

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF EMOTIONAL BONDS OF DOG OWNERS DURING PERSONAL CRISIS SITUATIONS

ABSTRACT

Aim: To explore the experiences and emotional bonds amongst dog owners and their pet dogs during personal crisis situations. The central research question for this study is “What are the lived experiences of emotional bonds of dog owners during personal crisis situations?” **Design:** A transcendental phenomenological approach was adopted to focus on the participants’ emotional bonds with their dogs during personal crisis situations. Nine dog owners (2 males, 7 females, ages 18-52) were asked to reflect on their experiences and interactions with their pets during situations of personal crisis through a series of semi-structured interviews. A qualitative approach was adopted in order to capture the subjective, personal accounts and interaction between dog owners and their dogs with a specific emphasis on the emotional bonds formed through interactions with their dogs during personal crisis situations. **Method:** Participants provided responses to a series of semi-structured interview questions relating to their emotional bonds with their dog during personal crisis situations. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to analyse the interview accounts. **Results:** Two themes emerged from the study. The first theme relates to owners’ seeing anthropomorphic behaviours in their dogs. Empathy and perception of care from the dog were facilitated by an emotional contagion that occurred between them, which gave the impression that the dog possessed human-like qualities. The second theme related to the sense of presence between dogs and their owners, and this gave rise to impressions of attentiveness and behaviours related to care-giving and care-receiving between dogs and their owners. The themes overlap, suggesting that feelings of companionship between dogs and their owners, as well as the resulting emotional bonds, is experienced through exchanges of verbal, and non-verbal emotional cues. **Conclusion:** This finding seems to suggest that the emotional understanding established between dog owner and dog is more valuable than understanding the content of the problem. As such, simply listening to someone’s issue and understanding their emotions may be enough to help the person feel better.

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