

Survey on the relationship between homeless people and the dog

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Abstract: The aim of this survey was to verify the characteristics of the relationship between homeless people and their dogs. The results have allowed to know the motivation of this coexistence, the dog education and some aspects of the everyday life of the couple. The pet plays a key role in this interaction and he is an important support to break social isolation, making possible, for the homeless persons, to communicate with others. The dog is a constant companion for those people with whom he shares and faces the difficulties of everyday life.

Key Words: dog; homeless; relationship.

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Introduction

Homeless people live in conditions of need and poverty, lack of stable housing and of any relevant relationship. They are mostly men, living in large metropolitan areas; when employed, they have occasional, low-skilled occupations but can receive money from friends, family, strangers and charity associations (Istat, 2011). Previous researches, conducted both in Italy and in other countries, showed that this social condition may be temporary, episodic or long-term and characterized by an economic and relational impoverishment (Busch-Geertsema, 2010; Gnocchi, 2009a; Hulchanski, 2011; Scardigno, 2011). For this reason, the animal can absolve a vicarious role for people living situations of poverty and social exclusion, supporting and encouraging them, as the pet requires care, time, responsibility and dedication (Wilson & Turner, 1998). Numerous studies have found that pets, such as dogs, are a source of personal satisfaction, affection, loyalty and serenity with a positive impact on mental and physical health of people (Rowan & Beck, 2000; Collis et al., 1998; Pallas & Costa, 2000). Living with a dog can reduce the frustration of feeling worthless, can contribute to the elimination of loneliness, alienation, boredom, apathy (Tonutti, 2004) and suicidal thoughts (Rew, 2000); negative feelings and emotions may be exorcised by the company of a dog.

The aim of this research was to analyze the characteristics of the relationship between homeless people and their dogs.

Subjects, material and methods

For the present study, a questionnaire divided into three sections and consisting of forty-choice multiple closed questions, has been used. The first section reported data of the person interviewed: sex, origin, age, work, family relations. The second section collected information about the dog: breed

or morphology, provenance, vaccination, castration etc. The last section investigated the daily interaction between dog and homeless people: motivation of living with the dog, veterinary assistance, feeding schedule, travel modality, places where spending the night and behavior of other people.

The questionnaire was distributed to twenty dog owners in conditions of extreme social unrest, with precarious employment and housing,

The interlocutors were met in urban and suburban areas of Pisa, Livorno, Firenze, Bologna and Sarzana. The meetings took place in the downtown streets of the above mentioned towns. The approach was directed without any intermediary (e.g. social street operators). The time required for the interview was on average of 30-40 minutes.

The transcription of the answers was done manually on paper, inviting the person to make spontaneous statements, without any forcing, respecting his/her privacy.

Owner characteristics

The 20 respondents can be divided into the following age groups: 65% under forty years old, 25% between forty and fifty-years and 10% over fifty-five years of age. The average age of respondents was just over thirty-nine. This finding agrees with a statistical survey conducted in 2012, in which the average age of the homeless under forty-five years was recorded (Istat, 2012). 85% are males and 40% are immigrants from Eastern Europe, while the remaining 60% was born in Italy. Married persons account for 20% of the group investigated and 30% of respondents said they had no family relation; 15% had children, while 15% had living parents and 40% brothers / sisters. The average level of education was low: 30% received a higher school certificate, 50% a certificate of middle and 20% of primary school. None of the respondents had ever done academic studies.

At the time of the interview all respondents were unemployed and survived begging; one interviewee said he worked as a farmhand and three were street artists. Some of the respondents have had previous work experience: 25% were employed (construction, catering, agriculture), 45% were craftsmen.

Dog characteristics

70% ($n = 14$) of the dogs were mongrels while the remaining 6 were: American Cocker, Hungarian hound, Cocker spaniel, Bichon Havanese, Labrador retriever and Pit bull terrier. Owning a breed dog is justified by their owners having the desire to produce puppies to sell.

85% of respondents said they had received the dog from friends, but did not specify exact age of the adoption; in 10% of the cases the dog came from a shelter, while the remaining 5% was found, abandoned, in the street. The mongrels were obtained by crossing breeds such as: Pastore maremmano, Pitbull terrier, Golden retriever and German shepherd. The subjects of medium and large size are preferred by all respondents because more appreciated and considered able to offer better protection against intruders. 55% of dogs were male, choice justified by the totality of their owners, by not incurring unwanted pregnancies and for the bigger size of the male dog that can provide better protection.

Regarding castration, this surgery is rarely performed as shown by the fact that only two females and one male were castrated. 55% of respondents justified the choice of not having performed the castration of the pet with the following reasons: "It does not work to reduce aggression"; "The dog might change its character and behavior"; "The dog has to be a dog"; "The male must be male", but the surgery would be performed for therapeutic reasons. Finally, 35% of dogs were vaccinated in the current year and the rest has not been vaccinated for lack of money. The totality of the interlocutors said their pet had a microchip.

Interaction dog-owner

70% of respondents had, in the past, owned a dog and other animals, like cats and birds. About dog behavioral education, for 55% no teaching was necessary, claiming the dogs are well behaved because living in the streets, free to move and always around people. 15% had to use verbal punishment, 15% lavished caresses, while 15% of the interlocutors was not able to give a precise answer.

Respondents say they do not want to use the muzzle (although mandatory), while the leash is considered essential to move and allows to retain and control the animal during collection of money. This need also arises when other dogs or when a passerby suddenly approaches for petting the dog.

The food chosen by the totality of the homeless was dry; 45% purchased the food with the proceeds of alms, 55% with donations from strangers. Two interlocutors claimed to use the money for their needs, considering it as the gain of a real work.

To the question: "Why did you choose the dog as a companion of life?", 50% of respondents claimed to feel less alone. These people reveal a strong link, witnessed by expressions like "He is my best friend and with him I do not feel alone," "I am consoled by him when the love with a woman ends", "He saved me from the abuse of drugs." 20% of respondents said they had chosen the company of a dog to arouse more attention in the people. 15% of respondents considered the animal useful to stand guard during the night spent outdoors.

Living with the dog is considered better than solitary life, although there are disadvantages such as:

- Dividing the money raised for purchasing food for the dog (45%).
- Difficulty in the travels. 90% of respondents avoided public transport in urban centers for the cost of the ticket, because crowded and for the mandatory use of the muzzle. The majority (55%) used the train to get from one city to another when the money was enough; 10% travelled by hitchhiking, and 25% moved on foot.
- Find a job. One interviewee said he would not know who to leave the dog if he were offered a job; so the dog becomes an excuse to avoid change of lifestyle.
- Being able to find accommodation to sleep with the dog. Half of the respondents spent the night in the open, because in the dorms it is not allowed to take the animal and any dog shelters are located outside the buildings. During the winter all respondents claimed to seek shelter in cars, caravans, railway stations, abandoned buildings, agricultural and industrial sheds.

60% of respondents said they had found a greater interest from the people when they are in the company of the dog. People are generally attracted "only" by the dog, especially when it is a puppy. 40% of respondents, however, said the dog was not a social catalyst.

50% of the interlocutors claimed they did not have a greater economic return for the presence of the pet, stating that passersby often bring back food for the dog and useful material for the person but do not make money donations.

25% of homeless stated their pet has had physical problems and in this case they were addressed directly to the vet, without use of third parties. The remaining 75% said the dog was always in good health, but they would bring the animal to a veterinarian if it became sick.

The totality of the sample believed the veterinary fees were too high and contacted several veterinarians before finding a professional who, understanding their situation, provided the performance for free or at a moderate price.

To the question: "Who would you foster your dog to, if you got sick?", 80% responded that they have contacts that can be trusted, 10% would trust in the family. Two respondents (10%) said it would be placed in appropriate facilities, according to current regulations, showing trust in institutions rather than in single people and implicitly revealing the lack of meaningful relationships

At the end of the investigation, questions to analyze the anthropomorphism of the relationship were asked. 15% asserted the dog can not understand the physical and psychological conditions of a

person. 85% believed the pet understands the mood of the person. The high positive percentage indicates the degree of complicity and affection between man and the animal. Adjectives with which the dog is defined by respondents are shown in Fig. 1.

The remaining 35% used more attributes to define the character of the dog, or used adjectives other than those indicated in the questionnaire:

- Smart, to define the behavior of a dog that does what he wants, taking advantage of the distraction of his master.
- Protective, to define the dog as a subject that transmits security and that does not leave his owner alone to face the difficulties of everyday life.

Discussion and conclusions

The homeless often have a past shaped by traumatic experiences, such as family break ups, period of imprisonment, loss of job, eviction from his home, illness, death of relatives or failure of an emigration project. Being homeless is not, therefore, a condition in which a person finds himself suddenly, but the outcome of a trial or “career of poverty” (Gnocchi 2009a, 2009b). The dog acts as an intermediary between the homeless and the urban environment in which he leads a precarious existence, with no support from the family of origin. The animal then plays the role of partner with whom to share every moment of the day, from waking up until the night when the homeless must search for a refuge, which must host also the dog; otherwise he can decide to sleep in the street, as it has been observed also in previous studies (Singer et al., 1995; Menteith, 2001; Baker 2001).

Another aspect of this relationship is the security and sense of protection offered by the dog, especially during the nights spent outdoors; this explains the choice of a dog of medium or large size. The dog comes back to play its old role of guarding the camp before concrete walls, iron gates, alarm systems, security doors and cameras replaced him and he is useful for defending the things that the owner bring with him: backpack, blankets, shoes, food, sleeping bag. Without any doubt, a utilitarian function of the relationship with the dog is present, caused by the street life and by the objective dangers the homeless face.

Almost all respondents say the dog can understand their state of mind and give him different adjectives; among all those indicated, the term “affectionate” testifies the strong bond established, confirming the existence of an important heterospecific attachment (Colby and Sherman., 2002) and the universal characteristic of pet owners to attribute to their animals feelings, emotions and thoughts. (Mitchell and Hamm, 1996; Gazzano et al., 2000; Serpell, 2003; Horowitz and Bekoff, 2007; Wynne, 2007; Irvine, 2013).

An important element in the relationship is dog education, a way to realize a balanced relationship with the animal. A good percentage of respondents said it was not necessary to teach him anything because the animal has learned education in a natural way. These dogs are accustomed to the urban environment, living in the streets since they were puppies and therefore exposed to a variety of stimuli such as city traffic, sirens, car horns, voices of passers-by, shouts and children’s games, traffic lights, etc; they follow the owner everywhere, leading a nomadic life with him. Unbeknownst to them the homeless has implemented the process of habituation.

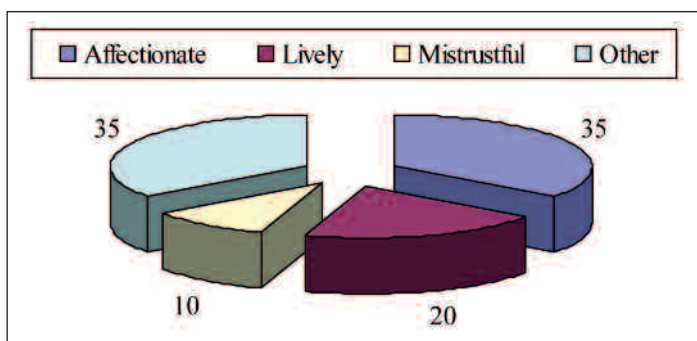


Fig. 1. Adjectives used by respondents to describe their dog.

Moreover, these persons are able to meet the essential needs of the animal, such as food and water, but the food supply may vary, depending on the momentary economic status of the owner: so dogs are subjected to frequent diet changes, passing from commercial food to the leftovers of the owner's meal.

The contact with the vet is present when strictly necessary and respondents rely directly on him without the help of third parties. This professional can provide the correct information to understand the principles of animal welfare. Such behavior proves the presence in the homeless of a sense of responsibility towards another living being.

A shadow on the relationship homeless-dog is the potential risk for the animal to be exploited for the economic return of almsgiving. Nevertheless, this advantage was not perceived by half of the interlocutors, a sign that, despite the presence of the dog, the contact with passers-by does not always end with alms. In addition, the interaction with the animal creates the opportunity to open up to the outside world and destroys the condition of loneliness (Rew, 2000) and social isolation; this could facilitate interaction and dialogue with others persons, as reported in the literature (Messent, 1984; Kidd and Kidd, 1994; Gazzano et al., 2013), having a communication not limited to social workers, doctors and police.

The animal is an integral part of the lives of the homeless, the faithful companion from whom they don't wish to be separated. The dog is the friend, as they declared, with whom they can express themselves freely, probably not feeling judged (Singer et al., 1995; Menteith, 2001).

The couple shares every hour of the day and the few resources it has. The dog is a catalyst of positive emotions, his company should make the homeless more relaxed, making him feel more secure. In addition to protection, the dog provides the only physical contact, by now lost with the co-specific, like embraces, caresses and kisses. Then the interaction with the dog can lead to an increase in well-being that both sides should share, even if the pet cannot solve the homeless problems at all. In 2001, Baker did not find substantial differences between the homeless with the dog and those who had not, probably for the serious physical conditions that can overwhelm any positive effect that the subject can have from the relationship with the animal (Taylor et al., 2004). Moreover, homeless dog owners more easily admitted to have an alcohol problem than non-dog owners (Baker, 2001; Irvine, 2013).

The research showed a clear majority of animals in good physical condition, although their psychological status is not clear.

In conclusion, this work is a contribution to the knowledge of a social dynamic influenced by the new social, cultural and economic aspects of modern civilization.

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Indagine sul rapporto tra le persone senza fissa dimora e il cane

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Sintesi

Le finalità di questa indagine sono state quelle di verificare le caratteristiche della relazione tra persone senza fissa dimora e cane. I risultati ottenuti hanno permesso di conoscere la motivazione di questa convivenza, le modalità di educazione del cane, il rispetto dei principi del benessere animale e alcuni aspetti del vivere quotidiano della coppia. Il pet svolge un ruolo chiave in questa interazione e viene ad essere un supporto importante per interrompere l'isolamento sociale e riuscire a comunicare con gli altri. Il cane è un compagno inseparabile per queste persone che con esso condividono e affrontano le difficoltà di ogni giorno.

Per il presente studio è stato utilizzato un questionario suddiviso in tre sezioni e costituito da quarantadue quesiti a risposta chiusa. Il questionario è stato distribuito a venti proprietari di cani in condizioni di grave disagio sociale, di precarietà lavorativa e abitativa. I 20 intervistati sono suddivisi nelle seguenti fasce di età: 65% sotto i quaranta anni, 25% tra i quaranta e i cinquantacinque anni e il 10% supera i cinquantacinque anni di età. L'età media degli intervistati è di poco superiore ai trentanove anni. Il 70% (n=14) dei cani delle persone intervistate erano meticci mentre il restante 30% (n=6) era costituito da soggetti di razza: cocker americano, bracco ungherese, cocker spaniel inglese, bichon havanese, labrador retriever e pitbull terrier. Il possesso di un cane di razza è giustificato dai loro proprietari dall'intento di produrre cuccioli da vendere.

L'85% degli intervistati ha dichiarato di aver ricevuto il cane da conoscenti, ma non ha specificato le modalità e l'età precisa dell'adozione; nel 10% dei casi il cane proviene dal canile, mentre nel restante 5% si tratta di cani trovati in strada. Alla domanda: "Perché ha scelto il cane come compagno di vita?", il 50% degli intervistati sostiene di sentirsi meno solo.

Il 20% degli intervistati afferma di aver scelto la compagnia di un cane per suscitare una maggior attenzione nel prossimo. Il 15% degli intervistati ritiene utile l'animale per fare la guardia durante la notte passata all'aperto.

Il 60% degli intervistati afferma di aver riscontrato un maggior interesse da parte dei passanti da quando è in possesso del cane. Le persone sono generalmente attratte "solo" dal cane, soprattutto quando è cucciolo. Il 40% degli intervistati dichiara, invece, che il cane non è un catalizzatore sociale.

La ricerca condotta ha evidenziato una netta maggioranza di animali in condizioni fisiche definite buone, anche se rimane il quesito circa le loro condizioni psichiche.

In conclusione, questo lavoro costituisce un contributo alla conoscenza di una realtà sociale dinamica influenzata dai nuovi sviluppi sociali, culturali ed economici della civiltà odierna.