

The rise of the furbaby: Investigating the psychological reasons behind owner's attachment to their dogs



Author: Amy Fortune, Supervisor: Dr Lucie Corcoran
Department of Psychology, DBS

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to explore the psychological reasons behind owner's attachment to their dogs by investigating whether dogs are being used to fulfil an absent maternal/ paternal need, whether an owner's personal attachment style affects how attached they become to their dog and also whether owners are developing attachment to their dog as a way to cope with certain types of psychological stress. This was a mixed method correlational study employing snowball, convenience and self-selecting sampling in order to recruit participants who were required to fill out a five part online questionnaire. 172 participants took part in this study. Inferential statistical analysis reported no significant results for all hypotheses although descriptive statistics showed small non-significant trends that lend support to each hypothesis. Qualitative analysis was also performed to get a deeper understanding into attitudes held by people with and without children in relation to pet attachment.

LITERATURE REVIEW



Attachment theory has established that the type of attachment style developed in early childhood can have implications on future attachments and relationships formed in adulthood (Howe, 2011; Bowlby, 1969). There are three main attachment styles: secure, avoidant and ambivalent (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). Whilst some studies (Siniscalchi et al., 2013; Konok et al., 2015) explored how an owner's attachment style can affect a dog's behaviour this study aimed to take a different perspective and investigate whether a person's attachment style affects how attached they become to their dog.

- It is hypothesised that there will be a relationship between a dog owner's personal attachment style and the level of attachment to their dog.

Based on research (Turner, 2011; Blackstone, 2014) it has been established that some people become attached to their dog in order to fulfil an absent maternal/ paternal bond. To study this with relation to the Irish population the following hypotheses are proposed:

- Dog owners without children will be more attached to their dog than owners with children.
- Single people without children will show the highest attachment to their dog.

Research also suggests that dogs can be used to mask certain psychological distress such as loneliness and depression (Peacock et al., 2012; Chur-Hansen, 2010). With the rising amount of single households in Ireland (according to the most recent census) and the fact that young adults tend to report higher attachment to their pet as a result of feelings of social isolation (Netting et al., 2013) it was prudent to explore whether this is true in Irish culture.

- There will be a relationship between dog owners' satisfaction with life and their level of attachment to their dog
- There will be a relationship between dog owners' general mental health and their level of attachment to their dog

In order to achieve a deeper understanding of the attitudes and opinions held by owners with and without children in relation to their pet dog, thematic analysis will also be performed using the data from five qualitative questions that participants were required to answer such as, "What are the positive aspects of owning a dog?" and "What are the negative aspects of owning a dog?" This analysis aims to complement the main quantitative hypotheses by providing a 'real life' perspective on how people feel and think about their pet dogs in Ireland today.

METHODS

Participants

A total of 172 participants took part in this study by filling out an online questionnaire. This questionnaire was posted to a number of facebook pages including Dogs Trust Ireland, D.S.P.C.A, Cork Dog Action Welfare Group and two doggy day care centres which cannot be named in order to protect the anonymity of participants. Participants needed to be over 18 years of age and own a dog. 135 of participants reported not having children and 37 participants had children. Participants included 156 females and 16 males. Participants were single, married, co habiting and divorced.

Design

This was a mixed methods, correlational study employing convenience, snowball and self-selecting sampling through the use of an anonymous, confidential and voluntary online questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of five sections that the participant had to complete in order to capture general demographics, level of attachment to their dog, personal attachment style, satisfaction with life and general mental health.

Materials

Google forms was used to create the questionnaire, post it online and collect the subsequent data.

Pet Attachment: To measure participant's attachment to their dog the CENSHARE Pet Attachment Scale (PAS) was used (Holcomb, Williams & Richards, 1985). The PAS is a 26-item scale of personalised statements, each rated on a 4-point scale, ranging from 1 (almost always) to 4 (almost never). The questions of the PAS measures attachment through physical interaction ("You like to touch and stroke your pet") and attachment surrounding emotional importance ("Within your family, your pet likes you best."). The lower the score on the PAS the greater the level of attachment (min=26, max=108).

METHODS

Attachment Style: To measure participant's personal attachment style the Measures of Attachment Qualities Questionnaire (MAQ) was used (Carver, 2003). The MAQ is a 14-item scale of personalised statements, rated on a 4-point scale from 1 (I disagree with the statement a lot) to 4 (I agree with the statement a lot). The MAQ has four scales that measure: (a) Secure Attachment, (b) Avoidant attachment, (c) Ambivalence-worry and (d) Ambivalence-merger

Satisfaction with life: The Satisfaction with Life scale (SWL) was used to measure participant's satisfaction with life (Pavot & Diener, 2013). The SWL is a 5-item scale of personalised statements rated on a 7-point scale from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree) and measures the participants' current satisfaction with life through their answers to questions such as, "In most ways my life is close to ideal". The total score was obtained by summing the five item responses where the higher the score the higher the participant's satisfaction with life (min=5, max=35).

General Mental Health: To measure the general mental health of participants the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) was used (Goldberg, 1992). The GHQ is a 12-item scale of personalised statements which asks if the participant has experienced a particular symptom or item behaviour within the last three weeks of completing the questionnaire such as, "Have you recently been able to concentrate on whatever you're doing?" Items are rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 0 (more so than usual or not at) to 3 (much less than usual or much more than usual). Higher scores indicate greater probability of clinical disorder (min=0, max=36).

Procedure

Participants were requested to take part in a voluntary, anonymous and confidential online questionnaire. The first page of the questionnaire contained an information page which informed participants that they needed to be over 18 and own a dog to take part. It also reminded participants that questionnaire was voluntary and they had the right to withdraw at any stage. To avoid biasing answers, participants were not given the full rationale behind the study but were advised that a full debrief would be given at the end of the study before submitting their answers. On the second page participants were required to answer questions regarding general demographics such as age, gender, marital status, whether they had children or not. They were also required to answer five qualitative questions. The subsequent pages required the participants to complete the PAS, MAQ, SWL and GHQ in that order. The final page of the survey thanked the participants for their time and gave full disclosure of the rationale behind the study. Participants were again reminded of their right to withdraw at this stage. They were also reminded that once their answers were submitted that they could not be retrieved owing to the anonymous nature of the study. Finally participants had to answer 'yes' or 'no' to the question, "I understand that by submitting my answers I am giving my informed consent to have my answers used in the aforementioned study." All participants answered yes which meant that all responses received could be used for the study.

QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

Hypothesis 1

It is hypothesised that there will be a relationship between a dog owner's personal attachment style and the level of attachment to their dog.

A Kendall's tau b correlation was run and found that there was no significant relationship between scores on secure adult attachment and scores on the PAS (tau b (168) = -.01, p=.844). There was also found to be no significant relationship between scores on the PAS and scores on avoidant adult attachment, ambivalent-worry attachment and ambivalent-merger attachment therefore the null was accepted.

Hypothesis 2

Dog owners without children will be more attached to their dog than owners with children

An independent samples t-test was run and found that there was no significant difference between levels of dog attachment between participants with children (M=56.83, SD=10.60) and those without children (M=53.26, SD=8.42), (t (166)= 1.84, p=.071, CI (95%)) and the null was accepted.

Single people without children will show the highest attachment to their dog.

A one way between groups unrelated ANOVA was run using marital status (single, married and co-habiting) as the IVs and scores on the PAS as the DV. This ANOVA was run by dividing the data in to participants with children (F(2, 31) = .166, p= .848) and participants without children (F(2, 120) = 1.437, p = .242). No significant results were reported hence the null was accepted.

Hypothesis 3

There will be a relationship between dog owners' satisfaction with life and their level of attachment to their dog.

A Pearson correlation coefficient was run and found that there was no significant relationship between satisfaction with life scores (M = 24.17, SD = 7.55) and scores on the PAS (M = 54, SD = 9.01), (r (166) = -.015, p = .844) and therefore the null hypothesis was accepted.

Hypothesis 4

There will be a relationship between dog owners' general mental health and their level of attachment to their dog.

Using scores on the PAS as the DV and scores on the GHQ as the IV, a Pearson correlation coefficient was run and found there was no significant relationship between scores on the GHQ (M = 11.58, SD = 6.22) and scores on the PAS (M = 54, SD = 9.01), (r (166) = -.009, p = .911) and the null was accepted.

QUALITATIVE RESULTS

Thematic analysis was carried out, using the Braun and Clarke (2006) method on five qualitative questions participants were required to answer. There were 37 participants with children and 135 participants without children. Below are the main themes identified for each question.

"For what reason did you buy/ rescue/ adopt your dog?"

Love of dog
Grew up with dog/ Always had a dog

"What are the positive aspects to owning a dog?"

Company
Exercise / Get you out
Unconditional love dogs provide
Happiness dogs provide

"What are the negative aspects of owning a dog?"

Restrictions on going away/on holidays
Feeling confined
Restricted on schedule
Restricted when planning to go out / socially
Cleaning

"Do you consider your dog a furbaby?"

Yes (n=127)
Part of the family group
Dogs seen as a baby or a child
Dogs like a baby or a child
No (n= 45)
Need for boundaries between dogs and humans
Dogs not equal to people or children/ Not considered to be a baby or child

"Do you think that society/local government bodies could do more to support dog owners in general?"

Yes (n=147)
More off-lead, good quality dog parks
More dog friendly places and public transport
Education regarding responsible dog ownership

DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to add credence to the fact that an owner's attachment to their dog is based on valid psychological reasons. The fact that inferential statistics reported non-significant results for all hypotheses meant that the null was accepted in each case although descriptive statistics showed a number of non-significant trends that require further discussion.

Hypothesis 1

Inferential statistics reported no significant results and therefore the null was accepted overall. Qualitative analysis revealed that participant's main reason for getting their dogs was because they either grew up with a dog or always had a dog in their lives. Consequently it could be suggested that people become attached to their dogs, not because of their attachment style but because they have learned early on that the dog belongs in their original working model of the secure base that is the family unit.

Hypothesis 2 a) and 2 b)

Inferential statistics reported non-significant results but descriptive statistics demonstrated that participants without children showed slightly higher attachment to their dogs than those with children. It was found that owners with children are just as likely to become as attached to their dog as people without children and this could be attributed to the fact dogs have evolved socially to mirror human attachment behaviour and as a result elicit the same care giving behaviour from their owner which is usually saved for the care of an infant or a child.

Hypotheses 3 and 4

Chur-Hansen (2010) maintained that groups who were most likely to be attached to their dogs were those who were socially isolated or suffering from psychological or chronic illness. With relation to hypothesis 3, inferential statistics showed no significant results whilst descriptive statistics showed only small differences so the null was accepted overall. Inferential statistics for hypothesis 4 reported no significant results but descriptive statistics revealed that those highly attached to their dog had higher mean scores on the GHQ than those who displayed low attachment indicating slightly higher psychological distress. Qualitative analysis revealed that company, exercise/getting you out, unconditional love and happiness were the main positive aspects of having a dog reported by participants which supports literature (Chur-Hansen, 2010) claiming that people are using dogs to combat social isolation and loneliness. As a result, the hypothesis regarding dog attachment's relationship with the mental health of the individual is partially accepted.

REFERENCES

- Ainsworth, M.D.S. & Bell, S.M. (1970). Attachment, exploration, and separation: illustrated by the behaviour of one-year-olds in a strange situation. *Child Development*, 41, 49-67. Retrieved from <http://eds.b.elsevier.com>
- Blackstone, A. (2014). Doing family without having kids. *Sociology Compass*, 8(11), 52-62. DOI: 10.1111/soc4.12102
- Bowlby, J. (1969). *Attachment, vol. 1 of Attachment and loss*. Pimlico: London.
- Bowlby, J. (2003). *A Secure Base: Clinical Applications of Attachment Theory*. Brunner-Routledge: Great Britain.
- Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. DOI:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Carver, C. S. (2013). Measure of Attachment Qualities (MAQ). *Measurement Instrument Database for the Social Science (MIDSS)*
- Chur-Hansen, A. (2010). Grief and bereavement issues and the loss of a companion animal: People living with a companion animal, owners of livestock, and animal support workers. *Clinical Psychology*, 14(1), 38-51. DOI:10.1080/13282010.01602800
- Goldberg, D., Williams, R. C. & Richards, P. S. (1988). The elements of attachment: Relationship maintenance and intimacy. *Journal of the Delta Society*, 21(1), 28-34
- Howe, D. (2011). Attachment across the lifecycle: A Brief Introduction. *Palgrave-Macmillan*: Great Britain.
- Konok, V., Kosztopany, A., Rainer, W., Mutschler, B., Haloband, U., & Miklos, A. (2015). Influence of owners' attachment style and personality on their dogs' (Canifamiliaris) Separation-Related Disorder. *PLoS ONE*, 10(2), e0118375. DOI:10.1371/journal.pone.0118375
- Netting, F. E., Wilson, C. C., Goodie, J. L., Stephens, M. B., Byers, C. G. & Olsen, C. H. (2013). Attachment, social support, and perceived mental health of adult dog walkers: What does age have to do with it? *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*, 110(4), 261-285
- Pavot, W. & Diener, E. (2013). The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWL). *Measurement Instrument Database for the Social Science (MIDSS)*.
- Peacock, J., Chur-Hansen, A. & Winfield, H. (2012). Mental health implications of human attachment to companion animals. *Journal of clinical psychology*, 68(3), 292-303
- Rackert, B. & Gorr, S. (2014). Animals and Attachment Theory. *Society & Animals*, 22, 415-431. DOI:10.1163/1568530613231132
- Siniscalchi, M., Sileo, C. & Quaranta, A. (2013). "Yes Owner, Use Dogs": Correlation between the owner's attachment profile and the owner-dog bond. *PloSone*, 8(10), 76001. DOI:10.1371/journal.pone.0076001
- Turner, W. (2011). Our new children: The surrogate role of companion animals in women's lives. *The Qualitative Report*, 6(1).