

1997

The presence of a dog increases greetings: a study in social intervention

Emily Dunlap

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Lori Graham

Univeristy of Tennessee at Chattanooga

April Burton

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Chassity Roberts

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.utc.edu/mps>



Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dunlap, Emily; Graham, Lori; Burton, April; and Roberts, Chassity (1997) "The presence of a dog increases greetings: a study in social intervention," *Modern Psychological Studies*: Vol. 5 : No. 2 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholar.utc.edu/mps/vol5/iss2/5>

This articles is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals, Magazines, and Newsletters at UTC Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Modern Psychological Studies by an authorized editor of UTC Scholar. For more information, please contact scholar@utc.edu.

The Presence of a Dog Increases Greetings: A Study in Social Intervention

Emily Dunlap, Lori Graham, April Burton and Chassity Roberts

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Pet dogs served many useful purposes, especially by provoking social interaction in the lives of their owners. The purpose of this study was to show that a person accompanied by a dog received more greetings from passersby than a person without a dog. This was a field study using a female confederate, a dog, and three observers. Subjects passing in front of the confederate were recorded as a greeter or a non-greeter. Results formulated by the Chi Square showed that when the confederate was with the dog, they were greeted significantly more than when they were not accompanied by the dog. This study had important applications for people who consider themselves lonely, shy, or socially inept.

Almost everybody hears the saying that "a dog is man's best friend." This phrase is now a part of American culture. There are many studies examining the importance dogs have in the lives of their owners. These studies show the positive influences of dogs. Dogs provide positive roles of emotional bonds with children (Kidd & Kidd, 1995), promote well-being of the elderly (Rogers, Hart, & Boltz, 1993), and illicit social interactions (Robins, Sanders, & Cahill, 1991).

The aspect of social interaction is a very interesting element of study in the psychological world. What kind of influence can a dog really provide for social interaction? It is implied through the research of Geries-Johnson and Kennedy (1995), that an average person walking down the street with a dog will be perceived as more approachable by the majority of the population. According to Geries-Johnson and Kennedy (1995), "It may be that individuals seen with an animal are perceived as more approachable and happier, thereby increasing the perception of friendliness" (p.432). Thus, these individuals are more likely to converse with a stranger.

There is no evidence yet that people like dogs so much that it causes them to like whoever is with the dog. However, this phenomenon of whether or not a person appears approachable may be caused by public perception as well as an individual's view of a dog.

Various views state that it is easier to socially interact with a stranger who has a dog than a stranger without a dog. A dog gives strangers something to talk about (Rogers et al., 1993). Robins et al. (1991) states, "Dogs facilitate contact, confidence, conversation, and confederation among previously unacquainted persons who might otherwise remain that way" (p.23). Another study dealing with social interaction by Hunt, Hart, and Gomulkiewicz (1992) agrees that a socializing effect is exerted by dogs and "social interaction takes place without effort, an obvious need or a special request" (p.255).

A study which simply showed that a person accompanied by a dog was greeted significantly more by passersby had not been attempted. Therefore, the purpose of this research was to reinforce studies resulting in the conclusion of dogs as a "bridging device" in social interaction (Robins et al., 1991). This method differed from previous studies and clearly showed significant results. Implications could benefit people who consider themselves shy, lonely or socially inept.

It was expected that a person accompanied by a dog would be greeted significantly more by passersby than a person without a dog. The independent variable was the accompaniment of a dog, defined as the presence of a dog on a leash held by the confederate. Greeting was the dependent variable, defined as the passersby's acknowledgment of the confederate with verbal communication.

Methods

Subjects

Observed subjects were of random age and sex from a mid-sized Southeastern college. Subjects or passersby were narrowed down to only the traffic passing in front of the female confederate for sake of simplifying observation methods. There was a total of 936 subjects. When the confederate was accompanied by the dog, there were 37 subjects who acted as greeters and 413 who acted as non-greeters. When the confederate was not accompanied by the dog, there were 3 subjects who acted as greeters and 483 who acted as non-greeters.

In this experiment a consent form was not necessary because this experiment did not break any ethical standards upheld by the APA and credited members of the psychological community. A person accompanied by a dog is a normal, natural, and frequently encountered situation. In this observational study, no harm, psychologically or physically, was possible upon the subjects or passersby. Debriefing the subjects also was not necessary for these same reasons.

Materials

Three coexperimentors observed the passersby who greeted and those who did not greet the confederate from about ten feet away. The coexperimentors recorded with marks the number of subjects that greeted and those that did not greet the confederate at times with or without the dog on a chart.

Procedure

This was a field experiment involving three observers and a confederate. The female confederate was positioned outside the University Student Center for one hour (11:00am-12:00pm or 12:00pm-1:00pm) on four different school days. During the first

half-hour, the confederate was accompanied by the dog. The second half-hour the confederate sat in the same place without the dog. The presence of the dog switched half-hours on following days to account for time effect. The three observers recorded how many people passed in front of the confederate. The three observers agreed on each recorded greet or non-greet to account for inter-rater reliability. A coding sheet was used to record the various greetings.

The dog used was a two-year old male. He was a small, white, long-haired mixed-breed. He had an affectionate attitude, was considered obedient, and had received all necessary shots.

The confederate was pleasant in demeanor and appearance and in her early twenties. The confederate was instructed to keep conversations as short as possible, and to try to make eye contact with as many passersby as possible. The reason for these instructions was that if passersby engaged in a lengthy conversation with the confederate, other passersby might be discouraged, preferring not to interrupt the ensuing conversation to greet. Eye contact was important to allow the confederate to appear approachable. The appearance of the confederate did not stand out, overly attracting attention or repelling the approach of a passerby. The confederate simply wore jeans and a T-shirt. These factors were necessary for consideration so the data would be as free of confounds as possible. Finally, since no consent form was necessary, no debriefing was given.

Results

The greetings counted were significantly higher when the confederate was with the dog. Since both the independent variable and the dependent variable were dichotomous, the Chi Squared statistical test

was used. The results of the Chi Squared test can be seen in Table 1. With the alpha level at .05, this test showed a significant difference between the greetings with and without the dog [$\chi^2(1)=33.03, p<0.0001$].

Although the number of non-greeting passersby of 413 subjects (44.1%) with a dog and 483 subjects (51.6%) without a dog were somewhat similar, the greetings of the passersby differed at 37 subjects (4.0%) with a dog versus 3 subjects (0.3%) without a dog.

The overall percentage of people who did not greet (95.7%) was much higher than those who did greet (4.3%).

It was also discovered that of the passersby who greeted the confederate, 93% greeted the confederate when the dog was present, when only 7% greeted the confederate when the dog was not present

Discussion

The results of the data collected strongly supported the hypothesis that a person accompanied by a dog received significantly more greetings than a person who was not accompanied by a dog.

Significant results from this experiment also reinforced past research. Rogers et al. (1993) stated, "dogs significantly enhanced friendly approaches in studies of people walking their dogs in a London park" (p.266). Thus, dogs were responsible for facilitating social contact with people. For instance, through calculations of gathered data, our study discovered that for every one person that greeted another who was not accompanied by a dog, thirteen greeted someone who was accompanied by a dog.

Also, Robins et al. (1991) stated that dogs helped to develop relationships among previously unacquainted persons in a public place. This past research supported the results of this study in which the presence of a dog

increased the number of greetings among strangers.

Although this study showed significant results between greetings received with a dog versus greetings received without a dog, it was not known whether or not the gender of the person with the dog would change the results, or if the breed of the dog would make a difference. Since our study was performed in late November when it was cold, overall greetings may have been lower than if this study was performed in the spring. In colder weather, people might be hurrying to get inside where it was warm, and thus not as willing to start conversations with a stranger who was outside.

It would also be interesting to see the results using a male or handicapped confederate and to know how many long term relationships were started among strangers with the help of a dog or another pet.

Therefore, a person who is accompanied by a dog is more likely to meet strangers than someone who is not accompanied by a dog. It is also found that 95.7% of passersby will not greet a person whether or not they have a dog with them. In some areas, chances are slim to even get a "hi" from a passing stranger, let alone strike up a conversation. Thus, a dog can greatly increase chances of conversation among the unacquainted.

As an "ice breaker" or a "social catalyst", dogs gave strangers something to talk about (Rogers et al., 1993). The confederate of this experiment declared that all conversations with passersby revolved around the dog. During the field study it was discovered that the female confederate had many opportunities to get involved in lengthy conversations with strangers, especially men.

In conclusion, it is suggested that getting a pet dog, regardless of many other benefits, will give a lonely, shy, or socially

inept person a great conversation starter and more opportunities to meet people.

References

Geries-Johnson, B., & Kennedy, J.H. (1995). Influence of animals on perceived likability of people. Perceptual and Motor Skills, 80, 432-434.

Hunt, S.J., Hart, L.A., & Gomulkiewicz, R. (1992). Role of small animals in social interactions between strangers. Journal of Social Psychology, 132, 245-256.

Kidd, A.H., & Kidd, R.M. (1995). Children's drawings and attachment to pets. Psychological Reports, 77, 235-241.

Robins, D.M., Sanders, C.R., & Cahill, S.E. (1991). Dogs and their people: Pet facilitated interaction in public settings. Journal of Contemporary Ethnography, 20, 3-25.

Rogers, J., Hart, L.A., & Boltz, R.P. (1993). The role of pet dogs in the casual conversation of elderly adults. Journal of Social Psychology, 133, 265-277.