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It's Not Just A Dog: The Role of Companion Animals in the Family's Emotional System

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IT'S NOT JUST A DOG:
THE ROLE OF COMPANION ANIMALS IN THE FAMILY'S EMOTIONAL
SYSTEM

by
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THE ROLE OF COMPANION ANIMALS IN THE FAMILY'S EMOTIONAL
SYSTEM

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University of Nebraska, 2018

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Past studies have looked into the role of companion animals in families. This study intended to explore the role of companion animals in the family's emotional system through the lens of Bowen Family Systems Theory. Data from a study on companion animal loss and grief were used. A qualitative phenomenological approach was adopted to analyze the data from interviews. Three primary themes emerged from the data: balanced family emotional system, response to relational anxiety and role of the absence companion animal. The first theme suggested that human family members and companion animals developed a balanced family emotional system through companion animals integrating into the family's daily routines and into the family's emotional system as an individual member of the family. The second theme suggested that human family members and companion animals responded to relational anxiety which was seen through Bowen Family Systems Theory concepts such as individuality, togetherness, emotional distancing, emotional fusion, underfunctioning-overfunctioning and pursuer-distancer. This supported the dynamic process that occurs between human and companion animal and as such, supporting companion animals as being a part of the family's emotional system. The third theme is the impact brought upon by the role of the

absence companion animal in the family's system, where there was evidence of an imbalance in the system and the surviving members' attempts to rebalance the system. Findings indicated that companion have a stabilizing and dynamic role in the family system and the absence of the companion animal resulted in the family system destabilizing. Implications for clinicians is to consider the role that companion animals play in the family's emotional system and the impact it can bring towards clients. The stabilizing role that companion animals play can also be a good resource when individuals are faced with emotional distress and require emotional support.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The human-animal bond has existed for thousands of years (Thurston, 1996). This unique bond between species has become the focus of research over the years with many positive benefits reported. Companion animals have been found to lower stress in their guardians (Fecteau et al., 2017; Wright et al., 2015a), provide social support (Faver & Cavazos, 2008; McConnell, Brown, Shoda, Stayton, & Martin, 2011; Walsh, 2009; Wright et al., 2015a), lower anxiety and negative affect (Crossman, Kazdin, & Knudson, 2015; Henry & Crowley, 2015; Walsh, 2009), increase positive affect (Crossman et al., 2015), provide physical benefits (Owen et al., 2010; Tepfer et al., 2017), provide a sense of security (Walsh, 2009), decrease depressive symptoms (Henry & Crowley, 2015), decrease psychological distress (Henry & Crowley, 2015) and increase mindfulness (Henry & Crowley, 2015). Companion animals have also been linked to physiological benefits in their guardians, such as lower blood pressure (SBP) (Allen, Blascovich, & Mendes, 2002; Anderson, Reid, & Jennings, 1992; Wright, Kritz-Silverstein, Morton, Wingard, & Barrett-Connor, 2007), greater 1-year survival rate among patients with coronary artery disease (Aiba, et al., 2012) and have favorable effects on cardiovascular risk factors (Arhant-Sudhir, Arhant-Sudhir, & Sudhir, 2011)

Past research also examined the role of companion animals in families. Most notably, Walsh (2009) discussed the role of companion animals in the family system and family therapy. The study highlighted the role of companion animals through a Bowen Family System's lens, where companion animals reflected feelings and behaviors of family members directly related to the behavioral trends in the family. Bowen Family Systems Theory is a widely utilized clinical approach. Hence, understanding the role of

companion animals from this perspective can facilitate translation into clinical work. Bowen's concept of emotional system explains that the naturally occurring system's existence in all forms of life enables an organism to receive information from both the environment and from within itself, to integrate that information and to respond on the basis of it (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Based on this theory, if the family has a lot of stress, the companion animal may perceive it as a need and provide emotional support to the human family members. It also may be possible that companion animals develop dysfunctional patterns in accordance with the dysfunction in the family. For example, one family in the study by Speck and Attneave (1973) showed a fear of leaving the house and a similar behavior was observed in their companion animal. Based on this observation, it is suggested that the behavior of the companion animal provides a glimpse into an overall picture of the role of the companion animal in the family's emotional system, which is the anxiety that is occurring in the family.

Looking into the role of companion animals from a systemic perspective is important in understanding the impact that companion animals have on the family. Companion animals are often described as the "glue" in the family; they are said to bring family members together and increase cohesion in the family (Cain, 1983). Companion animals are also commonly included in family rituals and ceremonies such as buying gifts for them on their birthdays or Christmas (Walsh, 2009). Given the companion animal's role in the family, the loss of the companion animal can destabilize the family system (Walsh, 2009). Hence, this study analyzed data from an existing study on the guardians and their experiences with grief as a result of the loss/death of their companion animals. The loss of their companion animals may illuminate the roles they play in the

family's emotional system and the impact they have on the family. Understanding the role of companion animals from a systemic perspective can also serve as an indication as to what is occurring in the family. Cain (1983) found that companion animals often reflected and expressed family distress. For example, companion animals showed physical symptoms such as vomiting or diarrhea, "acted out" their feelings through hyperactivity, restlessness, anxiety by barking, becoming ill or inability to eat or sleep and moved close, sought attention or withdrew when there was high tension or conflict in the family.

Therefore, the central research question for this study is: What is the role of companion animals in the family's emotional system? Sub-questions related to the central research questions will be:

(1) How do companion animals respond in relation to their human family members' emotions?

(2) Are there patterns that companion animals and human family members develop as a result of relational anxiety?

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Human-Animal Relationship

Many researchers have explored the interaction between humans and animals to better understand this relationship. In the past, animals were used to help humans with labor and also companionship. Currently, companion animals are often labeled as a family member and strong emotional bonds between companion animal and owner have been reported (Kemp, Jacobs, & Stewart, 2016). Dog companionship was found to

include seven themes: symbiotic relationship, dog-oriented self-concept, anthropomorphism, activity/youth, boundaries, specialty purchases and willingness to adapt (Dotson & Hyatt, 2008). This study explains that the human-animal relationship is symbiotic, a mutually physically and psychologically-beneficial bond (Dotson & Hyatt, 2008). More specifically, the human experiences less stress, a sense of security and feels happier while the dog receives care (e.g. being fed) and is psychologically nurtured (Dotson & Hyatt, 2008). The symbiotic relationship refers to the combination of enjoying the nurturing component that comes with having a dog and the benefits received by both parties (Dotson & Hyatt, 2008). Dog-oriented self-concept refers to the importance of the dog(s) to the owner's self-concept and social self (Dotson & Hyatt, 2008). The Anthropomorphism dimension describes the dog being seen as more of a person and less of an animal (Dotson & Hyatt, 2008). The Activity/Youth dimension refers to the increased activity levels of the owner due to the dog-ownership (Dotson & Hyatt, 2008). The Boundaries dimension describes the limits imposed on the dog by their owner (Dotson & Hyatt, 2008). The Specialty Purchases dimension refers to the extent in which guardians are willing to make a special effort to purchase items for their dogs (Dotson & Hyatt, 2008). The Willingness to Adapt dimension refers to the owners' readiness to change and adjust their patterns of living to accommodate their dogs (Dotson & Hyatt, 2008). One study described companion animals as being social actors, where becoming part of a family is a two-way process, as with any relationship (Charles, 2014). Companion animals are seen as social actors who make choices and act upon them if they are able to (Charles, 2014). Hence, it was suggested that companion animals have an active role in 'choosing' whether to be a part of the family or not (Charles, 2014).

One possible explanation for this two-way relationship process is that people may attribute human-like characteristics to their companion animals, this is known as anthropomorphism. People have been found to attribute emotions to their companion animals if they have beliefs in the animal mind (Wilkins, McCrae, & McBride, 2015). This research examined the factors that influence this attribution of emotions to animals and found that the only predictor of this was beliefs in the animal mind (Wilkins et al., 2015). This attribution of emotions however, is inconsistent; some animals were believed to have more emotions, such as mammals in comparison to fish and invertebrates. Such reasoning may explain why common animals used for therapy are dogs, dolphins and horses (Amiot, Bastian, & Martens, 2016; Antonioli & Reveley, 2005; Burgon, 2003), who are mammals. Since humans also fall into the category of mammals, it is possible that humans may unconsciously find similarities with these other mammals, and hence attribute the emotions to their companion animals. There is also a possibility that humans may project human-like characteristics or traits onto their companion animals to fulfill a need that they may not have been able to obtain from humans, such as companionship or safeguards from loneliness (Charles, 2014). This research provides indicators of bidirectional influence, a topic of primary interest to family therapists.

Companion Animals and the Family's Emotional System

Walsh (2009) brought to attention the role of companion animals in family systems and family therapy. She discussed the benefits that companion animals bring to the family, its importance for resilience, roles that the companion animals played in couple and family processes as well as their involvement in relational dynamics and tensions. She also discussed the impact of the loss of a companion animal can bring to the

family. She viewed this discussion through the lens of Murray Bowen's concept of the family emotional system where companion animals were seen as family members and as such, are capable of sending shockwaves through the network of relationships. The attribution of companion animals and their guardians being equals and part of the family provides evidence to the strong bond between humans and animals. As such, it is not surprising that the death or loss of one family member, whether human or companion animal, impacts the whole family system. Companion animal guardians have reported that the loss of their companion animal has brought them great pain and the intensity of the death was similar to that of the death of other family members or friends (Rujoiu & Rujoiu, 2014). Grieving the loss of companion animals appeared to be similar to that of family members or friends in several ways (Kemp et al., 2016). People reported feelings of shock, hurt, sadness, loss, numbness and emptiness while some even reported wanting to die as a result of the loss of their companion animals (Kemp et al., 2016).

Bowen's concept of emotional system explains that the naturally occurring system's existence in all forms of life enables an organism to receive information from both the environment and from within itself, to integrate that information and to respond on the basis of it (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Humans and animals exist in a system that is bigger than just themselves; they interact with the environment they are in. Hence, this concept assumes that there are operating principles that regulate various parts of a larger system to which organisms belong (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). This would suggest that a disruption in an organism may cause an imbalance in the larger system. The concept of emotional system also extends beyond the individual to include the relationship system. This suggests that there is an emotional interaction between an organism and that of other

organisms in the environment, which plays a role in the emotional functioning of the organism (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Thinking that the connection between humans and animals as an emotional system would suggest that if either owner or companion animal were to have dysfunctional behaviors, fall ill or pass away, it would cause an imbalance in that system. For example, the owner may experience grief over the companion animal similarly to that of a human family member (Rujoiu & Rujoiu, 2014).

Bowen Family Systems Theory was developed through clinical research with human families and has yet to be researched through the lens of human-animal interaction. The current study seeks to provide empirical validation for Walsh's (2009) theoretical application of Bowen Family Systems Theory to companion animals and families. As such, the following relational definitions of the primary theoretical concepts are described from the lens of human interaction only.

Bowen's Family Systems Theory is made up of several interlocking concepts, which include: differentiation of self, triangles, emotional cutoff, family projection processes, multigenerational emotional processes and social emotional processes (Gilbert, 2004; Nichols & Davis, 2016). Anxiety is the basis of these concepts; it refers to intense emotions, can travel in groups between and among individuals, and it defines the limits of the emotional system (Gilbert, 2004). Relational anxiety refers to the tension that occurs between individuals of a system, such as between mother and father, brother and sister or mother and son. Differentiation of self refers to the capacity of an individual to think and reflect and to not respond automatically to emotional pressures (Nichols & Davis, 2016). It refers to an individual's ability to be resilient and make wise choices, even in the face of anxiety (Nichols & Davis, 2016). Triangles are the smallest stable relationship system;

when anxiety increases in a relationship, people manage the anxiety by either distancing themselves or developing a greater need for emotional closeness (Gilbert, 2004; Nichols & Davis, 2016). This may result in the involvement of a third party as it decreases the anxiety (Nichols & Davis, 2016). However, that does not mean the anxiety is resolved. Family projection process refers to the differentiation levels that are passed from parent to child and how that process can be different for each child in the same family (Gilbert, 2004). Multigenerational emotional processes refer to the emotional forces that operate in families over the generations, which is the family projection process over multiple generations (Gilbert, 2004; Nichols & Davis, 2016).

The lack of differentiation, or imbalance between individuality and togetherness forces in families can result in dysfunctional relationship patterns that develop as ways to manage anxiety within the family (Gilbert, 2004; Nichols & Davis, 2016). These dysfunctional relationship patterns include: emotional distancing/cutoff, emotional fusion, overfunctioning/underfunctioning, conflict, pursuer-distancer and triangulation (Gilbert, 2004; Nichols & Davis, 2016). In emotional distancing/cutoff, family members distance themselves from each other in the presence of relational anxiety between them. This can be done by cutting off communication or ignoring each other. When family members become emotionally fused, they lose their sense of individuality and have a high level of emotional togetherness to manage the anxiety occurring between them. Family members can also develop an overfunctioning/underfunctioning dynamic where one member takes over the responsibility and becomes overly focused on the underfunctioning member while the underfunctioning member relies on the overfunctioning member. The overfunctioner may pay too much attention to the

underfunctioner's life in aspects such as work, school or relationships. The anxiety may also result in family members developing a pursuer-distancer relationship, whereby one person is the 'pursuer' and the other is the 'distancer'. The pursuer is seen as the person who is consistently reaching out to the other person to ease the anxiety while the distancer is the person who is distancing themselves from the pursuer to ease the anxiety. Triangulation occurs when the relational anxiety is too intense and a third party is brought in to ease the anxiety. Walsh's theory of applying Bowen Family Systems Theory to companion animals and the family further supports that there is a mutual gain between humans and companion animals as a result of the interaction.

Walsh's (2009) theoretical application of Bowen Family Systems Theory to companion animals and the family suggests that companion animals participate similarly as human family members do in the management of relational anxiety in the family. This clinical application surmises that there is mutual gain between humans and companion animals as a result of the interaction. While the literature currently does not include research describing the role of companion animals in families from a systemic perspective, the role of companion animals is described in other ways, including the benefits provided through the dyadic relationship between owner and companion animal.

Benefit of Companion Animals and their Role in the Family Functioning

To understand how companion animals are a major part of the family, it is important to understand the benefits that their guardians receive from their companion animals that may have prompted guardians to call companion animals their 'family.' Dogs were found to provide a relatively immediate and enduring stress buffering effect in people (Wright et al., 2015a). The researchers of this study found that dogs were able to

reduce stress in caretakers who were experiencing high levels of distress from a parenting role (Wright et al., 2015a). Interestingly, a different study found that people perceived their dogs as their child (Dotson & Hyatt, 2008). This may suggest that dogs have different roles depending on the family dynamics. It may be possible that the family who experiences more stress prompts the dog to provide social support and reduce stress in the family member(s). Another example would be a couple who is childless may treat their dog as the child they never had.

Apart from reducing stress, dogs were also found to reduce anxiety in humans (Crossman, Kazdin, & Knudson, 2015; Henry & Crowley, 2015; Wright et al., 2015b; Smyth & Slevin, 2010) and serve as a source of social support for their guardians (Fecteau et al., 2017; Wright et al., 2015a; McConnell, Brown, Shoda, Stayton, & Martin, 2011; Van Houtte & Jarvis, 1995). This has resulted in guardians bringing their dogs out as emotional support animals or therapy animals. Families who are experiencing disequilibrium from being affected by life stressors may turn to their dogs for security and stability. Companion animal guardians have also reported that their dogs provide them with a sense of security (McConnell, Brown, Shoda, Stayton, & Martin, 2011; Walsh, 2009; Faver & Cavazos, 2008; Hara, 2007). The support and security during a stressful time that is provided by their companion animal dogs may be similar to turning to other family members. For example, a wife may turn to her husband for support and also emotional security while she deals with the stress.

Interestingly, there has been research that suggests that just the presence of the dog itself can bring positive benefits to the owner. It was found that the frequency of companion animal presence, dogs in particular, was associated with greater psychological

wellbeing in the owner (Bennett, Trigg, Godber, & Brown, 2015). Participants reported greater wellbeing and mood when their companion animal was present during their daily activities (Bennett, Trigg, Godber, & Brown, 2015). Their companion animals' presence may give the owner the perception that they have company while doing their daily activities, rather than being alone. A separate study found that participants reported a greater reduction in their stress levels in the presence of a dog in comparison to a friend (Wright et al., 2015a). One possible explanation for this is that the dog is seen as a part of the family and the owner may share a stronger emotional bond with the dog in comparison to the friend; hence, the guardians experience greater wellbeing as a result of perceived support from their companion animal. In addition to psychological wellbeing, dog ownership has been found to positively contribute to the guardians' physical wellbeing. Dogs were found to contribute to higher levels of physical activities in their guardians (Tepfer et al., 2017; Anderson, Lord, Hill, & Mccune, 2015; Owen et al., 2010). An explanation for this is that the dogs' demand for more physical activity has encouraged their guardians to carry out more physical activities to meet the dogs' demand. This increase in physical activity then encourages a healthier lifestyle for the owner.

Companion animals were found to cultivate responsibility (Tannen, 2004), kindness, affection, first-aid and concern for other living things in children (Walsh, 2009). Companion animals also prepared children for later life experiences such as death (Russell, 2016), pregnancy and birth (Walsh, 2009). These findings would suggest that companion animals play a teaching role. Companion animals can also play a supportive role; children with companion animals were found to be less anxious and withdrawn

when exposed to major life changes such as moving to a new neighborhood or school (Walsh, 2009). Research has also found guardians talking to their companion animals when they are going through difficult life situations (Walsh, 2009), which further supports companion animals providing comfort and a sense of security by playing a supportive role to their guardians (Hara, 2007; Faver & Cavazos, 2008).

These positive effects that were contributed by the companion animals to the owner can be seen like a best human friend who has been providing support and comfort. This comfort and support provided by companion animals are unconditional; there is no expectation of comfort and support in return. However, the comfort and support are significant to the companion animal owner and invites them to love and care for their companion animal, which is shown by providing food and shelter, on top of comfort and support.

Despite the benefits of the human-animal interaction, there are challenges that guardians face. Past research found that companion animal ownership has been linked to negative experiences such as worry, inconvenience, burden, and grief and loss (Chandler, Fernando, Barrio Minton, & Portrie-Bethke, 2015). Guardians have cited issues relating to functional limitations and financial considerations that may contribute to worrying, inconvenience and burden on the part of the guardian (Anderson, Lord, Hill, & McCune, 2015; Carlisle, 2014). O'Haire (2010) found that one of the challenges with companion animal ownership is the housing industry's shift towards renting instead of owning. Rental agreements tend to limit companion animal ownership; some guardians who have to move may have to give up their companion animal while other guardians are unable to adopt a companion animal as a result of the rules. There are also concerns surrounding

what would happen to the companion animal should the guardian fall ill or die (Anderson, Lord, Hill, & McCune, 2015). However, it appears that companion animal ownership is worthwhile given the benefits that it brings to the relationship.

Companion Animals as Part of the Family Identity

Entin (1986) believed that the human-animal relationship provides a glimpse into the emotional processes of the family. The author examined the role of companion animals in the family and how these relationships may be revealed in photographs as he believed a family photo album provides insights into the relationships between family members and their companion animals (Entin, 1986). The importance of a companion animal to a family can be measured by how frequent they appear in family pictures, whether the pictures are displayed and what the family says about them (Meer, 1984). Entin (2001) also believed that what is chosen by a family to be included in a photograph reflects ideals, traditions and values of a family.

Companion animals being included in family rituals and ceremonies are also an indication of companion animals as part of the family identity. In one study, a woman and her husband decided to have his dog as the ring bearer to their wedding (Entin, 2001). She stated that her husband's dog was 11 years old and was raised by him since it was a puppy. This appears to indicate that the couple saw the dog as a significant part of their lives that they wanted it included in the wedding ceremony with an important role. Families also purchase holiday presents for their companion animals and plan celebrations such as birthday parties, "bow-wow vows" and "bark mitzvahs" (Walsh, 2009).

Tovares (2010) examined the role of companion animals in the family from a narrative perspective where family members recounted stories of daily life which included their companion animals. Based on the stories that the families were telling, they indicated a shared family identity which included their companion animals (Tannen, 2004); which was done by family members projecting human-like characteristics to their companion animals, such as checking on the baby (Tovares, 2010). In one of the stories, the father told their son that their dog would go to his crib and lick him to make sure he was okay. This story indicated that the father validated the dog's role in the family and illustrated to his son how their dog was part of the family.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

The current study utilized a secondary analysis of data from a previous study, both of which received approval from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

Participants

Participants were guardians of cats and dogs and one participant owned a horse. Participants were recruited through a companion animal loss support group and an organization within a University Foundation that assists with memorializing former companion animals. Eleven qualitative interviews were conducted; 10 individual interviews and one couple interview. There were seven female and five male participants. All participants identified as Caucasian. Participants' age ranged from 44 to 91 years ($M = 61.83$). The type of animal loss discussed in the interviews included six dogs, five cats and one horse. Collecting data in this context was important for the current study as it

allowed for the researcher to obtain the experiences of companion animal guardians based on the pure behavioral and emotional reactions of the companion animal guardians as a result of losing their companion animals instead of asking direct questions regarding their experiences of the roles of companion animals. By being able to collect the raw emotional and behavioral reactions of companion animal guardians, the researcher was able to better explore the impact of companion animals in the family emotional system.

Procedures

Participants in the study completed a semi-structured interview regarding their experience with loss of a companion animal. Interviews occurred via phone and in person. The interview questions included the following content areas, as related to the participants' experience with companion animal loss: (a) description of and relationship with companion animal (and animals in general), (b) circumstances of the loss, (c) experience with the veterinarian, (d) responses of support system (family and friends), and (e) experience of grief and healing processes.

Qualitative Rationale

Qualitative research is suitable to be conducted when there is a problem or issue that needs to be explored (Creswell & Poh, 2018). A qualitative design was selected for this study because it allows the researcher to explore the role of companion animals in the family emotional system. Qualitative research is based on the belief that knowledge is constructed by people through interactions and making meaning of an activity, experience or phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The experience of companion animals being included as a part of the family emotional system may be constructed

based on the interactions with other human family members and when they interacted with their companion animals.

Data Analysis

This study adopted a phenomenological approach as the structure for this research. A phenomenological study will allow for the researcher to explore the lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon (Creswell & Poh, 2018). This approach assumes that there is an essence to shared experience among a group of individuals (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Adopting this approach allowed the researcher to capture the essence of the shared meaning, which is the experience of the role of companion animals in the family emotional system that is commonly shared by companion animal guardians. This then allowed for the researcher to conceptualize the shared meaning through Bowen Family System's theory.

There are two approaches to phenomenology: hermeneutical phenomenology and transcendental phenomenology (Creswell & Poh, 2018). This study adopted the transcendental phenomenology approach, which consists of identifying a phenomenon to study, bracketing out the experiences and collecting data from several individuals who have experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994, as cited in Creswell & Poh, 2018). The researcher bracketed out statements from the interview transcripts of companion animal guardians who have experienced grief as a result of the death of their companion animal. The researcher then analyzed the data by categorizing the information into several themes based on similar information/data gathered from the participants (Creswell & Poh, 2018). The themes were guided by the concepts from Bowen Family System's Theory, such as triangles, relational anxiety, imbalance in the system,

individuality, togetherness, emotional fusion, emotional distancing, overfunctioning, underfunctioning and pursuer-distancer. For example, the researcher reviewed the transcripts and identify if there are patterns of overfunctioning-underfunctioning, pursuer-distancer, etc. The researcher did this for every transcript and MAXQDA was used to organize the coded data, where statements of similar concepts (i.e. togetherness) were grouped together to develop an overall picture of the findings.

Fifteen codes were derived from several books on Bowen Family Systems Theory (Kerr & Bowen, 1988; Nichols & Davis, 2016). Two independent coders jointly analyzed the data to ensure consistency in analysis procedures. Coders were graduate students in a Marriage and Family Therapy program. Both coders' main theory of therapy is Bowen Family Systems Theory. Coders met with the researcher to receive training on coding. In the first meeting, the researcher and coders analyzed the transcript independently and identified preliminary codes based on Bowen Family Systems Theory's concepts. Coders bracketed statements from transcripts and used codes such as IND (individuality), TOG (togetherness) and ANX (relational anxiety). The researcher and coders then discussed the identified codes and came to consensus on codes. Based on the codes that were identified, a codebook was developed (Appendix A). Coders then independently coded the other transcripts using the codebook. In the second meeting, the researcher and coders met again and discussed the coded transcripts to meet consensus. The researcher utilized the data management software, MAXQDA, to organize the codes.

As a researcher on the project, I acknowledge that I bring biases, expectations and experiences to the study. I am an animal lover and an owner to multiple companion animals; this includes two dogs and more than 15 cats. I have had companion animals

ever since I can remember, so I have grown up having companion animals as a part of my life. As a result, I have a strong interest in animals and companion animals, especially in how it relates to therapy, which is the field I am currently in. I have previously presented my research on this area of interest at a conference. However, I am committed to being professional about the research and will take necessary steps and precaution when it comes to conducting, interpreting and presenting the data collected. I am aware that although my experiences with companion animals has been positive, it is possible that others may not have experienced this. To further complement this, I am coming from a therapist stance of being aware of my biases and doing my best to not allow it to influence my thoughts and opinions. In addition, I will bracket my personal opinions, expectations and experiences with my advisors and ask for their interpretation of the data. Triangulation will be conducted to establish data validity. This was done by comparing and building on the theory by Walsh (2009).

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The goal for this study was to examine the role of companion animals in the family's emotional system through evidence of Bowen Family Systems Theory concepts in the human-animal interaction that occurs in families with companion animals. Three primary themes emerged from the data: balanced family emotional system, response to relational anxiety and role of the absence companion animal. The primary themes along with the subthemes within each are reported.

Codes were organized using the MAXQDA software. The frequency for each code is reported in Table 1. This study found that the code with the highest frequency is

Imbalance in the Family System (IMB), where participants reported that either they or their companion animals were able to detect an imbalance in the system. This was followed by Togetherness (TOG) and Emotional Fusion (FUS). The code that was not found was Underfunctioning (UDR). The code with the least frequency is Emotional Reactivity (REA) and was followed by Pursuer-Distancer (PUR).

Table 1

Codes Based on Bowen Family System Theory's Concepts

<u>Code</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Frequency</u>
IMB	Imbalance in system	75
IND	Individuality	10
TOG	Togetherness	62
FUS	Emotional Fusion	31
DIS	Emotional Distancing	26
TRI	Triangles	16
ANX	Relational Anxiety	3
OVR	Overfunctioning	9
UDR	Underfunctioning	0
PUR	Pursuer-Distancer	2
CLO	Emotional Closeness	16
EMO	Emotional Equilibrium	21
SOL	Solid Self	6
REA	Emotional Reactivity	1

Balanced Family Emotional System

Companion animals appeared to play a role in the family's emotional system. The companion animal is integrated in the family system through being involved in the family's daily routines such as watching TV together. The companion animal is also involved in the family's emotional system through an understanding of exchange of emotions that occur. By being a part of the family's emotional system, the companion animal contributes to the overall balance of the family emotional system, like another human family member would. Therefore, the two subthemes are: integration into the family system and integration of role as an individual in the family system.

Integration into the family system. Human family members included their companion animals into their daily routine, similarly to that of other human family members. Nine participants reported evidence of the integration of companion animals into the family emotional system. This integration appeared to be a mutual development, whereby the animal companion showed an active role or interaction that gave the human family member(s) the impression of the companion animal's inclusion in the family system instead of an 'assigned' interaction by the human family member to the companion animal. One participant described how their companion animal was familiar with the family's daily routine and anticipated the return of their human family member.

“He knew when she was coming home. He would go to the front door and sit out on the walkway until her car pulled up into the driveway and then he would go down the driveway talking to her.” (Interview 1)

Human family members also described having a sense of togetherness with their companion animals by having shared activities. One participant stated

“And we would take them to the Dairy Queen sometimes and my mom would take extra spoons and we would sit there and watch the cars go by at... and then everybody got their own ice cream.” (Interview 2)

In this instance, the companion animal is treated as if it were a human family member and included in human activities.

Integration of role as an individual in the family system. Human family members and their companion animal experienced an exchange of emotions or understanding. This occurred as a result of the companion animals being integrated into the family’s system. Six participants showed evidence of an emotional exchange or understanding that occurred between them that fostered emotional closeness between human family member and companion animal. One participant described this emotional exchange as something that was felt and difficult to explain,

“She really could sense how I felt and kind of what I needed. It’s kind of hard to say something to a cat or the other way around but the communication between us was just something that I had never experienced with another animal.” (Interview 10)

Another participant expressed certainty in the emotional exchange. The participant brought the companion animal to the vet when they noticed their companion animal was in a lot of pain. While being there, the participant reported an emotional exchange that occurred between them. They stated,

“The look in her eyes were... she was scared and it was like do something for me and don’t let me keep doing this and it was like almost a pleading... they would just lay down and look at us like ‘help me’”. (Interview 4)

These emotional exchanges appear to have a felt understanding between the human family member and companion animal, which provides evidence for the integration of the companion animal into the family’s emotional system.

Response to Relational Anxiety

The Bowen Family Systems Theory’s concepts of triangles and interaction patterns were identified in the participants’ descriptions. One important thing to note is that these Bowen Family Systems theory concepts are not pathological, rather, they are indicators of the dynamic processes between human and animal. Human family members described their relationship with their companion animal in response to relational anxiety (e.g., illness). Relational anxiety refers to the tension that occurs between two individuals. In this context, relational anxiety can also occur between companion animals and human family members. The findings supported the presence of each of the dynamic processes and demonstrated evidence for the system as dynamic; further supporting the companion animals being a part of the family’s emotional system. Findings indicated

how companion animals stabilize the family system and how the role absence can destabilize a system.

Individuality. Individuality refers to being independent from others by thinking and acting for themselves. Human family members showed evidence of a more solid sense of self when their relationship with their companion animal was invalidated. Four participants experienced being invalidated by those around them, who have difficulty understanding the participants' grief over the loss of a companion animal. One participant described this invalidation,

“Oh, I have to put on a strong front because people will say it was just a cat, or just a companion animal.” (Interview 6)

After being invalidated by others, participants would stand by and experience the grief, even if it means they are thinking differently from other people. In addition, they show evidence of being accepting of others' different grief experiences. One participant gave suggestions in managing this invalidation based on their experience after losing their companion animal. They stated,

“It differs with each person, and it... it has to... and you have to accept that fact that it needs to be different for each person, and I can't think of a person that would sit here with us today and be like “okay, this happened to me. And this is what you need to do because I did this.” Well, I would never do that to anyone. Never. Because their experience with their companion animal wasn't similar as cohabiters is intrinsically theirs and unique to them.” (Interview 5)

Togetherness. Togetherness refers to the inclination to be connected with others, such as thinking, acting and feeling like others. Human family members and companion animals showed evidence of sharing similar thoughts, behaviors and feelings. There was also a shared experience with others outside the family system after the loss of the companion animal. All participants discussed having a sense of togetherness with their companion animals, whether prior or after the loss of their companion animal; there is evidence of a change in togetherness as a result of relational anxiety. One participant described knowing that their companion animal was not feeling well and wanted to be close to her. The human family member may have wanted to be close to the companion animal and share similar behavior in hopes that the experience would help the human family member feel what the companion animal is feeling or lower the human family member's anxiety. They stated,

“She was up every night quite a bit and sometimes I'd sleep on the floor with her.” (Interview 2)

This togetherness wasn't limited to the human family member reaching out to increase the sense of togetherness with the companion animal. The companion animals appear to also increase the sense of togetherness with their human family member. One participant reported knowing that their companion animal showed that they wanted to be close with them. They stated,

“I noticed he wanted to be near. So, like a child, what you would do with a child... and I pulled him up in the chair and he was like a child...” (Interview 5)

Another participant noticed that their companion animal wanted to be close to them when they sensed an imbalance (e.g., illness) occurring in the family system. They stated,

“And I had like the flu, the kind of thing that just knocks you out... you just have to go and lay down. And during that time whenever I would lay down, [dog] would jump up and curl up next to my stomach... and he just kind of stayed there...” (Interview 7)

A sense of togetherness continued into after the death of the companion animal.

Participants indicated reaching out to others who shared similar experiences of losing a companion animal or others who have companion animals. One participant described reaching out to family members to share their feelings when they were met with the decision to euthanize their companion animal. They stated,

“I called my niece when I got home and she was – I mean, we cried together on the phone. I called my sister and we cried together on the phone.” (Interview 7)

One participant reported that others had reached out to them to provide comfort when they had to euthanize their companion animal. They stated,

“... “do you want to come over?” and I said, “yeah I do.” And I went over my friend’s house, and in fact I stayed there the first night...” (Interview 5)

Three participants reported that they had a supportive community who helped them through the grieving process, showing evidence of a sense of togetherness. One participant described how it was helpful when they had to euthanize their companion animal and received support from the community over the Internet. They stated,

“What really helped is that I had my whole community to talk to because they were sort of... I was posting that stuff was going on, so that really helped. And these are people on the internet, but still...” (Interview 6)

Triangles. Triangles occur when two parties bring in a third party to ease the relational anxiety that is being experienced. Triangles typically occur between two individuals and a third party, which may not necessarily need to be another individual, is brought in to ease the anxiety. One participant showed evidence of a triangle which included work and social relationships and the companion animal. They described having issues at work and social relationships and how the companion animal ease the anxiety from these issues. They stated,

“Sometimes there were issues at work or issues in social relationships, issues in friendships that would come up... when I would come in the door, the tail would wag and it didn’t matter.” (Interview 5)

Another participant described the relational anxiety that would occur between them and their partner and their dog would detect the imbalance and ease the anxiety through showing signs of fear to the human family members. They stated,

“When we would have disagreements, he would really get scared. I mean he could tell that we were arguing and then it got to the point where we would tell him, “hey, we’re not arguing, we’re just talking about work” and once he realized we weren’t arguing, we were done. He was like, “okay, I can go outside now.”” (Interview 1)

Emotional Distancing. Emotional distancing refers to individuals distancing themselves from others in the presence of relational anxiety; the individual actively chooses not to participate in togetherness with others. This occurred especially after the death of the companion animal and from individuals who would invalidate the

participants' experience. Seven participants reported similar experiences of distancing themselves from others who would invalidate their experience of losing a companion animal. One participant described distancing themselves who invalidated their relationship with their companion animal. They stated,

“I just simply stayed away from the people who thought ‘it’s just a dog.’”

(Interview 7)

Another participant reported taking off from work to recover from the loss of their companion animal. They stated,

“We both took time off from work because we knew we couldn’t cope and we just didn’t want to talk to anybody... stayed at the house and took the phone off the hook.” (Interview 1)

Emotional Fusion. Emotional fusion occurs when individuals have a decreased sense of individuality and an increased sense of togetherness to manage relational anxiety. Participants described their relationship with their companion animal that was similar to that of a relationship with another human family member while some participants described that they felt a part of themselves being ‘gone’ as a result of the loss of their companion animal. This indicated the closeness that was shared between companion animal and human family member and the impact of the absence of the companion animal. This emotional fusion is occurring in response to the relational anxiety and appeared to be a way for the participants to grieve over the loss. Seven participants described their human-animal relationship that showed evidence of the

closeness and the impact of the absence. One participant discussed their relationship with their companion animal after having to euthanize them. They stated,

“He was not a kid, he was one of us. I mean, he was not a cat. He just was a part of the family that was just loved as much as he loved us.” (Interview 1)

Some participants described their companion animal as being their children or baby, having a lowered sense of individuality and an increased sense of togetherness.

One participant acknowledged their companion animal being a part of their family and how much the companion animal meant to them. They stated,

“... because my dogs are my kids. They’re my family. They’re everything I have.” (Interview 2)

Some participants described their companion animal as being their world and a part of them, indicating the impact of the loss of their companion animal and how much the companion animal meant to them. One participant described the impact of the loss. They stated,

I didn’t even know if I wanted to live. I knew I had to cause I made it after all the others... just like a big... of my life had been taken away... you know I didn’t have anybody. [My dog] was my family. (Interview 3)

Underfunctioning-Overfunctioning. Underfunctioning-overfunctioning dynamic occurs when the overfunctioning member is more focused on the underfunctioning member in various aspects of their lives. In this context, the underfunctioning-overfunctioning dynamic occurred when human family members placed more focus on the companion animal when there was an indication that something was wrong with the

companion animal. This is done to ease the relational anxiety between the human family member and companion animal. Participants reported becoming more focused on their companion animal when they were presented with the decision of having to euthanize their companion animal. No participant showed evidence of underfunctioning. However, two participants showed evidence of this underfunctioning-overfunctioning dynamic, which was seen when the companion animal became sick and the human family member was able to detect that it was a serious health issue. One participant thought of different ways they hope they'd be able to help their companion animal recover and not having to be faced with the decision of euthanizing their companion animal. They stated,

“Well what can we do? What’s it going to take... money, credit card, I don’t care. I was thinking irrationally. It’s like okay, \$5000? No problem, you know, what price of money.” (Interview 5)

This dynamic was also seen in one participant, who reported that one of their companion animal functioned for their other companion animal who was sick. They stated,

“She wouldn’t leave her unless she saw her coming and would make sure that... because she couldn’t hear real good, and so [the second dog] would bark to let her know that it was time to go or come in... she’d stay right with her until she got inside, then she’d check her all over...” (Interview 4)

Pursuer-Distancer. In a pursuer-distancer dynamic, the pursuer would reach out to the distancer while the distancer would distant themselves from the pursuer; both do this to manage the relational anxiety. Only one participant showed evidence of this dynamic. The participant was told by others that he needs a companion animal in his life

and got a companion animal shortly after. In this context, the relational anxiety was between the human family member and companion animal in being unfamiliar with their relationship and trying to navigate their relationship. The participant described how their companion animal would get into trouble while the participant themselves showed evidence of distancing.

I get kind of short... I don't know if that's kind of neuroticism or whatever it is... [the dog] pretty much took everything in stride... he could get into things and he knew he had gotten into things. And, he knew that he was not supposed to. But, nonetheless he would test, I think... there were times he would get into things like chocolate... and one was a pretty severe account and I thought I was going to lose him at that point. And I just looked at him and said "well, hey! You ate the chocolate, buddy. You're going to die." (Interview 5)

Role Absence of the Companion Animal

Findings indicated that the companion animals played a role in the family's emotional system. Their absence in the system caused an imbalance in the system and human family members struggle to re-balance the system. The death of the companion animal is not the only way that can cause an imbalance in the system; illness is also detected by other members in the system. As a result, human family members are seen trying to re-balance the system through various ways. All eleven participants showed evidence of noticing the imbalance in the family's emotional system.

Imbalance in the family's emotional system. The integration of companion animals into the family system can be significant to the human family members. As such, when a significant incident or situation threatens the family system, an imbalance may occur. There were several instances that provided evidence that an imbalance was detected in the family's emotional system. One instance is when either human family member or companion animal was ill and the other detected that there was something wrong. Four participants reported that their companion animal noticed when they were feeling unwell. One participant described their companion animal being able to detect when their human family member was sick. They stated,

“My wife got extremely sick before we moved to [location] and he literally laid there with her for four days and just nursed her back to health, just watched her.”

(Interview 1)

Four participants also reported noticing when their companion animal was feeling unwell. One participant described noticing that their companion animal was behaving unusually and felt something was wrong. They stated,

“It was his custom to lie on the foot of the bed. But this night he did not.”

(Interview 5)

Another instance is when human family members would experience stress and this was detected by their companion animals. One participant described feeling upset and it was detected by their companion animal through the behavior of showing affection. They stated,

“When I sat down and cried, the dogs seemed to know and they'd come and lick my face.” (Interview 2)

Imbalance in the family's emotional system was especially highlighted when the companion animal passed away. One participant discussed the feeling of loss and imbalance in the system after their companion animal passed away. They stated,

“...So, all of a sudden we was without either one of them [both their dogs]. We found out how much their lives and our lives were intertwined... their lives were so intertwined with ours that we found we were looking for them to go do something for and they weren't there.” (Interview 4)

In one interview, the participant stated that their companion animal was upset as a result of the loss of the participant's mother, indicating the imbalance in the system being detected by the companion animal. They stated,

“[my dog] had separation anxiety after my mom passed away... she would lay in the hallway and look straight into the kitchen cry.” (Interview 2)

The imbalance in the family system was also detected by other companion animals in the system. Four participants noticed that their remaining companion animals detected the imbalance in the system brought on by the death of one of the companion animals. One participant described the relationship their companion animal had with other surviving companion animals and what happened after the loss of the companion animal. They stated,

“[my dog] was their leader, so she would always go to the door to go outside. And then after she passed away, I'd say, “C'mon [to the other dogs], let's go potty” and they just kind of looked at me like where's that.” (Interview 2)

The detection of the imbalance in the family system provides evidence towards the integration of companion animals into the family's emotional system and the impact of

their presence. As such, their absence may cause a significant imbalance that would affect every member in the system.

Re-balancing the family's emotional system. Due to the absence of the companion animal, the surviving human family members attempt to re-balance their imbalanced family emotional system. The re-balancing of the family system was seen through the lenses of the dynamic processes that occurred between human family member and companion animal, such as through increasing togetherness (e.g., extending to others outside the family system) after the death of the companion animal. In increasing togetherness, human family members attempt to reach out to others who have had similar experiences with regards to losing a companion animal or others who would validate the human family member's experience of losing a companion animal. Participants reported reaching out to family, friends and the community to talk about their experiences of losing their companion animal. One participant reported that it was helpful when they reached out to others who understood; they stated,

“If they find there's people who are unsympathetic or do the whole “it was just a companion animal” thing, umm, just tell yourself they don't understand and find someone who does.” (Interview 6)

It appears that participants re-balance the system by temporarily 'balancing' the imbalanced family system through bringing in others who share similar experiences or validate their experiences. These attempts at re-balancing the family's emotional system provides evidence towards the significance of the role of companion animals in the family's emotional system.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The primary aim of this study was to explore the role of companion animals in the family's emotional system through the lens of Bowen Family Systems Theory. Past research explored the benefits of companion animals, the human-animal relationship and companion animals' role in family functioning. There was a lack of research looking into the role of companion animals in the family's emotional system through the lens of Bowen Family Systems theory. This exploration allowed for the understanding of the underlying role that the companion animal plays in the family; providing a better look into the impact of companion animals being a part of the family system.

This study's findings suggested that companion animals have a stabilizing and dynamic role; they are included as a part of the balanced family emotional system and are a part of a dynamic process which includes the human family members. As such, the absence of the companion animal results in an imbalance in the family's emotional system and the remaining family members re-balances the family's emotional system. Walsh (2009) theoretically examined the impact that companion animals bring to the family system based on the benefits they bring to the family, their importance in fostering resilience and their roles in family processes as well as relational dynamics and tensions. Hence, she saw companion animals as part of the family's emotional system and are capable of sending shockwaves through the network of relationships. This study further expanded on Walsh (2009)'s theory by utilizing concepts from Bowen Family Systems Theory such as differentiation of self, triangles and dysfunctional patterns and using these

concepts as indicators in participants' accounts of their relationship with their companion animal.

Concepts from Bowen Family Systems Theory are indicators and response to the imbalance that is occurring in the family system. Findings from the study also indicated that members of a family system were able to detect the imbalance when something happened to a member in the system. This was seen in several ways: companion animal detecting an illness in a human family member, human family member detecting an illness in their companion animal, companion animal detecting emotional distress in the human family member and vice versa, and companion animals detecting something wrong with other companion animals. Dotson and Hyatt (2008) found that the human-animal relationship is a symbiotic relationship, hence, it would make sense that the absence of the companion animal results in an imbalance in the family system, as the surviving family member loses the sense of security and the confidant role that was brought upon by the companion animal. As a result of the loss, remaining family members attempted to rebalance the system, which was seen through the Bowen Family Systems theory concepts when there was a presence of relational anxiety. This study's findings support the theory by Walsh (2009) that companion animals participate similarly in the management of relational anxiety in the family as other human family members.

Companion animals were found to be integrated into the family system and the family emotional system. In the family system, companion animals were included into the daily routines of the family. The companion animals appeared to be familiar with the family system's routine such as having a sense of when the human family member would return from work. The study by Dresser (2000) found that companion animals were

frequently included in family rituals and ceremonies such as birthday parties and “bark mitzvahs”. Dresser (2009)’s study further supports the significance and the integration of the companion animal into the family system given that human family members would celebrate these rituals and ceremonies with companion animals just as they would with other human family members. Dotson and Hyatt (2008) found that guardians had a sense of willingness to adapt and adjust their patterns of living to accommodate their dogs. Human family members would adapt and adjust their patterns of living if a new baby or a new individual is added into the family system; given that they see companion animals as equals, this willingness to adapt may come as naturally as having a new baby in the family. This willingness to adapt may also be able to explain why human family members in this study reported having a sense of togetherness with their companion animals through shared activities. Human family members also reported a sense of emotional exchange that occurred between them and their companion animals. This emotional exchange that occurred could be due to a symbiotic relationship between human family members and companion animals. The symbiotic relationship is the combination of enjoying the nurturing component that comes with having a dog and the benefits that both human family member and dog receives (Dotson & Hyatt, 2008). In other words, there is a psychologically-beneficial bond between human family member and companion animal when the emotional exchange occurs.

Bowen Family Systems Theory’s concepts were seen in the dynamic process between human family member and companion animal. Concepts such as differentiation of self (i.e., individuality and togetherness), triangles, relational anxiety and dysfunctional interactions (e.g., emotional distancing, emotional fusion,

underfunctioning-overfunctioning and pursuer-distancer) were found. One important thing to note is that these concepts are not pathological; these concepts are seen as indicators to the interaction patterns between the human and animal. Most of the concepts were seen in the interaction between human family member and companion animal; apart from underfunctioning and pursuer-distancer. The concepts will be discussed based on pre-companion animal death and post-companion animal death.

In pre-companion animal death, togetherness, triangles, relational anxiety, underfunctioning-overfunctioning and pursuer-distancer were seen in the interaction between human family member and companion animal. Human family members described sharing activities with their companion animals. In post-death, individuality, togetherness, emotional distancing, emotional fusion and underfunctioning-overfunctioning were seen. This was typically in reaction to the loss of the companion animal.

Individuality was not seen during pre-companion animal death; it was seen post-companion animal death as a result of invalidation from others. Human family members seem to feel invalidated as a result of a lack of understanding from those around them, especially after the passing of their companion animals. Morley and Fook (2005) stated that there was an unwillingness to acknowledge the validity of companion animal loss and the impact on the human family member. Losing a companion animal was described as an unqualified occasion for bereavement (Weisman, 1991). This invalidation from others may explain the increase in a sense of individuality that the human family members experience. This may have been done to stay firm to the self, which is the human family member's self of having a symbiotic relationship with the companion

animal. Invalidating this relationship may be seen as invalidating the support that the companion animal contributes to the symbiotic relationship and invalidating the emotional exchange that the human family member experiences between them and their companion animal.

Human family members reported having a high sense of togetherness with their companion animals in both pre- and post-companion animal death. Prior to the companion animal's death, human family members and companion animals had shared activities and were familiar with daily routines, such as knowing when the human family member was coming home. This integration into the family's emotional system may enhance the symbiotic relationship between human family member and companion animal; where the companion animal gains by obtaining care and is psychologically nurtured, while the human family member(s) experiences less stress, a sense of security and feels happier (Dotson & Hyatt, 2008). As such, this would support the sense of togetherness that was reported by participants.

After the passing of the companion animal, togetherness was seen in the human family member through reaching out for support. The surviving human family member(s) would reach out to others including family, relatives and even the community. This reaching out is limited to others who they believe also understand what it is like to lose a companion animal. It may be possible that companion animal functioned as a co-regulator or confidant prior to their death; and as a result of their death, human family members lose an importance source of social support (Fecteau et al., 2017; Wright et al., 2015a; McConnell, Brown, Shoda, Stayton, & Martin, 2011; Van Houtte & Jarvis, 1995) and/or sense of security (McConnell, Brown, Shoda, Stayton, & Martin, 2011; Walsh,

2009; Faver & Cavazos, 2008; Hara, 2007). Therefore, they reach out to others who may share the experience of having a companion animal as they would understand the devastating loss of a companion animal.

Emotional distancing and emotional fusion were found in response to the anxiety and imbalance that was being felt by human family members. Emotional distancing occurred after the passing of the companion animal; where the human family member(s) emotionally distanced themselves from partaking in togetherness that occurred around them. There was a sense of the self not wanting to be close to others. This was done through choosing to stay away from others by avoiding social situations and work. The companion animal's presence in the human family member's daily activities resulted in greater wellbeing and mood in the human family members (Bennett, Trigg, Godber, & Brown, 2005). Therefore, the lack of their presence may most probably be felt by human family members who did benefit from having a better mood.

Emotional fusion in this context occurred when participants described their past relationship with the companion animal, and the lack thereof. For example, participants described this relationship as a great loss as the companion animal was part of the family. One participant described their companion animal as being a part of them and did not know if they wanted to live after the passing of their companion animal. Dotson and Hyatt (2008) found themes of dog-oriented self-concept, where the companion animal's presence is important to the human family member's self-concept and social self. Hence, the loss may impact the human family member's self-concept and social self, where they felt a 'lost' sense of self. Perhaps emotional fusion was a way for the human family members to describe the intensity of their loss through highlighting the role that the

companion animal played when they were still alive. Kemp et. al., (2016) found that human family members reported that the loss of their companion animals elicited similar emotions and feelings as they would experience with the loss of other human family members.

Concepts such as underfunctioning-overfunctioning and pursuer-distancer dynamics were not commonly seen in this study. When the family system became imbalanced as a result of the companion animal getting sick, human family members managed this by overfunctioning for their companion animal. Human family members go the extra mile to help their companion animal. This is consistent with the research by Dotson and Hyatt (2008), who found that human family members tend to show a willingness to adapt to their companion animals, which is seen through their readiness to change and adjusting their patterns of living to accommodate to their companion animals. This change and adjustment was seen when family members saw their companion animals in pain and did their best to adjust and make it as comfortable as possible for their companion animal. The family system can be seen as the legs of a chair; when an imbalance occurs, one of the legs of the chair is not able to hold up the chair. This is when human family members hold up this leg of the chair in hopes that it would keep the balance long enough for the companion animal to recover. One participant also reported having their other companion animals overfunctioning for their companion animal who is sick (detecting the imbalance in the system). Findings indicate that the underfunctioning occurs in the companion animal and was not seen in the human family member. The pursuer-distancer dynamic was seen in only one participant. This participant reported that

his friend had gotten him a dog with the reason of him needing a dog to manage his life, in comparison to the other participants who chose to get their companion animals.

Based on the current study's findings, companion animals appear to have a stabilizing and dynamic role. Entin (1986) believes that the human-animal relationship provides a glimpse into the emotional processes of a family member. This study supports this theory, as it appears that the lack of their presence in the family system causes instability in the family's emotional system. Findings also indicate that the companion animals have a dynamic role in which they actively participate in the dynamic role that other human family members also participate in. It is difficult to determine if the companion animals participate in this dynamic role or is it a perception that human family members place onto the companion animal. It is possible that human family members attribute emotions to the companion animals, which is known as anthropomorphism (Wilkins, McCrae, & McBride, 2015). Nonetheless, companion animals appear to have a dynamic role in the family system.

Previous studies indicated that companion animals reduced stress (Wright et al., 2015a) and anxiety (Crossman, Kazdin, & Knudson, 2015; Henry & Crowley, 2015; Wright, et. al, 2015b; Smyth & Slevin, 2010), provided social support (Fecteau et al., 2017; Wright et al., 2015a; McConnell, Brown, Shoda, Stayton, & Martin, 2011; Van Houtte & Jarvis, 1995) and provided a sense of security in human family members (McConnell, Brown, Shoda, Stayton, & Martin, 2011; Walsh, 2009; Faver & Cavazos, 2008; Hara, 2007). The current study's findings further support the contributions of companion animals from these previous studies. Given the stabilizing and dynamic role that the companion animals play, it would make sense that the companion animals bring

about these contributions to the family system. In addition, the absence of the companion animals would mean that the human family members no longer have these contributions from the companion animal and can feel overwhelming to the remaining family members.

Practical Implications

This study has several practical implications for clinicians. The findings of this study highlight the stabilizing and dynamic role that companion animals play in the family system; their absence can cause an imbalance in the system that may affect family members and their functioning. Past research supports that losing a companion animal feels similarly devastating as losing human family members (Kemp, Jacobs, & Stewart, 2016). As seen in this study, the network of relationships in a system gets affected by the loss through the Bowen Family Systems theory concepts such as an increase in individuality and emotional distancing; in addition, the individuals of the system struggle to rebalance the system. Therefore, it is important for clinicians to consider the impact of the loss on client's overall wellbeing and validate that it is not 'just' a dog. Clinicians can do this in the intake process, where the clinicians can assess for significant family members, which includes companion animals. Clinicians can also assess for significant life stressors, which would include companion animal loss.

The human-animal relationship also indicates the emotional processes that are occurring in the family system and can be useful information for clinicians. For example, one participant stated that his friends had gotten him a dog to manage his relationships and his accounts of his interaction with his dog can be an indicator to how he sees his other relationships. Cain (1983) found that companion animals reflected and expressed

family distress. The companion animal's role in the family also make them a great resource for those who are going through emotional distress and require support due to the stabilizing role that they play. Based on this study, an imbalance can be seen when the companion animal is no longer in the family system and occurred after the death of the companion animal. Given the significance of the role the companion animal plays, the death of the companion animal can destabilize the family system (Walsh, 2009).

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

One limitation of this study is the use of secondary data. Although using secondary data was able to illuminate the role of companion animals through the loss, it comes with the disadvantage of not being able to control the questions that were asked. As a result, the findings appear to cover a wide range, with some themes being less supported. For example, the concept of underfunctioning/overfunctioning and pursuer-distancer were less commonly seen as participants did not mention it as much. Participants were mainly asked questions about experiences with regards to companion animal loss and grief, therefore, participants may not have talked about their relationship with their companion animals in depth prior to their deaths, which was an important element in this study.

The use of secondary data also makes it difficult to determine the relationship that the participants have in relation to other family members and how the relationship compares with the relationship shared with companion animals. This study intended to capture a systemic perspective of the human-animal relationship. Understanding the relationship that the participants have with other members of the system could yield interesting information that speaks about the relationship with the companion animal.

Brown and Symons (2016) found that adults with anxious attachment to companion animals were susceptible to trauma if they tend to ruminate about relationships. In addition, anxiety in human-animal relationships predicted complicated grief symptoms that were above and beyond that of anxiety in their relationship with other human attachment figures (Brown & Symons, 2016). Therefore, it may yield important information about the individual and the network of relationships in a bigger picture.

Future research could explore other situations that can cause an imbalance in the system and including the perspectives of multiple family members. Cain (1983) found that companion animals often reflected and expressed family distress. For example, companion animals showed physical symptoms such as vomiting or diarrhea, “acted out” their feelings through hyperactivity, restlessness, anxiety by barking, becoming ill or inability to eat or sleep and moved close, sought attention or withdrew when there was high tension or conflict in the family. In addition, given that companion animals belong to a family system which includes other human family members, it would be interesting to see what other family members perceive as the role of the companion animal in the family. Future research could also explore the role of companion animals in the family emotional system in a wider context, not just in a grief context, which may allow for a better overall picture of the role, not just limited to the grief context. Future research could also observe human-animal interactions that occur in the family system live and triangulate the data between the researchers and the information from family members.

Conclusion

The current study supports the stabilizing and dynamic role that companion animals play in the family emotional system. Companion animals showed evidence of the

concepts Bowen Family System's theory, which supports the dynamic relationship between companion animals and human family members. The death of the companion animals illustrated the stabilizing role that the companion animal had in the family system as family members react emotionally to the imbalance in the system and attempted to rebalance the system. Therefore, it is important for clinicians to consider the impact of companion animals in the family system in order to provide the most optimal behavioral health care for their clients.

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Appendix A

Code	Name	Description
IMB	Imbalance in System	Imbalance occurs (i.e. illness, death, moving, etc.) and is picked up by companion animal.
IND	Individuality (Differentiation of Self)	Individual being independent from others; to think and act for themselves.
TOG	Togetherness (Differentiation of Self)	Inclination to be connected with others; think, act and feel like others. Companion animal/family members are inclined to connect with each other.
FUS	Emotional Fusion	Companion animal/family members lose their sense of individuality and have a high level of togetherness to manage the anxiety between them.
DIS	Emotional Distancing	Companion animal/family members distance themselves from each other through cutting off communication or ignoring each other.
TRI	Triangles	Third party is brought in to manage the anxiety. For example, animal companion, family member and another animal companion/family member/friend/religion.
ANX	Relational Anxiety	Tension that occurs between individuals/animal companions of a system
OVR	Overfunctioning	Overfunctioner overfunctions by placing a lot of focus on the underfunctioner. E.g. thinks about multiple ways to care and make up for the underfunctioner.
UDR	Underfunctioning	Underfunctioner allows the overfunctioner to 'function' for them
PUR	Pursuer-Distancer	Pursuer reaches out to other person to ease the anxiety while distancer distances themselves from the pursuer to ease the anxiety.
CLO	Emotional Closeness	Animal companion and family member(s) show a level of closeness emotionally that is healthy.
EMO	Emotional Equilibrium/Emotional System	Animal companion and family member(s) exist in the balanced system.
SOL	Solid Self	A sense of self that an individual stands by/believes in.
REA	Emotional Reactivity	Animal companion or family member reacts to the stressor that affects the family system.
INT	Intergenerational Family System	Evidence of influence from past generations. For example, individual loving or caring for

		companion animals as a result of having companion animals in the past.
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