Animal-Assisted Therapy Through the Lens of Occupational Therapists

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Need for Qualitative Study

○ **Need for study**
  ○ Lack of insight into the perspectives of OTs who use Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT)
  ○ Current literature does not capture the essence of OTs’ experiences with AAT
  ○ Results can be used to increase evidence-based practice in the area of AAT

○ **Why a qualitative study?**
  ○ Examine phenomenon in depth and gain a greater understanding of the experience of OTs using AAT
Research Questions

○ How do occupational therapists describe the experience of using AAT during their practice?

○ What are some activities that an OT utilizes during sessions involving an animal?

○ How do OTs use AAT as an intervention with clients?

○ Why do OTs choose to use AAT?
Literature Review - Benefits of AAT with various populations

- **Psychological and emotional benefits**
  - Increase in feelings of competence, self-worth, and self-esteem as well as emotional resilience

- **Cognitive and mental health benefits**
  - Pet ownership increases problem solving and decision making skills

- **Social participation**
  - Autistic children display a marked increase in the amount of social interaction while in the presence of a therapy animal

- **Physiological and physical benefits**
  - Decrease in physical pain when physically interacting with an animal
Research Method

- A **transcendental phenomenological approach**
  - **Phenomenology** is the science of describing how one perceives, senses, and unfolds consciousness and experiences
    - A phenomenological study describes the meaning of a specific lived experience (phenomenon) across several individuals
  - **Transcendental phenomenology**, a subset of phenomenology, similarly focuses on the lived experiences of a phenomenon, however the method of analysis is less a composite of researcher interpretation, and more a synthesis of the interviews reflecting authentic experiences
Participant selection

- **A snowball technique** (in which one subject gives the researcher the name of another subject, who in turn provides the name of a third, and so on) was used to recruit participants through the use of a key informant.

- The research study included **six participants** and the **inclusion criteria** of the participants for the study included licensed and practicing occupational therapists who have used AAT in at least three intervention sessions.

- Interviews were held in person, on the telephone, and through video conversation platforms.
Method of Data Collection

● Semi-structured interviewed
  o 60 minutes
  o Open ended questions
  o Informal and interactive process

● Interview questions were slightly modified after interviews when appropriate

● Transcripts were transcribed and analyzed

● Member checking to validate analysis
Method of Data Reduction and Analysis

- Phenomenological method used to reduce and analyze data to find overarching themes
  - Epoche (bracketing)
  - Horizontalization (significant statements)
  - Meaning units (derived from significant statements)
  - Clusters of meaning
  - Structural descriptions

- Trustworthiness and credibility
  - Each researcher read transcripts individually, identified common themes, and discussed discrepancies until consensus reached
Findings:
Observed human and animal interaction

- **Animal’s presence**
  - “She’s a huge motivator. I have kids that aren’t really interested in her, but the mere presence of her really helps with calming to say your anxiety and willingness to participate. And then I have other kids that have really blossomed and come out of their shell with the use of her.”

- **Markedly observable changes**
  - “It was night and day with this kid. The increased eye contact and with the little speech that he has, as long as he’s sitting next to the dog, he’s willing to talk to me and reciprocate.”

- **Connectedness**
  - “and [Meika] was all about him and he said, ‘I think she can tell I have autism, she loves me!’”
Findings: Job Fulfillment of OT

- **Facilitation of positive growth**
  - “He was like putty in my hands when we introduced the animals to him, it was just amazing.”
  - “I took a ton of pictures, it almost brought me to tears it was so cool.”

- **Excitement**
  - “I learn every day. I like that part of it. I learn more what the animals are capable of.”
  - “I think my favorite aspect is the newness of it and to keep exploring the interconnectedness between yourself and the animal, and how you can get the animal to do things that you didn’t think were possible.”
Findings: Special Bond Between OT and Animal

- Intimate personal connection with animal
  - “She’s a huge motivator to come to work. I wake up and it makes it really fun, rather than just work.”
  - “I love her. She is mine.”

- Protective instinct over animal
  - “He was banging her on the head and poking her eyes.”
  - “Oh my gosh, this kid is going to kill my dog.”
Discussion

- **Limitations of the study**
  - Efforts were made to reduce bias through bracketing, but some degree of bias may still exist
  - Findings are limited to the participants involved in the study
  - The analysis was limited to the 3 researchers who did the data analysis

- **Questions for future research**
  - More research needed to explore the specific methods of interventions used by OTs with measurable outcomes to determine its effectiveness among a particular population
  - Need for exploration on which animal(s) are best for specific populations and settings
Concluding thoughts...

- Our results indicate that the incorporation of animals in occupational therapy is a method that positively impacts the lives of individuals.
- Every participant was effusive with enthusiasm about this field of work that they saw making significant differences in the lives of others.
- Such substantial statements indicate a need for further research and more widespread knowledge about this therapeutic approach in occupational therapy.

“So, to me, occupational therapy needs to wake up and realize that – and I’m not saying that every OT should work with animals but where it’s appropriate to work with animals, the other disciplines are going to do it, an OT would be missing a very good opportunity because I think we are suited to do it.”

--Participant
Questions?
Comments?
References


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**Student Research Day 2015**


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**Student Research Day 2015**

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References


