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## Paws for Thought: The Importance of Dogs in a Seniors Social Intervention

*Elisa Maria Concetta Papotto<sup>1</sup> and Jessica Lee Oliva<sup>1</sup>*

**Keywords:** animal-assisted therapy, dog, well-being, seniors, community

**Abstract** As Australia faces an aging population with an unprecedented life expectancy, it is the community's obligation to ensure seniors are offered resources to support their well-being. Studies investigating loneliness in aged-care facilities attest to the therapeutic properties of dogs for residents' sense of well-being. Consequently, this study aimed to ascertain the effectiveness of a community-based dog lover's initiative for the self-management of well-being among senior citizens. Our qualitative research investigated whether community gatherings including dogs would produce greater feelings of subjective well-being among senior citizens compared to community gatherings without dogs. A conventional content analysis provided support for the supposition that dogs address some of the unmet needs of senior citizens by increasing well-being. The multitude of benefits provided by this human-animal friendship undeniably merits inclusion as a community initiative aimed at improving both the well-being of our senior citizens and the health of the community at large. It is anticipated that these findings will inspire a new field within social gerontology dedicated to promoting the human-animal bond via community initiatives.

### Introduction

In 2016, one in every seven Australians was aged 65 years and over, accounting for 15% of the population. This figure is projected to grow, with seniors tipped to represent 19% of the Australian population in 2031 and 25% by 2101 (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, 2017). Further to this, policy-makers

worldwide are encouraging their senior citizens to remain within their communities, rather than relying exclusively on eldercare support (Provencher, Keating, Warburton, & Roos, 2014). Despite this growing paradigm shift, community-based initiatives within the field of social gerontology have received an alarmingly small amount of attention to date (Wahl, Iwarsson, & Oswald, 2012). As such, it is

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our collective obligation to ensure that psychosocial factors impacting our senior citizens are explored in order to provide this population with vital sources of community-based support for later life.

One such psychosocial concern pervasive in old age is loneliness; with its reputed association with increased mortality and morbidity (Luo, Hawkey, Waite, & Cacioppo, 2012), loneliness represents one of the biggest threats to the health of adults in later life (Shiovitz-Ezra & Ayalon, 2010). Indeed, distress arising from loneliness threatens to burden the already overloaded Australian eldercare system (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2014), signifying a need for adequate interventions to limit dependence on more costly services such as healthcare, home help, and rehabilitation programs (Gardiner, Geldenhuys, & Gott, 2018). Much of the literature on alleviating loneliness in old age has been devoted to the assessment and implementation of national health strategies such as home visits by nurses (Mayo-Wilson et al., 2014), psychotherapy (Stern & Natale, 2014) and clinical case management (Taube, Kristensson, Midlöv, & Jakobsson, 2018). Relatively few interventions have focused exclusively on providing the elderly with community-based initiatives for alleviating loneliness and managing their own psychological health and well-being (Mossabir, Morris, Kennedy, Blickem, & Rogers, 2015).

The self-management of well-being theory proposed by Steverink, Lindenberg, and Slaets (2005) supports the view that healthy aging requires a proactive investment in resources (e.g., friendships, hobbies, physical activity, goals, etc.) that may contribute to long-term well-being and help alleviate feelings of loneliness. However, as these resources begin to diminish by sheer virtue of the aging process, an individual's ability to self-regulate may be challenged (Baltes & Baltes, 1990), leaving the person with only those services offered by the local community as a means to participate in life. An intervention that has gained momentum of late and is the focus of this study is animal-assisted interventions (AAI; Kanat-Maymon, Antebi, & Zilcha-Mano, 2016). Linked to the cultivation of positive affect, feelings of relatedness, and reduction in negative affect, AAI may

represent a symbiosis of hedonic and eudemonic well-being (White, Pahl, Wheeler, Depledge, & Fleming, 2017). This may arise from both the momentary pleasure from petting an animal (hedonic) and the longer-lasting feelings of connection and acceptance provided through the experience (eudemonic).

Evidence suggests that the presence of a dog can act as a catalyst for these eudemonic feelings of connection and acceptance by providing a neutral opening for conversation and a nonthreatening situation that facilitates trust between strangers (Fine, 2015; McNicholas & Collis, 2000). Indeed, Bernstein, Friedman, and Malaspina (2000) reported greater social interaction between aged-care residents during a visit from a therapy dog than during other interventions. Another psychological benefit related to dogs is the hedonic pleasure associated with laughter. People often laugh in response to a spontaneous act (Valeri, 2006) such as the antics of a dog, thereby generating an open atmosphere that promotes listening, understanding, and tolerance (Greatbatch & Clark, 2002). In a study by Halm (2008) on the healing power of dogs in the geriatric ward of a hospital, nurses attested to the bond between dogs and patients, and attributed the presence of the dogs to greater feelings of positive affect among their healthcare community. Carers within hospitals and aged-care facilities fortunate to have a resident dog attest to the influence of the animal to reduce feelings of negative affect among patients and staff (Barba, 1995; Morrison, 2007).

For many elderly dog owners, their dogs bring joy, better health, and a greater quality of life (Scheibeck, Pallauf, Stellwag, & Seeberger, 2011) by garnering elements from both hedonic and eudemonic forms of well-being as mentioned above. Evidence also suggests that even the briefest of interactions with dogs may yield the social capital necessary to counter loneliness and feelings of isolation in this population (Thompson et al., 2014). However, despite these assertions, reports indicate that older individuals are seldom pet owners (Gee & Mueller, 2019), which suggests that while pets outnumber people in Australia (Animal Medicines Australia, 2016), pet ownership declines with age. This is supported by Walsh (2009), who reported that age may inhibit an individual's

perceived ability to care for a pet, combined with the fear that their pet may outlive them. These reports contribute to findings by Sullivan, Victor, and Thomas (2016), which suggest that older individuals experience a decline in the resources necessary to alleviate loneliness and maintain well-being, and as such, these findings highlight the need for new initiatives. These unmet needs, which are further intensified by the weakening of family ties in the modern era (Ilfie et al., 2007), warrant the exploration of a community-based Dog Lovers Club for those seniors yearning for connection with an animal.

Geriatric AAI research is primarily concerned with alleviating symptoms of depression (Cherniack & Cherniack, 2014), anxiety (Le Roux & Kemp, 2009), agitation, and behavioral disturbances (Richeson, 2003) in the elderly, with little or no attention given to adopting AAI as a preventive measure against the above-mentioned conditions. Furthermore, the literature has focused almost exclusively on clinical and aged-care populations, which include the chronically ill (Nathans-Barel, Feldman, Berger, Modai, & Silver, 2005), residents with dementia (Motomura, Yagi, & Ohyama, 2004), psychiatric patients (Ziselman, Rovner, Shmueli, & Ferrie, 1996), hospital outpatients (Marcus et al., 2012), and war veterans (Furst, 2016). These populations are not representative of all senior citizens. A senior population that has been neglected thus far (to the authors' knowledge) is elderly people who still live independently, but due to circumstances, cannot own a pet themselves. This population is precluded from conventional AAI as they do not belong to a health or aged-care facility, depriving them of the well-being benefits available from regular interactions with dogs. As such, this warrants the exploration of our novel community-based initiative Must Love Dogs, a club for those seniors yearning for connection with a dog.

## Research Question

The present study aims to ascertain the effectiveness of the Must Love Dogs program for the self-management of well-being among senior citizens who

are not in aged-care facilities. Specifically, this study will investigate whether the one session when the dogs are not present will differentially impact subjective well-being among senior citizens, as compared to the other five sessions when the dogs are present.

## Methods

### Participants

Participants included eight seniors who visited the Bob Hawke Community Centre in Victoria, Australia, and an additional participant who was recruited via the hosting psychology clinic. Convenience sampling was employed by promoting a Must Love Dogs program to all local senior community centers. Incentives to participate included spending time with companion dogs and complimentary morning tea. Participation was voluntary following provision of informed consent, and participants had the right to withdraw at any stage of the intervention. Participants who volunteered for the 6-week program were included on the basis of meeting the following criteria: (1) 55 years and older; (2) living independently (not in an aged-care facility); (3) single (not living with a partner); (4) fluent in English; and (6) not currently pet owners. The final sample consisted of nine participants with a mean age of 61.7 years ( $SD_{age} = 5.62$ ) of whom 66% were male. Each participant, minus one, already regularly attended the Bob Hawke Community Centre every Monday, which included complimentary morning tea and mindfulness coloring activities.

### Animals

Three therapy dogs were selected to participate from the Wagging School dog training facility. Each dog and its handler had completed an 8-week training course entitled Dogs and Psychotherapy and regularly participate in aged-care programs, thus ensuring the dogs had the ideal temperament for this program. The dogs included a smooth collie (male), spoodle (male), and cairn terrier (female), with a mean age of 4.2 years ( $SD_{age} = 1.08$ ). Ethics approval

was granted from the Monash University Human (MUHREC; 9604) and Animal (MIPS AEC; MARP/2017/102) Research Ethics Committees.

### Design

The study was a 6-week social intervention, which adopted a qualitative design. The intervention involved the presence of dogs every week, except for week 2. During the 6 weeks, the researcher, who was facilitating the intervention, was always present in order to observe participants engaging with the dogs and to ascertain their feelings via semistructured individual interviews.

### Materials

**Interview Schedule Using a Conventional Content Analysis (CCA).** Qualitative data was collated from one-on-one interviews with participants at the end of the program. Participants were asked open-ended questions using a semistructured interview guide (see Table 1), which was adopted on the framework by Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson, and Kangasniemi (2016). Each interview lasted an average of five minutes. Prompts were frequently required to encourage participants to elaborate. These prompts included open-ended questions such as “In which way?” or “Can you explain?” Participant interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder (Olympus model WS-710M/700M/600S).

**Mindfulness Activities.** Throughout the 6-week program, mindfulness coloring activities were offered to participants to emulate activities offered at their community center. These included mandalas, landscape imagery, and blank paper, together with colored pencils, textas (felt-tipped pens), and crayons.

**Morning Tea.** Each week the researcher provided morning tea. This included tea, coffee, juice, fruit, pastries, and occasionally hot savories.

### Procedure

Willing participants responded to a flyer informing them of a pilot program aimed at improving well-being among senior citizens, which would involve playful interactions with dogs and complimentary morning tea. Inclusion criteria were listed on the flyer, such as minimum age, living status, and pet status, as well as the dates for the 6-week program (one hour each Monday morning over six weeks). Participants were not told that the dogs would be absent on the second day (control day). The Bob Hawke Community Centre’s coordinator advised that eight seniors had communicated their interest in attending the program. With the assistance of the community center, each participant’s demographics were screened to ensure they met the inclusion criteria. The community center agreed to transport the seniors each week to Healing Minds Psychology Clinic (the location of the program) via a private shuttle bus with one or two accompanying carers.

**Table 1** Interview Questions

Question 1	How would you describe the way you felt during the sessions?
Question 2	Did you feel noticeably different during the sessions when the dogs attended versus the other days? If so, how?
Question 3	How would you compare the way you felt after the sessions to any other ordinary day?
Question 4	What was your favorite part of the program?
Question 5	In what ways would you change the program?
Question 6	Did knowing that you would be returning the following Monday change the way you felt during the week? If so, how?

On day one of the intervention, once signed consent forms were collected, participants were ushered into the session room, where they made themselves comfortable, while the researcher introduced herself and the program. Participants were advised that they were welcome to help themselves to morning tea, pass the time with some mindfulness coloring, or simply relax and enjoy the music and tropical fish featured on the flat screen. On this first day, the dogs and their handlers arrived 10 minutes after the participants. The handlers led all three dogs around the room, greeting and engaging with each participant. The dogs were instructed to demonstrate their tricks, follow obedience commands, or simply rest their heads on participants' knees to be patted. It was at the handler's discretion to determine when it was time to move on or take a break. As such, each dog took a short break in the corridor, away from the participants, approximately 3 times per session.

On the second day of the program (control day), participants entered the room as they did before; however, on this occasion, they were advised that the dogs were unable to attend and that they were free to relax and enjoy the facilities as per the previous week. For the remaining four Mondays, the participants received the intervention as per the first day of the program, that is, in the presence of the dogs. During these sessions, the researcher was continuously observing the participants as they engaged with the dogs and each other. On the final day of the program, at the end of the hour, participants were individually interviewed by the researcher using the six questions featured in Table 1. The interviews were recorded by dictaphone.

### *Data Analysis*

One participant was unable to be interviewed because of difficulties communicating due to advanced dystonia and so is not included in the following analysis. The final sample used in the analysis includes the eight participants recruited from the Bob Hawk Community Centre. Their mean age was 60.8 years ( $SD_{age} = 4.40$ ) and 50% were male.

**Conventional Content Analysis.** Participant interviews were transcribed verbatim, entered into Microsoft Word for Windows (2010 edition), and analyzed using a conventional content analysis (CCA). The primary purpose of a CCA is to describe a phenomenon by identifying themes and patterns in text (Kondracki, Wellman, & Amundson, 2002), which in this case meant determining the impact of therapy dogs on the subjective well-being of participants. For the present study, an inductive approach was applied, as there were no previous studies exploring a similar phenomenon (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). As such, the researcher's observations made during the 6-week intervention were used to identify patterns in the text and extrapolate the central themes. These were then broken down further into subordinate themes. The CCA enabled the researcher to evaluate verbal responses, thus providing greater insight into participants' thoughts and feelings. This analysis allowed the researcher to consider the entire context of the 6-week program when interpreting the data (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In order to reduce potential biases, due to the subjective nature of the analysis (Plous, 1993), two members of the Monash School of Psychological Sciences, including the senior author of this paper who was not present during the intervention, also reviewed the data.

## **Results**

### *Conventional Content Analysis*

Central themes are presented in Table 2, as well as their emergence within each of the six interview questions (refer to Table 1) asked of participants. Subordinate themes are explained in subsequent tables with participant quotations.

Question 1 was used to assess the way participants felt at the time of the sessions, irrespective of whether the dogs were present or absent. Their responses, as specified in Table 3, indicated three central themes. With the exception of one participant who indicated indifference about attending the program, 90% of responses indicated feelings of positive affect and a sense of engagement with the environment. Among

**Table 2** Summary of central themes

Central Themes	Theme Emergence in Responses
No difference in affect	Q1, Q3
Positive affect motivated by the dogs	Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4, Q6
Positive affect motivated by the atmosphere	Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4
No difference in affect motivated by the dogs	Q2
Negative affect motivated by absence of dogs	Q2, Q3
Positive affect motivated by the program	Q4, Q6
Satisfaction with the program	Q5
Suggestions relating to the program	Q5
Suggestions relating to the dogs	Q5
Negative affect motivated by the program	Q6
Negative affect motivated by cessation of program	Q6

**Table 3** Question 1. How would you describe the way you felt during the sessions?

Central Themes	Subordinate Themes	Quotes	Frequency of Responses
No difference in affect	No change in mood Nonchalant attitude	"I felt the same as always" "I'm pretty laid-back"	10%
Positive affect motivated by the dogs	Feeling good around the dogs Feeling excited about the dogs	"It felt good to pat the dogs" "I was excited to see the dogs"	20%
Positive affect motivated by the atmosphere	Feeling relaxed Engagement in the setting	"I felt more relaxed" "It was funny"	70%

these reports of positive affect, 70% of responses may be considered general to the program as opposed to 20% of responses that spoke specifically about feelings related to the dogs. The majority of responses centered on feelings of relaxation (70%) and engagement with the dogs. Responses such as "*It was funny*" may have been indirectly motivated by the presence of the dogs, but cannot be confirmed as the respondent did not elaborate.

Question 2 was used to identify changes in affect between when the dogs were present and when they were absent. Participant responses, as specified in Table 4, indicated four central themes. Responses

indicated that the majority of the participants did not experience a change in affect irrespective of whether the dogs were present or absent (44.5%). In a similar manner, one respondent demonstrated a carefree attitude by claiming that "*It was still a happy atmosphere.*" The combined frequency of these two central themes accounts for 56% of responses, indicating that most participants were indifferent about the dog's presence. The remaining 44% of responses were divided between positive affect motivated by the dogs (22%) and negative affect motivated by the absence of the dogs (22%), both of which demonstrate a change in affect motivated by the dogs.

**Table 4** Question 2. Did you feel noticeably different during the sessions when the dogs attended versus the day they didn't? If so, how?

Central Themes	Subordinate Themes	Quotes	Frequency of Responses
No difference in affect motivated by the dogs	No change in mood	"Nah, didn't worry me either way"	44.5%
Positive affect motivated by the dogs	Feeling good around the dogs Feeling nostalgic around the dogs	"It was nice to have the dogs around" "It was nice to have the dogs around as I grew up with dogs"	22%
Positive affect motivated by the atmosphere	Carefree attitude	"It was still a happy atmosphere"	11.5%
Negative affect motivated by absence of dogs	Disappointed about the dog's absence Feeling sad about the dog's absence	"I wanted to see Clancy so I was disappointed" "Down about the dogs not being there"	22%

**Table 5** Question 3. How would you compare the way you felt after the sessions to any other ordinary day?

Central Themes	Subordinate Themes	Quotes	Frequency of Responses
No difference in affect	No change in mood	"I felt the same as usual"	37.5%
Positive affect motivated by the dogs	Feeling relaxed around the dogs	"I feel relaxed having the dogs around"	12.5%
Positive affect motivated by the atmosphere	Feeling relaxed Feeling good	"I felt different, more relaxed" "I feel good in your place"	37.5%
Negative affect motivated by absence of dogs	Disappointed about the dog's absence Feeling sad about the dog's absence	"I'm always sad to leave the dogs"	12.5%

Question 3 was used to assess whether participants felt differently on the day of the program compared to other days of the week. Participant responses, as specified in Table 5, indicated four central themes. Participant responses primarily indicated a notable difference in affect (62.5%) motivated by their attendance at the program, with 37.5% of responses focusing on the program's atmosphere and 25% focusing on the dogs specifically. Among the responses focusing on the dogs, 50% of these focused on the positive feelings: "I feel relaxed having the dogs around," while the other 50% focused on the negative feelings surrounding the

dog's absence from their everyday lives: "I'm always sad to leave the dogs." The remaining 37.5% reported no change in affect, thus indicating that the days they participated in the program felt no different than any other day of the week: "I felt the same as usual."

Question 4 was used to assess the participant's favorite part of the entire program. Participant responses, as specified in Table 6, indicated three central themes. The majority of responses (70%) centered on the activities and refreshments provided during the program (50%), and on the positive affect motivated by the atmosphere during the program



**Table 6** Question 4. What was your favorite part of the program?

Central Themes	Subordinate Themes	Quotes	Frequency of Responses
Positive affect motivated by the dogs	Being entertained by the dogs Engagement with the dogs	<i>"The dogs doing their tricks"</i> <i>"I enjoyed feeding and patting the dogs"</i>	30%
Positive affect motivated by the atmosphere	Feeling relaxed	<i>"It was really relaxing"</i>	20%
Positive affect motivated by the program	Engagement in the activities Interest in the refreshments	<i>"I enjoyed the activities such as drawing and painting"</i> <i>"The food was really good"</i>	50%

**Table 7** Question 5. In what way would you change the program?

Central Themes	Subordinate Themes	Quotes	Frequency of Responses
Satisfaction with the program	No suggested modifications Nonchalant attitude	<i>"I would keep it all the same"</i> <i>"Any changes would be much of a muchness"</i>	40%
Suggestions relating to the program	Shorten the length of the program Improve facilities	<i>"The program got a bit boring"</i> <i>"Perhaps more space next time"</i>	20%
Suggestions relating to the dogs	Include more dogs Include puppies	<i>"Maybe have a couple more dogs"</i> <i>"And a few puppies"</i>	40%

(20%): *"It was really relaxing."* A remaining 30% of responses focused specifically on the dogs and on the rise in positive affect due to the dog's being entertaining and being able to engage with the dogs: *"I enjoyed feeding and patting the dogs."*

Question 5 was used to identify ways in which the participants would modify the program in future. Participant responses, as specified in Table 7, indicated three central themes. Forty percent of responses indicated satisfaction with the program and thus no suggested modifications: *"I would keep it all the same."* Twenty percent of responses offered suggestions for the overall program: *"Perhaps more space next time"* and one respondent's critique of the duration of the program. The remaining 40% of responses centered on suggestions relating to the dogs; namely, the desire to have more dogs in attendance in future.

Question 6 assessed whether any positive or negative affect motivated by the program would endure

during the participant's week. Participant responses, as specified in Table 8, indicated five central themes. The majority of responses (34%) indicated that the program gave them something to look forward to during the week, while 11% suggested that they experienced a sense of calmness and relaxation after attending the program. Two respondents eagerly anticipated seeing the dogs each week (22%), whereas one respondent (11%) reported negative feelings related to attending each Monday: *"I started to dread the Mondays."* The remaining two respondents indicated sadness over the cessation of the program (22%).

## Discussion

The present study aimed to contribute to gerontological literature by investigating the effectiveness of a community-based dog lover's initiative for the

**Table 8** Question 6. Did knowing that you would be returning the following Monday change the way you felt during the week? If so, how?

Central Themes	Subordinate Themes	Quotes	Frequency of Responses
Positive affect motivated by anticipation of the program	Anticipation for the Monday	"Gave me something to look forward to"	34%
Positive affect motivated by the program	Feeling relaxed	"It made me feel relaxed during the week"	11%
Positive affect motivated by the dogs	Anticipation to see the dogs	"I was excited to see the doggies"	22%
Negative affect motivated by the program	Uneasy feelings about the Monday	"I started to dread the Mondays"	11%
Negative affect motivated by cessation of program	Feeling sad	"I'm a bit sad that it's over"	22%

self-management of well-being among senior citizens. Qualitative data from the CCA suggest that community gatherings including dogs may produce greater feelings of subjective well-being among senior citizens compared to community gatherings without dogs (refer to Table 2). These findings have important clinical implications, as currently therapy dogs and handlers do not offer their services to community settings. They will only provide services to facilities such as hospitals, schools, and aged-care homes. As such, quality connection with dogs may provide the key to improving the well-being of our senior citizens and the health of the community at large.

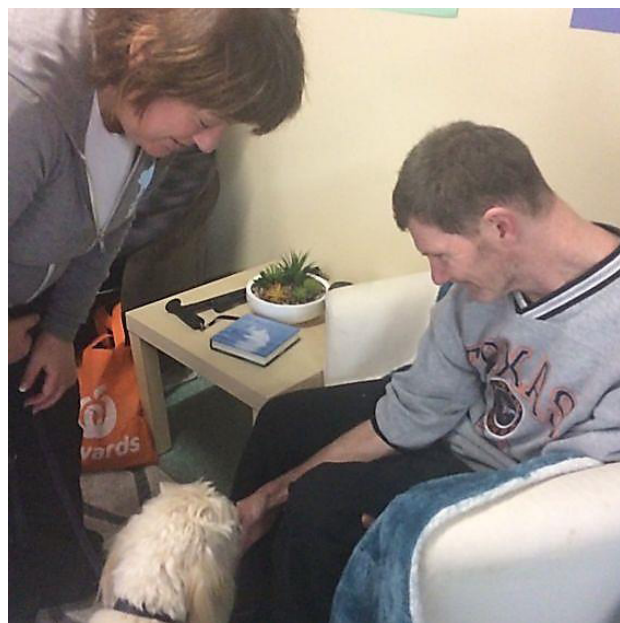
The intangible qualities provided by the presence of the dogs are evidenced in the CCA, although there appears to be some contradiction in participant responses. On one hand, responses to Question 2: "Did you feel noticeably different during the sessions when the dogs attended versus the day they didn't?" resulted in "No difference in affect motivated by the dogs" emerging as the highest recorded theme (45%). On the other hand, "Positive affect motivated by the dogs" proved to be the most prevalent central theme that emerged from the overall CCA (refer to Table 2), however only 22% endorsed this theme in Question 2. This might be explained by the possibility that the same participant's were endorsing this theme each time it

emerged (i.e. in five of the six questions), however, examination of the raw data indicates this is not the case, with five out of the eight participants endorsing this theme at least once in their responses to the six questions asked. Hence, this discrepancy may be attributed to the fact that participants were responding to question 2 retrospectively, at the end of session six, after experiencing five sessions with the dogs, and only one session (week 2), without them. The participants may also have been lacking insight into what specifically impacted their feelings when answering Question 2. While "well-being" may be considered by the layperson to be synonymous with "happiness" and "relaxation," insight into what actually constitutes well-being is often lacking (Ryff, 1989). This is demonstrated in the participants' responses to Question 1: "How would you describe the way you felt during the sessions?" Seventy percent of respondents used the term "relaxed" as opposed to other terms that may have been attributable to the dogs such as "excited" or "engaged." Similarly, responses to Question 3: "How would you compare the way you felt after the sessions to any other ordinary day?" centered on feelings of relaxation: "I felt different, more relaxed" (37.5%), as did Question 4: "What was your favorite part of the program?" with 20% of responses applauding the "relaxing" atmosphere.

The term “relaxed” is more closely associated with hedonic well-being. Participants may therefore have been describing the calming sensation provided by the heater, the relaxing music, the tropical fish featured on the big screen TV, or the comfort experienced from physical contact with the dogs (Huta & Ryan, 2010). This last point is important as participants may have considered the dogs’ worth to be based primarily on their entertainment value, such as the tricks they showcased and the commands they followed. Indeed, for two participants, entertainment appeared to be the primary intrinsic motivator (“*it was funny*” and “*I was excited to see the doggies*”) and possible justification for reporting high positive affect; however, based on the researcher’s observations, not all participants were interested in being entertained. The majority of participants simply enjoyed a discreet embrace with the dogs or having the dogs rest on the floor beside their feet. As such, the role of the dogs may have been undervalued. This raises the possibility that the overwhelming responses associated with feelings of “relaxation” may be attributed to the simple act of petting the dogs when they were approached. This supposition is compatible with a multitude of studies claiming the benefits of

petting a dog, such as lowered blood pressure (Cusack & Smith, 2014), increased oxytocin (Odendaal & Meintjes, 2003), and lowered cortisol levels (Heinrichs, Baumgartner, Kirschbaum, & Ehlert, 2003), which all culminate in feelings of “relaxation.” From the researcher’s observations, all participants actively petted the dogs from time to time. Some sought out the dogs constantly, whereas others enjoyed one or two moments of quiet connection with the animals before sitting back in their seats (Figure 1).

As such, 25% of responses to Question 3 were directly attributable to the dogs: “*I feel relaxed having the dogs around*” (12.5%) and “*I’m always sad to leave the dogs*” (12.5%), while the central theme, “*Negative affect motivated by absence of dogs*,” emerged in the responses of two of the six questions asked. These responses contribute to findings by Passmore and Howell (2014), who claim that while the construct of relatedness has primarily focused on connection between people, feelings of relatedness extend to animals, nature, and the unknown. Other responses that acknowledged the role of the dogs for improving positive affect produced sub-themes such as “*Being entertained by the dogs*”



**Figure 1.** A participant enjoying a quiet moment with Bailey the spoodle.



**Figure 2.** A participant entertained by the antics of Clancy, the smooth collie.

and “*Engaging with the dogs*” (30%). These responses support the researcher’s observations of the frequent laughter coming from the room anytime the dogs were present (see Figure 2). Furthermore, they are compatible with findings by Valeri (2006) and Greatbatch and Clark (2002) claiming that a spontaneous act by a dog can promote laughter, which in turn helps to generate a cohesive environment, encouraging acceptance and relatedness.

In her 2010 study, Mora-Ripoll advocates the therapeutic efficacy of spontaneous laughter for the health and well-being of people of all ages. Laughter is associated with an improved immune system (Stearns, 2009), decreased cortisol levels (Miller & Fry, 2003), and increased pain thresholds (Provine, 2000), thus tying it all back to feelings of “*relaxation*” or hedonic well-being (Martin, 2010). Participants demonstrated their satisfaction with the program in Question 5: “*In what way would you change the program?*” with 40% indicating they wouldn’t change a thing, and another 40% suggesting more dogs or puppies. The suggestion of more dogs is intriguing given that at the beginning of the interview, most participants failed to attribute positive affect to the dogs. Despite the possibility that participants may have been apprehensive to attribute positive or negative affect to the dogs, responses to the final question: “*Did knowing that you would be returning the following Monday change the way you felt during the week? If so, how?*” displayed overwhelming support for the program. Overall, 22% of responses focused exclusively on the dogs: “*I was excited to see the doggies,*” while 34% addressed the participant’s sense of anticipation each week: “*Gave me something to look forward to,*” and 22% reported sadness about the cessation of the program: “*I’m a bit sad that it’s over.*” These responses once again provide support for the research question as the only real point of difference between the Must Love Dogs program and their usual hangout at the Bob Hawke Community Centre were the dogs.

Replicating the environment of their usual community hangout was a real strength of the current study, as the two settings were virtually identical, with the exception of the dogs, thus allowing the effectiveness of the dogs’ presence to be more easily quantified.

The Must Love Dogs program shows promise as a novel initiative within social gerontology for enhancing the well-being of elderly community citizens, over and above their regular community interactions. We would like to see Dog Lovers programs being implemented in all community sectors, and future studies may wish to extend upon our first qualitative insights into the benefits of such programs. The current study employed a qualitative design to reduce participant variables such as age, background, and intrinsic/extrinsic motivations for participating in the intervention; however, future randomized controlled trials will help to build a stronger evidence base for these interventions. Longitudinal approaches should also be considered to ascertain baseline self-rated levels of well-being prior to engaging with the dogs, and then a follow-up to determine the prolonged effects of the intervention. One housekeeping suggestion would be to ensure the room is moderately spacious, but also not too sparse in order to encourage socialization. Lastly, one dog for every four participants would allow for greater engagement with the animals, particularly as there will always be participants who monopolize the handler’s time.

In addition to these considerations for the human participants, consideration needs to be given to the animal counterparts of the program. Use of animals in such programs should be confined by a Code of Ethics. We also do not support the specific breeding of animals for these purposes, but believe that there are many companion animals and animals in shelters that would enjoy participation in such programs. It is these animals and their handlers that should be approached; however, all animals and their handlers should undergo some therapy training so that physical and behavioral signs pertaining to the animals’ welfare and comfort are easily identified, and practical considerations pertaining to their involvement can be implemented.

In conclusion, our study suggests that AAI may address some of the unmet needs of senior citizens who currently engage in community gatherings with other seniors by fostering both hedonic and eudemonic well-being. As observed throughout the Must Love Dogs program, the vast majority of participants’

interactions with dogs provided tactile comfort, meaningful connection, sensory stimulation, and helped nurture a sense of relatedness among the participants. Findings from the current study suggest that the benefits provided by this human-animal friendship merits inclusion as a community resource aimed at both improving the well-being of our senior citizens and reducing the burden on the Australian healthcare system. It is anticipated that these findings will inspire a new field within social gerontology dedicated to promoting the human-animal bond via community initiatives.

### Summary for Practitioners

As many developed countries face an aging population with an unprecedented life expectancy, research and development into gerontological initiatives represents a global issue of both societal and economic importance. Moreover, we are witnessing the beginning of a paradigm shift, whereby policymakers worldwide are encouraging their senior citizens to remain within their communities, rather than relying solely on eldercare support. Despite this shift, community-based initiatives within the field of social gerontology have received an alarmingly small amount of attention to date. As such, it is our collective obligation to ensure that psychosocial factors impacting our senior citizens are explored in order to provide this population with vital sources of community-based support for later life.

One such psychosocial concern pervasive in old age is that of loneliness. Often prompted by a decline in physical function, the loss of a partner, and deterioration of social networks, distress arising from loneliness threatens to burden the already overloaded eldercare system. While practitioners support the view that healthy aging requires an investment in resources (e.g., friendships, hobbies, physical activity, goals, etc.), as these resources begin to diminish by sheer virtue of the aging process, senior citizens are often left with only those services offered by the local community as a means of participating in life. Consequently, this raises questions about what community

services and programs are currently available and whether they provide adequate opportunity to engender well-being and alleviate loneliness.

It has been asserted that interactions with dogs may yield the social capital necessary to counter loneliness and feelings of isolation in this population. However, despite these assertions, older individuals are seldom pet owners, with pet ownership declining with age. Furthermore, independent seniors are precluded from conventional AAI as they do not belong to a healthcare or aged-care facility, depriving them of the well-being benefits available from regular interactions with dogs.

Hence, the current study reports on qualitative experiences of an elderly community sample participating in a 6-week community initiative. The Must Love Dogs program aimed to emulate their regular community center meeting area, with the added benefit of interactions with dogs on 5 out of the 6 weeks. Qualitative reports from participants showed an overwhelming 70% of responses reported feelings of relaxation during the sessions, suggesting a physiological and psychological response that may be attributable to the presence of the dogs. This supposition is compatible with a multitude of studies claiming the benefits of petting a dog, such as lowered blood pressure, increased oxytocin, and lowered cortisol levels, which all culminate into feelings of relaxation.

Overall, these preliminary reports support the supposition that AAI addresses some of the unmet needs of senior citizens by fostering subjective well-being in community settings. As observed in the Must Love Dogs program, interactions with the therapy dogs provided tactile comfort, meaningful connection, sensory stimulation, and helped nurture a sense of relatedness among participants. This human-animal bond merits inclusion as a community resource aimed at both improving the well-being of our senior citizens and reducing the burden on global eldercare systems. It may also provide an important outlet for dogs in the community who may also be experiencing loneliness, as the authors believe that any dogs with the right temperament would be suitable for these roles, including those currently in shelters or in human care as companions.

The authors do not support breeding dogs especially for these purposes.

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