

## **Grow Old Along with Me: The Meaning of Dogs in Seniors' Lives**

I had the immense pleasure of being part of a team of five researchers at Mount Saint Vincent University exploring the importance of dogs in older adult's lives. Dr. Ardra Cole is the principal researcher who led us on this truly amazing experience. Using a phenomenological research method, the purpose of this study was to gain insight into the multi-faceted relationships that seniors share with their canine companions and the significant roles that dogs play in their lives. The project was funded by the Social Science Humanities Research Council SSHRC. A total of 14 human participants and 16 canine participants who lived throughout Nova Scotia participated in this study.

Each researcher met with their assigned participants regularly for one year. The phenomenological approach allowed us to use a variety of research methods to describe how older adults experience the phenomenon of living with one or several canine companions. These methods included: in-depth conversations with the participants, observing the seniors and their dog(s), in addition to shadowing the humans and dog(s) in different contexts. A huge part of our project involved taking photographs to capture the lived experience and nuances of the relationship between the senior and their dog.

Central questions that the research explored:

- For healthy elderly individuals with strong attachments to their canine companions, what is the meaning and value of this relationship?
- What is the meaning of the relationship with a canine for elderly who are well and attach a strong significance to that relationship?
- What does it mean for a senior to live in the company of a canine companion?
- What is the best way to describe this inter-species relationship?
- What happens in those quiet moments of being in relationship with a canine companion that helps to explain such often-heard, poignant statements as: "S/he is the most important thing in my life;" "My dog means everything to me;" "S/he is my best friend;" "I don't know what I would do without her/him."

A phenomenological analysis of the data revealed several predominant themes and ways to distinctly describe the dog-human experience between seniors and their canine companions. From this study, we discovered four common themes that helped capture the relationship between a senior and their dog (s): Beloved Attachment, Unconditional Love, Steadfast Friendship, and Joyful Responsibility.

An Arts Based Approach was used as a way to disseminate and communicate our findings. This unique way to publish our research findings included photography of the participants and their canines as well as participant commentary honouring the everyday life of seniors and their canine companions. This display method became a travelling "come to life exhibit" open to the

public. To honour our participants and their dogs, we chose to set up the display in public locations near where the participants lived.

Through our work, we were able to capture the meaning of dogs in seniors' lives and honour the extraordinary as well as profound significance of the special relationships that exist between seniors and their dogs. This study points to a need to secure greater support so that positive relationships between seniors and their animal companions continues. As the population ages, and the older members of the ageing demographic increases, there is increasing need to consider factors that will contribute to seniors' well-being. We believe that one avenue for this is to increase the role of companion animals and the roles they play in supporting physical, psycho-social, psycho-spiritual, and emotional wellbeing. Lastly, by recognizing and supporting the enormous importance of the relationship between dogs and seniors, local communities can better support older adults to live independently and actively.

Our research group presented at the CASAE regional conference at St. Frances Xavier University, in Antigonish, Nova Scotia in October 2017. I have included the "Call for Paper" for this conference in this artifact. Dr. Cole also presented our work as a poster at the International Federation of Ageing Conference in Toronto, Ontario, August 2018. Finally, we are currently in the midst of writing the first draft for a journal article submission. For this piece, we will continue to use a phenomenological writing approach to try and capture the relationship between the dogs and people that we worked with.

As a result of this project, I am assisting in further research with Dr. Cole called *Caring Canines*. The purpose of this new study is to gather observational data of the presence of a dog in a long-term senior care unit.

## Poster on Dissemination Times and Locations

*Grow Old  
Along with Me*

The Meaning of Dogs  
in Seniors' Lives

"Companionship as...." 2018 EXHIBIT

**Old School Community Gathering Place**  
1962 NSTrunk 7  
Musquodoboit Harbour  
April 14-20, 10:00-4:00  
April 14 Opening, 2:00-4:00

**Lunenburg School of the Arts**  
6 Prince St., Lunenburg  
April 28-May 4, 10:00-4:00  
April 28 Opening, 2:00-4:00

**St. James United Church**  
1078 Prospect Rd., Goodwood  
May 12-18, 10:00-8:00  
May 12, Opening, 2:00-4:00

**Parkland Clayton Park**  
Cameron Hall  
118 Fairfax Dr., Halifax  
May 26, 2:00-4:00

**Parkland at the Lakes**  
Kinross Hall  
112 Baker Dr., Dartmouth  
May 29, 1:30-3:30

**DOGS ON LEASH WELCOME**

Photos & commentary showing the everyday lives of seniors & their canine companions from several Nova Scotia communities come to life in this exhibit.

A close-up look at the many ways in which dogs enrich seniors' lives opens a conversation about how communities might better serve & support the vital connection between older adults & their dogs.

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Canada

MOUNT UNIVERSITY

ELDERDOG

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## Dissemination in Lunenburg



## Dissemination in Musquodoboit



## **Call for Paper: Adults and their Dogs: Perspectives on Companionship and Community**

### **Symposium Proposal**

Ardra Cole, Shirley Hardin, Margaret Knickle, Beth McAra, Theresa Myra, Hugh Samson, Mount Saint Vincent University

### **Purpose and Contribution to Conference Theme**

We draw on a SSHRC-funded research project in which we gained insights into the multi-faceted relationships older adults have with their companion canines and the significant role the dogs play in enhancing wellness, independent living, and community life for senior people. Against a backdrop of a continuous loop of digital photographs, each researcher will draw audience members into the lifeworld of the study participants through readings of evocative, narratives that reflect the multiple dimensions of companionship and community that give meaning to the participants' lives.

### **Contextual and Methodological Backdrop**

Nova Scotia, where the research is situated, has the highest percentage of senior citizens in Canada; part of the fastest-growing age group in the country (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2015). The study is set within a context of positive ageing within community where companion dogs are considered an integral part of creating a sense of community and belonging, acting as enablers of social interaction and civic engagement (Wood, 2009).

From a phenomenological perspective (van Manen, 1990), our research group worked with older adults and their dogs over the course of a year to explore what it means to live in relationship with a canine companion. We did so through in-depth conversations, participant/observation and shadowing of the people as they interacted with their dog(s) in different contexts, and photographs that capture nuances of the relationship.

### **Findings**

Audience members will be introduced to 13 active older adults and their dogs. The people range in age from early 60s to late 90s, live in rural and urban contexts, and vary widely in their socioeconomic advantage. The dogs are just as varied in age, size, breed, and lifestyle. We use art forms of photography and evocative text to represent the overarching and multi-faceted theme of inter-species companionship and explore the role of dogs in creating communities that support physical, psycho-social, psycho-spiritual, and emotional wellbeing.

### **Implications for Adult Education Theory and Practice**

Insights from this study have the potential to improve the quality of life of older adults as contributing members of communities and society. As the population ages, there is more need to consider factors that contribute to older adults' well-being. By recognizing and supporting the intensity and depth of dog-senior relationships, communities can better support older adults to live independently and actively.

## References

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