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THERAPEUTIC VALUE OF COMPANION ANIMALS ON
PSYCHOSOCIAL AND PHYSIOLOGICAL WELL-BEING:
A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
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DEPARTMENT OF COUNSELING PSYCHOLOGY

BY

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ABSTRACT

During the past two decades there has been an increase in interest among researchers and therapeutic practitioners regarding the value of companion animals in people's lives. Research has been conducted examining the psychosocial and physiological benefits of companion animals. However, much of the literature available is based on anecdotal case reports; few empirical studies have been performed due to a lack of clarification of potential benefits and appropriate methodological designs. Also, literature regarding the benefits of companion animals for the adolescent population are lacking, whereas literature is abundant for the elderly population.

The present thesis reviews literature regarding the psychosocial and physiological benefits of companion animals for people throughout the life span. Also, the thesis reviews the literature regarding pet-facilitated psychotherapy (PFP). From the literature review, implications for therapeutic practitioners can be drawn for the implementation of PFP. Directions and recommendations for future research are also discussed.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Within the past two decades, there has been an increase in interest among researchers and therapeutic practitioners regarding the value of companion animals in people’s lives. Many questions have been raised regarding the benefits companion animals may provide to people of all ages in terms of physiological, psychological, and social well-being. Research has been conducted on the effects of companion animals on cardiovascular responses, as well as other health related issues; research has explored the role of companion animals as aides to people with disabilities. Also, research has been conducted regarding the benefits of animals on stress, coping, and depression, as well as their roles as social supports. A further area of research which has more recently gained significant attention is pet-facilitated (or animal-assisted) psychotherapy.

Unfortunately, this increased interest in the value of companion animals in people’s lives has not led to an abundance of significant research findings; much of the available literature has been based on anecdotal information from case studies and studies with flawed research designs and no controls. Of the studies based on appropriate and sound designs, there appear to be mixed results. Because of
these mixed findings, it appears that there is a strong need for more fine-tuned empirical research on the benefits of companion animals.

The literature on the effect of companion animals on people's lives has focused on the benefits for the elderly population. Although there is literature exploring the impact animals have on other populations, there appears to be significantly more addressing the elderly. Literature is lacking for other developmental populations, namely adolescents, a population that may greatly benefit from animal companionship.

The adolescent years can be relatively complex and lonely for many individuals. It is during this stage of development that adolescents may feel that there is no one there for them. According to Erik Erikson's (1959, 1963, as cited in Steinberg, 1989) psychosocial stages of development, adolescence is a time when individuals are faced with complex issues of identity, autonomy, intimacy, sexuality, and achievement; it is a time of transition between childhood and adulthood (Steinberg, 1989). Several major concerns for adolescents include: the struggle between dependency and independence, acceptance and rejection; the search for identity; the search for security; pressures to conform; and the need for approval.

It is during adolescence that individuals begin to seriously consider who they really are and where they are
going. Adolescents undergo role experimentation: they try on different hats in an attempt to discover their true self (Steinberg, 1989). It is also during adolescence that individuals attempt to separate from their parents emotionally. As they move towards autonomy, they become able to make their own decisions which contributes to their emerging sense of identity. It is also important that adolescents, in their attempt to achieve a sense of identity and autonomy, receive recognition from others that they are unique individuals.

Adolescence is also a time when intimate relationships undergo a reformation. Intimate relationships during adolescence involve openness, honesty, loyalty, and exchanging confidences, whereas previously during childhood, relationships were based on sharing activities and interests (Steinberg, 1989). It is during adolescence that individuals begin to form trusting and loving relationships. Achievement also raises concern for many adolescents; at this time, they begin to evaluate their own competencies and capabilities regarding school and social performances, and they begin to make decisions regarding their future aspirations (Steinberg, 1989).

As with the other stages of Erikson's psychosocial development, successful mastery of the designated tasks results in a growth potential towards a healthy adulthood; failure to master the developmental tasks may result in
stifled personality development or regression (Corey, 1991). It is not surprising, therefore, that many adolescents experience severe anxiety in their attempt to deal with and overcome these developmental obstacles. However, the popular, stereotypical view of adolescence as a time of "storm and stress" is perhaps greatly exaggerated. Adolescence is a stressful period of development, yet some individuals experience more anxiety and difficulty during these years than others (Steinberg, 1989). Some individuals experience extreme anxiety during adolescence and turn to inappropriate coping resources, such as drugs and alcohol, while others turn to delinquency and promiscuity (Steinberg, 1989). There are also those individuals who are unable to cope at all; many adolescents suffer with depression and may contemplate or attempt suicide.

For adolescents who experience extreme anxiety, there may be assistance within reach. Peers, friends, family members, teachers, counselors, psychologists, and psychiatrists may be able to reach these individuals and provide whatever is needed to cope with the anxieties of adolescence. Unfortunately, some adolescents do not have and cannot gain these resources within their coping network.

With this view of adolescence in mind, it seems clear that there can be many psychosocial benefits of companion animals to this population. Animals may play different
roles for adolescents, including: companions, friends, confidants, and therapists. The majority of American households include companion animals, thus many adolescents have exposure to a nonjudgemental and nonverbal listener. Pines (1978, p. 106, as cited in Kidd & Kidd, 1985) emphasized that "a companion animal can be the right kind of friend at the right time, always available, always willing, and always ready with just the right thing to say."

Companion animals may also assist adolescents in mastering the developmental tasks they are confronted with, namely, the search for identity and security, achievement of autonomy and individuation, and a move towards intimate relationships. It seems plausible that when adolescents have no trusted, reliable person to confide in, they may turn to their companion animal for assistance and nonverbal reassurance. It seems likely that through their interactions with their animals many adolescents may receive the unconditional regard needed to cope with the anxieties of this stage of development.

Unfortunately, there is little research to support the likelihood that companion animals may assist adolescents in coping with the developmental difficulties they face. Much of the literature in this area is based on clinical impressions and theoretical assumptions. There are very few studies which have examined the developmental and therapeutic effect of companion animals for adolescents; of
those studies that have explored this area, most have either employed flawed research designs, or have lead to inconsistent findings.

In an attempt to clarify the potential psychosocial benefits of companion animals to the adolescent population, a critical review of existing literature must be completed. Because the literature regarding benefits to adolescence is limited, a thorough review of the literature focusing on other populations is necessary. It is from this extensive review of the existing literature that future areas of research can be identified and developed. In addition, a review of the pet-facilitated psychotherapy literature may provide further insight into the benefits of companion animals to adolescents, as well as potential psychotherapeutic treatments. Implications for therapeutic interventions may lead to the establishment of pet-facilitated programs for adolescents, which can be evaluated for their effectiveness.
Companion animals play a variety of roles for people of all ages. These roles contribute psychosocially to the beneficial effects on people; they contribute substantially to an individual's healthy progression into adulthood by facilitating developmental processes (Davis & Juhasz, 1985). According to Veevers (1985), the roles companion animals play can be categorized into three major functions: projective, social, and surrogate. As a projective function, pets serve as a symbolic extension of the self; an individual may express his or her personality through interactions with the companion animal. One may project his or her personality onto the animal as an expression of one's own character. Also, people, especially children, tend to treat their companion animals as they themselves would like to be treated, thereby disclosing a part of who they are as they interact with their pets (Robin & ten Bensel, 1985). As a social function, an animal may facilitate the establishment of meaningful, satisfying human relationships (Mallon, 1992). An animal serves as a social lubricant, increasing the quantity and enhancing the quality of social
interactions. The presence of a pet often attracts attention to an individual and makes the person more approachable; therefore, it provides an opportunity to meet people and is an ideal catalyst for casual conversation during initial contacts. Also, companion animals are considered a safe subject to talk about in almost any social situation. As a surrogate function, interaction with a pet may supplement or substitute human interaction; companion animals may take on the role of significant humans who are absent from the lives of some individuals. Companion animals may become surrogate mates, satisfying the need for an intimate, loving relationship without the complexities of human interactions; a relationship between a person and his or her pet is less threatening than a relationship between two humans (Mallon, 1992). The evidence of the simplicity and safety of the relationship between the person and his or her pet can be seen in the accepting, affectionate, honest, loyal, and consistent manner in which the two interact (Nebbe, 1991). Animals may also serve as surrogate children for those individuals or couples who cannot have, or do not want children; animals may also replace children for empty-nest parents. For some children, animals may also serve as surrogate parents, providing more patience and contact comfort than some parents may be able to offer. A pet is always there for the child; it is a source of continuity, a "parent" a child can count on to be there. A pet shares
similar characteristics of an ideal mother, such as: unconditional, devoted, attentive, and loyal (Robin & ten Bensel, 1985).

Throughout the life cycle, an individual may come to see his or her companion animal filling several of these diverse roles. A pet’s role in a person’s life is influenced by the individual’s perception of the animal’s attributes, as well as by the demands of psychosocial development, which change over time (Davis & Juhasz, 1985). The intensity of the bond between a person and a pet is also a factor of the potential benefits an individual may receive from a companion animal. When a relationship has developed between the two, the bond can be considered an emotional tie that binds them together over an extended period of time (Poresky et al., 1987).

Psychosocial Benefits for Children and Adolescents

Companion animals may be a very important part of the healthy social and emotional development of children. Children’s empathy, self-esteem, self-control, and autonomy may be promoted by raising pets (Poresky, Hendrix, Mosier, & Samuelson, 1987). For children and youth, companion animals play different roles and may have many specific effects on psychosocial development. Some of the roles they may play exclusively for young people are: companions, friends, admirers, confidants, mirrors, defenders, toys, servants, and scapegoats (Kidd & Kidd, 1985). Further, pets
facilitate the release of pent up tension which helps to minimize emotional stress and promote good mental health (Kidd & Kidd, 1985). They provide play, intimacy, mutuality, loyalty, exclusivity, confidentiality, enduring affection, physical comfort, empathic listening, and reassurance of worth (Bryant, 1990). An animal's warmth, acceptance, and uninhibited nature may convince a child that he or she is a loveable person (Nebbe, 1991). Young people can safely share private feelings and secrets with their pets, knowing that their intimate conversations will remain confidential (Bryant, 1990).

Companion animals may be an important part of a child's environment. According to Blue (1986), there are aspects of the human-animal relationship that are particularly important for children. The unconditional love and attachment that exists between the two contributes to the feelings of closeness and warmth the child experiences when he or she is with the animal. The companion animal acts as a transitional object, a link between the child and the outside world; this link helps the child overcome his or her insecurities and widen experiences in the outside world by alleviating stress and anxieties the child may feel as he or she faces critical developmental tasks. The relationship between the two also contributes to the development of responsibility, nurturance, and a sense of self-competence; caring for a pet makes a child feel needed, loved, and
respected (Blue, 1986). Companion animals also provide a means of teaching a child social skills, manners, and peer relations, which the child can then transfer to others (Nebbe, 1991).

Companion animals may be especially important for "latchkey" children, children who come home from school before their working parents (Heath & McKenry, 1989; Guerney, 1991). Studies focusing on "latchkey," or self-care, children have found that they often experience fearfulness, loneliness, social isolation, boredom, and emotional stress as they cope with their time alone (Heath & McKenry, 1989; Guerney, 1991). Returning to a companion animal who is happy to see the child and depends on his or her caretaking skills may promote feelings of competence and nurturance within the child, which may enhance feelings of self-worth and accomplishment; as the child cares for the animals needs, the animal in return may alleviate feelings of fearfulness and loneliness (Heath & McKenry, 1989).

In terms of Erik Erikson's (1959, 1963, as cited in Steinberg, 1989) theory of psychosocial development, related literature has focused on the manner in which companion animals benefit preadolescents. Davis and Juhasz (1985) provide an extensive review of how companion animals may be considered a developmental resource at this time; animals help young people face and deal with critical developmental tasks. The preadolescents can use their pets to meet
certain psychosocial needs; these animals may provide a valuable resource for meeting the demands of continuing growth. During preadolescence, an individual continues to expand his or her identity foundations through interactions with peers; he or she begins to learn how to leave the comfort and security of the family in order to prepare for the social demands of adolescence. This process of separation and individuation creates feelings of separation anxiety, which continues throughout the life cycle, and especially during times of stress (Robin & ten Bensel, 1985). Erikson's (1959, 1963, as cited in Davis & Juhasz, 1985) theory postulates preadolescents face the developmental task of industry versus inferiority. The preadolescent gains feelings of achievement through completing tasks well; it is at this time that parents may give him or her more responsibilities around the house, including pet care. Also, an individual may gain a sense of competence through his or her achievement outside the family context; a preadolescent may gain a sense of individual identity from his or her school performance. Without a achieving a sense of industry, a preadolescent is ill-prepared to meet the demands of adolescence which may hinder development into healthy adulthood. It seems that pet care provides a source of achievement for preadolescents, partly because a pet does not impose strict standards on the child's performance; a pet does not criticize the child if
he or she does not perform a task perfectly because a pet is unable to detect inadequacies. As a result, pet care may promote self-esteem and confidence within a preadolescent. A pet makes the preadolescent feel cared for while they themselves receive care from the young person.

Davis and Juhasz (1985) further examine the way in which an individual develops and maintains a sense of self which depends greatly on the feedback he or she receives from others, namely friends; how others perceive an individual and how the individual interprets the communicated perceptions affect his or her self-image. Because companion animals represent the ideal friend and playmate, a preadolescent may gain a lot of insight into his or her personality by the way a pet responds to and behaves with the individual.

It appears that the relationship between a companion animal and a person is ideal for meeting the developmental needs of preadolescents (Davis & Juhasz, 1985). A pet is a trustworthy companion, always there when the preadolescent needs to cuddle or talk, always providing unconditional acceptance and affection, and providing him or her with an opportunity to foster responsibility and develop a sense of accomplishment and self-worth through pet care (Davis & Juhasz, 1985). Further, it appears that childhood experiences with animals shape and influence lifelong attitudes and feelings towards them (Hart, 1993).
With regards to literature on the psychosocial benefits of companion animals to adolescence, there is very little available. Yet, it appears that relationships with companion animals tend to be more intense during this stage of development (Robin & ten Bensel, 1985). The roles that an animal may play for an adolescent include: confidant, object of love, protector, and social facilitator (Robin & ten Bensel, 1985). For adolescents, as with younger children, pets may serve as transitional objects; pets are ever present, and their constancy contributes to the adolescents feelings of security and higher self-esteem (Covert, Whiren, Keith, & Nelson, 1985).

According to Kidd and Kidd (1990), adolescents feel a special closeness to and love for their pets. It appears that a pet provides the security an individual needs as he or she begins to struggle with the move towards autonomy and individuation. It is during this process that the individual begins to withdraw from his or her human family members, therefore, there is a strong need for a close, loving relationship with a pet. As an individual achieves individuation, he or she begins to develop more mature relationships with family members, as well as others outside the family.

**Psychosocial Benefits for Adults and the Elderly**

With regards to adults, much of the literature focuses on the effects of companion animals as buffers of stressful
situations. Adults may consider their pets as part of their social network, which promotes psychosocial stability and helps to improve their quality of life by buffering or mediating stress (Wilson, 1991). Further, the bond between a child and his or her companion has an effect on a young adult’s social development (Poresky et al., 1987). It appears that adults with pets have higher self-esteem, which leads to increased social involvement (Wilson, 1991).

Later in life, elderly persons may lack motivation and a sense of usefulness, especially if they have outlived their significant others; because of this, they may be at an increased risk for loneliness, and depression (Hoffman, 1992). Although much of the literature focusing on the psychosocial benefits of companion animals for the elderly has been based on anecdotal clinical reports, it appears that this population may receive a great deal of support from their pets. Of the research studies conducted in this area, findings have been inconsistent. However, many speculate that companion animals are particularly important for those elderly individuals living alone (Boldt & Dellmann-Jenkins, 1992; Hoffman, 1992). It appears that the formation of a bond between an animal and an elderly person depends on several variables, including: previous interactions with animals throughout the life cycle, previous attitudes and attachments to pets, presence of others in the home, health status, housing situation, and
socioeconomic status (Boldt & Dellmann-Jenkins, 1992). It must be emphasized that although benefits exist for many elderly people, they do not appear to be benefits for everyone; some may perceive the presence of an animal as a burden (Boldt & Dellmann-Jenkins, 1992). Therefore, it is important that the factors involved in pet ownership and the development of attachment for the elderly be examined before assuming that companion animals are beneficial to this population (Boldt & Dellmann-Jenkins, 1992). It does appear, however, that the degree of attachment to a pet is an important predictor of potential psychosocial benefits. Under the right circumstances, association with a companion animal may enrich an elderly person's life.

Some of the reported psychosocial benefits of companion animals for the elderly include: decreasing loneliness for those living alone; providing security; fulfilling the need for love and affection; providing someone to love and care for; satisfying the need to feel useful and responsible through pet care; providing friendship; providing unconditional acceptance; and increasing social interaction (Boldt & Dellmann-Jenkins, 1992; Hoffman, 1992; Robb & Stegman, 1983). Animals provide a great amount of love and affection to their elderly companions, which leads to increased morale and higher self-esteem (Hoffman, 1992).

One research study which has been referred to in various other studies is that of Ory and Goldberg (1983).
They examined the role of companion animal ownership as a predictor of perceived happiness among elderly women. The authors contend that companion animals are a constant and unquestioning source of social contact and interaction, which have been shown to have a significant impact on physical and psychosocial well-being. Their findings suggest that several variables are predictive of perceived happiness and well-being, including: socioeconomic status, perceived health status, nature of human social interactions. They also report a positive correlation between degree of attachment to companion animals and happiness; very attached owners do not appear very different than nonowners, yet owners that are not very attached to their pets are most likely to be unhappy. Further, Ory and Goldberg report that among the elderly with higher socioeconomic status, ownership was associated with greater happiness.

**Psychosocial Benefits for the Family**

A final area to review regarding the psychosocial benefits of companion animals is the family. Pets are perceived by owners as improving the quality of family life and family relationships by stimulating laughter and family conversation, and by increasing time spent together and affection shown for each other (Barker & Barker, 1988). There are numerous reports discussing the roles and benefits pets provide to the family as a whole, as well as to
individual family members. It appears from the literature that the role a pet plays within a family depends on the family structure, emotional strengths and weaknesses, emotional stability, and social climate (Robin & ten Bensel, 1985). Within many households, the pet becomes a part of the emotional structure of the family; further, the pet may become involved in the family pathology (Robin & ten Bensel, 1985). The family members may interact with each other in relation to the pet. In some families, the pet becomes the major focus of attention and may assume a position even more important than human family members (Robin & ten Bensel, 1985).

According to Albert and Bulcroft (1988) families with children are more likely to have pets, yet attachment levels are generally low among these families; this may be because many parents believe that animals are beneficial to children's development and to induce responsibility. However, parental attitudes towards companion animals affect children's attitudes towards their pets; children of strongly attached parents are themselves very attached to the pets (Kidd & Kidd, 1990). Attachment to pets is highest among never-married, divorced, widowed, and remarried people, childless couples, newlyweds, and empty-nesters. It appears that attachment to companion animals is greatest in families with a limited number of significant others to function as sources of emotional support and affection;
perhaps these pets serve as emotional substitutes for absent family members. These findings suggest that companion animals are perceived differently at different stages of the family life cycle and play different roles related to the social structure of the family. When pets are considered family members, they play significant social and emotional roles for each family member, as well as for the family as a whole. These pets are an important source of affection and attachment for different family members throughout the family life cycle.

Entin (1986) emphasized that examining human-companion animal relationships provides unique insights into the emotional processes of families. Entin explored the ways a pet may function as part of the emotional processes in the family through photographs. Much can be revealed through a family photo album, including many intimate aspects of a family, its individual members, and the relationships between them; further, a lot can be learned about the family from the photos of the family pet. It is easy to determine how important the pet is to a family by just looking at how frequently they appear in photos, whether the photos are displayed throughout the home, and by what family members say about the photos. Entin further states that the time at which a pet is introduced into the family, perhaps surrounding a crisis or transition, is indicative of how the family deals with change and emotional issues.
Along with the positive effects of companion animals for families are the negative effects. While pets may enhance the quality of life for some family members, they may serve as stressors for others within the same family. Barker and Barker (1988) report that in some households, family members may meet their emotional needs through the pet and at the expense of normal family relations.

Soares (1985) examined the potential roles of companion animals in both functional and dysfunctional family systems. Among functional families, companion animals are often considered family members; they often function as significant others, especially for a developing child. It must be emphasized that there is a great deal of variation between families depending on where they are in the life cycle. It seems that pets can be very sensitive to the positive and negative feelings expressed within a family; pets may "act out" the feelings of family members. Often, a pet displays physical signs of stress when the family is tense or in crisis. It is within the functional family system that a companion animal may be utilized to stabilize the emotional processes of the family during conflict or crisis.

Soares (1985) further examined the ways in which the pet may be drawn into the dysfunctional family system. It appears that among these families, anxious attachments may develop between the individual family members and the
animal, along with compulsive care-giving. Also, unresolved feelings and fears may be displaced or projected onto the pet, which in some cases leads to cruelty towards the animal. Again, a pet's behavior may display the feelings expressed within the family; these behaviors may reveal psychopathology within the family system. In some families, the pet may be the wrongly identified problem, which may make the real issues that disrupt the family system more difficult to recognize (Barker & Barker, 1988).

Physiological Effects of Companion Animals

Among the available literature regarding the effects of companion animals on people's lives, a significant amount explores the physiological impact of these animals. Physiological health benefits have been examined for children, families, adults, and the elderly population. Although the literature reveals mixed results regarding physiological benefits, a review of this area is necessary to fully understand the value companion animals may provide.

Much of the literature regarding physiological effects of companion animals emphasizes that the health benefits are dependent on the owner's attachment to the animal (Friedmann & Thomas, 1985; Miller & Lago, 1990). Although the majority of American households include companion animals, their mere presence does not ensure beneficial effects for the owners. It appears that the companionship provided by the animal contributes to the physiological benefits. Further,
benefits tend to be more pronounced for those individuals and families with a limited human support network (Friedmann & Thomas, 1985; Miller & Lago, 1990). Social support elements are important to people’s health and well-being as either a buffer or mediator of life stress (Wilson, 1991). Because lack of social support increases one’s responses to stressors, which leads to a decrease in the body’s ability to fight infections and diseases, a companion animal may provide that support, alleviate the impact of stressful events, and significantly contribute to the physiological well-being of owners (Friedmann & Thomas, 1985).

According to Siegel (1993), people undergoing stressful situations or life events tend to pay more attention to physical symptoms and may find them more worrisome. Siegel (1993) proposed that circumstances that promote well-being or alleviate stress may reduce the need for doctor contacts; companion animal ownership may serve as one of those circumstances. Her findings confirm that owners had fewer doctor contacts within one year, as opposed to nonowners; companion animal ownership, particularly dog ownership, appears to moderate the impact of life events on the need for medical services.

Cardiovascular responses to interactions with companion animals have also been researched. Zajonc’s (1965, as cited in Allen, Blascovich, Tomaka, & Kelsey, 1991) social facilitation theory states that the mere presence of others
increases a person's cardiovascular arousal and affects performance. However, the presence of animal companions appears to have a relaxing or anti-anxiety effect similar to relaxation activities on people (Wilson, 1991). According to Vormbrock and Grossberg (1988), interacting with a dog is less physically arousing to people than is talking to another person. They further state that resting and touching a dog are associated with lowered blood pressure levels, regardless of the person's past associations with a dog. They postulate that tactual contact comfort with a companion animal effects a person's cardiovascular responses directly through the sense of touch.

Other studies have demonstrated the effect companion animals may have on blood pressure and heart rate. Friedmann, Katcher, Thomas, Lynch, and Messent (1983) studied blood pressure and heart rate measurements of children while reading aloud; the presence of an unfamiliar dog in a mildly stressful situation lead to a temporary decrease in blood pressure and heart rate. Friedman et al. (1983) speculated that the decrease in blood pressure and heart rate may be due to the child perceiving the situation as less threatening and more friendly in the presence of a dog. A related study examined blood pressure and heart rate measurements among college students under similar conditions; results indicate that interacting with a dog, as well as reading aloud in the presence of a dog, lowered
blood pressure and heart rate measurements (Wilson, 1987).

A similar study examined the effects of human friends and pet dogs as moderators of cardiovascular responses (Allen et al. 1991). Allen et al. (1991) were interested in the presence of others as potential moderating variables in stressful situations; additionally, they examined the degree to which potentially evaluative and nonevaluative others could act as buffers to cardiovascular reactivity during a stressful situation. Within the study, animal companions were perceived by the subjects as nonevaluative, whereas human friends were perceived as evaluative. The findings indicate that, while involved in a mental arithmetic problem, subjects' cardiovascular reactivity was buffered by the companion animal; cardiovascular reactivity was substantially greater in the presence of a human friend, than in the presence of the animal. Nonevaluative social support is critical to buffering physiological responses to acute stress; therefore, it appears that a nonevaluative animal is potentially capable of moderating reactions to stressful situations.

It also appears that companion animals may reduce the risk of coronary heart disease and increase the likelihood of surviving a heart attack; animals act as potential mitigators of stress, loneliness, depression, and anxiety, which are all risk factors of coronary heart disease (Patronek & Glickman, 1992). In a landmark study by
Friedmann, Katcher, Lynch, and Thomas (1980), companion animal ownership was associated with a significant improvement in survival rates one year after release from a coronary care unit.

A specific population that is at heightened risk for physiological problems is the elderly. There has been some research regarding the benefits elderly people may receive from animal companionship; however, findings have been inconsistent. Whereas some studies report no distinguishable physiological benefits from companion animals for the elderly (Ory & Goldberg, 1983; Robb & Stegman, 1983), others report significant benefits. Lago, Delaney, Miller, and Grill (1989) report that among the elderly, companion animal ownership and positive attitudes towards animals are significant predictors of self-reported health. According to Garrity, Stallones, Marx, and Johnson (1989), companion animal ownership and strong attachment to the animal may help protect the elderly from a decline in health caused by stress factors. Their findings state that strongly attached elderly owners with a minimal amount of human social support reported less illnesses than the less attached owners with greater human social support. Therefore, it appears that the strongly attached elderly companion animal owner may benefit physiologically by being protected from the decline in health due to stressful life events.

From the literature available regarding the
physiological effects of companion animals, it can be generalized that interactions with animals can have beneficial health consequences among people with positive feelings and strong attachments towards animals (Siegel, 1993). With this in mind, it is not surprising that humans often turn to companion animals in times of stress.

**Pet-Facilitated Psychotherapy**

Throughout the past two decades, as the value of companion animals for people of all ages has been recognized, there has been increasing interest in programs which bring animals into the therapeutic treatment setting. Pet-facilitated therapy (PFT) is described as integrating animals into therapeutic activities (Brickel, 1986). Yet, all PFT programs are not alike. One type of program simply brings animals together with people; this is most widely used in nursing home facilities. Another type of PFT program is referred to as pet-facilitated psychotherapy (PFP); an animal mediates therapy under the guidance of a therapist, clinician, or paraprofessional to enhance the usual therapeutic curriculum (Brickel, 1986). It should be noted that PFP has not been developed to substitute mainstream psychotherapy; instead, it is intended as a supplement to traditional therapy (Brickel, 1986).

There have been many reports claiming benefits for PFT. However, many of these reports have been based on anecdotal literature and case studies; of the research studies that
have been conducted, findings have been inconsistent. It is important that the literature be reviewed in order to develop appropriate methods to determine the potential effectiveness of PFT programs. Because there is a vast amount of literature in the PFT area, the review has been limited to therapy programs for the elderly population and to PFP programs for people of all ages.

A pioneer in the PFP area is Boris Levinson; his work within this field sparked interest among many practitioners and researchers. Levinson (1984) points out that animals can be helpful during the vulnerable stages of life, namely youth and old age, and that people can satisfy emotional needs through their association with animals. Levinson believes that people have an innate need for affiliating with animals, and that animals are intrinsically therapeutic (Levinson, 1969; Brickel, 1986). An animal is considered therapeutic because of their affinity for attachment and display of unconditional love and affection (Brickel, 1986).

According to Levinson (1984), two characteristics that form the foundation PFP are touch and attachment-formation which evolves into companionship. He states that touch comfort and companionship contribute to the effectiveness of all therapeutic modalities; however, due to the social and ethical taboo of touch between the therapist and client in the therapeutic setting, it appears that the introduction of an animal may be considered a surrogate for touch comfort.
As infants, the association between touch and pleasure or relief from anxiety begins to develop. While the mother is the primary source of such touch during infancy, others, including animals, will be able to satisfy an individual's need for physical contact throughout life. As infants grow older, touch begins to signify security, love, caring, and affection, which becomes an important component of life (Levinson, 1984). Therefore, it appears reasonable to conclude that petting an animal during the therapy session may elicit these feelings within the client.

Within PFP, an animal helps in various ways, including: acting as a link between therapist and client; relieving anxiety; drawing out emotional responsiveness; distracting the client from dysfunctional cognitive distress; enhancing self-esteem and identity; facilitating interpersonal and social interaction; building upon the client's inner resources; and enriching personal development (Brickel, 1986). PFP is compatible with therapies which attempt to increase insight and restructure personality; it brings about change within the person by promoting self-understanding (Levinson, 1984).

As a therapeutic adjunct, an animal may decrease a client's initial anxiety. An animal permitting a client to pet it gives the individual a feeling of acceptance; because the animal belongs to the therapist, the client may experience the therapist as accepting as well (Levinson,
Petting an animal provides the touch comfort an anxious client may need as he or she begins to self-disclose. Also, the animal may assist in the development of a therapeutic relationship between the client and therapist. As therapy continues, transference issues may be revealed through the client's behavior towards the animal; the client may behave differently with the animal depending on how he or she is experiencing the therapist (Levinson, 1984).

According to Levinson (1984), animals may also have a therapeutic effect on an individual in the absence of a professional therapist. The effectiveness of animals as sole therapists depends on the intensity of the relationship between an individual and his or her companion animal. However, the individual must possess self-directing capabilities in order to fully benefit therapeutically while interacting with the animal. As a sole therapist, the companion animal allows the individual to express himself or herself, release emotions, and overcome inhibitions felt in the presence of a human therapist. As an individual interacts with the animal alone, he or she may relax while petting the animal; this allows the person to get in touch with his or her emotions and inner self which may be difficult to do with a human therapist. The individual then takes responsibility for whatever insights he or she makes. An individual with a close attachment to his or her animal will feel unconditionally accepted; he or she may perceive
the animal as understanding and caring, which are characteristics of an effective therapist (Levinson, 1984).

PFP can benefit not only the emotionally debilitated, but also those individuals that are well and seem to function well in society (Levinson, 1984). PFP has been implemented in individual, group, and family therapy settings, with children, youth, adults, and elderly people. Animals appear to benefit a person in different ways as the individual progresses through the stages of life (Netting, Wilson, & New, 1987); the therapeutic effects of a companion animal are related to individual client characteristics (Davis & Juhasz, 1985).

Companion animals have contributed to therapeutic interventions with children and youth. Almost universally, a spontaneous bond develops between a child and an animal, especially a dog, which leads to the development of empathy within the child (Filiatre, Millot, Montagner, Eckerlin, & Gagnon, 1988). A child will feel safe communicating to a companion animal and sees it as a confidant; in this way, a companion animal acts as a bridge between the therapist and the child, and thus helps establish a relationship between the two (Mallon, 1992; Davis & Juhasz, 1985). After some time in therapy, the relationship begins to transfer from the child and the animal to the child and the therapist (Nebbe, 1991). It is then the therapist’s job to incorporate the relationship between the two into trusted
therapeutic interventions (Davis & Juhasz, 1985).

Literature emphasizes that animals enhance physical and emotional health, improve psychosocial functioning, provide companionship, reduce isolation, and contribute to the development of responsible independent behavior (Mallon, 1992; Davis & Juhasz, 1985). Because the child perceives an animal as accepting and dependent on others, his or her sense of control, responsibility, and self-confidence increases (Davis & Juhasz, 1985). Further, companion animals fulfill a child's needs for unconditional acceptance, loyalty, trust, love and affection, and security. It appears that animals have a great deal of therapeutic potential with young people.

Within a therapy session, an animal helps cheer the child up and helps him or her communicate feelings more easily. They relieve anxiety and provide emotional support as the child begins to explore his or her emotions in the presence of the therapist (Mallon, 1992).

Emotionally impaired or abused children appear to receive a great deal of benefit from animals in the therapy session. These children become more readily involved with animals than with other people (Nebbe, 1991). For these children, the animal represents someone to love and be loved by unconditionally (Mallon, 1992). According to Filiatre et al. (1988), dogs appear to be the most effective animal in improving the emotional, social, and cognitive development
of emotionally or mentally impaired children, as well as rejected, neglected, or abused children. Interactions between the child and the dog appear to counterbalance the poor interactions between the child and the abusive parent or parents. An animal may also represent a substitute for human social relationships; this appears most often among abused and delinquent youth, who may perceive the animal as a love object in place of an abusive parent (Davis & Juhasz, 1985). An added benefit of animals for delinquent youth in therapy is their ability to get him or her to respond openly and with less hostility, as well as to decrease aggressive behavior (Nebbe, 1991).

One PFP program which deserves special attention was implemented at Michael Reese Hospital in Chicago in 1981 (Rochberg-Halton, 1985). The program was developed to bring adolescent psychiatric inpatients to an animal shelter, called the Treehouse Animal Foundation, for neglected, injured, and abused cats. The significance of the name, Treehouse, contributed to the therapeutic effects; a treehouse is a metaphoric home, where children enter into their own world and play at being adults (Rochberg-Halton, 1985). The intent of the program was to allow the adolescents to work as volunteers within the Treehouse, their "home" away from their hospital "home." As volunteers, the adolescents took on the role of caretakers for the cats, thereby increasing their sense of self-
confidence and responsibility; the Treehouse provided the adolescents with an environment to improve their sense of self-worth (Rochberg-Halton, 1985). Further, the adolescents had an opportunity to interact with the cats in a way that stimulated the expression of emotions and self-dialogue through play and caretaking activities (Rochberg-Halton, 1985). The cats enabled the adolescents to express their emotions freely, without the perception of judgement which characterizes human interactions. Also, communication was further eased due to the nonverbal nature of the animals; the cats simply "listen" to what the adolescent has to say, without criticizing, lecturing, or interrupting. These nonthreatening interactions with the cats allowed the adolescents to experience positive emotions as they worked in an environment where others depended on them to be responsible individuals. Love, affection, contact comfort, and the nurturance of animals helps to socialize troubled youth into nurturing, respected roles within society (Mallon, 1992).

It was noted by Rochberg-Halton (1985) that throughout the Treehouse program, many important personal issues came to light for the adolescents. It appeared that the self-dialogues that took place while caring for the cats allowed them to articulate their inner experiences more readily.

With regards to the benefits of PFT for the elderly, much of the literature focuses on programs implemented in
nursing home facilities. As elderly persons enter nursing homes, they must give up most of their personal possessions and the security of their own homes (Gammonley & Yates, 1991). This can be particularly upsetting for many individuals; feelings of depression, helplessness, and disorganization, along with rapid deterioration of health, often follow admittance into a nursing home (Gammonley & Yates, 1991). Because studies have suggested that companion animals contribute to overall well-being, many nursing facilities either include companion animals as residents themselves, or invite special pet-visitation programs into the home on a regular basis. PFT programs within nursing homes may alleviate loneliness, promote caring behavior and responsibility, instill feelings of security, and promote health and longevity (Gammonley & Yates, 1991).

As resident companion animals, they enhance the nursing home environment. The animals promote social interaction and conversation among the residents (Boldt & Dellmann-Jenkins, 1992). Also, the less impaired residents may participate in caring for the animals, which promotes responsibility and feelings of usefulness (Gammonley & Yates, 1991). Some nursing homes develop individualized programs for these residents; this involves the development of individual goals and assessment and evaluative procedures (Gammonley & Yates, 1991).

Pet visitation programs implemented in nursing homes
vary. Some programs involve volunteers regularly entering the facilities with their own pets to visit residents; the volunteers take their pets room to room to allow the residents to interact with the animals (Yates, 1987). Using this approach, animals provide contact comfort and nonjudgemental acceptance to the elderly residents (Boldt & Dellmann-Jenkins, 1992). Other programs gather the volunteers, their pets, and the residents together in a group setting to interact with the animals; this approach facilitates socialization among residents (Yates, 1987). During group visits, residents are encouraged to reflect on former pets, which leads to reminiscence and life review (Boldt & Dellman-Jenkins, 1992). Pet visitation programs appear to contribute to changes in elderly residents' personality, activity level, and social involvement, as well as improving quality of life (Yates, 1987).

Although much of the literature emphasizes the benefits of companion animal programs within nursing homes, it must be noted that some residents do not receive pleasure from these interactions. Also, while these programs may have a significant therapeutic impact on many residents, they may only serve a recreational purpose for others (Boldt & Dellmann-Jenkins, 1992). It is necessary to evaluate the needs of each resident before implementing a therapeutic program within the nursing home (Boldt & Dellmann-Jenkins, 1992).
Group pet visitation programs are also implemented in inpatient psychiatric facilities. Holcomb and Meacham (1989) report that introducing companion animals during group work provides benefits for the inpatients as well as the clinical staff. For the inpatients, the companion animals provide an opportunity for socialization and interpersonal skills building, as well as an opportunity to receive unconditional acceptance and affection. Also, the pet visits seem to attract more patients, including the socially isolated, than any other group topic offered to the inpatients. Therefore, during these visits, the clinical staff have an added opportunity for observing the inpatients in a social setting, which allows them to make more accurate diagnostic assessments and to develop appropriate treatment plans.
CHAPTER 3

IMPLICATIONS FOR PSYCHOTHERAPEUTIC PRACTICE

After reviewing the available literature on the benefits of companion animals for people of all ages, a lot can be drawn and applied to psychotherapeutic practice. Before practitioners implement interventions or programs based on the literature, several precautions must be taken. There are many issues that need to be considered, including: the characteristics of the person, the therapist, and the animal; the nature and intensity of the attachment between the person and the animal; the costs and risks of incorporating an animal into a therapy session, institution, or nursing home; the health factors related to the presence of animals; the planning of care-giving responsibilities; and the ethical treatment of the animals. Also, implications may be made for the adolescent population by understanding the literature on other developmental populations.

The strength of a PFP program lies in the ability of the animals to draw out emotional and behavioral responses, provide a distraction from dysfunctional cognitive distress, and enhance or establish inner strengths; it is then up to the therapist to implement these abilities within an
intervention regimen for the benefit of the individual client.

Brickel (1986) describes therapist, client, and animal characteristics that are best suited for PFP. The following discussion is based on his suggestions and implications. The therapist that decides to employ PFP must genuinely enjoy animals; if he or she is reluctant, the consequences could be damaging for both the client and the animal. Implementation of PFP is demanding; not only does the therapist need to be creative with the interventions employed and sensitive to the needs of the animal and the client, he or she also needs to meet the requirements of responsible pet ownership and the ethical treatment of the animal. Further, the therapist must be able to depend on another individual as a backup caregiver to the animal in his or her absence, or for overnight and weekends.

When a therapist decides to implement PFP, he or she should introduce the animal by asking the client if it would be okay if the pet remain in the office so that it does not have to be alone at home all day while the therapist works. It is best that the therapist not tell the client that it would be good for him or her, as this may hinder the benefits people naturally receive from animals. Throughout the therapy sessions, the therapist directs the role the animal plays for the client; the therapist may draw attention to the animal at certain points and comment on his
or her behavior as it may apply to the client and his or her behavior. Further, the animal may provide contact comfort to the client, as well as be affectionate with him or her during pivotal emotional points within the session.

With regards to the client, assessment of his or her suitability for PFP is essential. PFP should not be implemented with clients with a history of cruelty to animals or violence to him or herself or others. Also, people with allergies or phobias should not be exposed to PFP. Therapists should screen clients by interviewing them regarding previous experiences with animals. It may be beneficial to gain this information during intake interviews with clients; questions about past and present interactions with animals can be included on intake checklists.

Just as the client should be assessed for his or her suitability for PFP, so should the animal. Although one type of animal can not be considered better than another, the therapist or the client may have a preference. The ideal animal would be comfortable around people, housebroken, trained, healthy, small to medium in size, low maintenance, moderately active, and affectionate. It is also essential that special considerations be made for the animal. He or she should not be made to sit in sessions all day long without breaks; a special area where the animal can go to rest and be alone should be designed. Also, the therapist should watch for signs of fatigue and stress in
the animal and should take precautions so that he or she does not become ill. The animal should also be exercised and taken out often throughout the day.

The benefits of companion animals, although being very real for many people, do not exist for others; animal companionship is not for everyone. Therefore, it is essential to assess whether or not the introduction of an animal, whether in a person’s home, an institution, or a therapy session, might be disruptive, unsettling, frightening, or harmful. It is also essential that the animal be evaluated by a veterinarian prior to incorporating him or her into a program. It would be beneficial if human service professionals and animal care professionals worked together to provide the most appropriate information and referrals for the implementation of PFP programs.

With regards to research with the elderly, whatever benefits companion animals may provide require evaluation within the context of life course development. The ability of an older person to form a bond with an animal and gain some benefit from it, depends on multiple variables, including: socioeconomic status, housing situation, health status, perceived well-being, early experiences with pets, and previous attachments to pets. Individuals who have had a strong attachment to pets earlier in life may have a strong attachment to pets later in life; however, a pet may be perceived as burdensome in later life for those
individuals who have no past experience, or negative experiences, with pets. The degree of attachment the older person has for an animal is an important predictor of the likelihood of physiological and psychosocial benefits. Within a nursing home as well, the quality of the PFT program depends on the nature of attachment that individual residents feel for the animals; however, the animals in such facilities usually attach to the staff. Residents may be upset because the animal is not affectionate towards them; therefore, it is important that the residents be actively involved in caring for the animals, so that they become dependent on them for the fulfillment of their needs.

Implications for adolescents may be made by evaluating benefits of companion animals for other developmental populations, as well as by focusing on Erikson's psychosocial theory of development. During adolescence, individuals face the developmental tasks of identity formation and a move towards autonomy while moving away from family (Steinberg, 1989); this can be a very emotional period for many adolescents. The companionship of an animal may lessen the stress experienced by providing contact comfort, unconditional acceptance, affection, empathic listening, and confidentiality. Also, what the animal does not provide, namely criticism and judgement, is beneficial as well.

PFP appears to be the ideal therapeutic intervention
for the adolescent population. An animal and an empathic therapist provide the perfect team for individuals struggling with the many issues they face during this stage of development. As psychotherapeutic practitioners work with adolescents, they should carefully consider the potential benefits of companion animals and PFP for their clients. Consideration of implementation should include reviewing available literature on the population they treat, as well as literature focusing on other populations. This will insure that the therapist has a complete understanding of the research available to date, which is necessary before implementing PFP interventions.
CHAPTER 4
RECOMMENDATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Much of the literature reviewed here has been based on anecdotal case reports by clinicians reporting the benefits of companion animals for diverse populations. Of the literature reviewed based on research studies, there have been inconsistent findings. The mixed results are perhaps due to methodological weaknesses, relatively small sample sizes, and unreliable measures. Also, the complexities surrounding human-companion animal relationships, as well as the uniqueness of every individual person and every individual companion animal, contributes to the difficulty in establishing appropriate research designs.

Future research should focus on a number of areas. There is a great need for the development and use of more sophisticated research methods to test and document what many believe works in terms of the benefits of companion animals. It is also necessary to employ appropriate sample sizes and matched controls so that generalization of the findings can be made. Longitudinal studies would also be of importance in this field, as the benefits of companion animals change over the life course. Experimental studies are needed as well to determine the effects, instead of just
correlations or associations, of companion animals. Further, replication of studies is essential to corroborate or dispute available findings.

With regards to the therapeutic use of animals, it is necessary to develop evaluative measures in order to determine the effectiveness of PFP programs. This is necessary in order to explain variability and improve predictability of outcomes when an animal is introduced in therapy. Also, there is a need for diagnostic and treatment models before PFP may be incorporated into a therapeutic regime.

Concerning research with families, it is necessary to examine the benefits of companion animals for all kinds of families, including combined families, families with special needs, and foster families. Because each family system is unique, as are all the members of the family, it is important to realize the potential complexities of introducing a companion animal.

As future research examines the physiological benefits of companion animals, it is necessary to focus attention on the potential effects these animals have on coping behaviors of people of all ages. Do pets enhance human coping abilities simply by distracting people from their worries, or do they contribute in a different manner? It seems possible that the physiological benefits from a relationship between a person and a companion animal may depend on
situational and personal characteristics which remain to be identified. Longitudinal studies would appear necessary in order to fully examine the long term benefits of pet, as well as how health variables change over time. Further, within these research studies, non-pet owners would be needed to serve as controls.

Throughout the review of the literature, there was relatively little available applying to adolescence. This is perhaps the most important area of future research, as it has been suggested that adolescents may gain a great deal, psychosocially, from their interactions with companion animals. Without appropriate research designs and measures, application to the adolescent population is difficult.

There are a number of important questions still unanswered, as revealed throughout the review of the literature. There is much research to conduct before the picture of the benefits of companion animals to people of all ages is clear.
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The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Date

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