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SOCIAL WORKERS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE EFFECTIVENESS
OF ANIMAL ASSISTED THERAPY WITHIN
SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work


by
Rebecca Marie Carpino
Janet De La Cruz
September 2011

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Approved by:



Dr. Thomas Davis, Faculty Supervisor
Social Work

6/14/11
Date



Dr. Rosemary McCaslin,
M.S.W. Research Coordinator

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to examine social workers' perceptions of the effectiveness of animal assisted therapy (AAT) within social work practice. A total of 10 social workers were selected and interviewed throughout Riverside and San Bernardino Counties. A qualitative research method was used to examine the perceptions of social workers with regards to AAT. Research findings revealed that AAT is an effective intervention for social workers to incorporate into their practice. Recommendations for future studies include professional training in AAT among social workers.

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We would like to thank our family members, Alicia, Renee Sr. & Jr., Cuca & Jose Rojas, LaLo, Gloria, Lenny, and Danny, for being supportive, loving, and understanding throughout these past couple of years. We would also like to thank our cohort for their support, friendships, and memories from these past 2 years. Finally, we would like to thank Dr. Thomas Davis for the guidance and support throughout the research project.

DEDICATION

We would like to dedicate our research project to our loving animals that have brought us joy, love, laughter, and smiles to our lives. Some have left our lives, but remain in our hearts. We love you: Tina, Patti, Bianca, Genie, Maddie, Sarah, LuLu, BooBoo, Chrissy, Garfield, Smokey Joe, Boogie, Nermel, Morefield, Momma Kittie, Vince, Scrooge, Sniffles, Pearl, Katie, Kiki, Cleo, Coco, Chloe, Tinky-toy, Mr. Bear, Lucky, Felony, Kinker, Samantha, Momma Cat, Daughter, Michael, Snowy, Muneca, Benji, Kobe, Negritta, and Dianis. We would also like to dedicate this research project to all the stray animals and future animals that may join our families in the future.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The chapter includes brief background information about animal assisted therapy (AAT). Animal assisted therapy is a seldom-used intervention in practice. The purpose of the study discussed how it contributed to social work practice. The chapter concluded with assessing the effectiveness of AAT as an intervention.

Problem Statement

This present study, focused on depression and AAT as an intervention. Depression is a common mental health problem that is presently affecting about 15 to 20% of adults in the United States (Ayotte, Potter, Williams, Steffens, & Bosworth, 2008). Within the 15 to 20% of adults, various interventions have been utilized to decrease clients' depression symptoms, but one that is not considered often is AAT. Rather, psychotropic medications have been prescribed to clients who are severely impaired by depression symptoms (Mizrahi & Davis, 2008). It is important to observe the trend that has been occurring for a little over a decade. Previous effective interventions have been continually

incorporated into client's treatment plans. It is important to note that AAT is one that has not received a lot of attention or use, when in fact it is quite useful, inexpensive, and effectual.

There are numerous interventions utilized by social workers in clinical practice, but unfortunately AAT is one that is seldom incorporated. Research has shown that AAT is effective for the well being of clients. There are numerous reasons why AAT is not being practiced, such as skepticism, not being aware of the benefits and the lack of support to use animals in therapy. In an effort to examine whether this intervention is effective for social workers, we presented the results with optimism that AAT obtains the respect and applied practice it deserves.

It is important to understand that social workers underestimate AAT; it is the purpose of this research to help them realize the importance of alternate remedies. There has been a profound contribution that animals have offered to clients while in session. AAT deserves attention for the benefit and well being of clients. Exposure to animals decreases depression symptoms and foster feelings of acceptance. Traditional interventions, such as therapy and medicine are valuable resources for

social workers, but implementing other forms of aid like AAT, will assist clients in their recovery. It is pragmatic to incorporate AAT and other interventions into a treatment plan to obtain superior and faster results.

The financial sector of an organization usually distributes the budget within departments. Management and the funds allocated for certain curricula are typical constraints on why AAT is seldom used. Throughout the Inland Empire, there are several facilities that incorporate AAT along with other interventions. There has not been an exact answer as to why other treatment facilities have not incorporated the use of animals for their practice.

The perception that social workers have about AAT is significant to make changes within organizations, if numerous individuals request access to AAT. The problem lies within the perception of social workers. If a large number of social workers do not feel the need for such practice, it is unlikely that it will prevail to management and therefore reduce the likelihood of a strong following.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the perception of social workers on the effectiveness in the field of AAT. We have found as to why it has not frequently practiced. Education and awareness may be contributing factors as to why AAT is not often practiced. If there were an interest by social workers to use AAT, but a lack of training and education prevented it, we provided these findings to show the effectiveness of AAT with certain populations. The goal was to bring awareness to social workers that are not familiar with this intervention. Doing so, we provided awareness.

Social workers perception of AAT was an indicator of whether future trainings would have been presented to professionals. In addition, an agency that does not desire to have this resource available was a constraining factor. Without the support of agencies as a whole, it is going to be a challenge to offer AAT to clients for social workers in practice. Agencies might not have access to animals, or the knowledge to see its significance to the mental health field.

Animals have been said to be a man's best friend. This study focused on AAT and the therapeutic

contribution animals have offered to individuals suffering from a mental health illness, such as depression. Depression is a common mental health disorder that many individuals are living with. The interventions used for depression or other mental health illness rarely entail AAT because of the lack of education and training.

For this particular study, qualitative data was gathered. Words are powerful and can discover emotions and qualities that can be underestimated and overlooked by quantitative data. In addition, it provided the opportunity to analyze language for meaning (Morris, 2006). The study was interested in descriptions and not concerned with measurement. While obtaining descriptions and perceptions from social workers, purposive sampling was used. This method provided the most complete data from social workers.

The perception of AAT among social workers was valuable to this study. Interviews provided a wealth of information regarding education, perception, tools, and awareness with reference to AAT. Interviews also offered valuable information to determine desire for and interest in AAT. In addition, the interviews opened an avenue of

awareness to new social workers in the field that have not been exposed, trained, or educated on AAT.

Significance of the Project for Social Work

Research indicated AAT is beneficial for individuals who are depressed, lonely, and/or experiencing co-occurring mental disorders. The research conducted gave a different perspective on an alternative therapy tool for social workers to use when working with clients.

This study assessed the awareness of AAT within San Bernardino County and Riverside County. If AAT is incorporated into social work practice, the effectiveness was assessed as an intervention. The research also evaluated the awareness and the perspective of social work practitioners had on AAT. Based on what the social workers indicated about AAT, the research determined if the therapy method was beneficial. If there was an agency interested in AAT, we would implement a training for members of the organization to bring forth awareness.

The research seeks to understand social work practitioners' perception of the effectiveness of AAT within social work practice.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter contains literature regarding animal assisted therapy and how it was used as a therapeutic intervention for clients. Furthermore, the literature discussed animals, depression, and how animals helped clients with depression, and how it was incorporated into therapy and curricula. The chapter concluded with the theories guiding conceptualization with an ecological perspective.

Benefits of Animals

Depression is common among individuals. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychological Association, 2000) depression is present when individuals lose interest in activities lasting longer than two weeks. Individuals may also experience changes in their appetite, sleep, decision making, and/or have suicidal ideations or attempts. Depression occurs more so with women than men. Individuals with depression have a fifteen percent death rate due to suicide. Co-occurring mental disorders are

also likely to occur. The types of disorders are: substance-related disorders, panic disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder, anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and borderline personality disorder (American Psychological Association, 2000).

Animals are shown to reduce stress, depression, anxiety, and improve cognition by the stimulation they provide. They have an overall positive effect on physical and mental health (Jaspersen, 2010; Le Roux & Kemp, 2009; Walsh, 2009). Cline (2010) suggests owning a dog can increase physical activity and can be used as a social support system when individuals are depressed. Physical activity has been proven to improve psychological health. Walking a dog enhances physical activity for individuals who own a dog and are depressed. Animals have the ability to help individuals cope with their stress and improve individuals' mental well-being (Parshall, 2003).

The presence of animals will probably not cure depression or other mental health disorders, but they can bring life, hope, happiness, and a reason to live for many individuals. This is not a new phenomena; it has been reported that the earliest documented therapeutic interaction between animals and humans dates back to the

1700's (Williams & Jenkins, 2008). It is not uncommon for animals to be treated as part of a family. Animals provide unconditional love and support (Corney, 2004). Individuals who incorporate animals into their lives, unconsciously benefit from their presence.

Although animals have demonstrated a positive effect with humans, they are seldom used for therapeutic purposes. There are numerous interventions that are available and used by social workers and other professionals, but it is unfortunate that professionals underestimate the power the therapeutic outcomes animals can bring into a session. AAT may be incorporated into numerous settings such as acute care, psychotherapy, and prisons (Miller & Connor, 2000).

AAT is a short-term intervention that improves a client's morale (Miller & Connor, 2000). This type of intervention additionally makes clients feel comfortable with the professional offering services. A client who may be intimidated or reluctant to give information will probably reveal him or herself willingly if there is an animal present (Vidrine, Owen-Smith, & Faulkner, 2002). Animals facilitate interpersonal relationships (Miller & Connor, 2000). They are in fact a social catalyst, they

provide encouragement to go outdoors, which in turn makes individuals feel better (McColgan & Schofield, 2007). Reaching out to individuals and carrying on conversations alleviates loneliness and other contributors to mental health. Having animals present in therapeutic sessions reduces stress and improves health outcomes (Williams & Jenkins, 2008).

Research has discovered that AAT is effective, but there are conflicting findings that discourage such use. Allergies, animal bites, and an increase in infection are some of the limitations (Brodie, Biley, & Shewring, 2002). Research has noted that dogs specifically are at greater risks of transmitting zoonoses (Brodie, Biley, & Shewring, 2002). This is not to say that other animals are not at risk of transmitting zoonoses. Fish are known to carry leptospirosis. All animals have potential to transfer some form of disease.

Animal Assisted Therapy and Integration into Social Work Curricula

The Delta Society defined AAT as a goal oriented therapeutic approach with the assistance of trained animals (Parshall, 2003). The Delta Society identified at least 2000 programs for AAT (Fine, 2000). The types of

animals used for AAT are cats, dogs, rabbits, birds, horses, small mammals, and fish (Chandler, 2005; Fine, 2000).

AAT is used as a tool within psychotherapy. The animal is the key element within the treatment process (Jasperson, 2010). AAT is used by therapists as an aid for counseling clients and for goal directed interventions (Jasperson, 2010; Parshall, 2003).

Therapists has the animals present in therapy and/or used them to model interpersonal relationships (Fine, 2000). However, animals should not be used as a replacement for human relationships. If a therapist used an animal for their sessions, they should be formal training before incorporating animals when working with clients (Chandler, 2005). The animal need obedience and social skills training. The therapist needs to be aware if their animal is stressed. The animal may be overwhelmed by the therapy and/or need a break (Chandler, 2005). If the stress persists, the therapist may need to re-evaluate if the animal is suitable for the therapy (Chandler, 2005). If the animal is suitable, the therapist needs to understand their animal's personality (Chandler, 2005). This is beneficial to the animal,

therapist, and client in order for the therapist to obtain important information for the client's recovery (Chandler, 2005).

There are limitations using animals with clients. For example, if the client has a history of aggression, the client may not treat the animal gently and with care during therapy (Parshall, 2003).

In recent years, social work education has considered incorporating AAT within their curriculum. At the University of Denver, the graduate program offers a course called animal assisted social work practice. The class covers how animals it is used for therapeutic use and how they interact with humans (Tedeschi, Fitchett, & Molidor, 2005). Students are given practice guidelines, ethical guidelines, appropriate safety measures, experiential and alternative theory therapy, and knowledge and skills for clinical training with the clients and animals (Tedeschi, Fitchett, & Molidor, 2005).

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

One of the theories used in past research was attachment theory. This theory illustrates the support

and bond between humans and animals (Jasperson, 2010). Human and animal bond can be linked to childhood. This theory applies to children who developed an enduring relationship with their animals (Anderson & Henderson, 2005).

The ecological perspective was the best approach for this study. The ecological perspective corresponds to the information that was addressed in the literature review. The ecological perspective comes from the same concepts as systems theory and focuses on the relationship between the person and environment. According to Lesser and Pope (2007), the ecological perspective explores "patterns of communication, individual coping behaviors, interpersonal networks, and characteristics of the physical and social environment which either support, or impede, human development" (p. 9). The focus of the ecological perspective is to manage problem solving and control the negative emotions from what is causing the stress (Lesser & Pope, 2007).

Animals are viewed as part of the social support system. They help clients build interpersonal relationships with individuals within their social support system. AAT assists clients with the negative

emotions they experience that is causing stress and depression in their life.

Summary

The chapter focused on the literature regarding AAT and how it is used in therapy with clients, animals, and depression. The literature also indicated the benefits and limitations of AAT for clients and practice. The chapter concluded with the theories guiding conceptualization. The ecological perspective was discussed and how it is being applied to AAT. It also provided how it applied to the research question.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

In this present study, data was collected through a qualitative approach. Ten participants were interviewed regarding social workers' perception of animal assisted therapy. Participants' confidentiality, informed consent and debriefing was covered as well.

Study Design

Animals can be a therapeutic source and an additional intervention for clients receiving services. The purpose of this study was to explore social workers' perception of AAT. In an effort to explore the perception of social workers, interviews were conducted with 10 social workers. A qualitative approach was taken because of the wealth of information it elicited from participants. Structured and verification questions were provided to the participants, for example "What do you know about pet therapy?" and "Have you ever wondered or heard if pet therapy is utilized or being considered at your agency?"

Sampling

The sample consisted of 10 social workers who were within San Bernardino and Riverside County. However, the participant's affiliation to the agency did not have an influence on the sampling selection. Males and females were selected. Social workers were the ideal candidates for this project; they are the professionals who are selecting the interventions for clients.

Data Collection and Instruments

The data being collected was gathered through interviews. The study explored what are social work practitioners' perceptions of AAT based on their expertise, knowledge, and/or experience.

Biases were addressed by interviewing the study participants in an environment where they felt comfortable (Grinnell & Unrau, 2008). Study participants were also sought to have a conceptual understanding of AAT and/or have not used AAT.

The questions for the interview focused on the effectiveness and perception of AAT, the health benefits animals produce for people, and if they have any knowledge about AAT (Appendix A). The questions also

asked the study participants if they wanted training on AAT.

Procedures

We both planned to interview participants in a variety of agencies. Participants were formally asked to participate in the research process during Winter quarter 2011. The data was gathered from early January through late February. Participants were sought through networking and referrals from participants.

Protection of Human Subjects

The protection of the study participants was addressed before the interviews began. Informed consent (Appendix B) was used to address the protection of human subjects. We adhered to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics, but also considered the participants' rights throughout the study. We ensured the participants confidentiality and anonymity regarding the information they share within the study (Morris, 2006).

Human subjects review evaluation was conducted through the university. Human subjects review evaluation assessed the benefits of the study, the participants and

population being researched, confidentiality and anonymity, and a description of the study (Morris, 2006). We did not disclose or gather any personal information from the study participants. These issues were addressed in order to protect the rights of the study participants involved in the research study.

Data Analysis

The data analysis was an important aspect of examining the content from the interviews. It was analyzed for any reoccurring information that the study participants present. In order to accurately present the results, the data went through phases (Grinnell & Unrau, 2008). The data from the interviews was formatted in a transcript. We took notes when interviewing the study participants. We transcribed the data because of the number of questions presented (Grinnell & Unrau, 2008).

Once the answers were reviewed from the study participants, a theory was determined (Grinnell & Unrau, 2008). The theory was developed based on reoccurring information from the questions. We also compared the information gathered with the literature regarding AAT.

The participants had the option of obtaining the results found within research gathered.

Summary

The chapter focused on the study design and how data was gathered from study participants for the study. The study was qualitative and interviews were conducted. We gathered 10 study participants in San Bernardino and Riverside County. We addressed biases and ensured confidentiality of the study participants. We analyzed the information gathered from the interviews, were aware of any reoccurring information, and how the information compared to the literature gathered.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

Chapter Four is the presentation of the results from the interviews. Qualitative data analysis is presented using charts. The charts were divided into persons, places, things, and ideas. The categories of words were narrowed into three core themes that were apparent in the interviews.

Presentation of the Findings

Table 1. Demographics of the Interviewed Participants

	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Years of Experience	Degree	Facility
Interviewee 1	Female	26	Latina	7	MSW	Sutter VNA and Hospice
Interviewee 2	Female	44	Black	21	Doctorate	Department of Aging and Adult Services
Interviewee 3	Female	38	Latina	15	MSW	Patton State Hospital
Interviewee 4	Female	31	Latina	3	MSW	Davita
Interviewee 5	Female	61	Jewish/ Caucasian	30	MSW, LCSW	Banning Mental Health in Riverside County

Table 1. Demographics of the Interviewed Participants

(cont)

	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Years of Experience	Degree	Facility
Interviewee 6	Female	32	Hispanic	5	MSW	Child Protective Services in San Bernardino County
Interviewee 7	Female	27	Latina	4	MSW	San Bernardino Mental Health
Interviewee 8	Female	35	Caucasian	2	MSW	Loma Linda University Medical Center
Interviewee 9	Male	29	Latino	3	MSW	Bilingual Family Services
Interviewee 10	Female	58	Latina/Native American	3	MSW	Indio Mental Health in Riverside County

Table 2. Respondent Responses to Person, Places, and Things

Person	Place	Thing
Addict	A.S.P.C.A	Alcohol
Adolescents	Betty Ford	Animal
Babies	Circuses	"Beju" (Dog)
Child	Class	"Carlitos" (Cat)
Children	Convalescent Homes	Case
Client	Department of Corrections	Cats
Colleagues	Drug Court	Dogs
Daughter	Facility	Door-to-Door
Elderly	Farm	Drugs
Family	Hospice	Eyes
Human	Hospital	Food
Human-like	Insurance Carriers	Horses
Individual	Medical Setting	Plants
Inmates	Mental Health Court	Puppy
Kids	Patton State Hospital	Rabbits
Marriage and Family Therapist	P.E.T.A	Television
Mother	Probation	Tool
Multidisciplinary Team	Ranch	Tool Box
Owner	Residential Treatment Center	
Patient	Riverside County	
People	Room	
Person	School	
Residents	Skill Nursing Facility	
Seniors	Unit	
Social Workers	WAGS	
Supervisors		
Therapist		
Treatment Team		

Table 3. Respondent Responses to Ideas

Animal Lover	Collectively	Feel	Life	Reading	Stress
Acknowledge	Comfort	Feelings	Live	Recidivism	Suicidal
Adore	Comfortable	Flat Affect	Living	Reciprocal Love	Suitable
Adopted	Communicating	Formal	Lose	Reduce	Support
Affect	Companion	Formal Training	Love	Rehabilitate	Support System
Affection	Compassionate	Friendly	Loyal	Rejected	Sympathetic
Aggressive	Cost	Function	Mediator	Relational	Theory
Anger	Crying	Gentle	Modeling	Relationship	Therapeutic
Angry	Cruel	Gifts	Money	Relax	Therapeutic Alliance
Anxiety	Decreased Depression	Greet	More Training	Rescue	Therapeutic Interaction
Application	Decrease Stress	Grief	Motivational Interviewing	Research	Therapeutic Intervention
Apply	Developmental Disorder	Happy	Neglect	Respect	Think Outside the Box
Atmosphere	Diabetic	Harmed	News	Responsibility	Traditional Therapy
Attention	Dialectical Therapy	Healing	No Agenda	Rights	Trained

Table 3. Respondent Responses to Ideas (cont)

Attention Deficit Hyper Activity Disorder	Difficult	Healthier	Non-judgmental	Run	Traumatic
Attributes	Disorder	Healthier Life Style	Nurturing	Safe	Treat
Awareness	Distress	Holistic	Occasion	Safety	Treated
Beautiful	Documentation	Holiday	Patience	Sanitary	Touch
Believer	Dying	Homicidal	Pervasive	Save	Unconditional
Beneficial	Ease	Human-Like	Personalities	Scratching	Underserved
Benefits	Effective	Hypothesis	Pets	Selfish	Unethical
Bereavement	Efficiency	Idea	Pet Lover	Selfless	Validate
Best friend	Embrace	Improve Health	Pet Therapy	Sense	Variety
Bio-psychosocial	Emotional	Incorporate	Personalities	Service	Verbalize
Biting	Energy	Instinct	Population	Session	Very Risky
Blind	Environment	Intrinsic Value	Post Traumatic Stress Disorder	Sick	Voice

Table 3. Respondent Responses to Ideas (cont)

Bond	Equal	Ill	Power	Social Skills	Walks
Calm	Ethical Rights	Internal Procession	Powerful	Social Support	Witness
Calming Effect	Exercise	Intervention	Problems	Social Work Practice	Work
Care	Exposure	Intuitive	Professional	Social Work Profession	Workload
Certified	Expressing	Joy	Protect	Socializing	Wrong
Change	Eye Opener	Kind	Psychological	Society	4 legged Therapist
Clairvoyant	Facial Expression	Learning	Rapport	Soothing	
Clinical (Norm)	Fascinating	Less Threatening	Reaction	Soothing Nature	
Cognitive Skills	Feed	Liability	Reaching	Starters	

Table 4. Reductive Categories for Pet Therapy

Accepting/Calm/Comfort/Less Threatening/Non-judgmental/ Safe/Soothing
Adore/Affection/Bond/Happiness/Joy/Love
Animals
Awareness/More Training
Depression
Effective
Ethical Rights
Family/Support System
Holistic
Individuals
Intervention
Powerful
Therapeutic
Tool for Toolbox
Touch

Table 5. Key Themes

1	2	3
Awareness	Adore	Accepting
Effective	Affection	Animals
Ethical Rights	Bond	Calm
Holistic	Depression	Comfort
Intervention	Happiness	Family
Therapeutic	Joy	Individuals
Tool	Love	Less Threatening
Toolbox	Touch	Non-judgmental
Training		Powerful
		Safe
		Soothing
		Support System

Table 6. The Three Core Themes

1	2	3
Practitioner	Affect-Emotions and Five Stages	Effect of Treatment

Summary

Chapter Four presented charts on common themes and words that arose throughout the interviews. Moreover, words that frequently appeared were categorized into three core themes. These three core themes gave us an understanding of how the perception of AAT is amongst social work practitioners.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

Chapter Five is the discussion and analysis of the three core themes on the perception of social workers with regards to AAT. We will discuss in depth the meaning of the three core themes, how it will be beneficial in social work practice, and the exceptions of AAT in social work practice. The chapter concludes with the limitations of the research and recommendations for social work practice, policy, and research.

Discussion

The present study finds what past research has suggested about animals being a therapeutic intervention for social work practitioners. The meaning of the findings from the interviews displays positive feedback about AAT. The three core themes that were evident were practitioner, affect, and effect of treatment.

Practitioner

In gathering the data for the interviews, key themes became apparent when identifying the qualities of the practitioner. Practitioners stated that AAT has

encompassed benefits when using AAT as in intervention for social work practice. In order for a practitioner to be effective in AAT, they have to present certain expertise, knowledge, and/or training when working with individuals. The interviewees were aware of the use to AAT entails. We found positive examples of the practitioner from the interviewees describing AAT being holistic, having awareness, and AAT being therapeutic. The interviewees gave an overall positive response of how AAT would be beneficial to individuals receiving treatment.

Effect of Treatment

The interviewees found the effect of treatment with animals to provide positive outcomes. Moreover, the possible meaning of the responses indicated that animals bring a peaceful acceptance to clients, have a soothing nature, and provide a relaxed environment. Although animals are not capable of communicating verbally with consumers, practitioners may have had a sense that they provide unconditional acceptance that carries out a therapeutic relationship, which allows emotional growth to develop beyond the therapeutic alliance that may have been established with the social workers.

Practitioners noted that social workers who incorporate animals into their practice, uncover that the effect of treatment with a four-legged therapist provides security to consumers. Practitioners responses to security it that it enhances ones ability to explore situations in which may be intimidating and/or traumatic. The security and protection that animals offer provides consumers with reassurance of a safe environment. Moreover, the meaning of safety is described by practitioners as providing a sense of peacefulness. Finding and uncovering peace within oneself can create an environment that can foster therapeutic outcomes. It is common for social workers to face challenging cases and/or situations that inhibit a therapeutic relationship. However, incorporating AAT can cultivate a therapeutic relationship between the therapist and the client.

The meaning of practitioners responses seem to be that relationships and companionship are essential needs for some individuals. It is common for consumers who are chronically mentally ill to lack a strong support system. Social workers who were interviewed described that the animal is a support system for the consumer. It is not

uncommon for animals to be treated as part of a family. Animals provide unconditional love and support (Corney, 2004). Practitioners described that clients become emotionally attached and concerned about the animal, and identify the animal as being part of their family. Furthermore, practitioners stated that the animals who are part of the consumers lives are non-judgmental, accepting, provide unconditional love, and companionship to the consumer.

Affect

The findings from the research provides positive examples between the affect of consumers and the incorporation of animals as an intervention. Practitioners indicated that people who have an animal in their household or work environment express satisfaction and fulfillment in their lives. Practitioners stated that animals provide unconditional acceptance, which then fosters bonding and support from the animals. The acceptance that animals offer brings hope for people, especially ones that are alone and/or isolated. We found that the friendship, associated with the animal, brings to the surface a unique attachment that is irreplaceable. Several social workers mentioned that kids, who receive

dialectical therapy, are eager to see the four-legged therapist. Practitioners stated animals bring fulfillment and emotions that are uplifting. We found that several social workers commented on the change of affect they had noticed within their clients by having an animal present.

We discovered from the social workers responses that the consumers who come in contact with the animals experience a wide range of emotions, which has a primal responses that are deeply meaningful and humanly. Practitioners described when coming into contact with the animals, individuals have a sense of support and safety with the animal. A client who may be intimidated or reluctant to give information will probably reveal him or herself willingly if there is an animal present (Vidrine, Owen-Smith, & Faulkner, 2002). Practitioners stated that it helps the consumer feel comfortable and open to share with the therapist, while building a strong connection with the animal. Having animals present in therapeutic sessions reduces stress and improves health outcomes (Williams & Jenkins, 2008).

Exceptions to Animal Assisted Therapy

Exceptions to these common themes were the concerns the interviewees had when using AAT in social work

practice. One concern when incorporating AAT as an intervention is the workload for the social workers. Practitioners concern mentioned was it would be an overload of extra work for the social workers when working with clients. Another concern that was mentioned by practitioners was formal training of using AAT. If a therapist used an animal for their sessions, they should be formal training before incorporating animals when working with clients (Chandler, 2005). The social workers stated it may be risky to work with the animals. The risks mentioned by the practitioners was the animal biting the consumer and/or therapists. The social workers are concerned with the animal becoming a liability issue if the animal harms the consumer. If this were to happen, practitioners thought it could then become an ethical dilemma within the organization. A final exception to these common themes is the absence of knowledge. Some of the interviewees are concerned with incorporating an animal as an intervention for treatment because of the lack of knowledge of AAT in social work practice.

Limitations

The possibility of limitations to the research study could have impacted the findings to the research. The amount of participants were limited and the majority of the participants were female. If we had more participants we could have a broader understanding of AAT amongst social workers.

Another possible limitation to the research study are the years of experience the participants have as a social work professional. The knowledge and responses to the questions could be due to the limited amount of experience the participants have in the field of social work. However, the use of AAT is fairly recent when using it as an intervention in social work practice.

A final possible limitation of the research study could be the types of questions could have mislead the interviewees to answer the questions more positively than negatively about AAT. The questions could have indirectly convinced the interviewees that AAT is a beneficial intervention and could have resulted to a biased opinion made by the interviewees.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy and Research

Based on the findings of this study, it would be beneficial for social workers to seek information from the client, prior to the exposure of the animal. It may be possible that some clients are allergic or have a phobia with the animal. It is important to note, incorporation of the animal requires the social workers to focus on the consumers, and animal needs. Animals can experience distress and anxiety, similar to humans.

As for policy issues, it would be helpful if policy makers provide funds for service programs, such as the Mental Health Service Act. Furthermore, agencies within the Riverside and San Bernardino Counties should support and focus on providing funds for AAT services. The research suggests that AAT is an evidence based practice that can assist clients with recovery. AAT can be a short and long term intervention. More research can be conducted in regards to the perception of social workers with AAT. Having an animal can increase the overall well being of an individual, especially if they are suffering from a mental health illness. More research could also be

done in regards to the desire of organizations supporting the idea of AAT financially.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine the perception of social workers with regards to AAT. This study found that social workers find AAT to be an effective intervention when working with clients. Furthermore, animals can be therapeutic and may open up opportunities to build a therapeutic alliance. Social workers expressed positive feeling about AAT. Moreover, they articulated that AAT could be a powerful intervention to incorporate and possesses a holistic approach in social work practice.

APPENDIX A
QUESTIONNAIRE

QUESTIONNAIRE

- 1) What do you know about pet therapy?
- 2) Have you ever wondered or heard if pet therapy is utilized or being considered at your agency?
- 3) Have you ever wondered if your colleagues would accept this intervention tool? Explain.
- 4) Ever wondered if animals have ethical rights based on being part of a team at an agency?
- 5) Do you believe pet therapy is effective or could be effective as an intervention? Explain.
- 6) Have you ever wondered or thought about pet therapy decreasing depression and improving health outcomes?
- 7) Would you support the idea of animals being a part of an individual's support system?
- 8) What do you know about human-animal bonding?
- 9) In your opinion, do animals experience the stress and anxiety the client is experiencing because of human-animal bonding?
- 10) Based on what you know about AAT, Would you be willing to attend pet therapy training to learn more about human animal bonding, information on pet therapy, and the use of AAT as a therapeutic intervention?
- 11) From your perspective of pet therapy, do you believe there are benefits of the training for social work practice? Explain why.

Developed by Rebecca Marie Carpino & Janet De La Cruz

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are being asked to participate is designed to investigate the perception of social workers about the effectiveness of animal assisted therapy. This study is being conducted by graduate students from California State University, San Bernardino under the supervision of Dr. Thomas Davis. The results will be conveyed to the California State University, San Bernardino and the School of Social Work. The study has been approved by the School of Social Work Sub-Committee of the California State University, San Bernardino Institutional Review Board.

There are numerous interventions utilized by social workers in clinical practice, but animal assisted therapy is one that is seldom incorporated. Research has shown that animal assisted therapy is effective for the well being of clients. The purpose of the study is to explore knowledge and understanding based in social work practice. If you take part in this study, you will be asked a set of questions that asks about animal assisted therapy and your perceptions. It should take no more than two hours.

This survey is anonymous and no record will be made or kept of your name or any identifying information. You are free not to answer any questions you do not want to answer. The anonymous data will only be seen by the researchers. The results will be conveyed to participants interested in knowing the results.

There are no foreseeable risks by taking part in the study and no personal benefits involved. Your opinions will help expand understanding of animal assisted therapy in social work practice.

If you have any questions or concerns about this study, you can contact Dr. Thomas Davis at (909) 537-3839 or tomdavis@csusb.edu.

APPENDIX C
DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

DEBRIEFING STATEMENT

Thank you for your participation. The information you provided will be used to evaluate the perception of social workers with regards to AAT. If there appears to be an interest in learning about this intervention, the researchers will provide classes on this topic. Confidentiality is a priority; the participants names will not be released. If you have any questions about this study, please contact Dr. Thomas Davis at 909-537-3839 in regards to the research, Rebecca Carpino and Janet De La Cruz, conducted. Results will be available at California State University, San Bernardino Pfau library after June 2011.

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ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES PAGE

This was a two-person project where authors collaborated throughout. However, for each phase of the project, certain authors took primary responsibility. These responsibilities were assigned in the manner listed below.

1. Data Collection:

Team Effort: Rebecca Carpino & Janet De La Cruz

2. Data Entry and Analysis:

Team Effort: Rebecca Carpino & Janet De La Cruz

3. Writing Report and Presentation of Findings:

a. Introduction and Literature

Team Effort: Rebecca Carpino & Janet De La Cruz

b. Methods

Team Effort: Rebecca Carpino & Janet De La Cruz

c. Results

Team Effort: Rebecca Carpino & Janet De La Cruz

d. Discussion

Team Effort: Rebecca Carpino & Janet De La Cruz