The correlation of social approachability, social interaction, and tolerance levels depending on the presence of a dog

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The Correlation of Social Approachability, Social Interactions, and Tolerance Levels Depending on the Presence of a Dog

This study attempted to measure social approachability, social interactions, and tolerance levels of other people towards another person depending upon the presence of a dog was conducted. The study itself was divided into two parts. Part one measured the amount of approaches and social interactions made by other people towards a confederate when she was accompanied by a dog versus if a dog did not accompany her. The results indicate that there was a significant increase in social approachability and social interactions when being accompanied by a dog versus not being accompanied by a dog. Part two of the study measured tolerance levels of other people towards the confederate when she was accompanied by a dog versus when she was not accompanied by a dog. To test other people's tolerance levels, the confederate pretended to be promoting a bogus religious organization. This part of the study questioned if there would be any significant difference in tolerance levels of other peoples depending upon the presence of a dog. The amount of time that people were willing to listen was also measured. Results indicate people were significantly more tolerant, willing to listen longer, and more polite when being accompanied by a dog versus not being accompanied by a dog.

People develop strong emotional attachments to family pets. They enhance our health and well being by reducing stress, loneliness by providing comfort during major life crises such as a loss of a loved one (Sable, 1995). It has been documented that pets reduce blood pressure (Katcher, 1982) and are capable of reversing the effects of depression (Garrity, Stallones, Marx, & Johnson, 1989).

Pets provide social comfort as well. According to Veevers (1985), pets serve as social lubricants. In social situations pets attract attention by increasing social visibility; thus, facilitating approachability of others. The mere presence of a pet eases the tension of engaging in conversation. The topic of a pet is considered just as neutral and safe as discussing the weather.

Hunt, Hart, and Gomulkiewicz (1992) have shown that the mere presence of an animal enhances social interactions. They investigated the significance of a small animal such as a turtle or a rabbit in social interactions. They used a
confederate female sitting in a park; she was accompanied either by a rabbit or a turtle. For the control condition the confederate was sitting in the park blowing bubbles or watching a portable television. The interactions toward the confederate from other individuals were recorded. Results indicated that when the confederate was with the rabbit, it attracted the most interaction from both adults and children. Response to the turtle was less by adults (this could be due to the poor response to cold blooded animals); however, adults and children did approach more often with the turtle than when the confederate was blowing bubbles or watching television.

There is sufficient documentation that pet dogs encourage social interaction. Rogers, Hart, and Boltz (1993), found that elderly persons engaged in more social conversations if they owned dogs compared to those who did not own dogs. Their study measured elderly persons walking their pet dogs in a trailer park. Results revealed that the elderly persons with pet dogs engaged in more social interaction than those without dogs. The topic of dogs was the focus of conversation, being their dog or dogs in general. They also concluded that elderly persons with dogs walk more frequently than those who do not own dogs. Walking in itself contributed to positive health benefits which is consistent with Katcher (1982). Dog owners also reported more satisfaction with their social lives than non dog owners.

The fact that people are seen with an animal welcomes positive impressions about that person. According to Messent (1983), a person is assumed to have more friendly characteristics and is more approachable if they are accompanied by an animal than those seen without an animal. Rossbach and Wilson (1992) tested to see if a person would seem more likable if they were seen in a photograph with a dog versus without a dog. Thirty five subjects rated various photographs such as pictures of people with a dog, without a dog, or with flowers. The subjects rated the people in the pictures in terms of their approachability, if they appeared happy or relaxed, and which was the best photograph. The results indicated that the pictures of the people shown with a dog were rated higher than the pictures of the people without a dog.

The purpose of the following study was first to measure social approachability (i.e., the amount of approaches made by others) and the type of social interactions (i.e., eye contact, acknowledgment such as a wave, or length of conversation) of individuals towards a person being accompanied by a dog versus not being accompanied by a dog. It was hypothesized that a person being accompanied by a dog would be approached more often and would have more social interactions than if they were not accompanied by a dog. The second part of the study was to test individual's tolerance levels (i.e., how much people were willing to put up with someone else when being approached about a bogus religious organization). It was hypothesized that other individuals would be more tolerant of those who are accompanied by a dog versus those who are not accompanied by a dog.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

The participants of the following study were 126 students of a local community college in South East Tennessee. The study was conducted by naturalistic observations, the students were unaware of their participation and therefore no demographics were collected other than what could be directly observed, which was gender. Race and age were excluded due to uncertainty. Of the total 126 participants, 54% were male and 46% were female.

**Materials**

A confederate female was used to make observations and record data. The confederate had no previous knowledge of any of the participants in the study. The dog utilized in this study was a female Australian Shepherd with a blue merle coat. The dog was medium sized and weighed approximately 35 pounds. The collection of data was done by observational methods. The data was recorded by writing information about each contact of a participant. In first part of the study, the confederate recorded the amount of approaches made by the participants. Also, using the social interaction ratio scale which was specifically designed for this study (see appendix A) that measured the type of social interactions made by the participants (i.e., eye contact, acknowledgment,
short greeting, or engaging in conversation) was recorded. Gender was also recorded. For the second part of the study, the confederate recorded the participants’ tolerance levels (i.e., how much other people were willing to put up with the confederate when she was promoting a bogus religious organization). This was measured by using the Dan Martino K-9 tolerance ratio scale which also was specifically designed for this study (see appendix B).

Design and Procedure

The study was divided into two parts with two conditions each. Part one of the study was simply to record the amount of approaches and the type of social interactions (the dependent variable) made by the participants toward the confederate when she was not accompanied by a dog (condition one dependent variable) versus when she was accompanied by a dog (condition two independent variable). Gender was also an independent variable. Part two of the study was designed to measure individual’s tolerance levels and amount of time spent with the confederate (the dependent variables in part two) when the confederate was not accompanied by a dog (condition three independent variable) versus when the confederate was accompanied by a dog (condition four, level two independent variable).

In part one, condition one of the study, the confederate female went to the local community college without a dog on a Tuesday. She sat in center courtyard mid morning to early afternoon. The confederate recorded how many people approached her, if any, and the type of social interactions of other individuals. This included: eye contact, acknowledgments (i.e., waves, nods, or greetings), and conversations that took place (short or long). If no contact was initiated, then it was not recorded. The confederate moved to various locations within the courtyard during her observation.

In part one condition two, standards were identical to condition one. The only difference was that a dog accompanied the confederate.

In part two, condition three of the study, the purpose was to measure tolerance levels of other individuals toward the confederate. The confederate went to the same local community college and went to center courtyard on a Friday afternoon without a dog. She pretended to be promoting a bogus religious organization. A flier was created (see appendix C) and given randomly to 30 students. An equal number of males and females were chosen as equal as possible. The confederate asked the students several questions (see appendix D) about their religious orientation and if they would be willing to consider attending a meeting. The type of responses and how much the participants were willing to tolerate the confederate (i.e., whether other people were hostile, ignored the confederate, not interested, or friendly towards the confederate) was measured by using the Dan Martino K-9 tolerance ratio scale (see appendix D). The amount of time they were willing to listen or engage in conversation was also recorded. This was intended to see how long other people were willing to listen to the confederate, how well they tolerated her, and how many questions they responded to, if any. Only students handed the flier were considered participants of the study and measured.

In part two condition four, standards were identical to condition three. The only difference was that the confederate was accompanied by a dog and went to the community college on a Tuesday afternoon.

The data for conditions one, two, three, and four were evaluated by a computer statistical analysis program. Part one, conditions one and two were calculated and compared separately from part two, conditions three and four. For part one, the amount of people who made the approaches was measured. The amount of males and females were measured and compared, and also the type of social interaction was measured and compared between sexes. For part two, tolerance levels and length of time was measured for all participants and then compared between sexes.

RESULTS

Part one condition one, which measured the amount of approaches and type of social interaction made by the participants towards the confederate without a dog, indicated that the total amount of approaches (participants) were 13. The average type of social interaction was simple eye contact (\( \_ = 1.38 \)) regardless of gender. Part one condition two, which was identical to part one condition one, except the confederate was with a dog, the amount of approaches (participants) were 53. The average
type of social interaction was acknowledgment (\(_= 2.33\)) for all participants. The average social interaction was also acknowledgment for males (\(_= 2.03\)). For females the average type of behavior was conversation between 0-5 minutes (\(_= 2.77\)).

By comparing means on the social interaction ratio scale using an independent t test, there was a significant difference between without dog versus with dog. Both males and females scored higher with dog (\(t = -4.12\) and \(p = .000 < .05\)) regardless of gender. Comparing means of females between without dog versus with dog on the social interaction ratio scale, there was a significant difference; females scored higher with dog (\(t = -4.01\) and \(p = .002 < .05\)). For males, there was also a significant difference between without dog versus with dog; males scored higher on the social interaction ratio scale with dog (\(t = -2.034\) and \(p = .05 < .05\)). Without a dog, males approached more frequently than females and scored higher on the social interaction ratio scale than females (9 males versus 4 females and \(_= 1.44\) score males versus \(_= 1.25\) females). With a dog males still approached more often than did females (31 males versus 22 females). However, females scored higher on the social interaction ratio scale than did males (\(_= 2.77\) females versus \(_= 2.03\) males). Part one results are summarized in figure 1.

In part two condition three, which measured tolerance levels of people when being approached about a bogus religious organization when the confederate was without a dog, the total number participants was 30 of which 14 were males and 16 were females. The average tolerance levels (i.e., if others were hostile, ignored, were not interested, or were friendly towards the confederate) for all participants was labeled as ignored (\(_= 2.31\)) for both males (\(_= 2.07\)) and females (\(_= 2.50\)). The average time participants spent with the confederate without a dog was 24.31 seconds (males \(_= 19.62\) seconds and females \(_= 28.13\) seconds). There was no significant difference between gender on the amount of time participants spent with the confederate without a dog (\(t= -.370\) and \(p= .714 > .05\)) and no significant difference between tolerance levels (\(t= -1.35\) and \(p= .187 > .05\)).

Part two condition four, which was identical to part two condition three, except the confederate was with a dog, the total participants was also 30 of which 14 were males and 16 were females. The average tolerance level for all participants was labeled as not interested (\(_= 3.19\)), which included females (\(_= 2.94\)). The average males' tolerance level was labeled as tolerant (\(_= 3.47\)). Average time spent with the confederate when she was accompanied with a dog was 106.45 seconds (males \(_= 146\) seconds

![Figure 1](image-url)  
Figure 1. Comparing amount of approachability and behavior type of male and female between without dog versus with dog.
and females = 69.38 seconds). Again there was no significant difference between gender on the amount of time participants spent with the confederate without a dog (t = 1.45 and p = .158 > .05) and no significant difference between tolerance levels (t = 1.31 and p = .201 > .05).

Utilizing a regression analysis to measure the amount of time people were willing to listen to the bogus religion promotion without dog versus with dog indicated a significant difference; people were more willing to listen to the confederate when she was accompanied by a dog (t = 2.75 and p = .009 < .05), regardless of gender. The amount of time people spent listening to the religion promotion was the most predominate predictor and most significant (t = 8.56 and p = .000 < .05), in which the scores were higher on the Dan Martino K-9 ratio scale when a dog accompanied the confederate. By having the dog present, time and score increased regardless of gender. Part two results are summarized in figure 2.

**DISCUSSION**

For part one of the study that measured social approachability and social interactions, when the confederate was not being accompanied by a dog there was very little or no social contact compared to being accompanied by a dog. Although very little social contact was made (i.e., eye contact or short greeting), more males initiated contact than did females. Being accompanied by a dog significantly increased social approachability of both males and females; however, slightly more males approached the confederate than did females. In general, people were more likely to approach the individual and engage in conversation if that person was accompanied by a dog versus if a dog did not accompany them.

For part two of the study that measured tolerance levels, when a dog did not accompany the confederate and attempting to promote a bogus religion, she was mostly ignored and very little time was spent listening to her. There were also more hostile reactions when a dog did not accompany the confederate. However, when accompanied by a dog, people were more likely to take the time to listen before they politely said they were not interested. Some people were willing to listen to the whole promotion and showed some interest. There was only one hostile reaction; however, it was shorter and milder than the hostile reactions when a dog did not accompany the confederate. Overall, when a dog accompanied the confederate, tolerance levels were significantly higher. People were more polite and were willing to spend more time listing
to the confederate if she was accompanied by a
dog versus not being accompanied by a dog.

There were some limitations to this study. Because this was an observational study, it was hard to account for extraneous variables such as people who simply did not like dogs. It is also possible that the breed of the dog, a medium sized Australian Shepherd, may have been seemingly intimidating. Another limitation to this study was external validity. Since the observations were made on a college campus, application to the general public may not yield the same results. It would be wise to conduct a similar study in the general public such as in a park or at a shopping center and compare results of the campus study.

Knowing that people are more sociable, friendly, and tolerant towards people whom dogs accompany can have some practical applications in some social situations. For instance, severely shy individuals may benefit by having a dog. This may aid in alleviating some of the awkwardness of being in social situations and engaging in conversations with other people. Dogs are a safe and neutral topic of conversation (Veevers, 1985), which could make an excellent social crutch. An interesting study would involve people who suffer from agoraphobia to see if having a dog would help eliminate some anxiety about being in crowds or around people. However, it should be noted that the benefits do not always apply. Some individuals simply may not care for dogs or may have certain fears of dogs. By having a dog present may cause more anxiety than if a dog was not present. Although dogs may not benefit everyone, it is important to continue research in this avenue. Currently as research and knowledge about the human and animal relationship increases, it becomes more difficult to deny the importance of dogs or other pets in our daily lives. Since dogs provide more than just simple companionship, it is worth the effort to discover additional benefits to one’s life in general, both psychological and physical.

The role of dogs in our society is quite profound. Dogs have a great value to people, more than most people may realize. If people can be nicer, more social, and be more tolerant of others when dogs are present, perhaps society should open their doors and allow more access for dogs such as in malls and other public facilities where dogs aren’t normally allowed.

REFERENCES


