

Chapter 3

A New Understanding of Man's Best Friend: A Proposed Contextual Model for the Exploration of Human–Animal Interaction Among Insecurely Attached Males

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My own (Chris Blazina) interest in the bond between man and dog is longstanding, tracing its origins to my youth. When my family's little house was filled with ten or more people, and felt particularly cramped, I would take a seat on the back steps and talk things over with our gentle German shepherd. I remember him sitting very still, alert, and attentive, almost like he was on point, but with a much calmer demeanor. As I recounted sometimes the frustrating events occurring on the other side of the brick wall, he would occasionally glance in my direction. As I talked and eventually felt some release, I would pet him as a token of thanks. We would then go to play. These exchanges influenced my aspirations for how I thought a good listener and then a psychologist should be. A calming, steady presence can be impactful. I have even unwittingly adopted a similar demeanor in my work counseling, a catch-and-release style of looking and then glancing away. However, I did not realize until recently that these exchanges also held significance for what I thought a man could be. Even with the influences of traditional male socialization's being prevalent across much of my formative years, being in the presence of dogs offered by contrast a different and unique encounter.

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I was surprised to discover there had not been a systematic psychological study of the bond between males and their dogs. While some research does exist, it is often inconclusive in terms of why males of various ages and life experiences find a special tie with animal companions. Besides my personal anecdotes with dogs that extend to the current day, over the years in my clinical practice I have also witnessed male clients discussing their ties with dogs in a special way. The male–dog bond is complex and needs to be understood within its own unique context. Context adds to the explanatory power of both clinical and research understanding, and is utilized throughout this chapter.

The bond with animal companions, just as in the case of human relationships, can be influenced by numerous contextual factors including age, socioeconomic status, race, religion, etc. (Blazina et al. 2011). How these dynamics occur as a main effect or interact with other variables has begun to be explored especially in regard to health and well-being. Human–animal interaction (HAI) has been previously associated with facilitation of recovery after a heart attack (Friedmann et al. 1980), and increasing physical activity (Dembicki and Anderson 1996; Serpell 2010). The presence of animal companions have also been shown to reduce levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and loneliness (Brown 2004, 2007; Garrity et al. 1989; Zarski 1984) as well as ameliorate the effects of potentially stressful life events (Folse et al. 1994), and enhance feelings of autonomy, competence, and self-esteem (Beck and Katcher 1996; Kidd and Kidd 1985; Levinson 1972; Robin and Benseal 1985; Triebenbacher 1998).

There are other variables of interest in need of attention among the HAI literature. This chapter explores the influence of male gender roles socialization. Further, more work needs to be done in understanding the role the bond plays in males' lives, especially those that experience psychological distress as the result of limiting definitions of traditional forms of masculinity. For example, researchers and theorists have identified some of the limiting effects of restricted forms of male gender roles (O'Neil 1981a, b; O'Neil et al. 1986, 1995, 2015) leading to conflict and dysfunction in both areas of work and love. O'Neil created the concept of *gender role conflict* to represent when restrictive socially constructed gender role do harm to the individual and those in their immediate circle, the ultimate result is a restriction of human potential causing psychological harm. Understanding more about the presence of animal companions in gender role conflicted males' lives across the life span is a needed contextual inquiry. The bond therefore deserves scholarly exploration, especially as a potential health-promoting agent. In order to understand more about gender and HAI, a contextual approach can be further expanded to include how the psychology involved in socializing males is interfaced with other key variables such as attachment related issues.

Attachment theory (see Bowlby 1969, 1982; Ainsworth 1978) has provided a heuristic model to not only understand various human dyads such as parent–child and romantic relationships (see Hazan and Shaver 1987) but also has become the leading research paradigm among HAI (Pachana et al. 2005; Sharkin and Bahrack 1990). This includes a focus upon those that claim a special relationship with

animal companions. In several research studies, between 87 and 99 % of pet owners defined their pets as being “like a friend or family member” (Cain 1983; Voith 1985). However, there is no universal agreement regarding male’s relationships with pets. Inquiries examining to what degree males attach to animal companions is a work in progress, and much remains unclear. Some research suggests that taken as a whole, males show lower levels of attachment (Kidd and Kidd 1985), while others find no gender differences (Prato-Previde et al. 2006; Ramirez 2006). Part of the problem with this line of inquiry is it does not always adequately account for male socialization as a contextual variable. Likewise, Herzog (2007) suggested it is the within-group differences among men (and women) that also accounts for some of the potential gender confusion regarding attitudes toward the bond. That is, simply comparing the average female to male on attitudes about animal companions does not consider a wide range of contexts and depositions toward HAI, which include both health and unhealthy influences. Even in North America, we assume that males are not a single homogenous sample but instead there will be expected individual differences in their experiences and expression of traditional male roles and also that of HAI (Blazina and Kogan in press).

There is also an expected variability regarding willingness to freely report experiences concerning an animal companion because they involve reactions that are both personal and private (Blazina and Kogan in press). Some males may deem this information as off-limits to discuss. To do otherwise may lead to the violation of stringent male norms regarding restricted emotionality, and self-sufficiency. We see these same potential influences beginning to shape male behavior toward the bond at a young age. In one study examining boys and girls levels of attachment to their animal companions, as measured through the likelihood of expressing love to them, saying they were loved by them, and reporting missing them when apart, boys reported significantly lower levels (Kidd and Kidd 1985). The researchers concluded that male socialization may have influenced boy’s willingness to report their actual feelings, because when examining the actual behaviors shown toward their animal companions, there were no gender differences.

Therefore, to begin understanding gender role-related factors within the context of HAI means accounting for a number of potentially divergent variables. One way to form a more integrated picture is by taking established gender role paradigms and applying each variable of interest in a systematic fashion. More specifically, in keeping with the psychology of men and masculinity, we wish to explore how males that experience gender role conflict (GRC) and the challenges of an insecure attachment history, respond in positive ways to their bond with canine companions—man’s best friend. If we begin mapping these various factors and their potential interfaces in a nuanced way, we are better able to make both descriptive and prescriptive statements regarding how males across the life span experience their attachment bonds with animal companions.

This chapter is a theoretical exploration of how the GRC paradigm and attachment history is related to the human–animal bond. More precisely, can males that have experienced insecure types of attachment with human companions, family, friends, and significant others have those experiences ameliorated by a positive

secure bond with an animal companion? Further, can males' *relational capacity*, the ability to make and sustain meaningful bonds with both human and animal companions, also be subsequently affected?

While attachment theory is one of the more contemporary psychoanalytic approaches emphasizing an innate and hardwired need to bond with others, it is our perspective that sexist gender roles restrict men's relational capacity and dehumanize both men and women. That is, male gender roles can thwart the innate attaching tendency, making a male feel as if forming emotional bonds is a violation of what it means to be a man. Many times, men's problems are not just personal failures but result from constricting values in the larger society (the macrosocietal context) that degrade men and discourage close intimate relationships. These macrosocietal contexts include patriarchal structures, restrictive stereotypes, oppression, social injustices, and the sexist socialization of both sexes (see O'Neil 2008a, b, 2015). From a GRC perspective, restricted gender roles potentially limit meaningful attachment with both humans and animals and help explain why some men have limited relational encounters, even violent ones, with animals and humans. When men have deficits in relational skills, there are fewer options for dealing with frustration, primitive emotions, less behavioral opportunities, and greater tendencies for skewed versions of power and control, and unhealthy aggression as tools.

Our general position is that many males can experience the human–animal bond as exception to the rule regarding getting close, being attached or vulnerable with another. Males not only developing deep and lasting attachment ties but also carrying the possibility of increasing the relational capacity with a range of others, both human and nonhumans. What makes this possible is in part that animal companions can be a “safe haven” and “safe base.” Bowlby (1982) identified these as key dimensions of an attachment figure that facilitates a sense of safety when under duress and allows for continued personal growth. It is suggested this process occurs because a different set of gender role and attachment norms operate within the human–dog dyad, allowing for at least a temporary relaxing of stringent male norms. Moreover, bonds with animals may help men validate or repudiate dysfunctional aspects of their masculinity ideologies and identities. There is also something exceptional found within the relational context of the man–dog bond that promotes men to grow in numerous other ways, once that initial prerequisite bond has been established. Themes of males' personal growth are explored in this chapter and include but are not limited to: searching for existential meaning, turning one's attention to matters of transcendence, and advocacy for others.

How male's bonds with animals can foster psychological development and interpersonal competence is a critical question that has far reaching implications across numerous disciplines. In this regard, the chapter supports the notion that the human–animal bond can directly impact the fostering of a positive, healthy sense of masculinity for males (see Kiselica and Englar-Carlson 2010) with insecure attachment styles. That is, the bond can act as a compensatory way of dealing with attachment needs that are the result of human bonding gone awry both in the formative years and then later as an adult. The human–animal bond leads to at least one

safe and secure type of attachment scenario for males. These contextual concepts are developed throughout the chapter within the framework of a proposed model with implications for research and clinical practice. Next, we turn to the summary of our model.

Proposed Model

How masculinity ideology and GRC affects men's relationships with animals raises a number of provocative questions. How do masculine norms and stereotypes play out in men's relationship with animals and are the expected gender role stereotypes, typical in human interactions, suspended and altered when men interact with animals and if so, why does this happen? Is animal bonding easier than human bonding for some men because worries about power, control, competition, and potential for devaluations and violations are not operating in animal relationships? Furthermore, a bond with an animal may be involved in a gender role transition, where a man changes his self-assumptions and world views about gender roles, thereby changing his behaviors. In this case, distorted gender role schemas may be mediated and changed with animal interaction, promoting healthy human development. Whether the animal-human bond facilitates men's journey with their gender roles and helps them deconstruct stereotypic views of masculinity and femininity is an empirical question. How the processes occur and how men change their relational capacities through animal interaction deserves study.

Our proposed model (see Fig. 3.1) suggests there will be an intersection of multiple contextual factors directly influencing males' experience of both human-human interaction (HHI) and human-animal interaction (HAI). Figure 3.1 depicts a model that expands our understanding of the animal-human bond by focusing numerous contexts, processes, and outcomes. At the bottom of the figure are four contextual parameters that include the actual attachment experiences, moderators, and mediators of the human/animal processes that include restricted masculinity ideology and GRC, and psychological outcomes that include concepts like generalization, compensation, and positive and negative psychological outcomes.

Located above the parameters is one way to map the contextual factors that influence the animal-human bond in both positive and negative ways. On the left in the rectangle is shown a men's insecure human attachment history that produce a variety of different bonding experiences. The most common attachment experiences have been described using the following terminology: secure/insecure, avoidant/ambivalent, anxious-ambivalent, and disorganized. The degree of insecurity in the human bonding processes predicts a man's relational capacity with both humans and animals.

Moving to the right, in the first circle, the HAI processes are hypothesized to be moderated and mediated by restricted masculinity ideology and GRC. The bidirectional arrow implies that a man's insecure attachment history, masculinity ideologies, and GRC have a reciprocal relationships, each potentially influencing each other.

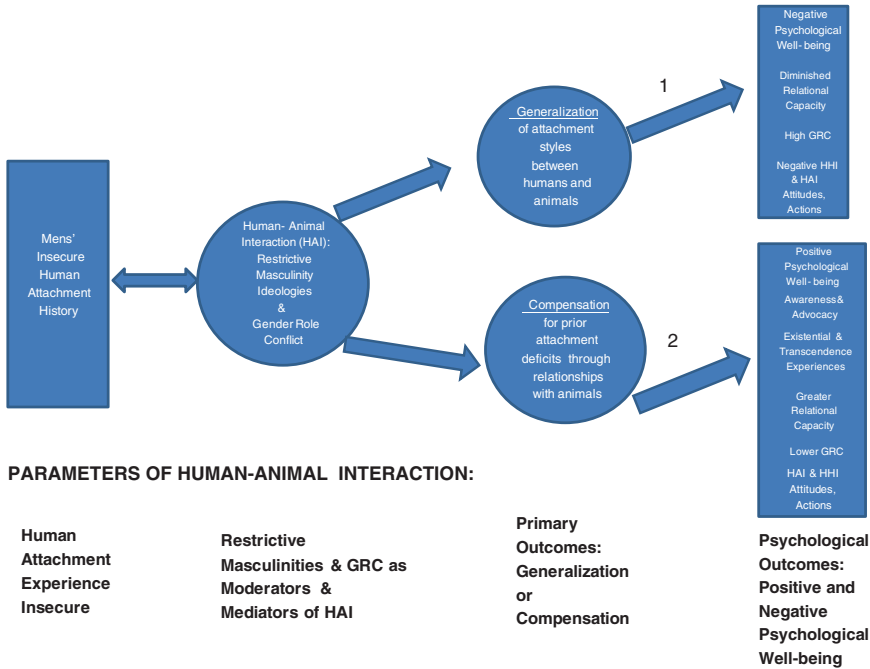


Fig. 3.1 Relationship between human and animal

The two circles in the middle of the diagram are defined as the primary attachment outcomes between animals and humans including generalization and compensation. These outcomes are defined as two bonding patterns based on prior attachment experiences and suggest variability in how attachment to humans and animals are played out in real life. In keeping with ideas discussed earlier, there is a range of variability and individual differences among men with insecure attachment histories, leading to at least two possible outcomes regarding the human–animal bond (especially with dogs). One possibility is that insecure attachment experience is generalized to most if not all attachment experiences (i.e., generalization). The other outcome involves how an animal companion can offset those with attachment challenges leading to improved quality of life through deeper more meaningful attachment bonds (i.e., compensation). Generalization implies that one’s prior insecure attachment process with humans can be negatively replicated with animals mirroring one another. For example, insecure bonding with humans will be repeated with animals and yield negative psychological outcomes, low relational capacity, higher GRC, and strained relationships with both human and animals (see the long arrow labeled number 1 in Fig. 3.1).

The second outcome involves compensation. Compensation means that what attachment problems that men have with other humans can be ameliorated and changed through bonding with animals and produce positive psychological outcomes, greater relational capacity, lower GRC, awareness and advocacy for both

humans and animals, greater potential for existential and transcendent experiences, and greater affirmation of both humans and animals (see arrow 2 Fig. 3.1). Each aspect of the model above is discussed in more detail with special attention paid to the theoretical rational and supporting research.

Generalization of Insecure Attachment Styles

The first trajectory involves the application of insecure attachment styles, attitudes, and behaviors from one type of attachment scenario to others, where patterns of interaction for humans and animals resemble one another. For example, if one has an insecure attachment disposition in one relational domain it will be generalized to humans or nonhumans. This makes for negative relational capacity affecting a wide range of other type of attachment scenarios. There is some research support for this generalized application, and it is consistent with the prevailing prescriptive and descriptive stereotype of men in North America, that investing in relationships is not considered masculine (Blazina 2001; David and Brannon 1976; Pollack 1995). One might argue that achieving core elements of traditional male socialization is tantamount to an avoidant or dismissive attachment style.

In terms of the HAI and HHI literature, Beck and Madresh (2008) found similarities when comparing subjects' insecure attachment scores for their pets versus romantic partners but ratings carried little or no statistical significance. Furthermore, relationships with pets were always rated as more secure. Zilcha-Mano et al. (2011) found a relationship between people's attachment orientations in human-pet relationships and their attachment orientations in human-human relationships. This included higher scores on attachment anxiety and/or avoidance in human-human relationships related to higher scores on the human-animal bond insecurity. Additionally, prevalent attachment insecurities seemed to counteract the beneficial regulatory effects of the presence of a pet. That is, attachment insecurities prevented the occurrence of the safe haven effect associated with being in the presence of an attachment figure. The disruptive occurrence was especially true for those with higher avoidant attachment styles toward pets. Persons who scored high on avoidant attachment viewed their pet in more negative terms such as perceiving them as unreliable, unsupportive, and expecting the pet not to be available and responsive to their needs.

In terms of these findings, a few considerations of Zilcha-Mano et al.'s (2011) work as it applies to this current chapter is in order. Their sample included mostly women and a mix of dog and cat owners. More research needs to be conducted given the contextual issues that have been highlighted regarding gender and those that have been previously found in terms of type of animal companion and attachment bond (e.g., cat attachment scores being lower than dogs) (see Zasloff 1996; Winefield et al. 2008). However, what seems most relevant are certain contextual factors that make an avoidant attachment style especially troubling for men with animals. With more severe forms of avoidant attachment elements, it may not only

impact attachment expectations but also the ways gender roles are enacted. The end result is males' relational capacity may be severely limited, impacting self-monitoring, levels of empathy, perspective-taking beyond one's own experience, and may also include the use of violence, neglect and harm being perpetuated against others both human and animal.

DeGue (2011) discusses the potential *triad of family violence* in which adult males target romantic partners, children, and pets for domestic abuse. In this scenario, the perpetrator who has traditionally (but not exclusively) been an adult male may use violence as a mean of threatening or controlling others. However, gender in itself does not adequately explain the contextual nature of what can be viewed as a type of generalizing of attachment expectations and behaviors from people to animals. Ducan et al. (2005) found conduct disordered boys that abused animals differed significantly from those that did not, by their history of being the victim of physical or sexual abuse and/or being exposed to domestic violence. Gupta (2008) found that callousness was a significant predictor of college men's violence against women and pets in a nonclinical sample. McPhedran (2009) suggests there are several complex risk factors involved in adult intimate partner violence (IPV) such as low levels of empathy, lack of prosocial parenting experiences from the formative years, childhood exposure to violence, and perhaps other dynamics, all of which potentially interact leading to violence toward intimate partners and pets. Obviously this is an area in need of further examination with other contextual research. However, it does not suggest that all men who have an insecure attachment experience with human attachment figures will lead to these violent outcomes. To the contrary and discussed next, are the various emotionally corrective experiences with human and animal companions that can offset these early attachment hurdles.

Compensation for Males' Insecure Attachment Experiences

The second trajectory in our proposed model involves males with insecure attachment histories regarding human attachment figures that have corrective bonding occurrences with animal companions. It is our argument that some males that may have had less than satisfactory attachment experiences with human attachment figures may find compensation for prior attachment deficits in the company of animal companions.

There is the notion of an *earned secure attachment* among human attachment figures, where early difficult attachment experiences can be compensated by others that provide a different type of bonding experience (see Wallin 2007). An earned type of security emphasizes the level of accompanying work involved in transforming an insecure attachment schema into a secure one. This occurrence is a fundamental change in one's general attachment orientation where attachment figures are seen in more benign if not benevolent perspectives. We argue that one's animal companion may be among those attachment figures that supply

rudimentary bonding that helps reorient males toward more generally secure types of general attachment perspectives. However, even this secure attachment bond is also earned through hard work; the context of the human–animal bond may allow males more flexibility and freedom to be relational.

We also recognize that not all males with insecure attachment orientations who have corrective human–animal bond experience will have an overall general schema change with attachment. Rather, some males may only see animal companions as a viable attachment figure and other possible human attachments as less favorably. This scenario leads to simultaneous competing perspectives of attachment within a male's mind, and with it, very different outlooks for animals versus humans.

The notion that we may have somewhat different or competing attachment models within our attachment repertoire is in keeping with recent evidence for human dyads (Klohnen et al. 2005) and has been referred to as *layering* of attachment expectations (see Wallin 2007) or hierarchical structuring of attachment figures (see Mikulincer and Shaver 2001, 2003). We also argue that different attachment scenarios for those that experience insecure human relations versus more secure animal companions can lead to very divergent perspectives. For some, the result is the development of a competing perspective of who is safe and trustworthy (i.e., humans are not to be trusted but animal companions are). For others, these attachment perspectives become more aligned and generalized from one scenario to another. While one might mark the ends of an attachment continuum with certain males that only feel safe bonding with animal companions versus those who are able to reconsider human companions in the same positive light. No doubt there will be many others who find their place in between.

So, not every insecurely styled male that has a positive bonding experience with an animal companion will develop a positive point of view with human companions. However, we argue the one good attachment figure be it in the context of animal and human companions carries with it the possibility of promoting psychological wellness in a number of ways that are outlined next in the chapter.

The Basis for Psychological Wellness

Figure 3.1 also shows how psychological wellness can be the product of a compensatory attachment HAI history. In the human–animal attachment dyad, it is possible for males to have a unique experience affecting attachment expectations but also further affecting other domains of one's life.

The premise that dogs are agents of emotional support and even healing is based upon recent research that suggests canines are unique in the animal kingdom (along with chimpanzees) to show a mutual gaze with humans (Horowitz 2009, 2011). Horowitz (2011) suggests that dogs possess a “rudimentary theory of mind.” Furthermore, dogs even outshine man's closest genetic cousin, on the “left gaze bias,” an essential step in reading emotions (Guo et al. 2009). The left

side (from the observers' perspective) gives much more unfiltered information about how people feel (see Ekman 2007). When a dog looks at a human face this includes scanning the right side of the face, (which is actually the left side from the dog's perspective) for tell-tale signs of emotional cues. Until recently, it was thought that only humans showed this type of gaze bias given that the human face is lopsided in displaying microexpressions related to displaying emotions. In the same vein, dogs have shown evidence for social referencing of their owner's facial expressions when encountering novel stimuli, utilizing the gaze as a means to process information and subsequently direct behavior (Merola et al. 2011, 2012). Likewise, there is indication for dogs displaying migraine-alerting behaviors on behalf of human companions (Marcus and Bhowmick 2013); a dog's ability to discriminate the emotional expressions of human faces (Müller et al. 2015), and a dogs' gaze being tuned to human communication (Téglás et al. 2012). There is also recent support for the hypothesis that dogs are capable of showing empathy (Silva and de Sousa 2011), and empathic responses to strangers in distress (Custance and Mayer 2012), and even more intense reactions to their own human companion in the same condition.

Research also indicates human physiological changes due to HAI. The tactile experience of canine companions can be experienced as emotionally soothing. Research supports blood pressure and heartbeat decrease when petting and stroking an animal's fur (Charnetski et al. 2004; DeMello 1999; Nagengast et al. 1997). Research on oxytocin, sometimes referred to as the "bonding hormone," has been shown to increase in a number of scenarios that involve the presence of dogs (Handlin et al. 2011; Miller et al. 2009; Odendaal and Lehmann 2000; Odendaal and Meintjes 2003) and when owners' mutual gaze with dogs (Nagaswa et al. 2009, 2015). Increase in oxytocin level is important in human health, as oxytocin may be a mechanism for the stress-buffering effects of social support (Heinrichs et al. 2003). There is also evidence for HAI decreasing the stress hormone cortisol even in short-term exposure to a dog (Polheber and Matchock 2014).

Furthermore, some scholars have argued that the power and value of the human-animal relationship is based on the psychological experience of nonjudgmental emotional support (Allen et al. 2002; Corson and Corson 1980). Nieburg and Fischer (1982) referred to this concept as one of "unqualified love and acceptance." Both Freud and his daughter Anna wrote of their personal experiences with dogs and how this affiliation taught them about "pure love" relationships (Roth 2005). Likewise, Brown (2004, 2007) suggests animal companions play psychological roles on our behalf such as the perceived sense we are worthy of care.

It is argued in contemporary psychodynamic theories (see attachment theory, object relations, etc.) that human beings are predisposed to make and sustain attachments throughout the life span. In fact, not having these connections leads to disruption in initial psychological development, and later continued growth and wellness. We suggest human beings respond to those companions (human and animal) that perform (or approximate) basic attachment-like cues. The attachment cues indicate that the human or animal companion is a viable attachment figure. The cues may involve our physiological changes (e.g., increase of oxytocin,

decrease of cortisol levels with HAI interaction), and sensations (when petting for the tactile sense of connecting). Cues may also include interactions with those that accompany us on day-to-day exploits (psychological accompaniment) and those we perceive as being in sync with our mood states and physical changes (psychological attunement) derived from mutual gaze, left gaze bias experiences, alerting responses, and the perceived psychological roles animal companions play in our lives. Each of these approximates our bonding cues with human companions prompting us to attach with animal companions. While HAI science has not progressed to the point of definitively offering dictums like dogs are “good listeners,” we can suggest that many of their behaviors are what humans recognize as attachment cues, ones that prompt building a potentially strong attachment bond. In essence, we suggest that animal companions become agents of helping and healing through relational encounters, an especially important point for those that had unmet needs or experienced trauma, abuse, or neglect. It seems important to continue studying these underlying dynamics of HAIs in future research. Next, we turn to other possible outcomes as the result of the human–animal bond interaction.

Awareness and Advocacy

We suggest that a possible outcome of the compensatory nature of the HAI is the development of awareness and advocacy for human and nonhuman beings. That is, males call upon more positive masculine gender roles that can manifest in a number of ways: feeling protective of those they care about, standing firm in the face of opposition, and working toward long-term solutions leading to others' betterment. There can be a number of factors that make these changes possible, including a psychological shift from viewing animals as a less than pertinent topic. Instead, animals take on a new relevance regarding one's own life experience or identity; some even perceive key-shared commonalities or/and develop a sense of kinship. One in turn is more likely to advocate for another that shares similarities and certain fundamental characteristics, emotions, and experiences. Frequent examples include awareness raising concerning animals as sentient beings capable of pain, or discovering that nonhumans display emotions. The position of awareness and advocacy is not entirely altruistic in a nature though, because the stance betters the individual through helping another. Sometimes it is the satisfaction of helping, gaining new levels of awareness, and personal growth; other times, the reward is symbolically in nature, one is helping a cause that has a special meaning to the individual.

There are various examples of how males have gained awareness and then taken on an advocacy position in terms of nature, animals, and animal companions. Some of these are captured by fiction writers such as in the case of William Faulkner's short story, *The Bear*. A boy discovers a new respect and kinship with the legendary bear that roamed the nearby woods. Other stories come from

historical accounts. Aldo Leopold is the father of modern day ecology. In the 1870s he was involved in the wilderness land management principles of the day that included hunting wolves. In one of these instances, he shot a mother wolf and her cubs, and personally witnessed a "... fierce green fire dying in her eyes ... I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and the mountains" (p. 130). After that encounter, Leopold went on to champion "The Land Ethic" emphasizing the interdependence of humans and the natural world and a call to respond in ethical ways.

Consistent with our proposed model is the notion one can demonstrate psychological well-being through social advocacy as a reflection of Alfred Adler's concept of *social interest*. Adler (1938) suggested that social interest is an attitude or outlook toward furthering the welfare of others. He also theorized that social interest as "a feeling of community, an orientation to live cooperatively with others, and a lifestyle that values the common good above one's own interests and desires" (Guzick et al. 2004; p. 362). Adler assumed that social interest promotes better coping and a healthier attitude toward stressful situations (Crandall and Putman 1980).

Social interest is compared to another of Adler's concepts, *Masculine protest*—"The desire to be above, like a real man." While social interest allows a male to expand his focus beyond his own interest, by comparison masculine protest limits involvement in the betterment of others. Adler believed that in a patriarchal, masculine-dominated culture what we would refer to know as the stereotypical notion of the feminine was evaluated negatively. Therefore, many men feel they must hide those aspects of self by exaggerated stereotypical masculine attitudes and behaviors through overcompensation. This can lead to egotistical drives, including greed and overambition that not only cause continuous psychological conflicts but work against social interest. In more contemporary times *relational* could be appropriately substituted for Adler's notion of feminine. Males can assume a broader view of events and issues beyond their own self-interest. In our model, we extend the notion of social interest to include an awareness and potential advocacy of nonhuman animals. In essence, a position of awareness and advocacy ultimately leads to an understanding of the interconnectivity of living beings. This includes the knowledge of how the health of one entity within a system is impacted and in turn, influences others.

Wilson (1986) discussed the *biophilia hypothesis* arguing humans have an instinctive bond with other living systems. Theodore Roszak (1992) coined the term *ecopsychology* arguing that we find more than physical sustenance in the natural world. Ecopsychology attempts to scientifically understand nature's positive psychological impact on human beings. Ecopsychology researchers (see Roszak et al. 1995) suggest that an individual's connection to nature can improve physical health and mental functioning. It is part of the reason researchers argue humans are innately drawn to architecture and settings that reflect elements of nature, feeling enlivened by settings that let in natural light, include plants, and have wood and stone as part of the decor. Psychologists like Roger Ulrich have shown the effects of bringing nature indoors through studies that examine how we

are soothed by looking at pictures of landscapes or watching a fish tank. A part of biophilia and ecopsychology is investigating the place of HAI.

While Western culture has traditionally struggled with the place of nonhuman animals and in some cases taking the benign stewardship position of overseeing the beasts of the field, in another cases nonhuman animals have fared far worse. Especially since the seventeenth century Cartesian mechanistic perspective built upon "I think therefore I am," placed nonhumans that were consider nonthinking animals at risk. In the Western viewpoint animals are reduced to little more than chattel, in some cases justifying abuse and neglect. Animals became soulless automatons that existed solely for man's use or misuse. Descartes explained away the pained sounds of animals during their live dissections as little more than a spring within a clock that was overwound. Various humane movements in the United States and England in the nineteenth and twentieth century lead to personal and societal changes (Wilson 2011).

Likewise, in the case of more contemporary research with dogs and their impact on human well-being, with each new study there is the possibility of not only gaining more scientific knowledge but also acquiring a reframing of societal viewpoints that have been detrimental, limiting, and violent toward animals. For example, in this text alone, there are several studies emphasizing how research subjects or clients training dogs to become more adoptable is a form of advocacy and awareness. It highlights the notion of perceived commonalities between man and dog bringing about changes in perspective. In addition, being in service to others occurs when one moves beyond the sole preoccupation of one's own needs and works toward a more generative position impacting others. However, it is not surprising these types of programs also seem to have mutually beneficial effects for dogs and the males helping them.

Transcendence

We suggest that HAI can also prompt growth in other ways and for some, this can lead to a focus upon *transcendence*—an awareness of mystery and the sacred. In short, transcendence involves the expanding of one's phenomenological experience or perception leading to the psychological occurrence of wholeness, calm, and wonderment. Searching for the transcendence prompts a higher level of awareness and attention to life; it may occur through a ritual, a personal awakening, or a deep meaningful interaction or encounter. It should be stated this type of encounter also can lead to an expansive feeling; one is connected to others, natural elements, animals, and even people in new ways. While there are numerous ways to achieve this state, being in the presence of nature and animal companions can increase our awareness of the ways living beings interact adding a unique appreciation of life and our place in it. Again, there are numerous examples of how one may achieve this state of transcendence influencing wellness.

Levinson (1969) was among the first to argue that it was animal companions, especially dogs, helped humans return to a more meaningful interface with nature as a means of restoring psychological balance. However, there are other traditions outside of psychology that also emphasize the transcendent promoting qualities of animals, some of which go back to medicinal practices in ancient Greece, or are part of totemic ceremonies, or even as spiritual guides within Native American rituals (Serpell 1996). Caedmon was a seventh century monk that had a spiritual awakening in the presence of animals who subsequently went on to become England's first poet. Likewise, Francis of Assisi was inspired by animals and is noted for his compassion and gentleness toward them. He believed nature itself was the mirror of God, calling nonhuman creatures his "brothers" and "sisters." The emphasis in each of these examples is one where human beings are enhanced significantly by the presence of nonhuman animals. Beyond the monotheistic religions are various polytheistic traditions that emphasize a sacred connectedness among beings. Shinto religion argues that rocks, trees, animals, humans, and even geographical regions all have *kami*—sacred or divine spiritual essences. The Hindu tradition venerates animals, a core belief that the divine exists in all living beings, both human and nonhuman. Buddhists try to show loving-kindness to all beings. They also believe animals possess a *Buddha nature* and therefore have the potential for enlightenment. Outside formalized religions and approaches are those that experience the sacred in nature in other ways. Henry David Thoreau was among the American transcendentalists of the nineteenth century that found nature and his frequent walks in it, a source of wonder and awakening. John Muir, the cofounder of the Sierra Club, talked about the trees of the forest delivering sermons to those who were ready to hear their message.

Above are all examples of a type of search for transcendence leading to the further actualization of the individual. In our model, transcendence allows us to see human and nonhumans as part and parcel of a larger framework. In this context, the human–animal bond becomes more than fringe topic within psychology but instead one of critical importance that needs more vigorous study. Some men that perceive their dogs as animal companions will be prompted to consider how the bond plays a vital role in a unique appreciation of life.

Existential Meaning

Another potential outcome of our model suggests that males' bond with animal companions can draw attention to existential concerns, and the search for deeper meanings. While existential issues are encountered in a number of places within the life cycle, facing the loss of a beloved attachment figure is certainly one of the more difficult challenges. For men who perceive their pets as animal companions it is understandable they may experience an inward turning, reflection, and life assessment. The research examining males' attachment to animal companions and the intensity of grief when lost is a work in progress. The research from the past has left some with the impression that men do not grieve the loss of an animal

companion as much, or on average perhaps do not feel all that attached in the first place. However, these results need to be viewed in context and alongside the pressures of male gender role socialization to not grieve openly in the ways mental health professions usually deems as optimal. The reluctance to disclose vulnerable material research studies makes it difficult to measure HAI accurately.

Doka and Martin (2010) argue many men feel socialized to adopt an instrumental approach to grief. The instrumental approach emphasizes “mastery” over “oneself,” the “environment,” and “one’s feelings.” Here the accent is on dealing with loss in a more private, introspective fashion, channeling reactions into mental or physical activity. For instance, the griever may retreat to the wood shop, work out at the gym, or even take action in support of some type of related cause after loss has occurred. But it is not just the way men may be socialized to grieve that is an issue, it is also the meaning found in the loss.

Blazina (2011) has discussed previously the importance of placing both secure and insecure attachment histories in the context of losing a beloved animal companion. Melanie Klein (1940/2002) and Bowlby (1960) discussed how losses in adulthood are particularly challenging when the current lost object took over an essential psychological role from another in an earlier timeframe, such as a caregiver. However, one can expand the significance of the lost love object to include adult friends, family, romantic partners, and animal companions in the role of a significant object, as well.

For the male experiencing an animal companion as such an attachment figure, the psychological importance may seem similar to the contributions and connections of other generative persons (or animal companions) from the past. In this case, one attachment figure may have taken on some of the duties of the other(s) that followed suit. However, even with the perceived similarity with former relations, it is important to recognize that an animal companion is experienced as a unique relationship in its own right. This kind of attachment figure is not only a generative presence like others but also has his or her own distinctive contribution in one’s inner world. If there is a history of secure, satisfying relations, one might expect a male to approach loss with more potential resources in hand, although he may still need assistance working toward forming a *continued bond* after loss (see Packman et al. in press). That is, a way to sustain a permanent connection even in the face of loss.

For others with differing developmental histories, an animal companion can offset certain needs that were never fulfilled in childhood or the ensuing years. In this case, the HAI serves in part as a compensatory function, making up for prior attachment deficits. In the best situation, the animal companion altered one’s internal world, relationships, and self for the better. When the transformation of the inner world occurs in the context of the animal companion, the existential issue of continuing bonds and existence of hope are particularly important. Fairbairn (1952) discussed how children go to great lengths to preserve a perception of some goodness in the world when growing up in dire familial circumstances. To not preserve hope means developing skewed relational perceptions, rigid defenses, and even extinguishing the expectancy of having any satisfying relations. For those who view the connection with an animal companion as such a tether to hope, they

may be in danger of feeling the world has become bereft of any goodness. If the bond is not preserved in a meaningful way, males that possess extremely divergent attachment expectations regarding HAI and HHI, may feel at the mercy of previous damaging experiences. That is, one is left to contend with the residual from previously unsatisfying connection(s), but now, without the access to the special attachment figure. Pondering these types of dynamics can lead to a reexamination of our personal narrative and with it our affixed meaning.

Neimeyer (2001) comments on a relational constructivist view, where we are shaped by both attachments and subsequent losses sustained. The loss prompts the revision of our life story along many potential lines of meaning. Neimeyer suggests that when loss or death occurs, especially in an unexpected or violent way and seemingly for no good purpose, it can cause uncertainty about previously held assumptions that the world is predictable. Instead, it seems random, dangerous, or unjust. However, even when deaths are nonviolent, they can challenge a person's core beliefs. A protracted and painful illness that claims the life of a loved one may also cause the bereaved to question if the world is indeed safe or fair. The survivor may begin a chain reaction of reexamining once deeply held assumptions: "I will have to face my own mortality one day"; "How much control is there really in life?"; "Do people really get what they deserve?"; "Is there an afterlife?" The griever may in turn set out on a quest for new meaning(s). The most fundamental questions are asked, "Who am I really?" and "What does all this mean?" Neimeyer says that regardless of whether a minor update or a major overhaul to one's personal sense of meaning and beliefs is needed; there is an attempt to resolve the inconsistencies that do not make sense anymore after the experience of significant loss. While not every loss will spur the need for a drastic reexamination, not embarking on re-sorting one's personal perspective when needed is associated with complicated grief reactions and an identity that no longer makes sense.

Understanding the existential meaning of the bond in men's lives is no small undertaking. If the connection held a place of significance, or the bond was lost through difficult means, then it can cause one to reexamine long-held perspectives and one's sense of personal meaning. In some cases, it leads to the revision of the deepest beliefs, a journey that is embarked upon that can include gender role transitions, a move toward more relational focus, and a reexamination of previously held rigid beliefs that were connected to being a man. The existential issues connected to the human-animal bond and human attachment figures challenges males to rethink, reprioritize, and rewrite personal narratives as men.

Future Research Directions, Hypothesizes, and Perspectives

The proposed model is one where HAI and HHI are interfaced, having implications for the psychology of men and masculinity. However, the bond with animal companions does not guarantee a panacea for males with difficult attachment

histories and so certain caveats need to be considered. One involves males that feel a strong sense of kinship with nature and animal companions but still have difficulty transitioning from the rigidity of traditional male roles and ideology. Will males of various ages be able to enact masculine role norms in a new ways within the context of HAI, and possibly generalize these ways of being a man when interacting with human companions, peers, family, and friends? The temptation may be to reuse old prescriptive dictums now applied in new contexts.

A parallel example may involve *ecowarriors*, or those that have utilized many of the male roles of traditional Western mythos, just generalizing them to the defense of nature (Gibson 2009). Ecowarriors have been known to engage in a range of activities from peaceful environmental protest to wanton destruction of property sometimes on the large scale such as fire bombs, destruction of ski resorts, car dealerships that sale SUV's, etc. Within these examples are aspects of some of the traditional male ideology that are valued by men and society that include a desire to protect and a willingness to stand firm in the face of opposition. However, we are also suggesting that those experiencing a positive generalization of attitudes and behaviors regarding HAI and HHI may need to seek new solutions through a change in dysfunctional male gender role schemata. Could it be the case that a subpopulation of men who value the bond with animal companions also becomes a type of ecowarrior on the behalf of pets and animal companions? This may manifest itself on one hand as rescuing stray dogs or standing up for their rights on various cultural levels. On the other, it may involve utilizing the 'leader of the wolf pack' mentality that has become erroneously associated with proper dog training. The metaphor has perspective traditional male gender roles embedded within as one assumes the role of an *alpha* in relating to one's animal companions, emphasizing a rigid hierarchy, dominance, or even violence.

The 'leader of the wolf pack' mentality may also extend challenges to relating with human beings that do not share the same HAI values and vehemently attaching them on social media, in print, and in person. These men may be viewed within our proposed model as wrestling with new solutions for both HAI and HHI. It should be noted the intersection of attachment and gender roles expectations make for a difficult personal and societal transformation. For men, rethinking core masculine beliefs is something profoundly personal and an impetus to do so involves events and encounters that are highly significant and life changing. We argue one starting place for insecurely attached males (though certainly not limited to this category of men) is found within the relational realm amide the bond with animal companions.

Placing prior research findings regarding gender and HAI in proper perspective also leads us to the following conclusion: seeking to compare the average male versus female on levels of attachment and/or loss regarding to animal companions is not the most beneficial way to interface masculine gender roles with HAI. In fact, we can lose contextual meaning by prioritizing those types of research studies. Instead, the context of how attachment and loss are both reported and under-reported, as well as, their meaning in men's lives is more a viable avenue.

Another example of a future line of inquiry is based on findings that suggest men that enact traditional gender roles seem to have smaller social support networks (Barbee et al. 1993), and how middle-aged males turn to their animal companions as a significant source of emotional soothing when under duress (Kurdek 2009). In these types of scenarios, it is important to understand if there are real cohort differences in the ways males turn to animal companions for soothing. It may also be the case that there is a cumulative effect of negative life experiences due to failed attachments with human companions. It would seem reasonable that after so many failed attempts on the part of attachment challenged males, that an animal companion seems like a viable and secure form of emotional bonding. However, stating again that the power of the bond is not limited to males with difficult upbringings or have experienced some form of loss or trauma. Future research should also focus on how males that have found satisfaction in work and love may find very similar levels of meaning, purpose, and transcendence due in part to the animal bond.

Each potential trajectory of our proposed model, whether it involves transcendence, existential meaning, or various forms of advocacy, all derives meaning from a significant relationship with someone other than ourselves. As mentioned previously, traditional male ideology emphasizes a strictly go-it-alone mentality, and has been critiqued for a level of self-absorption (Pollack 1995). These dynamics make relational endeavors challenging if not at odds with men enacting traditional masculinity in Western culture especially in North America. Yet, if we consider that in the healthiest relational context there is enough psychologically space for a strong sense of self (not the same thing as a narcissistic self-absorption) and an equally well-equipped relational capacity, then it permits one to relate with another in a meaningful way. In these circumstances the two dynamics of self and being in relationship with another that are often so easily viewed as mutually exclusive facets in masculine world, instead become complementary parts. Perhaps this is one of the reasons man's best friend is valued so highly even if not all men can verbalize that sentiment. The bond allows males to experiment and experience the dynamic tension of self-other in a unique way. When males are truly connected to their animal companions a relational encounter emerges that is less buffered with psychological defenses. That is, males feel less threatened of losing their identities within this connection.

It is also paramount to understand more about how men response to grief when animal companions are lost; this includes the intensity, duration of symptoms, and how they are expressed. It involves helping males understand more about ongoing bonds with animal companions as a way of sustaining meaningful ties and a retaining a source of emotional support. Both self-report measures and qualitative research need to be pursued by interviewers that are culturally sensitive to male contextual dynamics. Acknowledging publically there is an emotional reliance upon a companion cuts against much of traditional male socialization, and so does expressing substantial feelings of grief when an animal companion is lost. Men's felt but often unspoken meaning(s) regarding the bond with animal companions needs to be uncovered in forthcoming studies.

Another aspect of the needed work involves ways to measure the various variables in the proposed model. This may include an instrument that assesses both HAI and HHI simultaneously. While there have been various attempts to restructure measures from one content area to another (e.g., attachment strength and style for people and then applied to pets), to date there has been few efforts to develop an instrument solely for these purposes (see Zilcha-Mano et al. 2011). New measures may include elements of attachment strength to human and animal companions, as well as, purported behaviors.

Our model attempts to offer an initial way to contextually conceptualize and operationalize elements of male gender roles, attachment history, and HAI. Moving the field in this direction expands the various related variables of interest and provides a heuristic for both researchers and clinicians. However, attempting to do so will not be done without resistance or criticism that may involve anthropomorphizing or that an already fringe area of inquiry has now taken a few further steps in that direction. This new line of investigation must be accountable and held to stringent standards. Many of us have experienced the power of the bond. We honor those connections by exploring them with scientific rigor, all the while not losing sight of their emotional significance.

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