



## **PETS AS GENERATORS OF SOCIAL CAPITAL: A PRELIMINARY REVIEW OF PRIMARY EVIDENCE**

Sara Jackson<sup>1</sup>

### ***Summary***

The past few years have witnessed an increase in research investigating the social benefits of pet ownership. This preliminary review examines primary research evidence from quantitative and qualitative studies, and attempts to “connect the dots” between companion animals and the ability for people to generate social capital of the bonding and bridging types. Pet owners appear to be more likely to interact with others in their communities, and to have longer conversations with other people. The studies also indicate that seeing people out and about with their pets is conducive to positive feelings of community dynamics, with a sense of security, civic engagement, and reciprocity between neighbors. In addition, companion animals help improve social networks and elevate their owners’ sense of psychological well-being. Further research into the social capital benefits gained from interactions between pet owners and others in the community, with a focus on the practical implications of human-pet interactions is suggested.

### ***Introduction***

When Hurricane Katrina swept through the southern states in late August 2005, inhabitants were forced to choose between their pets’ and their own survival; Rules prohibited most evacuees from taking pets with them. Although most pet owners followed the advice of officials and left their pets behind, some refused and died in their flooded homes. Why were people so hesitant to leave behind their pets? What do pets do for us?

Since the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, pets have been used in therapy programs. There is substantial evidence that owning pets reduces pain, improves health, lowers blood pressure, and reduces

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<sup>1</sup> Sara Jackson graduated *Summa Cum Laude* from Tufts University in 2008 with a BA in Community Health and Spanish. She is currently working as a Home Based Visitor with Community Action Early Head Start. Correspondence: <sjackson@caowash.org>

anxiety—among other health benefits. Were Hurricane Katrina victims hesitant to leave their pets because of the physical and psychological benefits of pet ownership? If animals improve both physical and psychological health, can they also enhance social capital? Does the pet-owner relationship strengthen social capital, and if so, how?

These questions led to a preliminary review of primary evidence linking pet ownership and social capital and mental health during a semester's seminar course on social capital and mental health in 2007. To lay the groundwork, this essay will define social capital and provide a brief review of the research on pets as conduits of physical and psychological health improvements.

Main electronic databases in the health as well as social sciences were searched systematically for articles on 'social capital and animals', 'social capital and pets' appearing in the title, abstract, or text of peer reviewed articles along with 'social capital and health or mental health. The most relevant results of the electronic searches were handpicked to follow up references, using reports of primary data/evidence as the key criterion, focusing on pets and pet ownership. The final set of articles for review was selected on the basis of presence of information linking health or mental health and pets and social capital and pets. The abstracts for over 30 articles were reviewed and a final selection made based on the design or analytical rigor of the research. Studies with inconclusive evidence were included. The final list of primary sources was then divided into three categories: (A) Pets and physical health; (B) Pets and psychological benefits; and (C) Pets and social capital.

Electronic databases and journals were also searched for "pets and social ties" and "pets and social linking" but the articles that the searches produced were in no way connected to social capital or health benefits. These articles primarily dealt with the bonds and social ties that pets can

have with their elderly owners. For this reason, these articles were excluded because they did not deal specifically with social capital.

### ***What is social capital?***

In an interdisciplinary review of evidence, Almedom (2005) stated that social capital is “an umbrella term embracing social cohesion, social support, social integration and/or participation, among several other social determinants of health in general and mental health in particular” (944). Similarly, Harpham et al define social capital as “the degree of connectedness and the quality and quantity of social relations in a given population” (106). These definitions are more focused on mental health, than Putnam’s definition of social capital as the features of social organization such as networks, norms and trust that can improve the efficiency of a society by facilitating coordinated actions and enabling participants to pursue shared goals (as cited in Almedom 2005).

### ***Do Animals/pets improve physical & psychological health of humans?***

Because social capital is strengthened by interactions between people, understanding how pets improve the physical and psychological health of their owners is important in order to understand how pets serve as conduits of social capital. For example, improved physical health might lead to taking more walks outside with a companion animal which can therefore lead to increased interactions between neighbors. In addition, improved psychological well being promoted by a companion animal may cause that person to want to interact more with others and have longer conversations, thus strengthening social capital. Conversely, it could be argued that pet ownership is more likely to be common among healthy and active citizens who interact with

their neighbors and community acquaintances on a regular basis. Nevertheless, the evidence reviewed seems to suggest that there is a strong correlation and improved physical and mental health.

For example, a 1980 report on animal companions and one-year survival of patients after discharge from a coronary care unit was the first to document that after a heart attack, the ownership of any animal correlated with an improved survival rate of 94% whereas only 72% of heart attack patients without pets survived (Beck and Meyers 250).

Another study found animals to be beneficial for patients with diminished life skills resulting from dementia (Laun 49). Pets lessened withdrawal of patients through stimulation of the senses, improve short-term memory, triggered long-term memory, enhanced communication skills and reinforce spatial concepts. Pets also helped patients improve their motor and social skills as well as learn sequences of events. In this way, pets can contribute to self-efficacy, or the degree of confidence people have in their ability to perform specific behaviors (Berkman et al 850). By being responsible for and taking care of an animal, people, especially the elderly, improve their sense of self-efficacy.

Serpell (1991) had also demonstrated the benefits of pet acquisition on human health and behavior. He collected personal and socio-demographic details, as well as information on physical and psychological health of 71 pet owners and 26 non-pet owners. His research participants filled out a checklist of twenty minor health complaints experienced in the previous month. The General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) scores and reported minor health problems of the non-pet owning group did not change whereas dog owners reported a highly significant reduction in minor health problems and a reduction in the GHQ scores during the first month of pet acquisition. This effect

persisted for ten months. Dog owners also increased the number/duration of recreational walks taken after the first month of pet ownership. The results of Serpell's study did not show any significant evidence that walking on its own accounted for the health benefits reported by dog owners. This study also took prior health status into account and the two groups "did not differ significantly from each other in terms of age, marital status, sex ratio, type of housing, number of minor health problems reported or GHQ-30 scores" (718).

Earlier, Baun et al (1984) had demonstrated that individuals who petted their companion dogs exhibited a decrease in blood pressure. Participants' blood pressure was measured while reading quietly, petting an unknown dog, or petting a dog with which they had a relationship. The biggest difference was seen between petting a companion dog and petting an unknown dog. "In this protocol, systolic pressure decreased by a mean of 7.8 mm/Hg and diastolic pressure decreased by a mean of 4.3 mm/Hg, as compared to reading and petting an unknown dog where systolic pressures decreased by 7.2 and 1.2 mm/Hg and diastolic pressures decreased by 1 and 1.1 mm/Hg respectively" (Baun et al 128). The data demonstrated that petting a companion dog may help reduce blood pressure. "When the two protocols using the bonded dog and the unknown dog were compared there was a statistically significant difference over time in both systolic and diastolic pressures" (128). However, these authors stated that petting a companion dog had the same effect as quiet reading, and petting an unknown dog didn't seem to have any statistically significant effect on blood pressure, so the associations between pet ownership and physical health indicators such as blood pressure are not simple or clear cut. Baun et al's subjects were asked, "If you were upset about something not related to this dog, would you ever look to this dog for comfort?" Out of the 24 participants, 23 answered yes to this question, demonstrating the

comforting role pets play as their owners bond with them.

Animals also reduce stress and provide people with companionship and a sense of security as well as the opportunity for fun, play and relaxation. According to Beck and Meyers in “Health Enhancement and Companion Animal Ownership” some psychiatrists treat mentally ill patients using companion animals. Animals help patients laugh and maintain a sense of humor. As Beck and Meyers stated, “Laughter, or at least encouragement to find humor, is a recognized medical intervention and animals are a frequent source of that humor” (252). In addition, animals may help people develop trust, overcome isolation and improve their confidence (Cangelosi and Embrey 2006: 17). These authors stated that animals help bring ease to people who are hospitalized or who live in health care facilities. A visit by a “therapy dog” helped lessen the burden of illnesses, separation from the family, fear, loneliness and depression.

In 2005, Wood et al conducted a study on 339 survey respondents in Australia to test the mental health benefits of pet ownership. After age adjustment, “significantly fewer pet owners reported being lonely compared with non-pet owners, with 70.5% of pet owners indicating that they rarely or never felt lonely, compared with 58.3% of non-pet owners” (1165).

Furthermore, an earlier study had shown that companion animals alleviated distress in children undergoing physical examinations. Thirty-four children were assigned either to a treatment group in which a dog was present during their physical examination or a control group in which no animal was present. Blood pressure, heart rate and fingertip temperature were measured and the subjects were videotaped for analysis of behavioral distress using the Observation Scale of Behavioral Distress (OSBD). Subjects in the treatment group had statistically significant lower behavioral distress than subjects in the control group (Nagengast et

al 1999). This study demonstrated the positive effects animals have on the psychological health of humans. Animals not only reduced stress, loneliness and alleviated anxiety, but they also improved trust, confidence and psychological well-being: all key factors in developing strong social capital and cohesion within a community.

### ***Animal companions (Pets) & social capital***

Current evidence demonstrates the physical and psychological benefits of animal companions as well as suggests a link between improved physical and psychological health and improved social capital. This section will review links between pets and social capital to determine the extent of the relationship.

In Western Australia, qualitative data was collected from 86 participants about sense of community, trust and community involvement. In addition, quantitative data collected from 113 participants using a random cross-sectional telephone survey measured social capital, sense of community, mental health, neighborhood perception, and relationships with pets (Wood 2005: 46).

In the qualitative research, dogs were often referred to in conversations about meeting and getting to know people locally, both by pet and non-pet owners. Dogs increased the likelihood of their owners meeting other people by increasing the frequency and length of recreational walks and by creating “social interactions that link or cut across different communities or groups”: also known as bridging social capital (Harpham 2002: 106). In addition to the creation of weak ties, results showed that providing pet-related favors promotes other favors among neighbors, contributing to neighborhood goodwill and trust. Perceptions of helpfulness as well as reciprocity between neighbors were higher among pet owners than non-pet owners.

In the quantitative analysis of Wood et al’s research, dog owners were almost twice as

likely as non-pet owners to feel that living in their suburb gives them a sense of community and 2.23 times more likely to feel loyal to neighbors. A social capital scale relating to trust, reciprocity, civic engagement, perceived suburb friendliness, and social networks was also conducted among survey participants. Pet owners were 74% more likely to have a high social capital score compared with non-pet owners (Wood 50-51). In addition, 74.5% of pet owners reported rarely or never finding it hard to get to know people, compared with 62.6% of non-pet owners. After adjusting for age, pet owners were also 57% more likely to be civically engaged than non-pet owners.

The benefits of pet ownership documented in this study were not limited to the pet owners themselves. Neighbors also reported on the benefits of having pets in their community. In regards to pet owners walking their dogs, one such neighbor stated “It makes me feel really good to see lots of people out and about. It gives me a sense of community” (50). Wood et al’s study went beyond the traditional research of individual benefits of pet ownership and demonstrated the positive ripple effect that pets can have on a community. “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” (48).

McNicholas and Collis (200) had also demonstrated the ability of pets to enhance social interactions between people, improving social networks and thus elevating psychological wellbeing. In this study, an experimenter was observed in public places both with and without a dog. The dog was trained to not solicit attention. Interactions with the experimenter were categorized based on length and the approacher was categorized as a friend, acquaintance or stranger. The results indicated that dogs may act as catalysts for social interaction even when the

appearance of the dog and/or the experimenter was less appealing. Of the 206 interactions initiated by the approacher, only 50 took place in the absence of the dog. Of the acquaintances that approached the experimenter, many continued to initiate social interactions even when the dog was not present.

Hunt et al 1992 had produced similar results, with the added insight that it is not only dogs that are associated with generating social interactions in public spaces. Other animal companions (pets) had similar effects on people's responses and levels of interest aroused. Their study observed a woman confederate in a park who had with her either a turtle or a rabbit. For comparison the woman blew bubbles or watched television. Results showed that the woman was approached frequently by strangers when with the rabbit or when blowing bubbles, approached numerously when with the turtle and approached rarely when watching the television.

Clearly, pets may help improve psychological well-being by generating social interactions between their owners. For example, dog owners may form interest groups that create social capital of the bonding type. Bonding social capital is defined as social cohesion within a group or structure (Harpham 1165).

Among the practical applications of the above findings, particularly in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, is that the US government Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) adopted promotion of pet ownership as part of its public health policy implementation strategy. This was done so that both health workers and lay people, ordinary citizens may access useful relevant information directly from the CDC website, including a link to the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) which had issued a statement affirming the health benefits people gain from pet "animal companionship".

## ***Limitations***

The limitations of this review are two-fold. First, using documents that must contain the words “social capital” may limit the quantity and type of research found since it is a relatively new term associated with pet ownership. However, when including the words “social bonds” and “social links” no relevant articles were found.

In addition, it is possible that people who choose to own pets are already healthier physically, psychologically and have stronger social capital before pet acquisition. However, research suggests that even people who do not own pets may benefit in all three respects (physically, psychologically and improved social capital) from having other people’s pets in their communities as long as the pets are cared for and their owners do not neglect their civic duties of keeping public spaces such as parks and side walks clean and safe for all community members, especially young children.

## ***Conclusion***

In conclusion, the studies reviewed demonstrate the positive effects of pets on the physical, psychological, and social well-being of humans. Pets increase human survival after a heart-attack, address problems associated with dementia, improve the general health of owners, reduce blood pressure, stress and loneliness, alleviate anxiety, improve trust and confidence, and promote social interactions.

Pets also act as instigators of social ties by enticing people outside their homes and into public spaces where they are likely to meet other people, some of whom may share their own characteristics as fellow pet owners in their surrounding neighborhoods. This may increase the frequency of social interactions of community members, which further increases feelings of trust,

reciprocity, safety and sense of community. These studies also demonstrate how pets act as catalysts for the exchange of favors between neighbors, furthering the feeling of reciprocity and social connectedness. Pets (mainly dogs) are shown to be facilitators of community participation in activities that directly or indirectly involve pets such as dog walking, or meeting regularly at the local park. Finally, this review shows how pets can act as a protective factor for mental health, which in turn may influence attitudes towards, and participation in the community and relationships with community members. Although more information is needed on the concrete effects pets have on social capital, preliminary research shows that animals act as catalysts in social “reactions”: producing feelings of trust, reciprocity and sense of community. Further research should focus on the positive benefits that companion animals have on social interactions and mental health. The use of animals in health care settings as well as in communities should be researched in greater detail to determine their possible psychological and social benefits for humans. For example, after more extensive research on the relationship between companion animals and social capital, nursing homes and hospitals might consider having a “pet” dog in the facility. This would encourage patients and residents to interact more amongst themselves and create stronger bonding between people. Schools could also think about using companion animals to reach out to the children who are more timid and not as keen on interacting with others. Companion animals are beneficial in many respects and the practical implications of this research are endless.

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