

“SHE KNOWS WHO I AM”: ADDRESSING PRISONERS’  
INTERNALIZED STIGMA WITH A PRISON  
ANIMAL PROGRAM IN A CANADIAN MEDIUM SECURITY PRISON

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By

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## **ABSTRACT**

Prison animal programs have been increasingly implemented in prisons across North America to improve recidivism rates among prisoners and their institution environment. Prisoners can experience internalized stigma because of the social stigma attached to incarceration, especially when they are problematic substance users. In turn, internalized stigma can hinder prisoners' rehabilitation, including desistance from crime and community reintegration. A qualitative secondary analysis was done to examine the impacts of a canine-assisted learning program implemented in 2016 to offer comfort, love, and support among prisoners who had recently unintentionally overdosed at a medium-security prison in Drumheller, Alberta. Interviews were conducted with five prisoners and five institution staff in 2016 as part of a program evaluation. This research sought to understand (1) if and how the program participants experience internalized stigma and (2) how the program dogs can aid in the de-stigmatization process and in turn, contribute to a more positive sense of identity among participants. A total of five themes were developed from this study based on a thematic content analysis of interviews with both the program participants and program staff. Three themes identify the participants' experiences of internalized stigma; i) De-individualization resulting in a perceived lack of care by others, ii) Stereotypes reinforcing their negative social labels as criminals and problematic substance users, iii) Mistrust by others due to perceived blemishes of their individual character. Two themes suggest how the dogs aid in alleviating the participants' internalized stigma and in turn contributed to their development in positive self-identity; i) Participants perceived the dogs as caring for them through their emotional and physical presence and unconditional love, ii) The dogs and handlers exuded a perceived sense of trust towards participants. Addressing the harmful impacts of internalized stigma in a prison setting with a prison animal program creates an understanding of the importance of building non-stigmatizing social relationships for alleviating prisoners' internalized stigma within a prison institution. This research will contribute to literature exploring the impacts of prison animal programs specifically with regards to internalized stigma and problematic substance use. It will also contribute to prison program and policy development.

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is meant to highlight the magic of dogs. It is dedicated to the therapy dogs who have gotten me here and ignited my passion for this field, and to the ones who I never had the privilege of meeting but have the honour of telling their story.

To the program dogs Anna-Belle, Subie, and Kisbey:

For the impact you made in the PAWSitive Support program and the hearts of its participants. Without you, this program would not have been possible. I wish I could have witnessed in person the effortless trust, love, and enthusiasm you showed to a group of prisoners who needed it most and who you convinced were worthy of it.

To My Own Therapy Dogs:

Jager:

For introducing me to the world of animal-assisted interventions and showing me what unconditional love looks like. You taught me how much a little support through a pet, a laugh, or just sitting with someone going through a tough time could do. Beyond that, you were an essential support for me throughout my childhood and all the way into graduate school. Who knew becoming a therapy dog team back in 2018 so I could spend more time with you would lead me to work on a special project like this. Your memory is with me whenever I see someone light up when interacting with a therapy dog. It all started with you.

Reacher:

For allowing me to continue volunteering as a handler and witness the joy you bring to the people you visit. Training and visiting with you keeps my excitement for this field alive. Our hard work getting you certified taught me about the importance of connection during the training process. Watching you grow and learn as a therapy dog has reignited my love of volunteering. I can't wait for our adventures to come.

## Key Terms and Definitions

**Care:** Providing attention and comfort to someone to meet their mental health and well-being needs

**Connection:** Having a personal relationship with another being

**De-individualization:** An individual becoming separated from their identity and instead being categorized into a specific social group

**Human-animal bond:** A mutually positive relationship between a human and animal

**Internalized Stigma:** Stigmatization that is ingrained into a person's identity

**Identity:** Individual sense of self

**PAP:** Prison Animal Program

**Program dog:** Canine participating in the prison animal program

**Therapy dog:** A certified canine working with their handler to bring comfort through their calm and gentle presence and willingness to be pet

**Perceived Unconditional love:** Perceiving a person or animal as loving without judgement, ulterior motives or conditions.

**Well-Being:** Improving a person's quality of life by meeting their individual needs

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introduction

Animal-assisted intervention programs have recently been implemented within prison settings to increase prisoners' well-being. This is attempted, in part, through positive relationship development and connection with the participating animals. The connections humans can have with an animal are unique and are often not possible with humans. This is because animals are perceived as incapable of judgement while also having the capacity for unconditional acceptance. While animals can have their own reservations or fears when interacting with people (and this needs to be respected and recognized), they do not seemingly communicate this judgement like humans do (e.g. words and body language). Humans perceive animals as non-judgemental because of this compared to their interactions with other humans. There is a knowledge gap on the impact of prison animal programs (PAP) on prisoners' internalized stigma and positive identity development. Prisoners often experience internalized stigma due to the social stigma attached to incarceration. Problematic substance use can heighten prisoners' experiences of stigmatization and therefore, internalized stigma, because of the social stigma likewise associated with it. Internalized stigma directly impacts prisoners' sense of identity by causing them to accept negative criminal stereotypes as inherent to their identity. In turn, internalized stigma can hinder prisoners' rehabilitation, including desistance from crime and prosocial community reintegration.

This study examines the impacts of the PAWSitive Support Canine-Assisted Learning Program implemented to offer comfort, love, and support among prisoners with substance use histories at a medium-security prison in Drumheller, Alberta. Goffman's concepts of stigma and social identity are drawn upon to conceptualize and better understand (1) if and how the program

participants experience internalized stigma. A symbolic interactionist framework and attachment theory are utilized to examine the relationships and connections built between the prisoners and program dogs by analyzing (2) if the dogs aid in the de-stigmatization process and (3) how the dogs were de-stigmatizing. A qualitative secondary data analysis was conducted using interview data collected from the program participants and staff during a program evaluation of the program. Focussing on addressing the harmful impacts of internalized stigma in a prison setting with a PAP will help to develop knowledge on the impact of building positive and non-stigmatizing relationships on alleviating prisoners' internalized stigma. This will help to inform prison program development and traditional prison recovery programming that can learn from animal-assisted interventions.

### **1.2 Researcher PAP Experience and Research Interest**

I was able to participate in the PAWSitive Support Caine Assisted Learning Program in Saskatoon as a therapy dog handler with my therapy dog, Reacher. We did a visit to The Regional Psychiatric Centre and the Saskatoon Provincial Jail as representatives of the St. John Ambulance therapy dogs. At the Saskatoon Provincial Jail, we participated in the final visit of the five-week PAWSitive Support Program specific to addictions and recovery, where prisoners spent time with the dogs and connected their interactions with the dogs to their recovery plans. This session was a part of the series of sessions conducted by the PAWSitive Support Program in which the dogs provided love, comfort and support to the prisoners as they worked through their recovery plan. We had the participants visit with the dogs, pet them, and demonstrated different training exercises with the dogs emulating the unique boundaries each dog had and their body language to conceptualize that week's theme of respect.

I was able to observe the program dogs and handlers involved PAWSitive Support program at Regional Psychiatric Centre in Saskatoon. This was an animal-assisted therapy project where the participants got to walk and train the dogs themselves. This was similar to what was done at Drumheller. Two mental health professionals helped the handlers facilitate the training sessions by connecting the dog's training with the participants' recovery plan. I witnessed the different ways that participants connected with the dogs and how the dogs responded differently to each participant. Some participants wanted to be actively involved in the training process of the dogs and some just wanted to relax with them. The participants discussed how they felt interacting with the dogs, what they found unique in the dogs' personalities, and how the positive social interactions with the dogs could apply to their recovery. I will be going to Drumheller in August to be a part of another version of the program with Reacher and four other therapy dogs.

Participating in these visits helped to familiarize myself with therapy dog programming in prison contexts and how the PAWSitive Support program at Drumheller operated. These experiences also sparked my interest in understanding whether the relationships prisoners have with dogs are de-stigmatizing, and how the dogs specifically aid in the de-stigmatization process. Both experiences have aided in my ability to conceptualize the themes found in the current study and understand what the relationships built between the participants and dogs can look like, as well as how these relationships are formed. Additionally, I witnessed how working with the dogs gave participants more confidence to speak about their recovery as they reached their program goals with the dogs. I was able to interact directly with the participants and watch them have a brief connection with my own therapy dog by asking questions about him and having them read his body language as part of an exercise about respect. I believe having this experience has well-

equipped my analytical skills within this research area and has informed my epistemological process.

### **1.3 Ethics and Funding Statement**

The University of Saskatchewan Human Ethics Board granted ethics exemption for this project as it was a program evaluation. The University of Saskatchewan Animal Research Ethics Board approved the therapy animal work done in the program. The current study received funding from the Social Science and Humanities and Research Council (SSHRC).

Chapter 2: Background and Literature Review

## **CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Internalized Stigma**

The concept of stigma is generally defined and applied in a variety of different research contexts throughout academic literature. Stigma is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as “negative feelings that people have about particular circumstances or characteristics that somebody might have” (Oxford Learner’s Dictionary, Definition of stigma noun from the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionaries, 2023). Stigma was described by Link and Phelan (2001) as an accumulation of “labelling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination” (p.1). Link and Phelan (2001) argue that the labels that are adopted by stigmatized individuals vary in severity depending on how closely related the “undesirable attributes” and labels are, and how many stereotypes are under the umbrella of that label. When many negative attributes are connected to a label, the us vs them dichotomy and “othering” become increasingly prevalent, which in turn leads to further discrimination and status loss for the stigmatized person (Link & Phelan, 2001, p. 365).

Internalized stigma is a resultant effect of a continuous experience of perceived and anticipated stigma where the stereotypes asserted are accepted as true and accurate to the stigmatized individual's sense of self (Moore & Tangney, 2017; Corrigan, Watson & Barr, 2006). Internalized stigma is more detrimental to mental well-being compared to other forms of stigma as it can create lower self-esteem (Moore et al., 2017; Corrigan et al., 2006). This, in turn, can lower the chances of desistance from crime. Desistance is a term used in criminological literature to describe offenders keeping away from criminal activity for one reason or another (Laub & Sampson, 2001). Given that positive identity development is crucial to desistance among prisoners, this study took a specific focus on identity formulation in response to stigmatization leading to internalized stigma. Given that prisoners are a highly stigmatized social group that is subjected to several negative stereotypes attributed to them through media, policy, and institutionalization, internalized stigma is an important area to explore.

#### 2.1.1 Internalized Stigma Among Prisoners

Recent literature on the harmful impacts of incarceration has highlighted that the stigmatization of prisoners has a significant negative impact on their mental well-being and self-concept, which is vital in desistance from crime. Prisoners with experiences of perceived and anticipated stigma often have difficulties with reintroduction to their community (Moore, Stuewig & Tangney, 2016). Internalized stigma can also cause prisoners to withdraw from society and experience mental health issues upon release from prison (Moore & Tangney, 2017). Additionally, internalized stigma can create less adherence to psychiatric medications; a high level of internalized stigma is associated with high levels of distress and predicts lower adherence to medication (Farabee, Zaheer & Joshi, 2019).

Internalized stigma among prisoners is connected to criminal identity acceptance and internalization. Prisoners with mental health issues can experience heightened internalized stigma with the resultant acceptance of negative stereotypes, which in turn intensifies their acceptance of their criminal label (Moore & Tangney, 2017). Criminal identity labelling and the resultant perceived stigma inmates experience can lead to internalized stigma (Moore et al., 2016).

### 2.1.2 Social Factors Influencing Internalized Stigma and Desistance from Crime

Societal factors and pressures contribute to the development of internalized stigma and, in turn, have a negative influence on desistance from crime. Shame and labelling associated with internalized stigma are socially constructed and reinforced by societal moral standards (Braithwaite, 1989). Reintegrative shaming, a theoretical process presented by Braithwaite (1989), suggests that persistence towards crime is fuelled by a "deviant self-concept" that is "mediated by shaming" and acceptance by a deviant subculture (Braithwaite, 1989, p.13). This deviant self-concept is created by a rejection of a standard of moral social controls due to perceived shame and societal pressures enhancing that shame. Moral standards are accepted and practiced within the general population, and because of this, those who act outside of these normative expectations are shamed and labelled as deviant. Those labelled as "deviant" possess a deviant self-concept, and in turn, exercise a self-fulfilling prophecy where they fulfill this label and continue to commit "deviant" acts. Those labelled then adopt subcultures that accept them for who they are and support them, furthering them from the normative expectations of the dominant social culture. These subcultures are rationalized because of the supportive culture surrounding them, and ultimately legitimized. Those labelled then see themselves as victims of people and institutions trying to assert social control over their deviant lifestyle. Braithwaite (1989) furthers

that social control and stigmatization fuel the labelled person to internalize negative stereotypes and push them towards a more accepting deviant lifestyle. This also impacts that person's desire to rehabilitate themselves (Braithwaite, 1989).

There are several social factors that can inhibit the willingness and ability of an individual with a criminal history to desist from crime. Stigmatization towards formally incarcerated prisoners is reinforced by social factors that inhibit the individual's ability to develop as individuals outside of the prison environment. LeBel, Burnett, Maruna & Bushway (2008) outlined several social actors relating to criminal desistance a lack of community support, financial support, and criminal stigma impacting the ability to maintain employment, making desistance from crime more challenging for those who had previously been incarcerated (Western, Kling & Weiman, 2001; LeBel et al., 2008). They also identified internalized stigma as significant predictors of reconviction. Those with internalized stigma had a 37.9% increase in the probability of re-conviction at 89.9%. Only 5% of participants who felt stigmatized were not reconvicted, and only 24% did not experience perceived stigma. Feelings of stigmatization also predicted re-imprisonment; LeBel et al., (2008) states that internalized stigma leads to defiance and does not encourage desistance, leading to further recidivism. Hope and self-efficacy for a desired outcome, as well as creating a plan to achieve goals and outcomes, was shown to be an important predicting factor to criminal desistance. Promoting self-efficacy was seen as a primary way previous offenders could combat negative social structural factors such as stigmatization and achieve desistance from crime (LeBel et al., 2008).

## **2.2 Desistance and Identity**

Identity development can be linked to both recidivism and desistance from crime. Building positive identity practices upon release has been shown in the literature to create a



better chance at successful community reintegration, as well as desistance from crime (Maruna, 2012; Maruna, 2017; McNeil, Farrall, Lightowler & Maruna, 2012). Building positive socialization practices plays a large role in prisoners' desistance from crime (Maruna, 2012). Alternatively, negative identity development caused by internalized stigma labelling can create barriers to criminal desistance.

Desistance becomes challenging when reintegration into the community is met with stigmatization and internalization of negative stigmatizing labels. Internalization of these stereotypes is especially problematic as it asserts negative labels as an inherent aspect of that prisoner causing them to believe that these stereotypes are true and accurately reflect to who they are (Maruna, 2012). Maruna (2017) suggests that this labelling becomes an all-encompassing aspect of the offender's identity, and they are always seen as "criminal." They also state that research has shown most people are a part of some kind of criminal activity in their youth but they eventually "grow out of it" (Laub & Sampson, 1993 as cited in Maruna, 2017, p. 7). An adolescent's social and structural factors start to play a role in whether a person will continue to engage in criminal activity into their adult life or not (ibid.).

### 2.2.1 Desistance Factors and Identity

McNeil et al., (2012) outline eight factors of desistance related to identity development. First, they suggest that diverse intervention is important to desistance as desistance is "an individualised and subjective process." (McNeil et al., 2012, p. 8) Since developing an individual identity outside of criminal labelling is important to desistance, interventions that are less traditional and cater to the individual's needs may be more effective. Second, hope and motivation were identified as important to positive identity development which in turn lessens recidivism. Third, building social relationships is important to desistance. Fourth, they suggest

that working with offenders as individuals is a more effective treatment process than trying to force traditional interventions on them. Fifth, focusing on negative stereotypes and attributes in the offender interferes with desistance and in fact, labelling can "derail" desistance. Sixth, building social capital, including learning to build social relationships and social skills, is important to successful desistance. Seventh, community acceptance and support can help foster desistance practices and maintain positive identity practices (ibid.).

### 2.2.2 Narrative Identity Theory of Desistance

Narrative identity theory of desistance, originally conceptualized by Maruna (2001) (as cited in Stone, 2015) in their study on incarcerated men, makes a strong argument for the importance of positive identity development in desistance and why it should be incorporated into prison programming. Stone (2015) applied this approach to their study of incarcerated women who were problematic substance users. Narrative identity theory suggests that offenders with “redemptive personal narratives” are more likely to desist from crime. Redemptive personal narratives are personal narratives that conceptualize “failures” that occurred in the person's past life as important to the future success of who they are now. Stone (2015) identified five components of redemptive personal narratives: the establishment of the true self or core self as good or normal, identifying the bad “it” that is responsible for their crime or negative behaviour (for substance users, meaning the substance), empowerment from higher powers or individuals whom the individuals care for and have value, and redemptive suffering by connecting negative pasts with more positive future (i.e., redemption stories as important to future success). The study found that the incarcerated women who created redemption scripts desisted from crime (Stone, 2015). Prisoner’s overcoming negative self-concept due past life experiences and

labelling by understanding themselves as individuals can lead to positive identity development and improved internalized stigma.

Similarly, Anderson (2016a) argues for desistance-focused probation practice that considers the prisoners' unique lived experiences and allows them to express their identity. This is done by "bearing witness to the person's story" by taking into account the person's values and lived experience throughout the probation and reintegrative process. Additionally, the socio-political context of the incarcerated individual's story is important to recognize, and it is important to create a mutual environment where these stories can be shared (Anderson, 2016a). These findings suggest that recognizing prisoners' individual identity outside of the prison system and negative labels may help to combat recidivism. Prisoners being labeled as substance users is one negative stereotype that can inhibit this process.

### **2.3 Substance Use**

The participants in the PAWSitive Support program all had problematic substance use histories and were taking part in the program as part of their substance use recovery. Given that addressing substance use is specific to the scope of this program, it is important to highlight the impact that substance use can have on desistance, positive identity development, and internalized stigma among prisoners. A large number of prisoners within Canadian correctional institutions have substance use disorders before and/or during their incarceration. This is especially prevalent amongst males, with 80% of federal corrections institutions in Canada reporting substance use issues among prisoners (Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network, 2012; Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2015; 2016; 2018). Illicit drugs are known to be readily available in prison institutions. Programs developed to address the use of illicit drugs within correctional institutions often take zero tolerance, non-mental health-centred approaches and have low participation rates

(Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2021; 2019; House of Commons, 2012). Substance use recovery more generally is negatively impacted by mental health issues and lack of support (McQuaid & Dell, 2018).

### 2.3.1 Desistance and Substance Use

Problematic substance use impacts prisoners' paths to desistance from crime by increasing their level of stigmatization. This can cause further isolation from society upon reintegration into the community. Prisoners with substance use histories may withdraw from society as substance use has also been negatively correlated with prisoners' perceived social support (Rapier, McKernan & Stauffer, 2019). Schroeder, Giordano and Cernkovich (2007) conducted a study with a sample of previously institutionalized youth through three waves of data from a twenty-one-year project to understand the role of substance use in the desistance process. The study found that drug and alcohol use has a distinctive impact on desistance. Drug and alcohol use at the first and second follow-up interviews as adults was positively correlated with criminal offending. Both were independently significantly associated with “reduced odds of criminal desistance” (Schroeder et al., 2007, p. 205).

### 2.3.2 Substance Use and Identity- Individual Narratives and Trauma

Substance use programming has begun to embrace individual narrative approaches and trauma-informed care as an attempt to create more positive self-identity practices among program clients. Prison animal programs like the PAWSitive Support program take an individualized approach to substance use programming where program participants are able to form unique and interpersonal relationships with the program dogs with the goal of better understanding their own personal identities outside of the prison system. Individual narratives specific to addiction recovery processes can help to combat negative stereotypes about (or

specific to) substance use and develop a sense of identity beyond being labelled as an "addict". Bères (2023) states that those seeking counselling for addiction often speak about themselves as victims, but also that they did something wrong and are inherently damaged because of their paths to addiction. These patients tend to "internalize their problems" (White, 2007a as cited in Bères, 2023) and paint themselves as the source of their issues, thus believing the negative stereotypes that come with addiction.

Bères (2023) offers a few examples of how focussing on individual narratives and connecting this to their identity development shows promising results in the addictions field of social work. Externalizing conversations can help with issues of internalization of negative attributes by "externalizing the problem from the person's identity" (Bères, 2023, p. 438). Having externalizing conversations can help individuals understand how internalized narratives are developed and whether or not that person wants to continue living with that narrative (i.e., that they are inherently bad because of their addiction). Prison animal programs like the PAWSitive support program have applied this approach by creating space for these externalizing conversations with the dogs to occur. Additionally, they highlight that the field of addictions treatment should be "moving away from the shaming, labelling, and fearing people with addictions" (Hari, 2015 as cited in Bères, 2023, p. 435), and that there is a power in social discourse; these discourses need to be reconstructed to properly support those going through addictions.

Addressing negative labels around addiction through "re-authoring" is highlighted as a promising technique in addiction recovery to address internalized stigma and create more empowering personal narratives that lead to positive identity development. Using negative labels can make a person focus on the individual causes of those labels and less on their social

construction. Re-authoring is a "process of moving from a problem or dominant storyline to an alternate or preferred storyline"(White 2007 as cited in Bères, 2023, p. 436). Bères (2023) states that "a person is objectified, totalized, and pathologized" when labelled (Bères, 2023, p. 436). Working to develop a person's identity beyond those stereotypes can be achieved by examining individual narratives through "re-authoring" their dominant and alternative stories (Bères, 2023). It is when people tell their life events as a storyline that they can be influenced by the social labels they are given (i.e. labelling them as addicts), and within the telling of these stories, only a small amount of details are included to make up the stories. Those who are labelled as "addicts" or "alcoholics" leave out the parts of their life stories when they were sober or when they were victimized by a person in their lives or an institution.

This pushes forward the idea that the development of a positive identity isn't always an active process, and it needs to be addressed in mental health and addictions treatment. It also highlights the importance of re-telling stories from a different perspective and without all-encompassing labels for individual's to be able to see their life trajectory beyond these labels and that these labels are not inherent to their identity, but how they are socially asserted and then internalized into a person's identity. The process of re-authoring involves understanding the "meaning making, hopes, and values" of that person in their story and how it can be re-framed away from focusing on individual faults and more on who they are as a whole person. (Bères 2023, p. 439).

### 2.3.3 Trauma-Informed Approach to Substance Use Recovery

Addressing personal trauma can play a large role in individual identity development and combating internalized stigma. Trauma-informed care approaches focus on the reconstruction of a positive sense of identity through the conceptualization of that trauma and the relationships

surrounding it. Trauma-informed care in addiction treatment is unique in its approach to serve the specific individual needs of the person receiving the care, rather than asserting traditional techniques and approaches that don't necessarily address the individual trauma that a person holds (Reeves, 2015 as cited in Fletcher 2023). With trauma being heavily linked to a person's identity, and negative stereotypes around addiction amplifying negative personal identity development, it is imperative to understand how addiction programming focussing on individualized approaches can address internalized stigma. It is becoming apparent that successful addiction programs, particularly within prison contexts, are taking more individualized, identity development, and trauma-based approaches to care. Given that a major catalyst of addictions is isolation, prison animal programs have been readily implemented to not only address prisoner isolation but also contribute to positive identity development.

## **2.4 Human-Animal Relationships**

### **2.4.1 The Human-Animal Bond**

Human-animal bond research has become a more prevalent topic of social science research. With companion animals increasingly taking up social spaces in discourse, media, home life, and communities, it is imperative to understand the benefits and existence of the human-animal bond. The human-animal bond describes a mutual relationship between a human and an animal that revolves around the welling-being of both (AVMA, 1998 as cited in Hosey et al., 2018, p. 274). Current research suggests that the human-animal bond can be developed out of necessity for support and companionship, but also for overall mental and physical health (Hodgson & Darling, 2011). Applebaum, MacLean and McDonald (2021) found that the human-animal bond provides support in a variety of contexts. The human-animal bond can aid in areas of intimate partner violence by being a source of support for victims even while the animals

themselves are facing maltreatment. Those facing discrimination within marginalized communities such as LGBTQ+ individuals can consider pets "chosen family" when they are isolated from their own families (Putney, 2014 as cited in Applebaum et al., 2021). Animals can also create nurturing relationships with children and can be a source of emotional support and security during times of distress (Arkow, 2020). Arkow (2020) suggests that social workers should recognize six areas in which the human-animal bond can influence the well-being of their clients. They state that pets are often considered family members and should be considered when examining their client's homelife and when building trust with their clients. As well, human-animal relationships can be a form of social capital that can be a catalyst for community involvement. Due to the significance of the human-animal bond, pet loss is often considered a traumatic event that should be recognized in treatment plans, as well as the connection between domestic and child abuse and animal abuse (Arkow, 2020).

Barker and Wolen (2008) outline several areas of human-animal interaction research where pet ownership has positively impacted their daily life. They aid in cardiovascular health and several studies show that when comparing those who are non-pet owners (Barker & Wolen, 2008; Friedmann, Thomas, Cook, Tsai & Picot, 2007; Wilson, 1987). Pet owners often have better health outcomes and rates of health treatments (Barker & Wolen, 2008; Siegal, 1990) this can be partially explained by pets increasing daily activity (dog owners, specifically) and decreasing feelings of stress in daily life (Barker & Wolen, 2008; Rogers, 1993). Pet ownership can also have psychosocial and psychiatric benefits. Pet ownership has been shown to result in significant perceived social support from their pets and can aid in reducing depressive symptoms (Barker & Wolen, 2008; Tower & Nokota, 2006). A study examining the relationship between un-housed people and their dogs in the UK highlighted the uniqueness and importance of human-



animal relationships in challenging contexts (Scanlon et al., 2021). They found that the participants saw their pets as "kin" and felt that, although they rescued the dog, the dog rescued them as well. They also felt a sense of responsibility for caring adequately for their dog because of the bond they had with it and experienced "anticipatory grief" when faced with the reality of potentially having to give their dog up (ibid).

Animal-assisted interventions (AAI) have been adopted in social work and nursing practices due to the unique benefits of human-animal interactions (Beggs & Townsend, 2008; Matuszek, 2010). Within nursing practices, animal-assisted interventions have been utilized to bring joy to isolated patients, give them purpose, and distract patients from their pain (Matuszek, 2010). Within social work and therapeutic interventions, animal-assisted therapy can accompany traditional therapeutic practices. Having an animal present in these interactions can improve client-therapist rapport and improve outcomes by being a non-judgemental guide through the therapy session (Beggs & Townsend, 2008). Social work research also indicates that because of the significance of the human-animal bond, companion animals should be considered as central supports in cases of child protection and abuse and courthouse facility dogs can be useful supports during court hearings (Arkow, 2020).

#### 2.4.2 Substance Use and Human-Animal Relationships

Human-animal relationships can have a positive impact on substance use recovery. Current research suggests that having the opportunity to interact with and/or build relationships with animals (companion animals, service dogs, therapy dogs) can help alleviate barriers to care and enhance the well-being of those seeking treatment (Dell, Kostenuik & Bently, 2022; Williamson et al., 2021). Service dogs have been shown to assist their handlers in their substance use recovery. They can help encourage better emotional and mental health while also helping to

increase physical activity. Additionally, they can bring more meaning to their handlers' lives and decrease feelings of public hypervigilance (Dell, Kostenuik, & Bentley, 2022). They can also assist with harm reduction and increasing social capital, and help with behaviour changes among veterans in substance use recovery (Williamson, Dell, Chalmers, Cruz & De Groot, 2021a). In a study measuring substance use through a drug use screening inventory among veterans with service dogs, the veterans reported that in training with their service dog, they had a decrease in opioid and alcohol use (Williamson, Dell, Osgood, Chalmers, Lohnes, Carleton & Asmundson, 2021b).

Interactions with companion animals and therapy dogs have also been linked to positive outcomes in substance use recovery. Among patients receiving treatment at a methadone clinic, companion animals were found to be supportive of substance use recovery by increasing social and health well-being and building a sense of purpose by caring for their animals and improving their environment (Kostenuik & Dell, 2020). This study found that companion animals offered social support with the relationship to an animal being indicated as important or even more important than a relationship with humans. The companion animals also provide emotional support and felt that they took care of each other. The patients' animals were accepting of them, and they didn't feel judged by their animals. Their animals helped with their overall health and well-being by being a support during their recovery and being there for them when they were struggling. The companion animals also made them feel safe amidst potentially unsafe environments, offered a sense of stability in their lives, and a sense of empowerment and purpose from caring for the animal (Ibid.).

AAI have been implemented within substance use programming to improve patient outcomes and improve overall program practice. AAI can help to create "a therapeutic alliance"

between patients and therapists, as well as motivate and improve acceptance of the therapeutic environment for patients. With this, patients can have higher a likelihood of completing their program and remaining committed to their treatment plan (Butler Centre for Research, 2016). An equine-assisted youth addictions program found that those who participated in the equine therapy stayed in treatment for longer periods of time and were more likely to complete their program compared to those who were not in the equine program (Kern-Godal, Arnevik, Walderhaug, & Ravndal, 2015). AAI can also improve the actual process of substance use programming. One study conducted in an Italian prison found that among a group of prisoners with substance use issues, an AAI program improved their social skills, lessened their desire for substances, and decreased their anxiety and depression compared to a group who did not participate in the AAI programming (Contalbrigo, De Santis., Toson, Montanaro, Farina, Costa & Nava, 2017).

A significant outcome of therapy dog interventions in substance use recovery is the ability for quick connections to be established between therapy dogs and those they visit with who are in recovery. In her perspective piece, Anna-Belle (one of the program dogs from the PAWSitive Support program), as interpreted and written by her handler, emphasized the importance of human-animal connection within substance use recovery. When visiting the methadone clinic, Anna-Belle describes the connection she made with a client who was a mother in addiction treatment. Anna-Belle's lack of judgement and eagerness when interacting with the patient allowed them to develop a connection. This connection led to the participant being more engaged in her treatment, and strengthened the "therapeutic alliance" between herself and her counsellor (Anna-Belle The Therapy Dog, Dell, Sewap, McAllister & Bachiu, 2019). A second piece from Anna-Belle's perspective highlights the positive impact of physical affection that clients can gain from therapy dogs. Anna-Belle described being hugged, giving "kisses," and

laying on the floor with clients to decrease their anxiety and help them to feel better (Dell & Anna-Belle the Therapy Dog, 2015). The connections between humans and companion/working animals have unique benefits in substance use recovery that cannot otherwise be achieved within conventional interventions. Overall, the perceived non-judgement and lack of stigmatization from an animal can create more motivation towards recovery in a variety of contexts, including prisons.

### **2.5 Prison Animal Programs (PAP)**

Prison animal programs (PAP) have been employed globally to help combat the harmful impacts of stigma on prisoners. This is achieved through providing opportunities for positive prosocial identity practices to combat internalized stigma through non-stigmatizing social interactions. Existing programs within the United States and Canada aid in reducing prisoners' internalized stigma by offering opportunities for them to work with non-stigmatizing animals. These opportunities include obedience training programs where prisoners are tasked with training rescue dogs for rehoming, service and explosive detection dogs, animal husbandry, vocational training programs and emotional support dog programs (Camp Canine Kentucky, 2013; PAWSitive Change, 2013; McConnel & Taylor, 2011; DAWGS in Prison, n.d; Correctional Services Canada, 2013; Harkrader, Burke, & Owen, 2004; Villafaina-Domínguez, Collado-Mateo, Merellano-Navarro & Villafaina, 2020; Prison Pet Partnership, n.d; Collica-Cox & Furst, 2019; Puppies Behind Bars, n.d). PAPs are also present in Scotland, England, Austria, and Australia (Stetina, Krouzecky, Emmett, Klaps, Ruck, Kovacovsky, Bunina, & Aden, 2020; Correctional Service Canada, 2013; Humby & Barclay, 2018; Mulcahy & Mclaughlin, 2013). Additionally, equine, feline, and zoo animal-based PAP's have been established (Bachi, 2013; Wild Horse Inmate Program WHIP, n.d; Fischer, 2015). However, there is a lack of PAP dealing

specifically with problematic substance use health concerns within Canadian institutions. Current research examining prison programs with canines indicates that engaging with a dog can provide numerous benefits for prisoners' internalized stigma, mental well-being, positive socialization practices and prosocial identity development.

### 2.5.1 Enhancing Mental and Emotional Well-being

Canine-assisted prison programs can improve prisoners' mental and emotional well-being. Research has found that canine-assisted prison programs can decrease feelings of anxiety, loneliness, depression, and stress among prisoners. They have also been shown to help develop a sense of normalcy within highly stressful prison environments. These programs address participants' emotional well-being by increasing feelings of empathy, improving emotional regulation and awareness, and decreasing violent outbursts (Aufderheide & Jalongo, 2019; Koda, 2015b; Stetina, 2020; Cooke & Farrington 2016; Kunz-Lomeline & Nordberg, 2020; Beseres, 2017; Smith & Smith, 2019; Turner, 2007; Hill, 2020). These outcomes are achieved through a variety of program operations, such as communicative dog training where emotional regulation is practiced during the training process and having the dogs there as emotional support during the program (ibid.). Canine-assisted prison programs are particularly beneficial in improving the mental health of young and juvenile male prison populations with notable improvements in mood, impulsivity, emotional management, and self-efficacy (Grommon, Carson & Kenney, 2020; Seivert, Cano, Casey, Johnson & May, 2018; Syzmanski, Casey, Johnson, Cano, Albright, & Seivert, 2019). Research has found that those in a canine-assisted prison program had higher empathy and social sensitivity scores and lower levels of anxiety compared to those not in the PAP (Flynn, Combs Massey, Gandenberger, Tedeschi & Morris, 2019; Fournier, Geller & Fortney, 2007).

### 2.5.2 Developing Prosocial Identity Practices

Developing positive prosocial identity practices through connection and interaction with animals is a common outcome of canine-assisted prison programs. Other outcomes include learning to care for the dogs through vocational training, increasing animal rehabilitation knowledge, and developing interpersonal relationships with the dogs (Humby & Barclay, 2018; Moneymaker & Strimple, 1991; Cooke & Farrington, 2016; Jaspersen, 2013). It has also been found that canine-assisted prison programs can positively influence participants' social skills, including building their sense of responsibility, trust, parenting skills, patience, sense of connection to society outside of prison, and preparedness for employment (Fournier, Geller & Fortney, 2007; Minton, Perez, & Miller, 2015; Mercer, Gibson, & Clayton 2015; Smith 2019a; Strimple, 2003; Stetina, 2020; Turner, 2007).

### 2.5.3 Improving Institution Atmosphere

PAP can also improve the overall institutional atmosphere by creating a more hospitable and calming environment, improving inmate and staff relations, decreasing rates of aggression and infraction rates, and reducing general misconduct within the prison environment (Cooke, 2016; Turner, 2007; Flynn et al., 2019; Haynes, 1991; Minke, 2017; Britton & Button, 2005; Cooke & Farrington, 2016; Fournier et al., 2007; Antonio, Davis & Shutt, 2017).

### 2.5.4 Improving Recidivism Rates

The outcomes of PAPs have contributed to reduced rates of recidivism with research finding that participants of a PAP were less likely to be reincarcerated while on parole (Sweder, Abel & Stromsland, 2021; Strimple, 2003; Duindam, Asscher, Hovee & Stams, 2020). PAP effectiveness does appear to have some moderating factors with the age, ethnicity, and gender of the prison population. As well, individual characteristics of prisoners can influence whether the

PAP is received positively or negatively, as well as the level of stress experienced by the dog (Furst, 2006; Holman, Wilkerson, Ellmo & Skirius, 2020; Rawleigh & Purc-Stephenson, 2021; Collica-Cox & Furst, 2019; Wesley, Minatrea, & Watson, 2019; Offermans, Duindam, Asscher, Stams, & Creemers, 2020; Beseres, 2017; Jaspersen, 2013; 2010). There has been limited PAP whose programming incorporates substance use health programming within Canada.

### 2.5.5 Therapy Dog Programming

Therapy dog programming in prisons has generated similar results in its impact on prisoners' well-being and the development of a prosocial identity within Canada. A therapy dog program was implemented at Stoney Mountain Institution in Manitoba and the Regional Psychiatric Centre in Saskatchewan that incorporated substance use health concerns. The results of the programs found that interacting with the dogs offered feelings of unconditional love and support to the prisoners, which helped combat hypermasculinity and judgement based on criminal identity (Dell, Chalmers, Cole & Dixon, 2019). A second study conducted at Drumheller Institution found that prisoners participating in a PAP were better able to recognize their emotions and feelings because of interaction with the dogs, and the intervention aided with the participants' correctional plans (Dell, Chalmers, Stobble & Rohr, 2019). These findings inform the research questions for the current study as they demonstrate the unique impact that therapy dogs can have on prisoners' sense of self and well-being.

## **CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODS:**

### **3.1 Research Focus and Questions:**

Research examining PAPs has not directly focused on the role of the program dogs in decreasing the internalized stigma of prisoners with substance use histories in a Canadian context. Given the significant impact of stigma on criminal behaviour, desistance, and well-being

among prisoners, this knowledge gap needs to be addressed. This secondary qualitative analysis will build from the findings of increased love, comfort, and support, offered through the PAWSitive Support Canine-Assisted Learning Program. The research will address the following questions:

- 1 How is the stigma associated with criminal incarceration and problematic substance use identity articulated by participants and institutional staff in a PAP?
- 2 Do program dogs in a PAP influence participants' identity and internalized stigma about their criminal incarceration and problematic substance use?
- 3 If yes, how do the program dogs influence the PAP participants' identity and internalized stigma?

### **Secondary Data Set**

#### **3.2 PAWSitive Support Canine-Assisted Learning Program**

An existing data set was used to conduct this secondary analysis. The data set is from the first cohort of a program evaluation of the PAWSitive Support Canine Assisted Learning Program at a medium-security Correctional Service Canada prison in Drumheller, Alberta. Due to higher rates of overdoses within the prison, the program was initiated in 2016 at the request of the institution Warden who wanted to incorporate canine-assisted interventions into their programming. This program was initially introduced into this specific addiction recovery program as an emergency response to aid the members of that cohort who had all nearly died due to an unintentional overdose. Through an experiential learning approach, the program objectives were centred around the development of participants' skills, personal growth, and mental health. The program's focus on human-canine connections conceptualized through canine obedience training, play, and time for relaxation with the dogs were the core elements of the four-day



program curriculum. Of note, the human-animal bond is central to formulating these human-canine connections.

Three therapy dogs who lived with one researcher participated in the first cohort as program dogs. It is important to note that the dogs will be referred to as program dogs as, in the context of this program, they were participating in activities beyond their normal roles as therapy dogs. However, all three of the dogs were certified therapy dogs at the time of the program. Therapy dogs are dogs that are good-natured and provide comfort to those they visit. Therapy dogs are evaluated to make sure they are friendly around people and enjoy visiting with people. They are not fearful around new people and, because of this, are likely perceived as non-judgemental.

One of the program dogs was Anna-belle, an Old English bulldog mix who started visiting as a therapy dog in 2013. Anna-belle, with her intense and demanding personality, loved people more than other dogs. She was known to be physically and emotionally interactive with participants on visits by giving gentle “kisses” and making eye contact with everyone she visited. Kisbey, a boxer, was another program dog who had been visiting since 2013. Kisbey had a bright, happy, and fun-loving personality on visits. She was also very sensitive and caring with participants. She loved playing with participants and both giving and receiving affection. Subie was another program dog who had started visiting as a therapy dog in 2013. Like Kisbey, Subie was a typical fun-loving boxer who also had a calm and quiet side. This allowed him to instantly connect with participants particularly when they were upset by either leaning into them or being a quiet bystander. The dogs met health and obedience requirements and were advised by a master trainer at the Audeamus Service Dogs organization.

### 3.2.1 Maintaining The Welfare Of The Program Dogs

Canine welfare considerations are at the core of the PAWSitive Support program. The program handlers actively adjust to the needs of the program dogs throughout the training process of the program. The program dogs interacted with the program participants they felt comfortable with and the need to maintain the safety and well-being of the dogs is articulated throughout the program. The program handlers commonly utilize their conversations around maintaining the needs of the dogs to as a learning opportunity in the program to speak about the importance of understanding and respecting the needs of others. It is important to note that since these dogs had all been volunteering as therapy dogs, they had a significant love and enjoyment for interacting with people. Not all dogs are suitable therapy dogs or would be suitable for this form of programming if visiting with strangers was uncomfortable for them. The handlers respected and responded to the needs of their dogs above anything else during the operation of the program, as the welfare of the animals is the highest priority of animal assisted intervention programming.

### 3.2.2 Program Objectives

The program objectives were to build participants' social skills, personal growth (through reconnection with others and themselves), mental health, and combating the harmful impacts of institutionalization - all in conjunction with their recovery plans. This was achieved through meaningful social connections between the participants and dogs through the human-animal bond. The dogs helped reduce prisoner isolation through different activities including obedience training with the dogs, playing with them and relaxing with them for a 4-day program. These outcomes were meant to create a motivation for participants to work toward their recovery plans.

The program was conducted in a gymnasium and small classroom where bonding activities between the prisoners and dogs took place. The activities were facilitated by the lead researchers on the project, Dr. Dell and Dr. Chalmers, as well as institution staff. These activities included working with the dogs through obedience training, communication, teamwork, leadership and problem-solving. The purpose of the program is based on creating meaningful connections and bonds between the prisoners and dogs. This was done to combat feelings of isolation and disconnect in social relationships common in prison institutions.

Each prisoner had a correctional plan developed when entering the institution that addressed their individual needs and seven domain risk areas. The correctional plans reflect the experiential elements of the participants cognitive-behavioural development with the participants recognizing how their feelings from their past experiences influence their current behaviour. With a focus on substance use and personal emotions, the prisoners' experiences of isolation, and how that influences their thought processing and behaviour, are considered in reference to the positive relationships they build with the dogs. The relationships built with the program dogs helps participants to recognize their personal emotions relating to their sense of self, their trauma in the prison environment, and their histories of substance use. The dogs help diminish the barriers prisoners may put up that may otherwise prevent them from opening and having discussions around their recovery (Chalmers, Dell, Dixon & Rath, 2023). See Appendix 3.0 for a program diagram.

### **3.3 Interview Participants**

The participants' and staff's lived experiences and conceptualization of the impact of the program were captured in semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted with the five male prisoners who participated in the program, as well as during a participant focus group

containing all five participants. The participants came into the program with different backgrounds, length of incarceration, and resultant psychological trauma from being within the prison system. One participant had been incarcerated at the time of the program for 25 years, and another had been incarcerated for 30 years. Interviews were also conducted with five program staff during a four-day program. The staff members consisted of the institution wardens, two assistant wardens, and two program officers. The interviews were conducted at the beginning of the program with follow-up interviews occurring 6 months later and then annually. Additionally, the researchers had continual follow up with participants annually following the original program inception in 2016. There was a break with follow up during the COVID 19 pandemic, but the participants were given photos of the dogs to maintain the positive memories they had with them. The program was able to resume operation again in August of 2023 with five new program dogs. The participants were also able to become peer mentors for the cohorts that were a part of the program after them. The interviews used for this study were ones conducted at the beginning of the program. The interviews were conducted by the head researchers and program founders, Dr. Colleen Dell and Dr. Darlene Chalmers.

The program participants were selected based on the criteria that they had substance use histories or were, at that time, treating health concerns with substances, were non-aggressive and non-violent, had no history of animal abuse, and enjoyed dogs. Two participants reviewed and verified the developed themes from the data analysis. These themes represent the participant's experience of the therapy dog program and the impact it had on alleviating the prisoners' internalized stigma and perceived criminal identity.

### 3.4 Theoretical Frameworks and Operationalization

A symbolic interactionist framework, Goffman's conceptualization of the interplay between stigma and social identity, and attachment theory as it relates to the human-animal bond, will be used to operationalize and conceptualize the developed themes of this study. With stigma heavily influencing identity development and substance use according to the literature, Goffman's stigma and social identity provides a framework to better understand the negative process of stigmatization and how it can be applied to the prisoners' experience internalized stigma.

#### 3.4.1 Goffman's Stigma and Social Identity

Davis (2006) articulated how Goffman describes three components of stigmatization that was used to conceptualize how participants and staff articulate stigma in the current study. The **dehumanization of stigmatized individuals occurs through** stigmatization, creating a difference between the stigmatized individual's virtual and actual social identity as they do not fit into society's established social categories. Social categories allow humans to anticipate and respond to the attributes of others assumed to be a part of a specific social category and create normative expectations. Stigmatization occurs when a person becomes "tainted" by negative, discrediting attributes that are attributed to them initially through interaction with another person, where those negative attributes are then considered problematic. **"Blemishes of individual character"** (addiction, mental disorders, imprisonment etc), and tribal stigma (race, religion, nationality) are forms of stigmatization that are categorized as dehumanization and created through discrimination. These forms of stigmatization and stereotypes are most commonly assigned to prisoners. Those who are stigmatized can then **internalize** said negative characteristics attributed to their identity, and they then experience shame when they realize that

they don't meet normal societal standards (Davis, 2006). Using this lens to understand how the participants articulate their experiences of internalized stigma and the non-stigmatizing components of the program will help to formulate the developed themes of this study.

### 3.4.2 Symbolic Interactionism

The symbolic interactionist approach was applied to identify how the participants' interactions with the dogs could create a non-stigmatizing relationship that shape the prisoners' identity and aid in reducing their internalized stigma. The symbolic interactionist approach suggests that during social interactions, a process of self-reflection occurs where the impressions of others are reflected through or incorporated into one's self-concept or identity (Joas & Knöbel, 2009). Blumer (1969) defined three key premises of Symbolic Interactionism in his essay "Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method." These premises are used to conceptualize how the interactions between the participants and program dogs, and the non-stigmatizing relationship they form, may help to alleviate the prisoner's internalized stigma. The premises are:

“human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them, the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows, and that these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters” (Blumer, *The Methodological Position of Symbolic Interactionism*, p. 2 as cited in Joas & Knobel, 2009, VI Interpretive Approaches (1): Symbolic Interactionism, para. 9).

When applying this approach to the current study, it would be reasonable to predict that the prisoners' sense of self and self-identity becomes a reflection of how the dogs perceive them. Since the interactions with the dogs are non-stigmatizing, the prisoner can internalize a more

positive sense of self outside of the negative stereotypes they commonly experienced whilst interacting in human-human interactions. For example, if the dog trusts the participant, they may internalize that they are trustworthy.

#### 3.4.2.1 Human-animal studies, Symbolic Interactionism, and Sociology

The symbolic interactionist approach has been applied to the field of human-animal interaction within sociology to legitimize this field of study within the broader discipline. Animals were not initially accepted in the discipline as beings who engaged in meaning through social interactions, but rather had a more instinctual response to stimuli that did not come from cultural or social constructions (Irvine, 2012). Irvine (2012) outlined various interactions of sociology and human-animal relationships from a symbolic interactionist lens. Irvine (2012) summarized that, while the term “symbolic interactionism” originated from Blumer, the concept of it came from George Herbert Mead’s work around the meaning of social life and its construction. Mead’s approach argued that we gain a sense of meaning that isn’t inherent in social life but is socially constructed and that “we create and reproduce” meaning during social interactions (Irvine, 2012, p. 2) However, when considering animals, Irvine (2012) furthered that Mead discounted animals as being able to “communicate symbolically” and had “no mind, no thought, and no meaning” (p. 3). As well, he talked about animals in contrast to humans to support that meaning making in social interactions is unique to humans and isn’t possible with other animal species.

Irvine (2012) furthered that scholar such as Bryant (1979) and Arluke and Sanders (1990) disagreed with Mead’s discrediting view of animals in sociology by asserting that animals, particularly dogs, have had unique relationships with humans throughout history and have played a variety of roles within society. Dogs, specifically, are empathetic beings that can have

“meaningful communications” with humans (Irvine, 2012, p. 4). Sanders' (1990) research focused on animals as "minded participants in social life" and how this influences the human participant's identity. As we come to understand a person's identity by understanding how they define themselves and then socially categorize them, Sanders argued that humans assign identities to dogs as well. We do this by replaying cultural stereotypes to define them through different breed and personality traits and naming them to reflect different symbolic traits. The sense of "personhood" created for our animals, according to Sanders, helps to distinguish the relationships we build with people from the relationships we build with animals. The relationships we have with animals are a constant in that the animals do not care about the social status of the human when interacting with them (Irvine, 2012; Sanders, 1990)

#### 3.4.2.2 Asserting Personhood on Animals

Drawing from this idea of personhood in animals, Sanders (1990) discusses the idea of social identity and how it can be reformed with companion animals. Having companion animals can make your social identity more positive (i.e., appearing more easygoing) and can aid in social situations by initiating conversation and increasing social interactions. By interacting with others, Sanders (1990) argues that we create a dominant source of information on how we conduct ourselves. Dogs can aid in these interactions by creating positive interactions with mutual conversation topics around the dogs and allow for a more positive sense of self. Sanders (1990) argues that animals can act as social actors that can take the place or "stand-in" for various socially significant relationships like a friend or family member. Within these relationships, people talk to their animals like people. Sanders (1990) expands on this by discussing how human and animal social relationships act like human-to-human relationships with both containing “mutual acknowledgement” of each other when interacting, which includes



“mutual definition of the perspective of the other, imaginative estimation of the other's intentional definition-of the situation, and mutual adjustment of behaviour based on the essential social process of "taking to the role of the other" (Sanders, 1990, Relationships with Companion Animals and the Looking-Glass Self section).

#### 3.4.2.3 Animals As A Source Of Self-Definition

Sanders (1990) discusses animals as a source of “self-definition” that legitimizes the idea of humans and animals having unique and meaningful social relationships. With the assertion of personhood, humans individualize the animal and make them a part of their circle of reciprocal relationships. Since they are thought of as significant others, Saunders (1990) argues that the relationship between humans and animals can be a source of "the process of self-definition." He furthers that this relationship is unique in "the process of self-definition" because the non-judgemental and accepting aspect of the human-animal relationship offers an intrinsic reward that is not always possible in human relationships. Both humans and animals have mutual definitions created for each other that allow them to predict their behaviour in social settings.

#### 3.4.2.4 Symbolic Interaction in Prison Animal Programs

Furst (2007) recognized the existence of symbolic interaction within PAP. They conducted a study looking at whether prisoners assigned the dogs they worked with individual identities as they would humans. Similarly to what Irvine (2012) and Saunders (1990) suggested, the study found that dogs were thought of as intelligent beings with individual thought. Upon recognizing this, the participants changed their behaviour according to how the dog was behaving and were supportive of the idea of animals having free will. Working with the dogs and recognizing them as individuals helped to improve the participants' emotional responses as they adjusted their responses to the dog based on how they were acting. Creating these individual

relationships with the dogs helped participants address their emotional needs through their relationships with the dogs. The dogs also helped to facilitate social interactions and communicate with other prisoners and staff. One participant indicated that the dog had innate special abilities that allowed the dog to progress through the program rather than giving themselves credit as the trainer (Furst, 2007). By looking at PAP through a symbolic interactionist lens, the impact of creating positive, non-judgemental, and mutual relationships through human-animal interactions can be linked to positive identity development in prisoners. This study utilizes symbolic interactionism to examine whether participants' sense of identity changes as their internalized stigma is alleviated by interacting with a non-stigmatizing program dog. The current study explores the mechanisms of how this meaning is built and what characteristics within the dog allow this meaning to be formulated. This was done to better understand how important, and to what effect, positive and non-stigmatizing social interactions are for those experiencing internalized stigma. How the dogs act towards the prisoners in a non-stigmatizing way may reveal how these forms of social interactions can, in turn, develop a positive sense of meaning that can eventually be connected to the prisoners' sense of identity. Studying the development of self-hood through the interactions between humans and animals provides a unique lens into studying the self in the sociological field (Dell, 2017).

#### 3.4.3 Attachment Theory and the Human-Animal Bond

Attachment theory, in its relation to the human-animal bond, was used to identify how the non-stigmatizing connections are made between the program dogs and program participants. Attachment theory can be applied to human-animal relationships as animals can be considered attachment figures that can be relied on during times of stress, provide a secure sense of support, and feel enjoyment when around them (Rockett & Carr, 2014, p. 4). Research within the area of

the human-animal bond and PAP has utilized attachment theory to conceptualize the unique and beneficial relationships that can be created between humans and animals. Equine PAP research has applied attachment theory as a psychotherapeutic approach, evaluating how clients accessing therapy can alter their levels of attachment by creating bonds with horses. The emotionally sensitive species of horses allowed clients to better conceptualize and realize their problematic attachment styles that they otherwise would not be able to do. Another study utilized attachment theory within their study of prison inmates participating in an equine-assisted therapy program to examine how training and formulating a relationship with the horse may aid in addressing trauma through "corrective attachment experiences." (Loeffler, 2016, p. 44 as cited in Bachi, 2013).

Fletcher (2023) offers insight into how attachment theory plays a role in trauma and identity development processes. Developing insecure attachment styles as children from being around substance misuse can create insecure attachment styles that are a "risk factor" for later developing addictive habits (Kassel et al., 2007; Fletcher, 2023). Substance use can be considered an "attachment disorder" with those going through substance misuse who may have distanced themselves from others, leading to the development of that addiction to "self soothe". Substance use becomes a tool to combat negative feelings associated with isolation and develop social relationships (Flores, 2006 as cited in Fletcher, 2023).

Attachment theory is applied in the current study to examine if and how the program dogs involved in the program connected with the participants. Healthy attachments with the program dogs may aid in alleviating the internalized stigma of participants through the non-stigmatizing interactions they have with the dogs.

### 3.5 Data Analysis

Thematic content analysis was used to develop relevant themes around how internalized stigma relating to the participants criminal identity is articulated by staff and participants, whether the dogs had an impact on their internalized stigma throughout the program, and how this impact was achieved by the dogs. This analysis draws from Braun and Clark's (2008) steps to thematic analysis, and Saldaña's (2013) coding guide. In their steps to thematic development, Braun and Clark (2008) suggest that constructivists tend to focus on developing latent themes that capture ideas, assumptions, and patterns underlying the data to understand the sociocultural context and structural conditions impacting the individual's responses. The constructivist approach seeks to understand why and how people construct meanings and actions in specific situations (Charmaz, 2006). Given that the focus of this study is only in part to understand how meaningful and non-stigmatizing relationships are constructed between program participants and the dogs, this was an appropriate approach to use for this analysis.

In following Braun and Clark's (2008) approach, the first step was to become familiar with the data by reading it over, including elements outside of the specific latent themes of stigma and prosocial identity. Following this, initial codes were generated using NVivo coding software. These codes include codes creating identifiable features and interpretive codes. The same amount of attention was given to each set of interview data, coding contradictory data, including all codes, and assigning many different themes to codes and individual excerpts. The process ended by reviewing and refining themes to make them concise and accurately summarize the experience of the participants in the data (Braun & Clark, 2008).

### 3.5.1 Coding Interview Data

Saldaña's (2013) coding guide was drawn upon when codifying the interview data and producing summary themes. First, the participant and staff data were analyzed with a particular scope of how the internalized stigma was being articulated. This was important to begin with as it created a framework for how the dogs might have helped with those specific reports of internalized stigma for the second and third research questions. The codes were organized based on how the participants articulated stigma in their own words to better conceptualize how stigmatization is present in this particular context, with the prisoners and program staff interviews being examined separately.

Including both the participant and staff interviews in this analysis allowed for a more well-rounded understanding of the program experience and how internalized stigma could be developed in the prison environment. This was essential in answering the research questions as the most impactful elements of the program were highlighted by both participants and staff and served as the primary themes. These elements were described uniquely by participants and staff. Both codes relating to the dogs specifically influencing internalized stigma were then examined (connection with dogs in general, de-stigmatizing characteristics of the dogs, outcomes of positive interactions with the dogs, learning from the dogs). Both the participant and staff interviews were looked at separately, and commonalities across both sets of interviews were identified.

How stigma develops and how it can be internalized according to Goffman's conceptualization of stigma and social identity was drawn upon at this point as a framework for defining what stigma might look like in this context. This framework was imperative to developing meaningful findings that illustrated accurately what the participants and staff

reported as stigma. This was especially important given that this was a secondary analysis, and there were no questions originally and specifically posed around stigma. However, incorporating these concepts as a framework helped to define what stigma was in this context.

Following examining internalized stigma, coding for if and how the dogs aided in the participants' internalized stigma and how it impacted their sense of identity occurred. Initial coding was frame worked by the symbolic interactionist approach and attachment theory to understand how the relationships the participants built with the dogs were non-stigmatizing and could contribute to positive identity development. When considering if the non-stigmatizing interaction with the program dogs would influence the participants' sense of identity, the idea of meaning-making and self-reflection in social interactions from the symbolic interactionist perspective was utilized during coding. Additionally, the concept of assigning “personhood” to the animals and the process of "self-definition" was also utilized to conceptualize how the participants built their relationships with the dogs and what made them unique. Attachment theory was also drawn upon during the coding process to look specifically at whether the participants saw the dogs as attachment figures that could provide social support in the prison environment.

### 3.5.2 Developing Themes

Following initial descriptive coding and categorization of codes (creating parent and child codes) using NVivo, two tables were created within Microsoft Word for codifying and categorization. One table was used for secondary coding and memos created in NVivo and organizing them, and another for making sense of said codes, highlighting key quotes, and developing themes. Descriptive codes were initially created to summarize the topic of the paragraph excerpt. First impression codes were used alongside the descriptive codes to make

sense of the codes/data to produce summary themes. After the descriptive codes were gathered, a codifying process was used in preparation for thematic development. Coding continued to achieve abstract concepts by categorizing the standard codes from all the interviews and creating subcategories (Saldaña, 2013). Once the codes were organized into abstract categories, clumps of codes were analyzed and categorized by pulling out the essential themes across interviews. Once the codes were developed into themes, they were reviewed and synthesized if necessary. These themes were further refined to conceptualize the overall program outcomes in the data succinctly. For a full summary of parent and child codes, see appendix 2.0.

### 3.5.3 Strengths of Approach

Thematic content analysis allowed for the observations of the positive and non-stigmatizing interaction opportunities within the PAWSitive Support program to be synthesized. By examining the staff and participant interviews separately, the internalized stigma participants were experiencing from both their perspectives, as well as the from the perspective of the staff, could be analyzed. This allowed for a more nuanced data triangulation that created a more robust picture of how stigma was experienced by the participants from multiple perspectives. Which themes were most significant could then be determined and developed from both staff and participant interviews separately and comparatively. From this, both participants and staff articulated these themes and how their different perspectives on the program (i.e. as active participants or observers) highlighted the positive aspects of the program. Looking at both prisoner and staff perspectives also allowed for the impacts of the prison institution on the participants' internalized stigma to be highlighted from two different lenses.

My experience visiting prison institutions as a therapy dog handler has strengthened my conceptual lens within this research area. I participated in the PAWSitive Support program at the

Saskatoon Regional Psychiatric Centre four times, and once at the Saskatoon Jail. These visits assisted in helping to contextualize the themes that emerged from the data which aided in my understanding of the relationships between the dogs and participants that were developed. I was also able to understand how the human-animal bond can translate in this form of programming, and the different activities the participants would have done with the dogs. This not only allowed me to recognize what the dogs did to alleviate the participants' internalized stigma, but *how* they were able to do this (i.e. the types of interactions that the dogs had with the participants). The experience I've had was vital to this study, particularly given it being a secondary analysis.

#### 3.5.4 Limitations

Some limitations should be noted within this study. Given that this is secondary data analysis, direct questions around stigma were not able to be asked initially. However, reviewing the resultant themes with participants from the program to help verify my findings and ensure my analysis of their experience of perceived stigma and the program was accurate was a crucial component. Given the relatively small sample of program participants used for the initial data collection, there could be a lack of generalizability in the findings of this study in other prison programs and contexts. For example, stigma may be articulated differently in different prison populations, and the perspectives of staff may differ as well. However, the study is still partially exploratory, so having generalizable findings may not be as vital as developing themes from the unique experience of the program participants (particularly given their substance use histories), which still speak more broadly to the harmful impacts of being in the prison environment. There may also be social desirability biases within the data, given that some of the researchers involved were the therapy dog handlers who facilitated the program. It was found within the data that the non-judgemental and equitable interactions participants had with the handlers contributed to the



program's success. The influence of therapy dog handlers within these contexts is an area of research that should be further explored. A constructivist approach helps achieve a more objective lens to examine the social processes involved, regardless of social desirability.

#### **CHAPTER 4 THEMATIC FINDINGS:**

Overall, the participant and staff interviews reflected a stark difference between the internalized stigma participants typically experienced as incarcerated individuals, and the positive environmental shift that they experienced in the PAWSitive Support program. The following findings are presented as themes to encompass, across all interviews, the overall response to the research question. A total of five themes were developed from this study based on a thematic analysis of interviews with both the program participants and program staff. Three themes address the first research question by identifying the participants' experiences of internalized stigma, and two themes address the second and third research question by describing how the dogs aided in alleviating the participants' internalized stigma and, in turn, contributed to their positive self-identity development.

Within the data, the participants described how their internalized stigma developed from experiences as incarcerated individuals and high-risk individuals recovering from problematic substance use, and staff reflected on the presence of internalized stigma among the participants and its detrimental impact on their commitment to recovery and well-being. The participants' experiences of internalized stigma included i) de-individualization resulting in a perceived lack of care by others, ii) stereotypes reinforcing their negative social labels as criminals and problematic substance users, and iii) mistrust by others due to perceived blemishes on their individual characters.

The participants' interactions with the dogs were highly impactful and the individual relationships they formed with each of the program dogs (Kisbey, Anna-Belle, and Subie) were unique. Nonetheless, two primary themes were identified for how participants' interactions with the dogs were de-stigmatizing, and how this contributed to the development of a positive self-identity. These themes are: i) Participants perceived the dogs as caring about them through their emotional and physical presence and unconditional love; and ii) The dogs and dog handlers displayed a perceived sense of trust towards the participants. These themes respond to both the second and third research question. Regarding the second research question, the themes identify that the dogs were beneficial in alleviating the prisoners' internalized stigma and contributed to a positive sense of identity. Regarding the third research question, these themes describe the mechanisms of how the dogs were de-stigmatizing and what was unique about their interactions with the prisoners that achieved this outcome. All participant names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

#### **4.1 Research Question #1: How is the stigma associated with criminal incarceration and problematic substance use identity articulated by participants and institutional staff in a PAP?**

##### **Theme 4.1.1 De-Individualization Resulting In A Perceived Lack Of Care**

Three core concepts of Goffman's concept of stigma and social identity are evident in the stigmatization process illustrated by the following findings. These concepts are the dehumanization of stigmatized individuals, blemishes of individual character, and those being stigmatized internalizing negative characteristics.

##### **4.1.1.1 Participant Perspective**

Participants and staff described the participants' internalized stigma in part stemming from de-individualization, resulting in a perceived lack of care. De-individualization is described by the participants as a lack of care and support for their individual recovery and instead, feeling labeled as just another inmate within the institution. Steve spoke about his experience with feeling a perceived lack of care from the government institutions impacting his self-identity and ability to progress within the institution. The lack of care he described stemmed from being within a tense prison environment where he felt a lack of hope that people wanted to help him in his recovery. In describing this hopelessness, Steve shared, "I would say like for so long I kind of looked at the government and any institutions as against me, you know I held on to sort of a rebellious attitude for a long time and I thought that nobody wanted to help." ) Steve also described a lack of physical contact, love, and care within the prison environment. He explained that there was a "lack of that physical connection and that kind of love our interactions on a daily basis if there is any real love it is like maybe over the phone, it is not person to person."

Another participant, Eddie, furthered that the care they received from being a part of the program differed from the lack of individual care and de-individualization that occurred being a part of the prison institution. He explained that before being a part of the program he felt that there was little room for the prisoners to "do your own thing" within the prison institution. The de-individualization he experienced caused a loss of personal identity and perceived care. He stated:

"I have been here for so long we come to prison and pretty soon we forget who we are, and a lot of us like, now, we are in no one cares about us, we are prisoners, right, and you guys took your time out and said, 'hey let's take our dogs in' ." (Eddie)

Participant Nick described his experience of addiction stemming from a perceived lack of care. He said that from an early age, he didn't receive care from his family and that this had a large impact on his ability to express care to others later in his life. Nick commented on the repercussion of this on his addiction by stating "that was one of the reasons that I used drugs, because I never had love in my life" (Nick).

#### 4.1.1.2 Staff Perspective

Staff described the de-individualization and lack of care that occurs in the processes and public view of the prison institution. Staff shared two processes of de-individualization and lack of care for individual development that they perceived the participants to experience, including loss of individual identity and lack of adequate program support. Staff member 2 discussed how before the program, the participants could not see living a life beyond their "crimes" and "being a player inside the institution". They explained that before being part of the program, the participants had little sense of normalcy and familial connection to life outside of the prison institution. This contributed to a loss of self-identity and de-individualization beyond just being members of the institution.

Staff member 4 also recounted this loss of identity as the participants were "used to being called by their last name," rather than their first name as a means of further de-individualization. The individual personal connection program facilitators made with the prisoners was something the participants hadn't experienced before within the regular prison environment. Being called by their last name furthered their internal identity as a player within the institution rather than an individual. Lack of care was noted by staff member 1 to be the public expectation of the prison environment. Staff member 1 articulated that the "public view" of prison programming was that prisoners didn't deserve the "right to mobility" through their recovery plan and instead, should be

treated as just a member of the system. The right to mobility was defined as prison institutions offering a sense of care, humanity, and opportunities for human development within the prisoners' recovery plans.

### **Theme 4.1.2 Stereotypes Reinforcing Negative Stereotypes as Criminals and Problematic Substance Users**

Participants and staff described various stereotypes targeting the prisoners' social label as criminals and problematic substance users that are perceived as blemishes of individual character. Hypermasculine stereotypes and assumptions that incarcerated individuals are unable to be successful were prominently highlighted as ingrained in the participants' identities. Internalized stereotypes relating to addiction were also noted by some participants. Participants and staff articulated how these negative stereotypes have been internalized in their daily lives.

#### **4.1.2.1 Participants' Perspective-Problematic Substance Use and Hypermasculine Stereotypes**

Nick described asserting problematic substance use as a part of his identity, and how he internalized being labeled as an addict. This internalized label led to a loss of interest in connection and looking for work. He stated:

"When I was younger and people would say, man you guys do a lot of drugs, and we would go yes we are addicts, we embraced it we thought there is nothing wrong with being an addict as long as you can still function, it is okay."

He also discussed how the causes of addiction are misrepresented at an institutional level. He described how in most drug programming, "they give you a bunch of bullshit about how to avoid situations and that, but it doesn't get to the root of the problem - childhood trauma is what causes drug addiction" (Nick). The acceptance of labelling combined with a lack of institutional support

around substance use was viewed as a large gap in their recovery by some participants. Eddie also described the negative hypermasculine labels they received as prisoners and how it was not true to their actual identity. He explained that “some of us guys know we are big strong, tough guys but underneath we just want to be loved” (Eddie). He said that in front of their peers, the prisoners acted tough due to the nature of the prison environment.

#### 4.1.2.2 Staff Perspective-Criminal Stereotypes

Staff similarly discussed how criminal labelling as part of the institution process impacted the participants' lives and the progress they were unable to make in their recovery as a result of it. It was voiced that before the program, participants were often treated as part of the system, rather than as individuals. Because of this, they internalized many of those negative stereotypes. Staff member 1 explained that although the participants are individual people “below that surface, “being a part of the prison institutions, and the labels that come with that, make them identify with their criminal file. They stated, “But we label him, and we medicate him, and we do all these things and you know, we write stuff and once it becomes the truth, it is the truth” (Staff member 1). They also articulated the importance of individualization and its role in humanizing the participants. They spoke about how labelling and de-individualizing participants can lead to discrimination based on their criminal background. They stated, "We have a pretty good culture, but it's like still treating people as a human, based on what they did versus as a person" (Staff member 1).

Another staff member described hypermasculine stereotypes being internalized within the participants as they stated, “This is where he has grown up, you know, so he’s got this kind of demeanor about him, that I’m a big tough guy and whatever” (Staff member 4). The participants’ experience of labelling and de-individualization created an internalized sense in

many that they did not deserve to be a part of the program or be around the dogs, and that their identity had been connected to the stereotypes they were subjected to.

### **Theme 4.1.3 Mistrust by Others Due to Perceived Blemishes of Their Individual Character.**

#### 4.1.3.1 Participant Perspective- Criminal Stereotypes Impacting Perceived Trust

Participants discussed how the negative criminal stereotypes around being violent and un-trustworthy that they had experienced within the prison environment tainted their expectations that they could be trusted with the dogs in the program. This led some participants to be surprised that they were allowed to work with the dogs directly and were being trusted by the program staff to do so. Steve echoed this by discussing how the trust exhibited by the handlers and dogs was unexpected. He said, “You guys literally brought your own family pets in to be with us for those number of hours per day with no like, ‘are they going to hurt them?’ because you guys had no clue who we were, and vice versa, and the dogs took to us like they were a natural link to us.” He also described the hypervigilance he experienced within the prison environment due to mistrust as they are “all constantly being watched” (Steve).

Staff member 4 additionally explained that the participants' perceived sense of mistrust made them doubt and question how the program was implemented within the prison institution. This sense of mistrust came from an internalized stereotype that he was not an individual deserving of the program but was a "bad guy." They said speaking from the participants' perspective:

"Like, why do they come and do this, why would they bring their dogs to a prison? Like they don't know us, they don't know anything about us, like why would they do that? And he was very surprised, somebody would do that for him, because he's a bad guy, he's in prison" (Staff member 4).

Staff member 4 described how the participants did not have a perceived sense of trust within the prison environment or when they were outside of it. They highlighted how this lack of trust inhibited participants' individual development. They said:

"The dogs were with them...so they got to feel that, that feeling of I trust you, I want to be around you and I want to be with you, that I don't think they necessarily get in prison and possibly not even in their life outside, and that's a huge thing, you can only blossom when you feel that someone is trusting you, be it an animal, be it a person, and bonding with you" (Staff member 4).

Having a lack of perceived trust was sourced from both the negative stereotypes participants had endured and internalized but also de-individualization that projected that all prisoners within the institution were treated as "criminals" who couldn't be trusted.

#### **4.2 Research Question #2: How The Dogs Aided in Alleviating Participants' Perceived Stigma and Positive Identity Development:**

Care was a central theme throughout interviews with both participants and staff. The care the program dogs provided was one of the most significant outcomes of the program, and it was most clearly connected to the participants' positive sense of identity. Given that the participants felt a perceived lack of care for their individual development from both the institution and more broadly in society and their community, having the dogs display unconditional care was impactful. Care comes in the form of support and genuine attention to the well-being of those who are being cared for. Care within a prison institutional context is especially important to desistance and recovery with social isolation and attachment issues in substance misuse being a common result of incarceration.



### **Theme 4.2.1 Participants Perceived the Dogs As Caring For Them Through Their Emotional And Physical Presence And Unconditional Love**

The program dogs established connections with the participants that responded to their perceived lack of individual care. They did this by being emotionally and physically present when interacting with participants and providing perceived unconditional love, support, and lack of judgment. Receiving physical, emotional, and unconditional care and support from the dogs contrasted with what participants typically experienced within the prison. These outcomes positively impacted the participants' internalized stigma and, ultimately, their identity as criminals and recovering problematic substance users. This was achieved by reinforcing that they were individuals who mattered and that they could be cared for during their recovery.

#### *4.2.1.1 Participant Perspective- Participants Cared For By The Emotional And Physical Presence Of The Program Dogs*

The participants developed unique bonds and relationships with program dogs Anna-Belle, Kisbey, and Subie. The dogs aided in addressing the participants' internalized stigma by creating a perceived sense of care by being emotionally and physically present with the participants in their interactions. Emotional presence was articulated as the dogs being excited by, and being there to listen to, the participants. Physical presence was described as the dogs exhibiting enthusiastic play, participants touching the dog or having them sit close, and the dogs licking participants all in a controlled setting. The emotional and physical presence of dogs contributed to participants recounting feelings of unconditional love, support and lack of judgement when interacting with the dogs. The unconditional love, support, and non-judgment were seen to be important to participants' ability to connect with the dogs in ways they had not been able to connect with humans within the prison institution.

Eddie developed a particularly strong bond with program dogs, Anna-Belle and Kisbey, throughout the program. He shared how he felt cared for by the program dogs and in particular, Kisbey, because of Kisbey's genuine emotional and physical presence when interacting with them. He explained that a program where they experienced genuine care, was "something new" that he had not experienced within the prison environment. He stated that:

"It just shows again that there are people out there that do care for us, and it just shows that the dogs they care for us, because they let us pet them like there is one picture where it is me and Kisbey and we are laying on the mat playing that relax thing, and I actually took a picture where she is almost sound asleep" (Eddie).

Eddie furthered how being able to physically interact with the dog in the prison environment was impactful given that he hadn't "touched a human, well, an animal, for 20 some odd years" and how much it meant to him to "actually touch a dog" (Eddie).

Participant Tom, who had a personal connection with Subie, also discussed the impact of the dog's physical presence and opportunity for physical interaction on his perceived sense of care. He also highlights how being able to have physical contact with Subie was the reason he bonded with him and that because of this, he felt Subie cared for him. In explaining how he felt loved and comforted by the dogs, he said in his interactions with Subie that he "actually stopped," came up to him, and "made eye contact." Further, he felt supported when the dogs "just sit beside you and stay there" and provide "body contact." Coupled with the physical care and support he felt from the dogs, the emotional presence of the dogs was meaningful to Tom as well. He explained how the dogs' unconditional support and recognition of him as an individual person contributed to his sense of care and his ability to bond with the dogs. He said in relation to feeling supported by the dogs, "It means a lot; it is a good feeling just knowing that they like

me" (Tom). He also said that he bonded with Subie because Subie saw him as an individual, "looked at" him, and "remembered" him (Tom).

Participant Steve, who also had a particular connection with Subie, highlighted the positive impact that the physical and emotional presence of the dogs, had on his perceived sense of care, specifically within the prison environment. He illustrated that the eagerness for affection and physical attention from the dogs made him feel cared for in ways that he hadn't experienced within the prison environment. He said:

"You don't get hugs and kisses from people here, you know what I mean? It is pretty cold, everything is bricks and steel, and you are locked up in your cell at the end of the night. So, to be able to have that physical contact and the kisses it just makes you feel good inside" (Steve). Steve voiced that the dogs' eagerness to have physical contact with the participants was "such a break from the mundane and everything" within the prison environment. He explained that "these dogs they are such people dogs. They show you so much love it feels good when you come in and they come running up to you and show you affection" (Steve). He noted that having this form of contact within the prison environment produced a sense of care he was kept from within the prison environment.

#### 4.2.1.2 Participant Perspective- Unconditional Love From The Dogs Translated To Perceived Care and Support

Many participants found that the unconditional love and perceived non-judgement from the dogs were reflected in their physical and emotional presence, which in turn made them feel cared for by dogs. Unconditional love was conceptualized from my own understanding of unconditional love that I have witnessed between dogs and humans as a therapy dog handler. The dogs' love and care is unconditional within the prison context because they do not care why the

prisoners are incarcerated, or even that they are in a prison environment. They provide love quickly and with ease within in the prison environment. While it is still perceived unconditional love to a certain extent, the participants explicitly described their interactions with the dogs as unconditional love. They attributed meaning to their interactions with the dogs as unconditional and non-judgmental.

While relaxing with Anna-Belle, Eddie explained how this form of care he felt from Anna-Belle was unconditional. He explained that he felt Anna-Belle cared about and loved him without asking for anything in return. When asked if he thought Anna-Belle cared about him regardless of whether or not he had treats for her, Eddie responded "Oh yes, she does." He then went on to explain how he reciprocated that care for her by giving Anna-Belle the individual attention she had given him by stating, "She loves me to pick her up and walking around... I learned to take care of her that whole day and that showed her like hey it is all me, it is all about me and nobody else" (Eddie).

Participant Jake, who had a particular connection with Kisbey, also described the importance of the dog's unconditional care and enthusiastic presence in achieving a feeling of support. When asked if he felt supported by the dogs, Jake remarked "Yes for sure; like they don't judge you. They are always in a good mood to see me" (Jake). When asked if this perceived non-judgement was how he would define support, Jake described the support he felt as being related to the dogs not only caring about him, but also being able to form a relationship with equal respect. Jake, in replying with his definition of support, said "they want you to be happy and they want you to be on the same level".

The unconditional friendship and individual care he received from Kisbey and the other dogs was something he had not experienced within the prison environment. When asked if he

found it easier to practice connection skills with the dogs rather than humans because of their non-verbal communication, he replied, “For sure, because they don’t judge you and they don’t get jealous per se, you know what I mean? They get over it quick and they are not going to have any hard feelings towards you” (Jake). He explained that being a part of the program and interacting with the dogs took him out of the negative prison environment where he was missing that individual care. When talking about the impact had on him personally, he said, “It just helps me escape the prison and gives me that unconditional friendship and love that you usually don’t get in a place like this” (Jake). The individual care, enthusiasm, and support participants received from the dogs ignited a perceived sense of care that was responsive to their individual recovery and positive sense of identity.

#### 4.2.1.3 Participant Perspective-Unconditional Love Allowed Participants To Open Up About Struggles With Substance Use

Participant Nick, who also had a connection with Kisbey, similarly found that the love and care he received from the dogs was unconditional and that this allowed him to be open about his struggles with substance use and connect with the dogs in ways he hadn’t been able to within the prison environment. He articulated this immediate feeling of unconditional love through the enthusiastic physical presence and expression exhibited by Kisbey when she saw him. He said, “I felt from the dogs unconditional love like when we came in here Kisbey came running up to me and put her paws on my shoulders and stuff and started licking my face you know it was a moment” (Nick). He continued to describe how the dog’s eagerness to provide care and unconditional love came from the non-judgmental nature of the dogs. He said that “it is the non-judging, the lack of judgement, it is unconditional no matter what you might have done in the

past or how you might feel about yourself, these dogs will come and show you some love” (Nick).

Steve also specifically identified that the dogs were emotionally intuitive that this not only contributed to him feeling unconditional love from the dogs, but also allowed him to open up to them about his challenges of living with substance use. Nick articulated:

“It is like you see with the dogs, they are treating guys with PTSD, like, you know after so many years of using drugs and alcohol and living in places that I have lived, you get comfort in that from the dog; drugs have killed the emotions so you didn’t deal with it and so now that you are feeling that you can share with the dogs, and the dog feeds on your emotions.”

Nick continued to describe how he felt supported as an individual by the dogs and how this support translated into motivation to continue his recovery plan. He said, “Yes well after being with the dogs...I felt that the dogs gave me that support and seeing that sort of reinforced it and I just plowed ahead and did what I had to do” (Nick).

#### 4.2.1.4 Staff Perspective- Unconditional Love and Physical Presence Created a Positive Sense Of Identity Within Participants

The staff similarly witnessed the impact of the care exuded by the dogs through their unconditional physical and emotional presence on the participants' sense of identity. They described how the inclusion of animals in prison programming allowed participants to create social connections, despite the negative stereotypes they had internalized. The physical attention given during supervised breaks from training, through licking participants and by petting the dogs, was valued by staff as a way for participants to feel reciprocated care without feeling judged.

Staff member 4 described, from the participant's perspective, the unconditional care and presence from the dogs was felt by stating, "those dogs don't know that I've done bad things, and they still love me, they're jumping on them, they're licking them, they're hugging them, and to have that love with no strings attached - because they can't do anything for you, they can't do anything for the dogs, and they know that but still the dogs love them" (Staff member 4).

Staff member 3 described how one participant, " can't believe anybody liking him, I don't think, and that's where I always find with animals, it's so unconditional, they don't care, you know?" Another staff member described that it was the unconditional love that the dogs specifically offered that had a positive impact on the participants' identity and internalized stigma. Both participants and staff voiced how participants perceived care from the dogs through their enthusiastic and unconditional emotional presence, and physical contact and support. The dogs being present in their interactions allowed participants to bond with the dogs and feel that someone cared for them, and that they could be cared for.

#### 4.2.1.5 Participant And Staff Perspective - Participants Were Humanized by the Program Dogs

The unconditional love and acceptance participants received from the dogs' made participants and staff feel that participants were being humanized. This humanization was described as the participants feeling that they have unique connections with certain dogs based on personality compatibility and allowing participants to feel they were being treated as people and not just a part of the prison system. The personality traits that the participants identified ranged from friendly, stubborn, loving, relaxing, and supportive. This humanization, through positive attachment and meaning with the dogs, aided in combating the participants' internalized

stigma around de-individualization (i.e. that they were just another incarcerated individual in the system) and the inability to escape the negative prison environment they were immersed in.

Eddie explained how the unconditional love Kisbey showed him helped him to combat his negative internalized stereotype of being unlikeable. Eddie described how they bonded by lying on a mat together and playing. In describing his interactions with Kisbey, he explained, "It gave me something to do, right and it showed me that I must be doing something right, she hasn't bitten me yet" (Eddie). Eddie furthered that he felt the love he had for Kisbey was reciprocated. Kisbey's unconditional love and acceptance were reflected in her lack of aggression and willingness to spend time and create a unique bond with Eddie, which in turn, allowed Eddie to feel that he was "doing something right," and helped to alleviate the negative internalized stigma that he wasn't capable of such things.

Many participants identified unique traits in the dogs that they appreciated or identified with alongside the unconditional love they felt from the dogs. Nick described an interaction he had with Kisbey, in which he illustrated his unique relationship and the unconditional love he felt from her. He stated:

“Well, that second day she just came up and showed me that unconditional love and always ready to chase the ball or do whatever, she was the most active one. Subie was more food driven right, and she liked the toys.” (Nick).

Eddie identified with Anna-Belle's personality as he described, "she is stubborn and so am I. and she is a little bully which I can be too at the same time. We have our own personality, and it is just the way we are, and that is pretty much it" (Eddie). He further explained that identifying with Anna-belle helped him recognize his recovery process by stating:



"The connection to all three of them adds to my well-being from just observing how they deal with each other and seeing how Anna-Belle and Kisbey are getting into it, Subie will just avoid the situation and kind of mind his own business and Kisbey, even though if Kisbey really went off she could probably win a fight against Anna-Belle, but I don't know if it is because she values the relationship or if it is because Anna-Belle established dominance or whatever, but she is willing to play the back and let Anna-Belle have her way just to diffuse the situation. And I like that because in my life situation, I can't just be an aggressive person getting into altercations and everything else for the rest of my life" (Eddie).

Eddie also articulated that everyone in the program identified with the dogs as they, "all shared something different; everybody shared, like the sports he had, Kisbey because Kisbey loves ball, Subie give him food, Anna-Belle just give her love." He furthered that he was able to identify with Anna-Belle's desire to be loved. He explained that although the participants acted tough, that "Anna-Belle is the opposite, she just wants to be loved" and that in reality the participants "just want be loved" (Eddie).

Nick also described how the unconditional love from the dogs stemmed from a lack of awareness of what they perceived as the "bad things" they've done and that the dogs know who they are, despite the negative stereotypes they've experienced. Nick said, "I don't care what people think because I never have and that is like with the dogs, they don't care if we are bad or good. They love us no matter what" When the interviewer noted how relaxed Kisbey was with Nick, he replied, "Yes, she knows who I am." Identifying with the dogs as individuals, and not the negative stereotypes they had internalized, contributed to feelings of de-stigmatization.

The staff similarly identified how the dogs' humanized participants through the unconditional love they exhibited. Many staff members discussed how the dogs treated the participants with unconditional love, despite the negative criminal stereotypes they had received and internalized stigma they experienced. Staff member 4 explained:

"They are all the same, no matter, you're in here for assault, you're in here for weapons, you're in here for whatever, didn't matter, they're all treated the same by those dogs. And that's something that they don't get, and surprising too, because I wasn't really sure of the benefits of this when I saw it on paper" (Staff member 4).

They continued to say:

"I feel because they had something to love them regardless of their situation, regardless of their offense, regardless of how they look, what their status was, that I think that they like that, and it made them go, I'm not so bad. I'm not so bad. There's maybe I've done bad things but there's still people and things that, dogs, that can love me for me" (Staff member 4).

The staff found that, despite the criminal stereotypes previously internalized by participants, the dogs treated them as equal people whom they were excited to interact with. This led to some shifts in the participants' sense of identity that, at least to the dogs and handlers, they were not the stereotypes they had been subjected to.

#### **Theme 4.2.3 The Program Dogs and Handlers Exuded a Perceived Sense of Trust**

Trust between the program dogs and participants, as well as between the program facilitators and participants, was integral in alleviating the participants' internalized stigma around mistrust. Building trust with the dogs was possible because of their eagerness to work with participants and exude trust quickly after meeting them. Feeling that they trusted work with the dogs, and the

immediate trust they received from the dogs, helped to combat the mistrust and hypervigilance around being watched that they experienced within the prison environment, leading to internalized negative stereotypes of being untrustworthy that they experienced within the prison environment.

One of the outcomes of the PAWSitive Support Program was for the participants to build trust with the dogs, and most participants agreed that this was achieved. Participants and staff expressed that participants were able to fully connect and create a positive attachment with the dog based on a foundational perpetuation of trust by both handlers and the dogs. The handlers trusting participants with their dogs, and the dogs being trusting and unafraid of the participants, created a sense of meaning for participants that - despite their internalized stigma of assuming they could never be trusted with a dog - were trusted by the handlers and dogs to interact directly with the dogs.

#### 4.2.3.1 Participant Perspective - Unconditional Love and The Non-Judgmental Nature Of The Dogs Allowed Participants To Build Trust With The Dogs

The dogs were described as a unique and positive means for participants to build trust that they hadn't been able to with humans, given the unconditional and non-judgmental nature of the dogs. Steve described, "so you just build a friendship, even if it is with the dogs, and obviously the dogs love everybody, but they can build that trust with the dog." Steve described his appreciation of the quick trust and independence with the dogs by describing:

"I think that you guys do an amazing job, like you guys come here and exhibit trust right off the bat, and that is one thing that we don't get here...the fact that you guys come in here and have time with the animals and trust us to do our thing with them and we know

you guys always keep refocusing back on our recovery plans, I think it is really awesome" (Steve).

Steve also explained how building this trust with the dog and experiencing the program outcomes of bond, trust, and respect changed his perspective on building trust with other prisoners. He said:

"I didn't think of it with these words until right now - with bond, trust, and respect, right - because I am not going to listen to somebody that I just met and don't know from a hole in the ground because they may seem nice but I don't trust them; you know you are in jail, and people say don't trust anybody, so I think sometimes inviting a guy into my cell and offering him a coffee or something and just establish a little bit of a relationship."

He explained the importance of the handlers' sense of trust along with the dogs' genuine respect and immediate trust. He said:

"You guys are genuine in your motives and what you are doing, and that helps the trust. And you guys show respect and it is possible for the bonding to happen with those. Without the trust or respect, there cannot be bonding, so then we have the experiences with the dogs and it is kind of a joyful experience and you see bonding just happening naturally" (Steve).

The dogs provided a unique opportunity for participants to build mutual trust between themselves and the dogs by quickly bonding with participants and exuding trust. Eddie described how being a part of the program aided in alleviating the hypervigilance they had experienced previously in the prison environment by stating, "I feel at peace, and I know there is an officer behind me, but I don't really know that they are there. (Eddie)

#### 4.2.3.2 Staff Perspective - Participants And Program Dogs Developed Mutual Trust Quickly Despite The Participants' Internalized Stigma.

Staff similarly echoed how the trust that the participants built with the dogs and how quickly it was established, was impactful to participants, despite the internalized stigma they had experienced within the institution. Staff member four highlighted, “all of these guys have not had that, something, be a dog or a person, that has trusted them so quickly, bonded with them and continually has bonded with them.” They continued to describe how the dogs and, “facilitators didn’t care what they did, didn’t care what bad things they’ve done or if they are bad people, it was trusting and acceptance right off the bat, with no strings attached” (Staff member 4). Reduced hypervigilance, due to perceived trust, was also highlighted by staff as an outcome of the program. Staff member three described one participant:

“It helped with his anxiety, he seemed less anxious, you know? They tend to get that hypervigilance here, where they think you know, I could be stabbed walking around the corner, he just seemed a little less anxious, you know” (Staff member 3).

Staff member four similarly explained that when participants were interacting with the dogs, “there was no expectation, there was nobody looking over their shoulder, and they don’t get to do that” (Staff member 4). Staff member three indicated that this type of hypervigilance stemmed from the mistrust in the system, and the dogs were able to help alleviate that. he explained that “he’s got such deep seeded mistrust of the system, he's been in since 93, okay, so, that's a long, long time to be in the system. Umm, and he started his sentence, and he committed his offences when he was 19, and got his sentence when he was 20, he's not grown a lot. And I see, you know something like this, where you know, you've got that unconditional acceptance from an animal, it goes a long way (Staff member 3).

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION**

Two participants verified these findings. They provided insight and nuance on how these findings were true to their experience and made sense to them. Only two participants from the original cohort were available to have a discussion around the thematic findings. Some participants from this cohort are still incarcerated, and depending on their circumstances, were more difficult to get in contact. Additionally, some have been released and there has been little contact with them post-release. From the two participants who did verify the thematic findings, one participant did say that the themes from this study highlighted the most prominent outcomes from his experience as a prisoner and being a part of the PAWSitive Support program. The final discussion will reflect on the significance of these findings, the participants' verification and insight, and whether it was consistent with existing literature and the theories applied.

### **5.1 Research Question # 1: How is Internalized Stigma Articulated:**

#### **5.1.1 Theme 1: Stigma as De-individualization Resulting in A Perceived Lack Of Care**

##### **5.1.1.1 Overview and Participant Verification**

Participants experienced a perceived lack of care toward their personal development and recovery which, in turn, impacted their willingness to develop as individuals. Lack of care was articulated explicitly with participants stating that they felt “nobody cared for them” because they were treated simply as bodies under the umbrella of the prison institution, and heavily experienced the negative social stigma that comes with that. They also spoke about lack of care more implicitly as a loss of individual identity from being inside and dealing with the processes of the institution. This resulted in feeling a lack of support for individualized treatments that would address their unique needs to be made available to them.

When verifying my findings, one participant did agree that they experienced a lack of individual care within the prison system, and more specifically, found the treatment they did receive to be “cookie cutter” and not conducive to everyone. They felt that within the system, although all of the prisoners were there for different reasons with different needs, they received the same treatment. This was felt to contribute to the deindividualization process as treatment became a systematic process rather than an individualized care plan to address their unique needs and expectations. The second participant who verified these findings agreed that they felt that they were not cared for as an individual within the prison system. They felt that they were defined by their mistakes and that it was difficult to connect with others in the prison environment.

#### 5.1.1.2 Literature -The Importance of Identity Recognition and Perceived Support

This theme was consistent with the narrative in the existing literature around the importance of identity recognition and perceived support within substance use recovery, criminal desistance, and combating internalized stigma. Not having the space and opportunities to develop as individuals, and not having individualized treatment plans within the prison environment, has been shown to be problematic across the literature, particularly when it comes to reducing recidivism rates (Maruna 2001; McNeil et al., 2012; Stone, 2015; Anderson, 2016b). The prison environment and the practices of the institution that the participants experienced were a product of a historically problematic system that aims to de-individualize prisoners - possibly to assert a sense of control, but also to reaffirm the negative social stigma surrounding "how prisoners should be treated." Having a history of problematic substance use increases feelings of isolation and perceived lack of support, as evident in the literature and as verified by the experience of program participants. The participants highlighted how they were not only subjected to

heightened negative expectations as prisoners within the system, but also had an additional layer of stigmatization based on their substance use histories.

#### 5.1.1.3 Theory-Goffman's Stigma and Social Identity And Lack Of Care

Goffman's concepts of stigma and social identity, symbolic interactionism, and attachment theory each provided a strong conceptual lens for understanding the processes of how the dog program influenced the inmate's internalized stigma. Examining how the participants were able to construct their relationship with the dogs, while also focusing on how their lived experiences within the program and outside of it influenced these constructions, aided in this analysis. Goffman's concepts of stigma and social identity helped to better articulate the stigmatization processes experienced by participants and how these were addressed within the program.

This finding aligns with Goffman's concept of stigma being an internalized negative characteristic, as participants felt that nobody would care for them because of said negative characteristics (Davis, 2006). Program staff also described the stigma as de-individualization similarly to participants, with a specific focus on this stigma being based on their identities as problematic substance users. Stigma was described as people and institutions not caring about participants' progress as individuals, and a lack of space for individual expression within the prison institution. Additionally, Goffman's concept of stigma as dehumanization was reflected in the social categorization of "criminals" and "addicts" that the program participants experienced. This dehumanization led to de-individualization, as well with the participants' actual identities and needs not being recognized within the prison system. The idea of "nobody caring" about the participants, and they themselves not feeling worthy of being cared for, relates to Goffman's



concept of "internalizing negative stereotypes" where those who are stigmatized feel a sense of shame as they don't meet normative social standards (Davis, 2006).

## **5.1.2 Theme 2: Stereotypes Reinforcing Negative Social Labels As Criminals And Problematic Substance Users**

### **5.1.2.1 Overview and Participant Verification**

The participants' experience of internalizing negative stereotypes was a large factor in their adherence to personal development and working toward their recovery plans. The participants associated negative labels that they were aggressive, untrustworthy, and "addicts" with their own personal identities, and this was reinforced by the prison environment. Similar to the first finding, one participant verified that they and other prisoners did internalize negative social labels as "criminals" which led to all of the prisoners being treated in the same way. They furthered that these negative labels stay with you when you leave prison, as they are reinforced within societal structures and social interactions. It was explained that when people find out who they are and that they've been in prison, those negative labels continue to be reinforced. These labels were said to create a sense of dehumanization that ultimately led the prisoners to act out against the institution enforcing these labels. It was explained that if they were treated as less than human, then they would like it. The second participant who verified my findings similarly highlighted how he felt that he wasn't treated as a person within the prison and wasn't able to express his true authentic self. He was seen as a different person before the program occurred and expressed that people didn't like his old self, and he himself didn't like that part of him.

### 5.1.2.3 Literature-Labels Negatively Impacting Desistance, Substance Use and Identity Development

Current literature around desistance, substance use, and identity development highlights the negative outcomes associated with stigmatizing labels, particularly when they become associated with individual causes for these labels rather than how they are socially constructed (Bères, 2023; Stone, 2015; Maruna, 2001). The participants spoke about their addiction as stemming from an inherently negative trait about themselves rather than as a product of their environment, something that the literature suggests is common among those in recovery (Bères, 2023). Additionally, social isolation as a factor for understanding trauma in addiction research was evident in this population of prisoners (Fletcher, 2023). The labels the prisoners experienced as substance users further distanced them from general society, and also inhibited their ability to form healthy attachments with people.

### 5.1.2.3 Theory - Goffman's Stigma and Social Identity And Dehumanization

Similarly to finding #1, the dehumanization of individuals highlighted by Goffman's stigma and social identity suggests that negative stereotypes, such as what participants had internalized, further alienate individuals into negative social categories to create normative expectations (Davis, 2006). These stereotypes and labels included feeling that they were aggressive, failures, and "addicts." These labels were internalized in part because of the negative prison environment where they were not individualized and had no means of building individual relationships. Living in the prison environment magnified these negative stereotypes to the extent that many of the participants felt their identity had become synonymous with these stereotypes. This de-individualization participants experienced was similar to the alienation Goffman described, as the participants articulated that they were treated as part of the larger

prison institution that reflected negative normative expectations and not as individuals (Davis, 2006).

### **5.1.3 Theme 3: Mistrust by Others Due To Perceived Blemishes Of Their Individual Character.**

#### 5.1.3.1 Overview and Participant Verification

Mistrust between prisoners within the institution, as well as between prisoners and staff, contributed significantly to the de-individualization and creation of internalized stigma within the prison environment. The current operations of prison systems do not allow space for trust to be built or recognized which results in significant feelings of hypervigilance among the prisoners. When verifying my findings, mistrust was verified by one participant as a prominent theme within the institution - both between prisoners and staff, and between prisoners. They highlighted that because they didn't know each other's stories and where they came from, the prisoners tended to isolate and not trust one another. This is similarly the case with staff, as the prisoners were treated as just another body in the system that couldn't be trusted. They explained that this was just the nature of that type of environment which was heavily prevalent in their day-to-day experience. The second participant echoed these sentiments he spoke about how prisoners are constantly being watched and that the prisoners themselves are hyper-aware that they are being watched. He explained that the prisoners couldn't trust the guards because of the nature of the system, and that they feared they could be written up for "saying the wrong thing." Before the program, he had isolated himself from others and felt like he couldn't open up to anyone.

#### 5.1.3.2 Literature- The Harmful Impacts of Hypervigilance

An outcome of mistrust and hypervigilance within the prison environment is a common theme within criminological literature. Hypervigilance was the result of continued exposure to violence between prisoners, as well as the feeling that they were constantly being watched within

the institution. This is similar to outcomes of incarceration reported by the literature where participating in and witnessing violence can result in psychological trauma and hypervigilance (Boxer, Middlemass & Delorenzo, 2009). Mistrust became a form of internalized stigma with the prisoners feeling that they couldn't be trusted to work with the dogs because of the hypervigilance existing within the context of the system. Perceived mistrust within the prison system can, in part, be explained by the dehumanization of stigmatized individuals highlighted in Goffman's work, as well as the idea of self-reflection from the impression of others outlined in the symbolic interactionist framework.

## **5.2 Research Question #2: How the Dogs Aided in Alleviating Participants Internalized Stigma and Positive Identity Development**

The PAWSitive Support program was ultimately an enjoyable and impactful experience for the participants that greatly differed from what they typically experienced within the institution's environment. The significance of the positive environmental shift that the participants and staff experienced when working with the dogs revealed how much of the participants' internalized stigma was reinforced by the structure and social norms of the prison environment. The forms of internalized stigma that participants identified to be prevalent in their everyday life was (i) de-individualization resulting in a perceived lack of care by others, (ii) stereotypes reinforcing their negative social labels as criminals and problematic substance users, and (iii) mistrust by others due to perceived blemishes of their individual character, were addressed and improved by their interactions with the program dogs. The dogs offered comfort, love, and support that the participants were lacking as an extension of being a part of the prison institution and helped to alleviate participants' experience of internalized stigma and ultimately contributed to their positive identity development. The dog's (i) physical and emotional presence

and expression of unconditional love, as well as their (ii) perceived sense of trust contrasted the internalized stigma participants had developed, and made participants feel that they were deserving of care and trust.

### **5.2.1 Theme 1: Participants Perceived The Dogs As Caring For Them Through Their Emotional And Physical Presence And Unconditional Love**

#### 5.2.1.1 Overview and Participant Verification

The unconditional love and lack of judgement felt by the participants during their interactions with the dogs allowed them to fully connect, relate, and, ultimately, feel supported by the dogs. The human-animal bond creates the space for that initial attachment to develop, as the participants felt they were able to bond with the dogs differently than they had with humans. The findings illustrate that the participants felt that dogs trusted them quickly and provided individual care that they had not yet experienced via existing human relationships they had within the prison institution. When verifying my findings, one participant agreed that the dogs provided care and unconditional love to the participants. They found that these interactions with the dogs would be beneficial in any environment, but it is especially impactful within the prison environment. The physical care they experienced with the dogs was more meaningful within that environment because, as prisoners, they didn't get to experience that normally. The connections they built with the dogs allowed participants to better connect with others, as well as opened them up to the possibility of connection. They furthered that, just like people, they connected with certain dogs more based on their personality and were able to build individual connections with them because of that.

The second participant who verified the findings agreed that the dogs showed both emotional and physical care. He spoke about the doubts participants had about whether the

program would work, and how they expected it to be a computer program, not a program with actual living dogs. Bringing actual dogs into the prison showed the prisoners that they were cared about. He explained that all the prisoners needed was to be given a chance to improve themselves, that they could learn from their mistakes, and that everybody could change. The dogs gave them that chance to change by showing them "natural love" and treating them like human beings as opposed to solely being prisoners. He agreed that the prisoners formed individual relationships with the dogs and furthered that the dogs would listen to commands from certain participants better than others. He talked about how connected he was to program dog Anna-Belle because he recognized himself in her. He felt that both he and Anna-Belle were naturally stubborn and, because of this, he had to learn to be more patient. Working on this patience allowed him to think more clearly and eventually led him to move into low-security prison, an outcome he attributed to being a part of the dog program.

#### 5.2.1.2 Literature-Building Positive Identity Practices and Individualized Treatment In Addictions Recovery

The outcomes of the PAWSitive Support program align with the themes of building positive identity practices and individualized treatment deemed to be important in both addictions' recovery and desistance research. The dog's ability to build individual relationships with participants created a catalyst for "re-authoring" their story to be able to see themselves beyond their negative social labels (White, 2007a; Bères,2023). This process of "re-authoring" as described by Bères (2023) involved reframing the prisoner's individual narrative to see who they were as whole people, and less on their individual faults. The dog's non-judgemental nature allowed for this process to occur in a non-stigmatizing environment where they could feel that the dogs cared for them and didn't have ulterior motives for caring for them. The care that the

dogs provided illustrates Fletcher (2023)'s argument that trauma-informed care is meant to meet the unique needs of the individual undergoing addictions treatment, which was achieved within the PAWSitive Support Program.

#### 5.2.1.3 Literature-The Human-Animal Bond and Prison Programming

These relationships were made possible by the strength of the human-animal bond created between the participants and dogs. The human-animal bond exists in several different areas in the literature, with animals providing a sense of support in times of distress, companionship, and familial connection (Applebaum et al., 2021; Arkow, 2020; Barker & Wolen, 2008). Each of these elements was present in the relationships formed between the prisoners and program dogs with support being an especially prevalent theme. Support may have been a more impactful outcome given the context of the program in a prison institution where individual support is not always offered.

They were also able to achieve a number of outcomes similar to what has been identified in the broader prison animal program literature. While the focus of this research was not necessarily identifying the different responsibilities practiced in a prison animal program (something that is common in PAP research), the actual processes of the program did involve the participants learning to care for and train the dogs (Camp Canine Kentucky, 2013; PAWSitive Change, 2013). This not only improved their confidence as individuals but also allowed them to learn certain skills and responsibilities that might improve their reintegration into the community and/or motivation to work through their recovery plan.

#### 5.2.1.4 Theory-Attachment Theory and Symbolic Interactionism

Utilizing a symbolic interactionist framework and attachment theory captured how interacting with a non-stigmatizing therapy dog impacts the program participants' internalized

stigma. The bonds created with the dogs, and the reciprocal care participants experienced in their interactions with them, align with proponents of attachment theory as it related to the human-animal bond. The dogs became attachment figures for participants as they felt supported by the dogs and enjoyed spending time with them (Rockett & Carr, 2014). The positive attachment they created with the dogs helped to mend some of the social isolation and negative attachment practices the participants experienced as problematic substance users. Instead of using substances to "self soothe" in response to social isolation as Fletcher (2023) had illustrated, the participants' relationships with the dogs took the place of that.

Irving (2012) and Saunders (1990) application of a symbolic interactionist framework with the human-animal bond helps to explain how the sense of "personhood" the participants attached to the dogs aided in alleviating their internalized stigma. The uniqueness of the non-judgemental aspect of the prisoner-dog relationships was a source of "the process of the self-definition" in which the dogs caring for the participants acted as an intrinsic reward for the participants. The participants had "meaningful communication" with the dogs and were able to see parts of themselves in the personality of the dogs. By recognizing the dogs' individuality and comparing it to their own, the participants were able to situate themselves outside of the collective stigmatized group "criminals" and instead were able to be themselves.

The care participants received from the dogs also appeared to alter how they perceived themselves, as the dogs made them feel that they were individuals who could be cared for and trusted. A symbolic interactionism framework suggests that because of the positive meaning they created within their interactions with the dogs, participants were able to have a more positive sense of their identity as individuals rather than criminals (Blumer, 1969; Joas & Knobel, 2009). This positive meaning developed from the dogs being physically and emotionally enthusiastic



when interacting with participants (i.e. getting excited when they entered the room, jumping on them, licking them, leaning against them, cuddling with them) and being non-judgemental, attentive listeners. The trust participants were able to build with the dogs and the less hypervigilance they experienced in the program also contributed to a positive meaning development.

## **5.2.2 Theme 2: Dogs And Handlers Exuding A Perceived Sense Of Trust**

### **5.2.2.1 Overview and Participant Verification**

The program dogs and handlers exhibiting immediate trust with the participants was something the participants and staff noted as especially unique within the prison environment. The dog's ability to quickly trust the participants who had difficulty trusting their surroundings within the prison environment, but who also couldn't believe they were being trusted to work with the dogs, had a prominent impact on lessening their internalized stigma. Being able to work freely with the dogs, in an environment where hypervigilance is the norm, not only improved the participants' self-concept but also gave them some relief from the stressful prison environment.

Upon verifying my findings, one participant agreed that the dogs and handlers quickly trusted them, and that this created a safe space to interact and open up with the dogs. They said that the hypervigilance they experienced within the prison walls was all-consuming, but working with the dogs allowed those walls to be taken down briefly. They expressed that no matter where the program occurred, it would have taken them out of that negative environment where they could be vulnerable. Interacting with the dogs allowed them to not think about what was going on around them in their environment but focus on the positive interaction with the dog.

The second participant similarly agreed that they could relax more since starting the dog program. They illustrated how they made obstacle courses with the dogs that weren't being

judged through the process. The prisoners were able to work freely with the dogs and didn't have the officers telling them that they shouldn't be doing something. They also highlighted how the dogs facilitated social interactions between the participants, which eventually led them to becoming friends. He said that the dogs didn't care what they were in for and trusted them quickly, even though they didn't know who they were. This trust allowed them to speak freely with the dogs compared to the officers because the dogs couldn't "write them up." He explained the importance of being able to open up and show trust upon release, and that the dog program can open up the heart. He now advocates for PAP even though he was not open to it at first.

#### 5.2.2.2 Literature-Building Trust in PAP

Building trust with the dogs correlates with existing literature promoting opportunities for positive identity-building within prison institutions. It also aligns with PAP literature reflecting the benefits of the unique and non-judgemental angle animals can have when interacting with prisoners. Working with animals who have no ulterior motives, no hesitations or concept of stigma or social labels, achieves a level of trust that would likely not be possible with human interventions. (Mercer et al., 2015; Minton et al., 2015; McConnel & Taylor, 2011; Kern-Gofal et al., 2015).

### **5.3 Implications for Prison Programming**

#### 5.3.1 Incorporating More Prison Animal Programing in Prison Institutions

The findings from this study contribute to existing literature around the benefits of prison animal programs, while also highlighting what makes them unique compared to traditional prison programming. The human-animal bond is different from the relationships people build with humans in a multitude of ways, but most significant is the ability to instantly build mutual trust and unconditional love with an animal. In a highly stigmatized population such as

incarcerated individuals, there is little opportunity (and, often, capability) to form these kinds of relationships with humans. Bringing animals into a prison environment not only elevates the well-being and prosocial practices of prisoners, but they can also create a more uplifting space where the prisoner's sense of individuality and relationships with other prisoners and staff can be improved.

The opportunity to build individual relationships and connections with animals humanizes prisoners that have often, until that point, been de-individualized by the prison institution. This process can create breakthroughs in recovery plans that had otherwise not been achieved by purely human interventions. For many program participants, it was the PAP program that allowed them to feel a sense of freedom within the institution where they could form meaningful connections and, in turn, develop a better sense of self. With the opportunity for individual development and expression being crucial to better reintegration into the community and desistance from crime as evident in the literature, having PAP programs more readily available can drastically improve prisoner outcomes. By incorporating PAP into traditional prison programming and prisoner recovery plans, the program participants can experience a change in their regular environment that is more conducive to their individual development.

### 5.3.2 Learning From The Animals- How Can Human Interventions Be More Successful

PAP is not always possible to operate given certain constraints for programming in prison institutions. Despite this, policy and prison program developers can learn from how the dogs in this program (and animals in any PAP) interacted with the program participants and apply these approaches to human interventions. There are several outcomes the dogs were able to achieve that would be important to incorporate and foundationally change the approach and development of institutional programming. This includes allowing for the expression of individual identity

development outside of the negative characteristics that prisoners internalize and building mutual trust and positive relationships. The dogs also showed the importance of care and feeling supported during the substance use recovery process. Care is especially impactful when it is non-judgemental, enthusiastic, and done while being fully present with the individual and listening to their story.

### 5.3.3 Policy and Prison Program Development Specific Implications- What Happens

Next

The findings from this study have numerous policy implications that should inform future development and operations of prison programming. Overall, prison institutions and the policies that influence them should consider how creating a positive environmental shift within the prison can help provide a space for personal growth leading to desistance among prisoners. This can include incorporating more opportunities to de-isolate prisoners and create a sense of normalcy within the prison environment. In learning from PAP, the power of having social support and non-stigmatizing relationships greatly contributes to that sense of normalcy. Policies addressing how much social contact and opportunities for relationship building are offered to prisoners need to consider the known benefits of these interactions on the prisoners' path to recovery. These policies need to allow for programming specific to establishing and fostering positive social connections in a non-stigmatizing environment-whether that be with people or animals.

Additionally, taking a trauma-informed and connection-based approach to prison programming ensures that recovery treatments are unique to the needs of the prisoner. While PAP can be a great means to achieve these outcomes, these approaches need to be applied to human interventions when PAP is not possible. Connection-based approaches also allow for an environment of mutual trust between prisoners, and prisoners and staff, to be built where

hypervigilance can be lessened. The benefits of PAP have been well documented in the literature and in the current study. Next steps for PAP research should move beyond exploratory approaches and instead create a means for measuring or evaluating what it is about PAP that make them unique compared to traditional prison programming. This evaluation could be applied to multiple PAP to create a better understanding of what works well, what can be applied to human-based prison programming, and what could be improved within PAP programs.

## **CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION**

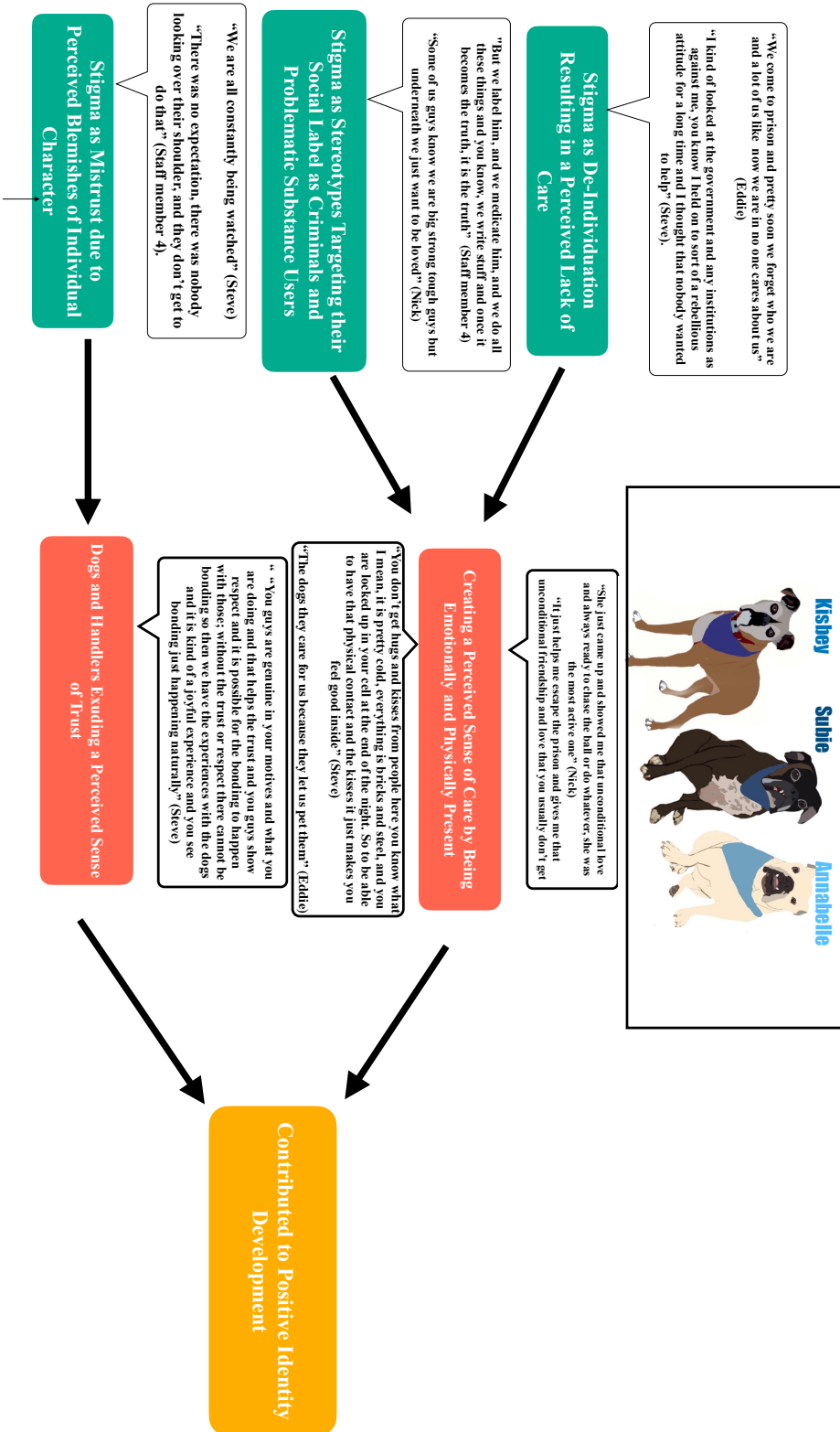
### **Concluding Statement**

This research contributes to sociological theoretical understandings of de-stigmatization through positive social interactions. These findings are relevant in both a PAP setting and general prison programming aimed at producing desistance from crime and reducing the chances of released incarcerated individuals reoffending. With desistance being tied to positive identity development and perceived social support according to the literature, considering the impact of emotional and physical care on positive identity development among prisoners may lead to better rates of desistance and recidivism. The findings also contribute to an understanding of the internalized stigma incarcerated individuals with substance use histories consistently face in their lives, and how it could be combatted. Care, unconditional love, and perceived trust are all outcomes of the PAWSitive Support program that addressed the needs of the participants facing internalized stigma. Perceived trust and unconditional love, in particular, combatted the negative stereotypes that the prisoners experienced, and this led to more positive identity development. The findings will also have substantive relevance: they will contribute to policy around therapy dog programming's public access, prison animal programming, having accessible prison

programming, and promoting the social justice initiative of combatting the stigma of incarcerated individuals.

Understanding the influence of positive social interactions on internalized stigma is incredibly valuable to creating a more just and effective correctional institution system. If programs like PAP are implemented, and the incarcerated individuals are given an experience of humanity and non-judgement, the outcomes for prison programming may be more promising. Additionally, examining internalized stigma through a non-human lens not only shows what positive things can be done within prison programming but also how we can learn from the animals in these settings. The non-judgemental, emotionally intuitive, and enthusiastic nature of these dogs are qualities do not necessarily exist in purely human interviews currently being implemented. Understanding how and why the human-animal bond can be developed differently, and sometimes with greater ease than human relationships within prison institutions, can better equip these programs to provide the strongest support and generate better outcomes for prisoners.

**Appendix: Figure 1.0**



**Figure: 2.0 : Codes Distinction and Breakdown**

**Research Question #1: How Internalized Stigma was Experienced.**

**Parent Code**

**Code Distinction/description**

<b><u>Parent Code: Hypermasculinity</u></b>	-Participants feeling that they are tough, aggressive, can't express emotion because of toxic masculinity in the prison environment
<b><u>Parent Code: Institution Issues</u></b>	-Speaking about issues they have with the prison institution as a whole. Not feeling supported, being isolated, de-humanized
<b><u>Parent code: Humans not caring</u></b>	-Feeling that society, friend and family, and the institution didn't care about their individual development.
<b><u>Parent code: Receiving initial judgement</u></b>	-Feeling judged initially in social interactions because of their criminal history
<b><u>Lack of connection</u></b>	-Not experiencing human connection within the prison.
<b><u>Loss of identity</u></b>	-Not feeling like themselves within the prison, not knowing who they are after being incarcerated, feeling that they are of the collective label as "prisoners" with negative stereotypes attributed to them
<b><u>Dehumanizing</u></b>	-Being treated negatively as less than human, human needs not being met within the prison



<b><u>Personal characteristics</u></b>	-Stereotypes becoming linked to personal identity
<b><u>Reaction to stigma</u></b>	-Reacting negatively to stigmatizing encounters, feeling judged etc
<b><u>Mistrust</u></b>	-Feeling hypervigilance in the prison environment, surprised that they could be trusted to work with the dogs, not trusted by the institution.
<b><u>Substance use and Addictions</u></b>	-Anything related to problematically using substances and facing addiction (experiences with “addict” label, isolating because of addiction, losing family connections)

**Research Question #2: How did the Dog Program Alleviate their Internalized Code**

**Code Distinction**

<b><u>Parent Code: De-stigmatizing outcomes of the program</u></b>	-When the outcomes of the program are spoken about specifically around de-stigmatization
<b><u>Parent Code: Dogs facilitating social interaction</u></b>	-Dogs helping to facilitate conversation between program participants and staff and participants
<b><u>Parent code: Factors for program success</u></b>	-Speaking about what made the program successful (non-traditional interventions)

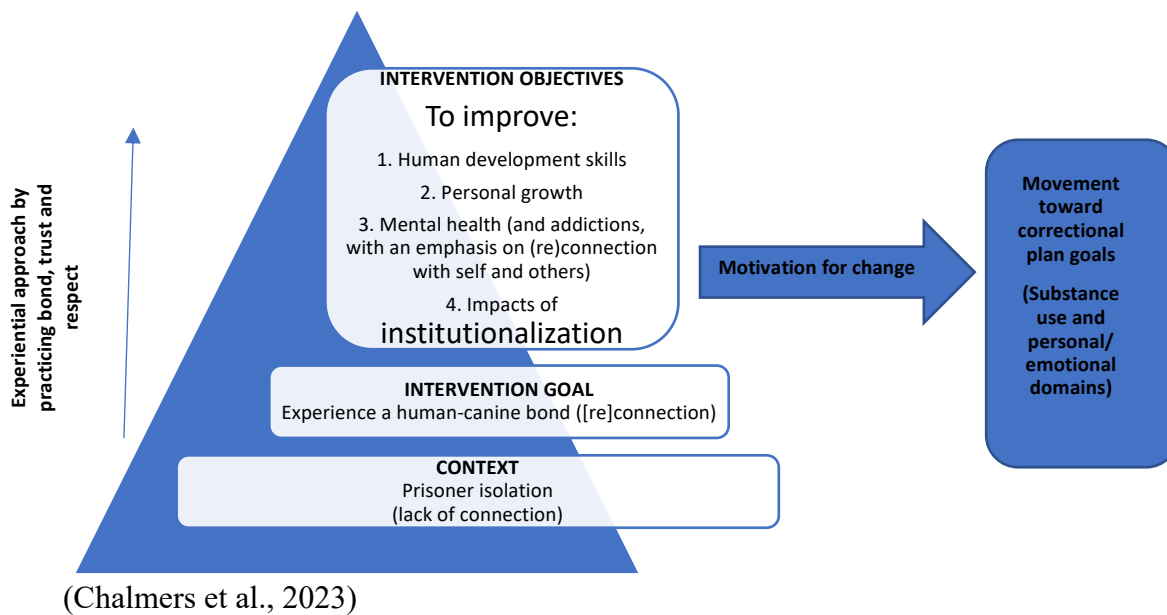
Child Code: Importance of non-judgemental handler	-The handlers non-judgement and openness with participants allowed for trust to be built between handlers/the program dogs and participants
Child code: Program as distraction	-Program different to their everyday experience in the prison, distracted from the stress and hypervigilance they normally experienced
<b><u>Parent Code: Feeling happy</u></b>	-The dogs making participants happy and joyful when interacting with them
<b><u>Parent Code: Improving inmate, warden relationship</u></b>	-The dog program creating a safe space for relationships to be improved between prisoners and staff
<b><u>Parent Code: Non-Stigmatizing characteristics in dog</u></b>	-any specific characteristics participants and staff noted about the dogs that helped to alleviate the internalized stigma they experienced
Child code: Able to create a bond with the dog	-Dogs made it easy for participant to feel bonded to them. Specially using the word "bond"
Child code: Allowing for physical contact from participant	-The dogs letting participants pet, hug, hold them
Child code: Dog as de-stressing and sensing stress	-The dogs recognizing when the participant is stressed and comforting them

Child code: Dog understanding them (picking up on personality) and responding to them	-Participants feeling like the dogs “knew them” and related to the dogs personality traits (ie dog and participant are stubborn)
Child code: Fun and friendly personality	-The dogs are enthusiastic and playful with participants and are friendly towards them
Child code: Loving (emotionally and physically)	-The word “Love” being used to describe what the participants feel towards the dog and what they feel the dogs feel towards them.
Child code; Making eye contact with participant	-The dogs looking at participants in the eye, adding to the bonding participants experienced
Child code: Not having hard feelings toward prisoner	-Dogs not having any negative feelings about participant
Child code: People dogs	-The dogs described as “People dogs” who love interacting with people
Child code: Supportive	-Participants feel that the dogs support them by being present
Child code: Trusting	-The dogs quickly trusting participants

Child code: Unconditional perceived non-judgement	-Phrases such as "the dogs don't judge us", "they don't care what I've done"
Child code: Acceptance	-Both dogs and handlers accepting the participants as who they are despite what they did to result in incarceration
<b><u>Parent code: Participant individual connection with program dogs</u></b>	-Whenever the participants or staff talked about the participants connecting with a certain dog more than others

Figure 3.0

## PAWSitive Support Program Structure



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