

People and Animals: The International Journal of Research and Practice

Volume 3 | Issue 1

Article 5

2020

Therapy Dog Ownership as Serious Leisure for Members of a Therapy Dog Volunteer Group

Jonathan R. Hicks

Minnesota State University, Mankato, jonathan.hicks@mnsu.edu

Mary Kramer

Minnesota State University, Mankato, mary.kramer-1@mnsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/paj>



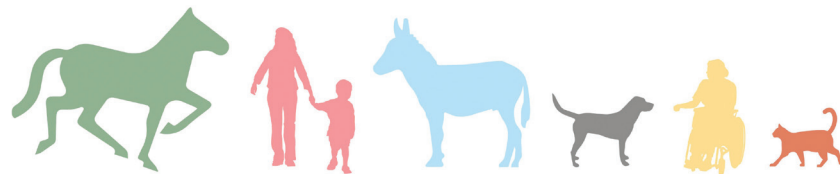
Part of the [Animal Studies Commons](#), [Health and Medical Administration Commons](#), and the [Leisure Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hicks, Jonathan R. and Kramer, Mary (2020) "Therapy Dog Ownership as Serious Leisure for Members of a Therapy Dog Volunteer Group," *People and Animals: The International Journal of Research and Practice*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1, Article 5.

Available at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/paj/vol3/iss1/5>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.



Therapy Dog Ownership as Serious Leisure for Members of a Therapy Dog Volunteer Group

Jonathan R. Hicks¹ and Mary Kramer¹

Keywords: leisure, therapy dog, training, recreation, health, wellness

Abstract: Therapy dogs are used in a variety of settings, including prisons, hospitals, and schools, for the purposes of providing emotional and psychological support to humans. They are trained to be well behaved and to be perceived as supportive of humans. This study sought to explore the benefits to the human individuals who facilitate trained therapy sessions. Specifically considered were the ways in which therapy dog ownership is a form of serious leisure and the ways in which that leisure influences owners' day-to-day lives. Findings suggest owners of therapy dogs experience enhanced personal enrichment, relationship with dog(s), and sense of responsibility. Implications for research and practice are discussed and include health-related components.

Introduction: How We Arrived

Events featuring therapy dogs began on our campus in 2010. As at so many other institutions, the dogs were brought to campus in the hope of alleviating student stress and anxiety during finals week. By 2016, they were more frequent visitors, and staff arranged for regular monthly visits to campus. By 2018, the dogs were well-known figures on campus, their arrivals frequently met with anticipation, joy, and camera flashes.

These dogs, of course, did not arrive alone. Always nearby, usually at the end of a leash, was their owner. The dog owners booked, planned, and facilitated

the monthly events. Because the owners were much less likely to be outwardly rewarded than their four-legged counterparts, benefits to the owners were not clear. This study will explore the perceived benefits of therapy dog training and ownership through health and leisure lenses.

Literature Review and Background

The connection between people and dogs is broadly referred to as the human-animal bond (HAB). The HAB is defined by Olson (2002) as

(1) Minnesota State University, Mankato

The mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and other animals that is influenced by behaviors essential to the health and well-being of both. This includes, but is not limited to, emotional, psychological, and physical interactions of people, other animals, and the environment.

Human-animal bonds have been regularly studied in recent decades. Animals are identified as “members of the family” (Cain, 1983; Voith, 1983; Wisdom et al., 2009) that offer comfort, companionship, and empathy (Beck & Katcher, 1996; Garrity & Stallones, 1998; Serpell, 1986; Wisdom et al., 2009), reinforce self-worth, support self-efficacy, strengthen a sense of empowerment (Beck & Katcher, 1996; Corson & Corson, 1980; Lott, 1988; Melson, 1991, 1998; Wisdom et al., 2009), and serve as “nonverbal communication mediators” that provide tactile comfort through their intermediacy (Corson & Corson, 1980; Serpell, 2000).

Dogs have arguably been the most studied species for which HABs exist. Dogs owned by members of the public are typically divided into one of three groups: companion, therapy, and service. *Companion animals* are most often thought of as pets (Messent, 1983). They are trained only as rigorously as their trainers and owners deem necessary for day-to-day social purposes; for instance, commands may include “sit,” “stay,” and “speak.”

On the other end of the spectrum are *service dogs*, which are the most highly trained. They assist persons with disabilities to achieve greater independence in a variety of performance areas, including activities of daily living, home management, functional mobility, socialization, emergency alerting, and environmental control (Delta Society, 2000).

In between are *therapy dogs*, which are often utilized for emotional and psychological support and to stimulate and evoke emotional experiences as a basis for therapy. Therapy dogs can be found in places as wide ranging as schools, hospitals, and prisons. In addition to basic commands, they are expected to be well behaved and to be perceived as supportive of humans. They are trained to encourage a sense

of peace as well as mental stimulation and socialization for the people with whom they interact (U.S. Department of Justice, 2011).

In the past four decades, across the globe hundreds of therapy dog groups have organized to train and screen both volunteers and dogs, provide liability insurance, and educate the public about the utility of therapy dogs. The American Kennel Club (AKC) currently recognizes dozens of therapy dog organizations across the United States that have the ability to “certify” a dog as an AKC Therapy Dog (AKC, 2019). Our exploration into this topic began by meeting with the president of the local group that had been visiting our campus with the intention of discovering their history and structure. We found they were an AKC-recognized chapter with over 30 volunteer members and were willing to collaborate with us.

With the rise of availability of therapy dogs in communities across the country, there has been increased peer-reviewed attention given to the potential benefits of therapy dogs for certain populations. Those include college students (Binfet & Passmore, 2016; Crossman & Kazdin, 2015), nursing homes (Majic et al., 2013; Williams & Jenkins, 2008), cancer care (Marcus, 2012), psychotherapy (Jones et al., 2018), elementary schools (Jalongo et al., 2004), prisoners (Walsh & Mertin, 1994), palliative care centers (Chur-Hansen, et al., 2014), and workplaces (Foreman et al., 2017). Benefits are thought to include increased positive emotions and reduced anxiety (Crossman et al., 2018; Foreman et al., 2017), increased satisfaction with life and connectedness to campus (Binfet & Passmore, 2016), patient rapport with therapy (Kruger & Serpell, 2010; Jones et al., 2018), increased positive social interactions (Wells, 2004), and stabilized behavioral and psychological symptoms (Majic et al., 2013).

Less clear are the implications for individuals who train therapy dogs and facilitate the experiences from which so many others are thought to benefit. Walsh and Mertin (1994) considered inmates in a women’s prison who trained dogs to serve in therapeutic settings. Following the training, inmates experienced diminished depression and increased

self-esteem. Similarly, Swall, Ebbeskog, Lundh Hage- lin, and Fagerberg (2016) explored therapy dog owners' experiences with dementia patients. Authors noted that dogs often facilitated relationships between handlers and patients. With those excep- tions, we were unable to identify any peer-reviewed efforts that specifically explored benefits for those who own and/or train the dogs.

To best understand the benefits of therapy dog training and ownership, we utilized the Serious Lei- sure Perspective (SLP) (Stebbins, 1992). Though our work is exploratory in nature, we determined there were benefits to utilizing established theory to guide our efforts. Specifically, we modified protocols from Gould, Moore, McGuire, and Stebbins (2008) and Stebbins (2007, 1992). Serious leisure is the system- atic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist, or volunteer core activity that is highly substantial, interesting, and fulfilling and where, in the typical case, par- ticipants find a career in acquiring and expressing a combination of its special skills, knowledge, and ex- perience (Stebbins, 1992, p. 3). Training dogs to be successful in therapeutic situations falls within that purview.

Methods

This study examined benefits associated with ther- apy dog training and ownership. Considering the exploratory nature of this work, we determined that a qualitative approach would allow us access to the rich, full data necessary to effectively explore poten- tially wide-ranging results. We viewed our efforts through a social constructivist paradigm (Schwandt, 1994). We believe that research of this type is a co- created process between researcher and subject.

Participants

Eight semistructured interviews were conducted via telephone with participants in a local therapy dog training group between August 2017 and Septem- ber 2017. All participants identified as female. All participants were current therapy dog owners who

regularly visited various locations with their dogs to offer support to children and adults. All participants lived in southern Minnesota, and seven of eight worked full-time jobs in addition to their therapy dog work. Four participants owned more than one ther- apy dog, and all had owned companion dogs prior to their current dog(s).

Procedures

Ethical procedures were approved prior to study commencement by the Institutional Review Board (irbnet.org). Participants were identified using pub- licly accessible contact information for an area ther- apy dog training organization. A recruitment email was sent to the chairperson of the group and subse- quently forwarded to approximately 35 active mem- bers. Participants self-selected into the study. Partial anonymity was maintained, as only email addresses were used to identify participants. They are identi- fied henceforth by pseudonyms.

Saturation was reached during the sixth inter- view, but interviews continued in an effort to bol- ster the strength of results. The first interview was utilized as a prototype in order to allow the inter- viewer to gain knowledge and make any necessary changes to the structure of the interview process. In- terviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were recorded for transcription and analysis. Interview questions collected limited demographic data, but primarily sought to explore the ways in which par- ticipants were impacted by therapy dog ownership. For example, participants were asked: "In what ways is working with people and dogs like a job?"; "When you describe what you do to other people, what do you say?"; and "What is your most memorable expe- rience working with dogs and people?" (see Table 1).

Data Analysis

Once collected, data were transcribed with online software Temi, confirmed by hand for accuracy, and then analyzed by the researchers. Subsequently, common themes were teased from the transcrip- tions. Field notes were taken in conjunction with the

Table 1 Semistructured interview protocol.

Background/History
Q: Tell us a bit about yourself and your background.
Q: How did you get started working with therapy dogs?
Q: Please describe a typical location visit.
Effort
Q: What is the best part about working with people and therapy dogs?
Q: What challenges exist?
Q: How do you overcome those challenges?
Q: In what ways is working with people and dogs like a job?
Social
Q: Does working with dogs bring you closer to other people?
Q: How does the training/visitation process influence your relationship with your dog(s)?
Identity
Q: Have other people come to know you as a result of your work?
Q: When you describe what you do to other people, what do you say?
Personal Enrichment
Q: What have you learned from your experiences with dogs and people?
Q: In what ways has working with dogs and people benefited you as a person?
Q: What is your most memorable experience working with dogs and people?
Self-Actualization
Q: How and to what extent has working with people and dogs made you a better person?
Q: Do you see the world differently as a result of your experiences?
Wrap-up
Q: Is there anything we missed that you would like to speak about?
Q: Do you have any questions you would like to ask us?

interview and post interview by the second author via code memos (Emerson et al., 1995). This process entailed utilization of open coding, then axial coding, and finally selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The transcriptions were read separately, then in conjunction with the researchers' notes, which were collected at the time of the interview. A color-assigned coding strategy was utilized to categorize

emergent themes and was reviewed multiple times by both authors to increase trustworthiness.

Results

Findings have been categorized based upon emergent themes that collected data illustrate throughout

this section. Emergent themes related included personal enrichment, relationship with dog(s), and sense of responsibility. The themes are arranged by strength of response, from most pronounced to least pronounced. Additional notes are included to clarify specific narratives as necessary.

Emergent Theme 1: Personal Enrichment

For participants in this study, the most pronounced emergent theme was a feeling of personal enrichment. The primary descriptor of personal enrichment was the ability to help others, with the perceived happiness of other people being the key driver of their own enrichment.

Rachel: When you volunteer, typically you engage with other people. And that engagement you get with other people and that contact you get through other people is really important. You get all kinds of benefits for your own well-being and health. When you take your dog somewhere, it allows you to bring joy to other people. There is a lot of joy seeing the pleasure people get from seeing your dog and petting your dog.

Rachel was a lifelong dog owner who found the best way she could contribute to her local community was to utilize her dogs. Sally felt a similar desire to engage with her community, despite already having a full-time job in nursing.

Sally: I think most people feel a need to help and give back. And this just happens to be the way that I feel I can best do this. I mean, besides in my working day as a nurse, but you know, that's my job, that's different to some degree in that this is what I choose to do in my free time and it's the way I can help and give back because everyone has their own skill sets of where they can best help out and it just happens to be one way that I feel I can.

Both Sally and Rachel expressed the positive feelings they associated with bringing their dogs into therapeutic settings. They suggested that for their own enjoyment and fulfillment, visiting local agencies with their dogs was the best way they could spend their time. Mae expressed similar feelings

about her dogs' ability to lift her spirits as well as for those seeking animal-assisted therapy.

Mae: I feel absolutely fantastic after we are done visiting. Even though maybe I'm tired or I've had a bad day or whatever, and I do get ready and take him to the therapy dog visit. Afterwards, you know that the people that you've visited appreciate it. And of course, many of them do tell us. And they got to pet a dog, they got to touch a dog. Depending on who we visit, you know the elderly, many of them used to have dogs and no longer can. And so this fulfills their need of having a dog. Children of course love the dogs. But just the fact that I know that these people are happy once we've left you makes me happy. My dog is happy because he got to get petted and talked to and hugged, and that kind of thing. So, it just makes me feel good all over.

Less pronounced though still present was the notion that social circles existed or were expanded by being part of a therapy dog group. Mae concisely expressed a notion that was similar across participants that their social circles were impacted, and arguably dictated by the therapy dog owner community. This too speaks to the personal enrichment participants felt when discussing the leisure aspects of therapy dog ownership.

Mae: Probably everybody I know is my friend because of the dogs [laughing]. I do a lot of activities with my dogs. A couple of weeks ago we were at a dog show and part of the reason I went was to see my friends. A couple weeks before that we were at a dog show and part of the reason that I went there was to see my friends. So yeah, I guess the majority of the people I know are my friends because of the dogs. Pretty much everywhere I go the dogs are going with me and I'm doing dog-related things. So, obviously the people are dog people also.

Emergent Theme 2: Relationship with Dog(s)

A second theme also emerged, which involved the relationship between human and dog. The dog owners expressed the sense that their dogs wanted to do therapy work with people. In many cases, the dog

owners expressed the belief that they were doing the best thing for their dog(s) by making them available to people for therapeutic purposes. In turn, providing their dog(s) with fulfillment further enhanced the HAB between owner and canine.

Mae: The more things I do with them that they enjoy doing, the more confident they are and the more we bond together. Each of my dogs to myself and vice versa. And we learn to communicate with each other much better, which is of course a great thing to have with a therapy dog. Like the thing I was talking about where some of the situations that could be hazardous to them, if they know what I'm talking about and get away from that person that might cause them injury, it's going to benefit everyone, you know. Most dogs are very intelligent so if we can do lots of different things with them, they're happy. My dogs get bored so extremely easily that that's one reason we do a lot of different things. But it's still working with each other. We're a team, we're doing a team effort, my dog and myself.

Mae owned dog breeds that she has worked with since they were very young. Rosalind owned dogs that were rescued, and therefore she was unfamiliar with much of their background prior to her ownership. She discussed the ways in which therapy dog events strengthened her bond with her dogs as well as proved to be educational about her dogs' pasts.

Rosalind: I think it definitely strengthens your bond with your dog because, when you do obedience training with them, a huge part of it is that they love to be with you. You develop that trust, that rapport, that companionship, friendship. And then when you take them out to do special fun things, they get rewarded for their good behavior and they're praised a lot of. I mean, the whole time during a therapy visit, not only are you with the dog, but the dogs are not hanging out by themselves . . . your responsibility is to be watching your dogs all the time to make sure nothing untoward happens. And you know, obviously interacting with the dog as the dog interacts with whoever they're visiting. So, there is a lot of bonding stuff. It definitely makes you a lot closer to the animal than if you just sat at home every evening and had the dog sitting by your feet but weren't talking to it or touching it or interacting with it. You get to learn a lot about

their personalities. And since both of my dogs are rescues, it was interesting because you don't know what their total background was. I didn't know what a lot of their experiences were. So it was sort of interesting when you take a dog like that out in the community; you can begin to perceive some things that they might have experienced at some point in their life that were positive or negative by how they react to it. And so, all those things really makes your bond with the animal a little deeper.

Elizabeth: I think it was pretty much an instantaneous bond. Her and I from the very beginning, we've been very in tune to each other. I'll even take her to work with me some days. She's a good traveler. She loves to go with me. She loves to go for walks, and if my husband is not around, I always have a walking companion. I also have another dog that is not a therapy dog, and I have loved all my dogs, but there is a special place in my heart for Lily.

Elizabeth suggested that bonds between owners and therapy dogs may be stronger than bonds between owners and companion dogs. For her, the types of activities and sheer amount of time spent with a therapy dog lent itself to a deeper HAB. Though not stated as concisely, other participants suggested similar experiences. Regardless, the perceived connectivity between owner and therapy dog is clear.

Emergent Theme 3: Sense of Responsibility

Similar but ultimately separate from the first two themes, participants also described a feeling of community responsibility, often characterized by a sense of duty. While not divine in nature, this "higher calling" provided participants with senses of purpose prior to therapy dog events and senses of accomplishment following those events. This theme is characterized by quotes that capture the perceived perseverance necessary to be active members of the therapy dog community.

As a lifelong pet owner, Rachel determined that for her, combining her love of dogs with her desire to help the local community provided the best avenue

for her to both enjoy her time, as well as give back to those around her.

Rachel: I have had dogs all my life for the most part or a pet of some sort. I have always loved animals. I think that is what drives my activity with therapy dogs. I have a lot of other activities and community engagements that I say I try to participate as I can. I like to do volunteer work. I like to be active in the community and I think it's something that I've always felt is important. I think that it's every individual's responsibility to do that as they are able. And so that's kind of what drives me.

Jane expressed that she sometimes considered skipping or canceling events but was often reminded by her husband of the importance of her efforts. Hedy noted the similarities between therapy dog ownership and work. In both cases, Hedy and Jane noted that even on days in which they were less than enthused to be going to a therapy dog visit, their sense of responsibility won out.

Jane: If I was like, "Oh man, I don't know if I feel like going today," then [my husband] says, "You know, those people are counting on you and Maggie being there and brightening their day and you know, you really need to be there." And it's like, yeah, you're right.

Hedy: It's kind of like a job because you're responsible to show up there. If there is a visit that night and you're just tired and don't feel like going, you feel like "I really should go." . . . I'm a member of this group, I'm a member of this chapter.

While not conveying the same challenges to therapy dog event participation, Mae expressed that family was a unique component of the sense of responsibility she felt. Mae was a dog owner long before she was a volunteer; much like Rachel, she found it later in life. However, Mae was inspired and motivated by her mother to give back. In addition to a therapy dog event-related sense of responsibility, she expressed broader feelings about the importance of volunteerism.

Mae: I never used to be a volunteer. Now I'm volunteering. And my mother was a volunteer. She did a lot of

volunteering, not with dogs because we didn't have dogs, but did a lot of volunteering through her church and that sort of thing. So, in this way it's kind of like saying, "Hey mom, I'm doing it too," you know? So that makes me happy and I think she would be happy that I'm doing this. I think I'm a better person because of it that way.

I think we need a lot more [volunteerism] world-wide. I think the world would be a much better place if more people were volunteering and helping each other. To me, it relates back to my mother; I think she would be proud of me. I just simply enjoy it. It's a way for me to go [to] different places I wouldn't go otherwise. You know, I wouldn't be going to nursing homes if I didn't have a dog.

Discussion and Implications

In total, Serious Leisure Perspective proved to be an appropriate theoretical frame to explore the many ways in which therapy dog owners who participated in this study experienced their dogs. SLP is thought to have six key tenets: a need to persevere; finding a career in the endeavor; significant personal effort based on special knowledge, training or skill; durable benefits such as self-actualization; sense of identity connected to the leisure; and a special social world that develops over time (Stebbins, 2007). There was evidence of each of these tenets with each of the participants.

In their discussions of personal enrichment from and relationships with their dogs, participants expressed notions that can be characterized by SLP, including feelings of self-actualization, a modified or enhanced sense of identity, and a special social world. Participants routinely discussed the ways in which they perceived that therapy dog events enhanced their lives and made them more well-rounded individuals. Similarly, they came to see themselves as part of a larger therapy dog community. In turn, being a member of that community altered how they viewed themselves and how they perceived they were viewed by others. Finally, identifying as a member of the therapy dog community influenced participants'

human-based social circles so much that virtually every participant noted that their human friends were almost entirely “dog people.”

In their discussions of feeling a sense of responsibility to participate in therapy dog visits, participants illustrated the SLP tenets of a need to persevere and making significant personal effort based on special knowledge. Participants often discussed therapy dog events as being challenging, difficult, and occasionally even unsafe. Yet, bound by a sense of responsibility, they persevered with their dogs, not only to show up at events, but to continue working even after completing full days at their full-time jobs.

The SLP tenet of finding a career in the endeavor was only present to a relatively lesser degree. Of the eight participants, only one noted that their full-time employment involved canines (dog trainer). All others worked and/or volunteered in fields that did not involve therapy dogs. However, all participants participated in at least two programs per month and described attending therapy dog events as being job-like in nature, so further distinction of terms may be necessary.

Implications for Research

Studies considering the benefits of therapy dog events are widely published and widely critiqued. These critiques are to be expected, particularly when considering the number of variables involved. Studies considering those who conduct therapy dog events are much rarer, and likely deserve increased attention. While this exploratory study provided an overview of the therapy dog ownership experience, there is likely much more to uncover. For instance, each of the six tenets of SLP could likely provide the theoretical backbone for additional scholarship. Of particular interest might be the sense of identity tenet. Participants in this study made it very clear that they saw themselves as doing work that made them feel a part of something bigger than themselves. In the process, a clear sense of responsibility to others was developed or enhanced. Since the SLP perspective emerged in 1992, seemingly innumerable studies have sought to explore the benefits and costs of one’s

leisure comprising so much of their sense of identity (see Baldwin & Norris, 1999; Gillespie et al., 2002; Lamont et al., 2014; Stebbins, 2001). While findings in this exploratory study did not yield meaningful descriptions of costs, understanding the ways in which therapy dog ownership enhances or detracts from one’s sense of identity would likely be fruitful territory for additional research, particularly if contrasted with research on companion animal owners.

Additionally noteworthy, this study relied on participant reports of human-animal bonds. To this point, the welfare of therapy dogs is not well studied, save for a few publications (notably Glenk, 2017). Future research efforts would likely benefit by considering direct observation of therapy dogs as a means to bolster evidence of both canine well-being and the human-animal bond.

Implications for Practice

In the United States, great strides have been made in health during the past two decades: death rates have decreased from main chronic diseases including heart disease, stroke, and cancer. Nonetheless, there are several other public health challenges that remain: increased diabetes, hypertension, and obesity. Significant health disparities persist with all these conditions. Of special note is an alarming uptick in mental health indicators such as suicide rates (National Center for Health Statistics, 2018), drug overdose deaths (County Health Rankings, 2018), and an increase in the percentage of Americans who have been told they have a form of depression: 17.5% in 2011 vs. 20.5% in 2017 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019).

These trends toward negative mental health outcomes are well documented. Several national-level organizations are taking steps to encourage more emphasis on preventive mental health interventions. For example, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMMS) recently issued a joint informational bulletin to provide examples and encouragement for all schools across the country to address and provide programming

for mental health, including early interventions (SAMHSA & CMMS, 2019). The National Council for Behavioral Health (NCBH) recently launched a “Mental Health First Aid” program to train people throughout the country in workplaces, older adult communities, higher education, and schools to recognize and intervene when someone is experiencing a mental health issue, with the vision for this to become as common as CPR and first aid (NCBH, n.d.). With the mental health benefits documented from therapy dog visits (Crossman et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2018) and the perceived benefits for therapy dog handlers described in our study, there is a growing case to be made that therapy dog ownership and certification can be a relatively low-cost option for optimal personal wellness, especially for those that are at highest risk for mental health and substance addiction disorders.

The National Wellness Institute promotes six dimensions of wellness: physical, emotional, occupational, social, intellectual, and spiritual (National Wellness Institute, 2019). These dimensions are best thought of not as separate objectives that a person must fulfill, but instead as interconnected avenues toward overall health. In other words, the more dimensions one can improve with a given activity or strategy, the richer the outcome. Therapy dogs can positively affect one’s physical dimension of wellness, as dog owners in general are more likely to meet the guidelines for physical activity than people without a dog (Westgarth et al., 2019). Certainly, the HAB referenced in our literature review and background section speaks to the power of dogs influencing the emotional dimension of wellness. The nature of the task, taking therapy dogs to visit and help others, can be a powerful social and spiritual enhancement. Indeed, several of our study participants mentioned having a sense of responsibility and purpose, as well as having met many people as a result of their participation in the therapy dog group. We see tremendous potential for therapy dog handlers to maintain and improve their overall personal dimensions of wellness.

Many helpful resources exist for those interested in becoming a therapy dog handler or interacting with a local therapy dog group (American Kennel

Club, 2019). Moreover, there are numerous guides and “lessons learned” articles of potential value for those who wish to begin a therapy dog visitation process at a workplace (Foreman et al., 2017), school (Jalongo et al., 2004), college (Binfet & Passmore, 2016; Binfet et al., 2018; Lannon & Harrison, 2015; Reynolds & Rabschutz, 2011; Von Bergen, 2015;), palliative care center (Chur-Hansen et al., 2014), or therapeutic setting (Daltry & Mehr, 2015; Fine et al., 2010; Jones et al., 2018; Maujean et al.,).

Limitations

As with any exploratory study, there were limitations to our efforts. For instance, information on dog breeds and therapy dog type was not available. Moreover, with only one local therapy dog group at the time of data collection, there is the potential that participants spoke to each other outside their interview setting. It is unclear whether outside conversations took place and if they influenced data collection. Also noteworthy, however, is that our findings were not intended to be generalizable outside of the sample (MacLure, 2010). Moreover, recent empirical discussion has centered around the ability for researchers to determine emergent themes. Although the conversations and subsequent transcripts were the result of a co-construction of meaning, it is noteworthy to acknowledge that the authors hold positions of epistemic privilege as the primary interpreters of the stories and their representations herein (Taguchi, 2012). Additionally, all participants identified as female. While this appears to be generally in line with the demographics of the therapy dog group, it is unclear why only females self-selected into the study. Finally, interviews were conducted via telephone, which minimized the authors’ ability to assess nonverbal cues.

Conclusion

With the proliferation of therapy dog programs in a variety of settings, deserved attention will continue to be paid to this and similar topics. The therapy dog owners who participated in this study described rich,

full lives that were made better not only by the presence of their dogs, but by the presence of the strangers they comforted. Therapy dogs and their handlers will continue to visit our campus. This study has given some voice to their handlers and offers the possibility of further understanding the merits of such visits.

References

- Adamle, K. N., Riley, T. A., & Carlson, T. (2009). Evaluating college student interest in pet therapy. *Journal of American College Health, 57*(5), 545–548.
- American Kennel Club. (2019). AKC recognized therapy dog organizations. Retrieved from <https://www.akc.org/sports/title-recognition-program/therapy-dog-program/therapy-dog-organizations/>
- Baldwin, C. K., & Norris, P. A. (1999). Exploring the dimensions of serious leisure: “Love me—love my dog!” *Journal of Leisure Research, 31*(1), 1–17.
- Beck, A., & Katcher, A. (1996). *Between pets and people: The importance of animal companionship*. Purdue University Press.
- Binfet, J., & Passmore, H. (2016). Hounds and homesickness: The effects of an animal-assisted therapeutic intervention for first-year university students. *Anthrozoös, 29*(3), 441–454.
- Binfet, J., Passmore, H., Cebry, A., Struik, K., & McKay, C. (2018). Reducing university students’ stress through a drop-in canine-therapy program. *Journal of Mental Health, 27*(3), 197–204.
- Cain, A. (1983). A study of pets in the family system. In A. Katcher & A. Beck (Eds.), *New perspectives on our lives with companion animals* (pp. 71–81). University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2019). *BRFSS prevalence & trends*. Retrieved from https://nccd.cdc.gov/BRFSSPrevalence/rdPage.aspx?rdReport=DPH_BRFSS.ExploreByTopic&irbLocationType=StatesAndMMSA&islClass=CLASS03&islTopic=TOPIC17&islYear=2017&rdRnd=51826
- Chur-Hansen, A., Zambrano, S. C., & Crawford, G. B. (2014). Furry and feathered family members—A critical review of their role in palliative care. *American Journal of Hospital Palliative Medicine, 31*(6), 672–677.
- Corson, S. A., & Corson, O. E. (1980). Pet animals as non-verbal communication mediators in psychotherapy in institutional settings. In S. A. Corson & E. O. Corson (Eds.), *Ethology and nonverbal communication in mental health* (pp. 83–110). Pergamon Press.
- County Health Rankings. (2019). Drug overdose deaths. [web-page] Retrieved from <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/explore-health-rankings/measures-data-sources/county-health-rankings-model/health-factors/health-behaviors/alcohol-drug-use/drug-overdose-deaths>
- Crossman, M., Kazdin, A., Matijczak, A., Kitt, E., & Santos, L. (2018). The influence of interactions with dogs on affect, anxiety, and arousal in children. *Journal of Clinical Child & Adolescent Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15374416.2018.1520119>
- Crossman, M. K., & Kazdin, A. E. (2015). Animal visitation programs in colleges and universities: An efficient model for reducing student stress. In *Handbook on animal-assisted therapy* (pp. 333–337). Academic Press.
- Dalry, R. M., & Mehr, K. E. (2015). Therapy dogs on campus: Recommendations for counseling center outreach. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy, 29*(1), 72–78.
- Delta Society. (2000). Benefits of a service animal/service dog. Retrieved from www.deltasociety.org.
- Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (1995). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*. Chicago guides to writing, editing, and publishing. University of Chicago Press.
- Feld, S., & Brenneis, D. (2004). Doing anthropology in sound. *American Ethnologist, 31*(4), 461–474.
- Fine, A. H., O’Callaghan, D. M., Chandler, C. K., Schaffer, K., Pichot, T., & Gimeno, J. (2010). Application of animal-assisted interventions in counseling settings: An overview of alternatives. In A. H. Fine (Ed.), *Handbook on animal-assisted therapy: Theoretical foundations and guidelines* (pp. 193–222). Academic Press.
- Foreman, A., Glenn, M., Meade, B. J., & Wirth, O. (2017). Dogs in the workplace: A review of the benefits and potential challenges. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 14*(5), 1–21.
- Garrity, T. F., & Stallones, L. (1998). Effects of pet contact on human wellbeing. In C. C. Wilson & D. C. Turner (Eds.), *Companion animals in human health* (pp. 3–22). Sage.
- Gillespie, D. L., Leffler, A., & Lerner, E. (2002). If it weren’t for my hobby, I’d have a life: Dog sports, serious leisure, and boundary negotiations. *Leisure Studies, 21*(3–4), 285–304.
- Glenk, L. M. (2017). Current perspectives on therapy dog welfare in animal-assisted interventions. *Animals, 7*(2), 7.
- Gould, J., Moore, D., McGuire, F., & Stebbins, R. (2008). Development of the serious leisure inventory and measure. *Journal of Leisure Research, 40*(1), 47–68.

- Jalongo, M. R., Astorino, T., & Bomboy, N. (2004). Canine visitors: The influence of therapy dogs on young children's learning and well-being in classrooms and hospitals. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 32, 9–16.
- Jones, M. G., Rice, S. M., & Cotton, S. M. (2018). Who let the dogs out? Therapy dogs in clinical practice. *Australasian Psychiatry*, 26(2), 196–199.
- Kruger, K. A., & Serpell, J. A. (2010). Animal assisted interventions in mental health: Definitions and theoretical foundations. In J. A. Serpell (Ed.), *Handbook on animal assisted therapy* (3rd ed., pp. 33–48). Elsevier.
- Lamont, M., Kennelly, M., & Moyle, B. (2014). Costs and perseverance in serious leisure careers. *Leisure Sciences*, 36(2), 144–160.
- Lannon, A., & Harrison, P. (2015). Take a paws: Fostering student wellness with a therapy dog program at your university library. *Public Services Quarterly*, 11(1), 13–22.
- Lott, D. (1988). Feeding wild animals: The urge, the interaction, and the consequences. *Anthrozoos*, 1, 255–257.
- MacLure, M. (2010). The offence of theory. *Journal of Education Policy*, 25(2), 277–286.
- Majic, T., Gutzmann, H., Heinz, A., Lang, U. E., & Rapp, M. A. (2013). Animal-assisted therapy and agitation and depression in nursing home residents with dementia: A matched case-control trial. *American Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 21(11), 1052–1059.
- Marcus, D. (2012). *Therapy dogs in cancer care: A valuable complementary treatment*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4614-3378-1>
- Maujean, A., Pepping, C., & Kendall, E. (2015). A systematic review of randomized controlled trials of animal-assisted therapy on psychosocial outcomes. *Anthrozoos*, 28(1), 23–36.
- Melson, G. F. (1991). Children's attachment to their pets: Links to socioemotional development. *Children's Environments Quarterly*, 82, 55–65.
- Melson, G. F. (1998). The role of companion animals in human development. In C. C. Wilson & D. C. Turner (Eds.), *Companion animals in human health* (pp. 219–236). Sage Press.
- Messner, P. (1983). Social facilitation of contact with other people by pet dogs. In A. Katcher & A. Beck (Eds.), *New perspectives on our lives with companion animals* (pp. 37–46). University of Pennsylvania Press.
- National Center for Health Statistics (2018). Health, United States, 2017: With special feature on mortality. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/atus/atus17.pdf>
- National Council for Behavioral Health. (n.d.). Mental health first aid. <https://www.mentalhealthfirstaid.org/about/>
- National Wellness Institute (2019). The six dimensions of wellness [web article]. Retrieved from https://www.nationalwellness.org/page/Six_Dimensions
- Olson, P. N. (2002). The modern working dog: A call for interdisciplinary collaboration. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, 221(3), 352–355.
- Reynolds, J. A., & Rabschutz, L. (2011). Studying for exams just got more relaxing—Animal-assisted activities at the University of Connecticut library. *College & Undergraduate Libraries*, 18(4), 359–367.
- Schwandt, T. A. (1994). Constructivist, interpretivist approaches to human inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 118–137). Sage.
- Serpell, J. A. (1986). In the company of animals: A study of human-animal relationships. Cambridge University Press.
- Serpell, J. A. (2000). Creatures of the unconscious: Companion animals as mediators. In A. L. Podberscek, E. S. Paul, & J. A. Serpell (Eds.), *Companion animals and us: Exploring the relationships between people and pets*. Cambridge University Press.
- Stebbins, R. A. (1992). *Amateurs, professionals, and serious leisure*. McGill-Queen's Press-MQUP.
- Stebbins, R. A. (2001). The costs and benefits of hedonism: Some consequences of taking casual leisure seriously. *Leisure Studies*, 20(4), 305–309.
- Stebbins, R. A. (2007). *Serious leisure: A perspective for our time* (vol. 95). Transaction Publishers.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research techniques*. Sage Publications.
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration and Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services. (2019). *Joint informational bulletin July 1, 2019: Guidance to states and school systems on addressing mental health and substance abuse issues in schools*. Retrieved from <https://store.samhsa.gov/product/guidance-states-and-school-systems-addressing-mental-health-and-substance-use-issues>
- Swall, A., Ebbeskog, B., Lundh Hagelin, C., & Fagerberg, I. (2016). Bringing respite in the burden of illness: Dog handlers' experience of visiting older persons with dementia together with a therapy dog. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 25(15–16), 2223–2231.
- Taguchi, H. L. (2012). A diffractive and Deleuzian approach to analyzing interview data. *Feminist Theory*, 13(3), 265–281.

- U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, Disability Rights Section. (2011). *ADA 2010 revised requirements: Service animals*. Retrieved from www.ADA.gov
- Voith, V. (1983). Animal behavior problems: An overview. In A. Katcher & A. Beck (Eds.), *New perspectives on our lives with companion animals* (pp. 181–186). University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Von Bergen, C. W. (2015). Emotional support animals, service animals, and pets on campus. *Administrative Issues Journal: Connecting Education, Practice and Research*, 5(1), 15–34.
- Walsh, P. G., & Mertin, P. G. (1994). The training of pets as therapy dogs in a women's prison: A pilot study. *Anthrozoös*, 7(2), 124–128.
- Wells, D. L. (2004). The facilitation of social interactions by domestic dogs. *Anthrozoös*, 17(4), 340–352.
- Westgarth, C., Christley, R., Jewell, C., German, A., Boddy, L., & Christian, H. (2019). Dog owners are more likely to meet physical activity guidelines than people without a dog: An investigation of the association between dog ownership and physical activity levels in a UK community. *Scientific Reports*, 9(5704). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-019-41254-6>
- Williams, E., & Jenkins, R. (2008). Dog visitation therapy in dementia care: A literature review. *Nursing Older People*, 20(8), 31–35. <https://doi.org/10.7748/nop2008.10.20.8.31.c6808>
- Wisdom, J. P., Saedi, G. A., & Green, C. A. (2009). Another breed of “service” animals: STARS study findings about pet ownership and recovery from serious mental illness. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 79(3), 430–436.