**A qualitative analysis of pets as suicide protection for older people**

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**Abstract**

**Background and Objectives:** An unanticipated finding during research onthe role that pets play in the health of older adults, was that pets had protected some from suicide. Given that older people are more vulnerable to fatal first attempts, understanding protective factors in this population group is vital.

**Research Design and Methods:** Twelve older adults interviewed about the role of pets on their health spoke overtly of suicide (n=2), obliquely referred to suicidal ideation (n=5), or reported high levels of distress and/or depression (n=5). These participants were aged 60 to 83; five were male and seven female. Interview transcripts were analysed using a qualitative descriptive thematic approach in order to understand how they (collectively) identified pets as protecting them from suicide.

**Results:** Concepts of function, presence, known-ness and reciprocity emerged as factors protective against suicide. These factors may counter those identified by Joiner as underpinning suicidal behaviour - perceived burdensomeness and social alienation.

**Implications and Conclusions:** For some older people, relationships with non-human others may be protective against suicide. Systemic responses that incorporate human-animal relationship awareness need to be explored to promote and protect some humans while also considering the impact on pets.

**Keywords:** human-animal interactions aging; suicide; health promotion; pets.

**Translational Significance** – The findings of this research could be used to help inform policy, procedures and support networks for aging individuals. At present, pets are generally not considered significant or relevant in the health and wellbeing of older adults in clinical settings. The data presented here supports the growing body of research that indicates that they should be.

**Background**

A long history of research explores the links between pet ownership and the health and wellbeing of older adults. Recent reviews (Obradovic, Laguex, Michaud & Provencher, 2019; Freidman & Gee, 2018) have identified both positive and negative findings and suggested future research directions and foci. Positive findings include the role that pets can play in improving older persons’ psychological, social and emotional wellbeing and functioning by reducing negative experiences in these factors, and increasing positive ones (Obradovic, Laguex, Michaud & Provencher, 2019). Pets can moderate, or soften the impact of negative life experiences (Freidman & Gee, 2018).

This paper focusses on our findings that pets play a role in suicide protection for some of the older adults we have been interviewing. The findings were unanticipated but emerged from a qualitative study exploring how older people identify and articulate the impact of their pets on their health, rather than seeking to test outsider/younger people’s theories about this relationship. We did not anticipate that asking the seemingly benign question “how do your pets influenceyour health?” would lead to participants revealing suicide attempts or ideas. To date, no other published research has specifically revealed such links, although other research has revealed pets to be significant in recovery from suicide attempts for some older people (Deuter, Procter & Evans, 2019; Figuerido et. al., 2015) and as protective against suicide for abused women (Fitzgerald, 2007) and homeless people (Irvine, 2013) .

***Suicide, euthanasia and rational suicide***

Internationally, suicide rates are decreasing, but the risk of suicide by older persons remains higher than for any other age group (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017; De Leo & Kolves, 2017), increasing exponentially from the age of 60 (Shah, Bhat, Zarate-Escudero, DeLeo & Erlangsen, 2016). In general, every individual who dies by suicide represents an estimated 20 non-fatal attempts (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2014). While there are debates about the distinction between suicide and euthanasia (Gould 2008), implicit within the approach taken in this paper is the position that suicide by older people merits a prevention approach akin to other age groups. Recent research is revealing that the ripple impact of suicide may be far greater than the commonly cited six affected people (Cerel et al 2019) with Cerel and colleagues calculating that each suicide they examined affected 135 people. They include families, friends, colleagues, neighbours and also first responders such as ambulance and police officers, who are increasingly recognised as experiencing post traumatic work related stress (Haugen, Evces & Weiss 2012; Koch 2010). Some older suicide survivors may experience renewed and even dramatically different life enhancements post suicide attempts (Deuter, Procter & Evans, 2019; Figuerido et. al., 2015). Our position is that suicide in older people merits preventive measures for the sake of older people themselves, and those around them. Furthermore identifying protective factors is vitally important in this age group as first attempts are more likely to be fatal than in younger people (Deuter, Procter, Evans & Jaworski, 2016).

***Ageing, quality of life and pets***

With longevity increasing in most western countries, identifying what creates and facilitates healthier longer lives has become a stronger focus of research and policy development (World Health Organisation, 2018), but views of health as the absence of disease still prevail. For example, even the language of prevention implies threat, rather than invoking positively or actively creating health (Becker & Rhynders, 2013) and the growth of preventive diagnostics conflates population based risks of disease with individual risk levels and can lead to people accepting aggressive preventative interventions (Kreiner & Hunt, 2013). Indeed, Australia, the location of the research, has one of the highest life expectancies in the world (OECD 2019). Yet the above noted suicide rates for older people show that we are not necessarily doing so well at facilitating the quality of these extended years.

Relationships between pets, health and ageing have been explored from a diverse range of perspectives for an extended period of time. Obradovic and colleagues’s (2019) recent review focussing on the positives and negatives of pets in community-dwelling older people included 1 170 relevant abstracts with 62 sources used in their analysis. They identified improved wellbeing, mood and relaxation capacity; social benefits including the sense of giving and receiving love, companionship, purposefulness, increased social interaction; and perception of being social/approachable as the benefits of pets for the health of older people. They found that older pet owners seem less likely to decline psychologically and more able to overcome hurdles; and may also report an increased sense of safety, physical activity and independence. Negative aspects of pet ownership for older people include the grief experienced at pet deaths, responsibilities and worries of having a pet that may cause stress with possible increased risk of falls and decreased self-care. At times the evidence is seemingly contradictory for example some studies show decreased use of medications and health services; others increased (Obradovic, Laguex, Michaud & Provencher, 2019).

Gee Mueller and Curl (2017) also note the history of research showing human-animal interactions as improving cardiovascular health and sense of social support while reducing depression and anxiety. They too note mixed findings – particularly those regarding physical activity, pets and ageing. In summary the research on pets, health and older people is extensive but still has some limitations including methodological issues (Friedman & Gee 2017), a tendency to focus on positives (Obradovic et al 2019) and some contradictory findings.

***Pets, ageing, loneliness and links to suicide***

Awareness of how loneliness can not only reduce quality but also length of life has recently burgeoned. For example the United Kingdom appointed a Minister for Loneliness in 2018 (Mannion, 2018) and the former Surgeon General of the United States (2014-17) has identified loneliness as one of the biggest public health issues facing the US (Murthy, 2017).

The role of pets as companions and company, or counters to loneliness are emerging as particularly important for some of the most vulnerable of populations. They include people with chronic mental health conditions (Brooks et al. 2018) or physical diseases (Brooks 2013) and homeless people (Slatter, Lloyd, & King, 2012; Taylor, Williams, & Gray 2004). They may also provide company in situations where social connections are reduced due to health conditions. Carr et al. (2018) found that pet dogs offered people with chronic pain caregiving and company. Einberg et al. (2016) noted that children undergoing cancer treatment identified pets as providing comfort and company. Pets seem to be particularly important when people are socially isolated or excluded. They can provide comfort, companionship, and a sense of worth, countering or reducing experiences of loneliness.

Loneliness has been linked to suicide risk in older persons (Wiktosson, Runeson, Skoog, Ostling & Waern 2010), and Joiner (2005) has argued that a deficit in the sense of being useful and needed in one’s world is a crucial factor in suicide risk. Increasingly the evidence is that loneliness reduces life expectancy (Henriksen, Larsen, Mattisson & Andersson 2019) but the evidence is that attempts to create social support networks do not have the same level of positive impact as those that are naturally occurring (Holt – Lunstad, Smith & Layton, 2010). Such research suggests that the role of companionship, loneliness alleviation and social contact facilitation linked to pet ownership may be not only be life enhancing but facilitates longevity through social connection mechanisms that are not yet fully understood.

**Project rationale**

Our broad interest has been in identifying and exploring the dynamics of everyday influences on quality of life and mental well-being in older persons’ lives, from the perspectives of older people themselves. While there is a substantial amount of research that has focussed on older people and pets, a gap seemed to exist in rearching older people’s own self-identified understandings of health linked to a diversity of animals that *they* identified as pets. Researchers are by default generally younger than older participants hence researchers are inevitably outsiders to the experience being researched (Young 2005). We may live to be old, but at this point our perspective on ageing are guesses, informed and perceived from our relative youth. For example older people think of death in ways that may be startling to younger people (Fleming, Farquhar, Brayne, & Barclay, 2016). This positional difference between researcher and researched in ageing research is not commonly identified. So while a large amount of research has now been published on the health impacts of pets in the lives of older people, a gap that merited exploration was providing a very wide platform for older pet owners to self-identify and define “health impacts” and indeed “pets”. This is the basis for the overarching research from which this unexpected focus on suicide protection has emerged.

The research and analysis presented here is an analysis specifically relating to interviewees who revealed that pets may influence older people’s decisions about ending their lives. First we present the qualitative descriptive approach used in this research and the inductive thematic analysis developed from interviewees’ transcripts. This inductive analysis is linked to Joiner’s theorising of suicide risk as a means of directly connecting to the current field of suicide analysis. The paper concludes with thoughts on implications for further research and application.

**Research Design and Methods**

The design of this research is underpinned by participatory and empowerment models of research (Green & Mercer 2004), including being mindful of the power of researchers to overlook or erase insights from participants, especially regarding human-animal relationships (Ryan & Ziebland 2015). Our aim was to hear the voices, thoughts and ideas of participants through having a broad framework of questions (see Table 1 below). Initial questions were generated by the research team in discussions about what was relatively unknown or unexplored regarding pet ownership by older people (Q1, 2, 5, 6, 8); a focus on understanding the nature of pets as a relationship (Q6, 7) as indicated by research with other vulnerable groups of pet owners; and ageing specific including seeking information about informal support to older pet owners and their pets (Q 8, 9, 10). While we had a list of questions – the aim of these questions was to generate discussions in which older people could reveal their perspectives and understandings.. The lead researcher (Young) worked in community ageing for many years and the approach to questions and interviewing was built around social work understandings of enabling open meaningful conversations with older people (Kadushin & Kadushin 2013).

Table 1: Interview schedule – pets, health and older people

**Interview schedule – pets, health and older people**

1. Can you tell me about your history of pet ownership?
2. Can you tell me why you have pets now?
3. How do you see your pet affecting your health? (positively and negatively)
4. Do you think having a pet adds to your quality of life? How?
5. Do different pets (individuals and kinds) impact on your health differently?
6. Has your relationship with your pet(s) changed over time? Eg as the pet ages? As you have aged?
7. What is unique about your relationship with pets compared to people?
8. Are there things that bother you with regard to having a pet at your age?
9. What are you future plans with regard to pet ownership?
10. Do you have someone who looks after your pet at times? Who?
11. Do you have anything more you would like to add re the topic of pets and aging?

As can be seen in Table 1, information about suicide was not sought, rather it emerged as participants responded to these questions; a line of responses that can be interpreted as supporting the underpinning open-ness of approach taken. The theorising presented here is based on analysis of interview transcripts. The data were provided spontaneously by older pet owners who responded to public calls via radio and snowball sampling to requests to share how they believed their pets impacted on their health. Within this open approach, purposeful sampling was employed to obtain broad rich insights (Kim, Sefcik and Bradway 2017) into the health impacting nature and facets of human-animal relationships. A diverse range of older pet owners, with a diverse range of animals was sought to gain insights into the variety of human-pet configurations. After the initial open recruitment, a more targeted approach was used to seek specific pet and owner profiles (to moderate the bias toward women, usually with pet dogs that had emerged). A total of 35 participants were interviewed (20 female and 15 males; age range 59 to 83 years; mean age 70 years). Most participants were Anglo-Australian although there were several interviewees of European origin; pet owners’ living circumstances were predominately single person and couple households. The interviewees’ pets reflected the patterns of pet ownership in Australia (Animal Medicines Australia 2016) of predominately dogs, followed by cats and birds (aviary and indoor housed) and an array of reptiles.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face by two interviewers, usually in participants’ own homes with their pets present; several were conducted via telephone (non-metropolitan interviewees) and one in the office space available to the team. There were four couple interviews. The interview team consisted of 9 people – 4 female academics, 4 volunteer undergraduate students (3 male and one female) plus one female participant interviewer who having been interviewed was very keen to interview her age peers about their pets. All of the academic staff had experience in qualitative research interviewing and an interview training program was developed and run with the student and peer interviewers. In addition face to face interviews were conducted in pairs to ensure that there was always an experienced interviewer present. All participants provided informed consent for the project which had Human Ethics approval (number 0000034961). Interviews went for 30 minutes to one and a half hours, averaging an hour. Only one interview per participant was conducted.

Participants were given the choice as to what first name they would like to have used (their own or a pseudonym) on the consent form. Surnames were not used and no participants asked to be identified in this way. Given the highly personal nature of the topic presented here, we have respected participants’ choice of names but provide minimal other identifying information. As an ethical note, none of these people expressed a desire for further (clinical) support in our interviews. Rather they seemed to be taking an opportunity to inform interviewers of a resource that they identified as powerfully protective in their lives.

Interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and then thematically coded using NVivo by pairs of team members. Gathering and analysis of data was recursive with suicide protection emerging strongly across time and interviews. Using a qualitative descriptive thematic approach (Kim, Sefcik and Bradway 2017) but drawing on grounded theory approaches (Charmaz 2014), initial coding and interviews (of all transcripts) were reviewed closely for indications of suicidality, including reports of acute psychic trauma, distress and overt discussion of life ending ideas or actions. Initial coding and themeing was then discussed, refined, reflected upon, and visually charted and recharted to develop a coherent collective account (Vaismoradi, Turunen & Bondas 2013) of how these participants spoke of their pets as being life-protecting. The theorising presented here was primarily developed by a subgroup of the research team but has been over-viewed by the full academic team for validation.

**Results**

From a total of 35 interviewees, 12 (35%) indicated some connection between pets and potential suicide (7 female and 5 males; mean age: 69 ± 7 years; age range 59 – 78 years). Two reported self-harm behaviours or potential actions in detail (previous attempts, clear planning of how to take their own life – Di and Bob). Five more alluded to suicide (e.g. “if not for the dog/birds/other pet …I wouldn’t be here”; Kay, Tony, David, Trevor, Jen), and another five reported significant trauma that had led to them being seriously “down”, or “depressed” such as marriage breakdowns, partner violence, and major illnesses (Wendy, Rosie, Cathy, Frances, Stephen).

***Functional role – active to passive***

The functional role that pets can play in suicide protection ranges from *active*, that is, in direct response to a particular pet or group of pets to *passive.* This theme can be seen as a spectrum of the directness of animal engagement/presence with a human guardian. These two ends of a spectrum of functionality may actually join up, as the active feeding, grooming, exercise, hygiene and other care needs of some pets may necessitate specialist understanding that require the owners to engage in passive (non-animal interactive) activities, such as researching their needs and joining specialist interest groups.

Both Bob’s and Jen’s comments demonstrate the active functionality of pet ownership:

I actually realized the only thing that is really keeping me alive, was these [nods to dogs] and the birds, giving me a chance to get out of bed in the morning. She [nodding to wife who in turn was nodding agreement to his story] would not feed them, she refused to feed them, so I had to get out of bed, and do something, all right? Otherwise, I would be asleep for twenty to twenty-two hours a day, no problems whatsoever (Bob).

Bob has a large collection of exotic and native birds with specialist needs. His wife’s “refusal” to provide the specialist care that these birds required was possibly a strategic move by her to counter some of the manifestations of his major depression. Jen’s relationship with her dog also displays the more active functionality that pets may provide in the lives of persons at risk of suicide:

... I do suffer pretty badly from depression, and you know, and I honestly think if it wasn’t for Elvis [dog] wanting to get up and walk every morning, I would probably just sit home here in the four walls,...and even now, there’s times when I don’t want to leave the house and I just don’t want to mix with people, but I’m forced to go out, because Elvis wants to go (Jen).

Jen is “forced” to move and engage with the world beyond her own home in responding to the needs of her dog Elvis, countering some of her melancholy.

For Di, pets have always been part of her life and they are family to her:

I have pets because I just can't imagine my life without pets …I have no children and to me they are an extension of my family (Di).

Di is house-bound by a physical condition, which she linked to her occasional depression. Her pets sit mid-spectrum between active and passive in their functional role in that they offer her a sense of familial connectedness that engenders obligations, including for the emotional wellbeing of these non-human family members (to be discussed further).

Stephen offers an example of how pet ownership may offer *passive* functionality in suicide protection.

So that was another thing, studying genetics and stuff like that and yeah, just the complete involvement with it all... I even ended up joining the reptile club. But going back to the birds I – just all the involvement and meeting new people and that because you do get very depressed and stuff when you have a very bad breakup. So that kept my mind and kept my peace of mind I suppose really, and even my son admits to the day, he said “you would have lost it old boy without the birds”, and I said, “I know.” I’ve got to give it to them - they have helped me …(Stephen).

Stephen’s final phrase identifies a core role that pets play in protection - the notion of ‘reciprocity’. Stephen feels a sense of gratitude to his collection of birds and reptiles (including a crocodile), as the functionality of caring for them helped him counter and recover from traumatic life experiences.

***Presence***

A second major emerging theme about how pets may protect from suicide is that of *presence*. Presence is the physical existence of the animal and the sense that they are "with" you; as company, giving a sense of protection, and at times mitigating the aloneness that could become loneliness. The two participants who discussed suicide most overtly identified presence as the core of the suicidally protective nature of pets for them.

What I found was that it did not matter how down I was or whatever, Missy, that’s the white one [dog], she was always there (Bob).

I spent literally two and a half years in bed…. and that dog was only a pup, a little pup. And where she should have been playing and carrying on, she spent the whole time with me. She was just my most wonderful companion (Di).

Both Bob and Di are referring to a sense that a pet has chosen to be present with them. Both had other pets but these individual animals stayed with them while the others were physically ‘away’ from their owner. For Bob, Missy has just “been there” while Di alludes to a sense that her puppy had given up her puppiness to be her companion during a dark time for her. Di noted that she did not restrain her puppy on the bed and he was able to come and go - otherwise toiletting would have been a major issue.

Loss of a pet can expose the sense of security and companionship that animal presence has offered:

Yeah, a few weeks [with no dog] and I thought “I can’t handle this”, because I was living on my own. And I thought you come home and oh it was horrible, just so bleak. Couldn’t live with it. Dark and there’s no one to say hello (Rosie).

Animals may be able to stay with a person far more consistently than humans, including at night when people may feel particularly vulnerable – physically as an older person living alone, and psychologically as they struggle to sleep, consistent with diagnoses of depression. Pets’ constancy of presence seems to feed into *known-ness,* the next theme.

***Known-ness***

For both Di and Bob, the two interviewees who shared stories of active suicidality, an intense level of suicide protection seemed to come from having a pet that they somehow felt a reciprocal “knowing” relationship with - a relationship between living beings whose existence and quality of life is entwined. This entwinement is highly protective for Di:

And the times I still think of it [suicide] now, when I have a difficult time and I think, what will happen to the dogs. ..Because I know Milly’s [one of her three dogs] very devoted to me. .. I think she would pine away. When I used to go away…and when I been away for one or two nights or something, I know, she goes off her food. She’s just not herself (Di).

Di identifies that is it not her pets generically that are protective, it is Milly in particular. Milly’s predicted pain at Di’s loss motivates Di to empathically push thoughts of self-harm aside.

Bob expresses a more general sense of known-ness and reciprocity that seemed to work in combination with other protective factors related to pets (the active functionality noted previously) for him.

…when I yell out “Joey” or whatever, the animals sense, tend to sense something is wrong, when you need a bit of a pick-up or something (Bob).

***Reciprocity***

This sense of reciprocal known-ness was reported by many of our interviewees, not just the 12 whose transcripts form the basis of this analysis (and a factor that perhaps most pet owners, including most of the research team, can relate to):

They sort of make you feel, you love them and they doubly love you back and you just feel, made to feel wanted and stuff like that (Stephen).

…you’ve got this person [referring to pets] that’s been there …and they love you and you love them (Frances).

…some animals, for instances, you don’t get much back from a fish, you get a certain amount back from a cat… whereas … a dog is the animal that reacts with a human being, although that lamb we had, (laughter) …became very very much part of the family (Wendy).

…they seem to love you a bit more [than people]…(David).

Oh, it makes you feel good, because they appreciate it, and they show you they appreciate it (Jen).

In summary, the inter-related themes that emerged from the descriptive analysis are:

* ***Function,*** direct (‘active’) or indirect (‘passive’) responding to pets
* ***Presence,*** the existence of the animal and the sense that they are ‘with’ you
* ***Known-ness,*** feeling ‘known’ as an individual by the animal
* And encompassing all of the above concepts, ***Reciprocity***, a sense of a mutual, reciprocal relationship with an animal

Figure 1 includes a schematic summary of the theory developed (on the left) and its relationship to Joiner’s theory (further explained within the discussion).



*Figure 1*. Interrelationship between Qualitative Emergent Theory and Joiner’s Theory

**Discussion**

As noted previously the concept of suicidal intent was not put to the interviewees. However, given that predicting exactly who in at-risk populations will commit suicide is difficult (Carter et.al., 2017); that suicidal intention is not as clear cut as diagnostic categorisation may imply (James & Stewart, 2018); the noted difficulties in recruiting informants in this age group (Weil, Mendoza & McGavin, 2017); and the fact that they are within a population group whose first indicator of suicidality may be them ending their life (Deuter et al., 2016) the criteria of identifiable distress was adopted in reviewing interview transcripts.

Overall we were struck by how many men identified their pets as protective of their mental health. This pattern seems significant given the higher suicide rate amongst males that increases with age in western countries (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2017; De Leo & Kolves, 2017). We also considered the possibility that for some people, the opportunity to talk about how their pets impact on their health (a common popular topic but not one systematically recognised in health care responses) enabled them to speak of something enormously significant in their lives. We may therefore have recruited a higher proportion of more extreme cases (Patton, 2002) than would be found in the general population of this age group.

The age span of these interviewees is from 60 to 83. The inclusion of younger aged people with pets in this analysis is significant for understanding suicide prevention as while pet ownership decreases with age (Animal Medicines Australia, 2016) it may be that people are giving up a powerful health creator and potential suicide protector due to a dearth of pet-accomodating ageing responses (AWLA 2018).

Four factors – facilitating *functional* actions or understandings that reduced or countered symptoms of depression and psychological distress, experiencing the *presence* of a pet who as a fellow being “*knows*” you and in some way “*reciprocates*” or facilitates a sense of thankfulness back towards them as non-human others – seem to underpin the protective nature of pets for the 12 older pet owners identified as indicating degrees of suicide risk in this study. These protective human-animal scenarios are *relational*, individually known and reciprocating cross-species relationships. It is not just about animals being around – it is about how they are perceived as fellow beings offering “support” (via presence and knowness) to a human experiencing distress.

Acknowledging the small sample, participants’ stories and our analysis of how pets can work to protect people indicates that prescriptions of ‘two pats of a dog’ will not protect someone from taking their life; and even engaged, loving pet ownership may not be protective. But listening carefully to how persons at risk of suicide speak of the animals in their lives, and how they perceive these animals to relate to, and be reliant upon their human may offer indications of protection. This emergent theory connects here to Joiner’s interpersonal-psychological theory of suicidal behaviour (Joiner, 2005). Joiner’s theory consists of three inter-related conceptions that may catalyze development of a desire for death; *percieved burdensomeness*, *social alienation* and *acquired lethal capacity*.

These three vulnerabilities are perhaps more likely to apply to older groups of people than younger populations. Older people are more likely than young people to experience complex health needs leading to a sense of being a burden (Cukrowicz et al., 2011); they are more likely to be isolated with one third estimated to experience social isolation and loneliness (Landeiro, Barrows, Nuttall Musson, Gray & Leal 2017), yet less likely to interact with technology which may aid social connections for younger ages (Kiriakidis, 2015). Older people are more likely to have undergone serious illnesses, surgeries and other painful treatments reducing their fear of pain as per Joiner’s characterisation of acquired lethal capacity and more likely to have access to medications that could be used as a means of suicide (Gavrielatos, Komitopoulos, Kanellos, Varsamis & Kogeorgos, 2006). The thematic analysis undertaken can be connected to Joiner’s (2005) concepts of perceived burdensomeness and social alienation. Figure 1 includes the connection between the two frameworks.

Pets offer a counter to the sense of uselessness and the perception that one’s existence is simply a burden. Animals’ needs for specialist care, seemingly known or only able to be provided by the person vulnerable to suicide, counter beliefs of burdensomeness. Pets need their human guardians and would suffer without them. In addition, pets may counter social alienation, loneliness and or isolation, providing cross-species relationships and social connectivity. Animals’ needs for, and responses to care, and responses to their owners as unique known other beings (as presented by Bob when his birds recognise and seem to respond to him) can create a new social space that encompasses human and non-human. In addition this human-animal connectivity may lead to connections with other humans. Our findings support the need for person-centered approaches to hearing what people at risk of suicide see as significant in terms of their level of risk, potential for self-harm and protective factors (Suicide Prevention Australia, 2018).

These findings also indicate the need to better understand the impact of ageing on pet ownership. For example, health and care providers should be aware of the distress that requiring older people to relinquish pets may engender. Pet relinquishment often occurs at times of major disruption in older people’s lives, such as when moving into aged accommodation, downsizing one’s home, becoming widowed or when ill. Pet loss may add to and compound stressors. For some people, the loss of a pet may mean the loss of a significant mental health support, one that was perhaps even protecting them from ending their life.

As a small qualitative study, our findings and theorizing need to be considered and applied with caution. However, these findings combined with anecdotal comments from colleagues in clinical positions that they are ‘not really surprising’ indicate a need to move beyond vague awareness amongst dispersed clinicians to sophisticated systemic understandings of how some human-animal relationships work to protect some people from suicide. Potential systemic responses include identifying and exploring human-animal relationships in clinical screenings and responses; developing systems that connect human health services with animal care and support services including working in partnership with animal services to create short-term, emergency and longer-term responses for animals when humans are experiencing crisis (as is beginning to occur in the field of domestic violence see for example https://www.dvconnect.org/pets-in-crisis/). Broader analyses and responses need to encompass and respond to pet-unfriendly policies, such as no-pet policies in many aged and mental health housing and care services, balancing hygiene concerns and non-pet people’s needs (including staff and other residents) with the substantially positive implications for some humans of animal relationships.

Future research directions emerge from our findings. Awareness of animal sentience especially when supporting humans (Nicholls 2018) calls for a growth in animal centred research in the field of human- animal engagements and human health. We would suggest that this will require novel approaches such as intense ethnographic observations (Nottle and Young 2019), autoethnographies (Franklin 2015) and building on non-verbal research, strategies and skills (Shamma 2018). Although it could be that human-animal research becomes a leader in this space as research with or about non-verbal human populations is surprisingly scant. Examing the wellbeing of animals in the context of pet ownership by older people who maybe struggling to care for themselves (raising queries as to their capacity to adequately care for an animal) is one future aspect for research. But we would suggest this needs to be undertaken in combination with applied research that looks at models for supporting older pet owners so that simplistic “shouldn’t have a pet for animal welfare reasons” responses are balanced. This could include exploring and developing broader models of engagement (pet sitting, fostering, emergency care, pet care support) so that people (and animals) who benefit from these relationships are not barred from them.

We believe our surprising “success” in having people speak of a highly stigmatised and traumatised topic indicates a need to use strength focussed frameworks to enable vulnerable and stigmatised people to talk about what works for them. The research and theoretical model developed here needs to be applied to other (suicide) vulnerable pet owning populations to test and refine it further. Future analysis of our data will include seeing if this is a general model of pet-human engagement, that is, does it seem to also be reflected in non-suicide suggesting older interviewees.

There is also a dark side to the topic of pets and suicide – suicide with pets is barely noted in the literature (Cooke 2013) but discussions with emergency personnel reveal that it may not be uncommon, and that for some of these personnel it is particularly traumatising. How frequent are both of these phenomena? What data exits, or may need to be collected? What are the characteristics of both scenarios? Indications are for initial qualitative scoping research as suggestions are that data is not being collected.

We would suggest that further research needs to be exploratory and qualitative; seeking to understand in contrast to seeking to prove how human-animal relationships work for which people; when and how from their insider lived experiences. Subjective experiences of distress underpin decisions to take ones own life. Loneliness, the subjective feeling of isolation and meaninglessness is also being revealed as an objective life threat. Subjective health *is* health, and subjective views of ones pets should be seen as legitimate foci of future research explorations.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, given that predicting exactly who in at-risk populations will commit suicide is difficult (Carter et al., 2017); the likelihood of first attempts being fatal in older adults, and the difficulties in recruiting informants in this age group (Weil et al., 2017), we believe the unanticipated finding that pets are protective against suicide in some older persons lives is important. With longevity increasing in most western nations, there is a moral imperative to identify protective life-building factors in this population group. There is a growing body of evidence that indicates that our lack of awareness of the role of pets may mean we unwittingly endanger people’s wellbeing. Humans have always been captivated by the idea of a human-animal bond; currently half of the global population have at least one pet (Animal Medicines Australia, 2016). It can be, and has been, far too easy to dismiss the impact that non-human companions can have in human lives. Emerging findings about the power of human-animal relationships, including those presented here add emphasis to the need to take cross-species relationships seriously.

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*Figure 2*. Interrelationship between Qualitative Emergent Theory and Joiner’s Theory