Socio-Economic Factors in Companion Animal Relinquishment on the Sunshine Coast, Australia

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Abstract

There is a critical need to reduce the surrender rates of companion animals by understanding the socio-economic circumstances of caretakers. This research analyzed questionnaires with 117 relinquishers and 13 interviews. Interviews were conducted with relinquishers and staff at Sunshine Coast Animal Refuge Society and Sunshine Coast Animal Pound. Most companion animals relinquished were from litters and around half were de-sexed and micro-chipped. A caretaker's living situation was a critical reason for relinquishment. Humans need to understand the time and space needs of companion species, how these might change with time, and the relationality between humans and companion animals. Alongside regulated breeding and accessible sterilization, shelter staff and other organizations might offer more tailored solutions, especially temporary care, during times of socio-economic crisis. Fundamentally, individuals need to critically examine their commitment to caretaking, but solutions are also structural and should be tailored to the underpinning socio-economic geography of different regions.

Keywords

socio-economic – companion animal – relinquishment – structural solutions – geographic variation
Introduction

Around 200,000 cats and dogs are euthanized in Australia each year, although most are treatable and adoptable (APWF, 2015). Companion animal relinquishment contributes to overcrowded shelters, community perceptions that there are “nuisance” animals, and the ill health of professionals involved with euthanasia (Alberthsen et al., 2013). A better understanding of the circumstances that lead to relinquishment will lead to more effective management strategies and alternatives, ultimately reducing nonhuman euthanasia.

Risk factors for relinquishment occur in both humans and nonhumans (Salman et al., 1998). Human risk factors include lifestyle changes (e.g., moving, travel, divorce), health (e.g., allergies), age, gender, income, education, living situation (e.g., “non-pet-friendly” rental, number of animals, family makeup), cost and source of companion animal (e.g., shelter, unwanted gift), and lack of knowledge about companion animals; whereas nonhuman risk factors may be behavioral (e.g., time requirements), health, size, breed, age, and life changes (DiGiacomo, Arluke, & Patronek, 1998; Scarlett, Salman, New, & Kass 1999; Irvine, 2003; Marston, Bennett, & Coleman, 2010; Dolan, Scotto, Slater, & Weiss, 2015). Despite costs of acquisition and care, Dolan et al. (2015) found that the majority of people on lower incomes did not relinquish their companion animals for financial reasons. Social and economic conditions frequently overlap—regardless of absolute income, casualization, under-employment, fluctuations in job markets, and housing insecurity are complexly intertwined.

Companion animal relinquishments are being framed as a problem of human society—one in which humans, rather than nonhumans, need to change their precursor mindsets and behaviors (Irvine, 2003; Fournier & Geller, 2004). For example, humans may believe there are behavioral differences between breeds, or that nonhumans misbehave to spite the caretaker (Salman et al., 1998). Where relinquishers cite nonhuman behavior as their reason for surrender, behaviors include aggression to both humans and nonhumans, and property destruction, but these may be related to the number of companion animals in the household; neuter status; training; age changes; length of ownership; and the source of the companion animal, which are resolvable (Salman et al., 2000). Additionally, excess breeding is cited as a critical challenge for relinquishment (DiGiacomo et al., 1998; Alberthsen et al., 2013). Companion animal relinquishment may be due to individual irresponsibility, commodification of animals (e.g., breeding, disposability), or anthropocentrism, albeit these are intertwined with structural factors that bring about the social and economic circumstances of caretakers.
Fournier and Geller (2004) propose a “human intervention” framework comprising guidelines for pre-acquisition training, human interaction with potential adoptees, and financial incentives for organizations with best practices. Lambert (2014) argues that the pre- and post-adoption counseling and post-adoption follow-up calls or visits are critical to companion animal education, particularly regarding training, de-sexing, and responsible care. Many interventions, however, presuppose that companion animals surrendered to shelters were originally purchased from organizations that provide such advice, whereas the reality may be that companion animals may have been sourced elsewhere without the caregiver’s exposure to such education. Reducing human-related risk factors for relinquishment through appropriate human knowledge, behaviors, and predispositions are profound forces, but cannot be understood without reference to their interplay with the socio-economic conditions of relinquishers.

Nuanced studies are needed that highlight the critical socio-economic experiences of those who decide to relinquish a companion animal (Irvine, 2003), through exploring the experiences of caretakers with companion animals prior to their surrender and the measures or strategies that may have prevented surrender. In addition, there is need for the systematic analysis of relinquishment or intake data, including the numbers relinquished and reasons for doing so; numbers unsterilized, adopted, and/or stray; reasons for lack of sterilization; and the demographics, knowledge and maintenance behaviors, and characteristics of the caretakers (Fournier & Geller, 2004).

Institutions may define companion animals as commitments for life and characterize the experience quite differently from the viewpoint of the caretaker, often negatively characterizing relinquishers because of their role in euthanasia (DiGiacomo et al., 1998). Shelters frequently rely on voluntary labor and consequently experience the lack of resources to set up and analyze trends (Wenstrup & Dowidchuk, 1999). Duxbury, Jackson, Line, and Anderson (2003) stress the need for institutions to implement effective management as well as education. This research therefore analyzes intake survey data from two organizations on the Sunshine Coast, Australia, a region of relatively high unemployment and high retirees (Carter, Dyer, & Sharma, 2007). Through in-depth interviews, it then explores the experiences of relinquishers and the views of shelter staff on institutional factors that might effect structural change.
Materials and Methods

The Sunshine Coast Animal Refuge Society (SCARS) is a non-euthanasia animal shelter that attempts to re-home surrendered companion animals and has pre-acquisition training and ongoing availability of staff for advice. Counseling prior to relinquishment is offered, including alternatives to relinquishment. Relinquishers are likely to witness adoptions while at the facility, enhancing expectations that their companion animal will find a new home. SCARS is experiencing increasing companion animal surrenders and a longer waiting list for accepting surrenders. Volunteers help to staff this facility, which receives some public donations of cash or commodities such as food.

This research analyzed 148 intake survey forms held by SCARS, covering the period January to October 2015. A second stage of data collection was based on an amended intake form containing additional questions regarding the length of companion animal ownership, time taken to make decision, and number of companion animals in the home; it was administered by SCARS during November 2015 to March 2016, with 31 respondents. Clients relinquishing companion animals in the second data-gathering stage had the option to self-nominate for a semi-structured interview, to which ten relinquishers agreed.

Four relinquishers were interviewed by telephone, with the discussions recorded, and the remaining six responded via email. Interview questions explored demographics of humans (including time with companion animal, number of companion animals owned) and companion animals (age, breed); reasons for relinquishment; source of companion animals; human and non-human health; financial circumstances; advice, support, and services sourced during difficulties; and factors that may have enabled them to keep their companion animal. The emotional component of surrendering a companion animal and potential to avoid or misrepresent reasons for doing so (DiGiacomo et al., 1998), and a need for confidentiality and sensitivity with the surrendering caretaker who can suffer guilt and social stigma (Irvine, 2003), were kept in mind during interviewing. Three staff members of SCARS were also interviewed based on unstructured questions, enabling in-depth responses and reflections on structural matters affecting trends in companion-animal surrender.

The Sunshine Coast Council Animal Pound (SCC Pound) does not provide client services, and instead treats surrender incidents as part of their “animal control” program. If questioned, the SCC Pound staff inform relinquishers that SCARS (which is adjacent to SCC Pound) will be contacted to determine whether the companion animal can be taken into their system—which requires that the companion animal passes a “temperament test.” No guarantees are given as to the fate of the companion animal.
The SCC Pound was provided with the amended intake form for relinquishers to complete during November 2015 to March 2016. The SCC Pound have a small staff, with little time to support or encourage relinquishers to participate in the survey; however, 12 completed forms were collected from the SCC Pound at the end of Stage 2. No interview opportunities were volunteered from the SCC Pound respondents; however, an informal discussion with one staff member provided an understanding of the staffing limits and procedures used at the Pound.

Due to the low numbers of survey responses from SCC Pound, and many respondents from both facilities not completing all questions, the relevant intake data from both facilities was pooled. Data were entered into an Excel spreadsheet and descriptive statistics such as frequency histograms were produced. Texts and emails of interviews were transcribed utilizing Qualitative Thematic Analysis, or QTA (Rivas, 2012, p. 366), to highlight emergent key themes. Utilized in data coding schemes (Boyatzis, 1998; Saldana, 2009), QTA has recently been argued to be a complete analysis in and of itself (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Rivas, 2012).

QTA is performed as a repeating process, firstly coding for general themes in a flow of “open coding” (Rivas, 2012, p. 370, citing Glaser & Strauss, 1967), then revisiting the material once general themes are discovered, seeking more detailed aspects of the general themes. As a multi-step process moving from “manifest to latent” (Boyatzis, 1998) themes, QTA has the advantage of deepening the researchers’ relationship with data, revealing more and more insight. Interviewee quotes and companion names are reported using a pseudonym to protect confidentiality, and additional data gathered during stage 2, such as length of companion animal ownership, are reported with interviewee quotes verbatim to contextualize their experiences of companion animal surrender.

**Insights from Intake Survey**

There were 117 survey respondents and 192 companion animals relinquished during the entire time period from January 2015 to March 2016. Of the 13 companion animals surrendered to the SCC Pound, eleven had been paid for and were adults, and relinquishment reasons were stated as moving, work commitments, and homelessness. These data are similar to the 179 companion animals surrendered to SCARS, except that there were far more litters (costing nothing to the caretaker) surrendered to the SCARS, possibly due to their no-kill policy.

Twenty-six percent of survey respondents relinquished more than one companion animal at the same time, accounting for 55% of all nonhumans
relinquished. A total of 28 dogs were relinquished with at least one other (2 middle-aged dogs relinquished together, a dam with 3 pups, and 22 pups without a dam), and sixty-six cats were relinquished with at least one other (2 old cats relinquished together, 2 middle-aged cats relinquished together, 23 in family groups with dam, and 39 kittens without dam), showing most of these were litters. All dogs in these groups were relinquished due to the caretaker moving, dogs not allowed in their accommodation, because caretakers had too many, because of their behavior, or for multiple reasons; whereas cats in these groups were relinquished due to characteristics of the caretaker or reasons were not stated.

While overwhelmingly most companion animals relinquished were born with the caretaker (reflecting the high number of litters), the next category of acquisition was from a refuge (18%, which may reflect a caretaker desire to return companion animals to the shelter due to its no-kill policy), and then acquired through a family or friend (12%). Few companion animals were purchased from outside the Sunshine Coast region (3%), from a “pet shop” (2%), or over the Internet (2%); and a small proportion were fostered, stray, or were “backyard” breeding acquisitions (1% each of all relinquishments). Only 40% of surrendered companion animals were de-sexed, and only 35% of companion animals were micro-chipped, probably reflecting the high proportion of litters. Slightly more dog caretakers than cat caretakers de-sexed (32% and 25%, respectively) and micro-chipped (31% and 21%, respectively) their companions.

The most frequent reason for relinquishment of all companion animals was behavioral problems, which constituted 13% of all responses. Survey answers usually did not specify the behavior, but some respondents included behaviors such as not getting along with other companion animals, escaping, and the carer’s inability to contain the nonhuman. Companion animal behavior was closely followed by relinquishment due to characteristics of the caretaker (11%), which included illness, age, allergies, work commitments, life change, carer death, or companion animal abandonment. The percentage of companion animals relinquished due to the caretaker moving was 11%, while the banning of companion animals in accommodation constituted 6% of the respondents. Some caretakers specified they had too many companion animals (4%) and 10% cited multiple reasons (usually two) that included combinations such as the caretaker moving and the dog barking, or the caretaker moving and the companion animal not getting along with other companion animals, or the carer’s age or illness and the behavior of the companion animal.

While companion animals relinquished due to behavioral problems comprised 13% of all relinquishments, all of the remaining reasons for relinquishing companion animals (87%) were due to human risk factors. If the categories of companion animal caretakers moving or the banning of companion animals
in accommodation (which often accompanies moving) are combined, then the living situation is the most frequent reason for surrender, constituting 17% of all reasons.

Dogs were primarily relinquished due to behavior (15%), followed by multiple reasons (13%), moving (12%) or not being allowed (12%), followed by there being too many (8%), and lastly characteristics of the caretaker (2%). Cats were primarily relinquished due to characteristics of the caretaker (18%), followed by moving (8%), behavior (7%), and multiple reasons (5%). Behavioral problems were most often associated with large dogs (18 dogs in total), with another 9 relinquished because large dogs were not allowed in human accommodation; although another five small dogs were relinquished because they were not allowed in the accommodation. Domestic short-hair cats were relinquished due to characteristics of the caretaker (11), caretakers moving (11), or behavioral problems (9).

A total of 118 respondents provided information on the purchase price of their companion animals. Of these, 102 respondents paid nothing to acquire their companion animals; 16 had paid something: 4 paid a relatively low price (AUD$0-$200); 10 a moderate price (AUD$200-$400); and 2 paid a high price (AUD$400-1,000). Only thirteen of all the respondents listed expense as a reason for relinquishment, and of those, 11 combined expense with personal health (e.g., illness, age), one with life change, and one with moving, meaning that no respondents listed expense alone as a relinquishment reason. Nearly all companion animals purchased for a fee and subsequently surrendered were owned less than a year, and they were mostly litters and an accompanying dam. Only 3 of the 16 who had paid for their companion animal cited behavioral reasons alone, and another 3 cited behavior with another reason such as carer age, moving, and not getting along with another dog and barking in the new place.

**Insights from Interviews**

Complementing the intake data, the social reasons for relinquishment expressed by interviewees concerned living situations (usually moving), and health, while economic reasons for surrender related to living situations, work requirements, and new jobs that required regular travel.

While some of the interviewees who moved chose non-pet-friendly accommodation, others stated unforeseen challenges with accommodation such as discovering problems with the neighbors after settling in the new, pet-friendly home. Kendra stated on the survey that she acquired her dog of 3 years at moderate cost from the shelter, but surrendered the dog due to moving and barking:
Hearing a neighbor yelling at him to shut up, and my stress levels were high trying to curtail his barking. The dog next door would bark at passersby and Oscar would react to that, as well…. Moving into a dog friendly [retirement] village I thought would work out well, but in the end, I had to have regard for my neighbors.

Kendra took three months to make the decision to surrender her dog, after trying a dog psychologist, training, and a bark collar:

I had found Oscar at the Sunshine Coast Animal Shelter when he was 12 months old with no history of his prior life … tried 3 types of anti-bark collars—Citronella spray collar, vibrating collar, and one that vibrated stronger each time he barked within a time limit. He seemed to become acclimatized to them … took him to dog training course, but he didn't respond well with other dogs. Took him to an animal behavior specialist [name] who described him as very clever but strong-willed. Gave a few techniques to help, which worked for a while, but then I moved into retirement village with less space between houses and roads. I don't think there was any other service I could have tried. I loved my dog and miss him badly, and hope he is happy in his new home.

James acquired his dog from a shelter, and after finding problems with his neighbors, had tried to rehome his dog with friends:

Some people didn't like her. She's a beautiful little dog. She didn't deserve this…. People who didn't like her let her out on the road then they rang the pound. They came and picked her up…. The young man who caused the problems has bipolar and it is very hard to negotiate with someone like that…. I'm so sad she's gone. She was a big part of my life. Her and I got on so well. I know now that if I ever do get another dog I'll make sure it's in the right environment…. I talked to some of my best friends and they said, “James she's not happy here, why don't you give her up?”, referring to the fact that she did need a lot of room to run around … so in the end … I thought I should let her go. Not for my sake but for hers. I tried with my sister but she said, “James I got two dogs here. I don't think I can take anymore.”

Social and economic experiences overlapped in many interviewee’s situations, particularly around housing. Rachael had taken three months with her decision to surrender, having first tried several options for rehoming her cat,
including websites and friends, but found most contacts already had companion animals:

The need for a roof over our heads was what helped us finally decide to surrender her ... unfortunately, it was not a choice I wanted to make. The house we were renting was sold and we had to find a new rental in the space of a couple of weeks. The house we got said no pets allowed and while we tried to find another place that would allow an animal, we couldn’t, so we made the heartbreaking decision to surrender her.

Without finding rental accommodation that would take companion animals, she had limited or no choice and her trauma was evident:

For me nothing could ease the fact that I had to give up my cat. Unfortunately, giving up an animal will always be hard and heartbreaking, as they are a member of the family. I kept watching the refuge center to see when Chloe got adopted. I needed to know that she found a home. I think it would make it a little better now if I knew she was happy and loved half as much as I loved her. I know that Chloe was adopted almost three weeks after surrender, which was nice to know but like I said I wish I knew that she was happy. For me the guilt of having to give her up still hurts and makes me sick.... When we got Chloe, she was the runt of the litter and very skinny ... the vet said that she was very malnourished.... It took us over a year to get her to the weight for her to be de-sexed. I like to believe we saved her from a horrible life but I feel we failed her as we had to give her up.

Sarah acquired her cat as a stray and described her reason for surrender as “traveling, not for work, for up to 7 months.” She had tried several homes prior to surrender. Eddie also encountered work challenges. He had acquired his companion animal from a “pet shop” at moderate cost, and owned her for 8 years, but was not allowed to take her when he was transferred interstate for work, as he was required to travel. Prior to surrendering her to the pound, he had tried for two months to rehome her with friends and families who could not take her because of their other companion animals:

We couldn’t bring her with us. Janey’s age was definitely a factor as well as being not very social towards other cats and dogs. She wouldn’t have been able to adapt to another family with other pets. I don’t believe there is a service that would have helped us keep Janey. But I think there should
be something available for helping families find new homes for pets, like contacting aged care facilities, and giving the elderly a chance to care and look after a new pet friend. When we first called the pound to get some information, they gave us the number for the animal refuge. However, when we contacted the animal refuge, they told us that they were unable to take her, as they were full and that she would need to be surrendered to the pound. If in that process there was another avenue ... a website for finding homes for pets or something, we would have tried that ...

At times a social or economic crisis was temporary, one in which companion animals would not require surrender if temporary carers were available. For instance, Jenna received her dog as a gift and tried to rehome the dog with friends when she needed to move, but regional areas do not contain such a service:

It would have helped if my son lived in a pet friendly accommodation with a good fence. If I’d been able to find somebody trustworthy out here [regional town] to look after her until I could get back here. Just having someone I could trust to leave her with, but it didn’t have anybody I could trust.... Out here [in the regional town] they don’t like small dogs. In the city they do, I guess they are easier to take care of.

The expense of caring emerged in the context of needing a short-term solution, again one in which relinquishment was not desirable. In another situation, Darren had acquired his son’s companion animal, when his son required long-term care in hospital. Darren had tried rescue organizations, Facebook, and friends, but found no short-term, inexpensive care:

I asked neighbors and friends to help care and house, then boarded at kennels but it was just too expensive to keep going.... If I could have boarded [the pet] at a refuge or temporary home for a very modest cost for 3 to 6 months, [his son’s] situation may have improved and [his companion could have] returned.

Characteristics of the companion animal played a part in some relinquishments. Some interviewees reported companion animals spoiling the home and some had tried to remedy challenges, while others had not. Peter had noted behavioral challenges as a reason for surrender on the intake form, but during the interview suggested behavior simply added to other challenges. Peter had acquired a cat from a friend and owned him for two years in which time he tried flea treatments. He had also tried rehoming, but friends already had cats:
[My] son seemed to be allergic to fleas, his legs were getting scarred with the scratching.... Flea baths, Revolution, flea bombs and keeping them indoors did not help ... wee’d and poo’ed all over the house! Not always in the kitty litters provided that were cleaned every day ... I could not lie about the flea problem they caused to my friends ... we took on the cats because they were not being looked after.

Another relinquisher, Noni, was not prepared for the specific health characteristics of her cat whom she had acquired from a shelter, although she had not tried other options prior to surrender:

It got really hard taking care of a deaf cat with 2 normal hearing cats. It would be better off for him to be surrendered where he could be in a really good home. We were going to try to surrender him back to [another shelter] but they said we might have to wait nearly a month.

Les had acquired his companion animal from a friend, but was not made aware of his behavior around young children. He hadn’t tried other alternatives to surrender:

I wasn’t sure whether he might bite my grandsons. He had a tendency to jump all the time and they [the grandsons] get scared quite easily.... He was full of energy.

Companion animal characteristics were thought to be manageable by shelter staff, given adequate human awareness about the attention needs and space requirements of the companion animal, critical reflection on caretaker circumstances as to whether they can provide that time and space for the long-term, and available services and legislation. The dog behavioral therapist at the shelter was concerned that institutional measures such as fines for lost dogs or those with behavioral challenges simply meant that carers may not be able to afford to re-acquire their companion animals, but could adopt another for free. This leads to a cyclical tendency in carers to relinquish and “repeat adopt,” and more companion animals entering already overcrowded shelters, without the carer learning to change their own behaviors. She suggested that education programs were not just the responsibility of shelters and caretakers, but other local organizations might offer options that were:

proactive rather than the reactive side ... it should be someone coming along and saying “Hey, your dog’s reacting to that other dog there. Here are things you can do very quickly,” and teach[ing] them how to handle
it. We have microchips on dogs but we don’t use them ... take it to the house, ask them questions, ask “Is there anything we can do to help you with training?”

In response to the high number of litters, the Operations Manager at SCARS explained there had been 2,300 kittens de-sexed in the shelter in 3 years, but that more formal means of changing human behavior required legislating sterilization, subsidizing the cost of doing so, and sterilization through mobile vans. She noted it was “frustrating that we can’t get what seems to me to be simple legislation put through.” The Animal Coordinator agreed with the need for institutional change in addition to human training, suggesting that local government:

bring in local laws for de-sexing of companion animals and police that.... I don’t think they can do much except for bringing laws to stop the breeding of animals. National de-sexing, across the board, of all companion animals, that’s where it ends for me. Stop breeding all these litters. Only regulated, registered breeders through the Canine Control Council, Queensland, or cat breeders society. I’m not saying purebred dogs should not be bred. But we need control.

Institutional and structural change was clearly critical, particularly with regard to reducing the high number of litters bred by caretakers, and in proactive, non-judgmental education with caretakers who faced difficult personal circumstances.

Discussion

The high proportion of newly born companion animals who were relinquished, representing over half of all animals at the shelter and pound, supplemented by the lack of de-sexing and micro-chipping, support the shelter interviewees’ concerns and recommendations to legislate sterilization and mandate registered breeders. Excess breeding has been shown to influence companion animal populations in shelters (Alberthsen et al., 2013) and requires individual and societal cognizance that excess breeding is a critical challenge for shelters and for the nonhumans.

Morris and Gies (2014) found a decrease in companion animal intake and euthanasia over 25 years, which they attributed to rescue organizations, more effective spaying and neutering programs, licensing and identification
methods, websites for searching for lost companion animals, marketing, mobile units, and events. Programs to increase transfer to foster homes using hair salons, restaurants, and other segments of society that provide alternatives to sourcing companion animals from a breeder or pet store are contributing to declining shelter trends (Mohan-Gibbons, Weiss, Garrison, & Allison, 2014). On the other hand, some shelters are now importing companion animals from other regions, which may manifest as higher numbers of adults than litters in shelters, and demonstrate geographic differences in companion animal surrender (DiGiacomo et al., 1998; Morris & Gies, 2014), with many places (such as this region) not mandating sterilization.

Societal lobbying for institutionally-driven change to mandate de-sexing and breeding regulation is hard to achieve, and while reasons for breeding companion animals were not specified in the interviews, a broader societal disposition around the commodification of animals may underpin excess breeding. In this region, unemployment is high and selling a newly born litter can be seen as a possibility for temporary financial relief (personal observation, first author), reflecting broader socio-economic challenges and a need for further research on the reasons caretakers choose to breed their companion animals.

While behavioral characteristics of companion animals were the single most frequent reason for relinquishment in the intake data, all other reasons for surrender were due to humans, and when combined, support suggestions that humans are the critical challenge for companion animal surrender (Irvine, 2003; Fournier & Geller, 2004). Suitable living circumstances, time, training, and health, are common needs for both humans and nonhumans; and training both humans and nonhumans about companion animal behaviors along-side regular (possibly subsidized) vet care is recommended (Salman et al, 1998, 2000; Dolan et al., 2015). Even behavioral challenges such as escaping are fundamentally due to human inattentiveness or misunderstanding of a companion animal’s needs. Humans frequently are not aware of the possibility of cat and dog behavior modification, and of the relationality between humans, the particular companion animal, and other companion animals in households and enclosed spaces (Scarlett et al., 1999; Salmon et al., 2000).

Interviewees in this research mostly divulged challenges that were additional to the companion animal’s behavior, such as the needs of young children or elderly parents. Potential caretakers also need to understand the notion of human and nonhuman change over a lifetime. For example, caretakers may not be aware that companion animal behaviors change with the addition of new companion animals, and this is normal (Salman et al., 2000); equally, human behaviors and circumstances change. Relinquishers may need to be
more aware that nonhumans have their own subjectivity, meaning that humans need to:

be aware that on many occasions, what the owner classifies as a “behavioral problem” is actually a normal behavior. This is often due to owners’ lack of knowledge or understanding or their unrealistic expectations. (Diesel, Brodbelt, & Pfeiffer, 2010, p. 16)

Behavioral problems were most frequently associated with large dogs, while domestic short-hair cats were most frequently relinquished due to characteristics of the caretaker. The RSPCA Australia (2013) national statistics show that the overwhelming majority of dogs are euthanized because of behavioral reasons while cats are euthanized for “other” reasons: infectious, behavior, or medical reasons. Marston and Bennett (2003) warn against trying to rehome dogs who present behavioral characteristics that are not dangerous but are challenging to humans, and there may be some role for shelter staff in more targeted training at their facility prior to fostering, perhaps by volunteers.

Further, Marston and Bennett (2003) note that problematic behavior is often a convenient excuse for a relinquisher, who may not want to admit their lack of time or commitment to care for their companion animal (Marston & Bennett, 2003; Coe et al., 2014). Many relinquishers in this study, however, had sought alternatives such as rehoming to no avail, and experienced trauma or stress during the relinquishment process, as found elsewhere (DiGiacomo et al., 1998; Dolan et al., 2015). This negative view of relinquishers is problematic in itself and can, in part, be countered by better structural responses to the circumstances of carers, such as short-term, especially low-cost, care options.

For example, shelter interviewees recommended that while education to manage humans rather than pets is critical, a proactive system that recognizes caretaker achievement in training, evaluates caretaker readiness to adopt, and is complemented by a positive post-adoption approach involving other organizations who can act to broker problems and solutions (such as calling on resources offered by shelters) is essential. Many relinquishers only know of a shelter and not alternative networks and resources for which the shelter is a conduit, highlighting that community-specific solutions are needed (Morris & Geis, 2014; Dolan et al., 2015).

Relinquishment is far more complicated than carer irresponsibility, commodification, or anthropocentrism. If the categories of carers moving and “non-pet-friendly” accommodation are combined, then the living situation is the single biggest factor affecting companion animal relinquishment in this research. A problematic living situation may be compounded by additional
factors such as illness, age, or financial circumstances (Irvine, 2003; Marston & Bennett 2003; Marston et al., 2010; Diesel et al., 2010). In this research, and as found by Dolan et al. (2015), financial factors alone were inconsequential, and only mentioned in combination with another challenge. At times, however, short-term, low-cost accommodation during a crisis could have prevented relinquishment. Although this research showed that anthropocentrism manifests during crises such as homelessness, this is underpinned by socio-economic circumstances of carers.

Structural changes such as institutional support, pet-friendly accommodation, and temporary care were seen as important interventions (as found by Scarlett et al., 1999). The high proportion of unemployed people and retirees on the Sunshine Coast, relative to the national average, suggests that “pet-friendly” rental accommodations are critical in this region, requiring that developers and landlords acknowledge their role in preventing companion animal relinquishment. In addition, in this region there is a special role for retirement villages in temporarily fostering companion animals with retirees or for therapy sessions. Geographic variation in socio-economic circumstances requires specifically targeted strategies (DiGiacomo et al., 1998; Morris & Gies, 2014).

Trends in data from the RSPCA Australia (Royal Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) since 2008 show that the overall euthanasia rate for dogs has decreased by 27% during this time and by 21% for cats, but conversely, reclaiming and rehoming trends are down by 6% for dogs (RSPCA, 2013). Rehoming and reclaiming trends for other animals increased, but so did euthanasia rates during this time. Rehoming, reclaiming, and short-term foster carer needs, including how to develop these networks, will help to alleviate companion animal relinquishment and euthanasia. The availability of short-term carers who do not have the restrictions and expenses of kennels may help eliminate some relinquishments, and shelters and other institutions and their networks could fill this role.

Marston et al. (2010) also state that there is a lack of knowledge related to owning a companion animal. While some authors stress the need for awareness about shelter resources (Irvine, 2003), others suggest pre-acquisition training and interaction with potential adoptees (Fournier & Geller, 2004), or counseling and post-adoption calls or visits regarding training, de-sexing, and animal care (Lambert, 2014). All of these strategies are needed, as companion animal relinquishment is fundamentally the problem of humans. Educating caretakers about sterilizing companion animals or desisting from attempts to breed companion animals is fundamental.

Education and critical reflection may help identify the relationality between humans and companion species, and increase the understanding of the human
role in causing the companion animal behavior. Lastly, educational tools are needed to evaluate the best formats and how they may require tailoring to different stakeholders, as well as the knowledge and behaviors of adoptees before and after acquiring a companion animal (Coe et al., 2014). Education about companion animal care should stress that although both human and nonhuman needs and characteristics will vary over the lifetimes of both, and stage of life effects household dynamics including additional nonhumans or humans (Scarlett et al., 1999), it is the responsibility of the human to make a companion animal commitment for life. Thus, critical reflection by humans on their own capacity to be this kind of caretaker for the lifetime of the companion animal is required.

While this research concentrated on cats and dogs, there are further problems and solutions indicated for all companion species. The discursive nature of companion animal adoptions and returns, and breeding and euthanasia, requires that the structural problems be tackled through a range of individuals and institutions. The RSPCA Australia nationally received 126,673 pets in the financial year 2012 to 2013: 39% were cats; 39% dogs; and 22% were other animals such as horses, livestock (including cattle, goats, chickens, and donkeys), wildlife, and small animals such as budgerigars, ferrets, guinea pigs, mice, and rabbits (RSPCA, 2013).

Thirty-seven percent of all dogs were reclaimed and 34% rehomed, with a further 5% in shelter care, and 3% transferred to another facility, pound, welfare, or rescue group. Twenty-one percent of dogs were euthanized. In comparison, only 5% of cats were reclaimed, although 47% could be rehomed, and a further 6% of cats were in shelter care and 3% transferred elsewhere. Forty percent of cats were euthanized. Forty-eight percent of all other animals were euthanized, with relatively smaller numbers reclaimed, or rehomed, and higher rates in shelter care or transferred, showing the reduced popularity of these species. There is substantial work required to address the welfare of all companion species.

Conclusion

There is research showing that the socio-economic circumstances of humans are associated with companion animal relinquishment, but there is little micro-level detail as to how these affect their companion animals and how support and services may alter their decision to relinquish. This pilot research has illuminated that the majority of companion animals relinquished in this research were from litters, and thus there is a need to legislate sterilization and make it geographically and financially accessible in some regions.
Some respondents cited behavioral reasons for returning companion animals, especially large dogs; however, this may reflect the social desirability bias of the relinquisher, suggesting humans require understanding of nonhuman subjectivity. There may be a role for shelter staff or shelter volunteers in training some relinquished companion animals.

Primarily human characteristics led to companion animal relinquishment, suggesting that potential caretakers need to undergo proactive training, which might involve the creation of a system of licensing caretakers rather than companion animals, and subsequent monitoring to track their effectiveness. Other institutions might also adopt an enabling role, shifting from reactive to proactive interactions in facilitating solutions that will prevent relinquishment, and informing potential adopters about the time and space needs of companion species, how these might change with time, and the relationality between humans and companion animals. The role of temporary carers, enabled by other institutions, may alleviate the increasing needs for rehoming companion species particularly during times of socio-economic crisis. Fundamentally, humans need to critically examine their own companion animal commitment including how their own circumstances might change over space and time. Solutions are broader than individuals, and should be tailored to the underpinning socio-economic geography of different regions.

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