

Assessing the Psychological Benefits of Animal Companions: The Importance of a Multidimensional Approach

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Opinion

In this brief article, it is suggested that a multidimensional approach is necessary to explore and understand the role of animal companions as possibly affecting the psychological well-being of human beings. To date, a more global factor is sought in terms of the pet effect, when human-animal interaction leads to positive psychological change. The approach leaves many in the field of human-animal interaction wondering about its legitimacy i.e., having pets leads all people to having happy, symptom free lives. By contrast, examining the pet effect in terms of smaller, multi-dimensional areas is an approach that allows for more scrutiny. The pet effect even in its more limited perspective may be relevant for only a subset of the population, not a universal one. Taking this approach may have application in more structured areas such as animal assisted interventions or animal assisted therapies, as well as the day-to-day interactions between people and animal companions. Pets that we encounter daily such as dogs, cats, horses, etc. By approaching the pet effect in a multi-dimensional way allows for clarity and further assessment of this important dynamic.

It is suggested here that the multi-dimensional approach assessing the pet effect includes state related changes, as well as more long-term benefits. There have been several different research modalities that examine state related changes connect to animal companions [1]. Some of these approaches focus upon the benefits of dogs during stressful time periods such as with college students end of term examinations. Other approaches include support animals visiting nursing home patients, or children in a hospital. Recently, reports included how trained therapy dogs offer support to children offering testimony in stressful court scenarios. It may also extend to reading programs where the presence of an animal companion may help a child focus on complicated tasks. This state approach emphasizes temporary psychological changes such as decreased anxiety, or sad mood. Given that this type of research approach is limited to brief encounters, in some cases, less than a few minutes, researchers may conclude that temporary changes are important, but wonder if they can turn into more long-term benefits.

Longer term benefits related to the presence of animal companions are logistically difficult to measure. Predictive models that exam if animal companions psychologically impact human beings are challenging, given a host of other factors and covariates may be present or undetected. Sorting through the complexity may cloud the perspective of whether animal companions truly do lead to more permanent psychological gains. It is suggested here that one of the approaches that may be beneficial is parallel to the psychological concept of post traumatic growth [2]. Trauma can be viewed through various lenses. We can talk about the notion that pets psychologically transformed into close friends or family members that

are then lost, may be viewed as a traumatic event. Research related to the aftermath and the potential growth connected to loss and trauma have been documented for more than 20 years among human beings. Some of these dimensions of post dramatic growth include a type of increased spirituality or connectedness to others and increase in empathy toward other's suffering. These are all potential areas to explore regarding the pet effect. It allows the growth-related focus to be on the aftermath of that bond. Again, from a methodological vantage point, assessing retrospective perspectives are potentially impacted by memory bias. The long-term approach that is suggested here would have to control for those issues being confounded.

Another version of more long terms effects includes how animal companions impact attachment perspectives. Bowlby's attachment theory [3] has become an important way to explore human-animal interaction including the pet effect. A difficulty again is when there is the hope of a more universal attachment effect. A good experience with an animal companion leading to a secure attachment experience may not be generalized to perspectives on human family, friends, and significant others. In difficult contextual situations, one would expect a more nuanced perspective of those it feels safe to connect with and those that are legitimately not. A way to approach attachment-based studies is more about some qualitative shifts in at least one attachment perspective approximating a secure one. Not a global notion of good feelings toward all one encounters. In too many approaches there is a hope for a panacea from the attachment derived from an animal companion. What one might realistically expect instead is based on one good experience, a sense of preserving hope that other secure attachments may one day come along.

Another area of importance in terms of measuring a potential pet effect has little to do with actual symptom reduction such as decreases in depression or anxiety. Instead, a focus on how animal companions help human beings derive a sense of emotional support, personal meaning, and existential purpose. These are less tangible in terms of quantitative investigation. For those with more long-term mental health issues. animal companions may be a central part of their everyday existence. This may have little to do with more long-term symptom reductions and more to do with how animal companions may help others weather the difficulties of their emotional and mental conditions. The notion that animal companions provide a type of emotional constant may or may not lead to permanent symptom reduction. It may occur that emotional support leads to a more momentary symptom reductions when in the presence of animal companions. This provides a type of respite that is much needed. But bigger contextual issues may not be impacted, it is instead a refocusing upon a bright spot in one's life that makes issues that cannot be affected more bearable. Likewise, the human-animal bond offers a type of meaning amid those difficulties. Human beings facing substantial contextual issues

such as childhood adversities, financial disparity, being culturally disenfranchised again may or may not experience significant symptom reduction but the presence of their pets may help some manage chronic issues.

In comparison, people derive a type of meaning/purpose not just from what they receive from animal companions but also what they are able to give. It may be psychologically empowering for some to feel able to provide good care to an animal companion, all the while facing difficult contextual issues on more regular basis. Again, from the methodological perspective sorting out what variance can be attributed to animal companions is difficult. It may be beneficial to focus how qualitative assessments and well as mixed method approaches where subjects are able to voice the nuance of their own individual experience of the pet effect.

The future research focusing upon the emotional impact animal companions have in our lives is complicated. Unlike more medical approaches that can be extensible controlled in the laboratory, the basis of our connection with animal companions is that of a relationship, a type of emotional support, a deep sense of a bond, or even that pertaining to a more existential meaning. We have much more difficulty measuring the various levels of generative relationships than say clinical trials with medications. Relationships do not lead themselves well to the same level of scrutiny being controlled in the form of dosages measured in milligrams. Therefore, future studies related to the pet effect must grapple with the limitations of such a paradigm approach without outright dismissing how human-animal interactions may impact us. One way to potentially overcome these difficulty's is through a multi-dimensional definition of the pet effect with certain subpopulations. Studies that can include a clear focus on short term and long-term gains as well as more existential meanings maybe a way forward for those within the field of human animal reaction. Researchers may feel a pressure to obtain evidence for a singular global pet effect, though it is cautioned that doing so loses the nuance that is desperately needed. The recognition of individual differences among those that count upon human-animal interaction as vital to their well-being may point to the notion that the pet effect does is not amenable to just one operational definition, but many. To adequately explore such an approach means assessing differing modalities and way to measure individual's changes in future research.

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