

The pet connection: Pets as a conduit for social capital?

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Abstract

There is growing interest across a range of disciplines in the relationship between pets and health, with a range of therapeutic, physiological, psychological and psychosocial benefits now documented. While much of the literature has focused on the individual benefits of pet ownership, this study considered the potential health benefits that might accrue to the broader community, as encapsulated in the construct of social capital. A random survey of 339 adult residents from Perth, Western Australia were selected from three suburbs and interviewed by telephone. Pet ownership was found to be positively associated with some forms of social contact and interaction, and with perceptions of neighbourhood friendliness. After adjustment for demographic variables, pet owners scored higher on social capital and civic engagement scales. The results suggest that pet ownership provides potential opportunities for interactions between neighbours and that further research in this area is warranted. Social capital is another potential mechanism by which pets exert an influence on human health.

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Introduction

Australians share their homes with nearly 30 million dogs, fish, cats and other pets (PIAS, 2002). In Australia, 64% of households are home to at least one pet (PIAS, 2002). Similar patterns of cohabitation are found in the UK (Brodie & Biley, 1999), the US (APPMA, 2003), and no doubt, many other countries. Pets are a great leveller, transcending racial, cultural, age, gender and socio-economic boundaries.

In a world of growing global uncertainty (Giles-Corti, et al., 2004; Sember, 2004) and violence (World Health Organisation, 2002), and a trend towards increased prevalence of single occupant homes (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002), household pets will potentially play an increasingly important role in many people's lives,

providing company and respite from the outside world. Moreover, as observed by Cusack (1988), pets live in the moment, and interacting with pets reminds owners of the joys and idiosyncrasies of living in the present, as well as prompting their owners to think beyond themselves.

There is growing interest across a range of disciplines, in the relationship between pets and human health. Interest to date has primarily focused on the links between pets and a variety of physiological and psychological indicators of individual health and well-being. The purpose of this paper was to explore the relationship between pets and elements of social capital; a community level construct that is increasingly being linked to health. Social capital has been conceptualised as the features of social life—networks, norms and social trust—that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives (Putnam, 1996), or, to facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit (Cox, 1995). There are many definitional and

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theoretical variations (Wall, Ferrazzi, & Schryer, 1998; Woolcock, 1998) on this theme, but networks, norms and trust, and some notion of mutual goals, actions or benefits appear to be core social capital ingredients.

Do pets contribute to better health?

The benefits of pets and pet–people interactions have long been the subject of anecdotes (Dembicki & Anderson, 1996) and intuitive belief (Brasic, 1998). Empirical research on the potential health benefits of pets has, however, accumulated over the last few decades. While some studies have failed to demonstrate a link, or have been hindered by methodological problems, the general weight of evidence suggests that pets enhance human health and wellbeing in a number of ways (Beck & Meyers, 1996; Brodie & Biley, 1999; Vines, 1993). The literature on the health benefits of pets can be divided into four primary streams: therapeutic, psychological, physiological and psychosocial. Growing understanding of the social determinants of health (Marmot & Wilkinson, 1999) however, suggests that the boundaries traditionally drawn between physical, psychological and social influences on health are somewhat artificial, and in practice, these factors overlap in various complex ways. Thus while this paper primarily focuses on the psychosocial benefits of pets, it is useful to view these in the context of other possible health benefits.

Specific therapeutic use of pets

Pet-facilitated therapy (or animal assisted therapy) refers to the introduction of an animal to a person's immediate surroundings with therapeutic intent (Brodie & Biley, 1999). Health conditions to which it has been applied include psychiatric illness (Barak, Savorai, Mavashev, & Beni, 2001); alzheimer's disease (Churchill, Safaoui, McCabe, & Baun, 1999); AIDS (Siegel, Angulo, Detels, Wesch, & Mullen, 1999); and ambulatory disability (Allen & Blascovich, 1996). Settings in which pet-facilitated therapy has been used include residential care (Banks, Gonser, & Banks, 2001); prisons (Edney, 1992), hospitals (Cole & Gawlinski, 1995), and psychiatric institutions (Holcomb & Meacham, 1989), and there is growing interest in the psychosocial benefits of accommodating pets within workplaces (Wells & Perrine, 2001). Particular subsets of the population are often the focus, including the elderly (Barak et al., 2001; Dembicki & Anderson, 1996); people with disabilities (Allen & Blascovich, 1996); children (Endenburg & Baarda, 1995) and adolescents (Banman, 1995). In general, pet-facilitated therapy has been shown to be effective with a range of target populations and settings across a variety of health conditions.

Psychological and mental health benefits associated with pets

The nexus between people and pets has been the subject of a number of studies examining both mental health outcomes (such as depression) and mental health determinants (such as social support). Human–pet interactions can play a beneficial role in relation to depression (Bolin, 1987; Siegel, 1990) and stress (Allen, Blascovich, & Mendes, 2002; Baun, Oetting, & Bergstrom, 1991) as well as to determinants of these conditions, including loneliness (Banks et al., 2001), bereavement (Adkins & Rajecki, 1999; Bolin, 1987), and social isolation (Kidd & Kidd, 1994). The literature has also explored protective effects of pet ownership on mental health, including social support (Allen, 1997; Garrity & Stallones, 1998), companionship (Siegel, 1993), improved self-care (Dembicki & Anderson, 1996); self-esteem (Allen & Blascovich, 1996), and community integration (Allen & Blascovich, 1996). Pets can also facilitate the development of attachment (Brodie & Biley, 1999), particularly in the lives of children (Melson, Schwarz, & Beck, 1997).

Physical health benefits associated with pets

There is increasing interest in pet ownership as a protective factor against cardiovascular disease, with evidence that owning a pet can positively affect physiological risk factors, such as blood pressure (Allen, 2001; Anderson, Reid, & Jennings, 1992); behavioural risk factors, such as physical activity (Bauman, Schroeder, Furber, & Dobson, 2001); and psychological risk factors, such as anxiety and social isolation (Patronek & Glickman, 1993). While a recent Australian study reported an inverse relationship between pet ownership, blood pressure and other cardiovascular risk factors (Parslow & Jorm, 2003) it was surmised that this could be attributed to other hypertensive risk factors indirectly related to pet ownership. This finding highlights the importance of, and the need for, well-designed population studies. While beyond the scope of this paper, others have examined the physiological mechanisms through which the effects of pets on cardiovascular health occur (Friedmann, 1995; Jennings, Reid, Christy, Jennings, Anderson, & Dart, 1998).

Physical activity is an important protective factor for cardiovascular disease, as well as a range of other health conditions. Several studies have reported higher levels of recreational walking amongst dog owners compared with non-dog owners (Anderson et al., 1992; Bauman et al., 2001), or increased walking following the acquisition of a dog (Serpell, 1991). Given current public health concerns about physical inactivity and obesity, dog walking is being advocated as a marketable strategy that will benefit both dogs and their owners (Bauman et al.,

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