

## ABSTRACT

GIERKA, ROBERT EUGENE. A Case Study of Veterinary Technology Students' Experience of Continuing Human-Animal Bonds. (Under the direction of Dr. Carol Kasworm).

The purpose of this case study was to explore veterinary technology (vet tech) students' perceptions of their special relationships with pets that died; and to better understand how these perceptions influenced their work in the vet tech program and their beliefs about their future work with pets and pet owners in veterinary practice. The following research questions were explored: 1) what are vet tech students' perceptions of a special relationship with a pet that died; and 2) what beliefs do vet tech students hold about these perceptions and their work in the vet tech program and their future work with pets and pet owners. A conceptual model based on the continuing bonds theory of bereavement served as a framework for the study.

Qualitative data were obtained from audio-recorded interviews with 16 vet tech students enrolled in a two-year vet tech program. The researcher asked open-ended questions to elicit detailed understandings and analyzed the data using open and theoretical coding to identify patterns and themes in the data.

Four key findings emerged from the data: 1) participants experienced special relationships with their pets that died; 2) participants experienced continuing emotional bonds with their pets that died; 3) participants experienced supportive and unsupportive interpersonal interactions with regard to their pets; and 4) participants' love of animals and continuing bonds with their pets influenced their engagement in the vet tech program.

Three key conclusions emerged from the findings. First, participants' perceptions of their continuing bonds with their pets were socially influenced. Second, participants'

continuing bonds with their pets had a positive, generative influence on their desire to help pets and pet owners. Third, participants expressed a deeply felt calling to pursue careers in veterinary medicine.

Study findings have relevance for research and practice. Findings suggest direction for future research on continuing human-animal bonds and the application of continuing bonds theory in veterinary education. Relative to education practice, this study has value for the development and delivery of pet bereavement education programs based upon continuing bonds theory. Veterinary students, practicing veterinary professionals, and practitioners who provide emotional support for bereaved pet owners, such as counselors, social workers and clergy, may benefit from training in continuing human-animal bonds.

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A Case Study of Veterinary Technology Students' Experience of  
Continuing Human-Animal Bonds

by  
Robert Eugene Gierka

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## **DEDICATION**

Dedicated in loving memory  
to my mother, Helen, who never met  
a child or pet she didn't  
love and feed.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Robert (Rob) Gierka received his Bachelor of Arts degree in Rhetoric and Communication from The University at Albany in Albany, New York. He earned a Master of Science degree in Technical Writing from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York. Rob has worked in technical communications and public affairs since 1984, serving as Public Information Officer with the State of North Carolina and Information Technology Publications Manager for North Carolina State University. He founded and manages the Pet Loss Support Group of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals of Wake County. Currently, he is Site Communications Lead for IBM Research Triangle Park. In addition to his interest in human-animal studies, Rob is an avid reader and enjoys swimming, bicycling and hiking.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

People love to tell stories about their pets. In the following pages, you'll hear 16 stories and meet the students who told them. You'll hear stories about hamsters, dogs, and cats, horses, pigs and rats. Each story begins with love and joy and a very special relationship. Death and heartbreak are also part of the stories, but not the end of them. In the end is love. For these students, their pets remained a living and loving presence in their lives. They continued to love their pets and passionately expressed their love through their schoolwork and in their calling to the veterinary profession. Engaged and empowered through continuing bonds with their pets, these students studied hard and looked forward to the day when they would become veterinary technicians (vet techs) and help pets and pet owners. We begin these stories of love, loss and love again with Mollie and Honey.

### **Mollie's Story**

Small in stature but strong and resilient, Mollie spoke with a distinctive twang as she told stories about her quarter horse Honey and life on the family farm. For Mollie, there was no other horse like Honey. "She wanted to play all the time," Mollie said. "She was very, very playful. And she was full of life. And I ain't never seen a horse with the personality she had. She had a one-of-a-kind personality." Mollie rode Honey in competition, and, together, they won many awards. She also had a dog, Buck, and the three took walks together around the farm. "They were my best friends," she said.

When Honey died, Mollie said, "it really, really tore me up.... She was a big part of me.... I never really understood when people said...when a loved one dies, 'I lost a part of me too.' I never really understood that until Honey died." She misses Honey and continues to

keep their connection alive by recalling the happy times they shared. “I know she’s gone. I understand that part,” she said. “... [When] I found out she died and sitting there and remembering the feelings that I had that time, that’s the part that hurts. But...I have joy in remembering her.”

Mollie finds inspiration for her work in Honey:

Sometimes when I get stressed out over my classes and stuff, I’ll look back at...the pictures of Honey and me, and I’m like, “Gotta do it.” Because there’s going to be a little girl one day...who loves her little pony so much, and her pony’s going to be sick.... And [she’s going to] end up calling the veterinarian and me, and I want to save that pony for that little girl. So basically I want to do for someone else [what] couldn’t be done for me.

### **Introduction to the Study**

In the past few decades the meanings that Americans ascribe to pets have undergone significant change. Part of this change is the greater emotional attachment that Americans experience with pets. As attachment to pets has grown, interest in the study of human-animal attachment has increased. A concern of human-animal studies is the grief pet owners experience for the death of a pet and the need for emotional support.

In response to this concern, veterinary education programs across the nation have stepped up their efforts to train students in theories of grief, bereavement and client support (Dickenson, 2010). As commendable as these training efforts are, however, veterinary education appears to lack current theoretical understandings of grief and bereavement. For example, a clinical student textbook used in vet tech programs focuses solely on the “stages

of grief' theory of bereavement (see McCurnin and Bassert, 2014). This theory is based upon Freudian psychoanalytic theory (Freud, 1957), which argues that human grief resolves in detachment (see Worden, 1982; Walsh & McGoldrick, 2004). However, the detachment theory currently used in veterinary bereavement education fails to account for or utilize a new understanding of bereavement represented by continuing bonds theory.

The continuing bonds theory of bereavement challenges Freudian conceptions of bereavement by claiming that the maintenance of a continuing emotional connection with a deceased loved one is normative human behavior and constitutes healthy coping and loss recovery (Silverman & Klass, 1996). In recent bereavement research, the experience of a continuing emotional connection with a deceased loved one has been suggested to apply within a context of pets and the human-animal bond (Carmack & Packman, 2011; Packman, Field, Carmack & Ronen, 2011).

How might researchers and practitioners concerned with veterinary education address new thinking about continuing bonds? Current literature does not address whether vet tech students experience a continuing bond with a deceased pet nor the meaning they make of that experience. Vet techs were selected for this study because in veterinary practice they are typically responsible for providing bereavement support for pet owners. The purpose of this case study was to explore vet tech students' perceptions of their special relationships with pets that died; and to better understand how these perceptions influenced their work in the vet tech program and their beliefs about their future work with pets and pet owners in veterinary practice.

This study may offer direction for future research into the continuing human-animal bond and veterinary education as well as the development and delivery of educational materials based on continuing bonds theory. In addition, this study has potential value for veterinary practice. The ability of vet techs to provide effective emotional support for grieving pet owners based on continuing bonds theory may have a significant impact on client satisfaction.

In this chapter, five areas of concern for this study are explored: the significance of the human-animal bond in Western society; bereavement and the human-animal bond; traditional and contemporary theories of bereavement; the continuing bonds theory of bereavement relative to the human-animal bond; and veterinary education efforts regarding pet loss and bereavement. In addition, this chapter outlines the study purpose, research questions, conceptual framework, significance and limitations.

### **The Significance of the Human-Animal Bond**

Interest in the human-animal bond, or the emotional connection between humans and animals, has increased in recent decades. Over the past 20 years, colleges and universities have implemented 23 Human-Animal Study (HAS) programs internationally and eight HAS programs veterinary schools in North America (Shapiro & DeMello, 2010).

The human-animal bond has been studied in a wide variety of human-animal relationships. It has been the focus of much research of late on the connection between humans and a wide variety of animal species. For example, researchers have studied emotional connections suggested to exist with dolphins (Williamson, 2008), horses (Cawley, Cawley, & Retter, 1994), birds (Anderson, 2003) as well as dogs, cats and other species.

The emotional connection that humans have with animals and the sense of wellbeing that this connection offers is voiced in the American Veterinary Medical Association's definition of the human-animal bond. The American Veterinary Medical Association (1998) defines the human-animal bond as:

a mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and animals that is influenced by behaviors that are essential to the health and well-being of both. This includes, but is not limited to, emotional, psychological, and physical interactions of people, animals, and the environment. (p. 1675)

Research supports the position that Americans have strong emotional attachments to their pets. The emotional connection that pet owners have with their animals is described as deep and meaningful (Meyers, 2002). Serpell (2002) points to a 1996 survey by the American Animal Hospital Association and writes that, "nearly half of the women...said that they relied more on their dogs and cats for affection than on their husbands or children" (p. 84). Further, the National Pet Owner's Survey by the American Animal Hospital Association (2004) found that 97% of American families regard their pet as a family member.

### **Bereavement and the Human-Animal Bond**

As the research cited above indicates, key aspects of the human-animal bond include companionship, emotional wellbeing, and a strong feeling that the animal is a member of the family. The value and importance that people place on their relationships with pets suggest that the emotional bond between people and pets is a significant experience for pet owners.

Strong emotional attachments to pets can result in strong reactions to the loss of the attachments (Archer & Winchester, 1994; Carmack, 1985, 2003). Some researchers maintain

that a strong attachment bond with a pet can significantly predict psychological distress in the owner when the animal dies (Field, Orsini, Gavish, & Packman, 2009; Kaufman & Kaufman, 2006; Margolies, 1999). The National Pet Owners Survey (2004) found that the death of a pet can result in a similar grief response as might result from the death of a human family member. Other research asserts that the grief reaction to the death of a significant animal companion is comparable to the grief reaction to the death of a significant human companion (Archer, 1997; Carmack, 2003; Clements, Benasutti, & Carmone, 2003; Cowles, 1985; Field, 2008; Gerwolls & Labott, 1994; Field et al., 2009). When losing a companion animal, “...you can expect to grieve for your pet as you would for a human family member” (Quackenbush & Graveline, 1985, p. 34).

### **A Change in the Science of Bereavement: Continuing Bonds**

Given the increased emotional attachment Americans have with their pets and the significant grief they can experience when pets die, a deeper understanding of recent changes in the science of bereavement is needed. Evolving understandings of the way humans cope with loss are gaining ground, leading to new insight in the science of bereavement. Interest is growing in the new field of continuing bonds, which is a sub-area of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980, 1982).

In describing human attachment, Bowlby (1980) suggests that maintenance of an intimate, emotional bond with a love object is a basic characteristic of healthy human interaction, whether one is in a role of giving or receiving care. Bowlby (1988) writes:

The capacity to make intimate emotional bonds with other individuals, sometimes in the careseeking role and sometimes in the caregiving one, is regarded as a principal feature of effective personality functioning and mental health. (pp. 120-121)

During his development of attachment theory, Bowlby (1980) studied the psychological effects of human separation and death. He observed that both adults and children experience continuing thoughts and fantasies about a lost love object well after the loss of the object. Bowlby (1980) suggested that continuing thoughts and fantasies about a deceased loved one are not forms of pathological mourning and grief because pathological forms are not defined by a continuing psychological relationship with the love object.

A subset of attachment theory, the continuing-bonds perspective of bereavement is challenging traditional detachment conceptions of bereavement and loss recovery. Detachment theories of loss and bereavement, grief and mourning generally focus on detachment from a significant attachment object (Lindemann, 1944; Freud, 1957). In detachment theories, loss recovery is characterized as the culmination of a process of psychologically separating from a love object. These theories describe recovery as doing one's "grief work," gradually processing and divesting the psychological energy (libido) that is invested into a relationship with a love object (Freud, 1957). For examples of detachment theories of bereavement, see the work of Lindemann (1944) and Freud (1957).

In contrast, Field (2008) suggests that bereavement may be more accurately understood not as detachment, but as maintaining connection. Moreover, he claims that coping with grief and bereavement is the maintenance of an emotional attachment bond. Coping with the loss of a love object is not achieved through detachment, but through

psychologically reorganizing the relationship as an internal attachment object and continuing an emotional connection with that object (Field, 2008). Research supports the idea that bereavement and recovery entails the maintenance of a continuing emotional connection with a lost love object. Rees (1971) found that 50% of bereaved individuals regularly sensed the presence of their deceased partner up to ten years after their loss. Similarly, a study by Shuchter and Zisook (1993) found that bereaved widows and widowers frequently felt the “presence” of their deceased spouses and regularly interacted with them in dreams and in conversations.

Others suggest that psychological recovery and coping may be achieved through maintaining some form of continuity in the relationship with a deceased love object (e.g., Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980, 1982; Gaines, 1997; Hagman, 1995, 2001; Kaplan, 1995; Parkes, 1970, 2009; Parkes & Weiss, 1983). A new acceptance has emerged in the field of bereavement studies that a continuing bond to a deceased loved one can be emotionally supportive (Field, Nichols, Holen, & Horowitz, 1999); aids in coping with grief (Field & Friedrichs, 2004; Field, Gao, & Paderna, 2005; Stroebe, Gergen, Gergen, & Stroebe, 1992); and helps with adapting to life without the loved one (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman, 1996).

Thus, attachment theory and the continuing bonds theory of bereavement provide a secure framework for the study of the enduring character of attachment following the death of a significant attachment object and the maintenance of continuing thoughts and feelings regarding a lost love object.

### **Continuing Bonds and the Human-Animal Bond**

In recent bereavement research, the experience of a continuing emotional connection with a deceased loved one has been suggested to apply within a context of human-animal bonds (Carmack & Packman, 2011; Packman et al., 2011). From a continuing human-animal bonds perspective, grief for the death of a pet is not resolved by working to “get over” the loss, by forgetting the pet, or by getting a new pet. Rather, a person copes with their loss through reorganized meanings (Silverman & Klass, 1996). These meanings find their expression in the beliefs and actions of bereaved pet owners. Researchers have proposed that continuing-bond expressions (CBE) demonstrated by some pet owners after a pet’s death help them cope with their grief (Packman et al., 2011). Types of CBE include talking with the deceased pet; creating memorials, shrines or tributes; or having thoughts of being reunited with a pet (Packman et al., 2011). Through these expressions, human-animal attachment bonds are creatively reworked to transform the loss into “an internal representation that is based on meaning, memory, or emotional connection” (Packman et al., 2011, p. 338).

Other research into the continuing human-animal bond has addressed the grief experience of pet owners following the death of a pet. Doka (1989, 2002, 2008) suggests that people who publicly express grief for the loss of a pet often experience what he has termed “disenfranchised grief,” which is a lack of social acceptance for the psychological experience of grief and a lack of social status of bereavement. When the human-animal relationship is lost or the pet dies, owners often feel socially isolated and lack sufficient bereavement support (Doka, 1989, 2002, 2008). Moreover, disenfranchisement can complicate grief

(Doka, 1989). Field et al. (2009) suggests that, although the majority of Americans who lose a pet maintain a continuing bond with the animal, many are afraid to express their continuing connection for fear they will be thought of as “crazy.”

A growing body of bereavement literature has also addressed the value of continuing bonds as a coping mechanism for the loss of a pet. This literature holds that the grieving individual may draw emotional sustenance by maintaining a continuing emotional bond to the deceased (Field et al., 1999). Researchers also suggest that grieving pet owners could receive validation for their feelings through supportive encouragement to share their continuing bond experiences in a safe, non-judgmental environment (Field et al., 2009). However, research also indicates that bereavement support providers and others who interact with grieving pet owners are not well prepared to deal with grief associated with pet loss. One study reported that bereaved pet owners believe that veterinarians display considerably less support for their feelings of grief than partners or spouses (Field et al., 2009). Similarly, a quantitative study of pet loss (Packman et al., 2011) found that:

The greatest source of support for our respondents was spouses/partners and pets.

These respondents received considerably less support from clinicians, clergy/spiritual counselors, and veterinarians. (p. 350)

### **Responses to Pet Bereavement in Veterinary Education**

A recent survey of American households by American Pet Products Manufacturers (2011) indicates that nearly 73 million American households own one or more pets, and most respondents consider their pets members of the family. Businesses and professionals who serve these households are educating themselves about how to respond to the strong

emotional attachment people have with their pets and the grief that comes from losing them. Part of this support includes increased bereavement care for clients who experience pet loss (*JAVMA News*, 2007).

In addition, increasing numbers of American veterinary colleges and universities are responding to the need for bereavement support for pet owners by including training in end-of-life and bereavement care to educate students who will interact with bereaved pet owners in their work. For example, a review of veterinary programs in the United States shows that, within a span of a decade, 96% of the 28 veterinary colleges in the country have added at least some bereavement training to the curriculum (Dickinson, 2010). Dickinson also found that 80% of veterinary students were exposed to bereavement instruction. This new educational emphasis reflects a significant change in veterinary education curricula. Slightly more than two decades prior, a study by Weirich (1988) reported a complete absence of end-of-life or bereavement education in veterinary schools.

Because this study is focused on vet techs, it is also important to consider how vet tech educational programs address pet loss and bereavement. Objectives of a vet tech introductory course include pet loss and its impact on clients (Sherrod, 2013). In addition, a popular book for training vet techs (McCurnin and Bassert, 2014) addresses pet loss and bereavement, but focuses on the detachment theory of bereavement and does not include any information on the continuing bonds theory of bereavement. Research indicates that continuing bonds are of significant value in assisting people to cope with grief felt for the loss of human-animal attachment (Field et al., 2009; Packman et al., 2011). Hence, while laudable, vet tech training reflects an incomplete picture of the bereavement experience.

In summary, in response to the increased emotional attachments Americans maintain with their pets, veterinary education has bolstered the training of veterinary practitioners and support personnel in bereavement concepts and support. In veterinary practice, bereavement support is typically the responsibility of vet techs. Vet tech training focuses on traditional detachment theories of bereavement and does not currently incorporate a continuing bonds view of bereavement.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore vet tech students' perceptions of their special relationships with pets that died; and to better understand how these perceptions influenced their work in the vet tech program and their beliefs about their future work with pets and pet owners in veterinary practice.

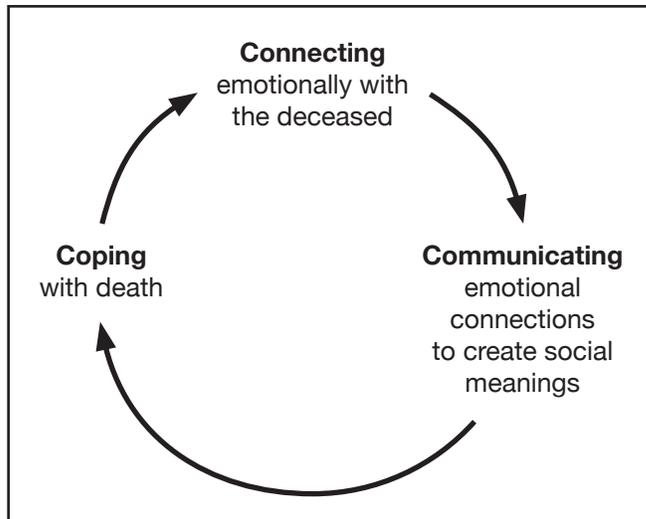
Bereavement for the loss of a pet is a relevant topic of study because of its significance to a large and growing population of Americans who keep pets. Pets are growing in popularity as intimate companions and trusted family members. However, the loss of a pet can lead to intense feelings of sadness and grief for pet owners as well as social alienation, isolation and loneliness. Research indicates that the grief felt for the death of a pet is disenfranchised. That is, grief for a deceased pet often goes unacknowledged or is deemed by society to be insignificant or inappropriate (Doka, 2002). In addition, people who grieve for the death of a pet experience reduced coping options. Studies suggest that the absence of societal acceptance for an individual's feelings of attachment to, and grief for the death of, pets has led to denial, rationalization, and minimization of their feelings (Sharkin & Bahrlick, 1990).

Existing research does not address vet tech students' perceptions of their continuing bonds with their deceased pets nor how these perceptions influence their beliefs about their work in veterinary medicine. Vet techs are a relevant audience for this study because they are often responsible for working with bereaved pet owners in veterinary practice. This study adds to the literature by offering an in-depth exploration of vet tech students' personal experience of continuing emotional connections with their pets. In addition, this study appears to be the first to explore the impact of vet techs' experience of continuing bonds on their beliefs about their work.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Most humans normatively experience an emotional connection with a loved one after loss. Researchers who study this experience call it continuing bonds. The experience of a continuing bond is suggested for humans who experience the death of a pet (Field et al., 2009). This study used a conceptual framework based on the researcher's interpretation of continuing bonds theory in exploring vet tech students' experience of continuing emotional connections with their deceased pets and how these experiences influenced their beliefs about their work in the vet tech program. The conceptual framework identified three social activities associated with the continuing human-animal bond: 1) *connecting* emotionally with a deceased pet to create individual meanings; 2) *communicating* these emotional connections to others to create social meanings; and 3) *coping* with the death of a pet. This conceptual framework forms a triad of continuous, iterative bereavement activity. According to this framework, the activity of coping with pet death is predicated on maintaining an emotional

connection with the deceased pet and communicating this connection to others. This conceptual framework is presented in Figure 1.



*Figure 1.* Conceptual framework of the continuing bonds theory of bereavement.

The three activities outlined in the conceptual framework are explored in the following sections: 1) connecting emotionally with a deceased pet; 2) communicating emotional connections to create social meanings; and 3) coping with the death of a pet.

### **Connecting Emotionally With a Deceased Pet**

Literature suggests that a continuing human-animal bond is a personal experience of emotional connection with a deceased companion animal, not a social experience. According to Silverman and Klass (1996), the continuing bonds theory holds that “the bereaved remain involved and connected to the deceased, and that the bereaved actively construct an inner representation of the deceased that is part of the normal grieving process” (p. 16).

In contradistinction to the detachment theory of bereavement, which focuses on a process of severing connections and moving on from the lost loved one, the continuing bonds theory focuses on activities or behaviors of survivors constructing and maintaining an internal representation of the deceased. Shuchter and Zisook (1993) describe continuing bonds activity as symbolizing “living and breathing” connections with the deceased as internal forms and images. For a bereaved pet owner, this connection might take conceptual form, such as the idea of a horse’s spirit; feelings or sensations, such as the remembered sound of a dog’s bark; and physical objects such as a dog’s favorite toy.

### **Communicating Emotional Connections to Create Social Meanings**

The social interaction in which a bereaved person shares private forms and images of their ongoing emotional connection to a deceased pet with others is a critical activity of continuing bonds. People engaged with the bereaved in this activity witness and participate in the individual’s personal story of connection. This can take the form, for example, of a family memorial service for a deceased pet or a wider community activity, such as a “blessing of the animals.”

A primary means by which bereaved individuals communicate their emotional connection with a deceased companion is through storytelling. Nadeau (1998, 2001) studied the meaning making of bereaved families who had lost a human companion and grouped her findings into sense-making strategies, a typology of meaning making, and patterns of meaning making. She found that the most common strategy that bereaved family members employed for making meaning of their loss was through storytelling (Nadeau, 1998, 2001a, 2001b). Numerous studies of human-human bereavement behavior affirm corresponding

activities of recalling stories and sharing memories as a means of constructing and maintaining ongoing connections with a deceased loved one (Gowensmith, 1999; Castle & Phillips, 2002; and Hedtke, 2002). Significant for this study, research into human-animal relationships suggests that storytelling and sharing memories provide coping value for bereaved pet owners (Blazina, 2011).

### **Coping With the Death of a Pet**

This study's conceptual framework describes the activity of coping without the physical presence of the deceased pet. When describing coping activity, it is important to consider the quality of the coping experience. Does the individual experience fond memories of their pet and social comfort; do they feel sad, alienated and isolated because others do not sympathize with their grief; or do they feel some other way? The literature suggests that the quality of the person's coping is predicated on the maintenance of a private, emotional connection with the deceased pet combined with social responses to the individual's continuing feelings of connection. That is, what a person undergoes and learns through a social, collaborative experience of human-animal bonding has a powerful effect on their bereavement experience. Ultimately, a pet owner's social experiences may determine whether the individual learns to cope with the loss of their pet through a feeling of acceptance within community or struggles to cope with feelings of isolation and alienation. Studies show that the sympathetic responses of co-workers or family members to a grieving pet owner facilitate coping (Field et al., 2009). In contrast, a bereaved pet owner who does not receive sympathy and social validation for their emotional connection to their deceased pet may experience

disenfranchised grief, which can complicate bereavement and result in feelings of isolation and alienation (Doka, 1989).

In summary, according to this study's conceptual framework of continuing bonds, coping with pet death is predicated on a grieving individual's continuing emotional connection with a deceased pet and the responses of others to the individual's loss experience.

### **Research Questions**

This study explored the following research questions:

- What are vet tech students' perceptions of a special relationship with a pet that died?
- What beliefs do vet tech students hold about these perceptions and their work in the vet tech program and their future work with pets and pet owners?

This research utilized case study method. It focused on obtaining detailed, descriptive understandings of vet tech students' perceptions of their ongoing emotional bonds with their deceased pets and the influence of these bonds on their beliefs about their work in the vet tech program. This descriptive study was heuristic in order to "bring about the discovery of new meaning, extend the reader's experience, or confirm what is known" (Merriam, 1998, p. 30) in regard to continuing human-animal bonds. The present study was also particularistic to conform to Merriam's case-study methodology and strove to develop a deeper understanding of the particular experience of an individual as he or she makes meaning of a pet's death through a continuing bond.

Because this study was participant focused, it was concerned with understanding the participants' experiences, and it adopted an interpretive, hermeneutic approach (see Dilthey, 1976; and Gadamer, 1975). Interpretive social research is rooted in the German idealist tradition, which has the salient feature of challenging the validity of researcher-focused, functionalist approaches. That is, interpretive research seeks to understand subjective human experience "within the realm of individual consciousness and subjectivity, within the frame of reference of the participant as opposed to the observer of action" (Burrell & Morgan, 1979, p. 28).

### **Significance**

The present study is one of only a few studies that has specifically explored and explicated continuing bonds in regard to the loss of a companion animal. Continuing human-animal bonds is an important topic of study because of its significance to a large and growing population of Americans who have strong emotional attachments to their pets and struggle to cope with the loss of their pets.

However, research indicates that, although veterinary education programs are attempting to respond to the increased need for bereavement support for pet owners, these programs do not yet incorporate concepts of the continuing bonds theory of bereavement. This study is relevant to veterinary educators since it examined the experience of continuing bonds in vet tech students. Vet techs are on the front lines of providing emotional support for bereaved pet owners because, in veterinary practice, one of the vet tech's responsibilities is to comfort clients who have lost pets. By understanding vet techs' personal experiences of pet

loss, veterinary educators may gain insight into the development and delivery of programs and course materials based on continuing bonds theory.

This study also has potential value for veterinary practice. The ability of vet techs to provide effective emotional support for grieving pet owners based on continuing bonds concepts may have a significant impact on client satisfaction. Veterinary practice managers may have a vested interest in understanding vet techs' personal experiences of pet loss and how these experiences inform their approach to bereavement support. In addition, study findings are also relevant to other practitioners who may work with individual's grieving the loss of a pet, such as counselors, social workers, and clergy. Such individuals may benefit from training in continuing bonds with a focus on pet loss and bereavement.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Limitations exist for all research studies and may spring from various sources. This study, which used qualitative methodology and case study, was no exception. Limitations may spring from both the qualitative method or from case study.

As an interpretive method, qualitative research relies on human value assumptions that require the researcher to take a position. For example, this study assumed that the subjective experiences of participants contained interpretable research data; this data could be examined by this researcher to a sufficient extent to provide valuable information about the subjective experiences of these research subjects; and, moreover, the information about participants' lived experiences could be used to arrive at qualitatively significant insights and new knowledge. Admittedly, this is a subjectivist and interpretive position that, from a strictly positivist social-scientific view, may lack a "value free" position and, therefore, be

unable to generate verifiable truth claims. However, all qualitative research risks the same criticism from a strictly positivist view of social science. Qualitative researchers generally dismiss this perceived limitation as “an attempt to legislate one version of truth over another” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p. 2). Moreover, qualitative research method is well suited to case study since it eschews separation between a researcher and their subject found in positivist research methods.

In addition, a limitation may spring from the case study method in the form of what Spence (1993) describes as an over reliance upon anecdote and narrative, which could seem to lead to only one possible explanation, rather than a thorough investigation of all possibilities leading to the most plausible explanation. Somewhat related to this limitation is what Spence (1993) considers an argument from authority, where the authoritative voice of the researcher, which may for various reasons withhold or selectively report information, seems to lead to a singular conclusion. Avoiding both of these situations required close attention to data collection and reporting. The researcher accomplished this goal by exhaustively investigating all available narrative data as well as thickly describing the data as openly and thoroughly as possible without divulging participants’ sensitive, personal information.

### **Summary**

In summary, this chapter discussed five areas of concern to this study: the significance of the human-animal bond in Western society; bereavement and the human animal bond; traditional and contemporary theories of bereavement; the continuing bonds theory of bereavement relative to the human-animal bond; and veterinary education for pet

bereavement. We have seen the rapid growth in interest and research into the human-animal bond in Western society. We have identified a shift in bereavement theory from traditional detachment theories toward new understandings of continuing bonds. We also have observed an increase in bereavement training in veterinary education programs. Vet tech education materials were also examined, and the researcher found that these materials are focused on detachment models of bereavement, with no mention of continuing bonds theory.

The purpose of this study was to explore vet tech students' perceptions of their special relationships with pets that died; and to better understand how these perceptions influenced their work in the vet tech program and their beliefs about their future work with pets and pet owners in veterinary practice. The study was designed according to a conceptual framework based on the continuing bonds theory of bereavement in order to gain in-depth understandings of vet tech students' experiences of continuing emotional connections with their deceased pets. In addition, this chapter outlined the study's research questions, significance and limitations.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study was to explore veterinary technology (vet tech) students' perceptions of their special relationships with pets that died; and to better understand how these perceptions influenced their work in the vet tech program and their beliefs about their future work with pets and pet owners in veterinary practice.

Extensive research has explored the emotional connections that humans can experience with companion animals, which is described as the human-animal bond. In addition, recent bereavement theory and research suggests that humans maintain continuing emotional connections, or continuing bonds, with lost loved ones. A continuing bond is described as the maintenance, by either adults or children, of a connection with a deceased loved one (Klass et al., 1996). Research also suggests that humans experience continuing bonds with pets that have died, yet there is limited past research exploring this phenomenon. Additional research in bereavement suggests that people who experience the death of a pet often encounter feelings of loneliness, alienation and a sense of social disenfranchisement (Doka, 1989). Their grief is not respected and their loss experience not well understood.

Existing human-animal bonds research and bereavement theory do not address the experience of a continuing emotional connection with a deceased pet among vet tech students. This omission is significant since a primary task of the vet tech is to provide bereavement support to pet owners whose pets have died. This study explored this topic through the following research questions:

- What are vet tech students' perceptions of a special relationship with a pet that died?

- What beliefs do vet tech students hold about these perceptions and their work in the vet tech program and their future work with pets and pet owners?

Areas of scholarly literature and research reviewed for this study include the fields of grief, bereavement and loss in relation to the human-animal bond. In a review of published works from 1970 to 2014, no research was found on the topic of continuing bonds in relation to students engaged in a vet tech program. This search resulted in no empirical studies of, or pertaining to, vet tech students' perceptions of continuing emotional connections with their deceased pets. Some anecdotal reports were found in journalistic reports and stories of popular literature, but aside from these informal sources, this topic remains unexamined.

Despite a dearth of empirical research specifically addressing the topic of continuing human-animal bonds and students in professional veterinary programs, there is a nascent body of contemporary literature that centers on the continuance of a human relationship with a deceased pet. The information in this literature is applicable to the present study and will be examined and extrapolated to the extent it may shed light on vet tech students' experience of continuing emotional connections with their deceased pets and their perceptions of these connections.

The review of literature that follows contains five sections: 1) the human-animal bond and social engagement with pets; 2) attachment theory; 3) the traditional detachment theory of bereavement and the new continuing bonds theory of bereavement; 4) continuing bonds theory with regard to pet loss and bereavement; and 5) veterinary education in the area of pet loss and bereavement.

### **The Human-Animal Bond and Social Engagement With Pets**

Research indicates that pet keeping in America is increasing in popularity. According to the American Animal Hospital Association National Pet Owner's Survey (2004), more than 62% of U.S. households, 72.9 million, own a companion animal. The significant role that pets play in Americans lives is evident in spending patterns associated with pet ownership. Consumer Reports (2003) found that "spending on veterinary services jumped to \$18.2 billion in 2001, nearly triple the 1991 level." In 2006, Americans spent \$24 billion on veterinary medical services (Shephard, 2008). In addition, a 2005 report by the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, Inc. (APPMA) estimates that Americans spent more than \$38 billion on pets, a figure that increased to \$50.96 billion by 2011 (APPMA, 2011).

In addition, research indicates that Americans have significant emotional connections with their pets. A study by the National Pet Owner's Survey by the American Animal Hospital Association (2004) found that 93% of pet owners are somewhat likely or very likely to risk their life to save their pet, and 64% would expect their pet to rescue them. Coren (1997) reported that, in spite of adverse health effects related to pet allergies, 80% of people advised by doctors to abandon their pets refuse to do so. An American Animal Hospital Association report (as cited in Huss, 2006) found that one-third of the respondents said that they "would spend any amount of money to save the lives of their pets. Eighteen percent . . . said they had spent more than \$1,000 on veterinary care for their pets in the previous 12 months" (p. 2059).

Many studies have focused on the psychological experience of pet owners' relationships with companion animals. Among many other topics, these studies have

examined the emotional benefits pets provide their human companions; pets in family systems; developmental or age-related differences in pet relationships; and social influences on pet owners' perceptions of their bonds with their pets.

The emotional benefits of pet keeping are well documented. Research asserts that bonds with a companion animal are perceived as nonjudgmental emotional support (Allen, Blascovich, & Mendes, 2002; Corson & Corson, 1981) and “unqualified love and acceptance” (Nieburg & Fischer, 1982, p. 52). Further, according to Blazina (2011), “individuals with a personal history of emotional deprivation and abuse in their formative years, or trauma or loss in adulthood, may find that pets become more consistent and reliable others to which they can turn” (p. 4). Blazina (2011) believes the loss of significant human-animal attachments in adulthood can be representative of the early loss of a childhood caregiver figure. He suggests a significant human-animal attachment may also represent the loss of a fulfilling attachment more meaningful than those experienced in childhood. In addition, research into the emotional significance of human relationships with companion pets asserts that some pet owners experience stronger bonds with their pets than with humans (Barker & Barker, 1988; Carmack, 1985).

Literature has also addressed human relationships with pets in family systems. A National Pet Owner's Survey administered by the American Animal Hospital Association (2004) found that pets are considered family members by 97% of American families. Another study found that more than 85% of pet owners consider their pets to be family members and that most treat pets the same as other family members (Cohen, 2005). Studies by Cowles (1985), Stewart, Thrush, and Paulus (1989), and Toray (2004) also indicate that

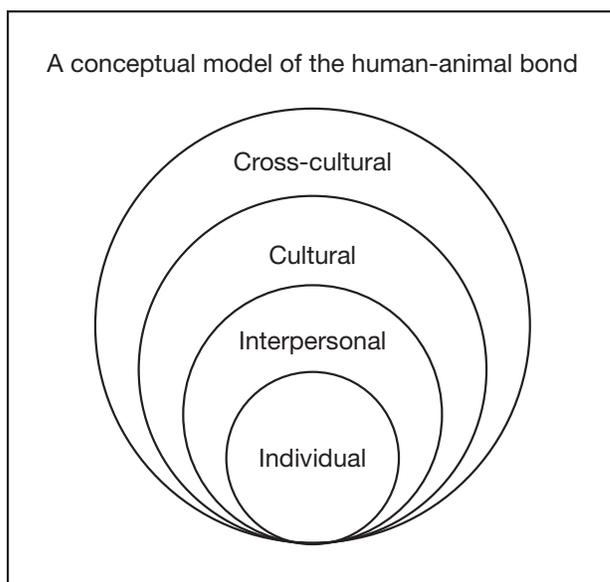
many people think of their pets as family. Other studies of pets and families indicate that pets can play an important role in families, or what Cain (1983) referred to as the “glue” that brings family members together and increases family cohesion. Further, a study by Walsh (2009) asserts that pets can be an important part of family relationships as they “enhance daily family life and promote greater interaction and communication” (p. 481).

In keeping with research into pets and family systems, studies hold that many pet owners regard their pets as children. In describing the strong ties of affection that people have with their pets and their reliance on pets for emotional support, Serpell (2002) points to a 1996 survey by the American Animal Hospital Association, which found that 75% of pet owners consider their animals akin to children.

Research has also focused on how pet owners in different age groups regard their pets. Studies by Melson (2001, 2003) indicated that most children consider their pets to be peers. Bryant (1982) states that children feel that their pets are special friends; share favorite activities and secrets with their pets; confide in their pets when they’re unhappy or upset; and rely on their pets for their consistent, attentive presence. Studies of adult pet owners found that adults enjoy many of the same benefits of pet ownership that children enjoy (Cohen, 2002; McNicholas et al., 2005; Walsh, 2009). These studies indicate that pets are an important source of companionship for adults; promote health and relaxation; provide protection and loyalty; and serve as an outlet for playful interactions through which adults can engage in childlike behavior.

In examining the emotional connections that pet owners maintain with their companion animals, Blazina (2011) suggests that an individual’s perceptions of a bond with a

pet are socially influenced. Based on a multi-disciplinary approach with an emphasis on psychological perspectives, Blazina’s conceptual model of the human-animal bond (see Figure 2) provides a holistic view of the myriad influences that shape an individual’s perception of a bond with a pet. Using a “multilayered focus,” Blazina identifies four social contextual factors that shape the individual’s perceptions of the bond: individual, interpersonal, cultural and cross-cultural.



*Figure 2: A conceptual model of the human-animal bond. From “Introduction: Using Context to Inform Clinical Practice and Research,” by C. Blazina, G. Boyra, and D. Shen-Miller, 2011. *The Psychology of the Human-animal Bond: A Resource for Clinicians and Researchers*, p. 10. Nashville, TN: Springer. Copyright 2011 by Springer. Reprinted with permission.*

Blazina provides explicit understandings of each of the social contextual layers depicted in the model. He asserts that, at the individual level, a variety of factors may influence an individual’s attachment to pets, including demographics, time of life, and

attachment history, among other factors. He identifies the individual contextual level as the focal point from which an individual makes meaning of a bond with a pet. That is, the individual contextual level encompasses the “internal dialog” that an individual undertakes when integrating their personal feelings about their pets with the perceptions and beliefs about pets evident at the other contextual levels (interpersonal, cultural and cross-cultural).

At the second level of the model, Blazina posits that interpersonal influences occur primarily within the family. He notes that families can influence an individual’s perceptions of the bond with a pet in two primary ways. First, the quality and nature of an individual’s relationships with family members and significant events such as divorce or the loss of a loved one may influence an individual’s attachment to a pet. Further, family perceptions about pets can have a significant impact on an individual’s meanings. For example, family members may share an individual’s attachment to a pet and regard the pet as a member of the family. Such shared meanings validate and reinforce the individual’s feelings of attachment with the pet. In contrast, conflicting meanings regarding pets within the family can cause considerable conflict and may lead “to a lack of social support during the life of a pet companion as well as disenfranchised grief upon its death” (Blazina, 2011, p. 12).

Finally, Blazina asserts that beliefs about human and nonhuman animals at cultural and cross-cultural levels can also influence an individual’s personal perception of a bond with a pet. He notes “attention to the role of culture is important in terms of how the specific elements of a culture (e.g., its religions, histories, philosophies) contribute to the meaning of that bond in individual’s or families’ lives” (Blazina, 2011, p. 5).

In describing the comparative influence of these contextual factors on an individual's perception of the bond, Blazina (2011) asserts that individual factors have the greatest impact on perceptions, followed, in order of priority, by interpersonal, cultural and cross-cultural factors. He notes that "...individuals may experience a barrage of influences at various contextual levels, and yet rely most heavily on internal dialogue to create an indelible set of beliefs regarding what the bond means" (2011, p. 11). According to Blazina (2011), perceptions of the bond are ultimately constructed by the individual:

We propose that the seat of phenomenological experience regarding the perception and meaning of the bond is ultimately at [a] personal level. While we may have various important influences and exchanges at other levels of context, the individual, in the end, ultimately perceives and constructs his or her own experience of the bond. (p. 11)

In summary, past research offers useful understandings of the increasing importance of pet keeping in America. Pet ownership and spending on pets has increased dramatically in the last 20 years. Further, extensive research has focused on the strong emotional connections that humans maintain with companion animals. However, although the bond between humans and animals has consistently influenced the way humans perceive and engage with animals, people who grieve for the death of a beloved pet often experience loneliness and alienation. To better understand this dynamic, a review of bereavement research is helpful. In the following section, we review the literature of bereavement to see how traditional views are changing and how these changes apply to human-animal relationships. Since the new bereavement theory of continuing bonds is a subset of Bowlby's (1969, 1973, 1980)

attachment theory, we first introduce attachment. Then we discuss detachment theory, the continuing bonds theory of bereavement, and the application of continuing bonds theory in veterinary education.

### **Attachment Theory**

In his research into human attachment relationships, Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980) suggested an adaptive evolutionary link between increased human survival rates and behaviors exhibiting attachment bonds. Human beings who exhibit attachment behavior are more likely to survive and pass their genes on to another generation. Bowlby saw attachment behavior as an evolutionary biological advantage to humans.

Scholars maintain that human attachment can be identified through four behaviors:

1) proximity maintenance, or seeking closeness to an attachment figure, especially at times of threat or increased stress; 2) safe haven, or seeking refuge, comfort or support from an attachment figure, especially during times of distress; 3) secure base, or using an attachment figure as a safe place from which to explore, take risks, and develop a secure, supported sense of self; and 4) separation distress, or feeling anxious when an attachment figure is unavailable (Ainsworth, 1991; Hazan & Shaver, 1987; Hazan & Zeifman, 1999; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007; Zilcha-Mano, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2011).

Bowlby (1969) further suggests that attachment has an enduring character, which he called a “lasting psychological connectedness” (p. 194). In Bowlby’s writings on attachment theory, there is sustained discussion of continuing postmortem connection with an attachment figure. Specifically, he notes in his phases of mourning that phase 2 is characterized by yearning for the lost loved one and related searching behaviors (Bowlby, 2005).

During this phase of mourning the bereaved is seized by an urge to search for and recover the lost figure. Sometimes the person is conscious of this urge, though often he is not: sometimes a person willingly falls in with it, as when he visits the grave or visits other places closely linked with the lost figure, but sometimes he seeks to stifle it as irrational and absurd. Whatever attitude a person may take towards this urge, however, he none the less finds himself impelled to search and, if possible, to recover. (p. 103)

Bowlby (2005) observes that there comes a “great restlessness, preoccupation with thoughts of the lost person combined with a sense of his actual presence, and a marked tendency to interpret signals or sounds as indicating that the lost person is now returned” (p. 102).

Thus, Bowlby suggests that attachment behavior offers humans a biological advantage through increased rates of survival. Moreover, human attachment behavior has an enduring character and persists after the object of attachment has ceased to physically exist. These qualities, as we will see in the following discussion of detachment and continuing bonds theories of bereavement, are of singular importance for understanding the significance of an individual's maintenance of a continuing emotional connection with a lost attachment object.

### **Detachment and Continuing Bonds Theories of Bereavement**

In recent decades, human bereavement research has undergone a major shift from a primary focus on detachment theories to more contemporary understandings of continuing bonds. Contemporary grief theory includes a new understanding that a healthy coping style

may entail maintaining a continuing emotional connection with a deceased love object (Klass et al., 1996). This understanding represents a shift from earlier bereavement theory based upon Freud's (1957) detachment theory. The following sections explore the detachment theory of bereavement followed by the continuing bonds theory of bereavement.

### **Detachment Theory of Bereavement**

The detachment theory of bereavement is based on Freud's work and later interpretations of this work. Although Freud introduced the concept of detachment, others have interpreted and extended his theory. Freud's detachment theory describes grief as a normal progression of stages leading to detachment from an attachment object (Freud, 1957). Detachment is linked to the Freudian concept of libido, or psychic energy, which Freud speculated enables human attachment to an object. During detachment, the grieving individual expends libidinal energy, and as energy wanes the individual releases the attachment object (Freud, 1957).

Some contemporary psychologists following Freud's lead have introduced the term *grief work* and encouraged bereaved individuals to do their work, i.e., detach and move on (see Archer, 1999). The detachment orientation is a part of so called "stage" theories of grief (see Worden, 1982; Walsh & McGoldrick, 2004). The concept of grief work is operational in postmodern reframing of Freudian theory into what is described as a diversity of grieving experience and is used as a multidimensional means of assessing normal grief (Shuchter & Zisook, 1993).

However, some maintain that detachment interpretations of Freud's work go beyond Freud's original intent and misinterpret Freud's theory. Granek (2010) holds that Freud did

not perceive the task of grieving to be complete detachment from the deceased attachment object, but merely detachment to the fullest extent possible. He claims that Freud considered complete detachment and sublimation of libido the ideal case (Granek, 2010). In his discussion on the topic, Granek asserts that what we actually find in Freud is the idea that detachment is never fully realized and mourning never completely finished. For example, Freud admitted his personal desire to continue a relationship with his deceased daughter, Sophie. Freud expressed the inconsolability of his loss and, in the following quote from Freud's letter to a friend, his desire to perpetuate a relationship with his daughter (Freud, 1960):

Although we know that after such a loss the acute state of mourning will subside, we also know that we shall remain inconsolable and will never find a substitute. No matter what may fill the gap, even if it be filled completely, it nevertheless remains something else. And actually this is how it should be. It is the only way of perpetuating that love which we do not wish to relinquish. (p. 386)

Thus, Granek (2010) argues that the idea of thorough and complete detachment from a love object found in detachment theories is foreign to Freudian thought. Freud never intended that grieving persons must thoroughly relinquish their emotional investment in a deceased loved one by working through grief and completely sublimating this attachment energy into another relationship or other aspects of their life (Granek, 2010).

Whatever the case regarding Freud and his actual understanding of detachment, there is little evidence that grief work actually helps a bereaved person cope with their loss (Stroebe & Stroebe, 1991; Stroebe, Schut, & Stroebe, 2005; Stroebe, Stroebe, Schut, Zech, &

van den Bout, 2002; Wortman & Silver, 2001). Moreover, a systematic study of bereavement-care literature (Forte, Hill, Pazder, & Feudtner, 2004) found no definitive and reliable guide, whatsoever, to the treatment of bereavement. The research found – with the exception of the pharmacological treatment of depression within the context of bereavement that showed some efficacy during treatment – that no bereavement treatment therapy recommendation emerged. One of the reasons given for a failure to find a reliable guide to bereavement treatment is the excessive theoretical heterogeneity in grief and bereavement theory (Forte et al., 2004).

Thus, the detachment theory of bereavement, first implemented by Freud and later interpreted by others, has been challenged in the literature from both theoretical and practical perspectives. Contrary to detachment theory, however, the continuing bonds theory of bereavement affirms that humans do not completely sever their connection with a deceased loved one, but maintain an ongoing connection that can help grieving persons facilitate their recovery (Silverman & Klass, 1996). Moreover, unlike detachment theory, continuing bonds theory recognizes significant psychological coping value in maintaining a continuing relationship with a deceased loved one. The following section discusses continuing bonds theory.

### **Continuing Bonds Theory of Bereavement**

Researchers Klass et al. (1996) first introduced the term *continuing bonds*. It refers to a human experience that they describe as the maintenance by either adults or children of a connection with a deceased loved one. This connection, they suggest, is normative behavior for humans (Klass et al., 1996). Research supports the position that humans continue to

maintain emotional connections with deceased loved ones. Rees (1971) found that 50% of bereaved individuals regularly sensed the presence of their deceased partner up to ten years after their loss. Similarly, researchers found that bereaved widows and widowers frequently felt the presence of their deceased spouses and regularly interacted with them in dreams and in conversations (Shuchter and Zisook, 1993). In addition, a study by Field, Gal-Oz, and Bonanno (2003) suggests that the greater satisfaction a person feels in a relationship with someone corresponds with a stronger continuing bond with the person after they die. Thus, the continuing bonds theory of bereavement represents a significant shift from traditional detachment orientations and focuses researchers' attention on adaptation to loss.

Unlike detachment theory, continuing bonds theory recognizes significant psychological coping value in maintaining a continuing relationship with a deceased loved one. Studies suggest psychological value and importance in the bereaved maintaining some form of continuity in the relationship with their deceased loved one (e.g., Bowlby, 1969, 1980, 1982; Gaines, 1997; Hagman, 1995; Kaplan, 1995; Parkes, 1970, 2009; Parkes & Weiss, 1983). In addition, research asserts that the maintenance of a continuing bond enables people to “foster the continuity of identity, reinforce coping efforts, and provide comfort and support” (Bonanno & Kaltman, 1999, p. 770).

In addition, as interest in continuing bonds theory has grown, researchers have begun to examine the psychological experience through which an individual maintains connection with a deceased loved one. Field (2008) suggests that the continuing bond concept describes activities of grief and bereavement in terms of maintaining a connection with a deceased loved one through a psychological activity of reorganizing the relationship. Other research

suggests that the way people maintain the connection with the lost love object is to “construct an inner representation of the deceased” (Silverman & Klass, 1996, p. 16). This inner representation is described as a reorganized mental image that may be created in several ways. For example, someone who maintains a continuing connection with a deceased loved one may have a mental image of the whole person or maintain some sense that their self continues to relate to the person (Horowitz, 1987, 1988; Kernberg, 1976). Shuchter and Zisook (1993) describe a continuing bonds activity as symbolizing “living and breathing” connections with the deceased as internal forms and images:

The empirical reality is that people do not relinquish their ties to the deceased, withdraw their cathexes, or ‘let them go.’ What occurs for survivors is a transformation from what had been a relationship operating on several levels of actual, symbolic, internalized, and imaging relatedness to one in which the actual (‘living and breathing’) relationship has been lost, but other forms remain or may even develop in more elaborate forms. (p. 34)

Thus, interest in the concept of continuing bonds as a loss adaptation strategy has grown. Studies suggest that continuing bonds facilitates coping with the loss of a loved one, and additional research has examined the psychological mechanisms that characterize the maintenance of a continuing bond. As discussed in the following section, the concept of continuing bonds recently has been applied in the context of the human-animal bond and pet bereavement.

### **Continuing Bonds Theory and Pet Bereavement**

The primary focus of continuing bonds research has been on the value of continuing bonds in helping bereaved humans cope with human loss (Field & Friedrichs, 2004; Field et al., 2005; Stroebe et al., 1992). However, research into this loss adaptation strategy has recently expanded into human-animal bereavement studies. Some researchers suggest that pet owners continue to experience their deceased pets as primary attachment figures (Weisman, 1991). In addition, evidence exists of a sense of comfort for bereaved pet owners from belief in a continuing bond with a deceased animal (Wortman et al., 1993). Studies by Field et al. (2005, 2009) assert that maintaining a continuing bond with a pet is an adaptive component of grief. Further, a pet owner's belief in an afterlife for their deceased pet was also found to be a comfort and an aid in their coping with the loss (Davis, Irwin, Richardson, & O'Brien-Malone, 2003).

Limited research also has examined the activities through which a bereaved pet owner maintains a continuing bond with a deceased pet. For example, one study suggests that a continuing bond with a deceased animal may include the individual having keepsakes such as photographs and personal items (Stroebe, Hansson, Stroebe, & Schut, 2001). In addition, in an empirical study of people who had lost a dog or cat within a year, researchers reported that study participants experienced increased levels of comfort from exhibiting continuing bond expressions (CBE) (Packman et al., 2011). In this study, CBE were listed as:

- sensing the pet's continued presence;
- hearing the pet's sounds;
- talking with the pet;

- having fond memories and dreams of the pet;
- having keepsakes and belongings;
- creating memorials and shrines;
- visiting the pet's favorite places;
- remembering lessons learned from the pet;
- responding to the pet's influences and wishes;
- having thoughts of being reunited with a pet.

The level of comfort experienced by participating pet owners as a result of using these CBE were reportedly comparable to that felt following the death of a spouse (Packman et al., 2011). In addition, a recent qualitative study of pet owners' experience of continuing bonds with their deceased pets indicates that CBE offer comfort and solace to the bereaved (Packman, Carmack, Katz, Carlos, Field, & Landers, 2014).

In summary, the continuing bonds theory of bereavement has been shown to apply in the context of pet loss. As a loss adaptation strategy, the maintenance of continuing bonds with a deceased pet offers significant value to grieving pet owners. In turn, the understanding of continuing bonds as a coping mechanism for people who have lost pets may have significant implications for people who work in the veterinary profession and interact with grieving pet owners on a regular basis. Vet techs, in particular, are of interest because they are frequently tasked with providing emotional support to pet owners following the death of a pet. The following section will explore the current trends in veterinary education in the area of human-animal bereavement and the role of vet techs in helping their clients cope with pet loss.

### **Continuing Bonds Theory and Veterinary Education**

Veterinary students are receiving significant clinical training and experience in end-of-life issues and client bereavement. In a recent study of 28 veterinary schools in the United States, 96% have educational offerings in end-of-life studies, and 80% of veterinary students were exposed to this instruction (Dickinson, 2010). In one of the schools examined, a considerable effort was made to integrate end-of-life study. At the University of Illinois College of Veterinary Medicine, first-year students received two hours of classroom lecture; second-year students, 28 hours study in bereavement; and third-year students, one hour training in role-play and client relations. Fourth-year students performed 20 hours of clinical teaching rounds and attended weekly ½-hour lectures (Dickinson, 2010). Dickinson suggests that the average time devoted to the teaching of death-and-dying issues in veterinary schools is 14.64 hours, which approximately equals the time devoted to the topic in medical and nursing schools in the United States (Dickinson, 2010). This, Dickinson further suggests, reflects a significant change in veterinary curricula. Only two decades prior, a study by Weirich (1988) reported an absence of end-of-life or bereavement education in veterinary schools.

Education programs for vet techs include training in pet loss and bereavement. For example, an introductory course in vet tech includes the following course objectives (Sherrod, 2013):

- understanding the history of veterinary medicine and organizations for veterinary technicians;
- explaining human-animal attachment;

- comprehending pet loss and its impact on clients;
- identifying various clinical facilities used by veterinary technicians;
- discussing client and business office practices.

Although bereavement training is included in most vet tech training programs today, there is little literature that speaks directly to the vet techs' bereavement support task. Nor has much been written in this area for the role of the veterinary nurse, which is a corresponding title for a similar role in the United Kingdom and other European countries (Reimer, 2007). Bereavement support, however, is a primary task for the vet tech. An ethnologist (Sanders, 2010), who studied the role of vet techs in veterinary practice, wrote:

While the attending veterinarian usually provided clients with information about what to expect and what the animal was, or was not, experiencing during the procedure, technicians often were called on to provide emotional care. (p. 256)

In his ethnographic research conducted with 22 vet techs, Sanders (2010) identified numerous tasks performed by vet techs in their work. Some of these tasks include:

- assisting veterinary doctors during patient visits (diagnosing, x-raying, intubation, anesthetization, catheterization, dispensing, euthanizing);
- caring for animals (monitoring, feeding, cleaning, exercising);
- disposing of remains (processing the animal's body and dispensing ashes);
- managing the office (answering phones, booking appointments, managing records, collecting fees);
- Attending emotional needs of clients following euthanization.

As previously noted, vet tech students receive training in attending the emotional needs of pet owners following pet euthanization. The primary textbook used at the two-year college attended by the 16 vet tech students who participated in this study was McCurnin and Bassert (2014). In describing pet bereavement, this text draws primarily upon *stages* of grief and focuses on grief as a *process* of denial, bargaining, anger, depression and acceptance. This process ultimately resolves in detachment. According to McCurnin and Bassert (2014):

The term *grief process* [emphasis in the original] implies that there is an intended end or result to be produced through grieving. Thus the grief process is the means of letting go of the object of attachment to feel better, reinvest, emotionally grow, and attach again. (p. 1380)

The McCurnin and Bassert (2014) text omits any discussion of continuing bonds. Notably, however, in its description of the acceptance stage of the grief process, the text alludes to a continuing relationship: “[acceptance] does not mean that a pet is forgotten, but that it has been assigned to a special place in the bereaved individual’s heart” (p. 1385). In this passage, the McCurnin and Bassert (2014) text appears to suggest the bereaved pet owner may experience a continuing bond, or some form of a continuing emotional connection with the deceased animal; and at least tacitly alludes to an awareness in veterinary education of the value of acknowledging this continuing connection in assisting a client who has lost a pet. The implication is that, within current vet tech clinical training, there is some reference made to what seems to be a durable human-animal bond. This bond is described as a private emotional connection continuing within the “heart” of the owner.

It is worth noting that the two bereavement theories, detachment and continuing bonds, employ their own unique languages. The detachment theory uses words or phrases such as “resolve,” “accept,” “reinvest energy,” “begin a new relationship,” and “move on” (Freud, 1957). These words signify the end of the relationship and imply that the pet owner is leaving something behind. In contrast, the continuing bonds theory uses words such as “hearing,” “talking,” “sensing,” “having” and “creating” (Packman et al., 2011). These words acknowledge the continuing presence of the relationship and imply that the pet owner is actively constructing an inner relationship with the pet. In bereavement support, the language of detachment and the language of continuing bonds may both be useful. The language of detachment helps the pet owner accept the reality of the loss. It acknowledges that the animal has died and introduces a sense of finality to the experience. In contrast, the language of continuing bonds acknowledges the love that still exists in the heart of the pet owner. It recognizes the ongoing memory of the relationship and offers an opening to a conversation about that relationship through the pet owner’s story.

### **Summary**

A review of literature suggests that pet keeping and spending on pets has grown dramatically in America in the last two decades. In turn, research into human relationships with animals has grown as well, with a particular focus on the human-animal bond, or a human’s experience of an emotional connection with an animal. Within this field, a large body of literature has addressed the quality of the emotional connections that people maintain with companion animals, including their regard for pets as family members or children; their reliance on their pets for unconditional love and emotional supports; and the social influences

on pet owners' perceptions of their bonds with their pets. Such research indicates that people maintain strong emotional connections with their pets.

This chapter also included a review of literature regarding bereavement theory, including the traditional detachment theory and the new continuing bonds theory. Continuing bonds theory is a subset of human attachment theory and has been identified to apply in the context of human-animal relationships. Research holds that individuals maintain continuing emotional connections with pets that have died. However, studies also suggest that an individual's experience of bereavement for his or her pet often goes unacknowledged, resulting in feelings of isolation and alienation.

Veterinary education has responded to the growth of pet keeping, pet owners' strong emotional attachments with pets, and the growing need for bereavement support for pet owners by establishing more programs focused on the human-animal bond as well as pet loss bereavement. However, the continuing bonds theory of bereavement receives only tacit acceptance within contemporary education and practice in veterinary medicine.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this study was to explore veterinary technology (vet tech) students' perceptions of their special relationships with pets that died; and to better understand how these perceptions influenced their work in the vet tech program and their beliefs about their future work with pets and pet owners in veterinary practice. This research study draws on the conceptual framework of the continuing bonds theory of bereavement to answer the following two research questions:

- What are vet tech students' perceptions of a special relationship with a pet that died?
- What beliefs do vet tech students hold about these perceptions and their work in the vet tech program and their future work with pets and pet owners?

This chapter describes the study design, including case study method, sampling, participant selection, data collection, and data analysis. It also discusses trustworthiness, validity, reliability, ethics, and researcher bias.

### **Case Study Method**

This qualitative research study used case study method to explore vet tech students' personal perceptions of their continuing emotional connections with their deceased pets and the influence of these perceptions on their work in the vet tech program. Case study can seem an equivocal term. On one hand, it can refer to case study research, which is a qualitative research methodology (Yin, 1994). On another, a researcher's selection of an area of study is sometimes referred to as a case study (Stake, 1980). Creswell (2007) observes that both are

true, because although case study can refer to a particular area of study, case study is also a commonly practiced qualitative research methodology.

This study used case study method for three primary reasons. First, as research methodology, case study is unique in that it considers social context (Yin, 1994). Others (Stake, 1995) affirm the usefulness of case study method for understanding social interactions and human behavior. Social context is of particular interest for the present study, which, in part, examined vet tech students' social interactions with others with regard to their pets. Second, the study is descriptive in nature because it focuses on a specific phenomenon, continuing bonds, within a real-life context of vet tech students enrolled in a two-year degree program. The study of a phenomenon or intervention within a real-life context is one definition of descriptive case study (Yin, 2003). Third, this is a multiple case study, which is particularly well suited to studying social phenomena. According to Yin (2003), a multiple case study allows the researcher to examine similarities and differences across several instances of the same phenomenon to enable comparisons across cases. Multiple case studies can be used to predict similar or contrasting results for (theoretically) predictable reasons (Yin, 2003).

Unlike large-scale ethnographic studies, which may include data sources such as observation and survey methods, the present study relied primarily on data from in-depth interviews. It included interviews with multiple participants. The researcher analyzed data collected from participants to build a detailed view of the phenomenon within a natural setting. The interview locations, chosen by the participants, were selected to facilitate

participants' telling their pet story and remembrances. Locations included the school, coffee shops and restaurants.

In addition to interview data, this research also used photographs provided by the participants as documentation. The study provided thick description to assist readers in understanding students' perceptions of continuing emotional connections with their deceased pets. It elicited students' beliefs and experiences regarding their continuing bonds with their pets and their work in the vet tech program.

### **Sampling**

This study focused on one group of vet tech students. Participants were selected purposively. In purposive sampling, participants are selected based on specified characteristics. Because of these special characteristics, vet tech students offered an information-rich source of data specifically relevant to the object of study.

#### **Purposive Sampling**

Polkinghorne (2005) identified two criteria for purposively selecting participants: people who are likely to have had the experience under study; and those who can reflect upon and articulate the experience. In addition, participants were required to meet certain criterion. In criterion sampling, participants are selected who meet certain criterion. These criteria, selected by the researcher, ensured that participants represent optimal data value (Patton, 1990).

#### **Selection Criteria**

As previously noted, vet techs are often required by their profession to provide emotional support to bereaved pet owners. By gaining an understanding of the vet tech

students' personal experiences of the loss of a pet, the researcher had the opportunity to examine how these experiences influenced their perceptions about their work, including pet bereavement. Vet tech students were selected for this study based on five selection criteria that required that participants: 1) were 18 years of age or older; 2) were enrolled in the vet tech program; 3) experienced the death of a pet with which they had had a special relationship; 4) experienced the death of their pet 12 months or more prior to the interview; and 5) were willing to share stories about their pets that died. These five criteria ensured that participants provided a rich data source for information regarding a continuing emotional connection with a deceased pet, perceptions of that connection, and how these perceptions influenced their work in the vet tech program with pets and pet owners.

Two of these criteria were especially important for the purposes of this study. First, when recruiting participants, the researcher defined "special relationship" as one with an animal that is a friend or companion rather than one that serves a strictly utilitarian purpose, such as a guard dog, hunting dog, service animal or a mouser (see Appendix F). Second, the researcher specified that participants had to have experienced the death of the pet 12 months or more prior to the interview in order to isolate for individuals who experienced a continuing bond with their pet that died. It was assumed that this time frame would more likely result in the experience of a continuing bond than if the individual had lost their pet closer to the time of the interview. However, the researcher did not assume that participants had experienced a continuing bond with their deceased pet and did not specify this as a requirement for participation in the study.

## Research Participants

The research participants identified for this study were 16 vet tech students attending a two-year, private, urban-based, degree-granting college offering technical and professional certification. The director of the college's vet tech program met with the researcher to discuss the goals of the research and agreed to provide the researcher access to her vet tech cohort. In addition, the program director agreed to give the researcher an opportunity to attend class sessions at the school to discuss the research with participants and collect names, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses of volunteer participants.

The program director arranged a time for the researcher to attend three sessions of a vet tech class at the school (VT100: Introduction to Veterinary Technology). At each session, the researcher conducted a classroom recruitment presentation (Appendix F) in which he reviewed the purpose of the research; defined the term *special relationship*; described the interview format; and assured students of confidentiality. In addition, the researcher distributed a participant recruitment letter that outlined the following: the study's purpose; requirements for participation; guidelines for interview length and selection of interview location; assurance of confidentiality; and notification of use of recording equipment for the interview (Appendix G). The letter also indicated that participants could bring objects related to their deceased pet to the interview, such as poems, photos, scrapbooks, and memorabilia. Finally, the researcher distributed a participant questionnaire that collected the prospective participant's name, telephone number, e-mail address, confirmation that they were 18 years of age or older, and the date of their pet's death (Appendix I). The researcher received 18 completed questionnaires and determined that 16 students met all study criteria. The two

students that were not selected for participation in the study did not meet criteria number 4, which required that they had experienced the death of their pet 12 months or more prior to the interview.

The researcher then contacted the 16 students who met study criteria, arranged a time and place for each interview, and conducted the interviews. Before the interview began, the researcher obtained a signed copy of the informed consent form for research (Appendix H) that the participant signed prior to completing the participant questionnaire (Appendix I) during the researcher's initial meeting with students.

### **Institutional Review**

The North Carolina State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) was engaged for the purpose of review and approval of this research study. Prior to any participant contact, IRB approval of this research was requested and secured from Deb Paxton, Regulatory Compliance Administrator, Box 7514, NCSU Campus (919/515-4514). The researcher verified that the two-year college of the potential respondents did not require a review process and that permission from the director of the vet tech program was sufficient approval for the researcher to solicit student participation.

### **Data Collection**

This study used a semi-structured interview format for accessing participants' interpretations of their experiences of special relationships with their pets and their continued connection with their pet after the pets' deaths. Describing the increased accessibility to human interpretations of reality through interviews, Merriam (2002) writes:

Because qualitative researchers are the primary instruments for data collection and analysis, interpretations of reality are accessed directly through observations and interviews. (p. 25)

Interview is a common data collection method for qualitative research (Kvale, 2007). A semi-structured interview format leads to topical or thematic questions with an open-ended flexibility to adjust to changes during the interview. A semi-structured format also allows the interviewer to respond to issues or questions raised by the interviewee during the interview (Kvale, 2007). Some thematic or topical structure to the questions, however, provides direction in the interview and reduces the problem of the interviewer floundering for what to ask or the interviewee wondering what is expected or what to say.

What was sought in the interview was neither a positivistic objectivity nor purely subjective experience, but rather something akin to what Kvale (1996) refers to as an experience of “intersubjective interaction.” The purpose of using an intersubjective, interactive interview approach was to assist participants in finding the words to tell their story about their pet. To this end, the interviewer interacted with the participant in an affirming, sympathetic role as witness and participant in an intersubjective activity of the participant’s storytelling.

Possible areas of concern for interviews included:

- Interview participants may have felt uncomfortable about discussing their continuing bond experience;
- Some individuals may have anticipated being misrepresented in a case study account of the connection they felt with their pet.

The researcher was sensitive to these possibilities, which are part of any case study fieldwork, and attempted to minimize exposure to these issues. When the researcher conducted the interviews, he gave the participant space to speak or be silent, to continue the conversation or end it, depending upon their comfort level. He performed a “feeling check” by asking periodically during the interview, “are you okay with continuing this discussion?” If the participant said that he or she was uncomfortable or if the researcher believed the participant was uncomfortable but unwilling to express their discomfort verbally, he gave them the option of ending the interview. Participants were encouraged to feel free to withdraw from participation at any time. All participants completed the interview.

The particular approach to the interview taken in this study was a narrative or story-telling approach often used in qualitative research (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). Using this method, the researcher encouraged the interviewee to tell their story of a pet that died. In addition, participants were asked to bring any documentation or materials that might illustrate or help them describe their emotional connection with a pet. This included photographs, poems, songs, or memorabilia. The researcher asked the participant to describe the meaning that each object held relevant to their deceased pet; conversations they have had with others concerning the object; and relevance of the object to their work as a vet tech.

During the interviews, the researcher made entries into a researcher’s journal. The purpose of the journal was to document all aspects of the research for later analysis, including thoughts and questions leading up to and during the interview. This process is called “reflection-in-action” (Schön, 1983). The journal was also a useful place where the researcher documented confusions, feelings and thoughts about the interview.

The researcher interviewed 16 vet tech students to achieve saturation with a minimum of 20 hours of interview time. One interview was conducted for each student participant. Interviews lasted from 45 to up to approximately 120 minutes with an optional 10-minute break after 45 minutes. An interview guide for semi-structured interviews (Appendix J) was used to facilitate the interviews with the students. Research questions focused on participants' personal experiences with their pets, the circumstances of their pets' deaths and their feelings about the loss. In addition, students were asked whom they talked with at the time of their pets' deaths. Students were then asked whether or not they continued to experience a connection with the pet after its death, if they shared their experience of continuing bonds with anyone and the responses they received. Finally, students were asked to reflect on how their experience of bonds with their pets influenced their work in vet tech. Interview questions are presented in Appendix J. Follow up questions were asked during the course of the interview to elicit greater detail.

During the course of the interviews, the researcher noted that participants appeared to be enthusiastic about telling stories about their pets. All participants happily recalled good times shared with their pets, and some cried when describing their pets' deaths. They commented at length on their interactions with others with regard to their pets. Participants described experiences with family members, friends, coworkers and community members, such as church members, veterinarians and veterinary staff. When asked to reflect on their continuing bonds with their pets and their work in the vet tech program, participants thoughtfully considered their responses. Some appeared to have already considered how their bonds with their deceased pets influenced their work in the program and provided detailed

information about their reasons for entering the program as well as their beliefs about their future work with pets and pet owners. Others appeared not to have thought about their deceased pets relative to their work, and some reported that they learned about themselves and their work during the course of the interview. These participants appeared to find the interviews revelatory and reported that they had gained greater insight into their understandings about their interest in helping pets and pet owners. Further, some participants reported that they had never told their story about their pet to anyone, and they appeared to find the interview process cathartic. All participants expressed gratitude at the end of their interviews for the opportunity to tell their stories about their pets.

To minimize the risk of a perceived misrepresentation of any individual participant, the researcher conducted a member check by allowing each participant to review their interview transcript for the purpose of clarification and correction prior to coding and analysis. The researcher also took appropriate measures to de-identify participants by adopting pseudonyms for individuals involved in conversations and revising circumstances to conceal to the greatest degree possible the participants' identity and mask individual identities in case study accounts.

### **Data Analysis Methodology**

Data analysis for this descriptive case study of continuing human-animal bonds was conducted from an examination of interview transcripts, including participants' description of participant-provided photographs and other materials and notes from the researcher's journal. The researcher transcribed interviews from digital recordings.

Transcriptions were analyzed first using open coding. The researcher analyzed the transcriptions using an inductive method in which the researcher attempted to discover patterns and themes in the transcriptions. Open coding is used in qualitative research for the purpose of organizing data according to recognizable patterns and themes (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Following open coding, cross coding and comparison were conducted to identify patterns and themes that repeated across open-coded transcription data.

A second stage of coding, theoretical, was conducted using the conceptual framework of continuing human-animal bonds, which further guided discovery of patterns and themes. Using a framework of connection, communication, and coping, which are identified as activities of continuing human-animal bonds, the researcher iteratively reduced transcripts and researcher notation to emergent patterns and themes. Continuing bonds patterns and themes were identified and documented for each participant and a summary matrix was produced cross-referencing all common patterns and themes that emerged across cases. This was a process of aggregating themes into classes (Stake, 1995). Following theoretical coding, a cross coding and comparison were conducted to identify patterns and themes that repeat across theoretically coded transcription data.

Data analysis was accomplished through coding (Schwandt, 2007). To do this, the researcher became immersed in the interview data to the point of saturation. This was completed through three iterations of listening to the audio recordings and reading transcribed texts. Following saturation, an inductive method was used for analyzing textual data. This analysis was an iterative search for repeated themes, concepts or ideas present in participants' interview texts (Bogden & Biklen, 1992). Convergent patterns of recurring

ideas and themes as well as divergent patterns were highlighted, with notes made and questions asked about the significance of emerging patterns. Ryan & Bernard (2003) suggest that the researcher pay close attention to metaphor and analogy as the interview data is being analyzed to discover emergent patterns and themes. Patterns and themes were highlighted, coded and systematically compared across participant interviews to discover commonalities. The researcher also wrote detailed participant narratives to identify the key patterns and themes that emerged for each participant and to capture key quotes and stories that supported these patterns and themes. During this process, the researcher was able to identify those participants whose experiences appeared to differ significantly from the majority. Patterns and themes were identified in this group and incorporated into the data analysis.

To assist in the management of the interview data and the coding, the qualitative software application NVivo was used. This software helped to identify, sort and arrange themes so the researcher could discover patterns and develop conclusions. Computer software facilitated organization of the large quantities of data associated with this qualitative study. Although this type of software has many advantages, including the ability to handle large quantities of data, provide a convenient repository and facilitate rapid coding, some criticisms have been leveled against it. This type of software cannot be used for analyzing data (Searle, 2005), so it was used primarily as a tool for storing and organizing research data.

### **Trustworthiness, Validity, and Reliability**

The trustworthiness of qualitative research relies on study design, data collection and analysis, interpretation and reporting (Merriam, 1998). Critical issues for the purpose of

assuring trustworthiness and integrity, whether the cases were accurately observed and reported, are the study's internal and external validity and reliability.

Internal validity refers to the degree to which the data and the researcher's interpretations reflect reality (Merriam, 1998). The researcher assured internal validity in this qualitative case study by spending time on-site with participants at their selected locations. In addition, during the course of the interview, the researcher periodically repeated participants' answers and asked if the answers had been interpreted correctly. The researcher also verified the accuracy of the transcriptions through participant review of interview transcripts.

Merriam (1998) also describes the importance of achieving external validity of the research findings. This refers to the applicability of research findings to other cases. External validity can be achieved through using multiple participants and data types. In addition, external validity may be achieved through thick description. Describing the participant's experience thickly adds validity to findings by giving readers a reasonable, credible and deep understanding of the experience under study through maximizing the depth and complexity of the description (Creswell & Miller, 2000). In the present study, external validity was achieved through multiple audio transcriptions, member checks of the transcriptions, the researcher's reflective journal, and thick description of each participant's experience.

Reliability of a study refers to consistency of the findings and the data (Merriam, 1998). Reliability deals with the question of whether the logic and method of research is consistent with the interpretations and findings. Reliability is closely associated with the issue of researcher bias and ethics. A researcher journal was kept in order to provide added reliability in the findings and ensure that researcher assumptions were clearly exposed,

delineated and described. A researcher journal also provides an audit trail (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

### **Ethical Considerations**

The researcher submitted an application for approval of this study to the North Carolina State University Institutional Review Board (IRB). On this application, the researcher included: the researcher's intention to discuss participants' continuing bonds experiences with their pets; consent forms; and the questions to be asked during the interviews.

### **Researcher Bias**

The researcher's family background, education and experience are potential areas of bias with regard to qualitative research. The following biographical sketch offers some initial insight into areas of potential bias and describes an accounting for bias, ensuring validity and reliability of the research findings.

The researcher grew up in a large, working-class, Polish Catholic family in upstate New York. His father was a welder and his mother a stay-at-home mom for the first 12 years of his life. The researcher's family of origin included six brothers, three sisters and numerous family pets, including his own two pets. This experience instilled a sense of value for animals as family members and a capacity for sympathy, empathy and care for humans who experience grief for loss of animals.

Since this study focused on the experience of a continuing bond for the loss of a pet, the experience of death was a significant factor in researcher bias. The first death experience

for the researcher occurred at 24 months of age when the researcher's younger brother died after surgery. One year later, the family dog was euthanized.

In 1995 the researcher studied Clinical Pastoral Education at a human hospital, logging more than 900 clinical hours. From 2000 to 2003, the researcher served a Baptist church in several capacities, including chair of the Congregational Care Committee. During that time, the researcher coordinated the spiritual care needs of 1200 church members through multiple ministry programs.

In 2006 the North Carolina College of Veterinary Medicine, Veterinary Teaching Hospital (CVM/VTH) requested the researcher's assistance in establishing pastoral care services at the veterinary teaching hospital. For 18 months the researcher carried a 24-hour pager and served the bereavement needs of CVM/VTH faculty, staff, students and clients and wore hospital identification labeled "Chaplain." In 2008, the researcher founded the Pet Loss Support Group (PLSG) program of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) of Wake County. The researcher continues to coordinate the PLSG program.

The researcher is President of Pet Chaplain®, a North Carolina nonprofit that provides grief education and consulting in veterinary environments. His pastoral work with bereaved pet owners has appeared in numerous publications and media, including National Public Radio, UNC Public Television, *National Geographic*, and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Pastoral care is the researcher's avocation. Prior to July 2007 and his return to full-time graduate study, the researcher supervised a university-based team that included a web application programmer, technical writer, technical trainer and graphic designer. Currently,

the researcher works full time with International Business Machines Corporation (IBM) in Research Triangle Park (RTP) as the IBM RTP Site Communications Lead.

These familial, educational and work-life experiences raised the possibility of biases that needed to be addressed at the onset of this research study. These biases spring from the researcher's working class background, his orientation toward ecology and nature spirituality, and a tendency toward a sympathetic perspective regarding bereaved pet owners. However, the researcher has no pets and is not religious.

The researcher has experienced and worked with people who have experienced an emotional bond with a deceased human or animal loved one. Since the researcher has had previous experience of loss and a continuing bond experience with a human and an animal and has witnessed others who have had similar experiences, these prior experiences may bias the research methods or researcher objectivity.

Having awareness of these potential biases, the conduct of interviews was modified to include a reflective component within the researcher's journal. Also, the researcher was on guard against interjecting personal experience into the interview discussion and focused instead on collecting participant experiences, thereby avoiding bias.

### **Summary**

This chapter outlined the purpose and objectives of this case study. The researcher proposed qualitative research methods that were used to study the experiences of vet tech students, suggested multiple sources of data to meet research objectives, and proposed methods of accounting for and avoiding researcher bias. Study findings are presented in

Chapter Four, and conclusions and implications and recommendations for research and practice are presented in Chapter Five.

## CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore vet tech students' perceptions of their special relationships with pets that died; and to better understand how these perceptions influenced their work in the vet tech program and their beliefs about their future work with pets and pet owners in veterinary practice. The continuing emotional connection with a deceased loved is described as a continuing bond (Silverman & Klass, 1996), and research suggests that humans experience continuing emotional bonds with pets that have died (Field et al., 2009).

Vet techs are the equivalent of nurses in human medical care, and their duties are similar in providing patient care and interacting with clients. In many veterinary practices, vet techs handle patient intake, asking pet owners probing questions about their pets' symptoms before they meet with a veterinary doctor. They also assist vets during pet examination, conduct medical tests, dispense medication, and help with medical procedures, including euthanasia. They are frequently charged with the task of disposing of a deceased pet's body following death from disease, trauma or euthanasia, and providing emotional support and assistance to grieving owners following the death of their pet.

In this study the following research questions were explored:

- What are vet tech students' perceptions of a special relationship with a pet that died?
- What beliefs do vet tech students hold about these perceptions and their work in the vet tech program and their future work with pets and pet owners?

To explore these questions, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews to elicit participant responses regarding their personal relationship with their pet, the loss of the pet, and their experience of an emotional connection with that pet after it died. In addition, interpersonal interactions with family, friends and community members at the time of their pet's death and subsequent to their pet's death were explored. In addition, interviewees shared their perceptions of their continuing emotional connections with their pets and the influence of these perceptions on their current work as a vet tech student. Interview data was analyzed using open and theoretical coding, and key patterns and themes were identified. The researcher also wrote detailed participant narratives to identify the key patterns and themes that emerged for each participant and to capture key quotes and stories that supported these patterns and themes. During this process, the researcher was able to identify those participants whose experiences appeared to differ significantly from the majority. Patterns and themes were identified in this group of outliers and incorporated into the data analysis.

This chapter will present key inductive findings regarding participants' perceptions of continuing emotional bonds with their deceased pets and beliefs they held about these perceptions in relation to their work in the vet tech program and their future work with pets and pet owners in veterinary practice.

### **Study Site and Participant Demographics**

Study participants were enrolled at a private, urban-based degree-granting institution offering technical and professional certification and degrees and diplomas in vet tech as well as business, cosmetology, esthetics and massage, criminal justice, healthcare administration,

medical, and technical and skilled trades. Interviews were conducted at locations and times selected by participants.

The 16 study participants represented a diverse population of students in age, race and gender. Nine participants were 18 – 24 years, three were 25 – 34, two were 35 – 44, and two were 45 years of age or older. (Participant age-range was estimated based on timelines that participants reported in the course of the interview regarding the loss of their pet and other life events.) Fourteen participants were female, and two were male. Thirteen participants were white, two were African American and one was Hispanic. Table 1 summarizes student participants' age, gender and race/ethnicity demographics. The table also presents the pseudonyms used for participants and their pets and the species of each pet.

Table 1

*Demographics of Veterinary Technology Student Participants, Pet Pseudonyms and Species*

<b>Participant pseudonym</b>	<b>Pet pseudonym and pet species</b>	<b>Participant age range</b>	<b>Participant gender</b>	<b>Participant race/ethnicity</b>
Anna	Brownie (dog) Chili Pepper (dog)	18 – 24	Female	African American
Carol	Daniel (dog)	25 – 34	Female	White
Celeste	Rambo (dog)	45+	Female	White
Colleen	Pretzel (dog)	18 – 24	Female	White
Frank	Muppet (cat)	45+	Male	White
Hannah	Timmy (dog)	18 – 24	Female	White
Helen	Wilbur (pig)	18 – 24	Female	White
Jane	Chance (dog) Sam Sam (cat)	18 – 24	Female	White
John	Dare (dog)	35 – 44	Male	White
Karen	Zuzu (dog) Daisy (hamster)	18 – 24	Female	White
Lisa	Bobby (cat)	25 – 34	Female	White
Mollie	Honey (horse) Buck (dog)	18 – 24	Female	White
Nina	Missy (dog) Pepper (cat) Chubbito (dog)	18 – 24	Female	Hispanic
Opal	Buddy (dog)	18 – 24	Female	White
Rachel	Scamp (dog)	25 – 34	Female	African American
Teresa	Chasey (dog)	35 - 44	Female	White

## Overview of Findings

Study participants experienced powerful, continuing bonds of friendship and love with their pets that died. The love that participants felt for their pets was reflected in Karen's declaration about her deceased pets: "I still love all of [my pets that have died]...I still love them like crazy." Further, the enduring quality of participants' emotional connection with their pets was typified by the way Celeste described her continuing bonds with her deceased pets: "I think the bond is pretty strong, as strong [a bond] as you had with [pets] on earth. I think you keep it going the rest of your life, just like [you do with] a person." Frank also felt a strong emotional connection with his cat Muppet, who had been his constant companion for more than 20 years. He commented that when she died:

The [loss of the] material part of [Muppet] hit me hard. She was a beautiful cat and very soft and very lovable. But her soul and her emotions...everything else about her has been with me all along, so I never really lost her.

Four key findings emerged from the data: 1) participants experienced special relationships with their pets that died; 2) participants experienced continuing emotional bonds with their pets that died; 3) participants experienced supportive and unsupportive interpersonal interactions with regard to their pets; and 4) participants' love of animals and continuing bonds with their pets influenced their engagement in the vet tech program.

The first key finding was that participants experienced special relationships with their pets that died. Although participants kept many pets throughout their lives, their relationships with the pets they described in their interviews appeared to be among the most significant. The special quality of these relationships was evident in four key areas. First, a majority of

participants appeared to regard their relationships with their pets as unique, or unlike any other relationship they had experienced with a companion animal. A subset of participants also described their pets as unique individuals. Second, all participants referred to their pets in strongly affectionate terms. A majority recalled their pets as favorite, much-loved companions and friends, and others referred to their pets as their babies or children. Third, participants' relationships with their pets appeared to be characterized by a particularly strong sense of emotional attachment or attunement. Most reported that their pets gave them reliable companionship and nonjudgmental, unconditional love. Some of these participants believed that their pets intuitively sensed their feelings and also felt that their pets helped them cope with difficult times in their lives. Finally, the significance of the relationships was evident in participants' strong emotional response to the deaths of their pets. A majority appeared to experience intense grief when they lost their pets, and some reported that they had never grieved so strongly for the death of a pet. A summary of the factors that defined participants' experience of a special relationship with their pets is presented in Table 2 (Appendix A).

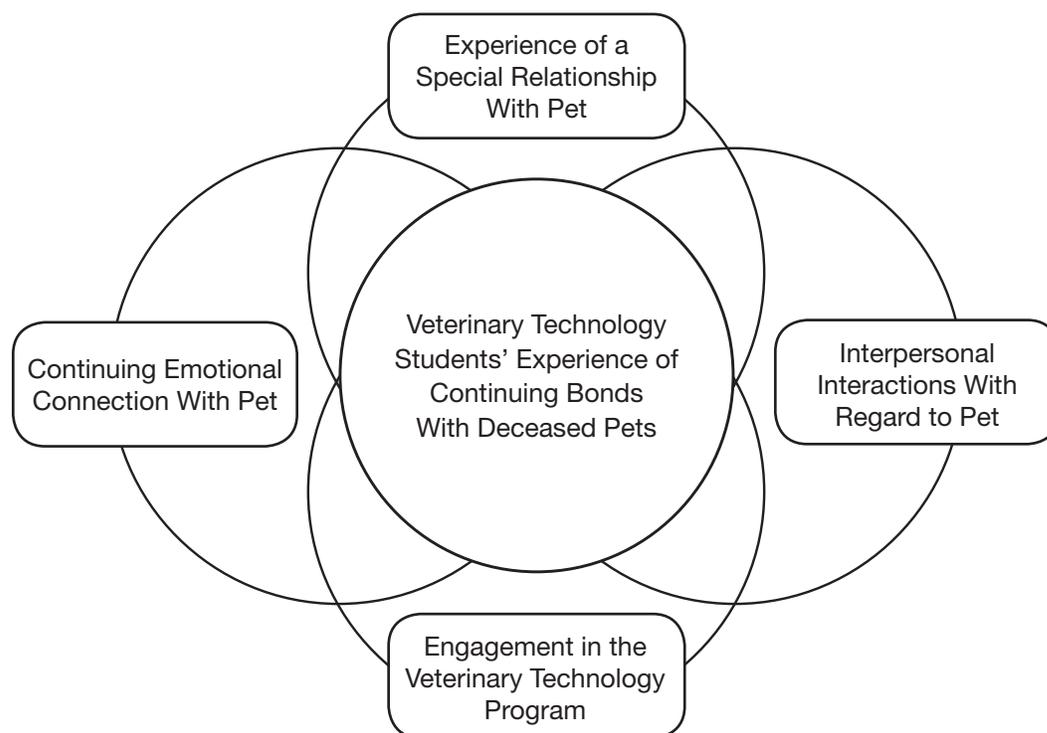
The second key finding was that participants experienced continuing emotional bonds with their pets that died. These connections were evident in their experience of Continuing Bond Expressions (CBE) with regard to their pets. CBE originated in literature about the continuing human-animal bond (Packman et al., 2011) and includes behaviors such as saving keepsakes as well as experiences such as dreams and physical sensations that reminded participants of their pets. A summary of the CBE exhibited by each participant is presented in Table 3 (Appendix B).

The third key finding was that participants experienced supportive and unsupportive interpersonal interactions with regard to their pets. Participants' stories indicated that the fabric of their experiences with their pets was intimately woven with their interpersonal interactions with the people in their lives. Participants described experiences with family members, friends, coworkers and others in their community, such as church members, veterinarians and veterinary staff. Most participants were children when they kept their pets, and their family members played an important role in their pet keeping experiences. Key interactions included the way in which others related with the participant's pet and others' perceptions of the pet; their regard for the participant's strong attachment to the pet; their responses to the participant when the pet died; and their regard for the participant's connection with the pet in the years subsequent to the pet's death. Participants' stories suggested that the majority received predominantly positive support that validated their strong attachments to their pets. A subset frequently experienced unsupportive responses from others with regard to their pets. The families of these participants, in particular, were unsupportive of their emotional attachments to their pets, often dismissing or minimizing the participant's feelings. In response, these participants appeared to feel sad, hurt, and isolated from family members and typically withdrew emotionally. Their feelings of emotional isolation appeared to be particularly intense when their pets died and family members failed to recognize or sympathize with their grief. A summary of participants' interpersonal interactions with regard to their pets is presented in Table 4 (Appendix C).

The fourth key finding was that participants' love of animals and continuing bonds with their pets influenced their engagement in the vet tech program. A majority reported that

their long-standing love for animals influenced their engagement, and they expressed self-perceptions as animal helpers and healers. In addition, for a majority of participants, their continuing bonds with their pets influenced their engagement in their program. Almost all participants reported that they believed the skills and knowledge they would gain in the program would help them care for animals better than they had been able to in the past. This belief appeared to be related to the frustration and powerlessness they felt when they were unable to help their own sick pets. Similarly, some participants were interested in a particular topic of study that was related to the illness that their pet suffered. In addition, all participants described beliefs about their future work with pets and pet owners that were influenced by their past experiences and continuing bonds with their pets. They discussed many beliefs central to their work in veterinary practice, including best practices for handling pets; educating pet owners; and providing emotional support for grieving pet owners following the loss of a pet. A summary of the factors that influenced participants' engagement in the vet tech program is presented in Table 5 (Appendix D).

The key findings of the study are depicted in the following Figure 3. As indicated, participants perceived that their relationships with their pets were special; maintained continuing emotional connections with their pets; and experienced both supportive and unsupportive interpersonal interactions with regard to their pets. In addition, participants' love of animals and continuing bonds with their pets influenced their engagement in the vet tech program.



*Figure 3.* Conceptual model of veterinary technology students' experience of continuing bonds with their deceased pets.

### **The Experience of a Special Relationship With a Pet**

The first key finding of the study was that all participants experienced a special relationship with their pet that died. One of the selection criteria for participation in the study was that the student had to have experienced a special relationship with a pet that died. During recruitment, the researcher defined the term special relationship as one with an animal that was considered to be a companion or friend rather than one used for utilitarian purposes, such as a hunting dog or mouser (see Appendix F). Study findings indicated, however, that participants had a much more nuanced interpretation of a special relationship. Although all participants had kept many pets throughout their lives, they selected one or two

particular pets to discuss in the interview, indicating that there was some quality about these relationships that set them apart from relationships with other pets they had kept. Four themes defined participants' experience of a special relationship with their pet: 1) participants described their relationships as unique, or different than relationships they had experienced with other companion animals; 2) participants used terms of endearment when describing their pets; 3) participants experienced strong feelings of emotional attunement with their pets; and 4) participants expressed strong grief responses to the deaths of their pets. A summary of the factors that defined each participant's experience of a special relationship with a pet is presented in Table 2 (Appendix A).

### **A Unique Relationship**

Although participants had kept many pets throughout their lives, a majority appeared to believe that their relationships with the special pets they described in their interviews were unique or different than relationships they had experienced with other pets. Some expressed the belief that they would never experience another relationship with an animal that was as significant or special. Others commented that their pets were unique individuals, with one-of-a-kind personalities. For some participants, the significance of the relationship appeared to be tied to the participant's age at the time they kept their pet; situational factors, such as the participant's reliance on their pet for emotional support during difficult life events; and the longevity of the relationship. In many cases, the participant's perception that the relationship was special appeared to be tied to more than one factor, e.g. a childhood pet that provided emotional support. All of these elements defined the quality of the unique relationships that participants experienced with their remembered pets.

Six participants appeared to regard their pets as unique individuals, and they distinguished these animals from others animals of the same species they had known. For example, Mollie believed her horse Honey was a very special horse. “I ain’t never seen a horse with the personality she had. She had a one-of-a-kind personality,” said Mollie. Lisa also felt that her cat Bobby was special. “I’ve had many, many cats. I’ve had barn cats. I had cats growing up,” she said. “... Bobby was a different kind of cat.”

A majority of participants kept their pets as children and reported that the pet they discussed in their interviews was their first pet. Their pets appeared to have a formative influence on their lives. For example, Opal considered her relationship with her childhood dog Buddy especially significant. Her stories suggested that her continuing bond with Buddy was intertwined with her childhood memories. The significance of her relationship with him and the way in which her bond with him was connected to her childhood were evident when she said:

My husband won’t be able to fulfill [that place in my heart that Buddy does]. My children won’t be able to fulfill that. All the dogs I get will never be able to fulfill that bond of everything that I possibly did when I was younger. I mean it’s a childhood memory. You don’t lose those. He was with me [through] a lot.

Like Opal, Hannah believed that her dog Timmy played a special role in her life. He was her first dog and her best friend as a child, and she didn’t believe she would ever have another pet like him. “There will be no Golden Retriever that will be like [Timmy]...just because he was my best friend,” she said. “... I don’t think that any dog could ever come close...because he was something special to me.”

John also had his dog Dare as a child. He commented that, although he loves all of the pets he has kept since he was a boy, his relationship with his dog Dare was special because she taught him a sense of responsibility and provided companionship and emotional support during his troubled childhood:

My dog now, I love him to death. But he's not my first dog, you know. And honestly I think...[Dare was special] because, having to walk her at such a young age, clean up after her, [helped] teach me responsibility...and [gave] me something to love at the time...at a time when I probably really needed it the most.

Like John, Carol relied on her dog Daniel for emotional support during her difficult teenage years. In reflecting on the bond she continued to feel for Daniel, she said, "I don't think I'll ever have a bond like that with an animal again. It was so special.... I love my dog that I have now. But it's just not the same."

In addition, for four participants, the longevity of the relationship appeared to contribute to its significance. For example, Celeste, who acquired her dog Rambo as an adult, described their "special bond":

I remember looking into [Rambo's] eyes as a puppy and how fun he was and everything and how joyful he was and how licky he was. And then I looked into his eyes again and saw the cataracts and everything, and I knew that he and I had a special bond, all these years.

Like Celeste, Frank acquired his cat Muppet as an adult and reported that, for more than 22 years, the two never spent a day apart. His story suggested that his relationship with Muppet was unique, in part because of the longevity of the relationship as well as the

emotional support she provided. He said they had a particularly strong connection and that the length of the relationship “played a role with it.... We had experiences over a lifetime...and she made me feel better, you know, on bad days.”

### **Terms of Endearment**

The special quality of participants’ relationships with their pets was evident in the strongly affectionate terms they used to describe their pets. Two themes emerged that defined participants’ feelings of affection for their pets: 1) participants regarded their pets as best friends; and 2) participants referred to their pets as their babies or children.

**Pets as friends.** A majority of study participants appeared to regard their deceased pets as close friends and companions. Their narratives suggested that friendship meant different things for different participants, and participants’ age appeared to be tied to differences in perspective. Participants who kept their pets as children based their relationships in play and camaraderie. Participants who kept their pets as adults based their relationships primarily in the companionship their pets provided.

***Friendships with pets in childhood.*** A majority of participants were children when they kept their pets and typically regarded their pets as playmates, peers or siblings. Their friendships were grounded in shared adventures, favorite activities and camaraderie. In addition, two of these participants, Opal and Rachel, appeared to enjoy their dominant positions in their relationships with their pets as the pets happily complied with their wishes.

The joy that Colleen experienced with her childhood dog, a dachshund named Pretzel, was evident in her stories of their adventures together. Pretzel went everywhere with her. Fishing and mushroom hunting were favorite activities, and he also liked to ride on her

bicycle handlebars. “I would literally pick him up and put him on my handlebars and hold his little feet,” she recalled. “And he would ride with me on my bike, and we would go for bike rides around the neighborhood. And he loved it.” Colleen considered Pretzel as her younger brother since she had no younger siblings, and Pretzel played a special role in her life. “I never had a little brother, a little sister, so [Pretzel] was all I had,” she said. “That’s why I used to dress him up in baby doll clothes and paint his nails, and he was like my little brother for me.”

Mollie’s bond with her horse Honey was grounded both in a fun-loving friendship as well as a sense of camaraderie. She described Honey as “very, very playful” and “full of life.” Here, she recalled the teasing, playful quality of their interactions:

She used to take my books from me. She would take my notebooks with her mouth and run off with them. I’m like, “Come back here!” And I’d have to chase her down. It was funny.... She wanted to play all the time.

An avid horsewoman, Mollie rode Honey in competition, and, together, they won many events. The sense of camaraderie and rapport she enjoyed with Honey was evident when she recalled their days of competition. “I won so many shows,” she recalled. “I won a saddle with her.”

Opal described her childhood dog Buddy as an “amazing friend,” and she relied on him as a steadfast companion with which she could share adventures and favorite activities. An only child through most of her childhood, she said that he would “sleep in my room [and] do everything with me.” She told many stories about the fun things they did together, including swimming, riding the bus around her hometown, going shopping, and visiting local

theme parks. Opal also appeared to take particular pleasure in Buddy's willingness to comply with her wishes. Though she had many friends, she felt that her relationship with Buddy was special:

I was the only sibling, [and] he was the only one I could dress up. I could put him in a stroller. I could do whatever I wanted to [him], and he would just sit there. I used to paint his nails and put bows in his hair.... [He was] better than a baby doll.

Rachel also recalled the close friendship she enjoyed with her childhood dog Scamp and the games they played together in her family's small apartment. Like Opal, shared play was an important part of their relationship, and she also appeared to enjoy his willingness to let her direct their play. She described the magical quality of their relationship and the way that Scamp became a part of her imaginary world:

It's almost like...you two are in your own world, and everybody else doesn't really exist.... When you're playing and you're having fun as a child and you have a pet that will let you put hats [on him] and do silly things and [he's] not trying to move away from you. It's like I know he knows he looks crazy right now, but he's not bothered by it. He lets me play and lets me do things. And so he just taught me a sense of friendship.

***Friendships with pets in adulthood.*** Four participants who described their pets as friends acquired their pets when they were adults, and their friendships appeared to be based primarily on the steady companionship they enjoyed with their pets and the important role their pets played in their day-to-day routines.

Frank rescued Muppet when he was a young man and said “for the next 22 and a half years, this cat and I bonded.... We ate together [and] slept together. We did everything together.” A devoted and loving companion, she met him at the door each day when he came home from work, lounged on his lap when he watched TV or read, and went to bed with him at the end of the evening. “We were friends,” he said. “We had experiences over a lifetime.”

Like Frank, Lisa was an adult when she acquired her cat Bobby, and the two enjoyed a long and fulfilling friendship. “He was my constant companion for 16 years,” she recalled. “... Everybody knew he was everything to me.” They lounged on the couch together, read together, studied together and slept together. When she traveled to visit her parents, she took him with her. “Normally when people come to visit their parents, they leave the cat at home. They have somebody feed the cat. I would always...bring [Bobby] with me,” she said. “Bobby was just part of my life like that.”

**Pets as babies.** A majority of participants referred to their pets as their babies or children. Their relationships with their pets appeared to be defined in part by a sense of responsibility for their pet’s well being. They believed that, like human babies, their pets were completely dependent on them for food, water and health care. They described experiences in which they nurtured and attended to their pets’ needs much as parents would attend to the needs of their child.

Helen referred to her pot-bellied pig, Wilbur, as her “little baby.” “I’ve always had this thing with raising baby animals, bottle feeding them, and [I] just wanted to raise them,” she said. For Helen, animals were family, and she loved picking out names for them,

frequently inspired by her favorite country music stars. “[My animals] all have names. They all have middle names. I mean they’re family,” she said.

The nurturing, parental relationship that many participants had with their pets was apparent in their descriptions of the careful, painstaking ways in which they attended to their pets’ needs. For example, Frank strove to give his cat Muppet the best life possible:

I took Muppet from an eyedropper up to the time she passed away.... I made an effort to make sure she had the best opportunity with the best kinds of foods, appropriate exercise, regular vaccinations, limiting her to exposure unnecessarily.

Similarly, Jane maintained a nurturing, parental relationship with her pets. This perspective was apparent in her story about nursing three kittens that were ill. “I got [the kittens] when they were like maybe a month old. And I pretty much bottle-fed them, and I was their mom,” she said. “I had to feed them every two hours and keep them clean and warm and stuff.” Jane considered her interactions with her pets as opportunities to learn about caring for animals and helping them live happy, healthy lives. She described this experience when she said that her connection with her pets was “like learning the signs, the symptoms, and what I can do more of [to help them].”

### **Emotional Attachments With Pets**

The third factor that defined participants’ experience of special relationships with their pets was the strength of their emotional attachments with their pets. Participants’ stories about their pets suggested that their relationships were especially deep and meaningful, and their connections with their pets appeared to be characterized by a strong sense of emotional attunement. For example, Mollie said that she was “emotionally attached to Honey.... That

horse loved me to death, and I loved her.... We knew each other so well.” Lisa also felt a strong sense of emotional attunement with her cat Bobby. She happened to find Bobby in an animal shelter, even though she had no plans of adopting a pet. Her connection with him was powerful and immediate, a love-at-first-sight experience:

It was like he called me. I can’t explain it. He was the only [cat] that I looked at that day. I took him out of his cage. And I filled out the application form that day. I cursed them for not letting me take him home for that day because I had to wait. And I thought about him. I thought about nothing more except letting me take my cat home. It was an immediate bond.

Karen’s stories about her childhood dog Zuzu suggested that her emotional connection with Zuzu had a spiritual quality. She believed that animals have souls and can see inside a person’s soul, and she attributed this belief to her strong emotional connection with Zuzu:

I think I might have learned [that an animal can see into your soul] from Zuzu. She was a part of me. Because I can still remember her eyes, those big brown golden eyes.... She would lay down on my lap, and she would just look up. And I’d just talk to her about everything.... I remember just knowing that Zuzu loved me...and part of me thinks that [she’s] up there watching me.

In addition, a majority of participants reported that they received unconditional love from their pets. They appeared to believe that their pet were attuned with their moods and consistently responded with steadfast affection. These participants perceived that the emotional support they received from their pets helped them cope with difficult times in their

lives. Struggling through divorce, family breakups, emotional and physical abuse, homelessness and frequent moves, these participants felt that their pets gave them the kind of steady, unconditional love that the significant people in their lives did not provide. The narratives of these participants indicated that they sometimes felt a stronger attachment to their pets than they did to people.

Celeste's story about her dog Rambo indicated that he was an important source of steady, reliable love as well as security. Unhappily married to an abusive man, she said that Rambo would often try to defend her from her husband's physical abuse and "ended up bloody sometimes." Rambo was also an important source of emotional support in this troubled time in her life. "[Rambo and I] went through a lot together; and an animal can get you through things you've never dreamed of," she said. "They can calm you down. They do more than a person does, in my opinion. They can express how they feel about you...and they're always there to help you out." She described how the simple, enthusiastic love that Rambo and her other pets gave her every day brought joy to her life:

When I walk through the door...[my dogs] ran up to me and jumped on me and welcomed me home all the time. The lab I have now, he acts like he hasn't seen me for ten years every time I walk through the door. He about knocks me over every time. Rambo did the same thing. He would run up to me and just jump all over me just because I came home.

Celeste's description of her childhood experiences suggested that she lacked strong emotional attachments with family members and that, conversely, she maintained strong attachments to her pets. This pattern began after some traumatic experiences in early

childhood, and she started “internalizing into my stuffed animals.” Her stuffed animals and, later, her pets gave her the love and support that she did not experience in her family:

My stuffed animals when I was little became alive.... I would doctor them and everything. I would feed them and water them, and what not, with real water.... My stuffed animals became my friends. And then when I got real animals, they became my friends, and I felt like I could talk to them, and I felt like I could get on their level where they understood me. And that has never gone away.

Carol’s stories about her childhood dog, Daniel, underscored the importance of a pet’s reliable and unconditional love to someone struggling with difficult experiences. When she started doing “bad things” as a teenager, his steady presence and unflagging love and devotion were an important source of stability in her life. During this time, Carol lived an unsettled life, moving out and back into her parents’ house multiple times. “I’d always leave and come back and leave and come back,” she said. “But when I came back, he was always the same. He was always right by me. He [always lay] by me. He was just, you know, unconditional love.” Her comments indicated that she felt that Daniel and her other dogs provided a kind of steady love and support that she didn’t always receive from the people in her life. “Dogs have always made me happy, and they’ve always been there, and they can comfort you, and...they don’t talk back to you,” she said. “They’re not mean to you like people are. So I knew I could always count on dogs.”

John’s dog, Dare, also played an important role as a stable source of unconditional love in what he described as a “very bad childhood.” Teased by schoolmates, he frequently got into fights and was scolded and punished by his parents as well as teachers – judgments

that he believed were unfair. “Most every day I was getting picked on or into fights,” he said. “It was a combination of the teachers didn’t believe that I wouldn’t start it. My parents didn’t believe. You know, I was always the trouble-maker, no matter what.” In coping with these difficulties, John came to rely on Dare for companionship as well as emotional support. He recalled coming home from a tough day at school and sitting on his front step. Dare would “come over and sit by me and put her nose in my lap and nudge my hand, kind of flip it up and get me to pet her.” He said it was like “you’re hurting and just the act of petting her, walking her, would help me out.” He believed that Dare loved him without judging him. “I could play with her whenever I wanted,” he said. “[I could] walk her. I had someone that I could rely on. And that loved me no matter what, and I could love her right back.”

John’s painful experiences with others combined with his positive experiences with Dare shaped his belief that he had a stronger attachment to animals than with people. John’s bond with Dare and other pets he has kept since his childhood was anchored in the nonjudgmental love he felt they gave him. “[The] bond that I’ve had with animals is that they...don’t judge you,” he said. “They’re there, they just want to be treated right and loved, and [they] give that love right back.” In keeping with this belief, John reported that he gets along better with animals than with people. “The hurt [I’ve had] from people was worse than any animal’s worst day,” he said. “... I relate to animals better in the long run than I do with people.”

### **Grief Responses to the Death of the Pet**

The final factor that defined participants’ experiences of special relationships with their pets was their intense emotional reactions to the deaths of their pets. All participants had

kept many pets throughout their lives, and some commented that they had never felt such deep feelings of grief for the death of a pet. As Karen said when describing the loss of her special childhood pets, “losing any [of my pets was] tough, but there’s always those special ones that stick with you a little longer than the others.”

The intensity of participants’ grief was most evident in the language they used to describe the experience. A majority referred to their grief experience with phrases such as “heartbroken” and “torn up.” They described feelings of intense despair and distress, especially when the pet died traumatically or suffered greatly. Seven of these participants also expressed feelings of guilt. For example, Carol struggled emotionally when her childhood dog Daniel died of cancer. Her story of his illness and eventual death indicated that he appeared to suffer at the end of his life. “He was just miserable the last few months,” she said. “... [and] he had scabs. All [his] hair fell off.... It was just horrible.” She commented that, although she had felt sad when her family’s dog Gracie died, Daniel’s death was more difficult. “I just remember feeling like my heart had been ripped out with Daniel,” she said. Carol also appeared to feel guilty following Daniel’s death because she didn’t think she was with him as much as she should have been. “It still hurts thinking about him. And it makes me sad that I wasn’t there enough,” she said. “... Because he was...my first baby.”

Like Carol, Celeste expressed guilt and remorse following the death of her dog Rambo. Celeste was going through a divorce at the time and had been forced to leave Rambo with her ex-husband, who left Rambo – previously an inside dog – outside when he left on vacation. Rambo was later found dead on the side of the road by some neighbors. When she discovered that Rambo had died, Celeste said she “felt a ton of grief run over me.” She also

appeared to be plagued by remorse for what she perceived as her culpability for his death. She found solace in her belief that Rambo had gone to heaven and that someday she would see him again and he would forgive her. “I was horrified when I found out [how Rambo died], but there was nothing I could do,” she said. “And when he died...I just prayed that he’s up in heaven and being able to have the freedom and the running around and everything that I wished he had down here. And I hope that he doesn’t hold it against me because I couldn’t take him with me. Because I really feel that I let him down.”

Lisa’s story suggested that losing her cat Bobby was like losing a human loved one. She said that when Bobby died, she had lost her “other half,” a phrase commonly used to refer to the loss of a spouse. Her decision to euthanize Bobby was very difficult, and, after his death, she struggled to get through her day-to-day routines. “I know I was...crazy,” she said. “... I went about my normal routine, but I wasn’t present... I felt like I wasn’t quite in my present state of mind. I wasn’t in my body, you know. I would forget things because you feel like there’s a missing piece.”

Like Lisa, Mollie used language typically associated with the loss of a human loved one when describing the death of her horse Honey. “She was a big part of me...and I never really understood when people said [when] a loved one dies, ‘I lost a part of me too’...until Honey died,” she said. She also said that Honey’s death “was a real heartbreaker for me.” Although as a farm girl she had experienced the death of animals many times, Honey’s death appeared to be especially difficult. “[Honey’s death] was a major hurt to me. That was probably the most I’ve been hurt by an animal dying is her,” she said.

### **Continuing Bonds: Expressions of Attachment**

The second key finding of the study was that participants experienced continuing emotional bonds with their deceased pets. It was not assumed at the outset of the study that participants had experienced continuing bonds with their pets. However, participants' stories indicated that their pets continued to be a living presence in their lives. Further, the maintenance of emotional connections with their pets appeared to help participants cope with the loss of their pets. All participants believed that, although they still felt sad when thinking about their pets' deaths, they took comfort in their memories of happy times shared with their pets.

Although on average it had been more than eight years since their special pets had died (see Appendix E), participants' feelings of love for their pets did not appear to diminish with time. They continued to engage in a variety of activities through which they maintained their emotional connections with their deceased pets. Literature identifies such activities as continuing bond expressions (CBE), which are defined as coping strategies demonstrated by pet owners after a pet's death (Packman et al., 2011). The CBE reported by each participant are presented in Table 3 (Appendix B). Participants' CBE fell into two categories: 1) behaviors in which participants actively maintained their connections with their pets; and 2) thoughts and sensations associated with their pets.

#### **Behaviors Associated With the Continuing Bond**

All participants actively maintained their emotional connections with their deceased pets through a variety of behaviors, including talking with their pet, talking with others about the pet, saving keepsakes, creating memorials and shrines, visiting their pet's favorite places,

and having thoughts of being reunited with their pets, among others. In addition, all participants reported that they engaged in more than one behavior.

One of the most common behavioral CBE was saving keepsakes such as photos and objects associated with the pet. For example, Mollie kept a set of Honey's horseshoes and had plans to hang them on the wall of her new home, arranged as if Honey were walking along the wall. Hannah said that her dog Timmy's collar was displayed in her father's office so that "when you sat at the computer you could look up and see it."

Another common CBE was creating memorials and shrines. Many participants' held burial services for their pets, typically interring their pets in a personal space such as their family's backyard and erecting tombstones or other markers for the grave. For example, Teresa reported that her family kept a burial plot with separate graves for all the family dogs, including her dog Chasey. Other participants had memorials in public spaces. For example, Opal's friends arranged to have a bone plaque installed in the memorial garden of their church, honoring the memory of her childhood dog, Buddy.

A majority of participants reported that they frequently shared memories of their pet with others who had known the pet. For example, Nina regularly shared photographs and stories about her deceased pets with friends and family. "I always try to look for the pictures and show [my friends] like, 'This is the cat that was really attached to me. And this is my Husky [Missy]. I used to have a Husky,'" she said. "... I always try to talk about my animals." Similarly, Colleen and her mother frequently talked about her childhood dog, Pretzel, a dachshund. After Pretzel died, Colleen and her mother both got new dogs of the same breed. Colleen's new dog reminded her of Pretzel, and she talked enthusiastically about

the funny mannerisms the dogs shared. “[The two dogs are] just so similar. And [my new dog] reminds me so much of [Pretzel] that it makes me smile,” she said. “... It’s a way for him to live here with us still. So even though he’s not actually here, we can kind of keep him alive with memories and different things.”

Three participants had thoughts of being reunited with their pets. For example, Celeste talked happily about her belief that someday she would be reunited in heaven with her dog Rambo, along with all her other pets. “When you get to heaven you can actually communicate with your animals like you wish you could here,” she said. “And to hear [Rambo] say I understood and I love you is the best thing that could ever happen.... We’ll have a big dog party when I get there.”

Participants reported a number of unique activities through which they maintained emotional connections with their deceased pets. For example, Carol said she plans to get a tattoo of her dog Daniel’s paw print “because he was that special to me.” Hannah continued to visit the pen where she used to play with her childhood dog Timmy. “His pen was still there, the dog house was still there, the holes that he dug, it just kind of like stayed the same,” Hannah said. “I guess I never really wondered why. I just always knew that it was something that should stay there.” In addition, Karen regularly talked with her childhood dog Zuzu, whose remains were kept in an urn just inside the front door of her mother’s home. “Her ashes still sit there so she is waiting for you,” she said. “I would talk to her. And I would be like ‘I wish you were still here. I miss you.’”

Anna also had a unique way of honoring her pets’ memories: she refused to reuse a former pet’s name for new pets. When her boyfriend wanted to use the name Brownie for a

new guinea pig, Anna refused because Brownie had been one of her childhood pets. She explained why she believed that using the names of her former pets would dishonor their memory:

To me it feels like...I'm not valuing the relationship [my pets and I] had or memories we had [if I reuse a name]. It's just like...I'm not valuing the relationship and the memories we had together.... I do care enough to keep [my pets] sacred in my heart, to keep the memories alive.

### **Thoughts and Physical Sensations Associated With the Continuing Bond**

All study participants experienced CBE through non-volitional activities, such as dreams; associations or triggered memories; and visual images and physical sensations. Dreaming about pets was common, although one participant had nightmares about her pet and his traumatic death. Helen, whose pig Wilbur died following a botched circumcision, said that she and her mother continued to have dreams about Wilbur's death in which they heard Wilbur's screams of pain.

In addition, six participants experienced associations or triggered memories of their pets. For example, Karen said that whenever she saw a Rottweiler, she immediately thought about her childhood dog Zuzu. Similarly, Hannah commented that whenever she sees a golden retriever, she immediately thinks of her dog Timmy. Carol said that, when she tosses the soccer ball with her young son, she thinks about her dog Daniel. When she was a child, she had enjoyed practicing soccer with Daniel. "I'd toss the ball to [Daniel], and he'd hit it back. He was awesome at catching and bouncing stuff," she said. "... My son loves throwing balls and...sometimes it makes me think of [Daniel]."

CBE also took the form of mental images. When reflecting about his childhood dog Dare, John said that he immediately had a mental image of Dare, vividly recalling the fields and swamps of his boyhood that he and Dare explored together. He said it was as if Dare and the physical spaces of his childhood were somehow connected in his mind. Karen experienced her continuing emotional connection with her childhood hamster, Daisy, as a physical sensation and a strong sense of Daisy's presence. "I feel warm, like there's still something there," said Karen. "I feel like [Daisy is] still part of me. Even though she's not here, she's still a part of me. And she still holds a special place [in my heart] because [I] get that warm [feeling], that ache."

### **Interpersonal Interactions With Regard to the Pet**

The third key finding of the study was that participants experienced supportive and unsupportive interpersonal interactions with regard to their pets. Participants described social interactions during their pets' lifetimes, at the time of their pets' deaths, and in the years subsequent to the deaths. Their stories suggested that their social experiences fell into two distinct groups: the majority experienced predominantly positive or supportive interactions with regard to their pets while a subset, or four participants, experienced predominantly negative or unsupportive interactions. This division in the study group held true across all of the interactions that were discussed. That is, supportive interactions as well as unsupportive interactions remained largely consistent during the pets' lifetimes, at the time of the pets' deaths and in the years following the pets' deaths.

A majority of participants were children when they had their pets, and in most cases they focused on their interactions with family members in describing their experiences with

their pets. Many also described interactions with friends and coworkers, and five described interactions with veterinarians and veterinary staff that took place during their pets' illnesses and at the time of the pets' deaths. Of the various social experiences that participants discussed, interactions with family members appeared to have the most significant impact on the quality of participants' social experiences. That is, participants' feelings of social inclusion or exclusion were expressed most strongly in the family context. Further, interactions at the time of the pets' deaths appeared to be especially critical on participants' sense of social belonging. For example, participants whose families supported their attachments to their pets relied on their families for sympathy and care at the time of their pets' deaths and felt that others' supportive responses were comforting. In contrast, the four participants whose families were predominantly unsupportive of their attachments to their pets often fell into despair when family members were unsympathetic, dismissive and, in some cases, derisive of their grief.

Three key themes concerning participants' interpersonal interactions with regard to their pets emerged from the data: 1) regard for the pet as a family member or commodity; 2) sympathetic and unsympathetic responses to the loss of the pet; and 3) continuing interpersonal interactions regarding the pet during the years following its death. A summary of participants' interpersonal interactions with regard to their pets is presented in Table 4 (Appendix C).

### **Pets as Family Members or Commodities**

As previously noted, the majority of participants experienced predominantly supportive interactions with regard to their pets during their pets' lifetimes. In supportive

social contexts, others valued the participant's pet in the same manner as the participant, even if they didn't share the participant's strong emotional connection with the pet. The participant's attachment to their pet was supported, encouraged and often celebrated. In contrast, four participants experienced predominantly unsupportive interactions with regard to their pets. In unsupportive social contexts, others did not appear to share the participant's same sense of love and attachment for the pet. Pets and animals in general were largely regarded as commodities and possessions. In turn, the people with whom the participant interacted appeared to misunderstand, dismiss and, in some cases, ridicule the participant's feelings about their pet. These participants appeared to feel alienated or excluded from their primary social systems. These two themes – pets as family members and pets as commodities or possessions – are explored in the following sections.

**Pets as family members.** A majority of study participants lived in pet-friendly homes in which their pets were valued and treated in much the same manner as other family members. Important rituals of family membership included participation in day-to-day family routines as well as special events and holidays. In some cases, a participant's family member shared their strong attachment to the pet, and their common experiences with the pet formed a bond between the participant and the family member. Participants and their families carefully attended to pets' needs for love and healthcare, and participants often credited their family members with teaching them how to care for their pets. In addition, some families kept multiple pets and appeared to have a strong ethic of animal rescue. In such supportive social contexts, the participant's bond with their pet was also their family's bond.

Hannah reported that her childhood dog Timmy was included in her family's holiday events and special occasions as well as quotidian activities. Timmy also represented a familial bond between Hannah and her father. She described her father as "mushy about dogs" and recalled that he shared her strong emotional connection with Timmy. "My dad was the absolute closest with [Timmy]," she said. "He was the one who brought him home." This shared emotional connection was an important part of their relationship. "Most of the time it was me, Timmy and my dad," she said. "I was very much daddy's girl when I was younger. Still am. But we would just kind of hang out outside, and we'd feed him, we'd play with him." The meanings Hannah made of her bond with Timmy reflected these experiences in her family. She believed that Timmy was "very much a part of our family" and, like her father, felt that pets should be cherished as friends and companions.

Like Hannah, Opal's strong attachment to her childhood dog Buddy was celebrated, nurtured and shared by her family, friends and tight-knit community. Buddy was an important part of her family's day-to-day routines. "If I wasn't home, [Buddy would] go and sit underneath my mom's desk," she said. "... And then if my dad came home, they would watch movies, and [Buddy] would go sit on the couch, and my dad would [lie] down and just rub his belly." Her friends had keys to her house and would frequently stop by to take Buddy for walks or play with him. Opal said that she used to dress Buddy up and take him around town in a special carriage that a family friend built for him. "Every time I took him somewhere he was the center of attention," she recalled. "... Like we used to go to Wendy's, [and] the staff would give us little Frosty cups with water and chicken nuggets." Buddy also visited her church, running up and down the aisles and greeting everyone.

Seven pet-friendly families kept multiple pets that had been rescued from animal shelters or from the street. In these families, participants appeared to have clearly defined self-perceptions as animal helpers and healers. They all expressed an interest in rescuing animals, indicating that their family members were significant role models for rescue behavior. For example, Jane grew up in a house full of rescued animals, and she and her mother currently have nine cats and two dogs. Her mother, a nurse, was passionate about saving animals, and Jane credited her with supporting and nurturing her interest in caring for animals. “I feel like she’s helped me a lot,” she said. “... She would give me her medical knowledge and what I can do to help [my pets].” Beyond these medical skills, Jane said she also “learned a lot of compassion from my mom.” In this setting, Jane developed a passion for rescuing animals, and her comments indicated that she found the experience of saving an animal gratifying. Her sense of pride was evident in her enthusiastic account of saving some kittens that would have died without her help:

Really rescuing [animals] is...great. [My mom and I] have three of the babies that we’ve raised. They’re five years old now.... One of them was...lost in like a trash plant...and he was like less than a day old, like maybe a few hours. And they didn’t think he was going to make it. And then he made it.

Nina’s family also had a long tradition of rescuing and caring for multiple pets, and these experiences informed her self-perception as an animal healer. Her grandmothers from both sides of her family rescued and kept many pets in their homes, and she credited them with teaching her how to care for them. “My grandmothers were the ones who showed me how to care for the animals,” she said. “That’s when [my interest in animals] started.” Under

the guidance of her grandmothers, Nina's passion for helping animals flourished, and she gained a clear purpose in life as an animal healer. "That is what I was meant for, to take care of animals," she said. "... Every person that has met me, they always know that this is who I am."

Similarly, John's family had a strong tradition of pet keeping. In John's family, pets were named by combining the names of family members, a tradition initiated by his grandmother. As a teenager, he sometimes lived with his aunt and uncle, and the family kept many cats, many of them rescues. His aunt painstakingly cared for them, even though she was allergic to cats. "They just had a hoard of cats at any given time," he said. "And...even though [my aunt] was allergic to cats, she'd check them for ticks and fleas and do what needed to be done. I'd sit down and help her." These experiences appeared to shape John's interest in rescuing animals. As an adult, he described himself as "the kind of guy, if I'm going I-40 doing 110, and I see a turtle, I'll block all the traffic and move this turtle."

**Pets as commodities.** Four participants – Anna, Celeste, Mollie and Rachel – experienced predominantly unsupportive interpersonal interactions with regard to their pets. These participants kept their pets in households in which their families appeared to regard animals, including the participant's pet, as commodities or possessions. Pets were sometimes neglected or mistreated by family members. These participants' stories of pet attachment and loss suggested that their family members were indifferent, dismissive and, in some cases, hostile to their feelings of attachment to their pets. Participants' feelings about their pets were often minimized or dismissed as being unreasonable or strange. In response to such interactions, the participants expressed strong feelings of sadness, isolation and sometimes

anger. They appeared to feel emotionally isolated in their families and often felt misunderstood or different than others since their love of animals was not supported or shared.

Notably, participants who kept their pets in unsupportive social contexts were greatly concerned when animals were not well cared for, and they shared a strong interest in protecting and rescuing animals. Undaunted by the lack of support for their strong attachments to their pets, they remained committed to giving their pets and other animals the best life possible.

Rachel's experience with her family and her childhood dog Scamp exemplified the social dynamic that typically occurred in homes that were not pet friendly. She reported that in her household, "a dog was just a dog" and that her parents considered her strong emotional attachment to Scamp as "silly." She was seven years old when her parents decided to move and leave her dog Scamp behind. The pain of the loss and her parents' disregard for her feelings informed her belief that they did not share her love for Scamp:

[My parents] were never pet people. They've always been working and doing things, so sometimes people don't really necessarily look at pets as family members. And I think that it took me constantly showing like, "[Scamp] is my baby," for them to actually get into it and really understand...that it really is a relationship or a bond that you have with somebody. It's not something that you can just, "Oh, we've got to pack up and move. [We have] got to leave the dog." And it was hurtful because it's just like I thought about it differently I guess in my mind than they did.

Rachel's comments also indicated that, in her family and community, animals were regarded as possessions or, in her words, as an "accessory...like a colored watchband." "For some people, it's not necessarily an attachment to the animal they have," she said. "It's the idea of, 'Well I have a dog that looks vicious. Or I have a dog that looks like a little stuffed animal.' Some people do look at animals that way. I've grown up with family members who they're the same way." She observed that people with this perspective often neglected their pets, and she saw first-hand how animals suffered at the hands of their owners. These experiences informed her belief that pet owners have an obligation to care for their pets just as they would for a human child:

[A pet is] a living thing. It's not a stuffed animal that you can just pick up and play with when you want to or pretend like you're having a tea party when you want to. You actually have to take care of them.... It's just like a child.

Like Rachel, Mollie was also concerned about what she perceived as her family's disagreement about the value of animals as well as her attachments to the animals she loved as pets. She grew up on a small family farm where many animals were kept, and her stories indicated that her family expected the death of an animal should be stoically accepted. She referred to this perspective as "the way of life" and explained that "the way of life is [animals] live, they die. We don't like it. We're never going to like the fact of losing someone that we care about." In this setting, she struggled to resolve her strong sense of connection to animals and her desire to rescue them no matter what the circumstances. She recalled one particularly painful experience in which her attachment to her pets came into conflict with her father's belief in the "way of life." When she was eight years old, her pony

fell ill. Frantic with worry, she begged her father to call a veterinarian to help, but he refused. It was an event that she has never forgotten, and she became determined to help others avoid the pain she experienced:

I do understand where my dad's point of view was...because we live on a farm, I mean, it's a way of life. [Animals] die. But when you have an eight-year-old daughter that her heart's all wrapped up in that...little pony, at least give her that satisfaction [of trying to save the animal]. And one day I want to be able to do that.

This experience appeared to have a lasting effect on Mollie's values and beliefs about animal care and stewardship. Although she understood the importance of accepting the death of animals as a natural part of life, she was determined from a young age to prove to others that animals they would give up for lost could be saved. When she was in middle school, she assisted her uncle and father with the birth of a clubfooted calf. When her uncle saw the clubfoot, he remarked that "this one ain't going to be worth nothing" and that the calf should be put down. Determined to save the calf, Mollie bargained with her uncle, and he agreed that he wouldn't kill the calf if she could heal the clubfoot. Her steely determination to save the calf challenged the prevailing attitude about animals in her family and community:

Every morning, 4 a.m., I was down there [with the calf]. Every afternoon when I got off that [school] bus, I was down there. Every night before I went to bed, I was down there. I kept warm water on his ankles and just constantly [worked] him, [worked] him, kept him working.... [I made] him put pressure on [his foot]. And I played with him so much that within about six months he was walking. No problems.

### **Sympathetic and Unsympathetic Responses to Pet Loss**

In keeping with the social patterns evident during their pets' lifetimes, participants' interpersonal interactions at the time of their pets' deaths fell into two primary groups: a majority experienced positive, sympathetic responses from others when their pets died, and a subset, or four participants, experienced predominantly unsupportive responses as their grief was misunderstood or dismissed. Most participants turned to close family and friends for support, purposefully seeking out others who they believed would understand their feelings. In addition to describing interactions with family and friends, some participants described experiences with coworkers as well as veterinarians and veterinary staff who were treating their pet.

Regardless of whom they talked with, participants' social interactions at the time of their pets' deaths appeared to have a significant impact on their grief experience and their feelings of inclusion or exclusion within their social systems. For most participants, their grief for the loss of their pets was acute. Many described feelings of guilt and despair, especially when their pet died traumatically or suffered. Participants who experienced sympathetic, caring responses felt comforted and reported that such interactions helped assuage their grief. When others validated their attachments and intense grief, participants appeared to feel that others cared about their pets and cared about them as well. In contrast, when participants experienced unsympathetic responses from others, they inevitably expressed feelings of sadness, isolation and anger.

These two themes – sympathetic and unsympathetic responses to pet loss – are explored in the following sections.

**Sympathetic responses to pet loss.** A majority of participants reported that they relied primarily on their families for emotional support when their pets died. In pet-friendly homes, the participant's family members attempted to console the participant. They typically held memorial services for the pet, and the pet was often buried in the family's backyard. In addition, half of the participants said they turned to friends, coworkers or other community members, including veterinarians and veterinary staff, for emotional support when their pets died. In all cases, participants felt that the positive, sympathetic responses they received from others helped them cope with their grief.

The compassionate, supportive response of Hannah's parents when she lost her childhood dog Timmy appeared to help her cope with the loss. Timmy died suddenly of heartworms when Hannah was ten years old. Shocked and distraught, she remembered her parents consoling her by acknowledging her sadness. "I basically just remember being really sad and crying a lot. And them having to explain to me that [Timmy] went to heaven and that he was very sick," she said. "[Knowing that Timmy was in heaven] definitely helped a little bit because my family was very much a religious family." Her family also observed important rituals of death, burying Timmy in their backyard, erecting a tombstone and holding a memorial service for him.

Many people rallied around Opal when her childhood dog Buddy passed away. Her supportive community included her family as well as friends and members of her church. Her father flew her girlfriends from her childhood home to their new home in North Carolina for an extended visit after Buddy died, and she said that having her friends with her "made it a

lot better.” Her friends later arranged to have a memorial erected to Buddy in their church back in Opal’s hometown:

[My friends were] really amazing. I belonged to a church organization [where I used to live].... They have a memory garden. And we put all of the very important people [in] our church [in the garden]. And fortunately all the girls got together and spoke with the pastor, and they put in a little bone...plaque. And they put [Buddy’s] name on it and everything like that with a [memorial] tree.

Similarly, Teresa relied on her family, friends and coworkers for emotional support during her dog Chasey’s difficult illness and death from cancer. Her comments indicated that their sympathetic responses validated her feelings of grief and helped her cope with the loss. Chasey was only five years old when she was diagnosed with cancer, and Teresa’s family was very supportive throughout Chasey’s illness. A family friend who was a veterinarian advised the family about seeking treatment, and her father also took an active role in helping her find a specialized veterinary hospital. When asked how she felt when she reached out to her family when Chasey died, Teresa said, “It was good because [my family was] always involved with [Chasey].” After her death, Chasey was buried with the rest of the family’s dogs. “My parents have a lot of land, and they have a huge backyard, so [the dogs are] all buried in one area,” she said. “And they all have their individual graves.” Teresa also reached out to her coworkers when Chasey died, and their sympathy and concern helped her cope with the loss.

I had coworkers at the time that I talked to that were aware of [Chasey’s illness] and everything.... And pretty much everybody that worked there were animal lovers, so I

had them, too. They'd always ask about her and everything. Obviously it's not an ideal situation because of her health, but as far as support goes, it was a good situation.

Four participants described supportive interactions with veterinarians and veterinary staff when their pets were ill or following their pets' death. For example, Carol believed that the support she received from the veterinary clinic during her dog's illness helped her cope:

I had to take Daniel to emergency. He wasn't doing well. And they were just so nice there. I'm like, "What would I have done if you guys weren't here?" I would have had to stay up the entire night to make sure...something horrible didn't happen.... I was really pregnant...[and] I was so distraught, too, and they were so nice.

Similarly, Lisa's story about the euthanasia of her cat Bobby indicated that the caring, sympathetic responses she received from the staff at the veterinary clinic helped her cope with the ordeal. Her comments suggested that, by recognizing and honoring her love for Bobby and acknowledging the intense grief she experienced when he died, the staff demonstrated that they cared for Bobby and for her as well:

The vet tech took me by the hand, and she...took me to the car, she put me in the car, and she asked, "Can you drive?" And I said, "Yes." And then she said, "Call me as soon as you get back." And I was so grateful to that tech because to her it wasn't about putting a catheter in or urinalysis.... It was she cared so much about that cat, and she cared also about me.

**Unsympathetic responses to pet loss.** As previously noted, a majority of participants experienced predominantly sympathetic responses from others when their pets died.

However, four participants experienced a mixture of sympathetic and unsympathetic responses, and the social experiences of an additional four participants were predominantly negative. In all cases, when participants encountered others who did not understand or sympathize with their grief, they expressed feelings of sadness and isolation, and these experiences appeared to aggravate or heighten their grief. The responses of family members, in particular, appeared to have a significant influence on participants' grief experience, although interactions with friends and veterinarians or veterinary staff also had an impact.

When discussing their social experiences at the time of their pets' deaths, many participants appeared to be cognizant of prevailing perceptions about pets among casual friends and peers. They often felt that others would not understand their strong attachments to their pets, particularly the intense grief they experienced when their pets died. In turn, they avoided sharing their feelings with people outside their closest social circles. For example, Carol said that she avoided talking with schoolmates when her dog Daniel died. "Some people look at [pets and think], 'Oh well...it's just your pet,'" She said. "So I don't think I really talked about [Daniel's death] to people."

Six participants described interactions with friends following the deaths of their pets that appeared to be deeply troubling and hurtful. For example, although she felt that her parents sympathized with her grief when she lost her cat Bobby, Lisa encountered friends who minimized her feelings. Dismayed at such responses, Lisa withdrew emotionally:

People would ask like, "How are you doing?" I would just be like, "Oh, it's OK." I think I just really wasn't ready to talk about it, you know. And some people would just sort of blow it off like, "It was just a cat." I had one friend who actually said,

“Oh, it was just a cat.” And that’s...when I shut down. And that was like, “OK, we’re not talking about this.”

Helen had an especially difficult interaction with the veterinarian who botched the circumcision of her pet pig, Wilbur. Wilbur died days after the procedure, and Helen was distraught and angry with the veterinarian – feelings that were exacerbated by his lack of sympathy for her loss. When she confronted him about his culpability in Wilbur’s death, he responded by saying that Wilbur was “just a pig. I’ll get you another one.” Helen was incensed. “I was angry. I was very very angry,” she said. “First of all, I’m a client of yours. And you pretty much killed my pet. Yeah, it’s just a pig to you, but it’s not to me.”

Among the four participants who experienced predominantly unsupportive interpersonal interactions, the lack of emotional support they experienced when their pets died appeared to be especially difficult. In struggling with their grief, these participants believed that they could not rely on their families for sympathy. For example, Mollie struggled with the death of her horse Honey, and she was angry with her parents because of their casual dismissal of her feelings. Mollie had moved away from the family farm, but continued to visit with Honey and ride her every weekend. One Sunday, she discovered that Honey was missing and later learned that she had died the previous Friday. Her mother subsequently told her that her father buried Honey with the backhoe. Mollie was deeply saddened by the loss and angered by the fact that her parents didn’t contact her when Honey died. In response, she promptly created a memorial for Honey in a defiant, determined effort to honor her beloved horse:

I started to cry. And then I ended up yelling and screaming and hollering.... It was anger mostly first and then I went into just crying. And then by the time my parents pulled in...it brought out that anger. I went to [the hardware store], got a piece of wood, cut it out...sanded it, stained it and burned in "RIP Honey. You'll always be in my heart."

In reflecting on the experience, Mollie believed that her family and friends were concerned about her grief. They didn't understand her strong attachment to Honey and why she reacted so strongly to her death. Mollie recalled a conversation with her best friend:

She was like, "I don't really understand why it hurts you so bad like as if it was a human that died. And that's basically what it is to you, and I understand that part of it. But I don't understand why."... And I was like, "To me, they're not just an animal. They're your friend. They're your better half sometimes. They're...miniature people to me."

Like Mollie, Anna believed that some family members did not recognize or support her emotional attachments to her pets. She spent much of her childhood on her grandparents' farm, and, although the family kept many pets, animals were left to roam freely on the unfenced property. Consequently, many were lost or killed. Anna struggled to cope with these losses, and she told a number of stories in which some members of her family were either dismissive or openly derisive of her strong attachment to her pets. Deeply hurt and alienated from her family, she came to believe that her family did not value or love animals in the same way that she did. Her story also indicated that the rejection she experienced from

her family because of her attachment to her pets shaped the overall quality of her relationship with family members.

Anna told a particularly poignant story that illustrated her deep feelings of alienation from her family. She was 11 years old when her dog Brownie was hit and killed by a car. When she cried about Brownie's death, her sisters ridiculed her, and her aunt accused her of overreacting. The sadness and alienation she experienced as a result of these interactions were apparent when she said:

I felt hurt. It felt like I couldn't come to [my family]...like I couldn't come to them for not only just my feelings towards a certain animal.... I felt like I couldn't come to them for anything that I may feel hurt about.... I felt that I couldn't count on them to be there for me if I needed them.... It just felt like...I shouldn't cry over an animal. And that's kind of why I shy away from expressing my feelings [about] my animals [to] other people.

Like Anna, Celeste struggled with grief after her dog Rambo died. Celeste had divorced her husband and moved out of the house, but was forced to leave Rambo behind due to financial constraints. Abused and neglected by her ex-husband, Rambo was killed by a car. Heartbroken and racked with guilt, Celeste felt responsible for Rambo's death:

[Rambo] was very much abused by being left outside [by my ex-husband], chained up and what not, and I was horrified when I found out [that Rambo had died], but there was nothing I could do. I hope that [Rambo] doesn't hold it against me because I couldn't take him with me. Because I really feel that I let him down.

Celeste tried to talk with family and friends about her grief, but felt that she received little sympathy or support. In response, she withdrew emotionally from others. Her feelings of isolation and alienation were apparent when she said:

I wasn't close to my mother, and she wasn't an animal person. My sisters would just say, "Well, you'll get over it. Get another pet." Or friends would say, "Yeah, I'm sorry you're going through this, but, you know, you'll get over it." And that's about all I heard. There was no consolation.... Nobody cared enough.... I didn't feel like anybody felt like I did.... I just kind of gave up.

### **Continuing Interpersonal Interactions Regarding the Pet During the Years Following its Death**

Participants continued to maintain emotional connections with their pets for many years after their pets' deaths. In the course of the interviews, they were asked if they talked with other people about their continuing emotional connections. Their responses indicated that their social experiences during the pets' lifetimes and at the time of the pets' deaths did not change. Those participants who experienced largely supportive interactions continued to experience the same sort of positive social support in the years after their pets' deaths. Family members, in particular, appeared to maintain their own bond with the participant's pet. Similarly, there appeared to be little change in the nature of the social experiences among the four participants whose family and friends were predominantly unsupportive of their attachments to their pets.

In pet-friendly homes, families saved keepsakes and photographs of the pet, often prominently displayed in their homes. For example, Carol's family kept pictures of her dog

Daniel displayed on a shelf in their living room along with pictures of other family dogs. Families also shared stories about the pet. Heather mentioned that she and her mother enjoyed sharing memories of her childhood dog Timmy. “Sometimes I still talk to my mom about [Timmy],” said Heather. “Like she’ll bring up he was a really good dog, and we’ll talk about him a little bit.” Colleen reported that her mother acquired a dachshund after the death of her dog Pretzel, also a dachshund. Colleen said she and her mother often talked and laughed about the new dog’s endearing mannerisms and how these reminded them of Pretzel. “My mom and I will talk about [Pretzel] because... Candy, her dog, can sit pretty. So [mom will] be like, ‘Oh, she can sit pretty like Pretzel.’”

For Frank, friends and coworkers continued to demonstrate support for his ongoing bond with his cat Muppet. Muppet was interred in a pet burial plot shared with his former work supervisor near his home in a western state. “She is buried in [my supervisor’s] back yard...out in the forest with several other animals of friends that we all kind of knew,” he said. “It’s kind of a little plot for animals.” He also said that family members also maintain a connection with Muppet: “...with close family, [Muppet] is always there.”

The social experiences of the four participants whose family and friends did not appear to understand or share their attachments to the participants’ pets appeared to remain largely unsupportive. The participants in this group – Anna, Celeste, Mollie and Rachel – continued to believe that others did not understand their continuing emotional attachments with their pets nor their perceptions about animals in general. For example, Anna commented that “[my family] still know[s] I love animals. They still know I have strong connections towards them. They just don’t understand the strong connections I have towards them.”

Similarly, although it had been nearly 16 years since her family abandoned her childhood dog Scamp, Rachel's family appeared to continue to regard dogs as possessions rather than cherished family members. This held true even though, over the years, Rachel repeatedly tried to help her parents understand how deeply she was hurt by their decision to leave Scamp behind when they moved. The pet-keeping practices evident in her family when she was a young girl appeared not to have changed. For example, the family continued to depend on Rachel to take care of the family's current dog, just as they relied on her to care for Scamp. Here, she reflected on her family's pet keeping practices and how she would take a different approach with her own young daughter:

If I chose to buy my daughter a pet, you know, it would be a permanent part of the family. I don't want it to just be a decision, you know, just to see [my child] smile and then you kind of like [have to] sink into reality, like if you can't afford the dog.... And that's usually what happened every single time [my parents] would choose to get a pet.

Like Anna, Rachel reported that she has not talked about Scamp with anyone for a very long time, in part because her current friends didn't know Scamp and because it still hurts to talk about him. When asked if she shares her ongoing connection with Scamp with others, she replied:

Actually you're the first person I've talked to in a long time about Scamp. I don't talk about Scamp very often because it's still a hard think to talk about.... Like even when I was sitting here with you, there are times when [I had to tell myself], "OK,

you have to be a big girl now. You can't cry about things like that." But I mean [I] do get emotional because [Scamp] definitely was a special pet.

### **Students' Engagement in the Veterinary Technology Program**

The fourth key finding of the study was that participants' love of animals and continuing bonds with their pets influenced their engagement in the vet tech program. Participants enthusiastically discussed the interests and experiences that contributed to their desire to enter the vet tech program and appeared to be highly engaged in their studies. Two key factors – a love of animals and participants' continuing bonds with their pets – are examined in the following sections. A summary of the factors that influenced participants' engagement in the vet tech program is presented in Table 5 (Appendix D).

#### **Engagement and a Love of Animals**

The stories of a majority of study participants suggested that their long-standing love of animals influenced their engagement in the vet tech program. Many referred to themselves as “animal lovers,” or said that they had always loved animals. They also often perceived themselves as animal helpers and healers and felt that their purpose in life was to help animals. For example, Colleen said that she had loved animals since she was a child and this love was one of the primary reasons she decided to enter the vet tech program. “The main reason why I went into this program is because ever since I was a kid I've always had this care toward animals,” she said. “... Everybody has their purpose in life, and I want to fulfill my purpose, and I feel like that purpose is to help these animals out.” Similarly, Celeste felt that her mission in life was to help animals. “I think I was put on the earth like St. Francis or

Noah or somebody like that where I think my whole job on earth is to help the animals,” she said. “And that’s it. That’s all I’m here for.”

Karen also described herself as an animal lover and reported that she had always known she wanted to help animals. “I love animals probably in a freakish way,” she said. “... I love animals more than I love people.” She had known she wanted to work with animals from the time she was four years old. When her mother asked her what she wanted to be when she grew up, she replied that she wanted to be a “peterinarian.” She recalled their conversation:

“Karen, what do you want to be when you grow up?” And I said I want to be a peterinarian. And she goes, “Don’t you mean veterinarian?” “No, I want to be a peterinarian.” “Well, what’s the difference between a veterinarian and a peterinarian?” “I want to take care of the animals that need love.”... And since that day that’s all I wanted to do.

### **Engagement and Continuing Bonds**

Participants’ stories about their pets indicated that – for all participants – their continuing bonds with their pets influenced their engagement in the vet tech program. When asked to reflect on their bonds with their pets and their work in the program, some stated directly that their pets influenced their decision to enter the program. In Hannah’s words, her dog Timmy “was pretty much the reason I decided to [study] veterinary technology.” For Rachel, the love and friendship she enjoyed with her childhood dog, Scamp, shaped her self-perception as a dog lover and sparked her interest in taking care of animals:

I think [helping animals] is just a part of who I am. I'm an animal lover. I'm a dog lover. I love Scamp even though I don't have him anymore. Those things, it's a part of who I am. He brought out that love for taking care of animals and actually bonding with them.

When reflecting on her decision to pursue a career in veterinary medicine, Rachel traced her interest in the field to her experiences with Scamp when she was a child. "My relationship with Scamp...made me appreciate the bond with an animal, which kind of pushed me towards wanting to learn about them more," she said. "And learning more about them pushed me into wanting to help them."

Two themes defined the influence of participants' continuing bonds with their pets on their engagement in the vet tech program: 1) their belief that the vet tech program was redemptive and empowering; and 2) their beliefs about their future work with pets and pet owners.

**Vet tech work as redemption and empowerment.** A majority of study participants regarded the knowledge they would gain in the vet tech program as redemptive and empowering. When reflecting on their studies, these participants believed that the program would help them gain the skills and knowledge to help animals live long, healthy lives. They appeared to be addressing the feelings of powerlessness and frustration they experienced when they were unable to help their own sick pets. Further, some participants expressed an interest in a specialty in veterinary medicine that was related to a condition their pets had suffered.

For Frank, veterinary medicine was a second career. The long friendship he enjoyed with his cat Muppet and the gratification he experienced when he was able to give her a long, healthy life transformed his perspective about animals. He came to realize that he enjoyed helping animals, and he believed the knowledge he was gaining in the vet tech program would empower him to help other animals enjoy long, healthy lives in the same way he was able to care for Muppet:

The role I had with animals all my life, that strong connection with [Muppet] and the desire to see what I could do to give [Muppet] the best life possible, not just as far as comfort, but health, widened the desire that I really enjoy doing that, and I enjoy that with all the animals I've had since those years [with Muppet]. So the only logical thing for me to do is to do the best I can now so that I can gather as much knowledge and continue to do that later in [a career as a vet tech].

Helen's story about the tragic circumstances of the death of her potbellied pig, Wilbur, illustrated the redemptive quality of her desire to help animals and her belief that the program would empower her to understand her pets' illnesses. Wilbur died as a result of a botched circumcision performed by a large-animal veterinarian. The veterinarian did not know that a potbellied pig could not be circumcised in the same way as a commercial hog. Helen felt angry with the veterinarian as well as herself. "I should have known better," she said. "... That was stupid of me to even think that [my veterinarian could treat Wilbur]. Yeah, kind of like disgusted." Ultimately, she transformed this painful experience into a desire to help other animals. Her work in the program appeared to represent an attempt to redeem what she perceived as her culpability in Wilbur's death:

After losing Wilbur and seeing what he went through, I was like there's a reason why [the veterinarian] did not know proper techniques. I want to know those proper techniques. If my animals are sick, I want to know what's going on with them. I may not be able to treat them, but I want to know what's going on with them... I guess for my own knowledge, but I also have my heart there.

Like Helen, Jane experienced feelings of powerlessness and frustration when she wasn't able to help her pets when they were sick. These experiences informed her belief that studying vet tech would improve her ability to provide better care for animals. When describing her studies, she frequently referenced learning more about the illnesses her pets suffered, such as her cat's thyroid disease, her dog's kidney problems, and the feline leukemia that killed some kittens she had tried to save. When asked to reflect on her bonds with her deceased pets and her work in the vet tech program, she said:

You know it's like I'm always looking for more, making sure I can do everything I can. So I think that...with [my cat], I just remember watching him walk around with the big saline hump they get when they get fluids and just thinking "I want to be able to help him." And [my dog]...I did notice he was getting older, and he was in more pain sometimes. And knowing he doesn't like to take medicine...[and] trying to find ways to help him be comfortable. And, yeah...watching the kittens get sicker and sicker, and there wasn't much to do but keep them comfortable, again like trying to help. [Studying vet tech] gave me the opportunity to learn more so that I can help more.

Teresa also believed that the knowledge she was gaining in the program possibly would have enabled her to save her dog Chasey. Chasey was quite young – only five years old – when symptoms of some type of illness first appeared, and Teresa was not overly alarmed given the dog’s age. But the illness progressed quickly, and Teresa chose to have Chasey euthanized. Following the loss, she began working in veterinary hospitals and reported that Chasey’s death contributed to her desire to learn more about animal diseases and ways to avoid unnecessary illness and death. “Because she did die so young, [I had] the need to learn more about diseases and stuff because obviously the earlier you catch some...diseases the better the outcome can be,” she said.

Teresa was particularly interested in studying animal behavior because behavior issues are often related to health problems. She believed that if she had known more about the connection between animal behavior and illness when Chasey was sick, she might have recognized the symptoms sooner and sought help in time to save Chasey. “I just kind of feel like if I had maybe been more in tune with her behavior, that I would have picked up on stuff a little earlier,” she said. “... There was probably stuff that I didn’t pay enough attention to [when Chasey was sick]. Even just little stuff.”

Like Teresa, Opal expressed an interest in a specialty in veterinary medicine that was related to her experiences with her dog Buddy. Buddy suffered from arthritis in the years leading up to his death, and Opal wanted to focus on lab work so that she could help diagnose and treat pets suffering from arthritis:

If I knew that the stairs would have had a toll on a senior [dog], you know, we probably could have checked him for arthritis, done some tablets, or done something

just to help him out instead of just wondering why in the world can he not go up these stairs.... If I see a senior [dog] come in, the first thing I'm going to [try is] the hip and joint tablets that they sell. So I'm very big into arthritis medicine and lab work to make sure that everything is working right.

Nina also reported that she wanted to learn more about the illnesses that her pets had suffered. "I try to do what I have seen before and to understand it more," she said. "... I try to use [illnesses] I have seen before [in my pets] in my studies." For example, when she was a girl, she assisted her grandmother in caring for one of her dogs that suffered from distemper. When she entered the vet tech program, she studied the illness in one of her first school projects to better understand her dog's strange behavior. "When I got in my project, I know what is distemper, why [Chubbito] was acting that way," she said. "... Her nervous system was all over the place. It [was] not working right. So, yeah, that's one of the [reasons] why I chose that topic."

**Beliefs about veterinary technology work.** The influence of participants' continuing bonds with their pets on their engagement in the vet tech program was evident in the connection between their past experiences with their pets and their beliefs about their future work with pets and pet owners. For example, some participants reported that they experienced unconditional love from their pets, and they viewed their veterinary work as an important way to memorialize this love by treating animals with kindness and respect. Others reported that their experiences with their pets taught them that animals were dependent on their owners for physical and emotional care. These participants believed that pet owners needed to be better informed about providing proper care for their pets. In addition, some

participants transformed the intense grief they experienced when they lost their pets into a desire to help grieving pet owners cope with their loss.

Three broad themes emerged that defined participants' beliefs about their vet tech work: 1) pets deserve to be treated with kindness and respect; 2) pet owners need to be educated about caring for their pets; and 3) pet owners need emotional support when their pets' die.

***Treating pets with kindness and respect.*** The majority of participants believed that it was important to treat animals with kindness and respect in the context of veterinary practice. This sensibility was often expressed in relation to their own experience of unconditional love from their pets in difficult times in their lives. For these participants, treating the animals in their care with kindness and respect represented a way to reciprocate this love.

Celeste's stories suggested that her experience of emotional support from her dog Rambo informed her desire and actions in her work in the vet tech program as well as her job as a veterinary assistant. Suffering in an abusive marriage, she relied on Rambo for both physical protection and emotional support. These experiences informed her desire to reciprocate the love and respect she received from Rambo and her other pets in her work. "My pets wanted to be treated with dignity and respect," she said. "... I want to let [animals] know that they're worth something and that they're not just an animal.... To me, they're a person.... They need to be treated a lot better than they are." She reported that she tried to treat animals gently and with sensitivity to their feelings in her work:

There's a lot of trust that an animal has to give a vet tech because you handle them a lot. And you're going to do things to them that they don't like. And if you respect

them and go slow and let them know that you care, they'll start calming down, and they're more apt to let you help them out.

In addition, Celeste does not believe that veterinarians treat animals with the respect they deserve. She said that she has often heard veterinarians and veterinary staff people refer to pets as “just animals,” a phrase that implies the animals were not regarded with the same level of respect and care as humans:

I don't think enough vet techs and I don't think enough veterinarians themselves really think about the psychological being of the animal when they do things to them. They're all out for money. Yeah, they like the animal. But they don't respect them.... They just go about doing their duties without talking to the animal and letting the animal calm down and get to know them before they do anything. You can't just grab up a child and just say “OK, I'm going to go do this, this and this to you.” They're scared to death. You can't do that to an animal either.

Like Celeste, John approached his work in the vet tech program with a desire to reciprocate the unconditional love he received from his childhood dog Dare and other pets he has kept. “[The] bond that I've had with animals is that they...don't judge you,” he said. “... They're there, they just want to be treated right and loved, and [they] give that love right back.” Dare was a great comfort to John during his troubled childhood, when he got in frequent fights with other kids and was alienated from his parents and teachers. In coping with these difficulties, he came to rely on Dare for companionship as well as emotional support. The nonjudgmental love John experienced with Dare informed his desire to

reciprocate this love with the animals in his care. He reflected on how the unconditional love that animals provided inspired his work:

I really think a large part of [my studying vet tech] is the non-judgmental [love], the genuine joy that you see out of these animals when they are better. You know, they may come in snappy and irritable and foul. But when they're feeling better and they're back to being right...there [aren't] many things on this planet that express joy to me like animals do when they know that you've helped them out.

In working with animals, John tried to be sensitive to their feelings. He was especially interested in animal behavior, how it related to animals' health and how to recognize what an animal may be trying to communicate, especially when they're hurting. "The animals [I've had], especially Dare, gave me a [desire] to understand them better," he said. "[To] understand why they went through the emotions or how to better recognize it."

Similarly, Karen's work in the vet tech program was shaped by a desire to reciprocate the unconditional love she received from her pets during her troubled childhood. In her current work as a veterinary assistant, the love and respect she continued to feel for her deceased pets was reflected in the kind and gentle way she treated the animals in her care. For example, one of her duties as a veterinary assistant was to "bag and tag" deceased animals. Although she has completed this task many times, she continued to treat the deceased animals gently. She described how she approached handling deceased pets and alluded to the empathy she felt for pet owners dealing with the loss of a beloved animal:

No matter how many times I [bag and tag a dog], I take the time to try not to hurt the dog as [I'm] putting them in the bag.... I'll like slide them in and just gently pick

them up.... They're dead, but I still don't want to hurt them. I think of them like, "I don't want my dog thrown in a bag." You know what I mean? Like, God, that sucks. I'm still so gentle with them.... It's someone's family member, in my opinion.

***Educating pet owners.*** A majority of participants expressed an interest in educating pet owners about how to properly care for their pets. In all cases, this interest was influenced by their past experiences and continuing bonds with their pets. For example, when asked how his bond with his cat Muppet influenced his beliefs about his vet tech studies, Frank reported that he was interested in educating pet owners about how to give their animals the kind of high quality care that he believed goes beyond the basic necessities of food and water. He explained:

There are a lot of everyday people – the clients, the owners – that don't quite understand the relationship they have with this animal.... Even adults don't fully understand the responsibility that they have by going to the pet store, picking this animal up, and taking it home. There's a whole lot more to truly caring [for a pet], than giving [them] food and water. And when people don't understand the relationship that needs to happen for that all to work well, that animal ends up in despair.

This belief appeared to be informed by Frank's experience of caring for Muppet. Frank rescued Muppet, the runt of the litter, and was a thoughtful and attentive caregiver. She lived to be 22 ½ years old, which is an extraordinarily long life for a cat. This experience taught Frank that there was a difference between taking care of an animal's basic needs and giving it a high quality of life. He explained:

I took Muppet from an eyedropper up to the time she passed away. And that was an entire life of learning, watching.... Well, that same care – when you see an animal and you notice they’re uncomfortable, it doesn’t matter whether they’re your favorite pet or the gorilla standing next to you or the cow that’s going to...slaughter. While they’re on this earth...it’s our responsibility to give them the best life possible.... And so that is where I started getting that relationship from [Muppet]. You know when I was growing up [on a farm] and taking care of animals, I had to feed them and water them, but I didn’t see the appreciation of the quality of their life at the time, other than care. Well there’s a difference between care and giving quality of life.

Hannah’s interest in educating pet owners about caring for their pets was informed by her experiences with her childhood dog Timmy. Timmy died suddenly of heartworms, a disease that can be prevented with a monthly treatment that pet owners can administer themselves. In reflecting on Timmy’s death and her work in the vet tech program, she reported that her future mission was to educate pet owners about the importance of preventative treatment for common diseases. “My main thing with doing vet technology will be client communication and client education,” she said. “Because I’ve seen firsthand what it can do if you’re not strict about [heartworm and flea prevention].”

***Providing emotional support for pet owners.*** In reflecting on their work in the vet tech program, many participants reported that they believed it was important to provide emotional support to pet owners struggling with their pets’ illnesses or deaths. This belief was related to their social experiences when their own pets died. For some of these participants, the desire to comfort pet owners appeared to be shaped by the painful

experience of losing their pets and the lack of emotional support from other people in response to the loss. For others, the desire to comfort pet owners appeared to be related to the sympathetic support they received when their pets died. Strongly empathetic to the grief pet owners may experience when their pets died, these participants expressed a desire to help their future clients just as others had helped them.

Colleen struggled with her grief when her childhood dog Pretzel died. Her love for Pretzel and the lack of emotional support from others shaped her beliefs about the way that veterinarians should support pet owners. Colleen and her brother were with Pretzel when he was euthanized, and during the procedure Pretzel appeared to struggle to breathe. Colleen's brother left the room in anger, leaving her alone with Pretzel and a veterinary assistant. Greatly distressed, Colleen was unable to stay with Pretzel, despite her belief that she should support him during the procedure. The veterinary assistant who was with Colleen during the euthanasia did not reach out to her or offer any kind of sympathy. In reflecting on this experience, Colleen thought a more compassionate response would have helped her cope:

[The assistant] should have stepped in and been like, "...I can see that you are hurting here and that you might need my hand or a hug or would you like for me to come over and hug you?" She could have said that and I would have stayed longer and spent the extra time that I definitely needed to spend with my dog.

Colleen's comments suggested that this experience shaped her perception about the way that veterinarians should interact with their clients. She believed that providing high quality care for animals depends on technical skills as well as the relationships veterinarians and vet techs build with their clients. In her opinion, these relationships should be based on a

sincere appreciation of the love people have for their pets. She was especially interested in helping clients who were dealing with the loss of a beloved pet, because she understood how difficult it can be when you lose them. She explained:

If someone else was going through something similar like we had to go through. I know now with the knowledge [I am gaining in my program] that I can be there to comfort them.... I just want to comfort these people because I know what they're going through. I know it's not easy.

Like Colleen, Lisa's continuing bond with her cat Bobby informed her belief that, when working with pet owners, it was important to let them know that you understand how deeply they're connected with their animals. In describing her relationship with Bobby, she remarked that it was a very powerful connection, unlike anything she had experienced with other pets. Her relationship with him gave her a greater appreciation for the love that pet owners feel for their animals. She was especially empathetic to pet owners' deep attachments to their pets and expressed the desire to honor and respect their feelings:

My relationship with Bobby helped me understand more about the human-animal bond.... Because if you've never had that bond, you don't really understand when people refer to their dog as their baby or have cute affectionate names...or you have a little less patience for somebody who puts their cat in a baby carriage.... And the truth is that pet care is now like a multibillion-dollar industry. And people go crazy for their pets. And it's a big deal for them.... And you have to respect it. But more than that you have to really understand.

Similarly, in her work in the vet tech program, Mollie was driven by the love she continued to feel for her horse Honey. She had transformed the grief she felt when she lost Honey into a desire to help others avoid the pain of losing an animal they loved. “If you remember all the good times you have with your animals, especially in this field, then it makes you work so much harder to save someone else’s,” she said. “Because you remember how it felt when one died on you.” Here, she described the connection between her relationship with Honey and her other pets and her studies in the vet tech program:

Sometimes when I get stressed out over my classes and stuff, I’ll look back and I’ll look at [my dog] Buck, I’ll look at the other dogs that I had there. And I also look at the pictures of Honey and me, and I’m like, “Gotta do it.” Because there’s going to be a little girl one day. I can just see it. There’s going to be a little girl who loves her little pony so much, and her pony’s going to be sick. It’s going to have colic or something, and [she’s going to] end up calling the veterinarian and me, and I want to save that pony for that little girl. So basically I want to do for someone else [what] couldn’t be done for me.

Her struggle with grief when she lost Honey also gave Mollie a clear perspective on how she would help pet owners deal with the death of an animal. She believed it’s important to focus on the happy memories you have of the pet rather than dwelling on the death. When asked how she would respond to a client who has lost a pet, she said, “Remember all the good times. Don’t grieve on it.... Remembering all the good times with an animal that you’ve loved and you lost is going to keep you happy.”

Carol's desire to provide emotional support to pet owners struggling with the illness or loss of a pet was informed by her love for her childhood dog Daniel, the difficulty she had dealing with his death, and the helpful support others gave her when he died. She recalled that, when Daniel was ill, the staff at the veterinary clinic that was treating him was very supportive of her emotional distress. This experience gave her insight into how valuable empathetic support could be to a pet owner. Here, she described the empathy she felt for pet owners whose beloved pets are sick and suffering and how she would like to help these people through the ordeal:

I was so distraught [about Daniel's death] too, and [the people at the animal hospital where Daniel died] were so nice. Like that would be awesome. That would be awesome to help somebody like that. I will take care of your pet. They are important to me too. Like I know what it is like to lose a pet, and it is not fun, so I will do everything I can.

### **Summary**

The first key finding of the study was that participants experienced special relationships with their pets that died. They believed that their relationships with their pets were more significant than the relationships they had had with other pets. Some commented that they believed their pets were unique individuals. The special nature of the relationships were evident in the strongly affectionate terms participants used for their pets; participants' feelings of emotional attunement with their pets; and the intensity of participants' grief when their pets died.

The second key finding was that all study participants reported that they continued to experience emotional bonds with their pets that died. They expressed their continuing attachments through a variety of behaviors, such as creating memorials and saving keepsakes, as well as non-volitional activities such as triggered memories and physical sensations. Many participants felt that such activities honored their pets and helped keep their memories alive.

The third key finding was that participants experienced supportive and unsupportive interpersonal interactions with regard to their pets. Key interpersonal interactions included the way that others interacted with the participant's pet and their regard for the participant's strong attachment to the pet during the pet's lifetime; their responses to the participant when the pet died; and their support (or lack of support) for the participant's continuing bond with the pet in the years following the pet's death. A majority of participants experienced positive, supportive social interactions with regard to their pets. These participants believed that the sympathy they received from their family and friends helped them cope with the grief they experienced when their pets died. The family and friends of a subset of participants were unsupportive of their attachments, and these participants appeared to struggle with the rejection they felt from others, especially when their pets died.

The final key finding of the study was that participants' engagement in the vet tech program appeared to be influenced by two key factors: a long-standing love for animals and their continuing bonds with their deceased pets. A majority reported that they had always loved animals, and some had known they wanted to work with animals from a very young age. These participants appeared to believe that the vet tech program would help them

achieve their purpose in life. In addition, participants' continuing bonds with their pets influenced their engagement in the vet tech program. This influence was evident in two primary ways. First, many participants believed that the program would empower them to help animals live long, healthy lives, and this belief appeared to be shaped by a desire to address the feelings of frustration and powerlessness they felt when they were unable to help their own sick pets. Similarly, some students expressed an interest in a specific topic in the field related to an illness their own pet had suffered. Second, the influence of participants' continuing bonds with their pets on their engagement in the vet tech program was evident in their beliefs about their future work with pets and pet owners. In all cases, participants' beliefs were shaped by their past experiences with their pets. Key beliefs focused on best practices for handling the animals in their care; the importance of educating clients about providing proper care for pets; and the need to support clients emotionally when they were struggling with a pet's illness or death.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

There is currently a lack of research into veterinary technology (vet tech) students' personal experiences of continuing emotional connections with pets that have died. The conceptual framework used for this study was based on continuing bonds theory, which holds that humans normatively experience an emotional connection with a loved one after loss (Silverman & Klass, 1996). Research suggests that humans also experience continuing emotional bonds with pets that have died (Field et al., 2009), yet there is limited past research exploring this phenomenon.

The purpose of this study was to explore vet tech students' perceptions of their special relationships with pets that died; and to better understand how these perceptions influenced their work in the vet tech program and their beliefs about their future work with pets and pet owners in veterinary practice. The following research questions were explored:

- What are vet tech students' perceptions of a special relationship with a pet that died?
- What beliefs do vet tech students hold about these perceptions and their work in the vet tech program and their future work with pets and pet owners?

The researcher conducted a qualitative study utilizing semi-structured interviews with a purposeful sample of 16 students enrolled at a two-year, private, urban-based degree-granting college offering technical and professional certification. Participants were required

to have experienced a special relationship with a pet that died 12 months or more prior to the interviews. They were asked about their personal relationship with their pets, the loss of the pets, and their experience of emotional connections with the pets after they had died. In addition, students were asked about their interpersonal interactions with family, friends and community members at the time of their pets' deaths and subsequent to the pets' deaths. Finally, they were asked how their experience of an emotional connection with their pets influenced their vet tech studies.

Transcriptions were analyzed first using open coding for the purpose of organizing data according to patterns and themes. Following open coding, cross coding and comparison was conducted to identify patterns and themes that repeated across open-coded transcription data. A second stage of coding, theoretical, was conducted using the framework of continuing human-animal bonds, which further guided discovery of patterns and themes. Following theoretical coding, interview transcriptions were reviewed using an inductive method to discover patterns in student interviews. The researcher listened to the recorded interviews and read the transcripts multiple times to the point of saturation to verify the patterns and themes that emerged in open and theoretical coding. Detailed narratives of each participant's experience were then developed to identify key content that supported these patterns and themes. During this process, the researcher was able to identify those participants whose experiences appeared to differ significantly from the majority. Patterns and themes were identified in this group of outliers and incorporated into the data analysis.

This final chapter will begin with a summary of the findings of the study, highlighting key themes. Following this discussion, three key conclusions will be explored: 1)

participants' perceptions of their continuing bonds with their pets were socially influenced; 2) participants' continuing bonds with their pets had a generative influence on their desire to help pets and pet owners; and 3) participants expressed a deeply felt calling to pursue careers in veterinary medicine. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of implications for research and practice.

### **Summary of Findings**

When asked to tell stories about their pets, the vet tech students who participated in this study responded with enthusiasm and passion. They described the love and joy they experienced with their pets during the pets' lifetimes, the sadness and despair they felt when their pets died, and the love they continued to feel for their pets in the years that followed. Four key findings emerged from the data: 1) participants experienced special relationships with their pets that died; 2) participants experienced continuing emotional bonds with their pets that died; 3) participants experienced supportive and unsupportive interpersonal interactions with regard to their pets; 4) participants' love of animals and continuing bonds with their pets influenced their engagement in the vet tech program.

The first key finding of the study was that participants experienced special relationships with their pets that died. A majority described these relationships as unique, or different than other relationships they had experienced with other pets. Some believed that they would never experience another relationship with an animal that was so special. Others described their pets as unique individuals, different than other animals of the same species, such as a horse that was exceptionally playful or a dog that was exceptionally smart. The extraordinary nature of these relationships was also evident in the emotionally charged

language the participants used in describing their pets. “Amazing friend,” “my little baby” and “my everything” were common terms of endearment. Finally, many participants appeared to regard their relationships as particularly deep and meaningful and expressed a strong sense of emotional attunement with their pets. Buoyed by the steady, unconditional love they felt from their pets, some of these participants relied on their pets during difficult times in their lives. Finally, the special quality of participants’ relationships with their pets was evident in the intensity of the grief they experienced when their pets died. Simply put, the intense, powerful quality of their relationships with their pets appeared to result in intense grief reactions. The factors that contributed to participants’ perception that their relationships with their pets were special are summarized in Table 2 (Appendix A).

The second key finding was that all participants experienced continuing emotional bonds with their deceased pets. On average it had been more than eight years since they had lost their pets (see Appendix E), and all participants appeared to love their pets as much as they had during the pets’ lifetimes. They expressed their emotional connections through a variety of behaviors and activities, such as creating memorials and shrines, saving keepsakes associated with the pet, and visiting the pet’s favorite places, among others. Some participants also described more passive experiences of connection, such as dreaming, triggered memories, and sensing their pet’s presence. Such activities and experiences are identified in the literature as “continuing bond expressions,” or CBE (Packman et al., 2011). The CBE displayed by the participants are summarized in Table 3 (Appendix B).

The third key finding was that participants experienced supportive and unsupportive interpersonal interactions with regard to their pets. Many people were involved in

participants' stories of pet attachment and loss. Family members, friends, coworkers, and veterinary professionals all played a role in participants' experiences with their pets. Most participants were children when they kept their pets, and their families were an integral part of their pet keeping experiences. The majority of participants felt that others understood and honored their feelings about their pets. For example, in pet-friendly homes, the participant's pet was welcomed and cherished as a family member, and family members sometimes shared the participant's strong attachment to the pet. When the pet died, family offered sympathy and support, often holding burial services and interring the pet in the family's back yard. And in the years following a pet's death, family members often maintained their own ongoing connections with the pets, keeping pictures of the pet and sharing favorite stories with the participant and other family members.

In contrast, a subset of participants experienced predominantly unsupportive interactions with regard to their pets. In unsupportive social contexts, pets appeared to be regarded as commodities or possessions that were not worthy of the same level of love and respect as humans. These participants felt that others did not understand their emotional attachments to their pets and described experiences in which their feelings were dismissed or minimized. Such interactions were especially difficult when their pets died, and others did not offer sympathy or emotional support. "It's just a pet" and "you can get another one," or similar comments, were responses these participants expected to hear, and sometimes did hear, when they lost their beloved pets. When faced with such dismissive responses, participants felt sad, hurt, isolated and angry. A summary of the factors that influenced participants' social experiences relative to their pets is presented in Table 4 (Appendix C).

The fourth key finding was that participants' love of animals and continuing bonds with their pets influenced their engagement in the vet tech program. A majority reported that a long-standing love of animals contributed to their interest in veterinary medicine. In addition, participants' engagement appeared to be influenced by their continuing bonds with their deceased pets. When asked to reflect on their bonds and their work in the program, a majority expressed the belief that the program would empower them to help other animals more than they had been able to help their own sick pets. Similarly, some expressed an interest in a particular topic or specialty in the field that was related to the illness their own pet had suffered. Finally, the link between participants' continuing bonds and their engagement in the program was evident in their beliefs about their future work with pets and pet owners. Drawing on their personal experiences with their pets – and driven by the love they continued to feel for their pets – participants came to the program with many deeply held beliefs about the proper way to treat animals; the need to educate clients about caring for their pets; and the need to provide emotional support for grieving pet owners. The factors that influenced participants' engagement in the vet tech program are summarized in Table 5 (Appendix D).

### **Key Conclusions**

The purpose of this study was to explore vet tech students' perceptions of their special relationships with pets that died; and to better understand how these perceptions influenced their work in the vet tech program and their beliefs about their future work with pets and pet owners in veterinary practice. Three key conclusions emerged from the findings:

- 1) participants' perceptions of their continuing bonds with their pets were socially

influenced; 2) participants' continuing bonds with their pets had a generative influence on their desire to help pets and pet owners; and 3) participants expressed a deeply felt calling to pursue careers in veterinary medicine.

### **Perceptions of Continuing Bonds Were Socially Influenced**

Student's perceptions of their continuing bonds with their pets appeared to be influenced by their personal experiences with their pets as well as their interpersonal interactions with others with regard to the pet. The way in which family and friends supported, or did not support, the participant's attachment to their special pet had a significant effect on the participant's experience of the bond during the pet's lifetime, at the time of the pet's death and in the years following the death. Ultimately, participants sought to integrate their personal feelings of love for their pets with others' perceptions of those attachments.

As discussed in the following sections, study findings regarding individual and social influences on students' perceptions of their continuing emotional connections with their pets are consistent with a large and growing body of literature focused on the emotional attachments people have with living pets. Notably, however, little research exists that examines the substance and character of the emotional attachments that people maintain with deceased pets nor the influence of social contextual factors on these attachments. This study adds new insights to current understandings of social context on the experience of a continuing bond with a deceased pet.

In this section, vet tech students' perceptions of their continuing bonds with their pets are examined relative to their personal experiences with their pets and their interpersonal

interactions with others regarding their pets. These findings are evaluated according to relevant literature about the psychological experience of pet keeping as well as pet loss. The section concludes with an examination of the comparative influence of these two contextual factors – personal and interpersonal – on participants’ perceptions of their bonds with their pets.

**Participants’ personal experiences with their pets.** All participants reported having strong, continuing emotional attachments with their deceased pets. These attachments were grounded in their experiences with their living pets as they recalled happy times shared with their pets. Their interpretations of these experiences were expressed as perceptions of their continuing bonds with their pets.

All participants described their deceased pets in strongly affectionate terms. A majority referred to their pets as favorite, much-loved friends and companions. Many had kept their pets as children or adolescents and appeared to regard their pets as peers. Some remembered talking with their pets and engaging in pretend play. Such descriptions align with literature about relationships between children and pets. Research indicates that most children regard their pets as peers (Melson, 2001, 2003). Further, a study by Bryant (1982) asserts that children think of their pets as special friends and enjoy favorite activities with their pets. Bryant also posits that children confide in their pets, sharing secrets and talking with their pets when they feel angry or scared; and rely on their pets for their steady companionship and focused, unwavering attention.

A subset of participants acquired their pets as adults. These participants’ recollections focused on the reliable companionship and day-to-day activities they had shared with their

pets. This finding aligns with current literature about adult relationships with companion animals. A number of studies assert that, for adults, pets are an important source of companionship; promote health and relaxation; and provide protection and loyalty (Cohen, 2002; McNicholas et al., 2005; Walsh, 2009).

In addition, many participants referred to their pets as babies and felt a strong sense of responsibility to nurture and protect their pets. These participants' regard for their pets as babies aligns with human-animal bond literature that describes the ties of affection that people have with their pets. A 1985 study by Cain indicated that a majority of pet owners consider their pets to be family members, much like children. In addition, as referenced by Serpell (2002), a 1996 survey by the American Animal Hospital Association found that 75% of pet owners regard their animals as children.

A subset of participants also reported that their pets gave them nonjudgmental, unconditional love. These participants recalled that the consistently loving and supportive presence of their pets helped them cope with difficult life experiences, such as divorce and abusive relationships. Such perceptions are consistent with research on human-animal relationships. A number of studies assert that humans rely on their pets for nonjudgmental emotional support (Allen, Blascovich & Mendes, 2002; Corson & Corson, 1981). Similarly, another study notes that pets provide "unqualified love and acceptance" (Nieburg & Fischer, 1982, p. 52). Moreover, findings in the present study indicated that these participants maintained a stronger emotional bond with their pets than they did with the significant people in their lives. This finding is consistent with research on the human-animal bond (Barker & Barker, 1988; Carmack, 1985), which asserts that some pet owners may experience stronger

bonds with their pets than with humans. In addition, according to Blazina (2011), “individuals with a personal history of emotional deprivation and abuse in their formative years, or trauma or loss in adulthood, may find that pets become more consistent and reliable others to which they can turn” (p. 4). In addition, a recent qualitative study found that pets often have “higher personal and emotional value to [pet owners] than most people they knew” (Packman et al., 2014, p. 347).

Additionally, a majority of the participants in the present study described strong feelings of despair and heartbreak when their pets died. Some reported that they had never experienced such intense grief for the loss of a pet. The depth of their grief was also reflected in the emotionally charged language they used to describe their feelings, for example, that they had lost their “other half” or their heart had been “ripped out.” Finally, some participants felt personally responsible for their pets’ deaths and, in turn, expressed strong feelings of regret or guilt. These findings are consistent with literature that describes the significant grief pet owners may experience when their pets die. In a recent study of pet owners’ grief experience, the authors note “many people may not perceive the death as a cause for intense grief, yet...scholars have demonstrated strong ties between pets and humans and profound reactions to loss” (Packman et al., 2014, p. 335). In addition, the 2014 Packman study holds that the experience of guilt and regret for a pet’s death is common and asserts that “one reason why the grief for an animal is so difficult comes from [the pet owner’s] perceived responsibility to our animal” (p. 351).

Finally, study participants appeared to regard their relationships with their pets as special or unique. Participation in the study required that students had experienced a special

relationship with a pet, and the researcher described this relationship in the interview protocol as a pet that is a friend and companion rather than an animal that serves a utilitarian purpose, e.g., a hunting dog or barn cat (see Appendix F). This definition mirrors common understandings of the term *pet*. According to the Merriam-Webster on-line dictionary (n.d.), a pet is a “domesticated animal kept for pleasure rather than utility.” Further, Anderson (2007) defines a pet as “a tame animal kept in a household for companionship, amusement, etc” (p. 1215).

However, findings of the present study suggested students’ perceptions of their attachments with their pets extended beyond this basic understanding of companion animal. Rather, participants’ relationships with their pets appeared to be more significant than their relationships with other companion animals. Some considered their pets to be unique individuals, and others expressed the expectation that they would never have another pet that was so special. All participants described their pets as friends or babies – terms of affection that signaled their strong emotional attachments. Additionally, a majority believed that they were emotionally attuned with their pets. Some appeared to regard their pets as soul mates or soul friends, and their connections with their pets were heartfelt and deeply meaningful. Others commented on their pet’s ability to sense their feelings and respond with consistent, unconditional love. Further, the significance of their relationships with their pets that died was evident in participants’ experience of intense grief following the deaths of their pets.

Based on these results, a special relationship with a pet can be defined as one that is especially significant to an individual and that is characterized by a particularly strong emotional connection. For example, an individual’s relationship with one particular dog is

not necessarily the same as their relationship with another dog they have kept. Further, a pet owner's sense of emotional intimacy or attunement with a particular dog may be stronger than with another, and their experiences with that dog may have been more influence on their lives than their experiences with another dog.

The present study's assertion that some pet relationships are more significant than others appears to be relatively new in literature about the human-animal bond and the continuing human-animal bond. Limited references were found that allude to a pet owner's experience of a relationship with a particular pet that is more significant than other pet relationships. For example, Stewart (1996) asserts that one pet relationship may be more significant or special than other relationships. Further, Grier, a historian who studies pet keeping, posits that "the most fundamental characteristic of pet keeping [is] the act of choosing a particular animal, differentiating it from all other animals" (2006, p. 6). This understanding of pet keeping infers that some pets may be considered a favorite or different than other pets.

In addition, a recent study of bereaved pet owners addressed the significant influence that a special relationship with a pet and the loss of that pet can have on an individual's life (Packman et al., 2014). This study asserts, "the death of a beloved pet can be a turning point that alters one's perspective on life" (p. 352). Other studies have addressed the grief reaction to the loss of a special pet. James Harris, a doctor of veterinary medicine, responded to a letter to the editor of the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* (2006) about a woman's troubled experience of her pet's euthanasia and her reference to her pet as "my girl." Harris referred to the writings of Keddie (1977), a British psychiatrist, who

asserted that the language a pet owner uses for their pet provides insight into their experience of a significant emotional attachment to the pet and signals the likelihood that the pet owner will experience an especially strong grief reaction when the pet dies:

People who insist on a special relationship with a pet can be expected to have a rather sharp reaction at the loss of the pet. It was obvious that this was the case with the aforementioned client. Referring to the dog as ‘my girl’ should have tipped off the practitioner. (JAVMA, p. 6)

Similarly, a recent study acknowledged a connection between the strength and duration of a pet relationship and the intensity of the grief reaction to the loss of the pet (Packman et al., 2014). The study authors assert that the “depth of responses to pet loss is often based on the strength and longevity of relationships individuals have had with their pets” (p. 335). The reference to the “strength” of the relationship with a pet indicates that some relationships may be more significant than others.

The findings of the present study add to literature by providing rich description of the psychological experience of a special relationship with a pet. This study supports the literature that describes a special relationship with a pet in terms of the affectionate language a pet owner uses for their pet; the owner’s strong emotional attachment to the pet; and the intense grief reaction that the pet owner is likely to experience when their special pet dies. The current study found that a special relationship with a pet and the loss of that pet might have a significant influence on an individual’s life. For these vet tech students, their special relationships with their pets and their continuing emotional connections with their pets transformed their lives. Their continuing bonds shaped their decision to pursue careers in

veterinary medicine as well as their engagement in the vet tech program. Further, the present study found that participants' continuing bonds with their special pets were enduring. On average it had been more than eight years since their pets had died, and participants continued to feel a deep sense of emotional connection with their pets. Hence, this study provides the new understanding of a special relationship with a pet as one that has an exceptionally influential and enduring impact on a pet owner's life.

In summary, findings of the present study suggest a strong alignment between participants' perceptions of their deceased pets and meanings associated with a living pet identified in human-animal bonds literature. That is, participants in the current study appeared to regard their deceased pets in much the same way they had regarded their pets during the pets' lifetimes. Little research was found that examines the emotional quality of the attachments that humans maintain with deceased pets. Hence, the present study adds new insight to current understandings about the continuing human-animal bond. In addition, findings of the present study provide greater insight into the psychological experience of a special relationship with a pet, the intensity of the grief experience following the loss of the pet, and the influence of that relationship on the pet owner's life.

**Intepersonal interactions with regard to the pet.** Participants' interpersonal interactions with family and friends with regard to their pets appeared to influence their perceptions of the continuing bond. A majority of participants experienced predominantly supportive interactions, while a subset experienced predominantly unsupportive interactions. In evaluating the attitudes and actions of others with regard to the participants' pets, key questions were considered. How did the participant's family and friends regard the pet? Did

they treat the pet as a family member or dismiss the pet as just an animal? Did they accept or reject the participant's intense attachment to their pet? Did they provide emotional support for the participant when the pet died or dismiss the participant's grief as strange or unreasonable? Did they observe common cultural rituals associated with death, such as a formal burial and the maintenance of a memorial for the pet? In the following sections, participants' social experiences relative to their pets are explored, and literature regarding the influence of social interactions on pet keeping and loss and an individual's perception of a bond with a pet is considered.

***Supportive interpersonal interactions.*** Most participants were children when they kept their pets, and their narratives indicated that a majority grew up in pet-loving families. The support that participants reported receiving for their pet attachments was consistent and enduring. They felt socially supported during their pet's life, at the time of the pet's death and in the years following its death. These participants reported that their pets were valued and treated in the same way as other family members. In turn, these participants' emotional attachments to their pets and their belief that their pets were best friends, babies and family members were celebrated and reinforced.

The pet-keeping experiences of those participants whose families welcomed and cherished their pets are consistent with studies about the role of pets in family life. The inclusion of pets as members of the family aligns with human-animal bonds research that states that many people regard their pets as family members (Cowles, 1985; Stewart et al., 1989; Toray, 2004). Further, a study by Cohen (2002) indicated that more than 85% of pet owners consider their pets to be family members and that most treat pets as full members, as

important as other members.

In addition, a number of participants reported that a family member, typically a parent, shared their strong attachment to their pet. As such, participants' pets appeared to play an important role in their family relationships, uniting family members and increasing family cohesion (Cain, 1983). Additional research has shown that pets can be an important part of family relationships, enriching family life, increasing interaction and improving communication (Walsh, 2009).

The family's response to the death of the participant's pet appeared to play a critical role in helping the participant cope with the loss. Traditional rituals associated with death, such as the creation of memorials, were often observed by the participants' family and friends, and pets were typically buried in the family's back yard. Participants felt that such activities were comforting and supportive as their intense feelings of loss were recognized and shared. Research into pet loss and bereavement underscores the importance of social acceptance and recognition of the grief that pet owners may experience when a beloved pet dies. For example, studies have shown that the sympathetic responses of friends, coworkers, or family members facilitate an individual's ability to cope with pet loss (Field et al., 2009).

***Unsupportive interpersonal interactions.*** All study participants experienced some interpersonal interactions that were unsupportive of their emotional attachments to their pets. A subset grew up in families that did not recognize or support their feelings about their pets. In these families, pets were valued only as possessions or commodities. Unsupportive interactions were characterized by the minimization or dismissal of the participant's attachment to their pet. Participants sometimes heard comments such as "it's just a pet," or

similar expressions that suggest that a strong emotional connection with an animal is inappropriate. In response to such interactions, participants reported feeling hurt, isolated, and angry.

These feelings appeared to be especially acute when their pets died, and participants' feelings of grief were unacknowledged and trivialized. All participants reported that they avoided sharing their grief with people they believed would not understand their intense feelings of loss. The reluctance to share their grief with others held true even among those participants whose families were supportive of their attachments to their pets. Participants were very selective about the people with whom they shared their feelings, and most shared only with close family and friends who knew the pet. The reluctance to share their feelings with others is supported by a recent qualitative study of the grief experience of pet owners (Packman et al., 2014), which asserts that:

Concurrent with the notion of pet loss as a form of disenfranchised grief is the resulting perception of minimal or absent validation and support for a pet's death. Respondents learned not to share their grief with people who were not supportive. (p. 345)

Participants' experiences of rejection and alienation associated with pet loss are consistent with research that indicates American society tends to trivialize or minimize grief for the loss of a pet (Chur-Hansen, 2010; Hart et al., 1990; Meyers, 2002; Weisman, 1991). Doka (1989, 2002, 2008) suggests that people who publicly express grief for the loss of a pet often experience what he has termed disenfranchised grief, which is a lack of social acceptance for the psychological experience of grief and a lack of social status of

bereavement. In addition, the authors of a recent study (Packman et al., 2014) of pet loss write “the death of a pet may not be fully recognized or validated as a significant loss, resulting in grievors feeling isolated and lacking in support” (p. 334).

Among those participants who kept their pets in homes that were not pet-friendly, their discussions with family members about their pets appeared to be marked by discord and conflict. These participants typically attempted to resolve these conflicts. For example, some repeatedly discussed their feelings about their pets with family and friends in an attempt to gain their sympathy and support. Others actively challenged the prevailing attitudes about animals among family members in order to demonstrate the validity of their beliefs about their pets and other animals.

In addition, the lack of social support these participants experienced during their pets’ lifetimes and at the time of their pets’ deaths appeared to continue for many years. Those participants who experienced predominantly unsupportive interpersonal interactions had lost their pets an average of 11 years before their interviews. Yet the pattern of conflict and discord with others who did not share their perceptions about their pets continued. Unlike pet-friendly families, these families did not save keepsakes or share memories of the pet. Their attitudes towards the participant’s pet and their pet keeping practices did not appear to shift. This continued lack of support reinforced these participants’ perceptions that others did not understand their ongoing emotional attachments to their pets.

Research was not found to address the ongoing influence of interpersonal interactions on an individual’s maintenance of a continuing emotional attachment with a pet. Literature on the continuing human-animal bond focuses on the short-term grief experience of losing a

pet, suggesting that individuals may experience disenfranchised grief when they do not receive sympathy for the loss (Doka, 1989, 2002, 2008). However, findings of the current study suggest that feelings of disenfranchisement may continue more than a decade beyond a pet's death (see Appendix E). At this advanced stage in participants' bereavement experience, study findings indicated their feelings of disenfranchisement were less significantly about grief and more about their experience of a disenfranchised attachment. In other words, just as some participants felt unsupported in their attachments to their pets, particularly when their pets died, they felt unsupported in their continuing emotional attachments.

**Integration of individual and interpersonal perceptions of the bond.** As previously noted, a majority of study participants experienced predominantly supportive interactions with family and friends with regard to their pets. When perceptions of the bond were supported and shared, participants' interactions with others were congenial and cooperative.

In contrast, among the subset of participants whose personal perceptions were incongruent with those of family and friends, interactions with others were marked by discord and conflict. In response to these experiences, these participants expressed deep feelings of sadness, isolation and anger. Notably, however, despite such difficult emotional experiences, these participants continued to regard their pets as much-loved friends, companions and babies. They honored the memories of their pets by constructing shrines and saving keepsakes, even though those activities weren't shared with their families. Further, they ultimately decided to pursue careers in veterinary medicine, despite the fact that their

families did not necessarily understand or support those decisions. These activities indicated that these participants and their family members essentially “agreed to disagree” about their perceptions of the pet. Changes in perceptions about the pet – as a child of the family or as a commodity – were not apparent on either side of the issue. In the words of one of these participants, “[my family] still knows I love animals.... They just don’t understand the strong connections I have towards them.”

The significance of participants’ relationships with their pets was also evident among a subset of participants whose experiences with their pets appeared to transform their pre-existing perceptions about animals. These participants, who acquired their pets as adults, grew up in farm families in which animals appeared to be regarded as commodities. For example, Frank commented that he “grew up on a farm not appreciating [animals] as pets, but as equipment.” This sentiment applied to farm animals typically regarded as food sources or commodities (e.g., cows and pigs) as well as companion animals such as dogs that were used for hunting or cats used to control vermin. For Frank and other participants with similar experiences, their interactions with their pets gave them new understandings about the strong emotional connections that people can maintain with an animal. Their perspectives about animals – previously defined by their families of origin – were transformed by their experience of special relationships with their pets.

Study findings regarding the influence of personal and social contextual factors on participants’ perceptions of their continuing bonds with their pets are consistent with Blazina’s (2011) conceptual model of the human-animal bond (see Figure 2, Chapter Two). Blazina’s model provides a holistic view of the social influences that shape an individual’s

perception of a bond with a companion animal. Blazina identifies four social contextual factors that influence these perceptions: individual, interpersonal, cultural and cross-cultural. As previously described, findings of the present study suggested that two of these contextual factors – individual and interpersonal – influenced study participants’ perceptions of their continuing bonds with their pets.

In describing the comparative influence of these contextual factors on an individual’s perception of the bond, Blazina (2011) asserts that individual contextual factors have the greatest impact on perception, followed, in order of priority, by interpersonal, cultural and cross-cultural factors. He notes “...individuals may experience a barrage of influences at various contextual levels, and yet rely most heavily on internal dialogue to create an indelible set of beliefs regarding what the bond means” (2011, p. 11). According to Blazina, individuals ultimately construct highly personal perceptions of their bonds with their pets:

We propose that the seat of phenomenological experience regarding the perception and meaning of the bond is ultimately at [a] personal level. While we may have various important influences and exchanges at other levels of context, the individual, in the end, ultimately perceives and constructs his or her own experience of the bond (2011, p. 11).

Findings of the current study support Blazina’s assertion that the individual ultimately creates a highly personal, subjective perception of their bond with a pet, regardless of other social influences. Specifically, the perceptions of those study participants who kept their pets in homes that were not pet-friendly appeared to be resolute and intractable, despite the rejection they felt in their families.

### **The Generative Influence of the Continuing Bond**

The second conclusion of this study was that participants' continuing bonds with their pets had a generative influence on their desire to help pets and pet owners. Students' work in the vet tech program represented a positive way for them to express the love they continued to feel for their pets that died. As such, their continuing bonds represented a foundational influence on their desire to help pets and pet owners. Participants shared the belief that their work was a beneficent way to engage others.

Although on average it had been more than eight years since their pets died, participants continued to love their pets in the same way they had during the pets' lifetimes. Each participant's emotional connection with their pet was an ongoing lived experience, rather than a static experience defined by memories of past interactions with the pet. That is, even as time dulled the pain of participants' loss, the love they felt for their deceased pets continued to sharply inform and influence their engagement in the vet tech program. In the words of one participant, her work was a way for her to share her continuing love for her pet with others: "With each life that [I] save, a little piece of [my cat] lives on, a little piece of his spirit."

The enduring, generative quality of participants' continuing bonds with their pets is evident in the way that their experiences with their pets framed their beliefs about their future work with pets and pet owners. All participants expressed the conviction that their beliefs were rooted in their experiences with their pets during their pets' lifetimes as well as their continuing emotional attachment to their pets. For example, many appeared to regard the knowledge they would gain in their vet tech program as empowering. This belief appeared to

be related to feelings of powerlessness these participants experienced when they were unable to help their own sick pets. In the words of one participant, “I want to learn more so I can help more.” Others reported that they wanted to gain expertise in a specialty or topic in the field based on a particular illness that was experienced by their pets, often with serious consequences. These participants hoped to help other animals avoid the illnesses their own pets suffered and, in turn, help pet owners avoid the emotional trauma of pet loss. In addition, participants who experienced unconditional love from their pets viewed their work as a way to reciprocate this love, paying the love forward by treating the pets in their care with kindness and respect.

Another common belief among study participants was that the vet tech program would empower them to help pet owners. Some participants reported that they believed it was important to provide emotional support to pet owners struggling with their pets’ illnesses or deaths. These participants displayed a strong sense of empathy for others’ grief, and this sensitivity appeared to be related to their personal loss experiences. Some were grateful for the tremendous emotional support they had received from others when their own pets died and were eager to provide the same sort of support to pet owners. Others had received little to no emotional support when their pet died and were determined to help pet owners avoid the same difficult experience.

The generative quality of participants’ continuing bonds with their pets is illustrated in the writings of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, a prominent theorist in the field of grief and bereavement. Late in life, Kubler-Ross (2005) reflected on the death of her childhood pet rabbit, Blackie, that she referred to as “my own special bunny” (p. 211). Her family raised

rabbits, and she loved “each and every one of them,” but she considered Blackie “the one love object that belonged only to me” (p. 211). She realized that her continued emotional connection with Blackie shaped her lifelong work in helping others. “My grief [about Blackie] was instrumental in [my] reaching out to others to find their own [grief],” wrote Kubler-Ross. “In this way, I healed my own grief little by little” (p. 212).

The identification of continuing bonds as a long-term, foundational influence on helping behavior extends current understandings of continuing bonds theory. The theory originated in bereavement studies, and to date the focus of research has been on the value of continuing bonds in helping bereaved individuals cope with loss of a loved one. The current study indicates that, for this group of vet tech students, continuing bonds represented more than short-term coping strategies. Rather, they exerted a pro-social influence on participants’ values, beliefs and behavior as they sought to help pets and pet owners in their veterinary work. These findings support and extend the conclusions of a recent study (Packman et al., 2014) of pet bereavement, which concluded that some grieving pet owners might channel their grief into pro-social behavior by helping other grieving pet owners.

Further, after a thorough review of current research, the researcher concluded that this study appears to be the first to examine a pet owner’s experience of continuing bonds after an extended passage of time since the pet’s death. To date continuing bonds research appears to be confined to pet owners’ short-term loss experience. For example, the most recent study of continuing bonds in bereaved pet owners examined pet loss that had occurred 12 months or less from the date of the study (Packman et al., 2014). As previously noted, it had been on average more than eight years since the participants of the present study had lost their special

pets. Their continuing bonds with their deceased pets were long-term, enduring reminders of the love they continued to feel for their pets and shaped their desire to pursue careers in veterinary medicine.

### **A Calling to be a Vet Tech**

The final conclusion of this study was that participants expressed a deeply felt calling to pursue careers in veterinary medicine. Inspired by their love of animals and their continuing bonds with their pets, their interest in the vet tech program was drawn from a deep-seated desire to help pets and pet owners. For many, their career choice appeared to be well considered and meaningful, or a way of fulfilling their purpose in life.

A number of participants said their decision to pursue careers as vet techs was directly related to their deceased pets. Others reported that the decision represented a shift in career direction. These participants were either pursuing or considering a different career path at the time of their pets' deaths, and they reported that their bonds with their pets influenced their decision to study veterinary medicine. Similarly, other participants entered the vet tech program to pursue a second career, and, again, their comments indicated that their bonds with their pets were a significant influence on this decision.

One of the primary reasons participants decided to enter the vet tech program was a general love of animals and a concern for their welfare. This finding is consistent with existing literature that identifies a love of animals as a key influence on career choice among students of veterinary medicine. Only one study was found that addresses the career motivations of vet techs. In an ethnographic study of practicing vet techs, Sanders (2010) asserts that "love and concern for [animals] draws vet techs to their occupations" (p. 244).

Further, a limited body of quantitative research addresses the emotional connections with animals on career motivations of veterinary students. In a 2001 study, Brown and Katcher identify two factors that influence veterinary students' interest in the field: a long-standing love for and personal experiences with companion animals. In addition, a nationwide, longitudinal study found that a majority of veterinary students cite an interest in animals and affection for animals as a motivation for entering the field (Heath et al., 1996). This study also found that the rate of pet ownership among veterinary students is significantly higher among veterinary students than the general population.

Two studies were found that provided somewhat more detailed understandings of veterinary students' interests with regard to their chosen profession. In a quantitative study, Mikkonen (2009) reported that many of the study participants used words such as "dear to my heart," "fascinates me," and "my passion" in describing their interest in veterinary medicine. These findings suggest that, for veterinary students, their work represents a personal calling to help animals. The results of the current study support this assertion. For the vet tech students who participated in this study, their decision to pursue careers in veterinary medicine represented a calling that was informed by a passion and commitment to help pets and pet owners.

In addition, a quantitative study by Serpell (2005) examined the personal and professional values of first-year vet students with regard to the human-animal bond and other animal welfare topics. Serpell (2005) asserts that students' values are shaped by their personal experiences with animals and that the animals themselves may have a "direct impact" on students' values and career choice (p. 495). Further, Serpell (2005) proposes

“early relationships with animals can exert a formative influence on people’s animal-oriented values and professional aspirations” (p. 495). The results of the current study support Serpell’s proposal in that, first, participants personal experiences with their pets influenced their engagement in the vet tech program and their desire to pursue careers in veterinary medicine; and, second, a majority of study participants were children when they experienced a special relationship with a pet, and these experiences appeared to influence their love of animals and desire to help pets in their work.

In elucidating the influence of continuing bonds on career choice, it is also important to consider that participants regarded their relationships with their pets as special. This finding adds to current understandings about the interests of students pursuing careers in veterinary medicine. There does not appear to be any literature that identifies continuing bonds with a pet – or the experience of a continuing bond with one particularly special pet – as an influence on career choice.

In summary, based on a review of literature, there appears to be limited research that identifies the experience of a special relationship with a pet on career choice among students pursuing careers in veterinary medicine. This study enriches current understandings about the reasons underlying veterinary students’ professional aspirations. It also provides new understandings about how the experience of a special relationship with one particular pet may contribute to career choice among students of veterinary medicine.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Research and Practice**

This study establishes a foundational perspective of continuing bonds with a deceased pet, exploring this phenomenon in collegiate vet tech students. Study findings have

significant relevance for future research about continuing bonds theory in human-animal relationships as well as the impact of continuing bonds theory on veterinary education.

Relative to practice, study findings may be of value in the application of continuing bonds theory in adult and continuing professional education and veterinary practice.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Research**

Study findings highlight possible directions for future research in two theoretical areas: 1) psychological understandings of continuing human-animal bonds; and 2) the application of continuing human-animal bonds theory in veterinary education.

**Psychological understandings of the continuing human-animal bond.** The findings of this study support Blazina's (2011) conceptual model of the human-animal bond. Blazina's model identified four social contextual factors that influence an individual's perception of the human-animal bond: individual, interpersonal, cultural and cross-cultural. The current study addressed the influence of individual and interpersonal social contextual factors on vet techs' perceptions of their continuing bonds with their deceased pets, refining understandings of the nature and significance of these factors. Study findings also indicated that participants were aware of tacit perceptions about animals at a cultural level, represented by their interactions with casual acquaintances or their larger community. This awareness was especially prevalent when participants' pets died and they anticipated that others outside their close circle of family and friends would not understand their grief. However, although this study did point to the influence of cultural attitudes about pets on participants' experiences of pet attachment and loss, cultural and cross-cultural attitudes about pets were not studied directly or in depth. Further, only one study was found that addresses the

influence of cultural and cross-cultural contextual factors on pet owners' grief experiences as well as their experience of continuing bonds (Packman et al., 2014). Hence, additional research into cultural and cross-cultural contextual factors and their influence on an individual's experience of pet attachment and loss will provide valuable insight into the full meaning-making experience of pet owners who maintain continuing bonds with their pets.

In addition, the findings of this study indicated that participants' experience of a special relationship with a pet influenced their perceptions of their bond with the animal as well as critical life decisions such as career choice. Study findings suggested that a special relationship with a pet is characterized by pronounced feelings of emotional attunement and enduring emotional attachment. A large body of literature addresses the emotional and psychological experience of human relationships with companion animals. However, a limited body of research has addressed the psychological experience of a special relationship with a pet, and further research may provide greater insight into this experience and its impact on people's lives.

An additional opportunity for future research concerns the impact of a pet's death on an individual's perception of their bonds with that pet. A longitudinal study that compares meanings held before and after the death of a pet would offer insight into a pet owner's meaning-making process. Are meanings fixed or do they shift over time? Do pet owners develop new meanings? If changes occur, what experiences or social factors influence these changes (e.g., individual, interpersonal, cultural or cross-cultural)? An exploration of these questions may offer deeper understandings of the experience of a continuing bond with a pet.

**Continuing human-animal bonds and veterinary medical education.** Another potential focus for research relative to continuing human-animals bonds is in the field of veterinary education. Veterinary education appears to emphasize the detachment theory of bereavement and lacks current theoretical understandings of continuing human-animal bonds and its application to bereavement support for pet owners. The findings of the present study indicated that vet tech students experienced continuing bonds with their deceased pets. These experiences are likely to affect the way they perceive instruction in pet loss and bereavement. Understanding vet tech students' perceptions of bereavement instruction is especially important because, in veterinary practice, vet techs are often responsible for providing emotional support to grieving pet owners. How will they respond to pet owners' grief in their work as vet techs? Will they approach their discussions with pet owners based on their personal experience of continuing bonds with their pets? Will they adopt a perspective of a traditional detachment model of bereavement taught in their classes? Or will they use some combination of their personal experience of continuing bonds and detachment theory? Future research may offer valuable insight into how instruction in pet loss and bereavement influences students' beliefs about working with pet owners in veterinary practice.

In addition, future research into veterinary medicine curricula could focus on the needs of a diverse student population. The selection criteria for the current study included only vet tech students who had experienced a special relationship with a deceased pet. Additional research could examine the beliefs of students who have not experienced a special relationship with a pet. The goal of this research would be to compare the pre-existing understandings of students who had experienced a special relationship and those who had

not. Are there differences between the two groups regarding their beliefs about their work in veterinary medicine? And are there differences in the way the two groups assimilate the instruction in the vet tech program? This research may provide further direction for the development of veterinary training programs about the continuing human-animal bond to ensure that these programs meet the needs of a diverse student body.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Education Practice**

The findings of this study have significant implications for the development and delivery of pet loss bereavement education programs. As described in the following sections, relevant findings include students' experience of special relationships and continuing bonds with their pets; the disenfranchised grief experienced by some participants when their pets died; and the cathartic value of storytelling evident when students shared their stories of pet attachment and loss.

The primary goal of a pet loss bereavement support education program based on continuing bonds theory would be to enable support providers to better assist pet owners struggling with the loss of a beloved pet. Findings of this study indicated that, by maintaining continuing bonds with their deceased pets, participants felt comforted and were better able to accept the physical loss of their pet. This finding is in keeping with a growing body of research that indicates continuing bonds are an important coping strategy for loss of a pet (Packman et al., 2014). Hence, an education program grounded in the concepts of continuing bonds is likely to improve support providers' ability to help their clients through the difficult experience of losing a pet.

In this section, a framework for a pet loss bereavement education program based on continuing bonds theory is outlined. This will be followed by an overview of the implications of such programs for different audiences, from vet tech students and practicing veterinarians to bereavement support providers such as counselors and social workers. In addition, a sample lesson plan instructing learners about the experience and influence of a special relationship with a pet is presented in Appendix K.

**Framework of a pet loss bereavement education program based on continuing bonds theory.** In this section, the basic components of a continuing bonds education program are outlined. This framework may be tailored to different educational formats, such as a semester-long class for veterinary students; an in-depth online training course; or a two-hour continuing education course or half-day workshop for busy professionals. Further, the framework may be adjusted to fit the needs of different audiences. Task and needs analyses that focus on any the workplace performance requirements of a given group of students may be used to provide direction for development of the program. According to Swanson (2007), key considerations of task and needs analysis include the impact of the training on the workplace performance of the individual, the work team, and the organization as well as the work process with which all are involved. In the context of a continuing bonds education program for veterinary professionals, for example, a task and needs analysis would consider the process of bereavement support for pet owners with which classroom participants are involved, specifically with regard to their interactions with a bereaved pet owner.

There are also likely to be differences in the experience and knowledge each learner brings to the classroom, particularly with regard to personal experiences with pets. For

example, veterinary students and practicing veterinary professionals may have a greater need for training in basic counseling techniques such as active listening (Rogers & Farson, 1957) while professionals such as social workers who are experienced with counseling techniques may have a greater need for training in the human-animal bond. Similarly, learners are likely to have different perceptions about animals, and, again, training in bereavement support and continuing bonds will need to be adjusted accordingly. The implications of education in continuing bonds theory and bereavement support for pet owners are reviewed for potential students later in this section.

***Overview of theory.*** An important component of a continuing bonds education program is a thorough review of key theoretical understandings of the human-animal bond, bereavement theory, and human coping mechanisms involved in the bereavement experience.

Historical perspectives on the human-animal bond will provide students with an overview of changes in how humans interacts with animals, particularly in the last half century as pet keeping has grown in popularity. In addition, literature that addresses the psychological experience of pet owners' emotional attachments with pets should be reviewed to ensure that students understand the unique qualities of such relationships, e.g., pets as family members or children, the unconditional love associated with pet relationships, etc. In addition, training should address the concept of a special relationship with a pet. As defined in this study, a special relationship with a pet is characterized by a particularly strong emotional attachment.

With regard to bereavement theory, instruction should address the detachment theory of bereavement as well as continuing bonds theory, highlighting key differences. A shift in

bereavement theory has taken shape in the last decade. Traditional understandings of the grieving process associated with the five stages of grief and detachment theory are being challenged by new understandings identified as continuing bonds. These theories differ fundamentally in their approach to bereavement: detachment theory holds that the bereaved ultimately detaches emotionally from the deceased love object, whereas continuing bonds theory holds that the bereaved continues to maintain an ongoing, emotional connection with the deceased. As part of this instruction, program developers should consider recent literature that indicates that an individual's experience of a continuing bond with their pet may offer comfort and assist coping (Klass et al., 1996). Further, instruction should include an overview of research that has examined the unique grieving experience associated with pet loss. For example, a 2014 qualitative study of pet loss and grief asserts that grieving for a pet can be a unique and particularly intense experience (Packman et al., 2014).

***Bereavement support strategies.*** In addition to providing a basic foundation in theory, a pet loss bereavement support education program based on the concepts of continuing bonds will provide focused training in support strategies. Key strategies include: 1) a thorough client evaluation that considers the quality or significance of the client's relationship with their pet, the quality of the social support for their grief, and their experience of a continuing bond with the pet; 2) the creation of a safe environment in which pet owners will feel comfortable sharing their feelings; 3) the value of storytelling as a coping strategy for pet loss; and 4) the effective use of language that reflects the concepts of continuing bonds. Further, the training program should include instruction in reflective practice in which students are given the opportunity to consider their personal experience (or

lack of experience) of pet attachment and loss as well as their perceptions about animals and pet keeping. Finally, training may also include a review of basic grief intervention techniques such as active listening.

It should be noted, however, that the continuing bonds education program outlined here is not intended to serve as a substitute for education in counseling techniques. The primary relevance of this study is to highlight the need for education based on current understandings of continuing bonds and pet loss, particularly in veterinary education. Many resources are available that discuss counseling techniques suitable for the bereavement support of pet owners, from both a professional and lay perspective. The sample lesson plan presented in Appendix K provides a list of additional readings.

*Client evaluation.* When working with a grieving pet owner, support providers should be prepared to address three primary concerns: the pet owner's experience of a special relationship with a pet; disenfranchised grief; and a continuing bond with the pet.

With respect to a special relationship, past research and findings of the present study indicate that an individual's experience of a special relationship with a pet is characterized by a particularly strong emotional attachment to the pet and intense grief when the pet dies. Support providers should be prepared to evaluate the quality of the relationship that a bereaved client has (or had) with their animal (e.g., my horse was my best friend versus my horse was only a financial investment).

With respect to disenfranchised grief, past research and findings of the present study suggest that the way in which others respond to the bereaved has a significant influence on the individual's grief experience. Bereavement support education efforts should emphasize

the importance of gaining insight into a pet owner's social experiences relative to their pet. Does the pet owner believe that friends and family understand how they feel about their pet? Who have they talked with about their pet and their pet's death? How did people respond when they shared their feelings? The answers to such questions may provide insight into a pet owner's experience of disenfranchised grief, which can complicate the grief experience.

With respect to continuing bonds, past research and the current study indicate that pet owners who experience a special relationship with a pet may also experience a continuing emotional connection with the pet after its death. Further, continuing bonds can provide comfort to a grieving pet owner and help them cope with their loss. However, a pet owner may be fearful that they will forget their pet and, simultaneously, uncertain about whether their desire to stay attached with their pet is normal. It is critical that support providers sympathetically address these concerns by assuring the pet owner that it is normal to stay emotionally attached to a deceased pet. Continuing bonds may manifest as activities such as sensing the pet's presence, creating memorials and shrines, dreaming the pet, saving keepsakes, among others.

One way in which support providers may evaluate these three factors – special relationship, disenfranchised grief and continuing bonds – is by listening closely to the words that the bereaved uses in describing their relationship with their pet, social experiences relative to their pet and continuing emotional connection with the pet. Client questions and comments associated may include:

- Special relationship:

- I've never felt this way before. My mother died two years ago, but this feels so much worse. Why does losing my pet hurt this much?
- She was my baby. Should I have done more to try to save her?
- She was unique. I'll never have another pet like her.
- Disenfranchised grief:
  - I don't know who to talk to about my grief. Everyone is going to think I'm crazy.
  - My friend said she was just a dog. My friend doesn't understand how much she meant to me.
  - People tell me I should be over it by now. But I still hurt so much.
- Continuing bond:
  - I still feel my pet's presence.
  - I want to keep my pet's blanket because it smells like her. Is this normal?
  - I'm worried that I'll forget my pet. Is it normal to want to stay attached?

Bereavement support providers should be prepared to respond knowledgeably and sympathetically to such questions/comments in order to normalize the pet owner's experience.

*Creation of a safe, nonjudgmental atmosphere.* A training program in continuing bonds should include instruction in techniques to create an environment in which grieving pet owners feel safe sharing their feelings. Findings of this study suggested that some

participants who experienced a lack of social support for their grief when their pets died withdrew emotionally when others did not sympathize with their feelings. Hence, it is critical that support providers begin a conversation with a grieving pet owner by acknowledging the pet owner's intense feelings of loss and assuring them that such feelings are normal.

*Storytelling as a coping strategy.* Findings of the current study indicated that storytelling has considerable value as a coping strategy for pet loss. During the course of the interviews, the researcher noted that telling stories about their pets appeared to have a cathartic effect for many of the participants. Some participants reported that telling their stories about their pets was revelatory and gave them new insight into their values, beliefs and behaviors. All expressed gratitude at the end of their interviews for the opportunity to share their stories. The cathartic nature of participants' storytelling is consistent with research that indicates that storytelling and sharing memories helps bereaved pet owners cope with the loss of their pet (Blazina, 2011).

Hence, a continuing bonds education program should emphasize the value of storytelling. Bereaved pet owners should be invited to share stories about their pets, including their experiences during the pet's lifetime; the circumstances of the pet's death; their feelings about the death; and their social experiences relative to the pet. Pet owners should also be encouraged to express any continuing emotional connection they may feel for their pet. To this end, a recent qualitative study of the experience of continuing bonds in bereaved pet owners (Packman et al., 2014) suggests that support providers should invite the individual to share their stories as follows:

A simple question such as, ‘Do you still feel her presence?’ can give one permission to disclose aspects of their experience. Another statement might be, ‘sometimes when people lose a loved animal companion, they describe perceptions of hearing or seeing or feeling their animal – I’m wondering if this has happened for you.’ Validating this type of continuing bond occurrence in a non-judgmental way can allow those in grief to feel safe to disclose their comparable experience; they are given permission to tell their stories. (p. 350)

However, the authors of this study (Packman et al., 2014) also caution that support providers should be careful about imposing preconceptions about continuing bonds on grieving pet owners. The goal is to make the bereaved feel comfortable in sharing their experience of continuing bonds, but the authors assert that some continuing bonds may bring more pain than solace, especially early in the grieving period. For example, a pet owner may express reluctance to pick up their pet’s ashes and should be assured that this is normal and acceptable.

*The language of continuing bonds.* The use of clinical language based on the concepts of continuing bonds may be especially important for effective bereavement support. The continuing bonds theory uses unique language to describe a continuing emotional connection that a pet owner may feel for their pet, including words such as “hearing,” “talking,” “sensing,” “having” and “creating” (Packman et al., 2011). These words acknowledge the continuing sense of the relationship and imply that the pet owner is actively constructing an inner representation of the deceased pet. In bereavement support, language matters because it represents the primary tools that care providers will use in responding to bereaved pet

owners. By using the language of continuing bonds, the support provider will acknowledge the love that still exists in the heart of the pet owner for their deceased pet. This language recognizes the ongoing memory of the relationship and offers an opening to a conversation about that relationship through the pet owner's story. Further, this language may enable support providers to better demonstrate their personal understanding of the continuing human-animal bereavement experience.

*Reflective practice.* Another component of a continuing bonds education program is reflective practice. Students should be given the opportunity to reflect on their personal experiences with pets or others' pet keeping experiences. The goal is to help students gain a deeper understanding of the experience of a significant emotional attachment with a pet and a continuing bond with that pet. Such training may be especially important for those providers who have no personal experience of pet keeping as well as strong emotional attachments or continuing bonds with a pet. The sample lesson plan presented in Appendix K outlines one activity that asks students to reflect on their personal experiences of pet attachment and loss, or the experiences of others if they have never had a pet, as a way of gaining greater insight into the experiences of bereaved pet owners.

*Active listening.* Basic training in active listening techniques may be especially important for veterinary students and practitioners since they are likely to interact with grieving pet owners on a regular basis. Active listening (Rogers & Farson, 1957) creates an atmosphere of openness and encourages the pet owner to feel safe in sharing their stories about their pets. The key elements of active listening are:

- **Adjust your posture: FOLLOW where your client leads.** Face them. Use **Open** body language, **Lean Lightly** forward, **Open** your eyes. Encourage your client to share their feelings. **Wait** for them to speak.
- **.Check your understanding:** Paraphrase your client's words to verify that you correctly understand how they feel. Be sensitive to body language, non-verbal cues and behavior such as crying or silence. Do not add new information, or attempt to challenge or correct them.
- **Sympathise:** Use words that indicate that you have heard and understand them. Validate your client's feelings to normalize their experience without agreeing or disagreeing.

**The potential audience for continuing bonds education.** The potential audience for a continuing bonds education program is broad. Currently, many people who work with grieving pet owners may feel helpless or inadequate in the face of an individual's demonstrated, intense emotional grief and continued attachment to a deceased pet. This includes students of veterinary medicine; practicing veterinarians and veterinary support staff; other professionals who work directly with animals, such as zookeepers and people who train service animals; and practitioners such as social workers, counselors, psychologists and clergy. Outside of the classroom, disseminating information about continuing human-animal bonds into the wider community through veterinary practices and animal rescue organizations may also help family members and friends who are struggling to provide emotional support for their loved ones. In this section, the significance of training in the continuing human-animal bond for these categories of providers is reviewed.

*Students of veterinary medicine and veterinary practitioners.* Students of veterinary medicine and veterinary practitioners are a particularly important audience for training in bereavement support based on continuing bonds. Vet tech students and practicing vet techs, in particular, may benefit from this training since they are often responsible for providing emotional support to pet owners in the context of veterinary practice. In turn, the ability of vet techs to provide effective emotional support for grieving pet owners based on continuing bonds may have a significant impact on client satisfaction. Hence, veterinary practice managers may have a vested interest in offering bereavement education based on continuing bonds to their staff.

Another important application of training in the continuing human-animal bond and bereavement support is to address the emotional needs of this audience. Research indicates that veterinary students are significantly more likely to suffer clinical depression during the course of their schooling than college students in general and human medical students (Hafen, 2008). As previously noted, the vet tech students who participated in this study appeared to enjoy sharing stories about their pets. Telling their stories also appeared to be cathartic as they described their past experiences with their pets, the intense feelings of loss when their pets died, and the activities that helped them cope with their pets' deaths, including continuing bond expressions, or CBE (Packman et al., 2011). Further, in sharing their stories, some participants appeared to gain self-knowledge and a clearer sense of purpose and direction in their work.

In a classroom setting, students who are learning about continuing bonds may benefit from the same opportunity to share their personal stories of pet attachment and loss. Hence, a

class in bereavement support based on continuing bonds may serve two purposes for students of veterinary medicine. First, by sharing their personal experiences of pet attachment and loss with other students, students may gain a greater sense of wellbeing and belonging, improving cohesion with classmates or team mates based on their shared experiences. Second, students will be better prepared to apply their personal experiences of continuing bonds in their future work with pet owners. To achieve this goal, a lesson plan geared specifically to veterinary and vet tech students should utilize exercises in self-reflection and storytelling.

*People in animal-related professions.* In addition to students of veterinary medicine and practicing veterinarians and veterinary staff, other professionals who work with animals on a regular basis may benefit from training in continuing bonds. This audience includes animal keepers at zoos, aquariums and similar public-facing organizations; organizations that train or employ service animals such as seeing eye dogs or therapy animals; policemen and military personnel who work in K9 units; and workers at animal shelters and rescue organizations. As with the veterinary students described in the previous section, such training may offer these workers the opportunity to share stories about the animals with which they have experienced an emotional attachment. In particular, storytelling and an open discussion of continuing bonds may help workers cope with their feelings of grief when an animal in their care has died and enable workers to better support each other, increasing team cohesion.

Furthermore, training in continuing bonds may help these workers respond to the grief that may occur in the general public when a beloved animal dies, such as a zoo animal or a favorite animal performer. One anecdotal story about a zoo animal underscores the benefits of publicly memorializing an animal that is loved by many people (Silverman,

1998). Ruby the elephant, a long-time resident of the Phoenix zoo, was famous for her paintings and very popular with zoo visitors. When she was euthanized in 1998, the zoo announced a free-admission day in her honor, and 43,000 people attended, nearly three times normal attendance.

***Bereavement support providers.*** Counselors, social workers, clergy, and family and friends of bereaved pet owners may also benefit from a continuing bonds bereavement education program. Research indicates that there is an apparent lack of knowledge of and expertise in new and expanded theories of human-animal attachment and continuing bonds among licensed professionals who may provide emotional support for grieving pet owners. For example, a national study by Risley-Curtiss (2010) suggests that professional social workers are neither trained nor skilled in the area of the human-animal bond and pet bereavement. This study also found a general lack of preparedness regarding continuing and professional education in the human-animal bond and recommends increased professional education in this area (Risley-Curtiss, 2010).

The present study offers insight into possible directions for educational efforts focused on practitioners who work with grieving pet owners. An important consideration is the possibility that this audience does not work regularly with pets and pet owners. Further, compared to veterinary students and professionals, such practitioners may not be as likely to have personal experience with pets. A quantitative study of veterinary students found that the rate of pet ownership was significantly higher than the general population (Shurtleff et al., 1983). Hence, for this audience, it may be especially important to focus instruction on concepts of the human-animal bond; social contextual factors that influence a pet owner's

subjective experience of pet attachment; the experience of disenfranchised grief associated with pet loss; and continuing bonds as a bereavement coping strategy.

### **Summary**

In summary, three key conclusions emerged from study findings. First, students' perceptions of their continuing bonds with their deceased pets were shaped by their interpersonal interactions. In constructing their highly personal, subjective perceptions, students balanced their strong feelings of affection for their pets with the perceptions of family and friends. For most participants, family and friends acknowledged, supported and sometimes shared their emotional bonds with their pets, reinforcing the participant's belief that their pet was a cherished member of the family. For a subset of participants, family and friends did not understand or support participants' love for their pets, and these participants struggled to resolve their strong attachments to their pet with the incongruent perceptions of others. Ultimately, participants' perceptions of their pets as best friends and babies remained resolute despite the rejection they experienced from others.

Second, study participants' continuing bonds with their deceased pets had a generative influence on their desire to help pets and pet owners. The love they felt for their pets remained in their hearts. Moreover, this love was also in their minds and hands, expressed each day as they studied to gain the knowledge and skills that would empower them in their future work.

Finally, students expressed a deeply felt calling to pursue careers in veterinary medicine. Inspired by their love of animals and informed by their continuing emotional

bonds with their pets, they studied to help pets live long, healthy lives and comfort pet owners struggling with pet loss.

This study has significant implications for research in the areas of the psychology of the human-animal bond. Possible directions for future study in this area include an examination of cultural and cross-cultural influences on an individual's perception of a continuing bond with a pet and the experience of a special relationship with a pet. Another area of study would examine how a pet's death may impact the meanings pet owner makes of their bond with that pet.

This study also has significant implications for education practice. Study findings suggested that practitioners tasked with providing emotional support for grieving pet owners would benefit from training in continuing bonds. Such training would provide instruction in the human-animal bond and bereavement theory, including detachment theory and continuing bonds. Further, training would provide practical strategies and interventions for helping grieving pet owners. Audiences for continuing bonds training include students of veterinary medicine; practicing veterinary professionals and support staff; other professionals who work with animals, such as zookeepers and military personnel in K9 units; and other support providers such as social workers and counselors. Training that emphasizes storytelling may be of particular benefit to students of veterinary medicine struggling emotionally during the course of their schooling. By sharing their personal stories of pet attachment and loss, students may find comfort from fellow students with similar experiences, increasing team cohesion. In the context of veterinary practice, a bereavement education program based on continuing bonds will enable bereavement support providers to

deliver more effective support. Ultimately, veterinary practices that embrace continuing bonds in working with bereaved clients may improve client satisfaction and retention.

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**APPENDICES**

**Appendix A: Contributing Factors to Veterinary Technology Students' Experience of a  
Special Relationship With a Pet That Died**

Table 2

*Contributing Factors to Veterinary Technology Students' Experience of a Special Relationship With a Pet That Died*

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Relationship was unique</b>	<b>Pet was my friend</b>	<b>Pet was my baby</b>	<b>Pet provided emotional support</b>	<b>Felt intense grief when pet died</b>
Anna			X		X
Celeste	X	X		X	X
Carol	X	X	X	X	X
Colleen	X	X	X	X	X
Frank	X	X	X	X	
Hannah	X	X			X
Helen			X		X
Jane	X	X	X	X	
John	X	X		X	
Karen	X	X	X	X	
Lisa	X	X	X	X	X
Mollie	X	X		X	X
Nina	X	X			
Opal	X	X	X		X
Rachel	X	X	X	X	X
Teresa	X	X			X

## Appendix B: Continuing Bond Expressions by Participant

Table 3

### *Continuing Bond Expressions by Participant*

<b>Continuing Bond Expressions</b>	<b>Anna</b>	<b>Carol</b>	<b>Celeste</b>	<b>Colleen</b>	<b>Frank</b>	<b>Hannah</b>
Sensing pet's continued presence			X		X	
Talking with pet			X			
Talking with others about pet	X	X	X	X	X	X
Having dreams, memories and associations	X	X	X	X	X	X
Saving keepsakes and belongings	X	X		X	X	X
Creating memorials and shrines					X	X
Reserving pet's name	X					
Getting a tattoo with image related to pet		X				
Memorializing pet through work		X	X	X	X	X
Visiting pet's favorite places						X
Remembering lessons learned from pet		X	X		X	X
Having thoughts of being reunited with pet			X			X
Physical sensations when thinking of pet					X	
Visual images of pet					X	
Obtaining a new pet similar to deceased pet				X		X

Table 3 (continued)

<b>Continuing Bond Expressions</b>	<b>Helen</b>	<b>Jane</b>	<b>John</b>	<b>Karen</b>	<b>Lisa</b>	<b>Mollie</b>
Sensing pet's continued presence				X		
Talking with pet				X		
Talking with others about pet	X	X		X	X	X
Having dreams, memories and associations	X	X	X	X	X	X
Saving keepsakes and belongings	X	X		X	X	X
Creating memorials and shrines	X		X	X	X	X
Reserving pet's name						
Getting a tattoo with image related to pet						
Memorializing pet through work			X	X	X	X
Visiting pet's favorite places					X	X
Remembering lessons learned from pet		X	X	X	X	X
Having thoughts of being reunited with pet			X			
Physical sensations when thinking of pet				X		
Visual images of pet	X		X	X	X	X
Obtaining a new pet similar to deceased pet						

Table 3 (continued)

<b>Continuing Bond Expressions</b>	<b>Nina</b>	<b>Opal</b>	<b>Rachel</b>	<b>Teresa</b>
Sensing pet's continued presence				
Talking with pet				
Talking with others about pet	X	X	X	X
Having dreams, memories and associations	X	X	X	X
Saving keepsakes and belongings	X	X		X
Creating memorials and shrines		X		X
Reserving pet's name				
Getting a tattoo with image related to pet				
Memorializing pet through work		X	X	X
Visiting pet's favorite places				
Remembering lessons learned from pet			X	
Having thoughts of being reunited with pet				
Physical sensations when thinking of pet				
Visual images of pet			X	
Obtaining a new pet similar to deceased pet		X		

**Appendix C: Veterinary Technology Students' Interpersonal Interactions With Regard  
to Their Pets**

Table 4

*Veterinary Technology Students' Interpersonal Interactions With Regard to Their Pets*

Participant	Perceptions about the pet		Responses to pet's death		Long-term support for participant's bond with pet	
	Pet was a family member	Pet was a commodity or possession	Sympathetic	Unsympathetic	Supported	Did not support
Anna		X		X		X
Carol	X		X		X	
Celeste		X		X		X
Colleen	X			X	X	
Frank	X		X		X	
Hannah	X		X		X	
Helen	X		X	X	X	
Jane	X		X		X	
John	X		X		X	
Karen	X		X		X	
Lisa	X		X	X	X	
Mollie		X	X	X	X	X
Nina	X		X		X	
Opal	X		X		X	
Rachel		X		X	X	X
Teresa	X		X		X	

**Appendix D: Factors That Influenced Student Engagement in the Veterinary  
Technology Program**

Table 5

*Factors That Influenced Student Engagement in the Veterinary Technology Program*

Participant name	A general love of animals	Experience of a special relationship with a pet	
		Empowered by education to help animals more than I could help my pet	Pet influenced beliefs about work
Anna	X	X	
Celeste	X	X	X
Carol	X		X
Colleen	X	X	X
Frank	X	X	X
Hannah		X	X
Helen	X	X	
Jane	X	X	
John	X		X
Karen	X		X
Lisa			X
Mollie	X		X
Nina	X	X	
Opal		X	
Rachel	X		X
Teresa		X	X

### Appendix E: Years Since Pet's Death by Participant

Table 6

#### *Years Since Pet's Death by Participant*

<b>Participant name</b>	<b>Years since pet's death</b>
Anna	14
Celeste	12
Carol	1.5
Colleen	6
Frank	8
Hannah	14
Helen	1.25
Jane	8
John	7
Karen	11
Lisa	2.75
Mollie	2.75
Nina	12
Opal	8
Rachel	16
Teresa	10

Mean number of years since pet's death: 8.4

Median number of years since pet's death: 8.0

### **Appendix F: Classroom Recruitment Presentation**

Thank you for inviting me to speak to you this morning about my research. I am a doctoral candidate at North Carolina State University. My doctoral program is in the field of Adult and Continuing Professional Education, and my research interest is the human-animal bond and pet attachment. I am researching the meaning that veterinary technology students make of a special relationship with a pet they had that has died. By “special relationship,” I mean a pet that is your friend and companion, not strictly a guard dog, hunting dog, service animal or a mouser.

I would like to interview you and hear stories about your pet. I want to ask you a few questions about your relationship and what it means to you and your study of veterinary technology. Your participation will involve:

- A private conversation with me about your pet. This conversation will last 45-90 minutes. We will meet on school grounds or a secure location of your choosing. The session will be recorded on portable audio recording equipment.
- You are encouraged to bring any objects related to your pet that you would like to talk about, including photographs; books, journals, stories or poetry; mementos and memorabilia such as pet toys, bowls and collars; and artwork or other creations.

Your confidentiality is assured. I will not publish your name or identify you in any report. I am happy to answer any questions concerning your participation now or through email, regular mail, or telephone.

If you are interested in participating in this study, please complete and return the *Participant Questionnaire* that I am handing out today and I will contact you to set up an interview.

Thank you for your interest in participating in my research study!

Yours truly,

Robert E. Gierka  
Doctoral Candidate  
North Carolina State University  
College of Education

### **Appendix G: Participant Recruitment Letter**

Dear prospective research participant:

I am researching the meaning that veterinary technology students make of their continuing bond with animals that they have owned. This study is part of my research as a North Carolina State University doctoral student in the College of Education.

I would like to interview you about your experience of a bond that you have with your pet(s) that are no longer living. I will be examining the meaning that you place on your bonds with your pets; and the ways these bonds inform you about the meaning and purpose of your veterinary studies and your work.

Your participation will involve the following:

1. A private conversation with you regarding your pet in a location of your choosing. This conversation will last a minimum of 45 minutes, but might go as long as 1.5 hours. The session will be recorded on portable audio recording equipment.
2. Bring objects related to a deceased pet, that you have owned, including poems, photos, scrapbooks, and memorabilia, and share stories about your continuing emotional connection.

Your confidentiality will be assured. All audio recordings will be destroyed at the close of the defense of the dissertation. All identifying information will be removed and personal names replaced with pseudonyms in all published material.

I am happy to answer any questions concerning your participation through email, regular mail, or telephone. I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours truly,  
Robert Gierka  
(email omitted)  
(telephone number omitted)

## **Appendix H: Informed Consent Form for Research**

### North Carolina State University INFORMED CONSENT FORM for RESEARCH

Title of Study: A Case Study of Veterinary Technology Students' Experience of a Continuing Human-Animal Bond

Principal Investigator: Robert E. Gierka      Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Carol Kasworm

What are some general things you should know about research studies?

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Your participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to be a part of this study, to choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty. The purpose of research studies is to gain a better understanding of a certain topic or issue. You are not guaranteed any personal benefits from being in a study. Research studies also may pose risks to those that participate. In this consent form you will find specific details about the research in which you are being asked to participate. If you do not understand something in this form, it is your right to ask the researcher for clarification or more information. A copy of this consent form will be provided to you. If at any time you have questions about your participation, do not hesitate to contact the researcher(s) named above.

What is the purpose of this study?

Research interest into the human-animal bond has grown rapidly since the 1970s. The purpose of this study is to explore the meaning that veterinary technology students make of their experience of a bond with a deceased pet in order to better understand how that meaning informs their beliefs about their work with pets and owners. The research question is intended to elicit deep and detailed insights and understandings of participants' experiences and perceptions, which might include knowledge and beliefs about their deceased pet animal.

What will happen if you take part in the study?

If you agree to participate in this study as a layperson, you will be asked to meet with researcher Robert Gierka for an interview, which will last 45–90 minutes. The interview will be held at a mutually agreed upon location that offers privacy so that you may answer questions freely. The interview will be scheduled at your convenience. You may be asked to bring documents and other materials such as stories, poems, photographs, scrapbooks, and pet memorabilia.

Risks

There are no physical risks associated with this research. Should you find yourself extremely uncomfortable answering any of the interviewer's questions, you are encouraged to ask to move on to another question or withdraw from the study if absolutely necessary.

Benefits

In addition to contributing to the scholarly research for bereavement models, this study will further inform other researchers, teachers, community leaders, and the community at large how better to understand the human experience of bereavement regarding pets.

Confidentiality

The researcher will maintain your confidentiality. Data will be stored securely in a locked firebox in the principal investigator's office and on an encrypted external storage device. No reference will be made in oral or written reports that could link you to the study. Only the researcher will have access to the data from your interview(s) before your name is removed. You will receive a transcript of your interview to review. Corrections or additions can be made within one week of the interview by telephone if you so choose. Data will be reported using pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality, and any demographic information that could indirectly identify you will be masked so you cannot be identified. This data will be presented in a doctoral dissertation for North Carolina State University. Additional possibilities exist for a journal article(s), conference proceeding(s), or work in the form of a book.

Compensation

You will not receive any monetary compensation for participating.

What if you have questions about this study?

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Robert Gierka, 2233 The Circle, Raleigh, NC, 27608; XXX.XXX.XXXX.

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Deb Paxton, Regulatory Compliance Administrator, Box 7514, NCSU (919/515-4514).

Consent To Participate

"I have read and understand the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study with the understanding that I may choose not to participate or to stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled."

Subject's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_  
Investigator's signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

### Appendix I: Participant Questionnaire

Yes, I am interested in talking with you about my pet and sharing about my involvement in veterinary technology studies.

1. Name:

---

First

Last

Middle

2. Local Telephone Number:

---

3. Email address:

---

4. Are you 18 years if age or older?

Yes

No

5. Year and month of your pet's death: \_\_\_\_\_

Please verify your information so that I may contact you to discuss the interview process.

## **Appendix J: Interview Guide for Semi-Structured Interviews**

Prior to the participant interview the interviewer will distribute and collect the following forms from study participants:

1. Informed consent form for research (Appendix H)
2. Participant questionnaire (Appendix I).
3. The interviewer will bring the following to the initial interviews:
  - Dual digital sound recorders
  - Interview guide for semi-structured interviews (Appendix J).
4. During the interview, the interviewer will do all of the following:
  - Greet participant.
  - Reintroduce the interview topic briefly and explain interview procedures.
  - Answer any questions.
  - Confirm receipt of demographics and pet bonding questionnaire and signed consent form.
  - Explain that some questions may cause momentary discomfort or unhappiness and participants can refuse to answer any questions they perceive as embarrassing or threatening.
  - Explain that the interviewer is interested in hearing about their personal meaning-making experiences.
  - Start recorders.
  - Conduct the interview.
  - At the end of the interview thank participant and stop recorders.

### **Interview questions**

Interview questions below are related to the research questions:

1. What meaning do veterinary technology students make of their experience of a bond with a beloved pet that has died?
  - a. You said that you experienced a special relationship with your pet that died. What was your pet's name?
  - b. Tell me about your relationship with [pet's name].
  - c. How did [pet's name] die?
  - d. Do you remember reaching out to others around the time of [pet's name] death?
  - e. Do you still experience a relationship with [pet's name]?
  - f. Do you ever talk with anyone about your experience?
2. What are students' perceptions of their interest in studying veterinary technology in relation to their bond with a beloved pet that has died?

Please reflect on your relationship with [pet's name] and tell me what it means to your study of veterinary technology.

### **Appendix K: Sample Lesson Plan for Continuing Bonds Training**

Veterinarians, veterinary technicians, social workers, psychologists, clergy and other professionals are sometimes tasked with assisting people who experience grief for the death of a pet. The present study findings indicate that pet owners who experience a special relationship with a pet can experience the relationship psychologically as a continuing human-animal bond a decade or more after the pet's death; and that this bond may continue to have a significant influence on the pet owner's life. The following lesson is designed to help students reflect on the effect that relationships with pets can have on them or others. This lesson should take approximately two hours to complete.

#### **A Special Relationship With a Pet**

In this lesson, students will express their feelings about human-animal bonds. The lesson integrates hands-on activity, classroom discussion and collaboration. It encourages mutual understanding and awareness for individual perceptions and feelings about pets. A list of resources for further reading is as follows:

Blazina, C., Boyra, G., & Shen-Miller, D. (Eds.). (2011). *The Psychology of the Human-animal Bond: A Resource for Clinicians and Researchers*. Springer.

Bonanno, G. A. (2009). *The other side of sadness: What the new science of bereavement tells us about life after loss*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Klass, D. (2006). Continuing conversations about continuing bonds. *Death Studies*, 30, 843-858.

Kubler-Ross, E. (1969). *On death and dying*. Scribner: New York.

Kubler-Ross, E., & Kessler, D. (2005). *On grief and grieving*. Scribner: New York.

Packman, W., Field, N. P., Carmack, B. J., & Ronen, R. (2011). Continuing bonds and psychosocial adjustment in pet loss. *Omega: Journal of Death and Dying, 16*(4), 335-356.

**Context.** This activity is especially suited to student self-reflection. Assign this activity to students to help them understand their own or others' human-animal bond experiences.

**Objectives.** During and following the activity, students will:

1. Reflect on experiences with pets and consider their influence on them or others.
2. Graphically and/pictorially represent the experiences.
3. Write brief descriptions of key experiences and discuss their influence.

**Materials/preparation.** Students will use 8 ½"x11" white paper, graph paper, construction paper, pencil, pen, or markers and art supplies for creating and representing their final documents.

**Activities.** Students will complete the following activities:

1. Ask students to take a pencil and 8 ½"x11" white paper and list 5 to 10 personal relationships they have had with pets. Note: if participants have not had or cannot recall 5 to 10 personal relationships with pets, ask them to list the pet relationships of co-workers, clients, friends or family members.
2. Have students rate their perception of each pet relationship from 1 to 5, with 5 being the most influential on their own, or another's, life.
3. Have students use graph paper to graph the level of influence that the relationship had on their own, or another's, life. Put the influence rating on the vertical (y) axis

and their age at the time of the relationship (or an approximate year of the experience) on the horizontal ( $y$ ) axis. Have students use a pencil to connect the dots on the graph.

4. On separate construction paper, have students redraw their graph. Beside each relationship rating, have students write a descriptive word or phrase and/or draw pictures to illustrate the relationship.
5. When students have completed their writing/illustration task, ask them to pick one or two of the relationships and write a brief description of its influence on their, or another's, life.
6. Ask students to pair up and take turns discussing the relationships they have described.

**Student reflection.** Students will complete the following activities:

1. Ask students to reflect on the relationships they have chosen and consider the following questions:
  - Why did they choose the relationships that they described?
  - What influence did these relationships have on their own, or another's, life?
2. Review each student's graphs and writing/illustrations.
3. If time permits, discuss each student's insights to assess whether students' writing/illustrations have resulted in any new insight or perceptions about their, or another's, experience with pets.
4. Ask for volunteers to present results and discuss their insights with the class.

**Analysis of teaching method.** Using a reflective model of learning (Kolb, 1984; Schön, 1987), this lesson is designed to help students reflect on a special relationship that they, their clients, friends or family members have had with pets; engage students in writing and thinking about relationships with pets; and discuss the various ways that students may experience the influence of relationships with pets.

In this lesson, students are encouraged and empowered to make their own decisions about what pet relationships to include in their graphs, the rankings of each relationship, and conclusions about the influence of the relationships. Students who have experienced a relationship with a pet have an opportunity to hear from students who have not, and vice versa.