

Barking away ruff times: A qualitative study exploring the effects of canine companionship on the wellbeing of older adults



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Rationale

Research on the topic of independently living older adults is limited, and there is little focused on the benefits of dogs for this population. On the topic of the benefits dogs provide for their human companions, research is from geriatric and nursing perspectives, looking at the population of institutionalized older adults. With an aging population, we need more preventative healthcare solutions to increase independent Canadians’ quality of life in older age. Exploring the impacts on wellbeing of dog companionship for older adults who live alone with their dogs offers a novel perspective of the roles dogs play in their companions’ lives.

Background

- The aging population and their increase in chronic disease is “the greatest health challenge facing our generation” (Canadian index of Wellbeing, 2001, p. 5)
- By 2036, 25% of Canadians will be over the age of 65 (Statistics Canada, 2014)
- A preventative approach to the healthcare for older adults is key to addressing the health and economic issues associated with aging
- Research from the perspectives of nursing and geriatrics have shown significant positive impacts of the presence of dogs as therapy in the lives of older adults. For example, a cross-sectional study found that pets can act as therapists, social catalysts, and companions (Parello-Krause, 2012). Additionally, this study found that older pet owners make fewer annual health care visits and spend fewer days in an acute care setting if hospitalized than non-pet owners.
- The Canadian Index of Wellbeing has a definition of wellbeing that focuses on the presence of the highest possible quality of life in its full breadth of expression, which includes good living standards, robust health, vital communities, balanced time use, and access to and participation in leisure and culture (Canadian Index of Wellbeing, 2011)

Methods

The purpose of this study was to explore how a dog’s companionship impacted the wellbeing of independent older adults.

- Data for this project was collected using individual semi-structured interviews.
- Interviews best allowed the meaning that participants attribute to their experiences to be understood (Gray, 2014, p. 383).
- The researcher reached out to the organization Elderdog, which is a non-profit that helps older adults care for their dogs and rehome them if necessary.
- The founder of Elderdog facilitated recruitment of research participants by distributing flyers with information about the study to older adults that were involved with the organization.
- One participant was recruited through personal contact of the researcher and not affiliated with Elderdog.
- Recruitment began following ethics approval in September 2016, and ended in October 2016. Five participants took part in the study.
- Interviews were 30 – 150 minutes long, and were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was used to code the data.

Findings

Findings suggest that a dog’s companionship to independent older adults increases their wellbeing in many ways, expressed within four themes (refer to figure 1.). Wellbeing may be further influenced by a fifth theme, negative aspects. While in every case, participants expressed that the positive aspects of dog ownership in older age outweighed the negative aspects, the challenges associated with dog ownership did affect the wellbeing of participants in varying capacities.

Figure 1: Key themes

Dog-Human Bond

“He understands nearly everything I tell him”

- The theme of the dog-human bond can be divided into the three subthemes of 1) unconditional love, 2) best friendship, and 3) companionship.

Purpose

“To have somebody that depends on me is important”

- Participants’ need to care for their dogs provided them with a sense of purpose.

Safety

"If I didn’t have him, within two years or so I’d be fearful”

- Having their dogs in their homes with them provided participants with a sense of physical safety and protection, and helped them to feel secure.

Health Benefits

“When you can bend over and pat a dog, you’re getting rid of some of your tensions”

- The theme of health benefits includes 1) physical health and 2) positive mood, as well as 3) the contribution of socialization to mental health.

Negative Aspects

“I guess there’s the danger that he can pull me over most days but he doesn’t know he can.”

- Some challenges associated with dog ownership affect the wellbeing of participants to varying degrees

Discussion

- All of the participants had lived with dogs for most of their lives, and thus associated having a dog with being well.
- The theme of *Dog-Human bond* was multidimensional, with each aspect being distinct from the others in that each expressed a different part of the dog-human relationship that contributed to wellbeing.
- For one participant, concern about the care of her dog after her passing negatively impacted her wellbeing
- Participants’ social lives surrounded their dogs in all but one participant, and they all gained a purpose through the care of their dogs.
- Dog ownership impacted specific domains of wellbeing, such as access to and participation in leisure and good living standards (Canadian Index of Wellbeing, 2011)
- Perhaps most significantly, participants’ dogs were their companions, beings with whom they experienced day to day life.

Implications for Therapeutic Recreation

- Since the profession of TR uses activity based interventions and recreation, it would be within the scope of practice to explore the creation of interventions that would offer some of the benefits discovered in this study to older adults, without dog ownership.

Suggestions for Future Research

- Interviewing a a larger sample of older adults living independently would expand upon results, particularly if some of these older adults had not always lived with a dog.
- Future research should also explore older adults’ concerns about the long-term care of their pets once they are no longer able to care for them

Conclusions

Through these findings, it was found that a dog’s companionship to independent older adults increases their wellbeing by increasing purpose, the presence of the strong human-dog bond, providing health benefits, and increasing feelings of safety. This research is important because there is a greater proportion of older adults in our population than ever before, and ways in which the wellbeing of this population can be increased are demonstrated through this study. Additionally, it provides a framework that can inform initiatives to keep older adults and their dogs living together for longer.

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Acknowledgements

To Dr. Karen Gallant, my supervisor and professor, thank you for your continuous guidance. To the founder of Elderdog, Ardra Cole, and the volunteers of Elderdog, I thank you for your interest and help in this project. To all of the participants, thank you for sharing your experiences. This research would not have been possible without any of your assistance.