Pet Loss and Human Emotion: Romanian Students' Reflections on Pet Loss

Octavian Rujoiu & Valentina Rujoiu


To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15325024.2013.806150

Accepted author version posted online: 23 May 2013.
Published online: 14 Jul 2014.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 417

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Citing articles: 3 View citing articles
Pet Loss and Human Emotion: Romanian Students’ Reflections on Pet Loss

OCTAVIAN RUJOIU
Department of Philosophy and Social and Human Sciences, Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Bucharest, Romania

VALENTINA RUJOIU
Department of Social Work, University of Bucharest, Bucharest, Romania

Thirty-five graduate and undergraduate students, owners of dogs and cats, were asked to respond in writing to a several questions regarding their relationship with their pet. In this retrospective analysis, we discuss aspects that describe the pet-owner relationship, including attachment and the role played by the pet in the owner’s life (e.g., emotional support, the pet being seen as a family member). Most of the participants felt that their pet’s loss caused great pain; some considered that even if they had suffered greatly, the death of their pet was not felt more intensely and severely than the death of any other family member or a friend.

KEYWORDS pet loss, human emotions, human-animal bond, emotional support

Pope John Paul II stressed that “animals possess a soul, and men must love and feel solidarity with our smaller brethren” (quoted in Becker, 2002, p. 44). Pythagoras asserted the same idea in the well-known postulate that “animals share with us the privilege to have a soul.” We think it would be more appropriate to say that “we share with animals the privilege of having a soul.” Not incidentally, we made this reformulation because of the many life situations in which pets exhibit dignity, honesty, and intelligence and give us their love unconditionally.

Received 25 March 2013; accepted 14 May 2013.
Address correspondence to Octavian Rujoiu, Department of Philosophy and Social and Human Sciences, Bucharest University of Economic Studies, 6 Piața Romană, District 1, Code 010374, Bucharest, Romania. E-mail: octavian.rujoiu@man.ase.ro, rujoiuo@yahoo.com
BRIEF REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The academic literature has highlighted several functions that pets meet in the life of their owners (Gunter, 1999; Ross & Sorensen, 2007). Many pet owners choose their pet “in relation to their own self-image,” wanting it to send a message about who they really are. In other words, the choice of a pet does not follow specific criteria. Sometimes it happens unconsciously. Later, one can notice similarities between owners and their companions. For some of us, style, personality, temperament, sensitivity, attitude, and status are guidelines in choosing a pet (Gunter, 1999). For example, in dogs, some people want medium or large breeds to denote “power, strength, and masculinity” (Gunter, 1999).

The emotional bond created between a pet and its owner becomes quite close over time and transforms to attachment (Kurdek, 2008). When the animal dies, the pain of its owner is typically unbearable. According to Ross and Sorensen (2007, p. 18), in such a situation the individual goes through several stages of grief: denial, bargaining, anger, guilt, sorrow, and resolution. The same scholars cite a number of works, including Lagoni and his colleagues’ work (Lagoni, Butler, & Hetts, 1994, p. 37) on grief, concluding the existence of “three predictable phases” specific to a grieving client (in our analysis, we used these phases as stages of grief): “shock and denial, emotional pain and suffering, [and] acceptance and resolution” (Ross & Sorensen, 2007, p. 18). Those who have a pet should be informed of what the death (or euthanasia) of their “best friend” means.

Trauma symptoms are even more pronounced when the pet dies suddenly (Adrian, Deliramich, & Frueh, 2009). Pets come to be considered as family members (Toray, 2004; Walsh, 2009), and often their food and health care needs are significantly higher than those attributed to other members. Many owners consider the loss of the pet as similar to (Adrian et al., 2009; Brown, Richards, & Wilson, 1996) or more intense and severe than the death of any other family member (Carmack, 1985; Clements, Benasutti, & Carmone, 2003; Field, Orsini, Gavish, & Packman, 2009). Pets in general, and dogs in particular, play an important role in our daily lives, performing various tasks (Coppinger & Schneider, 1995). For example, utilitarian dogs are specially trained to help people with disabilities at home and in social spaces. In addition, recent studies show that certain breeds of dogs, such as Labradors, German Shepherds, and Australian Shepherds, can detect various cancers, including prostate cancer (“Câinii Depistează,” 2012). There are also dogs specially trained in detecting and helping individuals with epileptic seizures and hypoglycemia (Wells, 2012).

In the United States, demographic studies show that in American families there are more pets than children (six out of 10 households have pets, compared to three out of 10 that have children) (Becker, 2002, p. 44), and 70% of families with children have at least one pet (Gage & Holcomb, 1991;
In Romania, unfortunately, there are no data in this regard. From discussions and interviews with several veterinarians, we found no studies, research, or accurate statistics to highlight the number of individuals (or families) in Romania (either local or national) who have pets. However, stray dogs (abandoned or born and raised on the street) are found in great numbers.

Nicolae Ceausescu and his regime had set an objective to transform Romania into a “multilaterally developed socialist society.” Visits to Communist countries and the earthquake disaster of March 4, 1977, were “reasonable grounds” for the demolition of several houses, buildings, and monuments of inestimable value. These changes led to a large number of stray dogs in Bucharest; many former owners had abandoned the care of animals they had in their yard (Duijzings, 2011). The authorities of the time remained indifferent to this situation, and the abandoned animals multiplied uncontrollably.

Today, although they are found in large numbers in other European cities such as Athens, Belgrade, and Sofia, the number of stray dogs is much higher in Bucharest (Sofia Echo, 2011). In a recent report, Arsene (2011, p. 4) noted:

> Hundreds of thousands of dogs have been killed in Romania. The number of killed dogs is much higher than the number of dogs found in the street at the beginning of the killing program. The efficiency of the program: ZERO—the streets are crowded with dogs up to their carrying capacity.

According to the same report, approximately 144,339 and 20,000 stray dogs were killed in Bucharest (between 2001 and 2007) and Brasov (between 2003 and 2008), respectively. It was also estimated that in 2011, there were 40,000 stray dogs in Bucharest.

**THE CURRENT STUDY**

To our knowledge, no studies have been conducted in Romania concerning pet loss. Not many people in the country who have pets want to share about how they relate to them, knowing that they are often viewed as “strange.” We were motivated to conduct this study based in part on the lack of responsiveness to pet loss even in Romania’s pet care professions. We assessed reactions to pet loss among a group of Romanian female graduate and undergraduate students in our study.

**METHOD**

Thirty-five female graduate and undergraduate students (age range: 19–37 years) from the Department of Social Work at the University of Bucharest who owned dogs or cats participated in this study.
The present, retrospective analysis investigated individuals who had experienced pet loss at least once. In order to identify aspects of the pet-owner relationship, including attachment and the role played by the pet in the owner's life (e.g., emotional support, the pet being seen as a family member), the subjects were asked to respond in writing to several open-ended questions (the survey lasted about 30 minutes and was conducted in February 2013). We considered this approach more appropriate than private discussions with each of the participants, so that they would feel free to express all of the emotions and feelings they have had with their beloved pet (the students were not asked to identify themselves). Also, we considered the recommendations and suggestions made by Toray (2004, pp. 249–250), who has outlined several directions for counseling individuals who have suffered the death of a pet. We adapted those guidelines and aspects that were, in our view, defining of the pet-owner relationship.

We analyzed the responses given by subjects who found themselves in the position of losing their pet at several levels. First, we wanted to know the context in which the pet entered the subject's life and the reason for the decision to adopt it. Second, we wanted to investigate the causes that led to the death of the pet and how the pet owner related to that event. Therefore, our analysis focused mainly on addressing specific stages of grief that a person experiences in the pet loss context (Lagoni et al., 1994; Ross & Sorensen, 2007). From this point of view, we considered the situation in which the pet owner had to opt for euthanizing the pet and the human emotions felt in such a context. We also believed it was important to assess the roles of informal social support (from family and friends) and formal support (communication between the veterinarian and the pet owner). Third, we wanted to explore whether the pet's loss was felt more intensely and severely by the pet owner than the death of any other family member or a friend.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Concerning the first aspect investigated, most subjects stated that they had received their pet from parents, grandparents, or relatives to whom they feel very attached. There were several instances where the animals were taken from the street and were considered community property. Whatever the context of the pet's entry into the family, we noted the presence of a common reason that favored its adoption: caring for a being that in some respects is dependent on and is in an asymmetric relationship with the pet owner. For example, according to one subject:

I received Max as a gift, when I turned 13 years old, from my sister's boyfriend. I enjoyed him very much. I think it was the best gift that I had received so far. I considered him as a member of our family even when
he was peeing; because he was just a cub he usually stayed at night in my sofa... because he slept with me I would always go to the bathroom and washed laundry at night because it was my job to care for him.

All of the subjects’ answers mention the link created instantaneously between the two “partners.” Pet owners gave unconditional support and perceived the pet as being their “playmate,” “the brother I never had” or “the perfect sister,” “the boyfriend always present,” “the flat mate,” and “the best friend and confidant.” Therefore, the companion left a strong imprint and marked the childhood and adolescence of its “guardians.” In this context, most of the subjects mentioned that, due to the pet, the memories of that period remained permanently inked into their memory:

She was like a kid to me; I showed her care and affection and felt proud in certain contexts with this puppy. I used to spend all day with her. For example, if I would shout her name and another person at the same time, she would always come to me. Some friends even said we looked alike.

On the other hand, less pleasant events and penalties received from parents (e.g., the death of a family member, mistakes that needed to be punished, arguments with family members) were all easily overcome by the presence and behavior manifested by the pet. It was no surprise that in these stressful times of life, the relationship between the subjects and their pet was therapeutic, with relevant principles typically specific to formal counseling such as unconditional acceptance, confidentiality, and absence of judgment and labeling. Moreover, because of the presence of their pet, subjects’ feelings of helplessness and abandonment in situations such as emotional disappointment or poor communication with a family member decreased significantly.

Some respondents mentioned unusual behavior in their pet where, under the influence of the anger of the moment, nerves, or inability to control emotions, as owners they reacted either aggressively or by isolating themselves and refusing any interaction and communication. Of course, in the latter case, the catalyst factor that restored them to a state of homeostasis was the pet friend. There are also contexts in which the pet substituted in the case of temporary absence of the family, representing, from this point of view, the only physical and emotional contact that the pet owner could directly count on.

The second investigated aspect concerns the cause of death of the animal and the reference to this event by the pet owner, relatives, and family. After analyzing the responses, we found the presence of three scenarios that influenced human companion reactions. The first situation is the natural death of the pet (two cases out of 35). The second situation concerns the acquisition of a disease that was diagnosed and treated but without the
desired result (seven cases out of 35). Finally, the third situation involves circumstances such as negligence on the part of the pet owner or the family or the pet’s death occurring in the context of a transportation collision (five cases), death by poisoning (deliberate, by a neighbor, in nine cases and accidental in seven instances), and death resulting from an assault by another animal (five cases). We found that mourning was characterized by pain, regret, and self-blame; helplessness was more acutely felt among those whose pets died by poisoning or because of fights.

Shock and Denial

Finding out about the accidental death of the pet caused confusion and even shock, manifested through emotions such as anger and despair. If the death did not occur instantaneously, reactions included refusal to accept the diagnosis accompanied by the hope of recovery. Some subjects asked for the opinion of another veterinarian, and others invoked divine power. For example:

I grew up with that dog. Astor was my brother… he is my brother. I had him since I was 3 years old and he died when I was 19. I was put in the situation to choose euthanasia. Initially, I did not want to consider this option. He was very old and suffered greatly from the disease. Older than the normal average for this breed of dog, [this] was the cause for a stroke that left him paralyzed. He could only move his head, and he was in great pain. He was still breathing and the doctor said he may still resist with injections about 3 weeks . . . . I administrated him the treatment a few days . . . still hoping he would recover. I did not want to understand that the powerful Astor cannot take it any longer . . . but he was struggling terribly. Then I decided to put him down. It’s indescribable . . . . I felt terrible pain . . . my soul cried. I had the same pain . . . the same pain you feel when you lose a family member. I have also suffered when my grandfather died. I do not want any man to go through this. Only the pet owners understood what Astor meant to us. Most do not understand that you can love an animal like a human being. All the family has greatly suffered and is still suffering. Though he died 5 years ago, I still have moments when I call Astor the current dog which I love tremendously.

In direct relation to their pet’s loss, most subjects felt that “what is happening is not right”; some even said that their pets had died “still having days left to live” and that they did not accept the pet’s death for a certain period of time. Sadness and a depressive syndrome manifested by anxiety, fear that something similar could happen to their other pets or even to other family members, refusal to visit places where their former pet companions had accompanied them, or refusal to watch programs they watched with their pets showed that subjects were emotionally “trapped” in the shock and denial stage.
Emotional Pain and Suffering

The emotions felt by the subjects included regret, sadness, and hopelessness. Among subjects who received formal support from a veterinarian, the conventional mechanisms used in trying to find an emotional balance consisted of discussions with and explanations by the veterinarian about the pet’s death. If subjects were unable to access the services of a veterinarian, either because the death occurred suddenly or because of lack of financial means, they reported self-blame for the death of their companion, as well as blame and culpability of family members who were not careful and did not appropriately care for the animal. However, feelings of guilt were mostly self-directed, with the subjects considering that they were solely responsible for the life of their pet. Some even said “I let down my friend and myself.” The following statement highlights feelings of damaged self-esteem and worthlessness and lack of confidence in decisions and subsequent actions (especially fear that another pet will have the same fate).

I knew [she] had a tenderness in the stomach and I always took into account the recommendations of the veterinarian. But I had taken her to grandma’s country house, who simply could not understand that she had special needs and had a diet . . . . she said it was a dog, and dogs eat anything . . . as if I had a premonition. From the moment she fell ill, she only lived for 1 month. I can say now that I was depressed and the symptoms began ever since she got sick. The treatment was of no help. Practically, she faded slowly. I cried for months and I feel like I’m to blame for everything. I don’t know how it is to lose someone very close, only distant relatives. I still cannot conceive what happened, but the thought that a loved one may die terrifies me and I don’t want to think about it.

Among these subjects, support from family members or friends helped in overcoming these feelings. There were also a few subjects who did not externalize their emotions and did not share with others how they felt in those moments, either because they felt they would be ridiculed by others or they felt acute psychological pain inflicted on them, impeding their ability to interact with others. These people had not yet overcome this stage of grief. The argument is quite simple, as illustrated in the following statement: “I will never get a dog again, because I will get emotionally attached, and if something will happen to him; I will suffer terribly and I don’t think I could stand feeling what I had felt then.” If this stage of emotional pain and suffering is not properly managed, emotions can be accompanied by physical symptoms such as fatigue, headaches, or stomach disorders.

Acceptance and Resolution

This stage of grief concerns the understanding of the overall situation by the subject in the context of unpredictable factors responsible for the
outcome. We found that there were two categories of subjects. The first category was subjects who overcame their grief and reached the resolution stage after understanding and accepting their pet’s cause of death (whether the death occurred suddenly, the pet was euthanized, or the pet died of complications of a disease). For these subjects, adopting another pet would not be a substitute for the former companion, but a means by which they could retain memories and moments spent in the past and also enjoy and appreciate the qualities of the present companion. For example:

It was summer when Lady died, and I was at my grandparents' country house. She was quite old and had health problems, which she had overcome with treatment. She [had] a rash and from the medical examination we found that some kind of flies [had] deposited larvae inside the vaginal and anal area. Everything had happened quickly and Lady died. The doctor told me that age and associated diseases [had] weakened [her] immunity, that is why it did not last, although we had given her treatment, although he hoped that we could save her. I miss her and think about her, and at my evening prayer I name her. I'll get another dog, but I will never forget her.

The second category was subjects who did not accept the loss of their companion and were not able to manage their grief, which emotionally traumatized them. When making their responses, they were overwhelmed with emotion and, reliving those moments, confessed openly that they had caused them great pain. After they had completed their written responses, they continued to share their experiences. Some said that even if it is no longer alive, their pet “helps” them to optimize interpersonal relationships and to initiate social contact with people they do not know but have a pet that belongs to the same breed or looks like their former pet.

Concerning the third aspect we investigated, most of the participants reported that their pet’s death caused them great pain. Some claimed that although they had suffered greatly, they did not experience the death of their pet more intensely or severely than the death of any other family member or a friend. Although deeply involved emotionally in their relationship with their pet, they considered that people who made such comparisons were exaggerating or perhaps even prone to emotional disorders. Although they did not deny the role that a pet has in the emotional and social development of a human being, each species has its well-defined role in the food chain, and people’s respect for all other species is an indicator of their emotional, social, and spiritual maturity. Obviously included in this category are those subjects who, although marked by loss, managed both by themselves and with the help of social support to effectively manage their grief and gain resilience.
CONCLUSIONS

In Romanian society, it is difficult to ask for social support as a grieving client because the existing services have “utility” only in the context of a person presenting a psychoemotional disorder. The preventive function of these services is almost nonexistent. The causes of this situation are many: poor information, financial issues, and, especially, stereotypes and prejudices.

Veterinarians often have difficulty in communicating with pet owners, as the college curriculum does not include adequate communication and networking techniques for such situations. Issues involving relationships with pet owners are typically influenced by the veterinarian’s empathetic abilities.

Euthanasia is a controversial topic among animal lovers as well as others. Some of those who claim to love animals see it as a crime, whereas others see it as a “necessary evil” because it eases the suffering of pets. Among people who opt for this procedure, mourning is often prolonged and accompanied by feelings such as regret and self-blame. These are normal emotional states, but pet owners would benefit from counseling covering all stages of grief specific to such an event so that they can gain resilience.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This research provides illustrative evidence about the impact of pet loss on female graduate and undergraduate students. Perhaps women are more emotionally involved with their pets than men, although our discussions with male pet owners have not indicated any significant differences (other than that they were less willing to talk about their relationship with their pet). We believe it would be appropriate to undertake more thorough research regarding the client-veterinarian relationship, especially in terms of the advice received by pet owners regarding whether to euthanize their pet. We also believe that people in other social categories should be investigated, for example elderly people who are living alone, single people, psychotherapists, and veterinarians. It would be interesting to see how individuals in these groups relate to their pets, especially if they have suffered pet loss.

REFERENCES


Octavian Rujoiu is a lecturer in the Department of Philosophy and Social and Human Sciences, Bucharest University of Economic Studies. His current research interests are interpersonal violence and human emotion, pet loss and human emotion, social psychology of emotion, and emotion management.

Valentina Rujoiu is a lecturer in the Department of Social Work, University of Bucharest. She is involved in research programs focusing on providing quality in social services and development of social workers in the context of implementation of a supervision system. Her main research interests are intimate partner violence, social work with families and children, social work methods and techniques, and methods and techniques for intervention in crisis situations.