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**Title:** “He keeps me going”: A qualitative study of the meanings and roles of UK pet dogs in human lives

**Key words:** dogs; companion animals; qualitative research

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**Introduction.** How people conceptualise dogs has implications for how dogs are treated. This study investigated the roles that dogs play in the lives of their owners.

**Methodology.** Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 164 sets of dog owners. Interviews focused on the motivations and influences that impacted why and how people acquired their dogs. This dataset was part of a larger study of dog acquisition. Interview transcripts were coded in NVivo (v.12) using inductive thematic analysis.

**Main Results.** Owners perceived their dogs as playing various roles within their lives. Many recognised their dogs as companions, while some perceived their dogs as providing a therapeutic or protective role. Dogs were often recognised as family members, sometimes as quasi-children. Owners reported that their dogs enriched their lives in various ways, including providing a beneficial contribution to human well-being. Emotional attachment (i.e., companionship, friendship and love) and emotional support were two important themes that emerged. Some dogs were understood to have a utilitarian function, sometimes *as well* as being a pet, notably in providing emotional support. The responsibility of caring for the dog offered their owner purpose, routine and a reason to keep going.

**Principal Conclusions and Implications for Field.** These findings indicate that pet dogs play an important role in many people’s lives. Our findings also suggest that in some cases dogs may be sought and/or valued, in part, for their affective value related to the potential emotional connection that they can provide. These findings may guide future research, for example to explore potential welfare implications for dogs arising from their owner’s reliance on them for emotional support.