

# **TERMINOLOGY INSECURITY? APPLICATION OF ATTACHMENT THEORY TO THE HUMAN-COMPANION ANIMAL BOND, AND REVIEW OF ITS EFFECTS**

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# OVERVIEW

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- × My Interest
- × Attachment Theory
- × Themes in Attachment Research
- × The Human-Animal Bond
- × Themes in HAB Research
- × Evaluation of Theory and Research
- × Intersections in HAB and Attachment
- × Recommendations
- × Questions / Discussion

# MY INTEREST

- × Life plan
- × Power of the connection



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**“My therapy is quite simple: I wag my tail and lick your face until you feel good about yourself again.”**



# HUMANS AND COMPANION ANIMALS

- × Long history of connection
- × Human-animal bond (HAB)
  - + The Human-Animal Bond is the dynamic relationship between people and animals in that each influences the psychological and physiological state of the other.
- × Present focus- companion animals

# ATTACHMENT THEORY

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- ✘ Relational in nature- emotions and interactions
- ✘ Bowlby used concepts from ethology, evolutionary biology, cognitive psychology, object relations, and systems theory.
- ✘ Infants and children instinctively seek closeness and attachment to caregivers for the purposes of protection, safety and nurturing.
- ✘ Rupture of an attachment can lead to emotional distress and maladaptive methods of getting one's needs met.

# COMPONENTS IN ATTACHMENT

- × Proximity-seeking
- × Secure Base
- × Safe Haven
- × Separation Anxiety





# ATTACHMENT THEORY

- Bowlby- relational, focuses on emotions, views of the self, views of others, interpersonal interactions (Bowlby, 1982)

## Attachment Figure

person to whom one is affectionally bonded

sought when wanting security

## Attachment Style

secure

disorganized

insecure-avoidant

insecure-anxious

## Attachment Behaviors

proximity seeking

separation anxiety

secure base

safe haven

## Affectional Bond

persistent over time

specific between two people

emotionally significant

# THE PHYSIOLOGY OF ATTACHMENT

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- × Interpersonal and relational
- × Role of the right brain hemisphere
- × Developmental process/Pruning
- × Role of neurons and neurotransmitters
  - + Oxytocin
  - + Vasopressin



# THE HUMAN-ANIMAL BOND

- The **Human-Animal Bond** is the dynamic relationship between people and animals in that each influences the psychological and physiological state of the other.
  - Present focus is pets and their human owners

## Physiological Benefits

- Decreased Anxiety in clinical and non-clinical samples
- Decreased Blood Pressure in clinical and non-clinical samples
- Increased release of Oxytocin in females in non-clinical samples

## Psychosocial Benefits

- Increased social skills
- Increased attendance and participation in therapy
- Enhanced perception of therapeutic alliance
- Increased self-esteem and independence
- Increased perceived social support
- Enhanced overall well-being
- Decreased loneliness

# THEMES IN HAB RESEARCH

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- × Focus is varied
  - + Companion animal
  - + Human owner
  - + Both pet and owner
- × Temporal Differences
- × Pet type

# PHYSIOLOGICAL BENEFITS OF THE HAB

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## Outcomes:

- × Decreased blood pressure
- × Neurochemicals
- × Self-Reported Anxiety
- × Medication Usage

## Mechanisms Proposed:

- × Classical conditioning
- × Buffering effect of support
- × Role of a relationship on physical health
- × Competing response theory



# PSYCHOSOCIAL EFFECTS OF THE HAB

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## Findings:

- Increased social interaction and engagement
- Safety and security
- Independence
- Increased social competence in children
- Personality characteristic correlations

## Mechanisms Proposed:

- Pet as source of social, emotional support
- Attachment theory

# EVALUATION OF THEORY & RESEARCH-- ATTACHMENT

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- ✘ Established measure for infant-caregiver dyad
- ✘ Established measure for adults
- ✘ Application of Theory in Research
  - + Valid construct
  - + Attachment trajectory
- ✘ Continued challenges
  - Practical significance
  - Neurobiology

# EVALUATION OF THEORY & RESEARCH–HAB

- × HAB is a real phenomenon
  - + Consistent findings about impact on physiological and psychosocial benefits
- × Challenges in Quantifying the Bond
  - + Techniques vary
  - + No clear standard for measurement
- × Studies
  - + Various measures used
  - + Researcher bias could be an issue
  - + Participants in studies may also be biased
  - + Reliability / validity info often missing
  - + Little to no replication



# INTERSECTIONS -ATTACHMENT AND THE HAB

## × Parallel constructs?

- + Emotional bond
- + Dyadic functioning
- + Measurement
  - × Self-report
  - × AAI, ASSP

- Tenets of Attachment
  - Secure base
  - Safe haven
  - Proximity-seeking
  - Separation anxiety

# ATTACHMENT THEORY AND THE HAB

- × Pet as attachment figure
  - + Safe haven, secure base
- × Pet as infant and/or caregiver
  - + Reciprocal caregiving
  - + Hierarchical?
- × Pet as transitional object in development
  - + Child
  - + Adult
  - + Death/Grief
- × Relationships with Pets v. Romantic Relationships
- × Pet Attachment Questionnaire
  - + Zilcha-Mano and colleagues

# PET ATTACHMENT



## *Attachment Bond*

- Affectional Bond
- Secure Base
- Safe Haven
- Proximity-Seeking
- Separation Anxiety



## *Pet Attachment?*

- Affectional Bond
- Attachment Bond
- Human-Animal Bond



## *Human-Animal Bond*

- Affectional Bond
- Secure Base
- Safe Haven
- Unconditional Love

Construct Equivalence?

*Pet Attachment* similar to adult attachment, people differ in their attachments to pets along the dimensions of attachment anxiety and avoidance. These individual differences reflect internal working models of pet relationships that are associated with pet-related expectations, emotions, and behavior (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011).



# PET ATTACHMENT (ZILCHA-MANO ET AL., 2011)

- × Attachment is a construct with multiple applications, including the relationship between pets and owners
- × Pet Attachment Questionnaire
  - + Self-report- lower score is indicative of secure attachment
  - + Factors- anxiety, avoidance
- × Significant correlation between human–pet attachment orientation human–human attachment
- × Experimental support
  - + Pet as secure base and safe haven
  - + Validated self-report measures
  - + Task appraisal
  - + Blood pressure

# ZILCHA-MANO ET AL., 2011

## × Pet as safe haven

- × Stress-inducing task
- × Three conditions
- × 120 participants
- × Independent variables
  - + Presence (physical or cognitive) of pet
  - + Pet attachment as covariate
- × Dependent variables
  - + Blood pressure
  - + Task appraisal
- × Results- pet attachment moderated effect
  - + Buffered blood pressure during task completion when primed for pet
  - + Found task less difficult when primed for pet

## × Pet as secure base

- × Exploration task
- × Three conditions
- × 165 participants
- × Independent variables
  - + Presence (physical or cognitive) of pet
  - + Pet attachment as covariate
- × Dependent variables
  - + Number of goals
  - + Self-efficacy about goals
- × Results- pet attachment moderated effect
  - + More goals when primed for pet
  - + Greater self-efficacy when primed for pet

# GAPS IN THE EXISTING RESEARCH

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- ✘ Most HAB studies are **atheoretical**- provide evidence of physiological and psychosocial benefits of pet ownership without a unifying framework.
  - + Does not explain the mechanism or pathway of the HAB
  - + Cannot draw conclusions about how someone can increase the benefits reaped from pet ownership.
- ✘ Other researchers have not **formally** applied Bowlby's attachment theory in measuring the HAB.
  - + Resulting studies do little beyond providing evidence that something positive may exist in the HAB
  - + No focus on the role of moderating or mediating variable of true pet attachment in understanding the relationship between adult attachment, daily functioning, and mental health.



# CONCLUSIONS

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- ✘ Many studies provide evidence that the HAB is beneficial
  - + Physiological, social, emotional effects
  - + Both short-term and longitudinal effects
  - + Suggestions that this is true for most individuals
- ✘ Attachment theory is a helpful lens through which to view HAB
  - + Tenets of the theory can be applied to pet-owner bond
  - + At least one measure (PAQ, Zilcha-Mano et al., 2011) has been developed which can assess this accurately and reliably

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH

- ✘ Use attachment theory to conceptualize and operationalize the HAB
- ✘ Use reliable, validated instruments to measure pet attachment as a covariate in empirical research
- ✘ Replicate and extend previous studies' methods with validated, meaningful tools
- ✘ Increase the generalizability of results by using diverse sampling, while acknowledging individual differences
- ✘ Implications for counseling

# CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS

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- ✘ Using an organized theoretical framework of pet attachment as it pertains to perceived social support and subjective well-being could contribute to the literature by adding to what is currently known about the effects of relationship with pets on owners and identify possible factors that may impact pet owners' subjective well-being
- ✘ It is my hope that clinicians may utilize this information to better understand and incorporate the influence of social support, pet attachment, and adult attachment into their conceptualization and treatment of clients who own pets
- ✘ Important to assess the clients' attachment bonds with their pets in terms of anxiety and avoidance, as this may be of greater clinical significance than knowing whether or not the client owns a pet
- ✘ As reviews in the field show, little can be said about the general impact of pets on humans. Focusing on individual differences in pet attachment orientation is therefore highly important. This research can contribute to our understanding of the unique contribution of pet attachment to people's well-being and perceived social support, above and beyond interpersonal attachment.



# QUESTIONS / DISCUSSION

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