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More Than a Furry Companion: The Ripple Effect of Companion Animals on Neighborhood Interactions and Sense of Community

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Abstract

Companion animals (pets) exemplify the affinities possible between humans and nonhuman animals. Evidence documenting a diversity of emotional, physical, and therapeutic benefits of pet guardianship (ownership) substantiates sentimental anecdotes from pet owners. Although the literature focuses primarily on the “one to one” benefits accruing from interactions with pets, this paper explores the potential role of pets as facilitators of social interactions and sense of community. The paper uses triangulation to synthesize findings from qualitative and quantitative research undertaken in three Western Australian suburbs. The qualitative data derive from 12 focus groups and quantitative data, from a survey of 339 residents. In both qualitative and quantitative research, pet ownership positively associated with social interactions, favor exchanges, civic engagement, perceptions of neighborhood friendliness, and sense of community. Pets appeared to ameliorate some determinants of mental health such as loneliness. Findings suggest pets have a ripple effect extending beyond their guardians (owners) to non-pet owners and the broader community. Given the high rates of pet residency in neighborhoods, there is merit in further considering the nexus between pets and community health and well being.

Keywords

Pets, social capital, sense of community, health, social interactions, triangulation

Introduction

As many a companion animal (pet) lover will testify, pets bring affection, enjoyment, companionship, and distraction to the lives of those with whom they reside. Such anecdotes are supported by studies associating pet guardianship (ownership) with a diversity of therapeutic, psychological, physiological, and psychosocial benefits. Although the bulk of evidence relates to individual level

benefits of pet ownership, emerging research suggests that there are also collective benefits that accrue to communities through the presence of pets, benefits that extend beyond pet owners themselves (Wood, Giles-Corti, & Bulsara, 2005).

Although the popularity of particular types of pets varies geographically and culturally, pets are entrenched residents in almost all societies around the world. Pets reside in nearly two-thirds of Australian households (PIAS, 2002), outnumbering the number of homes with children (ABS, 2004), internet connections (ABS, 2003) and DVD players (AFC, 2005). Pets are similarly represented in the demography of other countries (Brodie & Biley, 1999; APPMA, 2003).

This paper explores some of the potential community level impacts of pets, with a focus on pets as facilitators of social interactions and sense of community within neighborhoods. The paper draws from qualitative and quantitative research undertaken in three Western Australian suburbs and uses triangulation to synthesize findings from the two research methods.

Pets as Contributors to Human Health and Well Being

The World Health Organization (WHO) defines health holistically, as a "state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (WHO, 1948). Accumulating evidence associates pets with each of these physical, mental, and social dimensions of human health.

Much of the literature focuses on the benefits that accrue from the interactive relationship and bonds between pets and people with whom they directly engage. Pet-facilitated therapy has been used for a range of health conditions (Brodie & Biley, 1999; Barak, Savorai, Mavashev, & Beni, 2001); patient groups (Dembicki & Anderson, 1996; Lefkowitz, Paharia, Prout, Debiak, & Bleiberg, 2005); and in a diversity of settings (Banks, Gonser, & Banks, 2001; Cole & Gawlinski, 1995). Pets have been linked to the reduced incidence of psychological conditions, including depression (Siegel, 1990); stress (Allen, Blascovich, & Mendes, 2002); and amelioration of bereavement (Adkins & Rajcecki, 1999). Despite some discourse around the negative public health implications of pets and, in particular, dogs in relation to zoonoses and dog bites (Mayon-White, 2005), the weight of evidence supports their health-enhancing potential. Indeed, the community-borne costs of dog ownership have been calculated to be vastly outweighed by the potential health care savings (Bauman, Schroeder, Furber, & Dobson, 2001).

Physical health benefits associated with pets are well documented, with much of the evidence relating to cardiovascular disease risk factors such as blood pressure (Allen, 2001), cholesterol levels (Anderson, Reid, & Jennings, 1992), and physical activity (Bauman et al., 2001). Social support and isolation have recently

gained credence as risk factors for cardiovascular disease (Bunker et al., 2003) and may also be mitigated by pet ownership (Patronek & Glickman, 1993; Kidd & Kidd, 1994). Pet ownership has been linked to improved general health (Serpell, 1991) and fewer doctor visits (McHarg, Baldock, Heady, & Robinson, 1995; Heady, Grabka, Kelley, Reddy, & Tseng, 2002), although this relationship is not consistent in all studies (Parslow, Jorm, Christensen, Rodgers, & Jacomb, 2005).

Of greatest interest to this paper are studies exploring the association between pets and psychosocial factors. Although such research has focused predominantly on the benefits to individual pet owners, it begins to tap psychosocial concepts that are relevant to the way in which people view, and engage in, their local community. This includes the mitigating effects of pets on loneliness (Kidd & Kidd, 1994; Banks et al., 2001) and social isolation, documented positive associations between pet ownership and social support (Garrity & Stallones, 1998), and community integration (Allen & Blascovich, 1996). Studies in animal geography also touch upon the psychosocial imprint of animals within the places and environments in which they are enmeshed (Emel, Wilbert, & Wolch, 2002).

Only a few studies have explicitly considered the interface between pets, pet owners, and broader community interactions. Animal presence can facilitate human social approach (Melson, 2002), increase the likelihood of social contact (Messent, 1983; McNicholas & Collis, 2000), and serve as a conversation trigger between strangers or casual acquaintances (Messent; Robins, Sanders & Cahill, 1991; Rogers, Hart, & Boltz, 1993). Our own research extends beyond social interactions to look at the association between pet ownership and notions of sense of community and social capital. Social capital has been defined as the social networks and interactions that inspire trust and reciprocity among citizens (Putnam, 2000).

Methods

This study is part of a larger study that investigated the relationship between social capital, health, and neighborhood environments using qualitative and quantitative methods. Participants had lived in their suburb for a minimum of 1 year and were 18 years or older. The sample was drawn from three Perth suburbs with comparable socio-economic status. The study was granted ethics approval by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Western Australia.

The qualitative data was collected in October 2000 through focus groups conducted at community centers within study suburbs. In each suburb, male and

female participants were recruited to represent four different “life-stages”: (a) young singles, (b) working with dependent children, (c) not working with dependent children, and (d) retired. Twelve focus groups were conducted, averaging 7 participants in each and a total of 86 participants. Discussions explored perceptions and experiences of sense of community and elements of social capital such as trust and community involvement. Pets emerged as a theme within these discussions.

The quantitative data were collected through a random cross-sectional telephone survey of adults in April 2002, with 113 participants drawn from each study suburb (total $n=339$). The survey included items measuring social capital, sense of community, self-reported mental health, and perceptions of the neighborhood environment—along with a series of questions relating to pets. The survey instrument has been described in detail elsewhere (Wood et al., 2005).

Data Analysis

Focus group audio tapes were transcribed and the data coded with the assistance of the qualitative research software QSR NVivo. Thematic content analysis of the qualitative data was undertaken. SPSS (version 12.1) was used in the analysis of the quantitative data. The construct validity of scales was assessed using factor analysis and test-retest reliability undertaken. Associations between variables were analyzed using independent t -tests (continuous data) and Chi Square (categorical data). Logistic regression (binary outcome measures) and ordinal regression (ordinal scales) provided an estimate of effect (odds ratio) for associations with pets as the predictor variable. The multivariate analysis adjusted for age, gender, education, and children (under 18 years) living at home. Overall, pet ownership was the primary dependent variable, but dog ownership was examined separately for some items.

The qualitative and quantitative data were initially analyzed and documented separately, prior to triangulation (Shih, 1998). Although the concept of triangulation originated in surveying and mapping and related to three distal points, it is widely used in the social sciences to describe the combining and synthesized analysis of two or more methods, theories, or data sets (Perlesz & Lindsay, 2003; Oppermann, 2000). Triangulation strengthens research rigor and provides greater confidence in study results than is afforded by the use of a single method (Risjord, Dunbar, & Moloney, 2002). In this study, triangulation entailed systematic comparison of the qualitative and quantitative research findings, considering the congruency of findings and the relative strengths of each method.

Results

Demographic Profile of Sample and Prevalence of Pet Ownership

Detailed demographic information was obtained only in the quantitative research component. The proportion of survey respondents who owned one or more pets was 59%, which is consistent with other Australian data indicating pet ownership rates of around 64% (PIAS, 2002). Dogs were the most common pet (37.2%), followed by cats (28.2%); birds (12.4%); and various other types (9.1%). Dog owners represented 63% of the 200 pet owners. These distributions by pet type correspond to those in the Australian community generally (ACAC, 2003). Pet owners were more likely than non-pet owners to have dependent children living at home (53%, compared with 21.6%; $p < 0.001$), and to be female (64.5% compared with 35.5%), although this difference was not significant ($p = .069$).

Pets as Facilitators of Social Contact and Interaction

In the qualitative research, pets (specifically, dogs) were spontaneously referred to in discussions about meeting and getting to know people locally, by both pet and non-pet owners, and across the life-stage continuum. Dogs increased the likelihood of their owners meeting other people within their immediate street and the wider suburb:

I've met lots of people across the road when I've been out walking the dog (*Dependent children, working*)

...my mum has met a couple of people that she hasn't seen before but who live close... she's just started chatting to them while she's been walking the dog... (*Young singles*)

Although perspectives on neighborhood friendliness varied with age and suburb, there was a consensual view that pets can serve as an ice-breaker and a neutral topic for conversation:

... you meet people when taking the dog for a walk, I mean people always talk to the dog then they talk to you—they (dogs) break the ice (*Retired*).

I take my dog for a walk down paths and everyone you see says "G'day, how are you?" They may not say G'day the first time but then after that you know they will say hello because they recognize you (*Dependent children, working*)

As well as increasing the likelihood of walking and, therefore, “bumping into” people locally, dogs are a conduit for meeting and interacting with fellow dog owners:

I walk my dogs... and there are about 5 or 6 other people that go there and we all chat and have a little dog thing going. (*Young singles*)

I walk down to the park every night and there is about 10 of us and 20 dogs that all get together in a group and I've sort of met people through that. (*Dependent children, not working*).

The social lubrication and contacts derived from dog walking did not accrue only among dog owners but often extended to residents generally, including those without a dog:

I like to see them as they come past walking their dogs... there is always somebody out walking the dog and if you're out they always speak to you. (*Retired*).

... people walk through there all the time with their dogs and I get to know them. I've probably meet hundreds of people who go through there who speak to me every morning and evening and I've made some quite good friends amongst some on the street. (*Retired*).

Quantitative data corroborated the social dimensions of pet ownership elucidated in the qualitative research. A total of 40.5% of pet owners indicated that they had got to know other people in their suburb through their pets. Three quarters of dog owners (75.8%) indicated that owning a dog encouraged them to walk in their suburb more frequently. Of those who walked their dogs, more than four-fifths (83.8%) talked to other pet owners when doing so. Pet owners were more likely to feel that people in their suburb generally say hello to each other (89.5% pet owners compared with 79.1% of non-pet owners [$p = 0.008$]).

Pets as Catalysts for Reciprocity

Reciprocity between neighbors is considered a proximal marker of social capital and is often included in measures of sense of community. Favors involving feeding or minding pets can apply to the full spectrum of pet types, including goldfish, rabbits, cats, or dogs. A number of unsolicited comments related to pets precipitating reciprocity between neighbors. There was also a spill-over effect to other favor exchanges and evidence that the providing of pet-related favors contributes to neighborhood goodwill and trust:

We mind everybody's pet because my husband is a pet lover and everybody comes to us to watch their dog if they're going on holiday or anything and they all come and borrow things (*Retired*)

Our fence blew down a few weeks ago and someone from up the road brought our dog back and I find it a very good place to live and I think everyone gets on well. (*Dependent children, working*).

The survey ascertained generalized perceptions of helpfulness, as well as experiences of reciprocity between neighbors. Pet owners were more likely to agree—or strongly agree—with a statement pertaining to the general willingness of people to help each other out (85% of pet owners compared with 79.1% of non-pet owners), although this result was not statistically significant in the multivariate model. On the composite reciprocity scale,² pet owners had a mean score of 7.13 compared with a mean score of 5.90 among non-pet owners ($p = 0.003$). Pet-specific favors represented only one of the seven types of favors in the reciprocity scale; hence, they did not fully explain the differences observed between pet and non-pet owners. This was congruent with the inferences from the qualitative research regarding the broader, potential ripple effect of pets upon reciprocity.

Pets as Facilitators of Community Participation

The qualitative research garnered many examples of informal community activity associated with pets, ranging from using parks to regularly meeting up with other dog owners. In the survey, 8% of all pet owners and 11.9% of dog owners indicated they took part in community or social activities involving their pets. Unfortunately, the wording of the item precluded verification of the prevalence of informal pet-related activities as described by focus group participants.

In social capital parlance, civic engagement relates to the capacity of individuals to be concerned and active within the community. Passive community concern was evident among some dog owners who articulated views about park maintenance or facilities, although more active examples portrayed dogs as “companions on duty”:

I used to go at 8 o'clock at night to the park with the dog and my husband and we'd pick up syringes that have been used. And if they hadn't been picked up they probably have been there the next morning. (*Retired*)

It was originally neighborhood Watch, but now he's just an old man with a big dog that keeps a big note pad and runs around checking on everyone (*Young singles*)

In the empirical analysis, the civic-engagement scale comprised questions about 10 possible actions taken on local issues. Pet owners were 57% more likely to be civically engaged than were non-pet owners (OR 1.57; 95% CI 1.01-2.43).

Overall Sense of Community and Social Capital

In the qualitative research, lay definitions of sense of community resonated strongly with core elements of sense of community and social capital as articulated in academic discourse. Pets increase the “out and about” presence in neighborhoods and act as precipitants for initial contact and interaction between residents. This then has a ripple effect on perceptions of sense of community:

It makes me feel really good to see lots of people out and about. It gives a sense of community (*Dependent children, working*)

If we had more sense of community here life would be more enjoyable—if people took the time to stop and actually talk to each other for example. And if you could have people help you out and you help them out, but that doesn't happen. (*Young singles*).

In the quantitative analysis, dog owners were significantly more likely than non-dog owners to feel that living in their suburb gives them a sense of community (OR 1.88 95% CI 1.12-1.94) and to feel loyal to people within their suburb (OR 2.23 95% CI 1.21-4.09); however, these differences did not hold true for pet owners overall. An overall social capital scale included subscales relating to trust, reciprocity, civic engagement, perceived suburb friendliness, and social networks. Pet owners were 74% more likely to have a high social capital score compared with non-pet owners. This difference was not attributable to dogs alone, as there was no significant difference on the social capital scale when analyzed specifically by dog ownership.

Feelings of Safety

Feelings of safety and perceptions of crime can have a significant spill-over effect on neighborhood interactions and, more broadly, on sense of community and social capital. If people are fearful, they may be less likely to go out of their homes, interact with strangers, use local facilities, or attend activities—particularly at night. A number of participants regarded the visible presence of people “out and about,” including walking dogs, as a positive marker of community safety:

If you see people out and being active you think it is an area where people aren't so fearful—they are happy to be outside. (*Dependant children, working*)

Conversely, deserted streets and parks conveyed negative impressions about safety, crime, and general sense of community:

It's like well you know you think what is this? Like you don't see anyone walking around the street or walking their dog or anything or only occasionally you might see someone walking their dog down the street..... it's like what is going on here.
(*Young singles*)

In the survey, 63.6% of dog owners who walked their dogs ($n=99$) indicated that owning a dog helped them to feel safer when out walking. Among all dog owners ($n=126$), 82.5% felt safer in their homes because of owning a dog.

Pets as a Protective Factor for Mental Health

From the qualitative data, pets emerged as an inferred antidote to loneliness—not just as direct companions but by virtue of the social contact and interactions they precipitate with neighbors and others within the suburb. Although social support was not explicated in comments regarding pets, some of the examples of pet-related favor exchanges given by participants exemplified practical forms of social support accessed.

In the survey, the odds of frequently feeling lonely were twice as high among non-pet owners as among pet owners (OR 2.01 95% CI 1.08—14.4). Similarly, pet owners were more likely to “rarely or never” find it hard to get to know people (74.5% compared with 62.6% of non-pet owners; $p = 0.019$). The survey included a number of health measures. Pet owners were significantly more likely to report excellent or very good health (rather than good to poor health) compared with non-pet owners ($p = 0.019$). Although not statistically significant, fewer pet owners reported a diagnosed mental health problem (17.5%) compared with non-pet owners (21.6%).

Discussion

The contribution of pets to the social and community dynamics of neighborhoods emerged clearly in the qualitative research and was corroborated by the quantitative data. While the quantitative research supported extrapolation of qualitative observations to the broader population, the qualitative research provided valuable narrative and explanatory insight into associations empirically observed.

Although several other studies have explored social interactions facilitated by pets, our findings pertaining to the rippling of this effect into the broader

community and to many non-pet owners provide a new dimension to existing research. The qualitative research enabled delineation of a continuum of neighborhood interactions associated with pets. These ranged from the prompting of greetings among strangers to the formation of casual acquaintances, deeper friendships, and social networks. Studies to date have primarily focused on the “shallower” end of this social interaction and lubrication continuum (Messent, 1983; Robins et al., 1991; Rogers et al., 1993; McNicholas & Collis, 2000). An exception is the research of Collis, McNicholas, and Harker (2003), which found that casual acquaintances formed through pets do not necessarily translate into meaningful social networks or support. However, our triangulated analysis indicated that pet ownership is positively associated with attributions of friendship, social contact, and practical exchanges of support; pet ownership is negatively associated with loneliness. Further studies utilizing a combination of research methods would enable the nature and extent of the interface between pets and the psychosocial continuum of neighborly interactions to be better understood.

Sense of Community and Social Capital

Our study was particularly interested in sense of community and social capital—two concepts that transcend the individual to reflect a more collective notion of community. Along with generalized perceptions of sense of community, we considered the nexus between pet ownership and social capital—encapsulated in measures such as reciprocity, trust, and civic engagement. Although the quantitative research did not detect significant differences between pet and non-pet owners in relation to the trust scale, the exchanges of favors could be considered a proximal marker of trust between neighbors. This hypothesis, along with empirical associations between pet ownership and civic engagement, perceived sense of community, and overall social capital were validated by the qualitative research.

The social lubricant effect of pets appears particularly related to the role that dogs play in enticing people outside their front door and into their surrounding neighborhood. Although the quantitative analysis detected some associations between dog walking, social interactions, and sense of community, it was the qualitative research that more generally elucidated the direct and indirect impacts of this on non-dog owners and residents. Directly, non-pet owners spontaneously identify “people walking dogs” as one of the ways in which they get to know and recognize others within their suburb. Dog owners similarly refer to social interactions precipitated by dog walking, particularly in park settings. Less directly, our analysis suggests that the visible presence of people walking dogs and the impetus dogs provide for people to walk contribute to increased feelings

of collective safety and have a positive effect on generalized sense of community. These ramifications are important, as fear of crime can deter community involvement and friendliness and impede the development of trust and sense of community (Perkins, Mekks, & Taylor, 1992).

Social interactions and networks, social support, and sense of community are recognized as protective factors for mental health (Almedom, 2005); hence, our research highlights some pertinent congruencies between pet ownership, particularly dog walking and mental health promotion at the neighborhood level. Although not always significant, there were observed differences between pet and non-pet owners on a number of mental health measures. Although there has been some research interest in the capacity of pets to encourage physical activity, the potential health benefits of having more people out and about using recreational areas and interacting with one another warrant further exploration. There are also opportunities for mental health promotion to align with interventions and agencies that promote dog walking as a form of physical activity.

In the realm of public discourse, the potential negative consequences of pet residency within suburban neighborhoods (such as dog bites and noise) often dominate (Anderson, 1996; Mayon-White, 2005), but these consequences are less prolific than conveyed in the media and need to be considered against the benefits of pet ownership, including the social contact animals generate for their owners (Harlock, Jackson, Blackshaw, & Marriott, 1995; Messent, 1983).

Study Limitations and Strengths

The overall validity of the study is enhanced by the synthesized analysis of qualitative and quantitative data. There was very little inexplicable incongruency between the respective results or with hypotheses derived from the review of relevant literature. As with all cross-sectional studies, the inferences that can be drawn in relation to causality are limited. Other limitations of the quantitative research included sample size and sample selection from only three suburbs (Wood et al., 2005). In addition, as the overall study was broadly concerned with social capital, health, and neighborhood environments, the number of pet-related questions was restricted. Although some differences between pet ownership generally and dog ownership in particular were investigated, a larger sample and item pool would be required to more fully explore the relationship between type of pet, sense of community, and health measures.

Conclusions

Colloquial and affectionate appellations for pets include “man’s best friend,” “furry companion,” and “fine-feathered friend.” Although such terms capture the psychosocial benefits accruing to individuals from one-to-one type interactions with their pets, our research suggests that pets also influence broader social interactions and perceptions, experiences of sense of community, and social capital at the neighborhood level. Juxtaposed against growing global concerns about the prevalence of mental health issues and the erosion of community; and accumulating evidence of the impact of social and psychosocial factors on health and well being, pets emerge as a valuable and positive feature of community and neighborhood life. Thus, although not everyone has the desire or capacity to have a furry companion of their own, neighborhoods that embrace pets for their positive and tangible contribution to human health and well being have much to gain.

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Notes

1. Correspondence should be addressed to: Lisa Wood, School of Population Health, The University of Western Australia, Nedlands 6009, Western Australia. E-mail: lisa.wood@uwa.edu.au
2. Seven items: looked after house/garden; minded, fed or walked pet; loaned household items/tools; listened to problems; helped with odd jobs; transported to shop/school; and cared for child/family.

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