his dog. "I do

feel like I really carry that with me, like I killed this dog. That was my responsibility. And that

really eats me up." Adam also talked about the experience of his dog's sudden death in the

family's backyard and ruminated on his personal feelings of responsibility. He also indicated that

he thought his partner did not feel the same sense of guilt that he did. In the below narrative,

Adam recalls discovering that his dog had died unexpectedly after letting her outside.

> I keep trying to think that there's something I could have done. So, I had videos of
> that morning [when his dog died]...and I'm listening to the video and I'm watching

it....And I'm listening to hear Penny's bark. I'm thinking maybe she barked and I didn't hear it. Maybe it was my fault I didn't hear it. So I have that kind of like, I still you know, maybe it's my fault I didn't go out soon enough, that type of thing.

5.2 Seeking Comfort

Although many participants felt guilt or responsibility over the death of their pet, several described receiving comfort from others who supported them and understood their loss, particularly from other individuals who had animals themselves, or had previously experienced pet loss. After the death of their pet, participants talked about the supportive communication they received from others within and outside the family. Participants noted that they felt most supported from other people who had also lost pets. They also revealed that they found comfort in spirituality, or the belief in an afterlife.

Understanding and Supporting Loss

After the death of their companion animal, most participants described that they received support from at least one member of their family; some reported receiving support from both family and friends. The forms of support included friends and family who checked up on them with phone calls, in-person visits, personal text messages or through supportive messages on social media. Specifically, 16 participants indicated verbal support from family, in the form of face-to-face talk, phone calls or text messages. Five participants indicated some form of instrumental or physical support like meals, small gifts, or mementos in honor of their pet. Two participants who were sisters described providing and receiving physical assistance in carrying out treatment for their cat which they both described as support. One participant indicated he remembered supporting his father who was closer to their cat who had died. Participants also described that they received online support. "And I belong to a couple of cat groups online. And

that was a great place. A great place to get support, and empathy" (Jessica). One participant described that the death of their pet was something the family understood to be "going through" together. Another participant indicated that they perceived that there was a "mutual understanding" of what the family was feeling and didn't feel like talking about it. One other indicated that support was not offered or requested because their family simply did not talk about the death. Julie said that after their dog died, although her siblings are not close, her sister offered physical comfort after the death of their family dog.

> She like came over and we're both crying. She came in like laid next to me [in bed]. And so like it doesn't seem like a lot, but because that's so abnormal that was just like something that like she did just [to] like support and comfort.

Julie continued to describe that "acknowledging one another's pain" in her family during this time helped to validate what she was feeling was okay. One participant indicated that the support received from family was not necessarily helpful. When talking on the phone with her sister, Bridget expressed that she was upset that another family member who took their dog to be euthanized did not really like the dog. "I ended up hanging up on her because I was just so upset."

As overviewed in the previous section, there were instances in which participants talked about the guilt or sadness they felt over the death of their pet and described occurrences of their family providing comfort and reassurance that they were not personally at fault. Michael recalled reassuring his partner that it was not her fault that she didn't recognize initial signs of their cat's illness.

> She felt a little bit guilty because she didn't pick up on signs of him and stuff, and I was like "You know what? That cat had one of the best lives any cat could have." But you know it was sudden and that kind of, that kind of got to her.

Also, Lori said of her son "I vocalized with our son...some of the guilt that I felt, and he said, 'You know that cat loves you, she wouldn't go to anybody.'" Adam also described a conversation with his partner about the guilt he felt over their dog's sudden death and describing what he thought he had missed prior to her death. "And she stopped and said, 'What are you doing, why are you thinking that it's your fault?'"

Participants also described how they believed others who had pets themselves most acutely understood their bond to the pet, their sadness, or as Iris described, had "been through it." Some participants compared this communication with other people who did not have pets. For example, Stephanie recalled after her dog died, "My dad and my stepmom were super supportive, because they have had dogs their whole lives." Charlotte recalled that her friends were a comfort to her in that she felt they understood because they had recently experienced pet death.

> I think my friends that were, you know, texting me and everything like constantly, like every day "How are you? Are you okay?" I think they did it more than my family truthfully, but they had just gone through it too. They knew how bonded you could be to a pet, and I don't know that my family members were that bonded so it was, I think it was harder for them to feel what I was feeling, where the people who had just lost their pets did.

Lori described talking about the death of her cat with a work colleague.

> And because we would talk about the cat a lot, she was the one person I knew would ask me in the morning when I came in, you know, "How did it go? What happened?" And so I think that's why it's, I mean, not that other people don't care, they are in a different way but knowing that she had been there, and that she would ask me about the cat..."Hey how's Ariel doing?" Whereas you know most other people are just like, "Hey I know you have a cat but that doesn't really have much to do with me."

Martin described his partner as understanding his emotions after his dog died because his partner had also experienced pet death.

I feel like I was a pretty emotional. My partner also was with me most of the time. I was pretty much crying for the whole week. And she understood, she's lost a couple cats as well so she knows.

In contrast, some participants compared this communication with other people who did not have pets. For example, Stephanie said she wished her boyfriend had been more understanding about her sadness over the death of her 15-year-old dog.

I would talk about it to my boyfriend a lot but it was hard because he's never had a dog, so he doesn't really understand, I guess, how can you love an animal that much that it's so upsetting? Which I think is something that you really have to have a dog or an animal to understand that it's really part of the family.

Alison described that she wished people who did not have pets would be more "understanding" of the sadness of those who had lost pets; and that the one friend she could connect with after the death of her cat did not have a pet.

I had a friend that has this belief where, you know, you shouldn't be so sad about the loss of your pet. And I guess she has good intentions and everything but I think she was trying to tell me that [it] could have been your family that was sick, your family member that was sick and passed away, so you should be thankful for that...I feel like this comes from people that don't have pets or have never experienced any animal companionship. And that's fine. Just don't belittle our sadness.

Similarly, Eric also described people who think "a dog is just a dog and so you're going to get over [it] like very easily" and described a friend who would change the subject when he mentioned his dog had died. Eric continues:

There was some friends that I mentioned that she passed and they were like, okay, you can get another one. Like actually didn't say that but, he like acted in the way that he was saying that...I mean I know a dog is a dog but uh, it's in our family for such a long time and she was such a lovely dog.

Ruby described talking with her partner about the death of her cat and said that he did not understand what she was going through.

I even talked with him later and I was like "You've never had pets in your life." He still has all living grandparents, and I don't think ever really experienced like

personal family death, or death of a pet. And so I don't think he understood how that impacted me at all either.

Bridget also described that she wished people had given her more time after the death of her dog.

My friends wanted to like go out and do stuff like almost every other day which we hang out a lot. But like a week after, I really just wanted to like not achieve anything, like I was still kind of in mourning. And I kind of wish people gave me more time, instead of just being like, "Oh, I'm sorry this happened." Which like is helpful, but it's like I wanted more time to just deal with this.

Finally, Jessica remembered, "You know, sometimes it hurts when people say, 'Oh they're in a better place' you know? Like, we don't know that. We don't know if he's in a better place." This indicates that whether support providers had pets or not, people did not always provide the support that bereaved pet guardians wanted. Other participants also talked about the belief in an afterlife which will be described in greater detail below.

Materiality of the Pet in the Life

In this study, participants talked about the artifacts left behind after the death of their pet, including physical items like food and water bowls or a bed and blankets. Objects for remembrance such as clay paw-prints or physical memorials were also created post-death by participants. Participants indicated that these artifacts, including the remains of the pet itself, helped them find comfort and also were points of conversation, interaction, and tension within the family system. Several participants described discussing the physical items associated with their pet after the death and described them as points of decision-making for families.

We had all the Quinten stuff around the house. Um, and that night I think my husband cleaned up the food bowl and the water dish. Like picked those up, dumped him and washed them and so that was gone. We still have the bell hanging on the door. I think [partner] thought about taking it down and [I was] like "We can leave it up. It doesn't bother me I kind of, you know, I kind of like having it on the door" (Iris).

Similarly, Jack noted that he and his partner had to decide what to do with the artifacts of their dog who had recently died. "What do we do, you know? Tried to decide what to do with her bowl and her bed, and you know, her blankets and you know those things that are around." Other participants created physical artifacts in memory of their pet such as plaques, stones, or clay paw imprints. Iris recalled "We've got memorial stones so everybody has their own paw print of him. And then we've got actually two out in the yard. Not just one, but two, because we couldn't decide which stone we liked better."

For other participants, photographs became significant points of discussion and memory for both individual participants and among family members. Eric talked about posting on the social networking site Instagram of his family's dog as a puppy after she had died.

> And we received a lot of comments on there [Instagram] that people actually also reminded us of stories about her. And like other family members sending us pictures of, I don't know family photos with her...and so yeah, that was very, very nice of them and we actually, it's weird to say because it at the same time was sad, was nice to see all this engagement around the dog, you know? Because everybody felt like she was a family member, like a human being.

Iris recalled a conversation with her sister regarding making a "baby book" for their dog that had died.

> And so we were joking before you know Quinten died...that Quinten doesn't have a baby book Quinten again, he was one of the kids, Quinten needs a baby book so you know, we had talked about that...she made this really nice you know, just photo album so we had that to look through.

Adam recalled, "I've got pictures where I put together, you know like, pictures of Penny, and I found at least 800 pictures I took of this dog." Adam continues to describe that he sent his veterinarian an album of photos, and as he recalled talking to her and saying, "that's how I deal with it, like through those pictures." Alison also described sharing photos of her cat with her family on the instant messaging application Snapchat. "We share pictures and we just talk about those pictures and videos that we took [of] our cats. Um, yeah that that brings comfort."

For some family members, these artifacts appeared to be points of both cohesion and tension. For example, Adam described a conversation he had with his son who indicated he wanted their mom to be present with them to fix a memorial plaque for their pet, and so they waited to do so until she returned home from work. Other participants asked family members to save artifacts for them. For example, Martin was living apart from his family at the time his 11-year-old dog was euthanized and asked his mom to keep a hair clipping from the dog for him.

> I was actually trying to tell my mom "Just keep a bundle of her hair or something like that so that you know, I remember her"...And then my mom said yes initially and in the end, she convinced me, you know you need to move on from it. "I'm not going to do this." And I was like "Okay, fine."

Bridget was also living apart from her family after the death of her dog. She described that the objects that she associated with her dog were no longer present in family home.

> Like two or three weeks after it happened like, there wasn't really a sign of Gino being there. Like, I don't think they like, I don't know what they did. They didn't tell me, and I think that was mostly like they just told me about the clay paw print and they were supposed to give that to me but they didn't. And I didn't see anything about it so they might not have done anything and lied to me, I don't know.

Along with the physical objects left behind, families also made decisions regarding the remains of their pet after they died. In this study, there was variation on what families ultimately did with pet remains, although most participants reported that after the death of their pet, they buried their bodies or had them cremated (as opposed to leaving them with the veterinary office that then disposes of animal remains). Participants described burying their pet close to the home, scattering the ashes in a meaningful location, keeping the ashes in the house or preserving the ashes as artifacts. Amelia described how having her pets close after they died was like they were still with her.

> We have a farm, so we have woods in the back, and that's like where we bury our pets. And that's just, I personally I don't know, I like that, it might seem a little

weird but it was, it was nice because it's like all, they're like still here with us, you know?

Adam said that he kept the ashes of his dog in the home on a shelf, and Victor also described that he kept the ashes of his cat close.

> We agreed on getting cremated. And he, actually originally my brother was going to keep the ashes in his room, since I live outside of the house now. He was going to keep the ashes in his room but we decided to actually, share him. And so we have [them in] like a little, like a key chain.

Katrina also described keeping the ashes close with other artifacts like photos in the home.

> We keep their ashes and they're in a place where we can look at them and there's a picture next to them, so it's just it's nice to be able to walk by and be able to see them again. And just be like, "Hey, Zoey, Hey Penny."

Much like the physical artifacts left behind by companion animals, the remains of pets themselves could be an element of ambivalence and tension within families. Samantha said that she had the little box of her dog's ashes, but she and her partner "haven't figured out what we're are doing with that yet." Amy talked about an absence of communication in relation to the pet remains.

> My mom has the ashes right now, all boxed up. And we didn't even really talk about that. So when she went and got her and brought her home she kind of put her in the house and didn't mention that that was the thing they were going to do right? So no there was no ritual or even communication of that transition.

Jessica talked about the difference between the experience of burial versus cremation for her pets and compared a previous experience she had burying one of her cats who she "got to spend all day with" and her most recent cat, Gulliver whose death was sudden and unexpected.

> And there's something very, that feels more complete when you're digging a hole for your pet. And you wrap them up and then you put them in the ground. There's something that feels more complete and finalized with that. Rather than checking on a paper the kind of box you want the ashes put it, in the font for his name, and then it gets delivered to you in the mail. It yeah, I didn't feel quite the same.

Jessica continues to describe what she would have liked to have done.

Like if I could do that again, I would have taken Gulliver, I would have had them put Gulliver down, brought Gulliver home and then taken him to an animal cremation place. And, you know, maybe put some flowers and stuff around him and had more of a ritual with it, or just put them in the ground ourselves, you know? I think that might have felt better for me. You know as far as closing.

Spirituality and Afterlife

After a human death, many people find comfort in religion, faith, spirituality, or the belief in an afterlife, and used by the bereaved as a cognitive strategy for coping with loss (Keeley et al., 2014; Marrone, 1999). Participants in this study also described these beliefs as helping them find comfort after the death of their companion animal. Others revealed that even if they did not personally identify as religious or spiritual, the *idea* of these beliefs, as well as others' communication about these beliefs helped them find solace.

Although participants acknowledged that they understood their pets would not be with them forever, they still said the belief in an afterlife brought peace.

I believe in an afterlife, and I mean you know I kind of feel his presence now and then. I don't know why, but I'm just, I'm really at peace with, you know, I mean people don't live forever if you're a living being, you don't live forever. It's just you know, the way things are (Iris).

Alison, who identified her religion as Islam, also mentioned that her faith brought her comfort after the death of her cat.

It's like in our religion, you have this idea that if you lost a pet in this life, and someone you really loved, you're going to see them in the other life, so they're going to meet you there. And so I always try to ask religious scholars is this true? Like, well how true is this statement, do pets make it to heaven, is there a place for them that we can meet them, you know later on? And so that brings me comfort when scholars, religious scholars say "Yes, that's true, or anything you miss and love in this life you'll see in the other life." So that brings me comfort that I know that, you know, the idea that they're in a better place.

Alison continued to describe the importance of prayer in relation to her pets, and comfort after they died.

I know that when I would pray, sometimes Cira would love to come and sit with me when I'm praying. And so, I feel like he has that connection with prayer as well. Yeah, so like I said he has this high sensitivity to human connection. And I think it brings me comfort when we like and pray for the loss of our pets, and pray for them, and all that.

In contrast to participants who identified with a specific faith, others, like Jessica identified as non-religious, and noted that they liked the concept of being reunited with her pet after they died, even if they didn't believe it.

I like the idea of the rainbow bridge[2] and, you know, it's fun to talk about and imagine and pretend that all that exists. You know I'm kind of agnostic atheist so I don't believe I'm going to see anybody when they die, so I definitely don't think I'm going to see my pets again but, you know? I like to say that I will, just to make myself feel more comfortable, you know.

Also, Sean recalled a friend reaching out to him after his dog was euthanized and noted that he found comfort in her words.

And she you know, thanked me for giving him a really good life, and the old all dogs go to heaven. You know, I'm not a spiritual person, I don't think there's anything there. I think it's just, he's just gone. But it was kind of the like, the sentiment that he was really still a good dog and deserved a good life meant a lot to me.

5.3 Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined how participants in this study experienced the aftermath of pet death and how that death affected the family system. Participants described a feeling of absence as well as a suspension of communication about the death for a period of time within the family. However, there was evidence that support from outside of the family (verbal face-to-face talk, phone calls, texts or physical support) was important and noticed by participants. Also, it was found that participants described feeling guilt over the death of their pet, or that they carried a

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[2] The Rainbow Bridge is a symbol from a 1980's poem by an unknown author that suggests non-human animals will be reunited with their owners in heaven after they die. See Schuurman & Redmalm, 2019

personal responsibility for the death. As mentioned previously, the family is responsible for care, health and as many participants indicated here often the death of their pet. This guilt *and* responsibility expressed by participants may be due in part to the agentive nature of the pets position within the family tapestry. Families sought comfort after the death of their animals in objects and artifacts left behind, in spiritualty and in the idea of an afterlife as well as other family members and friends.

CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This dissertation project began as an investigation of the interactional challenges for families communicating about the end-of-life period for their pets. Using Family Systems Theory as an analytic framework, the goal of this dissertation was to better understand these dynamics using qualitative methods to address two primary research questions. First, what are the challenges families face during the companion animal death and dying period? And second, how do families respond communicatively to these challenges?

This study brings together family and interpersonal communication, thanatology and animal studies. Scholars in interdisciplinary fields have recently recognized that a holistic approach is needed in looking at the interactions between people and non-human animals, with findings that can have implications for public policy, environmental policy and health of both humans and companion animals (Rock et al., 2015). Likewise, the findings of this study provide further evidence of the usefulness of a more holistic approach in examining family life. The definition of what it means to be family has expanded in recent years, and prior research demonstrates many individuals include pets as family as was affirmed in these interviews. Consequently, entirely excluding non-human animals in investigations of interpersonal interactions, particularly within family life may be remiss.

Although scholars, including early systems theorists such as Bowen (1978), have made mention of non-human animals within the family, currently, family systems theory does not account for non-human elements and how the presence of non-human elements might affect family dynamics and communication. The family system as it is currently conceptualized includes only human members, therefore it is challenging to include the presence of a non-human, agentive member without identifying a different approach to this phenomenon. The

metaphor of a tapestry can be thought of as a visual means to understand how non-human elements are incorporated in the family system. Companion animals can be thought of as threads woven through the history of the family and included as distinct and visible parts of relational dynamics between family members.

This chapter will first review key findings, then discuss contributions, and finally address limitations and directions for future research.

6.1 Review of Findings

Using a grounded theory approach to analyze 27 in-depth interviews with individuals who had experienced pet death in the prior six months, this study was guided by family systems theory and focused on how families described the place of companion animals within the system. Analysis revealed that pets were found to be an element of the "family tapestry," serving the role of kin and emotional support for family members. They were also found to be integral to the family timeline and a catalyst for connection within the family system. Decision-making dilemmas, reverberations of companion animal end-of-life on family dynamics and the impact of loss on the individual and family system were also important themes that emerged in the interviews.

First, as an element of the family's "tapestry," companion animals occupy a unique space in the family system in that pets are animate but not agentive. Participants described that they themselves, as well as other family members formed attachments and interacted with their pets as cognizant beings. For example, participants described their pets as seeking them out to "connect," that they perceived that their animals took an interest in them and were, in general individual and unique beings. At the same time, participants recognized that pets are unable to decide their care, or what happens to them. Pets were also revealed to be catalysts for connection

between family members. Participants described that their companion animals were a part of family routines, subjects of conversation between partners, family members and children. Indeed, previous family therapy research has shown that pets can serve as "emotional barometers," maintaining relational equilibrium as well as becoming the subject of conversation, warmth, and concern between spouses (Walsh, 2009b). In this study, pets served as catalysts for connection, in that pets were subjects of talk, topics of both face-to-face and mediated communication among family members. They were also described as "connectors" or a unifying creature within the family system.

As scholars suggest, companion animals are liminal creatures, in that they are both kin and "other" within the family (Irvine & Cilia, 2017; Sayers et al., 2022). This was reflected in the current study as participants did, indeed, describe their pets as occupying a space somewhere at the edge of true family member yet one whose fate was entirely in the hands of the family, particularly in the context of euthanasia. As agentive family members then, although talked about in familial juvenile terms like "child" or non-juvenile terms like "brother" or "friend," participants did not imply that pets were entirely equal members of the family system and tended to express feelings of responsibility for the care of the pet in life and their death. This responsibility differs from responsibility to children in that children are considered family in most all circumstances, and this responsibility rarely extends to directly and purposefully deciding their death.

The status of pets as being creatures existing "in between" states within family life contributed to some of the communicative challenges revealed within this study which will be detailed next.

This study revealed that families do indeed face a number of challenges during the companion animal death and dying period, both before and after the death itself. Family members anticipating the death of their pet navigated several decision-making dilemmas, or tensions experienced at the relational and individual level. Often within the context of euthanasia, family members talked about wanting to let their pet go and at the same time often wanted to "hold on." Family members also talked about weighing the cost of treatment for elderly or sick pets which resulted in difficult conversations between family members. Participants described the challenge of performing instrumental care for pets, as well as negotiating emotions such as stress and frustration brought on by pet death and dying.

Individuals also avoided talk about the impending death of their pet within the family. After the death of their pet, participants described that pet death created an absence within the family system. Individuals referred to this as a "hole," a "vacuum" or that something was missing within the family. It also contributed to a disruption in family communication. This differed from avoidance of talk about death as in the prior end-of-life time period. Instead this manifested in a fading away of talk about the pet within the family or in other cases, individuals were reluctant to volunteer the news that their pet had died to people outside the family. Participants also talked about feeling guilty and responsible for the death. This was expressed in that they felt guilt over the manner of the death or that they blamed themselves for the death itself. Even in cases where their decision was supported by veterinary professionals, friends or other family members, participants still expressed individual guilt.

After pet death, family members also discussed seeking and receiving comfort or social support in family and/or friends. Participants described that the most helpful support was provided by friends or family who had also experienced the death of a pet. They indicated that

those who provided good support understood their emotions, and others helped alleviate the guilt and responsibility some participants expressed. Finally, participants indicated that artifacts left behind after the death, including the remains of the pet itself were sources of comfort, points of conversation, interaction, and tension within the family. Family members talked about performing post-death rituals such as scattering ashes, displaying remembrance plaques, or burial or body disposition and these physical items were also associated with points of decision-making for families. Finally, the idea or belief in spiritualty or afterlife for their pet provided comfort for some participants. Others revealed that even if they did not personally identify as religious or spiritual, the *idea* of these beliefs, as well as others' communication about these beliefs helped them find comfort.

6.2 Contributions

This project contributed to the understanding of family communication in a number of ways. As literature suggests, pet death can be an impactful and often stressful experience, yet previous studies have not examined how this experience affects family communication within the system. This is not necessarily surprising, as Albert and Bulcroft (1988) note, like children have been often excluded from the study of communication structures and family power "perhaps pets have been overlooked in family studies because it is difficult for the rational social scientist to consider them as potential 'members' in the family system" (p. 544).

Indeed, this study further affirmed that companion animals are a part of the family system, and if a part of the system is in danger, this can be a stressor on families to a greater or lesser degree. To understand the context of pet death and dying as an occurrence that families navigate together, family systems theory offers the principle of *interdependence* in that what affects one member of the family, affects all members to varying degrees. All participants in this

study indicated that the experience of pet death and dying was talked about with at least one other family member, typically more than one. As an element of the relational fabric, pet end-of-life contributed to decision-making dilemmas and reverberated out through the family system to affect family dynamics.

Participants recalled grappling with the dual tension of wanting to hold on and also let go of their elderly or sick pet and did so while considering and navigating other family members' personal attachments, beliefs and emotions. Tensions surrounding end-of-life are common and, specifically, dialectical tensions and contradictions (Amati & Hannawa, 2014). For example, Keeley and Generous (2015), identified a number of dialectical tensions at human end-of-life, one of which is acceptance-denial, where individuals note their unwillingness to accept death, while at the same time understood that death was inevitable. Although similar to acceptance-denial, most participants who experienced the tension of *holding on and letting go* did so within the decision-making context of euthanasia. In this context, participants talked about acknowledging that for their aging or sick animal, death was the best decision but at the same time, not wanting to make the decision to euthanize. As many participants cited euthanasia as cause of death, the responsibility of ending the life of a creature they considered family added another layer of complexity to this particular tension. In the case of families navigating pet end-of-life, the liminal nature, or the "in-between" position that pets occupy within human life added complications to these tensions.

Participants reported feeling both guilty and responsible for the death of their pet. Not only did participants state they felt guilt but also responsibility for not recognizing signs of illness, or that they could have done something more to prevent the death of their companion animal. This finding is echoed in the literature on suicide survivors. Feeling guilt/responsibility

is a thematic issue for individuals after the suicide of a loved one (Jordan, 2008). Survivors may "overestimate" (p. 681) their own role in failing to prevent the suicide and question their identity as a "good" caregiver. Pet guardians in this study expressed a similar sense of their role in pet death, both in cases of accidental death and euthanasia. Rumination on the event is also common, with survivors of suicide questioning what happened and how. For example, Jordan and McIntosh (2011) suggest that survivors will likely review their actions and have a "trial" to see if they ought to be "convicted." They propose that for survivors it is helpful to advise it at least be a "'fair trial' and that all of the 'evidence' is considered before reaching a 'verdict'" (p. 186). The rumination over the death event that some participants expressed suggests that this clinical approach may be similarly helpful to those grieving the death of a pet.

This study also highlighted communication challenges within the family about the subject of death itself. Participants recalled not wanting to talk about the future death of their companion animal and described this noticeable avoidance in other family members as well. Topic avoidance, particularly about death is common for families dealing with end-of-life (Goldsmith et al., 2011; Keeley, 2016; Planalp & Trost, 2008). Discussing the possibilities of death can bring about communication challenges, and people may engage in topic avoidance for a variety of reasons (Repass & Matusitz, 2010). For example, within families, individuals may avoid topics as a way to protect themselves, preserve alliances within families, or avoid introducing a topic that could produce conflict (Golish, 2003).

Although most participants did not indicate why they avoided talk about the impending death of their pet, some expressed frustration when they perceived that other family members had avoided talking about death. Yet, other participants asked family not to reveal the news to them if their pet had died or waited until "they absolutely had to" to talk about the death of their

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pet. The range of topic avoidance in this study was noteworthy. Interpersonal communication scholarship has indicated that people accomplish specific purposes when avoiding talk about death. From the multiple goals perspective of communication in particular, discussing death can make it a reality and avoiding the topic can allow families to protect themselves and others from emotional vulnerabilities (Caughlin et al., 2011) and in this way, "avoiding the topic of death may also serve a protective function" (p. 420). Carmack and DeGroot (2016) define communication apprehension about death as "an individual's fear associated with real and anticipated communication about the experience of dying and death" (p. 240). They note that communication apprehension about death can potentially impact decision making such as end-of-life care and advanced directives. As studies examining communication apprehension are situated within a human context, more research is needed to understand what is happening within families that may be similarly apprehensive about pet death and dying.

If the pet was previously a catalyst for connection in life for family members, then their death created a disruption in which family members had to reset. This disruption was primarily described as a decrease in talk about the pet or talk with family members (both in-person and mediated channels); although one participant described that family interaction intensified following the death. These findings suggest that pet death has the potential to disrupt a family's communication patterns. Family systems theory offers the principle of *patterns/self-regulation* to describe the messages and rules used by families to coordinate interactions in order to maintain cohesion. Family communication patterns also establish order and a sense of stability (Galvin et al., 2006). When patterns are disrupted, "families are 'calibrated' through feedback systems to regulate their behavior in accordance with their rules" (p. 313). For participants, this finding

confirmed that pet death was not an insignificant event for the system and affected the norms and interaction patterns of family members, even if for a brief time.

As *open systems*, families exchange information with non-members, the extended family and the larger culture in which the family is situated. After death, participants indicated they received support from other family members and individuals outside the family. Most participants indicated that they received some form of support, but the most helpful support included that of family or friends outside the family who had previously experienced pet death. In contrast, family members described the least helpful support was from those who did not have pets or had experienced death (human or companion animal). Participants also described unsupportive communication from others, such as one participant who indicated they were told by a friend they should be grateful that the death was not of a human family member.

Supportive communication, both verbal and nonverbal behaviors can be helpful to bereaved individuals; but as Servaty-Seib and Burleson (2007) found, the least helpful support minimized the significance of the loss or provided advice. One participant indicated they wished they had been given more time by others to adjust to the death of their pet. Most societies have rules of who should grieve, for how long, who should receive social support and other societal benefits (Doka, 2008). Grief that falls outside of acceptable norms, or grief that cannot be publicly mourned or socially validated is described as disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1989). Although most family members indicated they were supported in some way, there were examples in which participants indicated they did not feel as understood or supported as they would have liked. These findings affirmed that social support after death is important to bereaved pet guardians and particularly helpful from those individuals with prior experience with pet loss. Along with supportive communication, participants indicated that the objects and

artifacts left behind after the death of their pet provided comfort and were also elements of family cohesion and tension.

The artifacts, objects and remains left after the death of a pet were not trivial for participants and were sources of talk within families. Although there was variation in how individuals dealt with the physical remains of their pet, the remains themselves were discussed within families. In the absence of standard funeral rituals for pets in Western cultures (Chur-Hansen et al., 2011) participants were left to navigate burial, cremation or ritual individually within the family system, which resulted in the remains themselves serving as sources of comfort, ambivalence or tension in families. The decisions to keep artifacts or discard them were points of decision-making among family members, and the objects themselves became points of conversation for families and tension when they were perceived to be withheld from family members. After a human death, personal artifacts of a life led such as photographs, jewelry and clothing are left behind (Bryant, 2003) which can become "objects of discourse" (p. 156) within the family. These findings also echoed the importance of these objects for family members after pet death. After a human death, bereaved individuals may express continuing bonds which can take the form of attempting to re-establish a physical connection with the deceased such as "seeing" the person who was lost, or retaining their possessions (Field et al., 2005). It has been found that continuing bonds with the deceased may be either harmful or helpful for the bereaved (Stroebe & Schut, 2005). However, individuals who can make sense of the loss in a way that is personally meaningful experience fewer complicated grief symptoms (Neimeyer et al., 2006). There is opportunity to understand if the objects and artifacts retained or created by guardians to memorialize their pets are also elements of continuing bonds.

This study has practical contributions for scholars beyond the communication field. The interdisciplinary field of One Health has recognized the interdependence between people and non-human animals. One Health is an international, collaborative strategy to achieve optimal health outcomes while recognizing the connection between animals, people and the ecosystem (Zinsstag et al., 2011). This approach has revealed implications for public health, veterinary science and environmental health from understanding the spread of Zoonotic diseases to improving food safety (Cipolla et al., 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic (a One Health concern itself) brought some of these issues to the forefront, particularly concerning companion animals. Pets were found to provide complementary social support and helped manage uncertainty as people entered lockdown (Nieforth & O'Haire, 2020) and demonstrated the COVID-19 pandemic drove a demand for people to adopt puppies for exercise and a need to improve mental health (Waters, 2021). Given that some of these adopters were first-time pet owners, this uptick in adoptions created real concerns for public health and the welfare of the pets themselves that may not manifest for years (Habarth-Morales et al., 2022; Muzzatti & Grieve, 2022). From a communication perspective, the sudden entry of an animal into the family ecosystem during a time of intense stress, uncertainty and societal upheaval also may have lasting interpersonal consequences.

Additionally, this study offers several practical contributions for those in family practice and the veterinary field. Many practitioners recognize the importance of pets in family life (Toray, 2004; Walsh, 2009a, 2009b). However, extension of family systems theory to include non-human animals in the family system may assist professionals. For example, the participants who chose to be interviewed for this study were motivated to talk about their pets and paid attention to them, suggesting that this is a population that might present to clinicians. As this

study has demonstrated that the companion animal death and dying period has the potential to disrupt communication in families, practitioners may be able to help families move through specific interpersonal challenges or tensions related to pet death. Finally, veterinarians often see families together in practice, and the findings of this study may help to further understand the tensions particularly concerning euthanasia that families may be navigating together.

6.3 Limitations

As with any study, this project has limitations. First, the participant demographics were reflective of the demographics of the geographical region of the United States from which they were drawn. However, this study would have benefited from a more racially, ethnically diverse sample. It also reflects a primarily cis-gender, heteronormative perspective. Previous studies have demonstrated the importance of companion animals in the lives of marginalized groups, particularly those with a higher risk of social isolation and suicidal ideation such as LGBT+ youth (Jin, 2018) and in the lives of LGBT older adults (Muraco et al., 2018). Consequently, this study would have benefited from a wider range of participants reflective of these perspectives.

In addition, the individuals who chose to be interviewed for this study appeared interested and motivated to talk about their pets and the death and dying period. Their relationship with other family members may have influenced who they forwarded the study materials to, and who ultimately agreed to an interview. However as mentioned previously, understanding this sample may be helpful as it is a population that could present to clinicians and therefore, identified as candidates for intervention.

Finally, my analysis was limited to the 27 interviews conducted for this project. Although efforts were made to collect dyadic data, or at least two pairs from the family subsystem, a total of 14 individuals, or 7 pairs agreed to be interviewed (separately). This study would have

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benefited from an increased number of dyads, and potentially benefited from dyadic data analysis.

6.4 Directions for Future Research

These findings suggest interesting possibilities for future research. As at least one tension was identified within this analysis, "holding on and letting go" it may be useful to examine this as a distinct dialectical tension. The second theme of "financial strain" with further analysis may also emerge as a distinct tension. Dialectical tensions refer to coexisting forces, or tensions that exist in relationships (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008). They have been studied widely within interpersonal and family research, particularly within the context of human end-of-life (Hsieh et al., 2006; Keeley & Generous, 2015). Research has yet to examine tensions managed communicatively at companion animal end-of-life. Further examining these tensions, revealed within this study may shed light on how these are expressed and managed within families encountering pet end-of-life, and future research may discover that there are more.

As a second area of research, as mentioned above, dyadic data analysis can be particularly useful when examining the family as a system, as two individual perspectives can be compared and contrasted to understand how family members construct their experiences of pet end-of-life. Dyadic analysis therefore can be a tool used for understanding family dynamics. In this study, although most dyads shared a similar recall of the pet death and dying event, examining their narratives in a more systematic way may provide further understanding of the differences in perspectives and experiences of these family subsystems. As Manning and Kunkel (2015) note "competing discourses often illuminate or even create social realities that can and should be of interest to researchers. Moreover, these differences across interviews can indicate meaning-making in action, or how people navigate reflection about their lived

experiences" (p. 186). As families take part in collective meaning-making after a human death (Nadeau, 2008), a future study using data from these interviews could provide valuable perspective on how family systems make sense of the pet death and dying experience.

A third area of potential research interest is understanding why family members avoid talking about death, as well as the disruption in family communication following death. As outlined above, topic avoidance has been of great interest to interpersonal and health scholars especially surrounding end-of-life (Caughlin et al., 2011) and understanding topic avoidance may help scholars further understand the challenges and dilemmas families face in this context.

6.5 Conclusion

To conclude, this qualitative study framed by family systems theory examined the challenges experienced by families during the pet death and dying period. Several themes identified in the literature as individual concerns associated with pet death and dying such as pets-as-family, guilt and financial concerns were supported by this study. Further, this study extended the concept of pet-as-family, in that pets were found to be an element of the "family tapestry" serving the role of both kin and emotional support for some family members. In this way, they were also discovered as integral to the family timeline, and a catalyst for connection between family members and across subsystems. The pet death and dying experience brought about distinct communication challenges, such as tensions at end-of-life, and the disruption of family communication post-death. This study offers new insight into how pet death and dying affects families and family communication and is a step forward in further understanding the role of companion animals in human social life.

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APPENDIX A. RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Dear Purdue Student,

My name is Sara Kaufman, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Brian Lamb School of Communication at Purdue University. The purpose of my dissertation is to understand how families communicate about companion animal, or pet death and dying. We are looking for participants for a 60-minute interview about their feelings and experiences during their pet's end-of-life. This study is approved by the Purdue University IRB Board (IRB Research Project Number: IRB-2021-583). You are receiving this email because you were part of a random sample of students generated automatically.

If you are 18-years or older, living in the United States and experienced the death and dying of a pet within the prior 6 months, you are eligible for participation in this study. Interviews will last approximately 60 minutes. You do not have to participate in this research study, and you can withdraw your participation at any time. Our conversation will remain strictly confidential and neither your name, or your pet's name will be used in my dissertation. You will be provided payment for this study in the form of a gift card in the amount of $20 sent to you via email after the interview has concluded.

Participation is voluntary. **If you are interested in participating in an interview**, you are asked to first complete a brief survey:
https://purdue.ca1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_3CthHbx49EK2PtA

If you have any questions about this study, please email Sara Kaufman or my advisor, Dr. Felicia Roberts at familypetstudy@purdue.edu

Sara Kaufman (she, her, hers)
kaufmans@purdue.edu
Brian Lamb School of Communication
Instructor and Doctoral Candidate
Purdue University
Beering Hall 2167

APPENDIX B. RECRUITMENT FLYER

Communication about Pet End-of-Life Study

IRB NUMBER: IRB-2021-583

We are conducting a study that looks at how families communicate about pet death and dying. We are looking for participants for a 60-minute interview about their feelings and experiences during their pet's end-of-life. Please read the following information to see if you qualify for this study:

Participation requirements:

1. You must be 18-years or older
2. Experienced the death and dying of a pet within the prior 6 months
3. Living in the United States

Time requirement: Interviews will last approximately 60 minutes.
Compensation: Interview participants will earn $20 in the form of an electronic gift card. If you have any questions about this study, please email familypetstudy@purdue.edu Sara Kaufman kaufmans@purdue.edu or Dr. Felicia Roberts froberts@purdue.edu.

Participation is voluntary. If you are interested in participating in an interview, you are asked to first complete a brief survey using the QR code or this link:
https://purdue.ca1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_3CthHbx49EK2PtA

APPENDIX C. PARTICIPANT PRE-SCREENING QUESTIONNAIRE

We are conducting a study on how families communicate about their pet's health. At the end of this survey, you will be asked for your voluntary participation in an interview. We will make efforts to keep the contact information we collect from this survey confidential.

Q1: How old are you?

    _____

Q2: Where do you live?

    United States
    Outside of the United States

Q3: When did your pet die?

    More than 6 months
    Within 6 months

Q4: What kind of pet did you have?

    _____

Q5: Please provide your name and contact information (email or phone) if you wish to be contacted by the researcher for an interview.

    _____

APPENDIX D. PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SCRIPT

Hi, _____. My name is Sara Kaufman. Thank you for taking time to speak with me. I value your viewpoints and appreciate your participation.

Let me explain what we will be talking about today. I am working on my dissertation, which includes a focus on families and how they communicate about the end-of-life period for a companion animal, or pet. I would like to understand how people communicate about this subject.

Today, we will talk about your experience of pet end-of-life within the family. This interview will be recorded through our video/phone call, and will last approximately 60 minutes. Recording will help me focus on our conversation. We will be reflecting on experiences that have occurred in the past. These topics can be potentially emotional, but this exposure should not be beyond what you may experience in everyday life when you've talked about your pets. You will be provided payment for this study in the form of a gift card in the amount of $20 sent to you via email after the interview has concluded.

You do not have to participate in this research study, and you can withdraw your participation at any time. Our conversation will remain strictly confidential and neither your name, or your pet's name will be used in my dissertation. The recording will be stored in a secure location and will not be shared with anyone besides my advisor, Professor Felicia Roberts. Before we start, are there any questions you have for me?

APPENDIX E. SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

Thank you again for your participation today.

1. I'd like you to tell me about (pet's name), your pet who died earlier this year.
   a. What was your pet's name?
   b. How long did you have (pet's name)?

2. Tell me about what they were like?

3. How did (pet's name) die?
   a. Was this the first death of a pet you've experienced?

4. What part or roles do you think (pet's name) played within your family?

5. Tell me about who lived in your house when (pet's name) was alive?

6. With those household members in mind, how do you typically talk with each other?
   a. Examples: communication patterns, frequency, depth and type

7. Leading up to (pet's name) death, what kinds of challenges or difficulties did your family experience?
   a. How did your family talk about these challenges?
   b. Were there any conflicts during this time?
   c. Were there any decisions about (pet's name) that you made as a family?

8. Leading up to (pet's name) death, how did you talk about the death and dying period with your family?
   a. What did you talk about?

9. Were there any challenges or difficulties that you think you personally experienced that your family did not?

10. After (pet's name) died, how did you talk about (pet's name) death with your family?
    a. What did you talk about?

11. Before (pet's name) death, what kind of support did you receive from your family?

12. What kind of support did you receive from people outside of your family?

13. What kinds of support from (friends/family/others) do you think would have been helpful during this time?

14. Did you or your family have any remembrances, rituals or ceremonies for (pet's name)

15. Is there anything else you want to add or anything you think we didn't cover?

16. What is your current age?

17. What is your race/ethnicity?

18. With what gender if any do you identify?

Closing
Thank you for allowing me to interview you today. Your insights will be very helpful as I continue my research. If I have any additional questions or want to confirm that I accurately recorded and interpreted your responses, may I contact you? Please feel free to forward my contact information along with the study information to a friend if you think they may be interested in also participating. If you have any questions or would like to know the results of this research, feel free to contact me. My email is kaufmans@purdue.edu

Sara Victoria Alicia Kaufman

Brian Lamb School of Communication | Beering Hall, Room 2294

100 N. University St. | Purdue University | West Lafayette, IN 47907

EDUCATION

Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana

Ph.D. | Communication

Major Area: Interpersonal Communication

Minor Area: Health Communication

Portland State University in Portland, Oregon

M.S. | Communication

Major Area: Interpersonal Communication

San Francisco State University in San Francisco, California

B.A. | Journalism

PUBLICATIONS

Marr, C., **Kaufman, S.,** Craig, E. (April 2022). Communication and Disenfranchised Grief: Managing the Invalidated and Unrecognized Grief of Pet Loss. In G. Luurs (Ed.) *Handbook of Research on Communication Strategies for Taboo Topics*

Bruns, L. et al. (in progress) *Self-Identification, Definition, and Experiences of Non-Traditional PhD Students*

COMPETITIVE CONFERENCE PAPERS AND PRESENTATIONS

Kaufman, S. Marr, C., Craig, E. *"I feel like I betrayed her": Identity Gaps and Disenfranchised Grief following Pet Loss.* To be presented at the 2022 National Communication Association Conference, New Orleans, Louisiana

Buehler, E., Youngvorst, L., **Kaufman, S.** (2021). *Online Support-Seeking in the Context of Grief: How Aspects of the Support-Seeking Message and Aspects of the Channel Shape Support Providers' Impressions.* Presented at the National Communication Association Conference Seattle, Washington

Kaufman, S. (2021). *The "Stickiness" of Worry: Navigating Worry-talk in Everyday Interaction.* Presented at the National Communication Association Conference, Seattle, Washington

Kaufman, S. (2021). *Death and Dying in More-Than-Human Families.* Presented at "Witnessing and Worlding Beyond the Human: An Interdisciplinary and Interspecies Conversation" Center for Advanced Studies, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Kaufman, S. (2019). *The Narratives of Veterinary Medicine*. Poster presented at the annual meeting of the National Communication Association Conference, (Scholar to Scholar session), Baltimore, Maryland.

Kaufman, S., Poulsen, S., Kapoor, P. (2016). *Meeting, Matching, Bonding: A Communication Ethnography of a Humane Society.* Paper presented at the 3rd Annual Animal-Human Bond Conference, interdisciplinary.net, University of Oxford, United Kingdom

Kaufman, S. (2012)."*You Can See it in Their Eyes": A Communication Ethnography of a Humane Society.* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Phoenix, Arizona

INVITED PRESENTATIONS

Kaufman, S. (2021) *Interpersonal Communication and Animals in Human Social Life.* Guest class lecture COM 598, North Carolina State University

Kaufman, S. (2019). *What Veterinarians can learn from Communication Research.* Presented at annual West Indies Veterinary Conference 2019, St. Kitts and Nevis, West Indies

Kaufman, S. (2019). *Client Bereavement: A Perspective on the Human-Animal Bond.* Presented at the annual West Indies Veterinary Conference 2019, St. Kitts and Nevis, West Indies

ACADEMIC CONFERENCE INVOLVEMENT

Panel Member: "It's Never Too Late: Women Navigating the Unique Challenges and Benefits of Returning to Graduate School After Starting Their Careers." Central States Communication Association (2022)

Pre-Conference Workshop: "Animals, Nature and Human Relationships: Analyzing Evidence." Western States Communication Association Conference (2019)

TEACHING

Brian Lamb School of Communication | Purdue University

COM 303   *Intercultural Communication*
             Fall 2021, Instructor of record

COM 212   *Approaches to the Study of Interpersonal Communication*
             Fall 2021, Instructor of record
             Summer 2021, Instructor of record
             Spring 2020, Instructor of record

COM 318   *Principles of Persuasion*

Spring 2021, Teaching Assistant for Dr. Jen Hoewe

Fall 2020, Instructor of record

2019 – 2020, Teaching Assistant for Dr. Maria Venetis

Spring 2020 Lead Teaching Assistant for Dr. Maria Venetis

COM 320   *Small Group Communication*

Fall 2021, Instructor of record

Spring 2020, Instructor of record

COM 102   *Communication Theory*

Fall 2019, Teaching Assistant for Dr. Glenn Sparks

COM 114   *Fundamentals of Speech Communication*

2018 – 2019, Summer 2020, Instructor of record

GRANTS AND AWARDS

2022   Graduate School Summer Research Grant | Purdue University

   Award to support dissertation completion

2021   Charles J. Stewart Doctoral Fellowship 2021 | Brian Lamb School of Communication | Purdue

University *Competitively selected award to support early dissertation research*

Communication Graduate Student Association Professional Grant | Brian Lamb School of

Communication | Purdue University | *Award to support dissertation research*

PROMISE Award | College of Liberal Arts | Purdue University

Competitively selected award to support conference presentation at the 2021 National

Communication Association, Seattle Washington

DEPARTMENTAL APPOINTMENT

Online Master's Program Graduate Assistant

Brian Lamb School of Communication | Purdue University | Fall 2019

INDUSTRY APPOINTMENTS

Communications Manager

Ross University School of Veterinary Medicine | St. Kitts, West Indies | 2017 – 2018

- *Primary on-island crisis communication contact and lead*
- *Managed internal and external communications on island*
- *Produced and maintained content for print, web and social media*
- *Produced and co-hosted monthly community radio show*

Communications Specialist

Ross University School of Veterinary Medicine | St. Kitts, West Indies | 2015 – 2016

- *Managed planning and execution of all internal and external campus events*
- *Managed photography and video projects, both in house and external professional vendors*
- *Created and produced visual and written content for marketing teams*

Communications Coordinator

Graduate Medical Education, Oregon Health & Science University | Portland, Oregon | 2011 – 2014

- *Managed external communications with residents and fellows*
- *Produced yearly onboarding handbook for new residents and fellows*
- *Created written and visual content for School of Medicine publications*

DEPARTMENT AND DISCIPLINE SERVICE

Conference Submission Reviewer, Health Communication Section. National Communication Association Annual Conference, Seattle Washington (Spring 2021)

Conference Submission Reviewer, Student Section. National Communication Association Annual Conference, Seattle Washington (Spring 2021)

Conference Submission Reviewer. Communication Graduate Student Association Conference, Purdue University (Spring 2021)

Graduate Student Association Government Representative Senator. Communication Graduate Student Association. Brian Lamb School of Communication. Purdue University (2019-2020)

Graduate Student Mentor to incoming PhD student (Fall 2020)

Judge for Purdue Undergraduate Research Conference (Spring 2019)

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS

National Communication Association
International Communication Association
Western States Communication Association