

Empathy as a Result of Pet Ownership

Zainab Hussain Bhutto* and Hina Hassan,

Institute of Professional Psychology,
Bahria University, Karachi Campus.

Abstract

The purpose of the present study is to find out the difference of empathy levels between pet owners who have owned pets in their formative years (i.e. 5-15 years) and non-pet owners. Purposive sampling has been used in order to select the individuals. The sample consists of 40 individuals divided into two groups, the pet owners (n=20) and the non-pet owners (n= 20). Each group consists of 10 males and 10 females. The mean age of the individuals is 30 years. Multidimensional Emotional Empathy Scale (Caruso & Mayer, 1998) has been used in order to assess the scores of empathy. For the statistical analysis of data, t-test was applied. The results showed significant difference between the levels of empathy of the pet owners and non pet owners at $p=0.0004$ level. Pet owners were found to have higher levels of empathy as compared to non pet owners.

Key Words: Empathy, Pet ownershorship

A tamed animal or bird kept as a companion is a pet (Elaine & Anne, 1998). Keeping pets range from keeping the most common animals such as dogs, cats, birds, rats, fish and to the most uncommon such as cubs, crocodiles, turtles and lizards. Pet ownership is done at every age during an individual's life and has benefits throughout one's life. However, pet ownership done during childhood instils some characteristics that are beneficial for the human being for the whole life.

Keeping pets is not just a hobby; it serves as the basis of social development for children and gives companionship to adults. It is an innate human need to give comfort and care as called the need for nurturance by Henry Murray (1938). Fulfilling this need by keeping pets has a psychological impact on the individual the chance.

Owning a pet gives an individual to prepare one's self for many real life situations such as social interactions and dealing with death of loved ones because it is sometimes difficult for an individual to deal with the death of the pets. Pets are great comfort in times of conflicts and grief as they provide us with unconditional love and attention. Thus it inculcates in a person the emotional strength to deal with the loss of loved ones.

Children are the individuals who love the pets the most and consider them the part of their family. Keeping pets boosts the child development in a positive way. In children, keeping pets can provide great benefit as it stimulates the social development of children. Children find pets as their loyal friends and a source of comfort and give them warmth and attention. In order to study this effect of pet ownership, research (Davis, 1987) was done which suggests that children perceive their pets to be close friends and they form strong attachment with their pets.

Children with pets are also known to be better socially integrated. It is because with pets they learn to maintain relationships which they then generalize to other people whom they meet in their lives. In addition to being more socially integrated, children who own pets are more popular among class mates also (Endenburg & Baarda, 1995).

Apart from benefits specific to adults and children there are medical benefits of pet ownership that are common to children and adults. Keeping pets have medical benefits ranging from lowering of blood pressure to reduced stress levels.

There have been many researches finding out the relationship between pet ownership and the resulting health benefits. One such research was conducted by Friedman et al. (1980) which found out that the pet ownership results in higher survival rates from myocardial infarction due to decrease in mortality rate in patients with coronary heart disease who own pets. The research suggests that people who keep pets and suffer from a major illness are able to survive more than a year after major surgery or heart attack.

The benefits of pet ownership are not limited to the medical benefits only. The pet ownership has psychological benefits for the pet owners. Pets are also known to increase self-esteem in a pet owner as well as strengthening of the self-concept. It is because a pet owner feels very knowledgeable about his or her own pets and tends to tell other people excitedly about the pet. Many researches have been conducted in order to check the relationship between self-esteem and childhood pet ownership. One such study (Houtte & Jarvis 1995) confirmed that pet ownership in children leads to greater self-esteem.

Pet ownership in addition to providing the above mentioned benefits also increases empathy in a person. Empathy is defined as “responding to another person’s affective state with a vicarious emotional reaction that resembles whatever emotion is experienced by the other individual (Darley, 1993; Eisenberg, et.al., 1991). Empathy is an important psychological variable that strengthens relationships and gives a person the ability to put one’s self in another shoes and experience his or her feelings and emotions. Empathy is important in communicating with others as it enables a person to consider another person’s opinions and viewpoints as well.

Empathy is an essential component of emotions that refers to general emotion and a feeling of familiarity and physical reaction of verbal and nonverbal communication. Empathy refers to a feeling of connectedness and “being in another’s shoes”. Some individuals are more empathetic and some individuals find it very hard to relate to others and have a sense of other’s feelings (Roy, 2010).

This intriguing relationship between pet ownership and empathy has led to many researches which have been conducted in order to confirm whether such relationship exists. There are several researches supporting the fact that empathy is induced by the act of pet ownership.

One such research was done by Thompson and Gullone (2003) that resulted in the fact that by keeping a bond with animals, people tend to get empathic towards other living beings.

Another research done by Hyde, et. al. (1983) was based on assumption that pet ownership can alleviate depression, alienation, loneliness and it can also increase self-esteem and empathy. This was assumed because when people keep pets, they gain unconditional love and responsibility from the pets. The experiment revolved around college-aged pet owners and non-pet owners.

The experiment got the results that pet owners have high empathy and trust scores.

Bryant (1985); Poresky and Hendrix (1990) did a research on the relationship of empathy and pet ownership and found out that children who own pets feel more empathy towards people than the children who don’t own pets.

One another research done by Daly, Beth and Morton (2009) focused on finding the relationship between empathy and child and adult pet ownership. The finding of this research verifies the relationship between pet ownership and empathic development in both children and adults.

Current research has been carried out in order to bring forth the importance of pet ownership in inculcating empathy. Findings of the research can be used in the field of Psychotherapy while treating patients and improving physical as well as the psychological health of individuals as highlighted in the researches mentioned above. For the present research the following hypothesis have been formulated;

Individuals who own pets in their formative years would score high on the empathy scale as compared to the individuals who have not owned pets in their formative years.

Method

Participants:

The total sample of the present study includes 40 participants with 20 males and 20 females that were equally divided into two groups comprising of individuals who have never owned a pet and pet those who were owners. The criterion for pet ownership was that each individual had had a pet (a dog or a cat or both) at least for once in life for at least two years in their formative time period (5-15 years). The sample has been selected on the basis of non-probability sampling by using the purposive sampling method. The age range of the participants is between 20-55 years with the mean age of 30 years.

Material:

A consent form was used to reflect the volunteering of the individuals to participate in this research.

A Demographic Form was used to get information on demographic variables i.e. Name, age, gender, duration of pet ownership, and types of pets owned.

Multidimensional Emotional Empathy Scale (Caruso & Mayer, 1998) was used to measure the empathy level of each individual. It consists of 30 self-reported items. It is a five point liker scale with ranges from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. The scale demonstrated moderate to high internal consistency reliability (alpha = .86).

Procedure:

The participants were contacted individually and all the individuals were given information about the nature of the study. First, the individuals read and signed the consent form that reflected their will to participate in the research.

The demographic form was then filled by the individuals in order to get information on demographic variables such as age, gender; kind of pets (e.g. dogs or cats) was taken from the individuals.

Later, the individuals in both the groups were given the Multidimensional Emotional Empathy Scale and were asked to fill up the Scale. Afterwards, the forms were scored in order to obtain the empathy scores of each participant.

Results

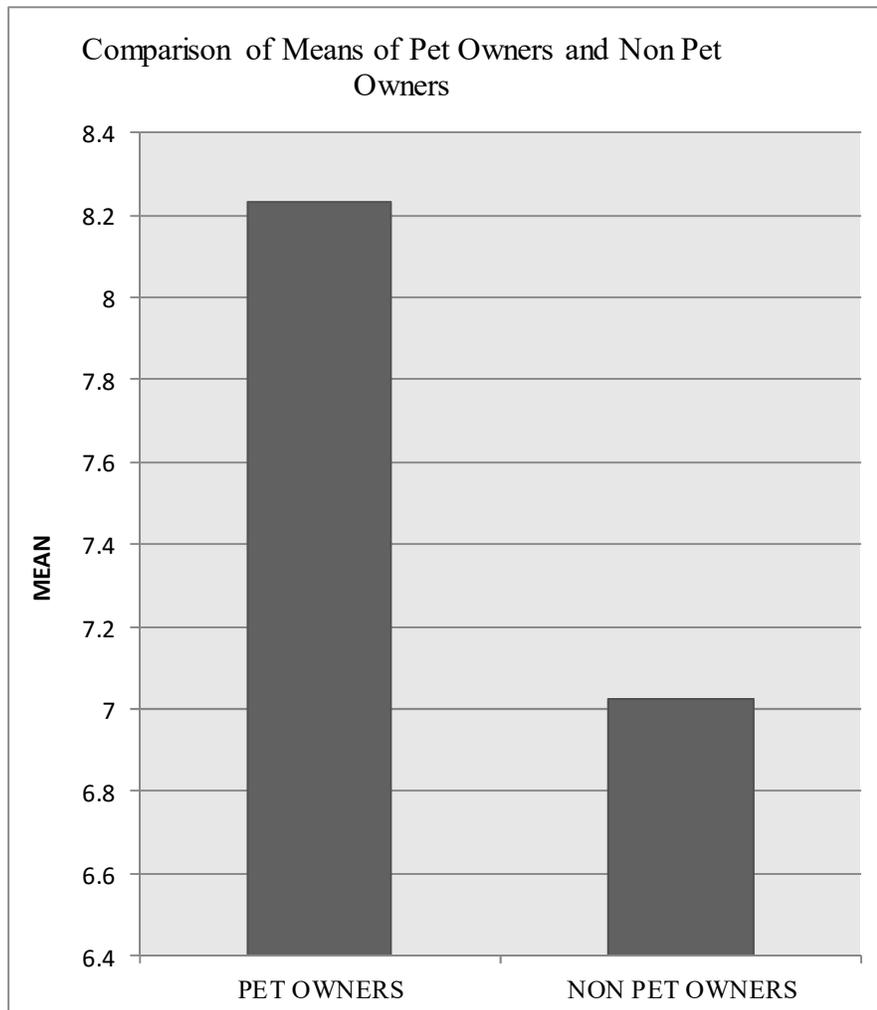
Table 1

Table Showing the Difference in the Empathy Scores of Pet Owners and Non-Pet Owners

Groups	N	Mean	St. Dev	df	t
Empathy					
Pet owners	20	8.232	0.642	17	4.04
Non Pet owners	20	7.022	0.698		

Table showing differences in the Empathy scores of Pet owners and Non pet owners at $p=0.0004$ level, indicating a significant difference between the Pet owners and Non-pet owners on the variable of Empathy.

Figure 1: Figure Showing the Comparison of Mean Scores of Empathy of Pet Owners and Non Pet Owners



Discussion

The results seem consistent with the hypothesis showing significant difference in the empathy scores between pet owners and non-pet owners (Table 1 and Figure 1). The results reflect that people who have owned pets in their formative time period i.e. between 5-15 years, their empathy levels are higher than those who have not owned pets. It is because keeping pets is a mutual relationship of love and affection. People who own pets treat them as their family members and they miss their pets when they are not around. They feed their pets and bathe them and take care of them in every possible manner. This is how this relationship develops which teaches the pet owners to feel for them and also feel their distress and happiness. Later, the same ability to feel another's pain and distress is transferred on to other human beings present in the environment.

Having a pet enables a person to hone an empathic skill in a child that continues to exist within the individual throughout his or her life. Research indicates the relationship between childhood pet ownership and development of empathy, carried out by E.S. Paul (1992) which states that there is a possibility that by interacting with pets that are dependent totally on the owner, children learn to understand the feelings and needs of animals and of human beings that are around at an early age. It is because a pet owner always knows when the pet is feeling low and is in pain. Although animals cannot express themselves, but a pet owner can always figure out his pet's feelings. This means that one puts another's feeling under consideration and feels other's pain and feelings.

To summarize, keeping pets can enhance an individual's personality. By keeping pets, one is better able to understand other's feelings because pets can inculcate empathy in an individual.

Further research on these lines should be done because there is not much research literature available on this topic in Pakistan. As pet ownership is becoming more and more common in Pakistan, such relationships may be researched so that people can become aware of the importance of pets in their lives.

References

- Bryant, B. K. (1985). The neighbourhood walk: Sources of support in middle childhood. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 50,
- Caruso, D. R., & Mayer, J. D. (1998). *Multidimensional emotional empathy scale*. Retrieved from <http://pages.uoregon.edu/lougee/Dreiling%20Summer%2009/readings/Empathy%2520Scale%25202000.pdf>
- Daly., Beth., & Morton, L.L. (2009). Empathic differences in adults as a function of childhood and adult pet ownership and pet type. *Anthrozoos: A Multidisciplinary Journal of the Interactions of People and Animals*, 22 (4).
- Darley, J. M. (1993). Research on morality: possible approaches, actual approaches. *Psychological Science*, 4, 353-357. In R. A. Baron & D. Byrne. (1997). *Social Psychology* (8th ed). Allyn and Bacon.
- Davis, J. H. (1987). Preadolescent self-concept development and pet ownership. *Anthrozoos* 1: 90-94. In V.V. Vidovic, V.V. Stetic & D. Bratko. (1999). Pet ownership, type of pet and socio-emotional development of school children. *Anthrozoos*, 12 (4), 211-217.
- Eisenberg, N., Fabes, R. A., Schallere, M., Miller, P., Carlo, G., Paulin, R., Shea, C., & Shell, R. (1991). Personality and socialization correlates of vicarious emotional responding. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 61, 459-470. In R. A. Baron & D. Byrne. (1997). *Social Psychology* (8th ed). Allyn and Bacon.
- Elain, H. & Anne, S. (ed.). (1998). Chambers essential English dictionary. Edinburgh chambers Harrap, Oxford University.
- Endenburg, N., & Baarda, B. (1995). In V.V. Vidovic, V.V. Stetic, D. Bratko. (1999). Pet ownership, type of pet and socio-emotional development of school children. *Anthrozoos*, 12, (4), 211-217. Retrieved from <http://www.deltasociety.org/document.doc?id=24>
- Friedmann, E., Katcher, A.H., Lynch, J.J., & Thomas, S.A. (1980). Animal companions and one-year survival of patients after discharge from a coronary care unit. *Public Health Rep*, 95,

307-312. In L. Owens, (2010). *Animal and human connections therapeutic yet undervalued*. Retrieved from <http://www.suite101.com/content/animal-and-human-connections-therapeutic-but-undervalued-a290651>

Houtte, V.B. & Jarvis, P. A. (1995). The role of pets in preadolescent psychosocial development. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 16: 463-479. In V.V. Vidovic, V.V. Stetic & D. Bratko. (1999). Pet ownership, type of pet and socio-emotional development of school children. *Anthrozoos*, 12, (4), 211-217. Retrieved from <http://www.deltasociety.org/Document.Doc?id=24> Hyde, Karen R., Kudrek, L. & Larson, P. (1983). Relationships between pet ownership and self-esteem, social sensitivity, and interpersonal trust.

Murray, H. (1938). Murray's system of needs. Retrieved from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murray%27s_system_of_needs

Paul, E. S. (1992) Pets in childhood, individual variation in childhood pet ownership. PhD Thesis, University of Cambridge, England. In N. Endenburg & B. Baarda. (1995). the role of pets in enhancing human well-being: effects on child development. Reprinted from *The Waltham Book of Human-Animal Interactions: Benefits and Responsibilities*.

Poresky, R. H. & Hendrix, C. (1990). Differential effects of pet presence and pet bonding on young children. *Psychological Reports*, 67, 51-54.

Roy, S. (2010) The Psychology of empathy. Retrieved from <http://www.futurehealth.org/populum/page.php?f=The-Psychology-of-Empathy-by-Saberi-Roy-100620-281.html>

Thompson, K. L. & Gullone, E. (2003). Promotion of empathy and prosocial behavior in children through humane education. *Australian Psychologist*, 38 (3), 175 – 182.