

## Older Adults, Their Cats, and Their Informal Caregivers

My research focuses on the roles companion animals, specifically cats, play in older adults and their families. The theoretical foundation of my dissertation will come from the field of human development and family studies and its modern definition of family, which has developed from the traditional consanguine and legal bases to a social construct based on kinship and chosen interpersonal relationships. The majority of people in the United States who live with cats and/or dogs consider their companion animals to be family members; our non-human family members should be included in the research and theoretical models of family. Cats and humans have a unique interpersonal relationship which evolves over time and is distinctive to each dyad making the relationship cats play in families particularly interesting to investigate.

The population of United States and many European nations are aging and so are their families. Many families are and will be facing the transition of an older adult into a long-term care facility (e.g. care home, nursing home). This process typically involves at least one person considered to be an informal caregiver (someone who provides significant support) for the older adult. The majority of such institutions in the United States do not allow companion animals; consequently incoming residents must relinquish their companion animal before moving in. My dissertation will explore this forced decision, its resolution, and how it affects the intra- and interpersonal lives of older adults and their informal caregivers.