

Human-Animal Bond: Suggestions to Future Research

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Opinion

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The interest in studying the benefits of the human-animal bond has been increasing recently. Measuring different variables, some studies have been conducted around the world. The procedures that have been applied involve comparisons between people with companion animals and those without. Some results have shown that dog owners are healthier exercise more, sleep better, miss fewer days of work because of illness, and require fewer doctor visits [1,2] than non-dog owners. Pet owners have reported significantly less loneliness than those who did not own pets [3].

Contradictory results have also been reported. For example, when dog owners and non-dog owners were compared, no differences in self-reported mental health, general health, loneliness, or the frequency of social contact were reported [4]. Similarly, no differences were found between the percentages of dog-owners and non-dog owners who identified themselves as happy [5-7].

The benefits of pet ownership may depend on many different factors that require further study. One such factor is how an individual perceives their relationship with their dog. Benefits related to perceived health and stress levels appear to be present when the dog is regarded as a family member [8].

Similar studies have been carried out in different countries, although they have not generally been conducted within Hispanic populations [8]. This gap is

worth noting because dog-owner interactions, the way in which these interactions are perceived, and the behavior of the dog likely vary from one culture to another [9]. For example, González-Ramírez and Landero [8] noted that dogs frequently live indoors in many countries. However, in Mexico, many of them live in backyards, which suggest that people in Mexico may spend less time interacting with their dogs, even when they are at home. This factor may then influence the human-animal bond and the benefits of pet ownership.

Comparing pet-owners to non-pet owners seems to be methodologically correct. However, as Herzog [10] noted perhaps those who perceive themselves to be healthier also tend to become pet owners, which would explain any perceived health differences between dog owners and non-dog owners.

Thus, I suggest conducting research that evaluates first-time pet owners and those who are completing the pet-adoption process. The variables that have been the focus of research with regard to the benefits of the human animal bond could be measured before and after pet ownership and could be compared with the findings for an equivalent group of non-pet owners.

Additionally, studies that describe the pet-human relationship could identify factors related to the human-animal bond that involve benefits to both the owner and the pet. Owing a pet is insufficient to benefits of human animal bond, I suggest to study variables such as amount of time that owner spends with the pet, human-pet

compatibility, the type of activities that the pet and owner share, perception about pet as a family member and the perceived cost/benefits of the human-pet relationship. Research that uses these and other variables to explain the human animal bond is necessary.

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