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“Not just a dog”: an attachment perspective on relationships with assistance dogs

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We explored individuals’ relationships with an assistance dog from an attachment-theory perspective. We used both inductive and deductive thematic methods to analyze semi-structured interviews with 25 participants who had lost an assistance dog to retirement or death. Analyses revealed attachment processes of safe haven, secure base, and separation anxiety. Although attachment dynamics were an important feature of these relationships, caregiving was equally important. When confronted with the loss of their dog, almost all participants experienced intense grief. Most grief responses were consistent with the loss of a caregiving relationship. Findings suggest that grief is a natural response to the loss of a beloved companion who fulfilled fundamental needs for attachment and caregiving.

Keywords: attachment; human–animal relationships; caregiving; grief; qualitative methods; assistance dogs

Introduction

She was a piece of me. She’s not just a dog, she’s not just a companion, she’s not just there to help you, she’s there through all thick and thin of your life . . . As soon as the vet told me she was going to die within 24 hours, I never left her side. Never, even to the point where I would not eat my meals . . . When my husband told me . . . “B is gone”. I know I cried in such a way I’d never cried before. I also remember that my heart jumped in my chest; it flicked. I never had that before, and I’ve never had it since (crying). It’s like my heart broke in two . . . I think about B and the good things that she did, and that she’s not suffering anymore, and that she worked her job really well, and she showed me what love can do. Dogs will be loyal, and dogs will always love you no matter what. She also showed me what I can do to keep my independence and gave me the courage to keep on going and be confident.

A study participant describes her relationship with Beauty, her assistance dog of nine years.

Why do some people love their companion animals and mourn their loss so intensely? Research on this topic is primarily descriptive, documenting that people are indeed bonded with companion animals and do feel grief when a companion animal dies. Little research has addressed why people so love and miss their companion animals. Attachment theory may help to address this question because it

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is a founded on understanding the development of deep emotional bonds, the functions of these bonds, and reactions to the loss of these bonds (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980). In this paper, we explore the human–animal bond from an attachment theory perspective in a sample of individuals who had lost an assistance dog.

**Bonds between people and companion animals**

An extensive literature has established that many people form strong emotional bonds with companion animals. People often consider companion animals to be family members and some even perceive them to be child, parent, or partner substitutes (Archer, 1997). Relationships with companion animals provide companionship, affection, and love for owners (e.g., Enders-Slegers, 2000), as well as physiological and psychological benefits (e.g., Allen, Shykoff, & Izzo, 2001).

An even stronger bond is likely to exist between people with disabilities and their assistance dogs due to their inter-dependence; the owner depends on the dog for daily functioning and the dog depends on the owner for daily care. People with disabilities often spend more time with their assistance dog than with other people, even close others, and they reap substantial functional and psychological benefits from assistance dogs (for a review, see Sachs-Ericsson, Hansen, & Fitzgerald, 2002). As well, most owners consider their assistance dog as a valued family member, think their dog is more important as a friend than as a working dog, and turn to their dog for comfort, esteem, and support (Lane, McNicholas, & Collis, 1998).

**An attachment theory perspective on human–animal bonds**

Bowlby proposed that infants of many species have evolved a behavioural system to protect them from danger and to facilitate safe exploration by regulating proximity to a caregiver or attachment figure (1969). Attachments to caregivers are comprised of four components: dependents tend to approach and stay near their caregiver (*proximity seeking and maintenance*); resist and become distressed by separations (*separation anxiety*); use their caregiver as a base from which to explore (*secure base*); and turn to their caregiver for comfort when distressed (*safe haven*) (Hazan & Zeifman, 1994). The fact that many species show attachment processes raises the possibility that attachment bonds may develop not just within species, but also across species. There is growing behavioural evidence that dogs form attachments with human companions (e.g., Palmer & Custance, 2008). In contrast, studies exploring human bonds with animals have generally used the term *attachment* to refer to a general emotional connection; they have not demonstrated that these bonds qualify as attachment bonds.

Recently, however, Kurdek has examined attachment components in humans’ relationships with companion dogs. In a college sample, mean component ratings were moderate at best, with secure base and proximity maintenance the most salient features (Kurdek 2008). In a community sample of dedicated dog owners, mean component ratings were considerably higher, with proximity maintenance the most salient and safe haven the least salient feature (Kurdek 2009). Individuals who were highly involved in the care of their dogs reported the highest level of attachment to dogs relative to human figures (Kurdek 2008, 2009). This finding may indicate that caregiving facilitates the formation of attachment bonds; but it may also indicate...
that caregiving is more central than attachment in these relationships. The importance of proximity maintenance (a characteristic of various affectional bonds) and the relative unimportance of safe haven (a characteristic specific to attachment bonds) also call into question whether humans do form attachment bonds with companion animals (cf., Kobak, 2009). Complicating the interpretation of findings, the meaning of some attachment items as applied to relationships with dogs was unclear. For instance, secure base items such as “I can count on my dog to be there for me” do not necessarily indicate that respondents derive a sense of emotional security from their dog. Thus, although suggestive, Kurdek’s findings do not unambiguously demonstrate human attachments to companion dogs. Notably, these studies do not distinguish attachment and caregiving bonds.

Bowlby (1969) proposed that the attachment system is complemented by the caregiving system: whereas the goal of the attachment system is to gain protection and security from proximity to an attachment figure, the goal of the caregiving system is to provide protection and support to a dependent. In non-reciprocal relationships, such as the parent–child relationship, the roles of caregiver and dependent are typically distinct. However, in reciprocal adult relationships, such as romantic relationships, both systems may be operative within each partner (Collins, Guichard, Ford, & Feeney, 2006). Both the attachment and caregiving systems are activated by separation from the relationship partner and deactivated by regaining proximity. Thus, the presence of separation anxiety and proximity seeking are not clear indicators of an attachment bond. In non-reciprocal relationships they may indicate a unilateral caregiving bond, as shown, for example, in a parent’s fear of separation from and desire to be reunited with a small child. In reciprocal relationships, separation anxiety and proximity seeking may be motivated by either concern for the self (attachment activation) or concern for the other (caregiving activation). Therefore, to understand a close relationship from an attachment perspective, it is essential to consider both attachment and caregiving dynamics.

The human–assistance dog relationship is an appropriate context in which to examine both attachment and caregiving. Owners are responsible for daily care of their dog, perhaps fostering a caretaking bond, and they are dependent on their dog for their own daily functioning, perhaps fostering an attachment bond. Moreover, organizations that provide assistance dogs to qualified individuals emphasize that caring for the dog is essential for developing the bond required to form a working alliance. Therefore, we explored the role of both attachment and caregiving from the perspective of the human partner in the human–assistance dog relationship.

**Grief**

If companion or assistance dogs fulfill attachment and/or caregiving needs for their owners, then we would expect the loss of such dogs to result in intense grief. According to Bowlby (1980), grief involves protest and despair, often experienced as waves of pain and yearning for the deceased. Weiss speculated that the nature of grief is linked to whether the self is the recipient or provider of protection (1993, 2001). Loss of an attachment figure triggers the attachment system, giving rise to a sense of abandonment and concern for the well-being of self. Prototypical attachment-based grief is observed in children who have lost a parent. In contrast, loss of a dependent triggers the caregiving system, giving rise to an intense wish to
soothe and protect the dependent as well as anger, anxiety, guilt, and despair when unable to provide that protection. Thus, the focus of concern is on the well-being of the dependent. Prototypical caregiver-based grief is observed in parents who have lost a child.

Although the human–assistance dog relationship may involve both the attachment and caregiving systems, it is difficult to predict how these systems may operate when owners are confronted with the loss of their dog. Spousal relationships are a common context in which both attachment and caregiving dynamics are present. Weiss (2001) postulated that the primary concern of the bereaved spouse could be focused on either the self or the other. However, the literature on loss of a mate has tended to emphasize loss of an attachment figure rather than loss of a recipient of caregiving (Fraley & Shaver, 1999). Thus, grief triggered by loss of an assistance dog may reflect the activation of either the attachment or caregiving systems (or both).

Numerous studies have documented grief following loss of a companion animal (e.g., Archer & Winchester, 1994; Wrobel & Dye, 2003). Grief symptoms are similar to those following loss of a significant person and include depression, guilt, and loneliness. Individuals who are most closely bonded to their companion animal, who have limited human social support, and who have experienced multiple losses are most vulnerable to strong grief reactions. In the one empirical study to explore the loss of assistance dogs, Nicholson, Kemp-Wheeler, and Griffiths (1995) found that 71% of those who had lost contact with their dog through death or retirement rated their experience as similar to the loss of a close friend or relative. Although this study indicates the significance of grief following loss of an assistance dog, the authors did not conceptualize the loss bond between owner and dog in attachment-related terms.

**Research questions**

We examined attachment components, caregiving, and grief responses in a sample of participants who had established, and subsequently lost, a relationship with an assistance dog. Our research was guided by the following questions: (1) Are the attachment components of safe haven, secure base, and separation anxiety evident in the human–assistance dog relationship? If so, what do these processes look like? Proximity seeking was not examined because it is not highly diagnostic of an attachment bond, and human–assistance dog relationships are necessarily characterized by close proximity; (2) What role does caregiving play in this relationship?; and (3) How do individuals experience loss of an assistance dog?

**Method**

We chose a qualitative methodology for several reasons. First, qualitative methods can be used to gain new perspectives on phenomena about which much is known, and to better understand phenomena about which little is known. Research has documented that people feel strong emotional bonds with companion animals and mourn their loss; but little is known about the nature of this bond and the experience of grief. Second, at the outset of this study, there was no established method for assessing attachment in human–animal relationships. Although Kurdek (2008, 2009) has since adapted human measures to assess human–companion dog relationships, this approach requires making an assumption that the meaning of items remains the...
same when applied to cross-species relationships. Qualitative methods allowed us to consider whether current ways of conceptualizing attachment bonds are applicable to human–dog relationships, and to better understand the meaning of these relationships. Finally, qualitative data can enhance understanding by allowing for richer expressions of participants’ experiences.

Participants
Participants were recruited from two dog-training organizations: Canadian Guide Dogs for the Blind and the Lions Foundation of Canada. To be eligible, individuals must have experienced the loss of at least one assistance dog. The first author conducted 26 interviews, 24 by phone and two in person. One interview was eliminated due to equipment failure, leaving a final sample of 25 (16 women, nine men) with a mean age of 49.00 (range 27–78; \( SD = 12.73 \)). All participants identified as Caucasian with one participant also noting the “possibility of Aboriginal blood”. The sample included eight single (two divorced; six never married) and 17 coupled participants (one living alone, three common-law, and 13 married). Three participants had a service dog to assist with ambulatory difficulties and 22 had a guide dog to assist with vision impairment. The average length of the working relationship with assistance dogs prior to loss was 7.44 years (range 3–12; \( SD = 2.21 \)).

Dog Loss Interviews
The Dog Loss Interview focused on participants’ relationship with their most recent assistance dog (nine had experienced the loss of more than one dog). Sections included demographics, background with assistance dogs, overview of the relationship with the target dog, experiences of attachment and caregiving, and experiences of loss. Questions were sufficiently open-ended to enable exploration of themes that arose during interviews.

Procedure
Potential participants were contacted by an employee or volunteer of the organization that provided their assistance dog. Upon contact, individuals were told about the research and asked if they were interested in participating. Those who expressed interest were asked for consent to have their contact information forwarded. Interested individuals were contacted by the first author to schedule the interview. Participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and confidential and that interviews would be recorded for transcription and analysis. Interviews typically took one to one and a half hours to complete and were transcribed for qualitative analysis.

Qualitative analysis of interviews
We analysed interviews using a hybrid approach that incorporated both deductive and inductive thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998). We used deductive analysis to assess whether attachment components were present in participants’ relationships with their assistance dogs. Based on the theoretical framework, we defined codes for the attachment components of safe haven, secure base, and separation anxiety.
Meeting with a group of three research assistants, we then examined the interview transcripts in detail to identify any passages that appeared to be consistent with the codes. To test the reliability of codes, the research team met weekly to compare and discuss the results. Modifications were made until all parties could agree on the match between codes and the supporting quotes.

A drawback of deductive approaches is the potential for missing important information and for confirming hypotheses without allowing for alternative interpretations. Therefore, we also used an inductive method to address more exploratory research questions: subthemes of attachment components, the role of caregiving, and grief experiences. Quotes relevant to a particular question were identified and each research assistant organized the quotes into groups that appeared to represent the same concept. Through discussion, the research team then sought to identify the key feature of the theme and to identity interview segments consistent with each theme. This process was repeated until consensus was reached. We have italicized these themes in our presentation of the findings.

Results and discussion

Safe haven

Safe haven refers to participants turning to their dog for comfort when distressed. Most participants (21 of 25) clearly indicated that their dog provided a source of comfort during times of emotional upset and distress: “He was my sounding board. I cried on that dog’s shoulder more times than I can remember” (167):

[Dog] was a comfort. Just by being there, you could literally talk to the dog. Sure, the dog’s not going to answer you, but it responds. It’ll come up and put its paw on you, or its muzzle … You could talk to the animal, they would understand. (171)

Even if you’re in the depths of despair, when you get that lick, or he just comes up and bumps you … “Come on!” … it knocks you out of it, gets your mind off it. Sorta like your psychiatrist in fur. (160)

A key feature of the safe haven component was contact comfort, paralleling the cuddling, prolonged skin-to-skin contact and mutual gazing that characterizes infant–caregiver and romantic relationships (Hazan & Zeifman, 1994). The human–dog bond is another context in which physical contact freely occurs: “Just the warmth, the physical warmth, and the tactile kind of things, the fur … he would kinda lean on you, and the warmth, and the fact that there was another living creature there that cared for you” (167); “He was a great comfort. He would not always know what to do, so he would jump up and give me kisses or snuggle in”. (168)

Thus, it appears that assistance dogs met these individuals’ basic attachment-related need for comfort and closeness when upset or distressed. In many cases, the dogs appeared to be so attuned with their owners’ emotions that the owners did not need to seek out the support: “That dog knew right away if I was upset. She’d come and lick your face and lick your hands and stay right beside you” (157):

... he always knew when I was upset. I didn’t have to say a word. If I was extra down and I decided “look you rest, here’s your chew bone, I’m going in here,” he was right by my side, like “Chew bone can wait woman. You feel like crud and I’m right here for ya”. (151)
Secure base

Secure base refers to participants’ perceptions of their dog as a dependable source of security supporting their confidence and exploration. Just over half of participants (13 of 25) clearly indicated that they derived a sense of felt security from their dog. This sense of felt security came from knowing that the dog was always there and from the dog providing a steady and stabilizing presence:

She was always there with me. There was always that bond, that comfort . . . You could get the affection, the bond, to speak to and they listen and they give you their muzzle or their paw, and they do understand, so you do have that constant feeling. (171)

Oh, he’s better than red wine (laughs) . . . He was so steady and he had this manner that was solid. So, if I tended to get rattled by something, he was such a good calming influence, because he didn’t get rattled by things. He was just kind of there, feet firmly planted, being my pillar. But I don’t mean a physical pillar . . . it’s a very philosophical kind of pillar. I just knew that if R was there, everything was going to be okay. (167)

Some participants described how the security and stability provided by their assistance dog provided a foundation for confidence and exploration: “He made me more confident. He’s almost like a little suit of armour . . . Not that he was there to protect me, but I was invincible. I didn’t need protecting . . . I could go anywhere and do anything” (151):

B . . . had the rare opportunity of going through what I call my growing years . . . She went to work with me, she was by my side as we got involved in the community and volunteer work, she was by my side when I got married, she was by my side when I was going through some of my family crises, she was by my side when I went from one job to another. She was there for almost every important event in my life as a young person . . . through all the ups and downs of my life. B basically gave me a lot of confidence. She showed me loyalty and love in every sense of the word. (173)

Some participants emphasized that their dog was more accepting and nonjudgmental than other people in their lives. This unconditional love appeared to nurture feelings of felt security:

You knew she was there for you emotionally . . . they are always there for you . . . I know that they accept me for who I am. I don’t have to dress a certain way, or look a certain way, or act a certain way. They love you unconditionally. (170)

Dogs don’t judge . . . They are what they are, and they accept you for what you are. They don’t care where you work, they don’t care how much money you have, they don’t care how you dress, they don’t care if you’re blind or in a wheelchair. If you’re their friend, then you’re their friend. And that’s a lifetime thing. They don’t abandon you when things go wrong. (156)

Some participants also spoke about the development of self that comes with having a deep emotional bond with another being who can be trusted to care for them, even in their weaker moments: “He saved my life as far as I’m concerned. I mean he made me a better person. He helped me because of the way he was” (156):

Because of the dog I have more empathy . . . he brought that out in me because he was so wise. He allowed me to screw up, and he was still there. He wasn’t critical, and even if I was mean to him because I was frustrated . . . he’d still be there, looking at me, wagging his tail. He said, “yeah, you didn’t really need to give me that shot, but I love you anyway”. It makes you re-evaluate so much. Had I not had the dog . . . I’d still be angry. I’m no longer angry . . . because I have the opportunity to meet the world through my dog’s eyes. (167)
Some participants described an emotional benefit that appeared to stem from a deep sense of being watched over and cared for: “She gave it 100%. I’ve never known B to fail me . . . Even when she was within two hours of her dying, she actually got up to make sure that I got to the door. And that tells me a lot” (173); “He was my friend, he was just there for me all the time. He was just so much of what I was all about . . . he was always there, he was always watching, but he seemed to know that I needed him” (167).

Though participants could easily describe whether they found their dog comforting when they were upset (safe haven), some found it difficult to describe whether the dog provided a sense of felt security supporting exploration (secure base). In several cases it was difficult to distinguish between the emotional and functional benefit of the dog’s presence: “When I was out on my own with D, it was much better than me with a cane, emotionally just feeling much more secure” (161). The increased mobility and functionality derived from an assistance dog likely gives rise to emotional benefits that are inseparable from the dog’s physical assistance. As well, safe haven and secure base sometimes coincided because felt security develops from having a reliable source of comfort. In total, eight participants described relationships in which secure base was unclear due to overlap with either functional assistance or safe haven functions. Just four participants clearly stated that their dogs did not provide secure base functions.

Separation anxiety

Separation anxiety is indicated by resistance to separation from an attachment figure and distress on separation. Many participants reported that they were either never separated from their dogs or had only brief separations when necessary. These participants saw no reason to separate and avoided situations where their dog was not welcome: “He was with me 24-7. He let me know very early on that, as a service dog, he was not designed to be left behind” (151); “Well, I called her my soul-mate. Because we were very close, and we were never separated. She even went into an operating room with me” (152); “We come in a pair, the four-legged version of my other half . . . The dog’s part of my life and my world and if you can’t accept that, then sayonara!” (170). Some described their frustration with friends and relatives who expected them to visit without their assistance dog. For instance, after a difficult experience of leaving her dog at home one participant concluded: “That’s it, we’re a package deal. No dog, no me. After that, I didn’t go to my sister’s. She didn’t want the dog there, then I’m not there either” (151).

The majority of participants reported missing their dog during separations: “Horrible, horrible . . . I missed him so much . . . It was like somebody took my wheels away. But also my best friend, too” (167); “Well it’s almost a lonely type feeling . . . you’re always calling for him, even though you know he’s not there . . . There’s a sense of, ‘Oh, where is my buddy, why isn’t he here, why didn’t I bring him?’” (160).

Within an attachment relationship, separation anxiety serves to maintain proximity to the caregiver for protection and safety. Therefore, the focus of concern would be on one’s own well-being. A few participants experienced self-focused discomfort during separations: “It’s kind of like, for a couple hours, if you lost all your hair . . . You’ve lost a part of yourself, a part of something that’s always been” (156). However, most participants were focused on their dog’s well-being.
during separations, an indication of caregiving: “I worried about her worrying about me . . . that would make her very nervous” (165); “It was like ‘Is he lonely, does he feel abandoned?’” (168); “I would worry, and I’d be stressed. ‘Was she being taken care of properly, has she been out for her walks, has she been fed on time . . . ?’” (154).

Loss through death or relationship dissolution can be considered the ultimate separation, and the same processes may underlie responses to brief and permanent separations (Fraley & Shaver, 1999). However, because we sought to explore grief in the context of both attachment and caregiving bonds, we will discuss caregiving before turning to grief responses.

**Caregiving**

Caregiving proved to be a central feature of participants’ relationships with their assistance dogs. Almost all participants (23 of 25) expressed considerable pleasure in caring for their dogs and described a variety of benefits that came from reciprocal caregiving. A common theme was the importance of daily grooming and care of the dog to develop the bond that was essential for a good working relationship: “That’s part of the bonding and, if they know you’re taking good care of them, then they’re gonna take good care of you. It works both ways” (159).

Although caregiving was seen as important for the dog’s enjoyment and bonding, a sense of mutual pleasure and pride was evident in many cases:

> Oh I love it. I brush them out every day . . . It’s a mutual thing that dogs can give me what I need as far as being a working dog and I reciprocate because I love them to pieces. I reciprocate because I know J loves to be brushed and so it’s a give-give situation. (170)

For many participants, the importance of caregiving extended beyond enhancing the working relationship to being an essential role for the individual. For a few, caring for their dog gave them a sense of purpose in life: “Mostly, he helped me. But I was his mum, and he needed me to take care of him and play with him and work with him, and I had a purpose now” (168):

> I would not be alive without the dog . . . because it’s an avenue of relief for your love . . . I get very depressed sometimes, and the animal is what brings me back out of it, because the animal needs my care, and I know that I cannot skip out on the animal. (152)

For some participants, becoming physically disabled was associated with a number of losses in addition to the loss of physical abilities. Participants spoke about their struggles with their loss of independence, confidence, and sense of self. As one participant explained, “You’re almost an emotional cripple when you go blind”. Having a dog that needed their care provided a sense of responsibility that helped to offset these losses: “I think [caregiving] was very important for me . . . it gave me a sense of having some responsibilities back in your life” (157). Other participants observed that they enjoyed being needed: “I feel important because I know she needs me, just the same as I need her” (165); “I need to be needed . . . It was great for me, especially now that I’m on my own, it’s better because at least my dogs need me” (170). Several participants felt that their dog was a surrogate child. This was the case for some who had children, but was especially salient for those who did not: “C was
like having a child, a child that I never had . . . she was my baby, and I would do anything for her that needed to be done” (154).

Although participants typically spoke about their dog providing comfort when they were upset, several also spoke about their sensitivity and concern for their dog’s emotions. “I knew that if I got upset, he’d get upset. So again, probably like having kids, you don’t wanna freak the kids out even more, so if you’re trying to stay calm, then he’ll be okay” (168). Such a focus of concern on their dog’s emotional well-being is a clear indication of caregiving. Several participants attempted to protect their dogs from distress by controlling their own emotions, whereas one individual removed her dog from emotionally stressful situations.

**Grief**

Thirteen participants lost their dogs before the dog had been retired and removed from their home, in all cases but one due to illness. Twelve lost their dogs to retirement, with seven of these dogs subsequently having died. Thus, five participants had lost a relationship with a dog who was still alive. In about half of retirement cases, participants were able to maintain some contact with their dog; in the remaining cases, no contact was possible. The majority experienced sadness or distress during the interview, even when the loss took place years previously, and a few stated they could not talk about the loss in detail because it was too difficult.

Many participants experienced the loss of their dog as a *loss of a close relationship*, “Ugh, that was like you lost your best friend” (160); “It’s like your world has come to an end. You don’t have anybody to look after and there’s nobody there to give you the love back” (154). Some described having lost a part of themselves: “I still feel it. She was a part of me. I lost a loved one. That feeling is always going to be with you” (171); “Devastating, I guess as much as what a parent would go through when they lose a child. She was a part of me. She was my first. She was a special one. She showed me the way” (173).

Many participants reported that their experience of loss was similar, or in some cases more difficult, when *compared to the loss of a significant other*, often a family member: “His death hit me harder . . . (crying) . . . than anyone’s, even my parents. He was always there” (151). The next quote is from a woman who had experienced many losses in her life:

> I felt lost, totally lost. I missed feeding her, I missed grooming her . . . I would say almost the same [as losing significant others]. It was so hard when I lost my son unexpectedly, but S was part of my life too and losing her was really really hard for me. (155)

Overall, the experience of *loss was intense* for the vast majority of participants. Consistent with previous research on loss of companion animals, participants described a variety of emotions including shock, sadness, guilt, and depression: “There was a lot of sadness. I cried and cried. I wanted to die. I didn’t want to live anymore. I wanted to die” (154); “I don’t think I stopped crying that whole night. I just felt so empty and lost, just numb all over” (163); “It was horrible. I cried. You’d be fine, and then all of a sudden you’d find yourself crying . . . You don’t get over it, ever” (174).

In a few cases, the response to loss was especially intense and resembled Bowlby’s (1980) description of responses to loss of an attachment figure. These participants
described protest or intense yearning and preoccupation with the deceased, accompanied by a sense of the deceased’s presence: “I wanted to look at the sky and scream, ‘I want my W back!’” (151); “I could still feel that he was around, even though he wasn’t . . . It’s almost like he was actually here, it’s really weird, even though I know that he wasn’t” (172).

Although these emotions may be reflective of the loss of an attachment relationship, no participants described feelings of abandonment that might be expected on loss of a primary attachment figure. Rather, participants tended to focus on the well-being of their dog during and after loss, suggesting that caregiving took priority over attachment during times of loss, even in relationships that exhibited strong attachment dynamics. This concern was often reflected in participants’ wishes to soothe or comfort their dog:

When I had to put him to sleep, he wouldn’t play, he was real lethargic . . . And I could see everything in his eyes. It was just like, “Mom, it’s time to say good-bye”. (Crying) And I knew I was doing the right thing because he was in pain, he was hurting. And I wasn’t going to prolong that. (151)

I stayed up with him all night, just talking to him, trying to tell him why I was going to do what I had to do and that it was the right thing. He understood, I know he did . . . I thanked him again (crying), he was sitting there looking at me and I said “C, I have one more command for you. You go now and be happy (whispering)”. (156)

The participant whose quotes follow (168) viewed her dog as the child she and her husband could not have due to their disabilities. She expressed the prototypical responses of a bereaved parent as described by Bowlby (1980) and Weiss (1993, 2001). A wish to soothe:

I said to him, “D, mummy and daddy love you, and we’ll be okay, but if you’ve got to go, go. Because you’ve done your job” . . . We just talked to him, made sure he knew we loved him . . . The vet picked him up, and he looked at me for a second, and I kissed his nose and I said, “You just go to sleep, baby, it’s okay” . . . D looked at my husband, and he closed his eyes, and that’s the way it stayed. To him maybe it meant we were there. I’m hoping that he thought we were there.

Guilt and helplessness about being unable to protect the dependent from pain and death: “One of my first responses was, ‘Did I do this? Did I miss something? Did I not call the vet enough? Is there something I did or didn’t do that caused this?’” Protest of the loss and vigilance about the dependent’s possible return: “Still, I wake up in the middle of the night screaming that something’s wrong with D, wait, I think I hear him in the other room”. Finally, the continuation of despair even when another relationship is available: “Most of the time it’s still pretty raw. There’s some guilt there, because I went and brought another one [service dog] home, and does D know we’re not replacing him . . . Still miss him very much”.

Just two participants reported low levels of grief. One participant reported missing his dog on it’s retirement but these feelings subsided once he was confident that his dog was being well cared for. He also said he loved and continued to care for the dog when the new owners went on vacation, suggesting a continuing relationship. In the second case, the dog’s role in the participant’s life appeared to be primarily functional and there was little evidence of strong emotional bonds of companionship, attachment, or caregiving.
General discussion

What is the nature of the human–assistance dog relationship?

We analyzed participant interviews on their relationships with assistance dogs for evidence of three attachment components: safe haven, secure base, and separation anxiety. The large majority of participants felt that their assistance dogs provided comfort during times of distress. They described their dogs as being available to talk to and providing reassurance through physical contact and affection. Participants rarely needed to seek out comfort from their dog because of their dog’s availability and responsiveness to their feelings. Thus, participants enjoyed a high quality of safe haven similar to that expected with responsive human caregivers. For about half of participants, secure base was also clearly apparent in their relationships with their assistance dogs. Similar to human relationships, participants reported that their dogs provided them with a feeling of security, confidence, positive self-development, and a sense of being watched over and cared for. However, for some participants it was difficult to identify secure base because they described a mix of secure base and safe haven functions or a mix of functional and emotional support. Finally, although many participants were not willing to be separated from their assistance dogs and separations of more than a few hours were rare, most did miss their dog when faced with separation. Concerns about separation were more often focused on the dog’s well-being rather than participants’ own well-being, suggesting activation of the caregiving system.

Given these findings, and especially the evidence of safe haven and secure base, it does appear that human–assistance dog relationships exhibit genuine attachment processes. However, caregiving emerged as an equally, if not more, important dynamic in these relationships. During training, participants were informed that caring for the dog was essential for the dog to bond to them and to form a good working alliance. Participants reported that they enjoyed caring for their dog and they expressed a deep concern for their dog’s emotional and physical well-being. Caregiving also provided participants with a variety of personal benefits such as gaining a sense of being needed, and of having a purpose in life. Thus, at least from the human perspective, the human–assistance dog relationship appears to involve both attachment and caregiving bonds.

For most participants, the loss of their dog through death or retirement was an intense, emotional experience and many said it was as distressing as losing a significant person in their life. Some participants reported attachment-related emotions such as protest and vigilance about the dog’s return. However, as with temporary separations, participants tended to focus on their dog’s well-being rather than their own well-being. From an attachment perspective, grief is a normative response to the loss of an attachment figure or dependent (Bowlby, 1980). Because human–assistance dog relationships involve attachment and caregiving bonds, intense grief is the expected response. Sbarra and Hazan (2008) argue that separation and loss result in distress and physiological dysregulation because bereaved individuals lose an efficient means for maintaining their sense of felt security, the availability of an attachment figure. A complementary framework to understand the loss of a caregiving relationship would further enhance our understanding of separation and loss.

Our focus on the human–assistance dog relationship introduced some challenges in exploring the human–dog bond. For instance, participants would rarely separate
from their dog, hampering our ability to assess separation anxiety. Future work with community samples of adults with companion animals may enable separation anxiety to be assessed more clearly and allow for proximity seeking to be investigated. As well, community samples are required to examine how commonly the components of attachment, including safe haven and secure base, are observed in human–companion animal relationships in the broader population.

**Implications for attachment and caregiving**

The relationships described by owners of assistance dogs may operate as reciprocal attachment and caregiving relationships, with both partners providing care for each other and depending on each other. It is likely that caregiving bonds are established first because care is emphasized in training. Assistance dogs must care for their owner’s functional needs and owners must care for their dog’s daily needs. From the human partner’s perspective, the development of attachment likely grows from the sense of being well cared for, as shown in the safe haven and secure base results. Moreover, during separation and loss, participants’ caregiving system appeared to take precedence over their attachment system, as reflected in participants’ primary concern about the well-being of their dog.

These findings suggest that our needs for attachment and caregiving are so fundamental that they can be satisfied in relationships with other species. Archer (1997) speculates that companion dogs have particular features (including baby-like features, fur, and a propensity to treat humans with affection) that facilitate this type of bonding. Moreover, dogs have been selectively bred for thousands of years for their tendency to bond with humans and to elicit and respond to attachment-related behaviours of their human companions (Morey, 2010). Thus, relationships with domesticated dogs provide ideal conditions for triggering human attachment and caregiving systems.

Participants in this study described remarkably secure relationships with their assistance dogs; they felt that they could rely on their dog, and they did not express anxiety about their relationship with their dog or avoid closeness with their dog. Many participants also spoke about increased exploratory activities and positive self-development as a result of having their dog. The emotional benefits owners derived from this relationship are consistent with extensive research showing the positive psychosocial benefits of secure human attachments (see Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007) and with research indicating that dogs provide physiological, psychological, and social benefits to their human companions (Wells, 2007).

An important factor in the security of human–assistance dog relationships may be the careful selection and training of both dogs and owners. The most popular breeds for assistance dogs are Golden Retrievers and Labrador Retrievers because they tend to bond easily to humans (R. Workman, personal communication, September 16, 2008). In addition, dogs are matched to the functional needs, activity level, and temperament of their future human companions. For example, a more adventurous dog who tends to push boundaries would be paired with an owner who is able to provide consistent supervision. This is in contrast to companion animals where discipline problems and subsequent relationship difficulties may arise once the dog has been chosen. It is also in contrast to typical human attachment/caregiving relationships, such as parent–child and romantic dyads, in which partners may not be well matched.
It has been hypothesized that people may form attachment bonds with companion animals to compensate for insecure human attachments (Archer, 1997), although Kurdek (2008) failed to find support for this hypothesis in a college sample. We did not investigate how participants’ relationships with their assistance dogs related to the quality of their human relationships. However, we observed that participants described attachment and caregiving as key features of their relationships with assistance dogs regardless of their marital status or their apparent satisfaction with their social networks. We also observed that a few participants who were socially isolated or described histories of difficult human relationships derived emotional support from their assistance dog that appeared to compensate for deficient human relationships.

Just as Kirkpatrick (1999) has identified attachment dynamics in peoples’ relationship with God and argued for considering God as a potential attachment figure, our results suggest that relationships with companion dogs should be considered as potential attachments (cf. Kurdek, 2008, 2009). A dog’s placement within the hierarchy of human attachments may differ depending on which attachment components the dog fulfils, the quality of other available attachments, and the complexity of the caregiving that is required. For example, dogs may be very effective in providing basic comfort and support (e.g., Allen, Blascovich, Tomaka, & Kelsey, 1991), but not so helpful in situations that require more active assistance. These findings also suggest that it may be important to consider whether individuals have resolved their loss of companion animals when judging their attachment state of mind based on the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; Main, Goldwyn, & Hesse, 2003).

Clinical implications
Participants described benefits of having an assistance dog that went well beyond functional assistance. One participant commented that, after 22 years of disrupted human relationships, her dog “taught [her] how to bond”. Research and anecdotal reports attest to how companion animals may help people with traumatic or criminal backgrounds to foster self-esteem, social skills, and meaningful relationships (e.g., Turner, 2007). Thus, relationships with animals may help individuals to develop a capacity to trust and care for others that may generalize to human relationships. Studies of vulnerable populations, such as sexual abuse survivors and the elderly, have also shown that a companion animal can help compensate for a lack of human supports (e.g., Barker, Barker, Dawson, & Knisely, 1997). These findings converge to suggest that companion animals can fulfill attachment and caregiving needs, highlighting the harmfulness of social policies that make companion animal ownership difficult for vulnerable people (Sable, 1995). For example, many senior care facilities do not permit residents to keep their companion animals, subjecting residents to the loss of a potential source of attachment, caregiving, and companionship.

The intense grief described by individuals who lose an assistance dog can be validated as the natural outcome when one has lost a companion animal that fulfilled basic needs for attachment and caregiving. The process of mourning can be hampered by a lack of validation for grief over loss of a companion animal and the absence of socially sanctioned grief rituals that typically accompany human losses (Donohue, 2005; Sharkin & Knox, 2003). Therefore, both the general public and
professionals working with the bereaved may benefit from being informed about the meaning of companion or assistance animals to their owners and the potential impact of losing a beloved animal companion.

References


