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PETS IN THE FAMILY

by

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THESIS

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Chapter 1 - Background

Introduction

The very essence of what is considered a family is currently being scrutinized in legal, religious, and social arenas. From the Supreme Court's ruling on the definition of marriage (*Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2015), to scholarly arguments over conceptual and operational definitions (Galvin, Bylund, & Brommel, 2004), these examinations have brought up the fundamental question: what is a family? Whereas researchers have examined that question time and time again, there is a recent movement in modern family life that research seems to ignore: as many as 93% of families consider their pet to be an important and integral member of their family unit (Shir-Vertesh, 2012). So important, that in addition to regular daily "conversations" with the pet, pets are also playing a role in important family rituals and holidays, for example, giving and receiving gifts at Christmas, and are being honored with their own celebrations, such as having "bark mitzvahs" (Walsh, 2009).

In spite of this societal movement to include pets as part of the family, research has been minimal in this area, especially in the field of family communication. Most current research regarding the role of pets in families has been in the field of clinical psychology, where pets are seen as an emotional tool to improve physical or psychological well-being, or cause of grief upon their loss (Ross & Baron-Sorensen, 2007; Shir-Vertesh, 2012; Walsh, 2009). Walsh (2009) found that families regularly cite their pet as providing educational and social benefits to their children, teaching the children responsibility and empathy. Many studies in psychology and sociology have had similar findings, with pets being assigned human-like characteristics (Broussard,

Joseph, & Thompson, 2012; Holbrook, 2008; Noonan, 2008). Most communication research around pets has been as a secondary phenomena found during life story studies (Furman, 2005; Kolva, 2004) or as communicative tools used as a means of maintenance in the families (Tannen, 2004; Tovares, 2010). However, if a family considers its pet to be part of the family, or even in some cases equivalent to human member of the family (Ross & Baron-Sorensen, 2007), how can scholars claim to study the family and relegate pets to a secondary role without further examination into the construction of a pet's status? Scholars, especially those in the area of family communication, need to have a working understanding of how the pet fits into the modern family in order to properly study the family.

Examination of families that consider their pets to be a member may provide valuable insight into how families are socially constructed. The way families interact with (and through) pets sheds insight into the role the pet takes in that family. Whereas some families may see them as property, other families may count them as a "human" member, and more may fall somewhere in between. This study aims to identify how families with dogs define family and how these families create the space in the family that the dog inhabits. Results of this study suggest that the dog fills a unique role in the family, shaped by how the family defines the status of the dog in the family and how they then operationalize that definition through the stories they tell about the dog. The first chapter will provide a review of the current literature surrounding pets and families. Next the methods used for this investigation will be reviewed. Third, the results from the study will be presented. Last, will be a discussion of the findings and conclusion.

Defining Family

Historically, many efforts have examined the definitions of families in a simple and succinct way. Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.) offers a few relevant definitions of families including: “a group of individuals living under one roof and usually under one head” (para. 1) and “the basic unit in society consisting of two parents rearing their children” (para. 5). The United States Census Bureau offers this definition: “A family consists of two or more people (one of whom is the householder) related by birth, marriage, or adoption residing in the same housing unit” (2013 definition section family para. 1). These sources exemplify the long held definitions of family as related by blood or law. Definitions of this nature focus on the structure of the family and are inherently exclusive and limiting, providing a narrow framework for examining family that cannot include pets. This framework is often appealing for its simplistic operationalization of family, allowing for a quick and easy decision of who is and is not family; however, this operationalization begins to face problems when one considers the data found by the Forum on Child and Family Statistics. In a 2013 report by Wallman it was found that only 64% of children lived in homes with two married biological parents, leaving 36% of the population with children not neatly fitting into the biological framework. The legal definitions begin to become questionable when one considers that eight percent of children lived with a single parent that was cohabitating with an unmarried partner (Wallman, 2013). Can one consider the unmarried partner part of that child’s family?

In an effort to include blended families, such as in the situation mentioned above, many researchers began to advocate a task definition of families. Caughlin, Koerner, Schrodtt, and Fitzpatrick (2011) define these task-based families as “a psychosocial group

consisting of two or more members that work toward tasks such as mutual need fulfillment, nurturance, and development” (p. 681). A task-based approach to defining family is much broader than a legal or biological one, but can face problems with its ability to limit membership. In this definition, family members can range from biological parents, to a kindly neighbor, to a temporary houseguest, so long as they fulfill a role in the family. With this broad definition, pets easily find a place in the family as an attachment figure that provides a dependable source of comfort and are sought out to alleviate distress (Kurdek, 2009). However, for this study, a task definition is too broad and inclusive, and would make differentiating between the pet as a tool for needs fulfillment versus a full-fledged member of the family difficult.

The last group of definitions, which serve as the basis for the one used in this study, are the transactional definitions of family. These definitions look at the sense of family identity that is created through interactions among a group of intimates. One such definition is:

...networks of people who share their lives over long periods of time bound by ties of marriage, blood, or commitment, legal or otherwise, who consider themselves as family and who share significant history and anticipated future of functioning in a family relationship. (Galvin, Bylund, & Brommel, 2004, p. 5)

This definition is a good starting point for a definition of family as it aims to include all groups that consider themselves family, but exclude groups that are close but fleeting. However, this definition explicitly states that it applies to “networks of *people* [emphasis added]” and therefore is not ideal for the purpose of this research examining nonhuman family members. Instead, the definition put forth by Turner and West (2006) in *The*

Family Communication Sourcebook will best serve this study; they state, “a family is a self-defined group of intimates who create and maintain themselves through their own interactions and their interactions with others” (p. 9). This is an ideal definition of family because it is broad enough to include all identified members, including pets, and yet narrow enough to specify characteristics of a family.

Three primary characteristics of this definition that are ideal for this study are: (a) self-definition, (b) intimacy, and (c) focus on interactions. Self-definition is vital — regardless of most legal systems not considering pets to be family members (Bogdanoski, 2010; Kindregan, 2013), between 85% (Walsh, 2009), and 93% (Shir-Vertesh, 2012) of families consider their pet, in one form or another, a member of the family. Although the pet itself cannot self-define as a family member, the human family members choose to define the pet as family on the pet’s behalf. Therefore, the “group” has self-defined themselves as a family unit as the group includes the dog in their collective definition of family. The next key component is intimacy, which establishes the family as having the ability to influence each other. This influence includes members’ thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Maguire, 2012). In examining intimacy toward the family pet, Taylor, Funk, and Craighill (2006) found that 94% of respondents would describe their relationship with their dog as close, as opposed to distant. Intimacy is important because it establishes a long term relationship, and is a limiting factor that allows for boundaries to be drawn between members and non-members of the family. Lastly, an interactional focus provides a lens for examining how the family is created.

One predominate method of interaction used in family creation and maintenance is story telling (Koenig Kellas, 2005; Peterson & Langellier, 2006). Koenig Kellas (2005)

argues that family identities are socially constructed through the joint telling and retelling of stories that shape the identity of their members and the unit as a whole. This study will focus on the stories the family tells about and through their pets, and how these stories create the pet's identity in the family. Using this interactional view of family, the role pets play in a family, and perhaps more importantly, how they obtained that role, can be examined.

Pets in Families

Humans have been keeping domesticated animals for thousands of years, but it was not until the mid 1800s in Victorian England that animals began to see a major shift from beasts of burden to household companions, or pets (Entin, 2001). In 2012 the American Veterinary Medical Association found that 62.4% of U.S. households have a pet, and specifically 36.5% of U.S. households have a dog. With this shift in attitude, pets began to grow in importance up to today where pets are a \$52 billion industry that has continued to grow, even during an economic recession (Thompson, 2013). With the prominence of pets in American family life, there is a growing body of research about families and their pets. This research has been mainly focused in four lines of inquiry: (a) pets as property, (b) pets as a burden, (c) pets as a tool, and (d) pets as family.

Pets as property. The oldest approach to examining pets is viewing them as property. This view is the most common view in the legal system, especially in the United States (Bogdanoski, 2010; Kindregan, 2013). Historically pets have been seen as chattel, just as livestock would be, and are therefore governed by the state's equal distribution laws during a divorce settlement. There have been minor changes in this system as cited by Kindregan (2013) when an Ohio court ruled that pets are assigned as

property whose best interest must be considered in the decision. This shift, though minor, is significant in that it establishes precedent of pets as a form of “living property” in the legal setting.

Another field where pets are examined as property is in historical anthropology. Since animals have been considered personal property, they also are signs of wealth. Mullin (2002) examined the roles that animals have played in anthropologic research throughout the years. She found that with the domestication of animals, agrarian societies created a new form of wealth and inequality. This attitude of animals as wealth prevailed in anthropology until recently, “with many [anthropologists] re-examining basic assumptions about animals and human-animal relationships” (Mullin, 2002, p. 388).

Pets as a burden. The next group of research on pets shifts the view on animals from a beast of burden to a cause of burden. In this context, a burden is not to be taken as a negative, as many of these scholars see pets as positive or neutral. Instead, pets are seen as a burden in that they cause an additional hardship that the pet owner would not have faced had they not owned the pet. The research that falls into this category can be further broken down into pets as an obstacle to escaping domestic violence, pets as a cause of grief, and pets as a source of financial drain.

Obstacle to escaping domestic violence. Domestic violence, or intimate partner violence, is “an all-out attempt to annihilate their [partner’s] self-esteem, to enslave them psychologically” (Dutton & Gaolant, 1997, p.13). When researchers are examining domestic violence, one common area of inquiry is indications and predictors of violence. Multiple studies have found support for abusing pets as an indicator and predictor of family violence (DeGue & DiLillo, 2009; Hardesty, Khaw, Ridgway, Weber & Miles,

2013; Strand & Faver, 2005; Volant, Johnson, Gullone & Coleman, 2008). Many of these scholars see abuse of the pet as a form of coercive control over the victim. Strand and Faver (2005) found that battered women see their pets as a form of emotional support and therefore worry for their pet's safety. This worry for the pets is present during the decision making process about seeking help, especially when no children are present (DeGue & DiLillo, 2009; Strand & Faver, 2005). Worry for pets has been found to increase decision making time, and in approximately half of the cases, the pet ends up needing to be left behind with the batterer (Hardesty et al., 2013). In cases where the pet needs to be left behind, the abandoned pet is a source of grief and stress for victims in shelters (Strand & Faver, 2005). Fortunately, some hope for pets in these situations is present, as 25 states now include pets in orders of protection in cases of domestic violence (Wisch, 2014).

A cause of grief. With the increased role that pets play in modern families, many studies, especially in the field of clinical psychology, discuss the grief which people face after the loss of a pet (Furman, 2005; Gage & Kolcomb, 1991; Ross & Baron-Sorensen, 2007; Sharkin & Knox, 2003; Walsh, 2009). Gage and Kolcomb (1991) found that pet owners' grief over the loss of their pets was less than when they lost an immediate family member or close friend, but deeper than over the loss of a more distant relative. The study advocates for counselors and therapists to inform themselves about pet loss and be prepared to deal with grief over the loss of a pet more frequently in the coming years. Their recommendation was again echoed when Sharkin and Knox (2003) and Ross and Baron-Sorensen (2007) reiterated how real the grief of pet loss is for some pet owners and advised practitioners to be prepared to help clients through grief over a pet loss.

These studies have given credence to the grief that families experience when they lose a pet, a previously underplayed and relatively ignored phenomenon.

Financial drain. Research is also being conducted regarding the increased financial burden that pet owners face. In a study by Holbrook (2008) it was found that pet owners value their pet enough that they will make otherwise economically poor decisions to ensure the wellbeing of the pet (e.g. extremely costly veterinary treatments for terminal illness). In an examination of a major pet supplies retailer, Gill (2012) found that there was a double digit profit growth in recent years, in spite of difficult economic times, suggesting that even though people may be struggling economically, they were still willing to spend money on their pet for more than just necessities, such as food. Perhaps the most revealing data on the financial cost of pets was outlined by Thompson (2013) in a piece examining the details of the 2013 National Pet Owners Survey conducted by the American Pet Products Association. It was reported that Americans spent \$52 billion on pets, with the average dog or cat owning family spending approximately \$1,300 annually on their pet, making them a significant expense for households.

Pets as a tool. One of the most common portrayals of pets in research is as a tool used by the family. This line of research often borders on the line of including the pet as a family member, but regularly stops just short and classifies the pet as a tool used by the family to obtain a goal. These goals can range from improving emotional wellbeing, to improving physical wellbeing, to using them as communicative tools in the family.

Physical wellbeing. The first major line of research into pets as a tool used by the family is from a medical perspective, seeing the pet as a way to improve someone's

physical health, especially seniors. For example, pets have been found to increase the survival rate among people who have suffered a heart attack (Friedmann & Thomas, 1995). Additionally, research has found that simply petting an animal has the benefit of lowering blood pressure (Friedmann, Katcher, Thomas, Lynch, & Messent, 1983; Levitt, 1988). Allen (2003) further researched this phenomenon and found that the effect on blood pressure is greater when there is a high attachment to the animal, and when the subject lives alone. Allen additionally asserted that pet ownership can be substituted for drug therapy in minor cases of high blood pressure.

Perhaps one of the most interesting lines of research into pets as a tool for physical wellbeing is in the field of Alzheimer's disease. Introducing a therapy dog into an Alzheimer's special care unit found an increase in socialization among the patients (Batson, McCabe, Baun, & Wilson, 1998) and a decrease in levels of agitation (Churchill, Safaoui, McCabe, & Baun, 1999). Edwards and Beck (2002) found that introducing an aquarium to the dining room increased the amount of food the residents ate, showing a positive effect on their overall health. With the benefits to physical wellbeing, it stands to reason that pets will also have a positive effect in other areas of wellbeing.

Emotional wellbeing. Pets have been found to be used as a tool for the emotional wellbeing of individuals as well as families. On the individual level, pets have been found to be an attachment figure that provides a dependable source of comfort and a refuge from distress (Kurdek, 2009). Dogs have been found to be a stronger source of attachment than other pets (Al-Fayez, Awadalla, Templer, & Arikawa, 2003; Sable, 2013). When functioning as this attachment figure, pets help individuals to cope with stress and strong emotion (Sable, 2013). This is especially strong in seniors who have

lost their partner (Kolva, 2004; Turner, 2005). This attachment is also displayed in children, more strongly in girls (Al-Fayez, et al. 2003).

Pets are also used as a tool for the family's emotional wellbeing. Couples without children, or those that have adult children, have been found to substitute their pet into the role of a child and thus use their pet as an outlet for nurturing and caretaking (Shir-Vertesh, 2012; Turner, 2005). A study on impoverished single mothers found that the pet plays an important role as a constant in the family that helps to relieve stress and anxiety (Broussard, Joseph, & Thompson, 2012). Entin (2001) describes pets as adding an additional relationship to a dyad, creating a more stable triangle. However, Entin warns that if the pet plays too great of a role in this triangle, the pet may become a crutch or barrier in the relationship and the dyad only exists through the pet, and upon loss of the pet the dyad may dissolve.

Communicative. It has become a common part of Western culture for people to talk to or for their pets (Al-Fayez, et al., 2003; Shir-Vertesh, 2012), but a much less studied phenomenon is families talking through or about pets. Tannen (2004) and Tovares (2010) set out to examine these phenomena with a data set consisting of one week of taped interactions from two middle-class White couples, who had at least one child, and a dog. Tannen found that dogs served as a tool for people to shift the frame of a conversation to a humorous tone, buffer criticism and praise, resolve conflict, and teach values to a child. Many of these actions occurred through “ventriloquizing” the pet, or making their point by speaking as the pet instead of oneself. Tovares looked at the “small stories” that families tell about their pets and found that the regular repetition of stories about their pets was a component of creating a shared family identity.

Pets as family. The newest, and smallest, category of research is examining the pet as a member of the family. In these studies the pet takes on a greater role than property, burden, or tool, and is instead seen as an active participant in the family. Kurdek (2009) re-examined the attachment figure role played by pets, previously thought to be limited to the secure base (dependable source of comfort) and safe haven (sought to alleviate distress) features of attachment figures. However, Kurdek found that pets additionally maintain proximity maintenance (accessible and enjoyable company) and separation distress (missed when absent), meaning that they fulfill the same four roles as human attachment figures. Kurdek also found that most people with positive feelings toward their pet will turn to their pet as their primary attachment figure, second only to a romantic partner. This trend was more strongly displayed in adult men, giving credence to dogs as “man’s best friend.”

Cohen (2002) and Topolski, Weaver, Martin, & McCoy (2013) acknowledged the role of pets as psychological kin, or family of choice, and sought to examine the degree to which people classified pets as family. Cohen provided a sample of 16 pet owners with forced choice questions such as “which family member would you rescue first if you were in a boat that tipped over?” (2002, p. 632). Of the 16 respondents, seven of them would first rescue their pet citing that they would want to save the most helpless member of the family first. A later question asked who should receive preferential treatment with a medically necessary, but scarce drug. Half of the respondents chose their family pet over strangers, but human members over their pet. This implies that pets are seen by many as members of the family, but that they are lower in the family hierarchy than

human members, placing them in a overlapping but still different space from human members.

Topolski, et al. (2013) set out to build on Cohen's research and further define the place that pets hold in the family hierarchy. The study provided participants with various scenarios in which people had to choose to save the life of a pet (either theirs or a stranger's) or the life of a human (distant stranger to sibling). An overwhelming amount of people favored their own pet over a stranger's pet. Forty percent of respondents would save their own pet over an unknown human, 27% over a distant cousin, but less than 4% over a sibling. This research again places pets in an overlapping but different realm of family. This raises questions about what distancing behaviors families use to differentiate their pet as a overlapping but different member of the family.

Limitations in Existing Research

Current research surrounding pets as members of the family has been very limited. Research has almost entirely moved from seeing pets as property, though in many cases the legal system is still behind. Many researchers still view pets through the lens of a burden or a tool for families. Though some research is beginning to mirror the cultural shift to include pets as a part of the family, this change has been slow and poorly explored. Research has supported that families define their pet as a family member (Cohen , 2002; Kurdek, 2009; Shir-Vertesh, 2012; Topolski, et al., 2013), but this has been primarily through asking the research participants if they would define their pet as a part of their family. The current research has not examined how the pet fits into the participants overall definition of family, nor how the pet came to fill that role as a family member.

This study aims to begin to fill in some of those gaps through interviews with several dog owning families. This study was limited to dog owning families so that intimacy could be more easily explored. Current research has identified that dogs are stronger attachment figures for families than other pets (Al-Fayez, Awadalla, Templer, & Arikawa, 2003; Sable, 2013) and 94% of dog owners describe their relationship to their dog as close as opposed to 84% of cat owners (Taylor, Funk and Craighill 2006). Given the difference in the reports between families with dogs and families with other pets, the limits were put into place to reduce the potential factors that may influence responses. The following research questions guided this study:

Research Question 1: How does an individual's definition of family effect how they view the member status of the family dog?

Research Question 2: What behaviors do families engage in to create, define, and possibly limit the membership status of the family dog?

Using the above questions this study adds to the existing literature about pets in the family and provides new and additional insight into the way pets are communicatively made family members.

Chapter 2 - Method

This study is designed to examine the role that pets play in the family and how that role is defined and constrained by their own conceptualizations of family. Multiple in-depth interviews and in-home observations of a snowball sample of 15 dog owning families were used to gather data. The transcripts from these interviews were analyzed using narrative performance theory and discourse analysis. This section describes in greater detail the sampling used, the interview method employed, and the means of data analysis.

Participants

Fifteen families that have owned at least one dog for more than one year were interviewed for this study. The participants were found through snowball sampling and with flyers at dog parks and pet supply retailers. Participants were recruited with the requirement that the researcher have no foreknowledge of the family. All participants were recruited out of the Phoenix-metro area in Arizona. This sample included fifteen men and fifteen women. The following demographic information was gained from self-disclosure of the participants. The ages of participants were between 30 and 66 with an average age of 47.8 years ($sd = 9.73$). The ethnicity of the sample included 29 Caucasian people, and one Chinese person. The couples that participated in the study had been together between five and 40 years with an average of 21.8 years ($sd = 10.5$). Four of the couples did not have children, seven had at least one child still living in the home, and four had all adult children that had moved out.

Procedures

This study utilized semi-structured interviews with the participants. This format allowed for the participants to provide open responses to fully express themselves, but allowed for a degree of consistency in the topics of the answers. The interviews lasted approximately 37 minutes (range 19-67 minutes, $sd = 13.9$) and were videotaped, with the participants' consent. To thank participants for their time they were offered a \$25 gift card to PetSmart. The interviews took place in the participants' home so that the pet could be present during the interview. This setting allowed for examination of how the participants behaved toward their pet in a more natural setting than an office. In addition, this setting allowed for research notes to be taken about the presence of the pet in family photographs around the home, as well as the visibility of pet related items (e.g., bed, toys, bowls) in the home. This study was reviewed and approved by the Wayne State University Institutional Review Board (IRB# 045414B3E).

The prepared questions for the interview were posed to each couple and each participant was able to answer with their own opinion. The questions for the interview focused on three main topics: (a) participant's definition of family, (b) participant's experience with pets, and (c) demographic information. The first section asked the participants how they would define family and how their pet fit into their family. The second section was aimed at eliciting stories about the pet. It focused around the questions such as asking for the pet's story about how they joined the family, what a typical day for the pet looks like, and how (if) bringing the pet into the family changed the way the family operated. The questions then shifted to examining if the pet plays any specific roles in the family, how successful the pet is at that role, and what significance

that has to the family. Lastly, the participants were asked about any pets they had growing up. The final section of the interview collected demographic data such as age and ethnicity.

Analysis

Data analysis for this study began with the framework of narrative performance theory, as described by Peterson and Langellier (2006). This theory asserts that one way of doing family is through the telling and retelling of stories. They argue

families ‘make’ narratives by remembering, telling, interpreting, and innovating stories through generations; and, we argue that storytelling constitutes one way of ‘doing’ family by ordering content, tasks, and identities in the formation of a small-group culture. Performing narrative is both a way to produce family culture and a way to ‘culture’ families in the midst of changing social and material conditions. (p 175)

Using this foundation, the stories the participants told were examined to see how the family produced culture and how they conveyed that culture. Protocol questions (see appendix) were designed to elicit responses from the participants in the form of a story, and typically each question resulted in one story, often told jointly by the couple. However, when both participants would offer different stories, as possibly indicated by a separate location, actors, and/or timeframe, these would be treated as separate stories in the analysis.

The analysis of the data began with transcribing the interviews. There were 117 double spaced pages of transcripts. These transcriptions are a combination of the spoken words, nonverbal cues, and interviewer notes. During the transcription, personal

identifiers were removed from the data. Coding was done beginning with a deductive scheme and the data was analyzed beginning with a line-by-line microanalysis as set forth by Strauss and Crobin (1998) to see how pre-established definitions of family would apply to the response given by each participant. Continuing this deductive approach, the data was further analyzed for trends that relegated the pet to the categories that previous research tended to follow (i.e. pet as burden, pet as tool, and pet as family). Even though pre-determined categories were present during this coding, as new themes began to emerge, new codes were added and sub-categories developed. For example, under the “pet as family” category, there emerged trends of using intimacy building language and distancing language (e.g., “he is starting to get old and slow down quite a bit”). Coding was done by the researcher. Participants have been given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality. Using these themes and patterns a cautious and limited interpretation of the data was offered, providing insight into these participant’s families and their dogs.

Chapter 3 – Results

The results for this study are separated into two sections corresponding to the research questions. This study set out to examine how definitions of family affect the status of the dog, and what behaviors families use to shape the dog's membership. First, the definition of families used among participants will be explored, then the various behaviors that the family used to create the identity of the pet will be examined.

Participant Definition of Family

Participants gave several answers that explored how they defined family. Two of the interview questions explicitly addressed definitions of family and how the dog fits within that definition. Three other questions explored how participant's childhood experience with pets shaped their current definition, how they would define the pet's current role in the family, and how their family changed when the dog was added. The stories and answers that the participants gave surrounding the definition of family will be explored below.

Stated definitions of family. The first question of the interviews focused on how the participants defined family. When asked, "how do you define family?" participants gave a range of answers. The most common definition was one of a transactional nature, where the participant focused on the interactions among a group of intimates. Overall, 14 of the 30 individual participants primarily focused on a transactional definition. One participant defined family as "a sense of inclusion with others that operate together as a bonded community. I think it is a unit where everybody feels as a part, a safety zone where everybody can trust each other" (Couple 2, lines 8-9). That definition was echoed in other responses such as, "being able to be yourself and being loved and cherished for

who you are” (Couple 1, line 18) and “Family is not just by blood, I think it’s by choice” (Couple 6, line 6). Instead of stating it outright, occasionally participants would allude to a transactional definition, and through their interactions together they would create a transactional definition they both agreed upon. A prime example of this was seen in the following excerpt:

Interviewer: How do you define family?

Juliet: The ones close to you.

Shawn: People that are in your close proximity that you keep the most contact with. They don’t have to be blood relatives, just important.

Juliet: People and animals that you spend the most time with.

Shawn: I guess they don’t have to be people.

Juliet: Clearly, I consider them my family. They are your support system. They nurture you, they help you, they support you.

Shawn: Family means a lot. They are the people you most identify with. It is definitely important. The people and beings that are closest to you. The way you feel reflects on them. (Couple 12, lines 5-18)

This was a particularly strong representation of the transactional definition of family, as several participants focused on the intimacy required of a transactional definition with phrases like, “close proximity” and emphasis on importance. This response also highlighted the way couples would work together to negotiate and articulate that would work for both of them, as seen in Shawn’s concession, “I guess they don’t have to be people” (Couple 12, line 10).

The second most common definition was a legal definition. In total, 10 participants gave a definition that focused on legal or biological ties; however, of those, six explicitly included pets on their list of family members, one included their dog but excluded other's pets, and three did not consider pets to be family. A common theme in these definitions was listing members of the household, and explicitly stating the pet's name in the list. One participant gave the definition of "People that are related to me" (Couple 3, line 8). He later elaborated and said, "When I talk about family in general I don't typically think of pets, but when I think of [Penny], she is part of the family" (Couple 3, lines 18-19). Of the three participants that did not define their dog as family, two of them were married to each other, and one of them was in disagreement with their spouse on the dog's membership in the family:

Danny: You can have friends, but friends come and go but family, that's blood, they are always there no matter what, you can't get rid of your family.

Carol: And pets are family too, why would we stay up all night with a pet who is sick if they aren't family. They are what they are.

Danny: You get the good with the bad, you just have to deal with it. They sell this thing called an annoyatron . . . that is pretty much all [the dog] is. The dog doesn't really like me. (Couple 14, lines 6-15)

Danny continued to describe the dog in terms that viewed her as a pet, whereas Carol would describe her as a family member, albeit a second class member behind the human family members.

A definition focusing on the task aspects was the least common, with six participants articulating definitions that fit this category. Participants that gave a task

based answer focused on what a family does, giving answers such as, “people that care about each other and looking out for the best interest of those involved” (Couple 1, lines 8-9) and “a small group of people that I would go out of my way for, to do whatever is necessary” (Couple 7, line 8). Participants that gave a task definition tended to allude to a legal or transactional definition as well, but maintained the primary focus on the actions that a family performs.

The single most important factor that the participant’s definition of family had on their future answers appeared to be, whether or not the family self-defined the pet as a family member. The three participants that used a definition that intentionally excluded their pet would generally continue to maintain that separation throughout the interview. Whereas, the participants that defined their pet in some way as a part of the family would generally take a more inclusive approach, regardless of the type of definition they favored.

Dog’s place in the family. The second aspect of family definition examined was specifically focusing on the pet. The participants were asked “how does [pet’s name] fit into your family?” Overwhelmingly the participants self-defined their dog(s) as family members, with 27 of the 30 participants supporting this. Within this group of self-definition, there was still stratification seen regarding the degree to which the dog was considered family. Two of the couples stated that the dog runs their family, claiming the dog is the “top rung” and that “she is the head of the household. What more can you say. This is her house, her bed. She rules the roost” (Couple 11, lines 136-137).

Three different couples gave the dog a status of personhood and viewed the dog as an equal and integral part of the family. As one participant explained, “we kind of

cover each other's strengths and weaknesses. . . I think it goes back to the support thing in the family, everybody does whatever they can to prop each other up" (Couple 2, lines 26-29). One of the couples gave the dog the status of family, but it was a distant family role below the human family stating, "But we haven't let her change our daily lives. We aren't one of those families that lives for their pet. We just work to incorporate her into the things we would already do anyways" (Couple 3, lines 74-76). Another couple labeled the dog as the pet and not part of the family stating, "She is the family pet and she was a gift to our youngest daughter" (Couple 13, line 11). One last couple was split between the previous two statuses: one participant saying only a pet and the other saying a lesser part of the family (see quote from couple 14 above).

Yet, the most common level of family that the dog seemed to take was that of the child. Seven of the couples identified the dog as their child or "fur-child." Of these seven, there were two main subtypes. In three families the dog was a substitute for children not yet had, or already grown, saying things like "We don't plan to have children, these are it, [the dogs] are the children" (Couple 7, line 14). The other four had children and the dog was considered to be one of them, as one couple stated:

Margret: He is a family member.

Frank: He is kinda like a mediator between the kids if they are fighting.

Margret: But he can be just as bad. If the kids are in the yard playing he can run over and wreck it all and take whatever it was and hide behind the shed.

Frank: Or he will take my pair of sandals and run outside because he wants me to go outside. He is another child. (Couple 4, lines 23-28)

Among those that considered the dog to be a child, misbehaving was a common theme that was used to reinforce the dog's position as a child.

These positions that the pets were described as having provided insight into the definition in practice, versus the definition in theory as previously described. The families that give their pet the status of personhood also favored a transactional definition of family. Whereas, the families the described their pet as a child also tended to have given a legal definition of the family, usually listing family members and including the pet on the list. While the position the participant's assigned their pet was not directly tied to the definition of family gave, there does appear to be a connection between that definition and the family creating the role of the pet to fit within that definition.

Impact of childhood pets. In an effort to examine if having a pet when growing up impacted the current definition of family and attitude towards the dog, participants were asked "can you tell me about any pets you had growing up?" Only five of the participants did not have pets growing up and all of them were married to a participant that did have pets growing up. These five considered their current pets to be family members, however did tend to favor a legal definition of family with an exception for pets. The three individual participants that did not define their current dog as family all also had dogs growing up. Of the participants that did have pets growing up, many of them relied on that pet as emotional support during difficult times. Additionally, ten of the participants talked about the loss of their childhood pet and the difficulty of dealing with it. As one participant stated:

I had a dog. How old was I? I was 12 or 13 when she died. So she had been around most of my life. I used to dress her up in dresses and put hats on her. She

was a great dog. My dad didn't deal with her death very well with me, but that was just the way things were. I went to school one day she was there, I came home and she wasn't. That's just you know, the way things were dealt with. She was a great comfort; it was good having her around. I dunno, it has always made me want dogs. You know, I like having a pet. I don't remember a lot of interaction with the family as a kid. But it made me always want a dog. That is why we got our first dog. (Couple 1, lines 33-48)

Answers like this, having a dog as a child leading to getting a dog as an adult were common, but their relationship to the current definition of family used for each participant is unclear.

Roles within the family. When participants were asked, “do you find that [pet's name] takes on any specific roles in the family?” their answers revealed more information about how their family defines and creates the structure of their family and the dogs' status. Throughout the interview and during this question specifically, participants were able to further expand on their definition of family as they reflected on their dogs' role. For several of the couples participating, their dog(s) took on multiple roles in the family, and all of the roles described are reflected here, couples were not limited to one role for the dog.

The most common role was explicitly described by nine of the participants, which was that of a friend/companion. Common traits in that role were filling in for a spouse when one was away, listening to the participant's problems, and being there after a rough day. As one participant stated:

A companion to whoever is here alone. They help fill the void of not having the rest of the family around. A nice filler for when the kids are at school and [my wife] is busy and I am home alone, it is nice to have [the dogs] here as a companion” (Couple 5, lines 129 – 131)

Eight of the couples mentioned that their dog was the primary protector or guardian of the house. In this role the dog alerted them if anyone was at the door or was trying to sneak in. One particularly good example of this role was described here:

There was one time we were not home, but our son was. There was a guy in all black outside that turned off the power and she just went berserk. I’m sure he heard her and nothing ended up happening. (Couple 3, lines 118-120)

The next two most common role pets took in the participant’s family were tied at seven. The first of these was the role of a child. Of the participants that described their pet as a child, three of the couples did not have children, two had adult children, and two had children still living in the home. When describing the dog as a child they would highlight the responsibilities they had to the dog and how they had watched the dog learn and grow over the years. They would also look at the companionship that the dog provided, but they would frame that companionship through the lens of a parent-child relationship as seen in this excerpt:

Hayden: [The dogs] are a crucial role. If we didn’t have the dogs we would be very lonely. Nugget is her empty nest dog. She adores him. Without them I think we would have a hard time. Our daughter just got married and is out of the house. Our oldest son is at that stage, he is finding his own way and our youngest is a

teenager in high school. Without them, we would sit on the couch and stare at each other all day. We need them for the companionship. . .

Sara: My daughter was going off to college and I knew I needed a baby and brought the basket of puppies here to play with the other dogs and we played with them for hours and Nugget ended up being the pick of the litter. (Couple 15, lines 13-17 & 55-57)

The dog filling this role of child, was common in the families that utilized a legal definition of family, perhaps in an attempt to describe the dog in a way that allows the dog to be family without having to dramatically alter their definition of family.

The other role described was that of the wise family elder and teacher. This role was usually discussed when they had an older dog that they had while they were raising children. They would regularly refer to how the dog helped them with the kids and taught various lessons to the kids and, at times, supervised the children. One great example of this supervision was:

Last night, the kids were going to bed, and my daughter kept sneaking out of bed and I told her to go back to bed. Then she comes sneaking out again. Radar went running and herded her back to bed. (Couple 4, lines 133-135)

One additional aspect of the wise old dog role usually involved speaking for the dog.

George: They all have different voices . . . [Walter] is really smart with an Oxford accent. . .

Wendy: You get pet people talking about their pets and we could be here for hours. (Addresses dog) Right Walt?

George: (In Oxford accent) Yes, that is true. But I think it is getting close to food time. (Couple 6, lines 303-304 & 357-359)

The participants would adopt a voice that was their dog's voice to express opinions on things that one of the participants held, but did not want to say outright. In the example above, the interview had already been in progress for about 55 minutes and ended 12 minutes after the observation was made "by the dog."

More minor roles that turned up throughout the study were that of the morning alarm clock, the peacekeeper, the entertainer, the annoyance, and the burden. In five of the families the dog was the first member of the family awake in the morning and would get the rest of the family up for the day, as expressed by this participant: "a typical day she wakes us up around 5:30 and wants to eat. She is our alarm clock" (Couple 8 lines 47-48). Additionally five couples assigned the role of peacekeeper to the dog, varying between keeping the peace among children and between the significant others. Four of the families identified the dog as the primary entertainer or goof ball in the family, responsible for keeping things light and happy. In one family the dog was seen primarily as an annoyance and another dog was a burden that tied them to their home and limited their freedom:

She went to live with our daughter a couple years ago. Then [our daughter] moved overseas and so the dog came back with us. When she was with our daughter, we were free. We didn't have any dogs or kids or pets or anything to keep us home. So now we are tied. (Couple 13, lines 49-51)

For all of these participants, the dog had some role to play in the family, no matter if they were considered part of the family or not, however for the couples where the dog was family, the dog tended to take on a much larger and more active role.

These roles tended to follow a similar pattern as the position the dog held in the family. Often for many of the participants, the role and position of the dog would both be a child, allowing the dog membership to the family in a way that would still allow consistency with the legal definition that was prevalent among this group. Often when describing the role of the pet in the family, participants would allude to more of a task based definition of family, focusing on what the dog does, rather than how the family interacts around that role as was the focus when the earlier transactional definitions were given.

Changes to the family. Participants were also asked to reflect on the changes that their dog has brought to their family and were asked, “Think back before you had [dog’s name]. What things have changed and what has stayed the same?” A common theme among the answers was an overall loss of freedom. However, for twelve of the couples, that was a welcome sacrifice, opposed to the three that depicted it as a burden. One participant stated,

More responsibilities, we treat him just like one of our kids. More scheduling, more responsibilities. Only thing that was different, we like to travel a lot and had to make arrangements for him now. He is just an extension of our family. He is nice to have for companionship. It would be lonelier without him. There are times when I am here by myself doing work in my office and he comes up and just puts his head in my lap. (Couple 4, lines 95-99)

The three couples that had the view of the dog as a burden limiting freedom are well represented in the quote above from Couple 13, especially the statement “so now we are tied” (line 51).

The theme of loneliness or emptiness before the dog was explored in eight of the responses, with an additional three that have had dogs longer than they had been together so they have never known a life without dogs. Losing the ability for long term travel without planning for the dog was seen in six of the answers. Two couples expressed fear for the future when they will lose their dog and the grief it will cause.

The three couples that had an overall negative view of the impact of the dog on the family focused on the same responsibilities and travel restrictions, but did not follow up with redeeming qualities of the dog. Perhaps the most extreme example is seen in this quote by a couple who gave the family dog to their adult daughter, but had to take the dog back in about two years before the interview:

Lily: We are committed to be here.

Marshall: To be here, or have someone take care of her. That is a commitment that we have now that we didn't have when she was gone. A commitment we are ready to give up again. The sooner the better. (Couple 13, lines 52-55)

With the exception of the three couples that have had dogs for the entirety of their relationship, it can be seen that the addition of a dog into the household, whether as family or not, played a major role in how that participant defines family and the roles associated with being family.

Participants' definitions of families varied, as did their ideas of what their dog's

place in their family was. Overall, most of the participants defined their dog as a family member and assigned their dog roles within the family structure. Participants' prior experience with pets did not seem to have much influence on their current definition of family and whether that includes their pet.

Participant Behaviors That Construct Membership of the Dog

The second research question aimed to examine the behaviors that families engage in to create, define, and possibly limit the membership status of the family dog. Since this study was conducted by interview, the primary behavior being examined is the stories that the families tell about their dog. Through these stories the families create their family's identity and the identity of their dog. With the interviews taking place in the participant's home, there was opportunity to also observe what presence the dog had in the home as seen in pictures and dog related items.

Origin stories. One of the protocol questions asked participants to "tell me [pet's name] story beginning when you first met." This was an important question, as it provided insight into the process that the family undertook when it first added an additional member. Answers to this question tended to revolve around why the participants got the dog, and how the participants chose the dog. When looking at why participants got a dog, or got the first of their current dogs, eight of the couples got their current dog to fill a void left by the loss of a previous dog. Participants made statements such as: "the house was just totally empty" (Couple 1, line 147) and:

Margret: We lost our Doberman a few years ago and he had been with the kids most of his life, so we had to get another dog.

Frank: When he died we treated him a lot like a person. We went through the grieving process, we had him cremated, we had him buried in a cemetery at Margret's parent's cabin, they have a cemetery there, and we had a little service for him.

Margret: All my family's pets are buried there, since 1952.

Frank: It is nice for us too, we go back once a year and visit him.

Margret: My mom made a nice tombstone with the kids.

Frank: For me, I can't imagine living without a dog; he is such an important part of my life. (Couple 4, lines 42-50).

In addition to grief, several participants expressed guilt at getting another dog to fill the void left by their previous dog. A common sentiment echoed was:

Penny we got when she was 8 weeks old. We had a golden retriever that was getting older and sort of feeble and we wanted another golden retriever. And [Angel] was so well behaved we thought it would be nice to have her around to help with training. So we got Penny as a puppy and . . . she was the runt of the litter, the last puppy there. After we got her, it revitalized the older dog and she lived another 5 years. She also lost 30 pounds. Because this one wouldn't leave her alone, she always wanted to play. Penny was still around and Angel passed away and we got Bandit a year and a half later as a rescue. It was some time later because we felt like we had to wait. I had Angel since she was a puppy. (Couple 2, lines 50-58)

Also heard was: "we were without a dog for a little bit because our last dog had an accident and it was hard" (Couple 8, line 35). For these families there was already a

place in the family for a dog, but that place was empty, or soon to be empty, so the current dog was gotten to fill the vacancy in the family roster.

For one of the couples participating, the decision to get the dog was made unilaterally, as described by one participant, who went behind his spouse's back to get their dog said:

I went out and got our first dog, and what changed was divorce was mentioned. She didn't want a dog. . . So, I go get the dog and she won't even look at him. We go to bed and about 5:45 in the morning she hits me, 'your dog has been whining all morning.' Then at six o'clock she said 'I'm going shopping.' She came back about an hour later and had spent over a hundred dollars on the dog.
(Couple 10, lines 66-72)

At the time of the interview this couple had a second dog and both are considered family members. The remaining reasons participants mentioned regarding getting their current pet included, being purchased as a gift, they just wanted a dog, and "she was dumped in the neighborhood . . . and she took a nap on our front yard" (Couple 6, lines 128 – 129).

When participants talked about why they got their additional dogs beyond the first they would cite two primary factors. The first and most common motive was seeking a companion for their current dog, "someone for [him] to speak dog with" (Couple 6, line 153). The other main motivation was they would see a dog in a bad situation and feel compelled to rescue it. An example of this compulsion is seen in the following excerpt:

Frank was the latest addition and the family he was with had nine dogs, and they were all outside without any shade. His name then was Frankie, and he made the rounds and visited with every one of us. The woman said, "Can't you just take

one of these dogs home?” And I said, “You are nuts, we have three dogs already.” And we were leaving and our son said, “Are you really just going to leave poor little Frankie to fend for himself?” And so I said, “Alright, you can go get him. But if it doesn’t work out he has to come back.” And so they went in and got him, and he came and sat on my lap and I said, “Frankie, we live a more sophisticated life at our house, so you’re gonna have to learn how to use a doggie door and become an indoor dog. And you’re also going to need a more sophisticated name.” So I made it Franklin. (Couple 9, lines 58-66)

This story was a particularly strong exemplar of a dog’s origin story in a family. The family already had dogs as members and had an idea of what role those dogs filled, but when they encountered a dog that they felt was not in a good situation, they decided to expand their family, but only if the new member could live up to the “sophisticated life” that the family was used to living.

When participants explained how they chose the dog they had, it usually came down to two statements. The first was along the lines of “I just knew he was the one” or “we knew right away we would be bringing him home with us”. An example of the family deciding that a dog is the one can be seen in this story:

Peggy: We got her for Christmas for the kids when they were younger. We found a breeder that bred golden retrievers and we went there together secretly prior to Christmas and picked her out. We liked her a lot she had a great personality and was just great. And so the breeder held her for about a month and then one of the women you work with...

Don: One of the nurses at work house sat their kennel, and so we decided we wanted to surprise the kids on Christmas. At this point Shasta was 3 months old and we wanted to surprise them. So the nurse picked her up Christmas morning and came here dressed as an elf, I mean to the nines, a full elf outfit. And we answered the door and she told this great story about how Santa wanted them to have this dog and they have to take care of it.

Peggy: Before that though, she had this big stocking and had her in the stocking. And out came Shasta from the stocking. It was the best Christmas. She was beautiful. (Couple 3, lines 38-48)

The second statement was similar, but shifted the choice to the dog saying, “Maybe it is a bit romantic, but I really like to think she picked me” (Couple 7, line 47). Another participant described the experience as:

She picked us. I got her from a breeder in another state. There were two boys and two girls, and I wanted a girl dog. She was 1.5 pounds and so I met them over at the house and they were running around, and her sister and one of her brothers were running around. The other brother was lying down next to me. [My husband] came and laid on the floor and she and started licking him. And it was a done deal, I wrote the check and we were on our way. (Couple 11, lines 41-45)

In both situations the participants had at least a rough idea of what they were looking for in their new canine family member, and fondly remember the process of meeting the dog.

Most of the stories followed the pattern of a pleasant experience that involved just knowing or being chosen; however a notable exception was the couple that does not consider their dog a part of the family. They describe getting the dog as:

Marshall: We had sheep at that time.

Lily: And other animals.

Marshall: We made a trade with our daughter, if we get rid of the sheep she can get a dog.

Lily: We adopted her from the pound. She was full of ticks, we had to pick all of the ticks off.

Marshall: She was the quietest dog in there because she was so timid. That is one of the reasons we picked her. She was a pretty dog. (Couple 13, lines 21-28)

In this case, the process was not remembered as an enjoyable one, but rather a concession to keep their daughter happy and a chore of picking off ticks.

These stories about how the current dog came to be part of the family were important parts of how the family constructed the identity of the pet. When creating their family identity many of the families felt like there was an emptiness that the dog filled. By telling this story of the dog filling this void and becoming part of the family, it serves to further reinforce the family's belief that the dog is a family member. With these stories also focusing on the concept of "we just knew" and "he chose us" it creates a sense of inevitability in the stories, further reinforcing the dog's position.

Typical day for the dog. Further stories were solicited when participants answered, "what does a typical day for [pet's name] look like?" The answers to this question were very procedural; however, much emotion came through in the answers. These responses were noteworthy because it was one of the main times the participants not only told a story about their dogs, but they also told stories about their families

normal routine as well, thereby allowing for the dog's typical day to be contrasted to the human family members.

Many participants used this question as one of the first opportunities to establish intimacy with their dog during the interview. Several participants mentioned "cuddle time" and "hug time," as well as talking about eating meal together: "we all go outside and eat breakfast on the patio every morning" (Couple 12, line 88). Five of the participants that were either retired or worked from home would say that the dog comes in the room to "supervise" and "check up on them," and then they would usually end up playing or cuddling. Additionally, nine of the couples would describe their dog's routine using the pronoun "we" and focus mostly on their interactions with the dog throughout the day; whereas the other six would use mostly "he" or "she" and describe the dog's day mostly independent of themselves. The couples that described the dog's day with inclusive pronouns like we, were clearly including the dog as a part of the family's routine; whereas, when couples described the dog using singular pronouns like he and she, they established a level of distance between the family and the dog.

An additional form of creating a level of distance from the dog could be seen in three of the couples that had senior dogs, potentially preparing themselves for a loss. Statements along this line were: "[She] is getting older now, she's hurting. She still likes to go for walks, but not very far" (Couple 1, lines 94-95), "She doesn't hear as good as she used to" (Couple 1, line 98) and perhaps what was the most direct preparation for loss:

George: She is starting to have incontinence issues, but we just keep paper towel in all the rooms to clean it up.

Wendy: We don't punish her, because she can't control it, it isn't her fault.

George: But as the disease continues up her spine she will lose more control of things. And it comes down to quality of life. When we bring an animal into our life we know that someday that decision is going to come, and it sucks.

Wendy: It is so hard, but it sucks. It is the shittiest decision to make.

George: It is the biggest responsibility to make that decision. Sometimes we are fortunate, and they decide for us. But sometimes, one had distemper . . . and we had to let her go. (Couple 6, lines 340-350)

For these couples, the story of their dog's daily life has shifted from a story of routine to a story of remembrance. Although for these families the dog was still very much an important member, they began to prepare for their upcoming loss by qualifying current stories with stories of better days when the dog was younger.

The daily routine of the dog provided a glimpse into how the families construct the dog's identity in their average day to day lives. These stories, though procedural, are lived out and performed every day, providing a foundation for the families construction of the pet's membership. Especially when these stories are told with an interactive, "we" perspective, they serve to continually build the membership that the dog has.

Best day ever. Participants continued to tell stories and began to think in more abstract terms as they described what "the best day of [pet's name] life would look like." Seven of the couples gave answers where the dog was acting independent of the family unit, and six of those instances were involving food, such as: "a big bag of dog treats that had a never ending supply" (Couple 1, lines 107-108), "being locked in a warehouse of hamburgers" (Couple 7, line 63), and "a sixteen ounce porterhouse" (Couple 10, line 58).

The final example in this group was the dog going to the groomer to get a “butt scrub and a haircut” (Couple 11, line 79). The remaining eight dogs’ best day involved interacting with the families. Five of the responses were camping with the family. The remaining three were going for a walk, playtime outside, and playing with the grandchildren. When answering this question, participants tended to answer either with interactive, “we,” situations or independent, “he/she,” situations as discussed above. However, when thinking in more abstract terms the couples that gave independent answers to the last question were not necessarily the same ones that gave the independent answers this time, implying that the interactivity of stories may be a part of how families create the membership status of their dog, but it is much more complex than the pronouns used in stories.

Through imagining what the best day ever for their dog would be, participants were able to assume the identity of the dog and project their perception of the dog’s ideas. This projection allows the participants to shape the family culture and narrative from an additional perspective by giving their dog a voice. Additionally, it provides insight into what the participants think the dog values.

Favorite memories. Participants next told stories about their favorite memory about their pet. These stories were another opportunity to examine if participants would describe their dog with more inclusive/interactive stories or with more independent ones. Two couples gave memories that included interaction and non-interaction components, and three couples gave memories where they were not interacting with the dog in any way. One example of a non-interactional memory was seen in this exchange:

Kara: Boomer and Apollo playing together. Just watching them in the pool and chasing each other.

Lee: Apollo was faster, but Boomer could turn like you couldn't believe. Starbuck is just a big goof.

Kara: And when Starbuck and Boomer would play together. Starbuck would chase the ball and Boomer would chase him. And I loved it when Boomer got the ball. Starbuck would just lay there and stare at her. It was so cute.

Like this example, these non-interactional memories were usually the participant as an observer of the dog playing with another dog or toy.

Most of the couples (10) responded with memories of them interacting with their pets in various ways. For seven of the families, their favorite memory was of a time when the dog was misbehaving, and the antics that ensued after. A common theme of these misbehaving stories was the speaker attributing the dog's behavior to a desire to be part of the family or acting like one of the kids. One particular example of this was:

Shawn: When we first got Chewie, I wanted him to sleep outside and he just wouldn't and kept barking. So, I let him in and had him sleep in the room we weren't in because I didn't want him to become part of the family. So he took the dog bed that I put out for him, and dragged it into the bedroom and put it by the bed.

Juliette: He demanded to be part of the family. (Couple 12, line 110 – 114)

Another common theme of the misbehaving memories was looking back and laughing at the situation that tended to involve the dog and one of their children, as seen with this story:

Frank: When I took the kids to school we would kennel him when he was younger. One time, I thought it would be okay to leave him out. Well, the kids do all their homework on the kitchen table and one of the things on the table was my son's eight page book report that was due in two days. Well, Radar ate all their homework. So our son had to tell his teacher that the dog ate his homework.

Margret: And we didn't explain to him that it was a long standing joke, and we asked him what his teacher said and he said, "well, she looked at me kind of weird." I started laughing and explained it to him and we thought it was so funny.

Frank: I remember though, Margret was almost in tears because she had to redo the whole thing. She was so mad at him. (Couple 4, lines 103-112)

These memories, especially the ones where the dog was misbehaving, served as a story the family would tell each other to reminisce on a time when the dog was acting out of the ordinary. By recalling and retelling these situations, the participants continually create and re-create the space that the pet occupies in the family.

Emotional significance. Participants were later asked to recount a time when their pet was emotionally significant to their family. There were two answers that were given most frequently to this question. The most common answer (7) is that their current dog was the most emotionally significant when they were mourning the loss of a previous dog.

Lee: When we put Apollo down. Having Boomer in here didn't make it easy but it uh...

Kara: It definitely helped to have dogs still in the house. It was a mixed blessing. It kind of made it easier, but it made it more difficult as well. It made it glaringly obvious he wasn't here.

Lee: But when we put our first dog down, she was the only dog. And a couple days later we got Apollo.

Kara: Yeah, it was just a couple of days.

Lee: The house was just totally empty. (Couple 1, lines 141 – 147)

The dog serving as particularly significant family member following the loss of another dog begins to bring to light the uniqueness of the role that the dog fulfills in the family. By turning to the dog after the loss of another dog the family creates a space and a role that a dog fulfills within the family.

Also common among the answers was closeness to the dog in times of stress. Six of the couples reported that their dog was most important to them when they are stressed and can turn to them for “unconditional support” and “cuddles.” Also noted by four of the couples, their dog was largely important after the loss of a human family member as well. Only one couple reported that their dog was not emotionally significant to them, but they did acknowledge that their dog had been significant to their kids.

These responses, acknowledging the emotional significance of the dog built on the dogs place in the family. By reiterating this significance the families are able to build intimacy with the dog and include the dog within the family system.

Observed interactions. During the interviews, participants' interactions with their pets were also observed. In every interview the pets started out in the room during the interview. Throughout the interviews, most of the pets stayed with the participants

(12), two went to other parts of the house, and one went outside. The pets that stayed close were regularly gestured to and looked at during the stories that focused around them. In nine of the interviews, at least one of the participants reached out to the dog to pet it or give it attention during the definition of family. The remainder of the time the dog would be lying near the participants and occasionally come over for attention, but generally no interactions were out of the ordinary. The gestures and interactions with the dog during the interview implied a level of closeness and intimacy that was also seen in their stories.

The overall presence that the dog had in the home varied based on the cleanliness of the home. The participants that had a very clean and orderly home also had the pets' items out of view and away from common areas. Whereas, the participants that had a more "lived-in" look to their home also would have toys and other items for the pet in the common area. Of all of the participants, only four couples had more permanent fixtures in the common area, such as beds and bowls. One of those four was due to space limitations of their one bedroom apartment. Eight of the participants did not have any family pictures visible in the common area. Of those that did, six included pictures of the pets, two did not. Of the two that did not have pictures of the pets, one of them was the couple that did not define the pet as a part of the family. Including the dog in family pictures and having various dog related items around the house also contributed to the feeling that the dog is a member of the family.

Participants utilized several different behaviors to construct the identity of the pet as a family member. Most common among these was using inclusive like "we" to describe the family and the dog in their stories. At times, participants would focus on the

individual, describing the pet separate from the family, yet other times would use the more inclusive “we.” Interacting with the dog was also a common theme seen throughout the stories the families told. This interaction supports the definition of the dog as a family member, as it is a key component in a transactional definition of family. Through the telling and retelling of these stories, most of the families work to create an identity where the pet is a family member, and continually reinforce this idea.

Chapter 4 – Discussion

As more and more Americans consider their pet to be a member of their family (Shir-Vertesh 2012), it becomes more important to understand the role the pet plays in the family and how the pet came to fill that role. However, research in this area has been lacking. Many scholars still treat pets as a tool used by the family, or as a burden to the family, but there has started to be a shift in this view. With this shift the pet has made the jump to being considered family by several scholars; however, little research has been done as to what perpetuates this idea of the pet as a family member within family groups.

This study sought to provide additional insight into how families create and maintain the identity that their pet has in their family. To that end, two research questions were examined. First, how does an individual's definition of family affect how they view the member status of the family dog? Second, what behaviors do families engage in to create, define, and possibly limit the membership status of the family dog? In order to investigate these questions, dog owning families were asked a series of interview questions to evoke stories about their family and their pet. Analysis of these stories yielded insight into the process of identity creation for the pets in these families, but also left questions for future inquiry. In the following pages the research questions will be used as a guide to discuss the results of this study. Following the discussion, limitations and recommendations for future research will be reviewed. Then the conclusion will review potential implications of this research and final thoughts.

How Family Definitions Effect Member Status of the Dog

The first question this study sought to answer looked at how an individual's definition of family effected how they viewed their family dog's place in the family. The

initial answer to this question was pretty straight forward, with 90% of participants defining their pet as family. This result is consistent with the range between 85% from Walsh (2009) and 93% from Shir-Vertesh (2012). This result falling within the pre-established range indicates that the sample was diverse enough to include multiple perspectives on the pet's identity in a family and support that saturation had been reached within the current limitations. However, even though the perspectives were diverse, the sample was quite homogeneous. All of the participants lived in the same Southwestern metro area, and approximately 97% of the participants were Caucasian. Given the limits of this sample, it is important to remember the limited scope of this discussion, as applicable only to these participating families.

After acknowledging the prevalence of self-definition of the dog as a family member, it is important to examine the actual definitions for more insight. This study used the following definition of family, "a family is a self-defined group of intimates who create and maintain themselves through their own interactions and their interactions with others" (Turner & West, 2006, p. 9). The results supported the use of this transactional definition, as a transactional definition was the most common one given by the participants. Specifically, participants focused on the importance of self-definition through explicitly stating their belief that pets are part of families. Although intimacy and interactions were not common themes in the explicit definitions, participants that considered the dog to be a family member continually displayed intimacy and interaction with their dog through stories depicting closeness to their dog, as seen during the interactional "we" based stories. However, since these interactional stories were not

consistent throughout the interview, it does imply a disconnect between the stated definition of family and the means by which family is done.

Some participants focused more on a task-based definition, elaborating what a family does, more so than what a family is. In using this task-based definition, participants would still self-define the pet as a family member and illustrate intimacy and interaction through their stories. Although a biological/legal definition was also prevalent, many participants recognized the exclusion of their pet from such a definition and altered their definitions to include their pet, despite of the pet not being legally or biologically kin. The participants that excluded their pet from the family took a strictly legal definition, often listing out biological kin. Many of the participants said that they had never thought about how they would define family, and reaching a definition was a collaborative process for the participants as they went back and forth with their discussion.

Within each family's definition, the stratification that was present illustrating the dog's level of membership was noteworthy. Twelve of the families likened the status of their pet to that of children or an otherwise human member of the immediate family. This human-like status is consistent with previous research by Cohen (2002) and Topolski, et al. (2013). One particularly interesting couple is the one that describes their dog as family, but also states that "we don't let her change our daily lives. We aren't one of those families that lives for their pet" (Couple 3, lines 74-75). For this couple, the dog meets the definition of family set forth, yet has the status of a subpar member. If it wasn't for this explicit statement of exclusion, the stories told by this couple would make

the dog's membership seem equivalent to that of the other participants, yet through this simple statement they limit the membership of their dog.

When examining the impact of having pets in their childhood family on their current definition of family, little information was found. There was no apparent relationship between those that did not have childhood pets and those that did not consider their pet to be a family member. Perhaps, of note is the frequency of pet ownership in youth compared to pet ownership as adults in this sample, as 25 of the 30 individual participants had pets as a child. While this finding did not appear related to the definition of family, it is worth noting that for most participants, their desire for pet ownership appears to have been a behavior they learned from their family of origin.

The final way that a family's definition would shape their view of their dog's place in the family was through the role assigned to the dog. For the majority of the participants the dog was assigned the role of friend/companion or child. In all of these instances the dog was treated as a human member of the family, and often as a surrogate for missing human members, be they at work or grown and moved out. By defining the dog in this fashion the families continually create and reinforce the idea of their dog being part of the family.

Although a task based definition was not common when explicitly defining what family is, this task based definition was seen repeatedly in the ways the dog was described as being part of the family. Participants would often describe the dog's role or position in the family in terms of need's fulfillment for them and the dog. This needs fulfillment would be used to shape the identity that the dog is a family member, yet was often absent or a secondary function of families in the definitions. It appears to indicate

that there is a degree of disconnect between how families define family and how families “do” family. Overall, there is generally consistency between the defining and doing of family in terms of membership, yet how that membership is gained shows a shift. Perhaps in an attempt to resolve this shift, some families describe their dog in terms of a child, which would allow them to fit into a much more conventional, legal definition of family, even when the definition they use allows for the dog.

Behaviors Used to Create the Dog’s Membership

Aside from the self-definition of the dog as a family member, this identity as a human-like family member was also seen in the behaviors that the families engaged in. These behaviors were especially evident in the stories participants told about their pet’s daily routine, their pet’s imagined best day, and their favorite memory of their pet. A common theme in all of these answers was an interactional focus, with the pet and the humans doing something together as a group, and in this group story the pet was referred to along with the humans with the use of the pronoun “we.” Since this study used Turner and West’s (2006) definition of family, “their own interactions and their interactions with others” are a vital part of creating the family identity. Further, Peterson and Langellier (2006) assert that family’s identities are created and maintained through the stories that families tell. These stories, focusing on the dog as a part of the family using stories of interaction and words like “we,” serve to build, maintain, and change the identity that the dog has within the families.

During the stories about the daily routine, a family breakfast or dinner was an important point for several of the families. Overall, when discussing their dog’s daily routine, nine of the families used an interactional “we” focus.

When describing what their dog's hypothetical best day would be this interactional focus was used eight times. The largest detractor from the interactional focus on this question was food. This question was unique in that it shifted the focus from what the human participants thought about the dog, to what they thought the dog would think. Of the three questions that generated a majority of interactional responses, it is interesting that the one that focuses on the dog's thoughts produced the lowest amount of interaction.

The final question that yielded the most interactional stories was asking the families to remember their favorite memory about their dog. Twelve out of the fifteen families had some degree of interaction within their favorite memories. All of these stories represent the "small stories" that Tovares (2010) talks about, which when repeated help to reinforce the identity of the pet as a family member. Through the telling and retelling of these interactional stories the families have socially constructed a narrative where the pet exists as a part of the family, yet functions in a role that is constantly being shaped and changed by these various stories.

When examining which families gave the interactional responses to the above questions however, some inconsistencies exist. The eight families that had an interactional best day story were not all in the set of nine that had an interactional daily routine. This may suggest a disconnect between how the family actually views the dog, and how the family wants to view the dog. However, both groups did have more parallels when examining the larger set of twelve families that had an interactional favorite memory, yet outliers were still present. The most notable of these was the one family where both participants agreed that the dog was not a part of their family. They

would commonly mention the burden that the dog causes; however, their idea of the dog's best day involved them taking her for a walk and being with her, seeming to indicate that they believe the dog aspires to be part of the family, but rejecting the dog's membership into that group. This distancing and separation was seen in multiple instances where the dog was described as a "pill" and a "commitment we are ready to give up." Also of note, one of the families that described their dogs as not only family, but as "the top rung," told all stories where they were passive observers of the dogs as the dogs either interacted with one another or the environment.

These inconsistencies in the stories, perhaps can be better understood through the lens of relational dialectics as set forth by Baxter and Braithwaite (2008). They assert that meaning is created through the interaction of different, often competing, discourses. These stories where the dog is defined as family, but then described as separate could be means by which the family is using these competing discourses to shape and limit the membership of the dog in the family. It is possible that these discourses surrounding the dog as a family member have become authoritative discourses for the family, simply accepted as truth and no longer viewed with a critical lens by the participants. By accepting as truth that the dog is part of the family, the oppositional statements such as focusing on the dog as an individual, are overlooked and no longer are causes for additional discussion in the family.

Stories of grief. Referring back to Gage and Kolcomb's (1991) research, grief was found to be a very real and very common theme in these participants' stories. Stories about the loss of past pets were seen in the majority of interviews and played into the current pet's story in one way or another. A unique use of the stories about grief was

found for three of the families. In two of these families the dogs were seniors and in one of them the dog had a terminal illness, similar to ALS. For these three families, the stories focused on better days when the pet was younger and healthier. The stories, especially focusing on the daily routine, would focus on how the pet is beginning to slow down and age. These stories seemed to serve as a way to distance themselves from the dog, preparing for a loss in the future. These stories focusing on happier days appear to parallel the final conversations that people with terminal illness have with their families (Keeley 2004). Much more common than the preparation for grief, was stories about grief from a prior loss of a dog.

One common manifestation of this grief was a feeling of there being a void or something missing from the family. Grief was seen as a common answer to four of the interview questions. The first of these occurred when participants were discussing childhood pets. Of the 30 participants, 25 had pets growing up, and 10 participants discussed the grief they felt after losing their childhood pet. Grief and loss were next encountered when participants were asked about the reasons for getting their current dog. Eight families stated they got their current dog to fill a void left by a previous dog. When later asked what changed in their family when they got their dog, four of the same families again mentioned the void being filled, and four additional families mentioned a void having been filled when their current dog joined the family. Seven of the families in this set of 12 where their dog filled a void, also said their dog was emotionally significant to the family by helping with the grief after a loss.

This pattern of a dog filling a void in the family left by a previous dog seems to be pervasive among the participants. However, this idea of the dog being a void-filler raises

concerns about the dog's role and identity within the family. With at least one participant in each family having had pets growing up, it can be argued that pet ownership was a learned behavior and seen as a normal part of family life for these individuals. When they didn't have a pet, they felt a deviation from normal, and therefore sought out a pet to fill that void. After the death of a pet, the waiting period for getting a new dog varied from the same day to many years later, but the emptiness was always mentioned.

This desire to get another dog after the loss of the previous one indicates the uniqueness of the role and position that the pet holds in the family. It cannot be denied that for most of the participants in this study, their dog is a part of their family. However, based on the desire to get another dog to fill a void left by a previous dog, the position in the family is unlike that of the human members. It could be argued, that it is the idea of the dog that is the family member, not the actual animal. This is not to say that the dog is an expendable member of the family, easily replaced by another dog. Rather, the role the dog plays is entirely unique from that of a child or other member of the family. In this unique role, the current dog performs that role with their own unique behaviors, quirks, and flaws; yet when that role becomes vacant, in twelve of the families another dog was gotten to fill that role.

For the majority of participants, the self-definition as a family member and the telling of stories where the dog is interacting as a part of the family seem to be the primary means by which they create the identity of the dog as a family member. However, that position the dog fills in these families appears to be entirely unique to the dog and needs to be further researched.

Limitations and Future Research

Additional research needs to be completed to further examine the role that pets have in a family. The uniqueness of the role that the dogs have in these families should be further analyzed with other families to verify if it is truly the idea of the dog that is the family member. Along this line, research also needs to focus on how long after the passing of a pet that the pet is still described as being a part of the family. Further, this study was limited strictly to dog owning families, whereas more research needs to be conducted to examine how and if other pets are made family. This research will need to focus on differentiating the role from the actor, as well as seeing if deceased pets are still considered to be part of the family, and if so, for how long after their death.

There are some limitations present in this study. One of these limitations is that the presence of the researcher inherently changes the family dynamic, and the results will reflect that. By explicitly stating that the dog's place in the family will be studied, the participants may have included the dog in their definition, when they otherwise may not of in a different setting. Future research may be able to minimize this effect with a more long term study of the same participants, allowing for more rapport to be built. An additional limitation is the small sample size. Since only 15 couples all within one metro area were interviewed, these findings apply only to this sample, a much larger and more diverse group will be needed before any generalizations can be made. While the presence of children was recorded, the number and exact age of any children was not. The presence of children may influence the pet functioning as a "fur-child" and further research will need to be done to account for this. Further, annual household income was not studied, yet can have an impact on many aspects of the family. Any patterns that

emerge from this study are applicable only to the participants sampled, and more broad generalizations are beyond the scope of this study.

Conclusion

The shift in research to include the pet as a member of the family has been recent and swift. This new line of research overwhelmingly supports that people consider their pets to be a member of their family. This study does not contradict those findings. The stories that 15 families tell about their dogs were examined to look for clues as to how the family identity is created to include the dog. Within this sample, 90% of the participants stated their pet was part of their family and either gave a definition of their family that included the pet, or altered their definition to allow the pet to have membership. In addition to this self-definition, the families displayed a high level of intimacy and a focus on interactions in many of their stories. This interactional focus was found in many, but not all of the stories. Through the telling and retelling of these stories, and the ever-present, but rarely thought about definition of family, most of these families have created a family identity that included their dog. However, based on the frequency that loss was mentioned and how often the current dog was gotten as a replacement for a prior dog, it does appear that for these families the concept of the dog is part of the family and the individual dog in that role, while important, is only part of the family because the role it is fulfilling is.

This study has shed new light onto the process that families use to create the identity of the dog in the family. Current research has been extremely limited on the pet as a member of the family, and this study provided additional support to that growing body of research. Perhaps most importantly, this study called into question the nature of

the role that a dog plays in a family. Prior research took this membership at face value, but now it appears that additional research into this unique role will be needed. The culturally accepted norm of who or what is or is not family will continue to shift and adjust, but for at least thirteen of these families, there will always be pets in the family.

APPENDIX

Research Protocol

Hello, I am Jason Brown and I will be interviewing you today. I am a communication researcher from Wayne State University that is conducting a study of how family communication creates the identity that the pet has in the family. This study is being conducted as part of my Master's thesis.

As you may already know, the entire interview will take approximately 45 minutes. I will ask you a series of questions to find out about how your family communicates about your pet(s) and how that communication shapes the pet's identity. The first set of questions will explore your definition of the term "family". Then, I will ask about your experience with pets, both current and former, and how those pets have been viewed in relation to your family. I will conclude with some questions to get basic demographic information.

However, before we can get started with that, there are some general "housekeeping" things that we need to review.

- 1) First, as indicated in the flyer and in our prior conversation, in order for me to be able to pay careful attention to what you are saying, I will video record the interview so that I may document any interactions between you and your pet during the interview. Is that alright with you? (if YES, start recording). Your name and identity will not be linked in any way to the information you provide me in the interview, and only the primary researcher will ever view the tape for the purpose of preparing a written transcript. In this transcript I will use pseudonyms for any names you use, and a fictional location for any specifically named places.
- 2) Second, all research conducted at Wayne State University requires that participants read an Informed Consent document prior to participation. Will you read and sign this sheet and let me know if you are willing to participate in this study?
- 3) Remember, participating in this interview is voluntary and you do not have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Definition of Family

- 1) Now that those things are taken care of, let's start out with the first question.
How do you define family?
 - a. What does family mean to you?

- 2) How does [pet's name] fit into your family?

Experience with Pets

- 1) Can you tell me about any pets you had growing up?
 - a. How did they fit into your families?
- 2) Now, I would like to know more about [pet]. Tell me his/her story beginning when you first met.
- 3) What does a typical day for [pet's name] look like?
- 4) If [pet's name] were to have the best day of his/her life, what would that look like?
- 5) Think back to before you had [pet's name]. What was different about your life then?
 - a. What things have stayed the same?
- 6) What is your favorite memory about [pet's name]?
- 7) Think about a time that [pet's name] was emotionally significant to family. Can you tell me about that?
 - a. How about the opposite, when was [pet's name] less significant to the family?
- 8) Do you find that [pet's name] takes on any specific roles in the family?
 - a. What is that role?
 - b. How did [pet's name] come to fill that role?
 - c. What does [pet's name] do when in that role?
 - d. What is a time when [pet's name] succeeded in that role?
 - e. What about a time [pet's name] wasn't able to fulfill that role?

Demographic Information

- 1) What are your ages? _____ & _____
- 2) How long have you been together? _____
- 3) What is your ethnicity? _____
- 4) What are your self identified genders? _____ & _____

Thank you again for your time and welcoming me into your home. Do you have any other ideas, suggestions, or comments?

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ABSTRACT**PETS IN THE FAMILY**

by

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Recent cultural shifts have found more people identifying their pets as members of their family. However, little research has examined how families create this identity that pets have. Using narrative performance theory, this study examined the stories that families tell about their pets and how their pets fit into the family. Fifteen dog owning families were interviewed about their dog and how it interacts with and fits within the family. Results of the study indicate that there were two main behaviors that are important to the development of the identity of the pet as a family member. First, the family must self-identify the pet as a member of the family. Second, the stories the family tells involve interaction between the pet and the human family members. Additionally, for many of the participants it seemed that it was the idea of a pet as the family member that was commonly enacted, more so than the actual pet filling that role. The results offer insight into how these families create the identity their pet has within the family, as well as bring shape to exactly what that identity is. Future research should continue to explore the roles pets play in a family and examine if the space occupied by pets is a truly unique one within families.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT

Jason Brown holds a Master's in Communication from Wayne State University. Jason's interests lie in the investigation of the narratives used by families and the role these play in the creation of a shared family identity. Currently, Jason is studying how the identity of pets as members of the family is communicatively created.

Completed course work relevant to this study: ethnographic methods, family communication, interpersonal communication, communication theory, and sociology of the family.