Adopter's Regret? An Autoethnographic Approach to the Post Animal Adoption Period

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Abstract

Autoethnography is a methodological approach which seeks to provide depth of experience and understanding of a phenomena through the researcher's analysis of their own personal experience. As a veterinary researcher with a focus on different methodologies, I elected to apply the autoethnographic approach to my experiences adopting my cat, Athena, from a shelter in 2014. I knew I had experienced feelings of regret and considered relinquishing Athena in the immediate post-adoption period, and I was interested in using this as a case study into the formation of a successful human companion-animal relationship. Through my analysis of my own experiences, I have three main reflections which may be able to aid the veterinary and shelter industries in supporting successful adoptions. First, the highly individual nature of each individual companion animal relationship must be recognised and supported, with veterinary and shelter advice being tailored to the specific needs of the owner and animal. Second, the transition to pet owner requires more active and realistic management, without following a 'recipe' for a perfect owner and pet relationship. Finally, I reflect on how my own mental health impacted the process of adoption in light of research surrounding the beneficial impacts of companion animals on pets. Overall, I found the autoethnographic process to be a challenging, but useful lens onto the phenomenon of pet relinquishment, and highlight some considerations for its use in veterinary research.

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Introduction

Companion animals serve a range of purposes across cultures (Beck & Katcher, 1996), and commonly in western societies people report strong emotional bonds with their pets (Maharaj & Haney, 2015; Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006). There have been many studies exploring the positive benefits that pet owning can bring to the human partner such as reduced stress and increased longevity (Allen et al., 1991; Parslow et al., 2005; Smith, 2016), although there are considerable gaps in the evidence regarding how big a benefit pets can confer on their owners (Chur-Hansen et al., 2010; Herzog, 2011), and what benefits pets might get from the arrangement. The process of acquiring a pet can be detailed and intentional (Holland et al., 2022; Mead et al., 2024), with prospective owners conducting research, but it is also common for pet acquisition to be spontaneous or involuntary which can have impacts on the animal's welfare (Holland et al., 2021). Some research has suggested that there are two distinct groups of pet owners, those who prioritise traits of the animal and so desire to find an animal from a breeder or similar, and those who wish to 'rescue' an animal from a shelter or kennel (Blackman et al., 2019).

Regardless of how a pet is acquired, there can be challenging aspects of pet ownership, which can impact owner satisfaction. One consequence of this can be pet relinquishment, a phenomenon where companion animals are relinquished by their owners, commonly to shelters which are often already overloaded with animals (Sharkin & Ruff, 2008), but also to other third parties or to euthanasia (Coe et al., 2014). Reasons for relinquishment are complex and multifactorial, including lifestyle factors such as allergies or lack of time (Scarlett et al., 1999), challenging behaviours from the animal (Kwan & Bain, 2013; Powell et al., 2021; Salman et al., 2000), but also more complex interpersonal reasons such as the owner's perception of the animal (Collisson, 2015; Jacobetty et al., 2020). There are many studies exploring why companion animals are relinquished, but far fewer looking at what contributes to a successful pet relationship and what that looks like (MacKay et al., 2016). Pet relinquishments are a challenging part of shelter work (Collisson, 2015; Salman et al., 1998) and are relatively under-researched (Marston et al., 2005). Understanding why a pet relationship may be successful is one factor that can help reduce the number of relinquishments (Kidd et al., 1992) as well as hopefully improving the welfare for the animal inside the relationship.

Given the unique and individual nature of human-animal relationships, it is challenging to understand what the experiences of a positive human companion-animal relationship (HCAR) is like, particularly in the early period or immediate post-adoption period where adopters may be more vulnerable. One potential source of information on this phenomenon is the researcher's own experience. The veterinary researcher is often more comfortable with quantitative and positivist approaches to research methodology (MacKay, 2021; MacKay & Wu, 2024), and yet qualitative approaches can bring new and informative approaches to a research topic. In this study, I approach the post-adoption period with an autoethnographic methodology with the aim of illuminating where some of the challenges can be as someone who experienced thoughts of regret after adopting my cat, Athena, in 2014.

Autoethnography draws on the lived experience of the researcher to provide insights into the cultural frameworks, practices and traditions surrounding issues of interest (Poulos, 2021). While it is not a common methodology within veterinary sciences, there are examples of it being utilised in feminist research within the veterinary profession (Ashall, 2022) and within the loss of companion animal life (Furman, 2006). It is commonly used in nursing research to reflect upon areas that are difficult to access information in to help identify areas of improvements (Kidd & Finlayson, 2010; Molloy, 2017), and it can also be used by researchers to provide information in under-researched areas where the researcher has a particular lived experience (Wall, 2012). This research is, in part,

conducted because I am interested in how different methodological approaches can be used to study questions, and autoethnography is an approach I am interested in learning more about. I wanted to conduct an autoethnographic study to better understand the process and expand my knowledge of methodological approaches, but I also thought that the post-adoption period was one where I knew I had experienced feelings of regrets. I also knew that I had journaled about these feelings and therefore I had a source of data which could be used to jog my memories and aid my reflections.

Methodology

Ethics and Availability

This project received a favourable ethical opinion from the R(D)SVS Human Ethics Review Committee (Reference HERC_2023_091)

The project was also preregistered on the Open Science Framework (https://osf.io/qbn2m/?view_only=258d16540e664925b3466a7d9f972216)/

Position of Researcher and Research Context

I am an academic researcher in the field of Veterinary Medical Education. I am particularly interested in methodology, and how different approaches can be used to explore a phenomena. I generally describe myself as having a critical realist ontological position and a constructionist epistemology, and while I was trained with a positivist theoretical lens, I now work more with a social constructivist lens often with a critical theory or advocacy approach as my research is intended to change and provoke per Moon & Blackman's (2014) definitions. Key aspects of my identity which should be considered in light of an autoethnographic approach particularly are that I am a white, cis-gendered, female academic, privileged in terms of knowledge and support networks. Furthermore, the majority of this work was conducted while I was pregnant, particularly in the third trimester of pregnancy, which is associated with neurological changes and greater cognitive flexibility and emotional regulation (Hoekzema et al., 2017; Rehbein et al., 2022). While I don't believe this pregnancy state either invalidates or confers greater validity to the results, I do think it is notable and part of my own development as a qualitative researcher that I feel more able to make connections between concepts, and given my own framing of myself as Athena's 'mother', of a sort, my own maternal status is an aspect of this work I feel I should recognise.

Sources of Data

Diary Entries

The primary source of data in this research piece are my personal diary entries. I have been journaling daily since January 2011. Each day is approximately a single sided page of A5 paper hand-written, and typically contains information about date, time of writing, and weather. To collate entries which I thought pertinent to the phenomenon, I identified through memory time points in the course of 2014 and 2015 where I researched obtaining a cat, viewed some cats, adopted my own cat, and dealt with adopter's regret. I particularly focused on the entries a fortnight prior to adopting Athena, the month she was adopted, and the key points found in the following few months, but I

also included entries from other time points, such as moving house several years later, where I remembered feeling concerned about Athena's wellbeing. Additionally, my memories and reflections are of course a core part of autoethnography, autoethnography pieces are not required to have a set of contemporary documents such as diary entries to hand.

Analysis

I wrote my findings and developed them as I reviewed data. I initially thought I would take a reflexive thematic analysis approach per Braun et al., (2019), however as I read through my diary entries and started to code them, I began to feel as though my thematic analysis approach was trying to lend an air of authority and reproducibility that did not in fact suit my project's needs. Indeed, it reflected in fact an initial scepticism about the method that is often shared by those using it (Marciniak, 2022; Wall, 2008). Autoethnography, is intended to be a highly reflective and 'observational data-driven phenomenological method of narrative research and writing that aims to offer tales of human social and cultural life that are compelling, striking, and evocative' - (Poulos, 2021, pg 5). This appealed to me because, as noted in Position of Researcher, my theoretical lens prioritises advocacy. I believe my experiences can support the veterinary industry to approach the problem of pet relinquishment by developing the industry's understanding of how adopters can perceive the post-adoption period. Therefore I leaned more on a narrative approach, hoping to use storytelling techniques to compel and persuade readers (Adams, 2017; Silverman, 2014) in the pursuit of advancing research in this critical period.

Results

In keeping with my analytical approach to use a narrative, I will start by describing Athena. On the first drafting of this paragraph, she is sitting watching me type with baleful eyes, as it is her dinner time, and she knows it. She is a silver tabby cat, of no determinant breed or type other than 'moggy'. Her formal name is 'Athena', but more commonly goes by 'Theenie', or in recent years 'Seesee' – a mispronunciation from my toddler. Athena is a small cat, and was described by the vet who conducted her first kitten check-up as 'the runt' of the litter. She has dust allergies, and a deeply nervous disposition, but is also undeniably very cute cat. She is the face of many R(D)SVS courses, and features heavily in my own science blogging. Our relationship has survived the introduction of my partner and our subsequent children.

Curiously, in my diary, I do not talk about the first time I saw Athena. I was looking for a cat for a period of months before seeing Athena. Per Blackman et al's. (2019) definitions, I most likely fall under their Rescue-Temperament-Compatibility category of prospective owners, as opposed to their Morphotype-Optimal Breeding Practice category, in that adoption was a priority for me, but I felt I would require a young and healthy cat to be compatible with my lifestyle so the cat would adapt to visitors. Often, while looking to adopt older cats from nearby shelters, I was told they would not like busy homes. Shelters have to balance many complicated risk factors when considering potential adoptions in an effort to maximise adoption success (Horecka & Neal, 2022), but in my experience looking to rehome, I felt there were many barriers that did not seem evidence based or reasonable. For example, I wanted to keep my cat inside, and with many shelters, this limited me to cats who had previous health problems. This matches with findings that often shelters have implicit biases within their adoption processes acting as barriers (Ly et al., 2024).

While staying with family in Canada in the summer of 2014, I saw a colleague post on Facebook that she was fostering a litter of kittens on behalf of her local shelter. The mother had rejected the kittens, and my colleague was hand feeding them. Among them was a little silver tabby girl. As an avid fan of Judith Kerr's 'Mog' growing up, I was immediately taken with her and messaged my colleague saying I had been looking for a kitten.

I adopted Athena, possibly circumventing some of the shelter's adoption checks through my prior relationship with my colleague, and brought her home to a tenement flat in Edinburgh. The notable part of this adoption was that I was immediately beset by anxiety and thoughts of regret, wondering why I had made the commitment to a pet, and if I was going to be a good owner. Much of these anxieties were related to my own general anxieties, and indeed this was the motivation to seek out support from my General Practice doctor and ended up attending counselling.

> *My heart is racing and I feel sick. The nerves have hugely kicked in tonight. Athena is sitting under the TV in her favourite hidey place watching me write this on my bed. She is very unsure about the bedroom and I think she will sleep in the living room tonight. I got her home at about 6 (freaking out on the drive home that I'd run out of petrol while Athena shouted at me). And she started exploring very quickly, running about and coming back to me for reassurance with little purrs. She fell asleep on my lap before and after dinner, and I've just played with her a bit to tire her out. I am totally exhausted. I am frightened about her tendency to chew electrical cables and get into small spaces. I'm frightened I won't be able to look after her properly. I want to be sick and to undo what I've done.*
> - *Diary Entry, 22nd September, 2014*

I experienced periods of intense regret surrounding Athena's adoption, concerned that I was going to offer a poor life, and that I wasn't a capable pet owner. I regretted my loss of freedom, and my sudden increase in responsibility. I also felt frustrated at the advice that was available to me from charities, NGOs, and veterinary resources, regarding how best to introduce a cat to a household. While I considered myself to be a knowledgeable and experienced pet owner, I felt I was constantly bumping up against the guidance or 'recipe' for a good pet owner which did not reflect the reality of my situation. While I was privileged enough to be able to supply Athena with adequate resources, such as a good climbing tree, a pheromone spray to attempt to calm her, a suitable rest environment, etc., I still did not feel as though I matched up with this perfect owner that seemed to exist in the guidance around settling your new pet. Coming to terms with the specific relationship that I had with Athena, and that I could make my own choices regarding her management, helped me to adjust to being an owner, and now we have a very successful relationship. One night, close to when I was finalising this paper, I was putting my toddler to bed, and Athena came to join me. She climbed onto the toddler's bed, sat by her toes, and gave me loving 'blinky eyes' while we waiting for the toddler to drop off together. I cannot now imagine having lived the last ten years without her, but those ten years have not been the picture of perfect welfare for a cat. I don't think I am the perfect owner, but instead a good enough one, and in my role as a veterinary education researcher, I feel this is an underrepresented understanding of the HCAR in research.

After engaging with this autoethnographic process, I have three main reflections. First, it is the highly individual nature of each individual companion animal relationship, and how effective veterinary advice etc. can be in such scenarios. Secondly is regarding how the transition to pet owner is managed, and third is specifically related to my mental health, and how that impacted the process of adoption.

An Individual Relationship

In the years I have taught animal welfare, I have always cautioned students about assuming a one-size-fits-all approach, and there is no 'ideal welfare state' for animals, much less companion animals. This is an extension of the 'natural behaviour' debate in welfare, e.g. an animal's natural state may not be one of innately good welfare even though we often seek to maximise naturalness (Browning, 2020). What 'natural' is for companion animals is highly debatable. The vast majority of animal species that we keep as pets have been shown to have individual personalities (MacKay, 2018), and therefore individual preferences regarding their environments. Humans, too, live highly individual lives, making public health initiatives so difficult to manage as 'one size fits all' approaches focussed on simply communicating the right message do not take into account the many varied individual challenges that people face (Kelly & Barker, 2016).

My adoption regrets were so specific and unique to my circumstances that at one stage of this analysis, I wondered how useful it could be for the veterinary industry at large. What helpful generalisations can I draw from one overly anxious millennial scientist adopting an overly anxious kitten? Fundamentally, this misunderstands the benefits of autoethnography, which aims to provide depth or fill in gaps in existing research narratives (Adams et al., 2017). My feelings of regret around adoption were complicated and highly individual to my own experience, and yet they are still valid experiences. In the discussion of the companion animal relationship, it is hard to find examples of the nuance that can exist within the bond. The relationship can be thought of as positive for humans (Allen, 2003; Archer, 1997), debatable for humans (Herzog, 2011) and mixed for pets (Maclean et al., 2021), but this 'either/or' approach to companion animal welfare and the HCAR is too simplistic. In any complex relationship, such as the individual ones we have with our pets, there will be strengths and weaknesses. Does our current research into HCAR retain enough nuance to understand this? Support to keep me from relinquishing my animal would need to acknowledge my individual circumstances. This undoubtedly is related to my opinions and research on human behaviour change in veterinary contexts, where I advocate for more personalised approaches to companion-animal management (MacKay & Pollock, 2023) but I think serves to emphasise the importance veterinary professionals and rehomers have in managing relinquishments proactively, such as asking adopters what strategies they might have in place should they start to feel overwhelmed.

Managing Transitions

In reflecting on my transition to owner, I was struck by the comparison between expanding my family with a pet, and expanding my family with a child. The transition to parent, at least in my experience in Scotland, was strongly supported through leaflets, public health initiatives, and an open conversation around how life would change. For example, 'Ready, Steady, Baby' and 'Off to a Good Start', both highlight the individual nature of relationships, and how things might be different for each family:

> *Remember, though, that all mums and babies are different. Some of the things mentioned may happen on a different day or may not happen at all! - (Public Health Scotland, 2023, Pg 36)*

Many charities, companies, and veterinary organisations provide guidance on welcoming an animal into a household, but these resources are obviously not distributed in the same organised manner that the NHS is able to. However, much of the learning from public health interventions could be applied by the veterinary industry more consistently, such as recognising the individual nature of relationships, recognising that rational and irrational behaviours are not necessarily expected, and

acknowledging that the Knowledge Deficit Model of behaviour change is not a useful approach to changing behaviours (Kelly & Barker, 2016).

For example, with cats, historically inappropriate care expectations have been linked to relinquishment (Patronek et al., 1996). Owners can often have concerns about the behaviours of their animal prior to adoption and describe them as 'deal breakers' (O'Connor et al., 2017), and so we need to consider how we can support owners with these deal breakers should they happen.

> *Some cats may not have had much contact with people, or may have had bad experiences in the past, so be patient. Not all cats will become lap cats. - (Cats Protection, n.d., Pg 9)*

I was keen to have a sociable cat, and this was one of my motivations for obtaining a kitten as opposed to an older rescue. I was an experienced cat owner, a knowledgeable cat owner, and I followed all the guidance regarding providing a positive social environment for Athena. Now, as a ten year old cat, she is not quite the social butterfly I had hoped for, but she is extremely sociable on her own terms. She shadows 'her' people, and enjoys sitting in the same room, even when that means putting up with the toddler. Despite being knowledgeable, I still required reassurance regarding Athena's care, especially early on, and examples of positive strategies would have been useful. In the Cats Protection information booklet cited above, it may be useful for example to highlight ways that cats interact positively with their humans that are not just lap-sitting. I felt deeply frustrated at the persistent recipe-like advice that NGOs and shelters provided when I was looking to adopt a cat, because I knew there were places where I did not fit that recipe, and so I felt I was doomed to fail as a pet owner. The role of the vet in moderating new owners' behaviours and expectations is important (Scarlett et al., 2002), and perhaps almost akin to the Health Visitor in the early stages of a pet joining a household. For example, we also know that relinquishment is linked to periods of stress (Applebaum et al., 2020; Carroll et al., 2023), and that often people don't seek support regarding pet-related problems because they have often had bad experiences on seeking the support out, or feeling shame or embarrassment (Muldoon & Williams, 2024). The veterinary consult has already been targeted as a key place to provide preventative care (Belshaw et al., 2019) and a place to build client loyalty and satisfaction (Corah et al., 2020), so more fully exploring what can be done in the new pet consult may be a useful place to provide individual and tailored support. It should be noted that some shelter workers consider rising veterinary costs and the difficulty of dealing with animal health problems to be a key challenge facing the sector (Stavisky et al., 2017), and that cost can be a barrier to seeking support with pets (Muldoon & Williams, 2024), so it may also be worth exploring what can be done through adoption sources and through veterinary nurse consults as cost effective approaches (Tottey, 2015).

Anxiety, Athena, and Me

My final observation that I found myself returning to throughout this autoethnography was about how very immediate and intense my anxiety was. This anxiety was not truly about Athena, but in fact was a manifestation of existing general anxiety that I was subsequently diagnosed with. It was also very familiar revisiting these ideas and feelings following my experiences dealing with Post Partum Anxiety (PPA) eight years later following the birth of my first child. I particularly noted this entry as being very familiar to my post partum experience:

> *I realise that my irritation with Athena's shitty bum* [a recurring health issue Athena experienced in the first few weeks] *is all about her not being perfect - she will learn I keep telling myself. Sometimes I'm suffused with love sometimes I'm more frightened - but its only*

week 2, I still have to get to know her more to love her fully. I will need time too. – Diary Entry 2nd October, 2014

I was frustrated by not having an immediate and overwhelming positive response to adopting Athena, something I can now recognise as unachievable and also a symptom of said anxiety. However, I think it also serves to reinforce an important consideration in relinquishment studies, and that is that concerns around a failing HCAR are stressful and unpleasant, at least for the human. The importance of time and realistic expectations in facilitating good HCAR should be emphasised in prospective adoptions, particularly if there are known issues surrounding mental health. To the best of my knowledge, it is rare that prospective adopters are questioned on mental health prior to obtaining an animal, and indeed, I would not recommend this becomes part of the adoption process. After all, this is sensitive information. But considering the prevalence of mental health concerns in the general population can be up to 24% in some countries (Kessler & The WHO World Consortium*, 2004), and the long discussed link between owning pets and improved mental health (Parslow et al., 2005; Walsh, 2009), the veterinary industry should not be ignorant of the possibility that individuals are motivated to acquire an animal in times of stress and difficulty. There has been an interest in this phenomenon in light of the high acquisition rates and subsequent relinquishments in light of the COVID19 pandemic (Applebaum et al., 2020; Carroll et al., 2023), and hopefully a period of learning can help facilitate strong HCAR.

Discussion

In this study, I utilised an autoethnographic approach to further explore why a pet owner might choose to relinquish their animal(s). I had two main aims with this study, the first was to provide the kind of deeper understanding to the phenomenon of relinquishment that autoethnography is purported to give (Adams et al., 2017; Bochner & Ellis, 2022), hoping to provide some future directions for the veterinary industry in their attempts to rectify this issue. Secondly, I hoped to come to a greater understanding of autoethnograpy as a methodology, to improve my own methodology teaching, and how it can be utilised in veterinary research.

Successful Human Companion-Animal Bonds

Unsurprisingly, given the deeply personal and detailed nature of autoethnography, one of my key findings in this work was a renewed appreciation for the highly individual nature of each HCAR, regardless of whether it is successful or not. There is an interesting conflict in autoethnographic research where the search for authentic analysis must acknowledge that an individual themselves isn't particularly interesting, but experiences when analysed in a broader critical framework can provide actionable goals (Weir & Clarke, 2017). It is notable that autoethnography is a tool that is used within family research, enabling unique questions about the highly individualised nature of relationships (Adams & Manning, 2015; Wall, 2012). We know that when pets are identified as 'part of the family', or even as being like a child to the owner, that this can be indicative of a long-lasting and presumably successful bond (MacKay et al., 2016). The field of HCAR is a diverse one, drawing from different disciplines, approaches, and often with a focus around establishing whether the relationships are overall positive, negative, or neutral (Hosey & Melfi, 2014). Obviously, veterinary and animal welfare researchers are concerned about the negative impacts on the animal of unsuccessful HCAR, the risks of relinquishment, and ultimately companion animal welfare. There is a great deal of evidence that behavioural change interventions need to understand the individual's

specific situation in clinical practice and offer highly personalised adaptations in order to be successful (Carroll et al., 2011; Glasgow et al., 2002). For example, supporting mothers with breastfeeding, a high priority for many health boards, requires more caring and considerate mother-centred approaches which recognise and do not downplay the difficulties associated with learning the breastfeeding skill (Trickey & Newburn, 2014). Do the veterinary profession and adoption organisations appropriately recognise the difficulties inherent in welcoming a new member of the family? It has not been my experience, and is not the perspective that this autoethnographic approach led me to. Animal welfare science could be described as obsessed with the importance of scientific objectivity with regards to measuring welfare, often lauding it as an essential component of any welfare measurement see (Broom, 1991; Serpell, 2019), but I fear that in the HCAR, this focus has inadvertently undermined the importance of understanding individual situations. The assessment of welfare in the home setting is a neglected component of animal welfare studies, at least in cats (Foreman-Worsley & Farnworth, 2019), undoubtedly because of its highly challenging nature. We need to ensure that in veterinary education we ensure that the teaching of appropriate animal welfare does not exclusively promote a form of black-and-white thinking about welfare that highly positivist approaches to STEM teaching often lead to (Staller, 2013; Yore et al., 2004).

Ultimately, all my findings from this work are supportive of shelter workers and veterinary professionals taking a more nuanced approach to the establishment of a HCAR in the initial post-adoption period. This must include recognition of the stresses and difficulties which a new owner may experience, and indeed, could even be thought of as normal. We need to be careful to avoid implying a recipe for perfect animal adoption exists, and acknowledge the many varied ways that companion-animal management manifests. Perfect welfare cannot become a barrier to 'good enough' welfare.

The Value of Autoethnography in Veterinary Research

The process of planning, conducting, and reporting an autoethnographic piece was undoubtedly helpful in developing my understanding of autoethnography. Some of the criteria which can be used to judge autoethnography include the authenticity of the data, the accountability of the research process, due ethics towards others and oneself, the sociocultural analysis and interpretation, and the scholarly contribution the piece makes to the field (Sparkes, 2020). I found great value in including my diary entries as a contemporary source of data for the time period, and for me, this made the reflexive work of autoethnography easier. I aimed to keep accountability through the pre-registration of this work, also to evidence how I set about planning the project for the benefit of my students, and the ethical considerations were given a favourable recommendation by my Ethics Committee, although I do note that I have further considerations on this aspect below. The analysis and scholarly contribution I hope are answered by my approach to the data, and the recommendations made to the field therein. I do note that I have stuck to a highly traditional scientific writing format, which some argue is not conducive (or even antithetical) to a good autoethnography (Adams & Herrmann, 2023), but as I have previously observed, the veterinary field has the positivist approach to scientific research highly engrained within them (MacKay & Wu, 2024), and while this fit may not be the most conducive to the autoethnography, I feel it has suited the evaluation of the methodology which was part of this work.

Generally, I think this methodology has a great deal of applications in veterinary research, such as it is used in medical fields like nursing research for example (Kidd & Finlayson, 2010; Molloy, 2017; Peterson, 2015). This work may not be the best example of autoethnography in veterinary research, but it does add to a growing body utilising this approach. I particularly found Ashall's, (2022) feminist

approach to be of use in providing an autoethnographic story, as opposed to my approach of reflecting on diary entries, which I think can be even more provocative and useful, and this more traditional or interpretive work is certainly a space in which veterinary autoethnographies could start to develop in more detail. However, I do note two cautions with regards to autoethnography in veterinary research.

My first methodology consideration is related to one of the methods of evaluating autoethnography: has it been done ethically? Weir & Clarke, (2017) consider the claim that autoethnography cannot be done ethically, and their position is that only the researcher themselves are exposed, therefore the risk is minimal. I don't feel I can agree. I have highlighted that I found links between my experiences of PPA and my feelings of regret surrounding adopting Athena. At present, I am not prepared to explore this further, or report in more detail. Autoethnography has great value in its personalised nature, its ability to draw findings and conclusions from highly unstructured data such as personal recollections, etc. But I find myself with a metaphorical line in the sand. I am sure that a deeper consideration of the link between my PPA and anxiety around adopting Athena would be extremely interesting and lead to novel perspectives, and has inspired me to think of further research ideas, but my pursuit of methodological understanding is not owed my privacy, and certainly not owed my daughters'. Whether this is a weakness or simply a limitation of the approach, I leave to others to consider, but from my perspective as an educator of research methods, it feels important to acknowledge there is a personal cost to autoethnographic approaches. I do believe that they must be given due ethical consideration.

Secondly, I find myself extremely conscious of the silent voice in this relationship, and I wonder what Athena would have to say about any of this work. Similar to another autoethnographic reflection on the human companion-animal relationship (Day, 2024), we are frustratingly limited to one-way communication and reflection. If I could put words in Athena's mouth, I would be tempted to have her complain about the state of her environment since the introduction of a toddler to it, but is that a true reflection of her state? Does it reflect her increased likelihood to receive treats from the toddler, or the way she has integrated the toddler's routine into her own? For such a personal and ostensibly deep approach to phenomena, we still cannot capture the animal's viewpoint with autoethnography, and this must remain a frustration for veterinary researchers. We must be ever conscious of anthropomorphism, particularly when we are taking such a personal and biased viewpoint. My perspective on Athena's adoption is clear, but we have very little insight on her perspective.

Conclusions

The human companion-animal relationship is complex and multifaceted, and while we can observe associations between periods of stress, anxiety, and physical characteristics that we know can result in animal relinquishment, we can utilise autoethnographic approaches to gain a fuller understanding of the experience of owners in the period of transition. This autoethnographic piece highlighted the importance of considering each relationships on an individual basis, and the dangers of providing a recipe for successful adoptions. It also demonstrated the utility of the autoethnography method to veterinary research.

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