

Summary

Companion Animal Loss: A Systematic Review of Experiencing Disenfranchised Grief

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Grief is a process that occurs after the death of a loved one, eliciting a range of reactions including emotional, physical, cognitive, and behavioral responses. Cognitive reactions may include feelings that the loss is unreal, difficulty focusing on daily activities, and efforts to find meaning in the loss. Physical reactions can encompass hormonal changes, shock, and decreased sleep quality. Behaviorally, individuals may withdraw socially and find it challenging to form new relationships (Bonanno, 2001; Dyregrov & Dyregrov, 2008; Shear, 2012).

Subjective reactions to loss can vary significantly depending on the nature of the relationship with the deceased. For instance, losing a child is often associated with more severe grief than losing a partner or a parent (Sanders, 1980). Furthermore, research by Eckerd et al. (2016) suggests that the level of closeness with the deceased, whether a person or an animal, may be a more critical determinant of the intensity of grief experienced than the specific role or identity of the one who has died.

Companion animals play significant roles in human lives, serving as friends, family members, and companions (Adrian, Deliramich & Frueh, 2009; Beck & Madresh, 2008; Rémillard, Meehan, Kelton ve Coe, 2017; Walsh, 2009). Research indicates that companion animals hold a distinct place within families, and their deaths often provoke profound reactions (Cohen, 2002). Additionally, Lavorgna and Hutton (2018) demonstrated in their study that the experience of losing a companion animal is comparable to the loss of a human loved one. However, individuals mourning the loss of a companion animal may feel their grief is not acknowledged or validated by society. In the study conducted by Karasu and Alkar (2020), which examined the coping mechanisms of individuals experiencing pet bereavement and the challenges faced during the grieving process, it was observed that the grieving processes of individuals who have experienced the loss of a pet were categorized under two themes. When examining the reactions and coping strategies of the individuals, it was noted that the

bereaved sought social support primarily through receiving support from their families, subsequently continuing to care for pets, and commemorating their deceased pet.

Though grief is inherently subjective, it is not always experienced in ways that society anticipates or acknowledges. ‘Disenfranchised grief,’ a term coined by Kenneth J. Doka in 1999, refers to complex grief reactions that are not supported or recognized by society, and therefore cannot be openly expressed (Attig, 2004; Doka, 1999; Robson & Walter, 2013). Disenfranchised grief manifests in several forms: (i) when the relationship is not recognised, (ii) when the loss is not recognised, (iii) when griever is not recognised, (iv) when the death is disenfranchised and (v) when the way an individual grieves is not validated.

Informed by this background, this systematic review examines how disenfranchised grief is experienced following the loss of a companion animal, incorporating quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods studies. The review was conducted using the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines, as outlined by Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, Altman, and the PRISMA Group (2009). Given this foundation, the primary question guiding this study is: How is disenfranchised grief experienced after the loss of a companion animal?”

Method

This review was conducted in strict adherence to the COPE (Committee on Publication Ethics) international standards for editors and authors, as outlined by Wager & Kleinert (2011). The search for relevant literature utilized English keywords combined in specific phrases: [‘companion animal’ AND ‘disenfranchised grief’], [‘pet’ AND ‘disenfranchised grief’], and [‘animal loss’ AND ‘disenfranchised grief’]. These combinations were consistently applied across Tandfonline, PubMed, and Scopus databases. The term ‘disenfranchised grief’

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was a constant element in every search query, reflecting the core focus of the study.

Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-method studies were included in this review without any time restrictions, specifically focusing on disenfranchised grief related to the loss of companion animals. Criteria for exclusion encompassed studies on stockbreeding, reviews, case studies, and others not directly related to the topic. Initially, 581 studies were identified; after removing duplicates, 326 studies remained. Of these, 316 were further excluded due to their irrelevance to the topic, such as being from different fields, editorials, or book reviews, leaving 10 relevant studies for detailed analysis. Among these, four were qualitative, three were quantitative, and three employed mixed methods. The analysis revealed that the distribution of these studies spanned from 2011 to 2020 (Figure 1).

Results

Among the included studies, four quantitative analyses specifically investigated disenfranchised grief following the loss of companion animals, focusing on diverse sources of data with total 1122 participants. These studies involved analyzing reader comments on an article about companion animal loss, examining phone calls to a hotline dedicated to companion animal loss, scrutinizing notes from eulogies for companion animals, and evaluating responses to open-ended questions regarding companion animal loss. The research conducted by Bussolari et al. (2018), Laing and Maylea (2018), Rémillard, Meehan, Kelton, and Coe (2017), and Rennard, Greening, and Williams (2019) collectively highlight the multifaceted ways in which individuals express and experience grief over the loss of companion animals. The analysis of the quantitative studies reveals several overarching themes related to disenfranchised grief following the loss of companion animals. Common themes identified across multiple studies include the depth of the human-animal bond, the range of emotions expressed by individuals, and the cherished memories shared with the deceased companion animals, as noted by Bussolari et al. (2018), Laing and Maylea (2018), and Rémillard et al. (2017). Additionally, unique themes emerged from specific studies, such as the emotional and ethical considerations surrounding the decision to euthanize (Rémillard et al., 2017) and aspects of spiritualism in coping with the loss (Rennard et al., 2019).

In this study, three quantitative research projects focused on individuals who have experienced the loss of a companion animal with total 4554 participants: Cowling et al. (2020), Habarth et al. (2017), and Spain et al. (2019). The findings from these studies reveal sig-

nificant insights. Cowling et al. (2020) observed that an increased attachment to a companion animal correlates with heightened severity of grief. Habarth et al. (2017) found that the severity of grief intensifies with increasing social pressure. Furthermore, Spain et al. (2019) identified strong correlations between experiences of disenfranchised grief and the mourning of companion animals.

In the mixed-method studies, which involved a total of 318 participants, the quantitative components included asking open-ended questions and utilizing several applications to measure word distribution (Lavorigna & Hutton, 2018; Packman et al., 2014; Packman et al., 2017). All three studies specifically focused on individuals who were bereaved as their participants. When the results were examined, it was reported that no difference was found between the participants who lost a human or an animal in terms of the degree of closeness felt towards the deceased person or pet and the intensity of grief. It has been conveyed that the perceived closeness to the lost human or pet, along with the perception of social support, significantly predicts the intensity of grief (Lavorigna & Hutton, 2018). Further findings from the research indicate that the level of attachment felt towards a companion animal and a human was comparable, showing no significant difference (Packman et al., 2014). However, empathy towards those grieving the loss of a companion animal was found to be lower. Additionally, a study highlighted those participants with higher psychosocial well-being experienced greater post-traumatic growth following the loss of a companion animal (Packman et al., 2017).

Discussion

In this study, the aim is to collect research about people who have been affected by the loss of a pet and who go through the grieving process in a disenfranchised manner after experiencing such loss. A review of four qualitative, three quantitative, and three mixed-method studies has been conducted for the purpose of this study.

The experience of disenfranchised grief following the death of a pet has been observed in many studies to reflect a lack of social support and someone to talk to, along with intense social pressure (Cowling et al., 2020; Habarth et al., 2017; Laing & Maylea, 2018; Lavorigna & Hutton, 2018; Rémillard et al., 2017). This situation is consistent with the literature on human loss, where the lack of social support is associated with more severe grief experiences (Dyregrov, 2006; Kaniasty, 2012; Packman et al., 2014; Van der Houwen et al., 2010).

In the studies reviewed, the expression of emotions emerged as a common theme. Feelings of guilt

were identified in several studies (Bussolari et al., 2018; Cowling et al., 2020), along with anxiety, anger, and fear (Rémillard et al., 2017). Conversely, positive emotions such as happiness and unconditional love were also reported (Rennard et al., 2019). These findings align with existing literature on the topic (Bussolari et al., 2021).

The connection between humans and animals is a pivotal component in understanding the nuanced experiences of individuals who encounter disenfranchised grief following the demise of a companion animal. This unique form of bonding, which transcends the traditional interpersonal relationships commonly recognized and validated by society, has garnered significant attention within the academic and psychological research communities. Various scholarly investigations have delved into this topic, aiming to unravel the complex dynamics at play and the profound impact that the loss of a pet can have on an individual's emotional well-being. Through these studies, researchers have sought to illuminate the depth and significance of the human-animal bond, providing insights into how it influences the grieving process for those mourning the loss of a cherished companion animal. This body of research underscores the importance of recognizing and understanding the role of this bond in the context of grief and loss, highlighting

its critical contribution to the broader discourse on emotional health and bereavement (Laing & Maylea, 2018; Packman et al., 2014; Packman et al., 2017; Rémillard et al., 2017; Rennard et al., 2019), with findings that are consistent with existing literature on the subject (Brown & Symons, 2016; Field et al., 2009).

This study represents the first known investigation into the disenfranchised grief associated with the loss of a companion animal and is noteworthy the first study on this topic to be conducted in Turkish to date. There are, however, limitations to this approach due to the exclusive use of English keywords that limited the scope of the research to studies that had been published in English. Additionally, by relying solely on three databases (Tandfonline, PubMed, and Scopus), the research may have missed accessing a broader array of information that could have been available through additional databases.

In conclusion, the purpose of this study was to explore the idea of disenfranchised grief in the context of companion animal loss, a topic that was first explored in 2014. In order to better understand, identify, and acknowledge the varying experiences of individuals who are grieving the loss of their companion animals, further research is needed in this emerging area of study.