

The experience of pet ownership as a meaningful occupation

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KEY WORDS

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Human activities and occupations
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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examined the experience of pet ownership in the everyday lives of seven men with human immuno-deficiency virus or acquired immune deficiency syndrome. Interviews and field observations were analyzed using a grounded theory approach. The findings demonstrate that the experience of pet ownership is both typical of any pet owner and yet profoundly impacted by the illness of the owners. The results of this preliminary study indicate pet ownership can be a highly valued occupation for some, and thus has implications for occupational therapy intervention.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude qualitative portait sur l'expérience quotidienne vécue par sept hommes atteints du virus de l'immuno-déficience humaine ou du syndrome d'immuno-déficience acquise et étant propriétaires d'un animal domestique. Des entrevues et des observations sur le terrain ont été analysées à partir d'une approche théorique à base empirique. Les résultats indiquent que pour cette clientèle, l'expérience de posséder un animal domestique est à la fois semblable à celle d'un propriétaire typique mais qu'elle est également profondément marquée par la maladie du propriétaire. Les résultats de cette étude préliminaire indiquent que la possession d'un animal domestique peut être une occupation très valorisée pour certains, ce qui entraîne des conséquences pour l'intervention ergothérapique.

...How exactly do Figaro and Jett enhance my life? Partly by just expecting me to always be here. They know nothing of AIDS or opportunistic infections. They don't understand the source of the fear, rage and upset that frequently threaten to consume me. They demand no explanations. They simply love me, and expect me to be here. And so, I am (Sugar, 1996).

Final lines from a short essay by Michael Sugar about his cats.

This study examined the meaning of pet ownership for seven men diagnosed with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). For many, both with and without disabilities, the routines, care, and affection shared with a pet are an important component of everyday life. Using a comprehensive occupational therapy approach, pet ownership can be conceptualized as an occupation as it "... refers to groups of activities and tasks of everyday life, named organized and given value and meaning by individuals and a culture" (Canadian Association of Occupational Therapists [CAOT], 1997, p. 34).

A central tenet of occupational therapy proposes that the restoration and maintenance of health and well being can occur through engagement in a occupations that are meaningful (Yerxa, 1993). The individual is viewed as an occupational being, capable of creating patterns of culturally relevant occupations that provide structure, promote skills, and assert one's self-identity (Christiansen & Baum, 1997). An occupation-based therapy approach would seek to: 1) understand the impact of illness on the lifestyle and occupational patterns of an individual, and 2) discern the meaning and value of the impacted occupation for the individual. Despite a growing interest in the use of occupation-based therapy, there are few studies that explore the meaning and impact of various occupations on the daily lives of those with disabilities (American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA), 1995). This preliminary qualitative study sought to add to the body of knowledge by exploring pet ownership as an occupation for individuals with HIV and AIDS.

Literature review - people with HIV/AIDS

It is estimated that by the end of 1998, over 33.4 million people worldwide were living with HIV or AIDS (United Nation AIDS & World Health Organization, 1999). The progression of the disease has slowed, in part, due to combination drug therapy introduced in 1996. For the first time since 1992, AIDS is no longer the leading cause of death in people ages 25-44. As a result, HIV or AIDS is now considered a chronic illness. Decreases in functional abilities and fluctuations in physical capacity are expected in this disease process (Reed, 1991). Psychosocial concerns may include grief and depression associated with the loss of ability that accompanies a chron-

ic illness. In addition, individuals with HIV or AIDS must come to terms with the anxiety that may accompany the uncertainty surrounding their death (Siebold, 1992; Gammage, McMahon & Shanahan, 1976).

People who are homosexual, intravenous drug users, blood transfusion recipients, and children born to HIV infected women are all associated with the HIV virus (Crandall & Coleman, 1992; Cadwell, 1991; Leary & Schreindorfer, 1998). Some of these individuals must cope with the social stigma particular to this diagnosis. "...People are stigmatized to the extent that they possess characteristics that lead others to avoid, shun, reject, or ostracize them" (Leary & Schreindorfer, 1998, p. 15). Leary and Schreindorfer introduce four criteria to establish the level of acceptance or rejection of an individual. The criteria are based on the extent that an individual (a) threatens others' health and safety, (b) transgresses from societal norms and values, (c) does not contribute to society; or (d) evokes negative responses such as depression, fear, and discomfort. They propose that people who are homosexuals or who use intravenous drugs meet all four of the above criteria (Leary & Schreindorfer, 1998). Furthermore, although those who are blood transfusion recipients and children born to HIV infected women often are seen as victims, they are still considered a threat to other's health, a burden on society, and an emotional weight. The resulting stigmatization can lead to anxiety, depression, and social isolation of individuals with HIV and AIDS (Crandall & Coleman, 1992).

Research examining pet ownership

There is a dearth of research on pet ownership with those diagnosed with HIV or AIDS. However, research that examines the relationship between pet ownership and health has primarily focused on populations with chronic illnesses such as persistent psychiatric problems, terminal cancer, and coronary heart disease. In addition, studies have been conducted with elderly pet owners who were experiencing changing lifestyles, health problems or decreased independence in daily activities (Netting, Wilson & New, 1987). Individuals with HIV or AIDS may experience changes similar to these populations such as depression, anxiety, decreased endurance, and other physical and psychosocial issues (Reed, 1991).

Dembicki and Anderson (1996) investigated the hypothesis that pet care by an older person leads to enhanced self-care. One hundred and twenty seven seniors aged 60 and older were observed, interviewed, and given questionnaires over a four-month period. The results indicated some aspects of pet care, such as routinized feeding and exercising, served to schedule activities for the elderly person. These pet care activities provided participants with consistency in daily routines and health promoting participation in activity. In other studies, presence of pets was associated with increased conversation and social interaction among nursing homes resi-

dents (Netting et al., 1987; Boldt & Dellmann-Jenkins, 1992; Hoffman, 1992) and companionship for the elderly patient. (Sable, 1995).

Friedmann, Katcher, Lynch, and Thomas (1980) examined the impact of pet ownership on the health of 29 women and 67 men diagnosed with either myocardial infarction or angina pectoris. Some were pet owners while others were not. The participants were interviewed regarding pet ownership, socio-economic status, social networks, geographic mobility, and living situation. Hospital chart reviews were used to obtain physiological data. The 92 surviving patients were contacted one year after the initial interview and survival rates of pet owners and non-pet owners were compared. A strong positive correlation between pet ownership and survival rate of the study participants was reported. In keeping with Dembicki and Anderson's (1996) study, pets appeared to contribute to the structure of daily routines, as well as increased physical and social activity levels. Friedmann et al. (1980) commented:

...pets do provide an important focus of pleasurable daily activity for their owners. Feeding, toileting, walking, talking to, and petting animals are important and regular daily events. Pets may serve as "clocks" by providing a source of order and responsibility for people who are no longer working or have no responsibility for scheduled activity (p. 310).

Thompson, Kennedy, and Igou (1983) examined the impact of pets on people with persistent mental illness. Twenty psychiatric patients were included in three one-hour long pet therapy sessions for six consecutive weeks. These sessions included hands-on pet care and group discussions regarding the pets. The authors reported that these interactions with the animals helped the individuals to develop 'healthier interpersonal relations'. Unfortunately, they did not provide specific measures for these relationships. Similarly, another study that explored the impact of pet ownership on depression and anxiety revealed that working women diagnosed with depression who had a deep attachment to their pets had fewer depressive symptoms (Watson & Weinstein, 1993). This research, however, also revealed that pets could increase stress if the owners depended on their pets for the majority of their emotional support.

Muschel (1984) studied the effects of pet contact with 20 patients with terminal cancer living in a nursing facility. She investigated the reduction of anxiety and despair and the development of well being through animal contact. The study was conducted over a 10 week period and incorporated weekly one and one half hour sessions. Data were naturalistic observation, questionnaire responses, and scores on a Thematic Apperception Test, which included pictures of people-animal contact. Interaction with cats and dogs was incorporated into the intervention. Participants sang, held, watched, and played with the animals. Findings suggested

that active engagement with the animals reduced the participants' anxiety and served as a social outlet. Interestingly, a shift in the role of the participant was noted from that of a patient to one of caregiver.

These studies contribute to our understanding of the ways in which pets can promote healthy activity patterns, well being, and social engagement. However, all used primarily quantitative methods of analysis, aggregating data across subjects. This methodology does not allow for understanding the nature of individual responses to pet ownership. In addition, no research was available that discussed the meaning of the experience of pet ownership to the participants. The researchers' interest in this line of inquiry was due to the importance of pet ownership in their own lives and interest in the meaning pet ownership may hold for people with disabilities. Some of the researchers were also involved with Pets are Wonderful Support/Los Angeles (PAWS/LA), an organization that assists individuals with AIDS and HIV in the care of their pet. Through this experience it had become apparent that the care of a pet could be a meaningful occupation for individuals with this diagnosis. This small-scale study sought to contribute to the field of knowledge by employing qualitative methodology that permits examination of the experience of pet ownership as it is individually expressed.

Method Participants

The inclusion criteria for participation in this study were people who 1) have a diagnosis of HIV or AIDS and 2) independently care for a pet. Two initial participants were recruited from a volunteer organization that assists individuals with HIV or AIDS in the care of their pets. Five other participants were gathered from the initial contacts using chain sampling methodology where participants recommended others for inclusion in the study (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Seven adult males, all diagnosed with HIV or AIDS participated in this research. All independently cared for their pets at the time of the study. Their ages ranged from 30 to 50 years. These participants represented a variety of socio-economic, racial, and cultural backgrounds, including four Caucasian men, two Afro-American men, and one Hispanic man. The types of pets they owned included a horse, a bird, frogs, turtles, cats, and dogs.

Data Collection

The research team consisted of seven graduate students and a faculty advisor. Initially, a literature review was conducted to develop an interview and observation guide designed to gather information about the experience of pet ownership, particularly for the HIV and AIDS population. The literature search revealed three key issues that were used to define the

Table 1
Open-ended Interview Guide

Routines:

1. On a typical day, what interactions do you have with your pet?
2. How much of your daily routine is involved in caring for your pet?
3. Have you made any plans if you are unable to care for your pets?
4. If you're away from home for an extended period of time what provisions are made for your pet?

Affective Domain:

5. Can you tell me any stories that would give me insight into the meaning your pet has for you?
6. What feelings do you associate with your pet?
7. Has the meaning of pet ownership changed from when you were younger?

Physical/Health Domain:

8. How has pet ownership contributed to your health/well-being?
9. How does having a pet affect your level of activity?
10. Has your health ever affected your interactions with your pet?

study interviews and observations; routines, physical demands, and affective factors related to pet ownership. The format for the interviews and observations used a general interview guide approach. Patton (1990) notes that this technique "... involves outlining a set of issues that are to be explored with each respondent before the interviewing begins. The issue in the outline need not be taken in any particular order and the actual wording of the questions to elicit responses about those issues are not determined in advance" (p. 280). In this study, the exact wording of the interview questions or types of observations varied dependent upon the interviewee. Open-ended probes were used to clarify and expand upon responses. An open-ended probe elicits additional information from a previous question. It does not restrict a participant's reply to a predetermined answer (Polit & Hungler, 1995). A sample of the interview probes used for each of the three key issues is illustrated on Table 1.

All participants were contacted by phone by a graduate field researcher. Interview sites, determined by the participants, included rented apartments, private homes, offices, and a riding stable. The interviews lasted an average of one and one half hours and were audiotaped.

Field observations of naturally occurring interactions between the participants and their pets were also conducted at six out of seven sites. The field observations provided additional information regarding how the pet owner's environment was structured to incorporate their pet. Five observations took place in participants' homes and the other in a rid-

ing stable. The seventh interview did not include a field observation because it was conducted at the participant's place of employment at the interviewee's request. Despite the fact that this interview was conducted without the pet, the data were comparable to the other interviews. Field notes were written during and after the observations.

Data Analysis

The interview and field observation transcripts were examined by the research team members. Each researcher independently reviewed the data and established themes which they felt reflected the participants' experience of pet ownership. From these themes, emerging commonalities, called units, were grouped together by the process of group consensus. Lofland and Lofland (1995) define "unit" as, "a set of tendencies one can see in fieldwork reports..." (p. 103). The manually coded data units fell into eight different categories including 1) daily routines, 2) responsibility, 3) communication, 4) social outlet, 5) love, 6) physical health, 7) mental health, and 8) spirituality. Then, two of the team members coded each piece of data independently into these eight units. Inconsistencies in coding between the two team members were discussed among the research team as a whole, in order to assign an appropriate code. In addition, the coded data units, aggregated across all participants, were analyzed for patterns of relationships between the units. Using grounded theory approach where no a-priori assumptions are made (Polit & Hungler, 1995), the coded units were examined for relationships between and within the data. Grounded theory "...involves the generation of theory on the basis of comparative analysis between or among groups within a substantive area, using methods of field research for data collection." (Polit & Hungler, 1995, p. 519). For example, if a participant reported his feelings towards his pet were like those for a family member, field observations that confirmed or disconfirmed this type of attachment were examined. In addition, the data for other participants were reviewed to determine similarities in level of attachment.

The comprehensiveness of the coded units (Gilner, 1994) was cross-checked through an interview with the Director of PAWS/LA. The Director is considered to be an authority on the issues surrounding pet ownership that confront this population. An in-depth interview was conducted using the same interview format incorporated in the data collection of the study participants. However, the Director of PAWS/LA was asked to answer the questions after considering the experiences of those that have participated in the organization. No information about the study findings were discussed so as not to bias the informant's responses. The coded units generated by the data collected from the Director of PAWS/LA were similar to those derived from the study participants and included no points of view not

Table 2
Experience of pet ownership for participants with HIV or AIDS

Response not influenced by illness	Response influenced by illness
Emotional component <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional bonding • Sense of reciprocity of attachment • Pet part of social world 	Emotional component <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship with pet unaffected by illness • Incentive to persevere • Buffer from social stigma, social isolation
Daily Routines and Responsibilities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structures daily routines • Creates demand for activity • Financial component 	Daily Routines and Responsibilities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structure/financial incentive can motivate to persevere • Long term planning more complex • Needs of pet can compromise health

already identified by the study participants. This indicated that the responses of the small sample of participants used in the study appeared to be consistent with the responses of other pet owners with HIV or AIDS, as described by an authority on the topic.

The design of this study primarily used triangulation to ensure rigor in the data collection, analysis, and results. Triangulation is "the use of multiple methods or perspectives to collect and interpret data about some phenomenon, to converge on an accurate representation of reality" (Polit & Hungler, 1995, p. 655). Triangulation of data was accomplished through the use of both interviews and field observations. Triangulation of investigators was established by the use of multiple field investigators for data gathering, coding, and analysis.

Results

The experience of pet ownership appeared to have two primary dimensions. One dimension could be described as an experience of pet ownership not influenced by health status. Thus, this dimension appeared to represent that of any pet owner, regardless of health status. The second perspective of pet ownership appeared directly related and influenced by their health status. Therefore, the findings suggest that the experience of pet ownership for the study participants is both typical of what one might expect from any pet owner and uniquely influenced by the course of the HIV or AIDS illness. The results can be conceptualized as a matrix, depicted in Table 2.

Emotional component of pet ownership

Throughout all interviews and field notes one paramount, consistent theme was the emotional component of pet ownership. The emotional bond described by the participants appeared to be largely unaffected by their disease and illness. This indicates that this component of pet ownership

may be typical of any pet owner. For example, all participants noted an attachment to their pet that they described as love. Field notes depicted the owners kissing, hugging, holding, playing and feeding the pets. One owner draped his cat around his neck like a scarf and explained that this was the cat's favorite position.

All pet owners also referred to their pets as companions. One informant, grieving the loss of a pet, stated, "He was more than just an animal, more than just a pet, he was my friend". Another person attributed human characteristics to his pet:

They are great companions and they give you a lot of love. They don't argue with you. They are very sensible in the fact that they intuitively are able to know whether somebody is feeling good or bad. And, they do their best to comfort in their own ways which is a wonderful thing....Everybody has some form of partner, some relationship. [The pet] could possibly be the best relationship you will ever have in your life.

Six of the seven pet owners likened the emotional bond with their pet as similar to that of family members, remarking, "Oh, they are my babies; they are like my kids" or "I can't live without Zeus. He is my life. He is my child. He is everything to me. I love my bird". For these participants pets appeared to provide unconditional love. An informant explained, "...if you are feeling great, then they [pets] are loving you great. And, if you are feeling bad then they are loving you to make you feel better. It is total unconditional." Most described a reciprocation of unconditional love. One interviewee summarized, "I can't imagine loving another creature as much...and having and feeling it so reciprocal...."

One of the seven participants described his attachment to his dog differently, describing a more moderate emotional bond when he stated, "Oh, I love him but not to the point where I would do anything in the world for him. I've seen some people just go crazy over their pets and I don't feel that way."

While the attachment of all participants appeared to have dimensions that could be typical of any pet owner, the emotional dimension of pet ownership for these participants also seemed directly linked to their medical condition. Many discussed what they believed was a strong relationship between emotional well-being and physical health. For example, one informant reflected, "I think that my cats are as much a part of my longevity and my well-being and my health as any doctor or medicine." Similarly, another interviewee explained, "[If] we don't get love from whoever or whatever... then we become depressed. And we become non-motivated to be healthy." One pet owner characterized his pets as an emotional buffer against his disease and health care process. He noted, "...they keep me from getting sucked into the whirlpool of the health care, and the grief, and all that other stuff."

The unbiased affection attributed to their pets seemed particularly meaningful for this group of interviewees. One participant explained,

...there's something comfortable about knowing that they [pets] don't know about dying. They don't know about AIDS...they're the only ones that don't worry about me, because all they expect is that I'm going to be here...it's refreshing to not have to explain those things because I spend a lot of my time explaining that stuff to people...

In addition, all of these participants had contact with others who were HIV positive or had AIDS, and most had known someone who had died of the disease. The consistency of emotional bond between owner and pet was particularly meaningful for these participants. An interviewee stated,

Just a month ago, I had another friend die...I had been through this before, all the times that I had held people when they died...It was overwhelming and to be able to come home and laugh with these guys [cats]. What would I do without them?

Love for their pets prompted many of these participants to adjust their daily routines to accommodate the care and maintenance of the animal. The emotional bond with the animal provided incentive to persevere in the face of illness. One participant's comments illustrated this point.

At moments that I have been really, really low, these cats have kept me alive....No matter how upset or depressed or screwed up my emotions may have gotten I always knew that I had these two little creatures that needed be fed, that needed to be taken care of, that I had to get out of bed to make sure that they were taken care of.

Although Leary and Schreindorfer (1998) discussed the stigmatization of those with HIV or AIDS, none of the participants in this study mentioned this as an issue in their lives. However, six out of seven interviewees raised the notion of social isolation. A few participants suggested that single people should own a pet to prevent loneliness. One individual explained that before he met his current partner, he spent a

great deal of time alone. Therefore, he depended on his bird to keep him company. Another participant appreciated the pet for "good companionship", commenting, "It's kind of nice to have a pet if you don't have someone. You can talk to them without people thinking you are crazy." The emotional attachment between pet and owner appeared to serve as a buffer from social isolation. However, the data does not distinguish if the feeling of social isolation was related to the participants' illness experience or was a response that any pet owner would have regardless of their health status.

Daily routines and responsibilities

Pet ownership impacted the daily routines for all of these participants in ways that seemed unaffected by their illness, and typical of what many pet owners may experience. All interviewees expressed a sense of responsibility for their pets, which contributed to the structure of everyday life. One interviewee commented, "It's a routine before I go to work. The first thing I do is take care of the animals." Another participant described his cat's daily routine which included watching a video of "Kitty Safari" on television. In addition, pet ownership played a role in the long term planning of events. One interviewee, who lives alone, remarked, "I make it a point never to be gone more than 24 hours. Never, not even 24 hours.... If he's not fed on time that's when he gets restless."

All interviewees incorporated pet maintenance into daily routines. For example, "...caring for them, brushing them, getting them to the vet's, getting them their shots. I mean, making sure that your animals are well taken care of, well fed, groomed, and healthy is a big responsibility. It's an occupation..." The responsibility of pet ownership also contributed to financial decisions that influenced everyday life. For some this included securing accommodations that incorporated pets, such as stables for horses.

The daily maintenance associated with pet ownership served as an impetus for physical exercise for some. Examples of activity included daily walks, grooming, visits to veterinarians, and social events with other pet owners. For most this was a positive experience, as one interviewee's comments illustrated,

I would not be the person I am today were it not for owning animals. I mean I'm active physically. I just turned 47. I probably do more now physically than I've ever done. I don't have to go to a gym.

The responsibility of pet ownership and the corresponding impact of one's daily routine also appeared influenced by the HIV or AIDS illness for all of the participants. For some, the financial dependency of their pets became a reason to care for themselves and ensure that they had a safe environment for their pet to live in. For example, one informant noted,

He keeps me from giving up. I look at him and I realize that I have to pay the bills and I've got to keep a roof over our

heads. He keeps me going because I can't be on the streets with a parrot on my shoulder.

However, other pet owners noted the toll that increased exercise could play on already decreased endurance and strength. The health precautions necessary for those with compromised immune systems made some facets of pet ownership more problematic. One participant discussed concern regarding the exposure to the sun incurred when walking his dog. He noted, "...with HIV it's not good to be out in the sun." Two other participants discussed AIDS related diseases that can be contracted with exposure to animal feces. This concern was echoed by staff at PAWS/LA who advise their clients to clean out their cats' litter boxes daily and to take "appropriate precautions" to avoid contracting toxoplasmosis, which is a disease dangerous to people with compromised immune systems.

Although all pet owners can be faced with the need for long term planning for the care of their pets, consistently the interviewees noted provisions for care in the event of illness. The needs for pet care and support could vary greatly during any given time due to fluctuations in the individual's health status. In some cases long term care planning was made in speculation to one's own death. For example, a 32-year old interviewee reported, "Sadly, I have had to make some decisions about what is going to be done with him in the event of my death. My friend Tony is going to raise him."

Discussion

The qualitative methodology of this study contributed information about the meaning of pet ownership in the everyday lives of individuals with HIV or AIDS, thus expanding upon previous findings that used quantitative measures. The results of this study indicated two dimensions of pet ownership; 1) emotional attachment and 2) the structure of daily routines and responsibilities. In many ways the attachment participants noted for their pets may be similar for many pet owners regardless of disability status. However, for these individuals, the experience of pet ownership also appeared to be impacted by their illness experience. For example, participants stated that the need to care for their pets was motivation to persevere when depressed or ill. In addition, the emotional bond with the pet appeared to comfort the owner when grieving over loss associated with their illness. In some ways, the attachment to the pet could be described as a coping strategy used to combat depression, social isolation, stigma, and grief associated with the HIV or AIDS illness. For some, the very act of caring for the pet appeared to provide an indication of their own health status. While a participant was able to care for his pets, he could view himself as more physically and emotionally capable. Overall, one consistent finding of this study was that pet ownership can be a meaningful occupation. As a valued occupation, pet ownership

contributed to the health and well being of these participants in tangible ways.

Previous quantitative studies (Friedman, et al,1980; Dembicki & Anderson,1996; Muschel,1984) found that the occupation of pet ownership contributed to the structure of daily routines, increased physical and social activity levels, and decreased depressive symptoms in individuals diagnosed with a range of health and psychological diagnoses. This study suggests that past research findings also appear applicable to individuals with HIV and AIDS. For the most part, the everyday activities associated with pet ownership for these participants provided ongoing opportunities for health promoting behaviour, such as increased physical activity. However, this was not always the case. For some, pet ownership also increased the risk factors associated with HIV and AIDS including increased sun exposure and exposure to toxoplasmosis. For these individuals, protective measures were necessary to provide for the ongoing needs of the pet while minimizing the risk to the pet owner.

Because of the small number of participants, this study should be viewed as a catalyst for more extensive research on the meaning of pet ownership and its utilization in occupational therapy practice with the HIV and AIDS populations. With a larger sample size, one could be better assured that data saturation would be obtained to support the findings. Also, all study participants were male, thus it is unknown whether or not gender played a role in the experience of pet ownership with this population. All of these participants were still able to independently care for their pets. While one can hypothesize that these individuals would seek to care for their pets as long as they are capable, this study does not address the experience of pet ownership on individuals with AIDS who are unable to care independently for the animals.

In addition, one most important limitation to this study regards the notion of meaningful occupation. The participants of this study valued the occupation of pet ownership, thus one could propose that these results describe the experience of a meaningful occupation. Yerxa (1998, 1993) proposes that engagement in meaningful occupation can have a corresponding influence on health, as was the case for these men with HIV or AIDS. It is not known whether or not the findings would be similar for those less committed to their animals.

Conclusion

The study results have implications for occupational therapy practice. Using the Canadian Model of Occupational Performance (CAOT, 1997) as an illustrative model, a comprehensive approach to occupational therapy services uses a client-centered approach and seeks to enable occupation for all persons. "Enabling occupations means collaborating with people to choose, organize, and perform occupations which

people find useful or meaningful in a given environment" (CAOT, 1997, p. 30). As occupational therapists address the needs of individuals with chronic illness such as HIV or AIDS, intervention incorporating pet ownership may be a successful avenue for enabling meaningful occupation. For those who value pet ownership as an occupation, intervention that incorporates the client's animals might enable occupation in both physical and affective domains, including motivation and satisfaction. As an example, dog grooming could be used to counteract depression and promote physical activity for those with limited daily activities.

In summary, this research, although preliminary, indicates that a careful examination of the experience of an occupation, such as pet ownership, can assist occupational therapists in understanding the meaning of the occupation in the everyday life of their clients. This in turn, can be an important first step to planning effective intervention.

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