

Making Lives Whole: Exploring Facets of Dog-Human Companionship

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True friendship is symbolized by mutual trust and unquestioning support. Often dogs seem to be more loyal and dependable as companions than most human beings. Previous research studies have suggested that having a dog companion enhances one's physical and psychological wellbeing. In the present study, variables of personality, empathy levels and coping strategies were studied amongst those with a dog companion and those without a dog companion to gain an insight into how such companionship influences one's worldview. The sample consisted of 112 young adults belonging to the age group of 18 to 26 years (53 with dog companion and 59 without a dog companion). Data was collected using standardized tests; the Big Five Inventory (John 1992), the Basic Empathy Scale (Jolliffe and Farrington, 2006) and the COPE Inventory (Carver, 2013). Relevant statistical analysis was carried out by calculating independent samples t test and the effect sizes in order to detect a difference between the two groups in the three variables. Results showed that people with a dog companion possessed greater Openness and Empathy levels (cognitive and affective) in comparison to people without a dog companion. Similar differences were found between those who like and dislike dogs. Moreover, people who disliked dogs tended to use more of religious coping in stressful situations in comparison to those who like dogs. Overall, the study provides wide ranging implications of how having a faithful animal companion, has a therapeutic value and fulfils the inherent human need for affiliation and belongingness.

Keywords: companionship, coping strategies, dogs, empathy, personality

Introduction

Human beings are essentially social beings. We thrive on social contact and affiliations. The importance of interpersonal contact has been discussed by many prominent theorists. Freud, (1930) talked in length about it, although saw the motive as primarily sexual in nature. Maslow, (1968) ordered "love and belongingness needs" as third most important after the basic physiological and safety needs in his motivational hierarchy. Bowlby's (1969,1973) attachment theory also emphasized on the importance of forming and maintaining fulfilling relationships. Baumeister & Leary (1995) discussed extensively about the pervasive human drive to develop lasting and significant interpersonal relationships. It can thus be, understood that establishing fulfilling relationships is one of the most crucial aspects of human existence. Companionship refers to a sense of fellowship, amity and belongingness. This need for belongingness is usually fulfilled by friends and family. However, apart from fellow human beings, pets most frequently become significant companions in the lives of many. Animal companions meet the four fundamentals of an attachment bond: proximity seeking, safe haven, secure base, and separation distress, as supported by Ainsworth (1991). Barker & Barker (1988) suggested

that pet owners experience a close emotional bond with their animal companions and report that their pets provide them with a safe haven acting as a source of comfort in difficult times. Allen, Balscovich, & Mendes (2002) suggest that the demise of a pet triggers feeling of despair, causing immense grief and anguish (Gerwolls & Labott, 1995).

Human-animal interaction fulfils the need for belongingness for both individual and the pet. Baumeister and Leary (1995) discuss two essential features of belongingness. Firstly, people need frequent and pleasant interactions with others. Since the pet is involved in most of the family activities, it ensures frequent contact and bonding, viewing the pet as a part of the family. Secondly, people need to experience an interpersonal relationship characterised by stability and concern. The warmth and compassion provided by pet provides a sense of unconditional positive regard and a feeling of being cared for. There are many cases where, divorced individuals, people without a child, or elderly have reported forming close connections with their pets as they become substitutes for human companions.

Out of various domestic animals, pet dogs are most common. Dogs facilitate a symbiotic relationship where the owner and the dog companion

are mutually dependent for emotional support. They are not considered mere animals but “unique individuals who are minded, empathetic, reciprocating, and well-aware of the basic rules and roles that govern the relationship” (Dotson & Hyatt, 2008).

Dog companionship has been found contributing to physical and psychosocial well-being of many. Previous researches reveal that pet owners have high self-esteem, higher scores on interpersonal trust and social sensitivity as compared to non-pet owners. (Hyde, Kudrek, & Larson, 1983). The sense of responsibility while nurturing a dog builds up self-confidence and provides higher sense of independence and autonomy. In terms of personality, a study found people who preferred dogs scored higher on the domain of extraversion, particularly, on the facets of warmth, gregariousness, and excitement seeking. Sociable, friendly and high spirited were top personality traits found among those who preferred dogs (Levinson, 2009). According to some relevant researches, neuroticism and pet ownership are negatively correlated supporting the idea of Levinson that stability and emotional harmony are associated with pet ownership, especially dogs. (Levy, 1985) Besides personality, evidence from researches support that those who had a dog companion were more empathic than those who did not. (Daly & Morton, 2006). Not only dogs but in general young adults with pets during childhood were more empathic, more socially oriented and more likely to choose helping professions than those without a pet. Moreover, dog owners are reported to be significantly lower than non-dog owners in levels of perceived stress. The non-evaluative support experienced by participants from their dogs support the dictums of Allen, Blascovich, and Mendes (2002), who suggested that pet dogs and cats play a vital role in helping their owners cope with challenges by enhancing positive affective states (Lee & Chai, 2015). Recent studies also show that the company of a calm and affectionate dog companion, regulates stress in a better manner in comparison to the presence of a supportive adult when children are reading aloud or undertaking medical tests (Jalongo, Astorino, & Bomboy, 2004). In addition to psychosocial benefits, dog companionship is also associated with reduced depression, lower blood pressure and heart disease as individuals having dogs are found to be more physically active. (Dotson & Hyatt, 2008).

Since the contemporary fast paced lifestyle has made us overly ambitious and competitive,

experiences of loneliness and alienation have become common. Therefore, the objective of the present study, is to develop an understanding of how having a dog companion, helps fulfil the need of belongingness, and influences the worldview of a person. The target population consisted of young adults in the age group of 18 to 26 years. These years are typically marked by identity-seeking and exploration of relationships as seen in 5th (Identity vs. Role Confusion) and the 6th (Intimacy vs. Isolation) psychosocial stages proposed by Erik Erikson. One experiences increased responsibilities, societal expectations and work pressures as well as the changing dynamics of relationships resulting in high levels of stress, thereby, making it crucial to study this population. To understand how experiencing such loyal and faithful companionship influences one's worldview, we decided to study personality, empathy levels and coping strategies of individuals with and without dog companions.

Hypothesis

H1: There will be a significant difference between dog lovers and non-dog lovers in: (i) the domains of personality (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, neuroticism), (ii) empathy and (iii) coping strategies used in stressful situations.

H2: There will be a significant difference between individuals with and without a dog companion in: (i) the domains of personality (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, neuroticism), (ii) empathy and (iii) coping strategies used in stressful situations.

Method

Participants

112 participants belonging to age group 18 to 26 years (Mean age = 20.30 years) with 54 males, 57 females and 1 person who identifies as gender fluid residing in Delhi NCR were selected using Purposive Incidental Quota Snowball Sampling.

Tools

The study was conducted using a set of standardized questionnaires, which included:

Informed consent form. To ensure informed and voluntary involvement in research, a consent form with preliminary details of the research was attached at the top of the questionnaire. The participants were informed about the ethics of the research, i.e. confidentiality of responses and their anonymity.

Demographic Sheet. The demographic sheet was prepared to gain details regarding the gender and age of the respondents. A set of questions aimed to tap the respondent's attitudes towards dogs as companions were asked at the end of the online questionnaire.

The Big Five Inventory. The Big Five Inventory (BFI) developed by John (1992) is a 44-item inventory that measures an individual on the Big Five Factors (dimensions) of personality, which are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Dimensions of Big Five Inventory

DIMENSION	EXPLANATION
Openness	Individual's readiness to try different things, think outside the box.
Conscientiousness	Tendency to control impulses and act in socially acceptable ways.
Extraversion	Extroverts "recharge" from interacting with others.
Agreeableness	Ability to get along with others.
Neuroticism	One's emotional stability and general temper.

Basic Empathy Scale. Jolliffe & Farrington (2006) developed a 20-item scale with a 5-point Likert-rating of items assessing cognitive and affective empathy. In BES, cognitive empathy is the capacity to comprehend other person's affective states, and affective empathy is the capacity to experience an emotive response when one faces the mental state ascribed to another person. For internal consistency, Cronbach's alpha for cognitive and affective empathy was .71 and .84 respectively. On analysing the correlations between test retest reliability, correlation for cognitive empathy was $r=.6110$, $r^2=.3733$, $p<.001$, and for affective empathy was $r=.7980$, $r^2=.6368$, $p<.001$ (Carre, Stefaniak, D'Ambrosio, & Besche, 2013).

COPE Inventory. COPE Inventory (Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub, 1989) is a 60-item scale with 15 subscales each assessing the way an individual copes with stressful situations. COPE items are on a 4-point Likert scale. The internal consistency ranges from 0.46 to 0.93. The test-retest reliabilities ranged from 0.42 to 0.89 at 6 weeks and from 0.46 to 0.86 at 8 weeks. Regarding the convergent and discriminant validity, correlation was found between relevant

scales and some personality measures (optimism, hardiness, self-esteem, Type A tendencies and trait anxiety). The 15 sub-scales measured by COPE are presented in Table 2.

Procedure

After extensive literature review, the objectives of the study along with the variables to be studied and the relevant hypotheses were formulated. Next, the scales for assessment were decided upon. An online questionnaire that consisted of an informed consent form, a demographic sheet and the three standardised tests was prepared. Thereafter, participants were approached, and data was collected. The data collected was then tabulated in a spreadsheet and analysis was carried out using IBM SPSS Statistics software. Independent samples t-test was conducted to calculate differences in mean scores of the two groups obtained on the three variables. Furthermore, in order to help detect the size of the difference and to differentiate between a practically important difference and a statistically significant difference, effect sizes of the obtained significant differences were calculated respectively.

Table 2: Subscales of COPE Inventory

SUB SCALES	EXPLANATION
Active Coping	process of taking action to remove the stressor
Planning	ability to plan active coping strategies.
Suppression of competing activities	avoiding attention towards other activities to focus on the stressor.
Restraint	waiting for the appropriate opportunity to act
Use of instrumental social support	seeking advice and information about what to do
Behavioural disengagement	withdrawing effort from trying to accomplish the objective related to the stressor
Mental disengagement	resorting to psychological ways of disengaging from the goal affected by the stressor through sleep, daydreaming, self-distraction.
Positive reinterpretation and growth	seeing something good growing out of the situation
Focusing on venting of emotions	the ability to be aware of one's emotional distress and discharging those feelings.
Denial	rejecting reality of the stressful situation
Religious coping	turning to religion to deal with stress
Humour	dealing with the event by laughing at the stressor
Use of emotional social support	getting emotional support from someone
Substance use	resorting to use of drugs and alcohol as means of disengaging with the stressor
Acceptance	accepting the stressful event as real

Results

Table 3: Frequency of activities participants engage in with their dog companion

Activities	Frequency
Playing	33
Walking	21
Cuddling	11
Feeding	5
Exercising (jogging, running)	5

Talking	7
Grooming	3
Relaxing	3
Others (Sleeping, Watching TV, Dancing, Listening to music, going for road trips etc.)	12
Total Number of Responses: 44	

Table 4: Frequency of responses of ways participants take care of their dog companion

Response	Frequency
Provide food	53
Take care of medical needs	21
Provide shelter	25
Provide comfortable clothes during extreme weather	28
Others (Play, Groom)	4
Total Number of Responses: 53	

Table 5: Table showing independent t test results, comparing mean scores of participants who like dogs with participants who dislike dogs on the dimensions of personality (df=110)

Personality Dimensions	Participants who like dogs (n = 69)		Participants who dislike dogs (n=43)		t	p-value	95% CI of the difference	
	Mean	S.D	Mean	S.D			Lower	Upper
Openness	36.86	4.333	34.47	4.920	2.694	.008	0.632	4.148
Conscientiousness	29.52	6.065	30.12	4.712	-.548	.585	-2.746	1.557
Extraversion	26.48	5.490	25.16	5.494	1.233	.220	-0.799	3.430
Agreeableness	33.29	5.041	33.16	4.741	.133	.895	-1.771	2.025
Neuroticism	23.49	5.674	24.30	5.630	-.737	.463	-2.988	1.369

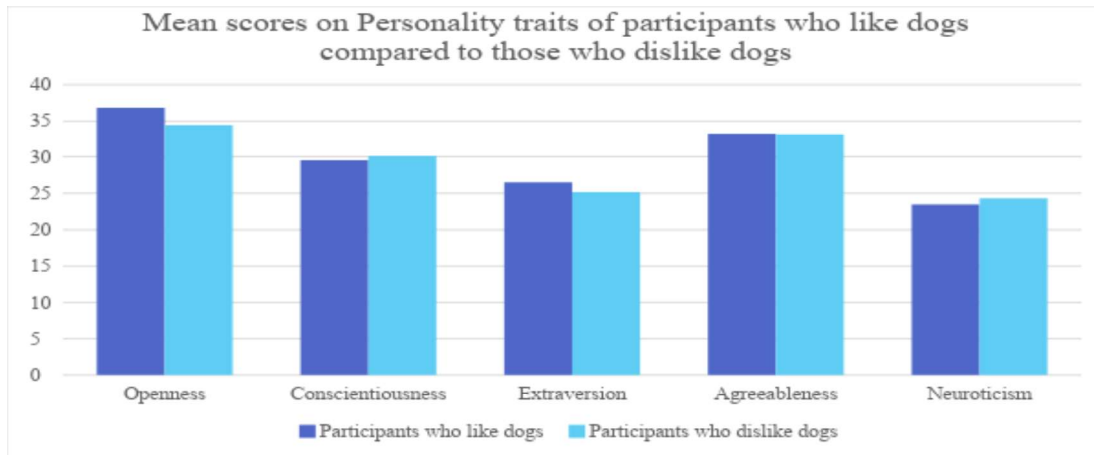


Figure 1. Mean scores of participants who like and dislike dogs in the dimensions of personality.

Table 6: Table showing independent t test results, comparing mean empathy scores of participants who like dogs with participants who dislike dogs (df = 110)

Empathy scores	Participants who like dogs (n = 69)		Participants who dislike dogs (n = 43)		t	p-value	95% Confidence Interval of the difference	
	Mean	S. D	Mean	S. D			Lower	Upper
Cognitive Empathy	35.88	5.323	33.12	5.025	2.734	.007	0.761	4.774
Affective Empathy	37.38	6.215	35.74	5.568	1.406	.163	-0.668	3.934
Total Empathy	73.26	9.540	68.86	8.749	2.449	.016	0.840	7.961

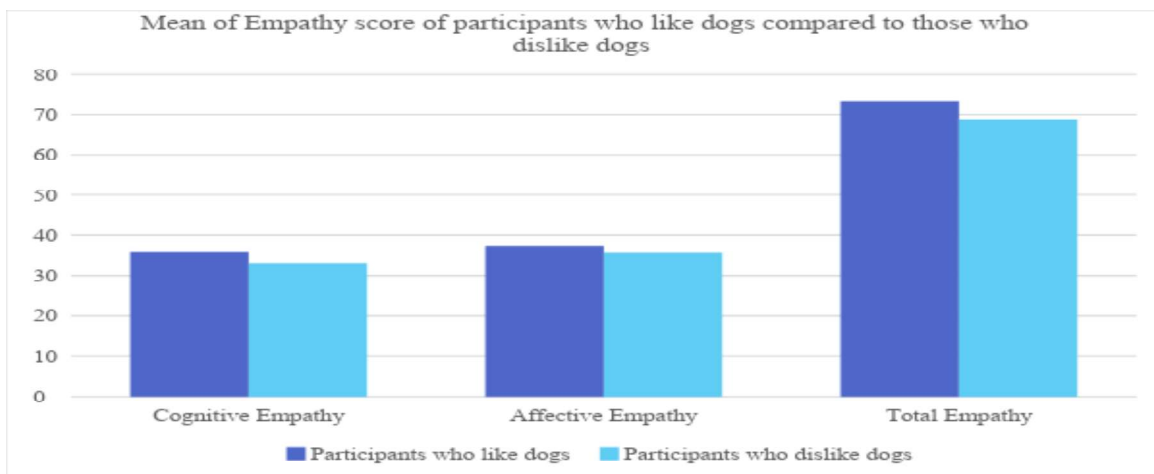


Figure 2. Mean empathy scores of participants who like and dislike dogs

Table 7: Table showing independent t test results, comparing mean scores of participants who like dogs with participants who dislike dogs in the dimension of coping

Scores on COPE Inventory	Participants who like dogs (n = 69)		Participants who dislike dogs (n = 43)		t	p-value	95% Confidence Interval of the difference	
	Mean	S. D	Mean	S. D			Lower	Upper
Positive reinterpretation and growth	11.87	2.229	11.84	2.115	.076	.939	-0.809	0.874
Mental disengagement	10.23	2.723	10.79	2.531	-1.085	.280	-1.580	0.462
Focus on venting emotions	10.32	3.188	10.40	3.274	-.122	.903	-1.317	1.164
Use of instrumental social support	11.00	2.965	10.49	3.319	.848	.398	-0.684	1.707
Active Coping	11.23	2.739	11.33	2.542	-.181	.857	-1.120	0.933
Denial	6.48	2.582	7.23	2.910	-1.432	.155	-1.798	0.290
Religious Coping	7.93	3.766	9.72	3.996	-2.394	.018	-3.278	-0.309
Humour	9.23	3.762	8.44	3.119	1.152	.252	-0.569	2.149
Behavioural Disengagement	7.04	2.794	7.65	2.776	-1.122	.264	-1.681	0.466
Restraint	9.86	2.451	10.21	2.122	-.782	.436	-1.252	0.543
Use of emotional Social Support	10.12	3.256	9.33	3.682	1.188	.238	-0.528	2.109
Substance use	5.86	3.079	5.51	2.857	.590	.556	-0.810	1.479
Acceptance	10.97	2.990	11.07	2.394	-.183	.855	-1.168	0.971
Suppression of competing activities	10.17	2.407	10.88	2.342	-1.533	.128	-1.627	0.207
Planning	11.71	2.996	11.65	3.046	.101	.920	-1.102	1.220

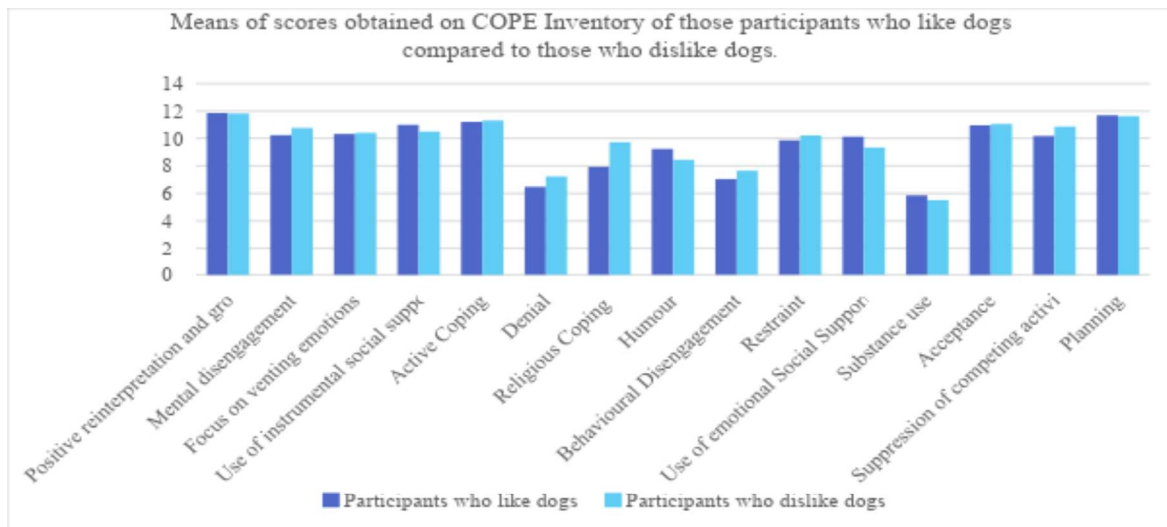


Figure 3. Mean of scores obtained on COPE Inventory of participants who like and dislike dogs

Table 8: Table showing independent t test results, comparing mean scores of participants with and without dog companions on the dimensions of personality

Personality Dimensions	Participants with dog companion (n = 53)		Participants without dog companion (n = 59)		t	p-value	95% CI of the difference	
	Mean	S. D.	Mean	S. D.			Lower	Upper
Openness	37.26	4.184	34.75	4.837	2.931	.004	0.816	4.221
Conscientiousness	29.06	6.106	30.37	5.010	-1.252	.213	-3.400	0.767
Extraversion	26.6	5.756	25.41	5.253	1.151	.252	-0.864	3.258
Agreeableness	33.57	4.881	32.95	4.953	.663	.509	-1.228	2.462
Neuroticism	23.87	5.495	23.75	5.824	.114	.910	-2.005	2.249

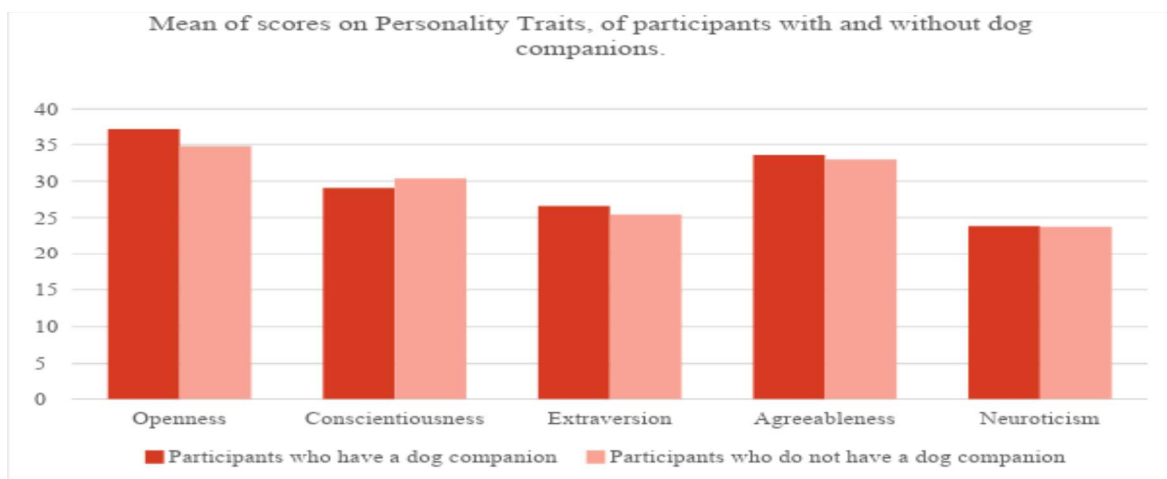


Figure 4. Mean scores of participants with and without dog companions on the dimensions of personality.

Table 9: Table showing independent t test results, comparing mean empathy scores of participants with and without dog companions.

Empathy scores	Participants with dog companion (n =53)		Participants without dog companion (n =59)		t	p-value	95% Confidence Interval of the difference	
	Mean	S. D	Mean	S. D			Lower	Upper
Cognitive Empathy	36.11	4.878	33.66	5.548	2.472	.015	0.486	4.418
Affective Empathy	38.13	6.089	35.51	5.691	2.357	.020	0.417	4.830
Total Empathy	74.25	8.914	69.17	9.346	2.933	.004	1.646	8.505

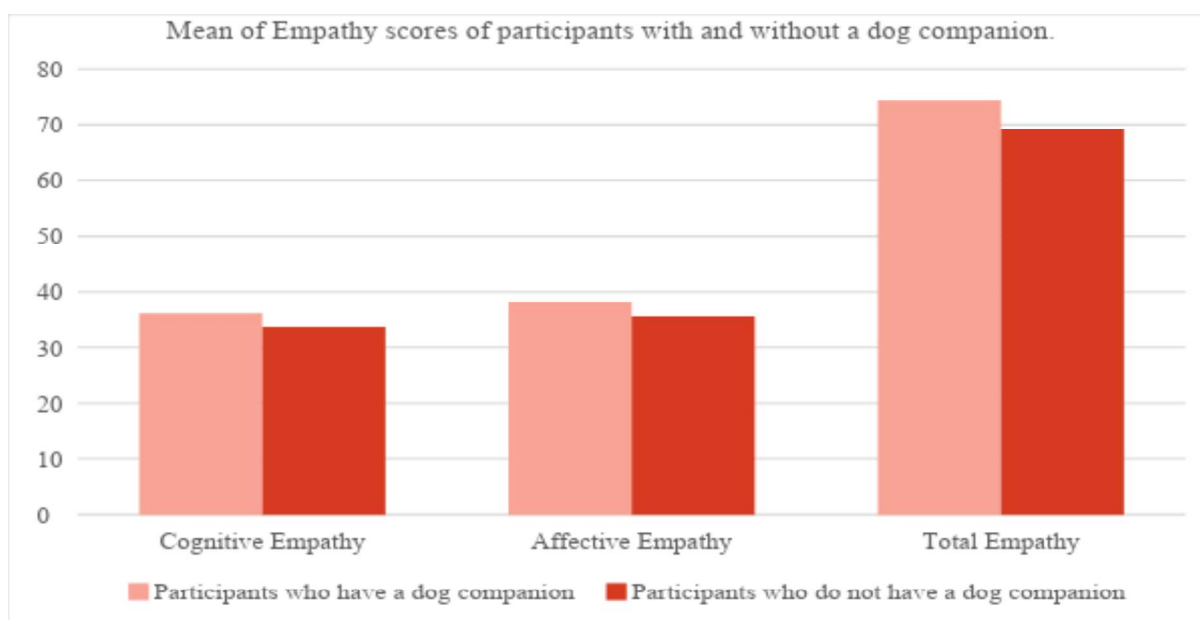


Figure 5. Mean empathy scores of participants with and without dog companions.

Table 10: Table showing independent t test results, comparing mean scores of participants with and without dog companions obtained on COPE Inventory

Scores on COPE Inventory	Participants with dog companion (n = 53)		Participants without dog companion (n = 59)		t	p-value	95% Confidence Interval of the difference	
	Mean	S. D	Mean	S. D			Lower	Upper
Positive reinterpretation and growth	11.72	2.315	11.98	2.055	-.644	.521	-1.084	0.552
Mental disengagement	10.32	2.834	10.56	2.500	-.473	.637	-1.237	0.760

Focus on venting emotions	10.68	3.056	10.05	3.334	1.036	.303	-0.574	1.831
Use of instrumental social support	10.98	2.892	10.64	3.295	.573	.568	-0.830	1.504
Active Coping	11.25	2.695	11.29	2.640	-.085	.932	-1.043	0.957
Denial	6.60	2.691	6.92	2.769	-.602	.548	-1.336	0.713
Religious Coping	8.30	3.998	8.9	3.894	-.799	.426	-2.075	0.883
Humour	9.06	3.845	8.81	3.261	.362	.718	-1.088	1.574
Behavioural Disengagement	7.30	2.946	7.25	2.669	.090	.929	-1.004	1.099
Restraint	9.85	2.507	10.12	2.166	-.610	.543	-1.145	0.606
Use of emotional Social Support	10.30	2.913	9.37	3.810	1.437	.153	-0.352	2.210
Substance use	6.25	3.339	5.25	2.570	1.770	.080	-0.119	2.101
Acceptance	11.17	3.173	10.86	2.360	.582	.562	-0.735	1.346
Suppression of competing activities	10.32	2.533	10.56	2.284	-.524	.601	-1.140	0.663
Planning	11.72	3.002	11.66	3.026	.098	.922	-1.075	1.187

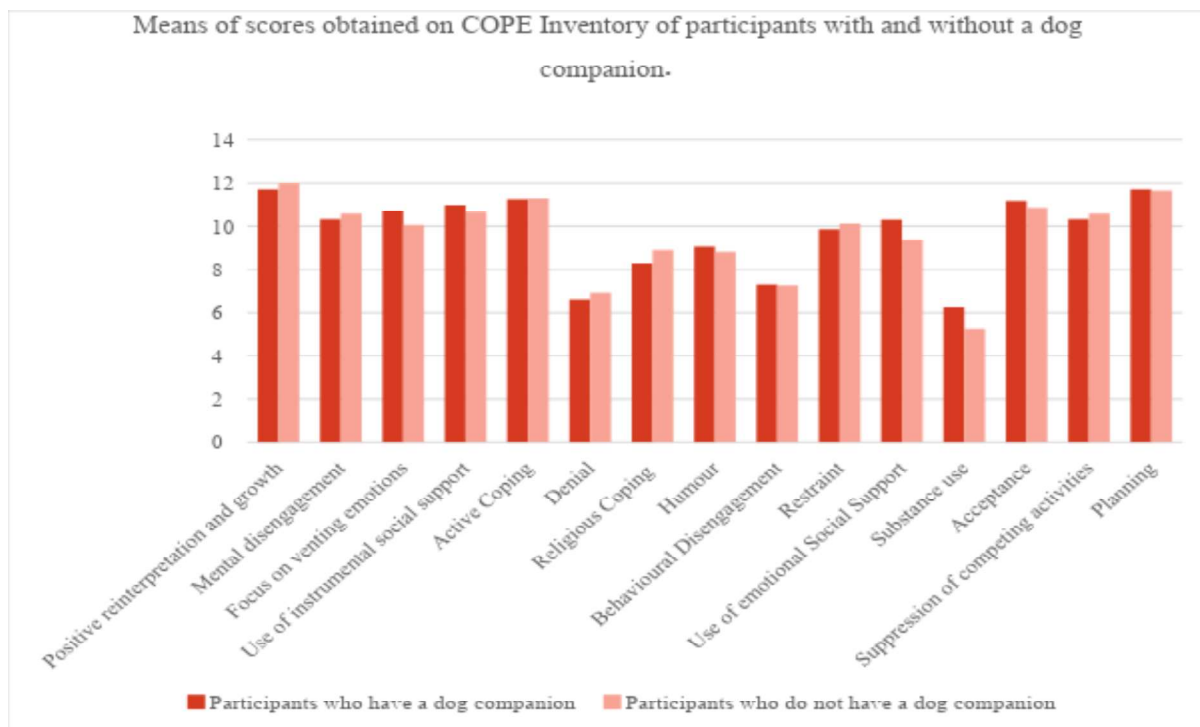


Figure 6: Mean scores obtained on COPE Inventory of participants with and without dog companion

Discussion

“Dogs are not our whole life, but they make our lives whole.” -Roger Caras

The meaning of friendship and fidelity was probably introduced to mankind by our fellow canine friends. As a popular proverb goes- “A dog is a man’s best friend”, there is no doubt to the fact that dog companions provide unending support and warmth to their human friends. The goal of the present study, is to develop an understanding of how having a dog companion, helps fulfil the innate human needs of belongingness, and influences the ways in which one responds to various life situations. For the purpose of this study, Dog Companionship has been described as a relationship of friendship, amity and closeness between an individual and his canine friend. Taking care of dogs and actively engaging with them can be seen as building companionship with them. Three variables were chosen, namely personality, empathy and coping strategies, to gain understanding of the worldview of both people with and without dog companions and those who like and dislike dogs. Statistical Analysis, i.e. independent t-test was conducted to calculate differences in mean scores existing in all the above-mentioned variables, for all mentioned categories.

Spending time and caring for ones’ dog companion

Participants often describe their dog companions as a part of their family and so, they become an inseparable part of their lives. Out of a total of 44 participants who answered the question- ‘How do you spend time with your dog companion?’ 33 participants reported that they play with their dogs, while 21 participants reported that they spend time by walking with them. The childlike innocence and enthusiasm of a dog provides a chance to divert one’s mind from daily stressors, and thus, people most commonly engage in such activities. It is also interesting to note that 7 out of 44 participants spend time talking with their dog companions and 11 out of 44 of them spend time Cuddling them. Dotson and Hyatt (2008) have discussed in their study the tendency of people to see their dog companion as more of a person and less of an animal (anthropomorphism). It is often seen that the dog owners talk to their dogs, possibly in “Motherese” or “Doggerel” (Russell, 1996). As dog companions are often seen as substitutes for children, siblings or other important relations, people pamper them like they would have probably indulged their human relatives.

Out of a total of 53 participants who answered the question ‘How do you take care of your dog companion?’ all 53 reported ‘By providing food’. Apart from this, 28 participants report providing comfortable clothes during extreme weather, 25 participants report providing shelter, and 21 participants report providing medical care. During the course of their friendship, dog becomes an inseparable part of one’s life and people start taking care of them in whatever capacity they can. Since providing food and clothing do not require expending of much resources they are most commonly reported ways in which dogs are taken care of. Providing shelter and medical care becomes important for the dog companion’s wellbeing and thus are also frequently reported.

Personality

In order to find out whether there exists any difference between people with and without dog companions, as far as the personality trait of openness is concerned, an independent samples t-test was conducted. A statistically significant difference was found at $t(110) = 2.931, p < .01; d = 0.55$. The effect size for this analysis ($d = 0.55$) was found to exceed Cohen’s convention (1988) for a medium effect ($d = 0.50$). The results suggest that individuals with dog companions have higher scores in Openness ($M = 37.26, S. D = 4.184$) in comparison to those without a dog companion ($M = 34.75, S. D = 4.837$). Similarly, an independent samples t-test was conducted to find the differences in the levels of openness between those who like and dislike dogs. The test was found to be statistically significant at $t(110) = 2.694, p < .01; d = 0.51$. The effect size for this analysis ($d = 0.51$) was found to exceed Cohen’s convention for a medium effect ($d = 0.50$). The results show that those who like dogs have higher scores in Openness ($M = 36.86, S. D = 4.333$) in comparison to those who dislike dogs ($M = 34.47, S. D = 4.920$).

The dimension of Openness taps intellectual curiosity, creativity and a proclivity for novelty. It is the extent to which a person depicts preference for unconventionality over strict routines. The results obtained are consistent with findings of Perrine & Osbourne (2015) as they suggest that self-labelled dog people are seen to score high on the dimension of independence. The free willed nature of a dog finds reflection in his human companion. Belk (1996) in her study uses the metaphor- ‘pets as an extension of self’. The dog companion and human being enter a symbiotic relationship wherein all emotional states are shared amongst them. As dogs are essentially

accepting creatures, people who enjoy their companionship, also become more accepting of unconventionality over the course of their friendship. Additional support on this finding has been provided by Dotson and Hyatt (2008) as they suggest that dog owners show greater willingness to adapt than others.

No significant differences have been noted as far as conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism are concerned, between both people with and without dog companions and people who like and dislike dogs. Previous research trends indicate that there exists high levels of extraversion and agreeableness amongst people with dog companions. (Levinson, 2009; Gosling, Sandy & Potter, 2015) These researchers suggest that a dog companion facilitates social interaction, particularly while participating in activities like walking with the dog. However, no significant differences have been found in the present study. It may be possible that for individuals with a dog companion, their canine friends may act as a substitute for other individuals, thereby, decreasing their likelihood for, seeking human contact. This is supported by Johnson and Rule (1991) who suggest the existence of a negative correlation between maintenance of a relationship with pets and extraversion. They propose that it is possible for pets to be stand-ins for other human beings in the lives of these people. Furthermore, the non-significant results in other four personality variables in the present study reflects that both the groups in the population are same as far as personality is concerned. The tendency to perceive pet owners as a group with an all-encompassing trait rather than just mere individuals and see them as extraverted, sociable, and lively may not always be correct. Non-dog owners may be as lively and extraverted as the pet owners.

Lastly, research trends suggest the existence of lower levels of neuroticism amongst dog owners. Ryder (1973) and Levinson (1980) have posited that pet-ownership may reduce the sense of experienced alienation and reduce levels of stress and anxiety. Dogs provide space for emotional catharsis by lending a patient and a non-judgmental ear. However, it is also important to note that taking care of a dog makes people more empathetic and attuned to finer emotions of everyday life. Thus, while having a dog companion reduces vulnerability to stress, it may at the same time increase the intensity in which emotions are experienced. This may have contributed to an inconclusive difference in neuroticism scores between people with and without dog companions.

Empathy

In order to find whether there exists a difference between individuals with and without dog companions in terms of empathy levels, an independent samples t-test was conducted. The test was found to be statistically significant, $t(110) = 2.472$, $p < 0.05$; $d = 0.47$. The effect size ($d=0.47$) was found to exceed Cohen's convention for a small effect ($d=0.20$). These results suggest that those who have a dog companion ($M = 36.11$, $SD = 4.878$) were high on cognitive empathy as compared to those without a dog companion ($M=33.66$, $SD= 5.548$). Similarly, an independent t-test was conducted to find whether a difference exists in empathy between those who like and dislike dogs. The test was found to be statistically significant, $t(110) = 2.734$, $p < 0.01$; $d = 0.53$. The effect size ($d=0.53$) was found to exceed Cohen's convention (1988) for a medium effect ($d=0.50$). These results indicate that those who like dogs ($M=35.88$, $SD=5.323$) were high on cognitive empathy as compared to those who dislike dogs ($M=33.12$, $SD=5.025$). Research suggests that nurturing behaviour towards animals often inculcates sensitivity and empathetic understanding for fellow human beings. Daly & Morton (2006) found that children with a favourable attitude towards animals displayed higher empathy than those who had unfavourable attitude towards animals. Being receptive to the cues of one's pet, understanding and being aware of the pet's movements, wishes and facial expressions helps the individual become more emotionally sensitive and attuned to subtleties in communication. This sensitivity and ability to understand others' emotional states is reflected as higher scores in cognitive empathy amongst dog lovers and those with a dog companion.

The t-test for affective empathy, $t(110) = 2.357$, $p < 0.05$; $d = 0.44$ was found to be significant indicating that those having a dog companion ($M=38.13$, $SD=6.089$) were high on affective empathy than those without a dog companion ($M=35.51$, $SD=5.691$). The effect size ($d=0.44$) was found to exceed Cohen's (1988) convention for a small effect ($d=0.20$). Caring for a dog teaches one to care for another being, thus reducing self-centeredness amongst individuals, particularly adolescents. It enhances perspective taking abilities, as one is constantly caring for his dog companion and thinking of his well-being as opposed to his own. This ability extends for other fellow human beings as well, wherein one becomes more considerate towards others' needs and feelings. This ability to experience emotions from the perspective of another translates

into higher scores in affective empathy amongst dog lovers and those with a dog companion.

The t test for total empathy, $t(110) = 2.933$, $p < 0.01$; $d = 0.55$ was also found to be significant indicating that those having a dog companion ($M=74.25$, $SD=8.914$) were high on total empathy than those without a dog companion ($M=69.17$, $SD=9.346$). The effect size ($d=0.55$) was found to exceed Cohen's (1988) convention for a medium effect ($d=0.50$). The t test for total empathy conducted among those who like and dislike dogs, $t(110) = 2.449$, $p < 0.05$, $d = 0.48$ was also found to be significant indicating that those who like dogs ($M=73.26$, $SD=9.540$) were high on total empathy than those who dislike dogs ($M=68.86$, $SD=8.749$). The effect size ($d=0.48$) was found to exceed Cohen's (1988) convention for a small effect ($d=0.20$). The unconditional support demonstrated by one's dog companion, alongside the abilities of silent communication one inculcates while caring for a dog all contribute to higher scores in total empathy amongst those with dog companions.

Coping Strategies

In terms of coping strategies, an independent samples t-test between those who like and dislike dogs was found to be statistically significant at $t(110) = -2.394$, $p < 0.05$, $d = 0.46$ for the dimension of religious coping. The effect size ($d=0.46$) was found to exceed Cohen's (1988) convention for a small effect ($d=0.20$). The results indicate individuals who dislike dogs have higher scores on religious coping ($M=10.21$, $S. D=2.122$) in comparison to those who like dogs ($M=9.86$, $S. D=2.451$).

However, no significant differences were found between participants with a dog companion as compared to those without a dog companion in using coping strategies during stressful situations. Both the groups have been found using problem focused and emotion focused strategies to the same extent. A reason for this could be that participants without a dog companion may have strong social support and human companion in real life for dealing with everyday stress as participants with a dog companion. A similar research supporting this found a significant negative correlation between scores of perceived social support from friends and family and scores of perceived stress among non-dog owners. Likewise, among dog owners, scores of perceived social support from family, friends, and dogs were not related to perceived stress scores (Lee & Chai, 2015).

Conclusion

The human-dog relationship is a truly special one. It not only provides unending support and love but also changes one's perception of the world. In the present study, people with a dog companion were seen to possess greater Openness and Empathy levels (cognitive and affective) in comparison to people without a dog companion. Similar differences were found between those who like and dislike dogs. Dogs are essentially loyal and accepting creatures, and humans who enjoy their companionship imbibe these qualities, thus becoming more open to unconventionalities. Moreover, taking care of a dog teaches one to be sensitive, and emotionally attuned to subtle nuances in communication. People who disliked dogs tended to use more of religious coping in comparison to those who like dogs. No significant differences however were reported between participants with and without a dog companion in using coping strategies during stressful situations. Overall, the study attempted to provide an understanding of dog-human companionship and its subsequent influence in people's lives.

Implications and future directions

The present study has wide ranging implications particularly in the nascent field of Animal Assisted Therapy. Dogs have been seen as loyal and faithful companions who fulfil the innate human needs of belongingness. They provide unconditional positive regard, which is indeed psychotherapeutic and provides a safe space for people to explore their feelings. In the modern day context, where people are becoming increasingly self-centred, lonely and alienated, such companionship restores the willingness to live life even in difficult times. This suggests a scope for more researches addressing dog-human companionship to emerge successfully and viewing the company of a dog companion as a stress buster in future. However, since the present study was done on a sample of only 112 participants, it suffered from the limitation of low generalisability. Moreover, since companionship and belongingness are complex human experiences, a qualitative exploratory study would provide valuable insights. Since, the present study has only focused on young adults, an enquiry on dog companionship and its influence on children and elderly is suggested. Lastly, other variables like perceived stress, self-esteem and perceived competence can also be studied.

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