

**The caring relationship: a qualitative study of the interaction  
between childless married couples and their dogs**

**by**

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### **Summary**

This qualitative study explores the relationship between a childless married couple and their dog by looking at this phenomenon through a social constructionistic viewpoint. Human animal interaction has been studied in various different research scenarios, where this interaction was seen as enhancing health or well being in both the human and animal.

This study focused on a more “human” role that an animal could play in the lives of people by becoming a family member and how this role affects the family as a whole. The research was conducted to determine whether a childless married couple could experience a fulfilling caring relationship with a dog within this formed family unit.

Four elements that are commonly found in a caring relationship were identified and looked at as to whether they can also be found in the relationship that develops between a childless married couple and their dog. The four elements, love, attachment, need fulfilment and ritualisation also formed the broad predetermined themes investigated in this study.

The participants were requested to complete an open-ended questionnaire in which the questions explored the relationship between the married couple and their dog. The data received from these questionnaires was then analysed through content analysis by using the predetermined themes as a framework but also allowing further themes and sub themes to develop from the research data.

The participants indicated that they experienced the fulfilment of various needs in the relationship they have with their dog. This need fulfilment included the need for a family, the need for companionship, the need to be needed and the need for gratitude. Ritualisation occurred in the

form of disciplinary methods and various set activities like fixed eating, sleeping and grooming times.

The participants viewed their relationship with their dog as one that is formed out of mutual love and attachment. The feeling of love was expressed through companionship, trust and physical contact as well as the use of nicknames for their dog and by showing pride in their dog.

A strong attachment also existed between the participants and their dogs. This attachment could be seen in the participants' holiday arrangements that were usually made to accommodate the dog as well as the fact that they missed their dogs and believed their dogs to have also missed them when they were separated. They could become so attached to each other that they might experience separation anxiety and grief at the loss or the thought of losing their dogs.

The four elements of caring were thus found in the relationship between a childless married couple and their dog. The existence of these elements suggests that a caring relationship can be formed between a childless married couple and their dog. This caring relationship can have positive emotional and physical influences on both the people and their dogs.

**Keyterms:**

**Caring, love, attachment, ritualisation, need fulfilment, quasi-family, childless, relationships, human-animal interaction, social constructionism.**

## **Die versorgingsverhouding: ‘n kwalitatiewe studie oor die interaksie tussen kinderlose egpare en hulle honde**

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### **Opsomming**

Hierdie kwalitatiewe studie verken die verhouding tussen kinderlose getroude egpare en hulle honde deur na hierdie verskynsel vanuit ‘n sosiaal-konstruksionistiese uitgangspunt te kyk. Mens-dier interaksie is reeds in velerlei verskillende navorsingscenarios bestudeer waar hierdie interaksie in beide mens en dier gesien is as iets wat gesondheid of welsyn verbeter.

Hierdie studie het op ‘n meer “menslike” rol gefokus wat ‘n dier in mense se lewens kan speel deur ‘n lid van die gesin te word en hoe hierdie rol die gesin as ‘n geheel beïnvloed. Deur die navorsing is gepoog om te bepaal of ‘n kinderlose egpaar ‘n vervullende versorgingsverhouding met ‘n hond kan beleef binne hierdie gevormde gesinseenheid.

Vier elemente wat algemeen in ‘n versorgingsverhouding aangetref word is geïdentifiseer en bestudeer om te bepaal of hulle ook in die verhouding wat tussen ‘n kinderlose getroude egpaar en hulle hond ontwikkel gevind kan word. Hierdie vier elemente, liefde, gehegtheid, behoeftevervulling en ritualisering, het ook die breë voorafbepaalde temas vir die ontleding van die data gevorm.

Die deelnemers is versoek om ‘n oop vraelys waarin die vrae gerig was om die verhouding tussen die getroude egpaar en hulle hond te verken te voltooi. Die data wat deur hierdie vraelyste ingesamel is, is ontleed deur middel van inhoudsanalise. Die vier voorafbepaalde temas is as raamwerk te gebruik, maar daar is ook ruimte gelaat vir verdere temas en subtemas wat moontlik uit die data kon voortspruit.

Die deelnemers het aangedui dat hulle die vervulling van verskeie behoeftes deur die verhouding wat hulle met hulle hond het ervaar. Hierdie behoeftevervulling sluit die behoefte aan ‘n gesin, die

behoefte aan kameraadskap, die behoefte om nodig gehê te word en die behoefte aan erkentlikheid in. Ritualisering het plaas gevind in die vorm van dissiplineringsmetodes en verskeie vasgestelde aktiwiteite soos eet, slaap en fisiese versorgingstye.

Die deelnemers het hulle verhouding met hulle hond beskou as een wat gevorm is vanuit wedersydse liefde en gehegtheid. Die gevoel van liefde is uitgedruk deur kameraadskap, vertrouwe en fisiese kontak asook die gebruik van troetelnaampies vir hulle hond en deur trots in hulle hond te toon.

'n Sterk gehegtheid het tussen die deelnemers en hulle honde bestaan. Hierdie gehegtheid kan gesien word in die deelnemers se vakansiereëlings wat gewoonlik gemaak word om die hond te akkommodeer, maar ook in die feit dat hulle hulle hond gemis het en geglo het dat hulle honde hulle ook gemis het wanneer hulle van mekaar geskei is. Hulle kon ook tot so 'n mate aan mekaar geheg wees dat hulle skeidingsangs en droefheid ervaar het met die verlies of die gedagte aan verlies van hulle hond.

Die vier elemente van versorging kom dus voor in die verhouding tussen 'n kinderlose getroude egpaar en hulle hond. Die bestaan van hierdie elemente impliseer dat 'n versorgingsverhouding tussen 'n kinderlose getroude egpaar en hulle hond gevorm kan word. Die versorgingsverhouding kan 'n positiewe emosionele en fisiese invloed op beide die mense en hulle hond hê.

**Sleuteltermes:**

**Versorging, liefde, gehegtheid, ritualisering, behoeftevervulling, quasi-familie, kinderloos, verhouding, mens-dier interaksie, sosiale konstruksionisme.**

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## **Chapter 1: Background and introduction**

### ***1.1 Introduction to chapter***

This chapter is a short introduction to the dissertation and includes literature on the background of the study as well as an outline of the various topics that will be discussed. It will also address the motivation for this study as well as the social constructionists' view of the caring relationship between a childless married couple and their dog/s. The chapter is concluded with a broad overview of the research methodology, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 3.

### ***1.2 Background***

Humans are considered social beings capable of reasoning and evaluation, but who can also harbour the capacity for love, commitment and a caring relationship (Gergen, 1994). As a result of the social nature of human beings, certain behaviours have emerged and grown powerful within certain cultural contexts (Gergen, 1994). These behaviours have become powerful to such an extent that by cohering to them people find greater life satisfaction. The caring relationship is one of these behaviours that have become a part of human nature.

Animals have been companions to humans for centuries. It is thus possible that a caring relationship, similar to that between people, may exist between a person and the animal that is dependent on him/her. It is, however, not certain that the human-animal caring relationship takes on the same form as that between people.

This study focuses on the caring relationship between a person and a dependent living creature. This caring relationship was studied by looking at the various social constructions wherein it occurs. According to social constructionism, different individuals may differ quite dramatically in what they think a caring relationship entails. Four common elements in "caring", namely, fulfilment of needs; ritualisation; love and attachment have been described (Barker & Barker, 1990; Erikson, 1975; Serpell, 1991).

Caring provides the means to fulfil certain needs. For this dissertation the fulfilment of needs that a caring relationship can provide will include the need for a unit of mutual love and attachment to

which one can belong, the need to experience a relationship that entails the care of a dependent creature and the need to be needed (this is discussed in Chapter 2).

Different people may have different views on the need fulfilment that may be gained from a caring relationship. There are however specific theories that deal with needs. For example, both Erik Erikson and Erich Fromm identified certain needs that caring for a dependent creature can fulfil. Erich Fromm (Odendaal & Lehmann, 2001) identified the person's need to belong. According to him it is part of human nature to want to unite with other living beings and to be related to them. A caring relationship provides a person with another being, which is not only dependent on him/her but also provides the person with a "family" to which they both belong.

Erik Erikson (Meyer, Moore & Viljoen, 1997) describes several developmental stages. In the stage, which he calls adulthood, the main focus falls on caring and the need for caring relationships. According to Erikson adults experience the need to feel that they are needed. One of the needs that children fulfil is the need that people have to care for an infant or a dependent creature. They thus help to fulfil the need to be needed. Erickson argued that if the need to feel needed is not fulfilled, adults may become self-centred and may also lose their trust in the community and the future of humanity.

One of the most visible psychosocial characteristics of caring is ritualisation (Erikson, 1975). Rituals are defined for the purpose of this dissertation as: Public or private repetitive actions that incorporate both order and spontaneity. Ritualisation will then refer to the introduction of these rituals within any given context (see the detailed discussion in Chapter 2).

Ritualisation involves "ceremonial" acts such as feeding times, bedtimes, and playtimes. Ritualisation occurs in one way or another in a caring relationship but it may vary according to the different social constructions wherein the caring occurs. Interplay between the living organisms in the caring relationship must be repeated at meaningful intervals and in a recurring context for it to be ritualised (Erikson, 1975). Ritualisation is important to provide both structure and discipline to the household. Through ritualisation people draw the borders of correct conduct that ensure that the family members live in harmony with each other.

Both the terms love and attachment come up in most of the literature discussing caring (Barker & Barker, 1990; Serpell, 1991). For the purpose of this study, love will be defined as a deep, strong mutual likening between two entities that grows in a "give and take" relationship and is characterised by mutual trust, companionship and affection. Attachment will be defined as a

strong and long lasting emotional tie between a person and another living creature (see the discussion in Chapter 2).

However, both these terms are relative to the social constructs and discourses wherein they are used. Love is usually seen as a strong positive emotion that a person or living creature has for another living creature. Attachment is usually viewed as an element of love, but attachment is more than just an emotion. It also involves certain actions and rituals that the parties involved begin to expect. In this study I looked at how the participants view these elements and to what extent they find them to be necessary in a caring relationship.

The caring relationship also forms part of another dominant social construct: The formation of a nuclear family. According to Le Roux (1994:16) the nuclear family can be defined as “a social unit in society consisting only of a married couple and their natural or adopted children”. Schaefer and Lamm (1995:361) define a nuclear family as “a married couple and their unmarried children living together”. From these two definitions it becomes clear that in order to form a nuclear family, children are needed as stated by the generally accepted social construction. These days other forms of nuclear families do, however, exist; like single parent families, families with gay parents, and families with adopted children.

Having children and taking on the various responsibilities of parenting can fulfil the various caring needs and also provide a caring relationship. Parents nurture their children and look after their needs, but these children also fulfil various needs of their parents (Post, 1994).

According to Post (1994), “Life is a gift” and not all people have the privilege of experiencing parenting. Some married couples also prefer not to have children. In this study childless married couples consisted of the following three groups: Married couples who can not have children; married couples who do not want children; married couples who have lost a child or whose children are grown up and have left home.

It is important to note that being childless may be the choice of some married couples. Books like *Childless by choice* (Veevers, 1980) and *The childless marriage: an exploratory study of couples who do not want children* (Campbell, 1988) explore the phenomenon of couples that chose not to have children. Reasons for their choice may vary from work responsibilities to the plain fact that they do not want children. However, these couples also live within a society where certain social constructs prevail. They may thus also feel pressure from social expectations to form a nuclear family and experience a caring relationship. In this sense animals may once again play an important role by becoming not only companions but also a living being to care for.

In married couples where a child has died or where the children are fully grown and live on their own, a feeling of emptiness may occur. Animals can be used to fill this emptiness. Animals are desperately in need of being cared for and cared about by people (Gaard, 2001). It makes sense that pets<sup>1</sup> can be adopted to provide a caring relationship.

Many married couples that do not have children struggle to adhere to the social pressure to form a nuclear family wherein they may experience a caring relationship. These couples can then form a quasi-family by keeping a dog as a pet in order to try and adhere to the social expectations. A quasi-family is defined by Le Roux (1994:17) as “A group of people functioning and characterised as a formal family without the traditional sanctions”. This type of family is thus seen as an unconventional family. The childless married couple may form a type of quasi-family wherein they include their dog as part of the family. A married couple that does not have children, but has a dog, cannot be seen as having a nuclear family. Rather they may be seen as an unconventional family that does not adhere to traditional sanctions stating that they have to have children in order to form a family.

Pets include a wide variety of animals, to narrow this range, this study will focus only on dogs as pets as it is the most popular choice of household animal and the relationship between owners and their dogs is studied more widely. The social reality of this study thus involves married couples that do not have children and decide to have a dog to provide a caring relationship.

### ***1.3 Why is this research needed?***

In this study the aim is to determine whether dogs can provide a caring relationship for people who do not have children. If a dog is able to provide such a relationship, it may enhance the quality of married couples' lives by providing the means to satisfy the need to take care of a dependent creature. Furthermore, if the human-dog relationship can provide mutual love and attention and thus provide the setting where the married couple can feel the responsibility to care for a “child” depending on them, then the dog may also enhance the quality of life for that couple within a social setting that emphasises such a relationship.

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<sup>1</sup> The term “companion animal” is currently often used to refer to pets. However, for the sake of readability the word pet will be used throughout the study.

Married couples that are unable to have children may experience various emotional and physical difficulties. If dogs can provide a caring relationship, therapists working with such couples can use the information gained through this study.

It is only recently that researchers have begun to explore the relationship between people and their pets and the possible physical and emotional benefits of that relationship (Barker, 2002). The surveys that were done show a strong psychological and emotional attachment between people and their pets. Researchers now use the term *human-animal bond* to refer to this attachment (Barker, 2002). Modern studies show that most pet owners view their pets as enhancing the quality of family life by minimising tension between family members and enhancing the owner's compassion for living things (Barker, 1993).

Barker and Barker (1990) conducted a study on the owners' closeness to their pet dogs. They found that dog owners were as emotionally close to their dogs as to their closest family members. They also found that a third of dog owners were actually closer to their dogs than to any other family members.

It is also not unknown to use animals in therapy sessions. Several studies were done on how pet ownership may affect physical and mental health (Barker, 2002). Friedman, Katcher, Lynch and Thomas (1980) conducted one of the first studies, which compared the survival rate of pet owners and non-pet owners following a myocardial infarction. They found a significant higher survival rate for pet owners. Odendaal (2000) conducted a study to determine the role of a neurotransmitter that is associated with positive interaction on an interspecies basis. He found that positive interaction with dogs caused a significant drop in blood pressure in the human and the dog.

Other researchers have examined the relationship between pet ownership and more general health factors. Serpell (1991) for example, compared adults before and after they acquired a pet. He found a decrease in minor health problems for pet owners. Allen, Batascovich, Tomaka and Kelsey (1991) also found that females had lower stress levels when their dogs were present.

According to Allen *et al.* (1991) some research results show that talking to dogs is related to greater life satisfaction, greater marital satisfaction and better physical and mental health. Research further reveals that dog-owning couples are better off than those without dogs. Furthermore, amongst dog owning couples, those with the highest attachment to their dogs are the healthiest, emotionally and physically (Allen *et al.*, 1991).

The results of this study may also contribute to the training of veterinarians to understand the importance of animals to people. By understanding the importance of dogs to childless couples, they may approach situations with better understanding, sympathy and compassion.

This study will also contribute to the advancement of science. The human sciences focus on human behaviour and the research of humanity. Through research done information is collected to explain or better understand certain aspects of humanity. This information not only provides knowledge on different phenomena but also provides the basis for theories and various interventions. Animals are used in therapy sessions to help people, but also in experiments in order to better understand human reactions and behaviours. People thus believe animal reactions and behaviours to be similar to human behaviours and reactions. Knowledge about the caring relationship can thus be gained by studying the relationship between a childless married couple and their dog. This study provides insight on how these couples construct a caring relationship. Looking in depth at this phenomenon will provide important information for future research.

Humans are not alone on this planet. We share our world with a wide variety of living organisms. Our interactions with these organisms may influence our behaviour and views. Through human-animal interaction there may also arise new socially accepted views. This implies that the human-animal bond creates a context wherein the individual can form new constructs and thus redefine his/her reality in accordance with new social beliefs. Humans, in the interaction with their dogs, develop these constructs and thus build a new view of reality. These different forms of reality need to be studied to broaden our understanding of human behaviour.

No animal species share such close contacts with people as pets do. Pets have become so integrated in our daily lives that it is impossible to imagine that they have no influence on our views and behaviours. Pets are not only dependent on humans but people have become dependent on their pets as well.

This study investigates this human-animal interaction between dogs and their owners. This study may thus provide valuable information on human-dog interaction. In recent years this pet-owner interaction was widely researched but the focus mainly fell on how the animals help people through companionship, therapy, work and protection. This study focuses on a more “human” role that the dog may fulfil in its owner’s life in the family context where people “humanise” their dog.

In Western culture the discourse concerning families and caring relationships allows us to understand why people adopt a child and choose to “mother” it, to take care of it. Even if the race of the adopted child is different from its parents’ it is understandable to society. What is not yet

fully understood by society within this discourse is when the species of the “child” is different from its “parents” (Gaard, 2001). When people choose to care for a dog as if it is a child society calls it “misplaced mothering instincts”. This conception shows the strong influence that social constructions of motherhood have on how appropriate the “caring” is viewed. If married couples then adopt a dog to experience a caring relationship, the societal views of caring may limit the need satisfaction they gain from the relationship with their dogs. People who choose to have dogs as “children” may face criticism from society. By studying this phenomenon, a better understanding can be gained of the caring relationship between humans and animals. A better understanding of this relationship may lead to less criticism and the childless married couple may then also experience a more fulfilling, caring relationship with their dog.

#### **1.4 Social constructionism**

The essence of this study was to look at how people view their relationship with their dog as well as the caring that evolves from that relationship. By using the social constructionist theory, a relevant background could be established wherein this view of a caring relationship with a dog could be studied.

Social constructionism provides an alternative to the individual perception of knowledge, which implies that the individual is the only role-player in his/her accumulation of knowledge. According to social constructionism, knowledge is lodged within the sphere of social relatedness (Gergen, 1994). Knowledge is thus something that is formed by the individual through his/her interaction with the people around him/her.

According to social constructionism our knowledge of the world is not derived from the nature of the world as it is, but is construed between groups of people living in the world. The daily interaction between people in the course of social life fabricates our versions of knowledge (Burr, 1995). Knowledge is socially disseminated through language. By talking to others we learn their opinions, ideas and beliefs on various aspects of reality. We also verbalise our own views and feelings through speech with others. Language thus also plays a very important role in social constructionism and derives its significance in human affairs from the way it functions within patterns of relationships (Gergen, 1994). Language is needed for us to learn other people’s views on aspects of reality so that we can incorporate it to form our own views and beliefs, which can then once again be modified, and changed through discussions with other people.



Both the terms “knowledge” and “reality” can be seen as relative to where, when and with whom you interact in your daily life (Berger & Luckman, 1975). The way we understand our world is thus historically and culturally specific. Within a specific cultural and historical background we try to understand our world by using categories and concepts, for example, we divide people into men and woman, young and old.

By constructing categories we try to give meaning to different things around us in order for us to better understand our reality. The meanings of these categories and concepts are not the same for all cultures and times; it depends on when and where in the world one lives (Burr, 1995). For example: One person may place emphasis on dogs and people belonging to different categories/groups called animals and humans, while another person may view them as essentially belonging to the same group called living creatures. These different perceptions may be the result of different experiences as well as different cultural beliefs.

Humans as a species consist of racial and cultural diversity. We as humans are situated in a specific cultural and racial background which causes us to have biased, subjective views on the various aspects of reality. It is, however, not only racial and cultural differences, which make us different from each other. There are many other things, for instance, where we live, what we eat and the people we interact with that influence the way we view our world. Taken-for-granted knowledge can thus be subjective to the specific circumstances of an individual. Social constructionism accordingly encourages people to investigate views and beliefs of people within their specific circumstances without simply accepting taken-for-granted knowledge as being unbiased and objective.

When studying caring relationships between people and their dogs with the purpose of exploring the reality of everyday life or the knowledge that guides their conduct through everyday life, it is important to understand the “common sense” available to the ordinary members of that society. Common sense can be seen as the shared knowledge within a community. This shared knowledge shows how social constructions contribute to how certain things are viewed and how certain relationships are approached (Berger & Luckman, 1975).

Wittgenstein (1953) explains that meanings are given to words as a derivative of social use. The words in language acquire a certain fixed meaning through the ways they are used in patterns of ongoing exchange (Gergen, 1994). Through the use of language people are not only connected to certain categories and cultures, but also certain social and cultural roles and identities. The use of language actively constructs and displays such roles and identities (van Dijk, 1985).

The understandings/knowledge can take a wide variety of different forms and there are thus numerous possible “social constructions” of the world. Social constructionists, furthermore, state that each of these constructs invites a different kind of action from human beings (Burr, 1995). We learn about our world and the meanings of the various different things in our world by talking to other people who share our world. We also learn how to act appropriately in different situations through social interactions where we talk to one another. Social constructionism thus sees language as the means that enable us to form social constructions, as it allows us to communicate with the people around us, which is necessary to build social views and modify personal beliefs.

Social constructionism also takes a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge. It encourages us to be critical and challenge the view that knowledge is based upon objective, unbiased observations of the world (Burr, 1995). The accumulation of knowledge is not only a personal experience, but also one that is socially bound and developed. A person may for example learn from his/her family what caring entails, but may then also expand his/her knowledge of caring through contact with the broader community. What a person has learnt about caring from others is then incorporated into his/her own ideas and beliefs of what caring entails. We as humans thus build our reality through a combination of social contacts and personal views and beliefs.

According to social constructionists people are born into an environment containing certain constructs, which were established by language through the interaction between people. The constructs that we are born into greatly determine our decisions and actions and form the basis with which we construe our world. This, however, only forms a background onto which the individual starts to build his/her own views and beliefs through social interactions with others, as he/she grows older. The social constructs, into which we are born, are then reformed and developed further, and can prescribe for example that people should marry and reproduce. People thus feel the need to do so. Married couples that do not have children face a problem, as they are unable to adhere to society’s views of what is desirable. They may then try to fill the gap by forming a construct of their own where their dog now plays the role of their dependent “child”. From the researcher’s personal observations in a veterinarian practice, this humanisation<sup>2</sup> of their dogs often becomes embedded in language for example by referring to their dogs as “babies” and “children” and even by giving them nicknames. The dogs are then also seen as more than mere pets and may be given the same privileges as human children, which may include a room of their own, and even birthday presents.

By establishing this construct, the dog helps the couple to fulfil the caring roles they believe are expected from them by the social views of a family. These dogs may also provide the basis for further social constructs to be formed by the pet owners as well as the communities in which they live. The pet owners themselves can formulate these constructs and then convey them through language to other community members, which then allows for new social constructs regarding the caring relationship and formation of a family to be formed.

### **1.5 Research method**

In the following paragraphs, a brief overview of the research process is given as an orientation to the reader. The method of research is described in greater detail in Chapter 3.

Social constructionism relies heavily on the view of different social beliefs. Each belief brings different aspects into focus and touches different issues, and also has different implications to what we should do (Burr, 1995). To capture a wide variety of beliefs, it was decided to use open-ended questionnaires as the data-gathering tool for this study. The questions therein were directed towards obtaining information about the caring relationship between the owner and his/her dog. The answers in these questionnaires were analysed by using a thematic content analysis.

Some researchers like Bryman (1988) believe that when a study is done qualitatively, the themes should flow from the research data and not be formed beforehand. This is, however, only one view. Punch (1998) on the other hand believes that an analysis of qualitative data can be approached in one of three different ways. Firstly, it can be structured with pre-specified themes; secondly, it can be semi-structured with some broad pre-specified themes that allow for change and added themes as might arise from the data. Lastly, there may be no structure where the themes are then developed from the data. In this study a semi-structured approach was followed.

The thematic analysis was done by firstly using the four elements of caring that were identified in the text: need fulfilment, ritualisation, love and attachment as basic themes. However, I was careful to also look at additional themes that arose from the data, which were then included in the analysis. These themes may be sub-groups of the predetermined themes or themes that emerged from data but were not anticipated.

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<sup>2</sup> When a person interprets something that is not human or personal in terms of human or personal characteristics it is known as anthropomorphism (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2003). In

The participants only consisted of married people who did not have children, but had a dog or dogs. Participants were approached by a veterinarian and asked to fill in a questionnaire as well as a consent form. In addition to this, participants were also recruited through the snowballing method. The questionnaires were completed and returned to me.

In qualitative thematic analyses a small amount of data may provide a large amount of information. This type of analyses can also be extremely time consuming. The number of participants in this study was thus kept to a minimum.

The study was concluded with the analysis and interpretation of the data. The analysis of the data was done in the following phases: Firstly, information related to the four themes was extracted. Thereafter, the questionnaires as a whole were looked at and analysed with the thematic analysis to extract any other themes that might have emerged from the data. These themes and the four elements were then discussed from a social constructionist perspective.

## **1.6 Conclusion to chapter**

The caring relationship that exists between a childless married couple and their dog was the focus of this study. It was thus necessary to look at caring as well as the different types of childless married couples that exist. Within a caring relationship four prominent elements were identified: Fulfilment of needs, ritualisation, love and attachment. These elements formed the four broad predetermined themes around which the study was structured.

This research is needed to broaden our understanding of the relationship that may exist between people and animals. The knowledge gathered from research like this may enhance compassion for others and their feelings and beliefs. It may also help veterinarians to understand better what people go through when their pet is sick or has died.

This study was done by using a social constructionist approach, which states that our knowledge of our world is formed and changed socially through verbal communication with other people. Language thus plays an important part, as it is through language that our ideas are conveyed and how we learn from other people.

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this dissertation anthropomorphism will be referred to as humanisation.

The research method used to gather the research data was an open-ended self-completion questionnaire. The research data was analysed by using a thematic analysis. The research method as well as analysis technique will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

## **Chapter 2: Discussion of identified themes and relevant topics**

### **2.1 *Introduction to chapter***

Chapter 2 includes discussions on the formation of a family and definitions of different types of families. Furthermore, the concept, childless married couples, is discussed and defined. It also addresses why dogs and dog owners were chosen for this study above owners of other household pets. The remainder of the chapter focuses on the discussion and definitions of a caring relationship; need fulfilment, love, attachment and ritualisation, which are the broad themes, identified in this study, and also their sub themes.

### **2.2 *The formation of a family***

A family can traditionally be placed into two groups, namely the nuclear family and the extended family. The extended family usually includes all people that are blood relatives or relatives by marriage and the nuclear family only consists the closest family members.

A definition of what the concept nuclear family entails can be different for different cultures, and races. The formation of a nuclear family greatly depends on the dominant social views within the cultural context wherein the people find themselves (Pretorius, 1998). The cultural context influences how the people are married, what the function of the family is, what rituals the family members will follow, and lastly, what will be seen as a nuclear family.

Literature that defines what is understood by a nuclear family in Western society is widely available. The following are some definitions that may be found:

“The organised and lawful unity of a man, woman and child” (Pretorius, 1998:41).

“A social unit in society consisting only of a married couple and their natural or adopted children” (Le Roux, 1994:16).

“A married couple and their unmarried children living together” (Schaefer & Lamm, 1995:361).

Although these three definitions differ slightly they all have certain specific criteria that a group of people have to adhere to in order to be seen as a nuclear family. Firstly, there has to be a lawful married couple and secondly, they have to have children. But in the modern Western society not all people adhere to these criteria. Such people form another type of unconventional family unit known as a quasi-family.

Le Roux (1994:17) defines a quasi-family as “A group of people functioning and characterised as a formal family without the traditional sanctions”. This type of family can include single parents and their children, and grandparents who look after their grandchildren. People who do not have children can also form a type of quasi-family when they include their dog as part of their family and thus have an unconventional family.

By forming a quasi-family the childless married couple forms a unit wherein they can experience mutual growth and fulfilment. This family thus provides the atmosphere to fulfil needs and of producing various possibilities for need fulfilment (Pretorius, 1998).

Cooper (Brown, Herber & Strivens, 1986) also identified the following aspects that can be experienced within a nuclear or quasi-family:

- It provides the experience of warmth, love, intimacy and attachment.
- It ensures the physical, material and emotional provision and caring, health and security of its members.

It is thus apparent that by forming a quasi-family, the married couple is able to experience the benefits that are usually experienced in a nuclear family. Furthermore, by forming a quasi-family the married couple also to some degree finds a way to adhere to the social construct of what a family should be. This can also release stress and enhance the quality of life for the married couple.

### **2.3 Defining childless married couples**

As mentioned before, the childless married couples are seen throughout this dissertation as belonging to one of three groups. The first group consists of married couples that, as a result of biological or medical reasons, are unable to have children. The second group is concerned with those married couples that do not want children. The last group consists of married couples whose child or children have died or whose children have left the home.

In this dissertation childless married couples are thus defined as married couples that do not have children because they either cannot have children, or do not want children, or their child/children have died or left the home.

### 2.3.1 Married couples who cannot have children

Society views infertility as a major problem in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The polluted and stressful environment of the modern Western society is taking its toll on many people's reproductive systems (Balswick & Balswick, 1997). Infertility can be defined as "a condition in which a couple cannot conceive a child despite consistent attempts for at least one year" (Balswick & Balswick, 1997:170). The impairment that prevents the couple from having children may involve either the man or the woman's reproductive system, but can often be a combination of both (Balswick & Balswick, 1997). In America 16 – 20 % of couples have problems with infertility. Statistics on infertility show that this phenomenon has a greater prevalence in white, middle class urban societies (Valintine 1987). People may also tend to postpone having families so as to concentrate on developing their careers or for some other reasons, and when they decide it is time to have children, they may find out that they have waited too long (Balswick & Balswick, 1997).

When a couple is unable to have children the first reactions or comments from friends and family usually are to ask "why?" or "who has the problem?" (Balswick & Balswick, 1997). Responses like these add to the pain of the couple but also exemplifies the strength of the construct society has formed that a married couple has to have children and if they do not, then there is a problem with them. Infertility is thus not just a medical problem, but for most couples it may be the toughest emotional and relational challenge of their lives (Balswick & Balswick, 1997). This can be seen if we look at the measures a couple may go to in order to try and have children.

Although current technology has made a wide variety of therapies available to counter infertility, not all people may benefit from it. The reasons for this are that: firstly, the therapies are not that effective and do not work in all cases. Infertility therapies can also be physically painful (Valintine, 1987). Therapies like these also require that the couples make sacrifices but the doctors can provide little or no guarantee that the therapy will result in a pregnancy and ultimately the birth of a baby.

Secondly, these therapies are extremely expensive even though there is no guarantee of their success. Even if couples are willing to sacrifice time, energy and go through physical discomfort they still may not have sufficient funds to undergo infertility therapy. Infertility therapy is seen by many as an alternative only for rich couples who cannot have children (Valintine, 1987). Because



of the high costs associated with these therapies, poor couples cannot really consider this as a viable option.

The high cost and the fact that there are no definite guarantees that infertility therapy will work also make this a risky choice for married couples of the middle-income class. These couples are not poor, but may not want to risk such high amounts of financial resources on treatments that may not even work.

Lastly, these therapies are also emotionally and psychologically draining and place a lot of pressure on married couples. Because infertility therapies generally include procedures like hormone therapy, blood tests and artificial insemination it can place extreme emotional pressure on the individuals as well as the couple (Valintine, 1987). If the attempt at infertility therapy fails the individuals, as part of the married couple may feel responsible, and end up resenting each other, or may even experience extreme depression and disappointment. This may result in added pressure on the couples' relationship, and may even result in a break-up if they fail to work through their disappointments, insecurities and blame, as well as learn to handle the added stress and depression (Valintine, 1987).

It is thus apparent that infertility therapies are not always an acceptable alternative to all married couples that cannot have children. There are, however, other alternatives. Adoption is an option that married couples may consider as a means to have children who will fulfil their parenting needs. Adoption can be defined as a "process that allows for the transfer of the legal rights, responsibilities and privileges of parenting from legal parents to new legal parents" (Cole, 1985:638). These rights are usually transferred from the birth or biological parents to the adoptive parents.

Adoption is also not a problem-free option (Valintine, 1987). Married couples that apply to adopt a child go through a strenuous screening process that can place additional stress on the married couple. The adoption process can also take extremely long. Even if these aspects are overcome the adoptive family is more vulnerable to dysfunction over the life cycle than nonadoptive families (Valintine, 1987).

Furthermore, married couples may be a bit nervous to adopt a child from an unknown background and family. This problem can be overcome by adopting babies that are family members. The largest single category of adoption in the United States is adoption by relatives (Schaefer & Lamm, 1995). But even this option has its own drawbacks. Adoptions like these can

cause friction and conflict within the family, which will then cause emotional stress and strain for the married couple (Schaefer & Lamm, 1995).

These challenges may discourage married couples from adopting children. Some married couples thus turn to animals to experience a caring relationship.

### 2.3.2 Childless by choice

Not all married couples want to have children. Data from the 1991 census in the United States of America show that 16% of women in their 40s will complete their childbearing years without having any children (Schaefer & Lamm, 1995). Furthermore, as many as 20% of women in their 30s expect to remain childless (Bureau of the Census, 1991).

Married couples like these generally see themselves as childfree and not as childless. These couples do not believe that having children should necessarily follow marriage. Neither do they feel that reproduction is the duty of all married couples (Schaefer & Lamm, 1995).

There are a number of reasons why married couples may choose not to have children. Having children is very expensive. Children need to be fed, clothed, and sheltered from birth to the age until they are able to look after themselves emotionally and financially. Furthermore, school, college and university fees can be extremely high. It is thus apparent that not all married couples will be able to afford to have children.

It is also not uncommon in the 21<sup>st</sup> century for both parties in a marriage to be professionals or working people. Work ambitions, goals and schedules may also leave the married couple with little or no time to look after a child. A child would thus be a nuisance rather than a pleasure to them.

Married couples may also simply just decide not to have children for personal reasons. Reasons like these would, for example, be that they do not want the added responsibilities that go hand in hand with having children. It is possible that, for married couples that do not want children, dogs may provide the ideal companion to experience a caring relationship with.

### 2.3.3 Married couples whose children have died or left home

In married couples where a child has died or the children have left the home a feeling of emptiness may occur. It could be argued that couples whose children have left home are not the same as childless couples in so far as parents may remain in contact with their children, and share life-experiences with them. However, there is a qualitative difference between these two groups of couples. Children who are grown up, perhaps married and who have left home, are usually more independent of their parents and have other sources for need gratification, love and attachment. This could have an effect on the caring aspect of the relationship. This study specifically deals with caring for a dog that is dependent on its owners as primary source of love, attachment and need fulfilment. This empty feeling may be related to the need to care for somebody or something. As was indicated in Chapter 1, caring is a social construction that is formed and reinforced through interaction between people and it is a central theme in how people think about the “ideal” marriage. When the children are grown-up and have left the house parents may feel glad for some peace and privacy but on the other hand they'd like a little noise and a little bit of mess (Balswick & Balswick, 1997).

For couples like these, pets easily fill the empty nest. A letter written by Ask Angel (1999), which is a website that gives advice to people, explains the benefits of animal contact to couples like these, by writing that dogs can help overcome loneliness and loss by supplying companionship and affection. Ask Angel (1999) further writes that the value of a hug is important but if a hug is not available a pet on the lap is the next best thing.

## **2.4 Why dogs?**

Household pets can include a wide variety of animals. Of these pets, cats and dogs are by far the most popular. Studies show that of the 60% of households that own a pet 40% have dogs (Animal Community Health Symposium, 1998: United States of America). The second largest group consists of cat owners. The biggest pet ownership group thus consists of dog owners with cat ownership following shortly on its heels.

The reasons why people prefer dogs as pets can be seen from their comments on web pages:

*“A relationship with a dog is an incredible opportunity for us to contact a being of great potential love and loyalty. Dogs are descended from wolves who mate for life and whose greatest joy is in their offspring. The loyalty and commitment of a dog to his master can be unparalleled”* (<http://www.markings.ca/mind/dogs> ).

*“Depression, loneliness and anxiety often accompany disabilities and it is the dog’s capacity for unconditional love that is its greatest gift. Through partnership with an assistance dog, people often experience a joy and confidence previously unattainable through other means”* (<http://www.pack-leader.com>).

*“Dogs are fine companions. They’re social creatures, very happy when they’re with their favorite person. They LIKE and NEED to be around people. They make good watchdogs, regardless of their size “* (<http://www.com/articles/pets.friends-lovers>).

These quotes show that pet owners see dogs as loyal creatures that are able to show love and affection towards their owners. The human-animal bond between a person and his dog thus consists of mutual love, attachment and loyalty. These experiences are central to this study in which the possibility and nature a caring relationship between dogs and their owners, (which includes both love and attachment) will be investigated. Dog owners thus provide a large sampling group wherein the caring relationship between a person and his/her pet can be studied.

It may be argued that cats and cat owners can provide a similar ideal relationship wherein to study the caring relationship. It is, however, a common perception among cat and dog owners that the two animals are inherently different in style and personality ([www.petnet.com.au/mccallum/mccallum9.html](http://www.petnet.com.au/mccallum/mccallum9.html)). This difference would also cause a difference between the dog-and-owner relationship and the cat-and-owner relationship.

These differences can once again be seen from pet owners’ views on the two types of pets. Dog owners state that it appears to be easier to have a rewarding relationship with a dog ([www.petnet.com.au/mccallum/mccallum9.html](http://www.petnet.com.au/mccallum/mccallum9.html)). According to dog owners, dogs love unconditionally, need one more than a cat does, and are more obviously grateful for what is done for them and to be more amenable to discipline. There is also general acceptance that dogs require more care and attention than cats ([www.petnet.com.au/mccallum/mccallum9.html](http://www.petnet.com.au/mccallum/mccallum9.html)). These views of dog owners can be seen from the following quotes extracted from the web site [www.petnet.com.au/mccallum/mccallum9.html](http://www.petnet.com.au/mccallum/mccallum9.html):

*“You don’t get as much feedback from a cat.”*

*“You never know what a cat is thinking.”*

*“Dogs are more faithful, cats like places more than people.”*

*“I wouldn’t have got a dog when I was working full-time, you enjoy a dog if you’re around to invest in it and make it like you want.”*

*“With dogs you can see the responsiveness, even if you don’t know what they want.”*

*“Dogs are loyal, cats aren’t. If you go away for two weeks a cat will have forgotten you.”*

It is thus apparent that dog owners see their pets as more accessible to receive and give love and attachment as well as more able to fulfil the various needs of its owner. Cat owners, on the other hand, acknowledge that cats are often not as approachable and friendly as dogs and, thus, not as emotionally accessible. However, they defend these characteristics on the grounds that cats are more discriminating and independent, less trying to please than dogs ([www.petnet.com.au/mccallum/mccallum9.html](http://www.petnet.com.au/mccallum/mccallum9.html)).

Cat owners’ quotes also extracted from the same website differ significantly from that of dog owners in that they focus more on the independence of their pets ([www.petnet.com.au/mccallum/mccallum9.html](http://www.petnet.com.au/mccallum/mccallum9.html)):

*“I like cats. They’ve got more personality, they’re more conniving.”*

*“I love cats because they never cower down; they’re independent, beautiful animals. “*

*“Cats are cleaner, they dig holes.”*

*“Our cat tells the dogs where to go.”*

*“With cats you reap what you sow, whereas a dog’s all over you regardless.”*

*“Cats are more intelligent; they own you, you never own them.”*

*“We’ve got a Burmese Siamese cross who thinks it’s a dog. It annoys me, at times, because of its demanding howl but I respect it. It’s got a brain.”*

Cats are thus in many ways the opposite of dogs. They are perceived as independent and self-assured and according to the pet owners’ view, most cats seem not even to notice if you live in the same house with them ([www.com/articles/pets.friends-lovers.html](http://www.com/articles/pets.friends-lovers.html)). This view, which is held towards cats as a pet, shows that many pet owners do not see cats as very attached to their owners or as very needy of their owners. This view limits the love and attachment and need fulfilment cat owners may receive from their pets.

It is thus apparent that people view cat and dog ownership as two very different experiences. A person who wants a pet to care for which is dependent on him/her and who will provide a relationship of mutual attachment and love will more readily chose a dog as a pet. It is thus a shared view of people that dogs are more needy but also that dogs provide a more fulfilling relationship in regards to love and attachment. Furthermore, dogs are also perceived as being more trainable than cats and ritualisation is easier to establish with dogs.

Dogs are thus seen as loving, caring and devoted towards their owners. In return for this love and devotion they need their owners to care for them. This situation makes the dog owners ideal

participants in this study where the focus falls on the caring relationship between a human and his/her pet.

## **2.5 Caring relationship**

Caring relationships form an integral part of the socially constructed reality of humans. Caring is construed as not only a positive characteristic of humans, but also something that is essential for a person to have in order for to be seen as an asset to society. Caring does not only entail a feeling, but may also involve physical activities that are carried out in order to help other living things (Chambers, 1998). It must, however, be noted that although caring has these two dimensions, a caring relationship does not necessarily include both dimensions. To explain this statement the two dimensions of caring will be discussed individually.

### **2.5.1 Care for someone/something by looking after him or her or it**

This dimension of caring involves physical tasks that have to be done in order to ensure the survival or well being of another thing/ living organism (Chambers, 1998). This dimension of caring is not necessarily a feeling shown towards a living creature, but does always involve physical tasks. For example, a person can care for his/her plants by watering them or care for his/her house by doing repair work.

This dimension does, however, also include the physical tasks that need to be executed in order to look after the well being of living creatures, for example, the feeding and grooming of pets by their owners. This dimension of caring also occurs in a professional context with doctors, nurses, and veterinarians whose professions are about looking after the health of living creatures.

This dimension does not necessarily go hand-in-hand with the emotional dimension of caring. A person can physically look after something without emotionally caring about it. For example, a gardener does not necessarily “love” the garden he/she tends but may do it only as a means to earn money. In an article written by Lee and Pretorius (2002) on family care for the elderly it is stated that women sometimes care for a dependent family member solely out of a feeling of responsibility. This implies that they are not necessarily fond of that family member but only physically care for him/her because they feel it is their obligation.

Furthermore, families tend to prefer to care for their own members as they view outsiders as having less compassion for the needy person (Gaugler, Kane & Kane, 2002). This also relates to people like nurses who may care for someone physically simply because it is his/her job.

### 2.5.2 Care for someone/something by being fond of the person/object

This dimension of caring entails an emotional feeling for a person or thing (Chambers, 1998). A person may, for example, be fond of a plant and thus look after it. A person may also be fond of a grandparent and children and thus take pleasure in looking after them. This dimension of caring involves love and attachment and may evolve into a caring relationship.

In the family context a caring relationship usually develops between the members of the family. This caring relationship entails activities that the members must complete in order to ensure the physical well being and security of all the members, but the relationship may also include the emotional dimension of caring to ensure that the emotional well being of the family members are also being met.

In the type of quasi-family where the married couple and a dog form the family unit, a caring relationship may also evolve. This caring relationship not only involves the practical tasks like feeding of the dog as well as the dog protecting his/her owners but also has a more emotional dimension like mutual love and attachment between the dog and its owners. Furthermore, the caring relationship may also provide the opportunity for the fulfilment of certain needs of the owners as well as the dog. In this dissertation caring will be seen as an umbrella term that includes love, attachment, fulfilment of needs and ritualisation.

## 2.6 *Need fulfilment*

People keep animals for specific reasons (Odendaal, 2001). There are various reasons why people would keep pets; these could include the fulfilment of human emotional needs (Odendaal & Weyers, 1990). The caring relationship with a pet thus provides people with an opportunity to fulfil certain emotional needs. In order to assess the needs that a caring relationship can fulfil, a definition of needs is necessary.

A need can be seen as a “person’s wishes, desires and inherent urges” (Le Roux, 1992:4). A person’s social norms will determine how the person will act to satisfy his/her needs. Needs are

also often socially motivated (Le Roux, 1992). Needs can thus either be a result of social actions or a cause for social actions. If needs are socially motivated it is apparent that they can also to a great extent be satisfied in a social context. The caring relationship between a dog and a human can provide the social context necessary for certain need fulfilment.

According to Meyer, Moore and Viljoen (1997) a person experiences needs that are not only physical but also psychological. The caring relationship may provide the opportunity for the person involved in the relationship to fulfil his/her needs in both these categories.

Different people may find different need fulfilment from a caring relationship and may also construe need fulfilment differently. To look at examples of what kind of need fulfilment may occur in a caring relationship, the theories of three well-known theorists, will now be discussed. It must however be noted that these theorists' statements are only examples of the belief that some sort of need fulfilment can be accomplished within a caring relationship, and it does not imply that a particular type of need fulfilment will definitely be experienced. The work of Erick Erikson, Erik Fromm and Maslow was chosen because of their theories' roots in social relatedness.

### 2.6.1 Erik Erikson

Erik Erikson's developmental theory is based on the principle that people go through eight phases of development throughout their life. Each of these stages represents a specific developmental phase. Erikson further identified a number of criteria of mental health within each of the developmental phases.

In the stage that he called adulthood, the person battles between generativity and stagnation. Erikson (1980) sees the problem of generativity as intimately related to the seventh criterion of mental health, which is concerned with parenthood. Two people who are on their way to finding generativity in their relationship will wish to combine their personalities and energies in the production and care of offspring (Erikson, 1980). Parenting is thus about giving to this world in a meaningful and lasting way by raising another human being who, in turn, will love and make its own contribution to society (Balswick & Balswick, 1997). Erikson termed this pervasive development underlying the wish to become a parent as generativity, because it is concerned with the establishment of the next generation.

It is thus at this stage that the married couple experiences the need for a caring relationship with a dependent creature/child. According to Erikson (1980) it is necessary for the couple to fulfil this



need to prevent the regression from generativity to an obsessive need for pseudo intimacy and ultimately stagnation. Individuals who do not develop generativity often begin to indulge themselves as if they were their own one and only child.

In light of this theory if a married couple does not have children, they face the probability of regressing to stagnation. The dog-human caring relationship may provide the context needed to fulfil the generative needs of married couples like these, and can thus prevent this regression.

Erikson's (1980) last stage of development is called old age and is concerned with the personal battle between integrity and despair. Integrity can only be achieved by someone who has in some way or another taken care of things and people and has adapted him/herself to the triumphs and disappointments of being. If a person is unable to achieve integrity he/she may fall into despair. Despair is characterised by fears of death and wishes for a chance to relive one's life. The caring relationship, according to Erikson, thus provides the married couple with the social context to fulfil certain needs that will enable them to achieve generativity and ultimately integrity.

## 2.6.2 Erick Fromm

Fromm (1995) sees humans as dualistic creatures that possess both animal and human features. This dualistic nature implies that humans have "animal" needs on the one hand like hunger and thirst, and "human" needs on the other. Fromm states that the individual has to fulfil his/her pure human needs in order to prevent being driven by the animal needs.

Fromm identified several "human" needs that are important to individuals (Meyer, Moore & Viljoen, 1997). Of the five needs identified by him, two are pertinent to this study and will now be discussed.

- *The need to be related.* Humans experience the need to be related in order to form a unity with other creatures. Marrying and having children and thus forming a family unit can satisfy this need. According to Fromm it is necessary for humans to relate to other living creatures as the individuals' sanity relies on the fulfilment of this need. This need can be positively fulfilled in a loving relationship. The person that is unable to fulfil this need faces the risk of getting caught in his or her own narcissistic life. When a married couple experiences this need, but are unable to fulfil it by having children, a dog can provide the feeling of unity through a caring relationship that can help fulfil this need.

- *Need for belonging.* Fromm states that people strive towards experiencing security and belonging. This need for belonging is also usually fulfilled through starting a family. Once again, married couples that do not have children can experience a family unit by keeping a pet dog. The difference between the need to belong and the need to be related is that a person may be related to another person or family, but may feel like an outcast within that family. Thus his/her need to belong may not be satisfied within this context. On the other hand a person may find fulfilment for his/her need to belong with a group of people he/she feels comfortable with, but is not related to.

### 2.6.3 Abraham Maslow

According to Maslow a person moves through a hierarchy of needs during development on his/her way to self-actualisation (Meyer, Moore & Viljoen, 1997). The lower the needs are on the hierarchy, the more important they are for survival and the lower needs have to be fulfilled so that the person can move on to the needs on the next level.

The third need that Maslow identified is the need for love and affiliation. This need can be fulfilled within a caring relationship where mutual love and attachment exist. The relationship between a married couple and their dog may provide the context to fulfil this need. This will then allow the person to move onto the next level of need fulfilment and bring him/her a step closer to self-actualisation.

But self-actualisation can only be achieved when all the previous needs are fulfilled on a regular basis. A caring relationship between the married couple and their dog provides the ideal contact where the married couple can find regular fulfilment for their need for love and attachment. In such a relationship, the couple can experience the feeling of receiving and providing love to a dependent living creature. A caring relationship is thus essential for need fulfilment to ultimately achieve self-actualisation.

### 2.6.4 Discussing need fulfilment

After looking at the theories on needs it becomes clear that there are various views about the different needs that people may have. Types of needs may vary profoundly from one person to the next. There are, however, certain commonalities when it comes to needs. For example, all people experience the need for food and water daily. But when it comes to more complex human

phenomena, like caring, the needs may not be similar and can be dependent on the context wherein the person finds him/herself. It is also important to note that needs may motivate the individual towards action with a view to satisfy these needs (Le Roux, 1994). It is thus important to look at the needs in order to understand whether the human-dog relationship will provide the context wherein they can be satisfied. For example, people may experience loneliness and thus the need for a companion.

Loneliness can be a painful experience for any person, but according to Murphy and Kupshik (1992) it can also cause problems in a person's mental and physical health. Cohen and Syme (1984) also found that loneliness and well being are indeed related in some way. According to them loneliness can cause mental and physical illness. A family can provide the needed companionship to counter loneliness and ensure greater life satisfaction. When a married couple has children they are also expanding their family, and this can help to counter loneliness. When a married couple does not have children, they may be more likely to experience loneliness. For couples like these, dogs may provide the needed companionship to overcome loneliness.

For this dissertation the fulfilment of needs that a caring relationship can provide are: the need for a unit of mutual love and attachment to which you can belong, the need to experience a relationship that entails the care of a dependent creature and the need to be needed. This last need entails the feeling that you are worth something to another living creature.

There is, however, also a possibility that other important needs might arise from the results of the study. As will be evident in Chapter 4 this was indeed the case and these needs will be discussed in the analysis and interpretation of the results.

## **2.7 Love**

The term "love" is widely used by people from all walks of life. But love is also closely bound to the set of social meanings in which it is experienced. The dominant social view of the modern Western marriage and family places love in a central position within marriage and family (McCarthy, 2001). But, although the term "love" is widely used by people, it is extremely hard to define because of its relatedness to contextual social constructions.

Communities differ as to how they socially construct love. Individual people also tend to view love in various ways. It is also believed that there are different types of love like parental love for a child, playful love for a friend and passionate love for a partner. In this dissertation the focus will

fall on parental love as the study looks at the caring relationship between people and their dog within a quasi-family. Love might have an evolutionary value because the mutual love experienced by parents and children binds them together and encourages the parent to ensure the child's safety, health and survival during the time that the child is dependent on his/her parents (Sternberg, 1995). Within a family that consists of a married couple and their dog, this love can ensure that the couple looks after and protects their dog and that the dog in return protects his/her owner.

As stated above, there are different types of love. Sternberg (Franzoi, 2003) identified seven different types of love in his triangular theory of love: Liking, infatuated love, empty love, romantic love, companionate love, fatuous love and consummate love. The parental love that is focussed on in this dissertation falls under companionate love. Companionate love according to Sternberg (1995) is the experience of intimacy and commitment without passion. This is the type of love experienced through the relationship between a parent and a child and thus also between a human and a dog that is seen as a child within the family.

To understand the concept love it is necessary to look at some definitions provided for the word love. The following are some definitions for love acquired from various dictionaries:

- "A deep affection or fondness" (Oxford Paperback Dictionary and Thesaurus, 2002)
- "Strong affection for another rising out of kinship or personal ties" (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2003)
- "To like something very much" (Cambridge English Dictionary, 2003)
- "To have a strong attachment to/like intensely" (Wordsmyth, 2002)
- "To have a deep, tender, ineffable feeling of affection and solicitude toward" (The American Heritage Dictionary, 1996)

These definitions indicate that love is a strong personal emotion that seems to sprout out of liking, attachment, kinship or personal ties for another person or object.

Love is, however, a word of which the meaning is subjective to every individual and might have quite different meanings from one person to the next. In broad terms "love" can be seen as a deeper stronger feeling than liking, where "liking" can be seen as a feeling of fondness for another person or thing without passion and commitment (Sternberg, 1995). This fondness then grows into the stronger emotion of love. Love also seems to grow stronger within a give and take relationship (McCarthy, 2001).

Parental care provides the ideal situations to give the love to a child that was given to the parents by their parents as children (Balswick & Balswick, 1997). Children often also provide their parents with unconditional love (McCarthy, 2001). When a married couple does not have children but a dog, the same exchange can be seen. At the Ask Alana web site (<http://www.askalana.com>) Alana states that the domestication process of the dog was birthed through their inherent nature to be part of a pack, form love relationships and to participate in a mutually rewarding relationship. The relationship between dogs and humans is characterised by mutual beneficial experiences. A person may, for example, decide to keep a dog as protection while providing food and shelter to the dog in return for his services. However, a married couple may also keep a dog for a companion to care for, and to provide love. In this sense the dog plays the same role as a child would.

It can be argued that a child is capable of returning that love, but that dogs are unable to experience such a complex emotion. This statement is, however, not accepted by dog owners who construe their relationship with their dog as one of mutual love and affection. According to Lou Randour (2000), dogs are experts in love. She states that animals do not care about how their owners look, how successful they are, how fat or thin they are, they just provide unconditional love (Lou Randour, 2000). For her this love involves complete trust, affection and companionship. Lou Randour is not alone in her view that animals are capable of giving love and affection. The Hamilton Division, which is an organisation that provides dog companions on a weekly basis to the elderly, sick and disabled, uses dogs in therapy because dogs provide unconditional love and affection regardless of any disability that a person may have ([www.sja.ca/on/h-w/tdogdiv.html](http://www.sja.ca/on/h-w/tdogdiv.html)).

In the 1995 National Pet Owner Survey conducted in the United States of America, it was found that women tend to turn to pets for affection ([www.healthypet.com/Library/animal\\_bond-4.html](http://www.healthypet.com/Library/animal_bond-4.html)) The results of this survey indicated that pets are a great source of affection, and that pet owners love their companions so much that they treat them like family. Results from the survey showed the following:

- 48 percent of female pet owners rely more on their pet than a spouse or child for affection;
- 51 percent of dog and cat owners surveyed give their pet a human name such as Molly, Sam, or Max;
- 25 percent of pet owners blow dry their pet's hair after a bath;

- 64 percent of pet owners include news about their pet and 36 percent include a photograph of their pet in their holiday cards;
- 70 percent of dog owners expect their pet to come to their rescue when they're in distress compared to 31 percent of cat owners;
- 27 percent of pet owners have taken their pet to a professional photographer to have its picture taken with its family, Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny;
- 48 percent of pet owners pamper their pet by taking it in the car on errands, while 45 percent set up a special bed for their pet in the house;
- 53 percent of pet owners go on vacation or travel with their pet.

These results indicate a social construction for love between a dog and its owner. This love relationship provides mutual affection, trust and companionship. Dog owners thus view the dog's commitment, trust as well as its actions of affection as proof that dogs are able to experience love. This social construct, developed mainly by dog owners, enables married couples who do not have children to experience giving love to and receiving love from a dependent creature.

This give-and-take relationship is needed in order for love to survive and grow (McCarthy, 2001). Love is thus a communion in that it binds two entities in a mutual emotion, which grows stronger through a give-and-take relationship (McCarthy, 2001). For the purpose of this study, love will be defined as a deep strong mutual likening between two entities, that grows in a give-and-take relationship and is characterised by mutual trust, companionship and affection. Love will thus be viewed as an emotion that can be seen through the actions of the married couple towards their dog as well as the actions of the dog toward the married couple. The married couple may, for instance, give their dog a nickname to show their affection for him/her. Furthermore, the dog and his/her owner may also show their love for each other through physical contact.

### 2.7.1 Nicknames

It is not uncommon for parents to give some type of nickname for their young children. These nicknames are commonly known as "pet names" and are given as a show of affection for the child (McCarthy, 2001). According to Morgan, O'Neil and Harre (1979) a name is not just a label but can have multiple associations. Nicknames can have even more associations and suggestions connected to it than a real name as it is usually given to reflect certain traits of the person or thing it is given to. In a family that consists of a childless married couple and their dog the owners may

also choose to show their affection for their dog by giving it a nickname. These names are then used when they talk to the dog or refer to the dog in an affectionate way.

When parents are annoyed by their child/dog they tend to convert back to the child/dog's real name and not use the affectionate nickname. According to Morgan *et al.* (1979) disapproval or anger can lead to a retreat from a pet name to a formal name. This further indicates that the nicknames are used to show affection and appreciation. Nicknames are thus a way for people to verbalise their feelings for a loved person or living thing.

### 2.7.2 Physical aspects of love

One of the most visible ways in which humans show their love for another person or living creature is through physical contact. People kiss, hug and touch one another to express their love for each other. This physical contact is seen as a normal part of a relationship that consists of mutual love between the parties involved.

In relationships, which consist of a human and an animal, the same show of affection can be witnessed. Dogs like to touch or be touched by their owners. As previously discussed, Lou Randour (2000) views dogs as being experts in love who are able to provide unconditional love. They may show this love by sitting on their owners' laps, licking their owners, or simply just touching their owners in some way with their bodies (Lou Randour, 2000).

Dogs like to receive physical attention from people. They like being patted, brushed or hugged. But people may also like giving physical attention to their dogs. Both the acts of receiving and giving physical forms of love may help to show and strengthen the love bond between the childless married couple and their dog.

### 2.7.3 Boasting

It is a common belief that when one loves another person or living creature, one tends to be proud of that other person or creature's achievements (Sternberg, 1995). This feeling of pride for another person or creature can then result in a person boasting about that person or creature to other people.

The following are a few definitions for boasting that were retrieved from various dictionaries:

- “To speak with excessive pride” (<http://Dictionary.com>)
- “the act of glorifying or vaunting” (Webster Revised Unabridged Dictionary, 1996)
- “To brag about a loved one” (Wordnet, 1997)

These definitions seem to indicate that people boast about someone or something they are proud of and love. Furthermore, through this boasting these loved ones are glorified. Boasting is, however, not only restricted to living things; one can boast about one's house, garden, car and various other material things. In this dissertation boasting will only be looked at in the context of boasting about a loved one. For this dissertation boasting will thus be defined as an act of glorifying a loved one through speaking about him/her with excessive pride to other people.

In the family situation a condition of mutual love normally exists between parents and children (Sternberg, 1995). It is, therefore, not uncommon for members of a family to feel proud of each other's achievements and then also to boast about that achievement to other people. Boasting is socially constructed as a way to show ones pride in a loved one, or to tell other people of a loved one's achievements. Boasting is thus a normal way for parents to share with other people their pride in their children, or for any person to share his/her pride of a loved one with another person.

In a family that consists of a married couple and their dog, the married couple may also be proud of their dog and may thus also boast about his/her abilities and achievements to other people. This boasting may be viewed as a way to express their love and pride for their dog and may be seen as being similar to people boasting about their children's abilities and achievements.

## **2.8 Attachment**

It is not uncommon for the terms love and attachment to be uttered in the same sentence. People tend to view these two concepts as being closely related. This assumed relatedness can also be seen in literature (Balswick & Balswick, 1997; Hulme, 1973) discussing love and relationships. One form of love entails that if a person loves someone or something he or she must also have a degree of attachment towards that entity.

But attachment is not necessarily present in all types of love. Of the seven types of love identified by Sternberg (Franzoi, 2003) in his triangular theory of love, he stated that in only four types commitment forms between the parties involved. For example, he sees infatuated love as the



experience of passion without intimacy or commitment. In an infatuated love relationship there may not be any attachment between the members of the relationship.

Sternberg (1995:463) defines attachment as “a strong and long-lasting emotional tie between two people”. This definition seems to imply that it is only people that can experience attachment with or towards other people. But this statement can be seen as ignorantly untrue. It is not only people who experience attachment; dogs provide us with evidence of non-human creatures that can experience attachment.

Sternberg’s definition is different from those provided in dictionaries. These definitions include:

- “To like someone or something very much” (Cambridge English Dictionary, 2003)
- “A bond as of affection or loyalty” (The American Heritage Dictionary, 2000)
- “The feeling of love or strong connection to someone or something” (Cambridge English Dictionary, 2003)
- “A bond that gives one fondness for or loyalty to a person, place, thing or idea” (Wordsmyth, 2002).

From these definitions it becomes clear that people are not necessarily only attached to other people, but can actually be attached to other things like places, animals and ideas. This implies that humans may become attached to their dogs and may even construe their relationship with their dog as one of mutual attachment. Dogs, on the other hand, have a history of forming close-knit groups.

Social relations are important to dogs. In the wild they tend to form packs like the African wild dog (Cape hunting dog) and even the domestic dog forms a “pack” with his owners and other household pets. Within these packs they grow dependent and attached to each other. These packs fulfil the same duty for the dog as the family would for the human. When dogs are prevented from forming an attachment during the critical periods of their development they may experience trauma that will result in an impairment of their ability to form attachments (<http://www.paws.org>). This same problem can be seen in the family situation. When children are deprived of warmth and love, attachment processes can either not form or go totally wrong (Sternberg, 1995).

It is socially construed that the child develops a lifelong attachment with his parents as an expansion of bonding (Sternberg, 1995). This bonding starts when the baby is born, but can also start when a child is adopted. Bonding also occurs with dogs. Bonding in dogs can be seen in the

wild within the African wild dog pack. In the pack it is only the alpha female that is allowed to have a litter but all the members of the pack look after this litter. This shared responsibility ensures that the litter bonds with the whole pack. The adults play, protect and nurture the pups (Stuart & Stuart, 1995). This bonding provides the building blocks for a cohesive pack that can hunt together and thus ensures the survival of its members. But this bonding also develops into more than a task orientation. They also grow attached to each other. This can be seen in the elaborate greeting procedures that take place after members have been apart for a while (Stuart & Stuart, 1995).

Bonding which grows into attachment also occurs between the domestic dog and its owner. This can be seen from the fact that dogs tend to suffer from separation anxiety. Dogs quickly learn their owners' routines when they are preparing to leave. When they see the signs that the owners are going away they may display strange behaviour like misbehaving. Upon being left alone they may vocalise their distress by howling, destroying objects or even stop eating. Upon the return of the owner they, similar to their wild counterparts, display elaborate greeting behaviour, which can include overexcitement, urinating, barking, licking, howling and jumping on their owner (<http://www.paws.org>).

It is thus apparent that dogs can bond and experience attachment with their owners. The question may now arise: Do humans bond with their dogs and as an expansion experience attachment towards their dogs? Steward (2000) states that people can become attached to their dogs, even to such an extent as to replace a lost human attachment. A study done on attachment showed that pet attachment was especially high among divorced, never married or widowed people (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988). It seems that when people are going through a rough time in their lives they are more likely to form a strong and lasting attachment with a dog (Steward, 2000).

When a married couple is unable to have children or has lost a child they may be able to cope with the situation by forming an attachment with a dog. Attachment with dogs can also be seen in other situations. In the United Kingdom the Pro-dog Active Therapy program organises regular visits of dogs to the elderly, the blind, the deaf, and to homes and hospitals (Edridge, 2002).

Although these dogs only visit the people once a week, the people get attached to them to such a degree that they look forward to their visits, prepare for the visits and even show distress if the dog cannot show up for the visit (Edridge, 2002). These dogs fulfil the inherent need of the people for attachment. These dogs visit the people on a regular basis and this allows for an attachment to form between the dog and the person.

The attachment with a dog also helps people who are being treated for drug dependency. Many patients suffering from drug dependency have a history of severe attachment problems in their childhood; this results in them being unable to form meaningful attachments. Because of their inability to form attachments with other humans, their main attachment is often with a dog (Charnaud, 2000).

Furthermore, it is not unusual to see children burying their dog that has died, crying over it as if they have lost a friend, or a homeless person walking around with a dog as his or her only companion. It is apparent that attachment between a human and a dog is not a new social construction, but one that has been around since the dog became domesticated. This can clearly be seen in the well-known statement that a dog is a man's best friend.

Within a relationship that consists of mutual attachment three ways of demonstrating this attachment has become apparent. Firstly, the parties included in that relationship want to be close to one another; secondly, the relationship ensures some sort of security and thirdly, the parties protest when separated (Parkes, Stevenson-Hinde & Marris, 1991). The parties within that relationship thus become dependent on each other.

Because of the mutual dependency that may develop, the parties involved in an attachment relationship can experience anxiety when separated. They can even experience anxiety at the thought of being separated. When a person is attached to another person or living being, they may thus experience anxiety not only after that person or being has died, but also at the thought of that person or being dying.

The anxiety experienced by people after a loved one has died is called grief. Grief can be more clearly defined as "the emotional response to loss, which includes a number of psychological and somatic reactions" (Stroebe & Stroebe, 1987:7). Grief is seen by Stroebe and Stroebe as a normal and effective response to the loss of a loved one. However, grief can become abnormal for example, when the grieving process results in long-term clinical depression. The grief experienced by a dog owner after the death of his or her dog can be seen as normal grieving. Humans can also experience anticipatory grief, which is caused by the fear of losing a loved one through death.

In a family that consists of a childless married couple and their dog the fear of the dog dying may also occur. Dogs do not live as long as humans and often the dog will die of old age before his human companions. This can cause dog owners to experience anxiety at the thought of their dog

dying. Furthermore, the childless married couple is also more likely to experience the death of their dog of old age than would other parents experience the death of a child.

Due to the fact that many people experience the death of people they know, death is seen as an imminent reality. It is part of our everyday lives. Death is a family event as it occurs within the context of relationships and deep attachments. Parents may fear the death of a child, which they love and are attached to (Cook & Oltjenbruns, 1998).

Grief experienced as a result of a deep attachment that is broken because of the death of the dog is something that the childless married couples will be likely to face. Dog owners may also experience more than one dog dying of old age before them; this may also aggravate their grief experienced at the death of a dog. Grief is, however, viewed by Stroebe and Stroebe (1987) as an important process that helps the parties involved to adapt to broken attachments and the loss of a loved one.

Dogs are no longer merely in people's lives to fulfil certain tasks but are seen as a friend and companion. It is thus apparent that a statement that humans can only be attached to other humans is not accurate since people interpret their relationship with their dog as being one of mutual attachment. For this study, attachment will thus be defined as, a strong and long lasting emotional tie between a human and another living creature.

## **2.9 Ritualisation**

Humans tend to structure their lives by establishing certain rituals, which are embedded in a system of meanings based on various social constructions. This act of socially constructing certain rituals is referred to in this dissertation as ritualisation. Ritualisation is an everyday occurrence both within the family and community as well as in the cultural units of society.

Literature refers to rituals as an age-old universal tradition, which is constantly part of our everyday lives and which may be performed by groups or communities and can be either private or public ( Bullock , Stallybrast &Tomby, 1988; Laird, 1984; Van der Westhuizen, 1993). People take part in rituals daily either consciously or sub-consciously. These rituals always occur within a certain context and have a certain function (Scholtemeyer, 1994). Rituals are thus socially constructed and used in accordance with the norms of the society or family in which they occur. Rituals get their meaning through social purpose and needs and the verbalization of that purpose

and needs. Rituals are also used to enforce social views of correct and accepted conduct (Scholtemeyer, 1994).

### 2.9.1 Defining rituals

There are a wide variety of definitions available to describe rituals. The following are definitions provided by various authors:

- “Rituals are formal agreed upon actions; they are actions that are re-enacted regularly in similar circumstances; and, though they are not pragmatic, they are nonetheless very purposeful in their intentions” (Renner, 1979:164).
- “Rituals have come to mean almost any kind of stylized or stereotyped behavior, any action that is not spontaneous” (Laird, 1984:124).
- “A ritual is a formalized behavior or activity in accordance with rules and procedures specified by society” (Bullock et al, 1988:749).
- “A ritual is a specific behavior or activity which gives symbolic expressions to certain feelings and thoughts. It may be habitually repetitive behavior or an one-time occurrence” (Bolton & Camp, 1988:51).

According to these definitions, rituals can either be individual and private, or social and public. Public rituals remind the individual of shared beliefs that thus unify the individual within the group, which may include the family or community (Scholtemeyer, 1994). These public rituals contribute to the individual’s collective sense of self (Wilcox & Sutton, 1981). Public rituals also reflect social beliefs and views on appropriate conduct in certain situations, which is directly derived from social constructions. Ritualisation within the family helps to bind the family members into a single functioning unit to fit with social and personal beliefs of what a family should entail. Individual private rituals are also known as habits. In a family unit the members tend to get to know each other’s habits and these habits become a part of an individual’s social identity.

Another aspect of rituals that becomes apparent from these definitions is that rituals are repetitive actions. For an action to become a ritual it most often involves repetition (Laird, 1984). Furthermore, rituals also always involve activities, active thought, behaviour, and traditional occasions such as Christmas celebrations and Easter celebrations (Scholtemeyer, 1994).

Rituals also seem to have elements of both order and spontaneity (Scholtemeyer, 1994). According to Laird (1984) rituals have an elaborate internal structure, which includes a beginning, middle and end. Although rituals are basically rigid, they are also a product of growth, change and

development and thus also contain an element of spontaneity. It can thus be concluded that although rituals provide a sense of stability by providing a prescribed pattern of responses to stimuli, they also promote change through their adaptive capacity; they thus integrate order and spontaneity (Scholtemeyer, 1994).

Bearing these elements in mind, rituals are defined for the purpose of this dissertation as: public or private repetitive actions that incorporate both order and spontaneity and which are closely bound to social expectations. Ritualisation will then refer to the introduction of these rituals within any given context.

### 2.9.2 Types of rituals

In this study ritualisation is concerned with the implementation of rituals within a family where a dog is regarded as an active family member. The types of rituals that are now going to be discussed focus on the family context.

The first type of ritual that is important to this study is a social ritual. Social rituals include birthdays, reunions and Christmas celebrations (Rosenthal & Marshal, 1988). Married couples who do not have children tend to include their dogs in these rituals. For them it would be natural to humanise these dogs in a sense that they give them birthday and Christmas presents or involve them in the family activities during these social rituals (Oliver, 2002).

The second type of ritual is patterned interaction routines (Scholtemeyer, 1994). These types of rituals include activities such as regular dinner times, bedtime routines or leisure activities (Lewis, 1983). They may also include greeting rituals (Scholtemeyer, 1994). In a family situation, this type of ritual occurs regularly and is important for the effective functioning of the family. According to Milani (2002), in families with dogs the rituals of mealtimes can occur in one of two ways. Firstly, the dog may have one or two set meal times or alternatively the owner can ensure that the dog's bowl is always filled and allow him/her to choose when to eat. These mealtime routines are usually determined by the owner's schedule and what he or she finds most appropriate, but it can also be based on consideration regarding the health of the dog.

Furthermore, dogs can also have bedtime rituals. These bedtime rituals include when the dog has to go to sleep, where the dog has to go sleep or even certain activities that the dog has to do before he/she can go to sleep (Oliver, 2002). Patterned interaction routines can also include

regular recreational activities that the dog and his owner participate in like daily walks or jogging sessions.

The last type of ritual is a private ritual. Private rituals are generally concerned with the emotional and personal well being of the human or dog (Scholtemeyer, 1994). A dog may for instance howl when his owners leave him/her alone at home, to release his/her anxiety at being left alone. Owners may want to pat their dogs before going to bed to reassure the dogs and themselves or to promote a feeling of safety and security. These types of rituals provide important functions within the family. These functions will now be discussed.

### 2.9.3 Functions of rituals

- *Stabilisation and change.* According to Scholtemeyer (1994) rituals provide consistency and thus help to maintain a balance within the family by inducing a sense of security among its members. The dog, as part of the family, is thus provided with set rituals like dinner times and play times, which strengthen the sense of security of the dog within the family. Discipline rituals teach the dog what behaviours are acceptable within certain family situations. It thus provides a way in which the family can function in harmony. Laird (1984) contends that rituals also offer guidance in the development of family life. This implies that rituals do not only stabilise relationships, but also symbolise a change in social relationships. Rituals also function to ease transition for the individual by dealing with the implications of change (Lewis, 1983). Rituals help socialise the dog effectively with his/her family members.
- *Establishing identity of the individual and family.* By having certain family rituals the members of that family are combined to form a united group. Rituals can thus help to unite the married couple and their dog as a family by establishing both family and individual identities.
- *Group solidarity.* According to Scholtemeyer (1994), rituals generate sociability by coordinating the pleasures of the individual with the pleasures of others. This implies that rituals provide the members of a family with a point of reference that entails what pleases the individual members and what situation allows certain actions that would be accepted by all the members of the family. This point of reference ensures group solidarity. The dog is conditioned through rituals as to what behaviour would be acceptable in what situations in order to ensure harmony between all family members.
- *Clarification of status and roles.* The family identity is secured by clarifying expected roles and boundaries for the family members within the family (Laird, 1984).

This clarification of roles is important as it not only helps protect the family members but also ensures that daily tasks and responsibilities are taken care of. At the time of the instatement of a ritual, participants are intensely aware of their purpose and of their connectedness to each other (Scholtemeyer, 1994). It can thus be concluded that rituals encourage the continuity of family functioning but also help to clarify and redefine statuses and roles. Through ritualisation the dog is provided with security and structure within the family situation. This structure ensures the well being of the family as a whole.

#### 2.9.4 Discussing ritualisation

Although rituals are to a lesser or greater extent part of everybody's daily life, it must also be noted that rituals are very diverse and may differ from one family to the next, and are greatly determined by how the family socially constructs rituals. This diverse nature of rituals would naturally imply that ritualisation is different for different families.

Rituals are an important part in family life as they provide the structure, background and point of reference, which is needed, for a family to function effectively within a given society where certain social beliefs prevail. Through ritualisation, a structural context is created that can allow the formation of love and attachment between the family members. Furthermore, it also provides the family members with the context to fulfil needs. It is thus apparent that some sort of ritualisation is needed within a family in order for the family members, including the dog, to experience caring relationships with each other.

#### **2.10 Conclusion to chapter**

Society urges people to form a nuclear family unit that consists of a married couple and their children. It is not, however, always possible for people to form a family that meets all the criteria for a nuclear family. A married couple may for instance, not have any children living with them.

Childless married couples can belong to one of three groups. The first group consists of married couples that for medical or other reasons cannot have children. The second group consists of married couples that do not want children, and the third group consists of married couples whose child or children have died or are grown up and have left the house. In all three of these groups the married couples are childless and thus do not meet society's views of what a nuclear family



should be. In order to meet these social expectations, such people may then form a type of quasi-family that is made up of the couple and their pet.

There are a number of popular household pets that a childless married couple can acquire to experience a caring relationship with. Of all these pets, dogs are the most popular household pets with cats following shortly on their heels. It is, however, viewed by dog and cat owners that dogs are more needy and dependent than cats. This makes dogs the ideal subject in a study that looks at the caring relationship between a childless married couple and their pet.

In the caring relationship that exists between a childless married couple and their dog four broad themes were identified. The four themes are need fulfilment, love, attachment and ritualisation. Need fulfilment includes various needs that exist within a caring relationship in a quasi-family unit. Within this caring relationship a feeling of mutual love and attachment may also develop between the members of the quasi-family unit. Lastly ritualisation refers to the introduction of set family rituals to ensure the harmony, well being and happiness of the family members.

## **Chapter 3: Method**

### **3.1 *Introduction to chapter***

In this chapter the method used for conducting the research will be discussed. This includes discussions on the relevance of qualitative data, the essential features of qualitative research, varieties of qualitative research and criticisms of qualitative research. Within these discussions the issues of appropriateness of methods, theories and reflexivity will be addressed. Furthermore, this chapter will also look at the data collection technique that was chosen for this study by exploring the advantages and disadvantages of open-ended questionnaires as well as an alternative method, namely interviews.

The chapter ends with a discussion on the analysis of the data and selection of participants. The purpose of data analysis is discussed and thematic analysis, which was chosen to be used in this study, is explained. Furthermore, the inclusion criteria for the selection of the participants that were involved in this study are described.

### **3.2 *Method***

This study addresses the following research question: Do dog owners experience a caring relationship between themselves and their dogs and what is the nature of their experience? Since the aim of the study was thus to gain an in-depth understanding of the personal experiences and the personal constructions of the participants, the study was done qualitatively. As a set of discussions and discourses, qualitative research is difficult to define. There is no specific theory or paradigm that can be used to identify and define qualitative research. It is used in a variety of different disciplines and draws upon a wide variety of methods and theories (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

According to Denzin and Lincoln (1994) qualitative researchers use narratives, contents, discourses, archival and phonemic analysis and even statistics. Furthermore, they utilise the approaches, methods and techniques of phenomenology, feminism, deconstructionism, ethnographic interviews and cultural studies, amongst others.

These research practices are used because they can provide important insights and knowledge. Qualitative research is thus an interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary field, which binds the humanities as well as the social, and physical sciences (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994).

Qualitative research as opposed to quantitative research promises a more in-depth look at the caring relationship between a childless married couple and their dog. This does not negate the legitimacy of quantitative research. The choice between the different research methods should depend upon what your research questions are. If a researcher is, for instance, concerned with exploring people's everyday behaviour, beliefs or views, then qualitative measures may be more appropriate (Silverman, 2000). In this case, the exploration of a caring relationship, where the focus lies on how humans construe their relationship with their dogs, favours a qualitative approach.

### 3.2.1 Relevance of qualitative research

According to Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor and Tindall (1994), qualitative research is an important methodology because of the diverse and changing social beliefs and views known as the pluralisation of life-worlds. Pluralisation of life-worlds implies that social constructions, beliefs, views and behaviours are constantly changing. For a researcher to understand this diverse and ever-changing reality it is necessary to explore social processes in-depth using qualitative measures (Punch, 1998). Pluralisation thus requires a new sensitivity, understanding and finer investigation to the empirical study of phenomena (Banister *et al.*, 1994).

Quantitative research methods may lack everyday applicability and a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study (Banister *et al.*, 1994). The reason for this is that it does not sufficiently describe the exact facts of a case, and does not explore finer details of the phenomenon.

To distinguish between whether qualitative and quantitative measures will be appropriate for a given topic the epistemological differences between the two must be looked at. Qualitative methods are based on a contextual perspective, which means that the goal in qualitative research is to understand the meaning of the phenomena according to how the participants experience it and this is done through in-depth exploration. Quantitative methods on the other hand are based on positivism and are concerned with the understanding of linear cause-and-effect relationships through hypothesis testing. Where qualitative research thus works with the in-depth study of a few participants, quantitative research works with numbers and quantifiable data of a large

number of entities and data analysis involves statistical procedures (Dalton, Elias & Wandersman, 2001).

To keep up with a changing society and changing meanings, it is often necessary to use an in-depth methodology like qualitative research. This will help shed light on the finer details of a phenomenon within a certain context. Although quantitative research can also provide detailed information about a topic, a qualitative approach provides one with an opportunity to conduct an in-depth investigation into the personal experiences and perceptions of participants, which can provide insight into how married childless couples construct their relationship with their dog.

### 3.2.2 Essential features of qualitative research

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) identified the following as being essential to qualitative research: the correct choice of appropriate methods and theories; the recognition and analysis of different perspectives; the researchers' reflection on their research as part of the process of knowledge production and the variety of approaches and methods.

#### *Appropriateness of methods and theories*

A researcher must first determine whether a research question can be studied empirically or not. The criterion for assessing whether the topic can be studied will be whether the methods available can be used to study it or not. In this case the caring relationship can be explored by using social constructionism and a qualitative approach.

Most phenomena are, however, complex and cannot be studied in isolation (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Qualitative research methods can help to ensure that the phenomenon, as a whole and within the context in which it exists, can be studied in detail. It allows for a wider and more in-depth exploration of research topics. The caring relationship between the childless married couple and their dog is a complex phenomenon and can be studied by qualitatively looking at the various aspects that such a relationship entails.

#### *Analyses of different perspectives*

Different perspectives are constructed by living in particular social and historical contexts. A person living in an African tribe may, for example, view his dog as a work partner who helps him look after his flock, while a person living in a Western society may view his dog as a family member.

All perspectives are formed through the interaction between members of a society. These perspectives are disseminated through language from one person to the next. This distribution of formed perspectives gives rise to the formation of different realities. For example, in an African tribe where the dog's role may be to protect the flock against predators their reality of the dog's role is that of a worker. Conversely, in the Western society the dog's role can be one of companionship and in their reality the dog is thus seen as a family member or friend. To see the full picture, which includes all the different realities, would require an analysis of all the different perspectives.

### *Reflexivity*

According to Tindal (1994), reflexivity is the most distinctive feature of qualitative research. The term reflexivity refers to the fact that the researcher's subjectivity as well as those being studied is part of the research process (Tindal, 1994). This implies that the researchers' views, actions and observations in the field as well as their impressions and irritations, become data in itself and form a part of the interpretation of the research data (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). It is thus important to note that the researcher's own social constructions on dogs as well as a possible caring relationship between dogs and a childless married couple become part of the research data as it will influence how the researcher interprets the data. The role of reflexivity in this research study will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

In qualitative research the researcher's involvement in collecting and analysing data is regarded as a part of knowledge production. Qualitative researchers do not see reflexivity as an intervening variable and thus do not try to exclude it (Tindal, 1994).

Wilkinson (1988) identified personal, functional and disciplinary reflexivity. The first two are more important and will now be discussed.

- Personal reflexivity - this includes the knowledge of who you are and your individuality as a researcher, and how personal influences and values influence the research process, as well as the interpretation and analysis of the research data. A researcher interested in human-animal interaction would thus more likely conduct research on that topic.
- Functional reflexivity - This implies that who we are directs and shapes the course of the research. A researcher who is a cat owner may for example approach research about dog ownership from a cat owner viewpoint.

Reflexivity is thus about acknowledging the central position of the researcher in the research process (Wilkinson, 1988). All findings are constructions by the researcher based on his/her

personal views of reality and are open to change and reconstruction. The results of this research project are thus a result of the researcher's interpretation of the participants' views of the caring relationship they have with their dogs.

### 3.2.3 Shared characteristics of qualitative research

Qualitative researchers share a common belief that they can provide a more in-depth understanding of social phenomena. There is, however, no single method of conduct underlying all qualitative research but there is nevertheless set of preferences that qualitative researchers share (Siverman, 2000):

- A preference for qualitative data - Qualitative researchers choose to work, for example, with the finding and exploring of meanings rather than numbers.
- A preference for natural occurring data- Qualitative researchers rely on observation and in-depth explorations of a phenomenon rather than experiments and use unstructured interviews or open-ended questions rather than structured interviews and close-ended questions.
- A preference for meanings rather than behaviour - Qualitative researchers attempt to explain phenomena from the point of view of the people being studied.
- A rejection of natural science as a model.
- A preference for inductive, hypothesis generating research rather than hypothesis testing.

### 3.2.4 Criticisms of qualitative research

Many researchers believe that qualitative methods have lower value than quantitative methods. According to them qualitative methods only have value in the beginning of a study and is useful to explore the phenomenon in order to gain more insight into the research topic (Punch, 1998).

Furthermore, qualitative research has been criticised on its reliability. This involves the consistency of the research. According to the critics, qualitative research only provides brief explanations and data extracts, which means that conclusions may not be consistent (Punch, 1998). However, in qualitative research the researcher who goes through the research data multiple times ensures the stability of the data. This ensures a better consistency of the research findings.

Another criticism of qualitative research relates to how sound the explanations are that they offer. This is also sometimes known as the problem with anecdotalism. This problem questions the validity of qualitative research. The validity is mainly criticised because: it seems that qualitative researchers do not make an attempt to deal with contrary cases, scenarios and questions, and do not try to explore different interpretations, and do not account for the influence of reflexivity (Punch, 1998). This criticism implies thus that the researchers ignore possible alternative options and opinions, and constantly look for examples within the research data to support their own views and beliefs. These criticisms have contributed to the downplaying of qualitative measures. In qualitative research this is not always the case as a researcher may look at contrary information and include these contrary findings in the research data. Although these criticisms are noted, they can be seen as stereotypes of possible shortcomings of qualitative measures that may not even always be present.

A qualitative approach is an appropriate methodology to tackle this research study. The caring relationship between a married couple and a dog can best be studied by using in-depth qualitative methods that would allow one to accurately explore the phenomenon. This in-depth exploration will help the researcher to uncover the finer details and thus to gain more insight into how married couples experience the caring relationship with their dog and how a caring relationship between a dog and a childless married couple is socially constructed by them.

### **3.3 *Data collecting technique***

The data collection technique chosen by a researcher influences the results and conclusions that are made from a study, as it determines what type of data are collected. It is thus important to carefully choose a technique that suits both the researcher and participants, and which is also an effective technique to provide relevant data.

When choosing a technique, it is also important to consider the methodology and theoretical approach that is used in the research study. The technique chosen for a qualitative study should allow for rich data collection that does not hinder the participants' freedom to discuss the phenomena under study. The technique must, however, also enforce some restrictions or boundaries to ensure that the participants do not wander away from the specific topic under study. There are various effective qualitative methods for data collection to choose from. These methods all have advantages and disadvantages and it is important to take note of these and possible influences they may have on the outcome of the study.

In this study it was decided to use open-ended questionnaires. A questionnaire according to Sternberg (1995:38) can be defined as “a set of questions used by social science researchers for conducting a survey, test, case study, experiment or naturalistic observation”. There are two types of questionnaires, namely open- and close-ended questionnaires.

### 3.3.1 Open-ended questionnaires

Open-ended questionnaires consist of unstructured questions. The difference between structured and unstructured questions is that in structured questions all the possible answers are provided, while in unstructured questions the respondent is allowed to put down anything he/she wishes to answer (Forcese & Richer, 1973). An unstructured question can thus provide more in-depth information on the topic.

Open-ended questionnaires are characterised by questions that require both short and lengthy answers from the participants, but these answers are not predetermined and the respondent can freely decide how to answer the question (Black, 1976). There is thus no suggested answer for the question given on the questionnaire. This allows the participants some free rein on how they experience the phenomena and interpret the question. Thus a more in-depth insight into how the participants experience the phenomena is provided. It is, therefore, more appropriate to use open-ended questionnaires in a qualitative study.

The questionnaire used to collect data, partly consists of structured questions to obtain factual information (for example the biographical background of the participants). The main part of the questionnaire consists of open-ended questions, comprising five sections (see Appendix 1). The first four sections consist of questions that are related to the four broad concepts of caring that were identified: need fulfilment, attachment, love and ritualisation. Some of the questions in the questionnaire were included to target a specific, identified concept of the caring relationship. These questions were included to look at whether the broad themes are inherent in the relationship between the couple and their dog. The last section was included to gather any further information that the participant may have and that may be valuable to the study.

Other questions in the questionnaire were included to determine whether there might be other important aspects of the caring relationship that were not included in the above-mentioned broad themes. These questions were for example: “ Why did you and your spouse decide to get a pet?” and “Do you have anything else that you think you would like to say about the relationship between you and your dog?”



A number of questions were also added to ensure that the participants meet the necessary criteria to take part in this study. Questions such as: “Are you married?” and “Do you have a dog?” were asked to eliminate those persons who did not meet the eligibility criteria. Furthermore, there were also questions added like: “How long have you had the dogs?” and “How many dogs do you have?” These questions may provide additional information and criteria with which to develop sub themes.

### 3.3.2 Advantages of open-ended questionnaires

Administering open-ended questionnaires have certain advantages:

- Questionnaires are easy to administer (Sternberg, 1995). By using an open-ended questionnaire the researcher can save a time. The questionnaires can be distributed and completed by the participants at a time of their convenience only to be returned before a certain date. This is also an advantage when the researcher uses participants that live far away.. The questionnaires can be mailed to the participants with a self-addressed return envelope or collected by the researcher.
- Respondents are less restricted in terms of possible choices than in a close-ended questionnaire (Black, 1976). An open-ended questionnaire can provide more detailed and in-depth information than a close-ended one. Furthermore, the questions only act as a guideline, which directs the answers and it thus allows the participants to express their own views. In a qualitative study this is essential to help understand the caring relationship between a childless married couple and their dog.
- It is helpful for the researcher to gain insight into the meanings of the particular group being studied (Black, 1976). Open-ended questionnaires can help a researcher to understand and develop a feeling for the behaviours, motivations and actions of childless married couples within a caring relationship with a dog. These types of questionnaires allow the participants to write about the relationship they have with their dog. Through these answers the different themes and sub themes can come to light.
- It may lessen observation anticipation. In an interview or focus groups the participants may experience observation anticipation. This phenomenon occurs when participants experience anxieties in a research setting for fear of being analysed by professionals in the field. Participants may then answer questions in accordance with what they think the

researcher wants to hear or what they think will make them look healthy, professional or normal (Cook & Campbell, 1979). As the open-ended questionnaire in this study was completed by the participants at their home, in the absence of the researcher, and then handed in observation anticipation was largely eliminated. This allowed for more truthful answers and thus answers of a higher accuracy.

### 3.3.3 Disadvantages of open-ended questionnaires

There are also certain disadvantages connected with using open-ended questionnaires. They are the following:

- The results may not be generalisable beyond the specific time, place, setting and people being used as participants (Sternberg, 1995). In this research study, care must accordingly be taken not to generalise these findings to other people, places and times that were not included in this study. It is not the goal of qualitative research to generalise the results but rather to gain a better understanding of a phenomenon.
- Different participants may appear to provide similar responses to the same item on a questionnaire but the importance and meaning each respondent attaches to his/her reply may be considerably different (Black, 1976). This might be the biggest disadvantage of using open-ended questionnaires and not interviews. Some of the meanings people attach to phrases and answers may be lost when the researcher is unable to probe for better understanding of a specific answer or meaning.
- Open-ended questionnaires can take some time to complete, as they require more than simple yes/no answers from the participants (Black, 1976). People may accordingly be less willing to take part in a study where they are required to complete open-ended questions. The questionnaire that was developed for the purpose of this study was kept relatively short and straightforward as it consisted of 24 open-ended questions. This minimised the time it took to complete the questions. Furthermore, participation in this study was voluntary and the participants were aware of what was expected from them before they agreed to participate. This ensured that only people who had the time to complete the questionnaire participated in the study.

Open-ended questionnaires can be biased against people who are not able to reflect their feelings accurately on paper. These people's beliefs and views would be overpowered by other participants who are able to accurately convey their feelings and beliefs (Black, 1976). This

implies that people with limited or no education cannot take part or will complete questionnaires insufficiently. Because this is a qualitative study, only a few data rich questionnaires were needed to do an analysis. This allowed the researcher to discard questionnaires, which were incomplete or insufficient. Unfortunately, uneducated participants were thus excluded from the research. The research is not, however, a neither comparative study nor will it provide generalisable results. It was thus not necessary to include all types of people from all backgrounds and all socio-economic groups.

Open-ended questionnaires are thus a method to gather data that can be easily administered and that allow for in-depth information to be collected. One of the disadvantages of this kind of data collection is that because probing cannot be performed, some of the meanings and in-depth understanding may be lost. Furthermore questions cannot be elucidated and the researcher has no control over external influences on the answers of the participants. It did, however, seem that the advantages outweighed the disadvantages in using an open-ended questionnaire in this study.

### 3.3.4 Why not interviews?

It seems to be widely accepted that face-to-face interviews are the most accepted and trusted method of gathering qualitative data (Rossi, Freeman & Lipsey, 1999; Silverman, 2001; Sternberg, 1995). Face-to-face interviewing promises to provide a context wherein the researcher can probe, explore and discuss phenomena with a participant in order to get in-depth information on a certain topic (Silverman, 2001). Interviews thus seem like the ideal method to gather qualitative data of a high quality.

Interviews are, however, also not free from disadvantages. Interviews are based on the relationship between language and meaning. They are thus contextually grounded and can be unstable, ambiguous and open to various interpretations (Mishler, 1986). This means that the interviewer can influence the way in which respondents answer as well as how these answers are interpreted. The way the researcher conducts the interviews and interprets the data, as well as the way the participant interprets the questions can influence the quality and in-depth exploration of the research data.

Black (1976:371-374) also identified the following disadvantages of using interviews as data collection technique:

- *Validity of verbal responses.* In an interview it is always questionable whether a participant behaves like he/she normally behaves. As mentioned before, the participants may experience observation apprehension and this may result in answers that are false, dramatised or constructed to impress the researcher. By simply using an open-ended questionnaire the researcher can greatly reduce this problem.
- *Interviewer variability.* An interviewer may look at certain responses differently at different times. Furthermore, an interviewer may probe extensively during one interview and then simply ask questions without probing in another interview. The quality and amount of data that can be gathered through an interview thus depends on the interviewer. There are no definite guarantees that an interview will provide information that are in-depth and of higher quality than, for example, information gathered from an open-ended questionnaire.
- *Time.* To conduct a sufficient amount of interviews to ensure that the data is saturated is extremely time consuming. Interviews usually take more time to complete than the researcher thought at first. An interview can last for one hour or up to three hours depending on the topic and participant. Additional time also has to be added for the transcription of the interview, which can be anything from one to six hours for a one-hour interview. Because there are two parties involved in the interview a time for the interview must be scheduled that will be acceptable for both parties. This means that interviews must sometimes be conducted over a weekend or in the evenings. This may discourage people from participating in the study.
- *Recording information.* When interviews are conducted the information gathered must be recorded in some way by either taking notes or making use of video or audio recorders. Some participants may object to being recorded which then forces the researcher to write down the information. If the researcher has to continually write notes this may distract the participant and some information may be lost. Furthermore, even if participants do agree to be recorded, the fact that they are being recorded may influence how they respond to questions. For example, they may get camera shy and only give short insufficient answers. The fact that the data has to be recorded can thus also influence the quality of the data obtained.

It seems that interviewing does not always stand up to researchers' expectations of it being a method that provides in-depth information. Interviewing is a valid method with which to gather qualitative data, but is by no means without disadvantages. As all methods have their

disadvantages, the researcher should choose the one that will provide adequate information to work with and that will also suit the researcher and research topic best.

### **3.4 Analysis of data**

#### **3.4.1 Purpose of data analysis**

After a research project has been conducted the researcher has usually acquired information of which not all is important to the study. This is where the analysis of data comes into play. The purpose of data analysis is to reduce, sift and organise the information in such a way that the themes, and interpretations that emerge from the process address the original research question (Tutty, Rothery & Grinell, 1996).

During the data analysis, conclusions are made about the topic under study. It is, therefore, essential to choose the type of analysis that suits a study and will lead to meaningful conclusions. In this study it was decided to use a thematic analysis.

#### **3.4.2 Thematic analysis**

The thematic analysis is a common and widely preferred way to analyse written data. This written data can be in the form of a transcribed interview or completed open-ended questionnaires (Aronson, 1994).

Thematic analysis focuses on identifiable themes and patterns of living and/or behaviour (Aronson, 1994). A theme can be defined as “ A statement of meaning that runs through all or most of the pertinent data or one in the minority that carries heavy emotional or factual impact” (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner & Steinmetz, 1991:150).

Themes are usually developed to form a network, which combines statements or phrases with shared meanings within the research data. This network of themes, derived from phrases or statements, can then help to identify various patterns in the research data. According to Aronson (1994) these patterns can come from direct quotes or common ideas. All the data that is relevant to the themes must be identified and included in the patterns. The related patterns must then be combined and sorted into themes and sub themes (Aronson, 1994). Researchers must thus

combine phrases into themes and sub themes to give meanings to the phrases that might have been meaningless when viewed alone (Leiniger, 1985). Themes thus provide meaning and structure to the information gathered through qualitative techniques (Ely *et al.*, 1991).

Broad themes can, however, also be defined before the study commences. They can be determined by looking at literature on the topic under study. These predetermined broad, basic themes can then be adjusted when the research data is analysed. Furthermore, themes and sub themes can also be formed from the research data and added to the predetermined themes.

In thematic analysis it is important to note that the themes, whether predetermined or gained from the research data, are constructed by the researcher and are thus subjective in the sense that they reflect the researcher's understanding of the meanings of the data and topic under study.

On this point, Leiniger (1995:60) stated that the "coherence of ideas rests with the analyst who has rigorously studied how different ideas or components fit together in a meaningful way when linked together." With this statement it becomes apparent that the person who analyses the data decides what the themes will be and how they are linked together. Leiniger (1995:60) also stated that researchers cannot objectively analyse a text and identify themes but are influenced by various personal and other factors. Thematic analysis, along with any qualitative analysis technique, thus requires self-reflexivity.

In this dissertation a thematic analyses was used where some of the broad themes were predetermined and other themes and sub themes derived from the research data. The predetermined themes were derived from literature on the caring relationship. The themes are discussed (Chapter 5) by quoting the responses given by the participants that support a specific theme or sub theme. Furthermore, the themes are also discussed and explained by using relevant literature (Chapters 2 and 5).

### **3.5 Selection of participants**

The study is set within the broad context of Western society. As the focus of the study is not to look at the differences in the prevalence of the phenomenon across different race groups, all the different races within South Africa were not included in the study. The prevalence of infertility is higher among Caucasians (Valintine, 1988) and the participants in this study consisted of only Afrikaans and English speaking Caucasian South Africans.

Further reasons to focus on only white South Africans are the following: Access to white participants was more readily available. As a white South African I may not understand the various meanings within other races and cultures and more accurate analyses could be done by working with people of my own racial and cultural group. By working with only white South Africans I was thus able to produce results of a higher quality.

As the study focuses on the human-dog interaction and how dog ownership provides a caring relationship there was no need to exclude certain socio-economic groups. The focus of this study was not on how members of particular socio-economic groups look after their dogs, and wealth does not necessarily play a role in how people feel towards their dogs, and to what extent the dogs fulfil their needs and provide a caring relationship.

The participants were personally approached or approached via a local veterinarian. The snowballing technique was also used to identify further eligible respondents, where the participants identified other people who met the inclusion criteria. Participation was voluntary and the participants were asked whether they would be willing to participate after the purpose of the study was explained to them. They were ensured of the confidential handling of all research data.

The group that was studied consisted of married couples that did not have children and have not opted for alternatives like adoption, or failed to conceive children even though they tried options such as infertility treatment. The group also included married couples whose only child has died or whose children already left home. In the study both male and female participants were used. Although there are debates that state that females are the caregivers and males the providers, it has recently been accepted that males also have “mothering” skills which include the ability to take care of dependent creatures (Gaard, 2001).

The participants in this study included five couples and both the male and the female completed a questionnaire. One of the questionnaires completed by a male was, however, discarded because of poor quality of the data in the questionnaire. The sample thus consisted of five females and four males. The participants covered all three groups identified as childless married couples. Furthermore, they consisted of married couples between the ages of 25 and 50 years who owned one or more dogs. The participants also included both Afrikaans and English speaking Caucasians who are South African citizens. Participants who agreed to participate in this study were required to complete an informed consent form (see Appendix 2).

### **3.6 Conclusion to chapter**

In this study it was decided to use a qualitative method to gather the research data. By using a qualitative approach a more in-depth view into the caring relationship between a childless married couple and their dog could be established.

Qualitative research can be criticised on various points. These criticisms are mostly concerned with qualitative research being seen as less reliable and more prone to anecdotalism than quantitative research. Even though qualitative research is criticised on these points it was still selected as the preferred approach for this study concerning the relationship between childless married couples and their dog.

Qualitative research can take on many forms but all the methods share some essential features. These are that, firstly, it is important to choose appropriate methods and theories for the collection and analysis of qualitative research data. Secondly, the qualitative researcher must acknowledge the role of his/her own personality, values and other background factors when collecting and analysing the research data.

The different forms of qualitative research also have certain preferences in common. These preferences include, a preference for qualitative data, a preference for natural occurring data, a preference for meaning rather than behaviour, a rejection of natural science as a model, and a preference for inductive, hypothesis generating data.

The data collection technique that was chosen for this qualitative study was a self-completion open-ended questionnaire. Open-ended questionnaires have several advantages. They are easy to administer, the questions are less restricting than close-ended questions, they can provide more insight into the behaviour of a particular group and they may eliminate observation anticipation that may be experienced by a participant during face-to-face interviewing.

On the other hand open-ended questionnaires can also have certain disadvantages. These include that different participants may appear to provide similar responses but the meaning may be considered as different, it is time consuming to complete and it is biased in favour of people who can easily express their views in writing. In this case the advantages outweighed the disadvantages and it was decided to use open-ended self-completion questionnaires as a means of gathering the research data for this study.



The choice of using questionnaires instead of interviews was based on the various disadvantages of using interviews as data gathering method. In an interview the validity of the verbal responses is questionable. Furthermore, interviewer variability can come into play, and interviews can be extremely time consuming for both the respondent and researcher. Lastly, the recording and transcribing of the interview information can be time consuming, difficult and may be of poor quality if a tape recorder is used and parts of the interview are inaudible. The participants may also not like to be recorded on tape. These disadvantages made the use open-ended questionnaires more practical for this study.

A semi-structured thematic analysis was used, where some of the themes were identified before the data was collected, and other sub themes were added as derived from the research data.

Participants for this study were selected based on certain criteria. They had to be childless married Caucasians who had a dog or dogs. People who met the criteria were approached by veterinarians or personally by the researcher. The snowballing technique was also used to identify further candidates. Participation in this study was voluntary and the participants were required to sign an informed consent form.

## **Chapter 4: Results and interpretation**

### **4.1 Introduction to chapter**

This chapter deals with the analysis and interpretation of the data obtained through the open-ended questionnaires. In a qualitative study the analysis and interpretation cannot be separated from each other and they are thus reported together in this chapter. The data is discussed according to the four predetermined themes; need fulfilment, ritualisation, love and attachment (Refer to Chapter 2 for detailed discussions and definitions of these concepts). Furthermore, throughout the data, sub themes were identified. To support these themes and sub themes, direct quotes from the answers in the participants' questionnaires are used. These quotes are then further discussed by using appropriate literature to show their relevance.

### **4.2 Fulfilment of needs**

#### **4.2.1 The need for a family unit**

##### **4.2.1.1 Family**

As discussed before (Chapter 2), the childless married couple can form a type of family known as the quasi-family. Within such as quasi-family they can experience the need fulfilment that is normally experienced in nuclear families (Pretorius, 1998). It was thus important to determine whether the married couple viewed their dog as being a part of the family since this would be essential in order for them to successfully function as a quasi-family.

In their responses, the participants referred to a family unit where the dog was included as part of the family; for example, "He is part of our lives" and "He is part of the family". Responses like these clearly indicate that the dog is included in the family unit. This shows that the couple has socially constructed a family which includes their dog as part of the family. A response like "From the start she was part of our family" clearly shows that the dog is included in the quasi-family unit.

This formation of the family unit creates an environment in which certain needs can be fulfilled (Pretorius, 1998). Some of the participants also gave responses that seem to allocate a certain

position to the dog in the family where the dog was no longer simply referred to as just a pet, but also given a position that is normally seen in a nuclear family. For example, responses like “She is my baby, I simply adore her, I cannot imagine our family without her”, “They are our children” and “We think she is the luckiest dog-child” seem to indicate that the dog is fulfilling the role of a child in the family unit. Furthermore, a response like “she is the child that we never had, the baby that never grew up, the teenager that could never backchat” not only indicates that the dog gets an allocated role, but also that the way the dog fulfils its role may be similar to a child and also that there are differences between how the dog and a child fulfils the role. This response also seems to suggest that the dog is a child to them.

By allocating to the dog a role similar to that of a child as is found in the structure of the nuclear family, the childless married couple adheres to the social perceptions of what a family should entail. This seems to indicate that these couples have achieved a sense of generativity that is related to the seventh criterion of health as identified by Erikson (1980), which was discussed in Chapter 2. This could imply that the participants have successfully overcome stagnation by forming a family wherein certain need fulfilment can be achieved. This also makes it potentially possible for the couple to achieve integrity and overcome despair during the phase that Erikson (1980) called old age.

#### **4.2.1.2 Provides companionship**

Children tend to fill the emptiness of a house. The caring relationship that exists between parent and child can provide the needed distractions which counter loneliness. When a married couple does not have children they do not have that extra distraction and companionship at home, but this can occur when a dog fulfils the role of a child.

A dog can provide the ideal companionships to childless married couples. This becomes clear in the respondents’ statements, such as “A dog is your best friend”. Odendaal (1999) stated that positive interaction within a human-animal bond is based on fulfilling the need for attention. Furthermore, positive interaction between a human and a dog has mutual benefits for both parties. The companionship relationship that may exist between the childless married couple is thus mutually beneficial and has a number of positive influences on the mental and physical health of both the dog and his/her owners (see for example, Odendaal, 1999).

If the childless married couple views their dog/dogs as companions, they may experience a more fulfilling home environment and the quality of their lives may be enhanced. In the study that Barker and Barker (1990) conducted on pet owners’ closeness to their pet dog, they found that

pet owners were emotionally as close to their dogs as to their closest family member. This indicates that dogs can successfully take on the role of companion and family member.

Responses like “He is a good companion” and “He provides companionship” indicates that the participants in this study viewed their dogs as companions. As in other companions, people also turn to their dogs for affection. Dogs are social creatures and are usually very happy when in the company of their owners. Dogs thus provide the ideal companion onto whom the childless married couple can bestow their affection.

Research results show that talking to dogs is related to greater life satisfaction, greater marital satisfaction and better physical and mental health (Allen *et al.*, 1991). When a person talks to his/her dog it also indicates that he/she relies on the dog as companion and friend. Responses like “I always talk to him although he cannot hear me”, “I talk to them as if they are my children” and “we talk to her like we would to another person ” indicate that the mere fact of speaking to the dog fulfils some need for the owner even though the dog cannot reply or participate in the conversation. This implies that even though dogs are unable to understand or reply to their owners, they still provide the needed entity with which people can fulfil their companionship needs.

A dog does not only provide its owners with something to talk to, but also fulfils some of the other companion functions. A response like “He follows me around, I never feel alone” indicates that the dog's presence helps to fight loneliness and also provides some sort of security. A letter written by Ask Angel (1999) explains the benefits of animal contact, by writing that dogs can help overcome loneliness and loss by supplying companionship and affection. Research reveals that dog owning couples are better off than those without dogs and that those with the highest attachment to their dogs are the healthiest emotionally and physically (Allen *et al.*, 1991).

The above-mentioned quotes indicate that the couples viewed their dogs as companions who were readily available within a family unit in which their need for love and attachment could be fulfilled. Maslow (Meyer, Moore & Viljoen, 1997) postulates that it is necessary to find fulfilment for the need for love and attachment on a regular basis in order to ultimately achieve self-actualisation. The participants in this study were able to find regular fulfilment for their need for love and attachment, which made it possible for them to move closer to self-actualisation.

#### 4.2.2 The need to experience a relationship that entails the care of a dependent creature

Taking care of children helps to fulfil the need that adults may experience to care for a dependent living creature (Post, 1994). Having a dog can provide the childless married couple with the opportunity to take care of a dependent living creature. In order for need fulfilment to take place, the childless married couple must construe their relationship as one in which their dog is dependent on their care. In some cases, caring for a dog helps to satisfy the couple's need for belonging and their need to be related (Fromm, 1995). The need for belonging is satisfied by the security provided within a family unit wherein a caring relationship exists while the need to be related is satisfied by caring for various family members. This caring helps to bond the family members and creates feelings of relatedness.

Responses like "We provide him with the opportunity to live under secure circumstances" and "We give our dog a good home" indicate that the participants felt proud of the fact that they could look after their dog and better his/her life. There is also a general acceptance amongst dog owners that dogs require a lot of care and attention. Responses like "I enjoy taking care of her", "They need us to care for them" and "She is like a child who needs constant care and attention" show that the participants in this study regarded their relationship with their dog as one that entailed caring for their dog.

Furthermore, a response like "We will never give her away. No one can look after her as well as we do" indicates that the respondents did not only view their relationship with their dog as one that entailed the care of a dependent creature but also that they believed that they could look after their dog better than any other person would be able to.

Dogs can thus fulfil the childless married couple's need to take care of a dependent living creature. This in turn can help these couples to ultimately achieve integrity and also to fulfil their needs to be related and for belonging. This could help to improve the health and quality of life of the couple.

#### 4.2.3 The need to be needed

People may want to feel that they are important to some other living being (Meyer, Moore & Viljoen, 1997). This need to feel needed can generally be satisfied when the married couple decides to have children. A helpless baby fully depends on his/her parents for care, and cannot survive without adult care. Similarly domesticated dogs are also dependent on their owners for food, water, shelter, and attention.

When a married couple is thus unable to have children, or do not want children, they can fulfil their need to feel needed by acquiring a dog. Furthermore, married couples whose children have left home and thus live independently of them may experience a loss in need fulfilment as they no longer have children who are dependent of them. Couples such as these can once again feel needed if they acquire a dog for whom they can care.

It is thus essential to determine whether childless married couples regard their dogs as needing them. Responses like “He needs us to look after him” and “She needs us. How will she survive if we do not take care of her?” indicate that the participants felt that their dogs were, similar to children, fully dependent on them. This indicates that they felt needed by their dogs and their need to be needed was thus satisfied within their relationship with their dog.

Furthermore, the participants also stated why their dogs needed them and what needs they fulfilled for their dogs. Responses like “We carry him up the stairs as he is too old to climb them” and “I soften her pellets with warm water as she struggles to eat the hard pellets” indicate not only what needs the owners thought their dogs had but also that they believed their dogs need them for certain specific things that they could not do themselves.

Such caring can have positive influences on how people feel about themselves. If they feel that they are needed, people may experience a sense of worth, which may enhance their sense of well being, resulting in better mental and physical health. Odendaal’s (2000) research supports this view by indicating that positive interaction with dogs can decrease blood pressure and cause a positive psychological effect in both species.

#### 4.2.4 Need for gratitude

The need for gratitude is a theme that was derived from the data and was not discussed in the literature chapter. Gratitude can be defined as the state of being thankful (Cambridge English Dictionary, 2003). According to Grusec (1991) social rewards that include praise and gratitude may be more rewarding to an individual than material rewards such as money. This implies that in a caring relationship the person may find the relationship more rewarding if the person or thing being cared for shows gratitude. Furthermore, the consequences of people’s actions often determine whether they will repeat that action (Franzoi, 2003). This means that a person will more readily repeat a caring function if that action was previously rewarded with some form of gratitude or praise.

Within a caring relationship most people feel the need to experience some form of gratitude or praise from the person or animal that they care for. This enhances the sense of fulfilment that the person experiences in the relationship and also ensures that the caring functions are repeated. If some form of gratitude is not shown the caregiver may find the relationship to be a burden rather than an asset. But not only humans have the need for gratitude. By their behaviour, it appears that dogs also need some form of recognition.

It became apparent that the participants in this study perceived to receive gratitude from their dogs. Responses like “He shows appreciation and affection” and “She is always so overly grateful, loyal and loving it makes it a pleasure to care for her” indicate that the respondents felt their dogs showed gratitude even though these activities might be submissive behaviour on the dogs part.. These responses also indicated the presence of companionate love where there is affection, loyalty and commitment without passion between the parties involved (Franzoi, 2003).

Furthermore, a response like “She has her way of thanking us if she has had something nice to eat” suggests that animals, although they cannot talk, have a way of showing their gratitude for their owners. Gratitude can also be shown by the owner to his/her dog. Responses like “Scaffy looked after our house, now that he is old we will look after him” and “Jaqueline looked after my mother and now we look after her” indicate that the participants felt they should show gratitude to their dogs to repay them for things they had done for them.

The responses given by the participants seem to indicate that dogs do not only know how to show their appreciation, but are experts at showing gratitude. The relationship between a human and his/her dog provides an ideal situation to experience this need fulfilment.

### **4.3 *Ritualisation***

#### **4.3.1 Discipline**

One of the most important functions of establishing certain rituals within a family is to ensure that the family members can live together in harmony. Rituals are an important way to establish correct ways of conduct in everyday situations to ensure such harmony. Discipline forms an important part of ritualisation as it is through disciplining children or pets that correct rituals are learned and established within the family situation. According to Scholtemeyer (1994) rituals are often used to enforce social views of correct and accepted conduct. Thus through rituals people are disciplined as to what actions are socially acceptable.

A well-disciplined child is essential within a caring relationship as discipline is necessary to establish caring rituals like the bathing, feeding and bedtimes of the child. Rituals always occur within a certain context and have specific meanings (Scholtemeyer, 1994). Bathing rituals, for example, ensure that the child is cleaned and is ultimately kept healthy. The child needs to obey these rituals for the benefit of his/her own well being as well as to ensure the cohesion and effective functioning of the family's daily life. When a married couple has a dog, and not children, the same applies to their dog. The dog needs to be disciplined in order to establish caring rituals within the family.

It is thus important to establish whether childless married couples view their dogs as well disciplined or apply disciplinary methods to ensure that caring rituals are followed. Responses like "He is very obedient and loyal", "Our dogs are very good and well behaved", "Because they have lots of toys they have never chewed something of ours" and "She has never made us angry. She has always been a good dog" indicate that the dogs are obediently following the interaction rituals with the family and are thus sufficiently disciplined. A well-disciplined dog sufficiently follows the interactive rituals and thus ensures that the couple lives in harmony with their dog and is able to sufficiently care for their dog.

Responses like "We disciplined him when he was younger but he is deaf now so its is difficult, and not necessary because he is well disciplined", "They always listen when we talk" and "My dog is well disciplined and it is no longer necessary to apply stringent measures of discipline" also imply that the respondents in this study viewed their dogs as being well disciplined and show that disciplinary methods were applied to establish the rituals. Furthermore, responses like "They are two well behaved and loving dogs and people notice that immediately" and "They have nice manners" also show that it is important for participants that their dogs are well behaved and that others notice this behaviour.

When the rituals are sufficiently learned and obeyed by all the family members it becomes unnecessary to apply stringent disciplinary methods. A response like "When we got her she was very naughty so we had to apply stringent disciplinary methods, but she is well behaved now and has settled nicely into our family" indicates that the respondent only applied disciplinary methods when necessary and stopped applying them when the dog was sufficiently disciplined and adhered to the daily family rituals.

It is socially accepted that disciplinary steps should not harm the child/dog in any way. Responses like "We never hit her but we talk to her in an angry voice, she understands that she



did something wrong and listens to us” and “A folded newspaper is used to discipline them, they are scared of the noise it makes so we never have to hit them” indicate that the participant viewed a simple change in his/her tone of voice or the noise provided by a folded newspaper as sufficient punishment for the dog. This form of discipline is not physically harmful to the dog, but ensures that sufficient discipline is applied.

From these responses given by the participants in this study, it is apparent that they regarded it as essential to discipline their dogs in order for them to live in harmony with their dogs as a family, but if a dog is well disciplined it becomes unnecessary to apply stringent disciplinary methods.

### 4.3.2 Activities

As discussed previously (Chapter 2) there are various interaction routines. These types of rituals include dinner times, bedtimes and leisure activities (Scholtemeyer, 1994). Within a family these activities are conducted on a regular basis and usually occur at set times and dates. Laird (1984) also stated that rituals are structured with a beginning, middle and end. For example, a bedtime ritual for a child can start at a certain time with a bedtime prayer, the middle process will then involve the actual sleeping of the child and the end time will be when the child has to get up in the morning. Within a family that includes a childless married couple and their dog, the dog may also be included in these family rituals.

#### 4.3.2.1 Eating

Eating times is a daily ritual in most families with the three major times being for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Even though not all of these are necessarily times that the family spends together, usually at least one is seen as a family meal. When a dog is included in the family, his/her mealtimes may be different from the rest of the family's as his/her needs are different. Although their mealtimes may be different from the rest of the family's, they still may have set times when they receive their food. Furthermore, they may also have set places and ways in which they receive their food.

Responses like “He eats at a specific time and place”, “She gets a tin of dog food in the early evening”, “In the mornings at 7 they get a snack and at 5 in the afternoon they get their main meal” and “His bowl is in the kitchen and he gets pellets in the mornings and evenings” indicate that the participants in this study have set mealtimes for their dogs. Furthermore, their dogs also receive their meals in specific places.

The rituals may, however, not always include specific food types. Responses like “In the morning she gets table scraps that consist of anything we had for breakfast, the same applies for lunch and between dinner times she gets some of whatever snacks we are having” and “For their meal they either get Eukanuba, or Husky home style meal, or mince mixed in mealie meal pap” indicate that although this dog is accustomed to certain specific feeding times he/she is not accustomed to having the same food all the time. Furthermore, some of these responses also indicate that the couple shares their food with their dogs, this sharing of food can be seen as a show of affection and togetherness.

These different mealtime routines are usually determined by the couple’s schedule and what they find most appropriate (Oliver, 2002). There may also be a set routine in what the dogs get to eat. For example, responses like “He is on a specialised veterinary diet”, “She gets pellets and extra treats at our mealtimes” and “He gets dog pellets in the mornings and canned dog food in the evenings” suggest that mealtime rituals for dogs can also include specific food types. The specific food types can also vary for different mealtimes or for the different dogs that form part of the family. A response like “Our old dog the staffie (10 years) eats Pedigree Senior Vets Choice, Vlooi (3 years) eats Eukanuba and Heidie (3 months) eats Pedigree Principle which we soften with warm water” indicates that the different dogs in this household differ in terms of what they eat during mealtimes. The mealtime rituals can thus be different for the different dogs in the household. These are further indications of mealtime rituals that are formed within the family unit.

In families which include a dog the dog’s mealtime rituals can take place in one of two forms; firstly, the dog can have one or two set mealtimes as can be seen from the responses above and secondly the dog’s bowl can be filled when empty and the dog decides when to eat (Milani, 2002). Responses like “She always has pellets in her bowl in the kitchen but we give her additional bones and treats when it is our mealtimes” and “Her bowl is always full of food and she eats when she is hungry” show that some of the participants in this study also just leave the food at the same place but ensure that there is always food available for the dog to eat. This is just another form of mealtime ritual, as this dog would know that his/her food would always be available at that specific place.

#### **4.3.2.2 Sleep**

Within a nuclear family, young children may be expected to follow bedtime rituals. These rituals ensure that they get enough sleep and are thus healthy happy children. In a family where the married couple does not have children, but has a dog, similar bedtime rituals may be formed. These bedtime rituals can include both where the dog sleeps and when he/she has to go to

sleep. According to the 1995 National Pet Owner Survey conducted in the United States of America 45% of pet owners set up special beds for their pets in the house ([www.healthypet.com/Library/animal\\_bond-4.html](http://www.healthypet.com/Library/animal_bond-4.html)).

Furthermore, these bedtime rituals can also include certain activities that the dog has to complete before going to sleep (Oliver, 2002). With children these activities can include bathing, brushing of teeth and saying bedtime prayers. Similarly dogs also have activities to complete like being taken outside to do their toilet.

Responses like “He sleeps in a dog basket next to our bed”, “He has a cushion in the TV room and sleeps there when we are watching TV” and “He has a nice soft bed in the bedroom next to our bed and sleeps there when we go to bed” indicate that the participants in this study have specific places where their dogs sleep.

Furthermore, responses like “He goes to bed when we go to bed”, “They normally go to bed when we do anytime between 9 and 11” and “I put her to bed at about 21:00 every night when we are also preparing to go to bed” reflect that the respondents also enforce bedtime rituals that prescribe when the dog has to go to sleep. Lastly, a response like “Before she goes to bed we take her outside to do her business” indicates that the bedtime rituals also include activities that the dogs have to do before going to bed.

Within a nuclear family the parents try to ensure that their children are safe and warm when they sleep. Similarly, within a family that consists of a married couple and their dogs, the couple may also take certain measures to ensure that their dogs are safe and warm while they sleep. A response like “We installed a Salton wall heater in the outside room where she sleeps on her mattress” indicates that the participant ensured that their dog had a warm place to sleep.

These sleeping rituals may also be connected to specific occasions, for example, a response like “She sleeps in the outside room on a thick blanket when we are not at home” indicates that the bedtime ritual of the dog changes when the owners are not at home. It is thus apparent that sleep rituals for their dogs are construed as important by the childless married couple. In the summer the bedtime rituals that the dog as part of the family unit must go through include where he/she sleeps, when he/she sleeps and what he/she has to do before going to sleep.

#### **4.3.2.3 Grooming**

Personal hygiene is an important part of a family. It is usually seen as the parents' responsibility to ensure that the child is clean and looks neat and tidy. By regularly bathing the child, brushing

his/her teeth, washing his/her hair and washing the child's hands, the parent can ensure that the child is healthy and well looked after.

In a family where the dog is part of the family unit the married couple must also regularly groom the dog to ensure that it stays healthy. Furthermore, the dog has to be groomed as he/she shares the house with his/her owners and needs to be kept clean to ensure a hygienic home environment. Grooming is thus an essential part of the caring relationship between a childless married couple and their dog.

Responses like "I groom the dog daily", "I brush her every morning and she goes to the doggy parlour twice a month" and "My husband grooms the dog and I help at bath times once a week" indicate that the couples have grooming rituals for their dogs. Furthermore, a response like "It is our responsibility to look after her and by grooming and bathing her we fulfil part of that responsibility" indicates that the couple views the grooming ritual as part of their responsibility to care for the dog who is part of the family unit.

Furthermore, the grooming ritual can also be associated with certain things like a specific bath or towel that is used for the dog. Responses like "She is bathed in her own plastic bath and dried with her own towel", "My husband baths her with her shampoo, Sulfaderm" and "We brush her with her brush daily" indicate that the participants use the same specific things each time to groom and bathe their dogs. The dog may then be conditioned in such a way that when he/she sees that specific object he/she will know that he/she is going to be bathed or groomed.

The grooming ritual may also vary for the different seasons. A response like "I bathe her just before it gets cold and in winter months I only bathe her when it is a warm day" seems to indicate that the seasons and the weather affect a regular bathing ritual.

By grooming their dogs the couples feel that they ensure their well being and fulfill their responsibility to look after the dependent creature. It is thus apparent that the couples view the grooming ritual as an important part of the caring relationship with their dogs.

#### **4.3.2.4 Treats**

Treats are discussed as part of ritualisation as it is usually given at specific times or before or during specific events. The giving of treats is seen as a normal part of family life. People within a family give treats to spoil loved ones or as a reward for good conduct. This ritual can be seen as an patterned ritual (Scholtemeyer, 1994). According to Milani (2002) patterned rituals occur regularly and are important for effective functioning of the family. Treats can be used to show

one's appreciation, love and caring as well as to encourage acceptable behaviour. Even though treats in this case are discussed under the theme of ritualisation, it can also be a function within a love relationship. In the latter case the dog will then be treated on a regular basis as a show of love.

In a family, which consists of a childless married couple and their dog, treats can be given to the dog on a regular basis. For example, whilst children may be treated with dessert after finishing vegetables, dogs could be treated with a dog biscuit after successfully obeying a command. But dogs can also receive treats on a regular basis without having to do something for it. For example, a dog may receive a dog biscuit every night before bedtime. This treat may be a way for the owners to show their love and appreciation of the dog.

Treats can take various forms, for example, according to the 1995 National Pet Owner Survey conducted in the United States of America 48 percent of pet owners pamper their pet by taking it in the car on errands ([www.healthypet.com/Library/animal\\_bond-4.html](http://www.healthypet.com/Library/animal_bond-4.html)). Although treats can involve different things, it must be something that the dog likes and that is not available to him/her at all times. The dog must thus look forward to receiving it or be excited when it perceives that he/she is going to receive a treat.

Responses like "She knows after I have finished brushing her she is going to get a biscuit if she behaves", "They get biltong or a piece of sausage when we have some", "Each night they get a piece of meat" and "We treat her with dog biscuits which she receives after breakfast and a dog bone on Sunday when we have our Sunday lunch" indicate that the participants in this study used treats as both a way to encourage acceptable behaviour as well as simply spoiling their dogs.

The quotes from the respondents also show that the participants share what they eat with their dogs. To share can be seen as a way to show that you care for another person or living creature. By sharing their food with their dog, the married couple does not only treat their dog, but also expresses their affection, love and caring that that they feel for their dog.

Furthermore, responses like "She loves bones and it is a joy to see her enjoying the treat", "We bring them a doggy bag when we go out to eat. They wait for it" and "She gets excited when she sees me taking down the biscuit tin with her dog biscuits in, she loves them" indicate that the participants in this study perceive their dogs to like and want the treats that they give them even though these actions from the dog may actually be behaviours or mimic behaviours that occurs within the social context.

Treats can, however, also be offered to family members if a person feels guilty about something or sorry for that family member. For example, divorced parents can treat their children to make up for their loss. Similarly childless married couples can treat their dogs to make up for other losses. Responses like “He gets a dog biscuit when I leave in the mornings for work” and “He gets a biscuit when we go out and he has to stay outside” indicate that the participants in this study also treated their dogs to compensate for things that they felt were bad experiences for their dogs.

According to Harkness (2000), treats can be used for behaviour modification as a form of reward. Treats are thus used to link a negative stimulus with a positive stimulus. By linking a negative stimulus such as leaving your dog at home with a positive stimulus such as giving him/ her a treat helps to divert the dog’s attention from the negative stimulus.

It is thus apparent that childless married couples have certain rituals that involve treats for their dog. These rituals can be given daily, weekly or only at special or certain occasions.

#### **4.3.2.5 General**

Apart from the various rituals discussed above, there are also other rituals such as greeting rituals and regular recreation activities that the dog and his/her owner participate in (Scholtemeyer,1994). In a nuclear family, which consists of a married couple and their children, other rituals can include activities such as regular dentist visits and annual inoculations.

Similarly, in a family that consists of a childless married couple and their dog there are also various other rituals. These rituals are different for every family and can include a wide variety of activities.

A response like “We take him to the vet regularly as he is old now” shows that for these families, visits to the veterinarian have become part of their routine. Furthermore, responses like “He waits for me by the gate every day to greet me”, “They are always so glad to see us even if we were away for only two hours” and “She jumps on me and I pick her up to greet her” indicate that the participants in this study view themselves and their dogs as having certain greeting rituals.

Furthermore, a response like “We take him to the kennels when we have to go away” indicates that a stay at the dog kennels has become part of the dog’s yearly routine and a response like “I carry him up and down the stairs as he is too old to climb the stairs” indicates that for this family carrying the dog up the stairs is one of their daily rituals.

The dog and his/her owner can also share ritual leisure activities. Responses like “Every day just before sundown it is her playtime, she gets my husband’s attention with short barks and then he has to throw her the ball and she will return it to him. Their playtime lasts for about half an hour every day” and “We play ball with them in the late afternoon, they know when we are going to play as I tell them to fetch or look for their ball” indicate that the ball throwing game between the owner and his/her dog has become a ritual within their family. These leisure activities can have mutual benefits for both the owner and his or her dog.

According to Nadler (2001), playing with, holding or patting your dog is a way of releasing stress. A leisure activity between a person and his/her dog can thus release stress. Furthermore, Harkness (2000) states that dogs experience stress similar to humans and that this stress can be relieved through exercise that can include playtimes. A positive interaction activity can also cause a feeling of elation, exhilaration and euphoria which can lead to in a feeling of well being (Fisher, 1992). Leisure activities between a childless married couple and their dog can thus be seen as a positive interaction that relieves stress for both parties and enhances their feeling of well being.

All of the activity rituals that are carried out within the family help to create an atmosphere wherein the family members can experience security as well as learn to handle changes. Furthermore, this secure environment helps the individual to establish his/her identity as an individual, as well as part of the family. The rituals established within the family context also contribute to the formation of group solidarity and help clarify the statuses and roles of the family members (Scholtemeyer, 1994).

In summary, it is apparent that rituals can be demonstrated in many different forms and include a wide variety of different activities and that they serve a number of important functions. Even though some activities can be seen as necessary routines or health activities, for example bath times and sleep times, there is also a form of ritualisation involved. For example, even though a dog must eat every night it may be ritualised when and where he/she eats or what he/she will do before eating. This necessary health routine then forms part of rituals. The activities can include rituals that are commonly used by most families or rituals that are unique for a specific family unit. Within the family that consists of a childless couple and their dog, rituals help to create a secure environment wherein the couple as well as their dog can establish their individual as well as family identities. As indicated above, it also helps to form group solidarity. Furthermore, rituals establish a context wherein the family members learn their own and each other’s roles within the family. Ritualisation within the family is, therefore, important for the family members to learn socially acceptable behaviour not only within the family context but also within the community in which the family lives.

## **4.4 Love**

Love is a word commonly used by people everywhere. As discussed before (Chapter 2) the meaning attached to this word is closely related to the social context wherein it is used. Since people differ as to how they construe love, different people view love in various different ways. From the responses given by the participants in this study six, broad themes were deduced indicating what they perceived a love relationship to entail.

### **4.4.1 Companionship**

Companionship has already been discussed in the need fulfilment themes. This aspect of a caring relationship does, however, also have a dimension in the love aspect of the caring relationship. It is a general view that someone becomes a companion to another person because he loves that person. Furthermore, if someone is a companion to another person a feeling of love may develop between the two people. This happens as closeness can enhance friendship, which can then develop into attraction and later love (Franzoi, 2003). In the relationship between a person and his or her dog the type of love that may develop is known as companionate love. Within a companionate love relationship the parties involved have attachment and commitment towards each other without passion playing a role (Franzoi, 2003).

When a dog is the companion to humans, people tend to believe that the dog loves them. Through such a companionship relationship a feeling of mutual love and understanding can develop. In the Ask Alana web site, Alana confirms this by stating that the domestication process of the dog was birthed through their collective desire to be companions, messengers of love and to participate in a mutually rewarding relationship (<http://www.askalana.com>).

Responses like “She is my devoted companion” and “ She loves being by my side wherever I am, I never feel lonely with her around” indicate that the participants in this study not only perceived their dogs to be companions but also that that companionship flows from a feeling of mutual love. According to the Counselling Centre (<http://counsel.ufl.edu>), which is an association that gives counselling advice online, loneliness can be described as a feeling of emptiness inside a person. According to them there are, however, different types of loneliness as well as different degrees of loneliness. One type of loneliness is related to missing a specific person or living creature because he/she has died or is far away while another type of loneliness concerns a feeling of being out of contact with people because one is actually physically isolated from others.



Loneliness is thus different from just being alone but is actually the feeling of being alone and being sad about it (<http://counsel.ufl.edu>). When people become trapped in their loneliness it becomes a problem as they might begin to experience psychological problems like depression (Anderson, 2003).

In a relationship between a person and a dog where the person views the dog as his/her companion, loneliness may thus be averted and this could result in better mental well being for the person. As the respondents indicated that they seldom feel lonely with their dogs around, it is thus apparent that a companionate relationship with a dog can help to counter feelings of loneliness.

Through companionship a feeling of mutual understanding may develop. The involved parties may feel they understand and know each other. A response like “We understand her although she cannot talk” indicates that the companionship relationship between the couple and their dog has developed to such an extent that they feel they understand her feelings and needs even though she is unable to communicate it to them through language.

It thus becomes apparent that because the relationship between the childless married couple and their dog is perceived to be one of mutual love the dog and humans are ideal and sought after companions for each other. This was confirmed by the results of the 1995 National Pet Owner Survey conducted in the United States of America, which indicated that people love their dog companions so much that they treat them like family ([www.healthypet.com/Library/animal\\_bond-4.html](http://www.healthypet.com/Library/animal_bond-4.html)).

#### 4.4.2 Affection

Within the family unit there are various ways that do not include physical contact in which the members express their affection for each other. In nuclear families that consist of a married couple and their children these can include “pet” names for each other, and boasting about family members to other people (Morgan *et al.*, 1979). Similarly in childless married couples that have a dog, the same methods to express their affection can be seen.

##### 4.4.2.1 Nicknames

It is not unknown for parents to give their children “pet” names for affectionate reasons. These nicknames are usually given at a young age and are then usually used by the parent for most of the child’s life. Similarly in a family which consists of a married couple and a dog the couple can

give the dog a nickname and call him or her that to express their affection to the dog. Nicknames usually exist within small groups like the nuclear family or friendship groups (Morgan *et al.*, 1979).

Nicknames can be anything from being derived from a name to being derived from certain body or personality traits. Furthermore, these nicknames are only used when the couple is addressing the dog in a friendly or affectionate way; when the dog is being reprimanded for something he/she has done his/her real name is usually used (McCarthy, 2001).

Responses like “I call him Makkie for affectionate reasons” and “We call her Liefie although her real name is Ounooi” indicate that the participants in this study did indeed give their dogs nicknames. They also regard these nicknames as being a way to show their affection for their dog.

Furthermore, a response like “When I call her Ounooi and not Liefie, she knows she did something wrong” indicates that the participants in this study also believed that their dogs knew the difference between their real name and nickname and also that their nickname was used in an affectionate way and not when they were being scolded.

The owner may also give his/her dog more than one nickname. A response like “She has many names and she knows them all. When we talk to her to convey a message we call her Tessa. But when we are playing with her or soothing her we call her Boklammetjie or Kuiken or various others. My husband also calls her Tolletjie and she loves it” indicates that a dog can have a variety of nicknames for various situations and also that the couple can each have a different nickname for their dog.

Responses like “ We call Steffie babetjie because she was raised like a baby”, “We call Vlooi Toy because she tires herself playing with her toys” and “I call Heidie Poppertjie because she looks like a toy dog” show that the participants choose nicknames for their dogs that illustrate some sort of personality or physical trait of the dog.

These responses indicate that the participants gave their dogs nicknames and that these nicknames had some sort of logic attached to it. Furthermore, they then used these nicknames as a show of affection for their dog.

#### **4.4.2.2 Pride**

Family members that love each other can often be seen to be proud of each other and their accomplishments. This pride in their children along with their love for their children can result in parents boasting about their children to other people.

Boasting is socially constructed as a way to show one's pride in a loved one or to tell other people of a loved one's achievements. Boasting is thus a normal way for parents to share with other people their pride in their children, or for any person to share his/her pride of a loved one with another person.

Similarly in a family that consists of a childless married couple and their dog the couple can also experience a sense of pride in their dog. They may also wish to share this pride with other people. They accomplish this by boasting about their dog to other people. In the 1995 National Pet Owner Survey conducted in the United States of America (it was found that 64% of pet owners included news about their pets and 36% included a photograph in holiday cards and letters. This indicates that pet owners share their feelings about their dog with other people ([www.healthypet.com/Library/animal\\_bond-4.html](http://www.healthypet.com/Library/animal_bond-4.html)))

The participants in this study also indicated that they frequently talked and boasted about their pets to other people. Responses like "I am so proud of her I always tell my friends of all the clever things she does", "I regularly boast about my dog to other dog owners" and "She is very clever and obedient. I regularly boast about what she can do to other people" indicate that the participants boasted about their dogs' abilities to other people.

Furthermore, responses like "When other people talk about their children I tell them about my dog" and "I will boast about my dog when people start to boast about their children or pets" suggest that the participants in this study felt they could participate in discussions about other people's children by including information about their dog. A response like "To us she is the prettiest, loveliest, most obedient dog that there can be" shows the inherent pride that this participant has for his/her dog. In summary, it is thus apparent that childless married couples do feel proud of their dogs and boast about their dogs to other people. They view this boasting as being similar to people boasting about their children.

#### 4.4.3 Trust

Trust is an important part of a relationship wherein the entities involved love each other. It is important in any family for the members of that family to trust each other, as a certain amount of trust is necessary for caring to evolve. In a nuclear family, for example, the children must trust the

parents to look after them and similarly the parents must trust the children to obey daily rituals. Trust is seen by Edgerly (1998) as a term that can be used for diverse circumstances. In order for both parties to understand what is expected of them it must clearly be defined as to what the parties are trusted with.

It is essential for the childless married couple to understand that their dog trusts them to look after him or her. Furthermore, it is also essential for the dog to understand with what the couple trust him/her. This trust can include anything from protecting the property, obeying family rituals and being well-behaved members of the family.

Although trust may involve diverse situations, it has at least three components (Edgerly, 1998). Firstly, it involves some form of expectation. These expectations include all of the parties within the trust relationship, for example, a person may expect their dog to protect them and their belongings, but in turn, the dog may expect his/her owner to take good care of him/her. The second component is the test of time. If the parties within the trust relationship fulfil their expectations of each other over time, their trust relationship will grow stronger. Lastly, it involves people's conscience. This implies that the parties involved in a trust relationship may experience guilt and anxiety when they fail to meet their mutual obligations. For example, if a dog fails to protect his/her owner and their property, the property can be stolen and the owner hurt, similarly if the owner fails to look after the dog the dog might become sick, run away or even die.

In a family that consists of a childless married couple and their dog there must be a certain amount of trust between the dog and its owners. In the 1995 National Pet Owner Survey the results indicated that 70% of dog owners felt that their dog would come to their rescue if they were attacked ([www.healthypet.com/Library/animal\\_bond-4.html](http://www.healthypet.com/Library/animal_bond-4.html)). This indicates that dog owners trust their pets.

Responses like "I feel safe when she is with me. I know she will protect me", "Scaffy has always been there for us when we are at work. We both worked and he looked after our house" and "He is obedient. I trust him, he will not do anything he should not do" indicate that the participants in this study trusted their dogs to be loyal and committed to them. Furthermore, responses like "She trusts me to look after her" and "He knows I will always take care of him," indicate that the participants perceived that their dogs trust them.

It is thus apparent that trust plays an important part in the caring relationship between the couple and their dog. Trust is construed by the couple as being a mutual feeling between the dog and

them. This trust relationship grows out of expectations of all the parties involved and is strengthened over time if these expectations are met.

#### 4.4.4 Physical contact

One of the most visible ways in which people express their love for one another, as well as for other living creatures, is through physical contact. This contact need not be sensual as one would find in passionate love (Franzoi, 2003). For example, parents in a nuclear family show their love for their children by hugging and kissing them and through various other forms of physical contact.

Similarly when dogs are part of the family, the people also show their love for their dogs through various forms of physical contact. These can include patting the dog, hugging the dog and cuddling the dog. These physical contacts are soothing for both the dog and its owners and can help to release stress and can have a calming, relaxing effect on both the owner and the dog. In Odendaal's (2000) study regarding the role of phenylethylamine during positive human-dog interaction, he found that positive interaction with dogs that include patting and playing with dogs might lower blood pressure and enhance feelings of pleasure within both species.

Responses like "I like to cuddle and kiss him", "We greet them in the mornings with a kiss" and "We constantly scratch her head and her tummy as well as ruffle her ears" indicate that the respondents showed their affection for their dogs through physical contact. Furthermore, responses like "She sits on my lap in front of the TV and I then pat her, it is very comforting" and "I always feel calm and relaxed while I am patting her" indicate that the participants viewed this physical contact as a relaxing exercise.

It is thus apparent that the participants in this study provided their dogs with physical contact. However love is a give and take relationship and the owners must also receive something in return. As mentioned before, the owners receive rewards for their physical actions in the form of feeling relaxed and calmed. Furthermore, the animals may also provide physical actions to show their affection for their owners. These can include sitting on the owner's lap and licking the owner. Responses like "She licks my hand and cuddles me with her snout in the evenings while we are watching TV, I think it is her way of saying she loves me", "Vlooi comes and asks us for a kiss", "They show their appreciation with a wagging tail every time they see us", "She puts her head on my lap if she sees I look a bit down" and "If I am a bit down he will jump on my lap as to comfort me" indicate that the participants believed their dogs performed certain physical actions to show their affection for them.

Dogs can also perform certain actions to indicate when they want physical contact with their owners. Responses like “In the cold months she lies on the couch close to me”, “If she is scared she jumps onto my lap”, “During the night if there is thunder she jumps onto my bed and lies in my arms until she is calmer and then she returns to her basket” and “When she feels sick she usually comes and licks my hand, then I know she is sick” indicate that dogs can approach their owners when they want or need physical attention. This also indicates that physical attention is important to dogs in their relationship with their owners.

Physical contact as a way of showing affection is perceived by the childless married couple as a mutual activity in which both themselves and the dog engage on a regular basis. This activity is also perceived as important in the caring relationship to show love and affection.

#### 4.4.5 General

As mentioned before, the understanding behind the term love can differ from one family to the next and even from one person to the next. Furthermore, we can also only guess how animals perceive and give love to others. It is thus very difficult to know when a person loves another person or animal without them informing you that they do. When animals are part of the family it is usually the people in the family who decide whether that animal loves them or not, based on certain actions by the animal.

In a family that consists of a childless married couple and their dog, the view of what love entails comes from the couple. Through their perception of love, they then establish whether their dog loves them and they love their dog. Responses like “I love him”, “We give her all the love in the world”, “Our animals know that we love them”, “ We love them dearly”, “We give them lots of love and attention” and “ I love my dog” are direct statements that indicate love. The couple perceives that, the relationship they have with their dog includes the fact that they actually experience a feeling of love towards their dog.

Furthermore, responses like “She loves us”, “They give us love, lots of it” and “He shows us love and affection” also suggest that the couples believed their dogs to not only experience the feeling of love for their owners, but were also able to express that feeling. In summary, through the participants’ statements it is apparent that they viewed their relationship with their dog as one which consisted of mutual love.

## **4.5 Attachment**

As discussed previously (Chapter 2), attachment is socially construed as being closely related to love. Society views people who love each other to also experience a certain amount of attachment towards each other. Society also believes that attachment is formed between a parent and a child as an expansion of bonding which starts at birth (Sternberg, 1995).

Bonding between animals, especially dogs, also occurs in the wild and it can thus be assumed that attachment can also evolve from this bonding (Stuart & Stuart, 1995). In a family that consists of a childless married couple and their dog bonding and ultimately attachment may also form between the couple and their dog. This attachment helps to ensure the emotional and physical well being of the family unit.

Studies (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988; Steward, 2000) indicate that people can become very attached to their dogs. It is thus apparent that a certain form of attachment may indeed develop between a couple and their dog. The participants in this study similarly indicated through their responses that they were not only attached to their dog, but also that they perceived their dogs to be attached to them. From their responses four themes in connection with attachment were derived.

### **4.5.1 Holiday arrangements**

When people are attached to each other separation over a long period of time may be an unpleasant experience (Bowlby, 1997). In a nuclear family parents rarely have to leave their young children for an extended period of time. In a family that consists of a childless married couple and their dog this may not be the case. It may be necessary for the couple to leave their dog behind when they go on holiday as not all holiday resorts take pets and not all pets travel well.

In some families the couple may refuse to leave their dog behind and will only go to places where they can take him/her. The 1995 National Pet Owner Survey indicated that 53% of pet owners go on vacation or travel with their pets ([www.healthypet.com/Library/animal\\_bond-4.html](http://www.healthypet.com/Library/animal_bond-4.html)). This shows that the people became very attached to their dogs and would not leave them behind when they go on holiday.

If a couple leaves their dog behind, this does not necessarily mean that they are not attached to the dog. When a couple has no choice but to leave their dog behind, they may go to great

extremes to ensure that their dog is well looked after while they are away. They may, for example, choose the best dog kennel or phone the kennel regularly to make sure their pet is fine.

Responses like “We leave him at Menlyn kennels, he is safe there and the owner’s wife is a vet” “If we cannot take her with my mom sleeps over at our house so that Tessa can sleep in her basket” and “We leave him at a professional dog kennel” indicate that the owners want their dogs to be safe and well looked after in the kennels that they choose for them.

On the other hand, responses like “We always take her with us, if we cannot take her then we do not go”, “If our dogs cannot go we do not go”, “We have only left her alone once since our other dog died three years ago”, “We never leave her alone overnight” and “She goes wherever we go” indicate that some of the participants have grown attached to their dog to such an extent that they refuse to leave their dog behind when they go away.

It is thus apparent that the couple’s attachment to their dog affects their holiday arrangements. The couple can either choose to put the dog in a dog kennel where they perceive the dog to be well looked after or decide to only go to places where they can take their dog.

#### 4.5.2 Missing each other when separated

When a child leaves the home or a member of the family has to stay in hospital for an extended period of time the other family members tend to miss them. It could be accepted that if a person is attached to another person or animal he/she will miss that person or animal when they are separated from them.

When a person misses someone or something it can be assumed that that person is attached to the person or thing that he/she is missing. If a family member to whom the other members are attached has to stay in hospital or away from home for an extended time, the family members will visit him/her because they miss him/her.

In a family that consists of a childless married couple and their dog, the couple may also miss their dog when they are separated from him/her. Furthermore, they may also perceive their dogs to miss them when they are separated. Responses like “I visit my dog when he has to stay at the vet’s but it is not a good thing as it upsets him”, “We will visit as often as we are allowed, if I have to sit with one of them the entire day and night I will do so”, “We will visit her daily to prevent her from missing us too much” and “She had to stay at the vets for a while as she hurt her leg. I was not allowed to visit her every day as she got upset, but I phoned the vet every day to find out how



she is doing. I missed her terribly” and “We miss him if we are separated” reveal that the participants in this study did miss their dogs when separated from them. Furthermore, they also perceived their dogs to miss them as they indicated that the dogs got upset when they visited them but then left them behind again.

Responses like “I do not like to leave her behind because she misses us too much” and “She misses us and we miss her” also suggest that the participants perceived their dogs to miss them when they were away from them. This indicates that the couple and their dog formed a unit with members that are attached to each other.

In summary, it is apparent that the childless married couples regarded their relationship with their dog as one of mutual attachment. As a result of this attachment, the couples missed their dogs when they were separated and believed their dogs also missed them. Furthermore, some couples also visited their dogs when they had to stay at the vets’ or away from home for an extended time.

#### 4.5.3 Separation anxiety experienced by the dog and owners

A family provides security to its members (Brown *et al.*, 1986). The members of a family thus feel safe and secure when surrounded by the other members of the family. This safe, secure environment is necessary for the healthy development of young children. It can be extremely difficult for a young child to have to leave this safe and secure environment. According to Bullock (2002), separation from family is one of the external stimuli that can result in stress. A young child may, for example, experience trauma and anxiety when he/she has to leave his/her parents and go to kindergarten. This trauma could be the result of the strangeness of the situation and they may express these feelings by crying, grabbing on to their parents or refusing to go.

Similarly dogs may also experience separation anxiety (<http://www.paws.org>). This can be seen through their actions: Firstly, when they perceive their owners to be preparing to go away and secondly, after they are left on their own. Dogs tend to learn their owners’ routine and quickly “catch on” when they are preparing to go away. They can then express their dissatisfaction by misbehaving.

According to Harkness (2000), separation anxiety can be a big problem with dogs as they bond closely with humans. Separation anxiety usually follows a situation where a dog’s close human companions leave him/her alone for a period of time. After they have been left behind, their

separation anxiety can be seen by their actions. The dogs can, for example, stop eating, howl or express their dissatisfaction through various destructive behaviours (<http://www.paws.org>).

Similarly, the owners of the dog can also experience anxiety when separated from their dog. According to Steward (2000), people can become as attached to their dog as to their closest family member. It is, therefore, understandable that they may become distressed when separated from their dog for an extended period of time similar to what would have been the case if they were separated from a close family member such as a child.

Responses like “She doesn’t eat a lot at the kennels and gets very thin because we are not there”, “ When we left her alone she cried for us, the neighbours said it sounded more like crying than howling, we never left her alone again” and “If we leave him alone at home in the evenings he howls” indicate that the participants in this study believed that certain behaviours of their dogs expressed their anxiety at being separated from them. Furthermore, a response like “I feel depressed and sad when we leave her behind” indicates that the participant also experienced the separation as stressful.

The participants also viewed their dogs to be emotionally affected by being separated from them. For example, responses like “She knows when we are preparing to go away and it distresses her” and “He does not like being left behind when we go away” indicate that the participants perceived their dogs to experience some form of discomfort at being left behind or at the thought of being left behind.

It is thus apparent that childless married couples, and their dogs, can experience separation anxiety when they are separated from each other for an extended period of time. This separation anxiety is a direct result of the attachment that was formed between the couples and their dogs.

#### 4.5.4 Grief experienced at the thought of loss/at the loss of the dog

As discussed in Chapter 2, grief can be defined as “the emotional response to loss which includes a number of psychological or somatic reactions” (Stroebe & Stroebe, 1987:7). Grief is seen as a normal reaction to the loss of a loved one. It is also accepted as normal for a person to fear the loss of another person that he/she is attached to.

In a family that consists of a married couple and their children, it is normally accepted that the parents will die of old age before their children die. In a family that consists of a childless married

couple and their dog, however, the dog does not necessarily outlive its owners. It is actually rare for the dog to outlive its owner.

According to the dog breed information website (<http://www.dogbreedinfo.com>), a dog's life span is much shorter than that of a human. Small dogs can live for up to 20 years, but most dogs rarely grow older than 12-15 years, while humans can live to the ripe old age of 80-90 years. This implies that the chances of the married couple outliving their dog is much better than a married couple outliving their children.

It is thus true that although some parents may experience the loss of a child, the childless married couple will most probably experience the loss of their dog. These couples are often aware of this and may experience fear at the thought of losing their dog, as their dog grows older. This is called anticipatory grief (Stroebe & Stroebe, 1987:7). Anticipatory grief is caused by the fear of losing a loved one. Because dog owners experience their dogs growing older, anticipatory grief may develop as the dog is nearing the end of his/her life.

Responses like "He is growing old now, he is grey and he struggles to walk, it scares me because I know he will only live for a few more years", "Their play is not as fast these days as she is getting old now and have to sit and rest regularly", " She is old now and probably does not have a lot more years left", "I know that the day will come that we have to put them down but for now I do not even want to think about it" and "It saddens me to think that she will die some day" indicate that the participants were not only aware that their dogs might die of old age but also that they were experiencing anticipatory grief at the thought of losing their dog.

Furthermore, responses like "Me and my wife were very sad when we lost our first dog, I do not even want to think how we will feel if Ounooi dies" and "We already had to have two dogs put down on recommendation from our veterinarian - it was horrible" indicate that the participants did experience grief and anxiety at the loss of their dog.

It is thus apparent that because of the attachment between a childless married couple and their dog, the thought of losing the dog as well as the actual loss of the dog caused grief for the couple. The couple lived with the knowledge that they would most probably outlive their dog and this caused anticipatory grief. Parents may fear losing their children but childless married couples know that some day they will lose their dog.

#### **4.6 Conclusion of chapter**

In this chapter, the four broad themes, love, attachment, need fulfilment and ritualisation that were previously identified as part of the caring relationship between a childless married couple and their dog were looked at in terms of how it manifested in the respondents' lives. Through this exploration it became apparent that these themes do play a significant role, but also that these themes can be divided into sub themes.

If it is assumed that the verbalisations of the participants are expressions of how they construct their realities, and that the content of the verbalisations reflects what is important for them, it follows that the sub themes within the broad themes were just as important to them as the broad themes themselves. In a sense the sub themes helped to construct the broader themes and ultimately what the respondents believed a caring relationship with their dog should entail.

The various concepts within this chapter were looked at anthropocentrically which implies that the concepts were discussed as to how humans would experience various phenomena in the world around them. The quotes that were used from the respondents thus indicate what they believed the caring relationship means to both themselves and their dogs.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion and recommendations**

### **5.1 Introduction to chapter**

This chapter provides a conclusion to the study within the theoretical context of social constructionism. A discussion on how reflexivity played a role also forms part of this chapter. The chapter is concluded with recommendations for possible further studies to gain more insight into the caring relationship between childless married couples and their dogs.

### **5.2 Conclusion**

#### **5.2.1 Components of caring**

From the discussions of the predetermined themes, as well as the themes derived from the research data in the analysis of the results, certain conclusions can now be drawn about the relationship that may develop between a dog and a married couple who does not have children living in the house with them. These will now be discussed.

The childless married couple exists within a society where certain views and beliefs prevail on what is expected of people and what a family should entail. Because they cannot comply with all of society's expectations, the couple may develop their own beliefs and ideas and also convey these beliefs and ideas to others. By doing this, they help to construct new social beliefs and views on families and the relationship between people and their dogs.

Through the respondents' responses to the questions, it became clear that they viewed their dog as part of their family. It is thus possible for a married couple to form a family unit, which includes a dog, but excludes children. By doing this they form a new view for what a family entails to them. This family can be seen as a type of quasi-family. By forming this family the couple constructs their own idea of what a nuclear family entails, one that is meaningful to them.

Within this quasi-family, the dog can be assigned a position normally found in a nuclear family. The dog may be viewed as the "child" in the house even though a dog is quite different from human children. By allocating these positions to the "family members" the quasi-family becomes similar to the social views of what a family entails. By forming this family unit the childless married

couple constructs a family environment wherein need fulfilment can take place in a manner similar to what occurs in a nuclear family.

#### **5.2.1.1 Need fulfilment**

A quasi-family that includes a dog can provide an ideal environment for the fulfilment of several of the family members' needs. It can successfully fulfil the need for a unit of mutual love and attachment. The study also showed that dogs could provide the companionship to their human family members as other people could. The respondents in this study clearly viewed their dogs as loyal companions who by their mere presence relieved tension and stress, and promoted a warm family atmosphere in their home.

The quasi-family unit, which includes the dog as part of the family, also allows the childless married couple to experience a relationship that entails the care of a dependent creature. A dog unlike children, may never become physically independent of his/her human family members. Dogs are thus believed to provide the ideal family member in terms of whom the couple can fulfil their need to care for a dependent creature.

It became clear from the couples' responses that they were not only aware that their dogs needed them, but also that they found it fulfilling to look after their dogs. In return for their affection and care the dogs also perceived to be able to show gratitude. The respondents clearly stated that their dogs were not only capable of showing gratitude, but they also appreciated and valued this gratitude.

It is thus apparent that the quasi-family unit that is formed by the childless married couple and their dog provides an environment wherein crucial need fulfilment can take place. A family unit is thus formed that to some extent adheres to the socially constructed view of what a family should entail, and should be able to provide, but that is also adapted for the different circumstances of the family that consists of a childless married couple and their dog.

#### **5.2.1.2 Ritualisation**

The study also revealed that within this family unit certain rituals are in place that the family members follow. These rituals ensure that the family members can live together in harmony and also promote the happiness and health of the family members whilst at the same time providing the members with security and stability.

The adults in a family unit are usually responsible to ensure that the dependants learn the correct ways of conduct for various situations. Through disciplining their dogs, the couple ensured that they learned the correct rituals that were performed within their family unit, as well as how to behave in different situations. The participants in this study viewed discipline as an important part of looking after their dog. They also acknowledged that there comes a time when the dog is sufficiently disciplined and that after that it will no longer be necessary to apply disciplinary actions.

It is expected from the family unit to ensure that its members are fed, rested and clean. The participants' statements showed that their dogs were able to learn essential feeding, sleeping and grooming rituals. The dogs followed these rituals as to where, when and what they were to eat, where and when they were to sleep, and when, where and how they were to be groomed.

The family members in these quasi-family units also engaged in rituals that were enjoyable or seen as a reward. These types of rituals included leisure activities like fixed playtimes or the giving of treats, actions that are socially viewed as necessary to ensure the happiness of the family members.

The quasi-family may also develop rituals that are unique to their specific family unit such as greeting rituals. The participants indicated that they have greeting rituals with their dogs. These rituals reflected the closeness of the family members to each other.

It is thus clear that the childless married couples viewed their quasi-family unit as being structured by means of various rituals. These rituals are seen as essential to ensure the well being and happiness of the family members, and also provide the atmosphere for love and attachment to form and grow between the family members.

### **5.2.1.3 Love**

Love is socially regarded as an essential part of the relationship between family members. The participants in this study also interpreted the relationship between them and their dogs as being one of mutual love. They viewed their dogs as loving companions. The affection the couples felt towards their dogs was expressed in various ways. Nicknames were given to the dogs and used when the couples talked or called them in an affectionate way. These nicknames were viewed as a way to show their affection and appreciation for their dogs. By giving their dogs nicknames they also verbalised the affection they felt towards their dogs, thus socially constructing the relationship they had with their dogs as one of mutual love.

Furthermore, they also only used the nicknames when talking or referring to the dog in an affectionate way and would revert to their real name when they were angry or annoyed with the dog. By doing this, they believed that the nickname was learned and remembered by the dog as being used as a show of affection.

The participants in this study also indicated that they boasted about their dogs to other people on occasions, which indicate that they were proud of their dog and his/her abilities. Boasting also expressed the feelings and relationship that existed between them and their dog. Through boasting, the couple conveyed their feelings to other people, which formed part of the process of developing new social beliefs and ideas.

Pride is seen as a part of a relationship that entails love. By boasting about their dogs the couples were actually also showing and announcing their pride and love for their dog. Through this social announcement the couple encouraged the formation of new social views on the relationship between people and their dogs.

A further important part of a love relationship is trust. The participants in this study indicated that they trusted their dogs in various ways. They trusted their dogs to be loyal, obedient and also able to protect them and their belongings. Trust is seen as a way of showing one's love for another person or living creature.

Physical contact is one of the most visible ways of showing love to another person or living creature. By touching, hugging, kissing or simply patting the dog, people are able to convey their love to their dog. The participants in this study indicated that a physical display of love is an important and major part of their relationship with their dog.

The participants also perceived their dogs to be able to show their love to them through physical contact. They believed that when the dog licks them, sits on their lap, or simply touches them with his/her snout or body it conveys their feelings of love for their owners. It is thus apparent that the couples viewed various forms of physical contact with their dogs as signs of the mutual love that existed between them and their dog.

What love entails is, however, perceived differently by different people. The best way to determine whether a love relationship exists between the married couple and their dog within their family unit is to determine whether they call it a love relationship. The participants in this study clearly stated that they love their dog and also that they perceived their dog to love them.

It is thus apparent that within the quasi-family that is structured through rituals, the members of the family formed a relationship that they perceived as one of mutual love.



#### **5.2.1.4 Attachment**

It is essential that attachment should form between a parent and a child. This attachment is viewed as helping to ensure the emotional and physical well being of all the members of the family unit. It seems that within the quasi-family unit attachment also develops between the married couple and their dog.

This attachment can be seen in the participants' descriptions of planning holidays. From the participants' responses it becomes clear that their dogs were seen as family members and were thus either taken with on vacation, or left at a place where they would be cared for and well looked after for the duration of the time that their owners would be away.

The couples' refusal to leave their dogs behind indicates the strong attachment that was formed between them and their dog. Even if the couple left their dog behind they went to extremes to ensure their dog was well looked after in their absence. This also indicates the strong attachment that developed between the couple and their dog.

The degree of attachment between the family members which includes their dog can also be seen in the fact that they missed their dogs when separated from them and that they also perceived their dogs to miss them. In the event that the couple had to leave their dog behind for various reasons they stated that they missed their dogs and would even visit them if they had to stay at the vet's overnight. Furthermore, the couples also perceived their dogs to miss them when they were separated from each other.

When people are attached to each other they may experience separation anxiety when they have to leave each other's company. This also occurred when the participants in this study were separated from their dogs. The participants stated that their dogs showed signs of distress when being left alone or if they thought they were going to be left behind. Furthermore, the dogs also displayed elaborate greeting rituals when reunited with their owners after they had been separated from them. This illustrated the attachment between the participants and their dogs and the gratitude for being reunited with a loved one.

The ultimate form of separation is death. From the responses of the participants, it is clear that they did not only grieve at the loss of the dog but also experienced anxiety at the thought of losing their dog. This further shows the extent of the attachment that was formed between the couples and their dogs. Society views the death of a loved one as a sad and stressful loss that has to be endured and accepted over time. The childless married couples viewed their dog as a loved one

and thus also viewed the death of their dog as sad and stressful, but acknowledged that it had to be accepted. The thought of the death of a loved one can, however, become more stressful to them as dogs do not live long and several of their dogs can die during their owners' lifetime. This may cause excessive fear of loss and loneliness.

#### **5.2.1.5 Discussion of the components of caring**

Within a quasi-family that consists of a childless married couple and their dog, the members can find need fulfilment, establish and learn certain rituals, love each other and become attached to each other. These four elements are all seen as essential parts of the caring relationship that existed between the couples that had dogs and took part in this study. Since all four elements were observed in this study, it can be deduced that a caring relationship existed between the members of the quasi-family. It thus becomes clear that dogs are able to provide a caring relationship for people who do not have children and that this caring relationship can have various benefits for the parties involved.

Possible benefits include the enhancement of the quality of life for the married couple and greater life satisfaction. People can thus successfully construct a new view of what a family entails by including their dog as part of their family. Furthermore, they can convey this newly formed views through language to other people. This social distribution of their views can result in newly constructed beliefs of this reality in society. The new constructs are formed personally and grow within the family; the family members then discuss their new social views with the people around them. These discussions form the building blocks for new social constructions to be formed within the community.

#### **5.2.2 The role of reflexivity in this study**

Having grown up within a household with a father as a veterinarian I had a lot of contact with people who had intimate relationships with their dogs. This gave me more insight into, and experience with people and their relationships with their dogs. It also opened my eyes to people who saw their pets as part of their family. These people taught me to respect the intimate relationships they have with their pets. These experiences could have influenced how I viewed the people's responses to my questions in this study.

Furthermore, we have always had dogs as well as various other animals as pets in my home. This meant that I knew what it entails to have to look after a dog as a pet as well as to become

extremely fond of animals. This experience could also have caused me to interpret the responses of the participants as I would have meant them if I were talking about my dog.

I have not experienced the emotions associated with being married and having children of my own. The data was thus interpreted on my understanding of a family from the background of being a child in a family. This might have caused that I failed to grasp the deeper emotional attachment that the participants might have or might not have formed with their dogs.

It is thus essential to emphasise that the data was analysed as to how I understood the responses. It was based on my personal views and beliefs about the caring relationship which were also influenced by the relevant literature I consulted. To broaden our understanding of this caring relationship, further research is needed. Further research possibilities will now be discussed in the form of recommendations.

### **5.3 Recommendations**

This study was done qualitatively by using self-completion open-ended questionnaires. The use of questionnaires can have various drawbacks as was discussed in Chapter 3. To eliminate these drawbacks it might be necessary to include personal interviews along with the self-completion questionnaire in future research on this topic. Personal interviews might provide the opportunity to delve into the finer details of the caring relationship between a childless married and their dog. This can then result in the identification of further themes and sub themes.

This qualitative study was limited to a single group of people who were white childless heterosexual married couples. It might be insightful to include other groups in further studies on this topic. These groups can include childless single sex couples, childless married couples from other racial groups and racially mixed married couples without children. By including these groups comparisons can be made on the similarities and differences of the caring relationship in the different groups. By studying these groups researchers can also explore whether this caring relationship with a dog develops similarly among other types of married couples who do not have children.

Furthermore, the study did not look at people from various age groups. By looking at childless married couples from various age groups better insight can be gained into how the caring relationship changes and evolves from one age group to another.

In this study only dogs were included to study the caring relationship. There are, however, various other animal types that can be kept as pets and that might provide similar caring relationships to their owners. It may prove to be worthwhile to do a study to verify whether other animal types can provide the childless married couple with a rewarding caring relationship, similar to the one dogs are able to provide.

As this study was done qualitatively it was prone to the disadvantages connected to doing qualitative research. The data gathered for this study are not generalisable to other people, places and times than the sample that was used. This study did not aim to provide generalisable data but only to investigate the nature of a caring relationship between childless married couples and their dogs. Therefore, it might be necessary to do some quantitative research on this topic along with qualitative research. The quantitative research should then cover a wide variety of people, places, and races. This might provide data that are more generalisable and will supplement the in-depth data gathered through qualitative research.

The caring relationship between childless married couples and their dog is a topic that has not been fully researched. The caring relationship between childless married couples and their dogs was not compared with that of married couples with children. This casts some doubt on whether the findings of this study only apply to childless married couples. There is thus still a lot to learn and discover about a caring relationship between dogs and their owners. This study was merely an introduction to the phenomenon of the existence of a caring relationship between people and their dog; further research is needed to gain deeper understanding of this phenomenon.

#### **5.4 Conclusion to chapter**

In this chapter it became apparent that the four broad themes that were identified as essential elements of a caring relationship between childless married couples and their dogs did exist within the families of the participants in this study. The existence of these broad themes indicates that a fulfilling caring relationship can develop between a childless married couple and their dog.

This caring relationship has meaningful implications for all of the family members. It can provide the members with a sense of well-being and meaningfulness which can then enhance their life satisfaction. The caring relationship thus has a salutary effect on their lives.

The study was, however, influenced by my own prior experiences and beliefs of caring relationships, people and the relationships that may exist between people and animals. Further exploration is needed to determine whether my findings would apply to other races, age groups

and family types. Recommended further research may include personal interviews, cross cultural research and quantitative research.

The caring relationship that we experience within our families is important for us to experience a meaningful life. This caring relationship can be established with other humans, children and with a dog who is seen as a family member.

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## Appendix 1

### Questionnaire

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Surname: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: Male/female

Tel number: \_\_\_\_\_

Are you married? Yes/No

How old are you? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have any children living with you? Yes/No

<b>If so: How are the child/children related to you? [ grandchildren, niece, nephew etc.]</b>

Do you have a dog/dogs? Yes/No

If so how many dogs do you have? \_\_\_\_\_

Name and age of dog/dogs:

How long have you had the dog/s?

Do you have any other animals?  
[Specify]



**3. How did you choose a name for the dog?**


**4. What needs do you think you fulfil for your dog?**


**5. What does the dog give back in return for the needs you fulfill?**






















## Appendix 2

### Consent form

For my Masters dissertation in Research Psychology, I am conducting a research project on the caring relationship between pet owners and their pet dogs. The aim of this project is to determine whether dogs can provide an adequate caring relationship to married couples that do not have children and if so, what the nature of this relationship is.

The research will be conducted in the form of an open-ended questionnaire, which will include various questions about the relationship between the owner and his/her dog. The questionnaire can be completed at your convenience and at your own home. The completed questionnaire must please be returned to the receptionist at your veterinary clinic.

Participation in this research project is voluntary and you may refuse participation or discontinue participation at any time during this project. You will not be asked to waive your legal rights in any way.

The completed questionnaire is for the researcher's personal use only and confidentiality will be respected throughout the project to the best of my ability.

For further information about the research project as well as your rights, please feel free to contact me, Esti van Heerden, at telephone number:

Cell: 072 643 5815

Tel: (012) 344 1500

Please inform me of your willingness to participate as soon as possible.

I.....agree to participate in the research project.

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Signature

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Date