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## ***Human Animal Relationship: A Source of Wellbeing and a Therapeutic Catalytic Tool***

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### ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to better understand the general beliefs and attitudes toward companion animals in Puerto Rico. This relationship becoming a possible source of wellbeing and a therapeutic catalytic tool in our participant life's. Data was collected using an auto-administered questionnaire developed by the authors. The target populations of this survey were Puerto Rican residents, aged at least over 21 years. The total data collected was a total of 1,327 responses. The results shows that 84% of the participants indicated they have an animal companions in their home, only 16% said they have none. Almost 82% participants currently have a total of 4 (mean = 3.8) animal companions. The majority (39%) of the participants indicated that they spend 12 hours or more with their companion animals. Concerning activities with their companion animal's participants said that they stroked (94%), played (92%), talked (89%) and walked (57%) their companion animals. Concerning the human animal bond, participants rated their companion animals as extremely important (72%), very important (24%), neutral (4%), not that important (0.4%), and not important (0.1%). They also rated their companion animals as family members (99%). The results of this study align with other research on the topic that show that human animal interaction enhance and facilitate positive traits in us (Hediger and Turner, 2014). This in turn becomes a fundamental opportunity in the work of counseling psychology within the context of psychotherapy to create more effective interventions and take into account a very important relationship in the participant's life. Companion animals should become part of the factors we consider when working and developing therapeutic plans for our participants (Thew, Marco, Erdman and Caro, 2015).  
Keywords: pets, companion animals, human-animal bond, animal assisted intervention.

**R**esearch on human-animal interactions (H-AI) has begun to be recognized as an integral and legitimate part of studying human interactions almost recently, just a few decades ago (González Ramírez, Quezada Berumen, and Landero Hernández, 2014; Thew, Marco, Erdman and Caro, 2015). Literature points out that all human beings tend to maintain bonds with non-human animals (Pacelle, 2011). This interaction is a process mediated by multiple factors such as individual preferences, social and cultural norms (Allen, 2013).

Thus, several authors have highlighted that in order to understand the interaction we need to

understand these factors and how they impact the relationships between the human-animal and the non-human animal in the different contexts around the globe (González-Ramírez, Ortíz-Jiménez and Landero-Hernández, 2013; López-Cepero, Perea-Mediavilla, Sarasola, and Tejada, 2015; Marx, et al., 2010). Some of this recent research has already begun to address this challenges while focusing at the same time on the impact of the H-AI in the processes of health and disease (Thew, Marco, Erdman and Caro, 2015).

Literature on the H-AI has consistently shown the benefits that animal companions have in the physical, emotional and psychological aspects of health and well-being (Fine, 2010). According to Palley, O'Rourke and Niemi (2010) this relationship has generally a positive impact in the lives of humans. Specifically, some of the identified benefits are: a) increase in good humor, laughter and play, b) increase body relaxation state, c) body contact and unconditional emotional closeness, d) increase in social interactions, e) provision of a conversation partner and important family members (Boissonneault, 2010). Furthermore, research has also suggested that the interaction with them over the long term can reduce responses of the autonomous nervous system (González-Ramírez, Ortíz-Jiménez and Landero-Hernández, 2013). Some possible variables that have been pointed out as mediators of this relationship include the perception of unconditional acceptance, the lack of judgment, and the provision of love (Huton, 2014). This in turn provides a sense of security and promotes emotional openness (Ernst, 2012). In addition, in the general population, our interactions with non-human animals have been shown to have a general effect of minimizing feelings of loneliness and stress among others (Boissonneault, 2010). Thus, the evidence suggests that when people interact with non-humans animals it has generally a positive effect on their health status and general wellbeing.

That's why Animal Assisted Interventions (AAI) were developed and its main purpose is to integrate animals and humans in activities and to connect emotionally,

physically and psychologically. It has also been shown that the relationship with companion animals and interventions including them can be effective in the treatment of psychological disorders by minimizing symptoms of depression and anxiety (Berget and Braastad, 2011); in people with dementia, interventions with animals have shown that they can be effective in bettering communication skills and motivating patients to become more active (Püllen, et al., 2013); in autism spectrum disorder Animal Assisted Interventions (AAI) can improve and facilitate social interactions and communication but also decrease maladaptive behaviors and stress reactions (O’Haire, 2013); patients with depression showed a decrease of mild and moderate depressive symptoms (Antonioli and Reveley, 2005); it can be also become another very effective psychological tool with elderly patients when they are institutionalized by decreasing their stress reaction, and also interventions with children can have a very positive impact on them reducing their stress reaction, facilitating empathy and developing a healthy self-esteem (Cirulli, Borgi, Berry, Francia and Alleva, 2011).

However, despite these findings, health professionals still resist to conceptualize animal companions as a possible tool to enhance our therapeutic interventions. This issue can have detrimental consequences to the therapeutic processes as these relationships can offer health professionals a unique opportunity and insight within clinical work and practical opportunities to work effectively with the participants (Beck, et al., 2012). Furthermore, although these advances have fostered studies of the impact of human-animal interaction in the health and disease processes worldwide, only a few studies address how the general population perceives their interactions with non-human animals (Yamamoto, Hart, Ohta, Matsumoto & Ohtani, 2014). Furthermore, most of these studies have been conducted either in Europe, the continental USA or industrialized countries, neglecting research in other socio-cultural context, such as Latin America.

In Latin America and specifically in Puerto Rico, there is a scarce of literature about H-AI (Meléndez-Samó, 2014). However, some of the research focused on Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) has documented openness from health professionals to include non-human animals as part of the therapeutic processes (Aragunde, 2008). Furthermore, recent research has begun to point out that in a cultural context in which the family is one of the most important cultural values, the relationship between companion animals and the other family members could be different from other contexts (Meléndez-Samó, 2014). Thus, the need to better understand these relationships in different cultural contexts becomes vital. Therefore, in light of this gap in the scientific literature, the purpose of this study was to document the general beliefs and attitudes toward companion animals in Puerto Rico to facilitate a possible source of wellbeing and a therapeutic catalytic tool in our participant life's that will help their wellbeing and can become a protective factor.

## **Methods**

Following a quantitative approach, we conducted a non-probabilistic sampling procedure. Data was collected using an auto-administered questionnaire developed by the authors. It was administered in two formats: paper and online. The target populations of this survey were Puerto Rican residents, aged at least over 21 years.

### *Instrument*

*Puerto Rico Comprehensive Companion Animal Survey* – This questionnaire was developed by the authors to collect the data for this study. A first draft of the data collection tool was sent to experts in the field of animal welfare, psychology and linguist for their revision and recommendations regarding possible biases, content, grammatical errors and ease of understanding.

The final instrument had a total of 86 questions, 60 of those were multiple choice, and were 26 statements rated using a 5- point Likert type scale (1= strongly disagree and 5=

strongly agree). The instrument was divided in 6 Sections. Section I included questions regarding demographic information. Section II consisted of questions regarding companion animal keeping regarding how many, types of and reasons to obtain companion animals, companion animal keeping practices and humans attachment level to their companion animals. Section III consisted of questions regarding the situation of stray dogs and cats. Section IV included statements about nonhuman animal sensitivity and intelligence perceptions. Section V included statements regarding the needs and behaviors of animal companions. Section VI included statements regarding compassion regarding animal companions; and Section VII included statements regarding violence toward animals and Puerto Rico animal protection law.

### *Participants*

The target population of this survey was Puerto Rican residents, aged at least over 21 years. The participants are a representation of the general population in Puerto Rico regardless of their views about companion animals.

The authors collected a total of 1,436 responses through the survey. Participants' age ranged from 21-60+. Females represented the majority by 79%. Respondents were mostly from the metropolitan area of Puerto Rico. Almost 69% of the respondents considered they were from urban areas and 31% of rural area. In terms of the economic status data shows that most participants were below the poverty levels of income (65%).

### *Procedures*

The investigation and all protocols were submitted and approved by the Turabo University Institutional Review Board (IRB; Investigation number: 03-336-12). The survey was uploaded at a provider of web-based survey solutions and it also was provided in paper. A written statement in the form of an information sheet regarding the research was always provided and it had to be read before completing the survey. The survey did not start unless

the participants indicated that they have read and understood the information sheet. The study was distributed in paper and was disseminated with a flyer in different community centers; diverse university campus, relevant social networking e.g. Facebook and email distribution lists also were used including the SUAGM university global distribution lists, Puerto Rican Psychological Association, Student Associations, Animal Welfare Groups and Shelters. The general population, including dog owners and non-dog owners were invited to take part. All participants completed either the paper or web based questionnaire voluntarily and it was made available online and paper format for about six months.

### *Analysis*

Data was analyzed using the IBM's Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive analysis were computed for all variables.

### **Results**

The total data collected was 1,436 self-selected participants over a six-month period. However, 109 participants were discarded because they did not answer required questions to complete the questionnaire, thus obtaining a total of 1,327 responses. Table 2 shows that 84% of the participants indicated they have an animal companions in their home, only 16% said they have none. Almost 82% participants currently have a total of 4 (mean = 3.8) animal companions. The majority had a preference for dogs (46%), cats (45%), birds (45%) and fishes (42%). Participants specified that they obtained their animal companion in different ways: 49% were a gift, 40% were rescued, 38% were bought and 20% were adopted.

Regarding taking care of the basic needs of their companion animal 68% of the participants indicated that they and another family member were responsible of taking care of their companion animal; only 22% indicated they were the sole caretaker of their companion animal. Regarding basic needs of their companion's animal, 55% of the participants change the water two or more times a day, 38% once a day and 6% every two days. The majority

(98%) of the participants indicated that their companion animal receive food specific to the species.

The majority (39%) of the participants indicated that they spend 12 hours or more with their companion animals. Regarding sleeping arrangements, 49% said their companion animals sleep in their bedroom, 42 % sleep inside the house and 32 % sleep outside in the yard without restraint. During the day 67% is free inside the house, 49% is free in the yard, 11% is chained in the yard and 6% is in a kennel inside the house.

Table 4 presents a summary of some of the general components of the human animal companion bond. Concerning activities with their companion animal's participants said that they stroked (94%), played (92%), talked (89%) and walked (57%) their companion animals. Concerning the human animal bond, participants rated their companion animals as extremely important (72%), very important (24%), neutral (4%), not that important (0.4%), and not important (0.1). They also rated their companion animals as family members (99%). When asked about the reasons why they obtained an animal companion 91% indicated because of the company, 42% for pleasure, and 40% for security.

## **Discussion**

The aim of this study was to better understand the general beliefs and attitudes toward companion animals in Puerto Rico. These results show that most of the respondents do have animal companions but also have more than one. This finding shows that we are part of the worldwide trend of wanting to have, and including companion animals in our everyday life (Grandgeorge, and Hausberger, 2011).

Another interesting finding, has implications for a concept that is central to the Latino culture, *familismo*. *Familismo* is a concept that means that we develop deep connections and our lives revolve around our nuclear and extended family (Smith-Morris, Morales-Campo, Castañeda-Alvarez, and Turner, 2012). These results suggest that companion animals should

be included in the discussion of this concept as the majority of the respondents have a strong connection to their companion animal, considering their companion animal part of their family. This means that we integrate them in our daily life taking care of their basic needs like water and food while at the same time, we interact with them on an emotional and physical level. We develop the necessary knowledge and sensitivity to interact with them appropriately (Senent-Sánchez, 2014) and they also learn that with us. The results of this study align with other research on the topic that show that human animal interaction enhance and facilitate positive traits in us (Hediger and Turner, 2014). In our findings regarding time spent with their companion animals, people spend many hours with them, in many occasions more than with other people or family. Reflecting a connection that is very intimate and personal possibly augmented by the fact that most of the respondents are the main caretaker of their companion animals (Hoffman, Chen, Serpell and Jacobson, 2013).

This study confirms that the human animal bond in Puerto Rican communities is very strong and important (Meléndez, 2014). It suggests that people interact and include (daily company, sleeping arrangement, and leisure activities) their companion animal in everyday activities this in turn having a positive effect on both participants (human and animal). This becomes a fundamental opportunity in the work of counseling psychology within the context of psychotherapy to create more effective interventions and take into account a very important relationship in the participant's life. Companion animals should become part of the factors we consider when working and developing therapeutic plans for our participants (Thew, Marco, Erdman and Caro, 2015). We should be able to integrate in our clinical initial interviews questions about personal companion animals and also explore the interest or inclusion of AAI.

Many of those companion animals are the main provider of joy, happiness and unconditional love. Also, they can become providers of health and activity (González-

Ramírez and Landero-Hernández, 2011). As long as they are present in people's lives they offer a long term and an additional support to confront life difficulties (Ryan and Ziebland, 2015). In addition, they seem to represent points of cohesion within families (Grandgeorge, and Hausberger, 2011). Supporting the findings of previous studies that indicate that companion animals are more than just pets, they become family, friends and resilient factors in people lives (Hugues, et al., 2014). This becomes a key component when connecting initially with our participants, and also to consider them as an essential factor to include as part of a more complete and effective therapeutic work with them. Animal companions as personal pets, therapeutic animals or family members can become fundamental in the work psychologist do, they represent their own and unique relationship, thus becoming an additional means to work through and with them (Ryan and Ziebland, 2015) in our participants life circumstances.

### **Limitations**

There are some limitations in this study. First, the recruitment was by availability. As the majority of the respondents reported having companion animals, this might suggest that the data may be biased, as they were more likely to accept to take part in the study than those with no companion animals. Second, the length of the instrument might have influenced some participants to finish the study before completing the instrument. However, despite these limitations, this study represents an initial effort to gain a deeper understanding of the H-AI among Latinos.

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## Appendix

Table 1: Demographic details of participants

<b>Variable</b>		<b>Percentage</b>
Gender	Female	79%
	Male	21%
Highest Level of Education	1-6 <sup>th</sup> grade	0.2%
	7-9 <sup>th</sup> grade	0.7%
	10-11 <sup>th</sup> grade	0.6%
	High School Diploma	21%
	Associate Degree	14%
	Bachelor	35%
	Master	21%
	Doctorate	8%
Type of Living Quarters	House	78%
	Apartment with garden, balcony or terrace	16%
	Apartment without garden, balcony or terrace	6%
	Public Housing	0.7%
	Institution (nursing home, shelter)	0.3%
Type of living area	Urban	69%
	Rural	31%
Socioeconomic Status	10,000 or less	26%
	10,001-20,000	20%
	20,001-30,000	19%
	30,001-40,000	11%
	40,001-50,000	9%
	50,001-60,000	4%
	60,001 or more	9%

Table 2: Animal Companion General Information

<b>Variable</b>		<b>Percentage</b>
Any Pets in the household	Yes	84%
	No	16%
Source of acquisition	Bought	38%
	Rescued	40%
	Gift	49%
	Adopted	20%

Table 3: Human and Animal Companion Caretaking

<b>Variable</b>		<b>Percentage</b>
	Employee	0.1 %
	There's nobody clearly defined	2 %
How many times do you change the water?	Once a day	38%
	Two or more times a day	55%
	Every 2 days	6%
	Every 3 days	0.5%
	Once a week	0.7%
What type of food do the pets get?	Leftovers	7%
	I cook them their own food	5%
	Food specific to the species	98%
When you're at home, how much time are you and the pet in the same place?	Less than 1 hour	9%
	1-4 hours	18%
	4-12 hours	30%
	12 hours-whole day	39%
	Some time every 2 days	0.6%
	Some time every 3 days	0.6%
	Sometime in the week	0.7%
	Sometime in the month	0.2%
	I don't spend time with them	1.3%
Where does the pet sleep?	Free inside the house	42%
	In my room	49%
	Free in the garden	32%
	Chained in the garden	10%
	In a crate inside the house	7%
	In a crate outside the house	7%
	Sleeps outside on the streets	1%
	I don't know where it sleeps	0.1%
Who is the primary caretaker of the pet (feeding and water), including visits to the vet?	Myself	22%
	Myself and another member of the family	68%
	Another member of the family	8%
	Employee	0.1%
	There's nobody clearly defined	2%

Table 4: Human Animal Companion Bond

<b>Variable</b>		<b>Percentage</b>
	Contests	4%
Would you say your pet is:	Extremely Important	72%
	Very Important	24%
	Neutral	4%
	Not that Important	0.5%

	Not Important	0.2%
Mention the principal reasons why you have a pet (please mark all that apply)	Security	40%
	Company	91%
	Social Status	1%
	Luxury	1.1%
	Pleasure	42%
	It was a gift	4%
	Money	0.5%
	Work	0.5%
Would you say your pet is part of the family?	Yes	99%
	No	1%