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An exploratory study of pet raising and health of the elderly people in Hong Kong

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**AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF PET RAISING
AND HEALTH OF THE ELDERLY PEOPLE
IN HONG KONG**

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An Exploratory Study of Pet Raising and Health of the Elderly People in Hong Kong

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Chapter 1: Background and Objectives

1.1. Introduction

Pets such as dogs, cats and fish were popular in many other countries (Marx et al., 1988; Gammonley, 1991; Brodie & Biley, 1999; PIAS, 2002). In Hong Kong, pet owners increased to 0.26 million (Census and Statistics Department, 2006). Dating back to 1980s, a research study reported the association between pet ownerships and health benefits for humans (McNicholas et al., 2005). According to the report, domesticated pets brought a sense of companionship and provided pet owners with pleasure. These pets could be tools for enhancing human social relationship and could also provide their owners with emotional comfort. Recent studies also revealed that the influence of the complex and rich relationship between pets and owners might far surpass daily pleasure in terms of improving physical, psychological and mental health of the elderly (Serpell, 1991; Garrity et al., 1989; Murrell et al., 1983).

1.2. Objectives

Not many studies in the literature were to investigate the positive impacts of pet raising on health of the elderly in Hong Kong. If pet raising had a positive impact on older people's health, there would be important implications to the health services in Hong Kong, with regard to further studies on an in-depth understanding of this issue and policy recommendations for the Hong Kong government to improve the health services of the elderly population. In light of the above rationale, the present study was designed to explore the qualitative impacts of pet raising on well-being of the elderly people in Hong Kong. The specific aims of the study were:

1. To explore the value of pet raising as perceived by the elderly people in Hong Kong;
2. To explore the impacts of pet raising on the physical, psychological and overall life satisfaction of the elderly people in Hong Kong;
3. To identify the critical factors influencing the physical, psychological and overall life satisfaction of the elderly people in Hong Kong; and
4. To make suggestions to policy makers regarding effective health services for the elderly people in Hong Kong.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Empirical studies in the past two decades revealed that human health was benefited from the interaction between pets and humans (Siegel, 1990), especially for the minority group, namely the isolated elderly and those living alone. They reported various ways that pets could be beneficial to improving the health and well-being of the elderly people (Friedmann, 1995; Siegel, 1990; Serpell, 1991; Kidd & Kidd, 1994; Beck & Meyers, 1996; Brodie & Biley, 1999).

2.1. Development of Companionship

McCulloch (1984) highlighted the development of the attachment of animals to human beings. In such attachment, pets were regarded as “companion animals” (Messent & Serpell, 1981; Wills & Robinson, 2000). In later life, when the elderly people came to face the bereavement of their spouses, pets acted as substitutes of their lost spouses or as companions after their spouses and children no longer lived with them. These animal companions could significantly enhance the emotional, mental and physical well-being of the elderly people. (Serpell, 1991; Parslow et al., 2005).

2.2. Benefits on Physical Health

Raina et al. (1999) found that pet raising was able to draw people closer, to enhance the sense of pride of the pet owner, and to improve the capability of living independently and of reducing blood pressure and cholesterol content in blood for the patients who owned pets. Anderson et al. (1997) investigated the relationship between heart diseases and pet ownership. It was found that the pet owners had significantly lower blood pressure and plasma triglyceride than those

without pets did. Moreover, Friedmann et al. (1995) stated that both pet ownership and social support were significant predictors of survival, independent of the influences by other psycho-social and physiologic factors. In other words, these findings confirmed the positive relationship among pet ownership, social support and survival of the patients with coronary artery disease. Friedmann et al. (1980) found that patients, who owned pets, were less likely to die in the year following a heart attack than those, who did not own pets. This positive relationship was confirmed by Wright and Moore (1992) in a large-scale research. Baun et al. (1984) showed that patting a dog could lower the blood pressure of the people with hypertension. A recent co-operative survey conducted by universities in Australia, China and Germany showed that pet owners paid 15-20% fewer annual doctor visits than non-pet owners did, and that the relationship remained statistically significant after controlling for gender, age, marital status, income and other variables associated with health (Headey et al., 2004). Seprell (1991) carried out a 10-month prospective study on changes in behaviour and health status of 71 adult subjects, and reported that the two pet-owning groups had a highly significant reduction in minor health problems.

2.3. Psychosocial Benefits

Some observational studies suggested that introducing pets into the lives of the terminal cancer patients (Muschel, 1984) or the patients in the geriatric ward had significantly positive social and psychological consequences (Brickel, 1986). An analysis of the survey data collected from a national probability sample of respondents aged 65 and over showed that pet attachment was inversely related to depression (Garrity et al., 1989).

A number of studies revealed that the lack of social support could influence (Brodie & Biley, 1999) or even cause the risk factors for the health of the elderly (McNicholas et al., 2005). McNicholas & Collis (2000) showed that dog was a more powerful social lubricant, which facilitated social interactions between people, and it had supportive influence on people's adjustment to their loss of spouses. It was reported that the development of animal companionship had positive impact on human health, and also directly created a new form of interaction between the pet owner and other people within the community (Brodie & Biley, 1999). Rogers, Hart & Bolitz (2001) found that dogs would become the focus of conversation with others when owners were taking the dogs for a walk. Such interaction could buffer and normalize social isolation, reduce loneliness especially for the elderly. Furthermore, McNicholas et al. (2005) revealed that pet owners obtained social benefits since pets could help promote conversation opportunities and make friends. The Australian study done by McHarg et al. (1995) showed that the elderly extended social networks by pet ownership.

Moreover, some other studies on the elderly people also found that pet ownership was related to physical and psychosocial benefits (Lawton, Moss, & Moles, 1984; Ory & Goldberg, 1983; Robb & Stegman, 1983), and to enhancement of social networks and support (Collis, McNicholas & Harker, 2003). From the perspective of community care, there would be a need to investigate the relationships among pets, social interaction and psychosocial benefits with regard to promoting the quality of life of the elderly people.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology and Sampling

3.1. Methodology

The present study adopted a qualitative approach by employing in-depth interviews with pet owners and non-pet owners to understand their perception towards the meaning of pets and the possible impact on their physical, psychological health and social interaction.

In Hong Kong, a large portion of the elderly aged 60 and above (78.6%) had only attained primary level of education (Census and Statistics Department, 2000), thus making quantitative data collection uneasy, because it was quite difficult for them to read and answer print questions. Lofland and Lofland (1995) mentioned that rich and detailed information could be collected from the elderly through the face-to-face in-depth interview. Thus, using in-depth interview as an effective way for exploratory data collection, became the most essential part of the present research study. The study was designed to understand the significance of pets with regard to older persons, and to identify the possible impacts of raising pets on pet-owners. The in-depth interview guidelines for this study were developed in advance and the interview processes were tape-recorded during the interview. The standardized procedures of conducting an in-depth interview in the study were closely observed.

3.2. Research Objectives

The present study was focused on the relationships between pets and the health of the elderly people in light of the improvement of the quality of life of the elderly people in Hong Kong. In addition, a supplementary investigation was

conducted to collect further evidence with regard to the misconceptions of the elderly people on pet raising so as to strengthen the main study mentioned above. Specifically, the objectives of the study were to explore the relationships between pets and the health of the elderly people in a main study and to investigate the factors causing misconceptions of the elderly people on pet raising in a supplementary study.

3.3. Sampling

The participants in this study were recruited through the assistance of a local elderly social service centre that had been initially identified as being willing to cooperate for the study. This service centre provided referrals to potential subjects aged 65 and over, who either did or did not own pets (normally dogs and cats), with arrangement for home visits. With the consent of the participants, two trained social work students carried out the interviews with tape recordings, which were later transcribed into protocols. There were altogether 20 interviews, of which 10 were pet owners and the other 10 were non-pet owners.

Chapter 4: Main Study

4.1. Profiles of Participants

The 10 pet owners in the main study consisted of 2 men and 8 women. The median age of these 10 participants was 77.5, ranging from 70 to 92. Of these 10 participants, eight lived in remote villages and two resided in public housing estates. Of these 10 pet owners, all owned dogs, but only four owned both dogs and cats. The average number of years to raise a pet is 16.5 years per person (SD=11.44) (Table 1). As regards the health conditions of the pet owners, 9 pet owners suffered from the chronic illness, including seven persons with one chronic disease, one person with two chronic disease, and 1 person with three chronic diseases. Furthermore, two of the 10 pet owners suffered from serious illness but both recovered prior to the interview (Table 2).

Table 1. Background of the Pet Owners

	<u>Name</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Dogs</u>	<u>Cats</u>	<u>Resident</u>
1.	Mr. Wong	82	Male	Yes		Village House
2.	Miss Ng	81	Female	Yes		Village House
3.	Miss Lee	92	Female	Yes	Yes	Village House
4.	Miss Yam	70	Female	Yes		Village House
5.	Miss Tam	92	Female	Yes	Yes	Village House
6.	Miss Lam	71	Female	Yes	Yes	Village House
7.	Miss Law	71	Female	Yes		Public Housing Estate
8.	Mr. Ho	79	Male	Yes	Yes	Village House
9.	Miss Yeung	76	Female	Yes		Village House
10.	Miss Cheng	70	Female	Yes		Public Housing Estate

Table 2. Profile of the Pet Owners

<u>Category</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Category</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Category</u>	<u>N</u>
Gender:		Education Level:		Chronic Illness:	
Male	2	Tertiary level	1	Rheumatism 風濕	2
Female	8	High school level	0	Cataract 白內障	2
Age:		Secondary school level	0	Diabetes 糖尿病	4
71-75	5	Primary school level	2	Hypertension 高血壓	4
75-80	2	Without education	7	Cardiopathy 心臟病	0
81-85	2	Occupation:		Serious Illness:	
Above 85	1	Teacher	1	Apoplexy 中風	1
Residence:		Worker	0	Intestinal cancer 腸癌	1
Village house	8	Peasant	3		
Public estate	2	Teacher	6		

4.2. In-depth Interview Findings

4.2.1. Physical Health

Three of the 10 pet owners' interviews explicitly indicated the positive impacts of dog walking on their physical health. The interviewees claimed that raising pets could help them to do exercises for a better health as in the following quotations:

- i. “帶狗散步，增加運動，身體都好一點。” (“Walking dog improves health as it makes me exercise more.”).
- ii. “我每日都會帶牠們出去兩次散步，可以增加運動。” (“I took them out for a walk twice everyday, so I can do more exercises.”).

Nevertheless, one participant reported the suffering of cough since the beginning of raising a dog because of the virus infection through air.

4.2.2. Psychological Health

The pet owners revealed that they were happy with their pets and satisfied with their current ways of lives while they felt that they had good companions.

They treated their pets as their “sons and daughters” or “friends”. They also exhibited childlike behaviour towards their pets (Voith, 1985). For those pet owners whose spouses had passed away in particular, would shift their affection from their diseased spouses to their pets. They reported that they named their pets and talked to them as if their pets would be able to converse with people. They became happy and, at the same time, less lonely, as they could feel the support from their pets. The observation records suggested that the interviewees were glad to talk about their pets. Without any distraction, “the Dog” became the focus of the conversation at the interview. The interviewees claimed that:

a. Raising pets improved their psychological well-being as in the following quotations:

- i. “寵物可以帶給我歡樂。” (“*Pet brings me happiness.*”).
- ii. “我好開心，因為他們很乖。” (“*I feel happy they are well-behaved.*”).
- iii. “當我有寵物的時候，我感到很自在。” (“*I feel at ease when I have pets.*”). (*This participant had dogs and cats.*)
- iv. “和他們在一起使我感到很開心，我待他們好似我的子女一樣。” (“*I am happy with them. I treat them as my children.*”).
- v. “我感覺好好，狗使到我無咁孤獨。” (“*I feel good, dog drives out loneliness.*”).
- vi. “我和我的狗在一起時，我不會感到沉悶。” (“*I do not get bored with my dog.*”).
- vii. “當我感到孤單時候，我可以和他聊天，他使我感到快樂。” (“*When I feel lonely, I can talk to him, he makes me happy.*”).

b. Raising pets improved their life satisfaction as in the following quotations:

- i. “他們令到我好開心，還有生活滿足感增加了。” (“*They make me happy and increase my life satisfaction*”).
- ii. “Kiki 帶給我係生活上的滿足。” (“*Kiki gives me life*”).

satisfaction”).

c. Pets serve as good companions as in the following quotations:

- i. “他們是我的朋友，我可以和他們分享我的感覺，我常常都和他們聊天。” (“*They are my friends, I can share my feeling with them. I chat to them all the time.*”).
- ii. “我比前感到更快樂，我和Kiki在一起的時候，我不會感到沉悶。” (“*I become happier and I do not get bored with Kiki.*”).
- iii. “他們陪伴我。” (“*They keep me company.*”).
- iv. “有他們在家時，好像我有人陪伴著我。” (“*It seems I have got a companion when they are here.*”).

d. Raising pets positively changed attitudes and behaviours:

Two respondents reported that they lost their temper easily, but dog raising positively changed their attitudes towards other people and diminished the irritable behaviours in their daily lives. They became calm and gentle to their dogs and to their neighbours as well.

The following quotations are given to address the above issue:

- i. “狗改變了我的態度，我不會再那麼容易發脾氣，我可以控制到我自己。” (“*Dog changed my attitude. I no longer lose my temper easily. I can control myself.*”).
- ii. “狗的反應可以影響我的態度。” (“*Dog’s responses may affect my attitude.*”).

e. Raising pets served as substitutes for relatives and friends:

The respondents felt happy to walk their dogs. To them, dogs acted as substitutes for their relatives and friends in addition to their companions, keeping them from loneliness (Messent & Serpell, 1981). They also felt that dogs satisfied their needs for security, and they believed that they were safe with dogs at home or on street. With the dogs as their life companions, the elderly subjects

emotionally relied on their pets to a certain extent. Furthermore, the interaction between the pet owners and their dogs provided pleasure to the elderly people (Kalfon, 1991), implying that the respondents were benefited as regards their psychological well-being. On the other hand, a new variable of living environment was found to indicate that this variable was an essential factor which affected the quality of life of the elderly people. The results from this exploratory study confirmed the relationship between pets and the psychological health of the elderly people as reported in the previous studies.

The following quotations are given to address the above issue:

- i. “和他在一起時，我感到開心，好像家裡有人一樣。” (*“I am happy to have him with me. It is like somebody living at home.”*).
- ii. “當我的老公死了之後，我很享受我和寵物的在一起的時刻。” (*“After my husband passed away, I enjoy my time with pets”*).
- iii. “貓狗就好像是我的子女一樣，他們使我開心，令我不會感到寂寞，還有他們會支持我。” (*“Dogs and cats are like my children. They make me happy so that I don't feel lonely. And they give support for me.”*).
- iv. “就算是我自己挨餓，我也會給他們足夠的食物。” (*“I will give them enough food and stand with hunger myself instead.”*).
- v. “我會和他們一起睡覺。” (*“I sleep with them.”*).
- vi. “就算是不吃飯，我也會餵飽他們。” (*“Even I do not eat, I will feed them well.”*).
- vii. “我寧願留在這兒，也不會搬到公屋或者是老人院。如果我住在那些地方，我就要放棄他們，再沒有人會照顧他們了。” (*“I prefer staying in this old house to moving to public housing estate or elderly home because once I lived there, I'd have to give up the pets. No one would care for them.”*).

f. Raising pets provided security and had functional impact:

According to the data gathered, there was an extra function of pets for the participating respondents. It was reported that seven of 10 respondents' homes were at high risk of burglary by illegal immigrants. Dogs in this case fulfilled the role in safeguarding personal and residential security of their owners. The respondents felt safe when they had pets because they thought that pets would provide a sense of security for them. Since the respondents lived in the remote rural areas where their residences were subject to a high risk of burglary, dogs therefore performed a basic defense function to secure the lives and properties of the elderly. In addition, one of the respondents reported that she suffered from Cataracts, and her dog served as a guide in most of her daily life.

The following quotations are given to address the above issue:

- i. “因為我養了狗，我覺得屋企很安全，他幫手看門口。” (“*My home is safe because I have a dog. It safeguards my house.*”).
- ii. “因為安全的關係，所以我養狗。” (“*For safety reason, I raise a dog.*”).
- iii. “Kiki 就是我的看門，當有陌生人來到的時候，他使我感到安全。” (“*Kiki is my guard when someone is coming. She makes me feel safe.*”).
- iv. “貓狗帶給我安全感。” (“*Dogs and Cats bring me a sense of security.*”).
- v. “狗使到環境安全些。” (“*Dogs facilitate safer environments.*”).
- vi. “狗使到我的居住環境更加安全。” (“*Dog makes my living environment safer.*”).
- vii. “因為我有白內障，我要倚靠他為我帶路。” (“*I have Cataracts, so I depend on him to lead my way.*”).

4.2.3. Social Contact and Social Support

Seven of the 10 respondents pointed out that they could extend or broaden their social network by meeting new friends through their dogs as the social

facilitators (Messent, 1983). One of the respondents obtained assistance in her daily life from a new friend. Dog facilitated the elderly, who lived in the remote and rural areas, to engage in social interaction, and particularly in contact with others and even regularly in community activities and functions (Hunt, Hart, & Gomulkiewicz, 1992; Woods et al., 2005).

In terms of social interaction, it was found that even respondents who lived alone could keep in contact with friends and get involved in community functions and activities through their dogs. In such way, they maintained their social relationship in the community, and they met new friends as well. Consequently, the elderly people were benefited from the attachment to their pets and the interaction between animals and human beings (McCulloch, 1984).

The following quotations are given to address the above issue:

- i. “我會同隔離鄰居傾下 Bebe，或者分享養寵物的情況和經驗。” (“*I talk about Bebe with my neighbours or share with them the raising experience.*”).
- ii. “透過養寵物，我認識了英姐，他會來幫忙替我清理我屋企。” (“*Since I have a pet, I met a new friend Ying, who comes and help me clean up my house.*”).
- iii. “因為我養了他們，我認識了多些朋友，我的社交擴闊了。” (“*I have made more friends because I have them. My social network is extended because of him.*”).
- iv. “當我養了狗，我的朋友多了，我和他們的社交生活多了。” (“*After having a dog, I have made more friends and more social interaction with them.*”).
- v. “因為養了 Kiki，我係社區既接觸越來越多。” (“*I am more and more connected with the community as I have Kiki.*”).
- vi. “我和鄰居有溝通的問題，有了 Kiki 之後，這個情況有所改善。我和其他人交談的機會多了，因為他們很喜歡 Kiki，Kiki 成為我們的話題。” (“*I found communication problems with my neighbours but this situation has changed*”).

since I had Kiki. I have more chance to talk to other people because they are fond of Kiki, which becomes the topic of our chats.”).

- vii. “我認識多了新朋友，他常常關心我。” (“*I have met more new friends, he always cares about me.*”).

Pets could serve not only the basic function of assisting the elderly in their daily lives, but also as buffers against a wide range of psychological problems for the elderly people living alone. The elderly people enjoyed their lives through the interaction with their pets, and most importantly, with other people. By the interaction with neighbours, friends and others living in the same community, the elderly people would be able to enhance their psychological well-being.

4.2.4. Negative Effect

Although there were findings from the previous studies showing the significant impact of pet raising on health of the elderly people, some other studies revealed the adverse effects of the separation from the pets on the well-being of the elderly people as in the following quotations:

- i. “我感到難過，當他們離開我。” (“*I felt sad when they were gone.*”).
- ii. “自從他們離開後，我還常常感到傷心。” (“*The sorrow lingered often after they were gone.*”).
- iii. “我太老了，不能再照顧他們，我惟有把他們送給朋友，因為咁我感到不開心。” (“*I am too old to take care of them so I have to give them to my friends, I feel bad about this.*”).

Chapter 5: Supplementary Study

5.1. Profiles of Participants

The non-pet owners in this study included 4 men and 6 women whose median age was 79, ranging from 74 to 94. Nine of the 10 non-pet owners lived in the public housing estates while the remaining one lived in a village (see Table 3). All 10 non-pet owners suffered from chronic illness, of whom six had one chronic disease, three had 2 chronic diseases, and one had 4 chronic diseases. Nevertheless, none of the non-pet owners suffered from serious illness at the time of the interview, and two of them had recovered from serious illness prior to the interview (see Table 4).

Table 3. Background of the Non-pet Owners

	<u>Name</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Residence</u>
1.	Mr. Liu	90	Male	Public Housing Estate
2.	Mr. Ma	74	Male	Public Housing Estate
3.	Miss So	81	Female	Public Housing Estate
4.	Miss Hui	77	Female	Village House
5.	Miss Lau	74	Female	Public Housing Estate
6.	Miss Kei	83	Female	Public Housing Estate
7.	Mr. Chan	78	Male	Public Housing Estate
8.	Mr. Yiu	78	Male	Public Housing Estate
9.	Mr. Chan	80	Male	Public Housing Estate
10.	Miss Chu	80	Female	Public Housing Estate

Table 4. Profile of the Non-pet Owners

<u>Category</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Category</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>Category</u>	<u>N</u>
Gender:		Residence:		Occupation:	
Male	4	Village house	1	Teacher	1
Female	6	Public estate	9	Clerk	1
Age:		Education Level:		Worker	6
71-75	3	Tertiary level	1	Peasant	2
75-80	3	High school level	0	Chronic Illness:	
81-85	3	Secondary school level	1	Rheumatism 風濕	6
Above 85	1	Primary school level	4	Cataract 白內障	3
		Without education	4	Diabetes 糖尿病	2
				Hypertension 高血壓	5

5.2. Factors Affecting the Decision to Raise Pets

In fact, the non-pet owners did not completely reject pets. Two of them also raised dogs before but did not continue to do so because of different reasons. All non-pet owners had positive views on dogs in one way or the other. In this study, the respondents revealed that they were fond of dogs and they believed that dogs were loyal and obedient.

It was found that the main reason for not having pets was the constraints of their living environments. Despite their interest in raising pets, these pet owners did not raise pets because pet raising was forbidden in their residences. Psychologically, some respondents pointed out that pet raising would impose greater pressure on them because would need to spend more time and efforts to take care of their pets when once they had pets. The issue of hygiene was another factor causing the elderly not to have pets. Besides the smell from the excrement of the pets, these elderly people also realized that their residences would be untidy and messy because they would not have enough energy to train the pets to keep

places tidy and clean. The above reasons were reported in the interviews regarding why the non-pet owners did not raise pets.

The following quotations are given to address the issues confronting the non-pet owners:

a. Positive views on dogs:

“狗識性、聽話又忠誠。” (“Dogs are royal and obedient.”)

b. Health condition not allowed raising a pet:

- i. “我鍾意，但不能養，因為自己照顧不到他們。” (“I like dogs, but I cannot have one because I cannot take care of them.”).
- ii. “我覺得養狗不安全，大狗會撲上身，會使我跌倒。” (“I feel unsafe to raise a dog because a big dog would jump over me and make me fall.”).
- iii. “我自己能力養不到，又怕骯髒，所以不養。” (I cannot take care of them, it would be dirty, so I do not raise a pet.”).
- iv. “自己也照顧不到，怎樣照顧其他寵物。” (I cannot take care of them, how can I take care of pets?”).

c. Expensive spending:

- i. “買寵物貴，又麻煩，所以養寵物花很多錢。” (“It is too expensive to buy a pet and it is not easy to take care of them. It costs lots of money.”).
- ii. “不想花時間和金錢飼養。” (“I don't want to spend time and money on them.”).

d. Hygiene

- i. “我又怕骯髒，所以不養。” (I am afraid of dirty, so I do not raise a pet.”).
- ii. “污糟，臭，狗毛多，所以無養。” (“They are dirty, smelly and hairy. Therefore I did not raise a dog.”).

e. Allergic to dogs:

“我喜歡狗，但我對狗毛敏感，所以無養。” (“I like dogs but am allergic to pets, so I do not raise a pet.”).

f. *Bother to care of dogs:*

“我都喜歡狗，但不想照顧，覺得麻煩，而且公屋不准養狗。”
(I like dogs, but I don't want to take care of them, because it is so inconvenient. Plus pet owning is not allowed in public housing estates.”).

g. *Regulation restrictions:*

“公屋不准養狗。” (“Pet owning is not allowed in public housing estates.”).

h. *Personal reasons:*

- i. “因為自己懶，唔想養。” (“I am too lazy to take care of them, therefore I give up having a pet.”).
- ii. “我個女移民後，我就無再養啦。” (“Since my daughter migrated, I did not raise a pet anymore.”).
- iii. “養自己都養唔掂，點養狗呢。” (“I cannot afford my daily living. How can raise a dog?”).

Chapter 6: Discussion

The present study revealed some important findings of the positive impact of pet raising on the physical, psychological and social health of the elderly people. The elderly people were able to keep their good health by walking their pets, by interacting with their pets, and by communicating with other in the community through their pets. In addition, their dogs as pets provided a sense of security for the elderly living in isolation against robbery and mugging and a companion to alleviate the loneliness and boredom of the elderly owners. Generally speaking, pets became the life companions of the elderly people who lived either in villages or in public estates.

However, the results from the interviews with the non-pet owners indicated that the elderly people might not gain benefits from raising pets. One of the key issues is the allergy to dogs or cats. Even though the participants in this study did not report any respiratory problems, there was an intrinsic risk of endangering the physical health of the elderly people who were allergic to animals. Thus, we should pay attention to this issue carefully.

Another key issue was related to the physique of the elderly people. The non-pet owners pointed out that they might not be able to control their dogs because they were too weak to manage their pets. They believed that they would easily get hurt by their dogs.

In sum, raising pets (dogs) in a certain extent might bring benefit to the good health of the elderly people, but it was not suitable for every elderly person to

raise a dog. The introduction of the “dog doctor” and the “pet facilitated therapy” for those elderly people with poor physical health conditions are highly recommended.

6.1. Limitations

The present study was limited by a small sample of respondents who were referred to the study project by a local non-government organization responsible for making arrangements for home visits and interviews. In addition, the respondents’ own children visited them regularly to provide emotional support and assistance in addition to the pets they owned. Since we did not control for these children’s visits which are expected to have direct impact on the respondents’ physical and psychological health, the insignificant difference in general health between pet owners and non-pet owners might be attributed to this uncontrolled variable of children’s visits. Future studies on pet raising are recommended to increase the sample size and take the variable of children’s visits into consideration as well.

6.2. Suggestions

The present study was a useful reference for research on the psychological needs of the elderly people in Hong Kong. It revealed that pets could independently play the role of life companions for the Hong Kong elders. Therefore, further development would be focused on how pets, as the social facilitators, bring positive impact on the psychological and physical satisfaction of the elderly people.

In addition, there had been an enthusiastic concern on the quality of life of

the elderly people (Chan et al., 2004). It had been reported that living condition was one of the key domains affecting the quality of life of the elderly people. The present research contributes to the awareness of the security supported by the pets and the constructive and productive functions of the pets regarding the quality of life of the elderly people. Inclusion of the roles of the pets in the life of the elderly is considered to be an important direction for future related studies .

It was noted that there were a number of factors including the prevention of pet raising in private and public housing estates, which imposed restrictions on the choices of raising pets by the elderly people. Policy makers may need to reconsider the regulations and mandates in the housing estates so that the elderly residents, including particularly those who live alone, will be able to raise pets in order to improve their quality of lives.

Furthermore, to promote the interaction between animals and human beings, the introduction of pet-facilitated therapy in local organizations which have business with the elderly people is recommended. It should be noted that the pet-facilitated therapy had been, in fact, reported in the literature as an effective way to bring happiness to the elderly people and to improve their psychological health as well.

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Appendices

1. Questionnaire Sample for Pet Owners

嶺南大學亞太老年學研究中心
寵物與長者健康研究深入面談訪問指引

本研究目的在於透過研究員與長者進行深入面談訪問，從而瞭解飼養寵物對長者的日常生活、社交層面、以及心理質素的關係及影響。在過去 12 個月有飼養寵物的情況下的健康狀況。整個面談大概需時 30 分鐘。

訪問日期：_____ 時間：_____ 訪問員：_____

資料輸入：_____

個人背景

1. 年齡：_____
2. 性別： 男 女
4. 第一次飼養寵物時間：_____ 年 _____ 月
5. 第一次飼養寵物年齡：_____
6. 飼養寵物種類： 狗 貓 雀 魚 其他；請註明 _____
7. 飼養寵物年資
 一年
 二至三年
 三至四年
 四至五年
 五年以上
8. 居住情況
 獨居於公共房屋 獨居於私人樓宇 村屋
(註：公共房屋指公共屋邨、未供滿的公共屋邨單位、居屋單位、中轉房屋及政府宿位等。)
9. 教育程度： 大學/大專 預科畢業 中學畢業

初中畢業 小學畢業或以下 未受教育

10. 職業（退休前）： _____

在想過去 12 個月飼養寵物的情況下，你的健康如何？

1. 健康狀況如何？（提示：疾病、活動能力、睡眠等，試舉例說明。）
2. 社交生活如何？（提示：結交朋友、社區活動、團體活動等，試舉例說明。）
3. 心理狀況如何？（包括正面情感、負面情感及生活滿足感，提示：開心、壓力、孤獨感、抑鬱等，試舉例說明）。
4. 整體而言，你覺得飼養寵物帶給你甚麼東西？（包括感受上或其他方面）

- 完 -

2. Questionnaire Sample for Non-pet Owners

嶺南大學亞太老年學研究中心 寵物與長者健康研究深入面談訪問指引

本研究目的在於透過研究員與長者進行深入面談訪問，從而瞭解飼養寵物對長者的日常生活、社交層面、以及心理質素的關係及影響。面談訪問是瞭解閣下現時的健康狀況。整個面談大概需時 30 分鐘。

訪問日期：_____ 時間：_____ 訪問員：_____

資料輸入：_____

個人背景

1. 年齡：_____ 2. 性別： 男 女

11. 第一次飼養寵物時間：_____ 年 _____ 月

12. 第一次飼養寵物年齡：_____

13. 飼養寵物種類： 狗 貓 雀 魚 其他；請註明 _____

14. 飼養寵物年資

- 一年
- 二至三年
- 三至四年
- 四至五年
- 五年以上

15. 居住情況

獨居於公共房屋 獨居於私人樓宇 村屋

(註：公共房屋指公共屋邨、未供滿的公共屋邨單位、居屋單位、中轉房屋及政府宿位等。)

16. 教育程度： 大學/大專 預科畢業 中學畢業
 初中畢業 小學畢業或以下 未受教育

17. 職業（退休前）： _____

在想過去 12 個月，你的健康如何？

1. 健康狀況如何？（提示：疾病、活動能力、睡眠等，試舉例說明。）
2. 社交生活如何？（提示：結交朋友、社區活動、團體活動等，試舉例說明。）
3. 心理狀況如何？（提示：開心、壓力、孤獨感、抑鬱等，試舉例說明。）
4. 整體而言，你覺得飼養寵物會帶給你甚麼東西？（包括感受上或其他方面）
5. 甚麼原因令你不想飼養寵物？

- 完 -

Asia-Pacific Institute of Ageing Studies (APIAS) at Lingnan University

HISTORY

The Asia-Pacific Institute of Ageing Studies (APIAS) was established as a University-wide institute in 1998 and has been operating as one of the research centers in the Institute of Humanities and Social Science (IHSS) since September 2001. The mission of APIAS is to facilitate and develop research in gerontology and issues related to population ageing in Hong Kong and the Asia-Pacific region.

OUR MISSION

“To develop a better environment for older people and their families in Hong Kong and the Asia-Pacific region.”

OUR OBJECTIVES

- To develop an area of research excellence in programme evaluation and action research; both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies.
- To strengthen our collaboration within the Lingnan University and the local communities, particularly in relation to student learning.
- To strengthen the collaboration and network amongst the Asia-Pacific region.

For further information on APIAS and opportunities for research collaboration and affiliations with the Centre, please contact us :

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