

A REVIEW OF THE ROLES OF PET ANIMALS IN PSYCHOTHERAPY AND WITH THE ELDERLY*

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ABSTRACT

A survey of case histories, anecdotal evidence and pilot studies shows that, as therapeutic adjuncts, pet animals facilitate rapport and otherwise enrich the treatment milieu. Similar evidence shows that pets enhance the lives of their owners in the community. Pet-facilitated psychotherapy (PFP) can increase social interaction, provide comfort and support, and reinforce feelings of independence. Replication and expansion of existing studies are recommended to further explore how pet animals may enrich the lives of members of psychiatric and geriatric populations.

Historically man has been attracted to and continues to make pets of a variety of animal species, from crickets to monkeys. Many pets serve pragmatic functions in providing protection for their owners, controlling pests, or serving as seeing-eye guides. The precise number of household pets (e.g., dogs and cats) in the United States is impossible to determine given the population of unregistered animals, although recent estimates place the dog population between 29 and 35 million [1], and the number of cats at about 25 million [2]. The U.S. Department of Commerce [3] reports that approximately 70 million dollars was spent in 1974 for advertising pet products on television alone.

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The widespread, successful association between man and “nonfunctional” animals, which includes rodents, birds, fish and reptiles, confirms pets as being important for meeting psychological needs such as status or companionship. Indeed, pets can have a major impact on the lives of their owners. Szasz documents instances in which the pet owner spends disproportionate time, money and energy attending to the comforts of the anthropomorphized animal [4]. Such extreme examples are relatively infrequent, but serve to dramatize the ability of pet animals to influence the lives of their owners. It is the intent of this paper to cover the beneficial effects that pets have on people, and by so doing, review the therapeutic roles of pet animals, a topic which remains relatively untouched in the clinical literature.

PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC ROLES OF PETS

The characteristics of pet animals which render them appealing are the same traits which render them useful in achieving mental health treatment goals. Smaller pets such as insects, reptiles, fish, and rodents are fascinating to watch. They provide entertainment and respite from daily problems. Larger pets such as birds, cats, and dogs provide this and more, for they are capable of serving as companions. In doing so they provide constant, unquestioning sources of comfort and affection. The absolute dependency that pets display to humans instills in their caretakers a sense of responsibility and self-esteem. A pet often serves as a catalyst for social interaction.

Clinical and Anecdotal Evidence

Pets can provide experiences in relatedness which are carried over into human relationships [5]. During the eighteenth century, a progressive mental hospital, “The York Retreat,” introduced a program that was structured to help patients gain self-control and responsibility through caring for small animals such as rabbits and poultry. Reflecting on the consequences of patient-pet interaction, a writer during that time noted that in addition to affording the patients pleasure, their association with the animals “. . . sometimes tends to awaken the social and benevolent feelings.” [6]

The use of pets within the clinical setting continues into the present. Heiman states that pets fulfill vital needs as companions, and probably are a major factor in maintaining the psychological equilibrium of their owners [7, 8]. Heiman commonly practices “zoo therapy” in prescribing pets for self-supporting individuals who are unable to live with other persons but are too anxious to live alone comfortably. In one such instance a parakeet was acquired by a patient whose social maladjustment exacerbated her morbid thoughts and feelings of social estrangement. Over the years she had been observed to cope with an expanding range of fears by entering into longer and more frequent semi-psychotic states. This patient readily adapted to the pet’s presence. Moreover,

whenever the patient was irritable and acted unpleasantly to the parakeet it responded in kind. Interactions with the parakeet eventually helped the patient to realize that her unrealistic demands upon others led to considerable friction. With the combined aid of the therapist and the pet she was able to terminate therapy and continue living in the community [8].

Feldman observes that pets basically perform a therapeutic role for their owners [9]. Significant emotional needs are satisfied when a pet is felt to be a friend and partner. A pet also can enrich feelings of self-esteem, and act as facilitator and catalyst for interpersonal relationships.

Boris Levinson, a clinician who utilizes pets extensively in psychotherapy, posits that man has a natural affinity for forming emotional attachments to animals. Citing evidence drawn from art, anthropology, religion and mythology, Levinson states that man's universal experience with animals indicates an innate tendency to associate with them and the natural world they represent [10].

Although Levinson initially emphasized using pets with children [6, 11-15] he did not ignore the therapeutic potential they hold for adults. His recent writings also attend to the therapeutic benefits of using pets with psychiatric and geriatric populations [10, 16-21]. Levinson details how pets contribute to the healthy development of the child and adult, and how they facilitate adjustments necessary for bereavement and successful aging.

The specific ways in which pet animals may aid in psychotherapy vary according to the characteristics of the therapists and client, but the following generalities appear in the literature. Pet animals serve in facilitating the initiation of therapeutic rapport. Clients who experience anxiety in the clinical setting have appeared to be soothed when they focus on pets (e.g., fish, dogs, cats). In many instances using the pet as a starting point of discussion the therapist can immediately create a bond between himself and the client, building upon this foundation to introduce more pointed inquiries.

Where rapport has already been established ongoing therapy can be further enhanced by a pet's ability to give tactile reassurance. This may enable the client to express repressed emotions. For example, one young woman who feared the desertion of loved ones seemed to find it easier to express these fears while holding and stroking a dog [10]. Affectionate pets have been known to elicit responses in clients who are otherwise noncommunicative, or who tend to deny their emotions.

One illustration of a pet's therapeutic impact can be seen in a case in which a therapist's dog seemed to attenuate the suicidal thoughts of a schizophrenic woman [10]. Interaction with the dog cut into the emotional void experienced by the woman, inspiring her to obtain a pet of her own. Her therapist felt that this signified a beginning wish for emotional responsiveness. Through monitoring a client's interactions with pets, pathognomic signs and prognostic clues appear which may aid a therapist's understanding in important areas.

The dependency needs of pets, their ability to serve as responsive companions,

and their power to catalyze person-to-person interactions may render them uniquely appropriate in counteracting the problems which the elderly experience. These characteristics enable a pet to serve as a constant life reinforcement—an anchor—for the individual whose role, lifestyle and relationships with others have undergone significant change.

The advent of old age brings a diminishment of family and friends, loss of earning power and responsibility, and an increasing sense of dependence upon others. Pets can provide an inexpensive method of allaying the negative psychological manifestations of these factors. The older person continues to feel important in caring for a pet. An animal companion provides solace in bereavement, attenuates the pain of social isolation and depression, and actively serves a role in preventing social withdrawal and alienation. Levinson presents a case which illustrates some of these effects:

Mr. Foster was a man of seventy-two whose wife had recently died . . . The son wanted his father to live with him but the old man refused . . . During the week he was alone it soon became evident that he was not eating enough to stay healthy. He and his wife had a cat, but it died about a month before his wife did, and he had not had the energy to replace it. The son came to the shelter to get a cat for his father, in the hope that the animal might relieve the old man's loneliness. . . . His father (was) delighted with his pet . . . with the result that the man ate more than formerly . . . By the end of the first week an elderly lady who lived next door had made friends with the cat and through it with the man [10, pp. 103-104].

The consequences of patient-pet interactions indicate that milieu enhancements are possible when pets are used in facilities such as hospital-based psychiatric treatment programs and nursing homes for the aged. Again, Levinson [10] presents evidence indicating that pets in caretaking institutions relieve feelings of despondency and depression, and instill a zest for life through their attentive companionship.

Corson and Corson introduced dogs to nursing home residents with positive results [22]. Data was obtained through administration of questionnaires to nursing staff and videotape recordings of resident-pet-staff interactions. The results indicated that the animals served as effective socializing catalysts. They also promoted more self-reliant modes of interaction. The residents improved physically when exercising the pets, one resident losing up to 30 pounds after her involvement in the program. A dramatic change was reported in one individual who spoke his first words in twenty-six years "You brought that dog." Having been self-isolated for two decades, this individual began drawing and displaying pictures of dogs.

Recognizing the therapeutic effects of animals in institutional settings, Cooper discusses the problems that may be encountered with pets in a hospital setting [23]. He suggests that activity, docility, food and habitat requirements, and susceptibility to disease be considered as factors pertaining to the choice of

animals, and makes recommendations as to their suitability and maintenance in light of hygienic considerations.

Studies

Pet companionship was seen to be a psychosocial factor contributing to survival after hospital admission for coronary heart disease [24]. Friedmann *et al.* followed up 92 patients one year after hospitalization. Of seventy-eight survivors, significantly more (50) were found to have pets. A multiple regression indicated pet ownership associated with survival. This relationship was independent of physiological differences between pet owners and nonowners. Pet ownership was seen as a variable warranting further investigation as a therapeutic tool for discharged patients.

In assessing the extent to which psychotherapists use pets in their practice, Levinson randomly surveyed half (N=435) of the members of the Clinical Division of the New York State Psychological Association [10]. Of those who responded to the questionnaire (N=319), 39 per cent reported familiarity with the use of pets in psychotherapy, 16 per cent had used pets at one time or another, and 51 per cent recommended pets to their patients for home companions. Dogs were most frequently used, followed by cats, fish, hamsters, birds, and turtles. Emotional and social isolation, schizophrenia, and desensitization of phobias were the most frequently mentioned problems amenable to pet facilitated treatment.

Rice, Brown and Caldwell undertook a similar survey in evaluating the extent to which animals are used in psychotherapy throughout the United States [25]. Questionnaires were sent to eighteen Fellows of APA Division 29 and a sample of 278 division members. Of those who responded (N=190), 21 per cent reported some use of animals or animal content in therapy. The areas with the greatest clinical use of animals were in the Northeast and Midwest.

Parallel to the Levinson survey the present study indicated that a variety of clinical problems were treatable with the aid of pets. Animals were used most frequently as vehicles to foster positive interpersonal relationships. Pets were also helpful in establishing rapport in the initial phases of therapy, and in treating phobias via *in vivo* desensitization. Again, the animals most frequently employed were dogs and cats.

Brickel surveyed nursing staff who were responsible for a hospital-based geriatric population [26]. These nursing staff had maintained two cats for over two years as mascots for the residents, the majority of whom had a diagnosis of chronic brain syndrome. Problems brought about by the unique presence of pets in an institution were overshadowed by positive observations. The pets were observed to stimulate patient responsiveness, give the patients individual pleasure, serve as a milieu enhancement, and provide a type of reality therapy.

Doyle introduced a pet rabbit to six psychiatric inpatients. In this experiment the patients were essentially responsible for the animal's care and handling [27].

While the rabbit received both love and abuse from its handlers, post-treatment questionnaires showed that relating to the rabbit was a uniformly positive experience for the patients. Less regressed patients saw the pet as both a joy and irritant, using it as a point of departure for other interactions. More regressed patients seemed to incorporate the animal's presence into their own highly personalized reality, and were able to use it as a bridge to external reality. The value of pets in institutional settings and the need for supervision of patient-pet interactions are suggested by such findings.

We have found only two pilot studies investigating the therapeutic potential of pets under controlled conditions to date. Corson, Corson and Gwynne conducted a pilot study to investigate the feasibility and effects of pet-facilitated psychotherapy (PFP) in a hospital setting [28]. These researchers introduced dogs and some cats to hospitalized patients in a psychiatric treatment program. Videotape recordings were then taken of patients (N=8) during various kinds of interactions, e.g., patient-pet and patient-pet-therapist. Rating scales were developed to evaluate such variables as social contacts, verbal interactions, behavioral improvement, and the development of self-reliance, dignity and responsibility.

PFP sessions were conducted with a total of thirty patients whose choice was intentionally biased against favorable improvement: "For this project we chose hospitalized patients who had failed to respond favorably to traditional forms of therapy (individual and group psychotherapy, pharmacotherapy, electroshock therapy, occupational and recreational therapy)." Two persons did not accept their pets. The remaining twenty-eight displayed improvement with PFP. Five who were studied in depth showed marked and sustained progress. A presentation of four case histories indicates dramatic improvements were achieved with these individuals. Quantitative data for two of the histories demonstrated significant increases in patient verbalizations and significant decreases in latency of verbal responses over the five PFP sessions.

Corson et al. concluded that the pets enabled patients to develop a sense of responsibility, self-respect and independence as they assumed varying degrees of care-taking for the animals. Pets were also seen as social catalysts, increasing the total number of personal interactions on the ward. The possibility that patients might interact with pets to the exclusion of people was not encountered. Based on these findings the researchers assert that PFP is feasible in a hospital setting and that its use as a psychotherapeutic adjunct is extremely desirable.

Considering the recalcitrant patient population that was selected for this study the results reported by Corson et al. [28] are most promising (see also 29, 30). Replication of this key study remains to be conducted in other psychiatric facilities to more precisely define the parameters of PFP.

Mugford and M'Comisky examined the therapeutic role of pet birds (budgerigars) in companioning pensioners aged seventy-five to eighty-one years living in a community in Great Britain [31]. The researchers standardized their

interactions with the participants by first interviewing them, then administering a dependent measure which tapped attitude toward self and others, and then giving the participant a small gift. Following this the participant was given either a begonia, a budgerigar or nothing. As approximately half of the participants had a television, five experimental groups with six participants each were generated:¹

1. Pet + TV (N=4);
2. Pet - TV (N=3);
3. Plant + TV (N=4);
4. Plant - TV (N=4);
5. No pet, no plant control, 50 percent with TV (N=4).

Emphasis was placed on the presence or absence of TV since the researchers felt that this medium provided a degree of interaction between the person and the larger society. It was expected that pets would have a greater impact on individuals who did not have TV.

The dependent measure was readministered at the end of five months. A comparison of questionnaire change indicated that the presence or absence of TV was not significant between the groups given pets (Groups 1 and 2) or plants (Groups 3 and 4). Further analysis revealed no significant difference in change between the plant groups and control group. However both pet groups displayed marked, positive changes in their attitude towards themselves and others, and this response was significantly different from the plant groups. Interviews with members of the pet groups indicated that not only had these individuals formed satisfying attachments to their pets, but that the animals also acted as a "social lubricant," i.e., a focal point for conversation with others. All pet recipients named their pets and many had trained them and purchased "knick-knacks" for both the pets' and their own enjoyment. An eighteen-month followup revealed that the pet owners were continuing to maintain their animals and insisted on doing so independently of the researchers.

The results reported by Mugford and M'Comisky are encouraging, but caution must be exercised in generalizing to different groups of participants. It is not clear how the individuals studied were selected, hence they may not have been representative of the larger elderly population. Only 63 per cent of the original participants (N=30) were available to retake the questionnaire. The authors note problems of attrition that can be expected with such a sample of participants but do not indicate whether the final results were affected. Replications of this important pilot study will provide us with valuable information on the ability of pet companions to meet the needs of the elderly.

¹ The number of participants reported per group represents the final number of individuals upon which results were based.

CONCLUSIONS

Pet-facilitated psychotherapy (PFP) represents a fairly new area of clinical interest to professionals who are interested in the psychological wellbeing of their clientele. As such, most of the literature concerning its use is composed of anecdotal reports or psychiatric case histories. Such studies reveal the therapeutic potential of pets and encourage systematic research to assess the validity and generalizability of current findings. The results of two pilot studies are promising and merit thorough replication to determine the benefits of PFP that accrue to members of psychiatric and geriatric populations who reside in institutions or the community.

Clearly the process of PFP needs more exploration to determine how the human therapist may guide PFP sessions. Methods of animal training and choice of animal also need further investigation. Variables of interest for future studies should be measured on clinically validated psychological instruments. Observation and the monitoring of patient care needs will assess the influence of pets upon level of patient functioning. Random or matched selection of research participants and the inclusion of placebo control groups will generate more reliable data than is presently available.

The advantages of utilizing pets in hospital settings require more precise delineation so that the effect of the presence of animals on the ongoing efforts of hospital staff can be evaluated. Systematic observation of pets in the hospital environment will provide information on how to enhance the treatment milieu and raise the level of institutional care. Areas of interest include, for example, the use of pets with the terminally ill as well as their continued use with psychiatric, medical and geriatric populations. The use of nocturnal pets could be assessed for wards where night restlessness, a complaint of some elderly patients, is problematic. "Sooth rooms" could be set up where patients could have continuous or contingent access to pets. Pets might in fact attract volunteers to the hospital setting.

Ward mascots need to be implemented and their effects on the social environment compared to control wards which lack a mascot. Longitudinal observations can be done on the effects of mascots with populations that are stable within the hospital setting. In this regard the advantages of working with hospital-based nursing home care units is obvious.

Equally important are programs that will explore the function of pets in aiding persons to continue living in their communities. Los Angeles County presently has a program which enables people over sixty-five to obtain pets from animal shelters at reduced rates. Expansion of programs like this will represent a fruitful utilization of our human and animal service organizations.

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