Conversations with my dog

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CONVERSATIONS WITH MY DOG

Anthropomorphising self-narrative as a researcher’s autoethnographic tool when writing her thesis and conducting grief work

Deborah L. Mulligan

Introduction

I began my first PhD six months after my 19-year-old son died of cancer. The cancer journey was long and harrowing. Paradoxically, it can be reduced to just a few words – we cared for him, we loved him and he died. It was an inexplicable occurrence. He wasn’t supposed to leave us but, in the end, he had no choice. I held his hand as he took his last breath. I was non-verbal outside of immediate family members for quite some time. How do you explain the inexplicable to others? You don’t even try. Only those who lived with him and loved him are cognisant of the mental and physical turmoil of grief and bereavement. What then of the solitary hours endured by a mother left to grieve on her own, unable and unwilling to communicate with the outside world? Where is she to find comfort when the house is empty and the other family members have resumed their working lives, a Labrador dog named El her only companion.

This chapter is a reflexive overview of the emotional process of my dissertation writing after the death of my son. “Reflexivity adds validity and rigour in research by providing information about the contexts in which data are located” (Etherington, 2004, p. 37). This is my doctoral story. An autobiographical incident is linked with the paradigm of autoethnography which is viewed through the lens of self-narrative as a tool for meaning construction. The ontological assumption underpinning this type of narrative links the “storied world” (Etherington, 2004, p. 75) in which I live with my individual reality as a bereaved parent. I seek to understand the nature of my existence in this foreign and unfriendly land. Connections of relationality are drawn between the traumatic aftermath of the death of my son, the anthropomorphisation of a beloved family pet, the event of doctoral thesis writing (doctorateness) and the manifestations of the dual identities of myself as an academic researcher and a grieving parent.

Today I have woken in a philosophical mood. I have the flu so I can’t go to the university campus lest I spread my germs. Grief still makes me susceptible to illness. So I am trapped and reflective. El senses my mood and stares out the open door at nothing. These are the moments when we sit united and cast our gazes outwardly into the universe.
We are momentarily calm amidst the chaos of grief. How did I get to this place of fleeting tranquillity? Single mindedness. It’s now a survival skill for me, just as it is for El and her love for our family. Constant inner dialogue initiated by my dog. “How are you feeling today? Can you do some work on your thesis? Remember you have that meeting with your supervisor. He will understand if you cancel.”

One foot in front of the other. I’m ok with this. I have to be.

Distance and purpose. Initially, my study gave me something else to think about – incrementally – whilst I sat at home. It gave me a purpose when interaction outside with people both known and unknown was fraught with tears and silences and too many words.

Thesis work: a solitary act with long periods of time at my computer. The perfect excuse to hide away. Never alone. My dog a stalwart and loyal companion.

Evocative autoethnography

Chronic grief is a misunderstood phenomenon in our western culture. Grievers become a form of cultural casualty. Their grief (although understood and expected) is to be borne in silence, away from a public forum where others may be embarrassed by overt displays of mourning. Profound extended grief, such as the loss of a child, constitutes an otherness of life to the extent that those who have never experienced it can only presume an exit strategy. Dominant schools of thought would have us mistaking quantitative, clinically investigated information (collected from an emotional distance) for authentic research. Autoethnographic studies allow a circuit breaker in this type of formalised data gathering: “Autoethnographies attempt to make social science more than just an end in itself” (Bochner, 2012, p. 155).

When positioning the self in academic writing, particularly if the author comes from a place of trauma, the production of authenticity is fraught with reflexive unease. This is not an easy story to tell. Chadwick (2021) discussed the notion of “discomfort” (n.p.) when researching and addressed the anxiety around writing that crosses the border from our personal lives into the domain of our academic worlds. However, the story of transformation woven around the bereaved self inextricably linked with doctoral study is not one to be secreted away. Chadwick further emphasised that discomposure is “actant in research practices” (n.p.; emphasis in the original). Indeed, it guides interpretation and is a fundamental element of the ownership of “reflexive and critical” (n.p.) research praxis. As such, it should be welcomed in that it constitutes a potentially significant source of knowledge production. It will serve to provide others with a range of possible strategies to implement when personally challenged by the diversity of experience located within the PhD journey and beyond.

Autoethnography seeks to evoke a reader/writer relationship built on the vulnerable first-person voice of the writer and the cognitive curiosity of the reader. Ellis et al. (2011) described this methodology as “both process and product” (p. 273). In her essay entitled ‘The risky responsibility of doctoral writing as grief work: Lessons learnt whilst journeying with trauma in Australia’, Mulligan (2021) discussed the precarity of thesis writing when under extreme psychological and spiritual pressure. It chronicled not only the path to production of the PhD thesis from conception to completion but highlighted the teachable moments along the way for both doctoral and emotional processes.

These moments included the strength that is fostered by belief. The confidence that significant others have in your ability to complete the doctorate is a powerful force. Both my supervisors and my family never doubted that I would finish. At times when I doubted myself, I drew on their faith in my ability. The PhD journey is a long one – a convoluted marathon. As such, it requires dedication and training. Physical and emotional self-care becomes
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an important facet of life. Exercise, water and rest (even though you don’t want to!) are key elements for mental health. Socialisation, in its many guises, is a significant boost to emotional health. My social activities occurred with small groups of friends and family. The latter included my dog. Doctoral writing can be a road to isolation and in the long hours of the research and the write-up, she was my only companion. Subconsciously, I depended on her to keep me company. Her snores provided a comforting backdrop to my days and nights. Her presence afforded a sounding board for recalcitrant paragraphs which, when read aloud, somehow found their own sense of formation.

Evocative autoethnography focuses on shared social themes viewed through the reflexive lens and voice of the individual. Readers are invited into the world of the writer as a particular cultural incident is explored from the writer’s unique perspective. Through this lens, the writer hopes to share her story in a manner that enables the reader to find some common ground with the writer’s experience. Roth (2009) referred to the self and the general population as being: “co-constituted in their relation, having emerged from a singular plural with” (n.p.; emphasis in the original). Meaningful exchanges are created that provide linkages to social change. Additionally, the writer is afforded an opportunity to challenge widely held and steadfastly regarded cultural stereotypes and traditional behavioural tropes.

Self-narrative as an adjunct of autoethnography magnifies the profile of the multiple facets and sensibilities of researcher identity. Personal reflexive accounts of self as the main actor are a feature of this methodology. As hypothesised by Anderson (2006), the autoethnographer as the author represents part of the process in which she is participating and is a pivotal element of the story as it unfolds. The reader is invited into the author’s world and is challenged to emotionally interact with the text by reflecting upon the events recorded as they pertain to their own life experience.

As befits the practice of autoethnographic methodology, the focus remains solely on my story (Adams & Manning, 2015) as I made my way through the maze of doctoral work layered over with grief work. As such, it will not be directed at any other living human involved in its production. The notion of reflexivity lies at the centre of this type of methodology and researcher subjectivity is foregrounded. Subjectivity emphasises depth, complexity and nuance when illuminating the individualised interconnected elements of a social (and academic) phenomenon.

Personalised vignettes are a common practice utilised in qualitative research, particularly evocative autoethnography. Barter and Renold (1999) listed three key objectives writers may have in mind when deciding to use vignettes. These are: contextual exploration of actions; clarification of the writer’s opinion; and to provide a more benign exploration of a sensitive topic. Compellingly, it is through the use of vignettes that the author is afforded agency through the opportunity to tell her own story on her own terms.

The different voices utilised by the writer provide an insight into the existential experience being portrayed on the page. This promotes an appreciation of the author as an “actor in my own life production” (Gray, 2003, p. 265). Alongside authenticity and agency, vignettes act as an instrument for “contextual richness” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 83) in that they enhance the reading experience and provide the reader with a relational realism not afforded by formal academic text. Pitard (2016) was attracted to the “lure of speaking from my heart” (n.p.) when utilising vignettes in her account of teaching students from Timor-Leste. Humphreys (2005) regarded the use of vignettes as an additional manifestation of reflexivity. He suggested that this form of inward-looking communication creates a dialogic link with the reader.

Another authorial technique that showcases reflexivity and allows the writer to step outside of herself and view the emotionality within, is anthropomorphism. This method of writing
provides the reader with a more vivid and insightful experience through the use of vignettes: in my case, conversations with my dog.

“I can’t take you outside to play, I’m busy.” This is me talking to my dog. What a difference this conversation is from the ones we used to have several years ago. At the beginning of my PhD, grief was fresh and energetic in its exhausting engagement. I have emotionally morphed from “I can’t take you outside to play, I need to stay in bed. I’m so tired.” Now I’m too busy writing.

I take her of course. No matter how engrossed I am in Chapter 5. Her loving brown eyes pressure me in ways that human words could never achieve. We play in the yard, me throwing a ball and her never returning it.

It’s good for me to get out into the open. There was a period when all I could do was sit in a chair and mourn.

Eventually, with time, I have reframed my sense of Self. Doctoral study and the supportive relationships therein have helped me enormously to rebuild self-confidence. It was a difficult and trebulous hard-won transformation but it happened.

**Anthropomorphism**

Dogs and humans have evolved together through the centuries to form a close bond. Exactly when dogs became domesticated is a provocative and controversial topic among historians; however, it is recorded that dogs played a powerful role in village life during the Palaeolithic era (Botigué et al., 2017). The exact time in history signifying dogs as much loved family pets is less contentious. Dogs began appearing in paintings of domestic and family life in the 19th century (Walsh, 2009).

The relationship a person considers that they have with their companion animal has as a powerful influence on an individual’s social and personal understandings, wellbeing and communicative preferences.

Anthropomorphism can be defined as “the situated direct perception of animal minds (or other human properties) in the behaviour or bodily expression of animals, by someone who is engaged in a specific purpose of activity” (Servais, 2018, p. 2). This is the most resonant of definitions in my particular circumstance. The shared history between my son, myself and our dog was a significant factor in my perception of El as a type of “fictive kin” (sociologydictionary.org) with whom I could relate on a deeply personal level as we had both experienced the trauma of Rory’s death. Servais (2018) further hypothesised that, pragmatically, anthropomorphism is contextual and socially orientated. I felt that El and I were engaged in a journey of grief together with a purposeful direction. The outcome of which was not only a PhD award, but also a personally transformative enactment.

Viviers (2014) reviewed the historical psychology behind animal companionship and posited that the term “socio-psychological support” (p. 1) was an effective reference for the service that companion animals provide for their humans. The author cites Fine and Beck as providing the definitive definition of the relationship between the two animal/human entities: “[A] mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and other animals that is influenced by behaviours that are essential to the health and well-being of both” (p. 1). Certainly, my interactions with my dog were based on the premises of emotional and physical mutuality, trust and reciprocity.

Airenti (2018) cited the circumstances under which anthropomorphism thrives. She proposed insecurity, anxiety and vulnerability as catalysts. Although the author was referencing natural disasters and/or threat of disease, the emotional characteristics were particularly pertinent when applied to my lived experience. Airenti further posited that anthropomorphism is
dialogic in nature and this interaction is commonplace in human interactions with pets who are considered to be life companion.

From my viewpoint, in my particular set of circumstances, anthropomorphism is a form of eudaimonia. My constructed relationship with El represented a human nurturing of mind, spirit and body and provided a promise of, if not all-encompassing happiness, then certainly a configuration of flourishing. Whilst writing my way into a doctorate, I was also writing my way back into a fulfilling and purposeful life with the help of my companion animal. The grief, potent and all-consuming was both a private and a public experience which manifested itself at times unexpectedly, but usually in the early days, with monotonous regularity. I relied on my dog to act as both a reflexive tool that assisted me to think through my grief and also as an impetus for action that impelled me to actually get out of bed in the morning to attend to the necessities of life and doctoral practice.

Thoughts of beginning a doctorate were conceived amid a wash of tears. Again. It was my dog who first suggested that I needed to get up out of the chair and do “something”. She can be very persuasive when she has a purpose. “Ring the uni. Tell them you need to resume your study.” I had begun a doctorate before Rory became ill but discarded it in order to focus on hospital visits.

She didn’t convince me at first. “I can’t even string two sentences together when I’m speaking, let alone write a whole thesis. What are you thinking! Who would want me? Who would take that risk?”

“You can do it. You can’t sit here for the rest of your life. I need you to come back and so does your family. I will be your constant. We will do this together.”

And so I began. It turns out that there are supervisors who are committed to journeying with their students and who are willing to invest time and effort. I’d given no thought to a topic – even my dog couldn’t help me with that. And I didn’t want to return to my old research. It was dated and reminded me too much of ‘before’.

I became a student again and learned valuable life lessons from both my doctorate and my dog.

Practise patience. Don’t give up on the process. One word, one sentence, one paragraph — it all counts. Endure. Just like El when she’s ‘desperate’ for food and trying to get my attention. Sit, focus, keep your eye on the goal.

Take time out to play. It’s not good for your physical and mental health to sit in front of a computer for endless hours. Throw a ball to your recalcitrant dog – who cares if it isn’t returned? Engage in life. Walk and sniff and contemplate your place in nature amongst the flowers. Or not. Just walk and absorb the environment and not think about anything.

Seek out good companions. Those who will support you and lift your spirits. They may already be in your life, sitting (or lying) beside you. They may be strangers who become friends and with whom you share a common interest.

Take nothing for granted. Whether it be advice from your supervisors/peers or the perception of your dog. Listen to their wisdom.

**Doctorateness**

I began my thesis entitled “‘Time to find a new freedom’: TOMNET and Men’s Sheds – Meeting older men’s contributive needs in regions within South East and South West Queensland, Australia?” (Mulligan, 2018). Having delivered all the signatures on the correct forms, the issue of how I was to traverse the doctoral landscape loomed large. What constitutes a successful doctoral candidate? It would seem that this is a contested concept with the existence of several scholarly disparate definitions. Denicolo and Park (2013) regarded enthusiasm, perseverance and flexibility as necessary personality attributes for a doctoral candidate.
They describe the definitional elusiveness of doctorateness as a result of the diverse criteria sought by examiners – “individual examiners from different disciplines are likely to put dissimilar weight on singular elements’ (pp. 193–194). Frayling et al. (1997) highlighted the structural and organisational rigours of peer review as a validation of doctorateness. Poole (2015) took a more pragmatic view and valued publications and citations as proof of doctorateness. He stressed that the academic accessibility of a doctorate should be prioritised and that examiners should assess “largely on the extent to which the material could potentially be adapted for publication in reputable journals” (p. 1521). Trafford and Leshem (2002) used the analogy of the jigsaw puzzle and claimed doctorateness was achieved when all of the pieces fit together as a viable whole. “Inherent in doctorateness is the notion of synergy” (p. 308). Wellington (2013) stated that seeking a common term for doctorateness was “rather like looking for the Holy Grail” (p. 1501).

After a comprehensive review of extant literature, I have compiled my own definition of doctorateness. I decided that it is a notion grounded in the ‘who’, not the ‘what’. I reflected upon the characteristics that I had at the time as well as those I thought I could assume in the future that could lend themselves to this notion. In this way, I personalised the concept and made it my own. As with grief, doctorateness is a question of ownership in that I am responsible for its everyday praxis. I determined that doctorateness required the personal qualities of commitment, emotional intelligence and intellectual curiosity, as well as the academic qualities of intentionality, competency, resilience and open-mindedness. Further, it is a notion that cannot be assigned a specific gender or age.

El and I are discussing this new academic world we find ourselves in. I am telling her about my university and the opportunities afforded to me by simply being there. Being part of something bigger than myself. The challenges, the triumphs. Will I be able to see it through to the end? Who cares if I succeed or fail? Have I got what it takes?

I am telling her about the different opinions people have about my doctoral endeavour that they have kindly shared with me. She’s gnawing on a bone so she’s not going any place any time soon. I am waxing lyrical to a captive audience.

Comments like: “I’d never have time to do that. I’m much too busy.” (the Timelords); You know it doesn’t really mean anything these days don’t you?” (the Justifiers); “I could do one, but I’m just not interested” (the Dismissives); “I just couldn’t bear to go back and study” (the Dramatists); “Have you finished yet?” (the Are-We-There-Yets); “But why would you want to do that?” (the Toddlers); “That’s all very well but what are you going to do with it?” (the Futurists).

These comments prompt me think about my version of doctorateness. There are certain truisms in these flippant (and at times, uninvited) comments. It’s true that I am busy – grieving still takes up a lot of my time and energy – and I have returned to work. It’s true that I am at the end of my paid professional life and a doctorate is meaningless for career advancement in my situation. BUT I am interested in the process of research – the structure of the thesis, the formation of paragraphs, the academic conversation, the new knowledge. I enjoy meeting with participants who trust me to utilise their confidences in a productive and meaningful way. I’m at peace with the notion that my study will take as long as it takes. I will not rush to finish. Part of the doctoral process is enjoyment. I am a lifelong learner and my learning style suits scholarship. Once my thesis is completed, I will spread my findings and raise awareness as far and as wide as I can. That is my right and my responsibility as a global citizen.

El looks at me. The slow but thorough demolition of her bone only half completed. But she’s tired from the complex constancy of marrow extraction. Time to bury it for another day. And then get back to the business of writing (me) and napping (her). Break time is over.
A doctoral candidate’s identity is a messy contrivance. It is moulded from the positive and negative lived experiences of the individual. These experiences are drawn from both personal and academic spheres and influences. They are also centred on the candidate’s historical, current and future imaginings perspectives. The same identity valence applies to the bereaved. The grieving process is somewhat parallel to that of the doctoral candidate. Chaotic and contradictory forces are at work on the psyche until a truce is formed between self-concept and reality. For the doctoral candidate and the griever, this may involve an initial period of angst where the individual is forced into an alien world with new rules and structures. Until one adapts and understands (or at least learns to live with) those rules, life is uncertain and fraught with mis-steps where trial and error are the order (or rather, disorder) of the day.

McAlpine’s identity-trajectories theory (2012) offers a conceptual framework for the dualism of newly acquired bereavement and doctoral candidacy identities. Both of which, in my case, occurred within six months of one another. The former was thrust upon me; the latter was an intentional undertaking on my part. The dichotomy of circumstances makes for an interesting parallel of life interpretations and understandings. Contextual learnings from both trajectories can be comparatively similar in that they are both embodied cognitive experiences. “Embodied cognition implies that there are resources, plural, available to the organism” (Wilson & Golonka, 2013, n. p.). In this case, the organism (me) utilised the interconnectedness of the brain, the body and the environment in order to seek a pathway to, and a resolution of my task-oriented goals.

The central notion of the identity-trajectories theory (McAlpine, 2012) focuses on the individual who privileges goal setting and achievement through intentional acts. In my circumstance, the goals were conferral of a PhD and an easing of the consuming emotionality of bereavement. Thus, doctoral work and grief work became the dual objectives of my trajectory: “nesting the academic within the personal and incorporating students’ past as well as imagined futures” (p. 38). My academic life ‘nested’ in my emotional life as I imagined a future where my identities of competent scholar and bereaved mother became synergetic.

Stroebe and Schut (1999) hypothesised a four-task grief work model that included:

1. acceptance of the world without the physical presence of the deceased
2. feel the pain from the loss but take some respite from it
3. adapt and mentally reconfigure the new grief environment
4. establish new “roles, identities and relationships” (p. 215).

This grief work model can be extrapolated to doctoral work in that I had to adapt to the new scholarly environment which included:

1. acceptance of the academic world that was unlike any previous exposure I had encountered in the decades since I had completed my Master of Education.
2. work my way steadily through the tasks associated with doctoral research and thesis writing, but take time out to rest and mull over concepts/ideas/new experiences that emerge throughout the research process
3. adapt to the new environment of the academic communities, reconfiguring a new academic role and new collaborative relationships
4. establish new “roles, identities and relationships” (p. 215) that enable me to fit into the new environment.
Each narrative employing the identity-trajectories theory connects historical, present and imagined future life events in an intentional manner. Pivotal to this theory are the three major elements of “agency”, “personal” and “past” (McAlpine, 2012, p. 39). These three components are also vital to my enactment of my grief work alongside my doctoral progress as shown in brackets.

Agency is afforded in the deliberate and planned forward progression of the doctoral endeavour (and my grief work), including any possible limitations or challenges that may arise. The doctoral processes are seen as a part of the personal life of the student (and part of the performance of my grief work). Consideration of the impact of past life episodes, including former relationships (my son), on the present and the future needs to be reflected upon.

El and I are out walking. It has been a long day writing and we are taking respite in the cool of the evening. As usual, she pulls on the lead, impatient to get wherever it is that we are going. As usual, our walk is also punctuated by full stops in the form of protracted sniffing of interesting smells. This doggy alchemy is to be endured by the poor hapless human who is forced to wait out this latest serious examination of the ground. Experience has taught me that this is a process that cannot – under any circumstances – be rushed. El becomes an immovable object around which everyone else must detour as I stand there and make my profuse apologies to those other walkers whose dogs are more obedient than mine.

There are several learning opportunities here I think. Not the least of which is that my dog needs obedience lessons. That aside, the juxtaposition of the harried human and the deliberative dog is an interesting one. If I’m not careful, my walk can become just another job. A ‘fit-in’ – get up, have coffee, turn on the computer, eat something, read those papers, have more coffee, walk the dog, write a thesis. Perhaps those full stops should remind me that life – and a doctorate – is more than a job to be done. Perhaps in the craziness of grief, those full stops should remind me to take the time to chat to my son. A bittersweet internal dialogue about nature and the beauty of sunsets and a dog that will not be rushed.

It also strikes me that El’s leash behaviour is similar to the life of a griever who is constantly straining to find a purposeful existence after the death of her child. Do a doctorate, go back to work, rush around – do anything that might silence the voice in your head that insists on rehashing traumatic memories. This is mentally and physically unsustainable. Eventually you will be forced to a full stop by a body and a mind that cannot keep up the pace. When this happens, take the opportunity to rest and recuperate and when you are re-energised, begin again.

As we come to the tail end of our walk, El trots serenely and sedately beside me like she is, and always has been, the best behaved dog in the neighbourhood. I’m not fooled – she’s tired from all that pushing and pulling exertion so she has morphed into a model of canine compliance. This is the time I enjoy the most. We are both momentarily at peace with the world.

Conclusion

Eminent scholars Abraham Maslow (1943, 1962, 1970) and Howard McClusky (1971, 1974, 1976) both developed theories around the notion of achievement of life potential. Maslow’s original hierarchy of needs or “pre-potency” (1943, p. 370) is a permanent fixture in significant historical scholarship. His stage-based hierarchy of human needs beginning with physical and then progressing upwards through security, social, ego and self-actualisation is a seminal work. In 1970, the scholar built upon his original hierarchy to add three more needs – cognitive, aesthetic and self-transcendence (physical, security, social, ego, cognitive, aesthetic, self-actualisation and finally, self-transcendence). When my son died, I was privileged enough to consider that the three basic needs were fully met in my life. I was physically and financially sound and I had positive relationships with others. However, the first victim of grief is self-esteem. I was cast adrift in an ocean of self-recrimination and hopelessness. In my eyes, a maternal failure.
Doctoral studies and all that it entailed provided me with a base upon which to rebuild my shattered ego and feed the need for cognitive rediscovery. This became the foundation of my ongoing grief work.

McClusky, an educational gerontologist, hypothesised a five-factor nonsequential series of needs in order to “satisfy the basic requirements of aging” (1974, p. 331). These needs were coping (authority), expressive (relaxation endeavours), contributive (valuable community contribution), influence (esteem) and transcendence (altruism). Bereavement rendered me deficient of all five. Through the structure of the doctoral process, the connections made with other academics and the emotional support of my supervisors, I now find myself able to claim four of the five needs as having been met. I am still working on transcendence! My grief work is far from over and will continue until I rejoin my son but for the present, and my imagined future, I am satisfied with my contribution to life.

My academic experience enabled the agency that had been sacrificed on the altar of overwhelming grief. As I made my way through my academic life, I became more clear-sighted about a way forward through my personal life. In the telling of my story, I sought to combine notions to do with “love and healing, … balance and connection … beauty and growing” (Aptheker 1989, as cited in Etherington, 2004, p. 54) as I journeyed.

“You’re here! You’re home! HOORAY!!!! I’ll just do a smallish dance.” That’s my dog El. She basically performs this greeting every morning, every night, any time I’ve left her for five or more minutes. Her welcome dances have become less agile over the years but that does not diminish the love and enthusiasm she has for seeing me again.

We are connected in our relationship built on the twin pillars of acceptance and belonging. As I grow through this period of academic and personal intensity, I am forever grateful for the gifts I have been given. The love of my family and the memories – both good and bad – that we share. The new relationships I have been lucky enough to forge with like-minded and committed academics. The companionship of a very effusive and devoted Labrador dog. (See Figure 10.1.)

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**Figure 10.1** El
References


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Websites

https://sociologydictionary.org/fictive-kin/#definition_of_fictive_kin