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The Therapeutic and Psychosocial Effects of Pets on Individuals in the USA

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The Therapeutic and Psychosocial Effects of Pets on Individuals in the USA

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Honors Project

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Abstract

The prevalence of animals in people's lives is ever growing. Many pet owners see their pets as members of their family. Animals can improve one's well being both physically and mentally. They have been used in therapeutic practices, both in one-on-one sessions and group settings. While there are several benefits to owning a pet, they can cause barriers to accessing healthcare and housing, and can be a deterrent to leaving abusive situations. The two roles pets play in people's lives creates a dynamic that is prevalent to several professional fields including social work. Social workers have already begun to acknowledge the prevalence of animals in people's lives with the creation of Veterinary Social Work and including pets as part of one's family/environment. This includes asking pet related questions during in-take assessments. Acknowledging the beneficial elements and barriers of owning a pet can open doors to addressing the problems pet owners face. A survey of a class of social work students at BGSU revealed interest in BGSU offering course options related to the topic of animal therapy. More research is needed on the topic of animals and humans to increase validity of existing data and to explore uninvestigated questions.

Keywords: Animal Assisted Therapy, Social Work, Mental Health, Domestic Violence, Homelessness, Healthcare, Emotional Support Animals, Psychosocial Effects of Animals, Animal Loss

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Introduction

The prevalence of animals in people's lives is ever growing. Recently, the notion that pets can serve as an attachment figure to humans has been recognized. This is due to the "powerful emotional bonds" that people can develop with their pets (Donohue, 2005, p. 187). Despite a long history of animals' positive impact on humans, there is a significant lack of programming and policy supporting their existence in people's lives. Part of this is due to a significant lack of consistent research studies on the impact animals have on humans.

Some believe that some of the research that has been done lacks either sample size, methodology, or an absence of other similar studies to compare the data. The majority consensus is the need for more research to be done. One paper identified six questions they felt needed to be answered by future research:

- ★ "How much of the rapid growth of children diagnosed with ADHD and children in special education has to do with the increasing lack of experience with animals and nature as well as decreased opportunity for physical activity?"
- ★ How much of the increasing difficulty that boys experience in completing high school and college stems from unmet needs for activity and contact with animals and nature?
- ★ How could contact with nature and animals be used to reform our present method of schooling in which learning and physical inactivity are so strongly linked?
- ★ How does lack of experience with animals and nature affect our capability for language, narration, and metaphor?
- ★ How do human and animal companionship interrelate: Are they addictive, competitive, or both? When can one substitute for the other, and when can it not?

- ★ What changes in our social structure can bring about a greater interaction between people and nature if it is found that lack of such interaction has detrimental effects?” (Katcher & Beck, 2006, p. 45).

Despite many positive findings and observations being noted in existing research, the ability to find funding for these research projects is lacking. For those that do find funding, there is a lack of opportunities to publish research papers relating to the topic (Katcher & Beck, 2006).

“Two of the most famous papers in the field are the budgie study, in which the number of subjects was too small to permit statistical analysis, and the original self-published evidence in support of the “Eden” alternative, in which the evidence consisted of four graphs with no indication of the number of subjects and no statistical analysis” (Katcher & Beck, 2006).

Despite the need for more research into the topic, there are findings that have led to a lot of growth in the field of animal therapy over the years. Informal versions of animal therapy have existed for centuries. Today, animals are being used in a variety of therapeutic settings. This includes one-on-one sessions, group therapy, emotional support animals (ESA), service animals, and more.

Animals as a therapy technique comes largely from observations made outside of a therapeutic setting. Animals without a doubt are prevalent in many families' lives across the world. Individuals like Sigmund Freud and Boris Levinson are both notable voices in this topic due to their observations of animals and humans which led to their theories on their potential positive impact and importance on humans (Serpell, 2006).

In social work, animals serve as both a barrier to clients and a tool to improve wellbeing. These polar opposite roles create a unique relationship between social workers and animals. By recognizing their benefits, a social worker can not only utilize them in the field, but also create

and adapt programs to address the barriers in recognizing the benefits of doing so. This can be seen in the creation of veterinary social work and in partnerships between social workers and animal welfare workers.

Research that has been done has shown animals may have several positive health benefits for people. These include a decreased risk for cardiovascular disease (Canady & Sansone, 2019), reduced stress, and increased social support (Serpell, 2009). For dog owners these health benefits may be especially true. For example, owning a dog has been known to encourage more exercise (Canady & Sansone, 2019). It has been found that people who view pets as family members have an increased level of wellbeing (McConnell, 2019).

When it comes to the beliefs humans hold about animals, there has been some variation throughout history. Some years there is a high, meaning the benefits of animals are praised and positively talked about. Then there are periods where the opposite is true, which are lows. This pattern has repeated throughout history. Currently, feelings towards animals are at a high after an approximately 50 year low (Serpell, 2006).

History of Animals & Humans

The relationship between humans and animals can be traced back centuries. Throughout history there is evidence of animals playing large roles in people's lives, people's changing beliefs, and the use of animals to improve health. While during some periods in history, humans looked upon animals highly, other periods animals were seen in less positive light. Human's complex relationship with animals and people's ever changing beliefs has influenced research into the impact of animals and humans relationship, as well as the uses of animals over the years.

The belief in animism is one of the most ancient beliefs relating to animals. Those who believed in animism believed that all living creatures have a spirit or soul that is invisible. This belief led those like the Inuit to give animals great respect (Serpell, 2006, p. 4). Similarly, some Native American tribes believed in guardian spirits known as *manitos* which were the spirits of deceased wild animals. As such, many treated live wild animals as servants of the *manito*. When an animal was killed, a ritual was required to take place to keep the *manito* pleased (Serpell, 2006, p. 5).

Humans have long held beliefs relating to animals. Some depict them as essential to humans. *Chanul* are soul animals, whom the Mayans believed were assigned to each person at birth. They believed the human and the *chanul* would share each other's fate. If one got ill, it was believed that their *chanul* was injured (Serpell, 2006, p. 7-8).

Animals have often been used as symbols for Gods. Their use in relation to Gods might very well be the first instance of animal assisted therapy (AAT) to be documented. Askleoi is the son of Apollo and was known as the God of Medicine and as the divine physician. In his cult, snakes and dogs played a central role. People would visit his shrine to seek medical help. Part of the ritual - which potentially involved drugs - involved the person sleeping in the shrine where it was said Askleoi would visit his patients commonly as a dog or snake. The animal would lick the patient on their body relevant to whatever brought them there. There were dogs that lived around Askleoi's shrine. They would lick people who came to visit and many believed them to represent God and to have the ability to cure with their tongues. There are reports of this occurring such as with a blind boy who was licked by one of the dogs on his eyes and left the shrine with the ability to see (Serpell, 2006, p. 8-9).

Many healers throughout history can be noted to have a relationship with animals. It was believed that Shaman were capable of developing relationships with guardian spirits. By entering a trance-like state often related to a feeling of ecstasy, they could enter a state where the distinction between humans and animals were non-existent. Animals were looked upon highly. Association with animals was seen as a “symbol of sainthood”, but in classic and medieval times, association with animals was seen as “a symptom of diabolism” (Serpell, 2006, p.11).

In 1231 AD, the Church formed an inquisition known as the office of the Papal. The purpose was to “identify and combat heresy” (Serpell, 2006, p. 10). The leniency that pagan customs once were given was now gone. It became a crime to visit shrines like Askleoi’s, trees planted in honor of sacred animals were burned, and sacred dog remains were destroyed. Those associated with animals were no longer seen as saints but instead accused of being a witch. It was believed that witches could use animals, that they were talking to the devil who was said to take animal form at times, and that they could have familiars or imps which existed in animal form (Serpell, 2006, p. 11).

In the 17th century, an emergence of “sympathetic attitudes” towards animals took place (Serpell 2006, p.12). In 1699, the benefits of owning a pet were being noted when John Lock advocated giving children an animal to care for, citing it would encourage empathy and responsibility (McCardle 2011, p.13). The practice of keeping a pet expanded beyond the upper class to the middle class. In the 18th and 19th century it can also be noted that there was a trend in children's literature of promoting “compassion and concern for animal welfare” (Serpell, 2006, p. 12).

At the end of the 17th century and continuing into the 18th and 19th centuries, sees an increase in the use of animals as tools to improve one's well being. In 1792 somebody used

rabbits as a tool to promote a sense of calm in patients they treated (Ernst, 2013). By the 19th century, animals had become commonplace in mental institutions. In 1867, a hospital in Germany implemented AAT to treat patients who suffered from epilepsy. They reported that it created a sense of “comfort and relaxation” for patients (Ernst, 2013, p.17). The use of pets in medicine expanded outside of mental institutions too. Those with long term health conditions were encouraged to get a small pet for companionship (Ernst, 2013).

In the early 20th century it is noted that a withdrawal from the inclusion of animals in the healthcare field took place. Despite the success seen between the 17th and 19th centuries, animals became nothing more than known for their zoonotic diseases or theories about the origins of mental health disorders. It took around 50 years for animals to make a reappearance as a tool in the medical field (Serpell, 2006, p. 13).

Sigmund Freud made a connection between children and animals. Similar to past beliefs, Freud noted that children shared many behavioral similarities to animals. Human’s basic animal nature he would come to call the Id. He believed that mental illness was the result of suppressing one's Id due to pressure to conform to society's standards without developing a “healthy or creative outlet later in life” (Serpell, 2006, p. 14).

In 1945, during World War 2, Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) was implemented in the form of therapy dogs for injured soldiers. They were trained with the purpose of providing “comfort and motivation” (Blank 2015). Since dogs have begun to be used to help those with PTSD it has been discovered that they can help with improving impulse and emotional control as well as patience (Blank, 2015).

Boris Levinson wrote in the 1970s about the potential benefits of animals on humans. His conclusion was drawn from seeing his own dog Jingle's interactions with his patients (McCardle,

2011, p.14). Levinson's writing is notable in the revival of the view of animals as beneficial to human's health. He wrote "we need animals as allies to reinforce our inner selves" and that "pets represent 'a half-way station on the road back to emotional well-being'" (Serpell, 2006, p.14).

In the mid-1980s, "metaphorical ideas" like Levinson's and Freud's had begun to be pushed away in favor of more scientifically "respectful" explanations (Serpell, 2006, p.14-15).

"The primary catalyst for this change of emphasis was a single groundbreaking study of 92 patients in a cardiac care study who, statistically speaking, were found to live longer if they were pet owners" (Serpell, 2006, p. 15).

There are two explanations that the scientific community has accepted to explain the results of this study. The first is that animals are capable of inducing a "psychologically arousing state of relaxation" which is accomplished by their ability to attract and hold human's attention (Serpell, 2006, p. 15). There are several studies that support this belief which has been shown only to have short term effects on an individual. The second explanation is that "animals are capable of providing people with a form of stress-reducing or stress-buffering social support" (Serpell, 2006, p. 15). This theory also has several studies to back it up. In comparison to the first theory however, this second one has been shown to have long term effects on an individual.

Although the history of animals as a tool to improve one's health is historically prevalent, to us it feels new due to its absence in practice for so many years. Prescribing an animal to improve one's mental health is again becoming more common, in fact a survey of mental health care workers found that around 50% have done so (Ernst, 2013). "Despite the growing evidence of recent anthropological research, the notion that animal companions might also contribute socially to human health has still received limited medical recognition" (Serpell, 2006, p. 16).

Today, the prevalence of pets in households is ever growing. Many have dogs, cats, horses, fish, reptiles, and other animals in their home as members of their family. It has been found that in the United States pets may outnumber children. There is also a higher likelihood that a pet will be present in a child's life than a father (McCardle, 2011, p. 1).

Animals & Therapy

Research has found a positive emotional correlation between animals and humans. For this reason, AAT has been a growing conversation amongst medical professionals, social workers, and other related fields. Although in AAT a multitude of animals are used, dogs are the most common (Blank, 2015).

Reduction of stress is one benefit researchers have found. This is due to a decrease in cortisol levels during interactions with animals. Studies have also found that animals can serve as a source of social interaction and support, and can reduce loneliness. Interactions with pets may have a positive impact on one's mood (National Institutes of Health, 2018). Additionally, pain, fatigue, and distress have all been found to be decreased using therapy animals. They've also been found to have a positive impact on feelings of motivation and safety (Canady & Sansone, 2019).

According to the biophilia hypothesis, humans have a "predisposition to attune to animal life" (Melson & Fine, 2006, p. 218). In other words, people can relate to and focus well on animals. This hypothesis supports the use of AAT. When it comes to therapy, the use of inanimate objects as a tool has been long used; however, animals can be more effective in reaching the patient.

After nationally recognized tragedies, organizations have utilized animals to provide comfort to those affected. For example after the terrorist attacks on 9/11, Hurricane Sandy, and the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School, Golden Retrievers were provided to survivors (Blank, 2015).

An increasing number of agencies are investing in animal therapy programs. Since 1989, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) has welcomed therapy dogs once a week. They visit patients at the institute who have life-threatening illnesses in order to care for “their heart, soul, and spirit” (Blank, 2015). Numerous hospitals have invested in similar programs. There are some concerns about the risks in bringing animals into hospitals which research funded by the NIH is actively investigating.

During World War 2, in order to help injured soldiers, therapy dogs were trained to help provide comfort and to help increase motivation. Since dogs have begun to be used to help those with PTSD, it has been discovered that they can help with improving impulse and emotional control as well as patience (Blank, 2015). In 2008, the Warrior Canine Connection was started. As part of the process, Warriors are responsible “to teach the dogs that the world is a safe place. In doing so, they must convince themselves of the same. Warriors participating in the program have reported that employing positive emotions to praise their dogs has significantly improved their family dynamics” (Blank, 2015). This program originated at the Palo Alto Veterans Administration and has since expanded to other organizations.

It has been found that dogs can maintain attention on and from people. This allows them to be useful in a variety of different settings. For example, working in classrooms with students who have ADHD. A variety of positive outcomes were found in a study of children diagnosed with ADHD reading to a dog. Those that read to the dog had higher social skills and less

problems with behavior (National Institutes of Health, 2018). Another study using guinea pigs with children with ADHD found they became less anxious after playtime with the animal. They also showed improved social skills and higher levels of engagement with peers (National Institutes of Health, 2018).

While dogs are the most commonly used animal in animal therapy methods, they are not the only animal used. Hippotherapy is a treatment technique that utilizes horses in a structured setting to treat a variety of different ailments including physical disabilities, autism, ADHD, PTSD, anxiety, and depression. Located on a 26-acre farm in Crownsville, MD, is Maryland Therapeutic Riding (MTR) whose goal is to “improve quality of life and conquer physical, developmental, and emotional health challenges” (Blank, 2015). Participants benefit from this therapy for a variety of reasons including improving self-esteem, physical abilities such as balance and strength, and social skills.

Specific populations have been the target of animal therapy. One popular population that animals are used in is with children. Due to coverage in the media, many may be familiar with dogs visiting children in hospitals to help boost morale, but animals are also used in more traditional therapy avenues. Research has found that children who have suffered from abuse and neglect can benefit from AAT. Due to the trauma they have experienced, many of these children have insecure attachment. If not treated, the children are at a high risk for “inappropriate or maladaptive relationships with others, especially in respect to adult-child relationships” (Parish-Plass, 2008, p. 8). They are likely to struggle with empathy which in turn can affect their ability to parent.

“[AAT] is based on emotional connection and relationship – between therapist and child, between therapist and animal, between child and animal, between

animal and animal” (Parish-Plass, 2008, p. 12).

Utilizing AAT, professionals can accomplish numerous goals with the child including enabling connection, creating a sense of normalcy and safety in the therapy setting, encouraging openness, allowing for exploration of past trauma and the present reality, increasing self-esteem, addressing attachment issues utilizing the animal as a attachment figure, improving social skills, and increasing empathy (Parish-Plass, 2008, p. 13-15). These are just a handful of the potential benefits that AAT can have when used with children who have adverse childhood experiences.

One of the several unique benefits of using AAT with children who have experienced trauma include nurturing a relationship of trust between the child and the therapist. When the child witnesses the therapist being kind to the dog, the child can feel more relaxed and comfortable. This can especially be helpful as kids who have experienced trauma can be mistrustful, especially if that trauma was abuse at the hands of an adult they trusted (Parish-Plass, 2008, p. 17).

Utilizing animals as a “social catalyst” can help children who have a mental illness and are struggling to succeed in social interactions and with understanding empathy (McCardle, 2011, p. 145). The study looking at children who have experienced trauma determined that they would benefit long term from the experience and be more likely to be empathetic and “well-adjusted” as adults (Parish-Plass, 2008).

AAT has been noted to be similar to group therapy. In the study about AAT and children who experienced trauma it is noted that,

“the child initiates, observes, participates in, and reacts to social interactions. The child has a chance to reenact past social situations in the ‘here and now’ with the support of the therapist” (Parish-Plass, 2008, p. 15).

These are very similar to the opportunities group therapy offers. However, the same study notes that the main difference is that with AAT the patient is the “focal point” (Parish-Plass, 2008, p. 15).

AAT is also used with group therapy. One example is the Green Chimneys School for Little Folk. It is renowned for its implementation of an AAT program for youth. Located on a dairy farm, children with behavioral and emotional needs attend the school which aims to utilize the benefits of AAT to address their individual needs. They employ licensed professionals, trained staff, and volunteers to implement their programs. One of the biggest concerns programs like Green Chimneys faces is the risk of infection control. This includes allergic reactions, injuries from animal interaction, and zoonotic diseases. Green Chimneys location allows for a wide variety of animals including wildlife. They operate as a location for wildlife rehabilitation which is consistent with their goals for the children in their care (Mallon, et al., 2006).

Animals & Social Work

In the field of social work, the prevalence of animals is ever growing. From specialization areas like Veterinary social work, to increased education on animal therapy, and the application of such practices in the field, social workers have begun to recognize the positive and negative impacts animals can have on clients. Most commonly, therapy dogs are known to visit hospitals but this is not the only setting animals are being used in. Additionally, there has been recognition of the need for social workers in animal related fields like veterinary medicine. Not only has there been recognition of the therapeutic benefits of pets, but the implication of pets on clients have begun to be considered in field practices.

Animals & Social Work Education

Veterinary social work is a growing field that was created fairly recently. Professor Elizabeth Strand, Ph.D., LCSW, came up with the term at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville in 2002. Strand is the founding director of the veterinary social work program at the Tennessee College of Veterinary Medicine (Blank, 2015). The term covers an area of social work addressing human needs that occur in the field of veterinary medicine. Services offered can include grief counseling for pet parents and counseling for veterinary professionals. Veterinary professionals can experience immense stress and loss in their work (Blank, 2015). Recognizing these struggles is part of the reason veterinary social work now exists.

This area of social work is growing, including the creation of numerous educational programs to teach students this speciality. In Canada, the Veterinary Social Work Initiative offers support at the regional veterinary college and it's medical center. Michigan State University (MSU) Veterinary Social Work Services (VSWS) offers numerous services to the surrounding community. It was created by the School of Social Work and the College of Veterinary Medicine at the university. One of the goals of the social workers in the program is to provide emotional support for staff and clients at the MSU Small Animal Clinic, Oncology Center, and Large Animal Clinics (Blank, 2015). The social workers role additionally includes providing educational and referral services. The program also hosts a support group for Michigan residents who have lost a pet and are experiencing grief (Blank, 2015).

Sponsored by the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, the Veterinary Wellness and Social Work Summit is a conference that brings together members of numerous fields including social work. In 2015, one topic covered was compassion fatigue. It taught students how to identify compassion fatigue and differentiate it from other similar conditions such as burnout or PTSD.

Additionally, students learned more about the causes of compassion fatigue and how to treat it (Veterinary Social Work at the University of Tennessee).

In 2018, the international summit was themed around animals and poverty. Several speakers attended to give keynote presentations on a variety of subjects relating to the theme. These included Jim Tedford, CAWA “Beyond the Cliche-- Pets really ARE Family Members”, Dr. Michael Blackwell “Strengthening the Social Safety Net”, and Don Bruce, Ph.D. “Poverty in America - An Economist’s Perspective” (Veterinary Social Work at the University of Tennessee). Attendants were also immersed in a simulation experience by Dr. Frieda Herron aimed to better their understanding of the barriers low income pet owners face. Due to significant interest they repeated this theme in 2020 in a virtual summit (Veterinary Social Work at the University of Tennessee).

Beyond Veterinary Social Work, other educational programs have been created to address the use of animals in the field of social work. The University of Denver in Denver, CO created the first in America, human-animal-environment interactions masters certificate (Blank, 2015). It explores the diverse application of animals in social work.

In the university's own words, “The certificate centers social justice and highlights intersectional systems of oppression, speciesism and violence directed towards humans, animals, and the environment.” Students who elect to earn this certificate take three core classes plus one “applied topic” course of their choice (University of Denver). The certificate also offers global opportunities for students through “international courses and internships” (University of Denver).

Animals in Field Work

The number of social workers who currently consider animals in practice is low. In one study of social workers, only 33% reported including questions about animals during intake assessments and only 23% of social workers mentioned animals during intervention practice (Risley-Curtiss, 2010, p. 42). As knowledge about the impact of animals on people grows, considering animals in practice is becoming more important.

Social workers acknowledging animals in the field has been getting more attention. During COVID-19 this became even more recognized as many suffered from loneliness due to isolation. Past research indicating animals may be able to serve as a form of social interaction piqued interest as a potential solution for those suffering from the isolated reality the pandemic created. During COVID, animal shelters saw an increase in adoptions (Kavin, 2020).

Older adults were at an increased risk for COVID and an increased risk for other health conditions due to the isolating conditions. Social isolation can lead to cardiovascular disease and mental health conditions. Pets were considered a potential solution to these concerns. It has been found that there is a positive relationship between pets' ability to create an increase in social connection and one's age (Rauktis & Hoy-Gerlach, 2020).

In a letter to the editor, two social workers wrote about the importance of including companion animals in assessments:

“Companion animals need to be part of the psychosocial assessment so that the presence of an animal in the home is in the record and the benefits and challenges are known and incorporated into service plans” (Rauktis & Hoy-Gerlach, 2020).

They felt that while it's important to see how pets may play a positive role in the person's life, it's also important to acknowledge the barriers they face. For example, barriers may include food

insecurity or being less likely to seek medical care due to concerns for their pet (Rauktis & Hoy-Gerlach, 2020). Acknowledging these barriers can allow a social worker to help the client address these concerns from the perspective of a preventative plan in order to avoid these negative effects having an impact on the individual. A preventative plan may include having pet care prearranged in case of a medical emergency occurring (Rauktis & Hoy-Gerlach, 2020).

Acknowledging the effects animals have on people is important when working with clients. The impact of losing a pet can have a detrimental emotional impact on a person.

“[Odean] Cusack noted that grieving pet owners may experience stages of bereavement similar to those identified by [Dr. Elisabeth] Kubler-Ross. Bereaved pet owners may also be more vulnerable to illness and encounter difficulties with eating, sleeping, social activities, and job performance” (Donohue, 2005, p. 187).

The loss of a pet may trigger memories of a past loss or result in the loss of previously enjoyed activities. One may also experience grief symptoms due the loss of their pet whom they may have regarded as a friend or family member. The stronger the bond between a pet and their owner, the more intense the grieving process is. It is important to note that older people may be more vulnerable to experience stronger grief symptoms after a pet passes (Donohue, 2005, p. 187).

The grieving process may be impacted by society's lack of “universally accepted social standards for mourning a companion animal” (Donohue, 2005, p. 188). These lack of standards can result in increased feelings of loneliness and the lack of an outlet to express their emotions. The death of a pet can be considered as “disenfranchised grief” because their “...death is not publicly mourned, and frequently neither openly acknowledged or socially supported” (Turner,

2003, p. 71) In addition, the individual may not receive “adequate sympathy and support” from those close to them (Donohue, 2005, p. 188).

It’s important to also recognize the way the pet passed. When a pet is suffering due to injury or old age, the decision to euthanize comes into play. Because of this, one may experience intense guilt due to the decision. In fact, “sixty-four percent of the pet owners who had been referred to social services at the Veterinary Hospital at the University of Pennsylvania ‘were upset about having to make the decision to have their pets killed’” (Turner, 2003, p. 71)

Due to social work’s “focus on the person in the environment” they are uniquely qualified to address the impact of pet loss (Turner, 2003, p. 79). “Without that pet, the individual is experiencing tremendous environmental changes” (Turner, 2003, p. 79) For Social Workers, recognizing the potential impact of pet loss can be beneficial when working with clients. It is important to recognize an individual may not be open to asking for help due to perceived societal expectations. One way to address this concern is to normalize documenting pets in families when gathering background information from a client. By regularly checking in on pets as part of one's family dynamics, a social worker can better recognize if the loss of a pet is having an impact on the individual (Donohue, 2005, p. 188).

The benefits of monitoring the effects of animals on people is becoming more known. For social workers, recognizing how animals are affecting their client is becoming recognized as necessary. While few social workers currently ask questions about pets during in-take and even fewer consider them in practice (Risley-Curtiss, 2010, p. 42), several studies are recommending this change in order to better serve clients.

Animals as an Emotional Support Animal

In America, one out of five adults has a diagnosable mental illness (NAMI). An emotional support animal (ESA) is an animal which provides emotional support and/or comfort to its owner. An ESA does not require special training but in order for a pet to be considered as an ESA, it does require a written letter by a medical professional.

ESAs have not always been welcome in university housing. There have been several landmark cases that have paved the way for ESA rights on college campuses under the Fair Housing Act (FHA). *Velzen v. Grand Valley State University* in 2012, was a case between a student who had been prescribed an ESA for two different ailments. They initially filed a complaint with the Fair Housing Center of West Michigan (FHCWM) which resulted in the student being granted an interim exception. When they took the university to court, the university chose to settle paying \$40,000 and guaranteeing the student could live on campus with her ESA. They also agreed to develop new ESA policies (Salminen & Gregory, 2018).

Another notable case was *U.S. v. University of Nebraska at Kearney* in 2013. The university denied Britney Hamilton, who was living in an off-campus apartment owned by the university, the right to have her dog which had been prescribed as an ESA. They cited their no pet policy as their reasoning. This case caught the eyes of the U.S. government which chose to sue the university on behalf of Hamilton. Their suit alleged that the university's refusal to accommodate Hamilton's ESA was a violation of the FHA. The university's defense was that student housing did not fall under FHA laws since it was more similar to jails which do not fall under FHA as they aren't considered dwellings. The court did not agree and thought they were more similar to senior residences which did fall under the definition of dwelling. The court ruled against the university and ordered them to do several things including to modify their ESA policies

(Salminen & Gregory, 2018). U.S. v. Kent State in 2014 resulted in similar rulings to the others and Kent was ordered to change its ESA policies.

Under the American with Disabilities Act (ADA), an ESA can be protected. If a person qualifies for a disability recognized under the ADA, then they are allowed to request a reasonable accommodation from their landlord. This can include allowing a pet despite a no pet policy, allowing more pets than they usually allow, and/or allowing an ESA regardless of breed or size. Landlords are not allowed to charge a pet deposit or pet rent for an ESA.

There are reasons a landlord can deny an ESA legally:

- ★ “Granting the request would impose an undue financial and administrative burden on the housing provider
- ★ The request would fundamentally alter the essential nature of the housing provider’s operations
- ★ The specific assistance animal in question would pose a direct threat to the health or safety of others despite any other reasonable accommodations that could eliminate or reduce the threat
- ★ The request would not result in significant physical damage to the property of others despite any other reasonable accommodations that could eliminate or reduce the physical damage” (U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development).

Barriers

For some, a pet is a member of their family. You see hashtags and products aimed at “fur moms” and “fur dads” extending the belief many hold that pets are like kids. One study found

that a total of 63.2% of American households refer to their pet(s) as family members (Power, 2017). While owning a pet comes with many rewards, there are struggles for those who welcome an animal as a member of their family.

Healthcare

Pet owners may face a barrier to receiving needed healthcare due to a lack of resources available to them. Due to lack of funds to pay for a pet sitter, no family to help, and/or the fear of losing them, some owners opt out of needed healthcare. In fact, one study found that nearly half of pet owners would consider delaying hospitalization due to their pets (Canady & Sansone, 2019). In one study over three quarters of participants said they would miss their pets if hospitalized (Canady & Sansone, 2019).

Joey Martin faced this exact fear when he experienced a medical emergency that landed him in the hospital while out of town. His dog and best friend was with him who served as Martin's service dog and as an ESA to help with his PTSD. The dog was left in the hotel room when the emergency occurred. Due to this, animal control was called about an abandoned dog and the local shelter took him in. Within a few days, Martin's dog was adopted. When Martin got out of the hospital he made pleas on social media to find his dog. When the shelter heard the story, they contacted the family who adopted his dog who were understanding and chose to reunite Martin with his best friend which was documented in a video (Fox13, 2021).

Pet owners, especially those who see their pets as their best friends and/or members of their family are less likely to seek medical care which would take them away from home for too long. The implications of this was apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic. A study found that 10% of pet owners might delay or avoid testing or treatment for COVID-19. The most common reason given for delaying or avoiding care was finding accommodation for their pet. The stronger

the attachment between the owner and pet, the more likely they were to avoid treatment (Applebaum, et al., 2020). When one postpones healthcare, there is a higher chance for the pet owner to have to be in the hospital longer and to encounter worse health outcomes (Canady & Sansone, 2019).

Those who have less support are more likely to delay receiving health care. A lack of support from family and friends can lead to a pet owner not having a safe, affordable pet care option. There has also been found a negative correlation with one's emotional closeness with a pet and the likelihood they seek medical care. Like other studies have found, the stronger the bond between the owner and their pet, the more likely they will consider postponing treatment due to concerns about their pets. Pet owners feel so strongly about their companion that it was found they are more likely to think about postponing treatment than non-pet owners. The same study also found that dog owners experience a greater amount of concern over being separated from their pet than non-pet owners did about separation from friends or family (Canady & Sansone, 2019).

The concerns over peoples health expands to their ability and willingness to get to safety in disasters. In 2005 during Hurricane Katrina, several pet owners in New Orleans chose not to leave their homes due to their inability to leave with their pets. The nation took notice due to the striking images of pet owners with their pets during the storm. Due to a significant number of pets perishing in the disaster, the Pets Evacuation and Transportation Standards Act (PETS) was passed in the United States. This act mandates that local and state governments have a plan in place to accommodate households with pets during disasters. This plan must include accommodation within emergency shelters as well. If they do not comply then they do not qualify for federal disaster-relief funding (Rock & Blue, 2020).

Housing

Owning an animal can also be a barrier to housing. Some landlords have no pets policies or policies restricting breed, size, or type of animal. This limits the rental options pet owners have. Of those that do allow pets, some require pet deposits that are sometimes as high as \$500 and/or pet rent that's charged every month. Pets are largely missing from most research related to housing. This leaves the true impact pets are having on housing up in the air (Power, 2017).

Leases tend to ignore the prevalence of animals in households (Power, 2017). Their notable absence paints pet ownership as a luxury. While some leases do allow animals, they may restrict the kind of animal. These restrictions can include type of animal, breed, or size. Large dogs and breeds with bad perceptions by society such as pit bulls are often prohibited from pet friendly properties.

A major concern landlords have about allowing pets is property damage according to approximately $\frac{2}{3}$ of landlords surveyed in one study. Other reasons that were given were noise, insurance, and concern of conflicts with tenants (Power, 2017). These reasons influence a landlords decision to allow pets in their properties and the extra costs associated.

Another factor that influences the availability of pet-friendly housing is pet-appropriate housing. In other words, the housing must be appropriate for the pet. Factors that affect if a rental is pet-appropriate includes lease length and if there are any "restrictions on property modifications" (Power, 2017). If it is a short lease, the pet owner may be concerned about the stress of moving the pet from home to home and concerns about locating another pet friendly rental in their budget. The rental location may also impact if it is an appropriate choice. A large dog may not do well in a studio apartment. Locations nearby for a dog to go to the bathroom is also a necessity.

When households move - especially during a housing crisis - is a high risk time for pets being surrendered to shelters or rehomed. One factor influencing this is the lack of affordable pet-friendly housing to meet the demands of the market (Power, 2017). According to the CEO and president of ASPCA, Matthew Bershadker, “Forty-plus million Americans live in poverty. They have pets and they love their pets” (Lombardi, 2019). At the ASPCA Animal Hospital located in New York City, he reports that over half of clients live on \$15k or less a year (Lombardi, 2019).

In the animal welfare field, agencies have taken note of the impact poverty has on pet owners. Their continued partnership with other fields is beginning to address these concerns. One partnership might be offering free spays to pet owners. The animal welfare agency would pay for it to be done by a vet they have partnered with (Lombardi, 2019).

Those who work in animal welfare agencies can partner with social work agencies, domestic violence agencies, and law enforcement to address poverty and pet ownership. Some have already begun to do so, such as offering pet food in food banks (Lombardi, 2019).

In 2002 in New York City, the Mayor’s Alliance launched due to the increasing number of animals entering shelters and not leaving. The public-private partnership includes over 150 nonprofit animal shelters and rescue groups. An essential resource provided by the alliance is an online toolkit. This toolkit was made for those who work with “people and pets in crisis” such as social workers (Blank, 2015). This resource is beneficial in domestic violence situations, homelessness, and more. The alliance has seen great success helping over 1,000 cases, seeing a decline in animals entering shelters, and an increase in good outcomes such as adoption for those that do (Blank, 2015).

Domestic Violence

A third barrier pet owners face is leaving abusive situations. Abusers may use pets as a means to control another. They can threaten harm to them and even death. According to Strand, “Individuals who are being abused delay leaving the situation to protect their pets, which have become a leverage point” (Blank, 2015).

It was found from a group of women in a domestic violence shelter, that of those who had experienced intimate violence, there was a higher likelihood their partner had abused or killed a pet. A majority of shelter women and their children reported having close relationships with their pets and that it was emotionally difficult witnessing the abuse (Ascione, et al., 2007). It is not uncommon for perpetrators of domestic partner abuse to also be abusive to animals. In addition, abusers may harm animals as punishment or a way to torment a victim.

Not all shelters are pet friendly and when starting fresh the pet owner may have limited resources and options for housing. If the survivor cannot take their pets with them they may choose not to leave for several reasons including fearing for the pet's safety and their own feelings towards the pet (i.e. the pet being considered family). Losing a pet due to leaving an abusive situation can add to the trauma one has experienced. A small number of women in a study of domestic violence shelters mentioned their pets welfare having an impact on their decision to postpone seeking shelter. This was less likely for women with children (Ascione, et al., 2007). Another study found that a quarter of the sample named pets as having an impact on their decision to leave an abusive partner (Canady & Sansone, 2019).

In Bowling Green, OH is a domestic/sexual violence agency called the Cocoon. One of the services they offer is a shelter which is animal friendly. According to Elle Fullenkamp, the Education and Outreach Coordinator at the Cocoon (personal communication, November 2,

2021) they are lucky to be able to offer this service. They have worked with survivors who have stayed in abusive situations due to not being willing to part with their pet. They referenced one survivor who waited three years, then reached a point where the survivor was willing to leave their pet behind, and called the Cocoon where they found out that they wouldn't have to, which meant so much to them.

Fullenkamp mentioned that animal abuse can be a precursor to domestic abuse. They've witnessed this first hand when a survivor's perpetrator was arrested for murdering animals and then released on a relatively low bond. When they got out they beat up the survivor severely. Perpetrators may also retaliate against a survivor using animals. Fullenkamp said that abuse to animals can be an indicator for more lethal abuse. They acknowledged that it is rare survivors have a pet friendly option to leave and it is a major barrier within the field.

Fullenkamp also mentioned the trauma leaving a pet behind can be for survivors. Survivors have already been through a traumatic experience and the process of losing a pet can be part of retraumatization or re-victimization. Additionally, the pet may be a key emotional support for the survivor. Fullenkamp acknowledged that for many, pets are family and it is not easy to leave them behind. Some organizations allow animals in shelters like the Cocoon and others partner with local animal shelters for a foster program until the survivor can enter pet friendly housing. While the Cocoon is able to offer these services, not everybody is.

While there is a lot of work to be done, Fullenkamp was excited by progress made with Ohio House Bill 33. The bill expands guidelines relating to mandated reporting of animal abuse as well as requires communication between "investigators and social services when a child or older adult is in the home" (Dempsey, 2021). Fullenkamp does not believe the bill to be enough and believes additional funding and research is necessary to address this gap in the system.

Survey of Social Work Students

Introduction

Inspired by research I had read, I wanted to understand how common pets were amongst students and what effect they believed pets had on people. The goal was to further past research and to potentially open up a conversation about investing in an AAT educational course at BGSU. I also had questions about the impact of pets in social work.

In order to better understand the effects of pets on Bowling Green University (BGSU) students as well as in social work, and to see if there was any interest in BGSU offering course options related to AAT, I handed out a five question survey to the students of SOWK 3600: Practice Two. The survey responses were confidential. There were 28 students in the class and I received 11 responses.

Animals have been used as a method of therapy for centuries. They exist as ESAs, therapy animals, and service animals. Each type has their own roles and purposes in improving one's health. The training for one compared to another is not the same. While an ESA requires no training, therapy and service animals do require special training to be certified. Some animals are bred specifically for the purpose of serving as therapy or service animals.

Universities have recently begun to recognize the growing use of animals in human service fields. Due to this, programs across the country have begun to be developed to teach and train their students to utilize animals in the field. The University of Denver offered the first animal therapy educational program of its kind, offering masters of social work students the opportunity to graduate with a certificate relating to animal therapy. The University of Tennessee at Knoxville developed the first veterinary social work program after Professor Elizabeth Strand

recognized the need for social workers in this previously unaddressed area. Veterinary social workers help vets with the emotional toll their job can have on them, as well as provide help to grieving and struggling pet families (Blank 2015). As universities continue to progress forward, it is important to do the same.

Methodology

During SOWK 3600, a paper with all five questions on it was handed out to students. The five questions asked were: (1) Have you ever owned a pet? (2) What type of pet? (3) What effect do you think pets have on people? (4) What barriers do you see in terms of owning a pet? (5) Would you be interested in a course that involved the use of pets in therapeutic contexts? Why or Why not?

The completed surveys were collected in two ways. The first by the individual sending a photo of their survey. The photo was saved onto a laptop and the message was then deleted. The second method of collecting the surveys was to collect the physical copies during a different class.

Results

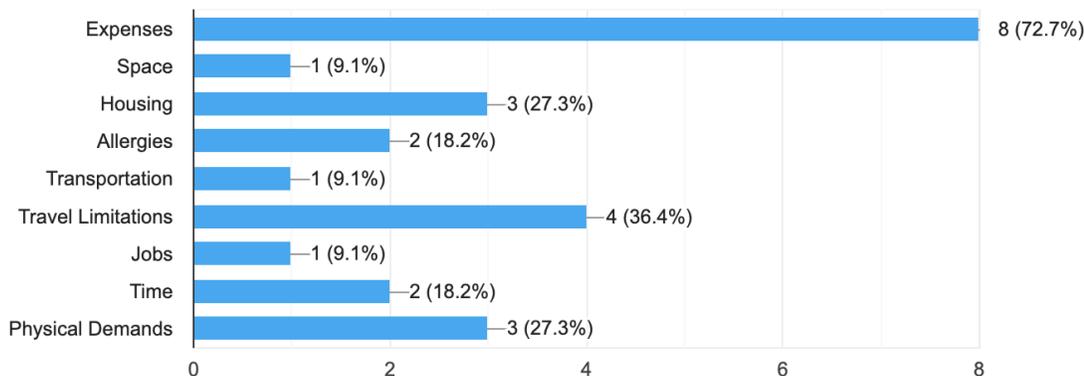
All the survey responses were analyzed and turned into quantitative data. Everybody who responded to the survey had owned a pet before. Collectively they had owned dogs, cats, hamsters, birds, bunnies/rabbits, fish, turtles, and guinea pigs.

Every single respondent mentioned pets having a positive impact on people. Reasons respondents gave included the emotional impact pets can have and the companionship they offer. One respondent said they believed pets “improves [a person's] quality of life.”

Table 1:

What barriers do you see in terms of owning a pet?

11 responses



In terms of what barriers they believed existed, there were nine different general areas of concern shared. All nine barrier areas mentioned in Table 1. The most popular barrier talked about was related to the cost of owning a pet. These expenses included the cost of food and vet care. In total, over 70% mentioned at least one expense that they believed served as a barrier. This question was open ended. In order to analyze the data, the responses were read through and I determined what the general barrier area mentioned was. For example, if somebody wrote that food costs were a barrier, their response was recorded as expenses.

Over 80% of respondents expressed interest in BGSU offering a course teaching the therapeutic use of animals in practice. Students gave many different reasons for their response. Some mentioned their own personal experience of owning a pet and the positive benefits they noticed on themselves. There was also mention of their desire to better understand their own experiences with pets. Another reason given was a desire to be able to use animal therapy in the field with their future clients. There were two respondents who said they would not be interested

in a course relating to animal therapy. Both expressed a lack of interest in the topic either due to the work owning an animal requires or having a focused interest elsewhere.

Discussion

As the mental health field continues to expand, it's important to expand with it. A core principle of social work is competence. It is important for a social worker to continue to advance their knowledge in order to be able to better serve their clients. The application of pets in social work is ever growing, with some universities already taking notice.

The majority of respondents expressed interest in BGSU offering a course relating to the therapeutic use of animals. These results would support BGSU investing in related programming for majors like Social Work. The potential application in the field can be beneficial to their future as a social worker.

The respondents unanimously expressed that they felt pets had a positive impact on people. Many referenced their own personal experiences in support of this. Research has found much to support the idea that animals do have positive impacts on people. Studies have found that animals can serve as a source of social interaction and support (National Institute of Health, 2018), can decrease feelings of pain, and can have a positive emotional impact on people (Canady & Sansone, 2019).

Of those surveyed, less than half responded. The lack of respondents does create an issue of credibility and future surveys would be required to confirm the results I collected. It would be recommended that future surveys target a larger number of students, different populations of students such as psychology majors, and that the survey be handed out and collected at the same time.

Conclusion

There are centuries of evidence and beliefs supporting that animals have a positive impact on people. Despite this, there is a significant lack of scientifically respected studies exploring this relationship. Many pet owners see their animals as members of their family and/or their best friend. Nevertheless, animals also have multiple roles in therapy. They could serve as an ESA, a therapy animal, or a service animal. They can be used in group settings or one-on-one sessions.

There is significant reason to hypothesize that animals improve one's well being: both short term and long term. From affecting people's emotional well being by reducing stress, to providing a social system, studies have shown a positive correlation and relationship between humans and animals. Despite there being centuries of evidence to support the positive effects of animals on people, the barriers people encounter when owning a pet have remained stagnant, hardly talked about, and largely unaddressed.

There is still a great deal to understand about animals and people. Future research conducted should attempt to answer or further investigate these research questions:

- ★ What are animals' effects on housing?
- ★ How do animals' impact the human brain?
- ★ How do animals' impact the human body?
- ★ What is the impact of losing an animal on people?
- ★ What are animals' effects on personal health?
- ★ How many survivors delayed leaving an abusive situation due to animals?

These are just a few of the many questions that would further understanding on the topic. With a better comprehension of the barriers to owning a pet and the positive role they can have on humans, it can help direct creation of future programming and policies.

The impact of animals on humans is something that is influencing numerous fields from animal welfare workers to social workers. As people's bonds with animals grow, so does the interdisciplinary nature of this topic. Social work and mental health are ever changing fields with new discoveries happening every day. It is important to keep with the times and be a part of the continued growth that is happening, both by investing in the research of this topic, the teaching of these findings, and the implementation of it.

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