

Comunicación**Short Communication**

Pets in family genogram
Las mascotas en el genograma familiar
Animais de estimação no genograma da família

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Abstract: The sociocultural changes that occurred in the last decades have elicited a greater permeability to diverse family models and the incorporation of non-human members in the family. In western countries, 90% of people tend to consider their animals as family members. Despite the relevance of this human-animal family configuration, in the clinical practice with families, animals seem to have been overlooked until recently, for example, when a family genogram is performed. Although some authors have started to incorporate animals in this graphic representation, this has appeared to be problematic and little structured. Based in previous research, we provide a guide for the inclusion of animals in the family structure layout, the registry of the information related to it and the assessment and delineation of the family relations that affect its members. Finally, we propose that animals should be included in therapeutic workshops related to genogram.

Keywords: companion animal, family dynamics, genogram, family, psychotherapy, pet

Resumen: Los cambios socioculturales de las últimas décadas han posibilitado mayor permeabilidad a modelos familiares diversos y a la incorporación de integrantes no humanos. En occidente, el 90% de las personas tiende a considerar a sus animales como miembros de sus familias. Pese a la relevancia de esta configuración familiar humano-animal, en la práctica clínica, hasta recientemente, los animales parecen haber sido pasados por alto, por ejemplo, en la confección del genograma familiar. Si bien algunos autores han comenzado a incorporar a los animales a esta representación gráfica, la misma se ha mostrado problemática o poco estructurada. Fundamentándonos en las investigaciones previas, proporcionamos una guía para la inclusión de animales en el trazado de la estructura familiar, el registro de la información relacionada a estos, y de las relaciones familiares que los implican. Finalmente, realizamos una propuesta de incorporación de los animales en los talleres terapéuticos ligados al genograma.

Palabras clave: animal de compañía, dinámica familiar, genograma, familia, psicoterapia, mascota

Resumo: As mudanças socioculturais das últimas décadas têm possibilitado uma maior permeabilidade a modelos familiares diversos e à incorporação de membros não humanos. No Ocidente, 90% das pessoas tendem a considerar seus animais como membros de suas famílias. Apesar da relevância dessa configuração familiar humano-animal, na prática clínica, até recentemente, os animais parecem ter sido negligenciados, por exemplo, na confecção do genograma familiar. Embora alguns autores tenham começado a incorporar animais nessa representação gráfica, ela se mostrou problemática ou pouco estruturada. Com base em pesquisas anteriores, fornecemos um guia para a inclusão de animais no desenho da estrutura familiar, o registro de informações relacionadas a eles e às relações familiares que os envolvem. Por fim, realizamos uma proposta de incorporar os animais às oficinas terapêuticas ligadas ao genograma.



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Palavras-chave: animal de companhia, dinâmica familiar, genograma, família, psicoterapia, animal de estimação

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Introduction

Ninety percent of pet owners consider their animals as members of their families (e.g., Cain, 1985; Cohen, 2002) and spontaneously tend to include them when they are asked to complete a graphic family diagram (Charles, Davies, & Harris, 2008). This way of representing the family configuration has been referred to as a *more-than-human family*, multi-species or a human-animal family (Díaz Videla, 2017).

Talking about clients' pets can improve clinical communication, strengthen the therapeutic alliance and reveal significant clinical information (Hodgson, Darling, Freeman, & Monavvari, 2017). Even though the request to include pets in a family diagram generates enthusiasm in the guardians (Hodgson, Darling, Monavvari, & Freeman, 2018), this is a quite recent practice. At the beginning, the layout of family structure in the genogram was limited to “the construction of figures that represent people and lines that describe their biological or legal relationships” (McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985, p. 25).

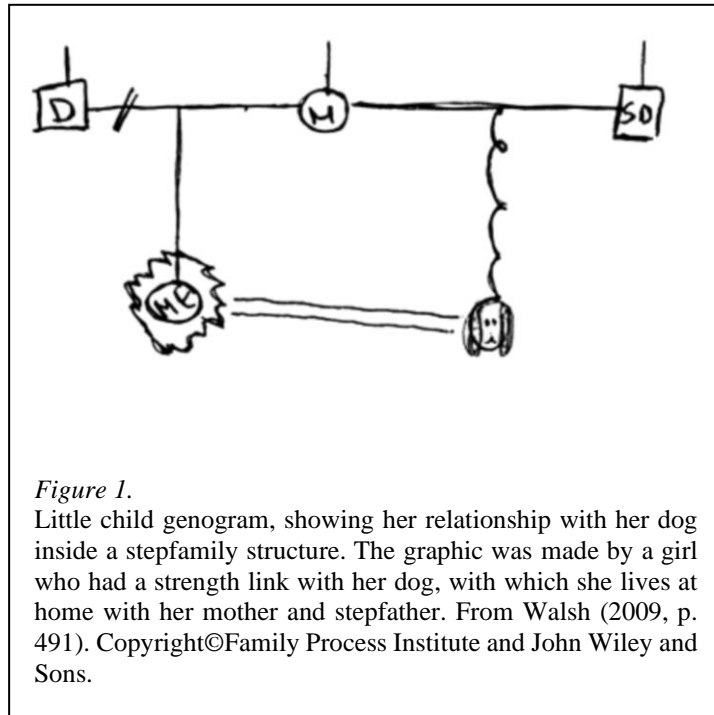
However, some clinicians had already highlighted that as far as people considered their animals as members of their families, they should be included when family structure is graphically represented, especially in children therapy. For example, Davis, Geikie and Schamess (1988) conducted a study in which they asked a group of children around 10 years of age to build a genogram of their family structures. The results showed that, by their own initiative, children tended to develop new symbols to include their pets in family diagrams.

The first formalization of pet's inclusion in the genogram is attributed to McGoldrick, Gerson and Petry (2008), who highlighted the importance of incorporating pets even if they were not physically present in the consulting room. For the authors, that information could reveal the meaning and importance of the relation, implication, concerns or conflicts about the pet, animal disease and its death meaning; the role of the animal in couples and family relationships, as well as metaphorical discussions about pets that could help the expression of complex emotions.

Since then, McGoldrick's work has remarked the relevance of representing not only biological and legal kinship relationships in the genogram, but also informal ones as friends, work colleagues and, of course, pets (e.g., McGoldrick, 2016). However, it is not clear to what extent it intends to incorporate the animal as a legitimate family member, and to what extent, it is relegated as a human attributions' projection and metaphorical expressions. In this line, for example, García (2015) also emphasizes the greatness of including pets in the family genogram as a metaphorical component of the family system, also including artistic activities, hobbies and games. From this

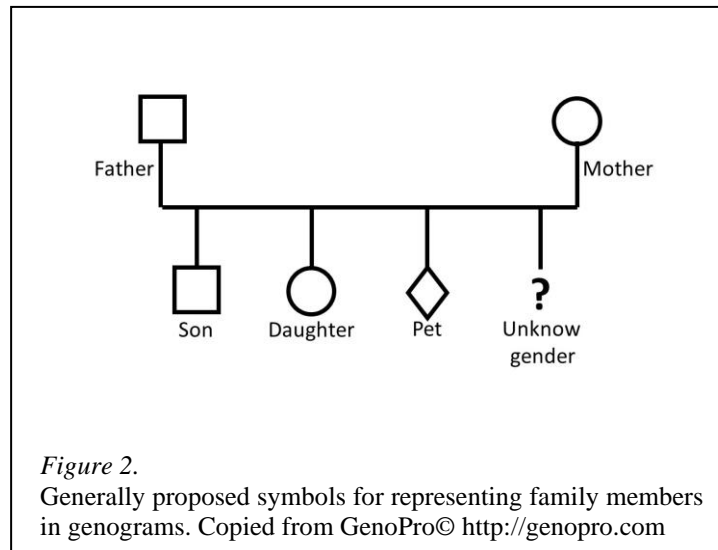
perspective animals do not have the ability to develop a bidirectional link, nor do they have autonomous drive, so it is not consistent matching.

Although the incorporation of animals in the genogram has not been clearly structured, their legitimacy as family members is currently unquestionable and consequently shows the usefulness of including them in graphic maps that clinicians make (see Figure 1). By incorporating companion animals in the genogram, family therapy participants can articulate their opinion about trans-species family structures. Also, it stimulates the co-construction of narratives that (re)interpret family dynamics considering relationships and affiliations that are developed inside the family, but which extend beyond the human beings (Herman, 2018).



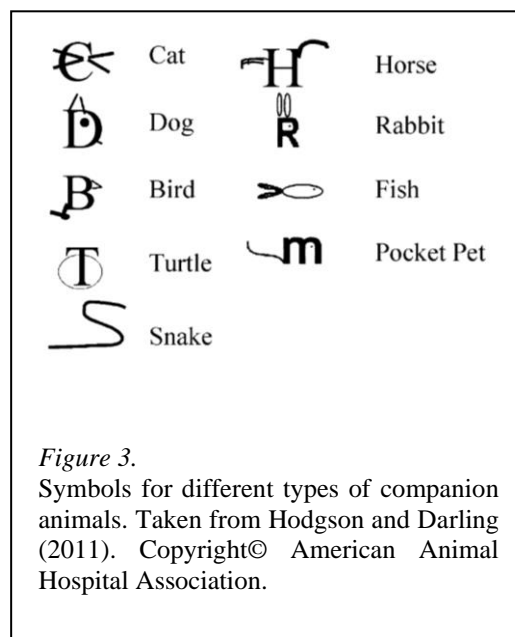
Companion animals have already been considered in computer programs that allow the making of genograms or family tree representations (see Metcalf, 2011). The graphical form that has been given to pets corresponds to a diamond or rhombus, and its location in the structure would be similar as children. While this symbol had been proposed for people of unspecified gender (e.g., Bennett et al., 1995; Bennett, French, Resta, & Doyle, 2008), it is frequent that these people are represented with a closed question mark (see Figure 2).

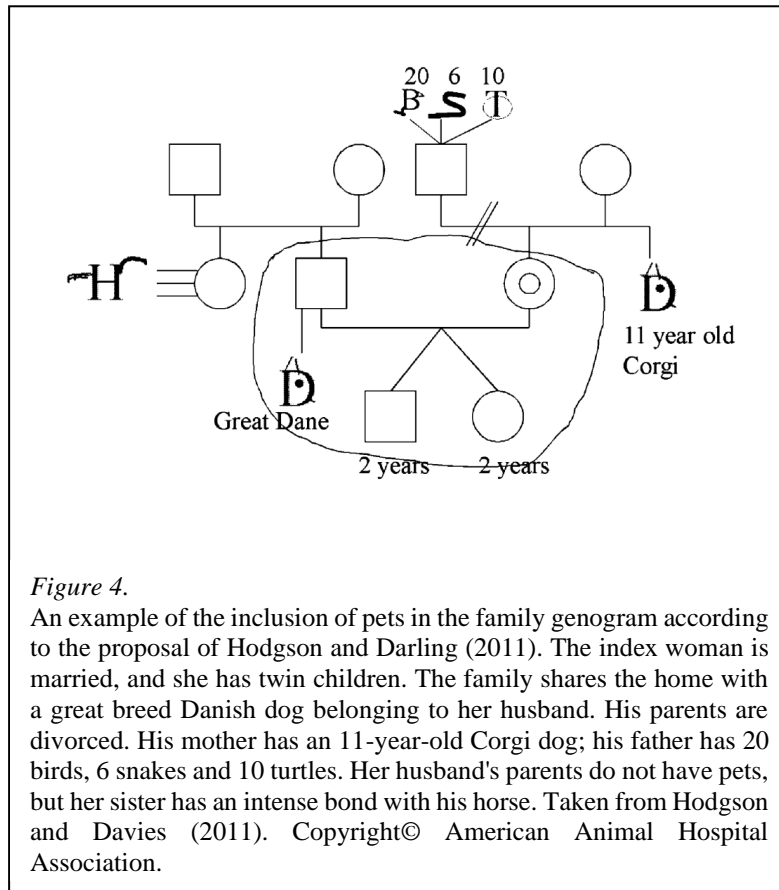
The extra information that has been suggested includes animal species and breed, age, age at which it was acquired, and dates such as the loss of a pet or other related stressor. Furthermore, animal diseases can be recorded, its role in relationship and family (e.g. alliances, conflicts, triangles, losses), and the role of animals in coping with adversity (Johnson & Bruneau, 2019; Walsh, 2009).



Hodgson and Darling (2011) have looked for greater specificity in the inclusion of animals in the genogram. The authors have refused to use the rhombus as the only symbol, creating specific symbols for each class of companion animal (see Figure 3), next to which the sex, breed and age of the animal can be consigned. In this proposal, symbols are not universal, and the graphic location and connector used are not reported. When people have multiple animals of the same species, only one specie would be represented and on it they would record the amount (see Figure 4). Additionally, the authors propose to record the quality of the relationship with animals by changing the type of connecting line: intense, merged, conflicted or interrupted.

In summary, although the role of pets is currently recognized in families, the proposals for including them in family genograms are not exhaustive and they lack enough systematicity.





The proposal: the “more than human” genogram

Creating a genogram involves three levels: (1) the layout of the family structure; (2) the registration of family information, and (3) the outline of the family relationships (Ceberio 2005; McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985).

We will address each of these aspects, and we will end with a proposal of animal incorporation in a therapeutic workshop that unfolds around the genograms making and activities related to it.

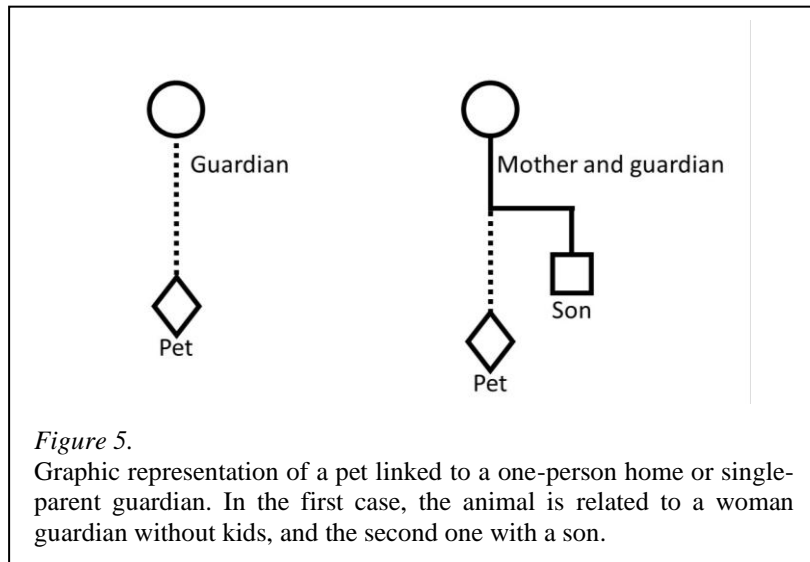
Pets in the layout of family structure: How to represent animals in the genogram?

The incorporation of companion dogs and cats is significantly more frequent than adding other species. Because households with pets have mostly a single animal species (European Pet Food Industry Federation [FEDIAF], 2017), graphic discrimination of species will be frequently impractical. In homes with only one class of pet, we consider the graphical use of the rhombus for its graphic representation. This geometric form is simple and universal, as long as it is not linked to cultures or languages as it happens with letters. The rhombus drawing should necessarily be accompanied by the animal species and its age.

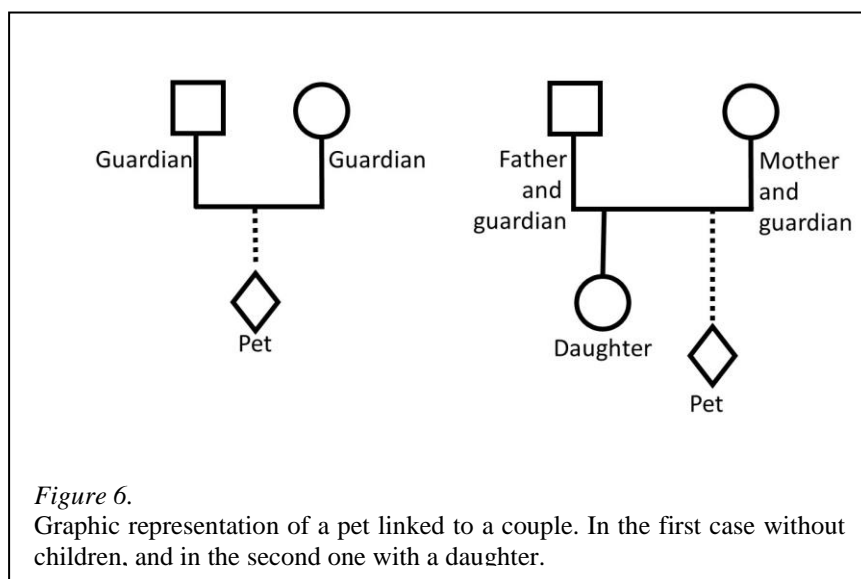
The connection of this figure with the rest of the family configuration will depend on the type of family structure into which it is incorporated, its location will be in a lower arrangement than the guardian, with connectors similar to those used for children, seeking to spatially differentiate the hierarchy between children and pets.

When the pet is integrated into a family structure with a single adult in charge, the animal will be linked to it from a descending line directly from the human figure as it happens in the case

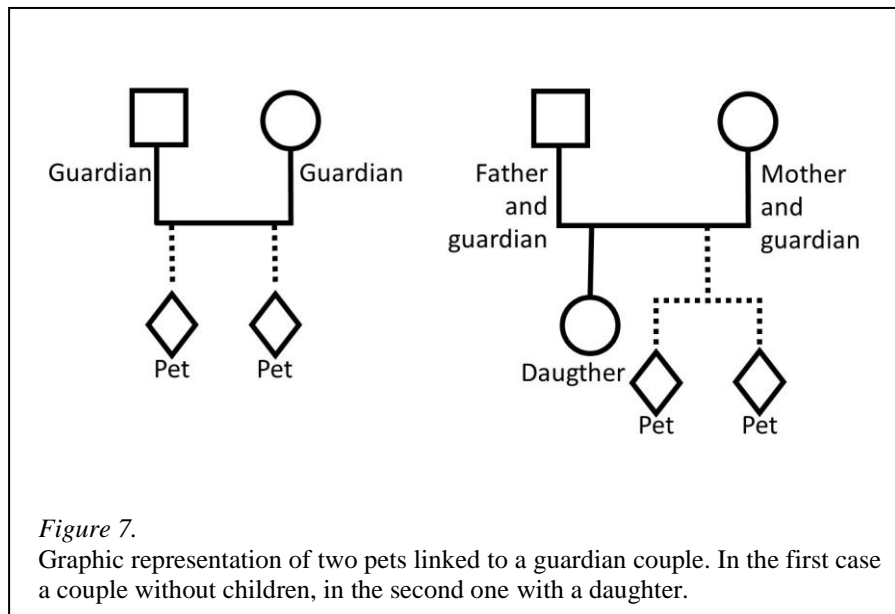
of single parent families. This line, in addition, will be punctuated, as in the case of foster children. In the case that this adult guardian also has children, the descending line will be partially shared with the pet, differing in height, which will be slightly more extensive for the animal, culminating as a dotted line (see Figure 5). Something similar will happen when that animal depends on a single adult guardian, although he or she is in a relationship. Consequently, in situations in which the animal was incorporated by unilateral decision (e.g., because it preceded the couple beginning, the partner or spouse rejects it or does not recognize it as their own), the link connection must be made to the guardian of origin.



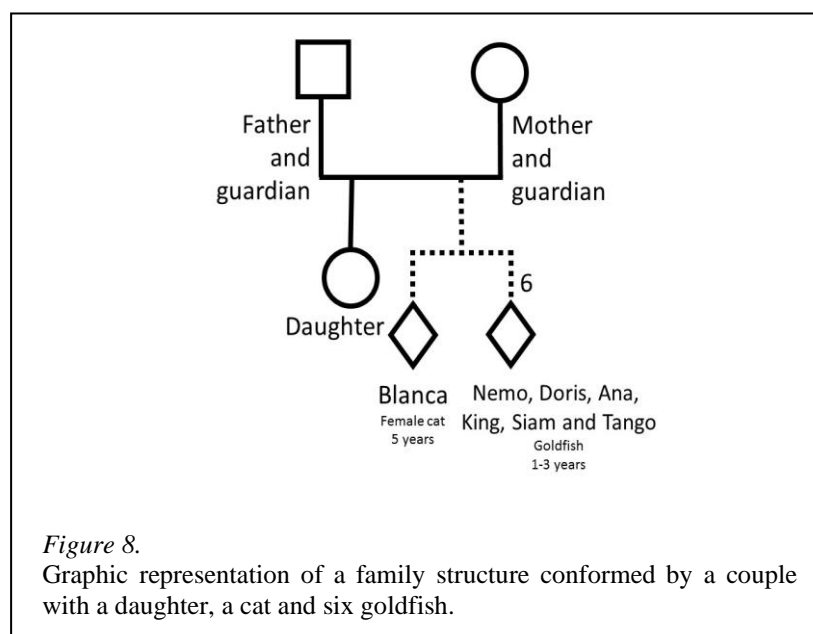
When the animal incorporation depends on a decision that involves both members of a couple, the descending dotted line towards the rhombus will start from the couple union. If the couple has children, the down connector should be slightly longer to differentiate the levels of both (see Figure 6).



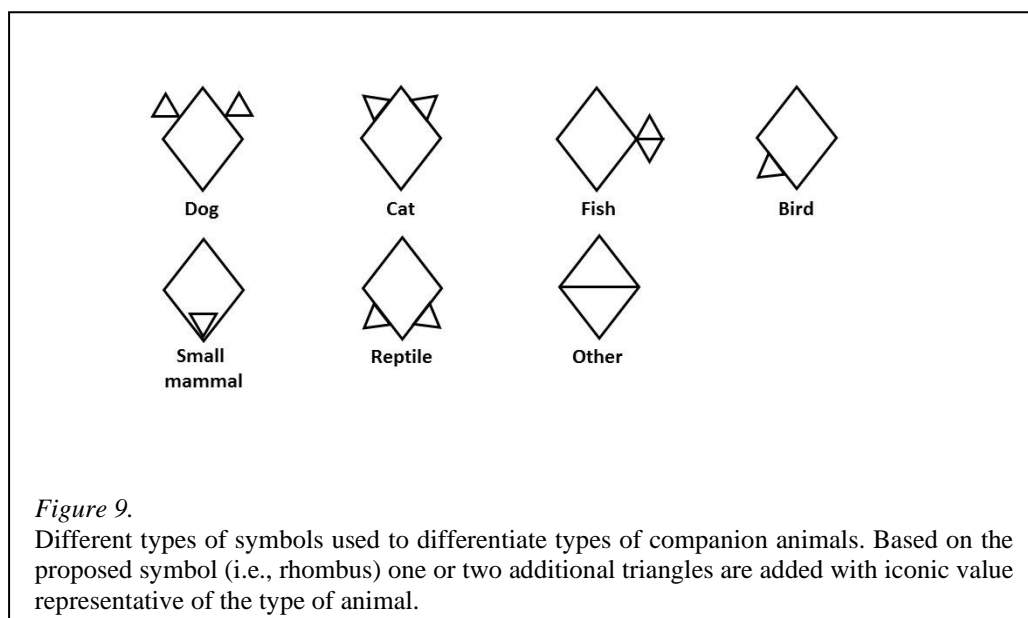
When there is more than one pet in the same relational style type, a single descending dotted line will be used from the guardian or couples' union, then it gives rise to a horizontal line from which the individual lines of each animal will descend (see Figure 7). The possible inbreeding links between these animals (e.g., one animal is the child of another, two animals are born in the same litter) or when there is a male and female pair of one species, will be graphically omitted. If such information is considered relevant, it should be recorded within the family information.



When there are more than five animals of the same species in the same relational family style, a single rhombus will be registered for them and the number of animals will be recorded on it. If applicable, all the names and ages of the animals will go under the rhombus, which occasionally can be recorded in a range. The order of the animals, from left to right, will be established according to a longer time of coexistence (see Figure 8).



When we have to record more than three different species or when the zoonotic control is a central element of the evaluation (e.g., evaluations of health) we propose the incorporation of variations in the symbol for each species. Given the statistics of pet ownership in Western culture, and the frequently made groupings according to the interaction type (e.g., European Pet Food Industry Federation FEDIAF, 2017; Global GfK Survey, 2016), we will use the following classification: cats, dogs, birds, fish, small mammals (e.g., rabbits, rodents, ferrets), reptiles (e.g., turtles, snakes, iguanas) and others (see Figure 9).



When there has been a pet death its symbol will be crossed with two lines as it is done in the case of human deaths.

Finally, pets will also be located within the punctuated line that includes all those family members who share the household.

Registration of pet information. What animal data has to be included?

Clearly, human-animal relationships are not influenced by the same sociocultural factors than human relationships. So, approving the same information may be unproductive. Some studies have studied which animals' characteristics have more influence in the human-pet relationship quality, mostly in dogs. For example, castrated animals were less destructive, crossbreed dogs showed more problematic behaviors, and small dogs were more disobedient (Bennett & Rohlf, 2007). Also, in homes with more than one dog, guardians tended to feel emotionally closer to them (Meyer & Forkman, 2014).

Another study showed that the presence or not of a specific dog breed, dog's sex and reproductive status had little or no influence. Dog's age associated negatively with interactive intensity, perceived benefits and costs. The size of the dogs was also associated with greater perceived benefits and greater willingness to adapt to the dog, but not with the perception of costs (Díaz Videla & Olarte, 2017).

Another study showed that the dog's belonging to a definite breed or not, its sex and its reproductive status had little or no influence. Also, the age of the dogs was negatively associated with the interactive intensity, benefits and perceived costs.

We emphasize the need to include the size of the animal when it can be variable according to the type (e.g., in dogs and reptiles), their age and their custody time (when there are discrepancies between one and the other), in addition to its name and its species, when it has not been graphically identified (see Figure 10). Additionally, the clinician can compute any other information that he/she considers relevant in the uniqueness of that family system.

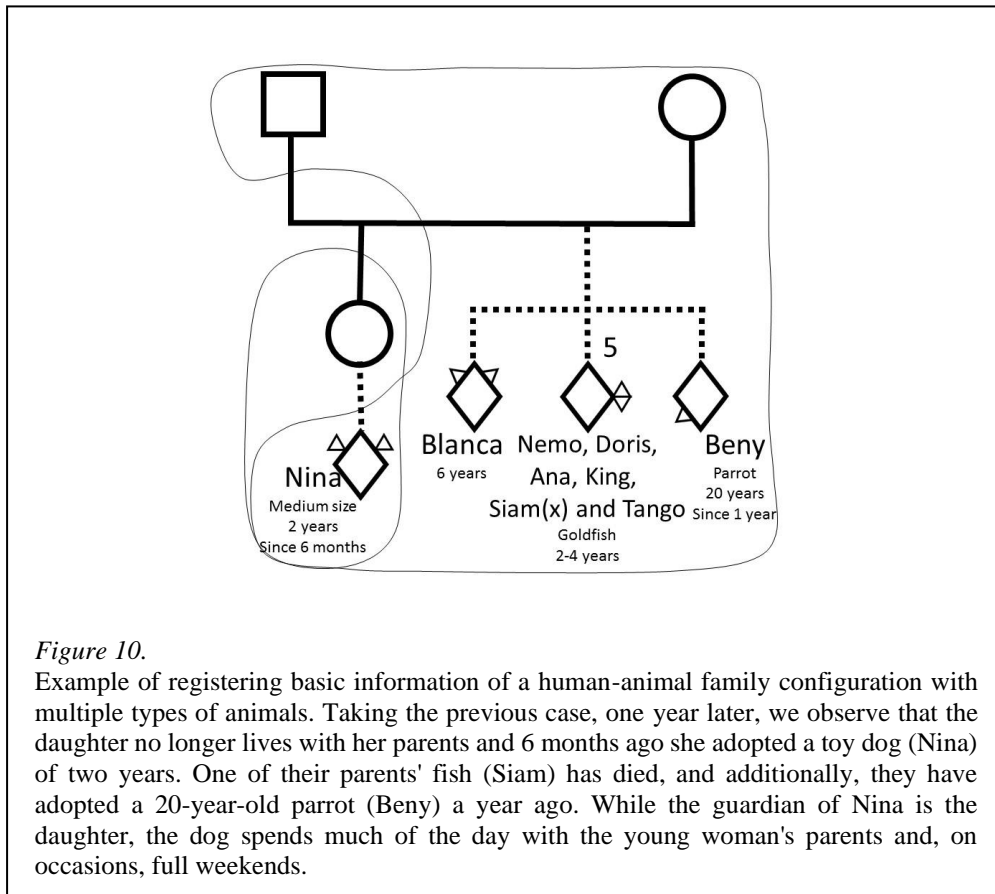
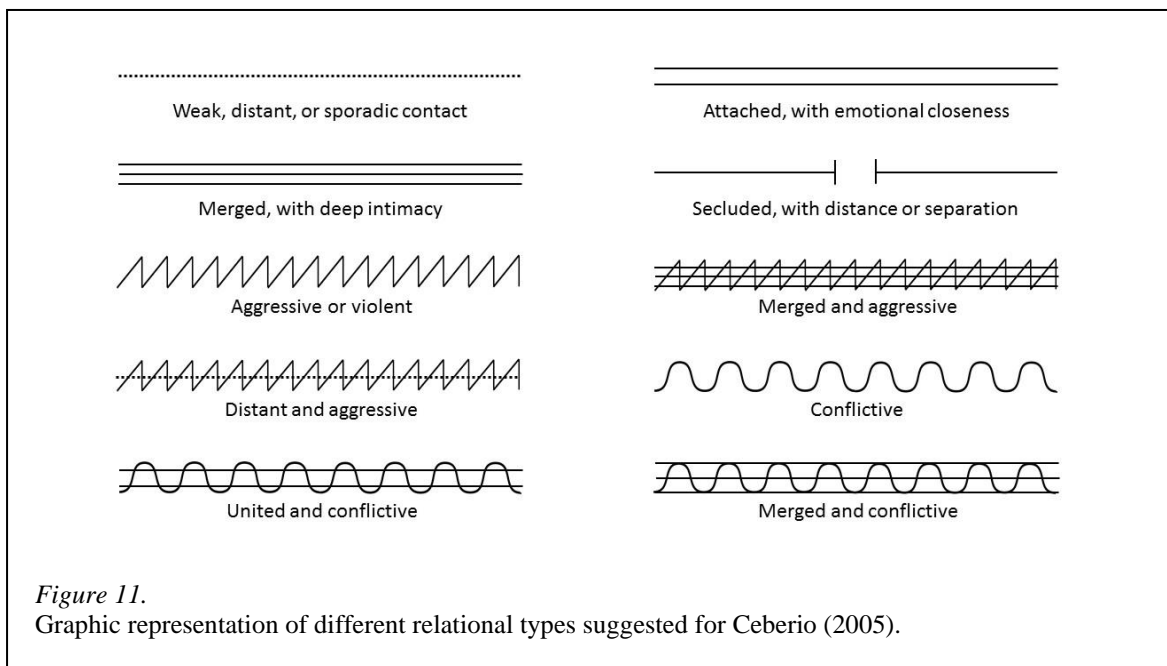


Figure 10.

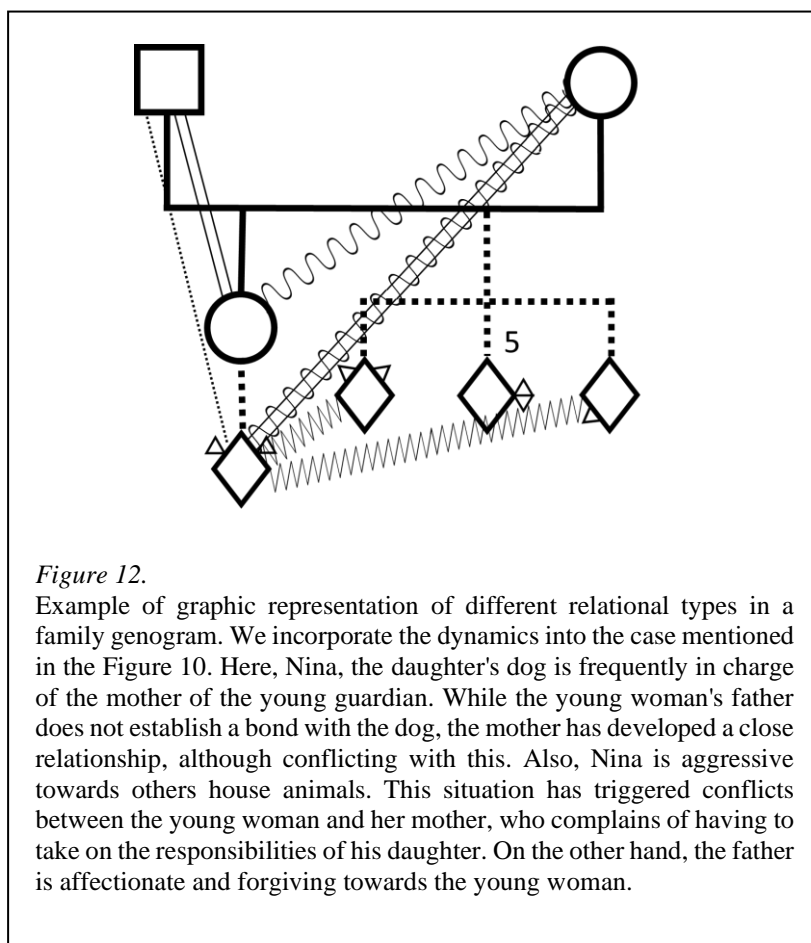
Example of registering basic information of a human-animal family configuration with multiple types of animals. Taking the previous case, one year later, we observe that the daughter no longer lives with her parents and 6 months ago she adopted a toy dog (Nina) of two years. One of their parents' fish (Siam) has died, and additionally, they have adopted a 20-year-old parrot (Beny) a year ago. While the guardian of Nina is the daughter, the dog spends much of the day with the young woman's parents and, on occasions, full weekends.

Pets in family relationships: Assessment and representation graph

Tracing relationships level between family members is the step with more clinical deduction during the construction of the genogram. The characterizations are based both on what family members report and on what the direct clinician observation reveals. Different sorts of lines are used to symbolize the different types of relationships between two family members (McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985), and the same could be applied to human-animal dyads (see Figure 11).



When the bonding guidelines become too complex, we recommend representing them in a separate genogram (McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985). Following with the preview case, we exemplify the relationship types representation in Figure 12.



During the clinical evaluation, before asking questions about pets, it is recommended to highlight the relevance of these animals to understand and solve family problems (Walsh, 2009). The clinician can use direct observation to place the animal in the family system, or he/she may ask questions about the animal's physical location in the individual or family environment. For example, where the animal eats, sleeps, or spends most of the time is correlated with its role in the system (MacNamara & Moga, 2014).

Particularly during the making of the graphic layout, it will be of interest to inquire about the feelings of each family member towards the animal (Johnson & Bruneau, 2019). Other items to inquire include the daily activities with the animal; concerns and conflicts; recent or expected disease, loss or death of animals; and the role of the animal in relationships, for example, in the formation of triangles or alliances (Walsh, 2009).

In addition, it is convenient to ask about what the animal does and how their presence or absence contributes to family processes, it helps to evaluate the role the animal plays in the family system. Likewise, you may ask: Who is responsible for the care of the animal? How much are they considered in family decisions and transitions? These questions allow the clinical to evaluate the family dynamics related to stability, expectations and rules, and the animal's place in them (MacNamara & Moga, 2014).

Another significant aspect to investigate is whether the animal was purchased or adopted, as well as in what context. It has been emphasized that motivations to rescue abused or abandoned animals are frequently associated with previous human difficulties and the desire to love, save or care for others (Johnson & Bruneau, 2019).

We recommend keeping the word writing inside the genogram as limited as possible (i.e., name, species, size, age / time of custody), but we advise not to limit yourself in the inquiries about the question, being able to record them on the side of the paper or on another sheet.

Finally, it is important that clinicians can review their own attitudes regarding the importance of pets, in order to be sensitive to the meaning that this unique relationship has for each client (Walsh, 2009). In this sense, the exercises around pets, proposed in the following section, can also be used by clinicians to work their own implication, prejudices and preconceptions on the subject.

Genogram workshop exercises: The pet-guardian subsystem

In the book *Who am I and where do I come from* (Ceberio, 2005) a therapeutic model of genogram is developed to apply in a variable duration group workshop. This can be applied with people within the same stage of the evolutionary cycle or not, and the workshop allows the possibility of developing in small or big groups. The workshop seeks to explore the history of family relationships in order to raise awareness of the resonances and internal echoes of relational models of the participants, their identifying figures, patterns and family rules, as well as to explore the different family subsystems (i.e., couple of parents, brothers, grandparents, uncles, etc.).

Following the same line of this workshop, we attach a series of exercises so participants can incorporate the work about subsystems made up of the companion animal and its guardians within the family system.

The pet-guardian subsystem

Pets in families take a place of great emotional importance giving us company, joy and love, while allowing us to protect and care for someone. For these reasons, we have incorporated them into genogram exercises. Analyzing relational dynamics and paying attention to the family bond, the way of relating with non-human members of the family, can enrich our perspective on it.

Goals

The purpose of the exercise is to analyze the relationship you have with your pet, what activities you share, the forms of care and the time you dedicate to them, among other issues. Mainly, this section looks for the taking of awareness of the affective relevance that these animals have for you and your family.

Reflections

What kind of pet do you have?

When and how was it incorporated into your home?

What do you love the most about it?

What changes does the presence of your pet generate in your life? And in the rest of your family?

What kind of bond do they share (affectionate, provocative, directive, overprotective, protective, demanding, etc.)?

Do you consider it to be a member of your family? In what sense?

If you had to put a typology of human links, what link / s of family would you stand next to your pet (dad, mom, cousins, brothers, grandparents, etc.)?

What responsibilities have you taken on this animal?

You miss him? In what moments do you do it with more intensity?

What is your animal ownership history like? What were the most significant?

Has your pet influenced your way of taking vacations? If you don't take it along, where / with whom do you leave your pet / s?

How does your pet influence your social life? Do you think it stimulates you in some sense? Do you think it limits you somehow?

If you have more than one pet, what is your favorite and why?

Where in the house does your pet spend most of the time?

Do you sleep together? Do you share the bedroom or the bed?

How are your pet's walks?

What would change in your home if your pet was not there?

How traumatic do you think the moment will be when your pet dies?

Have you ever suffered the loss of a pet before?

What do you think you should thank your pet for?

Conclusions

Implementation of tools like the genogram has been highly recommended to conduct psychotherapy process or clinical researches. Genogram works like a therapeutic organizer that summarizes the information and simplifies the complexity of the family relationships.

Even though originally this tool used to consider only human family members, the highly recognized presence of pets as members of families has demanded clinicians to be more flexible and incorporate these animals in the genogram.

In the process of making a genogram, patients project their life in their affections and relationships. It's easier to talk *about the graph*, since it is an outsourcing of your life placed in concrete in a drawing. For that reason, it is as important as the content of the process of genogram construction.

If we consider that the bonding narrative is incorporated in the genogram and with it the emotions and feelings, and taking into consideration the relevance given to pets in the lives of people, we consider that it is essential to incorporate them into the design and making of the genogram, as well as adding the data that is provided on the characteristics of this valuable emotional bond.

Human-animal interactions within family dynamics can be very diverse. Whatever they are, emphasizing these interactions in clinical evaluations allows us to acquire valuable information about the relational and affective world of the patient, and his/her family system. Until relatively recently, this possibility had been neglected in genogram confection. Consequently, we emphasize not only the importance of including pets in the preparation of the genogram, but also consider them in investigation, psychotherapy, work and vocational interviews.

A couple talks about their "children" in consultation, referring to two beautiful stray dogs they adopted, and take out their cell phones to show their photo; a widowed lady shows her Siamese cat that accompanies her while watching television or playing the piano; a marriage with adult sons incorporated their pets into the empty nest, readjusting to this new stage; a man who lives alone and teaches his canaries to sing; two little brothers who take care of their five goldfish and relax their hyperkinesis.

Including an assessment focused on the functionality of pets can be of vital importance; by ignoring it, you can lose relational information with their games, alliances, coalitions and other triangles. In this manner, a person can refuse a clinical admission for not being convinced about the safety and care of the animal in his/her absence, for example. Or, an older person may refuse to live in a nursing home as long as he/she should get rid of her/his animals.

Either as a research vehicle or as an organizer of the clinical material, as an intervention itself, or as an exercise in a workshop, genogram is configured as a way of working linked to the context and the relational and affective life of the patients, where companion animals have been placed in an important position.

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