



Research

The quality of life of pet dogs owned by elderly people depends on the living context, not on the owner's age



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ABSTRACT

Social and physical changes associated with human aging may influence the characteristics of the relationship between dogs and their owners and ultimately pets' quality of life. In view of the need of data on this aspect, this study examined the effects of owners' age on the quality of life of dogs. We compared parameters of dogs' quality of life (owners' care and attachment to them and pets' physical condition) between elderly and adult owners living in rural/suburban areas of 2 cities in Northern Italy. Within this context, the only finding was the lower degree of health care provided to dogs by their elderly owners, suggesting a lack of specific information about dog health care, rather than a general effect of the owners' age on the relationship with their pet. Dogs' quality of life parameters were also compared between elderly people living in rural/suburban areas and another sample of elderly people living in city centers. The latter were more attached to their dogs and provided them with a higher level of care. In conclusion, this study found very limited concerns about the adoption of dogs late in their owners' lives. However, in view of the importance of the living context of the elderly on their pets' quality of life, this aspect warrants further investigation.

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Introduction

Extensive research in the last few decades has focused on the consequences of pet ownership on humans' quality of life, emphasizing in most cases the benefits (e.g., Barker et al., 2003; Virués-Ortega and Buéla-Casal, 2006; McConnel et al., 2011) and sometimes the disadvantages associated with owning a pet (Bonas et al., 2000). Fewer studies looked at the subject from the pet perspective, that is, the positive or negative effects of pet–ownership on the pets' quality of life. On one hand, animals receive from their owners food, shelter, companionship, and, usually, veterinary care (Podberscek, 2006). On the other hand, owners may not really know how to look after their pets properly (Podberscek, 2006). They may excessively “anthropomorphize” them (Serpell, 2003) or, in the worst-case situations, abuse them (Munro and Thrusfield, 2001).

Although few data exist on the role of owners' characteristics on pets' quality of life, several owner-related aspects do affect the quality of life of companion dogs. The term “quality of life” broadly comprises all aspects of animal welfare, from preventing mistreatment to improving living conditions (Bono, 2001). Two recent studies (Adamelli et al., 2005; Marinelli et al., 2007) noted that the quality of life of pets depends on some of their owner's characteristics, such as sex, education, and number of family members; moreover, they listed the diversity of owner-related factors that may affect the pet–owner bond and, in a broader sense, the quality of life of pets of various species.

One factor that may have particular importance in influencing pets' quality of life is their owner's age. The elderly are often advised to adopt a pet because pet ownership has been associated with a general improvement in physical and psychological health in aged individuals (Siegel, 1990; Raina et al., 1999; Thorpe et al., 2006; Cutt et al., 2008). However, aging, by increasing physical and/or psychological fragility, has direct consequences on human beings, thus making the pets' need more difficult to be fulfilled. Elderly people also differ from younger generations in a variety of aspects: financial means, quality and quantity of social contacts, educational level, and particular mindsets are other aspects that may differ to

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a considerable extent in elderly owners and may affect the owner–pet relationship and the pet's quality of life.

Conversely, the aforementioned aspects may depend on not only owner's age but also the characteristics of that person's living context. Studies from several countries report context-related differences in social interactions, loneliness, and health status among the elderly. Such variations have been found between countries (Samuelsson et al., 2005), regions within a country (Fernandez-Martinez et al., 2012), and even among cities within the same region (Cavallero et al., 2007). A greater feeling of loneliness has been reported in the elderly living in small towns rather than large cities (Savikko et al., 2005), and differences in these aspects have also been attributed to rural/urban disparities (Tang et al., 2008). Therefore, context-related characteristics may ultimately reflect on the owner–dog relationship and the dog's quality of life.

In the need of data on the quality of life of dogs owned by elderly people, the present research focused on evaluating the effects of age and living context of elderly owners on their dog's quality of life.

Materials and methods

Participants

The effects of the owners' age on dogs' quality of life were studied in a sample of 148 owners, recruited in the rural surroundings and suburbs (rural/suburban areas, RA) of 2 cities in Northern Italy (Padova, with a population of about 200,000, and Bologna, with about 380,000 inhabitants). This sample was divided in 2 cohorts: adults (18–65 years; N = 74) and elderly (older than 65; N = 74).

Study of the effects of elderly people's living context required further recruitment, specifically targeting elderly owners (N = 74) living in the city center (urban areas, UA).

Recruitment of participants was carried out over a 2-year period in local veterinary clinics, public parks, and through associations for the support of elderly people. For inclusion in the study, owners were required to be older than 18 years and to have been living with their current dog for at least 6 months. The participants were not made aware of the study aims in advance.

The work described in the present article was carried out in accordance with the Ethical Principles contained in the Declaration of Helsinki of the World Medical Association and in the directive 2010/63/EU of the European Union.

Quality of life assessment

To assess dogs' quality of life, we adopted a multiple approach, which involved 1 questionnaire and a physical examination of the dog in question, validated according to Marinelli et al. (2001) and the Lexington Attachment to Pets Scale Test (Johnson et al., 1992). A further questionnaire was administered to collect data about owners and dogs' characteristics. All questionnaires were of multiple-choice type, self-reported by owners, in the presence of a person available to answer any queries.

Characteristics of owners and dogs

The questionnaire covered the following owner characteristics: sex, education, employment, marital status, number of family members, size of dwelling, identification of person who looked after the dog, previous experience in dogs' ownership, and number of friends, emotional bonds, and social activities.

The questionnaire also regarded the following dog characteristics: age, sex, breed, size, neutering, age at acquisition, reason for acquisition (i.e., company, work), cohabitation with other animals, and occurrence of any previous diseases.

Care given to dogs

The questionnaire on dog care included treatment against parasites, reasons for veterinary care, reasons for food choice, type of bathing product used, frequency of coat brushing, and frequency of walks longer than 30 minutes.

The items in this section were scored on a 5-point scale, on which 1 denoted very poor and 5, excellent condition (Table 1). The sum of the score for each item was used as a measure of the level of care given by the owner (range, 6–30).

Physical examination

A veterinarian performed a physical examination of the dog, which included evaluation of nutritional status and the condition of the ears; Marinelli et al. (2001) found these 2 aspects to be positively correlated with the level of care given to dogs. Both aspects were evaluated on a 3-point scale (1 = the worst condition and 3 = the best condition). The sum of these scores represented the total level of the dog's physical condition (range, 2–6).

Owner's attachment to dog

The owner's emotional attachment to the dog was evaluated with the Lexington Attachment to Pets Scale (LAPS), a questionnaire validated for owners of both dogs and cats (Johnson et al., 1992). It consists of 23 statements, to all of which respondents are asked to state their degree of agreement on a 4-point scale (0 = total disagreement and 3 = total agreement). The sum of the scores ranged between 0 and 69.

Table 1
Scale used for the evaluation of care provided to dogs

Item	Score	Options
Frequency/reason for veterinary care: do you take your dog to the vet and for what reasons?	1	I never take him/her to the vet
	2	By necessity
	3	Yearly for routine examination
	4	Yearly for routine examination and by necessity
	5	More than once per year for routine examination and by necessity
Treatment against parasites: do you regularly treat your dog against 1 or more of the following parasite categories (ectoparasites, heartworms, intestinal parasites)?	1	I never treat my dog for parasites
	2	Not regularly
	3	Treated for 1 category
	4	Treated for 2 categories
	5	Treated for 3 categories
Reason for food choice: how do you choose the food for your dog?	1	I feed him/her with leftovers
	2	I base my choice on economical convenience
	3	I choose the dog's favorite food
	4	I choose food I believe is of good quality
	5	I choose the food suggested by my vet
Type of bathing product used: do you bathe your dog and what kind of product do you use?	1	I never bathe my dog
	2	I use a generic or a scented product
	3	I use an antiparasitic product
	4	I use a dog-specific product
	5	I use a product suggested by my vet
Frequency of coat brushing: how often do you brush your dog?	1	Once per month or less
	2	A few times per month
	3	Once per week
	4	A few times per week
	5	Daily
Frequency of walks longer than 30 minutes	1	Once per month or less
	2	A few times per month
	3	Once per week
	4	A few times per week
	5	Daily

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