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If Pets Are Family: Pet Loss and the Need for Grief Equity in One Health

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ABSTRACT

One Health frameworks increasingly recognize pets as integral to human health and well-being. However, these models often overlook the health and equity implications of pet loss. Culturally mediated grief experiences following pet bereavement represent a critical grief equity gap in One Health systems. Drawing on findings from a qualitative study of African American adults who experienced pet loss, along with existing literature, this Viewpoint highlights how pet loss is not only an emotional experience but also a socially structured one shaped by cultural norms, social recognition, and access to support. These dynamics contribute to inequities in how grief is experienced and addressed across communities. Integrating grief equity into pet-inclusive models of care can strengthen interdisciplinary responses to pet bereavement and support more inclusive, equitable approaches to health across the lifespan.

KEYWORDS

human-animal bond; One Health; pet loss; pet bereavement; grief equity; veterinary social work

THE ONE HEALTH FRAMEWORK has expanded beyond its original focus on zoonotic disease to recognize the interconnected health of people, animals, and the environments they share. Through transdisciplinary collaboration across health sciences, One Health seeks to address complex health challenges by acknowledging the relationships among human, animal, and environmental systems.¹ Additionally, this framework has incorporated the concept of *zooevia*, which highlights the physical, psychological, social, and spiritual benefits that pets can provide to human communities.² Within this expanded perspective, recognizing pets as family situates the human-animal bond within broader frameworks of the social determinants of health.

Zooevia is the foundation for understanding the human-animal bond as a contributor to health and well-being.³ This concept highlights the role of pets in fostering connection. Pets operate as builders of social capital by reducing loneliness, facilitating social interaction, and strengthening community engagement.^{2,3} This emphasis on relational connection helps situate the human-animal bond within broader systems that shape health, social connection, and lived experience.

The implications of *zooevia* extend beyond individual well-being and are particularly evident within interdisciplinary human services practice. Veterinary social work, for example, has emerged as a specialized area of practice that aligns closely with One Health by addressing the interconnected relationships among human health, animal welfare, and community support systems. Within veterinary settings, social workers assist clients across a range of animal-related challenges, including the emotional and psychological impacts of pet loss. They may support pet owners during euthanasia or natural death, create space for grief expression, and facilitate coping and meaning-making throughout the bereavement process.⁴

Although not limited to veterinary social work, interdisciplinary human services professionals who incorporate the human-animal bond in practice recognize both the depth of these relationships and the need for compassionate, culturally responsive support when they end. Mental health practitioners, including counselors and therapists, must be attuned to individual differences in how pets influence emotional well-being and prepared to support clients experiencing pet loss.^{5,6} In addition, veterinary and animal chaplaincy have emerged as complementary fields that provide interspecies spiritual care, addressing the relational and existential dimensions of loss involving both humans and animals.^{7,8}

Family systems are not shaped only by connection; they are also shaped by loss. As pets increasingly occupy roles as social capital builders within households and are recognized as family members, their death represents a significant relational and emotional disruption for individuals and family systems.^{9,10} Research on pet bereavement has demonstrated that pet loss can evoke grief responses similar to those experienced following the death of a human loved one, including sadness, anxiety, sleep disturbances, and disruptions to daily functioning.^{11,12} Despite these documented impacts, pet loss is frequently socially invalidated or disenfranchised, while much of the existing literature continues to emphasize the health benefits of pet ownership, including human-animal interaction and animal-assisted interventions.^{13,14}

Grief is universal, but the social, cultural, relational, and structural ways people experience grief are not. Grief equity recognizes the importance of equitable access to validation, support, and bereavement resources across diverse communities. Factors such as stigma, lack of social recognition, cumulative loss, life adversity, and inequitable access to support can create grief inequities that compound bereavement experiences and influence overall health and well-being. Within this context, if pets are increasingly recognized as integral members of family systems and One Health partners, then their loss must also be understood as a health-relevant event rather than a separate or secondary emotional experience.

Grief responses to pet loss do not occur in silos. Cultural expectations, social norms, and support systems shape how individuals experience and express bereavement, including which losses are considered worthy of recognition and support.¹³ Within many communities, pet loss is frequently minimized or dismissed, reinforcing the perception

that such loss is insignificant or easily replaced.^{15,16} As a result, individuals grieving the death of a pet may feel pressure to suppress their emotions or avoid openly discussing their loss due to fear of embarrassment, misunderstanding, or social exclusion. These dynamics illustrate how pet loss functions as a socially mediated grief experience, in which validation and support are unevenly distributed across social contexts and communities. Recognizing these patterns is essential for understanding how pet bereavement intersects with broader issues of social recognition, cultural expectations, and access to support.

While the broader literature on pet loss has documented grief responses that parallel human bereavement, it has also relied heavily on predominantly White samples, leaving important cultural perspectives on loss underrepresented. This lack of representation limits understanding of the social determinants of health and contributes to ongoing health and mental health disparities among racial and ethnic groups.¹⁷ When considered alongside the disenfranchisement of pet loss, these gaps reveal an incomplete picture of how grief is experienced across diverse communities. Addressing this limitation is essential for advancing a more comprehensive and equitable One Health framework.

Drawing on findings from a previously completed qualitative study of African American adults who had experienced the death of a pet during their adult lives, several themes emerged that illustrate how grief following pet loss intersects with social context and available support systems.¹⁸ These findings are not intended to represent the experiences of all African American pet owners but rather illustrate how cultural and social contexts may influence pet bereavement experiences. Themes included experiences of disenfranchised grief, social encouragement to replace the pet, fear of empathic failure when sharing grief with others, and uneven access to culturally responsive bereavement resources. Participants in this study also described cumulative grief related to repeated pet loss and situational distress associated with navigating these experiences with limited social validation. Together, the findings from this study illustrated how pet bereavement can function not only as an emotional experience but also as a socially structured one shaped by cultural norms, recognition, and access to support.

Recognizing pets as family within One Health systems requires equal attention to the health and equity implications of pet loss, particularly within marginalized communities. Recent adaptations of the National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities research framework have expanded traditional population health models. These adaptations incorporate One Health as an additional level of influence and introduce an interspecies domain that accounts for the human-animal bond across the life course.¹⁹ This expanded framework recognizes that relationships between humans and animals influence health outcomes through behavioral, social, and environmental pathways. However, fully realizing the potential of these models requires attention not only to the benefits of human-animal relationships but also to the inequities that may emerge when those relationships end. Integrating culturally informed perspectives on pet bereavement can strengthen One Health approaches by aligning human-animal bond scholarship with broader goals of health equity and inclusive systems of care.

Practical implications for integrating culturally informed perspectives on pet bereavement into One Health extend beyond recognition of loss and require attention to how grief support services, resources, and knowledge are organized and delivered. Greater coordination across disciplines is needed to improve communication, streamline referral pathways, and connect bereaved individuals with appropriate sources of support. One practical example is the creation of shared pet-loss support pathways that help veterinarians, behavioral health providers, chaplains, and community-based support organizations coordinate identification, referral, and follow-up support based on individual needs. Such efforts may be supported through interdisciplinary training opportunities and shared referral infrastructure that increase awareness of available resources and facilitate cross-sector collaboration. Additionally, translating research findings about pet bereavement, grief equity, and support needs into community-facing resources and partnerships may further strengthen access to culturally responsive grief support. These approaches

may help reduce barriers to recognition, validation, and support following pet loss, advancing grief equity within pet-inclusive systems of care.

As One Health systems increasingly integrate pets into models of family well-being, they remain structurally incomplete when culturally mediated experiences of grief following pet loss are excluded from care frameworks. Although pets are widely recognized as contributors to human health, social connection, and emotional support through the concept of zooeyia, the loss of these relationships continues to be minimized or overlooked within broader health systems. This gap reflects a broader limitation in how grief is acknowledged and supported across diverse communities, where cultural context shapes both the experience of loss and its validation. Addressing this limitation requires expanding One Health approaches to include culturally responsive grief support, interdisciplinary collaboration, and more inclusive research practices that reflect the communities most affected. By incorporating grief equity into pet-inclusive systems of care, scholars and practitioners can better align the human-animal bond with broader commitments to health equity and compassionate support across the life course.

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Whitney ML: Conceptualization (lead); Writing – original draft (lead); Writing – review and editing (lead).

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