

The impact of dog ownership on human well-being

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Summary of the project

In order to learn more about the dog human related activities in which dog owners are involved and how these activities impact their mental well-being, six focus group sessions with 35 dog owners were performed in September 2019 at the Sarah Swift Building (University of Lincoln). In the initial project, the author had also planned to develop a Q study and to give a small talk about dog-human interaction to the participants of the focus groups. However, each focus group session lasted around 90 minutes and, afterwards, there was a break of at least 30 minutes, in which pizza and soft drinks were provided, and participants had the opportunity to socialise with like-minded people. Therefore, due to lack of time and participants' unavailability to stay longer in the study, in which their participation was voluntary, the Q study and the talk about dog-human interaction did not take place. However, the removal of these two activities did not decrease the quality of the event. The focus group sessions were full of discussions and allowed participants to engage with other dog owners and share their personal experiences. Also, the break with free pizza and soft drinks gave participants an opportunity to talk to other people and enjoy a high quality experience. Participants were very happy with the study and thankful to the main researcher. Several of them volunteered themselves to take part in future studies of the same kind.

Outcomes of the activities and its impact on people who engaged with it

In overall, the research was successful. Numerically speaking, more than 90 people registered their interest to take part in the study, which shows that studies of this nature (human-animal interaction and mental health) are very attractive to people, especially when pizza and soft drinks are freely offered. The 35 people selected by the main researcher to take part in the study were involved in face-face focus group sessions in which they discussed how dog human related activities impact their mental health. Many stories have been shared about things they like to do with their dogs, and how these interactions have improved their mental well-being, e.g. helped increase their self-esteem, their purpose in life, or have augmented positive feelings (e.g. happiness, joy) or decreased negative ones (e.g. loneliness, depression) in their lives. Negative aspects of dog ownership have also been shared by dog owners, such as the challenges of looking after a young puppy or looking after an old dog, or coping with the end of the animal's life, e.g. euthanasia, sickness. Participants felt very welcomed and comfortable in the environment. In some moments, participants would cry while telling others their stories, in other moments participants would laugh of someone's narration. In general, participants could see how similar to each other they are, as they agreed in most of the benefits and harms associated with dog ownership. This might have helped to reassure their role as dog owners and to make them reflect on improvements to be made in their relationship with their dog in order to achieve the greatest potential of a dog-human interaction.

The main goal of the study was to create a framework of dog human related activities associated with changes in human mental well-being. As a result, after qualitatively analysing the data, with NVivo software, from the focus group sessions, the author created a framework with 58 dog human related activities and 15 themes of activities, e.g. playing with the dog, walking the dog, looking after a puppy, watching my dog, etc. Each of these activities was more relevant to one specific area of mental well-being. For example, being greeted by the dog upon arrival was very important for participants' self-esteem, while looking after the dog (e.g. feeding, giving water, walking) was paramount for owners' purpose in life and to their personal growth. The results in details have been reported in the manuscript of the paper the author is willing to publish.

As reported in the summary of the study, two activities (Q study and small talk) could not be performed due to time limitations. Besides that, not many men took part in the study. Around 75% of the participants were women, even though purpose sampling has been used to select the participants registered in the study. Apart from these limitations the author believes that the activity with dog owners was successful and participants had a very positive experience. For the next time, the author would start recruiting participants earlier and would give fewer details about the nature of the study, as it is believed that men are more reluctant to get involved in studies involving mental health or psychological openness as compared to women. This way, more men could be recruited.

Impact of study on research

This study was part of the PhD project of the main researcher (author of this study), thus, it will impact on research by means of a publication of a paper in a scientific journal. The manuscript of the paper has already been written and is now under analysis by the supervisors of this student. The PEARL grant allowed the researcher to buy food and drinks for the participants, which was essential in the recruitment phase. More than 90 people registered their interest in taking part in the study, which is partly due to the offer of free food and drinks. Additionally, the "coffee" break gave participants an opportunity to share their ideas, get to know like-minded people and give a feed-back to the main researcher on how much they liked the study. The author believes that the food and drinks provided made the overall experience of participants even more positive and improved the quality of the research.

Plans in repeating the study

This study was so successful that the author will supervise two master projects in 2020, in which a replica of this study will be conducted, including the focus group sessions and the offer of food and drinks. Different types of participants will be targeted for these two new projects, but the essence of the moderator guide used and the qualitative analysis will remain the same.

Outputs from the project

Pictures of the participants were not taken due to ethical issues. However, there are some pictures (see below) to illustrate the room where the focus group sessions took place, where you can see that a seat was allocated for each participant and snacks and water were offered during the whole time. For each participant, the author printed a picture of a dog with the participant's name and placed that picture on the table so they would have a stronger connection with the topic and feel more welcomed in the environment. Also, there are pictures showing the coffee break (pizza, potatoes, garlic bread, soft drinks, water) offered after each focus group. This coffee break was only possible due to the PEARL grant.

Further comments

Thank you for the PEARL grant. It was fantastic for my study and I am sure it contributed a lot to the personal experience participants had in my research. Now members of the public are more aware of mental health issues and on how their four-paw friends can be beneficial to their mental well-being. I suggest you keep running the PEARL grant, especially in association with research, as it can impact on both public awareness and scientific knowledge simultaneously!

