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Article in *Psychological Reports* · November 1994

DOI: 10.2466/pr0.1994.75.2.747 · Source: PubMed

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LONELINESS AND PET OWNERSHIP AMONG SINGLE WOMEN^{1, 2, 3, 4}

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Summary.—Relationships among loneliness, pet ownership, and attachment were studied in a sample of 148 adult female students, 59 pet owners and 89 nonowners. No significant differences were found on the loneliness reported by pet owners and nonowners. A two by two analysis of variance showed that women living entirely alone were significantly more lonely than those living with pets only, with both other people and pets, and with other people but without pets. No associations were found between loneliness and pet attachment. Also, no significant differences were found in loneliness or pet attachment scores between dog and cat owners; however, women living only with a dog were significantly more attached to the dog than those living with both a dog and other people. Conversely, women living only with a cat were significantly less attached to the cat than those living with both a cat and other people. These findings indicate that having a pet can help to diminish feelings of loneliness, particularly for women living alone, and compensate for the absence of human companionship.

Loneliness has been defined as “the unpleasant experience that occurs when a person’s network of social relations is deficient in some important way, either quantitatively or qualitatively” (Peplau & Perlman, 1982, p. 4). It also has been described as “an inability or disruption in the ability to relate to others in an effective and mutually satisfying manner” (Jones, 1982, p. 238). Weiss (1981) has described loneliness as a severely distressing condition resulting from emotional or social isolation. Loneliness is often associated with negative affective states such as depression and anxiety, low self-esteem, and self-destructive behaviors such as alcoholism and, in the extreme, suicide (Rokach, 1990). For these reasons, practical solutions to the problem of loneliness are important.

Some studies of human-animal relationships suggest that animal companions may help to decrease feelings of loneliness for certain individuals.

¹This research project was supported in part by a grant from the Dodge Foundation.

²The authors express their appreciation to Dr. Lynette A. Hart for her assistance in the preparation of this manuscript. The first author also thanks Dr. Edmund Amidon, Dr. Richard Iano, Dr. Vytautas Cernius, and Dr. Aaron Katcher for their support of this project.

³The data for this study were collected by R. L. Zasloff in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Doctor of Philosophy degree in the Department of Psychological Studies in Education at Temple University.

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For example, older pet owners have displayed lower scores on depression and lonely dissatisfaction and increased social interaction than have nonowners (Connell & Lago, 1984; Garrity, Stallones, Marx, & Johnson, 1989; Goldmeier, 1986; Mugford & M'Comisky, 1975). According to Karsh, Moffatt, and Burket's study (cited by Turner & Bateson, 1988), persons over 60 years of age reported greater life satisfaction and less loneliness, anxiety, and depression one year after adopting a cat than did noncat owners.

Attachment to the pet also may be an important factor. Older persons who were strongly attached to their pets reported greater happiness (Ory & Goldberg, 1983) and lower depression (Garrity, *et al.*, 1989) than did those who were not attached.

Although a number of studies of companion animals and loneliness have been conducted with older persons, they have not been done with other populations. Therefore, the purpose of the present study was to explore the effects of owning a companion animal and attachment on loneliness scores in a sample of adult students. The following research hypotheses were addressed: (1) highly attached pet owners as a group were expected to be significantly less lonely than less attached owners and nonowners, (2) individuals living entirely alone were expected to be significantly more lonely than those living with either pets or other people, and (3) no differences were expected between dog and cat owners on pet attachment or loneliness scores. The third hypothesis was based on evidence that positive social, psychological, and physical effects have been associated with a variety of companion animal species (Anderson, Reid, & Jennings, 1992; Friedmann, Katcher, Thomas, & Lynch, 1980; Mahalski, Jones, & Maxwell, 1988; Mugford & M'Comisky, 1975; Straede & Gates, 1993).

METHOD

Subjects

Altogether 252 survey packets were distributed to graduate and undergraduate students in the College of Education and the School of Social Administration at Temple University and the University of Pennsylvania who were at least 21 years old and single, and who were not living with a mate, a significant other, or children under the age of 18. Because statistical analysis showed no significant differences between the two university groups on age, attachment scores, or loneliness scores, the data were pooled.

Of the 252 packets given out, a total of 211 (84%) were completed and returned. Five who did not meet the eligibility requirements, five who had pets other than cats and dogs, and one pet owner who did not complete the pet attachment scale were excluded. Because too few male pet owners responded, data of males also were eliminated.

The final sample, then, consisted of 148 women. Of these, 59 (39.9%)

owned pets and 89 (60.1%) did not. Altogether, the participants owned 22 dogs and 37 cats. Fifty-eight participants (39%) were living alone and 90 (61%) were living with either family members or friends. Of those not living with other people, 24 (41%) had pets and 34 (59%) did not. Among those living with other people, 35 (38%) had pets and 55 (62%) did not. The mean age of the participants was 28.4 yr. (± 8.3) with a range of 21 to 53 years.

Instruments

Loneliness was measured on the Revised UCLA Loneliness Scale which has been reported as having excellent internal consistency (coefficient alpha of .94). It also has good concurrent validity, indicated by correlations with several measures of mood and personality (Russell, Peplau, & Cutrona, 1980).

Attachment to a companion animal was measured with the Pet Relationship Scale, an instrument developed by using both a sample of community-dwelling older adults and a sample of students from introductory psychology classes in Canada (Lago, Kafer, Delaney, & Connell, 1988). The coefficient alpha for the total scale was .91 for the older individuals and .94 for the students, showing high internal consistency and indicating that the test is internally reliable. Construct validity was established with moderate to high intercorrelations for scores on the Pet Relationship Scale subscales and those of the Pet Attitude Scale (Templer, Salter, Dickey, & Baldwin, 1981).

Procedure

With the instructors' approval, the first author distributed the survey packets to potential participants in classrooms. Each packet contained a letter describing the study, a Research Study Consent Form, copies of each instrument described above, and an index card requesting the participant's first name and telephone number and the date. The latter was provided as an option to help the investigator locate missing or incomplete information. Participation was voluntary. Subjects were informed of their right to drop out of the study at any time and were also given an investigator's telephone number for any additional information about the study.

The questionnaires were returned in a postpaid envelope provided by the investigator or by campus mail.

RESULTS

The *t* tests showed no differences in loneliness between pet owners and nonowners or between dog and cat owners on either loneliness or attachment. Among dog owners, however, those living only with a dog were significantly more attached to the dog than were those living with both a dog and other people ($t_{23} = 2.27, p < .05$). On the other hand, cat owners living only with their cats were significantly less attached to their cats than those

living with both a cat and other people ($t_{34} = 2.51$, $p < .01$). There was no significant relationship between age and loneliness ($r = .09$).

The mean loneliness scores for women living alone, living with a pet, living with people and no pets, and living with both people and pets were 38.9 (± 8.1), 34.2 (± 7.4), 35.7 (± 7.6), and 34.3 (± 10.5), respectively. A two by two analysis of variance analyzing loneliness scores between women living alone and living with others and between pet owners and nonowners was run. The results are shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1
TWO-WAY ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE OF PET OWNERSHIP AND LIVING ARRANGEMENTS

Source	df	MS	F	p
Pet Ownership (A)	1	49.00	1.00	ns
Alone vs Others (B)	1	266.00	5.43	<.05
Interaction A · B	1	8.00	.16	ns
Within Groups	148	48.99	.16	ns

The Scheffé test demonstrated that women living alone without a pet were significantly lonelier than were members of other groups. There was no significant difference in loneliness scores between highly attached and less attached pet owners ($t_{36} = .11$).

DISCUSSION

The first hypothesis, that highly attached pet owners would be less lonely than less attached owners and nonowners, was not supported in that no significant differences occurred in loneliness scores between pet owners and nonowners, probably because 35 (59.3%) of the pet owners were living with other people.

The second hypothesis, that women living entirely alone would be more lonely than those living with either pets or other people, was supported. The women living entirely alone demonstrated significantly higher loneliness scores than those living with a pet, with other people, or with both. This finding supports research by Goldmeier (1986) who indicated that pets helped significantly to diminish lonely dissatisfaction among older women living alone. Although it is not known if their subjects were living alone, it also is consistent with the Karsh, Moffatt, and Burket findings (cf. Turner & Bateson, 1988).

The third hypothesis also was supported. As expected, dog and cat owners showed no differences in mean loneliness or attachment. Apparently, both dogs and cats especially provide emotional benefits for people living alone. Although dogs may have a greater influence on their owners' physical health (Serpell, 1991), cats can be an equally important source of unconditional love, affection, and companionship (Zasloff & Kidd, 1994).

The absence of a correlation between loneliness and pet attachment scores contributes to the body of mixed results concerning the role of attachment in human-animal interactions. As Ory and Goldberg's (1983) study showed, for example, older women who were attached to their pets were significantly happier than those who were not, and Goldmeier's (1986) findings were similar, although he did not consider attachment. Further, a national survey indicated lower ratings on depression among older Americans who were strongly attached to their pets (Garrity, *et al.*, 1989), although research by Miller and Lago (1989) showed no relationship between scores on depression and pet attachment for older women. But, because the average age of the subjects in the present study was 28 yr., it may be that the relationship between loneliness and pet attachment would differ significantly between younger and older subjects. Clearly, a better understanding of the nature of pet attachment as well as improved measurement are needed.

Obviously, the difference in attachment between dog and cat owners living alone and living with other groups of people raises some interesting questions. Although these groups were small (7 and 15 for dog owners; 17 and 20 for cat owners), the findings suggest possible differences in the role of companion animals in single vs multiperson households. Those living alone with a dog often have more interactions with the pet by going for walks, taking rides, playing outdoor games, and travelling together, activities in which a dog can compensate for the absence of some aspects of human companionship. When living with others, especially family members, however, more people are likely to interact with the owner and help in caring for and playing with the dog as well.

On the other hand, interactions with and care for cats may not be so different for owners living alone and those living with others. That cat owners living with others should be significantly more attached to their pets than those living alone, however, is curious. Perhaps the cat serves as a bulwark and diversion from the interactive demands of human companions. This could be another very engaging topic for research.

Although this study provides some information on the value of pet ownership for people living alone, it is limited by the exclusion of males and the use of a convenient sample of adult students. Furthermore, because the findings are correlational, no conclusions can be drawn about whether a pet actually produces less loneliness in women who live alone. Longitudinal studies or studies utilizing an experimental intervention to assess causal relationships could provide important new information about the role of pets in human health and well-being.

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Accepted July 15, 1994.