Dogs as a Catalyst for Social Interactions

Student# 4176

Evergreen Valley College
Abstract

To determine the effect that the presence of a canine has on frequency of interaction between strangers, I conducted a three pronged observational trial. To analyze the impact of a canine companion on meeting new people, I sat outside of a coffee shop without a dog, with an interesting looking, but non-interactive dog, or with a small “lap” dog. In each trial, passers were categorized by their level of response or lack thereof. I found that the presence of a dog, particularly a small dog increases the number of social interactions significantly.

Introduction

When walking your dog, you may have noticed an increase in interaction with those you encounter. Be it a compliment on your dog or a smile, those who were once strangers may suddenly seem welcoming and friendly. Many pet owners would agree that their animal companions have had a great impact on their lives. They provide companionship without the complication of human relationships, greeting you excitedly when you arrive home. Some pets, such as dogs and horses provide opportunities for exercise and recreation. But dogs, it seems, may help to expand your social circle. A study by J A. Serpell (1990) evaluated the health benefits of pet ownership. Via a survey, he found that approximately 41% of respondents reported an increase in social interactions since obtaining their dogs. A common love of canines, it seems, serves to unite groups of people that might otherwise have nothing in common, or, at least no
fodder to begin dialogue. In June McNicholas’ study, *Dogs as catalysts for social interactions Robustness of the effect* (2000), it was found that when participants were accompanied by a dog, interactions with strangers increased twenty-one times compared to being without the dog. The following study expands on previous research by the dog handler taking a more passive role. Here I simply sat, waited and recorded data, allowing subjects to approach, while we (the dog and I) remained stationary. Based on prior experience and previous research, I was expecting the presence of a dog to increase the number of interactions significantly.

**Participants**

Participants included all persons entering a coffee shop. Children that appeared to be under the age of sixteen years old were omitted.

**Method**

In each condition, I sat outside of a local coffee in a chair facing the door. I brought reading material so as to keep my eyes diverted downward, thus not initiating interaction. In each test, I wore an identical, nondescript outfit. All conditions were tested on days described by the local newspaper as “sunny”. Each condition was tested at approximately 1300 hours, each for 30 minutes. In the first condition, I sat alone. In the second condition, I sat with my Saluki, a striking and rare breed whose personality is best described as aloof. In the third condition, I sat with my Chihuahua mix, who was friendly but nervous and only wanted to sit in my lap. The number of
people who passed was recorded. Each passer was categorized as one of the following: no response/neutral response, friendly acknowledgment (non-verbal, such as a smile or nod or simple verbal such as “hello”), and conversational (meaning a question, statement or more expansive dialogue).

**Results**

Without any dogs, I received only 1 acknowledgment. For the most part, passers were content in ignoring my presence. With the large dog, approximately 31% of subjects acknowledged me, but nobody initiated conversation. Only about 33% of participants were able to ignore the small dog. Half of the subjects acknowledged the dog, while about 16% engaged in more in depth conversation. The chi-square of the results was about 11.55, $X^2(4, N=38)$, with $f=0.02$. This study showed that the presence of a dog, especially a small dog, had a significant effect on social interaction in this situation. See table 1 for results.

**Table 1: Number of Social Interactions with/without Dog**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Large Dog</th>
<th>Small Dog</th>
<th>No Dog</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neutral Response</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgment</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conversation</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chi-Square: 11.549

Degrees of Freedom: 4

p-value: 0.0210399
Discussion

The results of this trail supported the initial hypothesis. Though this test did show a significant increase in social interactions with the presence of a dog, I was surprised that there was not more reaction to the large dog. Being that the large dog is an unusual breed, I thought that more people would initiate conversation about him (as this seems to be the case when I walk him). In contrast, I thought that the small dog, who insisted on being on my lap the entire time, would go unnoticed by passers. This study should be conducted in other settings as well. The coffee crowd may be more or less apt than the general population to react to a dog or to even want to take time out to talk to somebody. Additionally, working with a more common large breed dog, such as a Labrador Retriever, might help to ensure that subjects don't approach simply out of curiosity (though this didn't seem to be the case in this trial).

References


http://find.galegroup.com/itx/infomark.do?&contentSet=IAC-Documents&type=retrieve&tabID=T002&prodId=EAIM&docId=A60300362&source=gale&userGroupName=san57663&version=1.0