

Attaching Person-Pet Attachment to Positive Psychology: In Response to Andreassen, Stenvold, & Rudmin (2013)

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What do humans need to be happy? This question has gained increased interest in the last couple of decades, but have we come any closer to an answer? Many psychologists preoccupied with this question would say *yes*. Similar to other countries throughout the world, the birth of positive psychology in the nineties has led to an increased theoretical and empirical focus among psychologists in Norway on what makes humans happy and healthy, instead of mainly focusing on factors that make people unhappy and ill. Positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) seems to represent a contrast to traditional clinical psychology that tends to be fixated on psychological illness and psychopathology. These new developments on life satisfaction have directed psychological research and practice to an even broader part of people's lives, taking a more constructive and adaptive view on mental health. In particular, positive psychology in Norway has been especially influential in organizational psychology (Straume, 2008), health psychology (Dyrdal, Røysamb, Nes, & Vittersø, 2011), personality psychology (Vittersø, 2001), and sports psychology (Halvari, Ulstad, Bag, & Skjesol, 2009). So, I believe that I am not alone when I suggest that a well-being perspective is highly relevant to Andreassen, Stenvold, and Rudmin's article "My Dog is My Best Friend": Health Benefits of Emotional Attachment to a Pet Dog.

There are several perspectives in the field of positive psychology that may be relevant to the person-pet relationship. To own a pet is normally not necessary for security or survival, so why do so many people and families want to own a pet? Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) is a meta-theory of well-being that has gained much popularity and it may provide an original view on this phenomenon. Most relevant to Andreassen et al.'s (2012) study is the *need satisfaction* postulates of the theory. Deci and Ryan (2000) suggest that humans are equipped with three basic psychological needs, namely autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy refers to the motivation of individuals to pursue their personal values and interests. Competence refers to the development of key skills and abilities. Relatedness refers to a sense of belonging in groups or close relationships with friends and family. Relatedness is often defined by referring to Baumeister and Leary's *Need-to-Belong Theory* (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). According to the latter theory, humans are genetically programmed to establish social relations in order to achieve safety and existential predictability. When this need is thwarted, for example through rejection, bullying or other forms of social exclusion, individuals tend to turn destructive and aggressive instead of socially constructive. A string of experimental studies showed that being socially excluded led to poorer self-regulative abilities (Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Twenge, 2005), reduced prosocial behavior, (Twenge, Baumeister, DeWall, Ciarocco, & Bartels, 2007) and impaired executive cognitive functions (Baumeister, Twenge, & Nuss, 2002). Moreover,

in a recent prospective study in Norway, we (Stenseng, Skalicka, & Wichstrøm, 2013) found that social exclusion in preschool affected self-regulation capacities negatively two years later in primary school. Together, these findings highlight people's inherent need to feel related to someone.

As there is ample empirical evidence that to feel related to someone is of crucial importance for humans to be able to function optimally - can such a need for relatedness also be fulfilled by an animal? Andreassen, et al.'s work suggests so. They found that the degree of attachment a dog-owner has with his/her pet is associated with perceived outcomes on mental and physical health. In other words, not just having a dog seems to spur positive effects, but a significant strength of attachment seems to be necessary to satisfy the relatedness need. In line with psychological attachment theory (Ainsworth, 1979; Bowlby, 1990), the type of attachment a person develops with its caregivers during early childhood affects the child's temperament and mental health. In turn, this attachment will again affect the caregivers' well-being and mental health. This dyadic dynamic is probably recognizable to many experienced pet owners, who may agree that every pet relationship they have had has been qualitatively different from the other. Accordingly, positive relationships could capture the person and the pet in upward spirals with regards to positive emotions and experiences. Such a perspective is compatible with the Broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001) of positive emotions, which suggests that positive emotions trigger mental energy resulting in even more positive emotions. Moreover, this model also accounts for interpersonal relations. In sum, the abovementioned aspects of the person-dog relationship emphasize its resemblance with person-person relationships, indicating that being related to a pet may result in need satisfaction in the same manner as being related to a person.

Another perspective from positive psychology may offer some mediational explanations for the association between emotional attachment to a pet dog and health outcomes. An alternative to the need satisfaction view places more weight on the role of being a pet-owner and the activities that follow this role. Robert J. Vallerand and his coworkers have presented the Dualistic Model of Passion (Vallerand et al., 2006) to describe the positive and negative aspects of being highly engaged in identity-defining activities, such as sports (Vallerand et al., 2006), work (Vallerand, Paquet, Philippe, & Charest, 2010), and different leisure activities (Stenseng, 2008; Stenseng, Rise, & Kraft, 2011). According to their theory, it would be possible to develop either a harmonious passion or an obsessive passion towards pet ownership and pet activities (e.g. agility training). A harmonious passion would be associated with a flexible and balanced interest for activities related to the pet-ownership, whereas obsessive passion would be associated with a controlled engagement stemming from a contingency-based interest in pet activities, which may in turn lead to less positive psychological outcomes. Compared to individuals with an obsessive passion towards an activity, harmoniously passionate individuals tend to be less focused on goal-attainment in their engagement (Vallerand et al., 2008). Furthermore, obsessively passionate individuals also tend to experience more intrapersonal and interpersonal conflicts compared to their counterparts. Accordingly, since obsessive passion is related to an inflexible interest for an activity, pet ownership stemming from an obsessive passion could also make the person less attentive to the pet's needs. This may eventually result in a less positive reciprocal dyadic relationship between the person and the pet. In other words, there could be several aspects of the pet ownership that affects the psychological outcomes from pet attachment. To the extent that dog ownership affects identity, being attached to a pet in

an obsessive manner may also lead to negative psychological outcomes according to the Dualistic Model of Passion (Vallerand, 2010).

To conclude, Andreassen, Stenvold, and Rudmin's contribution is interesting in the sense that they establish a connection between pet attachment and perceived well-being outcomes. Their findings highlight the psychological processes that entail pet ownership. Based on developments in the field of positive psychology, one may also infer that pet ownership may affect mental health positively through many different paths, either directly or indirectly related to attachment. I have suggested that the degree of relatedness felt with the pet and what kind of passion the owner holds for pet activities may be of particular interest in future work. Hence, to build upon the findings of Andreassen et al. (2012) on the benefits of pet ownership - which is a timeless phenomenon applicable to millions of people - one may expand their work by explicitly applying theories and measurements from positive psychology.

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