The ritualised memorialisation of companion animals around the world

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Abstract: Pets or companion animals are a feature of many households and people are increasingly considering animals to be family members. After a companion animal dies, many people now wish take this new view of human-companion kinship into account and seek a way of meaningfully marking the death of their companion. This article outlines differing forms of memorialisation rites and practices for companion animals from around the world, and discusses some implications for those who provide medical, psychological and veterinarian services.

Key words: animal companions, pet loss, memorialisation

Introduction

Few homes today are without at least one companion animal. In the United States, almost 412 million companion animals live in 71 million homes; more people live with companion animals than with children (DeMello, 2012). In the UK, about 65 million companion animals live in 13 million homes (Pet Food Manufacturers, 2014).

The international trends that have resulted in this shift include the continued emphasis on the nuclear family as the primary societal unit, the declining birthrate in many countries, the aging of many societies (Ambros, 2012), an increase in single-family households, older ages at first marriage for both parties, rising infertility rates, and smaller families (Brandes, 2009). When houses begin to seem empty or when an individual suddenly finds himself or herself alone after an unexpected life change, companion animals can become a solution to the need for a companion. However, our companion animals may have become more than our new friends – some people consider them to be family members.

Kinship between humans and animals

Charles has pointed out that the species barrier has never been a significant hindrance to companion animal-human relationships (2014). If we rationalise these relationships to be the result of a post-humanist sensibility or a modern response to ontological insecurity (Charles, 2014), this fails to take into account that companion animals have played significant roles in our lives and in our homes since at least Victorian times. This suggests the continuation of a long-term trend towards an increasingly pervasive experience of human-animal connectedness (Charles, 2014).

It maybe more socially acceptable now to acknowledge the importance of this relationship than it has been in the past, however. In a South Wales study of 1,000 households, which was followed by193 in-depth ethnographic interviews from 2001 to 2003, researchers originally intended to explore how variables such as class, culture and race impacted patterns of kinship and family formation (Charles & Aull Davies, 2008). The researchers found that, even though companion animals had not been mentioned

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at all when instructions were provided, 46 subjects (24%) mentioned them at some point in the interview (Charles & Aull Davies, 2008). This cultural construction of kinship appears to be the result of a more flexible notion of family today and a society where it is socially acceptable to acknowledge this understanding of kinship.

Another development is the change in animal naming conventions over time. Up until the mid- to late-twentieth century, dogs and cats were routinely named for their physical characteristics, such as Spotty or Brownie. Beginning in the latter part of the twentieth century, companion animals were routinely named using human names. This shift may reflect the change in the view of the status of the companion animals from animal to quasi-human or quasi-family member whose change in status merits a change in naming convention (Sloan, 2012).

In 2013, Americans spent more than $55 billion on their companion animals (Berry Hawes, 2014). In the United States, 56% of CAs sleep on the bed with their human (Chomel & Sun, 2011). In the United Kingdom, a survey of 260 households in Cheshire revealed that 14% of dogs slept on the bed (Thompson & Smith, 2014).

Some critics have noted that the human animal relationship can bring challenges as well as benefits. Treating companion animals as part of the family may mean that animals are not living an optimal lifestyle – The PFMA noted in 2015 that four out of five veterinary professionals have seen an increase in companion obesity in the last two years (2015). Some people spend inordinate amounts of money on veterinarian bills, pet food, grooming services, doggie day care, pet toys and other services. Many people expend a great deal of time on dog walks and at the dog park. Many people no longer want to leave their companion animal upon death. One of the challenges many people will face is creating new memorialisation rites and practices that take this new view of human-companion animal kinship into account.

Terminology

In this article I will be using is the term 'companion animal' (sometimes called 'animal companion') instead of the traditional term 'pet'. The distinction is important as the term 'pet' carries with it the connotation of ownership and lacks the sense of reciprocal relationship inherent in 'companion animal' (CA). Individuals residing with CAs today often feel a family member relationship with their dog, cat or other animal residing in the home. The owner may derive a significant sense of emotional support from this relationship.

Another recent term is one created by Japanese sociologist Ōmura Eishō, who coined the term 'neofamilism' (Ambros, 2012). This term refers to the inclusion of nonhuman animals into a human family and is consistent with the growing trend of CAs being increasingly viewed by their American and European owners as extended members of the family. They are the new family created to fill the void when other family members died or moved away.

Other terminology has evolved over time. Some English-speakers now routinely use the term 'fur baby'. In Japanese, the term *uchi no ko* or *wa ga ko* ('our child') is used exclusively for CAs and is even less ambiguous than the English term. If individuals today truly feel that their CA represents a legitimate member of the family, perhaps a child, then it should not be surprising that when that member of the family dies, the grief and expenditures associated with death rituals may be considerable. In fact, in the last few years, many people have created meaningful ceremonies associated with memorialising the loss and memories of their beloved CAs where none existed previously.

Grief, rituals and attachment theory

The grief that many humans feel upon the death of a CA can feel very similar to the grief that they might feel on the death of a family member. As noted earlier, neofamilism posits that the CA is a family member, so significant grief should not be surprising. In some cases, in fact, it may be more pronounced as many families do not live in the same geographic area and may see each other only at holidays, while they see their CA every day. This grief may be explained by attachment theory, where humans derive lifelong security and emotional support from their CA due to the reciprocal attachment resulting from the close relationship, and experience grief when that relationship is severed by death (Sable, 2013). Citing an unpublished 1990 UK survey of 900 readers of *Dog World*, one of the researchers found that the death of a CA reminded 34% of dog owners and 41% of cat owners of a previous CA death; however, 15% of those surveyed were reminded of a human death following the death of a CA in this survey (Davies, 2002). About 80% of British pet owners remembered the anniversary of the death of their CA in a 1990 survey (Davies, 2002).

The loss of an attachment relationship can lead to feelings of intense grief, whether the relationship involved a human or a CA (Sable, 2013). Grief over the loss of CAs may be compounded by the fact that societal expectations remain unclear and CA death may go unacknowledged in many cases, further isolating the individual in his or her grief (Hewson, 2014).

In a cross-sectional study of 106 bereaved owners in 2009, about 30% of those surveyed experienced subclinical levels of grief and sadness after the death of a CA, defined as 'feelings of profound sadness, emptiness, longingness, bitterness, and/or intrusive thoughts or memories of the deceased animal/pet' (Adrian, Deliramich & Frueh, 2009, p184). The study also found that no one met the criteria

for probable post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and only 4.3% met the criteria for complicated grief (Adrian, Deliramich & Frueh, 2009).

Memorialising companion animals

In order to ease the grieving process, rituals have been created for both adults and children who have experienced the death of a CA. However, the rituals may vary depending on the location.

In Europe, pet cemeteries began to appear in France in the 1870s, later in Germany, then in the New York City area and then London (Howell, 2002) and the rest of Europe. In England, pet cemeteries were created in the Victorian era and one writer theorises that they were a product of the Victorian belief that dogs represented the 'heart of Victorian middle-class family sentiment', including the virtues of constancy, companionship and trustworthiness (Howell, 2002, p8). In the United States, the Hartsdale Pet Cemetery was founded in 1896 and was originally used by wealthy members of society (Brandes, 2009), although that is no longer the case. Hartsdale is home to more than 70,000 deceased companion animals, including dogs, cats, birds, rabbits, snakes, rabbits, monkeys and even the pet lion of a Hungarian princess (Brandes, 2009). Over time, the headstones at Hartsdale have evolved from merely reflecting the name of the animal with perhaps the years that the companion animal lived to a reflection of the sentiment indicating family ties such as 'Third Member of the Family', 'Our Little Baby', and 'Our First Baby and Love' (Brandes, 2009, p. 105-6). Furthermore, the headstones often reflect the religion of the owners, carrying a Star of David or a Christian cross (Brandes, 2009), apparently indicating the belief of companion animal owners that the animal is the same religion as the owner.

Memorial services might be viewed as secular liturgies where owners recall the life of the animal, share memories and acknowledge their loss. At New York's Hartsdale Pet Ceremony, a minister offers services including a reading from Genesis with an emphasis on the creation of animals by God, recitation of secular poems and prayers by the minister, although few companion owners choose to take advantage of this service (Brandes, 2009).

In Australia, one researcher was unable to find any evidence of a formal funeral service in that country, while cremation services were common, with providers willing to come to the home to pick up the animal's body and either inter or return the cremains in an urn (Chur-Hansen *et al*, 2011). In a qualitative survey methodology using the framework analysis approach, seven Australian individuals who chose to use cremation services from three animal cremation providers, the authors identified five putative reasons why CA owners might use creation servicers. The reasons included people who believed that 'everyone used animal cremation services' (either because their CA was too large to manage alone after its death, they lived in an area that prohibited CA or they found it too difficult to touch the body of their dead animal) and people who 'consider their companion animal as a family member, as a child'. Australian law prohibits the burial of humans and animals so some people in the latter category planned to cremate their CAs and then be buried with the cremains (Chur-Hansen *et al*, 2011). Others who chose cremation included those who 'wanted memorials for their CA' (one person in this group explicitly chose ceremonies such as opening a bottle of champagne with friends while scattering the cat's ashes), those who were considered 'grieving people' (this group included those in extreme distress, including some people who had experienced the loss of a family member recently along with the death of the CA) and those who were 'seeking compassion and social support' (including humans who needed support in choosing the urn and practical decision-making in the cremation process) (Chur-Hansen *et al*, 2011, p253).

A British researcher has theorised that the practice of cremation has facilitated the practice of joint CA-owner cremation. The fact that the human cremains and the animal cremains are virtually indistinguishable from each other in the urn somehow eases the process when the survivors see only ashes in the urn. That is, '[t]he merging of ashes reflects a kind of merging of identity between owner and pet, something made possible by cremation in a way that could never be achieved by burial' (Davies, 2002, p185).

Perhaps the final decision we will make, the choice of eternal resting place, is easy to share when the difference in physical appearance – human and CA – is lessened and reduced to a handful of ashes. Also, since ashes generally carry less symbolic weight than that of a corpse (Davies, 2002), it has become more acceptable to friends and family members to leave the ashes of CAs in the family home until the human dies and the cremains can be combined and dispersed or interred.

A Scandinavian researcher examining memorial websites for cat owners who had recently lost a CA in Sweden and Norway found that that the sites often included messages noting that the cat was a member of the family and that the owner has experienced significant grief on the death of the animal (Gustavsson, 2013). While not a comprehensive survey, Gustavsson nonetheless provides an interesting look at a small sample of memorial websites created by individuals in Scandinavia and their motivations for creating the on-line memorials. There are also references to a feline heaven and a belief in Sweden (but not Norway) that one reason the owner may have posted on the website is in the hope that the dead cat may be able to communicate with the owner from the dead (Gustavsson, 2013).

In Scandinavia, as in the United States and Europe, there are frequent references to Rainbow Bridge, a sort of animal heaven envisioned by companion animal owners where the dead animal lives and is no longer in pain. (A recent check found that the most popular version of the original poem called 'Rainbow Bridge' has had 85 million views and 424 pages of CA photos of have been published on the site (www.rainbowbridge.com)). In some versions of this story, CA owners believe that the Rainbow Bridge is a limbo where the animal waits until the owner dies and the two are then reunited in heaven (Brandes, 2009).

Japan has perhaps the most extensive set of rituals associated with the death of a companion animal. There are an estimated 600-900 pet cemeteries in Japan, 120 of which are operated by Buddhist temples (Ambros, 2012). Animal memorialisation and mortuary rites are believed to have emerged between 1600-1867, beginning with communities which benefitted from specific commercial animals such as whales as a ceremonial thanksgiving (Ambros, 2012). It has been suggested that the extensive and long-standing death rituals in Japan are the 'product of a uniquely Japanese folk spirituality that illustrates the harmonious and respectful relationship the Japanese have toward nature in contrast to the West's dominionistic and rationalistic attitudes, a position closely linked to ideas of Japanese uniqueness' (Narushima, cited in Ambros, 2012, p85).

In Japan, humans and companion animals are cremated in different furnaces and human bodies are always cremated separately while multiple animals are sometimes cremated together (Ambros, 2012). Mobile cremation services that operate trucks will also make visits to private homes or Buddhist temples (Ambros, 2012). Finally, deceased human family members are typically memorialised at a home altar and at the family grave at the local cemetery; the same is now becoming true for CAs although some more traditional Japanese people frown on the inclusion of companion animals on the home altars (Ambros, 2012). A Tokyo cemetery now allows animals and their owners to be buried together and the headstone reflects both names (Ambros, 2012).

Some American practices on offer which are not yet common in other countries include taking an imprint of a your dog's nose and having a silver charm created as a reminder of how it felt when he rubbed against you, turning your cat's coughed-up hair balls into jewelry, turning your companion animal's remains into shotgun cartridges for one last hunt with your dog, creating a cat drone, getting your dog's face tattooed on your body, putting your companion animal's ashes into a pillow or an urn that looks like the pet or freeze drying your companion animal (Unkenholz, 2015).

A recent report of the 2014 funeral of Paco the Chihuahua, details how his owner chose to mark his death with a cremation ceremony on a beach near his home in California where balloons were released. His cremains were preserved in a copper urn and his owner's daughters created a charm with Paco's nose print for their mother (Berry Hawes, 2014).

Implications for providers

The development of these rituals and formal and informal memorialisation practices around the world have implications for those caring for individuals who have lost companion animals, including general practitioners, psychologists, psychiatrists, ministers and church leaders from all denominations, veterinarians, and those involved in the cremation and memorialisation business.

The need for support for those who lose a CA

There may be inadequate emotional support being provided when an individual loses an animal. The Australian study found that there was insufficient emotional support for those who had experienced companion animal loss; while funeral or memorial services for companion animals are rare in Australia as the survey authors note, '[w]ithout appropriate, socially sanctioned rituals, people must find their own ways of dealing with their grief' (Chur-Hansen *et al*, 2011, p257). Some, or perhaps many, individuals who have lost a pet, will have experienced the 'neofamilism' sense that the CA was as close as a sibling or spouse, and resulted in feelings of loss as significant as that of a family member.

Responses to grief will vary by individual. As Adams, Bonnett and Meek discovered in a 1999 Ontario, Canada study, 44 of 57 individuals surveyed at various points in the year after a CA death experienced what the authors called a social and psychological search for meaning in an attempt to address their grief. Exacerbating their emotions was a perceived lack of support from others in their community and society in general, according to the researchers, and the fact that there was 'the absence of protocol for grieving a deceased pet' (Adams, Bonnett & Meek, 1999, p36).

Individual characteristics such as personal beliefs, life stage, critical life events and the CA's attributes contributed to the variation in individual response (Adams, Bonnett & Meek, 1999). Some individuals may be overwhelmed by emotion, while others may behave in a more controlled manner, as described in Machin's Range of Response to Loss (RRL) Model, which attempts to explain general patterns in human behavior when experiencing a human loss (2010).

In 2006, two researchers proposed a bereavement questionnaire for providers which attempts to measure grief, guilt, anger and trauma and was specifically geared to measure the responsibility that pet owners feel toward their CA (which would likely not be present upon the death of a human member of the family) (Hunt & Padilla,

2006). Their initial findings indicated that the tool showed evidence of identifying those individuals at risk of depression and other illnesses. General practitioners and veterinarians may wish to consider use of screening tools when learning that a patient has lost a companion animal. Perhaps more importantly, general practitioners might ask more open-ended questions when a patient visits to learn what has happened recently in a patient's life to prompt a patient to report an animal's death. This would allow a provider to ask questions and, if necessary, use a screening tool to ascertain depression risk. As Hewson notes, given that many of our CAs live lives ranging from 18 months (hamsters) to seven years (rabbits and some very large dog breeds) to 13 years (dogs and some cats) to 20 years (cats) and because many people have more than one CA in their house, it is quite likely that individuals will experience CA grief more frequently than human grief (2014).

The need for ritual

Given that no formal structure exists to provide CA owners with the needed outlet for their grief, individuals are creating their own secular liturgies to fill this gap. The owner of a CA may feel that the death requires a memorial service. Since this death straddles the human/pet divide, as noted previously, the ceremony may straddle the secular/sacred divide. The human must decide how to acknowledge the life of the CA, pay tribute to the animal and what sort of memorial, if any, to create. Some religions may consider such a service blasphemous while others may embrace such a service. However, the human is clearly creating meaningful ritual for himself or herself.

The need for a ritual memorialising the companion animal generally implies a belief that the animal was a creature of God or had some affiliation with the divine. Furthermore, the human and those present may find comfort from the belief, either implied or directly stated, that the animal may be reunited with the owner in the future. These end-of-life services may help the human begin grieving for the departed animal. Those organisations and individuals who can provide the necessary religious and quasi-religious services designed to meet the spiritual needs of the human may be filling an important need for individuals in the future.

Conclusion

Companion animals are likely to continue to play significant roles of the lives of millions of people worldwide and that trend is expected to continue in some parts of the world as demographic changes take place. Those who provide medical, psychological and veterinarian services to individuals now and in the future should be aware of this trend and its implications for ritual memorialisation after the comanion animal dies. ■

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