

Exploring the Meaning of Pet Ownership for Older Adults through the Pets for Life Project:
Effects on Social Isolation and Quality of Life

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Abstract

Objectives: This study investigated the impact of the Pets for Life project on social isolation quality of life, and the meaning of pet ownership for older adults. **Methods:** In this mixed methods study, purposive sampling was used to recruit eight older adults participating in Pets for Life. Quality of life was measured using the Short-Form 36-item Health Survey (SF-36V2®). Semi-structured interviews explored social isolation, experiences of the Pets for Life Project and the meaning of pet ownership. **Results:** Effects of social isolation were found to vary between participants. Pets had a positive impact on their owners and ongoing pet ownership had health-related benefits. The Pets for Life Project has a key role in supporting ongoing pet ownership. **Discussion:** The Pets for Life project plays an important role in supporting ongoing pet ownership and this has important social, physical and mental health benefits for older adults living in the community.

Keywords: older adults, quality of life, pet ownership, meaning, social isolation

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Social Isolation and Quality of Life

Social isolation is a growing health issue in the developed world that especially affects vulnerable groups, such as the older population (Cattan, White, Bond, & Learmouth, 2005). The health implications of social isolation are not clearly understood, however, research suggests that social isolation plays a dynamic role in contributing to poor health, including lowering quality of life (British Columbia Ministry of Health, 2004; Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2003; Cornwell & Waite, 2009). The growing number of older adults living alone in our communities indicates an ongoing risk of social isolation, as the prevalence of social isolation increases with ageing (Cattan et al., 2005; Coyle & Dugan, 2012). The high incidence of social isolation in the older population may be due to a variety of factors including decreased social interaction, issues with transportation, becoming widowed, living alone, and low socio-economic status (British Columbia Ministry of Health, 2004; Cacioppo & Hawkley, 2003; Cornwell & Waite, 2009).

Although social isolation has been difficult to define (Cornwell & Waite, 2009) there seems to be some consensus amongst authors that there are two components of social isolation: the perceived isolation and the actual isolation (Dickens, Richards, Greaves, & Campbell, 2011; House, 2001; Thoits, 1995). For the purpose of this study, social isolation encompasses both perceived and actual isolation.

Strategies to prevent or ameliorate the negative implications of social isolation are of particular importance because there is evidence to suggest that reducing social isolation can improve health-related quality of life (British Columbia Ministry of Health, 2004). A

strategy to reduce social isolation that has been identified in the literature is pet ownership (Grenade & Boldy, 2008; Keil, 1998; Parslow, Christensen, Rodgers, & Jacomb, 2005).

Health and Wellbeing Benefits of Pet Ownership

The research findings and approaches regarding the benefits of pet ownership are varied (Headey, 2003). The potential health benefits of pet ownership have been tested through various methodologies, which may have contributed to the inconsistent findings (Pachana, Ford, Andrew, & Dobson, 2005). Some studies have found that there were no direct physical or mental health benefits to pet ownership (Parker et al., 2010; Straatman, Hanson, Endenburg, & Mol, 1997; Parslow et al., 2005). However, these studies tended to focus on specific health improvements that pets might provide (Herzog, 2011). Some studies have also found contradictory evidence to previous research. For example, it was found in a study by Friedmann, Honori Katcher, Lynch and Thomas (1980) that in the year following discharge from a coronary care unit there was a lower mortality rate for people with pets than people without pets. However, in more recent research Parker et al. (2010) found that people with pets who had experienced a heart attack were more likely to have re-admissions than people who had heart attacks and did not have pets.

Recent studies that have furthered the research on the potential health benefits of pet ownership are limited (Herzog, 2011; Knight & Edwards, 2008). Due to the difficulty in making assumptions about population-wide effects of pet ownership, Headey, Grabka, Kelley, Reddy, and Tseng (2002) suggest that it may be useful to further research on specific groups, such as older adults. McNicholas et al. (2005) have suggested that in future studies a broader definition of health should be taken, rather than concluding that pets either do or do not have health benefits from focussing on one particular aspect of health. The World Health Organisation defines health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social

wellbeing” (1946, p.100). This holistic view of health, was adopted throughout this study and has been termed health-related benefits.

Various studies have found that there may be physical and mental health benefits to pet ownership, for example a decrease in stress indicators (Allen, Hammon Kellegrew, & Jaffe, 2000; Dembicki & Anderson, 1996). Some research also shows that merely being in the presence of an animal has a physiological relaxing mechanism (Knight & Edwards, 2008). Pets require feeding, grooming and caring for, which promotes a routine and has been found to be beneficial in prompting self-care tasks in individuals (Dembicki & Anderson, 1996).

There may be mental benefits to pet ownership in terms of people classifying their pet as an important part of their lives. The pets therefore have a positive impact on happiness due to being given a role of social support (McConnell, Brown, Shoda, Stayton & Martin, 2011). Pets have been found to decrease feelings of loneliness and, dogs specifically, were found to increase the owner’s sense of safety (Allen et al., 2000; Boldt & Dellmann-Jenkins, 1992; Knight & Edwards, 2008). Depression and anxiety were found to be less in people with pets than in people without pets for specific populations (McConnell et al., 2011; Serpell, 1991). Pets have even been described as “emotional anchors” for people who are going through a transitional stage in their life (Brickel, 1986, p. 312). This may be especially true for the older population who are likely to experience many life transitions such as the loss of their spouse (Grenade & Boldy, 2008). Many participants in past studies have expressed the high level of value that they had for their pets, and how their pets comforted and motivated them, for example, dogs motivated people to go walking (Allen et al., 2000; Knight & Edwards, 2008). These benefits were particularly identified for people who expressed that they were lonely (Allen et al., 2000; Knight & Edwards, 2008). Wells (2009)

also notes that pets can facilitate social interaction between people, for instance walking a dog may create a common interest for strangers to initiate conversation.

Research to date suggests that pets may help improve health and wellbeing in some populations (Allen et al., 2000; McConnell et al., 2011; Serpell, 1991; Wells, 2009). The longitudinal research evaluated by Headey et al. (2002) suggested that older people may benefit more so from the companionship provided by a pet compared to other groups. Despite the existing research, evidence through further studies is required to explore the benefits of pet ownership as a whole (Boldt & Dellmann-Jenkins, 1992; Herzog, 2011).

A gap noted in the literature is that few recent studies directly explored the meaning of pet ownership to an older population (Wells & Rodi, 2000). The existing research focused on different populations such as animal assisted therapy for older adults in residential care (Rosenkoetter, 1991). Those studies that did look at older adults in the community investigated specific aspects of pet care such as playing with a pet or pet attachment rather than the meaning of pet ownership as a whole (Tucker, Friedman, Tsai & Martin, 1995; Winefield, Black, & Chur-Hanson, 2008).

Benefits of Supporting Ongoing Pet Ownership in Older Adults

There is no literature exploring how promoting and supporting ongoing pet ownership may influence a person's social isolation and overall quality of life. In a Queensland-based community program called the Pets for Life Project, volunteers are matched to an older adult who is having difficulty maintaining care of their pet. Volunteers visit several times a week to provide assistance in a variety of tasks, which may include grooming, exercising or giving medication to the pet. The overall aim of the Pets for Life Project is to support older adults in their homes, to maintain pet care. Anecdotally, many of the participants are reported to be at a risk of social isolation and may be experiencing lowered quality of life. In addition to the

volunteers providing pet care services they may also have a social role with the participant. The Pets for Life Project also has other social events throughout the year for participants, such as end of year lunches. Therefore the objective of Pets for Life is not merely practical services but providing an avenue of social interaction for participants.

The aim of this study was to explore the meaning of pet ownership for the older adults who are involved in the Pets for Life Project and therefore living in the community. Additionally, the study aimed to explore the lived experience of the people within the project, in relation to their perceived quality of life and social isolation.

Methods

Research Design

All research begins on the premise of certain assumptions or philosophical viewpoints (Creswell, 2003). It was clear from the outset of the research process that there would be a small sample due to the small population within the Pets for Life Project and the specific inclusion criteria that participants would need to fit into to be included in the research. Consideration was given to utilising a solely qualitative approach to research. This was due to the fact that qualitative methods do not rely on the size of the sample and rather focus on depth and richness of data collection (Liamputtong, 2010). However, the use of quantitative methods was also required as it was desirable to be able to compare the participants' levels of quality of life to normative data. This comparison would help to identify whether the population being examined were experiencing a level of quality of life less than that of the wider population. In order to be able to utilise both qualitative and quantitative components, a mixed methods design was chosen.

The quantitative research process employed a survey tool to gather data which would be used to contextualise the qualitative component of this study. However, qualitative methods were given higher status in the research process as it provides a mechanism for exploring the lived experience of participants, complementing the research question (Grbich, 2010; Liamputtong, 2010). Mixed methods research can be conceptualised by typology. This study used a sequential typology of a mixed methods approach with a focus on qualitative research (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003). Integration of the qualitative and quantitative forms occurred specifically at the data analysis and interpretation phases (Creswell et al., 2003).

The qualitative research process in this study employed an interpretive phenomenological methodology (Carpenter, 2010). Interpretive phenomenology is a methodological approach which aims to explore the meaning that individuals have for certain experiences (Carpenter, 2010). This approach utilised semi-structured interviews to allow for some direction as to the content of the answer but also providing the opportunity for participants to discuss themes that they felt were relevant.

Ethical approval was obtained through the University of the Sunshine Coast Human Research Ethics Committee.

Sample

The aim was to recruit ten members from the Pets for Life Project for inclusion in this study. Sampling was purposive with any person who met the following criteria being invited to participate. The inclusion criteria was defined as: on the waiting list or who have been participating in the Pets for Life Project for up to twelve months, were 60 years of age or over, and having no known mental health or cognitive issues. These criteria were set as the population being researched were older people who could be defined in accordance with the

World Health Organisation as 60 years of age or over (2013). Participants who had been in the program less than a year were sought because this would give them insight as a relatively new person to the program so as to allow future research to be completed after the participants being involved for more than a year. In the original study design the recruitment criteria stipulated that a participant must only have been in the project for up to 3 months. This was amended to 12 months after consultation with the Pets for Life Project as there was a very limited number of participants who would then be suitable for the research (under two people). Due to ethical consideration it was necessary to recruit participants with no known mental health or cognitive issues to ensure the research would not impact on their conditions. Informed written consent was obtained from all participants.

Measures

This investigation employed a quantitative measure of health-related quality of life as well as using semi-structured, in-depth interviews to collect qualitative information concerning: the Pets for Life Project, social isolation, and the meaning of pet ownership.

Quality of life

Quantitative measurement of health-related quality of life was undertaken using the Short-Form 36-item Health Survey version 2 (SF-36V2®, Ware et al., 2008). Questions in this self-report survey related to the following areas: physical functioning, role-physical, bodily pain, general health, vitality, social functioning, role-emotional, mental health, and reported health transition. To keep the burden on participants to a minimum, the short form version of the quality of life survey was used. The SF-36V2® has acceptance for clinical use in measuring health and quality of life (Ware et al., 2008). It is a generic measure with sound psychometric properties that has been found useful to compare specific populations such as the older population through the use of normative data (Ware & Gandek, 1998).

Social isolation, Pets for Life Project and pet ownership

Qualitative methods are used to explore the lived experiences of people (Carpenter, 2010). Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were therefore used to collect information on the participant's perceived social isolation, their experiences of the Pets for Life project and the meaning they find in pet ownership. Persons interested in further details of the interview structure may contact the first author.

Rigour and Trustworthiness

The approach to conducting rigorous research is different between qualitative research and quantitative research. In qualitative research rigour focuses on the concept of trustworthiness (Krefting, 1991). This study employed the following strategies to increase trustworthiness. Triangulation of data was used by utilising multiple collection methods: existing literature and both qualitative and quantitative data forms. This increased the credibility of the data by crosschecking and assessing the results against each other (Krefting, 1991). Multiple researchers analysed the data, increasing the data dependability by crosschecking that similar codes and themes were identified by each researcher (Krefting, 1991). Member checking in this study was used by rechecking themes with the participants; and was completed immediately after the interview and then again approximately one month after the interview. Ensuring that participants' viewpoints have been accurately translated into themes increases the credibility of qualitative research (Grbich, 2010). Data dependability was increased by including the variability of the data in the findings (Krefting, 1991). For instance, including themes that may have been discussed by only one participant may not be representative of all of the participants but it shows the broad range of experiences that participants have. This strategy supports the aim of qualitative research to explore the individual's lived experience (Liamputtong, 2010).

The rigour of the quantitative data largely relied on the existing validity and reliability of the SF-36V2® outcome measure, which has been documented in past literature (Ware & Gandek, 1998).

Data Collection Procedures

Interviews and SF-36V2® completion occurred at each participant's home due to ease of physical access as many participants had physical conditions that impacted on their ability to mobilise any further than household distances. Some participants also had limited access to public or private transportation.

The data collection occurred in two stages, survey administration and interview. In stage one, the SF-36V2® was administered by a Pets for Life Project staff member following brief training on survey administration by the researcher. The participant had the option of either completing the questionnaire for themselves or, if they had visual or reading issues, participants had the option of having the Pets for Life Project staff member transcribing answers on the participant's behalf.

During stage two, a staff member from the Pets for Life Project introduced the researcher to the participant and then left the room to ensure that the participant could speak confidentially. The participant answered a series of questions asked by the researcher. The duration of each interview varied depending on each participant's answers and ranged from 18 minutes to 45 minutes in duration. All interviews were audio recorded with permission to aid in transcription and data analysis.

Data Analysis

Quantitative statistical analysis of the SF-36V2® data was completed by using the SF-36V2® QualityMetric Software. The software compared central tendencies of this

study's data to normative data of quality of life for physical and mental components (Ware et al., 2008). To avoid researcher bias the SF-36V2® results were not reviewed prior to completing the interviews.

Thematic analysis of the qualitative data was initially completed by the first author. The thematic analysis entailed coding transcribed data into codes that related to the research aims. The second stage was to organise the codes into categories to identify trends or themes in the data (Liamputtong & Serry, 2010). The second author then re-examined each code, category and theme and agreed or disagreed with the theme assigned by the first author. Codes, categories and themes were discussed by the research team until consensus was achieved. This process is illustrated in Figure 3 (see below).

Results

Participants

A total of eight people in the Pets for Life Project volunteered to participate in the study for both stages. After interviewing eight people in stage two, no new themes were emerging from the information being shared by participants, therefore it was assumed that data saturation had been reached. The participants were all women between the ages of 60 to 94 years old, and had at least one pet. In each circumstance the pet was a dog. Each participant had been in the Pets for Life Project for a varying length of time, from 1 day to 12 months.

Quantitative Findings

The quantitative results indicated that the participants scored a level of health worse than average, with 88% of the participants scoring below average on the physical component

of the SF-36V2® (see Figure 1). This component includes physical functioning, role physical, bodily pain, and general health.

<<Insert Figure 1 about here>>

Figure 1. Physical component summary of the SF-36v2® compared to normative data

In terms of the mental component, 50% of participants scored below average, however, the other 50% of participants scored above average against the normative data. This component includes vitality, social functioning, role emotional, and mental health.

<<Insert Figure 2 about here>>

Figure 2. Mental component summary of the SF-36v2® compared to normative data

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative data analysis revealed three themes and 18 subthemes (see Figure 3). The three main themes were “Social Isolation versus Loneliness”, “Pets as Companions”, and “Pets for Life has Multiple Benefits”. The 18 subthemes are linked to each other and to the main themes. The subthemes with supporting quotes are listed in Tables 1, 2, and 3. All participant and pet names listed are pseudonyms to protect their identity.

<<Insert Figure 3 about here>>

Figure 3. Theme map

Social Isolation versus Loneliness

Social Isolation versus Loneliness involves various aspects of social participation. Some people reported that their health impacted on their social participation, others that they preferred to be socially isolated. This indicates that the social preferences of people impact on social isolation and that the importance lies with how the individual perceives and copes

with the isolation. For example, one participant noted that she does feel lonely at times but she has strategies in place to relieve these feelings, such as playing with her pet. This theme also encompassed the participant's physical health and how it impacts on functional tasks (see Table 1).

<<Insert Table 1 about here>>

Table 1

Summary of Subthemes from Social Isolation versus Loneliness

Pets as Companions

In the main theme of Pet as Companions, the meaning of pet ownership was described broadly. The theme is represented through this quote: "Other people might let you down but your pet doesn't"- Mavis. Within this theme, various subthemes were identified around the positives of pet ownership (see Table 2). Furthermore, these themes suggest that maintaining pet ownership provides health-related benefits to the owner.

<<Insert Table 2 about here>>

Table 2

Summary of Subthemes from Pets as Companions

Pets for Life Project has Multiple Benefits

The theme of Pets for Life Project has Multiple Benefits incorporates all aspects that participants found positive about the project. The following quote is just one of several that highlighted the importance of the role that the Pets for Life Project play in supporting ongoing pet ownership. "If you can keep the animals and their owners together it's got to be

a good thing, hasn't it? It's got to be a good thing because there must be people who have no family, no friends, or they're just natural recluses but their animal is everything to them." - Mary. The subthemes in Pets for Life Project has Multiple Benefits involved the more obvious components that the project provides such as practical help, but also incorporated the accessibility and reliability of Pets for Life and the social aspect of the project (see Table 3).

<<Insert Table 3 about here>>

Table 3

Summary of Subthemes from Pets for Life has Multiple Benefits

Discussion

In order to triangulate the findings and identify similarities in this research it was important to assess the quantitative and qualitative data against one other. It was found that the findings supported each other in the following ways; all participants noted that their physical ill health limited their ability to perform pet care. These qualitative findings are supported by the quantitative results where 88% of participants scored below average on the physical health component of the SF-36V2® indicating that their physical health would impact on their functional abilities, including pet care.

Social Isolation and Quality of Life

Prior to this research it was believed by the researchers that participants were likely to be experiencing social isolation and the negative effects of this, such as loneliness. However, both the qualitative and quantitative findings did not fully support this hypothesis. The qualitative and quantitative results identified that some participants do experience a level of social isolation or loneliness. However, the SF-36V2® survey identified that 50% of participants scored above average on the mental component indicating that some people were not likely to be experiencing the negative effects of social isolation. In the qualitative

research it was noted that different participants perceived social isolation differently and in fact, some people preferred to be alone. Other participants reported that the more social interaction they had, the less negative of effects of social isolation, such as loneliness, they experienced. Previous research has also found that social interaction is beneficial to the health and wellbeing of older people as it can decrease feelings of loneliness and depression (Cacioppo & Hawkey, 2003; Coyle & Dugan, 2012; Dickens et al., 2011; Findlay, 2003; Fine & Spencer, 2009). However, unlike this current research, the findings from these existing studies do not detail that people's personal preferences of social interaction may impact on how they experience social isolation.

Health and Wellbeing Benefits of Pet Ownership

The themes that emerged from the qualitative research identified that pets have a positive impact on their owners through a variety of factors. These factors include pets as a companion, a way to decrease loneliness, a motivator, a facilitator of social interaction, providing feelings of safety, or as someone to nurture. The results from this study support what has been reported broadly in other literature and indicates that pet ownership has similar benefits for older adults as to those in the wider population (Allen et al., 2000; Boldt & Dellmann-Jenkins, 1992; Knight & Edwards, 2008; McConnell et al., 2011; Wells, 2009). It is important to note that the findings in this research contrasts to other literature that has stated that pet ownership has minimal or non-existent effect on older adults (Wells & Rodi, 2000; Winefield et al, 2008). The difference in the findings may be due to the fact that this research looked specifically at a population involved in a program to support pet ownership, whereas other literature looked broadly at older adults living in the community (Wells & Rodi, 2000; Winefield et al., 2008).

Two subthemes that also emerged were that pets were seen as one of the family and that pet health can impact on the owner's happiness. These themes were both noted as being linked to the level of attachment that pet owners have with their animals. This adds to the body of literature which discusses the varying levels of attachment between pets and owners, however, was outside the scope of this study and was therefore not a focus (Boldt & Dellmann-Jenkins, 1992; Keil, 1998; Winefield et al., 2008).

Benefits of Creating Programs to Support Ongoing Pet Ownership

The health-related benefits of pet ownership identified in the findings indicate the importance of supporting ongoing pet ownership in order to be able to afford these positive aspects for owners. It is important to note that this research has focussed on supporting ongoing pet ownership for older adults, rather than promoting becoming a pet owner for the first time. This is linked to recommendations in the literature that pet ownership should be encouraged in the older population if the older person has a history of pet ownership (Dembicki & Anderson, 1996). Boldt and Dellmann-Jenkins (1992) also note that the degree to which pet ownership is beneficial to mental and physical health depends upon the individual's level of attachment with their pet.

Financial accessibility

As highlighted in Table 3 the financial accessibility of the project was a theme that emerged from the data. Financial accessibility is noted in the literature as a potential way of promoting engagement in services (British Columbia Ministry of Health, 2004). Many of the older adults who participated in this study reported to be living on welfare pensions from the government. As Australian government pensions are strictly means tested, participants are very likely to be living with limited funds to access support programs that they need

(Centrelink, 2014). Therefore the absence of costs to be involved in the project was important to participants.

Community partnership

Some authors have advised that it may be beneficial to partner with community volunteer services to create programs to decrease social isolation in the older population (British Columbia Ministry of Health, 2004; Cornwell & Waite, 2009; Grenade & Boldy, 2008). The success is due to these not-for-profit organisations often having a good understanding of the needs of the older community and how best to access them (British Columbia Ministry of Health, 2004; Cornwell & Waite, 2009; Grenade & Boldy, 2008). The Pets for Life Project was started by a local community centre. The success of this project is therefore likely to be directly related to the existing positive relationship between the community centre and the community. This relationship allowed the Pets for Life Project team to have a good understanding of the needs of those in the community, specifically older adults.

Multi-layered outcomes

Due to the relatively unexplored nature of research on a community project such as Pets for Life, that supports ongoing pet ownership, the findings from this study have little to compare with. The findings of this study identified that Pets for Life provided practical and reliable help and provided peace of mind to participants. Peace of mind that Pets for Life gave was explained by participants in terms of knowing that no matter what the future might hold in regard their personal health, that there was support in place to maintain care of their pet. This is a particularly critical role considering the importance of pets in the participants' lives.

Another theme that emerged was that the participants did not want to burden their friends with pet care. Pets for Life have addressed this need by providing the practical service of pet walking. The fact that participants describe the project as meeting practical needs to the point that they felt peace of mind indicates that participants perceive that their needs are being met in this regard.

In terms of the project meeting multiple aims, research suggests that community services could be used as a “piggy-back” service to facilitate outcomes to minimise social isolation on top of their main objectives (British Columbia Ministry of Health, 2004, p. 32). These programs would already have access to the socially isolated population and could be developed to include objectives surrounding decreasing social isolation (British Columbia Ministry of Health, 2004). The findings from this research indicate that Pets for Life is using a “piggy back” approach (British Columbia Ministry of Health, 2004, p. 32). It does this by contributing to two objectives, assisting with pet care, as well as having a side focus of facilitating outcomes of decreased social isolation through the social aspect of their program. The increased risk of social isolation to older adults warrants continued research in this area. Further research on this topic could more deeply explore the theme the “Social Aspect of the Pets for Life Project” and investigate how this may link to improving health outcomes.

Through a novel population, participants in the Pets for Life Project, the results of this study add to the existing body of knowledge around the health-related benefits of pet ownership to older adults. This information is particularly important for people working with older adults in the community sector. The health-related benefits of pet ownership that have been identified in the findings indicate that it is therefore important to support ongoing pet ownership. Due to the prevalence of social isolation in older adults, support should be given to “piggy back” projects such as Pets for Life which support pet ownership as well as provide social aspects to participants (British Columbia Ministry of Health, 2004, p. 32).

Limitations

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of any research project. As previously noted, the sample size for this research was 8 participants. This is a small sample size for quantitative research as a small sample cannot produce enough data to be generalisable or statistically significant (Liamputtong, 2010). However, the purpose of using the quantitative component in this mixed methods design was as a way of setting the context for the qualitative research, therefore the data will not be used to make generalisable assumptions about this population (Grbich, 2010).

It is also important to note that much of the literature that was located and used to inform this study was published up to two decades ago, which may indicate a lack of currency in their findings (Allen et al., 2000; Boldt & Dellmann-Jenkins, 1992; Brickel, 1986; Dembicki & Anderson, 1996; Headey et al., 2002, Keil, 1998, Knight & Edwards, 2008). However, this limited nature of related literature justifies the need for continued research in this area, such as in this study.

Additionally, volunteer bias must be considered as there may be differences in experiences for those who would choose to volunteer to participate in this research and those who would not. This consideration is especially relevant to this study as only one gender participated and the participants had been in the Pets for Life Project for varying lengths of time (Boughner, 2010). Volunteer bias affects generalisability of the findings to other participants of the Pets for Life Project, as well as to other older adults in the wider community. Therefore, the findings should be used with caution for other groups. Similarly, in each circumstance the pet owners who volunteered to participate in this study had pet dogs. This means that caution should be used when applying the findings from this research to pet ownership of other animals.

Conclusion

There are a growing number of older adults living alone in our communities who are at a risk of social isolation and lowered quality of life. Strategies to combat these health impacting factors are therefore of great importance. One such strategy is supporting ongoing pet ownership, such as through the Pets for Life Project. This study explored the meaning of pet ownership to older adults in the Pets for Life Project and how this impacted on social isolation and quality of life.

The findings indicated that there are health-related benefits to pet ownership. These relate to social health, pets can facilitate social interaction between people; physical health, pets can motivate their owners; and mental health, pets act as a companion, a way to decrease loneliness, provide feelings of safety, and act as someone to nurture. To continue to afford these health-related benefits for pet owners, it is important to support ongoing pet ownership through community projects, such as Pets for Life.

The success of Pets for Life is thought to be due to the close relationship with the community in which they work and their understanding of participant's needs. The findings show that the Pets for Life Project is providing practical, financially accessible and reliable assistance which provides the pet owners with peace of mind. This study found that the participant's personal preferences of social interaction impacted on their experiences of social isolation. It was also identified that the Pets for Life Project served two objectives: practical assistance with pet care and providing a social connection for participants.

The Pets for Life Project provides clear benefits to older adults living in the community who wish to maintain pet ownership. Other community organisations could use the Pets for Life Project as a model in building multi-layered community projects that provide a needs-based support service to older adults living in the community with their pets.

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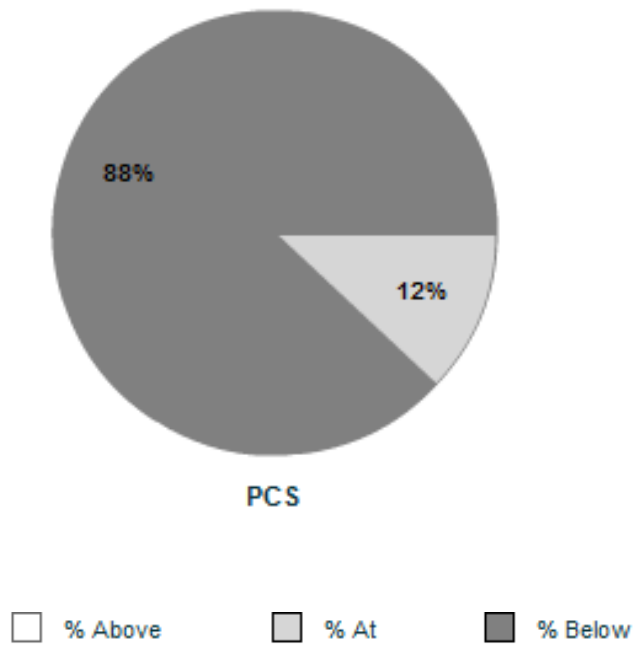
Figures

Figure 1. Physical component summary of the SF-36v2® compared to normative data

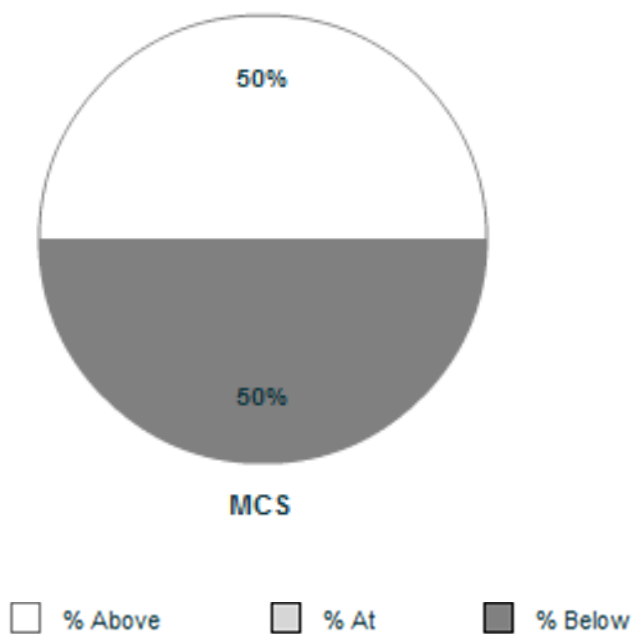


Figure 2. Mental component summary of the SF-36v2® compared to normative data

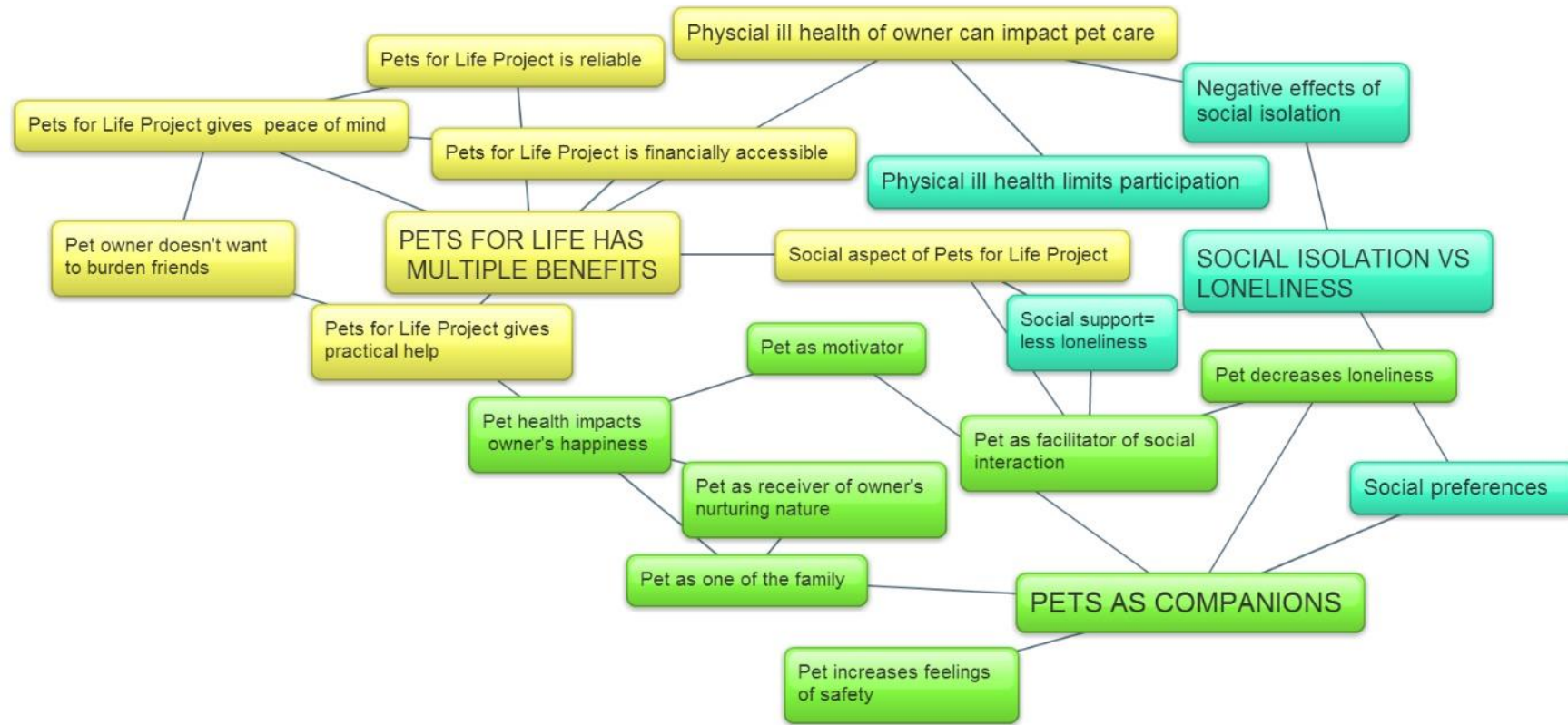


Figure 3. Theme map

Tables

Table 1

Summary of Subthemes from Social Isolation versus Loneliness

Subtheme	Examples of Quotes from Participants
Physical health impacts on participation	“Yeah I mean I want to be climbing Mt Everest to go and see Kathmandu or whatever but I can’t, it’s unrealistic... [my pet] is all I’ve got currently because I can’t go do all these things.”- Valerie
Negative effects of social isolation	“I don’t know how people who are older than I and really immobilised, I don’t know how they survive being so lonely, it’s a killer.”- Mary
Social preferences	“I’ve always said I get on very well with me. I don’t need other people to make me happy”- Betty “I’m not a people person” - Valerie.
Social support = less loneliness	“Companionship. Day to day - friendships. Having people that are there to care for me, help me if I need it, so valuable to me.”- Lynne

Table 2

Summary of Subthemes from Pets as Companions

Subtheme	Examples of Quotes from Participants
Pet as motivator	<p>“If I take him for a walk it was great because it meant I had to go for a walk and then I didn’t get stiff.” -Mary</p> <p>“I could be inclined to get a bit down on the dumps, depressed. That was how I was going before. She [the pet] gives me a burst of energy. I have to do things for her when I’m perhaps feeling a bit depressed and I don’t want to but I have got to.”- Betty</p>
Pet decreases loneliness	<p>“That might be the only interaction they have with a living thing [with their pet]...I would be very empty, I’d be very lost and lonely [without her pet].”- Mary</p>
Pet as facilitator of social interaction	<p>“If I don’t meet people I know, I meet people that I don’t know and they stop, ‘how are you? Oh look what a lovely dog’ and they make a big fuss of her so I don’t feel in any way I’m missing out.”-Lynne</p>
Pet as receiver of owners nurturing	<p>“I think for most people, maybe mainly women, but we have that nurturing thing and it’s still there. Like having a child, you have got to be there for that little one.” - Betty</p>
Pet as one of the family	<p>“They’ve been treated as one of the family and that’s really what I look on them as.”- Elizabeth</p>
Pet increases feelings of safety	<p>“I always feel safe with her here because she knows even if anybody comes in the front gate.”- Claire</p>
Pet health impacts owner’s happiness	<p>“Well it helps Patch be healthier and happier. And if he’s healthier and happier, then I am.”- Mavis</p>

Table 3

Summary of Subthemes from Pets for Life has Multiple Benefits

Subtheme	Examples of Quotes from Participants
Pets for Life Project gives peace of mind	<p>“I have a lot more peace of mind knowing that I’ve got those regular walks with Pets for Life, I can rely on them. And I would be more concerned if I didn’t have that.”- Lynne</p> <p>“It gave me comfort knowing my dogs were being taken care of.”- Judy</p>
Pet owner doesn’t want to burden friends	<p>“You don’t want to overdo the time that you take from people.”- Lynne</p>
Pets for Life Project is reliable	<p>“They were reliable and I know that if I need them again, I can just call.”- Judy</p>
Pets for Life Project is financially accessible	<p>“I certainly appreciate for some people on a pension it could be rather difficult too, but in this case it’s free so it makes it very accessible.”- Betty</p>
Pets for Life Project gives practical help	<p>“Well they’re doing what I can’t do. You know, supplying a walker and all that sort of thing so I think that they’re a great help to me in that way.”- Elizabeth</p>
Physical ill health of owner can impact pet care	<p>“I’ve got a quite a few medical things, I’m legally blind and I have this breathing problem and that’s why I can’t walk the dog.”- Claire</p>
Social aspect of Pets for Life Project	<p>“Oh I like the company of the carers and they’re all very, very nice people”. - Claire</p>