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## Understanding Grief Experiences of Pet Loss Among African Americans

Michele Lisa Whitney  
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# Walden University

College of Psychology and Community Services

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Michele L. Whitney

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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Walden University  
2025

Abstract

Understanding Grief Experiences of Pet Loss Among African Americans

by

Michele L. Whitney

MPhil, Walden University 2024

MS, Capella University, 2014

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Human Services

Walden University

February 2025

## Abstract

Disenfranchised grief responses and associated stigma from pet loss have been documented among researchers; however, the unique lived experiences of African American adults facing pet bereavement have been underrepresented in research. This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to deepen the understanding of grief responses after pet loss, specifically focusing on African Americans' experiences of human-pet bereavement. Grounded in the dual process model of coping with bereavement, which emphasizes the oscillation between loss- and restoration-oriented coping strategies, this study explored how African American pet owners experience and make meaning of grief following pet loss. A phenomenological design was employed with a purposeful sample of 23 African American adults in the Midwest United States who had lost a pet during adulthood. Data were collected through semistructured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis, which reflected the lived experiences of participants through eight primary themes: (a) familial bonds and pet relationships, (b) anticipatory grief, (c) disenfranchised grief, (d) grief confrontation, (e) grief avoidance, (f) post-loss social support, (g) grief inequities, and (h) spiritual and emotional growth. Findings from this study can inform human services researchers and professionals in developing culturally relevant public health policies, programs, and practices. Such contributions not only enhance support systems within diverse cultural contexts but also have significant implications for positive social change by addressing inequities in bereavement care and fostering inclusive approaches to grief support.

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## Dedication

This research is dedicated to all those who grieve for loved ones in private. You are not alone.

For Mama and Daddy in heaven, who always believed that I was “born for great things.”

This research is also in honor of the strong Black women and men I grieve for and who paved the way for me, specifically, Uncle Joe, Auntie Tina, Uncle Johnny, Uncle Clarence, Uncle Paul, and Uncle Orzia Jr.; Grandma Gertrude and Granddaddy Orzia; Grandpa John Pryor; my sister, Ruby; and the two women who sparked my love for cats: my grandmother Beatrice (my laugh twin), and my mother’s best friend, Auntie Sandra.

Finally, this research is dedicated to my beloved feline companion of 17 years, Samson, who was my inspiration for this study. You are gone, but forever in my heart. I love you, always.

“Creator’s blessing rests on the ones who walk a trail of tears, for he will wipe the tears from their eyes and comfort them.” (Gift from Creator Tells the Good Story, Matthew 5:4, First Nations Version)

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your presence in my life has been a grounding force throughout this long journey, reminding me of where I come from and what truly matters.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

Over the years, the concept of pet ownership through the human–animal bond has evolved in the United States. Pet owners now consider their pets as essential members of their families through the concept of the human–animal bond (Park & Royal, 2020). Pet owners experience this bond through their perception of reciprocal love with their pets, the symbolic role of their pets within their families, anthropomorphism, and ultimately, the experience of pet loss (Applebaum et al., 2021; Brooks et al., 2019; Jia et al., 2022; Kristel et al., 2021; Lavorgna & Hutton, 2019). Moreover, humans frequently hold an unconscious expectation of outliving their pets, leading to a profound sense of loss that is largely unrecognized and unacknowledged by society (Lee, 2020). Pet owners who have experienced this loss may present additional complications through the lens of race and ethnicity, specifically among African American adults (Matthews et al., 2021; Nugent & Daugherty, 2023).

In Chapter 1, I introduce the study and provide background of the research topic, problem statement, purpose, and research question. Next, I explain the dual-process model of coping with bereavement (DPM) as the theoretical model. Finally, the nature of the study is described, along with its definitions, limitations, and significance.

### **Background**

Throughout history, humans have relied on animals for various purposes, including agriculture and the companionship they provide through pet ownership (Kristel et al., 2021). Multiple fields of research, including veterinarian science, social work, and



psychology, acknowledge the existence of the human–animal bond (Arkow, 2020; Chalmers et al., 2020; Hanrahan, 2019). This bond is a reciprocal relationship between people and animals that positively influences humans’ emotional, psychological, and physical health (Janssens et al., 2020; Janssens et al., 2021; Whipple, 2021). However, there are differing opinions regarding the overall benefits of pet ownership and whether these benefits vary based on race and ethnicity, particularly for historically marginalized groups such as African Americans (Applebaum et al., 2021).

Within the concept of the human–animal bond, pet loss (or companion animal loss) is an area of research that deals with the death of a pet due to euthanasia, accident, illness, or natural causes (Cleary et al., 2021; Matte et al., 2020). Losing a pet can be deeply traumatic, evoking emotions like the grief one feels losing a family member (Compitus, 2019). In certain loss circumstances, pet owners may compare their relationship with their pet to that of a child (Behler et al., 2020; Hughes & Lewis Harkin, 2022). Consequently, perceiving a pet as a companion or family member and forming an attachment to the animal can intensify the emotional pain of pet loss (Park & Jeong, 2022).

### **Problem Statement**

The problem in this research study was disenfranchised grief responses and stigma after pet bereavement among African Americans. People who own pets are likely to outlive their animal companions, leaving a void and leading to grief comparable to losing a family member or close friend (Cowling et al., 2020; Lee, 2020; Park & Royal, 2020). Additionally, some pet owners experience a disenfranchised grief response that

discourages them from grieving for their lost companion (Lavorgna & Hutton, 2019; Spain et al., 2019). In contrast, some pet owners report positive outcomes after experiencing pet loss, such as developing continuing bonds with the deceased animal and posttraumatic growth (Bussolari et al., 2019; Bussolari et al., 2021; Habarth et al., 2017). However, researchers conducting studies on pet loss have either omitted race and ethnicity (Adrian & Stitt, 2019), predominantly included White participants (Cowling et al., 2020), or excluded African American participants altogether (Bussolari et al., 2018).

Society often expects adults to demonstrate strength and offer comfort to others during loss. This expectation of strength is even more pronounced in the African American community (Matthews et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2022). African Americans have historically faced barriers and disparities in mental health and overall healthcare (Barksdale et al., 2022), which has the potential to make the stigma surrounding grief responses from pet loss more intense. Additionally, while research has validated measures for pet attachment and bereavement (Testoni et al., 2019), the use of these measures among minority groups, like African Americans, remains limited. For example, validated questionnaires about pets and the human–animal bond do not factor in race or elements such as socioeconomic status, housing, or background that can impact pet bereavement experiences (Brown, 2015; Nugent & Daugherty, 2023).

Although the research regarding the experience of pet loss has illuminated important findings, I have found no research examining the experience of pet loss among African American adults. Further research is warranted to explore the African American experience of pet loss to address the documented problem of disenfranchised grief

responses and stigma after pet bereavement (Laing & Maylea, 2018; Marton et al., 2020; Park et al., 2021).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to improve the understanding of grief responses after pet loss by exploring African Americans' experiences of human–pet bereavement. This study aimed to address a gap in previous research on the human–animal bond and pet loss, particularly in areas lacking ethnic diversity. By conveying the significance of pet loss for African Americans, this study could raise awareness of this experience beyond the veterinary field and into human services. This could provide human service professionals, such as researchers, counselors, and social workers, with more tools for assisting African Americans in coping with pet grief within a cultural context.

### **Research Question**

What is the meaning of grief for African American pet owners who have experienced pet loss?

### **Conceptual Framework**

DPM was used as the conceptual framework for this qualitative study. Previous grief theories and models have focused primarily on grief work, neglecting adaptation to the loss. However, DPM includes both grief work and adaptation in its framework (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). DPM describes how individuals come to terms with loss and explore dealing with loss, which encompasses the processes, strategies, or styles of managing grief (Stroebe & Schut, 1999, 2010). Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut (1999)

developed this model to expand the understanding of grief from traditional models such as Bowlby's attachment theory, phase model of grief, and Worden's task model of grieving. The previous grief models centered around grief work; however, these grief models did not consider adaptation to the loss (Stroebe & Schut, 2010). The DPM includes grief work in the framework and extends the understanding of loss adaptation by identifying two types of stressors: loss orientation and restoration orientation (M. S. Stroebe & H. Schut, 2001). Coping with or concentrating on aspects of the loss experience is known as *loss orientation*, while reorganizing life and developing a new identity without the deceased is known as *restoration orientation* (M. S. Stroebe & H. Schut, 2001). Consequently, individuals oscillate between loss-oriented and restoration-oriented coping, which assists in understanding the meaning associated with the loss (Stroebe & Schut, 1999; M. S. Stroebe & H. Schut, 2001).

The central research question of this study was to understand how African Americans grieve the loss of a pet. The utilization of the DPM aided in addressing this study's central research question and guided the development of interview questions within the research design. The grieving process may vary across cultures, depending on factors such as the coping strategies used, the focus on loss or restoration, and the interaction between the two. Additionally, DPM aided in understanding the specific cultural context of pet loss, including how the death of a pet was perceived or mourned, the emotional responses after the death, and the social and interpersonal context of how grief was expressed. DPM provided a framework for understanding how the African

American culture processes a loss that others may consider insignificant or highly stigmatized.

### **Nature of the Study**

A phenomenological qualitative inquiry was used to address the research questions in this study. Because this study aimed to explore African Americans' experiences of human–pet bereavement and improve the understanding of the meaning of pet loss grief responses, a phenomenological qualitative inquiry was the most appropriate. This design allows a researcher to integrate the data collection and analysis content with acknowledging personal experience toward an interpretation of meaning. For the planned research design, I conducted semistructured qualitative interviews with 23 African American adults who had experienced pet loss. I recruited participants from cities in the Midwest region, specifically within Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin. Phenomenological qualitative inquiry uses qualitative methods such as in-depth interviewing to answer research questions through open-ended questions and reciprocal communication (Moustakas, 1994).

In this study, I used thematic analysis to generate themes from participants' experiences to better understand grief responses from pet loss. Whereas some types of analysis are tied to specific themes, thematic analysis can be used with any appropriate theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Additional data points such as triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checks were used to establish study credibility. Triangulation is a process of validation that authenticates themes using different data sources (Creswell, 2009). Triangulation involves comparing notes taken from interviews with audio

recordings and verbatim transcripts. To confirm the accuracy of study findings and ensure impartiality, I used peer debriefing to discuss the study's progress and outcomes with an unbiased peer and confirm the accuracy of study findings and interpretations (see Spall, 1998). Finally, I used member checks to ensure there was no misinterpretation of the data and followed up with participants to guarantee the accuracy and credibility of the analyses.

### **Definitions**

*African American*: An ethnic group consisting of individuals in the United States with partial or complete ancestry to any Black racial groups originating from Africa (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023).

*Anthropomorphism*: The tendency for companion animal owners to ascribe human emotions and behaviors to animals to deepen the human–animal connection (Mota-Rojas et al., 2021).

*Companion animal*: A contemporary term for pets that goes beyond the idea of pets as property and identifies pets as unique sources of social support and positive contributors to mental health and well-being (Janssens et al., 2021).

*Continuing bonds*: A coping mechanism after the death of a loved one in which the bereaved maintains an emotional connection with the deceased through storytelling, reflections, and actively remembering the deceased (Black et al., 2022; Hughes & Lewis Harkin, 2022).

*Disenfranchised grief:* Grief experience that occurs as a result of a loss that is socially unacceptable to grieve, which can lead to feelings of shame, guilt, and other intensified grief reactions (Pitcho-Prelorentzos & Mahat-Shamir, 2022).

*Grief work:* The psychological process of dealing with the truth of a loss by reflecting on memories and events surrounding the death, with the goal of detachment from the deceased (Stroebe et al., 2017).

*Human–animal bond:* Interdisciplinary term encompassing humans’ emotional attachment, affection, interactions, and responsibility for their pets (Whipple, 2021).

*Oscillation:* The guiding process described in the DPM between two coping strategies: loss-oriented coping or traditional grief work and restoration-oriented coping (Fiore, 2021).

*Pet loss:* A unique experience in which the human–animal bond is severed because of the death of a pet, which may cause complex grief responses for the bereaved (Park et al., 2021).

*Posttraumatic growth:* A positive emotional response to pain or trauma characterized by overcoming and recovering the trauma as a foundation for future personal growth (Park & Jeong, 2022).

### **Assumptions**

This study was conducted under five assumptions. First, I assumed that individuals could form meaningful connections with their pets and such losses could profoundly impact them. Second, I assumed that individuals manage the loss of their pets through a grieving process after the pet’s death. Third, I assumed that participants would

share their experiences with pet loss openly and honestly through the research process. Fourth, I assumed that all participants would meet the study's inclusion criteria. Fifth, I assumed that I would remain receptive to new insights and perspectives that emerged from the study, regardless of my own experiences with the phenomenon.

### **Scope and Delimitations**

This study aimed to address the gap in the literature by researching the experiences of pet loss among African American adults. Previous studies have been conducted to explore pet loss experiences but have not addressed diverse populations, especially African American adults. I used nonprobability purposeful sampling to select adult participants who self-identified as African American and had experienced pet loss to gather data relevant to the research question. Although purposeful sampling is vital for qualitative design, it limits generalizability as traditionally understood in quantitative research. However, transferability allows for connections from the data to other research contexts, enabling researchers to determine if similar concepts apply to comparable settings and situations (Given, 2008). Other researchers will be able to determine if similar concepts within this study can be applied to comparable settings and situations and obtain similar results.

### **Limitations**

This study had several limitations or challenges. One of the limitations of this study arose from the researcher's role, as the researcher serves as the instrument of inquiry through personal experiences and decisions about data collection and interpretations in qualitative research (Mertens, 2019; Patton, 2015). My personal



experience with the phenomenon being explored may have introduced challenges with objectivity and potential researcher bias. Structured guidelines such as bracketing were necessary to set aside any preconceptions about pet loss. Bracketing involves placing the research topic and questions in brackets to identify data in its pure form (Patton, 2015). Consequently, the bracketing process allows the data analysis and interpretation to emerge in a new way.

Recruitment challenges may arise as a limitation in this study. The targeted criteria are African American adult pet owners who have experienced pet loss. Historically, pet ownership rates have been higher among Whites and other ethnic groups than African Americans (Applebaum, Peek, & Zsembik, 2020). To overcome this limitation, recruitment strategies addressed the underrepresentation of African Americans as pet owners and the limited research on this topic within this ethnic group.

### **Significance**

This research aimed to address a gap in understanding by focusing on how African American adults experience pet loss. Several researchers have emphasized the need for population-based studies centered on pet ownership and health within human–animal bond research, including pet loss research (Park & Royal, 2020; Park et al., 2021). This research was unique because it prioritized an underrepresented population in health and mental health research (see Duran & Pérez-Stable, 2019). The underrepresentation of minorities, particularly African Americans, in human–animal bond research related to health research and mental health research highlights social issues that may have significant implications in the field of human services (Mosi Adesina et al., 2022).

Professionals working in social service agencies, community-based programs, and institutional settings that provide mental health, psychological, social work, and other services impacting quality of life can use the results of this study to inform their practices. Additionally, this research could be of interest to research organizations such as the Human–Animal Bond Research Institute (HABRI), the International Society for Anthrozoology, and the Human–Animal Interaction Section of the American Psychological Association as it relates to each of their missions of educating the public about the impact of animals on health.

This study was centered around an underrepresented group, which presents an opportunity for health and mental health researchers to gain insight into the experiences of grief and bereavement from a cultural perspective. Neglecting to include underrepresented groups in research can lead to a limited understanding of the social determinants of health, which has historically resulted in health and mental health disparities among racial and ethnic groups (Alvidrez & Barksdale, 2022; Palmer et al., 2019). The focus of this study may also attract the attention of animal-centered groups such as Companions and Animals for Reform and Equity (CARE) and the National Association of Black Veterinarians, which are dedicated to prioritizing the voices of marginalized groups in research and other fields.

Finally, this research may interest services and groups that aim to support people through pet loss, such as the Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement, Rainbow Bridge Pet Loss Grief Center, and the Pet Loss HEAL Support Group through PAWS Chicago. By accurately reflecting the human–animal bond experience through the social and

community context of the African American experience, this research will ultimately widen the understanding of social determinants of health and promote social change.

### **Summary**

Pets have become essential family members in the United States, and their loss can be as devastating as losing a close friend or family member. However, the grief associated with pet loss can be disenfranchised and stigmatized, making it difficult to cope with. This study aimed to explore African Americans' experiences of human–pet bereavement and enhance the understanding of grief responses after pet loss. The study used DPM as a conceptual framework to address a gap in previous research on the human–animal bond and pet loss, especially in ethnically diverse contexts. DPM delineates two stressors—loss orientation and restoration orientation—and examines the oscillation between the two stressors to facilitate an understanding of the coping strategies associated with loss. This study used phenomenological qualitative inquiry through semistructured interviews to investigate the meaning of grief for African American pet owners who had experienced pet loss. The research study contributes to the literature concerning diverse populations, particularly African American adults, and offers insights for professionals in various human services settings.

Chapter 1 included an introduction to the study and provided background on the research topic. The problem statement and purpose of the study were provided, along with the research question. DPM was introduced as the conceptual framework. The nature of this phenomenological qualitative study was stated, along with the definitions, limitations, and significance. Chapter 2 is a review of the literature and further details

will be provided on DPM and its relevance to the study. In Chapter 3, I will describe the research methods of this study.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to improve the understanding of grief responses after pet loss through an exploration of African Americans' experiences of human–pet bereavement. The problem addressed in this research study was disenfranchised grief responses and stigma after pet bereavement among African Americans. By focusing on the perspectives of African Americans, this study sought to fill a notable gap in the existing literature on the human–animal bond and pet bereavement, which has often overlooked the experiences of diverse ethnic groups. This research endeavored to shed light on underexplored aspects of grief and stigma in the African American community, thereby contributing to a more inclusive understanding of pet bereavement experiences.

This chapter will first provide the literature search strategy used to locate relevant research on the topic. In the next section, I expand on DPM, the model that served as the conceptual framework for the study. Finally, a review of the existing literature related to the key concepts of pet ownership, the human–animal bond, pet loss, and the grief experience among African Americans will be provided, along with an identification of gaps in the literature to justify the rationale for this study.

### **Literature Search Strategy**

I used the library resources provided by Walden University to conduct the literature review. A search for peer-reviewed journal articles was performed through the EBSCOhost research platform using several databases, including Thoreau Multi-

Database Search, APA PsycArticles, ScienceDirect, APA PsychInfo, Taylor and Francis Online, and SocINDEX with Full Text. In addition, I searched for additional peer-reviewed journal articles using Google Scholar, ProQuest One Academic, and books through ProQuest Ebook Central. Keywords used in the search included *grief, bereavement, human–animal bond, human–animal relationships, companion animal loss, pet loss, grief responses, African American grief, African Americans, Black Americans, African Americans and pet loss, health research participation, health disparities research, underrepresented minorities in health research, disenfranchised grief, pet attachment, continuing bonds, and post-traumatic growth.*

### **Conceptual Framework**

This study was conducted using as its conceptual framework DPM, initially developed by Margaret Stroebe and Henk Schut (1999), to understand coping mechanisms after the death of a romantic partner. Stroebe and Schut (2010) aimed to enhance the understanding of coping with loss by identifying positive and negative adaptation behaviors and the unique differences in grieving processes. DPM enables researchers and practitioners to gain deeper insights into the bereavement experience, transcending traditional grief theories and grief work (Stroebe, 2002). The model distinguishes the grieving process between two distinct stressors—loss orientation and restoration orientation—with an active oscillation between the two (M. S. Stroebe & H. Schut, 2001). Loss orientation involves coping with specific aspects of the loss experience, while restoration orientation entails reorganizing one’s life and forging a new identity in the absence of the departed (M. S. Stroebe & H. Schut, 2001). DPM introduces

the concept of oscillation, which alternates between loss- and restoration-oriented coping and assists individuals in comprehending the significance of their loss (Stroebe & Schut, 1999; M. S. Stroebe & H. Schut, 2001).

Several studies have been conducted utilizing DPM to explore various complex aspects of grief (Albuquerque et al., 2017; Habarth et al., 2017; Packman et al., 2014; Richardson, 2010b; Stroebe & Schut, 2010; Wijngaards-de Meij et al., 2008). Richardson (2010) focused on older widowers who had been caregivers for their partners, finding that time since death and ethnicity had negative impacts, while length of caregiving and social support contributed positively. Wijngaards-de Meij et al. (2008) and Albuquerque et al. (2017) examined parental bereavement within the DPM framework, highlighting the importance of loss and restoration coping for parental adjustment. Additionally, Packman et al. (2014) and Habarth et al. (2017) utilized the DPM's loss orientation, specifically continuing bonds, to understand pet loss, noting that engaging in memory reflection and holding onto pet possessions provided comfort, meaning making, and distress in coping with pet loss. Through the application of the DPM, whether it be the loss of a spouse, a child, or a pet, the studies underscore the significance of both social support networks and individual coping strategies, such as reminiscing and maintaining bonds, in facilitating adjustment and finding comfort amid grief and loss.

Given its integrative nature, DPM expands on previous grief theories and acknowledges the importance of preceding theories that paved the way for its development. By integrating various grief theories, a comprehensive understanding of grief experiences emerges, aiding in comprehending the challenges associated with

different types of grief (Supiano, 2019). Additionally, the model offers avenues for interventions and treatment of grief-related complications (Fiore, 2021). Stroebe and Schut (1999) categorize grief theories that contribute to the development of DPM into grief work models and general theories of coping with stress and bereavement.

### **The Grief Experience**

Grief, although universal, manifests uniquely in each individual's grieving process. Various perspectives have contributed to the evolution of grief theories, reflecting the intricate nature of this human experience (Supiano, 2019). Research highlights the diversity in grief reactions across individuals, cultures, and historical contexts (Granek & Peleg-Sagy, 2017; Moore et al., 2022; Rosenblatt, 2017; Stroebe et al., 2008a). Factors like personality, culture, and contextual elements such as racial discrimination, poverty, and religious beliefs significantly influence people's responses to death-related loss (Nortey Botchway et al., 2022; Rosenblatt, 2008).

Bereavement-specific risk factors play a critical role in shaping the impact and recovery process of grief. Socioeconomic status, for example, correlates positively with health but does not mitigate the effects of grieving (W. Stroebe & H. Schut, 2001). Moreover, W. Stroebe and Schut (2001) stated that bereavement-related risk factors amplify the risk of disease by either altering the health repercussions of the loss or the pace of recovery. These risk factors can be interpersonal, personal, or situational (W. Stroebe & H. Schut, 2001). Interpersonal risk factors involve elements of the bereavement situation relating to social support and the type of relationship, such as the level of support within the bereaved person's social network (Houwen et al., 2010;



Stroebe et al., 2006; W. Stroebe & H. Schut, 2001). Personal risk factors include individual differences in personality and sociodemographic or group differences like age, gender, or religion (Houwen et al., 2010; W. Stroebe & H. Schut, 2001). Situational risk factors, such as sudden death, encompass the circumstances surrounding the loved one's death, which significantly influence the course of grief (W. Stroebe & H. Schut, 2001).

Understanding the complexities of grief necessitates distinguishing between bereavement, grief, and mourning. Bereavement represents the loss of someone significant through death (Stroebe et al., 2017; Stroebe et al., 2008b). Grief encompasses the distress that stems from bereavement and includes a range of psychological, behavioral, social, and physical reactions in response to the loss of a loved one (Stroebe et al., 2017; Stroebe et al., 2008a; Wilson & O'Connor, 2022). Finally, mourning involves the societal or cultural expectations regarding the public expression of grief following a loved one's death, often influenced by religious or cultural beliefs and practices (Uccheddu et al., 2019; Stroebe et al., 2017; Stroebe et al., 2008b). The distinction between bereavement, grief, and mourning is essential for a comprehensive understanding of the grieving experience.

## **Dual Process Model of Coping With Bereavement Origins**

### ***Grief Work Models***

Central to the foundation of understanding grief is the idea of *grief work*. In *Mourning and Melancholia*, Sigmund Freud laid the groundwork for this idea, describing grief as a process wherein the bereaved must engage in grief work to progress (Freud, 1917; Stroebe et al., 2001). Grief work entails continually confronting memories and

thoughts associated with the loss, aiming for detachment from the deceased (Archer, 2008). Furthermore, avoiding memories altogether may lead to physical or psychological complications for the bereaved, hindering adaptation to the loss (Richardson, 2010a; Stroebe & Schut, 1999). DPM incorporates two grief models: Bowlby's phases of mourning and Worden's task model of mourning.

**Bowlby's Attachment Theory and Phases of Mourning.** Understanding the role of attachment theory in Bowlby's phases of mourning is essential for grasping the origins of DPM. Attachment theory comprises several components: attachment behavior, affectional bonds, and attachment figures (Bowlby, 1982). Attachment theory seeks to explain attachment in terms of behavior, aiming to maintain closeness to or communication with an attachment figure (Bowlby, 1982). Moreover, Bowlby's work indicates that infants exhibit attachment behaviors through specific responses, such as smiling when feeling secure and crying when separated from their mothers, explaining the formation of lasting attachments (Bowlby, 1982). The action of seeking and maintaining affectional bonds with others is a significant part of attachment theory (Bowlby, 1980). Bowlby (1980) linked an individual's mental and physical health to the strength of their bonds, with initial attachment figures usually being immediate caregivers in childhood, primarily mothers.

Affectional bonds usually endure long periods and rely on individual behavior, with attachment figures symbolizing the target of attachment behavior necessary for developing these bonds (Bowlby, 1980, 1982). In adulthood, individuals may acquire and maintain attachment figures more diversely than in childhood, with behavior toward these

figures evolving across the life cycle (Feeney & Collins, 2019; Feeney & Noller, 1996). Moreover, Bowlby (1982) suggested that attachment figures could be within or outside the family, including friends, counselors, or pets (Teo & Thomas, 2019), with behavior toward these figures varying while maintaining the uniqueness, accessibility, and responsiveness of the attachment figure.

Bowlby and Parkes (1970) identified four phases of mourning representing an individual's responses to losing an attachment figure or affectional bond. First, the numbing phase reflects disbelief and intense emotions similar to denial. Second, the yearning and searching phase involves preoccupation with thoughts of the deceased and prolonged anger. Third, the phase of disorganization and despair entails reflection on the loss and may lead to depression and apathy. Fourth, the reorganization phase involves restructuring life to move forward without the deceased. Though these phases offer insight into grief responses, they fall short of understanding adaptation to loss, often portraying them as passive rather than active processes for the griever to navigate (Stroebe & Schut, 2010).

**Worden's Task Model.** Worden's task model, or four tasks of mourning, represents another grief model applicable to the DPM (Worden, 2008). While Bowlby's phases of mourning suggest a passive phase process, Worden's tasks assert that the bereaved must actively work through their grief. The first task of mourning requires accepting the reality of the loss, acknowledging the loss occurred, and realizing that the person lost will not return. This first task corresponds to Bowlby's yearning and searching phase within the phase model. The second task entails confronting the pain of

grief rather than avoiding it. The third task involves adjusting to a world without the deceased, requiring external, internal, and spiritual adjustments. Finally, the fourth task of mourning is finding a lasting connection with the deceased that allows the griever to move on with life. This fourth task aligns with Bowlby's fourth phase, indicating a restructuring without the deceased. While Worden's task model significantly enhances the understanding of grief by emphasizing that the bereaved engage in grief work through completing specific tasks, it neglects adaptation to loss amid external factors (Stroebe & Schut, 2010).

Although it may seem logical that using grief work as described by earlier grief models is a successful strategy for coping with a loved one's death, the idea presents some difficulties on its own (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). The variety of stressors, types of losses, and the contribution of culture to grieving have not received adequate acknowledgment (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Additionally, grief work has focused on health outcomes rather than wellness and adaptation, without mentioning potential health enhancements, such as positive growth (Stroebe & Schut, 2010). Finally, there is a presumption that grief work takes place alone rather than in a community with other people who could be experiencing pain (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Consequently, grief work ignores the necessity of focusing on stressors other than the actual loss of the relationship, does not account for attentional fluctuations during the coping process, and does not offer a thorough understanding of the dynamic coping process (Stroebe & Schut, 1999; Stroebe & Schut, 2010).

### ***General Theories of Coping With Stress and Bereavement***

In addition to the grief work theories, the DPM framework integrates several theories and models that emphasize coping and grief adaptation: cognitive stress theory, the stress response syndrome, the two-track model of bereavement, and the model of incremental grief (Fiore, 2021; Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) proposed the cognitive stress theory, which suggests that individuals experience adverse health effects when perceiving a situation as difficult or stressful and become anxious when the perceived demands exceed their capacity. The stress response theory defines a normal response to a traumatic event as the ability to continue functioning after experiencing trauma (Horowitz, 2011). However, a complicated reaction may occur due to intrusion (re-experiencing feelings related to the event) or avoidance (Horowitz, 2011). Stress theories help predict responses to specific stressors, such as grief. Therefore, cognitive stress theory and stress response theory play a significant role in developing the DPM (Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

Rubin (1981) proposed the two-track model of bereavement, which suggests that the grieving process involves two tracks. The first track is outcome-based and focuses on the social and psychological effects of losing a loved one. The second track explores how the relationship with the deceased evolves into a continuing bond.

According to Cook and Oltjenbruns (1998), in the model of incremental grief, one loss precipitates another, and grief intensifies with additional losses. People who experience a shift in their relationship with a deceased loved one before their death may feel a secondary loss and grief. The two-track model of grief and the model of

incremental grief look at specific aspects of how people cope with loss, which are related but not the same as the DPM's focus on successful bereavement coping mechanisms (Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

### **DPM and Coping**

Individuals utilize coping strategies to manage the grief experience. Moreover, coping encompasses the cognitive and behavioral processes, techniques, or styles people use to navigate bereavement and effectively address challenges arising from internal family dynamics and external environmental factors (Stroebe et al., 2017; Stroebe et al., 2008a). Grief work demonstrates a coping strategy that can involve actively mourning the loss of a loved one through rituals, discussing the deceased, or seeking counseling that facilitates detachment from the deceased (Stroebe et al., 2017). Another coping strategy is grief therapy, which integrates specialized intervention techniques to guide individuals with a prolonged grief reaction toward coping (Stroebe et al., 2008b).

The DPM integrates stress, bereavement, and grief work theories to further elaborate on the grief work concept and explain the challenges of coping with loss and how grief affects overall health (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). The DPM framework incorporates two types of bereavement-related stressors that impact bereaved individuals through different coping strategies: loss- and restoration-oriented stressors (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Loss orientation concerns how a bereaved individual copes with or focuses on aspects of the loss experience. In contrast, restoration orientation involves rearranging one's life and creating a new identity without the deceased (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). The interaction of these stressors leads to a unique element of the DPM known as oscillation.

Oscillation is a dynamic regulatory process that guides the bereaved through coping with loss and restoration-oriented stressors (Stroebe et al., 2006). Consequently, understanding loss and restoration-oriented stressors and the process of oscillation can explain the complexity of grief and assist researchers and practitioners in identifying healthy adaptation to grief (Stroebe, 2002; Stroebe et al., 2006).

### ***Loss-Oriented Stressors***

Individuals experiencing grief encounter a spectrum of emotional responses through loss-oriented stressors, ranging from happy memories to painful longing, relief from the deceased's end of suffering, and sadness at being left behind (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Stroebe and Schut (1999) assert that individuals confronting loss-oriented stressors tend to focus on a specific aspect of the loss, focusing on the deceased. The traditional grief work concept fits with this idea as the bereaved grapple with thoughts and emotions concerning their relationship or bond with the deceased (Stroebe et al., 2008a, 2008c). It typically involves reflecting on the individual, reminiscing about shared memories, reflecting on their life, and contemplating the circumstances surrounding their death. Loss-oriented coping demonstrates adaptability and encompasses anticipated and unforeseen bereavement-related emotions (Fiore, 2021). Additionally, loss orientation commonly occurs shortly after the loss, marking the initial encounter with bereavement, although not perceived as a distinct phase or stage (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). As bereaved individuals gradually adjust, their reliance on loss-oriented coping mechanisms diminishes.

### ***Restoration-Oriented Stressors***

A distinctive aspect of the DPM is the inclusion of restoration-oriented stressors in grief. Restoration orientation denotes secondary coping mechanisms that significantly intensify the burden of loss and exacerbate existing anxiety and distress (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). With restoration orientation, the emphasis lies on addressing loss rather than its outcome (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). For example, following the death of a romantic partner, the survivor may struggle with social loneliness, which they cope with by avoiding isolation, ultimately facilitating moving forward with life (Fiore, 2021). Restoration orientation centers on adapting to loss through experiences of loneliness and coping strategies such as avoiding isolation, resulting in restored mental health and well-being (Eisma et al., 2022; Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Other restoration-oriented factors can include coping with an anticipated loss versus an unexpected one and family dynamics such as conflict and disagreement (Eisma et al., 2022).

### ***Oscillation***

Oscillation constitutes the DPM's central and most distinctive aspect, distinguishing it from traditional grief work models, stress theories, and general bereavement theories. The oscillation concept involves a dynamic alternation between loss and restoration-oriented coping, balancing the confrontation and avoiding various stressors related to loss (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). The main idea behind oscillation is that bereaved individuals oscillate between confronting aspects of loss (i.e., recalling memories of the deceased) and avoiding them (i.e., engaging in regular daily activities such as work) (Stroebe et al., 2017). Oscillation is an essential regulatory strategy for



adapting to loss, as excessive focus on either loss or restoration-oriented stressors fails to foster a healthy adaptation (Stroebe et al., 2006). The dynamic oscillation process, involving confrontation and avoidance, addresses the limitations of foundational grief theories, thereby filling gaps in grief theory.

The DPM examines how individuals confront or avoid specific aspects of loss, a concept not intrinsic to grief work. Moreover, instead of presuming that confronting grief is adaptive while avoiding it is maladaptive, the necessity of oscillation regulates the process toward effective outcomes (M. S. Stroebe & H. Schut, 2001). Analyzing thought processes associated with confrontation and avoidance is crucial in understanding individuals who adapt well to grief and those who struggle (Stroebe & Schut, 2010; M. S. Stroebe & H. Schut, 2001). Individuals inclined to dwell on negative thoughts about their loss encounter more significant difficulties adjusting than those who avoid such reflections (Stroebe et al., 2017; M. S. Stroebe & H. Schut, 2001). Similarly, research demonstrates that confronting positive elements connected to a loss can facilitate the process of recovery (M. S. Stroebe & H. Schut, 2001). The oscillation between positive and negative confrontation and avoidance in grief underscores coping strategies and healthy outcomes post-bereavement.

### **Application of DPM to the Study**

This study used the DPM to explain the potential oscillation between coping with loss- and restoration-oriented stressors following pet loss. Furthermore, the DPM facilitated an understanding of the underlying concepts of coping and adaptation to loss, informing the development of interview questions. Loss-oriented coping with pet loss

may involve emotions stemming from ongoing connections with the pet after its death (Cordaro, 2012; Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Questions probing how participants initially responded to the loss uncovered the types of grief work or coping strategies used, such as inquiries about their activities in the days following the pet's death. Restoration-oriented coping may include discovering new friendships and recreation opportunities previously shared with the pet (Bussolari et al., 2018; Eason, 2021). This concept guided interview questions and probes regarding mourning practices, if any, for the pet and discussions about moving forward in the pet's absence beyond grief work.

While past studies have often utilized attachment theory to explore pet loss and the human–animal bond (Applebaum et al., 2021; Compitus, 2019; Cowling et al., 2020; Kogan et al., 2022; Teo & Thomas, 2019), attachment theory and other grief work models, as they relate to grief and culture, exhibit limitations (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). Grief, dying, and death are universal human experiences but are also influenced by cultural values and beliefs (Moore et al., 2022; Stroebe & Schut, 1999). It is essential to have a complete framework to understand the intricate concepts of life and death within the African American community. In the African American context, research opportunities on grief arise from perspectives of race, discrimination, and racism (Coard, 2021; Stern et al., 2021). Due to euthanasia decisions and financial constraints in pet medical treatments, pet loss can lead to added complexities in the grief experience (Bussolari et al., 2018).

Loss orientation may apply to pet owners in the study who frequently experience thoughts of their deceased pet and feelings of numbness, disbelief, depression, and

anxiety as they come to terms with their pet's death (Cordaro, 2012). Restoration orientation may apply to bereaved pet owners navigating their daily routines despite the pet's absence to discover new avenues for companionship and leisure previously shared with the pet. Oscillation may explain how African American pet owners, upon losing a pet, process grief through various coping strategies, such as through confrontation and avoidance. Additionally, this concept shaped the development of interview questions to understand the interplay of time, culture, stigma, and growth resulting from the loss from an African American perspective. Consequently, the DPM offered a comprehensive conceptual framework that shed light on loss- and restoration-oriented stressors and the oscillation between the two, enhancing understanding of the impacts of pet loss for African Americans.

## **Literature Review**

### **Concepts of Grief and Bereavement: Responses and Types**

#### ***Grief Responses***

Responses to losing a loved one through death often manifest physically, cognitively, and emotionally. Fatigue, sleep problems, shortness of breath, feelings of emptiness, muscle weakness, tension, pain, and changes in appetite are all physical reactions to grief (Jens et al., 2020; Wilson & O'Connor, 2022). Cognitive responses to grief can include doubt, longing, ruminating, or trouble focusing (Wilson & O'Connor, 2022). Furthermore, sadness, longing, loneliness, anxiety, sorrow, guilt, anger, and sometimes relief are all emotional manifestations of grief (Jens et al., 2020; Wilson & O'Connor, 2022). Of the various grief responses, two major themes that relate to human

health and coping with bereavement are guilt and loneliness (Li et al., 2019; Vedder et al., 2022).

Guilt in grief represents a remorseful emotional reaction with the recognition of failing to meet one's inner standards and expectations concerning the deceased (Li et al., 2019). Researchers have found that higher feelings of guilt after bereavement are associated with higher levels of depression and complicated grief (Li et al., 2019). Loneliness is also a typical grief response. People who have recently lost a loved one often feel lonely, empty inside, and cut off from others leading to poor mental health (Vedder et al., 2022). Vedder et al. (2022) suggest that cultural norms and ritual practices significantly impact the bereaved during the grieving process, where loneliness plays a fundamental, if not pivotal, role. Attachment theory, stress theories, and the DPM model are frameworks that help to understand the various types of loneliness and their potential mediating processes in bereavement (Vedder et al., 2022). Two subcategories of loneliness are particularly relevant to grief: emotional loneliness and social loneliness (Vedder et al., 2022).

Emotional loneliness refers to the absence of attachment, while social loneliness is linked to the lack of an engaging social network (Vedder et al., 2022; Vedder et al., 2021). Only a reciprocal relationship may alleviate emotional loneliness, whereas the availability of social support can alleviate social loneliness (Hawkley et al., 2020; Vedder et al., 2022). Bereavement has been linked to increased emotional loneliness but not social loneliness because of the loss of an attachment figure, as social support cannot compensate for this loss (Vedder et al., 2022). However, social loneliness can play a role

in grief through the perceived meaning of a relationship. Losing a loved one can be especially difficult when that person is a vital part of one's social network (Vedder et al., 2022; Vedder et al., 2021). As a result, a specific relationship's emotional or social importance can be a risk factor in dealing with loss.

### *Types of Grief*

Normal grief can be characterized as an emotional response to the loss of a loved one that aligns with societal expectations, such as a reasonable period of sadness and longing. However, certain situations may present challenges such as anxiety, depression, and trauma in adjusting to loss (Fernández-Alcántara et al., 2021). Scientific literature has identified various types of grief where adaptation to loss can be challenging, especially if the social environment does not recognize the grieving process (Fernández-Alcántara et al., 2021). These types of grief can include disenfranchised, prolonged (or complicated), anticipatory, and ambiguous (Fernández-Alcántara et al., 2021; Jens et al., 2020). The drivers of whether a person experiences normal grief can consist of the circumstances and implications of the death, the time that has passed, and societal and cultural factors that determine the expected norms (Eisma et al., 2022; Stroebe & Schut, 2021). Disenfranchised and prolonged grief are critical to understanding the pet loss experience.

People usually experience disenfranchised grief when the circumstances surrounding their loved one's death are either stigmatized or not generally accepted. For example, society does not generally accept attending funeral services for pets or taking several weeks off from work to grieve. Pet loss is considered a type of disenfranchised

grief because grieving pet owners often experience a lack of support from their social environment (Bussolari et al., 2021; Lavorgna & Hutton, 2019; Spain et al., 2019). Grief is disenfranchised when societal grieving rules are broken (Marton et al., 2020; Pitcho-Prelorentzos & Mahat-Shamir, 2022). These rules govern who, what, and how long a person can grieve and the type of social support obtained due to the loss. Empathic failure is a central concept of disenfranchised grief where family, friends, and the larger community fail to recognize and support a grieving person and provide no validation of support (Rosenblatt, 2019). Therefore, disenfranchised grief can occur when the relationship, loss, or griever is not acknowledged by family, friends, or within the griever's community (Pitcho-Prelorentzos & Mahat-Shamir, 2022; Rosenblatt, 2019).

The circumstances surrounding disenfranchised grief can complicate a person's adaptation to loss. The nature of disenfranchised grief can lead to additional issues such as heightened emotional reactions, identity disturbance, trouble connecting, and the removal or reduction of sources of support (Doka, 2019). These issues can cause a type of grief called prolonged (or complicated) grief. Prolonged grief is a deviation of the grief experience from cultural and societal norms regarding the intensity of specific or general grief responses or symptoms (Thacker & Duran, 2022). Moreover, prolonged grief involves daily intense grief experiences that last longer than a month, is characterized by an overwhelming sense of preoccupation with the deceased, extreme loneliness, and impairs functioning in daily life, and has been categorized as a disorder (Jens et al., 2020). Prolonged grief disorder was recently added to the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual*

*of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)* of the American Psychiatric Association in the March 2022 release (American Psychiatric Association, 2022).

## **African American Grief Experience**

### ***Historical Issues Related to Grief***

A discussion about the African American experience of grief should begin with an understanding of the overall African American experience in the United States. Race, discrimination, and unaddressed systemic racism are among the most pressing issues in the United States today, and these issues have a profound impact on all aspects of African American family life (Coard, 2021). Moreover, a defining feature of the African American experience is disproportionate experiences with grief, loss, and bereavement due to the overlapping and interconnected forces of systemic discrimination and oppression (Wilson & O'Connor, 2022). The repercussions of structural racism yield strong links between racial housing segregation, health disparities, educational segregation, and the widening wealth gap (Rose et al., 2023). This historically inferior status has consequences for African Americans, often resulting in a perpetual state of grief (Moore et al., 2022).

The African American experience of racism stems from the legacy of slavery in the United States. Enslaved people, for example, were routinely forced to separate from their spouses, children, and family during chattel slavery (Wilson & O'Connor, 2022). These separations were often violent, and they are commonly cited when addressing the trauma of slavery (Moore et al., 2022; Wilson & O'Connor, 2022). The traumatic historical circumstances of slavery may live on in African Americans' shared cultural

beliefs and fears today as an overarching and collective grief (Richardson et al., 2020; Wilson & O'Connor, 2022). Consequently, unbalanced grief and loss experiences resulting from interconnected aspects of systemic discrimination are a defining feature of the African American experience (Wilson & O'Connor, 2022).

The legacy of slavery profoundly shaped the experience of African Americans in the United States. The unique context of the lived experience of African American families not only includes trauma from slavery, but also Jim Crow, lynching, racialized disinvestment, and redlining (Homan et al., 2021). Moreover, when researching any aspect of the African American community, specifically those about family and attachment, ongoing racist policies that excessively harm African Americans, daily experiences of discrimination, the Black Lives Matter movement, cultural strengths and family resilience should be considered (Coard, 2021; Stern et al., 2021). Racism and discrimination are pervasive, harmful, and inevitable elements in the lives of African Americans (Coard, 2021).

### ***African Americans and Attachment***

While Bowlby's attachment theory was described as a universal phenomenon, there were limitations to this understanding, specifically in the context of race. The primary objective of Bowlby's attachment theory is to understand attachment through the lens of human behavioral patterns, including interactions and maintaining proximity with an attachment figure (Bowlby, 1980). However, when attachment theory was tested and developed, specific social factors, such as current systemic disparities, were not widely understood within psychology (Stern et al., 2021). Moreover, as African Americans have



not been represented in attachment conceptualizations, knowledge that is consistent with African American values and beliefs is needed (Coard, 2021). Consequently, if the understanding of attachment lacks an African American perspective, there will be an incomplete understanding of what happens when attachments are severed through loss.

Context is a significant detail to consider when coping with loss, and race is an essential factor within that context. Understanding attachment behavior in African American families requires an awareness of the social context of caregiving intertwined with discrimination and racism in the African American community (Coard, 2021). When studying attachment among African Americans, it is critical to determine who is an attachment figure and under what circumstances (Stern et al., 2021). Attachments have developed among African Americans to navigate a racially conscious society through immediate family, extended family, and other relational networks with complex norms and understandings to provide social support, strength, resilience, and survival (Coard, 2021).

### *African Americans and Grief*

Grief has been described as a universal experience worthy of scientific exploration; however, that exploration has historically neglected the African American experience of grief and loss. Research on grief is often based on the dominant White culture despite its universality (Moore et al., 2022). The commonly accepted definition of grief as pain after loss is limited through the lens of the African American experience, including the history of enslavement, racial violence, and structural inequalities within the community (Wilson & O'Connor, 2022). Comparing the African American grief

experience to the White grief experience has negative research and clinical implications as the everyday survival difficulties for African Americans, including racial discrimination in healthcare and lack of psychological care, intersect with the grieving experience (Matthews et al., 2021).

Bereavement researchers have neglected the African American grief experience, with few studies published about African Americans and grief. The emphasis on African Americans and traumatic loss, such as homicide, while relevant, may result in norms and generalizations that do not accurately reflect the majority of African Americans' experiences with normal grief (Wilson & O'Connor, 2022). However, the few grief studies focusing on African Americans suggest that the grief and mourning experience can differ from the mainstream and that cultural differences should be considered in research (Jones-Eversley & Rice, 2022; Matthews et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2022).

Context impacts attachment behavior and makes the African American experience of grief unique when attachments are severed. The bereavement experience for African Americans differs quantitatively due to the unequal burden of dying, death, and grief and qualitatively due to cultural grief resulting from racism and oppression (Jones-Eversley & Rice, 2022; Wilson & O'Connor, 2022). The historical narrative of race in the United States and the persistent racial challenges are likely to manifest in the processing of African American grief (Wilson & O'Connor, 2022). Furthermore, in African American culture, the death of an extended family member may be as impactful as an immediate family member's death, leading to greater sadness than in the dominant culture (Moore et al., 2022).

Although African Americans are diverse, researchers have identified specific patterns in their grief responses and mourning practices. Grief responses, such as crying, fear, and anger, are typically experienced across cultures, but the manifestation of these emotions and the length of the grieving process varies (Matthews et al., 2021). Pain is at the core of the grieving process, integrated with anger, religion, and faith, and these grief expressions can be dictated by the standards of the community through which the bereaved belongs. Moreover, many African American funerals, methods of grieving, religious practices, and community support are culturally distinct from what is common among White Americans (Moore et al., 2022). African Americans' reliance on community, social support, and the church is rooted in exclusion from institutional support in the dominant American culture (Matthews et al., 2021).

African Americans have traditionally relied on social support, religion, and continuing bonds to cope with loss. Traditional African American funeral death rituals, intergenerational family support, and cultural resilience all contribute to coping with loss (Matthews et al., 2021). For example, some African Americans believe how well the bereaved family participates in mourning customs determines how easily their deceased loved one will transition to the spirit world (Matthews et al., 2021). Many African Americans believe in an afterlife or heaven, where life is free from social injustice and hardships (Moore et al., 2022). In addition, the African American funeral is often regarded as a home-going celebration where, despite sadness and grief, the deceased's transition is joyfully celebrated with the belief that they are in a better place (Matthews et al., 2021). A sense of connection is maintained with deceased loved ones through dreams,

talks, cemetery visits, and celebratory remembrances of birth and death (Moore et al., 2022).

### ***African Americans and Help-Seeking***

While many African Americans appear to use mourning rituals, traditions, and spirituality as coping mechanisms after the death of a loved one, seeking professional help does not appear to be a popular option. Religion, spirituality, faith, and social support from family, friends, and the community can often provide comfort and support during the grieving process for African Americans. Instead of seeking help from mental health professionals, many rely on these sources to cope with loss (Matthews et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2022). Furthermore, in several recent studies, many African Americans reported not seeking mental health services after experiencing grief (Hall et al., 2021; Matthews et al., 2021).

It is a common problem among African Americans to face stigma about mental health. Studies have revealed that African Americans are afraid of being seen as crazy by their social circles if they admit to having depression or anxiety. They also fear being misunderstood by non-African American professionals (Hall et al., 2021; Matthews et al., 2021). However, African Americans generally view the experience of grief as an acceptable concern that can be addressed in a mental health setting, and they have positive attitudes toward therapy and counseling (Hall et al., 2021; Matthews et al., 2021). Despite recognizing the benefits of mental health services and treatment, stigma and judgment often prevent them from seeking help for mental health challenges (Hall et al., 2021; Yelton et al., 2022).

The stigma of mental health and help-seeking is also perpetuated by African Americans and others who acknowledge the *strong Black woman*, *superwoman*, *Black superhuman*, or *John Henry* schema or script (Hall et al., 2021; Matthews et al., 2021; Perez et al., 2023). Specifically for women, the strong Black woman schema can present a constant tension between the need to be perceived as strong in psychological distress and the stigma they will face for seeking mental health treatment (Hall et al., 2021). Moreover, the superwoman schema presents a coping mechanism for overcoming racial and gendered stressors and supporting others but also heightens the risk for stress-related illness (Perez et al., 2023). These labels are cultural narratives that, while representing strength, hard work, and focus on achievement, can also yield high levels of complicated grief symptoms and less likelihood of seeking help for those symptoms (Matthews et al., 2021; McCleary-Gaddy & James, 2022).

### **Pet Ownership**

In most societies, having a pet is common, and in the United States, most households have pets (Brkljačić et al., 2020; Nugent & Daugherty, 2023). According to the American Pet Products Association National Pet Owners Survey for 2023-2024, 66% of households in the United States own a pet, equivalent to 86.9 million homes (American Pet Products Association, 2023). Moreover, the United States has seen an increase in ownership of traditional pets. From 2016 to 2020, dog ownership increased yearly by 6%, and cat ownership increased by approximately 3% (American Veterinarian Medical Association, 2022). According to the American Veterinarian Medical

Association (2022), nonconventional pets also impacted pet ownership overall, with nearly 3% of households owning fish or birds in 2020.

Aging, rising single and childless families, and lifestyle changes have recently caused structural changes in the population, resulting in a steady rise in pet-owning households (Kim & Chun, 2021; Park & Jeong, 2022). The relationship between people and companion animals, known as pet ownership, illustrates the human–animal bond (Chalmers et al., 2020). However, research on pet ownership has historically neglected entire populations, particularly those who are not White (Applebaum et al., 2021). While pet ownership data provides an understanding of the importance of pets in society, it has often offered a limited understanding of this phenomenon.

### ***History of Pet Ownership Research***

Researchers have studied the human–animal bond for approximately 40 years, and it has spread into numerous fields, such as psychology, sociology, and history (Cowling et al., 2020). However, before 1980, the study of the human–animal bond made little progress except for what had been done within veterinary science (DeMello, 2021). Moreover, animals did not have a therapeutic role until the 1960s, when patients of Dr. Boris Levinson, a New York psychotherapist, communicated with his dog Jingles when brought to work but did not communicate when the dog was not present (Compitus, 2019; DeMello, 2021). Dr. Levinson is credited with developing the foundation of animal-assisted therapy (AAT), which has inspired further research in various fields (Compitus, 2019). Despite starting slowly, research on animals in human life has dramatically advanced in the twenty-first century (DeMello, 2021).

People's awareness of the advantages of companion animals has led to the growth of human–animal bond studies across academic and professional areas. Many interdisciplinary publications, journals, college courses and programs, organizations dedicated to the human–animal relationship, and conferences are now accessible to help academics and students research and network regarding the human–animal bond (DeMello, 2021). These sources have addressed topics such as human–animal interactions, pet ownership and quality of life, and pet bereavement and grief (Cleary et al., 2021; Kristel et al., 2021; Park et al., 2021; McCune et al., 2020). Although ample opportunities for knowledge exist, researchers have yet to thoroughly investigate the collective human experience associated with pet ownership (Applebaum, Peek, & Zsembik, 2020).

### ***Human–Animal Relationships***

Dogs and cats are the most popular household pets, each having unique perceived benefits to human quality of life. Dog owners report that their pet dogs are a source of companionship, friendship, love, joy, devotion, and help in stressful situations (Krouzecky et al., 2019). Cat owners attribute their pet cats to emotional support, sensitivity to human moods, and social cues through proximity and vocalization (Vitale & Udell, 2019). Research suggests that owning non-traditional pets like horses, birds, rabbits, and fish in aquariums can positively impact human health (Clements et al., 2019; Macauley & Chur-Hansen, 2023). Understanding the impact of these reported benefits relies on human perception, emphasizing the importance of comprehending the repercussions of losing such relationships.

Pets can defend against negative feelings and foster supportive relationships, enhancing human well-being through positive interactions. According to the pet effect theory, the presence of pets and interaction with them are associated with increased psychological, physical, and mental well-being (Janssens et al., 2020; Kim & Chun, 2021). Moreover, this presence may serve as a defense mechanism against negative feelings, while interacting with a pet may give rise to positive emotions (Janssens et al., 2020). Consequently, pets can act as social lubricants or social catalysts and stress buffers, which improves human well-being by fostering supportive relationships and positive social interactions (Janssens et al., 2021).

Pets can also represent various roles within different families through the pet effect. For example, pets can provide solace or act as a buffer for their owners when dealing with difficult family situations (Applebaum & Zsembik, 2020). For families that experience emotional distance or a lack of communication with each other, pets can provide a way for family members to connect (J. D. Green et al., 2018; McConnell et al., 2019). In addition, researchers have found that respondents who speak about themselves and their connection to their pets refer to themselves as parent (Mom/Dad) and refer to their pets as kids/children, which indicates a familial relationship (Volsche et al., 2022). Therefore, the idea of the human–animal bond has promoted animals as family members, making them an essential part of many people’s daily lives (Kristel et al., 2021).

Many pet owners adopt the identity of pet parents, caring for their pets as they would children (Nugent & Daugherty, 2022; Volsche, 2018). Pet parents use conventional parenting techniques while caring for their animals (Volsche, 2018).



Furthermore, pet parents invest money, emotion, and time in their pets as a form of care given by nonbiological parents, and this concept often occurs in cultures with high rates of urbanization, declining fertility rates, and life stages beyond reproduction (Volsche et al., 2022). While pet parents are clear about the difference between raising children and raising pets (Volsche, 2018), the experience of caring for pets in this manner further illuminates research about the human–animal bond.

Pets received significant attention during the COVID-19 pandemic through news outlets and mainstream media (Applebaum, Tomlinson, et al., 2020; McDonald et al., 2021). Moreover, implementing social distancing and stay-at-home orders significantly increased pet adoption rates (Zenithson et al., 2021). In response to the increased interest in pets, numerous scholarly journals have published pet-related research since 2020. These studies have shed light on various aspects of pet ownership during the pandemic, including stress, loneliness, social isolation, well-being, attachment, mental health, and pet loss (Applebaum, Tomlinson, et al., 2020; Clements et al., 2021; McDonald et al., 2021; Oliva & Johnston, 2021; Park & Jeong, 2022; Zenithson et al., 2021). Results from research about the health impact of pets during the COVID-19 pandemic were both positive and negative, which demonstrated the complexity of the connection between pet ownership and quality of life in times of adversity (Applebaum et al., 2021; Clements et al., 2021).

The consequences of pet ownership during the pandemic included concerns about pets, humans, and households (Applebaum, Tomlinson, et al., 2020). Pet-focused stressors included challenges with obtaining veterinary care and managing pet behavioral

problems (Applebaum, Tomlinson, et al., 2020; Zenithson et al., 2021). Human-focused issues included working from home and mental health (Applebaum, Tomlinson, et al., 2020). For example, pet owners with moderate to severe mental health symptoms before the pandemic benefited from stronger pet attachment. However, those with severe mental health symptoms had worse mental health outcomes (McDonald et al., 2021).

Furthermore, pet owners had to learn how to manage work-life balance with pets being physically present during the workday as many organizations moved to telework (Junça-Silva, 2022; Junça-Silva et al., 2022). Taking care of pets while working from home could be both rewarding and challenging as respite breaks with pets could enhance mental health but also cause distractions during the work day (Applebaum, Tomlinson, et al., 2020; Junça-Silva et al., 2022). Household-focused issues with pet ownership during the pandemic included economic issues, as economic resources and attachment were connected with the level of pet owner concerns (Applebaum, Tomlinson, et al., 2020).

Spending money on pets has also been associated with well-being. Pet care has become a multibillion-dollar industry, and the vast sums spent on these animals demonstrate their value (Hoffmann et al., 2018; Maharaj et al., 2018). In addition, there is evidence that spending money on pets promotes happiness and is more favorable than giving and receiving personal gifts (White et al., 2022). However, there is another side to the economics of pet ownership that factors in issues such as socioeconomics and housing (Arluke, 2021; Rauktis et al., 2021). The health and well-being of people who live with pets are influenced by economic inequality (Applebaum et al., 2021). The responsibility of pet ownership and the human–animal bond may pale compared to other

objectives for limited resources among marginalized and disadvantaged people (Applebaum et al., 2021; Arluke, 2021).

Housing is a crucial factor in the ability to keep pets. For example, a landlord's refusal to permit pets might further alienate renters from their dwellings. This results in a strained relationship with housing, marginalizing pet owners in search of quality, affordable homes (Rose et al., 2023). Families and individuals who face other disadvantages, such as prejudice or lack of resources, are disproportionately affected by the challenge of renting with pets (Applebaum et al., 2021). These challenges could add to the vulnerability people in these groups experience while losing a pet.

### ***Pets, Race, and Culture***

Research on the human–animal bond has largely overlooked the role of race and culture in this relationship. African American/non-Hispanic, Hispanic, and multiracial/other/non-Hispanic individuals are significantly less likely to keep pets than Whites (Applebaum, Peek, & Zsembik, 2020; Mueller et al., 2021). Some researchers cite cultural differences as the reason for this difference (Applebaum et al., 2021). While the American Pet Products Association National Pet Owners Survey for 2023-2024 reported that 86.9 million homes in the United States include pets (American Pet Products Association, 2023), this report did not provide the data in the context of race. The lack of this cultural element can be applied to pet loss and grief. Additionally, due to the absence of such cultural information in the U.S. Census, researchers know little about the racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, age-related, and geographical demographics of pet-owning families (Arkow, 2020). As a result, the efficacy of utilizing pets to enhance health

remains insufficiently understood, owing to substantial cultural differences in perceptions of pets and the human–animal bond (Friedman & Krause-Parello, 2018).

**African Americans and Animals.** The historical relationship between African Americans and animals is multifaceted, originating from dehumanization imposed upon the African American community. During slavery, dogs were used to apprehend freedom seekers, and during the civil rights movement were used to attack protestors (Mayorga-Gallo, 2018; Richardson et al., 2020; Rose et al., 2023). In addition, African American and pit bull stigma stemmed from the stereotypes of African American criminality and mascots in hip-hop culture (Applebaum et al., 2021; Linder, 2018; Rose et al., 2023). Historical dehumanization has contributed to false cultural beliefs that African Americans are animals or animal-like in that the race is not capable of processing physical and emotional pain and lacks reasoning and intellect in comparison to other racial groups (McCleary-Gaddy & James, 2022; Richardson et al., 2020). However, African Americans' shared historical experience of victimization and exploitation fosters understanding and compassion for animal suffering and inferior status (Richardson et al., 2020).

It remains unclear whether the complex history of African Americans and animals contributes to lower rates of pet ownership among African Americans. Past and present African American societal issues such as insufficient socioeconomic resources and racial discrimination may heighten concern about survival and basic social needs, and serving a suffering community is put before animals (Richardson et al., 2020). While African Americans are less likely than Whites to own pets, there is no evidence of racial or ethnic

variations in pet attachment or care, aside from economic and access concerns (Applebaum et al., 2021). However, when combined with a long history of limited housing options for African Americans, research reveals a distinct dimension of racism in neighborhoods and housing markets, affecting pet ownership (Rose et al., 2023).

## **Meanings and Experiences of Pet Ownership**

### ***Pet Attachment***

Traditionally, people have considered attachment figures as friends, parents, siblings, or spouses. However, compelling evidence suggests that attachment figures can also be animals, specifically pets (J. D. Green et al., 2018; Guthrie et al., 2018; Teo & Thomas, 2019). The literature about companion animals describes several common themes that include companionship, mental health, physical health, and social support, all essential elements of overall well-being (Brooks et al., 2018; Friedman & Krause-Parello, 2018; Hawkins et al., 2021; Hill et al., 2020; Hodgson et al., 2020; Oosthuizen et al., 2023). However, it is important to understand that, like human attachment, the health outcomes of pet attachment depend on the quality of the relationship. In particular, a strong bond between pets and their owners has been associated with reduced psychological distress and psychopathology, as well as improved quality of life in terms of social connections and psychological health (Teo & Thomas, 2019).

Depending on the degree of intimacy with the pet, the support the pet may offer its owner, and the nature of the relationship, the quality of a human–animal relationship may vary (Guthrie et al., 2018; Teo & Thomas, 2019). The quality of the human–animal bond is determined from the pet owner’s perspective and is subjective to the attachment

experience. Consequently, scholars in the human–animal bond field have found many ways through which people experience pet attachment. Three critical aspects of the human–animal bond experience include (a) the role of perception, (b) anthropomorphism, and (c) expressions of grief from pet loss (Applebaum et al., 2021; Friedman & Krause-Parello, 2018; Hill et al., 2020; McConnell et al., 2019; Teo & Thomas, 2019).

### ***Perception***

How people perceive their companion animals is essential to understanding the human–animal bond experience. Pet attachment involves perceiving a human–animal relationship as emotionally supportive and reciprocal, resulting in the owner’s desire to keep the animal close (Teo & Thomas, 2019). Themes that promote pet owners’ well-being include perceptions of unconditional love, nonjudgment, and reciprocity, which have emerged across cultures (Bussolari et al., 2019; Teo & Thomas, 2019). How people perceive pets is important because it affects human behavior and the welfare of humans and animals (Hoffmann et al., 2018). Additionally, having pets in communities enhances people’s sense of support and friendliness within those communities (Friedman & Krause-Parello, 2018).

Pet owners have also reported perceptions of empathy from their pets and that they have a basic understanding of human language (Volsche, 2018). One of the unique qualities of human–animal relationships is that people frequently view their pets as trustworthy, understanding sources of companionship and support, especially in the face of difficulty or adversity (Applebaum et al., 2021). For instance, categorizing pets as family members enhances their perceived socially supportive qualities, positioning them

as unique sources of companionship rather than mere substitutes for human interaction (Guthrie et al., 2018; McConnell et al., 2019).

### ***Anthropomorphism***

A concept closely related to perception in the human–animal bond experience is the tendency for people to anthropomorphize their pets. Anthropomorphism occurs when pet owners attribute human emotions to animals (Macauley & Chur-Hansen, 2023). People commonly project their hopes, desires, and feelings onto their pets with anthropomorphism, strengthening the human–animal bond (Hoffmann et al., 2018). For example, some pet owners make up stories about their pet’s thoughts and actions for their human amusement, giving the pet a personality or celebrating their pet’s birthday (Behler et al., 2020). The tendency to anthropomorphize pets often reflects how humans relate to their own lives and those around them (Teo & Thomas, 2019). The anthropomorphic way of relating to pets is an extension of the pet owner’s overall well-being.

Anthropomorphism has been described as a rationale for using pets to obtain social support and health benefits (Maharaj et al., 2018). Pet owners who anthropomorphize their pets often report receiving enhanced social support from their animals, which correlates with improved mental and physical well-being (McConnell et al., 2019). Conversely, individuals who experience lower levels of social connection with others and anthropomorphize their pets can make the loss making the loss of a pet equivalent to losing a vital source of comfort and security (Behler et al., 2020). In addition, culture plays a role in anthropomorphism (Volsche et al., 2022). For example, there are differences in the anthropomorphic view of pets between Whites and African

Americans, where Whites perceive animals more humanly than African Americans (Richardson et al., 2020). Consequently, the concept of anthropomorphism in the human–animal bond experience is complex through the lens of pet loss and culture.

### ***Pet Loss***

Millions of American families experience pet loss due to euthanasia, illness, or injury, which may lead to grief (Brkljačić et al., 2020; Whipple, 2021). Understanding the significance of pets to their owners is crucial in comprehending the human–animal bond. Furthermore, how the animal is perceived, and the extent to which the owner anthropomorphizes the animal impacts the intensity of grief experienced when a companion animal passes away (Behler et al., 2020; Eason, 2021; Lavorgna & Hutton, 2019). Studies have shown that pet owners often rely on their pets to provide comfort and support in their daily lives, and the prospect of losing them can cause significant worry and anxiety (Hawkins et al., 2021). The loss of a pet can lead to depression, a loss of social support, and harm overall health (Friedman & Krause-Parello, 2018).

Another way to understand the depth of a person’s relationship with their animal is by examining the similarities between the experience of losing a pet and the experience of losing a human companion. Grieving the loss of a pet is comparable to grieving the loss of a human loved one, such as a spouse or child (Uccheddu et al., 2019), due mainly to the anthropomorphic features owners assign to their pets (Behler et al., 2020). Furthermore, pet owners who have lost a pet have described the same feelings of bondedness and mourning to their animal companions as to their human loved ones (Behler et al., 2020; Bussolari et al., 2021). Losing a pet can cause grief reactions that



symbolize the loss of an attachment figure and bring up past trauma, anxiety, and unresolved feelings regarding the deaths of human relatives (Compitus, 2019). Consequently, the emotional and psychological reactions to human and companion animal loss can be the same.

While pet loss grief responses can mirror those of human loss, the grieving experience, which involves adaptation, social support, and mourning, can be complicated. Because pets have traditionally been regarded as possessions rather than family members, societal rules suggest differences in emotional coping with a pet's death versus that of a family member (McKinney, 2019). Grief over pet loss is less widely accepted than grief over losing a human loved one (Schuurman & Redmalm, 2019). For example, while there are comparable grief responses for human and pet loss, expecting a day off work to mourn is usually unacceptable. In contrast, this provision is expected due to losing a human loved one. In a study about pet loss, Kogan et al. (2020) found that 34% of pet owners did not take time off work after pet loss, and more than 40% said they wanted to but were afraid to ask. The societal difficulty in accepting the loss of a pet as a legitimate source of grief indicates a stigma that does not give moral meaning to animal death (Testoni et al., 2023).

As discussed earlier in the literature about types of grief, people typically experience disenfranchised grief when the circumstances of their loved one's death are either stigmatized or not widely accepted. Furthermore, according to research on human-animal relationships, pet grief is often disenfranchised as pet owners often receive less emotional support after pet death, leading them to experience feelings of loneliness and

more susceptible to experiencing prolonged grief (Behler et al., 2020; Cooney et al., 2021). Although it would be disturbing to suggest that someone replace a recently deceased child with a new one, it is still common for people to suggest that the loss of a pet is insignificant and that the pet should be replaced (Compitus, 2019; Eason, 2021). Disenfranchised grief in pet loss is an empathic failure because the griever's support system does not often understand the meaning of the loss and cannot validate the depth, unconditional love, and longevity of the human–animal relationship (Bussolari et al., 2021).

Mourning represents the outward expressions of grief over losing a loved one, which is usually expected in human death. Societal infrastructures allow people to grieve through funeral rites, memorials, and eulogies that allow for the public expression of loss and provide consolation to the bereaved (Rennard et al., 2019). However, the disenfranchisement of pet loss offers limited opportunities for expressions of mourning and acceptance. Burying pets did not become a widespread phenomenon in the West until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and today, many pet owners cremate their pets or bury them on private land (Kogan et al., 2022; Schuurman & Redmalm, 2019). Moreover, religion is a factor in mourning as it buffers against the awareness of death and fills the human need to avoid mortality (Kogan et al., 2022). For example, some bereaved pet owners have acknowledged belief in the *rainbow bridge*, a popular poetic concept of a pet heaven where pets journey after death to wait to be reunited with their owners (Eason, 2021; Rennard et al., 2019). However, it is not the existence of the rites of passage or spiritual beliefs about pet death that are a factor in disenfranchised grief, but the lack of perceived

social support and discomfort with an open expression that causes the stigma and ultimately can lead to maladaptive coping (Lavorgna & Hutton, 2019; Lyons et al., 2020).

Related to the idea of rituals and memorialization for pet death is the concept of continuing bonds. Despite the physical separation that is a reality of death, continuing bonds reflect a sustained emotional attachment to the deceased and have received increased attention, specifically within pet bereavement literature (Bussolari et al., 2019; Kogan et al., 2022). Examples of continuing bonds include looking at photos or reminiscing about a lost loved one. Furthermore, examples of continuing bonds specific to pet loss include posting about the beloved pet on social media, displaying a picture or making a photo album, having a pawprint made or keeping some of the pet's fur, talking to their pet, obtaining a special receptacle for their pet's ashes, and using their pet's collar as a memory object, or getting a tattoo (Kogan et al., 2022). Pet owners who have used continuing bonds have reported, over time, a transformation in the meaning of the loss and found growth through lessons learned (Bussolari et al., 2019). According to Kogan et al. (2022), the extent to which certain expressions of continuing bonds are comforting varies between individuals. Consequently, like the entire grieving process, the application of continuing bonds to grief is complex.

Posttraumatic growth is the positive change that occurs as a result of overcoming difficult life crises, including the experience of grief (Williams et al., 2021). This type of growth encompasses positive and negative effects and can manifest significant personal development (Eisma et al., 2019). Posttraumatic growth includes feelings of strength,

connectedness with family and friends, new possibilities, greater life appreciation, and spiritual growth (Eisma et al., 2019). Furthermore, some pet owners have reported experiencing personal growth and improved family relationships following the loss of a pet (Bussolari et al., 2019).

While reflecting on the death of a pet can be a healthy part of the grieving process, repeatedly dwelling on feelings of guilt or sadness can worsen the pain, hindering posttraumatic growth (Park & Jeong, 2022). Additionally, different cultures may have varying beliefs about spirituality and its role in coping with pet loss (Bussolari et al., 2019). Those who are more attached to their pets may experience more intense feelings of grief and loss, but focusing on positive emotions can help promote growth even in the face of pain (Park & Jeong, 2022). Consequently, experiencing posttraumatic growth after losing a pet is not assured and may necessitate deliberate efforts to cultivate.

### ***Pet Euthanasia***

One significant difference between the grief experienced after the loss of a pet versus the loss of a human is the process of euthanasia. In veterinary medicine, euthanasia is a painless procedure used to bring about a peaceful death for an animal, typically due to medical reasons such as unbearable pain, injury, illness, aging, or undesirable behavior (Park & Royal, 2020; Pegram et al., 2021). While a veterinarian performs the procedure, it is the pet owner who decides to euthanize their pet (Lyons et al., 2020; Park & Royal, 2020). The pet owner's decision to euthanize a pet is unique from end-of-life decisions prior to human loss. While there are often conversations or plans about end-of-life care, wills, or advance directives in human loss, deciding to

euthanize a human dealing with illness is currently unacceptable in U.S. culture and considered unethical and illegal in most states (McKinney, 2019). Many pet owners struggle with moral concerns about euthanasia because of how much they anthropomorphize their pets (Behler et al., 2020). Consequently, there is little framework for managing pet owners' grief reactions surrounding the euthanasia decision.

While many pet owners reportedly have felt the euthanasia decision was an act of love and compassion (Bussolari et al., 2018), others have reported the euthanasia of a pet caused significant psychological distress (Adrian & Stitt, 2019). Pet owners facing the decision to euthanize their pets often need to come to terms with the appropriate time, cope with the decision and the loss, engage in rituals and spirituality, and find ways to fill the void (McKinney, 2019). Guilt is a typical response to grief, and euthanasia can intensify guilt depending upon a person's perception of their pet, as the pet cannot communicate their wishes or provide reassurance at the end in the same way a human loved one might (Behler et al., 2020). Bussolari et al. (2018) add that by feeling guilty, pet owners are still doing something for their pets by continuing to care.

The euthanasia decision can emotionally affect pet owners, and this emotional impact can contribute to a prolonged grief response (Park & Royal, 2020). Moreover, most pet owners mourn privately due to the disenfranchised grief of pet loss (Park & Royal, 2020). Frequent, intrusive thoughts of guilt and anger can cause prolonged grief in human loss and pet loss when a person attributes part of their identity to their pet (Uccheddu et al., 2019). Research has shown that grief symptoms of bereaved pet owners apply to three symptom clusters proposed by the *DSM-5*'s prolonged grief disorder

symptoms: attachment reactions, reactive distress, and social and identity disruptions (Lee, 2020).

Risk factors for experiencing disenfranchised or prolonged grief are similar across both human and pet loss scenarios. Factors include the type of death, the type of pet, the quality of attachment to the pet, the availability of social support, and the time since the loss was experienced (Cowling et al., 2020). For example, older adults, women, those living alone, or childless individuals may be at a higher risk of experiencing intense grief over pet loss (Whipple, 2021). Additionally, the perception of the pet as the owner's child or best friend and the degree of interdependence or perceived intuition between the owner and pet may contribute to grief intensity (Cowling et al., 2020).

### **Human Services, Research and Practice Implications**

To understand the impact of the human–animal bond and pet loss in human services research, researchers must comprehend the scope of available research on human and animal relationships. Human–animal interaction studies, human–animal studies, animal studies, critical animal studies, and anthrozoology are examples of research and scholarly work on the role of animals in human life (Collado et al., 2023). Through the increasing number of collaborative articles written about the human–animal bond each year, these research areas represent a complex theoretical, methodological, and multidisciplinary field of great interest (Collado et al., 2023; Yacilla, 2021).

According to Collado et al. (2023), sociology, philosophy, anthropology, literature, education, history, politics, economics, geography, biology, medicine, archaeology, religion, psychology, ethology, veterinary science, law, journalism, and art

are disciplines that are related to human–animal interaction studies. In addition, human–animal interaction studies share many similarities with other post-humanist movements, including multiculturalism, indigenism, postcolonial studies, gender studies, class studies, ethnicity, queer theory, and even climate change (Collado et al., 2023; Osman, 2019; Tomlinson et al., 2021; Woodhouse et al., 2021). Most human–animal interaction studies focus on the health consequences of pet ownership, contact with pets, and animal-assisted interventions (Friedman & Krause-Parello, 2018). Anthrozoology incorporates knowledge from psychology and the social sciences, arts, and humanities due to its holistic view of human-nonhuman interactions (Collado et al., 2023). Consequently, the intersection between anthrozoology and human–animal interaction studies has implications for human services research.

In the topic of African American grief and loss, there are opportunities for scholars, clinicians, and practitioners to collaborate through three disciplines of study: epidemiology of death, social epidemiology of death, and thanatology. Epidemiology of death examines the occurrence or frequency of death, social epidemiology of death explores the social distribution and social determinants surrounding death, and thanatology looks at the effects of death and dying (Jones-Eversley & Rice, 2022). Broadening the scope of grief research to include the African American experience has the potential to adequately address the historical, sociopolitical, economic, and psychological components that are critical to holistically understanding grief (Moore et al., 2022). These endeavors aim to address the specific issue of assisting African

Americans in navigating the complexities of grieving within a socially adverse setting (Jones-Eversley & Rice, 2022; Moore et al., 2022).

### ***One Health and Zooeyia***

The one health approach brings together different health science fields to improve the health of people, animals, and the world by recognizing the connection between people and animals and addressing health disparities and social factors. Moreover, one health involves transdisciplinary collaborations to achieve optimal health for humans, animals, and the environment (Friedman & Krause-Parello, 2018; Morgan et al., 2022). Initially developed to study and prevent the transmission of infectious and zoonotic diseases, the one health framework has been expanded to encompass the concept of *zooeyia*, which recognizes the strong bond between humans and animals (Williamson et al., 2022). Zooeyia is a one health approach that proposes that interactions with animals, particularly pets, can improve human health (Kim & Chun, 2021).

Zooeyia refers to the physical, psychological, social, and spiritual advantages of engaging with pets (Williamson et al., 2022). This concept is the foundation for the philosophical construct of the human–animal bond (Chalmers et al., 2020). These health advantages have been divided into four categories: pets as builders of social capital, agents of harm reduction, motivators for health behavior change, and active participants in treatment plans (Chalmers et al., 2020; Williamson et al., 2022). The pets as social capital builders category is of interest to understanding pet loss and the experience of pet loss through the lens of ethnicity. Pets operate as social capital builders through interactions with humans that reduce loneliness, facilitate social contact, and increase



community engagement (Chalmers et al., 2020; Williamson et al., 2022). However, a context through race and ethnicity is essential for a complete understanding. For example, in one study, dogs positively impacted social contact among White residents, but dog-based interactions between African American and Latino inhabitants tended to be negative (Mayorga-Gallo, 2018).

### ***Human–Animal Relationship Data***

Anthrozoology, zooeyia, and human–animal interaction studies have contributed to understanding the relationship between people and pets; however, there are still gaps in the data on pet ownership and loss. Given the prevalence of pets in households, it is essential to have empirical research and population-based studies on the impact of pets on human life (Applebaum, Peek, & Zsembik, 2020). However, while researchers have conducted studies on pets, they have not gathered sufficient data on pet-dwelling homes in both urban and rural underserved communities, diverse populations, and historically marginalized populations (Hawes et al., 2022; Kristel et al., 2021; Nugent & Daugherty, 2023). This knowledge gap starts with pet ownership rates, moves on to research on the human–animal bond, and continues with the effects of pet loss.

Data about pet ownership published by organizations such as the American Pet Products Association and the American Veterinarian Medical Association are broadly aggregated and industry-focused (American Pet Products Association, 2023; American Veterinarian Medical Association, 2022). In addition, while national studies such as the 2018 General Social Survey and the 2021 enumeration of the American Housing Survey included a question about pet ownership (Applebaum, Peek, & Zsembik, 2020; Hawes et

al., 2022), national health surveys such as the National Health Interview Survey (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2023) ask no questions about pets. As a result, obtaining specifics on measurement and sampling design is challenging since industry studies are not constrained by the same rules guiding social science research (Applebaum, Peek, & Zsembik, 2020). The scarcity of high-quality, freely accessible datasets that include information about household pets has historically constrained social science research into human–animal interaction, even though the impact may seem confined to the animal welfare field (Applebaum, Peek, & Zsembik, 2020). Researchers face challenges regarding validity and reliability in human–animal bond research, particularly when studying understudied populations such as African Americans (Nugent & Daugherty, 2023).

### ***Pet Loss and African American Grief in Human Services Practice***

There are unique collaborative opportunities for human services researchers and practitioners to understand pet loss and ethnicity and to examine the human quality of life in connection with the non-human world. The concept of pets being considered as family highlights the importance of the topic of pet loss for professionals across diverse disciplines, such as social work, veterinary medicine, animal care, psychology, family therapy, and clinical healthcare (Applebaum & Zsembik, 2020; Nugent & Daugherty, 2023). To support and nurture the bond between pets and people, health and social services should take a holistic approach to provide service to families that benefit humans, animals, and the environment (Applebaum & Zsembik, 2020; Rauktis & Hoy-

Gerlach, 2020). Consequently, these interdisciplinary implications make the human–animal bond and understanding of pet loss significant for use within human services.

The overlap between the social work and veterinarian professions is a valuable starting place for understanding collaborative opportunities in the context of the human–animal bond and pet loss within human services. In certain situations, a veterinarian’s counseling abilities may be adequate in assisting bereaved pet owners with grief following euthanasia, but there may be cases, such as prolonged grief situations, where pet owners need additional support (Bussolari et al., 2018; Cooney et al., 2021). Pet owners experiencing these situations might turn to social workers who have received grief and loss theory training to assist during their pet’s disease and illness and with the treatment decision-making process (Arkow, 2020; Loue & Vincent, 2021). There is a growing need for social workers and other mental health professionals to acquire knowledge and engage with the complexities of pet loss (Whipple, 2021) and other intersecting factors such as race and ethnicity (Matthews et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2022).

The field of veterinary social work serves as an emerging discipline that effectively connects the domains of veterinary care and social work within human services. Veterinary social work as a discipline was established by Dr. Elizabeth Strand, founding director of the veterinary social work certificate program at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville (Arkow, 2020; Loue & Vincent, 2021). According to Arkow (2020), veterinary social work is a practice that fosters and deepens interdisciplinary collaborations that address the interface of humans and animals. The discipline includes four distinct areas demonstrating these collaborations: animal-assisted therapy, animal-

related grief and bereavement, compassion fatigue, and the connection between human and animal mistreatment (Loue & Vincent, 2021).

The veterinary social work discipline aligns with the one health framework discussed previously. As a result of the one health model, veterinary social workers can help clients across a spectrum of animal-related issues, including pet loss. The veterinary social worker can be with the bereaved pet owner when the animal is euthanized or dies naturally, giving the individual space to grieve and facilitate coping (Loue & Vincent, 2021). Because of the disenfranchised nature of pet loss, social workers can provide opportunities for grieving pet owners to validate their feelings, memorialize their pets, resolve guilt, and find closure (Whipple, 2021). For example, veterinary social workers could establish support groups focused on pet loss. Professionals can provide a supportive environment that promotes understanding, validation, and long-term well-being by characterizing the grief process as normative and comparable to a human death (Lavorgna & Hutton, 2019).

The fields of psychology and mental health are intricately connected to the wider realm of human services, with both disciplines focusing on the welfare of individuals and families. Within this context, a particular focus exists on understanding the effects of pet loss on the many groups these services cater to. Psychology is well-positioned to provide comprehensive insight into human behavior related to the human–animal bond (C. Green et al., 2018). Mental health practitioners should be aware of individual differences in how pets can affect mental health symptoms (Hawkins et al., 2021). Counselors and therapists should develop greater self-awareness and understanding when dealing with people who

have lost a pet (Lavorgna & Hutton, 2019). Counselors specializing in pet grief may motivate bereaved pet owners to follow through with treatment after their pet's loss (Leonhardt-Parr & Rumble, 2022).

Human services clinicians and practitioners must demonstrate cultural awareness while addressing the grieving process for African Americans. For example, to effectively address grief in psychology or social work, it is important to consider the immediate cause of loss and the historical context surrounding the experience of African American individuals and communities (Moore et al., 2022). Culturally, African Americans often see more death throughout their lifespans and experience it earlier in their lives than Whites. This exposure to death is a unique stressor that adds to racial health disparities where many African American adults and families are disadvantaged (Wilson & O'Connor, 2022). Therefore, it is important to consider including a bereaved individual's environmental support system in professional practice, mainly when dealing with African American individuals who have experienced loss (Moore et al., 2022). Although this approach may differ from the norms of the majority culture, it can play a vital role in helping the bereaved navigate their grief.

### **Health Equity Through Pet Loss Research**

In addition to implications for human services research and practice, the African American perspective on pet loss has health equity consequences. Health inequalities are avoidable, unnecessary, and unjust inequities in health outcomes driven by health disparities influenced by structural racism and inequalities in economic, social, and environmental resources (Chinchilla et al., 2022). As discussed previously, the related

factors of systemic discrimination and oppression cause African Americans to experience disproportionate grief and loss, and bereavement has particularly been referred to as an African American health disparity (Wilson & O'Connor, 2022). Moreover, the death of a loved one has been widely established as a substantial stressor that impairs health, but the impact can be particularly harmful to African Americans. Frequent and early life course exposure to death is specific to African Americans, with lasting effects on relationships and health. African Americans, for instance, are much more likely than Whites to have lost a mother, father, or sibling by midlife (Wilson & O'Connor, 2022). Researchers have yet to examine the potential influence of the African American experience, which encompasses various manifestations of grief, through the unique phenomenon of pet loss. Even though losing a pet is different from losing a human loved one, knowing the social factors affecting African Americans' health can help move research toward a more complete truth.

Significant health disparities have highlighted the need for a complete understanding of the social determinants of health in the pursuit of health equity. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, social determinants of health are the conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live, and age, as well as the more extensive set of forces and systems that shape the conditions of daily life. (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). Furthermore, mental health, a common issue when dealing with the effects of grief, can present additional complications. Social determinants of health interrelated with other environmental factors can drive mental health disparities, contributing to health inequities (Barksdale et al.,

2022). The social determinants of mental health could include housing instability and poor quality, unemployment, and other living conditions that contribute to the likelihood of a person of color developing a mental illness (Prokosch et al., 2022).

To address these disparities, researchers need to intentionally shift their research focus to include historically underrepresented groups, such as African Americans, in research that has historically been based on predominantly White samples, such as in pet loss research. The National Institute on Minority Health has developed the health disparities research framework that illustrates a diverse set of health determinants important for understanding and addressing minority health and health inequalities (National Institutes of Health, 2022). The framework is a way to encourage research that addresses the complex and multifaceted nature of minority health and health disparities through domains of influence over the life course and levels of influence that impact health outcomes (Alvidrez et al., 2019). Examples of domains of influence include biological, behavioral, physical, sociocultural, and healthcare environments, and different levels of influence can consist of individual, interpersonal, community, and societal factors within those domains (Alvidrez et al., 2019). This framework includes general social determinants and determinants specific to mental health to encourage a more holistic perspective of inequalities.

Based on this concept, researchers should approach research projects examining pet loss outside of the dominant culture's limited silos and through the perspective of a diverse culture and society. The National Institute on Minority Health's health disparities research framework offers a thorough yet flexible approach because population health

factors might vary over time (National Institutes of Health, 2022). Researchers have adapted the framework to include one health as a level of influence and added an interspecies domain of influence over the life course (Morgan et al., 2022). The interspecies domain includes the human–animal bond and pet ownership.

Similar to the inquiry into human interactions at the interpersonal level under the original framework, the adapted interspecies level explores the dynamics between humans and animals throughout the domains of influence, with pet ownership falling within the category of behavioral relationships. For example, in a study that identified a correlation between dog ownership and owner obesity (Bjørnvad et al., 2019), there could be an opportunity for health professionals and veterinarians to collaborate and distribute educational material about pets and potentially reach underprivileged communities that may distrust the medical establishment (Morgan et al., 2022). Including the one health approach in the expanded National Institute on Minority Health’s health disparities framework can create new opportunities for exploration, promote collaboration across disciplines, and lead to better health outcomes and reduced health inequities.

### **Methodological Framework**

This study sought to understand how African Americans experienced pet loss through a qualitative phenomenological approach. As a researcher, I embrace the constructivist philosophy, where qualitative research methods align with the belief that realities are diverse and rooted in individual perceptions (Burkholder et al., 2020). Constructivism embodies a perspective where individuals actively seek to understand the world in which they operate. In this worldview, research endeavors prioritize the



perspectives of study participants (Creswell, 2007). Furthermore, researchers acknowledge the influence of their own backgrounds on their interpretations and position themselves within the research process to acknowledge how their interpretations are shaped by personal, cultural, and historical experiences. Moreover, the constructivist worldview finds expression in phenomenological studies, where individuals articulate their lived experiences (Creswell, 2009). This study employed a qualitative inquiry with a phenomenological approach to enrich the understanding of grief responses following pet loss, particularly focusing on the African American experience of human-pet bereavement.

Additionally, previous studies on pet loss have employed qualitative designs, recognizing the importance of exploring emotions and coping mechanisms after pet loss (Bussolari et al., 2018; McKinney, 2019). For instance, McKinney (2019) utilized a qualitative method to investigate how pet owners cope with emotions following pet loss, contributing to psychology literature and emphasizing grief work post-pet loss. Additionally, Bussolari et al. (2018) made contributions to psychology literature as well as social work, nursing, and veterinary science through an integrated qualitative analytic design that examined bereaved pet owners after making euthanasia decisions. Their study focused on grief responses subsequent to the euthanasia decision and noted limitations regarding the predominantly White female sample. My study qualitatively contributed and expanded knowledge in these interdisciplinary research areas, broadening the inquiry of grief work into adaptation and coping with pet loss while addressing the limitations of African American participation in research studies on this topic.

There are also methodological issues with the concepts of African American grief and African Americans' relationships with animals. A 2017 review examining African American samples in grief research found that less than 5% had an African American sample, with most studies focusing on homicide-related losses and comparisons between African American and White grief experiences (Granek & Peleg-Sagy, 2017). Consequently, contemporary literature about African Americans and grief remains scarce. Furthermore, research on African Americans in relation to pets or animals is limited. Since my study did not aim to generalize the African American grief experience or the African American experience of pet ownership, using a qualitative approach positioned this study to provide participant narratives that could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of understudied phenomena.

Finally, it is hoped that this research will contribute to the empirical validation of DPM as the conceptual framework. Previous validation of the model has predominantly been examined through quantitative studies focusing on data collection via surveys and intervention programs (Eisma et al., 2022). However, Fiore (2021) advocated for the need for qualitative studies to provide a holistic view of the DPM. Specifically, qualitative research can offer insights into the concept of oscillation, facilitating a better understanding of the depth, frequency, and extent to which the oscillation between loss- and restoration-oriented coping occurs. This study's qualitative inquiry into loss-oriented coping (grief work), restoration-oriented coping (including mourning), and oscillation (including time after loss and adaptation) can be positioned as a qualitative addition to the DPM's validation. Consequently, this study, using a qualitative approach, is poised to

contribute to the interdisciplinary knowledge base of human services research in an inclusive and equitable context, furthering the understanding the meaning of pet loss and how the context of African American adult life and history underscores loss adaptation.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

In Chapter 2, I explored the literature concerning the various facets of comprehending pet loss grief experiences among African Americans. The literature review spanned from fundamental grief concepts to the potential for advancing health equity through research and practice in this field. This chapter first delved into the core concepts of grief and bereavement, providing insights into the emotional and psychological aspects of the grieving process. I also delineated the conceptual framework as the DPM, specifically applying it to the context of pet loss within the African American community. Furthermore, the literature review explored the distinct grief experiences within the African American cultural environment, considering historical, familial, and community influences on how grief is perceived and expressed. This offered a cultural lens for understanding pet loss grief. The section on pet ownership underscored the emotional bonds, companionship, and therapeutic roles of pets, which are essential for comprehending the significance of pets in the context of pet loss. Lastly, the literature review addressed the intersection of African Americans and pet loss, highlighting implications for human services and research, such as mental health support and the broader pursuit of health equity within this context.

Researchers encounter a significant gap in the literature when considering the underexplored issue of disenfranchised grief responses and stigma following pet

bereavement within the African American community. While literature acknowledges the legitimacy of pet loss, society often stigmatizes or dismisses this experience of grief, perpetuating disenfranchised grief. Additionally, the complexities of grief within the African American context remain largely undocumented, with no studies exploring pet loss in this community. This study added to the literature by acknowledging the cultural relevance of pet loss within the African American community. Addressing this literature gap brings to light a facet of grief that has long been overlooked. Moreover, in recognizing and addressing this research gap, it becomes evident that research into pet loss among African Americans has the potential to inform broader health equity initiatives. Collaborative efforts between multidisciplinary researchers and professionals in human services have the power to generate knowledge that can shape the development of public health policies, programs, and practices.

Chapter 3 will present specifics on the proposed research design for this qualitative study, the justification for the design choice, the researcher's role, the recruitment process, instrumentation, data collection, data analysis, participant protection, and a summary are presented.

## Chapter 3: Research Methods

### Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the methodology and research design used for this study. The purpose of this qualitative study was to improve the understanding of grief responses after pet loss through an exploration of African Americans' experiences of human–pet bereavement. Exploring African Americans' experiences of grief through a qualitative approach will enhance the existing knowledge of individual grief responses following pet loss. A qualitative approach offers insights into African Americans' grief, focusing on aspects of disenfranchisement and stigma following the loss of a pet. For this study, I used a phenomenological approach to gain a deeper understanding of African Americans' experiences of the human–animal bond and pet loss and to provide insight into the perspective of this historically marginalized and underresearched group. This chapter provides the rationale for selecting a qualitative phenomenological research design, the role of the researcher, methodology, data analysis plan, considerations for trustworthiness, and ethical concerns.

### Research Design and Rationale

The following research question guided this study: What is the meaning of grief for African American pet owners who have experienced pet loss? Animals have historically been important to humans in various ways, but their importance has often been highlighted because of their label as *pets* or *companion animals* (Kristel et al., 2021). The human–animal bond represents a relationship between individuals and their pets that can impact human emotional, psychological, and physical health (Janssens et al.,

2021). While past research has explored the human–animal bond through pet ownership, empirical results have been inconsistent. The experience of pet loss, coupled with considerations of race and culture, complicates this relationship, especially for historically marginalized groups like African Americans (Applebaum et al., 2021).

This qualitative inquiry used a phenomenological approach to enhance the understanding of grief responses following pet loss, specifically focused on African Americans' experiences of human–pet bereavement. As the chosen qualitative approach, phenomenology is particularly suitable for understanding how individuals make sense of their lived experiences in their own words (Dodgson, 2023). This study aimed to uncover the meaning of pet loss for African Americans from the internal perceptions of the human experience. In phenomenology, perception is considered the primary source of scientific knowledge (Moustakas, 1994) and cannot be questioned, which aligns with the study's purpose. Phenomenology aims to get to the essence of the concept being studied (Moustakas, 1994). The explored concept can also be described as a human experience, such as a human's experience with or losing their pet.

Phenomenology, rooted in the work of early philosophers like Kant and Descartes, focuses on perception and experience to provide a detailed account of phenomena (Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, Edmund Husserl's contributions to phenomenology have influenced its application as a scientific method, emphasizing essence and intuition in empirical research (Husserl, 1960). As a field of philosophy, phenomenology seeks to provide a detailed account of phenomena, specifically focusing on how things are perceived and experienced (Cudjoe, 2023). Moustakas (1994) noted

that Husserl, Kant, and Descartes align their views of foundational knowledge, which precedes empirical knowledge and is rooted in essence and intuition. By applying ideas such as intentionality and pure essence in empirical research, phenomenology, as a qualitative research method, often draws inspiration from phenomenological philosophy (Cudjoe, 2023).

The qualitative phenomenological research design of this study was based on Clark Moustakas' practical approach to phenomenological research. Moustakas (1994) highlights the importance of uncovering the complete essence, exploring qualitative behavioral aspects, actively involving participants, avoiding predictions and causal determinations, and relying on multifaceted descriptions.

### **Moustakas' Major Processes of Phenomenological Research**

Moustakas (1994) stated that phenomenology prioritizes describing experiences over explanations or analyses. The phenomenological approach requires researchers to explain a phenomenon by grasping its meanings and essences through intuition and self-reflection (Moustakas, 1994). This dedication to describing experiences is rooted in key phenomenological concepts: intentionality, noema, noesis, and intuition. Researchers conducting phenomenological research must understand these concepts to reveal the essence of lived experiences.

Intentionality, a core element of phenomenology, signifies an individual's conscious relationship with the natural world (Dodgson, 2023; Moustakas, 1994; Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). The natural world represents various perceptions, emphasizing that all conscious activities are directed toward something in the world. Intentionality

involves two interconnected concepts: noema and noesis. *Noema* refers to the perceptual meaning of an experience as it appears to an individual, influenced by factors like time, background, or judgment (Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, *noesis* represents the interpretation of an intention directed toward the experience (noema). In the noesis, meanings may not be apparent and require acknowledgment and discovery (Moustakas, 1994). Integrating both concepts is essential to describing meanings and uncovering the essence of an experience.

Intuition, another foundational concept in phenomenology, is the starting point for understanding human experience (Moustakas, 1994). Examining lived experiences, rather than deducing meanings from facts, allows for intuition to guide the researcher (van Manen & van Manen, 2021). Intuition guides researchers to gain an intrinsic understanding of what it might be like to undergo the studied phenomenon, fostering a personal grasp of the lived experience (Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). Consequently, intuition plays a crucial role in describing lived experiences. To reach these descriptions, Moustakas (1994) outlines four processes for phenomenological researchers: (a) epoché, (b) phenomenological reduction, (c) imaginative variation, and (d) synthesis.

### ***Epoché***

Epoché, a Greek term, refers to preparing for new knowledge by relinquishing preconceptions, biases, and judgments, enabling a fresh perspective on things, people, and events (Moustakas, 1994). It involves reflecting on and becoming aware of thoughts and feelings about a phenomenon, setting them aside for a renewed view (Moustakas, 1994). The epoché entails giving up natural beliefs to see the world through the



subjectivity of everyday life (van Manen & van Manen, 2021). However, the researcher does not deny all experiences, just the biases of standard knowledge as a foundation of truth and reality (Moustakas, 1994). In a phenomenological epoché, the researcher acknowledges prior beliefs about the phenomenon and then sets them aside in preparation for new descriptions.

### ***Phenomenological Reduction***

Epoché closely aligns with phenomenological reduction, both reflective processes providing insight into the studied phenomenon (van Manen, 2017). However, phenomenological reduction goes further, involving a researcher's purposeful opening to the meaning of a phenomenon (Groenewald, 2004). Reducing a complex topic to its fundamental pieces narrows the researcher's attention to the essential parts (Moustakas, 1994). The deliberate bracketing process achieves this by encapsulating the researcher's inherent attitude toward the world within brackets (like using brackets in math formulas) and subsequently reflecting on it (LeVasseur, 2003; Thomas & Sohn, 2023). Bracketing is an ongoing, dynamic process involving writing memos throughout data collection, interviews with an outside source to bring awareness of biases, and reflexive journaling to identify preconceptions (Tufford & Newman, 2010).

### ***Imaginative Variation***

Imaginative variation aims for researchers to seek interpretations through imagination and varied frames of reference, addressing the phenomenon from different perspectives (Moustakas, 1994). The process involves moving from invariant themes to textural portrayals, describing experiences without yet providing essence, such as

expressed feelings of sadness through grief (Patton, 2015). Following textural portrayals, the analysis includes a structural description, capturing essential elements shared by the group under study. During structural synthesis, the researcher explores emotional aspects of the experience to uncover deeper meanings.

### ***Synthesis of Meanings and Essences***

In the final step, Moustakas (1994) identifies the synthesis of textural and structural descriptions to capture meanings and essences. The researcher integrates the epoché, phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation into an expression of the phenomenon's essence. Essence refers to the structures of meaning or true nature of the lived experience (Cudjoe, 2023; Finlay, 2013). In this synthesis, the researcher explores examples from the data to determine what is unique or essential about an experience (van Manen & van Manen, 2021). Phenomenology aims to understand the concept's essence, such as the human experience of pet loss. This investigation into pet loss within the African American community seeks to explore the true nature of this phenomenon by combining individual experiences to reveal a universal essence.

### **Role of the Researcher**

In this study, I used qualitative methods, excluding instruments or measures typical in quantitative studies. As the qualitative researcher, I was the instrument, making decisions on questions, approaches, observations, and note-taking (Mertens, 2019). With a professional background in data collection and interviews for institutions like NORC at the University of Chicago and the U.S. Census Bureau, I possess expertise in research interviewing techniques, including active listening and probing methods. Although I did

not use quantitative measures, I conducted an exhaustive literature review for inspiration for interview questions during data collection.

### **Phenomenological Inquiry and Personal Context**

Phenomenological inquiry encompasses various aspects of the human experience, from events and objects to thoughts and feelings (van Manen, 2017). Researchers often choose topics based on a personal interest in gaining knowledge through close association with the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). In 2020, I decided to euthanize my pet due to illness, and I identify as an African American adult. Recognizing the potential for bias as a researcher within the target population, I followed structured guidelines, such as the phenomenological concepts of the epoché and phenomenological reduction, to set aside preconceptions.

### **Bracketing and Reflexivity**

As a researcher who has experienced the phenomenon, I embraced the concepts of the epoché and phenomenological reduction through bracketing. Bracketing temporarily suspends old ideas for new perspectives and questions (LeVasseur, 2003). This can significantly improve data collection, study findings, and interpretation, with self-awareness as an ongoing process (Tufford & Newman, 2010). The goal of bracketing is to combine the aspects of setting aside preconceptions about a specific phenomenon with a focus on the essence and structure of the phenomenon to describe and understand it (Gearing, 2004). While I could not separate myself from the fact that I made the decision to euthanize an animal and the fact that I identify as African American, I bracketed my

prior interpretations and perceptions of this experience and culture and maintained curiosity about the phenomenon.

To accomplish bracketing, I used two practical methods used in qualitative studies: reflexive journaling and mindfulness. Reflexivity entails individuals reflecting on their role in shaping specific knowledge or undertaking particular actions (Fischer, 2009). Additionally, reflexive journaling involves keeping a written log of reflections throughout data collection or analysis (Tufford & Newman, 2010; Vicary et al., 2017). This activity can also be done before data collection to assist in unpacking past assumptions, beliefs, and understandings in preparation for how participants experience the world (Sinfield et al., 2023). Mindfulness aids reflexivity as a type of bracketing, enhancing nonjudgmental awareness so that curiosity and openness guide the research process (Fischer, 2009; Lemon, 2017; Nicholls, 2019).

## **Methodology**

### **Participant Selection**

According to Creswell (2007), individuals eligible for a phenomenological study must be able to articulate their lived experiences with the phenomenon under investigation. This study specifically targeted adults who identify as Black or African American and have experienced the loss of a pet. The inclusion criteria were as follows: (a) age, Participants must have been 18 years of age or older; (b) ethnicity, participants must identify as Black or African American; (c) experience, participants must have experienced the death of one or more pets they considered their own; (d) timeframe, the

loss of the pet(s) could have happened at any time during the participant's adulthood, beginning at age 18 or later.

While dogs and cats are the most common household pets, eligible individuals included those who have experienced the loss of unconventional animals, such as birds, rabbits, and guinea pigs. Individuals who have experienced the loss of household animals designated as therapy, service, or emotional support animals were also included if applicable. Exclusion criteria were African American adults who experienced the loss of animals they may have considered their own but only served as therapy animals within institutional settings and pet loss during childhood (17 years of age or younger).

### ***Sampling Strategy***

For this study, I used purposeful sampling to select participants. Qualitative research often focuses on deliberately chosen relatively small samples to facilitate in-depth investigation and comprehension of a phenomenon (Patton, 2015). Unlike quantitative research, where generalization is emphasized, purposeful sampling in qualitative research prioritizes information-rich, illuminating cases for inquiry. This sampling strategy entails intentionally selecting participants based on specific characteristics that enable a comprehensive examination of the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2007). Therefore, purposeful sampling was utilized to choose participants with characteristics conducive to thoroughly examining the phenomenon.

Patton (2015) outlined various strategies and sub-strategies for purposeful qualitative research sampling. One such strategy is group characteristics sampling, aiming to establish a group of cases that provide opportunities for information-rich data

collection and analysis. These information-rich cases can unveil significant group patterns (Patton, 2015). For this study, I adopted a homogenous sampling strategy, a subset of the group characteristics sampling strategy described by Patton (2015). Homogenous sampling, commonly employed by phenomenological researchers (Frost, 2011), entails selecting cases that exhibit a high degree of similarity to analyze the shared characteristics among them (Patton, 2015).

### *Sample Size*

For this study, the target sample size was 12 participants. The rationale for this choice was informed by a combination of recommendations from literature (Guest et al., 2006; Mason, 2010), general guidelines (Creswell, 2007), and the concept of saturation (Morse, 1995, 2000). In qualitative research, it is crucial to prioritize quality over quantity when determining the sample size (Koerber & McMichael, 2008). Unlike quantitative research, where generalizability is essential, qualitative research focuses on the value of the data, credibility, and available resources, resulting in substantially smaller sample sizes (Gill, 2020; Patton, 2015; Staller, 2021). Additionally, phenomenological research, characterized by extensive interactions between researchers and participants through in-depth interviewing, typically involves smaller sample sizes than other qualitative approaches (Dodgson, 2023).

Understanding saturation is essential in qualitative research, where data collection becomes unnecessary when no new issues or themes emerge (Tight, 2023). Initially introduced in grounded theory as theoretical saturation, the term has evolved into data (or thematic saturation) for other qualitative methods, such as phenomenology (O'Reilly &

Parker, 2013). Saturation is reached when the collected data becomes repetitive, indicating that further data collection is not warranted (Hennink et al., 2017). Estimating the required number of participants to achieve saturation depends on factors such as data quality, study scope, the information obtained from each participant, and the number of interviews (Morse, 2000).

In a qualitative study investigating data saturation, Guest et al. (2006) found that six interviews were adequate for developing meaningful themes and useful interpretations, with complete thematic discovery occurring after collecting data from 12 participants. The researchers argued that interview structure, focused content, and participant homogeneity were factors driving the choice of 12 participants. The target sample size of 12 participants for this study aligns with the qualitative saturation literature. In this study, interviews followed a semistructured interview protocol, focusing on a specific phenomenon (pet loss), and the sample consisted of a racially homogeneous group (African American adults) without comparison to other groups. While the target sample size was 12 individuals, adjustments were made based on ongoing data collection and analysis to ensure saturation was achieved.

### **Instrumentation**

Researchers typically conduct long interviews in phenomenological examination to extract a comprehensive narrative of an individual's experience (Moustakas, 1994), commonly known as in-depth qualitative interviewing. During these interviews, researchers interact with individuals possessing relevant knowledge or experience related to the research problem (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). This engagement facilitates thoroughly

exploring participants' experiences, contributing to a broader understanding of diverse perspectives. Within the realm of in-depth qualitative interviewing, the semistructured interview, a subtype, involves the researcher focusing on a specific topic, preparing predetermined questions, and incorporating additional follow-up questions during the conversation (Rubin & Rubin, 2011).

In a phenomenological study, Moustakas (1994) recommends utilizing a pre-established general interview guide, known as an interview protocol. For this study, a semistructured interview protocol with open-ended questions gathered detailed information from participants (see the appendix). The initial emphasis was to establish rapport before transitioning to study-related questions. The development of questions involved contextualization, understanding of the phenomenon (including descriptive and structural questions), and clarification of the phenomenon through imaginative variation (Bevan, 2014; Moustakas, 1994). Probing techniques were consistently applied throughout the interview for neutral clarification and understanding.

### **Procedures for Recruitment, Participation and Data Collection**

This study targeted adults who identify as Black or African American and have experienced the death of one or more pets they considered their own. Participants were recruited from cities in the Midwest Region, specifically within Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin. Approval to recruit participants for this study was received from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). In designing the recruitment plan, factors such as communication, participant interest, value, trust, and availability were considered (Bonisteel et al., 2021). To communicate the research study,



a recruitment email and recruitment flyer were developed using templates provided by the Walden University IRB, containing essential information about the study.

Internet-based and social media research recruitment has become increasingly popular due to overarching challenges in research, such as time constraints, cost considerations, low response rates, and the need to access a broader population (Chambers et al., 2020). Consequently, the recruitment flyer was posted on social media platforms like Facebook, LinkedIn, Instagram, and Reddit. All recruitment materials featured my contact information and a link/QR code directing to a brief screener questionnaire. This screener questionnaire collected prospective participants' email addresses and included questions to establish whether individuals met the study's criteria.

In addition to social media, I received approval to utilize the Walden University participant pool and respondent.io, an online platform connecting researchers with willing research participants. Outreach extended to primary contacts of affiliated animal interest organizations, such as the Human–Animal Interaction Section of the American Psychological Association, International Society for Anthrozoology, CARE, and the HABRI. Permission was requested to share information about the study in these organizations' newsletters or on their social media. Publicly available resources on the Pet Loss Support Page (Allen, 2023) were also utilized, which involved contact with virtual support groups in each desired sample state using the recruitment email and requesting permission to distribute or post flyers on their group's website or social media page.

Incentives have proven effective in encouraging recruitment and reducing respondent burden, particularly among minority populations like African Americans (Ndumele et al., 2011; Paskett et al., 2008; Yancey et al., 2006). As such, participants in this study were offered a \$25 Amazon gift card to incentivize their participation.

Interested individuals expressed their willingness to participate by contacting me directly or accessing the online screener questionnaire. Upon confirming eligibility through the screener questionnaire, prospective participants were invited to join the study via email, with phone follow-up if applicable. Subsequently, I sent the informed consent form along with instructions, study details, an estimate of the interview duration, and inquiries about their availability. After obtaining consent, a mutually convenient time was scheduled for the interview. Data collection involved conducting semistructured interviews recorded through Zoom, chosen for its ease of use, cost-effectiveness, data management tools, and security options (Archibald et al., 2019; Gray et al., 2020). The anticipated length of each interview was approximately 45 to 60 minutes.

Participants received a Doodle poll to identify an optimal interview time. Upon agreement, participants were emailed a Zoom link and calendar invite for the interview. The interview protocol was structured with procedural, opening, content, and concluding components to ensure a comprehensive and respectful process (Billups, 2021). The procedural phase introduced the study, outlined the interview's purpose, explained participant selection, shared general sampling information, reiterated informed consent, and addressed confidentiality. This phase also allowed for addressing any general questions participants may have had. The opening segment included open-ended, general

questions to establish trust, build rapport, and provide context for more detailed questions. The content component comprised of the core interview questions involving specific, complex inquiries to elicit thick, rich, descriptive stories from participants. Probes and detailed follow-up questions were integrated to enhance the depth of responses. The concluding component aimed to effectively end the interview, involving a sequence of questions for interviewee debriefing, summarizing key points, and providing participants an opportunity for final thoughts or reflections.

### **Data Analysis Plan**

I used a thematic analysis approach to comprehensively understand the data collected in the interviews and effectively explain participants' experiences. Thematic analysis is a qualitative analysis technique with broad applicability across many epistemologies and research questions (Nowell et al., 2017). This method involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In phenomenology, thematic analysis specifically focuses on the lived experiences of participants, grounded in the data obtained from interviews, searching for meanings, patterns, and themes (Sundler et al., 2019). The analytical process aligns with the phenomenological processes described by Moustakas (1994), encompassing epoché, phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation, and meaning synthesis. Thematic analysis was particularly suitable for this study, as the systematic generation of themes derived from participant experiences provided a deeper understanding of grief responses resulting from pet loss.

### ***Codes and Themes***

In qualitative research, codes function as symbolic labels attributing meaning to the descriptive data collected during a study (Miles et al., 2020). The coding process involves assigning codes to units of varying levels, ranging from simple, descriptive labels to more intricate ones. Codes encapsulate concise phrases or essences that reflect attributes derived from qualitative interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This process encompasses retrieving, categorizing, and clustering data meanings to address the research question effectively. Coding is the foundation for further analysis, identifying broader themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes, in turn, represent shared, multifaceted meanings patterned throughout a qualitative dataset, brought together by a central organizing concept through the clustering of codes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Codes often represent a distinct or individual significance, while themes encompass more extensive, collective meanings. While codes often signify distinct or individual significance, themes encompass more extensive, collective meanings.

### ***Dedoose Qualitative Data Analysis Software***

Qualitative software tools are crucial in managing data by offering secure storage, coding, retrieval, comparison, and connection (Patton, 2015). While there is debate about using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) in phenomenology, qualitative researchers generally agree that it can be a valuable tool for enhancing the research process (Vignato et al., 2022). For this study, the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software Dedoose assisted in the data analysis process. Developed by Eli Lieber, Thomas Weisner, and Jason Taylor at Sociocultural Research

Consultants LLC. (Salmona et al., 2019), Dedoose is a web-based analytical research tool designed to help researchers organize and analyze various types of research data, including transcribed qualitative interviews. It features a flexible design that aids in data analysis, with the researcher driving the analysis process rather than the software application itself.

The Dedoose project workspace comprises distinct workspaces that were used for this study: codes (housed the codebook with code names and definitions when developed), media (contained uploaded interview transcripts), excerpts (housed coded segments of the data), and memos (stored all project-related memos). Assigning codes in Dedoose involves selecting text to be coded from the interview and assigning the corresponding code from the codebook. Additionally, using the memo workspace in Dedoose allows for organized research documentation. I established four memo groups in Dedoose to categorize documentation throughout analysis: Analytic memos for capturing preliminary interpretations and meanings, reflexive memos for reflexive journaling, methods memos documenting research design issues, and code development memos detailing code evolution. Depending on the context, these memo groups were electronically linked to the transcribed interviews (excerpts or media workspace) and specific codes in the codebook (codes workspace).

### ***Braun and Clarke's Phases of Thematic Analysis***

I used Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) six-step thematic analysis process, utilizing Dedoose as the coding and data management tool for this study's data analysis. Phase 1 involved manually transcribing each recorded interview into Word documents to

ensure accuracy and deidentification. This process aimed to enhance understanding of the data. Subsequently, the transcriptions were uploaded into a Dedoose project workspace tailored for this study. Using the Media workspace in Dedoose, I reviewed each transcription multiple times, making brief notes on analytic insights in analytic memos.

In Phase 2, I generated initial codes from the dataset. Systematic analysis identified segments relevant to the research question, with Dedoose assisting in assigning code labels. Codes were organized using the codes workspace, and relevant text sections in the transcribed interviews were allocated to each code. This phase laid the foundation for thematic analysis by compiling a comprehensive list of identified codes across the dataset. Phase 3 involved searching for themes by examining the initial codes. Emphasis was placed on categorizing groups of codes with shared central concepts, with themes emerging from data analysis. The Dedoose codes workspace, housing the codebook, aided in organizing a consolidated list of potential themes, subthemes, and coded data extracts.

In Phase 4, themes were reviewed to ensure coherence with codes and the entire dataset. The focus was on evaluating coded data extracts and identifying significant shared meaning patterns. The dataset was reexamined to ensure that themes effectively highlighted patterns related to the research question, aiming for a comprehensive understanding of themes, their connections, and the overarching narrative conveyed by the data. Phase 5 involved defining themes to ensure each revolved around a central concept. Reviewing organized data extracts for every theme helped create a logical and consistent narrative, with the goal of clearly describing each theme in a few phrases,

contributing to the overall story addressing the research question. The development of codes and themes were documented in the code development memo group in Dedoose.

The final phase, Phase 6, involved moving to the final analysis and written report. The report presents a compelling story about the dataset, integrating the analytical narrative with vivid data extracts. Examples from the data were used to support analytical points, make sense of the data, and address the study's problem. The final report encompassed the complete dissertation manuscript, ensuring the validity of the analysis through narrative and data extracts.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is essential in evaluating qualitative research, with transparency being its most significant component (Adler, 2022). It serves as a means for researchers to demonstrate to themselves and their readers that the outcomes of their qualitative research are credible and worthy of attention (Nowell et al., 2017). Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that trustworthiness, rather than traditional scientific standards, such as reliability and validity, should evaluate qualitative research (Adler, 2022). Therefore, researchers should evaluate trustworthiness in a qualitative study through considerations of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

#### **Credibility**

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), credibility is a two-step process. First, the research must be conducted to enhance the likelihood that the results will be believed. Second, the results must be substantiated by the creators (participants) of the various realities being studied to demonstrate their credibility. In qualitative research, credibility

is established by demonstrating that the researcher has gathered enough information to understand what participants think, believe, and do (Roulston, 2010). Phenomenological researchers, in particular, must facilitate intensive and free-flowing discussions with participants about the research topic to establish credibility (Collingridge & Gantt, 2019).

This study operationalized credibility using triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking. Triangulation enhances credibility by integrating different data sources (Patton, 2015), including comparing notes and interview observations with the verbatim transcripts and recordings of the interviews throughout the coding and theme phases of the analysis. Peer debriefing involves organizing comprehensive discussions about the findings and progress of the study with an unbiased peer, minimizing bias and validating the honesty and credibility of the findings and interpretations (Morse, 2015; Spall, 1998). Additionally, I engaged several experienced qualitative researchers in unrelated fields from my professional network to conduct a peer debrief for this study. Finally, member checking, or respondent validation involved returning the interview or analyzed data to a participant for validation, verification, or assessment of the credibility of the qualitative results of this study (Birt et al., 2016).

### **Transferability**

In qualitative research, transferability involves generalizing the study's findings to other settings. It determines whether similar concepts within a study can be applied to comparable settings and situations to obtain similar results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I ensured transferability by using rich, thick data to communicate the results in the write-up and report phase of the analysis (Nowell et al., 2017). Rich data provides detailed and



complete descriptions of the experiences described in the study (Maxwell, 1996), allowing the research results to be transferred to other settings with similar characteristics.

### **Dependability**

Dependability emphasizes the research process and the researcher's responsibility to ensure that research procedures are rational, traceable, and documented (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015). In this study, dependability was achieved by recording the logistics of methodological choices and reflections to establish a transparent audit trail of the research process. This was facilitated through the Memo workspace in Dedoose. Specifically, memos were recorded within Dedoose, utilizing the analytic, code development and method memo groups. Within these memo groups, I documented interpretations of meaning, code lists, examples of coded data, code and theme definitions, and the rationale behind design decisions or recommended changes.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability ensures that the researcher's interpretations and findings are directly derived from the data, necessitating a clear demonstration of how conclusions and interpretations were formulated (Nowell et al., 2017). Furthermore, confirmability is achieved through credibility, transferability, and dependability and requires establishing clear connections between assertions, findings, interpretations, and the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015). To establish confirmability in this study, I created a reflexive memos group within Dedoose to document my reflexive journaling through the analysis. Reflexive journaling involves documenting the researcher's reflections on decisions and

choices regarding methodological concerns throughout the study (Morse, 2015). This reflective practice ensured transparency, accountability, and thorough documentation of the research process, thereby contributing to the overall dependability and confirmability of the study.

### **Ethical Procedures**

Qualitative research involves ethical considerations, particularly when dealing with vulnerable participants, sensitive topics, and emotionally charged questions (Potthoff et al., 2023). During data collection and analysis, researchers bear the responsibility of ensuring the well-being of participants and preventing harm to individuals who trust them with their personal stories (Pascoe Leahy, 2022). To address these ethical concerns, IRB scrutinized the research proposal, ensuring that the study followed laws and ethical practices. Informed consent is a cornerstone of ethical research, and each participant in the study received and was required to sign and electronically return a consent form. The consent form comprehensively outlined the study's purpose, procedures, voluntary nature, potential risks and benefits, payment details, privacy assurances, and contact information.

Managing conflict of interest is a critical ethical consideration in research studies. In qualitative research, issues can arise between conflicting roles of the researcher as a practitioner, potentially impacting the integrity of the study (Iphofen & Tolich, 2018). To address this issue in the current study, I refrained from conducting research within my place of employment, with clients, or with individuals with whom I may encounter ethical dilemmas. Additionally, I avoided involving participants in personal or

professional relationships where there may be undue pressure to participate, which could lead to biased responses and compromise data validity.

In research studies, offering incentives to participants can also raise ethical concerns. Monetary incentives have been shown to increase participation rates in qualitative research (Kelly et al., 2017), but determining the appropriate compensation for interviewees involves ethical considerations and impacts data quality (Patton, 2002). It is recommended that researchers carefully consider the amount of compensation to avoid unduly influencing participants' decisions (Burkholder et al., 2020). In this study, participants received a \$25 Amazon gift card as an incentive. However, while participants received an incentive, establishing rapport, gaining trust, and emphasizing the potential social impact of the study were essential for gaining cooperation and mitigating any respondent burden. Participants were clearly informed through informed consent that their participation was voluntary and that the incentive served as gratitude for their time.

Given the sensitive nature of grief and bereavement discussions, participants were informed about the potential emotional impact of the interview content. Researchers commonly employ preparatory techniques, such as a distress protocol, to mitigate potential participant distress (Pascoe Leahy, 2022; Whitney & Evered, 2022). The qualitative research distress protocol (QRDP), developed by Whitney and Evered (2022), was used in this study to evaluate participant sensitivity and manage distress during qualitative interviews. The protocol included the triage pathway, referral resources, and reporting directions, aligning with ethical principles of nonmaleficence, autonomy, and justice.

Ensuring the secure storage and retrieval of all data, from raw data to final study results, requires a systematic data management plan (Miles et al., 2020). Dedoose, the qualitative analysis software chosen for this study, incorporates custom-built data security protocols that are HIPAA-compliant (Salmona et al., 2019). Access to Dedoose requires a username and password known only to me. Interview recordings and transcripts were securely stored on my personal computer, protected by a password and encrypted system password. All data related to the study, including transcriptions, report text, analytic text, coded data, analytic memos, and journals, will be securely stored for 5 years or as instructed by the IRB. After the designated storage period, all data about the study will be permanently destroyed through best data destruction practices, including clearing and purging.

### **Summary**

This chapter outlined the research design for this study, which encompassed sampling, data collection, and analysis strategies. The chosen approach was a phenomenological research design to answer the research question: What is the meaning of grief for African American pet owners who have experienced pet loss? The design was specifically qualitative and phenomenological, following the processes outlined by Moustakas (1994). The study delved into the experience of pet loss through semistructured interviews, employing thematic analysis to derive codes and themes. Dedoose, a qualitative data analysis software, was utilized for effective data management. The chapter also addressed measures for ensuring the study's trustworthiness and

anticipated ethical considerations that could arise during the research. Chapter 4 will delve into the review of the study results.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research study was to improve the understanding of grief responses after pet loss by exploring African Americans' experiences of human–pet bereavement. This study aimed to address a gap in previous research on the human–animal bond and pet loss, particularly in areas lacking ethnic diversity. This research study aimed to address the problem of disenfranchised grief responses and stigma after pet bereavement among African Americans by focusing on the following research question: What is the meaning of grief for African American pet owners who have experienced pet loss? This chapter covers the study setting, demographics, data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and results.

### **Setting**

All interviews were conducted with participants through Zoom. Most respondents chose to activate their video, and my video was always activated. Interviews were conducted in my home office space. I live alone, so there were no human distractions, but I do have two cats that would occasionally provide welcome distractions related to the topic, helping to build rapport with respondents. Some respondents also had pets who would join the video call, further aiding in establishing rapport. Despite the pet visitors, respondents remained focused, acknowledging that they understood the study's purpose and concentrated on answering the interview questions.

My personal and social identities were as a positive rapport builder in this study. I was on video, and I felt that not only did my identification as African American and my

sharing of my experience with euthanizing my pet add to the comfort and eagerness of participants telling their stories, but also seeing a researcher who looked like them contributed to their willingness to share. Several participants expressed gratitude for connecting with another African American to tell their story; one participant even stated, “It’s inspiring to see a Black face doing research.” Many participants indicated that I was the first person they had talked to about their grief over their pets. Several participants began to cry as they described their pet grief, and I responded with the first step of the qualitative research distress protocol by asking if they needed to pause for a moment. Those who did not need a moment confirmed they could continue, and the interview proceeded without incident. Participants who needed a moment paused and then confirmed when they were ready to continue. Each respondent, regardless of their emotional response, was provided with a debrief form that included resources for pet bereavement. Overall, I was surprised by the interest I received for this study, as each participant displayed an eagerness to share their stories about their lost pets.

### **Demographics**

The study included 23 adults who self-identified as Black and/or African American (see Table 1). Through an online screening questionnaire, each participant confirmed experiencing pet loss during their adult life. Ages ranged from 24 to 66, with the majority residing in Illinois, followed by Michigan, and smaller numbers in Indiana, Wisconsin, and Ohio.

Understanding the grief experience requires consideration of interpersonal, personal, and situational factors (Houwen et al., 2010). Therefore, building rapport and

eliciting detailed responses is crucial. Gender and household type were derived from interview responses: 18 participants identified as female and five as male. Household types were categorized using U.S. Census Bureau definitions: *Family households* include at least two related members by birth, marriage, or adoption (with or without children), and *nonfamily households* are individuals without any relatives at home (Hemez et al., 2024).

Participants also shared additional details relevant to the study, including the type of pet lost, duration of ownership, cause of death, and the time elapsed since the loss. Most participants discussed losing a cat or dog, with some reporting multiple pet losses, and one participant described the loss of a bearded dragon (see Figure 1). Most participants had cared for their lost pet for at least 3 years or more (see Figure 2). Illness or euthanasia were the most commonly reported causes of death, with unknown causes and accidents following (see Figure 3). Euthanasia was generally due to prolonged or chronic pet illness, and there was one instance of a pet dying from violence. Lastly, most participants reflected on pets who had died either within 6 months to 4 years before the interview or more than 10 years ago (see Figure 4).



**Table 1***Participant Demographics*

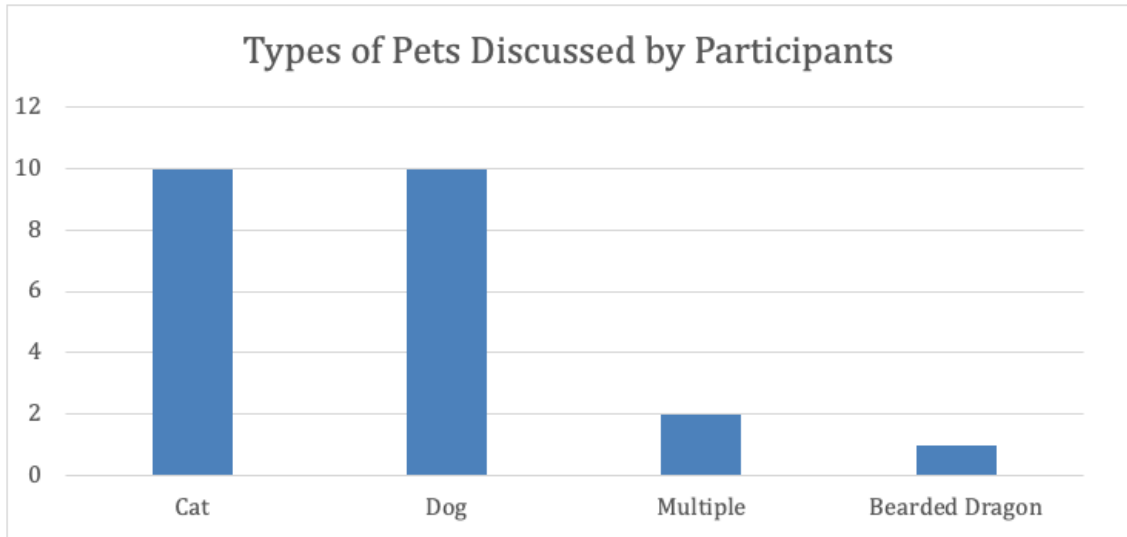
Participant	Age	Gender	Household/household type	State
P1	31	Female	Nonfamily/lives with roommate, partner	IL
P2	45	Female	Family/married, no kids under 18	MI
P3	43	Female	Family/no spouse, with kids under 18	IN
P4	41	Female	Family/married, with kids under 18	WI
P5	57	Female	Nonfamily/lives alone	IL
P6	43	Female	Family/no spouse, with kids under 18	WI
P7	43	Male	Nonfamily/lives with roommate, partner	IL
P8	42	Female	Family/no spouse, with kids under 18	OH
P9	43	Male	Nonfamily/lives alone	MI
P10	51	Female	Family/married, no kids under 18	WI
P11	66	Male	Family/married, no kids under 18	IN
P12	34	Female	Family/married, no kids under 18	IL
P13	60	Female	Nonfamily/lives alone	MI
P14	52	Female	Nonfamily/lives alone	IL
P15	55	Female	Family/married, no kids under 18	IL
P16	27	Male	Family/married, no kids under 18	IN
P17	51	Male	Family/married, with kids under 18	IL
P18	50	Female	Family/married, with kids under 18	MI
P19	40	Female	Family/married, with kids under 18	IL
P20	52	Female	Family/no spouse, with kids under 18	IL
P21	49	Female	Family/no spouse, with kids under 18	IL
P22	24	Female	Family/married, no kids under 18	MI
P23	36	Female	Nonfamily/lives with roommate, partner	IL

*Note.* Gender and household type were extracted from reviewing respondent answers to

interview questions.

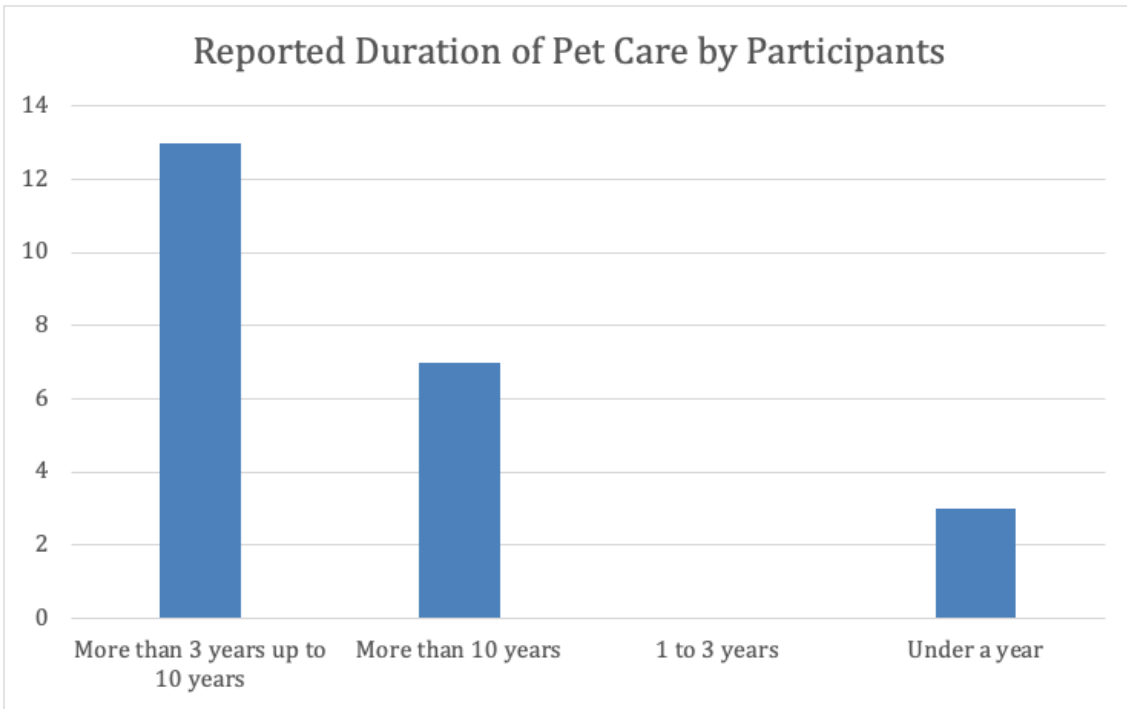
**Figure 1**

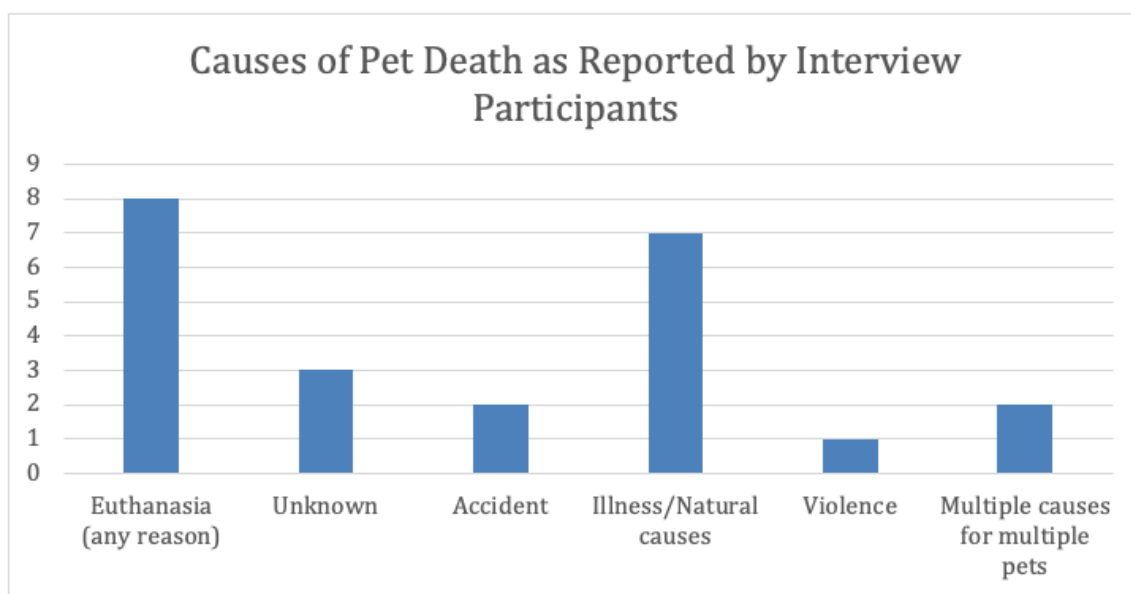
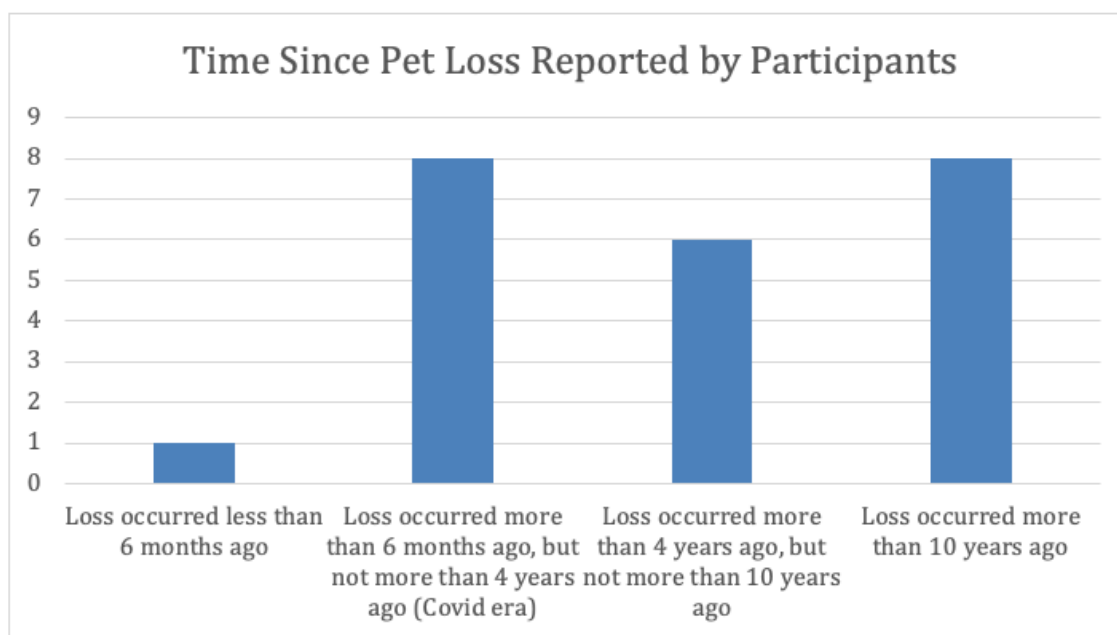
*Types of Pets Discussed*



**Figure 2**

*Duration of Pet Care*



**Figure 3***Cause of Pet Death***Figure 4***Time Since Loss*

### **Data Collection**

I conducted interviews with 23 adults who identified as Black and/or African American and had experienced the loss (through death) of a pet during their adult lives. I received IRB approval to recruit participants from cities in the Midwest, specifically in Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin. The interviews included 11 participants from Illinois, three from Indiana, five from Michigan, one from Ohio, and three from Wisconsin.

The study recruitment flyer was posted on social media sites, such as Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn. I reached out to the moderators of various pet-focused groups on Reddit but did not receive approval to distribute the flyer through that platform. After sending the study recruitment email to primary contacts of animal interest organizations, I received recruitment support through flyer postings on social media pages from the Human–Animal Interaction Section of the American Psychological Association, the International Society for Anthrozoology, and CARE. Additionally, recruitment emails sent to virtual pet loss support group contacts on the Pet Loss page garnered recruitment support from a few group leaders.

The study details were also posted on respondent.io, an online platform connecting researchers with willing participants. This platform proved to be the most impactful source for recruiting participants for this study. The majority of the interviewed participants were found on this platform. Many respondents reported being part of the platform to make a little extra money, as respondent.io is generally geared toward market

research. Some respondents were drawn to the recruitment headline about pet loss, and my study was the only one they participated in on the platform up until that point.

Interested participants completed an online screener to confirm eligibility and were then sent an invitation to participate in the study, along with scheduling information and informed consent. An interview was scheduled only after consent was received and acknowledged. Participants received a reminder email the day before their scheduled interview. Consent was read at the beginning of each interview, and all participants acknowledged their understanding, agreed to continue, and consented to recording. Following each interview, participants received a thank-you email, a participant debrief form, and their incentive.

While I had more interested participants than expected, a few unusual occurrences arose. There were several no-shows, which I anticipated due to my experience in data collection. I used the study's interest level to overschedule interviews to balance out these occurrences.

I initially set a target sample of 12 participants, based on recommendations from the literature (Guest et al., 2006; Mason, 2010) and general guidelines (Creswell, 2007) concerning the concept of saturation (Morse, 1995, 2000). However, by the 12th interview, I had not yet reached saturation due to the diverse data points within the racially homogeneous group of African American adults. Therefore, I continued interviewing until I reached 23 respondents, at which point I believed saturation was achieved.

Another unexpected challenge was dealing with imposter participants, individuals who fabricate or exaggerate their identities or experiences to participate in research. This issue has become more prevalent with the shift to online data collection during the pandemic (Ridge et al., 2023). For example, I encountered a suspicious participant who claimed to be from Chicago during a Zoom interview, where inconsistent responses raised red flags. Being familiar with Chicago, I realized their responses did not align with the local culture, leading me to terminate the interview.

### **Data Analysis**

Twenty-three African American adults who experienced the loss of a pet during their adult lives participated in this study. Semistructured interviews guided by an interview protocol, based on DPM, provided the foundation for exploring their experiences. The DPM served as the conceptual framework, shaping interview questions to capture the nuances of coping and adaptation to loss, encompassing both loss-oriented and restoration-oriented coping, as well as the oscillation between the two. Participants shared their pet loss experiences, describing events surrounding the time of loss, the aftermath, and the cultural and environmental factors that influenced their coping journey.

To capture the lived experiences of the participants, I employed a phenomenological approach, which began with bracketing my own experiences as an African American adult who had chosen to euthanize a pet. Throughout data collection and analysis, I used mindfulness techniques to remain aware of my own biases and engaged in reflexive journaling within the memo workspace in Dedoose before and after

each interview and during each dedicated analysis session. The phenomenological approach was closely aligned with thematic analysis, grounded within the data collected from the interviews, and guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) six-phase thematic analysis framework. Although these phases were distinct and systematic, they required a reflexive mindset and multiple iterations, maintaining an ongoing sense of curiosity throughout the process.

The process began with familiarization as I manually transcribed each recorded interview into Word documents, ensuring accuracy and de-identification. Using the media workspace in Dedoose, I reviewed each transcription multiple times, making brief analytic notes within the analytic memos group. My initial review focused on ensuring transcription accuracy compared to the recordings. In subsequent reviews, I highlighted excerpts relevant to the study's topic, noting insights as they emerged. Finally, I conducted another thorough review, capturing any preliminary analytic observations.

In the coding phase, I systematically generated initial codes by analyzing and identifying text segments relevant to the research question, using Dedoose to assist in assigning code labels within the codes workspace. This phase involved two rounds of coding. The first round resulted in 371 codes across 1,198 text applications, while the second round refined these to 275 codes across 1,500 text segments.

As I moved on to generating initial themes, I conducted a thorough cleanup by merging codes with overlapping meanings, ultimately consolidating them into 239 unique codes. The first round of generating themes led to 38 candidate themes. Several rounds of

assessment followed, ensuring that I was identifying true themes rather than merely topics, a process that continued into the next phase.

The development and review of themes involved further analysis and refinement. I evaluated the candidate themes, omitting those that were merely codes or topics. Analytic memos in Dedoose helped me track emerging patterns and develop initial ideas. Additionally, I used manual mind mapping to conduct another round of analysis, reviewing excerpts to confirm that sufficient content supported each theme. Following Braun and Clarke's recommendations, I assessed theme boundaries, meaningful evidence, and coherence, as well as each theme's relevance to the research question. Ultimately, this iterative process resulted in the identification of eight main themes and 25 subthemes (see Table 2).

Next, I proceeded to refine, define, and name the themes by finalizing and reviewing each theme and subtheme, drafting initial definitions, and making revisions as needed. Drawing on Braun and Clarke's suggestions, I evaluated the central concept, boundary, uniqueness, and overall contribution of each theme to the analysis. These definitions were then recorded in the analysis memo group in Dedoose. The final phase involved writing the report, where in the results section I present the emerged themes and subthemes, integrating participant experiences and ensuring that the narrative accurately captured the essence of their pet loss journeys.



**Table 2***Themes and Corresponding Subthemes*

Themes	Subthemes
Familial bonds and pet relationships	Pet as family member Parent-child relationship Transformation of pet ownership
Anticipatory grief	Acceptance of euthanasia Awareness of pet mortality
Disenfranchised grief	Cultural stigma in pet ownership Social encouragement to replace Fear of empathic failure
Grief confrontation	Guilt and regret Pet afterlife Rituals and memorialization Emotional triggers
Grief avoidance	Attachment anxiety Learned compartmentalization Euthanasia avoidance Transitioning bonds
Post-loss social support	Access to pet bereavement resources Culturally specific support Veterinarian guidance
Grief inequities	Cumulative grief Reoccurring pet loss Situational distress
Spiritual and emotional growth	Faith and resilience Growth in human connections Spiritual connection and transformation

**Evidence of Trustworthiness****Credibility**

Credibility was established in this study through triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking. Throughout the phases of data analysis, triangulation was achieved by taking and reviewing notes, comparing transcripts to recordings, and noting observations from the interviews in the memo workspace in Dedoose. For peer

debriefing, I secured feedback from two experienced qualitative researchers, with whom I met regularly to discuss the design, data collection, and theme development. All interview transcripts underwent member checking, where participants validated their transcripts and provided any necessary feedback for clarification. This process also involved obtaining permission to use their pet(s) names in the report if necessary.

### **Transferability**

Transferability was achieved through a detailed and rich written report of the results. The narratives provided encompass the lived experiences described by the participants, offering rich, thick data that allow for the results to be understood and potentially transferred to other settings with similar characteristics.

### **Dependability**

Dependability was established by recording the logistics of methodological choices and reflections, creating an audit trail of the research process. The memo workspace in Dedoose was utilized from the point of IRB approval through data collection and analysis. Memos were organized into four groups, and insights about the process of data collection, peer feedback, and interpretations were recorded within the code development and analytic memo groups.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability was demonstrated through the documentation of reflexive journaling throughout the study, which also served as an audit trail. I was open and transparent in documenting the research process, including any hindrances, roadblocks,

challenges, and ways to overcome them. All of this is clearly documented within the reflexive memos group in the Dedoose software.

## **Results**

The lived experiences of African American adults who experienced the death of a pet during their adult lives revealed the following main themes among the participants: familial bonds and pet relationships, anticipatory grief, disenfranchised grief, grief confrontation, grief avoidance, post-loss social support, grief inequities, and spiritual and emotional growth. Each theme, along with its corresponding subthemes, is discussed below, supported by verbatim excerpts from participant interviews, reflecting the research question: What is the meaning of grief for African American pet owners who have experienced pet loss?

### **Theme 1: Familial Bonds and Pet Relationships**

Participants expressed the deep emotional connections that adults form with their pets, emphasizing the evolving role of pets as integral family members or even as surrogate children. Participants highlighted how anthropomorphism and the perception of reciprocal love significantly impacted the intensity of grief they experienced after a pet loss. Central to this theme is the multifaceted meaning pets hold, not only as companions but as cherished family members who contribute to the family's emotional dynamic. P19 reflected on the unique familial bond and relationship she had with her cat Sugar:

I love all my cats, but what people be trying to figure out is like, how do you have individual love for them? Because they all have different traits. Sugar was my pregnancy partner. And she was my pregnancy partner through two babies. And I

was hoping that she would be there for my last baby... So you know it took me a while. Yeah, it took me a while. That was our thing. She had got pregnant, and I got her fixed and I was fixed too. So we was good to go [laughter].

***Subtheme: Pets as Family***

This subtheme captured the experiences of participants who viewed their lost pets as integral members of their family unit. Participants reflected on how their pets were treated with the same level of affection, care, and emotional significance typically reserved for human family members. P22 reflected on the specific nuances of her cat Tiger, as part of the African American family:

So I think it's really your understanding of how much you value life. Because some African Americans were like, oh, it died. Move on. Right, but there are some of us that actually kind of see our pets as part of the family. We may not actually say it. We may not say like, 'Hey, I love this pet, and this pet is part of the family.' Yeah, but if it's stolen or it's passed, and you're like, yeah, actually, you're feeling that sense of loss and grief. Every now and then, you'll see, like, I'm kind of like fussing at the cat, like it's an actual child... You kind of enter that family mode to deal with it... I yelled at him the same way I yell at my siblings, but I still loved him like he was a sibling. And I think that's just a cultural thing, you know. If you're under the same roof as somebody or any living thing for an extended period of time, you have to love them and treat them as family.

***Subtheme: Parent–Child Relationship***

This subtheme highlights how participants often viewed their pets as their children, using terms such as “baby,” “kid,” or “child” and identifying themselves as pet parents. P5 shared about her dog Snuggles:

Oh, Snuggles was the prima donna. So, like, I didn’t have any kids, so he was my baby. So whenever I would travel a lot, he would go to the best of the best. He would be at like resorts where they, like, had swimming pools and popsicles and, peanut butter jelly sandwiches and they had cameras and they would be taking pictures and filming him and he would have the best of the best of everything. I really considered him like my little boy.

***Subtheme: Transformation of Pet Ownership***

This subtheme reflects the evolving nature of pet ownership within families over time. Pet owners whose losses occurred more than 10 years ago acknowledged that pet ownership and the experience of pet loss have changed, becoming more recognized in contemporary times compared to past generations. P14, who lost her cat Bentley in 2000, stated:

I think pet ownership was different then than it is now. Like people are out here getting like steps for the cat and scratch pads for the cat. And yeah I didn’t do any of that stuff. You know, again, like this was before social media. Like, I think I probably would have coped better if I had, you know, fun cat videos to laugh at.

**Theme 2: Anticipatory Grief**

Participants expressed their pet loss experience in terms of grieving in advance, as they became aware that their pet's life was nearing its end. This grief often unfolded gradually, beginning when pet owners noticed signs of their pet's decline, such as changes in behavior, appetite, or health. While anticipatory grief is commonly associated with human terminal illness, it also emerged as a significant factor in pet owners' experiences, reflecting the emotional process of preparing for an inevitable loss. P21 reflected on watching her cat Princess decline in health:

I noticed she wasn't eating, and therefore she wasn't drinking water. And then I took her to the doctor, and they just let me know how old she was, and they gave me this food to, like, push in her mouth. She was rejecting it. And, so I just knew it was about to happen because she was literally shrinking in front of me, like she wasn't eating or drinking. And then, one day she just, died from naturally from just not eating. And, I put her in a box.

P2 described the anguish when her cat Ted began his health decline:

But I remember he stopped using the litter box. And I read up on it and it's like when they do that, they might be trying to tell you ... something's wrong. Like they want you to see something. So, I kept their litter boxes in my guest bathroom. And one day I went into the guest bathroom, and he didn't use the litter box. He went on the bathroom on the floor, and he had a bloody stool. And I'm not going to lie, I just went to pieces. I was like, 'Oh my God, like, what's wrong with him?' So, I called my wife all hysterical like 'Something wrong with Ted.

His stool is bloody.’ I’m kind of telling the story calm, but I was like hysterical when I called her like he has a bloody stool ... She’s trying to calm me down. Like calm down. I’m not really a person that lose it like that. But I lost it because it’s my baby.

***Subtheme: Acceptance of Euthanasia***

Participants delved into the emotional journey and conscious deliberation involved in deciding to euthanize their pet. They expressed the complex feelings of responsibility, compassion, and acceptance in making this difficult decision to end their pet’s suffering. P6 reflected on the experience she shared with her mom as a young adult with their cat Lucky:

And I remember on one occasion, I was petting him under his neck, and I noticed this knot. So my mom took him to the vet, and the vet started just flat out and was like, ‘You guys have had a very long time with Lucky.’ And we knew, we knew then what was about to happen. So it’s like Lucky’s lived a very long life, and my mom lost it. So he’s like, ‘You have the decision. We can try removing the tumor,’ and of course, that was going to be extremely expensive ... so we just we made the decision because he’s like, ‘We can remove it, but it’s still a possibility that he can get sick or something could spread’ ... She didn’t want him to suffer because they explained to us that it’s going to get more painful. Um, and so she decided to put him down.

***Subtheme: Awareness of Pet Mortality***

Participants talked about the realization that their pet's lifespan was limited. Despite the inevitability of saying goodbye, they found that the experience of loving and forming a bond with their pet was profoundly meaningful, even with the knowledge that this love would one day come to an end. P11 stated: "I've always liked pets, but my mom would not allow us to have a pet. So it was the most difficult thing though about the pets is they had a short lifespan, and that just drove me crazy."

**Theme 3: Disenfranchised Grief**

Participants shared the unrecognized or unsupported experience of grief after pet loss, particularly in the context of identifying as Black and/or African American. This theme reflected the lack of empathy or validation from social support systems, which made the grieving process more isolating. Participants also highlighted the cultural influences that contributed to this stigma and how the grief they experienced was often diminished or dismissed, reinforcing a sense of invalidation and amplifying the emotional impact of their loss. P6 shared: "But it is hard. I feel like it's not identifiable or acceptable. You know, you can't grieve your animal like you would grieve a family member, although they are family members." When reflecting on her grief about her cat Ted, P2 expressed:

What I can say is I did I did cry a lot about it. Privately. And it really makes you feel like you're some sort of psychopath because you love something. It's almost like my grieving process for that was mostly done in secrecy because that's what we have to do.



***Subtheme: Cultural Stigma in Pet Ownership***

Participants explored the influence of longstanding cultural beliefs and stereotypes within the African American community regarding pet ownership. P7 talked about pet cat stigma:

You know, but I do think it was a stigma because I didn't know of any African Americans that even had cats. It was something about the cat. And I guess it was, well the little dog can jump on the counter, but the cat can't, no matter how small or how large.

P18 reflected on what she learned culturally about cats:

And that's how I grew up. My grandparents were from the South, so they have a lot of these old adages and how they experience cats and pets. And so, I just said no, I'm going to research it for myself. I'm gonna see for myself. And I absolutely love them. My mom, I could tell she was a little uneasy. But now it's been a few years. So now when she comes to visit, she's like 'what are my grandbabies doing?' (laughs). I crack up so bad. So the stereotype is that cats are sneaky, they are just unpredictable, they're different. You don't get cats. Black people don't, and it wasn't never said, but I could tell. Yeah, my husband neutralized that notion for me. He was like, everybody's experience is different ... And so I became more intentional about my walk as a pet lover.

***Subtheme: Social Encouragement to Replace***

Participants expressed the tendency to receive suggestions from friends and family to replace their lost pet, reflecting an assumption that the bond with a pet is less

significant than a bond with a human family member. They highlighted how this encouragement, despite being perceived as unintentional, minimized their grief experience, implying that the loss was not as profound or irreplaceable. P5 shared that friends encouraged her to replace her dog Snuggles: “Yeah I think it was more like, okay, by now you should have got through this, you know, it’s a dog. Like they’re replaceable. [laughter] Oh, go get another dog and be done with it.”

P1 shared about her cat MJ:

I didn’t realize it until about 2 or 3 weeks later. I ended up having about five kittens ... I felt grieved and I was hurt and everybody was just bringing me cats. And it wasn’t the same, but I don’t think they noticed that it wasn’t the same. So they just like, you like this one? You like this one? (Laughs) Honestly. I wasn’t ready. I understand what their intentions were, but ... I didn’t feel like MJ could be replaced ... Like I wasn’t ready to just jump and act like he was just something that, oh, I lost this one. Just go get another one. Like, um, it doesn’t really work like that for me.

***Subtheme: Fear of Empathic Failure***

Participants reflected on the anxiety of sharing their grief, fearing that it would be met with a lack of understanding or support. This concern often led them to grieve privately, avoiding the potential pain of invalidation. P23 catastrophized the response when she thought about making arrangements for her cat Tommy:

I mean, of course, I didn't ask them, but I think they would have laughed at me if I did a service for my cat. My actual belief is that, yeah, they would have looked at me like, 'You're doing this for an animal?'

P21 shared:

People was like, you didn't tell nobody about them. And I'm like because I didn't want to lose a friend if you did not have this [the appropriate] reaction ... it was like after the fact, like, dang, you should have told me and like, why? Why would I tell you? Because I know, you know, you wouldn't have understood. So me being anticipatory thinking that they're not going to understand, maybe some of them would, but I don't know.

Participant 20 stated about the loss of her cat Sebastian:

I think I did worry sometimes that maybe I would talk to somebody that said, oh he was just a cat. You know get over it. And I didn't want to hear that. So I'm pretty sure that's probably why I didn't want to share with a lot of people because I knew those feelings were out there. And I know that thinking that way myself before I got him, I could kind of understand why.

#### **Theme 4: Grief Confrontation**

Participants shared the active process of engaging with grief, often referred to as grief work, which involved moments when they faced and sat with their emotions, processing the loss and memories of their pet. The experiences of grief confrontation spanned from the initial realization of the loss to moments of remembrance that evoked

the bond shared with their deceased pet. P6 shared the experience of confronting the euthanasia of her pet:

We got to the appointment, and they told us, you know, 'We're going to give him ... his first shot will put him to sleep. The second shot is going to end life.' And so, the one nurse was like, 'Would you like to hold him while I administer the shots?' And I said yeah ... My mom was losing it. She couldn't keep herself together. She's wailing silently but enough to where it's like, oh my gosh ... And then they gave him his final shot, and he just went limp.

***Subtheme: Guilt and Regret***

Participants shared feelings of guilt and regret related to their pet's death. These emotions often stemmed from thoughts about their last interaction, wondering if they could have done more to save their pet, feelings of inadequacy, or not having the chance to say goodbye. P16 shared about the illness that led to his dog Boss's death:

In hindsight, we probably could have done more to help him. Because doing the research on what we think was going on, everything we looked up says that it could have been fixed if caught early enough. So that's in hindsight being 20/20, we probably could have gotten him some help.

***Subtheme: Pet Afterlife***

Participants expressed beliefs in ongoing spiritual connections with their deceased pets, including concepts like pets being in heaven, acting as guardians, or being reincarnated into another pet. P8 shared about their pet bearded dragon, Sandy:

He is around. Definitely around. My oldest [human child] noticed it like, well, we would hear weird rustling, that sound very similar to the way that he used to rustle. So he would eat lettuce and sometimes, he would let his lettuce dry in his cage and then he would start chomping on it and it had a distinct crackle. And like, sometimes we will hear that crackle and I'm like, he is around. I know he is.

P5 acknowledged a spiritual connection from her deceased dog Snuggles through her current dog Simba:

I feel like Snuggles, you know, is here in Simba because ... whereas I didn't get Snuggles from the beginning, from a baby, from a puppy I did with Simba. So I feel like I'm getting the chance to start all over. Brand new.

P4 shared similarly about her dog Andy being spiritually represented in her current dog Moxie:

Honestly, I think that he's right beside me reincarnated in Moxie. I think he's here because there are times where I would get a memory of him out of nowhere and I'd be like, hi, Andy. I know you're here giving me. Yes. Hello. You like you are giving me that memory, right?

P3 shared when reflecting on the possibility of an animal heaven,

Dog heaven looks like just joy. Not what we're dealing with down here. You know, just the everyday nonsense. I think it's just, like, full of flowers and peaceful and, you know, happiness up there, wherever it is. Like Paradise.

P9 shared his spiritual continuing bond with his dog Tyler:

He's in heaven. It's interesting. It's a good thing. Uh, I remember one day. I woke up ... it's like it was a dream. I was sitting on the couch. I was watching TV ... in the place that I was staying in when he passed ... He comes out of the room. He jumps up on the couch. He sits next to me. He puts his right paw on my left leg. I start rubbing his head ... He goes into the room, and I wake up ... I told my mom that, and my mom told me that he was just letting me know that he's fine and it's okay. And he's not in pain no more. That's the way I looked at it. So I feel, I feel he went to heaven. And he's peeing on every bush up there. He's peeing on every bush for the last five years that's what he's been doing and making sure that things are alright. [laughter]

***Subtheme: Rituals and Memorialization***

Participants highlighted how they maintained a continuing bond with their pet through rituals and memorial practices, including decisions regarding the pet's body disposition, preserving items like the pet's belongings, or keeping paw prints as tangible reminders. P10 shared about needing to keep the connection with her dog, Max:

Because for me, with the cremation, that was my way of keeping him with me, um, so although burial did come up when I was at the vet, you know, and discussing those arrangements, I was adamant about the cremation because I did want to keep him with us.

P18 enjoyed reminiscing about how her kids applied cultural flair to the memorialization of Greylen the cat:

And she [her daughter] was like, I think Greylen's been hurt ... I'm running down the stairs ... I'm right here on the sidewalk I go into the middle of the street. And it was him. And she was just like, we can't leave him here. And so she's having a meltdown. I don't know if I did or my son because he heard it too, like her screaming and crying and I think he got a trash bag, picked him up and we took him to the backyard and ... we end up doing ... uh my kids are crazy. I don't know, I think they played the Boyz II Men song "It's So Hard to Say Goodbye." [laughter] I was like, I'm so tired. Black kids in America. I'm done ... So they buried him. And so we got like a little incline or a hill out back, and they put little rocks so we'll know where he is.

***Subtheme: Emotional Triggers***

Participants described various triggers that evoked emotional responses as they navigated their grief, often stemming from memories, reminders, or encounters with similar situations involving other pets. Social media, in particular, played a unique role in this process, where posts, photos, or memories of their deceased pets would unexpectedly resurface, prompting a range of grief responses. P22 shared "And I had a good amount of videos of him and saving all my Snapchat memories. And so every now and then I catch myself going through it and I'm just like, oh, I miss this goofy cat (laughs)." P18 reflected:

Those memories pop up on my phone and I could be talking to my husband. I'd be like, aww...He was like, I don't even want to talk about it. I don't even want to

talk. He just refuses. I mean, I was like, look. Yeah, cute. And he had these yellowish-green eyes. So, so cute. So cute.

### **Theme 5: Grief Avoidance**

Participants expressed the ways they avoided engaging with traditional grief work, recognizing that some level of avoidance could be a natural and necessary part of adapting to loss. They acknowledged culturally influenced behaviors, denial, and coping strategies that helped them distance themselves from their grief, allowing moments of respite and gradual adaptation to the loss. P22 shared:

I think because I just never learned how to process those types of emotions. I spent a good amount of time on the internet, Netflix, just doing whatever I could to not think about it because I needed to step away from the real world.”

P13 reflected:

I don't know if I truly mourned. I think sometimes it's hard because even with our other animals, we never really mourn. I think we just kind of kept it in, you know? I guess I just think it was easier just not to think about it.

#### ***Subtheme: Attachment Anxiety***

Participants addressed their reluctance to confront their grief, often by avoiding reflection or discussion about their pet's death. This included the unwillingness to consider loving another pet in the future due to the fear of experiencing another profound loss. P3 shared her dilemma on moving forward after the loss of her dog, Trina:

Losing her was just, like, destroying me, and I have two children, and although I was so scared of animals, they love animals, so they took it really hard, too, when



the dog passed away. So we're, like, stuck in between. Now, should we get another pet or...do we want it because I'm hearing dogs not expected to have a really, you know, long life. And I'm like, do we want to go through that traumatic experience again?

***Subtheme: Learned Compartmentalization***

Participants expressed the culturally influenced strategies they used to manage their grief, often involving learned behaviors of repressing or compartmentalizing emotions. They referenced messages like “keep it moving,” “remain strong,” or “push through,” which served as coping mechanisms to contain their grief. P17 shared about losing his dog, Eva:

I can't say it's grief right now. So with the death of a family member, I guess I've kind of compartmentalized it the same way as, uh, losing, an uncle or aunt or, you know, a family member. And, uh, I still have memories of them. Or memories of her.

P16 shared:

Specifically, I would say, going back to the moment where I kind of had to separate myself and go upstairs, I feel like that's a bit typical of people in our community, where we just kind of have to spend some time for ourselves and really digest what's going on and decide how to handle it. We'll handle it in different ways...separate ourselves into different extents. Some people separate themselves by, you know, leaving home completely and maybe just going for a

drive for a few hours. Me, I had to go upstairs and, you know, collect myself and collect my thoughts.

P21 stated:

Repress it and act like it didn't happen. Yeah. That's my keeping it moving. Don't talk about it. I think that's the way we cope. I know that's the way I cope. I guess I learned it from my mom. I hadn't seen her cry all my life except for two times...I think I just took after her to just be tough and move on because I mean she says well yeah you can be down but you can't be down for too long. You know, you can cry about it but you still gotta pick yourself up. How long you gonna be down? You know, you dig a hole, dig the hole. How far you got to climb up? Keep it together, keep it moving. So I got it from her.

P7 and P23 shared some of the internal conflict they experienced due to teachings about grief from the Black church, including beliefs about the soul and the appropriateness of grieving for a pet:

So growing up, part of the stigma...and growing up in the church was animals don't have souls. Then I started to question that the older I got because I'm like well then why do they have so much personality? So, I started to question that...studying the Bible. And I'm like, I was looking for that. Like, where does it say pets don't have souls? So I changed my perspective...I got rid of that...well, animals don't have souls to...there may be another life. There may not be.

P23 shared:

I grew up in a Black church too. And there really is this sort of accept the cards that you're dealt kind of thing. Like you got to be strong, it seems like. And then there's me who's sort of like my actual nature is if I'm sad, I'm sad and I'm going to cry and I'm not embarrassed about it.

***Subtheme: Euthanasia Avoidance***

Participants expressed the emotional challenges faced during the euthanasia process, reflecting on their decision to distance themselves physically during the procedure, allowing the veterinarian to carry out the process alone as a way to avoid the pain and trauma of witnessing their pet's final moments. P23 shared:

I just ran out of the vet's office in tears, and I just ran because I couldn't handle it. I couldn't take it, just seeing him go from running around a day or two before to just laying there on that table.

P9 shared when asked if he wanted to be present for his dog, Tyler's euthanasia procedure:

I couldn't witness him take his last breath. I wanted my last image to see was him fighting...that's the image I wanted to have...I wanted to have the image of him with his big heart and having all the courage that he had. That's the last memory I wanted to have with my buddy alive.

***Subtheme: Transitioning Bonds***

Participants in this study expressed an approach to grief that involved finding healing in letting go, by relinquishing their pet's belongings and avoiding memorialization. This approach led to discovering new possibilities for animal love, such

as adopting new pets or engaging in animal care. P20 shared, “We didn’t want his ashes, just because, you know, for us, that’s not him anymore. You know, we had his soul here, so we didn’t want his ashes.” P13 expressed that “I know I thought about her, but I basically tried to keep busy and focused, and I had to go ahead and get rid of her stuff, because I couldn’t, you know, look at that every day.” P4 shared:

I wish I would have, uh, cremated his body, but we didn’t. We let them keep Andy. I think that’s because I didn’t want a reminder. I still wanted to, like, have him here in my heart. You know, still living and thriving.

### **Theme 6: Post-Loss Social Support**

Participants discussed the availability of various forms of social support following the loss of their pet, including professional resources, cultural nuances in receiving support from friends and family, and the role veterinarians played in offering guidance and information during this challenging time. When asked about seeking counseling or support groups for the loss of her cat, Sebastian, P20 shared:

No, never. And I don’t know if it’s just because my mom and I, we had each other and we were both going through it together. So they did offer it at the vet offices...One of the pieces of literature they gave me was about counseling, but it’s never anything that I considered doing.

P11 shared about having his spouse to turn to for support rather than counseling after losing his dogs Shaggy and Shea:

We never gave it any thought, and I guess one of the reasons why we never gave it any thought is because we had each other, and then we had a pastor who was

not only our pastor but our friend, uh, that if we needed him, we knew that we could go to him.

***Subtheme: Access to Pet Bereavement Resources***

Participants shared experiences with seeking professional help after their loss, such as therapy, counseling, pet loss support groups (both in-person and online), and social media communities. Factors such as the ease or difficulty of accessing these resources, stigma or acceptance around seeking help, and the belief that support was unnecessary emerged as important considerations. P23, P12, and P2 who lost pets within the last ten years were not aware that pet bereavement resources existed. P23 shared:

In fact, actually, after losing Tommy, I didn't know they existed...it never crossed my mind to go to a psychologist or anything...it never crossed my mind even once that there were even pet support groups or psychologists for that.

P12 shared about being unaware of pet bereavement resources after losing her dog Cody:

I don't know, because that's a good question. Because I'm an avid, like, believer in therapy and counseling and it never occurred to me that there was even something that existed, like pet loss support groups. Never occurred to me. So I guess, I don't want to say not directly, but not, I guess verbally, maybe, um, there's a whole stigma of, like, Black people and therapy. So how I just said like I didn't know. I didn't like realize that that was something that even existed even until like, right now.

P2 shared about her lack of awareness of resources after losing her cat Ted:

Even if I wanted to talk to somebody, it's like, who do you really talk to about it? You know? If that exists, I had no idea. Like if there are support groups for people who lose pets, I didn't know. Okay, so just having this conversation right now is actually kind of shedding some light on it for me. So, in hindsight, I'm like, well, if you know you have problems with grieving and you're actively in therapy, why wouldn't you talk about Ted in therapy?

P9 shared help-seeking experiences after losing his dog Tyler from the perspective of seeking help as an African American man:

It's funny you ask that because right after Tyler passed, maybe a month or so later, I went to a support group for people who had pets pass. And I was the only African American in there. And as they went around the room and they shared their stories. And I'm listening. And I'm sitting there and I'm like, wow. They share their stories. They're doing this, they're doing that. And I'm just sitting there...there's no one, they feel like I feel, but they don't look like me, right? So with that being said, it's like. I felt uncomfortable. I shared my story. And I never returned. I felt uncomfortable...I knew it was people out there that look like me that goes through this, but to finally see one and meet one. So thank you.

***Subtheme: Culturally Specific Support***

Participants highlighted the cultural nuances in how support was received from friends, family, and the African American community. These nuances often shaped the availability and effectiveness of post-loss support. P11 reflected on the availability and

capability of support from African American friends versus White friends after the loss of dogs Shaggy and Shea:

Now, our friends who were not people of color, many of them tended to have pets and understood what we were going through and went through. And those who were not people of color did send cards expressing sympathy for the loss of our, they would call our fur babies. They're family. So I don't know the answer, but I surmise that, many of them [friends of color] just were dealing with life. And life did not include pets...now, as I think about it, our, our non-people of color friends who many of them tended to have pets and those when we lost our pets, uh, tended to come alongside of us with the greater sympathy and empathy. Maybe it's that, many of us have struggled for so long that, um, that struggle did not include having a pet because that's an additional burden, so they didn't really see, you know, why and how someone could love a pet so much when you have to just deal with life.

P7 shared about receiving support from fellow paw parents after losing his two cats and sentiments from people in the African American community:

That's why I wasn't quick to tell a lot of people. I have a few fellow paw parents as we call each other that could relate. But a lot of them are of other nationalities. I know, you know, in our race, I mean we've lost dogs and fish and all of that whatever...pets. But it was...sometimes I...from what I've seen growing up and, you know, hearing people say, well, yeah, the dog died, but, you know, they live

this long. And it was it's kind of like, oh, okay, moving on. Whereas for me it was, you know, different because they were more like kids.

P4 shared her post-loss social support experience after losing her dog, Andy:

The difference was stark. I felt a little disgusted and betrayed, you know, like damn, the people that I expected the most sympathy from are kind of like, girl it's just a dog. And you only had him for two months. I'm sitting here like man a lot has happened in those two months. You know you don't understand. And then it hit me like you know they didn't understand because they haven't experienced a love like that. Either before or yet, you know. So I couldn't expect them to give me the sympathy that I needed. I kind of had for my own sake and as a Black woman I had to give myself the sympathy I was expecting from my Black community. Or from our community I should say.

P2 shared about the difference between African American and White support after losing her cat:

I do have plenty of White friends, and I can sit there and cry on Becky all day and she'll be fine. But, um, as far as Black people, my wife is really the only person I probably could talk to about it, but I just don't because I also understand it's hard for her, too. I mean, I think it's very insensitive, and people...let me be very specific. Black people kind of make you feel like you have some sort of mental illness if you have an attachment to your pet, and it's also generational.



*Subtheme: Veterinarian Guidance*

Participants discussed the role of veterinarians in offering guidance and informational support, especially around the process of euthanasia or aftercare options. This guidance often shaped how participants perceived and managed their loss. P20 described her interaction with the veterinarian in the last moments she had with her cat Sebastian:

And we brought him in, and we had the most wonderful vet. He was so compassionate and so caring and so just gentle about the whole thing and everything. And he was the one that he'd taken care of him all the time. So he knew him. And even though occasionally we'd have to bring him in with a muzzle, you know, he still really liked him, and he still thought he was a cool cat...and the and the vet was telling us, you know, he's not in any pain. He's just he's just exhausted. He's just tired. And you know, his, functions are just failing. And so we were, you know, in the room and the doctor, and he was just nice and calm and just had a gentle voice and everything...he explained, you know, what was going to happen and what order that he was going to give him the sedative first, and then he would give him the other medication to stop his heart.

P8 shared the challenges with finding an affordable vet for the body disposal of their bearded dragon Sandy:

I suppose, I don't know, but my kid had found, I think, it's called Faithful Companion, a pet crematorium. And they called them to see, like, how much it would cost to cremate him. And, it was reasonable but it was like, I didn't have

the extra funds to do it. So I ended up, since like Sandy had met so many people in his lifetime, like between like my work friends and friends that I met at the school and the schools that I've worked at, we were able to crowdfund. And I also raffled off some earrings because I think the fee was \$175. So, we had him cremated, and that was really emotional. And Faithful Companion was really wonderful with handling us like a grieving family. And with my oldest, they were so helpful. We had a little room, and we were able to say goodbye to him. Um, they put him in a beautiful box before they took them to be cremated.

P5 shared about the vet's affinity for her dog Snuggles:

And it was funny because he won the hearts of the vets. So the veterinarian actually was taking him home with her to her home so she could watch him. That's how much they all loved him, so she was taking him home with her and she was giving me reports, you know, of how he was doing because she didn't want him to be in the actual hospital thing by himself. And so she would take him home in the crate and observe him. And so they kept him, um, and then she started doing recommended different treatments.

### **Theme 7: Grief Inequities**

Participants discussed the layered and intersecting challenges they faced in their pet grief experience, which often compounded or intensified the grieving process. These inequities emerged in the form of cumulative grief, reoccurring losses, and situational distress that intersected with their experiences as African American pet owners, revealing

how factors such as multiple losses, life circumstances, and broader systemic challenges shaped their grief journey. P9 shared:

Well. I guess, uh, in our community, because we see so much. Hurt. Death.

Sometimes people take for granted that, a dog or a cat or a bird or whatever you love is just a pet. I don't look at it that way...I don't look at them as a pet because they're not a pet. They're my friend.

P3 shared:

I just think that ... Black people to me is just so used to losing everything, you know. Anyway, like everything just is a loss to us. So. Um, culturally like, you know, like I say, people don't take you serious.

P11 shared how, as an African American adult, his model of grieving growing up was not equal:

Actually, many of us come from single-family homes. Many of us come from broken homes, and I think that many of my non-African American friends, growing up, had a mom and a dad in the home. They had seemingly more stability than I and many of the people in my community had. So I do believe my grieving process would have been different because I would have had the emotional support of a mom and a dad to get me through that, or I would have seen what it looks like.

Due to external and compounding factors, P12 could not be with her dog Cody when he was euthanized. Cody was staying with a relative in another state, and P12 could not travel because it was during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. She shared:

And at the time, it was 2021...So it was like still Covid you know. So we weren't able to like travel like that. Just because, you know, just reading about, like, pet's last moments and stuff like that, and they're like, really wanting to be with their owners. Like, she [her aunt] was just as much, you know, involved with him as I was. So it's fine that she was there. I'm just glad that she was there. But, you know, it's still like. The principal. Like I wasn't able to actually be there and it was, because of Covid."

P21 pushed through the grief at work after losing her cat Princess:

I don't think I took any time off work. I don't believe I did. I really don't think I did. I'm sure I wanted to...I just, I'm that type of keep it moving person. So I had to repress it and keep my life going. I would have had to put in a sick day. I know that we do have bereavement days at my job, but it's like, yeah, they would have been like, 'come on now' and taking a sick day would have been the last thing to do. Yeah, I'm sure I still had personal business days, but I just think I went in and just pushed through. I don't know how I made it. I really don't even know how I made it (laughs).

P6 shared about her pet loss workplace experience when needing time off for the euthanasia of her cat Lucky:

My mom and I worked for a company...no other black staff there. I think it was like a year before that, one of our coworkers had to put her dog down, and everybody was like bringing her cards and flowers. And um, when it came to Lucky, and us telling we were going to have to put Lucky down, it was like, can

you find somebody to work your shift? Can your mom do it and you stay or can you stay and your mom go? And I'm like, no, I don't think you understand. This was both of our animal. There were no cards. There were no flowers. There were no... 'my condolences.' It was more that this young lady who lost her dog, that was, like part of her family. And for us it was like, it's just your cat. So that was impactful. But they did let us eventually because I was like... well then I quit.

***Subtheme: Cumulative Grief***

Participants described the layered and multifaceted nature of grief that African American adults often experience, as they cope with pet loss alongside other significant human losses and non-death-related challenges. This cumulative grief highlights the heavier emotional burden carried by African Americans, often shaped by broader historical and community experiences of loss. Although the loss of a pet might seem less significant in comparison, participants emphasized how it becomes another layer in the intricate and complex journey of grief that they navigate. P18 shared about her grief burden since the time of losing her cat Greylen.:

And then what actually happened, fast forwarding is just life continues to life. My grandmother got sick, my dad got sick. And so for the last 18 months I've suffered my grandmother passing, then my father, my mom's best friend from childhood that when she was pregnant as a teenager they both were pregnant together, passed away, then my dad, her husband and then a week after that, my mentor, someone I knew from when I came in this community ten years ago, and

then this past December of '23, one of my favorite aunts. So it's like life has frickin life-d in my world, right?

P12 shared about the connections of her dog Cody to another significant loss:

So my grandfather passed away in February of 2021. And then he (Cody) passed away in June of 2021. So it was like literally like back to back, like two individuals who just had my heart and meant a lot to me and that I was not able to really see like that, like towards the end, basically, so that was very hard... So this is also like still trying to process my grandfather's passing too.

P7 shared about the passing of his grandmother, who instilled in him a love for animals, and he connected her loss to the loss of his pet cats who both died around the Christmas holiday.

And so he [one of his cats] passed Christmas Eve, 2022, Christmas Day. My grandmother passed the day after Christmas, two years prior. And my last day of seeing her not to get into all that, but just kind of like how it kind of connects. The last time I talked to her and saw her was Christmas. And then she passed away the following day. So it's like okay I have now making this [euthanasia] decision Christmas Eve. At this point I really don't care about Christmas. I just want you to know. Yeah it's a whole new year and then the 26th. So I'm like I've had two tragic losses the day before Christmas and the day after Christmas.

P3 shared about losing her mom in relation to losing her dog Trina, "I think it's a combination of everything because I've lost, you know, a few family members in the last few years, my mom being the major one. And then Trina died."

***Subtheme: Reoccurring Pet Loss***

Participants who had experienced multiple pet losses over time described how each subsequent loss revived memories of past grief, adding another layer to their emotional experience. This often resulted in intensified feelings of sorrow and a sense of dread or resignation toward future losses. P7 reflected on cat brothers he called Meanmo and McFranklin that were with him for 11.5 years and died within a month of each other:

Whereas not only did I have one, I had both for 11.5. And even with McFranklin you know with the diabetes as of 2019 there was still three years that he lived with that...so that brought comfort knowing that, okay, how many people do you know that close that have had cats. Two cats at that live that long...Of course I didn't want them to go. McFranklin I kind of understood a little bit more because of the health condition. I really didn't like how soon it was for Meanmo, but then I kind of understood...it kind of all was like, had its purpose.

P11 lost dog brother and sister Shaggy and Shea close together as well:

After the loss of our two pets, uh, now, it's been a year and a half...two years. We had two, uh, Shih Tzus that we absolutely loved, after their passing, it took a while, it took us a while to emotionally get over the loss of our two, uh, little Shih Tzus. They were just phenomenal. Phenomenal pets.

***Subtheme: Situational Distress***

Participants recounted the traumatic and distressing circumstances surrounding the loss of their pets, which included witnessing their pet's death up close, encountering violent deaths, or experiencing the shock and trauma of discovering their pet's body.

These intense situational factors added a layer of complexity to the grieving process, making it more challenging for participants to process their loss and contributing to a heightened sense of grief. P15 reflected on the violent nature of her dog Teila's death:

I think it was more so how she died. It was just kind of that was a cruel way you know for anybody I mean human or pet I mean just, it was a cruel way. For a pet to die especially when they haven't done anything to anyone. Didn't provoke anybody. To me that's what just kind of, like, made it really numb, I think. Had she died naturally or something, or with some disease, it would have been hurtful. You know, I definitely would have mourned that, but that's nature. That's natural...but when Teila got shot, that was just like, that's not part of the playbook on how this is supposed to happen.

P7 shared more details about the experience of losing one of the Meanmo and McFranklin cat brothers:

It kind of happened in my lap and I'm behind the wheel of a car trying to, you know, get him there...it was more of just like starting to just accept it, you know, because once he stopped moving, I just knew.

### **Theme 8: Spiritual and Emotional Growth**

Participants reflected on how the experience of pet loss facilitated growth in their spiritual beliefs, emotional resilience, and connections with others. This theme captured the transformative aspects of grief, where participants found deeper meaning, personal growth, and even a sense of healing as they navigated their grief journey. For many, the process of grieving for a pet served as an opportunity to explore their spirituality,



strengthen relationships, and foster a greater appreciation for life. P22 shared about the connections of her cat, Tiger, to her faith tradition:

In my religion for sure, I know that cats actually have a, pretty high status. So like a lot of Muslims have cats and there's like a running joke where we say that cats are Muslims...because our prophet, Muhammad is quoted to have cut his own garment because he didn't want to disturb the cat that was resting on his lap, so that's the level of, like, respect.

***Subtheme: Faith and Resilience***

Participants highlighted how their faith or spiritual beliefs played a crucial role in helping them cope with and make sense of their pet loss. Many shared that their faith provided comfort and a framework for understanding the cycle of life and death, which contributed to their resilience. P11 shared specifically about saying goodbye to his dog, Shea, who died a year prior to her dog brother Shaggy:

Well, I'm a man of faith. And I just said, you know, Lord, this didn't catch you by surprise. Certainly, we have been preparing for this moment, and even though we've been preparing for this moment, I said my goodbyes...so I felt that I had my time with her.

P5 shared about praying for her dog Snuggles:

Oh, yeah. I'm very spiritual. And I do believe in healing. I do believe in the power of God. I do believe God will heal pets just like He will heal humans. That was my belief then, my belief now that he will heal humans, just like, you know, there is a miracle-working power that belongs to us. And so in saying that, I was like,

you know, praying over him and anointed him with oil and speaking the word over him and all kinds of stuff. Yeah. Whatever you would do for a human, I declared and decreed for him. And so I had to wrestle with God with that. So that was a spiritual thing too for me that, um, well, why didn't you completely heal him?

***Subtheme: Growth in Human Connections***

Participants described how the experience of pet loss led to a heightened sense of empathy and understanding in their relationships with others. They reflected on how caring for and losing their pets taught them valuable lessons about compassion, which, in turn, deepened their ability to support friends and family members through similar experiences. This journey of grief and empathy often fostered stronger interpersonal bonds and a greater sense of community among those who shared the experience of pet loss. P16 shared in reflecting about his dog Boss:

It reinforced to cherish the moments that you have with the people, things that you love, simply because I didn't really have a chance to really say goodbye to him...And every time I would go home to visit Boss, I would say goodbye and give him the full, the full goodbye, you know, love on him, kiss on him, hug him. Give him all that attention as if I would never see him again. And to not truly be able to say that last goodbye to him. Really kind of tears me up today.

P15 shared about helping others through pet grief after losing her dog Teila:

And because of the support that was received, it really helped me to support those, you know, my friends, when they would lose their pets, you know, we grieved

differently, but some of them who did lose their pets, it was like it just kind of like just shattered them. And so I was like, I just had to give that support back to them.

***Subtheme: Spiritual Connection and Transformation***

Participants shared how the experience of losing a pet led to a profound spiritual awakening, where they recognized their pets as more than mere companions but as spiritual beings with a divine purpose. This realization instilled a deep sense of gratitude for the time spent with their pets and fostered a greater appreciation for the natural cycles of life and death. The spiritual connection with their pets prompted a transformative journey, enriching their perspectives on life, faith, and the interconnectedness of all living beings. P17 shared about his dog Eva:

I think losing her. Well, loving her, shall I say. That was, you know, that is funny because I didn't realize it then that you know, that was showing love to her. I just thought, you know, I'm trying to help take care of our pet, you know? And, I didn't realize at the time that those things that we were doing was like, demonstrating love. And so now it sit a little different now that I reflect back on it.

P21 stated about her cat, Princess:

I just know that, you know, she was there when she was supposed to be there for me. And that's what I think is like the spiritual part. And I, I mean, I couldn't cry over it. I knew she was older. No, I would have never wanted her to pass away. But I just know in my heart that, I mean, we're born to die. We're born to die. We

live and we die. Same thing with her. And I was just pretty much not just sad, but just appreciative of the time that I did have with her.

P9 shared:

So I think that we kind of take for granted that the love that these animals have is unconditional, um. They're here for a short time. That sounds cliché, but we all they have, we're they're human. That's the way I look at it.

P8 reflected that pets “are more than just helpers, like they fulfill a need in humans. They're not just there for entertainment or whatever, like they are living breathing, full of personality.” P6 reflected about her cat Lucky:

I think Lucky has taught me in all of the pets that we've had have taught me overall that, uh, animals also deserve life. And I mean that in a sense of I think a lot of times we'll get pets and...That's my pet. This pet is staying here with me. This pet is staying in this house, this pet. And I think of like, if human beings, we want to have experiences...I feel like it's important if we want to be pet owners, to also give our animals, to give our pets experiences in life.

P7 shared about Meanmo and McFranklin:

Definitely, there was a sense of accomplishment. There was a sense of, I wouldn't necessarily say pride, but I felt. Honored...I felt honored again to have rescued them both. I'm so glad I got them both. I think that was probably the best pet decision I've ever made to get them both. Um, because I would think, like, how would one have been, you know, without the other?

P18 shared her reflections about the spiritual purpose of Greylen the cat:

So for me, when Greylen came into our lives, it was so fun. And so I'm like, God knew. I mean, that's my relationship that we can't even process or fathom the great things, the hurts, the growth edges, whatever he puts before us in our lives to strengthen that muscle, our spiritual muscle, our faith. We can't even fathom it. But I know God, because of my thriver-ship with cancer that he introduced Greylen, because I had been feeding them [cats] forever, never allowing them in. It was like because we bought our home, this one here in 2019. So during that time that was July 2nd 2019. So from the moment we got settled and we started seeing the cats, we began feeding them. So, 2019, and then I was diagnosed in 2020. You know, I know that's not a coincidence. God knew that that Greylen would soften the blow and opened up my heart, and my emotions to someone and something other than me, my children, my husband and my work.

### **Summary**

The data collection in this study, conducted through semistructured interviews and guided by DPM, illuminated the lived experiences of African American adults who have experienced pet loss. Using a phenomenological qualitative methodology and thematic analysis, this research effectively addressed the central question: What is the meaning of grief for African American pet owners who have lost a pet?

Several significant themes emerged from the participant interviews, including familial bonds and pet relationships, anticipatory grief, disenfranchised grief, grief confrontation, grief avoidance, post-loss social support, grief inequities, and spiritual and emotional growth. These themes provided deep insight into the participants' relationships

with their pets, highlighting the significance of these bonds, the perception of mutual affection, the role of the pet in their lives, and the unique emotional connections shared. These elements underscore the profound emotional impact of pet loss, revealing how the grief felt by pet owners is often underrecognized or minimized by others.

In Chapter 5, I will explore the interpretation of these findings and examine how they confirm, challenge, or extend the existing literature, as well as the DPM conceptual framework. Furthermore, I will discuss the broader implications of these findings for social change, particularly within the context of bereavement support for pet owners.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### Introduction

This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to deepen the understanding of grief responses after pet loss by focusing on African Americans' experiences of human–pet bereavement. Previous research on the human–animal bond and pet loss has often overlooked ethnic diversity, leaving a significant gap in understanding how different cultural contexts shape this experience. This study addressed that gap by shedding light on African Americans' perspectives of grief, particularly within the framework of human services. By increasing awareness of these unique grief responses, the findings provide human services professionals with valuable insights and tools to more effectively support the African American community in coping with pet loss through a cultural lens.

This research specifically explored the problem of disenfranchised grief and the stigma surrounding pet bereavement among African Americans. Pet owners often outlive their pets, creating a void that can mirror the loss of family or friends. While prior studies have been conducted to examine pet loss, few have considered the distinct experiences of African American adults whose experiences are shaped by complex and systemic factors. DPM was applied as a conceptual framework to analyze the themes that emerged, focusing on loss-oriented and restoration-oriented coping, as well as the oscillation between the two. Twenty-three African American adults who had experienced the loss of a pet during adulthood participated in semistructured interviews. These interviews sought to answer the central research question: What is the meaning of grief for African American adult pet owners who experienced pet loss? I used a phenomenological design

to integrate data collection and thematic analysis, leading to a deeper interpretation of the participants' lived grief experiences.

In this chapter, I will present interpretations of the study's key findings, which resulted in categorical insights such as familial bonds and pet relationships, anticipatory grief, disenfranchised grief, grief confrontation and avoidance, post-pet loss social support, grief inequities, and spiritual and emotional growth. I will also discuss the study's limitations, offer recommendations for future research, explore implications for social change, and conclude the analysis.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

The results of this study revealed a conflict between the perception of pets as family members and society's limited acknowledgment of the right to grieve their loss. Participants often viewed their pets as important parts of their families but encountered frequent challenges in expressing and validating their grief within social settings. This lack of recognition was influenced by cultural factors, historical contexts, and structural barriers, shaping the distinctive experiences of the African American pet owners in this study. The findings confirm existing literature on the human-pet emotional bonds and deepen the understanding of pet bereavement by incorporating cultural nuances, spirituality, and the cumulative nature of loss that disproportionately affects African Americans. By exploring the multifaceted nature of grief that encompasses emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions, this study offered critical insights into how pet loss was experienced, processed, and, ultimately, navigated within the African American community.



### **Familial Bonds and Pet Relationships**

All 23 participants described their deceased pets in familial terms, perceiving their pets not as mere animals but as integral family members, often assigning them roles such as friends, siblings, and, in many cases, children. The pets as family concept, frequently discussed in the human–animal bond and pet loss literature (Nugent & Daugherty, 2022), was reflected in all the participants’ experiences. Additionally, 18 participants specifically referred to their pets as “kids” or “babies,” reflecting a parent–child relationship dynamic often noted in the literature (Behler et al., 2020; Hughes & Lewis Harkin, 2022). Notably, this parent–child characterization extended beyond participants without children. Four participants with human children frequently referred to their pets as additional children or as siblings to their offspring, challenging assumptions that pet-as-child bonds are exclusive to those without children (Volsche, 2018; Volsche et al., 2022).

Participants also tended to attribute distinct personalities to their pets. Ten participants specifically described their pets as having personalities, citing human-like traits such as charisma, compatibility with the participant’s personality, or a unique sense of individuality. This anthropomorphic tendency aligns with literature linking such human-like descriptions to grief intensification (Macauley & Chur-Hansen, 2023). Five participants who described their pets as children became emotional when discussing their pets’ unique personalities, reinforcing a connection between anthropomorphism and grief intensification (Behler et al., 2020; Cowling et al., 2020; Eason, 2021; Lavorgna & Hutton, 2019). The findings in this study support research suggesting that perceiving pets

with human characteristics can make their loss feel similar to losing a human family member or friend.

Participants also described how their experiences of pet ownership changed over time, with ages ranging from 24 to 66 and pet losses occurring from less than a year to over a decade ago. This range offers insight into significant shifts in pet care resources, societal acceptance, and support systems across different time periods. For instance, social media platforms, such as Facebook (established in 2004), were socially positioned quite differently in earlier years than they are today. Eight participants whose pets passed away over a decade prior noted that evolving cultural attitudes and support systems influenced their experiences, adding to literature that has not extensively examined these shifts over time.

Generational differences in pet loss experiences were also apparent among participants, who represented three age cohorts identified in the Strauss-Howe generational theory: Generation X, baby boomers, and millennials (Karashchuk et al., 2020). Nine Generation X participants and one baby boomer expressed greater difficulty in openly processing their grief, attributing this difficulty to the lingering stigma around pet ownership. In contrast, five millennial participants noted finding greater support from family and friends—despite lingering stigma—through avenues like social media, suggesting a societal shift toward more widely accepting pets as family members. This generational perspective on pet loss and the human–animal bond is not widely addressed in existing literature.

Five participants reported forming bonds with the pets they discussed in the interviews during adolescence, continuing to care for these pets until the pet's death in adulthood. Although childhood experiences were beyond this study's scope, these enduring bonds appeared to intensify grief, suggesting that such connections spanned multiple psychological and developmental stages. This finding aligns with literature noting age as a significant factor in pet grief, with younger individuals often experiencing more intense grief (Cowling et al., 2020), and contributes to understanding pet loss across the life cycle.

### **Anticipatory Grief in the Context of Pet Loss**

Anticipatory grief is a concept that emerged in this study, expanding on existing pet loss and grief literature. Traditionally, anticipatory grief has referred to grieving before an expected loss, often in caregiving contexts for the elderly or terminally ill (Plant, 2022). However, anticipatory grief related to pet loss has received limited attention in the literature. A key finding in this study was that pet owners willingly opened their hearts to the profound love of their pets, despite the inevitability of eventual loss. For example, sixteen of the twenty-three participants reported noticing health changes in their pets prior to their death, such as limited mobility, lack of appetite, or behavior changes. This finding aligns with literature indicating that pet owners who rely on their pets for emotional support experience significant fear when anticipating their pets' loss (Hawkins et al., 2021). These anticipatory observations resemble family caregivers' experiences with loved ones declining from illnesses like Alzheimer's disease or cancer, yet this parallel remains underexplored in the literature. Furthermore, this

raises the question of why some pet owners willingly engage in the pet adoption process repeatedly. Twelve of the twenty-three participants reported currently caring for pets, with ten adopting new pets after the loss they discussed in the interview. This finding supports Brkljačić et al.'s (2020) study, which suggested that anticipating a pet's death could lead to a more positive evaluation of the loss, reflecting an adaptive process.

The decision to euthanize also plays a significant role in anticipatory grief. While the literature has explored the psychological distress and guilt associated with pet euthanasia (Bussolari et al., 2018), it has given less attention to the acceptance of this decision and the anticipation leading up to it. However, Laing and Maylea (2018) found that anticipatory grief is a crucial consideration in the professional support provided to pet owners facing euthanasia, underscoring the need for greater focus on this aspect for grieving pet owners. This study confirmed this finding, as three of the eight participants who euthanized their pets described being able to schedule the euthanasia appointment, creating a period of anticipation before the procedure. For the remaining five participants, the decision to euthanize was unexpected, resulting in a brief period of anticipatory resolution. These results suggest that both short- and long-term anticipation of euthanasia may significantly impact the grieving process.

### **Disenfranchised Grief in Pet Loss and Cultural Perspectives**

Fifteen of the twenty-three participants in this study described experiencing disenfranchised grief following the loss of their pets, noting that they grieved privately or did not mourn openly. This finding supports existing literature that identifies pet loss as a form of disenfranchised grief (Bussolari et al., 2021; Lavorgna & Hutton, 2019; Spain et

al., 2019). Two significant aspects of disenfranchised grief emerged from this study, expanding on previous literature. First, eleven participants reported experiencing a fear of empathic failure. This fear stemmed from anticipating that others would not understand or validate their grief, leading them to withhold expressions of mourning. While existing literature addresses disenfranchised grief in pet loss (Lavorgna & Hutton, 2019; Lyons et al., 2020), this study highlighted how fear, rather than an actual lack of empathy, shaped the experience of disenfranchised grief. Additionally, three participants described influences from the African American church, including questions about whether pets have souls, which reinforced their fear of openly expressing grief as they were uncertain if their grief would be acknowledged within these settings.

A second aspect of disenfranchised grief identified in this study was the encouragement, often from friends or family, to replace the lost pet. Eleven participants mentioned that friends or family urged them to adopt a new pet, either directly or indirectly, such as by presenting them with another animal to care for. This response reflects a common misconception about pet loss, where others may view a pet's death as insignificant and assume the pet can simply be replaced (Compitus, 2019; Eason, 2021). This finding aligns with literature on disenfranchised pet grief, where empathic failure often arises because the support system does not recognize the depth of the human–animal bond or the significance of the loss (Bussolari et al., 2021).

Another factor participants reported was the stigma associated with pet ownership, particularly within the African American cultural context. Eighteen participants described facing stigma related to pet ownership, which influenced the grief

they experienced after losing a pet. Two participants who lost pit bulls acknowledged facing social stigma due to stereotypes associated with their pets. This stigma is well-documented in the literature, linking African Americans and pit bull ownership to stereotypes of criminality and hip-hop culture (Applebaum et al., 2021; Linder, 2018; Rose et al., 2023). Additionally, ten participants reflected on cats they had lost, and three specifically mentioned a sense of stigma associated with African Americans owning cats. These participants described beliefs within the African American community, including perceptions that cats are sneaky or cannot be trusted, which contributed to their hesitancy to express grief openly. Given the popularity of cats as household pets (American Veterinarian Medical Association, 2022), this stigma presents a striking contrast, underscoring the unique cultural challenges African American pet owners may face in grieving cats specifically. This finding not only expands the existing literature on African Americans and their relationships with animals but also offers additional insight into the nuances of disenfranchised grief.

### **Confrontation and Avoidance in Coping With Pet Bereavement**

DPM was the conceptual framework for this study, reflecting loss-oriented (confrontation) and restoration-oriented (avoidance) coping strategies, and the oscillation between the two (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). According to this model, individuals who dwell on negative thoughts about their loss face greater challenges in adapting to grief than those who avoid such reflections (Stroebe et al., 2017; Stroebe & Schut, 2001). Conversely, confronting positive elements related to the loss can facilitate recovery

(Stroebe & Schut, 1999). In this study, pet grief confrontation and avoidance emerged across the narratives of all 23 participants in varied ways.

Eighteen participants specifically confronted emotions of guilt and regret after losing their pets. Guilt, defined as remorse for not meeting the perceived standards of the deceased, is widely documented in both general bereavement and pet grief literature (Bussolari et al., 2018; Cowling et al., 2021; Li et al., 2019). Five participants expressed guilt specifically linked to pet euthanasia, a finding consistent with pet loss literature (Bussolari et al., 2018). However, thirteen participants reported feeling guilt unrelated to euthanasia, such as regret over their last interactions with their pet or a belief that they did not do enough to save it. This finding expands the concept of guilt in pet loss literature beyond euthanasia. Interestingly, although both guilt and loneliness are central and related themes in pet bereavement literature (Cowling et al., 2021), loneliness did not emerge as a significant theme here. Participants seemed to counter loneliness through restoration-oriented coping strategies, such as adopting another pet or shifting their focus toward caring for a surviving pet sibling.

Belief in a pet afterlife was another prominent aspect of grief confrontation and aligns with the DPM's loss-oriented coping concept. Nineteen of the 23 participants described a spiritual bond with their deceased pets through beliefs in pet heaven or reincarnation, which brought them comfort and connection. This finding aligns with grief literature, suggesting that African Americans often find relief in afterlife beliefs to cope with social injustices and hardships after a loved one's death (Moore et al., 2022). Eleven

participants specifically described a belief in a pet heaven where their pet is pain-free, and three participants referred to a “better place” but hesitated to call it heaven.

Pet loss literature suggests that bereaved pet owners often maintain a spiritual connection with their pets after death (Lavorgna & Hutton, 2019), and this study expanded that concept to include beliefs in reincarnation. Four participants saw their deceased pets as an active guardian presence watching over them. However, the idea of pet reincarnation went beyond the guardian concept, with five participants expressing that their deceased pet’s spirit inhabited their current pet. This belief in reincarnation deepened the concept of deceased pets as continuing spiritual bonds, suggesting that pet owners view their lost companions as present and influential through new forms. Notably, only two participants referenced the rainbow bridge, a poetic vision of a pet heaven where owners are reunited with their pets (Eason, 2021; Rennard et al., 2019), and the participants who acknowledged the bridge did so by acknowledging it as a familiar concept than as a personal belief. The findings about the pet afterlife emphasized an ongoing, active spiritual connection with pets rather than a future reunion.

Memorialization was also a significant form of loss-oriented coping and continuing bonds. Twenty-two participants engaged in memorialization practices such as cremation, burial, keeping paw prints, displaying photos, or reflecting on memories, which support existing literature suggesting that memorialization enables pet owners to maintain a bond with deceased pets (Bussolari et al., 2019; Kogan et al., 2022). However, only two participants described holding rituals for their pet resembling a funeral, which occurred within the family unit without involvement from friends or places of worship.



While the African American homegoing celebration typically includes friends, family, and the church (Matthews et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2022), the current findings suggest that these traditions may not extend to pet loss.

Social media, typically associated with social interaction and sharing, also served as a memorialization tool for seven participants who posted about their pets on anniversaries or birthdays. This use of social media aligns with Kogan et al. (2022), who found that most pet owners used social platforms to maintain bonds with their deceased pets. However, four participants expressed discomfort with automatic memory prompts (i.e., Facebook Memories), which resurfaced emotions they felt unprepared to confront. This finding expands on Kogan et al. (2022) by indicating that while social media can support memorialization, it can also complicate grieving through unexpected emotional triggers.

Grief avoidance, represented by restoration-oriented coping within the DPM framework, had a complex impact on pet bereavement for participants in this study. Restoration-oriented coping involves secondary coping mechanisms that often compound the emotional burden of loss (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). This was reflected in thirteen participants who expressed anxiety over the possibility of future pet loss, aligning with literature that pet owners with attachment anxiety may hesitate to adopt new pets for fear of future grief (J. D. Green et al., 2018). However, eight of the thirteen participants who expressed attachment anxiety showed resilience by eventually adopting new pets.

Additionally, African American cultural influences played a role in grief avoidance, particularly through compartmentalization. Nineteen participants reflected on

lessons from parents or cultural influences within the African American community that emphasized resilience and emotional suppression. This theme echoes the strong Black woman and John Henry schemas, which stress resilience but may complicate the open expression of grief (Hall et al., 2021; Perez et al., 2023). Five participants used phrases like “push through,” indicating a cultural script that prioritized resilience over emotional processing. For instance, P10 said, “I’m still sad about this, but I still got these priorities over here. I have to push through.” While this mindset promotes resilience, it may also exacerbate disenfranchised grief, particularly in the context of pet loss.

A distinct aspect of participants’ experiences was their avoidance of being present during the euthanasia procedure. Of the eight participants whose pets were euthanized, four chose to be physically present with the pet through the entire procedure, describing it as a parental responsibility, while the other four avoided it, finding it too painful. Those who avoided the procedure preferred to remember their pets in healthier states, rather than witnessing their final moments. This finding aligns with Adrian and Stitt (2019), which suggested that attending a pet’s euthanasia is not correlated with complicated grief or PTSD; rather, it is the companionship loss that drives the grief.

While continuing bonds are frequently discussed in grief and pet bereavement literature (Black et al., 2022; Habarth et al., 2017; Hughes & Lewis Harkin, 2022; Stroebe et al., 2010), this study introduces an expanded concept of *transitioning bonds*. Instead of maintaining an ongoing connection, eight participants described gradually letting go by discarding pet belongings or choosing not to retrieve their pet’s ashes. These findings suggested that while some pet owners benefit from continuing bonds, others may

prefer transitioning bonds as part of their grieving process. This idea of transitioning bonds may stem from learned compartmentalization within African American culture or from the discomfort of unexpected social media or other memory triggers.

The DPM concept of oscillation, defined as the dynamic process of shifting between loss-oriented coping (confrontation) and restoration-oriented coping (avoidance), ideally supports healthy adaptation to loss as individuals manage grief within the demands of daily life (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). In this study, several factors emerged that influenced how participants experienced and balanced this oscillation, including post-loss social support and grief inequities. The following two sections explore these factors, examining how external influences shaped participants' approaches to adapting to grief.

### **Post Pet Loss Social Support**

Social support played a significant role in shaping the grief experiences of African Americans in this study, particularly regarding pet loss. Three key factors influenced post-loss social support: access, African American culture, and veterinarian support. Previous research has identified the availability of social support as a crucial factor in coping with pet bereavement (Cowling et al., 2020; Behler et al., 2020). This study confirmed the importance of social support, as each participant reflected on its impact on their grieving process. However, unique challenges in the African American experience expanded the understanding of social support in pet loss.

Ten participants described receiving compassionate support from family or friends who understood the significance of the pet-owner relationship. In contrast, five

participants reported a lack of understanding from some African American friends and family, specifically regarding the depth of the human–animal bond. Additionally, six participants observed differences in support availability between their White and African American friends, noting that while White friends often offered genuine support, African American friends were less likely to empathize. This difference in support may stem from stereotypes or perceived differences in attachment (Richardson et al., 2020) and could be influenced by historical pet ownership trends within African American communities (Nugent & Daugherty, 2023).

Another important factor was access to pet bereavement resources, such as support groups, counseling, and therapy. Only one participant reported seeking and receiving pet bereavement counseling, and another attended a pet loss support group. This finding aligns with literature indicating that pet loss support groups are among the least commonly used coping mechanisms following euthanasia (Park & Royal, 2020). Cultural factors, such as the emphasis on resilience and self-reliance, may also influence this trend. The strong Black woman or superwoman schemas, which discourage help-seeking among African American women (Hall et al., 2021; Matthews et al., 2021; Perez et al., 2023), could partly explain the limited use of formal support resources. However, notably, the one participant who received therapy for pet loss identified as female.

Additionally, five participants who sought therapy for unrelated issues reported that discussions of pet loss naturally became part of their therapeutic process, highlighting the cultural complexity surrounding help-seeking in the African American community (Hall et al., 2021; Yelton et al., 2022). This complexity was further

underscored by a lack of awareness of pet bereavement resources, as five participants expressed surprise that such resources existed. Interestingly, these participants had lost their pets within the last decade, suggesting that while pet ownership perceptions have evolved, awareness of bereavement services has not yet become widespread.

Veterinarians also played a crucial role in helping participants navigate their pet loss. Fourteen participants described positive experiences with veterinarians who provided support comparable to that offered to grieving families after human loss, including guidance on post-death body care and memorialization. This finding aligns with literature suggesting that pet owners often rely on their veterinary team for assistance with end-of-life decisions and arrangements (Cooney et al., 2020). However, three participants reported challenges with veterinary services, feeling that their concerns about the pet's illness were dismissed or that the veterinarian could have done more to save their pet.

### **Grief Inequities in Pet Bereavement**

Grief inequities were identified as a significant factor affecting the process of healthy adaptation, or oscillation, as individuals strived to cope with pet loss. In this study, participants reported substantial challenges in processing the loss of their pets, with twenty describing how these challenges were further compounded by cumulative factors, including multiple human and pet losses, non-death losses, disproportionate grief, the impact of COVID-19, work pressures, and the specific circumstances surrounding their pet's death. Three participants shared experiences of multiple pet losses during adulthood, a topic not widely covered in existing literature. For two of these participants,

this included grief for a deceased pet and anticipatory grief for a surviving sibling pet. Additionally, one participant lost two sibling cats within a month, further intensifying their grief. Five participants also noted that life challenges and non-death losses, such as cancer treatment and divorce, filtered into their grief, compounding their emotional burden.

Workplace challenges further complicated the grieving process for ten participants, with six struggling to concentrate at work after their pet's death. Two of these participants did not take the time off they needed, aligning with literature suggesting that pet owners often forego time off following pet loss (Kogan et al., 2020). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic also intensified pet grief for five participants. Two were recovering from COVID-19 while grieving, and one was unable to travel to be with their pet for euthanasia due to travel restrictions. These findings challenge studies that emphasized the positive impact of the human–animal bond on quality of life during the pandemic (Clements et al., 2020).

Seventeen participants discussed disproportionate grief burdens faced by African Americans in relation to pet loss. Nine participants discussed the broader African American experience with grief, shaped by historical conditioning from challenges like gun violence and socioeconomic hardship, which foster a unique collective familiarity with grief. This finding aligns with literature indicating that African Americans often face unbalanced grief due to the intersectionality of these challenges (Wilson & O'Connor, 2022). Notably, four participants shared overlapping experiences of losing both a pet and a parental caregiver, with the pet closely associated with the deceased caregiver,

compounding the emotional weight of the loss. This finding expands existing literature indicating that African Americans disproportionately experience grief and are more likely than other groups to have lost a parent or sibling by midlife (Wilson & O'Connor, 2022). The death of a pet often intensified these participants' overall grief response, adding complexity to their already significant grief burden.

Situational risk factors further shaped participants' grief responses. According to DPM, situational risk factors, such as sudden or traumatic losses, heavily influence the grieving process (Stroebe & Schut, 1999). While existing literature often focuses on euthanasia as a significant situational factor in pet loss (Bussolari et al., 2018; Park & Royal, 2020), this study highlighted additional circumstances: Two participants lost their pets in car accidents, and one participant's pet was killed by gun violence. These findings expand the current understanding of how the specific cause of a pet's death can shape the grief experience.

### **Spiritual Growth in Pet Loss**

Spirituality emerged as a central element in participants' reflections on the purpose and meaning of pet loss. In this study, 11 of the 23 participants identified with Christianity, while the remaining participants held other spiritual beliefs. Thirteen participants shared that they used prayer or meditation to seek healing and strength in coping with their pet loss. Given the limited use of pet bereavement resources discussed earlier, this reliance on spirituality aligns with literature suggesting that African Americans often turn to faith and community, rather than mental health professionals, when coping with loss (Matthews et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2022). This study also

supported existing pet loss literature, which identified community support, continuing bonds, and religion as vital components in coping with pet loss (Bussolari et al., 2019). For the thirteen participants who used prayer and meditation to cope, faith served as an emotional buffer, helping them navigate the emotional challenges of losing a pet and underscoring the distinct role of spirituality in African American experiences of pet loss.

The concept of posttraumatic growth also played a significant role in participants' experiences. Seven participants reported experiencing personal growth through a heightened appreciation for life, and eight noted improved relationships with others who shared a love for pets. These findings confirm the literature on posttraumatic growth in the context of loss, which includes feelings of strength, increased connectedness with family and friends, a sense of new possibilities, greater life appreciation, and spiritual growth (Bussolari et al., 2019; Eisma et al., 2019). Additionally, four participants expressed a desire to help others cope with pet loss, having been inspired by their own experiences. These restoration-focused activities also align with DPM and broaden the understanding of posttraumatic growth in the context of pet loss for African Americans.

An additional aspect of posttraumatic growth involved the adoption of new pets by nine of the 23 participants after losing the pet they reflected on in the interview, symbolizing new possibilities in their grief journey. This finding supports existing literature that identifies pet adoption as a restoration-oriented coping mechanism commonly used after pet loss (Park & Royal, 2020). Finally, six participants viewed their pets as more than companions, seeing them as spiritual beings with needs similar to those in Maslow's hierarchy, from physical to self-actualization needs (Maslow, 1943). For



these participants, pets were not in their lives merely for human amusement but were deserving of love and happiness in their own right. This perspective provided a sense of spiritual fulfillment and growth that extended beyond the typical grieving process.

### **Limitations of the Study**

This study had several limitations related to design and methodological considerations that may impact the interpretation and transferability of the findings. One key limitation was the generalizability of results due to the specific inclusion criteria used. While the study included participants ages 24 to 66, most were between 38 and 58 years old, with one over 65 and none between 18 and 23. The sample size of 23 participants, while sufficient to reach data saturation, remained relatively small and was not intended to support broad generalization but reflected the qualitative research goal of capturing in-depth, information-rich insights through purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015).

Another design limitation was the timeframe of pet loss, as the study only included losses that occurred during participants' adult lives, which spanned varying lengths of time for each individual. This criterion potentially excluded valuable perspectives from adolescent experiences of pet loss and introduced variability across different periods. Furthermore, some losses were recent, while others occurred up to two decades ago, which may have influenced participants' recall accuracy and emotional response. This limitation raised concerns about recall bias, as memories and reflections may vary significantly based on the timing and recency of the loss (Althubaiti, 2016). Additionally, the predominantly female sample limited the diversity of perspectives,

potentially influencing the dependability of the results in reflecting gender-related experiences of grief.

Lastly, as a researcher with a personal connection to the topic, there was a risk of personal bias. This was mitigated through rigorous phenomenological bracketing and reflexive journaling to consciously separate personal experiences from the analysis, striving to maintain objectivity and enhance the credibility of the findings. These methodological steps were implemented to reduce the impact of researcher bias and ensure a clear, unfiltered presentation of participants' lived experiences.

### **Recommendations**

This phenomenological qualitative study has contributed to a deeper understanding of pet loss, particularly within the African American community, revealing both strengths and limitations that suggest directions for future research. The findings underscore the need for more inclusive, diverse research on pet bereavement, expanding the scope beyond traditional study samples.

The unexpectedly high level of interest from African American participants in this study suggests a demand for more research on pet loss within this community. A larger-scale, quantitative study could offer generalized insights into the African American experience of pet bereavement, providing a broader perspective on the prevalence and impact of pet loss. Such research would complement the qualitative depth of this study with data that could be used to identify patterns and inform community-based support systems. Future research should also examine pet loss as a factor in population-based health studies. Recognizing pet loss as a form of grief with potential mental and physical

health implications may enhance understanding of how this experience intersects with overall health outcomes, particularly within marginalized communities. Health studies focusing on bereavement might consider including questions on pet loss to gauge its impact more comprehensively.

This study also highlights the importance of intentional diversity in pet loss research samples, especially in terms of racial and gender representation. Researchers are encouraged to actively diversify their recruitment strategies to include African American participants, potentially through community-engaged research methods that foster trust and cultural relevance. This inclusive approach could be applied to other underrepresented groups as well, such as African American men, whose experiences with pet loss remain underexplored. While this study included five African American men, the sample was predominantly female, mirroring the gender imbalance seen in much of the pet loss literature. Future studies that specifically examine the experiences of African American men with pet loss could provide valuable insights into this historically understudied and often stereotyped group.

Additionally, the diversity within the African American community itself warrants further exploration. Although African Americans are often studied as a homogenous racial group, this approach overlooks the intersectional variations in grief experiences. Future studies might consider the role of generational, socioeconomic, and household composition differences, such as single, childless, married, partnered, same-sex, and nonbinary identities among African American pet owners. Furthermore, research

on how African American adolescents transition into adulthood while navigating pet loss could reveal unique developmental aspects of grief in this community.

Future research might also consider how the type of animal influences the grieving process, as losses of less conventional pets, such as reptiles, aquarium fish, and amphibians, may present unique grief experiences. This study included one participant who lost a bearded dragon, suggesting that the attachment and bereavement associated with these nontraditional pets may be unique from those typically reported for more conventional animals like dogs and cats. Exploring these distinct experiences could broaden the understanding of pet loss and the ways in which attachment varies across species.

Finally, while the African American experience of pet loss in the United States is distinctive, the need for inclusive pet loss research extends to other cultural groups within and outside the United States. Expanding pet bereavement research to encompass a broader range of racial and cultural identities, especially among people of color, could provide a richer understanding of how cultural context shapes the grief process.

### **Implications**

This study presents several potential implications for positive social change, including addressing underrepresentation, enhancing social services, engaging research organizations, supporting advocacy groups, expanding understanding of social determinants of health, and aligning with the one health approach. Interdisciplinary collaboration with human services researchers can generate new knowledge to inform policies, programs, and practices in public health. Each of these areas demonstrates how

insights from this study contribute to a more inclusive understanding of pet loss and its impact within African American communities.

### **Addressing Underrepresentation**

This study centers on an underrepresented population in research, specifically African American adults coping with pet loss. By bringing attention to this community, the research fills a gap in human–animal bond literature and highlights the need for greater inclusivity. Neglecting underrepresented groups can perpetuate health and mental health disparities among racial and ethnic communities, emphasizing the importance of diverse perspectives. As some participants noted, the study provided a rare opportunity for African Americans to share their experiences with pet loss. For example, P18 expressed, “I want to just say thank you ... this is the first [study] that I’ve seen focusing on us as African American or Black people. And we care about our pets.” Similarly, P9 said, “Thank you for providing this space ... until I got that [study info] from my therapist, I didn’t know others like me were going through this.” These reflections underscore the significance of inclusive research and suggest that future studies could benefit from intentionally diversifying samples by race, gender, and other intersecting identities.

### **Impact on Social Services**

The findings from this study can inform social service practices, particularly within agencies and community-based programs that provide mental health and other human services impacting quality of life. African American individuals may experience pet loss in unique ways, influenced by cultural, social, and historical factors, and

understanding these distinct experiences allows professionals to deliver more culturally sensitive and effective support. For example, recognizing the importance of spirituality, community, and family in African American grief processes can help practitioners tailor their approaches to meet the specific needs of this community. This research highlights the value of incorporating cultural awareness into service delivery, potentially reducing the risk of disenfranchised grief and isolation that individuals may feel in response to pet loss. Ultimately, these insights could lead to improved mental health outcomes within African American communities as professionals become more familiar with the distinct grief processes related to pet loss and adapt their practices to support this unique aspect of bereavement.

### **Engagement With Research Organizations**

Research outcomes from this study may be of interest to organizations like HABRI and the International Society for Anthrozoology, which focus on promoting education about the impact of animals on health and well-being. By incorporating the experiences of African American individuals into the human–animal bond research landscape, this study amplifies voices that are often underrepresented in conversations around pet loss and grief. Highlighting the African American perspective on pet loss can enrich discussions within these organizations, encouraging a more inclusive approach to research and expanding the understanding of how diverse cultural backgrounds shape human–animal relationships. Such inclusivity not only broadens the scope of human–animal bond research but also enhances its relevance to human services by acknowledging the varied experiences of grief across different communities.

### **Advocacy and Support Groups**

The findings of this study may draw interest from animal advocacy groups dedicated to amplifying marginalized voices in research and animal-related fields, such as CARE and the National Association of Black Veterinarians. By highlighting the African American experience of pet loss, this study provides these organizations with valuable insights that support their missions of fostering inclusivity in animal advocacy and care. Furthermore, organizations offering pet loss support, like The Association for Pet Loss and Bereavement, could use these findings to develop more culturally sensitive resources tailored to the needs of African American clients. By integrating an understanding of unique grief processes within this community, these support organizations can enhance their ability to provide meaningful, empathetic services, ultimately contributing to more equitable support in times of loss.

### **Widening Understanding of Social Determinants of Health**

By accurately reflecting the human–animal bond in African American communities, this research broadens the understanding of social determinants of health and fosters opportunities for positive social change. Examining the intersectionality of race, culture, and pet loss reveals how these factors collectively shape health outcomes, particularly within marginalized communities. This aligns with efforts to address health disparities and promote health equity, as the study highlights how cultural context influences grief experiences and their related health impacts. By shedding light on these nuanced grief processes, the research supports a more comprehensive approach to health

that considers diverse cultural perspectives, ultimately contributing to a more equitable understanding of bereavement and well-being.

### **Alignment With the One Health Approach**

This study aligns with the one health approach, which highlights the interconnectedness of human, animal, and environmental health. By incorporating the concept of *zooyeia*—the health benefits animals provide to human communities—this research underscores the value of including diverse cultural perspectives in health research. By exploring the human–animal bond within African American communities, this study enriches the one health framework, promoting a more inclusive understanding of health that incorporates cultural context alongside human–animal relationships. This approach encourages a holistic view of health that respects the unique experiences of different communities and recognizes the impact of cultural factors on health and well-being.

### **Conclusion**

This phenomenological qualitative research study highlighted the stories of 23 African American adults who experienced pet loss. This study advances the field of human services by illuminating the unique and often overlooked experiences of African American pet owners, who described their pets as family and often faced disenfranchised grief in expressing this loss. By documenting these deeply personal stories, some shared for the first time, this research validates participants' voices and underscores the profound meaning these bonds carry. Their reflections reveal both the depth of attachment to their pets and the unique cultural factors that influence their grief, such as



spirituality, community values, and even stigma associated with pet ownership in African American communities. This study affirms the power of research to make individuals feel seen and valued, as a reminder that every perspective matters.

For too long, studies on the human–animal bond have focused on a narrow range of experiences, often overlooking the diverse cultural factors that shape grief and loss. Excluding African American perspectives from pet loss research leads to a limited understanding of a single narrative that misses the richness of alternative truths and grieving processes. This study challenges that conventional approach, advocating for research that embraces diversity to build a more inclusive and comprehensive view of the human experience. Such inclusivity is central to the essence of human services research, which is rooted in the mission to understand, support, and empower individuals across all communities. Through these findings, I hope to inspire a shift in human services research, one that values diverse realities, fosters empathy, and ultimately promotes social change for those whose experiences have often gone unheard.

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## Appendix: Interview Protocol and Interview Questions

Research Question: What is the meaning of grief for African American pet owners who have experienced pet loss?

### Procedural Section

- Introductions: Introduce myself, review the interview process, the estimated time the interview will last, and the general format for interview questions.
- Study purpose and applications: Review the study's purpose and uses of the findings, including how the findings will be reported and shared.
- Consent forms, approvals: Review informed consent, assurance of privacy and confidentiality, inform the interview will be recorded, obtain permission for that, and ask if there are any questions about consent.
- Treatment of data: Review how data will be managed, secured, and disposed of after a specific time period
- Address any other questions or concerns prior to beginning the interview session

**Researcher Script:** *The purpose of this interview is to hear about your experience as an African American adult who has experienced the loss of a pet(s), and how you describe that experience by sharing your personal stories, insights, reactions to, and interpretation of those experiences.*

### 1. Opening Question

- a. Tell me about yourself and your current life (where you are from, family, work, children, pets).
  - i. *Probes: If the participant currently has pets, inquire about names, types of pets, ages, etc., to build rapport*

### 2. History with Animals

- a. Can you describe your history with animals throughout your life?

- i. *Probes: Favorite pets, number or types of pets throughout the years, memorable experiences, significant relationships with animals, attitudes toward certain animals, and family history with pets/animals.*

### **3. Describing the Relationship**

- a. Tell me more about the pet(s) that you lost. How would you describe the type of relationship you had with <<pet's name>>?
  - i. *Probes: type of pet, pet's name, gender, age when they died, pet's age and how they came into the participant's life, personality, demeanor, specific activities, routines, shared moments (if the respondent provides the pet's name, use pet's name through the remainder of the interview when referring to pet), responsiveness, closeness, petting, sleeping with pet, working from home with pet, laughter and fun with animal, communication, confiding in animal, increased or decreased loneliness, increased or decreased social support, celebration of pet birthdays, dressing pet up for holidays, creating stories about pet.*

### **4. Coping with Loss (Loss orientation)**

- a. Describe how you coped with the loss of <<pet's name>>?
  - i. *Probes: What happened that day/day of the week? What season was it? What was going on in your life at the time? (stressors, economic issues, health, COVID, work, etc.). How it happened (i.e. euthanasia, illness, accident, natural causes) Where it happened (i.e. vet's office, animal hospital, participant's home). Who participant was with? Who was the first person the participant told and why? Where was the participant (i.e. next to pet at euthanasia procedure, notified by vet or loved one, at work, or the pet was found deceased). Where did the participant go after it happened? What kind of arrangements were made, if any, and why? Response*

*when you (either heard the news, spent the last moments, etc.).  
Days following, compared to losing a human*

### **5. Mourning Process (Restoration orientation)**

- a. How did you mourn for <<pet's name>>?
  - i. *Probes: Openly mourn, posts on social media about pet, hold a service, days off from work, mourned with others, memories, support from others, talking about the pet with others, seek counseling or support groups, continuing bonds, rumination*

### **6. Time After Loss (Oscillation)**

- a. Describe how you've been navigating the ups and downs in your emotions since the loss of your pet?
  - i. *Probes: Recency of loss, coping over time, memories of pet, balancing everyday responsibilities, how feelings from loss was confronted or avoided, cultural influences*

### **7. Cultural Impact on Grief**

- a. Describe the experience of mourning or your process of grieving for <<pet's name>> from the perspective of identifying as a Black and/or African American adult. How do you think culture or race identity (identifying as Black or African American) impacted or influenced how you mourned or grieved for <<pet's name>>?
  - i. *Probes: Felt supported or not supported, embarrassed, had to be strong, other more important things to worry about, cultural or community support, considered or did not consider therapy or counseling*

### **8. Psychological Safety**

- a. How did you perceive the availability of support and understanding from your community or cultural context (as a Black/African American adult) when expressing your feelings about the loss of <<pet's name>>? Can you share any specific instances or ways in which you felt supported, or



conversely, any challenges you encountered in expressing your grief within your cultural or community framework?

- i. *Probes: Ability or willingness to share the experience and the true feelings from the experience. For euthanasia deaths – how did you process having to make the decision? Guilt? Intersectionality of race, culture, or spiritual beliefs?*

## **9. Learning from the Experience**

- a. What did the experience of losing <<pet's name>> teach you, or what did you learn from the experience?

- i. *Probes: Posttraumatic growth, life change, new perspectives*

## **10. Cultural Reflection**

- a. In reflecting on the loss of <<pet's name>>, how do you believe your experience of mourning may have been different if you were part of a different racial or ethnic community? How do you think any differences might have manifested in your grieving process?

## **11. Concluding**

- a. To obtain your final thoughts, is there anything else you would like to tell me or share with me regarding today's topic?

*Researcher Script: Thank you for your time and your insights on African Americans and pet loss. Immediately following this interview, I will email you a debrief form, which provides you with resources in case anything discussed in this interview was distressing. I will also follow up with you in a few days to complete a member-checking exercise to verify my notes from our session and/or to ask you a few questions if necessary for clarification.*