

“LIVING OFF THE GRID”: THE INFLUENCE OF COMPANION CANINES ON ONE’S
QUALITY OF LIFE

by

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Estimates of individuals experiencing homelessness in the United States range between 549,928-643,067 on any given day (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2018; Green Doors, n.d.). Among those individuals experiencing homelessness, approximately 25% have a companion animal (Petsofthehomeless.org, n.d.). There is not a uniform definition of homelessness and the researcher was intentional to acknowledge that the individual is a person and not their circumstances. Participants in this study were two individuals who identified as “living off the grid” in Durham, North Carolina rather than identifying as homeless. The purpose of the study was to evaluate the influence of companion canines on the quality of life of these two individuals. Data were collected through interviews that were audio recorded. Narrative analysis guided the coding of interviews for qualitative data analysis. Using Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs as a framework to investigate how individuals experiencing homelessness may have a different hierarchy of needs than the original framework suggests. The results revealed for the two individuals, who identify as living off the grid, their hierarchy of needs is more fluid than the original hierarchy framework suggests. Their hierarchy has safety, love and belongingness, and physiological needs intricately interwoven. Findings suggest that these

two individuals, who identify as living off the grid, have a stronger desire and need for unconditional love than the rest of the general population and find that love with a companion canine.

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QUALITY OF LIFE

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

According to Green Doors, a nonprofit organization that works to prevent and help end homelessness, on any given night in America, about 643,067, are experiencing homelessness (Green Doors, n.d.). 549,928 individuals were found to be experiencing homelessness during the Housing and Urban Development's Point-in-Time Count of 2016 (National Coalition for the Homeless, 2018). With over a half million people experiencing homelessness, 25% are suffering from a mental illness (bipolar disorder, depression, and schizophrenia), another 17% are considered chronically homeless which is defined as two or more years, and 13% are escaping domestic violence (Green Doors, n.d.). These individuals are not only experiencing emotional turmoil, but financial strife is also a burden they bear. In many instances, those experiencing homelessness do not have access to the resources they need to get themselves off the street, or their circumstances are not covered in the qualifications of the resources that are available (Green Doors, n.d.).

A neglected part of research is the percentage of pets that are among the nation's homeless. Of the 643,067 individuals experiencing homelessness, approximately 25% have a companion animal (Petsofthehomeless.org, n.d.). For a homeless individual, having a companion animal often creates even more barriers to resources, as many shelters and assistance buildings do not allow animals, thus preventing the individual from getting off the streets (Aliment, Rankin, & Lurie, 2016). Despite this challenge, in research and in society, of this population, those experiencing homelessness possess surprising resiliency (Bender, Thompson, McManus, Lantry, & Flynn, 2007). It is thought that those experiencing homelessness with a companion animal possess greater resiliency, as their definition of home is different than others (Labrecque

& Walsh, 2011). Even though having a companion animal creates more barriers for this population, the benefits often outweigh the potential costs (Caines, 2016).

For families in general, their companion animals are considered friends, and for many, part of their family (Walsh, 2009; Caines, 2016). This is not a new concept. Companion animals have been found as valuable parts of the family home since ancient times, dogs have been playing central roles in the lives of humans for centuries (Walsh, 2009). From ancient Egypt mummification to Greek and Roman burials to modern America's nose-print necklaces, the human relationship with dogs has been nothing short of a positive one. As with human family, animal family members provide a mutually supportive attachment as well as emotional support, in turn developing a sense of empathy, among a plethora of other benefits, such as increased responsibility, physiological health, and socialization (Walsh, 2009; Shubert, 2012; Slatter, Lloyd, & King, 2012; Mueller, 2014). As emotional health is improved with a companion animal, physiological health is improved as well, through physical exercise, and the release of neurotransmitters (Shubert, 2012).

Among the homeless population, connection with a companion animal leads to making responsible decisions and taking responsibility for their character, thus improving the overall well-being of the owner (Slatter et al., 2012). Opportunities for socialization are increased for the individual experiencing homelessness and their companion animal, allowing social health to be supported and social skills honed (Walsh, 2009). Empirical literature exploring the quality of life of those experiencing homelessness with a companion animal and reciprocal nature of their relationship is scarce. This study will specifically focus on the human-canine relationship. There are many names for the human-canine relationship, thus it is valuable to explore how different titles, companion animal, therapy animal, and service animal, influence the human-canine bond.

Using Abraham Maslow's theory of human motivation, this study will explore how the hierarchy of needs of those experiencing homelessness may be different from those originally proposed by Maslow. As posited by Maslow, the hierarchy can be adapted to any population to suit their priorities (Larsen & Buss, 2014), with the overarching goal of mankind is to reach self-actualization (Maslow, 1954), despite each individual progresses through the hierarchy in a unique way.

This study will use an oral interview approach with open-ended prompts to engage the participants in a dialogue about their relationships with their dogs. The interviews will provide the researcher with person-first knowledge of one experiencing homelessness as well as the many facets of the human-canine relationship. In addition to the oral interviews, the researcher will utilize narrative photography as a mechanism for portraying a richer story (Aubert, 2009). Through viewing a photograph of the participant and reading their narrative, one can expand upon the humanness of the individual, creating a more complete story to tell (Campbell, 2010). Because those experiencing homelessness often experiences prejudices and fight stereotypes, it will be especially important to help tell their story as authentically and respectfully as possible. Using Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the purpose of this study is to investigate how canine companions enhance the quality of life among individuals experiencing homelessness. It is important to study the homeless population because it is often ignored, in research and reality, as there is a social stigma against them. Research of this population is important because this population is considered extremely resilient. To better understand resilience among the homeless population with companion canines, the researchers will investigate what factors enhance their resilience and the contributions of companion canines. This study will enable the researcher to tell the story of homeless individuals with companion in a way that has not been

previously empirically documented. Using narrative analysis of photography, the visual story can express the deeper meaning of the relationship between human and canine companion.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Before evaluating the importance of companion canines in the lives of individuals who are experiencing homelessness, it is important to describe the theoretical framework utilized for this study. This study utilizes Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as the guiding framework from which to view those experiencing homelessness and their canine companions. This theoretical framework is used to explain and illuminate the possibility that those experiencing homelessness may have a different hierarchy of needs than the general population. This study will explore the possibility that love and belongingness, for the homeless population, are better classified as basic physiological needs which are often fulfilled by having a companion animal, thus increasing the quality of life of the homeless population.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory

Abraham Maslow was considered a humanistic psychologist, meaning that he not only saw through the eyes of an observer, but also through the eyes of the individual doing the behaving, as each individual's behavior is anchored within their inner feelings and self-image (What is humanistic psychology?, n.d.). Maslow's hierarchy of needs is rooted in his theory of human motivation. He proposes that mankind is a perpetually wanting species, consistently working towards fulfilling needs of various levels, the highest-level being self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). To reach self-actualization, an individual must have all their needs met. These needs, according to Maslow, have a specific order in which they need to be fulfilled, ranked by necessity to life. However, it takes motivation to be self-actualized and each person's motivating force is different (Larsen & Buss, 2014, pg. 66). Maslow explained the needs by the goals upon their completion. The needs are separated into five separate domains: physiological, safety, belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization.

At the most basic level are physiological needs, these are needs that must be met for an individual to survive, and include things such as air, food, water, sleep, and sex, ultimately maintaining internal homeostasis (Maslow, 1954, pg. 35; Larsen & Buss, 2014, pg. 346). Once one's physiological needs are met, the next needs towards self-actualization are safety needs. Safety needs include having shelter, feeling secure and free from danger, as well as having a structured lifestyle. When safety is established, the individual's next needs concern is belongingness. This can be described as the need to be welcomed and belong in a group that makes them feel safe (Larsen & Buss, 2014, pg. 347). Rooted in an evolutionary perspective, belonging to a group increased chance of survival: sharing the work and resources, and protecting each other. Next on the hierarchy are the esteem needs: self-esteem and esteem from others. Once accepted into a group, individuals want to be seen as, "competent, strong, and able to achieve... respected by others for our achievements and our abilities" (Larsen & Buss, 2014, pg. 348). This, in turn, results in self-esteem: feeling competent, valuable and worthwhile thus increasing one's confidence. And finally, the peak of Maslow's hierarchy is self-actualization, where one develops their absolute potential, the pinnacle of who one is born to be. Put simply, "What a man can be, he must be" (Maslow, 1954, pg. 46). Not everyone achieves self-actualization, in fact, Maslow suggested that only one percent of the population achieve it (Larsen & Buss, 2014, pg. 350-351).

In some ways, the homeless population may have different priorities than those in the general population, as their needs may be somewhat different. Admittedly, Larsen and Buss state that there are individuals who do not follow the hierarchy, such as starving artists (2014, pg. 347). While stating that Maslow's theory is applicable to the general population, it can be adapted to fit a number of populations, even entire communities, and situations (Zalenski &

Raspa, 2006; Scheller, 2016; de Guzman & Kim, 2017), which reinforces the idea that the homeless population fulfills their hierarchy differently than other populations. It is suggested that the base needs, the physiological needs, create a more intense impact on the individual than the higher needs, as the physiological needs are critical to survival.

In the quest towards self-actualization, the needs for each individual person is unique. Maslow mentions that this hierarchy is not in a fixed order, which is supportive of the idea of this research that companionship is more of a physiological or safety need rather than a belongingness need (Maslow, 1954, pg. 51), thus every person's hierarchy is different than everyone else. This research seeks to explore the possibility that the homeless population has a different hierarchy than the general population.

Homelessness

Homelessness can be defined in many ways and is used in a variety of contexts. Some research refers to those experiencing homelessness as those who are in homeless shelters (Bender et al., 2007; Lebreque & Walsh, 2011; Mabhala, Yohannes, & Griffith, 2017), those utilizing drop in centers (Thompson et al., 2013; Rhoades, Winetrobe, & Rice, 2014; Caines, 2016), those using free food venues (Slatter, 2012), those who do not have a permanent address (Taylor, Williams, & Gray, 2015), those without shelter (Aliment et al., 2016), those who were found to be visibly homeless through the Point In Time (PIT) Count (Fitzpatrick, Myrstol, & Miller, 2015), those spending the night on the streets and in public places (Bender et al., 2007). Thus, there is not a uniform definition of homelessness, creating making the concept of homelessness ambiguous. For purposes of this study, homelessness will be defined as individuals who do not have a public or private housing facility but may utilize other resources such as soup kitchen and reside on the street full time. When discussing this population, it is important to use

person-first language, acknowledging that first and foremost the individual is a person, they are not their circumstances. Therefore, this study is exploring individuals experiencing homelessness rather than homeless individuals.

There are several causes of homelessness, and they are often unique to the individual. Youth experiencing homelessness often leave home due to some form or many forms of abuse in their home environment (Whitbeck, 2009), and facing poverty and a myriad of adverse childhood experiences (Mabhala et al., 2017). As for adults facing homelessness, causes include domestic violence (Cronley & Strand, 2009), mental illness, disabilities, addiction, lack of affordable housing and foreclosures, low wages and job loss (National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, 2017).

Adverse childhood experiences. Stressful or traumatic events, including abuse, neglect, domestic violence, and addiction are classified as adverse childhood experiences (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2017). Those who have these experiences, “are a significant risk factor for substance abuse disorders” and “are strongly related to the development and prevalence of...health problems” (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2017). The main cause of homelessness among adults as identified by Mabhala, Yohannes, and Griffith (2017) in England was substance misuse and alcohol dependency. There was an increase in homeless youth because at age sixteen, individuals can leave home and school as they are no longer legally under their parents. Many of the participants in this study had been defiant towards authority figures and came from home environments that were chaotic, abusive, neglectful, instable, pernicious or from foster care. Often, those in their environment and community had poor education and employment, or unemployment, poor social connection, and poverty (Mabhala et al., 2017).

Domestic violence. Alternatively called domestic abuse, or intimate partner violence, domestic violence is any kind of violence, abuse, or aggressive behavior, within a home dynamic, including sexual, physical, mental, and psychological. In attempt to escape the abuse, individuals flee their homes, and often bring along their companion animals. Their companion animals can offer feelings of companionship and protection during their getaway (Aliment et al., 2016; Caines, 2016; Cronley & Strand, 2009; Walsh, 2009; Thompson et al., 2013; Slatter et al., 2012; Labrecque & Walsh, 2011; Irvine, 2013; Rhoades et al., 2014). In children, being exposed to domestic violence can result in them becoming violent, regenerating the cycle of domestic violence (Walsh, 2009). Women are more likely to report being a victim of domestic violence and utilize emergency shelter (Cronley & Strand, 2009). Unfortunately, many victims of domestic violence delay leaving their abuser in concern for their companion animal's welfare (Aliment et al., 2016; Caines, 2016). In Atlanta, Georgia, there is a facility for this population specifically, called Ahimsa House. They provide a 24-hour crisis line, emergency shelter, veterinary care, pet transportation, pet supplies, and even pet deposits for transitional housing (Ahimsa House, 2014).

Mental illness, addiction, and disabilities. With the social stigma encapsulating individuals with mental illness, addiction, and disabilities, employment can become difficult to find. Some diagnoses are not allowed to obtain employment because of bodily limitations and/or societal stigma; thus, they have no income (Fitzpatrick et al., 2015). Unfortunately, experiencing homelessness creates new health problems and worsens the existing conditions (National Health Care for the Homeless Council, 2011). Those with disabilities are a protected class, however, those with disabilities who are also homeless may be a segment of that population that is intentionally overlooked due to societal stigma against the homeless population.

The understanding of addiction as a mental disorder is becoming more normalized, thus reducing the stigma around those suffering from addiction (Fazel, Khosla, Doll, & Geddes, 2008). In their study of 5,684 homeless individuals, Fazel et al. (2008) found that the most common mental disorder of homeless individuals is drug/alcohol addiction. The other findings reported that depression and psychosis have similar high prevalence rates amongst the homeless population in comparison to the general population (Fazel et al., 2008). Services and resources for individuals experiencing mental illness, addiction, and disabilities are often expensive and not covered by insurance, which often leads to individuals choosing a different route for treatment or no treatment at all (Labrecque & Walsh, 2011). For some diagnoses, this can be lethal, for some, it worsens over time and eradicates quality of life. Addiction, in particular, has resulted in people losing everything for another fix of their drug of choice (Irvine, 2013), with a final downfall resulting in a life on the street.

Financial strife. It is commonly known that lack of money results in financial struggles. Sacrifices are often made to be able to make ends meet. The economy is consistently inflating costs of every day necessities, yet wages are not inflating at the same rate (Focuseconomics, 2017), resulting in people not being able to afford the basic necessities of everyday life, such as food and hygiene items, and paying bills. In recent years, unemployment has been a more prevalent cause of homelessness than in the past because governmental resources, and access to those resources are limited and often unknown. Unfortunately, those becoming homeless are the working poor, those aging out of the foster care system, those being discharged from the hospital, and those being released from prison, thus income, savings, and resources are limited due to elements out of the individual's control (Green Doors, n.d.). Cunningham (2009) reported that these populations, along with veterans and the aged population, are also prone to repeated

bouts of homelessness due to the lack of assistance for them. For some individuals experiencing homelessness there are no programs to assist them, as they do not fit the program criteria (e.g. their income level is too high, the program is for those with certain disabilities/diagnoses) (Cunningham, 2009).

Experiencing homelessness with a companion animal. This study will be focusing on the human-canine relationship specifically. Dogs have been documented to provide love, affection, companionship, and emotional support to their owners (Oyama et al., 2017). For purposes of this study, the term companion animal and companion canine will be used instead of the term pet because these animals are more than just a possession or property. These animals are a significant being in the human's life. Through constant companionship and freedom in the outdoors, being homeless with a companion animal enhanced quality of life (Irvine, Kahl, & Smith, 2012). Identifying as a companion animal owner allows these individuals to positively cope with the stigma of homelessness and redefines their companion animal ownership as homeless not helpless (Irvine et al., 2012). Relationships with companion animals are often an "unacknowledged social tie" (Irvine, p. 24, 2013) that motivate behaviors of commitment and responsibility, thus driving individuals to get off the street and reducing social isolation. Despite being homeless, the relationship with the companion animal provide feelings of redemption and the opportunity of a second chance at life. The relationship is interdependent, even reciprocal, having responsibilities tied to someone other than the self leads to a sense of salvation and atonement for their circumstances (Irvine, 2013).

Barriers. According to Petsofthehomeless.org (2017), there are only 48 shelters in the United States that accept homeless individuals with their companion animal. This tells that, yes, there are nonprofit organizations tailored for this population, however, the amount is pathetically

small despite this large, and growing, population of homeless individuals with companion animals. There are many barriers, and even discrimination for those experiencing homelessness with a companion animal. Aliment et al. (2016) reports how those experiencing homelessness are encouraged to give up their companion animals to animal shelters, however euthanasia rates in shelters is 50% and reuniting after surrendering a pet is only 15%, additionally, there are fees associated with surrendering and reclaiming animals from shelters. Some animals are being kidnapped during the night by people who report to be doing what is best for the animal (Aliment et al., 2016).

Additionally, many businesses and agencies are not pet friendly, thus the owner must either tether their pet outside until they are finished or have a trusted individual to watch the animal. However, anti-tethering laws put these animals at risk of being confiscated by the city, therefore many homeless individuals avoid going to resource agencies in fear of losing their beloved companion animal (Aliment et al., 2016). Many housing options have limitations about having companion animals and many do not allow them at all. Law enforcement uses animal welfare laws against this population and can cease the animal from the owner, and the cost to redeem their animal is upwards of \$100 and can result in having a criminal record and serving time in prison for unpaid fees which hinders the possibility of finding housing even more so (Aliment et al., 2016). To legally own an animal, the animal must be licensed. Some states have other requirements such as having the animal spayed or neutered. Some places offer a discount or a voucher for this procedure, but they often require proof of income, which many homeless individuals do not have employment (Aliment et al., 2016).

Strength and resilience. The homeless experience an exponential amount of hardships and issues in their lifestyle in comparison to the general public (Bender et al., 2007). Among

individuals experiencing homelessness, they are unable to call upon family and loved ones for support, they must pull upon their own strengths (Bender et al., 2007). On the streets, the homeless teach the homeless, however they are expected to be independent because those who use resources outside of their “street smarts” are not respected by their homeless peers. Their interpersonal relationships, including those with their companion animals served as a source of motivation to get off the streets (Bender et al., 2007).

When experiencing homelessness, becoming an adult is difficult developmentally, psychologically, and sociologically (Thompson et al., 2013). Youth experiencing homelessness are victimized, challenged psychologically, lacking resources, and have unfit living conditions. However, this population draws from overcoming their adversities and credits their strengths. They believe they can persevere, and remain autonomous and self-sufficient (Thompson et al., 2013). Experiencing homelessness is considered a learning environment, especially for youth experiencing homelessness. Homeless peers provide street skills for safety and survival, as well as emotional support, coping strategies, reducing stress, stop drug use, and the motivation to make improvements in their lives. While many individuals do report drug use and self-harm behaviors, they admit it only made things worse. They accept their adversity with a positive attitude that everything happens for a reason and there is a higher power who has a plan (Thompson et al., 2013). Similar results were found among the homeless in Fitzpatrick et al.’s (2015) study, where religious social capital helped reduce depressive symptoms.

“Home.” Many states mandate that if an individual has an outside pet, they must have a water proof roof, structurally sound and appropriate insulation as well as room to move around and regular removal of waste (Aliment et al., 2016). This can be difficult for the homeless population, as they often do not even have that kind of shelter for themselves. For the homeless

population, the definition of home is much different than those with homes. For the homeless, home is more than just a building structure: it is a feeling of safety and comfort, especially when a companion animal is present (Labrecque & Walsh, 2011). Relationships with companion animals were related to those with children and other loved ones, providing a main source of friendship and companionship which is one of many contributions companion animals have on well-being. Among the other contributions are feelings of acceptance, responsibility, empathy, safety, comfort, and health (Lebrecque & Walsh, 2011). In fact, this relationship is so pivotal to the homeless population, that 96% of homeless women stated they would not accept housing if their companion animal could not be accommodated (Lebrecque & Walsh, 2011). Similar results in relationships were found with homeless youth in Rhoades et al. (2014) that companion animals, predominantly dogs, but also cats, hamsters, rats, chinchillas, fish, and iguanas, alleviate symptoms of depression and loneliness, increased happiness and healthy coping strategies, and gave a sense of comfort. Consistent with Lebrecque and Walsh (2011), Rhodes et al. (2014) also found that youth did not want to be housed if companion animals were not allowed. Constant and consistent companionship with companion animals, predominantly canines, is repeatedly found to improve the well-being of the owner (Aliment et al., 2016; Slatter et al., 2012), they are a source of unconditional love, which is why many homeless individuals wish to have a companion animal, specifically a dog (Slatter et al., 2012).

Homeless owners often adopt a mentality of companion animal before self. They will often postpone getting agency help or getting a job because the companion animal is not welcome within the building (Caines, 2016). Through emotional support and simple presence, companion animals empowered their owners to develop patience, compassion, feelings of safety, and avoid criminal activity and drug use. Many have reported feelings of safety and protection

from maltreatment, theft, sexual harassment, and criminal victimization. A physical sense of safety is reported by shared body heat (Caines, 2016). This is especially important to take into consideration because most homeless animal owners are females who have become homeless due to their experience of domestic violence (Cronley & Strand, 2009). Unfortunately, there are not many resources tailored to this specific population. Ahimsa House, discussed earlier in this report, is a rare and important resource available to women who are victims of domestic violence with companion animals. Therefore, the homeless population is unique because of the sacrifices this population is willing to make for their pets, their definition of home, and their striking resiliency.

Human-animal bond

In 2017, 68% of American homes had a companion animal (American Pet Products Association, 2017). This statistic provides compelling evidence about the prevalence of companion animals in our lives and in our homes. From a historical perspective, evidence of companion animals dates back as far as ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome (Walsh, 2009). Dogs in ancient Egypt were revered as guides in the afterlife because of their unwavering loyalty. Greek and Roman traditions cherished the loyalty of the companion animals, they also sought these animals as hunters, herders, and family guardians. When the animal died, a burial was held and given an epithet (Walsh, 2009). In Peru, it was customary for the Chiribaya people to bury the dog of a deceased individual with the corpse, leaving food and blankets for the dog (Walsh, 2009). Lap dogs were seen as sources of warmth and comforters. The Pekinese breed were sleeve dogs, sources of warmth and protection from intruders (Walsh, 2009). In contemporary times, companion animals, most commonly dogs, are considered friends, and even family for many (Walsh, 2009; Caines, 2016). Owners are willingly spending more money on their

companion animals for not only food and health, but pedigree pets, travelling, and DNA testing (Walsh, 2009). This financial and emotional commitment to companion animal leads to several physical, emotional, and interpersonal aspects of an individual's life. The annual average cost of having a companion animal ranges from \$1,471 to \$2,008 in the first year alone ("Pet Care Costs," n.d.). These costs include food, toys, treats, flea/tick medication, grooming, and trips to the vet ("Cost of Owning a Dog," n.d.; "Pet Care Costs," n.d.). With lifespans spanning 10-15 years, having a canine companion is a massive investment.

Coming home to a wagging tail or a gentle purr after a long day can sometimes be the only thing to which an individual awaits. Companion animals, namely dogs, cats, small mammals, fish, reptiles, horses, amphibians, birds, and farm animals, have been reported as sources of emotional attachment, nurturance, comfort, and unconditional and unjudgmental support (Hawkins, Williams, & Scottish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, 2017; Kabel, Khosla, & Teti, 2015; Walsh, 2009; Byström & Lundqvist Persson, 2015; MacDonald & Barrett, 2015). For children, having a companion animal teaches about nurturance and how to recognize and understand others' emotions.

They also report their companion animal makes them happy, is their best friend, and that they love their companion animal (Hawkins et al., 2017). Not surprisingly, caring and friendship behaviors with a companion animal were more prevalent among girls than boys, as was attachment to the animal. This attachment to the animal led to more caring and empathic behaviors during adolescence, suggestively because of the increase in responsibilities (Hawkins et al., 2017; Mudaly, Graham, & Lewis, 2014). Similarly, Mueller (2014) found that when youth had more interaction with their companion animals, they were more likely to participate more in family, community, and school. The emotional attachment with the animal allowed for emotional

development in other relationships. The following sections detail the benefits of companion animals in the lives of humans.

In a study of women with HIV and benefits of the human-animal bond, it was found that companion animals, specifically dogs, are viewed as spiritual custodians, meaning that they are keen to when humans need support or comfort and warn of danger (Kabel et al., 2015). The women also reported the dogs inspired them to make better life choices and provided a sense of purpose despite a stigmatized medical diagnosis (Kabel et al., 2015).

Attachment. Caring for and spending time with a living thing creates an attachment from shared experiences. Companion animals provide an emotional attachment (Slatter, et al., 2012) that resembles the attachment of a toddler to a parent: if a parent is calm in a strange situation, the toddler is at ease, and vice versa; therefore, when an owner is calm during a strange situation, the companion animal is calm (Siniscalchi, Stipo, & Quaranta, 2013). Several positive behaviors are developed from an emotional attachment to a companion animal, especially in children. Marsa-Samboloa et al. (2017) found that the younger the individual is, the stronger the attachment is to the companion animal; additionally, this attachment led to stronger communication between significant others, especially if the companion animal was a dog. Hawkins et al. (2017) discovered that compassion, caring, and friendship stem from attachment. Just as companion animals play a role in child development, they continue to play a role through adult development as well.

Additionally, empathy, pro-social behavior, and the humane treatment of animals is developed and reinforced when a child has an attachment to a companion animal. Feeling more engaged with the family and the community also is a result of emotional attachment to a companion animal (Mueller, 2014). Interestingly, attachment to dogs was more likely and girls

were more likely to attach to the dog than boys (Hawkins et al., 2017). Marsa-Samboloa et al. (2017) uncovered that strong attachment to companion animals improves communication between significant others through more shared responsibilities, improved sensitivity, positive affect, support, mutuality, stimulation, synchrony, and reported higher quality of life.

Emotional support. Stemming from the emotional attachment, companion animals serve as a source of emotional support (Hawkins et al., 2017; Irvine et al., 2012). These animals are deemed so important as a source of support that physicians can recommend and prescribe an emotional support animal, and the owner is given a letter that the companion animal is certified support (Silcox, Castillo, & Reed, 2014). As a source of emotional support, the animals serve as a coping mechanism for their caregivers in relationship to loneliness and overall health (Marsa-Samboloa et al., 2017). Emotional support from these animals is intertwined with one's the attachment to the companion animal. A familial bond is developed from receiving support, which helps those who struggle with mental illness (Caines, 2016) which then fosters the caregiver's emotional well-being, as the companion animal is seen as a source of love, affection, and companionship from this emotional support, thus resulting in a positive feedback loop that is mutually beneficial to both the human and the animal (Oyama et al., 2017).

Empathy. Attachment to a companion animal develops one's ability to be empathic toward other living beings (Hawkins et al., 2017; Caines, 2016). Particularly among children, shared interactions with a companion animal can teach children how to understand the needs and feelings of the animal, in turn developing the child's empathic ability (Mudaly et al., 2014). Walsh (2009) reported that most people who strongly connect with animals have a large empathy capacity for both humans and animals. Active investment with an animal, developing connection and caring for the animal, leads to empathy skill development (Mueller, 2014). In children's

empathy development, companion animals make it easier to teach and apply empathic behaviors than humans (Walsh, 2009), perhaps because this connection and care is applied and develops a sense of responsibility.

Responsibilities. Companion animals have served as inspiration and motivation for owners to make better life choices such as drug use and criminal activities (Kabel et al., 2015; Caines, 2016). Mueller (2014) found that an owner's connection, investment, and care for their companion animal results in taking responsibility and character development. Having a companion animal provides daily routines and responsibilities (Slatter et al., 2012). Responsibilities and routines have shown to develop the owner's overall well-being (Labrecque & Walsh, 2011), and the animal serves as a witness to their owner's conduct, which contributed to strides toward getting off the streets (Irvine, 2013). The responsibility of a companion animal includes ensuring they are fed, even at the sacrifice of a meal for themselves. This helps the owner develop a positive personal identity since they have the responsibility to care for someone other than themselves (Irvine et al., 2012). From their adjusted identity, they are more likely to avoid suicide and feel a moral obligation and emotional investment into their companion animal (Dotson & Hyatt, 2008; Walsh, 2009).

Physiological health. In addition to emotional health benefits, having a companion animal has evidence showing physiological health benefits. Shubert (2012) found that those who owned companion animals had higher survival rates of cardiovascular disease and had lower blood pressure. During interactions with companion animals, cortisol levels lowered in the caregiver, and oxytocin, prolactin, and dopamine released more for both the caregiver and the companion animal (Shubert, 2012). Silcox et al. (2014) mirrored these results, reporting findings of lower blood pressure and decreased heart rate when owning a companion animal. Similar

results were seen in Urbanski and Lazenby's (2012) study of hospitalized cancer patients and pet-therapy interventions: cortisol levels were decreased, dopamine and endorphin levels increased. Over time, these interactions were found to increase coping capabilities and overall quality of life for the patient (Urbanski & Lazenby, 2012).

Outside of the medical setting, results similar to those reported by Shubert (2012) were found. Health problems were fewer in old age among those with companion animals. Companion animal owners increased and maintained a regular exercise routine (Silcox et al., 2012), thus cardiovascular stress reactions were less, and blood pressure was reduced (Walsh, 2009). Physical activity with a companion canine bolsters physical well-being (Lebrecque & Walsh, 2011; Oyama et al., 2017). Interactions between human and animal increased release of neurochemicals that facilitate relaxation and bonding, additionally improving the immune system of the owner (Walsh, 2009). Sometimes, companion animals go above the role of companion to become service animals, most often for those with a physical or mental disability. As their title suggests, they service and support better health through encouraging exercise (Hall, MacMichael, Turner, & Mills, 2017).

Socialization. While owning a companion animal increases companionship, the relationship also increases social interaction opportunities (Walsh, 2009). Walsh (2009) related dog park interactions to toddler play groups, increasing socialization opportunities for both dog and owner from individuals asking to pet the dog and asking questions about the dog, resulting in sharpened social skills. In the same report, Walsh (2009) found that having companion animals in the nursing home setting decreased resident irritability and increased socialization. Described as a "social lubricant" in Silcox et al. (2014), companion animals increase interpersonal connections. For those with disabilities, companion animals encourage socializing and integrated

with the community. Similarly, children with autism were found to more likely interact with others if there is a dog present (Byström, & Lundqvist Persson, 2015). Urbanski and Lazenby (2012) researched animal-child interactions with participants who have developmental and emotional disorders as well as down syndrome. It was found that these interactions increased socialization, attention, and cooperation, thus resulting in better compliance and other activity participation. Many homeless individuals reported that their companion animals motivated them to get off the streets and helped sharpen their skills so they could more easily reintegrate back into society (Slatter et al., 2012; Bender et al., 2007). For the homeless population, their companion animal helped them develop societal bonds with local veterinary clinics thus validating the existence of the individual experiencing homelessness (Irvine et al., 2012).

Quality of life

Investigating the relationship between human and animal, the literature discusses how this relationship impacts quality of life. There are many kinds of human-animal relationships, thus, it is important to understand and differentiate between them. As there are many kinds of human-animal relationships, there are a variety of definitions of quality of life, as each person's definition is subjective to their experience. For purposes of this study, the following definition will be used: a subjective concept evaluating an individual's life satisfaction in relationship to all present factors as interpreted by the individual (IESE Insight, 2013).

With companion animal. Oyama et al. (2017) developed a quality of life measurement tool for individuals who have companion animals. Through their research, they found that dogs influence emotional and social well-being as well as how one handles stress. Companion canines are seen as a source of love, companionship, affection, and emotional support. Social activities increased physical activity as well as social interactions, thus positively impacting social well-

being. (Oyama et al., 2017). Clarke Cline (2010) discovered that dog ownership impacted the quality of life more for single individuals and women. For women, dog ownership was associated with lower depression. Companion animals have been psychological mechanisms utilized to help improve quality of life (Marsa-Samboloa et al., 2017). Specifically, dog ownership has been seen to mediate communication between significant others, which in this study were mothers, fathers, and best friends. Companion animals serve as a coping mechanism in stressful situations, helping the individual to adapt (Marsa-Samboloa et al., 2017). The stronger the attachment to their companion animal, the higher quality of life the individual had, which also resulted in stronger communication with significant other. Interestingly, the younger the individual was, the stronger the attachment was. Specifically with a dog, communication among significant others improved shared responsibilities, sensitivity, positive affect, synchrony, mutuality, and support (Marsa-Samboloa et al., 2017).

Companion animals versus therapy animals and service animals. Much research has been conducted showing the positive impact animals have on an individual's healthcare experience. Service animals, which are trained to perform tasks that makes their handler's disabilities easier to manage and are legally allowed in public places through the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and therapy animals, which are trained for psychological therapy for people other than their handler and visit various centers such as childcare programs and hospices, differ from companion animals in that companion animals are not trained for any specific assistance to their humans (Alliance of Therapy Dogs, 2017). Definitionally different from companion animals, benefits of having a service animal are similar to companion animal benefits. Owning a service dog, and even being on the waiting list for a service dog, was found to increase quality of life for individuals with physical and hearing disabilities (Hall et al., 2017). With a physical service

dog, participants reported having a higher understanding of themselves, which improved their social networks and showed greater satisfaction when socializing, participating in organization, and even visiting and helping relatives. Service dogs increased independence, learning, working, and health. Men had higher quality of life when owning a service dog (Hall et al., 2017).

From a mental health perspective, Shubert (2012) found that stressful tasks are less stressful when owning a dog. As discussed earlier, owning a dog has positive physical health benefits, which in turn reflects upon mental health and well-being. In the United States, animals have been used to help veterans from World War II to cope with their posttraumatic stress disorder (Shubert, 2012). More medically specific, among hospitalized cancer patients, animal-facilitated therapy showed to decrease pain and emotional distress, provide distraction, decrease fear, increase socialization and pleasure (Urbanski & Lazenby, 2012). Those who interacted with companion animals reported better coping with chronic disease, decreased loneliness, increased comfort, relaxation, socialization, and self-esteem which resulted in compliance with treatment, rest, nourishment, physical activity, independence, and activity participation, thus motivating the patient to get better (Urbanski & Lazenby, 2012). The use of animal facilitated therapy was recommended by nurses and families to other patients because it was felt that it boosted hospital morale. Among children with developmental disorders, emotional disorders, and down syndrome animal facilitated therapy improved their emotional stability, socialization, responding, play, attention, and cooperation and decreased negative behaviors and aggression (Urbanski & Lazenby, 2012).

Case study

A case study looks at a singular case within a specific setting or culture gathering data through a multitude of information sources such as interviews, artifacts, audiovisual materials, and observations drawing themes from the data.

The goal of a case study is to develop an in-depth and complex understanding of the case at hand. From this understanding, a more complete description of the case is able to be developed. Conclusions that are drawn should be described as the overarching theme of the case, describing the patterns and lessons learned from the case.

As with any qualitative study, the results could be far too broad or far too narrow. The data may not be able to be generalized to the population. Perhaps the most pressing issue is that there may not be enough data gathered to come to any helpful conclusions (Creswell, 2013).

Narrative Analysis

Narrative research is investigating and analyzing the stories given by the participants, exploring the life of an individual. First, the research question has to be solidified to capture the detailed stories of the participants (Creswell, 2013). Then, identifying individuals who have relevant stories or experiences to the research question, spending time with them to gather data in a variety of avenues, from spoken word to artifacts. Next is contextualizing the information and collecting information in regard to the context of the participants' stories (Creswell, 2013). From personal experiences to historical contexts, it is critical to encapsulate the context of the participant. Analyzing the given stories then go through a process called restorying, "the process of reorganizing the stories into some general type of framework... may consist of gathering stories, analyzing them for key elements of the story... and then rewriting the stories to place them within a chronological sequence" (Creswell, 2013, pg. 56). The final step is collaborating

with participants to articulate the meaning of their stories and develop turning points within the story to empower the participant and allow them to see the value in their experience.

Summary

Using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs as the guiding theoretical framework, the purpose of this study was to explore the nature of human-canine companion bond among humans experiencing homelessness. The following research questions were addressed in this study:

For humans experiencing homelessness:

1. What factors influence your well-being?
2. How does your canine companion contribute to your well-being?
3. How do humans experiencing homelessness define quality of life?
4. How do humans experiencing homelessness perceive their canine companion is contributing to their quality of life?

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

With narrative analysis, this qualitative research study investigated how, and in what ways, canine companions influence the quality of life of homeless individuals. This study was conducted to learn about the unique human-animal bond between humans experiencing homelessness and canine companions through the use of interviews and narrative analysis. As a case study, the researchers immersed themselves into the environment of the participants as well as their language, choice of belongings, and other documents and artifacts. The research study was approved by the University and Medical Center Institutional Review Board (UMCIRB) at East Carolina University (Appendix A) prior to data collection.

Both participants independently responded to a series of questions to start the dialogue about their story. The researchers wanted to learn the details about their relationship with their companion animal(s), how their companion animal impacted their quality of life, their favorite thing about their companion animal(s), things they have learned from experiencing homelessness, and the overall impact of having impact of having a companion animal(s). What follows are Donna's and Ethan's, the participants, stories as retold by the researcher.

Sample

The initial target population for this study was homeless individuals who have companion canines in the Durham, North Carolina area. The target population was accessed by contacting local law enforcement agencies and homeless resource agencies within the greater Durham area and locating common gathering places among the homeless population. The inclusion criteria for this study was individuals experiencing homelessness with canine companions. Homelessness, for the purpose of this study, was defined as sleeping on the street, in a makeshift structure, or other outside living structure (ie. tents). Canine companions are defined as dogs that regularly

accompany a human experiencing homeless, regardless of the human's location and housing status.

Procedures

Potential participants received an oral explanation as well as a written informed consent form explaining the purpose and nature of the study, their role in the study, and their confidentiality (Appendix B) prior to interviews. As it is the participant's choice to opt out of the study at any time, the researcher offered an addressed and stamped envelope with a piece of paper and a pen to send in their withdrawal from the study. There was an assistance bag for compensation for participation and participation was voluntary. All individuals that were approached for this study were offered an assistance bag, regardless of their participation in the study. Getting a coffee together was also offered regardless of participation. After consent was obtained orally and by signature, a brief seven question demographic assessment (Table 1) was completed regarding the participants' age, gender, ethnicity, the age and breed of their companion canine, how long they have had their companion canine, and how long they have been experiencing homelessness (Appendix C). To identify trends within data, it is important to gather basic demographics, such as age, gender, and ethnicity, because these trends can introduce new knowledge which may help future research on this topic as well. As an exploratory study, it is critical to gather as much information as possible from the participants.

Table 1*Sample Demographics*

Your current age

Gender

Female

Male

Other

Prefer not to answer

Race

American Indian or Alaska Native

Asian Indian (Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Other Asian)

Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin (Mexican, Mexican-American, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Other Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin)

Native Hawaiian (Guamanian, Chamorro, Samoan, Other Pacific Islander)

White or Caucasian

Other race not listed

Prefer not to answer

Age of your companion canine (dog)

0 – 1 years

1 – 4 years

5 – 7 years

8+ years

Breed of your companion canine (dog)

How long have you had your companion canine (dog)

0 – 12 months

1 – 2 years

3 – 5 years

5+ years

How long have you been experiencing homelessness

0 – 6 months

6 – 12 months

12 months – 2 years

2 – 5 years

5+ years

Participation or not, all individuals approached were offered a bag of supplies that included items such as wipes, toothbrushes, tooth paste, body wash, hats, shaving cream, q-tips, bars of soap, blankets, socks, cotton balls, band aids, deodorant, mints, tampons and sanitary napkins, flea collars, dog harnesses and leashes.

From information gathered from the literature review, the researcher developed seven interview prompts that address how the quality of life of each homeless individual is impacted by their companion canine (Appendix D). Prompts exploring quality of life with a companion animal (Appendix D, #1, 2, 6) were developed from the research of Clarke Cline (2010), Oyama et al. (2017), and Marsa-Samboloa et al. (2017) that found that companion animals have an impact on emotional and social well-being, reduce depression, and can serve as a coping mechanism. Prompts about the individual's status of homelessness (Appendix D, #4, 5) were formed from the research results of Mabhala et al. (2017), which discussed main causes of homelessness, Bender et al. (2007) and Thompson et al. (2013), presenting the homeless population as resilient. Previous research illustrating how companion animals serve as sources of emotional attachment, nurturance, comfort, and unconditional and unjudgmental support, as found in Hawkins et al. (2017), Kabel et al. (2015), Walsh (2009), Byström et al. (2015), and MacDonald and Barrett (2015) served as the foundation for interview about the human-animal bond (Appendix D, # 3, 7). All prompts for this study served to initiate conversation between the researcher and participant, allowing the participant to guide discussion, thereby producing a semi-structured interview (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2010). Interviews were conducted in areas comfortable for the homeless individual (ie. park bench, the ground, a café). One researcher conducted interviews with each individual. Each interview was estimated to take approximately 30-60 minutes.

The context of the experience described below is a secluded wooded area approximately three-quarters of a mile behind a suburban shopping area in Durham, NC and occurred on June 23, 2018. Information provided by the Durham City Police indicated this area was a frequent location for individuals experiencing homelessness. The researchers set out with a cooler of water bottles, audio recorder, camera, and an eagerness to learn more about the role of canine companions in the lives of individuals experiencing homelessness.

The researchers were unsure of the number of people, if any, living in the wooded area during the time of our visit. They explored numerous paths within the wooded area. At the end of one path, they encountered an intimidating sign hanging on a tree along with a security camera and decided not to proceed down that path. They later found out that the security camera was fake. After returning to car, driving around looking for other paths and wooded areas in the vicinity, the researchers returned to the original area approximately 10 minutes later to find a woman sitting along the curb of the road. She was sitting at the end of the very path previously explored waiting for a friend to return a book. The researchers parked the car, waved to her and approached. The three sat down, introduced themselves, told of the exploration of the paths in the woods, and then described the purpose of the study. After chatting for about 10 minutes, the woman's friend drove up and gave her a book, we chatted with him, then she invited us to her camp.

Before the interview, the researcher asked each participant if he/she would like to be photographed before, during, and after the interview, or have candid photographs throughout the interview. When agreed, one of the researchers took multiple photographs of the participant and their canine companion with a digital Canon Rebel. After the interview and photographs, the participants were asked to review the photos to pick which photograph best depicts their

relationship with their canine companion. To compliment the audio recordings, the visual of the photographs tells a story as well. As highlighted in the literature review, when a photograph is paired with written words, a more complete understanding develops (Ketelle, 2010).

Each interview was audio recorded with consent of the participant using a digital voice recorder. Once completed, the interview was uploaded to a computer for transcription by the researcher. The F5 transcription will be used by the researcher to transcribe each interview. F5 transcription allows the transcriber to manually type the recordings with features such as varying speeds and rewinding. These adjustable settings and audio recordings allow the researcher to review each participant's interview as many times necessary to correctly transcribe the interviews. Each interview was transcribed verbatim by the researcher for content analysis and was coded by both researchers for interrater reliability. Transcription did not include nonverbal cues such as audible pauses, facial expressions, and other body language.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This case study included two human and two canine participants. Donna and Ethan, the two humans, utilized both verbal and non-verbal communication that included words, hand gestures, and hugs during the approximate 5-hour experience. Shorty, a spayed 1 ½ year old mixed breed female and her 3-month-old puppy, Mini, were the two canine participants in this research study. Their participation mostly involved licking, snuggling, and laying beside the two human participants and the researchers. In full disclosure, it should be noted that Donna was consuming a beverage during the time of the interview that was later discovered to be alcoholic. Donna, however, presented as sober and coherent during the interview.

There were a few consistent themes throughout the interviews with Donna and Ethan. Donna and Ethan have both faced the loss of loved ones in very different ways and have allowed dogs to be such a grounding force for them. Despite experiencing homelessness, Donna and Ethan are able to get their love and belongingness needs met through Shorty and Mini. Donna and Ethan both expressed gratitude for the unconditional love.

Donna welcomed her dogs into her home as a new family for herself as she is estranged from her biological family. Ethan was welcomed into Donna's home and he felt more at home because the dogs were present. When asked about their definition of quality of life, both Donna and Ethan exhibited concepts of making it one's own, "...*what you make it...*" and "*why not let it be?*" Donna expressed that her dogs, past and present, have saved her life. Ethan shared that the dogs bring happiness to his life. Donna and Ethan voiced that the dogs have made their lives much better and helped create a nonjudgmental space with unconditional love, also providing a sense of calm.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Through reviewing the literature and drawing themes from the interviews, it is apparent that companion canines provide a sense of love and belongingness to the homeless population, or in the case of this study, those “living off the grid.” The need of love and belongingness is more of a lower-level needs and it can be deemed that love and belongingness, safety, and physiological needs for the homeless population are more fluid.

Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs

After thorough conversation with Ethan and Donna, it was easy to see how their hierarchy of needs differs from Maslow’s hierarchy. To revisit Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Figure 1), the separate domains from bottom to top are: physiological (survival needs), safety (security), belongingness (feeling welcomed), esteem (how one views themselves), and self-actualization (pinnacle of self). Donna and Ethan’s hierarchy is unique in that their physiological needs are intricately interwoven with their safety, love and belongingness needs (Figure 2). Their willingness to be so open, honest, and welcoming to the researchers is telling of their need of love and belongingness. Ethan and Donna shared some of their most personal experiences without hindrance or discomfort and were met with gratitude and compassion from the researchers.

Figure 1. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

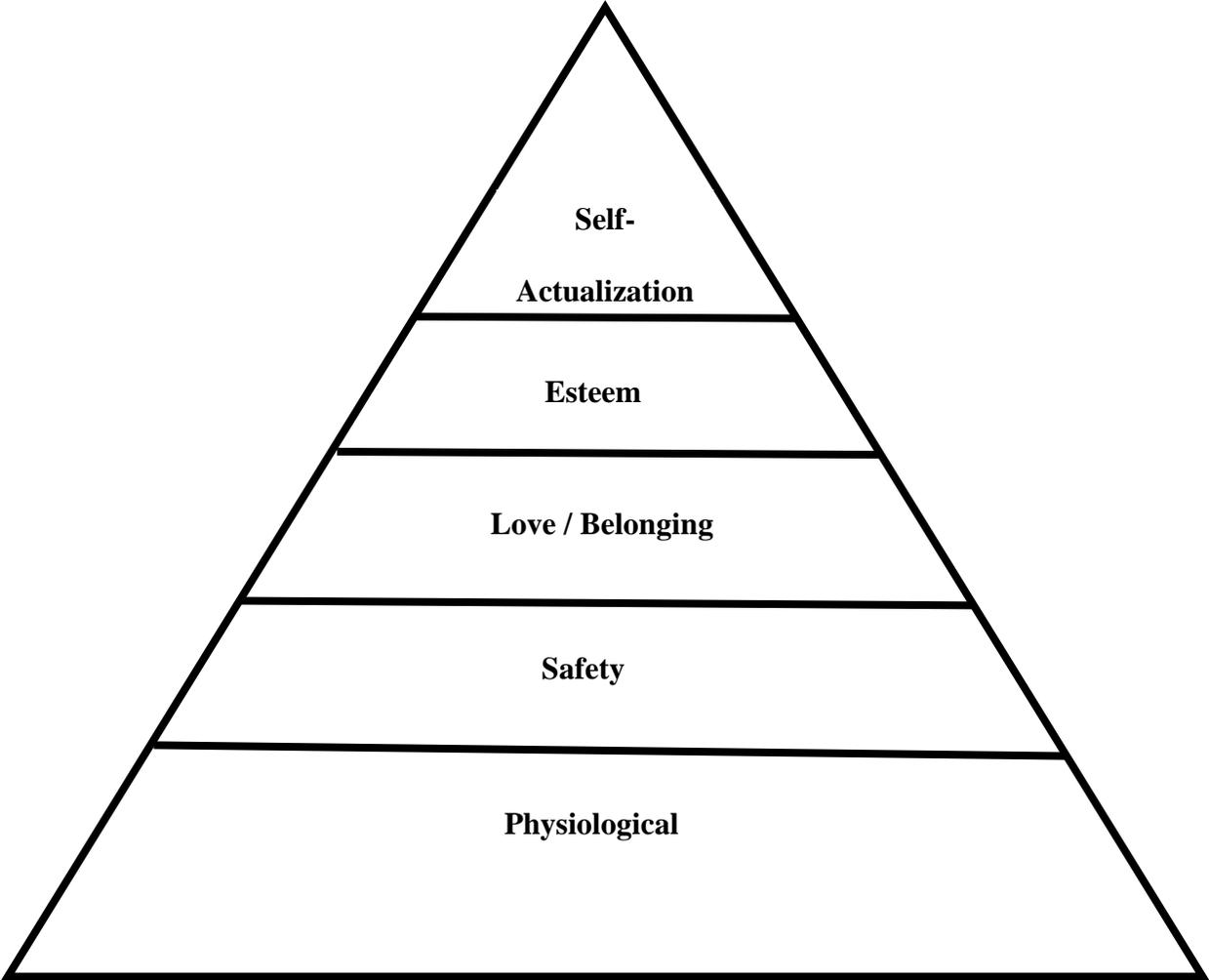
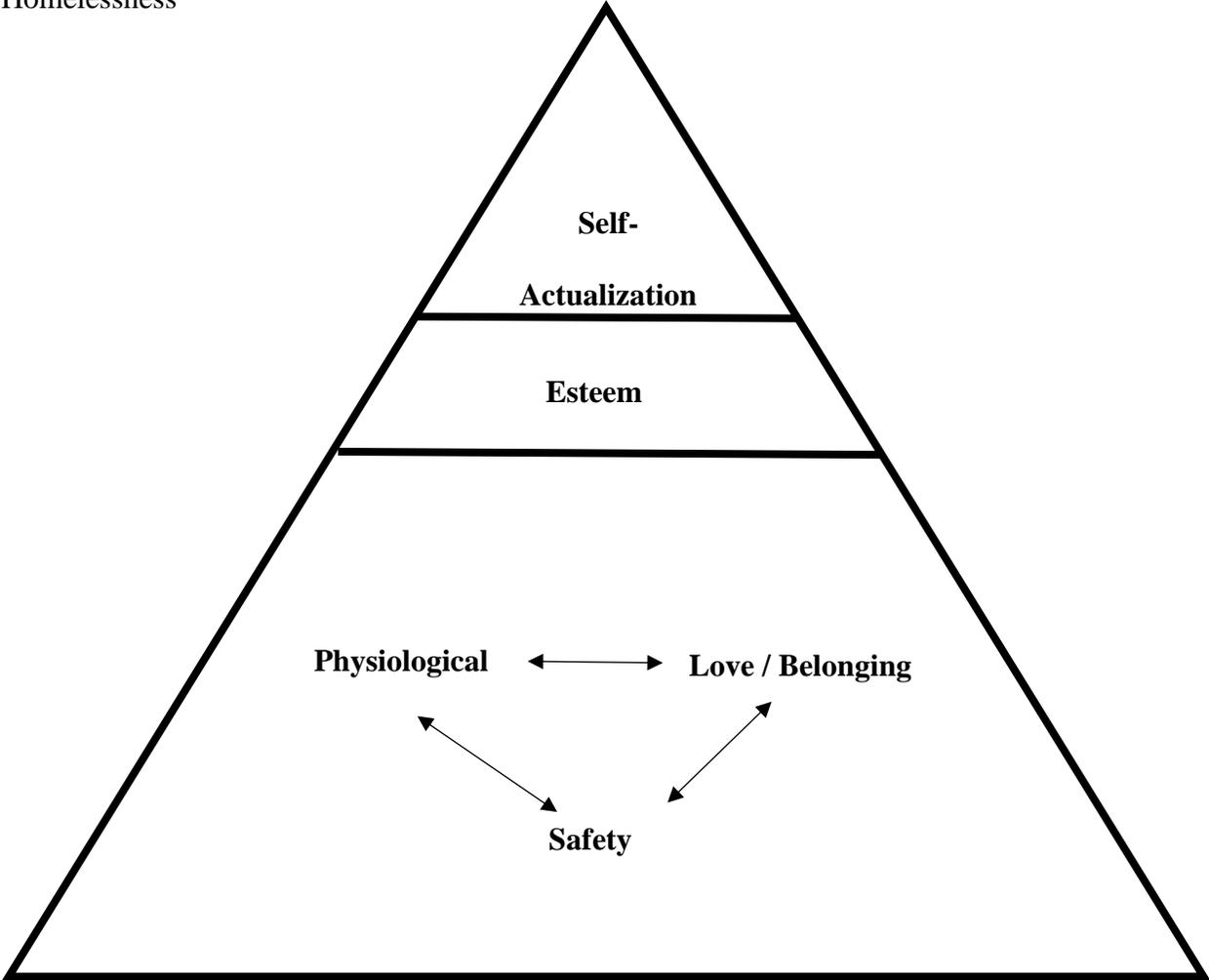


Figure 2. Maslow's Revised Hierarchy of Needs: Individuals with Canines Experiencing Homelessness



The Interviews

The entire interview process with Donna and Ethan was more unorthodox than expected. The researchers were met with kindness, friendship, and compassion. The researchers were open minded going into the interviews but were expecting some hesitation and deflection, but Donna greeted them with open arms and immediately invited the researchers to her home. She had such a pride in her home, as she made it herself. Donna and Ethan's answers had frequently corresponding themes yet such unique tangents that make their stories even more powerful. Donna was very forthcoming with information and details about her life. Through the somber look in her eyes, it was obvious she had seen a lot in her life (Figure 3). Ethan, a man of few words, was honest and spoke more with his facial features than with his words. Ethan's weathered voice was telling of his emotional battle (Figure 4). Donna and Ethan have had such unique yet such similar experiences. They have seen so much trauma and strife but are able to see such joy and love within their lives too. Quality of life is different for everyone and Ethan and Donna were no exception. Donna shared that her quality of life is about love and freedom. Ethan stated his quality of life is just letting life be great. Both participants shared their lessons from being homeless and interestingly, they both exhibited the concept of being cautious of who you let into your life. Donna let Shorty into her life, and shortly after, Shorty let Mini into Donna's life. Shorty and Mini helped create a home environment for Ethan and Donna that in turn impacted their quality of life. Donna expressed her dogs are her life and her everything, Ethan expressed that dogs are full of love.

Figure 3. Donna



Figure 4. Ethan



Donna's Background Information

Donna identified as a female in her 40's and when asked about race / ethnicity, she responded "all of the above." Donna revealed that she was raised in a "wealthy, racist family" in Michigan and was told by her mother, "Don't go with those across the tracks people!" Donna responded to her mother with, "SEE YA! . . . I'm gonna date 'em too. "She's (Mother) gonna say "I can't have you in my life anymore if you date them." Donna responded, "I'm like I WOULD'VE DONE THIS YEARS AGO. I love her, poor thing." Donna shared that in the late 1980's she was a hairdresser in Hillsboro, NC and was making a good living. "I made \$150,000 a year when I was 21 years old and I'm like this is great, I'm gonna go see the world." Donna shared that she was "married to two Peruvians and my son's father is from Brazil so I've got no issues with race." At the time of the dialogue with Donna, her son was 22 years and she had not seen him in 10 years. Her mother obtained custody of her son when he was 12 years old. The same year her son was taken away from her, she miscarried twin daughters at 6 months gestation. Donna stated that she is

sort of restoring my relationship with my family that I chose to take out of my life.

Because first they took me out of their life because they didn't understand me and took my son because I was helping homeless people and thought it was crazy for writing poetry and wearing a hat. It's a long story. I raged. I became an alcoholic. I got into an abusive relationship. I didn't care about anything anymore. I used to scream at god, I love god. I love my relationship, I go to the Hari Krishna temple, I've read books on Buddhism, Daoism, Taoism, All-ism. Came out of that. Somehow, I came out of it. I drink in moderation. I don't do drugs. I don't allow drugs. There's no drugs allowed here. Marijuana, pot-smoking's fine with me, I don't even smoke pot.

Donna indicated that she does not consider herself homeless but is “*living off the grid.*” When asked how long she has been living off the grid, she indicated that is hard to say

Because I’ve been living in tiny houses and campgrounds, I’ve been living in apartments on and off, I’ve been trying to live off the grid on and off. I’ve lived in a Volkswagen camper van for ten years. I mean I’ve been aspiring my whole life. I don’t know how to answer that. I’ve been off the grid, okay, I haven’t had a bank account in twenty-five (25) years, I haven’t paid taxes in twenty-five (25) years, I haven’t really worked in ten (10) years, technically, paying taxes. I’ve lived out here... that’s a very hard question.

Donna’s current living arrangement is a “*camp*” comprised of a main living area that is covered on all sides, a front porch area that is covered by a tarp (Figure 5), a separate tent with a latrine that she called the “*poo-poo tent*” (Figure 6), and a showering area with a shower curtain for privacy (Figure 7). There is electricity that runs to her camp from a house on adjoining property that enables Donna to cook in an electric skillet, run a small refrigerator, operate two fans and a radio (Figure 8). She indicated that the property owner “*allows her to live there.*” Donna has a bed with a memory foam topper (Figure 9) as well as a guest bed (Figure 10) that she acquired while dumpster diving at Bed, Bath, and Beyond. Donna also has a designated area for her dogs and their cage inside of her home (Figure 11).

Figure 5. Donna's Home



Figure 6. The “poo-poo tent”



Figure 7. The Shower



Figure 8. Electric Devices



Figure 9. Donna's Bed



Figure 10. The Guest Bed



Figure 11. The Dog Cage



Ethan's Background Information

Ethan, aged 36, identified as male and when asked about race / ethnicity, he responded "I guess white." He was born in and spend most of his childhood in North Carolina. At age 16 years old he moved to Florida, where he met his fiancée, Crystal. At approximately age 26, he and Crystal returned to North Carolina to be closer to his mother. Soon after returning to North Carolina, Ethan and Crystal were in an auto accident and Crystal was killed. Ethan received an insurance settlement from the accident and he bought a house and land in Cedar Grove, NC. He started working construction

for this guy under the table pretty much, building houses, and the whole time I didn't know he was selling drugs. And I ended up going to federal prison for eight years for just being associated with him! You know, I build houses. He let me roof, side, box and molding. And um, ugh. I worked 9 years and then the federal, the US marshals and the DEA, and they took me to prison and they asked me a lot of questions that I really didn't. And they took my house and my land from me. I got out a prison so...

Ethan was released from federal prison in Virginia on December 17, 2017 with \$85 and a bus ticket to Chapel Hill, North Carolina. At the time of we spoke with Ethan, he has been at Donna's camp in the woods for 3 days. Prior to Donna inviting Ethan to stay at her camp, he slept on Franklin Street from December 17, 2017 until June 23, 2018.

Factors that Influence Well-Being

Answering the specific research questions, Donna and Ethan both expressed that the most important factor that influences their well-being is being loved and accepted for who they are, despite their circumstances. When asked how their companion canines influence their well-being, Ethan and Donna stated that the dogs provide unconditional love and acceptance, the need

that is most critical to them (Figure 12). Thus, a feeling of love and acceptance is a powerful factor in the lives of Ethan and Donna. Experiencing homelessness, understandably, alters one's well-being and changes how a person perceives things effecting their life. Donna and Ethan were no exception, their circumstances may have influenced their well-being, but they created a bond with two dogs that allowed them to influence their well-being positively.

Figure 12. Donna and Ethan with Shorty and Mini



How a Family Comes Together: Donna, Shorty, and Mini

Um, long story short, I was living in a tiny house that I've purchased in Hillsboro. Like a real tiny house. A shed that I was making into a tiny house. On Watson's property and he was doing it put out or get out. Found a friend in Michigan who was like I need you to come and help me. I'm going to lose my house. I took a leap of faith. I took my dog, Gracie Rose, who was a pit pup of eleven (11). And my friend broke her wrist and I was helping her raise her puppies. Long story short, it blew up, it was a mess. I got stuck, I couldn't bring her back to the Amtrak. I was devastated. I came back here and my friend Robert said you can come out and stay here. Because I didn't want to go back to Watson's. And I had to leave... -tearing up- and um, so. I went to Virginia with my friend Rob and his brother Sean said I just got this puppy and my dad said I can't keep it. I'm like oh my god I just lost my dog. I want her, what's her name? So, he said her name is Shorty. Shorty knows her name so you can't change it. I said okay. So, then I met Shorty and I'm like oh my god, she looked like a little turd, she was so cute. Fat, and chubby with this little head. She grew into herself. So that's how I acquired her.

"Shorty...I believe, like, people rescue animals, the animals rescue us. And uh, Shorty's my love of my life, she got pregnant, I kinda wanted it, I kinda didn't because what I went through with Mandy's pups. It was horrible, eleven (11) with the poop-a-torium in the room, and I could never do that again."

(Shorty) "Came out here and then she had her puppies, on Easter Sunday morning exactly. It was so auspicious. So then Mini was the second one born. I heard the beep. Shorty's sitting there going -growling sounds- I woke up and I'm like don't growl at it,

it's a puppy! It's your puppy! She didn't know what the hell it was! She's not even a year old barely."

"Mini's like -gasping- and she wasn't moving. And I said I think she's dead. So, he (Robert – friend) picks her up, I said take it, I don't know. And she jerked, she came to life, so she's a miracle. She was little, she was the runt, she could barely walk, couldn't find the nipple, I thought she was blind, and she was... her dexterity and all that shit was not right. And anyway, she's fine. So, that's how Mini came into my life"

Homelessness Experiences

Donna and Ethan are both experiencing homelessness in different ways, Donna does not even identify as homeless. However, she has learned much from not having a concrete address.

I've had everything in my life, materially and physically that I've ever wanted. And that, I live like a minimalist. The most important thing I've learned is at the end of the day, you come into this world alone and you leave alone. So, when you're living your life, live it to the fullest, things bog people down. Mentality of "I need my- what's my phone charged at?" The less we have... right, you know, you get on the bus, no one says hello, they can't hear you because they have the—the most important thing I learned is quality of life is not about things. The quality of life is about animals, you know, birds, this beautiful canopy of green, for me. The only thing I'm missing is the ocean. the most important thing I've learned is... I don't need a house, I don't need my car, I don't need my driver's license, I don't need my Prada purse, I don't need my Louis Vuitton bag, because it never really made me happy. This makes me happy. And I've also learned that most people are very unhappy because they're striving to have things they never had and they want them. They don't have this and they want it. They have love but they're miserable. Uh,

simplicity, inner peace, harmony, a relationship to god, whatever you call him or her.

That's what it's about. Period. Mini! Shorty! That's what makes me happy!

When asked about the struggle of finding shelter, Donna expressed some frustration about individuals trying to help those experiencing homelessness

My hurdles have been controlling people that want to help you for personal gain so they can control you or belittle you or berate you. My biggest hurdles have been freaking men that say they want to help you but really, they want you to put out or get out. My other hurdles have been I'm doing this for you in the name of god when they're really just doing it for their own personal gain. Controlling people, people who say they want to help you that really just want personal gain. Ego feeding, people who need to feed their ego saying I'm helping someone in the name of Jesus and it's really just about them wanting to control you because they want to go to bed with you. Those have been my biggest hurdles. And it's usually been men.

Ethan's lessons from experiencing homelessness echoed from his past.

"I've learned – since homelessness – watch out who you associate with. I mean even if you're not getting into trouble, per se, because of them, right down to the fact that, the police are like hey well he's hanging out with that guy so – So he must be doing the same thing. I mean you gotta be careful who you associate with and uh, the sun, I've learned the sun hurts."

When he was asked about hurdles to finding shelter, Ethan shared insight into life at the shelters.

"I don't really want to go to the shelter because they don't have space anyway. The biggest hurdle to me is finding somewhere I want to be. Something I'm okay with – if I'm going to stay somewhere, I want to be happy with where I'm at. I don't just wanna – I got

a roof over and it's raining, you know, I mean like the Durham Mission, I tried that for like 3 days and like nope. Not happening. Finding a space that fits."

Definition of Quality of Life

Donna's definition of quality of life was all about freedom, independence, and nature.

*Quality of life is what you make it. . . quality of life to me is living with freedom, and with authenticity. You know, I've read a lot in my life and Eckhart Tolle wrote the Power of Now. Living in the moment, living off nature, living like this. ... quality of life to me is being in harmony with yourself, being at harmony with nature, and pulling it all together. It's about letting go of people that don't fit your life and it's about bringing people into your life that are quality and um, I mean this is like a slice of heaven. I go to bed at night, and the frogs lull me to sleep. The cicadas are starting to come out. The fireflies, the dragonflies, I mean, what else? It's about love and compassion... I will fight for my rights for my freedom. I will fight for my rights later on with the people who treat me like garbage because they associate me with the other *inaudible*. I can't explain it. It's some kind of energy, I cannot explain it (Figure 13).*

Ethan spoke his definition with a heartfelt grin. His definition was centered on going with the flow. With an optimist's perspective, Ethan expressed that he concentrates on his blessings and that he looks at the glass half full. With a relaxed posture, Ethan stated,

"I think the people you're around have a big part of it. Quality of life is... life is great! Why not let it be that way? You gotta kinda... life is good. And why not let it be good? I concentrate on my blessings, I count my blessings and not whatever is... look at the glass half full, or a quarter full, or however full it might be. I always try to look on that. It kind of helps me stay happy."

Figure 13. Donna giving a hug to the tree that supports her home.



Canine influence on Quality of Life

Donna became emotional when this question was asked.

Oh my god. Shorty has run away seven or eight times since the dogs (her puppies), looking for them or looking for me. Every time I felt like, I don't even want to live if I can't have her in my life. Sometimes I'm like I can't handle this anymore. It's heartbreaking. So, she's tethered down, it breaks my heart. She's on a lead. She's microchipped. She got out the other day because my friend was here. She was trying to put Mini in the cage, and her, and she's like just let her go! And I'm like I can't. Caught her at Home Depot, she runs to Home Depot. I paid over hundreds of dollars to get her out of the Durham thing (animal shelter). Um, Shorty! She's like a Houdini! One night I put her in there and after I went to bed, first time, I'm sleeping and all of a sudden Shorty jumps on me. And I'm like how'd you get out?! She opened the thing (kennel). So, she either goes into the kennel with Mini or she's out there on a very tight collar to sleep on her own. It has to be that way. My dogs are my life.

Donna compared the relationship she has with her dog to that of a child, “*Shorty is the love of my life, like my child who got taken away from me. She's my baby... I'm like her mom*” (Caines, 2016; Slatter et al., 2012; Walsh, 2009) (Figure 14). Again, unconditional love was brought up. Donna was looking at Shorty as she was talking about her mother-child relationship,

“My god. Shorty is the love of my life, she's like the child I had that got taken away because I was helping homeless people (Figure 15). Mini, I've been with since she was born, she's like my baby (Figure 16). She's my baby, she's like the other baby. The dynamics of the two of them together is amazing. They're like playmates, and I'm like her

mom. It's my life. I mean, I don't know. Just, it's just oh, total unconditional love. Dogs are my life."

Donna told a story about a friend of hers who got to pick one of Shorty's puppies when they were born. The friend shared with Donna that Hector (the puppy) is the only thing that could make her happy right now (Hawkins et al., 2017, Rhoades et al., 2014).

Ethan answered this question with a question, *"What is it, really, about a dog? They just make you feel better, you know?"* Throughout his answer, Ethan smiled and watched the dogs as they laid at his feet. He said that dogs just make him happy. Expressing feelings of unconditional love and acceptance, Ethan shrugged,

"They've impacted it in a good way. They're- like I said dogs can't- they just make me happy. Dogs are great. And then they fall asleep on your feet, and whatever it is- they can't - don't shit on you."

Through Ethan's life, he has come face to face with some individuals, and circumstances, who/that have been disrespectful and harsh to his coarse exterior. His experience with Donna's dogs, and his own dogs, showed him a compassion and love that not everyone has given him.

"They just love you, man! They can't, they just- my favorite thing about them is they make me happy, man. They're cool. They're calm, and they come trampling up. Like this morning, Mini!"

He expressed that the dogs make him feel more at peace and they help create more of a homelike environment, *"Without the dogs here, it wouldn't feel as homey"* (Labrecque & Walsh, 2011).

Figure 14. Donna with Shorty and Mini



Figure 15. Shorty



Figure 16. Mini



How companion canines have changed their lives

Donna's answer was very insightful and personal for her to share with the researchers.

Since my son got taken away from me when he was twelve (12) and now he's twenty-two (22) and my dog died that year, and I lost everything. I lost twins at 6 months pregnant. I was married to a Peruvian, I was 6 months pregnant and I lost Isabella and Gabriella. Miscarried. My father died that year. I was living in Hillsboro. My dog Cassie died at the end of all this horrible year. (Donna tears up) I loved Cassie, she saved my life. When she died I didn't have another dog for 9-10 years. I couldn't bear losing another pet. Then I had to leave Gracie. My dogs are the family I don't have in my life. And I love them. I don't care if I have one friend. I have Shorty, now I have Mini, and uh, by the grace of god, I am blessed with people who help me. And I work. I can afford my own dog food. The sheriff came up and was like... I don't know how it happened, but he like brought me a 50-pound bag of dog food, collars, and halters, and I mean I didn't even ask him. People are amazing. You know, not all people. People are amazing. My dogs have been my grounding force and my family while I've had no family for the last ten years because I chose to take them out of my life. And their unconditional love. And we all need unconditional love. And it hasn't always been easy. There's days where I'm like Shorty you ran away, this time you're staying. And I'm just like I can't. She's so loving. SHORTY! So, my dogs are everything to me.

Ethan's response was very lighthearted and cheerful.

"I got dogs around me! Yeah, they me bring back – because I've always had a dog. I had dogs when I was going up to prison. They just – they make you feel at peace and – without the dogs here it wouldn't be as homey."

“Yesterday she had left (Donna), she (Mini) had went and got on her back on top of my feet and put one arm over her face like this and one like that, and I looked down and I said oh my god.”

Research Consistencies & Themes

Both Donna and Ethan told stories and gave answers that were consistent with the research, almost flawlessly. From discussing personal trauma to sharing happiness, Donna and Ethan were open books and more than willing to share their experiences.

Donna reminisced on her dog Cassie, stating that she loved Cassie and she saved Donna’s life (Dotson & Hyatt, 2008; Walsh, 2009). Donna paused, and her eyes welled up when thinking about her relationship with Cassie, *“I didn’t want to live if I can’t have her.”* Aliment et al. (2016) discussed how those experiencing homelessness with companion canines are often encouraged to surrender their pets to shelter, Donna reported she was devastated when she had to leave her dogs or when she lost her dogs. Those experiencing homelessness often have to pay to get their dogs back from the shelter (Aliment et al., 2016), and Donna was no exception. Donna’s answers to the questions almost seemed like rehearsed quotes from previous research on this topic. Donna expressed how dogs are healing, they are a grounding force that bring simplicity and inner peace (Caines, 2016; Irvine, 2013; Marsa-Samboloa et al., 2017; Silcox et al., 2014).

Ethan discussed how dogs just make people feel better (Urbansky & Lazenby, 2012). According to Ethan, *“dogs don’t shit on you,”* implying that dogs provide salvation, atonement, second chances, and love (Irvine, 2013; Slatter et al., 2012).

Both Donna and Ethan expressed how dogs can provide unconditional love and happiness, and as Ethan stated, *“They just love you, man”* (Hawkins et al., 2017; Oyama, et al., 2017; Rhoades et al., 2014; Slatter et al., 2012). Consistent with Bender et al., both Donna and

Ethan faced adversity surrounding their circumstances (2007). Donna reported that controlling people were a major hurdle for her, especially in her times of need. Ethan warned to, “*watch who you associate with.*” Donna and Ethan both discussed that they have learned and there is much to learn from the canine population, overarchingly the concept of unconditional love (Mudaly et al., 2014; Mueller, 2014; Slatter et al., 2012; Oyama et al., 2017) Like many individuals, Donna expressed how her dogs are her family, her children, and her whole life (Walsh, 2009; Caines, 2016). Ethan followed suit in that he felt the dogs bring a sense of home (Labrecque & Walsh, 2011). Fascinatingly, there was nothing that Donna or Ethan said that was unique from the literature.

Limitations and Strengths

The most unexpected limitation for this study was that Donna did not identify as homeless, however, she fit the working definition utilized for this study. She identifies with the phrase “living off the grid,” thus Donna’s homelessness experience is different than those who are stereotypically seen sleeping on concrete ground with a box as a home. It would be valuable to ask future participants how they identify their housing/lack thereof status. The researchers decided to move forward with Donna and Ethan’s interview because their housing status fit the definition that was being used for the study. Being in the middle of summer in Durham, North Carolina, this climate is very different than the middle of winter in Colorado, thus this research brings to light only a small section of the influence that companion canines have on their caregivers who are experiencing homelessness. As with ethnographic case studies, the small sample size emphasizes that particular individual’s experience, not the general population, thus findings may not be universal or generalizable. With an interview style study, the presence of the researcher may have affected the way the participant responded to the questions, thus participant

bias playing a role in the information gathered. There is not much data specifically about this population because it is not easy to gain access to this population, those experiencing homelessness with companion canines. Donna's alcohol consumption was an unexpected limitation, as the researchers were unaware of the beverage having alcohol in it until after the interview was concluded.

Though there are numerous limitations, the strengths have a presence that makes this study so unique. Donna and Ethan provided a rare opportunity for the researchers to have open access to the living quarters of persons who are living "off the grid" and shared such deep and intimate details of their lives (Figure 17). Interestingly, Donna was the first person the researchers came across in the search for those experiences homelessness and she met the inclusion criteria for this study (Figure 18). The data collection method adds such a rich picture for this study. The study was audiotaped and transcribed by the researcher. This transcription was reviewed and verified by the graduate advisor to compile results collaboratively. Additionally, the use of photography allows for a physical portrait of the world of the participants.

Future research

There are many directions that this research can take moving forward. The influence companion animals have on men versus women should be investigated further addressing factors of safety as well as companionship. Much of the homeless population is comprised of veterans (Fitzpatrick et al., 2015), it would be curious to find how their companions canines influence their quality of life and if it differs from regular civilians' quality of life. This study was conducted in Durham, North Carolina, future research should investigate how participants express their bond with their companion canines differently in different regions of the state, and

even country. June weather in North Carolina is very different than December weather in North Carolina. Exploring the importance of the bond between companion canines and their caregivers in different seasons may bring light to different roles and characteristics of the bond. Through the phenomenological approach of an ethnographic case study and the use of narrative photography, this study is able to encapsulate an understanding of the triumphs and tribulations that arise while experiencing homelessness with a companion canine.

Figure 17. Ethan, Researcher Seibel, Donna, Researcher Lookabaugh



Figure 18. Donna and a Walmart gift card that says “love”



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APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER

EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board
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600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office 252-744-2914  · Fax 252-744-2284  · www.ecu.edu/ORIC/irb

Notification of Initial Approval: Expedited

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
To: [Emily Seibel](#)
CC: [Sandra Triebenbacher](#)
Date: 5/30/2018
Re: [UMCIRB 17-002791](#)
Homeless and Pets

I am pleased to inform you that your Expedited Application was approved. Approval of the study and any consent form(s) is for the period of 5/30/2018 to 5/29/2019. The research study is eligible for review under expedited category #6, 7. The Chairperson (or designee) deemed this study no more than minimal risk.

Changes to this approved research may not be initiated without UMCIRB review except when necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the participant. All unanticipated problems involving risks to participants and others must be promptly reported to the UMCIRB. The investigator must submit a continuing review/closure application to the UMCIRB prior to the date of study expiration. The Investigator must adhere to all reporting requirements for this study.

Approved consent documents with the IRB approval date stamped on the document should be used to consent participants (consent documents with the IRB approval date stamp are found under the Documents tab in the study workspace).

The approval includes the following items:

Name	Description
Appendix C - Demographic Survey.docx	Data Collection Sheet
Demographic Survey	Surveys and Questionnaires
Interview Prompts	Interview/Focus Group Scripts/Questions
Letter of Consent	Consent Forms
Proposal for IRB	Study Protocol or Grant Application

APPENDIX B: LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT

Dear Participant,

I am a student at East Carolina University in the Human Development and Family Sciences department. I am asking you to please participate in my research study called, "The Influence of Companion Canines on the Quality of Life of Individuals Experiencing Homelessness."

The purpose of this research study is to determine the impact that companion canines have on the quality of life of their caregivers who are experiencing homelessness. I am hopeful to learn how companion canines impact socialization, access to resources, personal well-being, and other topics discovered upon interview. Your participation is completely voluntary.

You are invited to partake in this study because you have met all of the inclusion criteria for the study. The amount of time necessary for participation is approximately thirty minutes.

If you agree to partake, you will:

1. Be asked questions regarding your living situation, your relationship with your companion animal, and your overall personal well-being (physical, emotional, and mental). _____ (initials)
2. Have our conversation audio taped for transcription purposes _____ (initials)
3. Have a photograph taken of you and your canine companion _____ (initials)

This research is overseen by the ECU Institutional Review Board. Therefore, some of the IRB members or the IRB staff may need to review my data, thus your identity will be known to them. However, I will take precautions to see that anyone not authorized to that information will not be given that information.

If you have questions about your rights during your participation of this study, please call the Office of Research Integrity & Compliance (ORIC) at 252-744-2914 during the week between 8:00 am and 5:00 pm. If you have a concern or a complaint to report, please contact the Director of ORIC at 252-744-1971.

You do not have to take part in this research and you are free to stop at any time. If you decide to participate, please continue reading and to the next page. Thank you for taking time to enlighten my research.

Sincerely, Emily C. Seibel, Principal Investigator

APPENDIX C: DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

1. Your current age: _____
2. Gender: _____ Female _____ Male _____ Other _____ Prefer not to answer
3. Race/ethnicity:
 - _____ American Indian or Alaska Native
 - _____ Asian Indian (Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Other Asian)
 - _____ Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin (Mexican, Mexican-American, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Other Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin)
 - _____ Native Hawaiian (Guamanian, Chamorro, Samoan, Other Pacific Islander)
 - _____ White or Caucasian
 - _____ Other race not listed
 - _____ Prefer not to answer
4. Age of your companion canine (dog):
 - _____ 0 – 1 years
 - _____ 1 – 4 years
 - _____ 5 – 7 years
 - _____ 8+ years
5. Breed of your companion canine (dog): _____
6. How long you have had your companion canine (dog):
 - _____ 0 – 12 months
 - _____ 1 – 2 years
 - _____ 3 – 5 years

_____ 5+ years

7. How long you have been experiencing homelessness:

_____ 0 – 6 months

_____ 6 – 12 months

_____ 12 months – 2 years

_____ 2 – 5 years

_____ 5+ years

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROMPTS

Please respond to the following questions pertaining to your companion canine, quality of life, and experience of homelessness.

1. Tell your story in relationship to (companion canine's name).
2. What is your definition of quality of life?
3. How has (companion canine's name) impacted your quality of life?
4. What is your favorite thing about (companion canine's name)? Why?
5. What has been the most important thing you have learned from experiencing homelessness?
6. What have been your biggest hurdles to finding shelter?
7. How would your life be different without (companion canine's name)/ How has your life changed since (companion canine's name) has come into your life?
8. What have you learned from (companion canine's name)?