

DOG OWNERSHIP AS A CATALYST OF CONFLICT AND RELATIONSHIP
MAINTENANCE IN ROMANTIC RELATIONSHIPS

by

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B.S. University of Central Florida, 2008

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in the Nicholson School of Communications
in the College of Sciences
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Summer Term
2014

ABSTRACT

Pets are a common aspect of life for many Americans. In 2012, 36.5% of American household owned dogs and 30.4% owned cats (American Veterinary Medical Foundation, 2012). The purpose on this study was to explore the influence of dog ownership on romantic relationships. Specifically, this thesis investigates how dog ownership acts as a catalyst of relational maintenance and conflict behavior in interactions about the couple's dog. No prior research has been conducted on the role dogs' play in enacting relational maintenance or conflict in romantic relationships, so it is unclear if there is an influence to the these behaviors. This study asks how dog ownership might act as a centripetal force pulling the relationship together (e.g. relational maintenance) and/or as a centrifugal force pushing the partners apart (e.g. conflict). A total of 379 participants were recruited through social media to complete a short online survey. The survey asked questions on the romantic relationship, dog ownership, conflict regarding the dog, relational maintenance activities regarding the dog, and demographics. The majority of participants reported engaging in 8 of the 24 relational maintenance activities "often" or "always" and 3 of the 30 conflict topics occurred at least one or more times. Satisfaction with the romantic relationship associated positively with partial weak and negligible correlations to the relational maintenance activities and one negligible association with a conflict topic. A thematic analysis provides details on the short answers participants provided. The results shows that dogs do provide couples opportunities for relational maintenance but also are the source of conflict. This research is the start to understanding the role of dog ownership within romantic relationship. While each couple and dog may produce different influences on the relationship, this study is the start for the investigation and provides guidance for future research.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge my committee members for their time and dedication during this project. Thank you Dr. Harry Weger for your guidance through this process. Your ideas and directions helped create the finish project presented here. Dr. Sally Hastings, you provided great insight that made this a stronger thesis. Thank you also for all of your assistance with the qualitative aspects and ensuring that my data was the best possible. And finally, thank you Dr. Ann Miller for your in-depth critiques that made me a better writer. You also made sure that this research was would be understandable to a wider range of readers and not just animal lovers.

I also want to thank Kirsten Seitz for making sure that I always had everything and was there to talk about any concerns.

My family and friends provided wonderful support throughout this process and I would like to acknowledge a few that were critical. Jason, my husband, pushes me to aim high and to never stop chasing my dreams. My mother was always there to listen and discuss ideas or concepts. Finally, I want to thank Kate O'Neal. Our lunches, coffee dates, late phone calls and random text messages helped me throughout this project.

Without this combined support, this research would not be been completed.
Thank you!

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	vi
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	3
Relationships and Communication Between Pets and Humans	3
Romantic Relationship Satisfaction.....	5
Step Families.....	7
Animal Ownership and Relationships	7
Centripetal Effects	8
Self-Expansion Model	8
Relationship Maintenance Behavior.....	10
Commitment	12
Centrifugal Effects	14
Relationship Conflict	14
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY	18
Participants.....	18
Dog Ownership Demographics.....	18
Procedures.....	19
Instrumentation	20
Romantic Relationship Demographics	20
Dog Ownership Demographics.....	20
Conflict	21
Relational Maintenance Strategies.....	21
Thematic Analysis	22
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS	23
Research Question One: Relational Maintenance.....	23
Physical Activity.....	23
Cuddling Together	24
Dog Friendly Events or Travel	24
Trauma	26
Relationship Strengthening.....	27
Research Question Two: Relational Maintenance and Satisfaction	27
Research Question Three: Conflict.....	29
Sleeping on the Bed	30
Training and Obedience.....	30
Exercise.....	31
Cleaning	31
Research Question Four: Conflict and Satisfaction	32
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION.....	34
Summary of Results	34

Implications.....	40
Limitations and Future Research	42
Conclusion	44
APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER	45
APPENDIX B: IRB APPROVED SURVEY	47
APPENDIX C: TABLE 5 CORRELATIONS OF ALL RELATIONAL MAINTENANCE ACTIVITIES.....	54
APPENDIX D: TABLE 6 CORRELATIONS OF ALL CONFLICT TOPICS	56
REFERENCES	58

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1: Frequency of Relationship Maintenance Activities.....	25
Table 2: Correlations Between Relationship Satisfaction and Relational Maintenance Activities	28
Table 3: Frequency of Pet Related Conflicts	29
Table 4: Correlations Between Relationship Satisfaction and Conflict Topics.....	33
Table 5: Correlation of All Relational Maintenance Activities	55
Table 6: Correlation of All Conflict Topics.....	57

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Companion animals (henceforth pets), are becoming a common aspect of life for many Americans. In 2012, 36.5% of American households owned dogs and 30.4% owned cats. Of those U.S. households, each owned an average of 1.6 dogs and 2.1 cats for an approximate 70 million dogs and 74.1 million cats. Dogs and cats were reported to be the most commonly owned animals. Other animals were reported but found in a much smaller number of American households. Of the pet owners, 63.2% considered their animals to be part of the family (American Veterinary Medical Foundation [AVMF], 2012).

Pets have been shown to influence the lives of their owners. The influence of companion animals impacts a variety of outcomes, such as health issues (Friedmann et al., 1980; Siegel, 1990) and social support (Stammbach & Turner, 1999). Many studies focus on attachment to pets in general (Nagasawa, Mogi, & Kikusui, 2009; Zilcha-Mano, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2011) and Ferry (2007) compared pet attachment styles to human anxiety and avoidance attachment in adult romantic relationships (Ferry, 2007). Most of the studies on human and animal interactions have focused on individual effects instead of the impact within a family or relationship.

Given the influence of pet ownership on communication processes such as social support, it stands to reason that a companion animal might also affect communication in romantic relationships. In a study by Smith (2003), the connection between marital satisfaction of dog owners and their communication patterns, stress levels, and pet attachment were investigated. Although the results were not statistically significant, the study does establish the rationale for additional investigation into the impact of animal ownership on romantic relationships.

The purpose of this study is to explore the influence of companion animals on romantic relationships. With very little research examining this phenomenon, it is unclear what aspects of pet ownership influence romantic relationships. If pets do have an influence, does pet ownerships constitute a centripetal force of pulling the relationship together or centrifugal force to push the relationship apart? Dogs will be the primary animal type in this study as dogs are the most commonly owned pet in American households. The required care and opportunities for activities outside the house are also higher for dogs than pets such as cats, fish, rodents, or other animals.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Relationships and Communication Between Pets and Humans

Serpell (2003) proposed similarities between human mother-infant relationship bonding and the bonding between owners and dogs. Although this seems a stretch, there are similarities. For example, like infants, dogs are completely dependent on their primary caregiver and like infants, dogs form attachment bonds with their caregivers. Archer (1996) also suggested that attachment to pets comes close to the relationship we have with other people, especially the relationship between parent and child. Animals require similar care as a child, which is why the attachment and relationship can be viewed as comparable (Archer, 1996). For example, Horn, Huber, and Ranger (2013) reported a remarkable similarity between the secure base effect found in infant caregiver relationships and the dog and owner relationship. Secure base effect is when the child uses the caregiver as a secure base when interacting with an environment, which Horn et al. (2013) has now shown to be similar for a dog and owner.

Attachment to pets appears to have many benefits for the owner. Zasloff and Kidd (1994) explored adults' attachment to their cats. The primary benefits of the relationship between owner and cat include affection and unconditional love. While companionship of a cat is not a replacement for human contact, it can serve as a source of pleasure and emotional comfort to the owner (Zasloff & Kidd, 1994). Relationships with pets can become substitutes to human bonds for individuals who are unable or unwilling to develop ordinary relationships with other individuals (Serpell, 2003). Endenburg (1995) found that 79% of her participants acquired a companion animal to provide company. The emotional bond between an animal and owner can

approximate the powerful emotional experience of a relationship between two people and can even lead to non-compliance with medical advice due to reluctance of parting with an animal (McNicholas, et al., 2005).

More generally, research indicates that people consider pets as part of the family circle and believe they provide companionship and comfort (Cohen, 2002; Sife, 1998; Tannen, 2004; Wallendorf & Belk, 1987). Even though the participants of a study by Cohen (2002) knew their pets were not human, some people thought of their pets as children. Since animals require some of the same care and responsibility as young children, certain people see the animal as fulfilling similar functions in a household (Cohen, 2002). One study reported that the majority of respondents considered their companion animals as their children and some people even deemed an animal as an acceptable substitute for children (Sife, 1998; Wallendorf, & Belk, 1987). Research also points to family members' inclusion of pets in family discussions. Pets can be used within family interactions to mediate interactions. Tannen (2004), who analyzed tape recordings of families with dogs, found that dogs could be used to assist in mediating interpersonal interaction. This mediation occurred when participants spoke to, as, or about the dog when the dog was present. The family dog was used as a resource for a humorous shift, criticism buffer, praise delivery, lessons in values for the children, conflict resolution, and also it created a family identity for the dog (Tannen, 2004). Research on pet ownership not only focused on the care, attitudes and interactions but also the personal attachment to the pet.

Not everyone experiences family pets in positive ways, however. For example, Kidd and Kidd (1997) researched pet ownership by assessing participants' current adult attitude towards pets and their perception of their grandparents' and parents' attitudes towards pets. The

participants were categorized into one of four pet ownership groups: never-owned, always owned, owned only in childhood, or owned only in adulthood. The participants that owned only in adulthood had been persuaded by their significant other or children to obtain a pet and often developed a strong attachment. Unpleasant experiences were more often reported with the participants that only owned pets in childhood. These unpleasant experiences included the pet requiring too much work, time, space, or money (Kidd & Kidd, 1997). For those participants currently without pets, the required effort of known past unpleasant experiences outweighed the potential benefits of pet ownership.

Romantic Relationship Satisfaction

Relationship satisfaction is conceptualized in this thesis from the perspective of interdependence theory (e.g., Rusbult, 1980). From this perspective, relationship satisfaction can be understood conceptually as the difference between the actual rewards and costs that obtain from a relationship compared to the rewards and costs that are expected from a particular type of relationship. High levels of relationship satisfaction can be attained through either lowering the expectations or maintaining high outcomes (Arriaga, 2001). Within interdependence theory, Rusbult (1980) developed the investment model to better explain commitment as an outcome of relationship satisfaction. The model proposes that within a relationship, the level of commitment is a result of satisfaction, perceived alternatives and perceived investments (Rusbult, 1980).

Partners who have shared goals have higher satisfaction in a relationship. When looking specifically at parenthood, higher support for attaining goals results in higher relationship satisfaction. These goals ranged from property ownership to motherhood and had women report the goals during pregnancy and through the first few months of infancy (Salmela-Aro, Nurmi,

Saisto, & Halmesmaki, 2010). Just as human relationship partners experience strain and often reduced relationship satisfaction, introducing a pet to a dyad can serve as an aversive stimulus, which reduces satisfaction for one or both romantic partners. Serpell (2003) suggested that the relationship between humans and dogs is similar to the human infant-mother bond. To the extent that the presence or absence of a companion animal changes the dynamic of the romantic relationship, or interferes with one or both partner's ability to attain desired outcomes, the introduction of a pet into a relationship can function similarly to the introduction of a new human family member.

The introduction of children into a relationship has been shown to change partners' level of satisfaction. For example, Lawrence et al. (2008) found that parenthood sped up the decline in marital satisfaction. When couples initially became aware of the pregnancy, they reported a decline in satisfaction. This was true even among couples that were satisfied prior to childbirth and planned for the pregnancy. Although couples had a slower decline in marital satisfaction when the pregnancy was planned and had high marital satisfaction prior to the pregnancy (Lawrence et al., 2008). A child requires attention and affection. This places additional demands on the couple to focus on the child and not each other. Upon launching of children, couples tend to experience an increase in marital satisfaction (Gorchoff, John, & Helson, 2008).

Although children and pets are very different, some people do consider their pets to be parallel to human children as mentioned with the attachment literature. Acquiring a new pet within an existing relationship does create an opportunity for relationship satisfaction to change by either increasing or decreasing. Complications can also arise when a developing relationship must deal with the inclusion of a pet already owned by one of the partners. For comparable

research to this idea of transitioning into a relationship with a pet, step family research will be reviewed.

Step Families

The development of relationships between divorced adults without children does not differ drastically from couples in first marriages or cohabitating relationships when both adults do not have children (Coleman, Ganong, & Leon, 2006). However, the creation of a blended family with children from one or both parents forming a new family can create turmoil in the parents' relationship. According to Bray and Kelly (1998), strong stepfamilies must attend to three areas. First, the needs of the adults and nurturance of the developing relationship must be discussed. Second, a shared vision must be developed for the family and marriage. Finally, a consensus must be reached on parenting and child related issues. The outcome of the relationship hangs on a mutual agreement on how to handle the children. Without this shared understanding, the relationship is destined for failure (Bray & Kelly, 1998). While perhaps not having nearly the impactful effect described in this study, an owner and step-owner with differing opinions about how to treat the animal can cause turbulence in the relationship. The differences can be related to training, rules, diet (e.g., table scraps), exercise, and many other aspects of pet care. The stress of the opposing views of the pet can lead to a decrease in satisfaction in the relationship and the potential for termination of the relationship if the differences are too extreme.

Animal Ownership and Relationships

Very little research exists concerning the ways in which pet ownership influence romantic relationship dynamics. In fact, an extensive search of the literature turned up only one

published study on the topic. The study conducted by Smith (2003) investigated communication patterns and animal ownership looking specifically at the variables of marital satisfaction, communication patterns, stress levels, and pet attachment. While the study found no significant results with any of the eight hypotheses, it does provide suggestions for future research. With the sample containing only nineteen couples with dogs and an additional nineteen couples without dogs, this might have not been enough participants to create the power needed for statistical significance. This small sample was also not a random sample but acquaintances of the researcher. Another limitation was that only dog owners were included and owners of any other type of animal were excluded (Smith, 2003).

Centripetal Effects

There are several potential ways that pet ownership can act as a catalyst for relationship maintenance. Caughlin and Huston (2006) refer to such catalysts as centripetal relationship forces. The centripetal forces in relationships act to hold people together. Looking specifically at how pets influence relationships, the self-expansion model, relationship maintenance, and commitment are all areas where pets may enhance a romantic relationship. These areas will be discussed in more detail starting with the self-expansion model.

Self-Expansion Model

The self-expansion model arose as an explanation of the motivation for seeking and maintaining close relationships (Aron & Aron, 1986). The “motivation to maintain relationships, fundamentally it is the desire to expand the self” (p. 85). Relationships are maintained because a person is continually incorporating more and more aspects of the alter – i.e., the partner, into

their own identity. Aron and Aron explain that relationships lead to the expansion of the self when partners incorporate new knowledge, experiences, social networks, and material resources through interacting with each other. The individual self and the other self will slowly start to overlap while always maintaining a small portion of the two individual selves. When a relationship is terminated, a person will de-expand the self (Aron & Aron, 1986).

Within a close relationship, the expansion of self typically includes both partners and results in a mutual expansion. Close relationships also allow for very rapid self-expansion due to the new resources available (Aron & Aron, 2006). The four areas of possible expansion include physical and social influences (i.e., possessions, power), cognitive complexity (i.e., general knowledge, awareness, and wisdom), social and bodily identity (i.e., identifying with others), and awareness of position in the universe (i.e., meaning of life, religion; Aron & Aron, 1997).

Early in relationships couples may talk for hours, engage in risk taking, and escalate the intimacy and frequency of their self-disclosure. This initial period is exhilarating and allows for rapid self-expansion due to the intense exchange of knowledge. Once the couple knows each other moderately well, the opportunities for rapid self-expansion decrease. During times of rapid expansion, a person will experience a high level of satisfaction. When this expansion slows down or becomes nonexistent, satisfaction levels decrease and boredom appears (Aron & Aron, 2006). One motivation for self-expansion is to connect with others and attachment styles will explain the different ways people connect to other people as well as animals.

Aron and Aron (2006) suggest that the attachment styles are developed as different solutions for the need of self-expansion based on individual experiences. Secure individuals are confident of support available during self-expansion. Avoidant people have learned that intimate

others are not to be counted on to supply a secure base for self-expansion. The anxious-ambivalent individuals know that the secure base's availability is tentative and has potential to be withdrawn (Aron & Aron, 2006).

The self-expansion model suggests that over time relationships offer fewer novel experiences with, and less information from, the partner. Over time, this habituation leads to dissatisfaction with the relationship. If the increased time together in the relationship is spent on self-expanding activities, the relationship satisfaction will increase. The self-expansion activities become associated with the relationship although the other self is familiar and not the source of new expansion (Aron & Aron, 1997).

The novel experience of a pet within the relationship could increase the satisfaction of the relationship. This addition would need to be a mutual choice from both partners to increase the relationship satisfaction. Pet ownership would allow the partners to participate in additional novel activities together. The activities would include not only learning more about the person as they interact with the pet but also allow for joint activities with the pet. Activities such as walking the dog, talking about the pet, or shopping for pet supplies could all be considered self-expanding activities. While these activities allow for self-expansion, they also assist with relationship maintenance.

Relationship Maintenance Behavior

Relational maintenance uses actions and activities for sustaining the desired qualities of the relationship. Relationships are not self-sustaining and require the use of relational maintenance behaviors in order to sustain a relationship (Canary & Stafford, 2001). Some maintenance behavior is strategic, such as planning romantic getaways on special occasions,

while other routine behaviors, such as doing housework together, family dinner time, and so forth are not specifically aimed at relationship maintenance but have a bonding effect on the couple (Stafford & Canary, 1991).

The original five categories of strategies for relational maintenance included positivity, openness, assurances, social networks, and sharing tasks. Positivity is any behavior that is polite, cheerful, upbeat, and avoids criticism. Openness covers discussions on the relationship and sharing feelings. Assurances include commitment and other expressions that imply the future of the relationship. Social networks involve the time spent with mutual friends and family members. Sharing tasks is a fair distribution of household chores and any other tasks that the couple assume equal responsibility (Stafford & Canary, 1991). While these are the original categories, later studies have used these and added additional categories as needed to meet the needs of the research.

Activities that the couple engages in that include the pet allow for relational maintenance. These activities will not only allow the individuals to connect with the pet but also their partner. Tannen (2004) found that dogs can be as an interactional resource by talking through the dog to other individuals. These interactions include talking as the dog, talking directly to the dog about the situation, or talking about the dog (Tannen, 2004). Similar to the activities mentioned for expanding the self, relational maintenance behavior could include activities involving the pet that range from routine to novel for maintaining the relationship. The activities include reminiscing about something the couple did with the pet, attending a pet-friendly event, and sharing pet related tasks.

Commitment

Commitment represents feelings of attachment and the desire for maintaining the relationship with a partner. Satisfaction in the relationship is one factor that influences commitment. Couples that are happy will show above average levels of commitment compared to couples that are unhappy. In addition to satisfaction levels, the investment model proposed that quality of alternatives and investments also contribute to the overall commitment felt in a relationship (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993). The investment model is an extension of the interdependence theory, which focuses on partner interactions and the outcomes of the interactions in terms of rewards and costs as well as comparison for alternatives (Thibaut & Kelley, 1959).

In the investment model, commitment is affected by three factors: satisfaction level (e.g., the ratio of costs to rewards), quality of alternatives, and the investments. The investments of a relationship can be intrinsic (e.g., feelings) and also extrinsic (e.g., shared physical possessions) (Dindia, 2000). Investments can be direct (e.g., moving to the same city as the partner) or indirect (e.g., mutual friends, shared memories). For the satisfaction level, individuals are more committed when they feel satisfied with the relationship. This satisfaction is due to the relationship providing rewards and not involving serious costs. When costs increase, the satisfaction reduces and in turn also lowers the commitment felt towards the relationship (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993).

When an individual is committed, he or she is more likely to continue the relationship and also engage in behaviors for relational maintenance. Not only do partners in committed relationships employ more relational maintenance actions and activities, but these behaviors also

increase the level of commitment (Dindia, 2000). The partners' personal identities also become linked to a joint identity of the relationship. A person no longer considers just himself or herself as "I", but as a collective "we" (Rusbult & Buunk, 1993).

Specifically looking at a pet within a relationship, the pet would count as an investment towards the relationship due to the time and energy spent on the pet. The pet requires care, exercise, training, and affection which would all be lost if the relationship was terminated. The more invested a person is in the pet, the more committed to the relationship. The pet is also considered a shared property and makes leaving the relationship more costly. The pet provides rewards for both partners in the relationship. The animal offers opportunities for new and routine activities (e.g., obedience training, exercise) for the partners to experience together.

Another way that pets provide a reward to the relationship is through affection. Floyd and Morman (1998) discuss the communication of affection as an individual's intentional and explicit expression of feelings for another person. The feelings can be for closeness, fondness, and care of the other person (Floyd & Morman, 1998). Individuals are able to express affection towards the pet (e.g., petting) as well receive affection from the pet (e.g., sitting in ones lap). Given the potential for pet ownership to influence relationship satisfaction and act as a catalyst for relationship maintenance, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1: In what ways are dogs involved in the relational maintenance activities of romantic partners?

RQ2: Does satisfaction with the romantic relationship associate with the relational maintenance activities involving the dog?

Centrifugal Effects

Centrifugal effects are the opposite of the centripetal effects and act to pull relationships apart (Caughlin & Huston, 2006). Conflicts within a relationship, both recent and serial, have the potential to destroy a romantic relationship. An overview of relationship conflict will be presented as well as research on how children are a source of conflict.

Relationship Conflict

The general public tends to view conflict within a relationship as being negative (Kluwer et al., 2007). Conflict is an unavoidable part of almost all relationships. For some couples, the conflict can be considered healthy which leads to understanding, change, and growth within the relationship. For others couples, the conflict is damaging which leads to feelings of hurt, misunderstandings, and a stagnation or decline of the relationship (Guerrero & Floyd, 2006). Although research has reported mainly negative effects, some research shows that conflict might be perceived as less negative depending on the issue (De Dreu, & Weingart, 2003). Trivial relationship problems receive little attention (Cloven & Roloff, 1991) and problems perceived as insignificant in the relationship are often the motive for partners withholding complaints (Roloff & Solomon, 2002).

Some conflict might not be resolved during a single episode as a disagreement might arise again after it was considered settled. A pattern of disagreements reoccurring in a given subject is serial arguing (Trapp & Hoff, 1985). Serial arguments occur due to opinions, behaviors, and values not being in alignment after a sole confrontation. The important aspect of serial arguing is not the number of times that a particular disagreement has occurred but the

perceived possibility of resolution (Johnson & Roloff, 2000). There are three key elements to serial arguing. First are argumentative episodes, which begin when the argument has been initiated and concludes when it has partners signal their belief that the discussion has concluded. The end of an episode is not always the end of a disagreement as the issue might not have been resolved. Second is the issue-focus on the argument. Issues vary in level of abstraction as well as the assumed size (e.g., smoking vs. unhealthy habits). The final element is reoccurrence. For serial arguing to occur, the issue must be brought up at least twice. Reoccurrence also discusses how serial arguments will vary each time in pattern, form, and the participant roles (Roloff & Johnson, 2002).

Fincham and Beach (1999) review the physical, mental, and family health effects conflict has on relationships and the initial research highlights the importance of goals. One issue that seems to have a large impact on marital functioning involves the birth of a child. Roloff & Johnson (2009) suggest that the dynamics within marriages are altered with the birth of a child. The roles and responsibilities of the spouses must change when a child is brought home. The negotiations of duties do not always produce a mutual decision, which can result in a conflict (Roloff & Johnson, 2009). Research also indicates that new parents report more relationship conflict and disagreement compared to their own responses prior to childbirth and to nonparents. Crohan (1996) investigated the transition into parenthood over a two-year period by studying both a group of couples who became parents and couples who did not have a child during the study period. She found that after the transition to parenthood the marital happiness was lower and the couples reported more frequent conflicts (Crohan, 1996).

MacDermid et al. (1990) examined marital conflict during the transition into parenthood over a two and a half year period with comparisons of both parents and childless couples. Parents who held traditional beliefs about gendered division of labor experienced less love for each other and reported more marital conflict than couples with less traditional beliefs. With the addition of new responsibilities of being a parent the couple must renegotiate their roles within the relationship. A discrepancy between attitudes towards appropriate responsibilities could cause conflict and reduce the feeling of love in the couple.

Like the introduction of a child into a household, the presence of an animal also holds the possibility to change the dynamic and development of the relationship. The relational turbulence model (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004) states that people are more sensitive to relationship events during the development of the relationship. The model specifically looks at relational uncertainty and also interference from partners as the main contributions to relational turbulence. For this study, interference from partners was the primary focus. Early in relationship development, a partner will have limited involvement in the other person's activities and little potential for interference with the routines. As the relationship progresses, the likelihood of disruptions to activities is increased and the partner learns over time to replace the interferences with enhanced goal achievement (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). With people viewing pets as children, this could cause differing opinions and conflict on the care and responsibility within a relationship.

The addition of an animal can also create interference in the relationship. Similar to incorporating a partner into daily activities, an animal will create disruptions for both partners in the relationship. Not only are additional responsibilities and tasks required for animal ownership, the daily routine developed within the relationship must change to enhance the new goal

achievements. The new responsibilities and tasks must be negotiated between the partners to develop the new routine. Conflict may develop during the negotiations or even afterwards if the duties are neglected. Given the possibility that pet ownership can act as a catalyst for centrifugal force in relationships, the following research questions are posed:

RQ3: In what ways are dogs a topic of conflict for romantic partners?

RQ4: Does satisfaction with the romantic relationship associate with the conflict topics involving the dog?

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Participants

Social media and online forum users (N=379) were the participants in this survey. A total of 711 individuals initiated the survey but 332 participants did not qualify, did not complete the survey, or were found to be false participants. Recruitment was through advertising on personal social media pages, dog-specific social media groups, and dog-related online forums. In order to qualify for this research, all participants were over the age of 18, had Internet access, currently owned a dog and has been in a romantic relationship of two months or longer. Participants ranged from 18 to 64 years old ($M=29.9$, $SD=9.1$). Females comprised 81.3% ($n=308$) of the sample with 18.7% ($n=71$) male. A male partner was reported by 79.2% ($n=300$) of participants and 20.8% ($n=79$) reported a female partner. Participants were able to select multiple ethnicities, if necessary. The majority of participants identified as Caucasian, 92.6% ($n=351$), 4.7% ($n=18$) as Asian, 5% ($n=19$) as other and the remaining participants ($n=11$) identified as Native American, African American, or Pacific Islander. The marital status of participants was 37.7% ($n=143$) married, 35.4% ($n=134$) living together, 16.6% ($n=63$) committed dating, 9.8% ($n=37$) engaged, and 0.5% ($n=2$) casually dating. Length of relationships ranged from two months to 42.1 years ($M=6.12$ years, $SD=6.64$ years).

Dog Ownership Demographics

Fifty-eight percent of participants ($n=220$) owned at least one dog, 25.6% ($n=97$) owned two dogs, and 8.5% ($n=32$) owned three or more dogs. The dogs ranged in age from one month to 16 years ($M=3.96$ years, $SD=3.33$ years). The dog breeds ranged over 100 breeds and/or mixes

with the most reported breed being an unknown mix ($n=36$). Other top reported dog breeds included Labrador ($n=34$), Cardigan/Pembroke Welsh Corgi ($n=21$), Chihuahua ($n=16$), German Shepard ($n=14$), Border Collie ($n=12$) and Pit Bull ($n=11$). Over 60 breeds were reported only once including Catahoula Hound, Dalmatian, French Bulldog, Korean Jindo, and Whippet. The majority of participants, 52.2% ($n=194$), owned animals other than or in addition to dogs. The additional animals included primarily cats but also fish, ferrets, guinea pigs, snakes, cockroaches, and a variety of reptile, rodent, and farm animals.

A total of 44.1% ($n=167$) of participants claimed themselves as the primary caregiver for the dog, 6.6% ($n=25$) reported only the partner as providing care, and 48.3% ($n=183$) claimed both equally provide care to the dog. The dog was acquired during the current relationship for 66.8% ($n=253$) of respondents. The dogs that were acquired prior to the relationship were from 113 participants themselves and 19 of the partners. For the decision to acquire the dog, 57.5% ($n=218$) made a mutual decision, 29.8% ($n=113$) of respondents decided solely, 4.5% ($n=17$) of partners decided alone, and 7.4% ($n=28$) unintentionally acquired the dog. When referring to ownership, the dog was reported as 36.4% ($n=138$) “my” dog, 4% ($n=15$) the partner’s, and 59.6% ($n=226$) “our” dog.

Procedures

A description of the topic, requirements and survey link were posted on personal social media pages, dog specific social media groups, and dog-related online forums. Once participants accessed the survey website, the first screen displayed the informed consent along with three checkboxes to confirm their participation and eligibility. The first question asks participants to type the romantic partner’s first initial and the name of the oldest dog. Participants were

instructed to think of this person and this dog when responding to questions. Participants then completed the measures on the romantic relationship, dog ownership, conflict, relational maintenance and then demographics. The final page thanked participants for completing the survey.

Instrumentation

Romantic Relationship Demographics

Participants were presented with eight demographic-related questions. The items included relationship status, relationship length, relationship satisfaction, and degree of happiness in the relationship. The responses for relationship status were casual, committed dating, living together but not married, engaged and married. The total years and months in the relationship were collected for relationship length. The satisfactions questions were recorded on a Likert type scale with a range from 1 (strong disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). A sample question is “We have a good relationship.” The degree of happiness asked that participants use the slider from 1 to 100 to best describe their happiness in the relationship.

Dog Ownership Demographics

Participants reported how many dogs they owned ranging from zero to five or more. The following items included the primary caregiver, how the dog was acquired, and if the decision was mutual or individual. Details about the breed, length of ownership, and presence of other animal were recorded. The final items had participants rate their feelings about the dog and then about the partner’s feelings about the dog on a Likert type scale with a range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A sample question is “My partner loves the dog.”

Conflict

The first portion was open-ended responses that had participants list the three most frequent topic of disagreement between the participant and the partner that involved the dog directly or indirectly. The next item was also open-ended and participants provided details about the last disagreement regarding the pet and summarized what both parties said during the disagreement. For serial arguing, two items recorded if the disagreement in the previous response had been a topic on more than one occasion and if the problem was solved or would probably disagree about the topic in the future. Participants were presented with 30 pet specific topics of conflict (see survey in Appendix B). The conflict items were constructed for this study as a starting point since conflict items specific to pets were not available. Responses were recorded on a Likert type scale with scores ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (more times than I can count). Directions indicated that the responses should reflect only their point of view and not the partner's. A sample pet item is "exercise of pet (e.g., walking the dog)".

Relational Maintenance Strategies

Similar to the conflict items, participants were asked in open-ended responses to list three ways the dog was used to strengthen or maintain the relationship with the partner and to describe the most recent time that the couple had bonded over the pet. Participants then responded to 24 items on pet specific relational maintenance strategies. Responses were recorded on a Likert type scale with scores ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always). The items were constructed based on the general items found in the Relation Maintenance Strategies Measure (RMSM; Canary & Stafford, 1991), which has 5 subscales on positivity, openness, assurances, network and tasks.

Individual behaviors related to maintenance via pet-partner interaction were constructed for this thesis. Those items can be seen in the survey in Appendix B.

Thematic Analysis

The open-ended questions for relational maintenance activities and conflict topics were analyzed using thematic analysis. Braun and Clark (2006) describe thematic analysis as identifying, examining, and noting patterns to generate themes that emerge from the data. The responses provided by participants were first read through to gather an overview of material and then responses were read again to review for patterns. These patterns were then coded to create themes and named based on the patterns found. The examples provided are exact responses from participants and were not altered or shortened. The names of dogs were changed to protect anonymity. The relational maintenance activities and conflict topics were reviewed and analyzed separately but a comparison is presented in the discussion.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

Research Question One: Relational Maintenance

Research question one asked in what ways that dogs are involved in the relational maintenance activities of romantic partners. Over 50% of participants responded as “often” or “always” to eight relational maintenance items. Over 50% of participants reported “never” engaging in three of the activities. The frequencies for all 24 relational maintenance activities can be found in Table 1.

To also answer research question one, participants were asked to provide three activities involving the dog that strengthened or maintained the relationship with their partner. Of the participants, 90.8% ($N=344$) provided at least 1 activity, 85% ($N=322$) provided at least 2 activities, and 78.4% ($N=297$) provided 3 activities. From these responses, several themes emerged including: physical activities, cuddling together, dog friendly events/travel, parental qualifications/childlike, trauma, and relationship strengthening.

Physical Activity

Physical activity came forward through many different options. Participants reported walking, hiking, swimming, visiting dog parks and general exercise. Examples included, “Hike with the dog together”, “walking and playing”, “We occasionally walk the dog together – it’s a good excuse to go outside, walk, and chat” and “use dog walking time as me & him time (makes hiking a bit more interesting with the pup).” While some of the responses gave a very broad description (e.g., “walk the dog together”), others gave extensive details to provide a full picture. An example of a more elaborated response would be, “we go on day hikes with him, though we

carry his pack now that he's older and has arthritis, and finding hiking areas that fit his needs has taken us places we'd otherwise not go."

Cuddling Together

Cuddling together or having physical contact with the dog and partner was another common theme. Many of these responses were simply "cuddling together" or "cuddling together with the dog". Some provided a little more explanation such as, "my dog and her dog both provide stress relieve [sic] by playing and cuddling with them", "we cuddle on the couch with the two little dogs and they sleep with us in the bed", "cuddle time with all 3 of us (and the cats too)" or "cuddling her up on our bed before we all go to sleep (she always comes up to say goodnight to Papa before she falls asleep at the end of the bed)."

Dog Friendly Events or Travel

Another theme was attending dog friendly events or coordinating travel. These activities require coordination and advanced planning especially when traveling. Examples include, "go to dog related events together", "Taking the dog to the park, the lake, on trips", and "went to a herding trial together." Many of the physical activities mentioned above require participants to travel such as when hiking. One participant indicated that they "travel, a lot, for dog related activities. In process of buying RV for longer trips." Another participant reported that they "take vacations for the dog (going to dog-friendly locations instead of places we have to fly to)." Participants also mentioned how the dog's experience was the highlight as seen in this example, "We both really enjoy doing things where we can take Rover and watch her experience new things and have fun."

Table 1: Frequency of Relationship Maintenance Activities

Activity	People reporting engaging in the activity:			
	“Often” or “Always”		“Never”	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Told my partner about something funny our pet did when my partner was away.	326	86.5%	4	1.1%
Spend time with our pet together	324	86.2%	7	1.9%
Talked (reminisced) about something fun we did with our pet.	247	65.5%	16	4.2%
Help equally with the pet care tasks	235	62.7%	40	10.7%
Offered to take care of the pet while my partner was out of town.	216	57.6%	80	21.3%
Tried to cheer up my partner by talking about our pet.	201	53.4%	31	8.2%
Walk our dog together	198	53.1%	22	5.9%
Offered to help pay for vet or other expenses related to the pet.	194	51.7%	90	24.0%
Shop for our pet’s toys/supplies together.	185	49.2%	31	8.2%
Shopped for toys or pet supplies together.	184	48.8%	27	7.2%
Offered to take a sick pet to the vet.	177	47.2%	81	21.6%
Talked about our pet as a way to make the interaction more enjoyable.	170	45.1%	50	13.3%
Like to bring our pet with us to parties or other social events with friends and families.	145	38.8%	85	22.7%
Played with or pet our animal as a way to relieve stress during disagreement.	135	35.9%	65	17.3%
Offered to fix property that the pet destroyed.	116	31.6%	148	40.3%
Had a “play-date” with another pet owner.	109	29.1%	117	31.2%
Attended a pet-friendly event with our pet.	97	25.8%	133	35.4%
Talked about our pet to change the subject to a more enjoyable one.	92	24.5%	65	17.3%
Went to a gathering for people with pets.	84	22.3%	141	37.5%
Talked about our pet as a way to show I’ll always be there for him/her	83	22.1%	163	43.4%
Talked about our pet to stress my commitment to him/her.	76	20.1%	159	42.2%
Attended pet obedience training class with partner.	71	18.8%	242	64.2%
Talked through our pet as a way to disclose feelings (used our pet as a way to talk about feelings about the other).	53	14.1%	177	47.2%
Joined a social group for other pet owners.	50	13.3%	231	61.4%

Took a class together on pet ownership.	36	9.5%	281	74.5%
<hr/>				
Childlike and Parental Qualifications				

Participants indicated that the dog was a child for the couple or exposed the parental qualifications of their partner. This can be seen in the following examples, “My dog is our child. We dote on him and spoil him with attention”, “Our dogs are our children”, “treating him like our ‘baby’ allows us to nurture him and bond through ‘parenting skills” and “we joke that the oldest dog is my husband’s daughter; since we don’t have kids.” Participants that wanted children reported how the dog was assisting in preparing the couple for children or even highlighting the kind of parent the partner would be to a child. Examples of this include, “husband caring for dog made me want to have his children”, “get to practice ‘parenting””, “I believe that having this dog has prepared us for (or warned us against) having children”, and “While we have a problem dog, it’s helped us see that not all dogs will be easy to handle, same as the things that happen in life and when we have a child not everything will be as planned.”

Trauma

Another theme was trauma. Several participants reported, in great detail, how their dog had help them overcome personal trauma. An example includes “Spot (our dog) has helped my partner begin to heal from trauma induced by a sexual assault.” Another example provided clear details on the role the dog played:

From my history (extreme physical and verbal abuse, stalking, attempted homicide by my ex fiance 3 years ago) my dog Duke has been a huge mediator in who I allow around me. He can pick up on who is good and who is bad, and he was a large part of the beginning stages of my relationship with my partner when I met him. Duke was always included,

and the partners attitude towards Duke, and vice versa, gave me tiny clues as to how I felt about this man in my life. Duke was really integral in strengthening how I felt about my partner.

These responses not only explained how the dog assisted the person either start the healing process or show who to trust again. Other traumas included abuse and adultery.

Relationship Strengthening

The final theme was how the dog strengthened the couple's relationship. Many of the responses included reports of bonding, reasons for maintaining the relationship, and increased love or appreciation for the partner. Examples include, "bonding over shared love of dog and giving him affection", "I think the dog does bring us together at times—gives us topics of conversation, etc.", "My partner and I will send photos of the dog to each other and thus communicate more", "This is the first time we have had a joint 'project' and had to work together", and "I get to see him interact with my dog and it makes me appreciate him in a new light."

Research Question Two: Relational Maintenance and Satisfaction

Research questions two asked if satisfaction with the romantic relationships associates with the relational maintenance activities involving the dog. Partial weak and negligible correlations were found with the relational maintenance activities and satisfaction in the relationship. These correlations can be found in Table 2. Correlations between all of the relational maintenance activities are located in Appendix C: Table 5.

Table 2: Correlations Between Relationship Satisfaction and Relational Maintenance Activities

	RS	<i>p</i>
Positivity		
Interaction	.06	.26
Change Subject	.02	.02
Funny	.14	.01
Reminisced	.13	.01
Spend Time Together	.17	.001
Support		
Cheer Up	.18	.001
Care while Away	.06	.06
Vet	.02	.02
Help Pay	.06	.06
Fix Property	.07	.21
Relieve Stress	.06	.25
Openness		
Talked Through Pet	.03	.55
Assurances		
Stress Commitment	.08	.11
Always There	.11	.03
Network		
Pet Gathering	.03	.51
Social Group	.05	.34
Pet Event	.07	.16
Play Date	.09	.09
Bring Pet	.05	.05
Tasks		
Equal Care	.17	.001
Walk Dog	.20	< .001
Shop Together	.20	< .001
Class Together	.07	.21
Obedience Training	.05	.35

Note: RS = Relationship Satisfaction

Research Question Three: Conflict

The third research questions asked in what ways that dogs were a topic of conflict for romantic partners. Over 50% of participants responded as a topic occurring at least once or more times to three of the conflict items. The remaining 27 conflict topics were reported as “never” occurring by over 50% of participants. All frequencies for the pet related conflict topics are located in Table 3.

Table 3: Frequency of Pet Related Conflicts

Contact Topic	People reporting			
	“Once or Twice” or more		“Never”	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Discipline of the pet	248	65.4%	131	34.6%
Rules for the pet (not allowed on couch, counters)	219	58.0%	159	42.1%
Exercise of pet (e.g., walking the dog)	215	56.7%	164	43.3%
Dog needs obedience training	169	44.7%	209	55.3%
Feeding pet table scraps	169	44.7%	210	55.4%
Disposal of pet waste	158	41.6%	221	58.3%
Pet makes too much noise (barking, meowing)	140	36.9%	238	63.0%
Pet destroys property	138	36.5%	240	63.5%
Feeding the dog	132	34.9%	247	65.2%
Diet of the pet	120	31.6%	259	68.3%
Financial expenses of animal care	113	29.8%	266	70.2%
Dog is not completely housebroken (pees or poops in the house)	106	28.0%	273	72.0%
Pet jumps too much	100	26.6%	277	73.5%
Pet is too hyper	100	26.4%	279	73.6%
Deciding when to take a sick pet to the vet	98	26.0%	281	74.1%
Repairing destruction from pet	88	23.3%	290	76.7%
Pet escapes from the house or yard	87	22.9%	292	77.0%
Pet is active at night	77	20.4%	301	79.6%
Pet is timid or fearful	69	18.3%	310	81.8%
Pet wakes up too early	62	16.4%	317	83.6%
Pet is afraid of storms or loud noises	60	15.9%	318	84.1%
Pet is aggressive towards other pets in the household	59	15.6%	320	84.4%
Wanting to give the pet away or otherwise get rid of the pet	51	13.4%	328	86.5%
Pet inflicted injuries to people or other animals	46	12.2%	333	87.9%

Pet is afraid of people	45	12.0%	332	88.1%
Pet is not friendly	38	10.0%	341	90.0%
Pet doesn't get along with children	36	9.5%	343	90.5%
Taking the pet to daycare	29	7.7%	350	92.3%
Pet receiving annual shots	25	6.6%	354	93.4%

To also answer research question three, participants were asked to provide three topics of conflict regarding the dog. Of the participants, 85.2% ($N=323$) provided at least 1 topic of conflict, 72.6% ($N=275$) provided at least 2 topics, and 63.1% ($N=239$) provided 3 topics. From these responses, several themes emerged including: sleeping on the bed, training and obedience, exercise, and cleaning.

Sleeping on the Bed

There was conflict about if the dog could sleep on the bed. The basic concern that is raised with these responses is related to whether the dog should be allowed to sleep in the bed. The responses do occasionally provide more details about the conflict, such as “her sleeping on the bed – she tends to lay her head on my feet, and snuggle closely. He (W) doesn't like it.” In addition to the general issues of sleeping on the bed, other concerns include taking up too much space, playing with toys in the bed, and if the dog should even be allowed in the bedroom. Examples of these issues include, “His position on the bed at night”, “Where the dog sleeps” “space in bed”, and “Letting dogs come physically between us- couch, bed.”

Training and Obedience

Another common theme was issues with training and obedience for the dog. Responses listed “training”, “consistency of training”, “training techniques”, “lack of training” and other obedience related terms as conflicts between the couple. These responses ranged from the broad terms of “training” to provided details on the training concerns. Participants also reported that

their partner disrupted training in many ways, including: “training (he can’t train a dog to eat steak, but he thinks he’s the next Dog Whisperer)”, “He doesn’t discipline her enough”, and “consistency of training (encouraging fun, but bad behaviours such as ‘dancing’).” Negative behaviors are also in this theme, as the participants wanted the behavior to change. These behaviors included “digging”, “barking”, “separation anxiety”, potty training accidents, and the excitement or energy level.

Exercise

Exercise was another concern for participants. This not only included the general idea of “walking the dog”, but how often, how long and who would walk the dog. Examples of exercise concerns include, “who should do walkies”, “not playing with the dogs enough”, and “who will take her out when it is raining.” The training aspect of exercise was also mentioned. Participants reported conflict over handling the dog on walks such as “allowing the dog to chew and pull on the leash when walking her”, “Leash discipline”, “He finds taking her on walks to be a hassle because she can be difficult on leash” and “We had some discussions about whether she was ‘de-training’ the dog, making him difficult to walk, and encouraging cute-but-disruptive behaviors.”

Cleaning

The final theme was cleaning, which includes dog grooming, common housework, and accidents or destruction. Giving the dog a bath was a concern in terms of who would give the bath as well as the frequency of baths. Other dog grooming concerns included “Cleaning his eyes”, “Dog is smelly”, and “shaving him.” The common housework involved the task of sweeping or vacuuming dog hair, “the amount of pet hair in the house. This is very annoying to

my husband”, “tracking mud into the house”, and “shaking in the house when wet (from going outside to potty).” Accidents in the house were potty type accidents and the conflict was over the actual accident or who would clean it up. The accidents were also deemed intentional for some participants with responses such as, “dog peeing out of spite on the cats’ food”, “how to get one of the dogs to quit peeing in the spare bedroom”, and “Whether or not he pees on the floor out of spite/anger or senility/ medical issue.” The destruction conflicts ranged from the dog chewing on inappropriate items (e.g., “Dog chewing shoes” and “Who left the trashcan open”) to more details cases such as “Huck has severe separation anxiety, and has damaged things in our house. He now has to be mildly sedated to be put into his kennel, which has to be zip tied closed.”

Research Question Four: Conflict and Satisfaction

Finally, research question four asked if satisfaction with the romantic relationship would associate with the conflict topics involving the dog. One negligible correlation was found with the conflict topic and satisfaction in the relationship. This can be found in Table 4. All correlations between the conflict topics can be found in Appendix D: Table 6.

Table 4: Correlations Between Relationship Satisfaction and Conflict Topics

	RS	<i>p</i>
Exercise	.00	.97
Pet Waste	.01	.90
Feeding	-.03	.51
Needs Obedience	.03	.63
Discipline	-.02	.72
Rules	-.05	.34
Destroys	.00	.99
Daycare	-.01	.86
Diet	.00	.96
Up Early	.04	.44
Active at Night	-.08	.12
Not Housebroken	.05	.35
Table Scraps	.04	.42
Repair Destruction	.01	.80
Injuries	-.06	.23
Get Rid	-.07	.19
Sick To Vet	-.05	.38
Financial Expenses	-.12	.02
Aggressive	.01	.81
Children	.05	.37
Hyper	.01	.88
Jumps	-.01	.83
Noise	.02	.71
Afraid of People	.04	.50
Afraid of Noise	-.01	.84
Escapes	.05	.35
Not Friendly	.04	.42
Timid Fearful	-.04	.41
Annual Shots	-.10	.05

Note: RS = Relationship Satisfaction

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Across the social sciences, research on pets has focused on the individual effects with little investigation into the role pets have within the family and even less on the influence on romantic relationships. This study focused on dog ownership and its role within romantic relationship concentrating on relational maintenance and conflict. Overall, pets do create opportunities for strengthening or maintaining a romantic relationship but are also topics of conflict between partners.

Summary of Results

This study investigated the role dog ownership plays in relational maintenance and conflict within romantic relationships by seeking the answers to four research questions. First, in what ways are dogs involved in the relational maintenance activities of romantic partners? Second, does satisfaction with the romantic relationship associate with the relational maintenance activities involving the dog? Third, in what ways are dogs a topic of conflict for romantic partners? Finally, in what ways does satisfaction with the romantic relationship associate with the conflict topics involving the dog? This chapter will provide some answers to the research questions posed and areas for future research within this topic.

To gain more insight into the ways dogs are involved in relational maintenance activities, research question one was examine through the frequencies of activities and short responses. Of the activities listed, the majority of participants engaged in eight of the activities often or always. Telling the partner something funny about the pet and spending time with the pet had the highest responses from participants. These two activities require very little effort from the partners,

which could be the reason for their prevalence among participants. Talking to the partner about the pet is an activity that can be accomplished in virtually any setting or time. Unlike an activity that might require planning (e.g., taking the pet somewhere), talking to the partner about the pet is a fairly uncomplicated activity. While it might not physically involve the pet, it does actively involve the pet in a relational maintenance activity. Spending time with the pet could encompass a wide range of activities, which might explain its prevalence for participants. Partners can spend time together with the pet while watching TV on the couch, taking the pet on a walk, or going on a more planned outing (e.g., hiking, swimming). Since the question was so broad, it is unknown on the exact activity the participants each engaged in while spending time with the pet together.

The pet-related relational maintenance activities were created based on the categories developed by Stafford and Canary (1991). Of the eight more frequent activities, three were positivity, three were support, and two were task. Fewer participants reported engaging in the openness, assurances, and network activity categories. The high frequency activities might be achieved through the ease of the activity or the shared duty felt towards the dog. Activities with lower frequency could require more effort or be seen as inefficient use of time such as taking the dog to a social event with family or attending an obedience class together. The openness and assurances categories also had significantly fewer items than the other categories with only three total questions. Having additional items for these categories could provide more details. The difference in frequency between the six categories needs additional research.

Participants also provided short responses to assist in understanding research question one. Nearly a thousand items on relational maintenance activities were provided. These responses expanded the list of activities created for this study and will assist in generating new

items or categories in future research. Participants also offered depth by not just listing activities but explaining why the couple engages in the activity with their dog(s).

Of the open-ended responses, six themes emerged: physical activities, cuddling together, dog friendly events/travel, parental qualifications/childlike, trauma, and relationship strengthening. With examples like physical activity, participants not only listed going on walks but also elaborated on why they select certain areas or trails for hiking. Many participants listed exercise or some form of physical activity as being one of their activities. Participants could feel that outside of simply spending time together that this is an easy way to include the dog. Cuddling together was extremely common in the responses and would make a great addition to the listed items. It can be seen as one of the many ways that people spend time with the partner and pet. It is a close bonding activity and requires very little energy or effort. However, taking the dog to events or on vacation does require more planning and coordination from couples. Participants indicated in various ways how the dog was like a child to the couple. This either was a direct statement or through wording responses with terms like “his daughter”, “papa”, “mommy”, etc. While previous research does show that some people do view their pets as their children or at least a family member (Cohen, 2002; Sife, 1998; Tannen, 2004; Wallendorf, & Belk, 1987), it is intriguing that participants provided this detail as an activity to maintain their romantic relationship. Responses also revealed that the interactions between the dog and partner increased the participants desire to have a child with the partner. The pet helps showcase potential parental qualifications and also serves as a test subject for the couple to see how they would handle children. The responses also highlighted the feelings towards the dog and partner in unexpected ways, such as with trauma. The trauma examples particularly demonstrated how

important the dog is to the participant and partner. It also showcased the couple relying on the dog to provide comfort and stability. Throughout the open-ended responses, there was a heavy focus on how the relationship is strengthened or maintained by the activities with the dog. This emphasis might have occurred naturally or through the wording of the question. Participants were able to list activities that were unknown to the researchers prior to this survey. Additional research is needed to better understand the responses provided and the prevalence among a larger population of dog owners.

The second research question asked how the relationship satisfaction associated with relational maintenance activities. Weak correlations were found when looking at relationship satisfaction and the activities. Relationship satisfaction might not be directly associated with the activities and may require additional variables to explain the relationship. The activities may also need adjusting using the wide variety in the open-ended responses to fully capture which activities influence relationship satisfaction. The broad items (e.g., spending time with the pet together) may not be specific enough for participants to clearly show what activities influence change.

The third research question examined the ways that dogs are topics of conflict through frequency of conflicts and open-ended responses. The majority of participants reported only three of the 30 conflict topics as occurring at least once. The remaining conflict topics were reported by the majority to never occur within their relationship. The topics that were reported as points of conflict were discipline, rules, and exercise. The prevalence of these topics might be due to participants only reporting on the oldest dog in the household. The topics of accidents or destruction might end after a pet is grown out of the puppy phase. Other topics reported as never

occurring with the dog might be due to the issue ending several years prior if the dog is older. Topics that have not occurred recently might be forgotten or intentionally under reported when responding to the items. Issues of discipline, rules, and exercise can occur through the dog's entire life or start at any point after a major life change. Since we requested participants to answer the questions based on their oldest dog, certain topics might not be relevant at this time or at any point in the ownership. If the dog were adopted as an adult, it would not necessarily create the same types of conflict issues as a puppy. The topics listed might have also been too broad for participants to relate their specific situation to directly. Additional research into the types of conflict and reasoning behind the conflict is needed to better understand the ways that dogs are topics of conflict. The short answer responses that participants provided are a start to gaining a deeper understanding into the conflict that occurs regarding the dog.

Over eight hundred responses were provided on the different topics of conflict participants have regarding the dog. The majority of these responses were short and to the point without any additional explanation, unlike the relational maintenance activities. Of the open-ended responses, the following themes emerged: sleeping on the bed, training and obedience, exercise, and cleaning.

Sleeping on the bed was another conflict topic for participants with few providing additional clarification on why this was an issue. For some people, this issue might arise due to the dog's size, age, ability to get up or down, allergies, or cleanliness of the bed (e.g., hair, sand, etc.). Other participants listed this as a rule for the dog that is still being negotiated between the partners but the dogs is not allowed up prior to the issue being settled. The idea of rules flows into the next issue of training and obedience. There were many different reasons for this to be a

topic of conflict for couples that ranged from simply training to listing specific behaviors that were issues. With discipline and rules being listed by the majority of participants as concerns, it was no surprise that these topics were listed in the short responses. Future research could focus specifically on training and negative behaviors, as there were so many variations and intricacies for this topic alone. Exercise, as noted above as a frequent topic, was also common in the short responses. The topics expanded beyond just walking the dog and highlighted other exercise issues such as frequency, length, and training. For participants that list it as an issue, exercise was a task that needed to be completed and the negotiations of responsibly were not finalized. Cleaning was a theme that was seen throughout and encompasses a broad range of topics. Taking care of housework, cleaning dog specific items (e.g., hair, mud, etc.), and training aspects (e.g., accidents, destruction) were included in this category. The issue of cleaning in general is an area that the couple must negotiate tasks and follow through by completing their roles. Taking care of the extra cleaning a dog requires adds additional task negotiations.

For the open-ended responses, the conflicts appear to vary in severity. The exact severity of a topic reported for a participant is unknown as participants did not disclose this information. Some topics might be extreme such as obedience while sleeping on the bed might just be a sore topic. The frequency, severity, and resolvability of the conflict topics were not reported in the responses. Additional research is needed to better understand the complexities of how dog ownership creates conflict and how the conflict influences the romantic relationship.

The final research question asked how relationship satisfaction associates with dog-related conflict topics. A single negligible correlation was found. As seen with the frequencies for the conflict topics, the majority of people claimed to never disagree with 27 of the conflict

topics. The topics listed might not have provided the depth needed for participants or they might have been too broad for identifying their specific concerns. Participants might view walking the dog as different from their issue of how often should the dog be walked or the walk distance. The short responses can assist in creating a more inclusive list of options for selection in future research. As mentioned with the relational maintenance activities, an additional variable might influence the association with relationship satisfaction.

Reviewing the short answer responses for research questions one and three, it was seen that certain topics of conflict were viewed as relational maintenance activities to other participants. These differences were noted in the open-ended response areas for both conflict and relational maintenance. Examples of topics and activities that are seen on both sides include walking the dog, bathing/grooming, and sleeping in the bed or cuddling. The conflict topics were very connected with the themes crossing over into multiple themes (e.g., training) while the maintenance activities were fairly isolated to a single theme. Participants provided higher quality relational maintenance responses by not only listing more activities than conflict topics but also describing the activities with more detail. The conflict topics were very short with often only one word (e.g., grooming, exercise, etc.) while the maintenance activities were more elaborated and explained.

Implications

The present study helps us develop a foundation for the influence of dog ownership in romantic relationships. Specifically this research lays a foundation for understanding how dog ownership acts as a catalyst of relational maintenance and conflict for romantic partners. The open-ended responses for relational maintenance activities demonstrate that pets, specifically

dogs, are involved in helping romantic partners maintain or strengthen the relationship. For example, the open-ended responses indicate share chores associated with pet ownership. Sharing chores is an important activity in helping to maintain relationships. Research suggests that couples who share chores feel more satisfied with their relationship and feel as though the relationship is more equitable (e.g., Canary & Stafford, 2001).

My data also suggest that dog ownership provides opportunities for self-expanding activities. Aron and Aron (1997) developed the self-expansion model, which suggests that engaging in self-expanding activities together (i.e., novel or fun experiences) can increase the relationship satisfaction. This is due to the activities being associated with the partner and not the actual activity (Aron & Aron, 1997). The activities that participant's listed show not only routine activities (e.g., walking the dog) but novel experiences (e.g., traveling with the dog). Even the reoccurring and routine activities allow for self-expanding experience. If walking the dog is a daily routine, this activity allows for conversation and knowledge exchanges between the partners as well as the potential for meeting other people, seeing new sights, and creating new stories or experiences that will expand the self.

The responses provided by participants painted a limited picture of conflict with the partner regarding the dog. If pet-related issues between the partners are seen as trivial, little attention might be given to the issue (Cloven & Roloff, 1991) or the partner might be motivated to withhold the complaint (Roloff & Solomon, 2002). This could explain why conflict was reported less often than relational maintenance activities. The issues might be forgotten or seem too small to mention when responding to the conflict questions. Participants may have also only reported conflict that was negative or damaging to the relationships and excluded healthy conflicts

(Guerrero & Floyd, 2006; Kluwer et al., 2007). With the present study, it is difficult to determine which conflict topics were perceived by the participants as negative or positive for the relationship. As seen with the mixed responses to certain subjects (e.g., sleeping on the bed), a topic might have different influences on the relationship and this would be unreasonable for researchers to evaluate without direct inquiry to the participant.

Previous research on relational maintenance strategies and the self-expansion model has not included any activities or experiences involving pets. This opens additional avenues for further investigation. This research also offers couples additional options on ways to increase their relationship satisfaction with activities involving the dog. Many of the activities involve talking to the partner or spending time on a shared experience. Counselors, therapists, and any other professionals working with couples can suggest these activities to help strengthen the relationship. The professional staff can also discuss the conflict topics with couples to see the degree to which the pet is a source of conflict. Once the sensitive topics have been identified, solutions can be created to assist the couple in negotiating the issues. This study aims to contribute to the literature on ways of strengthening romantic relationships through identifying conflict topics and suggesting activities for bonding.

Limitations and Future Research

This study creates a glance into how dogs influence romantic relationship but there are limitations. The first limitation involves the sample collected. Although the survey was distributed through social media sources to collect participants outside the university setting, the participants were primarily white females. Participants that initiated and completed the survey might have a strong attachment to the dog or be the primary owner/caregiver. Their responses

might differ from individuals with lower attachment to the dog. There is also a design limitation as participants were asked to self-report conflict and relational maintenance activities.

Participants were limited to the conflict and relational maintenance activities that were suggested by literature about childbearing couples and the researcher's own experience. Open-ended responses to the questions made it evident that a number of other activities and conflict topics were common among dog owners. The closed-response lists probably missed important or at least moderately common activities or topics. The open-ended responses were able to expose some of the missed issues, such as parental qualifications, trauma, and the wide range of training concerns. The responses provided in this study will be able to assist in creating better-designed measures that will present participants with more common issues that were missed with the current measures. Participants were also asked to answer the questions based on the oldest dog in the household. This may have assisted some participants by creating the limitation but caused others to report less information if a different dog in the household causes more conflict or creates more activities. Allowing participants to provide responses regarding all dogs or separate sections for each pet, as needed, might allow for additional details missed in this study.

For future research, responses should be collected from the participant's partner to be compared for similarities and differences within the relationship. Romantic partners might have different views on the relationship satisfaction, conflict topics, and maintenance activities, which could be compared for analysis. Investigating the differences in conflict and relational maintenance regarding how the pet was acquired, the primary caregiver, and primary ownership. These variables might change the issues and activities experiences with the dog. The presence or absence of children within the household may also change the dynamic, as the influence of the

dog is no longer occurring just between romantic partners but within a family setting. Measures of jealousy and affection might also be important for determining differences within relationships. Future research should use different research methodologies (e.g., experimental design, focus groups) to assist in the development of research questions, measures and provide direction for additional research.

Conclusion

With dogs present in 36.5% of US households (AVMF, 2012), the influence of dog ownership on romantic relationships is an area that requires additional investigation. This research forges a new path for future research on dog ownership by revealing that couples do engage in activities and conflict topics regarding the dog. The extent of these communication interactions and the impact to the romantic relationship is still undetermined.

APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board
Office of Research & Commercialization
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276
www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html

Approval of Exempt Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1
FWA00000351, IRB00001138**

To: **Ashley Elrick**

Date: **February 07, 2014**

Dear Researcher:

On 2/7/2014, the IRB approved the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review: Exempt Determination
Project Title: Romantic Relationships and Pet Ownership
Investigator: Ashley Elrick
IRB Number: SBE-14-09953
Funding Agency:
Grant Title:
Research ID: N/A

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

On behalf of Sophia Dziegielewski, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Joanne Muratori on 02/07/2014 10:37:43 AM EST

IRB Coordinator

APPENDIX B: IRB APPROVED SURVEY

Romantic Relationship Demographics:

We are interested in how pets, specifically dog ownership, might affect people's communication. We want you to think of your current romantic partner and your pet dog. If you have multiple dogs, think of the oldest one when we ask about a specific pet. To help you focus on this one person, please put his/her first initial in the space below and then enter the name of the dog.
 (_____)

1. What is your relationship status?
 - a. Casual: I date this person and others
 - b. Committed Dating: I date only this person (but not living together)
 - c. Living together but not married
 - d. Engaged
 - e. Married
2. How long have you been in your current relationship (please type a number in the box)?
 - a. ___ Years/ ___ Months
3. Directions: Please rate your relationship with your partner by following questions on a scale from 1 (low satisfaction) to 5 (high satisfaction).

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree
We have a good relationship.						
My relationship with my partner is very stable.						
Our relationship is strong.						
My relationship with my partner makes me happy.						
I feel like part of a team with my partner.						

4. Slide the pointer to the point that best describes the degree of happiness in your relationship. The middle point ('happy') represents the average degree of happiness most get from their romantic relationship
 - a. 0 __ 50 __ 100 Happiness Overall

Pet Ownership Demographics:

1. How many dogs do you own?
 - a. 0
 - b. 1
 - c. 2
 - d. 3
 - e. 4

- f. 5+
2. Who provides the primary care for the animal?
 - a. Self
 - b. Partner
 - c. Both equally
 - d. Someone else, Explain: _____
 3. Was the animal acquired during your current relationship?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 4. If the animal was owned prior to the relationship, who brought it into the relationship?
 - a. Self
 - b. Partner
 - c. Acquired during the relationship
 5. How was this animal brought into the relationship?
 - a. Mutual decision between both partners
 - b. Decision made by only you
 - c. Decision made by only your partner
 - d. Acquired unintentionally (i.e., family member could no longer care for the animal)
 6. Is the animal considered:
 - a. Your pet
 - b. Your partner's pet
 - c. Equally yours and your partner's pet
 7. What breed is the animal? (i.e., Dog- Corgi, Boxer)
 - a. _____
 8. How long have you owned the dog?
 - a. __ Years/ __ Months
 9. Do you have other animals?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. If yes, what type of animals? _____

10. Please rate your agreement with the following statements about your feelings about the dog (if more than one, choose the oldest).

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
I love the dog					
I would be sad if we were to lose the dog					
I feel strongly attached to the dog					

11. Please rate your agreement with the following statements about your partner's feelings about the dog (if more than one, choose the oldest).

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
My partner loves the dog					

My partner would be sad if we were to lose the dog					
My partner feel strongly attached to the dog					

Pet Disagreement Short Responses

1. Please list the 3 most frequent topics of disagreement between you and your partner that involves your pet(s) either directly or indirectly.
 - a. _____
2. Think about the last time you and your partner had a disagreement about your pet. Please tell us what the disagreement was about and summarize what the both of you said during the disagreement.
 - a. _____
3. Has this been a topic of disagreement on more than one occasion?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
4. Do you think your last discussion about this topic solved the problem or do you think you'll disagree about it again in the future?
 - a. Yes, the problem was solved.
 - b. No, we will probably disagree about this again in the future.
5. The following topics are common issues people disagree about concerning their pets. Please indicate about how often you and your partner have had a disagreement about each topic.

	Never	Once or twice	A few times	More than a few times	More times than I can count
Exercise of pet (e.g., walking the dog)					
Disposal of pet waste					
Feeding the dog					
Dog needs obedience training					
Discipline of the pet					
Rules for the pet (e.g., not allowed on couch, counters)					
Pet destroys property					
Taking the pet to daycare					
Diet of the pet					
Pet wakes up too early					
Pet is active at night					
Dog is not completely housebroken (pees or poops in the house)					
Feeding pet table scraps					
Repairing destruction from pet					
Pet inflicted injuries to people or other animals					

Deciding when to take a sick pet to the vet					
Financial expenses of animal care					
Pet is aggressive towards other pets in the household					
Pet doesn't get along with children					
Pet is too hyper					
Pet jumps too much					
Pet makes too much noise (i.e., barking)					
Pet is afraid of people					
Pet is afraid of storms or loud noises					
Pet escapes from the house or yard					
Pet is not friendly					
Pet is timid or fearful					
Pet is up to date on shots					

Pet Maintenance Short Responses:

1. We are also interested in how pets can help maintain relationships, increase the bond between people, or help make relationships better, more fun, enjoyable, etc. For example, people walk their pet together, comfort each other about the pet's health, join social groups related to their pets, and so on. Please answer the following questions with this in mind.
2. Please think of 3 ways that you and your partner have used your pet as a way to strengthen or maintain the relationship with your partner and list them in the space below.
 - a. _____
3. Please think of the most recent time you and your partner bonded over your pet and describe what happened.
4. The following items concern the ways people might use their pet to maintain their relationship with their romantic partner. Please indicate your frequency of each item.

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
Positivity					
Talked about our pet as a way to make the interaction more enjoyable.					
Talked about our pet to change the subject to a more enjoyable one.					
Told my partner about something funny our pet did when my partner was away.					
Talked (reminisced?) about something fun we did with our pet.					
Spend time with our pet together					
Support					
Tried to cheer up my partner by talking about our pet.					
Offered to take care of the pet while my partner was out of town.					

Offered to take a sick pet to the vet.					
Offered to help pay for vet or other expenses related to the pet.					
Offered to fix property that the pet destroyed.					
Played with or pet our animal as a way to relieve stress during disagreement.					
Openness					
Talked through our pet as a way to disclose feelings (Used our pet as a way to talk about feelings about the other)					
Assurances					
Talked about our pet to stress my commitment to him/her.					
Talked about our pet as a way to show I'll always be there for him/her.					
Network					
Went to a gathering for people with pets.					
Joined a social group for other pet owners.					
Attended a pet-friendly event with our pet.					
Had a "play-date" with another pet owner.					
Like to bring our pet with us to parties or other social events with friends and families.					
Tasks					
Help equally with the pet care tasks					
Walk our dog together					
Shop for our pet's toys/supplies together					
Took a class together on pet ownership.					
Attended pet obedience training class with partner.					

5. We are also interested in general disagreement between partners. About how often do you and your partner disagree about:

	Never	Less than once a month	More than once a month	More than once a week	At least once a day
Household chores					
Jealousy or lack of trust					
How to spend leisure time					

Friends or in-laws					
Money					

Participant Demographics

Finally, we have a few questions about you and your partner.

1. What is your age? (____)
2. What is your biological sex?
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
3. What is your partner's biological sex?
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
4. What is your ethnic background? (Select all that apply)
 - a. American Indian or Alaska Native
 - b. Asian
 - c. Black or African American
 - d. Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 - e. White
 - f. Other, Explain: _____

**APPENDIX C: TABLE 5 CORRELATIONS OF ALL RELATIONAL
MAINTENANCE ACTIVITIES**

Table 5: Correlation of All Relational Maintenance Activities

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	
1. Interaction	1																							
2. Change Subject	.60	1																						
Funny	.48	.34	1																					
Reminisced	.50	.36	.65	1																				
Time Together	.36	.24	.46	.59	1																			
Cheer Up	.47	.46	.52	.63	.54	1																		
Care while Away	.16	.18	.36	.32	.26	.31	1																	
Vet	.16	.11	.31	.30	.22	.28	.52	1																
Help Pay	.13	.10	.27	.25	.21	.21	.40	.65	1															
Fix Property	.15	.13	.18	.25	.18	.20	.42	.48	.48	1														
Relieve Stress	.35	.44	.35	.40	.33	.46	.37	.26	.21	.31	1													
Talked Through Pet	.24	.40	.21	.23	.20	.35	.21	.18	.17	.16	.43	1												
Stress Commitment	.35	.36	.31	.38	.31	.45	.23	.21	.17	.17	.41	.52	1											
Always There	.31	.30	.33	.42	.33	.48	.26	.24	.21	.21	.44	.46	.88	1										
Pet Gathering	.24	.17	.25	.28	.24	.23	.18	.23	.20	.19	.28	.20	.26	.27	1									
Social Group	.11	.11	.23	.17	.12	.17	.13	.23	.20	.17	.20	.12	.07	.09	.54	1								
Pet Event	.22	.14	.26	.31	.32	.21	.17	.20	.17	.18	.29	.16	.21	.22	.74	.51	1							
Play Date	.22	.17	.25	.27	.22	.26	.09	.12	.12	.12	.27	.17	.18	.20	.52	.41	.51	1						
Bring Pet	.23	.11	.28	.28	.29	.26	.15	.14	.12	.09	.21	.11	.20	.24	.48	.32	.53	.54	1					
Equal Care	.19	.15	.31	.35	.44	.33	.33	.30	.28	.20	.23	.12	.20	.23	.09	.13	.16	.13	.22	1				
Walk Dog	.11	.05	.26	.31	.37	.22	.18	.11	.09	.10	.19	.13	.20	.24	.19	.20	.28	.22	.24	.43	1			
Shop Together	.19	.09	.34	.42	.40	.31	.18	.20	.22	.16	.21	.16	.20	.23	.20	.18	.22	.22	.24	.41	.48	1		
Class Together	.09	.07	.18	.18	.08	.11	.09	.12	.07	.05	.11	.05	.16	.17	.31	.28	.31	.23	.23	.10	.11	.21	1	
Obedience Training	.13	.11	.19	.20	.08	.15	.10	.11	.12	.04	.09	.08	.15	.14	.34	.28	.33	.28	.25	.16	.09	.22	.74	1

Note: Correlations greater than .2 are significant at the $p < .001$ level of significance; and correlations greater than .11 are significant at the $p > .05$ level.

APPENDIX D: TABLE 6 CORRELATIONS OF ALL CONFLICT TOPICS

Table 6: Correlation of All Conflict Topics

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28
1. Exercise	1																											
2. Pet Waste	.31	1																										
Feeding	.32	.33	1																									
Needs Obedience	.18	.18	.26	1																								
Discipline	.19	.21	.31	.62	1																							
Rules	.14	.17	.29	.36	.51	1																						
Destroys	.08	.20	.17	.39	.43	.40	1																					
Daycare	.22	.13	.22	.16	.12	.12	.24	1																				
Diet	.21	.17	.30	.12	.18	.30	.03	.07	1																			
Up Early	.08	.16	.18	.17	.16	.14	.15	.19	.14	1																		
Active at Night	.10	.19	.12	.25	.21	.23	.31	.16	.09	.52	1																	
Not Housebroken	.06	.31	.19	.34	.32	.21	.37	.19	-.01	.16	.28	1																
Table Scraps	.19	.14	.29	.20	.25	.30	.15	.10	.47	.07	.13	.07	1															
Repairs	.09	.26	.18	.35	.36	.35	.71	.30	.08	.12	.27	.32	.25	1														
Injuries	.01	.12	.10	.21	.19	.11	.15	-.03	.00	.03	.12	.19	.04	.15	1													
Get Rid	.04	.13	.12	.18	.22	.22	.24	.09	.09	.19	.22	.23	.06	.28	.18	1												
Sick To Vet	.27	.23	.26	.16	.19	.20	.18	.18	.28	.15	.20	.14	.29	.28	.12	.26	1											
Financial	.13	.24	.22	.27	.31	.28	.25	.09	.23	.23	.17	.17	.25	.28	.13	.24	.55	1										
Aggressive	.03	.23	.12	.21	.19	.09	.11	-.03	.05	.13	.26	.27	.06	.13	.38	.16	.21	.19	1									
Children	.12	.09	.06	.10	.09	.08	-.02	.02	.12	.11	.13	.05	.12	.03	.32	.21	.13	.05	.17	1								
Hyper	.18	.13	.12	.29	.29	.28	.35	.13	.09	.33	.40	.15	.18	.27	.07	.20	.11	.13	.05	.02	1							
Jumps	.15	.11	.16	.30	.33	.32	.32	.10	.07	.15	.23	.07	.20	.28	.06	.12	.06	.14	.03	.06	.54	1						
Noise	.12	.13	.19	.36	.38	.33	.34	.17	.09	.24	.39	.26	.25	.37	.17	.24	.20	.17	.25	.21	.45	.36	1					
Afraid of People	.04	.10	.15	.22	.18	.05	.10	-.05	.12	.16	.09	.02	.11	.08	.07	.10	.13	.07	.15	.19	.10	.10	.22	1				
Afraid of Noise	.07	.24	.18	.21	.19	.20	.26	.21	.21	.23	.23	.18	.22	.24	.03	.19	.19	.18	.28	.14	.23	.19	.33	.20	1			
Escapes	.06	.18	.23	.27	.27	.24	.33	.21	.12	.13	.19	.32	.23	.33	.21	.20	.19	.17	.18	.05	.13	.19	.30	.04	.20	1		
Not Friendly	.05	.13	.17	.21	.19	.03	.02	-.04	.12	.14	.02	.09	.10	.07	.21	.08	.08	-.01	.20	.31	.06	.08	.14	.61	.12	.06	1	
Timid Fearful	.06	.07	.17	.22	.26	.10	.12	-.01	.12	.12	0	.06	.09	.06	.10	.16	.09	.09	.15	.08	.09	.13	.17	.62	.28	.14	.49	1
Annual Shots	.11	.09	.19	.15	.07	.12	.13	.20	.22	.28	.19	.13	.10	.18	.02	.22	.30	.36	.09	.09	.13	.09	.12	.02	.25	.30	-.03	.06

Note: Correlations greater than .2 are significant at the $p < .001$ level of significance; and correlations greater than .11 are significant at the $p > .05$ level.

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