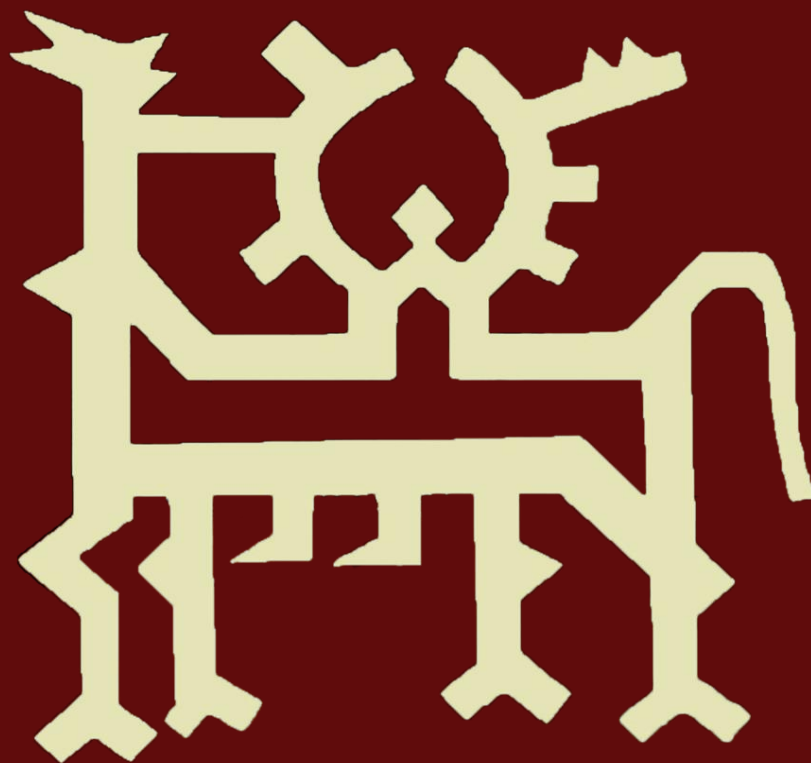


Studies on the Human-Animal Relationship



Edited by
Borbála László and Antal Lovas Kiss

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Studies on the Human-Animal Relationship

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Borbála László and Antal Lovas Kiss

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A Scoping Review of the Roles of Pets in Families between 1980-2023 from a Gender Perspective

Ivett Szalma, Lóránt Pélyi, Orsolya Udvari

Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to review the international literature on the role of pets in the family, with a particular focus on the differences that previous literature has found between men and women in this regard. For this purpose, we use the scoping review method. In this framework, we collected international journal articles published between 1980 and 2023 that dealt with our chosen topic. Based on the results of the scoping review, we found 49 articles that matched the focus of our research. After reviewing them, the following topics emerged: the emergence of fictive kinship between humans and animals, the related flexible role of pets within the family. In addition, some of the journal articles analysed the different types of attachments between pets and their owners, and related to this, the issue of grief at the loss of a companion animal is often at the centre of these studies. Finally, the focus is also on how pet caregivers form partnerships and whether pets can be a substitute for children.

Keywords

pets, companion animals, family, partnership, childbearing, scoping review

1. Introduction

Pets play an increasingly significant role in people's lives in 'developed societies'¹ in the 21st century. Often, we refer to them not just as 'pets' but as 'companion animals,' indicating their primary function for pet 'owners' to build social connections with them (Soares 1985; Turner 2006; Volsche 2018). In this study, the terms 'pets' and 'companion animals' are not used synonymously; rather, all household animals are considered pets, but only those pets with whom the participants have a strong emotional attachment are considered companion animals.

In many households, pets, particularly dogs, are no longer seen merely as nonhuman animals (hereafter 'animals') but as members of the family. This is highlighted by the expression 'fur baby,' which pet owners increasingly use to refer to their pets. Alongside the evolution of the roles of pets, the dynamic and relational system has led to changes in people's roles in the pet-related relationship. Rebekah Fox and Nancy R. Gee state that just as pets have become companions (Franklin 1999), pet 'owners' or animal guardians have

¹ We acknowledge that the term 'developed societies' is a contested term. See, for example, Lewis 2015.

become caregivers (Franklin 1999 qtd. in Fox – Gee 2016). In the study, we continue to use the term 'pet owner'; however, we consciously distinguish contexts where 'caregiver,' 'pet keeper,' or 'guardian' would be more appropriate, considering the subtle yet significant differences between these roles.

The terminology for describing the human role in companion animal relationships is constantly evolving, introducing new categories that reflect more progressive attitudes and practices towards animals. Beyond the term 'owner,' new categories such as 'pet parent,' 'guardian,' 'caretaker,' and 'pet slave' are becoming increasingly popular. However, the systematic literature review by Marcos Díaz Videla et al. (2023) reveals that the interpretation of the pet owner's role may not only have an impact on the human caregiver through identification with the animal but also has a role in shaping identity.

Pamela Carlisle-Frank and Joshua Frank (2006) conducted a nationwide survey in the United States in 2006 with 305 participants. In their research, they examined how dog owners identify themselves in the animal-human relationship and how certain owners perceive their roles in the lives of their animals, and whether their perception influences their behaviour towards their pets. Participants could choose from three designations that best fit them: 'owner,' 'guardian,' and the designation 'owner-guardian' for those who see themselves in a role between the two. The results revealed that 63.3% of the participants considered themselves as guardians, of which 77% were female and 23% were male. Meanwhile, 22.3% identified themselves as owners, with 69% being female and 31% male. Those who chose the designation between owner and guardian accounted for 14.4%, with 82% being female and 18% male. The research also indicated that those who identify as owners are more willing to purchase pets, while guardians are more inclined to adopt. Furthermore, owners were more likely to give up their pets due to significant life changes compared to dog keepers who identified with the guardian role.²

Pet parenting encompasses dynamics similar to the caregiving and nurturing relationship between parents and children in the realm of animal care. Pet parenting can be defined as the human investment of money, emotions, and time into companion animals, which is analogous to parental investment in children (Volsche et al. 2022b). In this attitude and practice, the emphasis is on treating the animal as they were a human child, and the owner uses the term 'parent' as part of their identity within the relationship (Volsche et al. 2022b).

Based on research, most dog owners who define their pets as family members often perceive them in a childlike status (Owens – Grauerholz 2018; Shir-Vertesh 2012; Laurent-Simpson 2017b). This raises the question of how pet ownership may influence decisions related to having children and how pets can alter roles, shape the development of relationships, and impact dynamics within the family.

This article aims to provide a comprehensive overview of research conducted between 1980 and 2023 on the evolving roles of pets, particularly companion animals, and most specifically dogs within the family. The choice of starting our literature review from the 1980s is because, by this time, key elements of the Second Demographic Transition, such as changes in fertility behaviour and transformations in family and marital/cohabitation relationships, were already noticeable. We have compiled and analysed studies focusing on how various pets, especially dogs, become family members in contemporary societies

² These findings align with those of Rebekah Fox's (2006) and Nickie Charles' (2016) respective studies, which suggest that pets occupy an ambiguous status in 'Western' societies, being on the verge between subject and object, irreplaceable family member and replaceable property. The flexible status of pets is discussed in detail in subchapter 4.2.

worldwide. Unlike ethologists who investigate the impact of these changes on animals, our approach, using the scoping literature review method, seeks to uncover how these changes can influence the lives of pet caregivers and families. We particularly focus on understanding the role of pet keepers in decisions related to relationship formation and childbearing. What impact does living with a pet considered a family member have on pet keepers? How can the roles of pets, specifically dogs, change throughout the life cycle of families, and how can they integrate into different stages of family life? Additionally, our scoping literature review has brought up topics such as how pet caregivers cope with the loss of their pets and how perceptions of pet death have evolved over time, as reflected in mourning notices and epitaphs.

2. Methodology

In our study, we employed the methodology of a scoping review, as proposed by Micah D. J. Peters et al. (2015). The goal of a scoping review is to provide a map of literature on the researched question, rather than offering a synthesised, comprehensive result on a particular question or area (Munn et al. 2018). Nevertheless, a scoping review can identify the types of research conducted in a specific area, contribute to clarifying key concepts and definitions, showcase the methodologies used to investigate the issue, uncover additional questions awaiting examination and potentially serve as a preparatory step for a systematic literature review (Munn et al. 2018). An important feature of our chosen method is that the qualitative evaluation of literature is not part of the procedure; hence, we refrained from undertaking such an assessment.

Journal articles were sought in the Web of Science and Scopus databases based on predetermined keywords. Our choice of keywords was based on terms found in studies previously reviewed on the topic, as since September 2022, we have been collaborating with the Momentum Companion Animal Research Group, led by Enikő Kubinyi, on a joint interview-based study. One of the research questions in this collaborative effort explores how dog ownership may influence the reproductive decisions of individuals. Preliminary literature searches related to this narrow topic yielded limited results. Consequently, the idea of employing the scoping review method emerged, with an expansion of the research question. We not only collected literature on how dog ownership influences decisions related to childbearing but also explored the role of pets, especially dogs, in family life.

The primary criteria for keyword selection involved using terms identified in previously collected articles. These terms included 'pet parent*', 'companion animal', 'pet attachment', 'dog parent*', 'human-animal interaction', 'interspecies', and 'human pet.' The asterisk * following 'pet parent' and 'dog parent' indicated the inclusion of all variations of these terms, including 'dog parenting', 'dog parenthood', 'pet parenting', and 'pet parenthood.' The search for keywords was conducted within the abstracts of articles.

We focused on peer-reviewed, English-language journal articles published between 1980 and 2023. Specifically, if research findings were published in forms such as book chapters or working papers, they were excluded from the search. While we did not restrict the search by geographic area, we did limit it by scientific discipline. In the Scopus database, we focused exclusively on the social sciences. In the Web of Science database, however, such a specific limitation was not possible. Consequently, we considered the following sub-disciplines:

sociology, anthropology, social work, and family studies.³ Notably, the field of psychology was intentionally excluded. This decision was motivated by our desire to avoid primarily psychological approaches and because a significant number of such articles are available, which would have complicated the processing of studies. We did not search for studies in the Google Scholar database due to the lack of options for discipline-based filtering and the potential inclusion of a large number of natural science articles.

The abstracts collected for this study were reviewed by all three authors, and collectively, we assessed whether they aligned with our narrower topic, namely, whether they reflected how dogs participate in the lives of families or individuals who consider them as family members. If all three of us agreed that the topic of the article was relevant to the focus of our research, we read the entire study.

Table 1 illustrates the search results for various keywords in the two databases and indicates how many of the results were considered relevant. We categorised articles as non-relevant for obvious reasons, such as searches for the term 'interspecies' often examining the relationship between domesticated and wild animals. The keyword 'companion animal' yielded many articles not focusing on the dynamics of family and pet ownership but, for example, exploring the potential connection between loneliness and pet ownership or the impact of the caregiver's death on the pet. The term 'pet attachment' often examined the relationship between a pet and their owner from a psychological perspective, such as during the Covid-19 pandemic, or focusing on validating the possible measurement of attachment. The keyword 'pet parent*' mostly covered our research interest, and nearly all articles in this category were included in the analysis.

Table 1. Scopus and Web of Science results for the search terms

Keywords	Scopus	Total found	Appropriate articles	Web of Science	Total found	Appropriate articles
Pet parent*		14	6		6	5
Companion animal		608	23		121	17
Pet attachment*		59	3		29	4
Dog parent*		12	0		2	0
Human-animal interaction		226	0		86	3
Interspecies		519	4		117	3
Human-pet		201	6		16	2

Source: Authors' selection based on the literature search

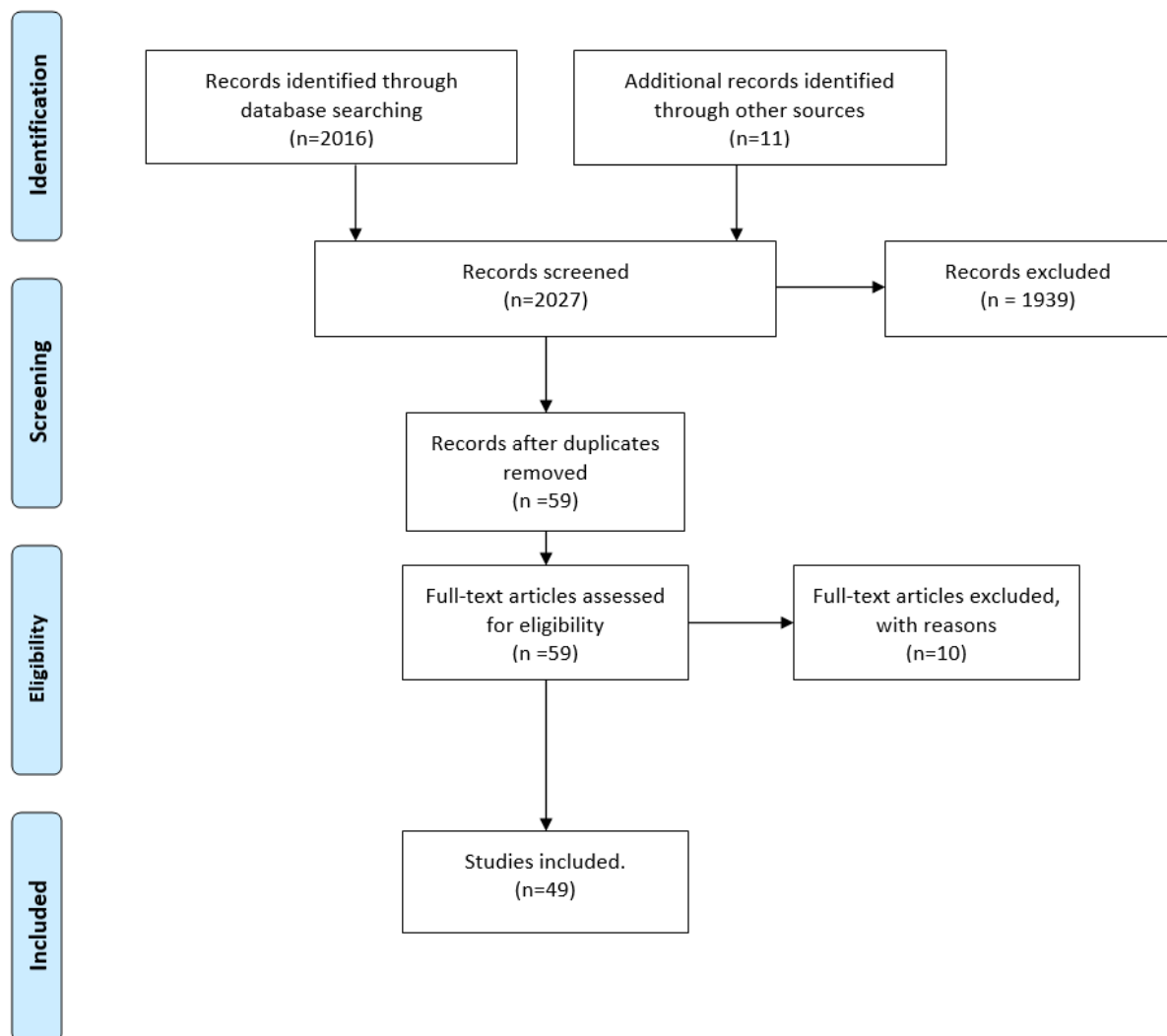
³ We chose these four sub-disciplines within the social sciences because the other sub-disciplines were much more specific, such as women's studies or ethnic studies.

From the two databases, we collected a total of 76 articles; however, some articles were present in both databases, so duplicates were removed. Subsequently, we read through the articles and assessed whether they truly focused on the sought-after topic. Finally, we identified a total of 49 articles that were relevant to our investigation.

Additionally, we encountered articles that were not found during keyword searches in either the Web of Science or Scopus databases. Later, however, these articles became part of our literature review when we discovered them through references in the previously selected studies. We identified a total of eleven such articles and included them in the analysis. Therefore, after the multi-phase literature review, we read a total of 59 articles.

Figure 1 illustrates the stages of literature collection, prepared following the methodology suggested by Peters et al. (2015).

Figure 1. PRISMA⁴ flowchart of the scoping literature analysis



Source: Authors' selection based on a methodological study by Peters et al. (2015)

⁴ <http://prisma-statement.org/prismastatement/flowdiagram.aspx>

3. Parameters of the Literature Database

The examined articles used quantitative analysis in nearly half of the cases, predominantly relying on online survey data. Some of these studies were based on their own data collection efforts, such as extracting information from gravesites in a pet cemetery, which researchers later analysed. The overwhelming majority of qualitative research employed the methodology of interviews, with a few relying on ethnographic observations. Only a small percentage of the articles involved literature reviews, and among them, only one can be considered like the literature review presented in this study.

In terms of the animals focused on in the studies, most studies primarily investigated the owners of dogs, occasionally extending to cat owners. Additionally, in some cases, research included owners of less conventional pets such as birds, reptiles, or horses. In the present study, the authors included those articles that focused specifically on dogs.

Geographical classification was based on the location of the research or the source of the data. Nearly half were conducted in North America, the majority in the United States. South America contributed articles from Argentina and Brazil. In Europe, texts were published from the UK, Sweden, and Italy. Oceania provided articles from Australia and New Zealand. Additionally, studies reported empirical data collection from Asia, including China, Japan, and Israel. One comparative study worked with data from both the United States and India.

4. Main Themes Emerging Based on the Literature

After the three authors had read the selected articles, we collectively identified several relevant topics, utilizing one article for multiple themes when applicable. This section of the study is structured based on the identified thematic areas. Initially, we delve into the development of fictive kinship between humans and animals, exploring how pets become integral family members. We then shift our focus to studies examining the roles that pets can play within family life and how these roles may evolve along with family life cycles. Then we present the attachment to the pets and how it affects the well-being of the keepers. Reflecting the evolution of the bond between humans and animals, studies also examined how owners grieve the loss of their pets; this topic is presented in the fourth subchapter. The last two subchapters do not generally explore the role of pets in the lives of families and individuals but rather associate them with specific life events.

4.1. *Fictive Kinship, Hybrid Households*

Increasingly, researchers use the term 'fictive kinship' to describe the relationship with pets (Charles 2016). The term 'fictive kin' refers to a person who is not connected by blood or marriage ties to the family unit but is treated as a family member (Ball 1972 qtd. in Auster et al. 2020: 263). Most studies report that pets are often considered as family members, and in this sense, they can be seen as fictive kin (e.g., Auster et al. 2020; Belk 1996; Franklin 2006; Díaz Videla et al. 2023; Wilson et al. 2013). An Australian study based on a 2000-person nationwide representative survey examined the relationship between people and pets, finding that 88% of the respondents considered their dog as a family member (Franklin 2006). Similarly, in the United States, a Harris Poll (2011) online survey conducted in 2011 with 2184 participants, including 1328 pet owners, found that 91% of pet owners considered their dogs as family members.

In addition to the term 'pet,' the use of the term 'companion animal' has also become increasingly common, especially in connection with dogs and cats. This term implies that

these animals have become companions to humans, indicating a shift in the roles between pets and their owners. According to Adrian Franklin (1999), existential uncertainty – the feeling that one can no longer rely on stability in key areas of life – manifests not only in the increasing prevalence of pet ownership, such as more people having dogs in their households but also in new postmodern relationships with animals. In these relationships, animals have transformed from ‘pets’ into ‘companions,’ and owners have transitioned from ‘owners’ to ‘caretakers’ (Franklin 1999:86 qtd. in Fox – Gee 2016: 109).

Considering companion animals as fictive kin leads to the formation of so-called hybrid households, where the boundaries between humans and animals become blurred. However, this blurring always occurs in the context of power relations since companion animals enter households as dependents, requiring care (Carter – Charles 2013; Smith 2003; Power 2008). Therefore, it is not coincidental that most people attribute child status to pets within the family (Peterson – Engwall 2019).

Since when has humanity regarded companion animals as fictive relatives? According to Franklin, since the 1970s, we have shifted towards new forms of intimacy between humans and companion animals, resulting in “hybrid” households (Franklin 2006). However, the claim that pets being considered family members is a new phenomenon is debatable, as intimate relationships between humans and animals, especially humans and dogs, have existed for hundreds, if not thousands, of years (Charles 2016). In this sense, the term ‘companion animal’ not only reflects how roles in human-pet relationships have changed, which might be the case, but more precisely, it also reflects a shift in people’s *attitudes* towards animals, acknowledging a more equal relationship than ownership and control (Mohan 2023). The widespread acceptance of companion animals as fictive relatives is indicated by studies conducted in various parts of the world. For example, there are studies from China where interviews were conducted with women who own pets (Tan et al. 2021) or where 503 dog and cat owners were surveyed (Su – Martens 2020). Additional studies are available from the United States, including Wendy G. Turner’s (2006) theoretical overview of the role of pets in family life and how these roles change during different stages of the family life cycle; from Canada, where 23 interviews were conducted with dog and cat owners (Laurent-Simpson 2017b); from Australia, where Cecelia J. Soares (1985) summarised previous studies on the role of pets in families; from Israel, where Dafna Shir-Vertesh (2012) conducted interviews with 52 young, childless, pet-owning couples; and from Japan, where Shelly Volsche et al. (2022a) conducted a survey with 615 dog and cat owners. These studies reveal that the treatment of pets, especially dogs, as family members manifests in two main ways: through the anthropomorphism of the animals and the extension of family rituals to pets.

Since the presented studies primarily focus on owners of dogs, and rarely cats, we will illustrate rituals related to them. For a dog (or a cat), participating in family events means eating, sleeping, and playing together with the family, as well as taking part in special family occasions, events summarised by several authors as rituals (Belk 1996; Fox – Gee 2016). Pets are not only invited to family gatherings but are also celebrated with birthday parties organised by their owners. Some studies found that in hybrid households, pets receive birthday gifts just like children or other family members (Walsh 2009). Most often, pets are considered as children within the family. Both Andrea Laurent-Simpson’s study (2017a), which involved interviews with 14 pet owners, and Jessica Greenebaum’s study (2004), which included interviews with 16 dog owners, revealed that owners often refer to their pets as ‘fur babies.’ Pets are often associated with qualities such as being affectionate, forgiving, gentle, uncritical, and available, and it is believed that they offer unconditional love. Furthermore,

the basis of the relationship, like that between a mother and a baby, is fundamentally non-verbal. That is, dogs and cats are similar to young children in many respects, but the needs of animals can be satisfied more easily than those of a young child;⁵ being a 'pet parent' involves lower emotional and time costs than being a 'traditional' parent (Blouin 2012).

4.1.1. Gender Differences

Harold A. Herzog (2007) compared gender differences in human-animal interactions based on the results of previous research. Nicole Owens and Liz Grauerholz (2018) conducted 39 interviews in the United States with individuals who consider their pets as family members. These studies report that women generally exhibit more empathy or positivity towards animals than men, and they tend to view pets as family members and children to a greater extent than men (Herzog 2007; Owens – Grauerholz 2018). However, as we will see later, treating pets as family members has its limits, and their roles are much more flexible than those of children.

4.2. Flexible Role of Pets within the Family

Russell W. Belk (1996) conducted a study in the United States, where he interviewed a total of 39 individuals with pets, examining the impact of pets on their owners' lives. Based on the results, he concluded that treating a pet as a family member requires the perception of the animal as possessing human qualities to some extent, either as a human or quasi-human (Belk 1996). Various studies, both theoretical and empirical, propose multiple categories for the role of pets interpreted as family members. According to Belk (1996), a pet can serve as a substitute for a child or even a grandchild for those who do not have children. However, some couples consider their pets as trial children to prepare for parental roles through them.

In a study conducted in the United Kingdom, Fox (2006) interviewed 16 pet caregivers and found that, alongside anthropomorphising companion animals, a dual status persists: pets are viewed both as persons and as property. The status of companion animals is characterised by ambivalence, navigating between person and non-person, living being and property, and family and other dualities (Sanders 1995; Beverland 2008). Charles (2016) explored how dogs and other companion animal species become family members, collecting data from two different sources. She used the results of a questionnaire completed by 244 individuals published in 2009, focusing on the relationship between humans and animals. Additionally, she analysed 21 interviews conducted between 2011 and 2012 with individuals who owned companion animals. Charles concluded that despite human-like qualities, companion animals retain their animal status, creating a boundary between human and animal (not quite human, but no longer purely animal). The status arising from this boundary, along with changing power dynamics which still favour humans, allows for the adaptable nature of the role of companion animals, depending on the current situation or life stage.

Turner (2006) provided a descriptive typology based on the family life cycle, relying on the heteronormative classical family model, illustrating how the role of companion animals can change within a family structure. Turner identified six stages. The first family stage is that of the independent young adult (1), where the animal satisfies the individual's need for companionship. In this stage, the animal often serves as a roommate or best friend for the

⁵ We acknowledge that this idea might be contested. Since the basis of the relationship between the human and the companion animal is largely non-verbal, and, additionally, the animal belongs to another species, in many cases, people will not know what the pet's needs are.

(single) person. The second stage is that of the newlywed couple (2), where the couple may choose to have a pet to practice their future parental roles. The animal assumes the role of a child in the life of the young couple. Among the members of the couple, the woman is more likely to see the animal as a child, thus forming a stronger bond with the animal compared to the man. The third stage is the family with young children (3), where the pet no longer plays a substitute role, the level of attachment decreases, and less time is devoted to the pet from the parents' perspective. However, children within the family may still view the pet as a companion or sibling. The fourth stage occurs when there are adolescents in the family (4). In such cases, children progress towards autonomy, gaining new responsibilities during the process of separation from their parents. It is common during this period for families to acquire a new pet, and the care and upbringing of the pet often become the responsibility of the adolescent. During the "empty nest" period (5), when the children leave home and the parents are left alone in an empty nest, the bond with the pet may be rekindled, and the pet may once again play a substitute role. This is particularly characteristic for women, who can re-experience their nurturing desires through the pet. In the later stages of family life (6), such as family reorganisation, coping with potential losses, mourning, or creating new situations, the companion animal can play an essential supportive role, helping overcome loneliness and isolation.

Turner's theoretical typology is well-supported by Shir-Vertesh's (2012) empirical research. Shir-Vertesh observed young couples with companion animals over several years in Israel. The study aimed to answer how the role of pets changed in the lives of young couples after having children. Based on the study results, Shir-Vertesh used the term "flexible person" for pets since their role adapted to changes in the human life cycle (2012: 420). In most families, the pet had a central role, and couples agreed that the relationship within the family with the pet was similar to that with a child. The research identified four patterns related to the flexible role. Pets viewed as trial children could prepare young couples for parenthood by requiring care and responsibility. The child-substitute role of pets was characteristic of couples not having children, where the companion animal emotionally satisfied individuals in a less demanding and dependent relationship compared to having a young child. In families treating pets almost like children, the companion animal did not serve as a trial child or substitute but occupied a position between the two. When the pet had a significantly different role from that of the child, parents treated them as a family member but not as their child, and it generally remained unclear precisely how they viewed the pet as a family member. During the study, three case studies were conducted where the roles of pets changed so much after the birth of a child that the pets were placed outside the family in another household (Shir-Vertesh 2012).

4.3. Attachment and Well-Being

In the human-pet relationship, the question of the role of pets within the family regarding attachment is inevitable, as the relationship between the parties not only influences their relational system but also affects behavioural patterns resulting from it. Attachment theories, in the context of studying and measuring attachment, have appeared in various forms in the studies. Volsche et al. (2022a) highlighted that attachment theories related to pets can be traced back to the work of John Bowlby, considered the father of attachment theory in the field of British psychoanalysis. As Volsche et al. define it, the concept of human-animal attachment refers to "the emotional bond felt and expressed between a companion animal and its guardian. [...] Companion animals provide security and meet a person's

emotional needs, much like a child or a parent; hence, pet attachment theory encompasses a degree of emotional bond, physical proximity, and caretaking” (Volsche et al. 2022b: 3). Melissa Laing and Christopher Maylea (2018) qualitatively analysed online comments on an article dealing with pet euthanasia. In this study, they based their analysis on the relational theory of attachment between humans and animals, which captures the dynamics of attachment between people and animals, satisfying desires for companionship, love, care, and emotional support.

Based on this approach, the attachment between humans and animals includes emotional, physical, and caregiving aspects, resembling relational patterns among humans. Charles (2016) argues that we live in an era where the privileged status of humans is being questioned, leading to a stronger, emotionally charged attachment between humans and animals, which is reflected in family practices. Pets can provide a different type of relationship than our human companions or family members, as they offer caregivers a stable and unquestionable source of love in an increasingly uncertain and unstable world (Franklin 1999 qtd. in Fox – Gee 2016: 109). The increasing use of human names for pets, an example of anthropomorphism, can be an expression of the owner viewing the pet as a person (Brandes 2009). In addition to names, the way owners refer to their pets is also an indicator of attachment. Scales examining attachment styles include categories related to pets such as ‘child,’ ‘best friend,’ ‘companion,’ ‘animal,’ and ‘partner,’ reflecting attachment relationship patterns. New expressions like ‘fur baby’ or ‘fuzzy kid’ are strong indicators of the quality of the relationship between humans and pets, resembling a parent-child relationship in this case. The extent to which pets are involved in family events also shows the existing attachment (Belk 1996; Walsh 2009; Auster et al. 2020). Besides becoming part of human ceremonies (Christmas, family photos, birthdays, family gatherings), pets also have their own celebrations (such as the animal’s birthday).

The establishment of intimate bonds with companion animals may exert positive effects on the mental well-being of their guardians. Allen R. McConnell et al. (2019), who conducted a questionnaire-based study in the United States, arrived at similar results. They found that the acceptance of pets as family members can contribute to better mental health for pet keepers, as these animals can alleviate feelings of loneliness and depression by providing emotional support. This bonding also often helps those who experience a lack of social connections or loneliness and supports the well-being of socially marginalised groups, such as the LGBTQ+ community (Díaz Videla et al. 2023).

4.3.1. Gender Differences

Attachment to pets can be a response to changing social relationships or their absence in modern societies. Research conducted by Volsche et al. (2022a) in Japan revealed that female participants were more inclined to have a dog than a child. This inclination is influenced by structural changes, such as the second demographic transition, as women gained more space for self-realisation in the labour market, leading to a delay in childbearing. However, the desire for attachment to a partner, the need for physical closeness, the desire for care, and coping with loneliness remain, and pet ownership seems to be a suitable solution for many to satisfy these needs (Laurent-Simpson 2017b; Turner 2006; Soares 1985).

Research that approaches the issue of attachment with quantitative measures has used various attachment scales and questionnaires to determine the extent and degree of attachment. John Archer and Jane Ireland (2011) conducted a survey in 2011 among dog keepers in the United Kingdom, with 418 respondents, examining the attachment to their

dogs. They found that singles were more attached to their pets than married individuals, and women exhibited stronger attachment than men.

Several studies have explored how people's relationships with their pets change over time and how owners cope with the loss of their pets. The processing of losing a companion animal may strongly correlate with attachment styles. Previous research has shown that anxious attachment styles, experiencing continuous uncertainty in relationships, and strong attachment are associated with higher levels of grief (Cowling et al. 2020). The following subchapter will present research related to the loss of companion animals.

4.4. Loss of Companion Animals

Surprisingly, a significant portion of the articles – almost a quarter – examined topics related to the loss of companion animals, such as the historical changes in pet epitaphs and obituaries or the challenges in making decisions related to euthanasia. These studies are linked to the themes of pet caregivers and family because they found that the loss of companion animals is just as painful as the death of a close family member – often equated with the death of a child. We assume that research in this category is prominent because one of the most significant differences between dogs considered 'fur babies' and children is that dogs have a shorter lifespan, therefore 'dog parents' often have to face the death of their 'furry child.' The perception of pets as family members is often reflected in the grief experienced by their owners (Cowling et al. 2020). Furthermore, pet owners extend many practices previously associated only with the loss of human family members to animals, such as writing obituaries (MacKay et al. 2016) or creating memorials for their deceased pets (Brandes 2009; Dickinson – Hoffmann 2017). These phenomena are well-illustrated by the study of Jill MacKay et al. (2016), in which they analysed 130 obituaries specifically about dogs, or Stanley Brandes' (2009) ethnographic research examining memorials in American pet cemeteries.

Although the nature and extent of grief following the loss of a companion animal often coincide with what is experienced after the death of a close relative (Gerwolls – Labott 1994; Wong et al. 2017; Laing – Maylea 2018), grief related to the loss of a companion animal has several aspects that distinguish it from traditional grief. For example, the significant difference in life expectancy between humans and dogs results in pet keepers having to confront the inevitability of losing their dogs. The anxiety stemming from this is referred to as "anticipatory grief" and, while it can occur in human relationships, it is much more characteristic of the relationships between pets and humans (Laing – Maylea 2018: 223). David Redmalm (2015), in his research interviewing 18 Swedish pet owners between 2010 and 2012, identified further differences between the grief over the loss of a pet and the loss of a human relative. Pet keepers experience a unique ambivalence in their grief, where they may simultaneously view their pets as irreplaceable and as beings that can be replaced. This duality complicates the grieving process, as dog caregivers navigate feelings of loss while also considering the possibility of moving on with another pet.

Another characteristic of grief following the death of pets is the sense of "disenfranchised grief," referring to the notion that the environment of pet keepers does not attach particular importance to the loss of a pet (Laing – Maylea 2018: 223). Therefore, mourners cannot express their grief, and they do not receive the level of support they need (Laing – Maylea 2018; Wong et al. 2017; Cowling et al. 2020). According to Millie Cordaro, grief over the loss of a companion animal is "a normative grief process that carries additional complexity because societal attitudes toward the death of a companion animal deter grieving pet owners from openly mourning their pet" (Cordaro 2012: 284 qtd. in Laing – Maylea 2018).

4.4.1. Gender differences

In the study by MacKay et al. (2016), which examined posts on a website dedicated to pet obituaries, a complex picture emerges of the role dogs in their caregivers' lives. One of the most frequently recurring patterns was the expression that the lost pet was more than a simple animal – rather, they were regarded as a family member, some considering the pet as a child. From their study, another noticeable pattern emerges: women tend to be more inclined to articulate their grief following the loss of a companion animal. This pattern is underscored by their analysis of grief statements; where the gender of the caregiver could be determined, a predominance of instances revealed self-identification as female parental figures. Furthermore, there seems to be a difference in the degree of experienced grief between genders. Nortey Botchway et al. (2023) conducted a questionnaire-based study in Ghana, examining grief following the loss of companion animals. According to their results, women experienced a higher level of grief after the death of a companion animal.

In the following two chapters, we shift our focus from a general review of pets' roles in the lives of individuals and families. Instead, we concentrate on how companion animals impact specific life events: the formation of romantic relationships and the decision to have children. We explore how having a companion animal affects the establishment and dynamics of human relationships, beginning with an examination of how companion animals influence the formation and dynamics of romantic relationships.

4.5. The Effect of Companion Animal on the Formation and Dynamic of Partner Relationships

As the overview above reveals, pets can substitute missing human connections. Often, individuals with more solitary and smaller social networks form closer bonds with their pets than those with less loneliness (Archer – Ireland 2011). This can lead to pets replacing human relationships, such as a romantic partner (Veevers 1985). A Chinese study conducted in 2020, based on 34 interviews, highlighted that urban middle-class Chinese women prefer living with a pet rather than getting married. The participants explained their decision by emphasizing that living with a pet offers more freedom and involves fewer compromises compared to living with a man, while pets also provide unconditional love and help avoid loneliness (Tan et al. 2021).

4.5.1. Gender Differences

In an American online survey (Gray et al. 2015) with 1210 participants in 2014, the authors examined the roles of dogs and cats in the dating lives of single Americans. They hypothesised gender differences due to women paying more attention to the well-being of their existing pets and, therefore, being more concerned about the relationship between their pet and a potential partner. Results showed that single women and men did not differ significantly in the likelihood of bringing a pet on a first date or choosing date locations based on their pets. However, a small percentage of both men and women (less than 10%) mentioned they would bring a pet on a first date. Both men and women similarly considered using their pets as an excuse to end a poorly going date (men: 7.1%, women: 8.6%). Notably, women reported a higher likelihood of being attracted to someone because of their pets. Women were also more likely to evaluate a date based on how their pets reacted to the partner. Furthermore, women were less likely to date someone who did not like pets compared to men.

The presence of pets not only affects the formation of romantic relationships but also influences the dynamics of existing relationships. Similarly to children, pets can serve as emotional barometers, mitigating stress in relationships (Allen – Blascovich 1996). If pets are treated as family members, the perception of feelings of jealousy, anger, control, guilt, and fear may arise in them. For instance, pets often display jealousy when their caregivers kiss or hug someone.

In the case of a breakup, some couples may argue over the custody and visitation rights of their pets, similar to disputes over the custody and visitation rights of children. However, legally, pets are considered property, so guardianship, supervision, and well-being are not necessarily viewed in the same way as with children. Therefore, couples typically resolve disputes among themselves without resorting to the courts (Walsh 2009).

4.6. *The Companion Animal as a Child Substitute*

As fertility rates have been decreasing in developed countries, the perspective that pets are family members has become increasingly prevalent, and more and more people consider pets as child substitutes (Wong et al. 2017). Pets may be capable of replacing children since, for many, they satisfy the desire for caregiving without requiring the same level of sacrifice and commitment as having a child (Laurent-Simpson 2017a). It is becoming more common for people who experience parenthood through their pets to refer to themselves as the parents of their animals (Peterson-Engwall 2019; Volsche et al. 2020). According to Owens and Grauerholz (2018), those without children or those whose children have grown up and moved out are more likely to identify as parents of their pets and behave accordingly, resembling the dynamics of a parent-child relationship.

Laurent-Simpson (2017b) examined the relationships between various dog keepers and their dogs, finding patterns that were traditionally characteristic of a parent-child relationship. These patterns included a high degree of care and empathy towards the animal, and childless dog keepers often made significant lifestyle changes to be able to provide better care for their dogs. Additionally, the study indicated that for individuals who experience parenthood through their pets, it is essential for their immediate environment, such as grandparents or siblings, to reinforce their role as parents.

Pets resemble children in multiple ways, such as the sense of pride or guilt caregivers feel regarding their behaviour, similar to raising a child. While the needs of animals are lower than those of children, taking care of an animal is still akin to parenting but less demanding, making it easier for the caregiver (Volsche 2018). Laurent-Simpson's (2017b) qualitative study in the United States revealed that some childless participants conducted a cost-benefit analysis, choosing pet ownership over having children due to lower associated costs. In a Swedish qualitative study (Peterson – Engwall 2019), 15 consciously childless women were interviewed, four of whom had dogs. These women reported that their maternal instincts were directed towards their dogs rather than young children. While some participants emphasised the responsibility associated with pet ownership as limiting personal freedom, others considered it equally restrictive as parenthood (Peterson – Engwall 2019). One participant even mentioned that her experience with pet ownership strengthened her decision not to have children because taking care of a pet was already a significant responsibility, and she did not want to further limit her freedom (Peterson – Engwall 2019).

4.6.1. Gender Differences

In terms of gender, most studies found that women are more likely to consider their pets as family members compared to men (Herzog 2007; Owens – Grauerholz 2018; Archer – Ireland 2011), often viewing them as small children. Furthermore, research suggests that childless women are more inclined to anthropomorphise their pets (Blackstone 2014; Gray et al. 2015; Turner 2001). Turner (2001) examined the role of pets in women's lives through the question of euthanasia. By conducting interviews with eight women who owned pets, she argued that childless women are more prone to anthropomorphism because society expects women to have a strong desire to nurture living beings. When this desire is not fulfilled through motherhood, women tend to build a parent-child relationship with their pets (Turner 2001).

In another study (Turner 2001), women without children, some of whom had adult children who had moved out, were interviewed. All women with children reported having a stronger connection with their pets either before or after their children left home. This study reinforced the idea that childless women are more likely to develop a 'maternal' relationship with their pets than women who live with their children.

5. Conclusion

In our research based on the analysis of international journal articles published between 1980 and 2023, we explored how companion animals, especially dogs, fit into family life and examined their impact on decisions related to childbearing and the formation of partner relationships. The results indicate that companion animals play an increasingly significant role in family life. Many people now report considering their companion animals as family members, often attributing child status to them. Particularly, childless women frequently refer to their companion dogs as 'fur babies' and a similar phenomenon is common in families where children have already left the nest (Archer – Ireland 2011; Owens – Grauerholz 2018).

The status of companion animals is more flexible than that of children and can change throughout family life cycles (Turner 2001). Couples expecting a child often view their pets as a trial child or a substitute for a child, while the arrival of a small child may temporarily push pets into the background (Shir-Vertesh 2012). After the children grow up, pets can regain their child status. Additionally, the role of pet owners transforms into caregivers (Fox – Gee 2016). The development of strong emotional bonds between humans and animals leads to the creation of new family models, forming hybrid human-animal families (Franklin 2006). However, such intense emotional bonding can also have disadvantages, especially when dealing with the grief after the death of a companion animal, which may become as challenging as mourning the loss of a close relative. Moreover, the lack of an accepting environment can further complicate the grieving process (Laing – Maylea 2018).

Having companion animals can also influence the process of partner selection, particularly for women, who often seek partners that have a good relationship with their dogs (Gray et al. 2015). Furthermore, it can affect reproductive decisions as well. Especially women's reproductive choices are influenced by having companion animals (Laurent-Simpson 2017b). However, the relationship between caring for companion animals and reproductive decisions is complex: on the one hand, there may be individuals who choose pet parenting over motherhood due to lower costs. On the other hand, there are also many conscious women who avoid getting a pet to preserve their personal freedom (Peterson – Engwall 2019). Although the studies show geographical diversity, they were mainly conducted in Anglo-Saxon countries with middle-class women. Future research

may be necessary, involving different social classes and regions to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the role of companion animals within families.

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