




Assessing Companion Animal Attachment Among Future Latino Human Services Professionals


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Abstract

As the population of individuals from minoritized ethnic background continues to grow in the United States, the relationship between humans and their companion animals can provide valuable information for human services professionals. Attachment to companion animals can play a significant part in clients' emotional well-being, family dynamics, and quality of life. This study aimed to examine the associations between human attachment with companion animals and their educational training and attitudes about animals. Analysis revealed that relational attachment was significant among Latino students in the study, and participants' positive attitudes and beliefs about animals significantly predicted their level of attachment to companion animals. Participants also reported having diverse species of companion animals that demanded different responsibilities. Considerations to enhance service delivery and educational preparation of future human services professionals have implications for humane education and improved client outcomes.

Keywords: Hispanics, companion animals, human services, companion animal attachment, attitudes

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Introduction

“I want to help people” is a very common motive identified by students in human services programs. Training and educating well-prepared human services professionals is the goal of many allied health programs in higher education institutions. In human services, workers combine their personal experiences with professional preparation in services delivery (Summers, 2016). To support the desire to help others, pre-service professionals can benefit from understanding the importance of companion animals to their clients and the impact of animals in the workplace (Silcox et al., 2014)—especially that companion animals are an

integral feature in U.S. society and animal assisted interventions continue to grow in medical and human services facilities (Fine et al., 2019; Horowitz, 2008).

In U.S. society, many individuals have—or have had—a companion animal at some point in their life. In fact, the Humane Society reported that about 85 million (67%) of U.S. households included at least one companion animal. Companion animals have a strong presence in U.S. households, with dogs being the most popular. Therefore, companion animals are a significant component of the familiar structure of U.S. society. Companion animal and human relationships, lasting for years, can provide humans a unique perspective leading to potential strong emotional connections to their animals (Martens et al., 2016; Reddy & Morris, 2006).

Generally, the presence of a companion animal and interaction with animals are considered beneficial for humans (Herzog, 2011). Having a companion animal has also been found to serve as a buffer in stressful situations (Motooka et al., 2006). It also helps to deal with negative consequences of stress (Janssens et al., 2022), while increasing caretakers' physical activity (Brown & Rhodes, 2006; Friedman & Krause-Parello, 2018). In addition, having a companion animal can help reduce anxiety, depression, and social isolation among children and adults (Berget et al., 2007; Friedmann & Tsai, 2006; Wells, 2019). This unique bond also seems to reduce heart rate, loneliness, and cholesterol levels in people (Handlin et al., 2011; Hughes et al., 2020). McConnell et al. (2011) found that animal companions aid their caretakers by increasing self-esteem and physical activity, reducing their fearful attachment, fulfilling their social needs, and providing support to them. Furthermore, having a companion animal helped individuals promote trust, calmness, motivation, and concentration (Beetz, 2017), as well as dealing with stay-at-home orders due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Segarra-Gonzalez & Melendez-Samo, 2021).

Literature Review

Attachment to Companion Animals

Despite past research findings on the potential benefits of companion animals, there is still a need to continue exploring attachment to pets. In the literature, attachment to pets is often used interchangeably with attitudes towards pets (Herzog, 2007). However, these two concepts represent different parts of human and animal interactions. Attachment, as described by Bowlby (1982), offers a secure base, comfort, and love, while attitudes comprise beliefs or a form of evaluation, either positive or negative, toward a specific subject (Fiske, 2010). Cromer and Barlow (2013) suggested that attachment to companion animals represent a relational concept instead of an attitude or ideology about companion animals after evaluating temporal proximity, emotional resilience, and quality of human–companion relationship.

According to Bowlby (1982), attachment represents a psychological bond between human beings. He explained that mothers who were available to their babies and responsive to their needs foster a sense of security among their children. In a way, the children knew they could rely on their mothers creating a secure foundation to explore their surroundings. Attachment theory establishes four main elements: safe haven, secure base, proximity maintenance, and separation distress (Bowlby, 1988). A safe haven represents a caregiver who can provide comfort and soothing to an afraid or threatened child, while a secure base represents the caregiver as a reliable base for exploration of the world. Proximity maintenance is a child's tendency to stay close to their caregiver because of a sense of security. Finally, separation distress occurs when a child becomes upset while—or after—being separated from their caregiver.

Attachment theory helps to understand the relationship between humans and companion animals by using assumptions of similar qualities between the human–animal bond and interpersonal relationships (Hawkins et al., 2017). Humans and companion animals can represent significant attachment figures for one another

(Amiot et al., 2016; Rynearson, 1978). Having a companion animal might also lead to higher levels of self-esteem and the development of autonomy in children (Wong et al., 2019). A person's relationship with a companion animal often involves warmth, loyalty, and tenderness that make humans feeling loved unconditionally (Zilch-Mano et al., 2011) and fulfilling their need of love and self-worth (Nebbe, 2001). With this feeling of complete acceptance, humans may rely on their companion animals for comfort and reassurance even in tough times.

Since dogs and cats are the most popular companion animals, many studies have assessed attachment between humans and these two species. In previous studies, humans have been found to be more attached to (Muldoon et al., 2019; Smolkovic et al., 2012; Winefield et al., 2008; Zasloff, 1996) and enjoy greater emotional closeness (González-Ramírez & Landero-Hernández, 2021) with their dogs than with their cats; however, after eliminating those items on the instruments in the study that focused on dog behavior, dog and cat owners showed similar attachment (Zasloff, 1996). Additionally, the perceived cost of the relationship between humans and dogs could lead to a better perceived relationship between humans and cats (González-Ramírez & Landero-Hernández, 2021). Similarly, another study of two groups—one with dog owners and another with cat owners—suggested no difference between these two groups (Vitale et al., 2019; Vizek-Vidovic et al., 1999) with an equally beneficial relationship between pets and owners (Diaz Videla & Olarte, 2016). Therefore, attachment to these animals seems relevant to their humans despite of the species.

Exploring Attachment

Companion animals represent a special category of animals that are often perceived as human (Hirschman, 1994) having human-like qualities (Paul et al., 2014; Waytz et al., 2010). Attachment theory explains that humans, like many animals, are biologically predisposed to establish physical contact and emotional connection to selective figures that provide familiarity, as well psychological and physical protection to them (Sable, 2013). Interactions with companion animals trigger the release of oxytocin, a hormone with stress-regulating effect, which plays an important role in attachment and social behavior (Beetz, 2017).

Companionship has also been identified as the primary human benefit derived from living with an animal (Antonacopoulos & Pychyl, 2010) and has been described as offering intrinsic rewards, not extrinsic support that improves the person's quality of life (McNicholas et al., 2005; Rault et al., 2020). These rewards could be recreational opportunities, relaxation, and spontaneous ideas.

General attachment to pets has been found to have positive factors on individuals' lives, fostering psychological well-being (McNicholas et al., 2005; Muldoon et al., 2019), maintained mental health (Endo et al., 2020), and positive emotions (Luhmann & Kalitzki, 2018). Using attachment theory and social support, Banks and Banks (2005) reported that attachment to pets might reduce loneliness and decrease levels of stress. Additionally, human attachment to a companion animal has been suggested as a positive predictor of psychological distress in the form of depression, anxiety, and somatoform symptoms because of a strong relationship with an animal (Peacock et al., 2012). Humans can also grieve and struggle after losing a significant figure, such as their companion animals (Uccheddu et al., 2019). Through myriad references, Nieforth and O'Haire (2020) emphasized the role of social support provided by companion animals and highlighted its association with a reduction in the appearance of possible post-traumatic stress symptoms.

Humans can also create a secure relationship with companion animals that is consistent with human attachment (Carr et al., 2017). Emotional attachment leads to emotional links between people and others, including companion animals (Sable, 1995), developing a strong emotional connection between humans and their companion animals (Pirrone et al., 2015). Moreover, companion animals can offer affectional bonds, special friendships, and secure bases (Beck & Madresh, 2008; Carr et al., 2017). Additionally, companion animals can provide comfort, assistance, and protection (Zilcha-Mano et al., 2012). Companion animals can

act as supplementary attachment figures without completely fulfilling all secure human attachment relationships with other humans.

The relationship between humans and companion animals can vary in level of attachment and type of connection. The human–animal relationship can be perceived as simple and safe, reducing any potential harmful risk (Nebbe, 2001). In another study, children with companion animals reported receiving emotional support from their animals when human social support is limited (Melson, 2003). On the other side of attachment, attachment could result in an unattached relationship between human and animals. Zilcha-Mano et al. (2011) found that participant attachment deficits to humans were consistent with insufficiencies in attachment to pets. Therefore, attachment to pets can influence not only a person’s well-being but also relationships and interactions with others (Hawkins et al., 2017).

Companion Animals as Family Members

In many families in the United States, companion animals represent an important part of their social support network and family systems (Beetz, 2017; Cohen, 2002; Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006). Explicitly, previous studies have found that companion animals are seen as friends and family (Bouma et al., 2021; Hirschman, 1994; Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006), and that some individuals perceived their companion animals as a significant and important family member (Crawford et al., 2006; McConnell et al., 2019). Many pet owners report having strong connection to their companion animals and consider pets as members of the family (Chur-Hansen et al., 2009), providers of social support (Doherty & Feeney, 2004; Stambach & Turner, 1999; Wood et al., 2015), a source of social connection (Bussolari et al., 2021; Epley et al., 2008), and a source of self-compassion (Kogan et al., 2021). In a large poll by the Associated Press (2010), 50% of respondents claimed that their pet was part of the family as much as any other person in the household; 30% reported their pet sleeps in their bed; and 35% have included their pets in family pictures. These results show the participatory role and involvement of companion animals in family activities and dynamics.

In their study evaluating social support, attachment, and individual characteristics, McConnell et al. (2011) found that companion animals bring advantages to a person’s overall well-being; however, these benefits become stronger when the animal fulfills one’s social needs. The findings showed that pet owners often experience greater well-being, have healthier personality traits, and possess more positive attachment styles toward themselves than those without companion animals. In addition, people with companion animals exhibited less depression, loneliness, and higher levels of self-esteem and happiness, thereby fulfilling human social needs. In this study, participants, who received greater benefits from their pets, expressed enjoying a closer relationship and received more support from others in their lives.

Companion Animals in the Latino Community

Between 2007 and 2016, Latino homes with pets have increased from 11.4 to 20.4 million, representing almost a double increment in pet ownership in the United States (Granderson, 2017). The term Hispanic and Latino are pan-ethnic terms use to describe individuals in the United States who identity as part of this ethnic background (Lopez et al., 2021). The increasing role of companion animals in human lives has resulted in a growing emphasis on the human–animal bond in the literature (Blazina et al., 2011; McClaskey, 2019). With the growing trend of having companion animals among Latinos, attachment to animals among this ethnic group adds to the understanding of cultural influences on animal–human interactions.

Among Latinos in the United States, companion animals also seemed to play an important role in the family systems. In a study by Johnson and Meadows (2002), 79% of Latinos aged 50 and older reported that their dog was a member of the family, and 67% stated their dog was their best friend helping with feelings of acceptance, motivation, and happiness. Similarly, Faver and Cavazos (2008) reported that companion animals were esteemed as members of the family, offering companionship and unconditional love, as well as

emotional support and companionship to children. The researchers suggested that companion animals offer more relational benefits than functional benefits to humans due to their direct involvement and interaction with the animal. In a study by Risley-Curtiss et al. (2006), women of color explained that having a pet provided friendship, love, comfort, fun, and dependability for themselves or their children or both. Moreover, women who saw companion animals as family members identified additional contributions that the animal made to the family, such as protection from harm or interpersonal cohesion.

Different factors among Latinos might affect their attitudes and attachment towards companion animals. Since there is great variation of subgroups among Latinos in the United States, it becomes challenging to identify a limited set of factors affecting the human–animal bond. However, the level of acculturation (Faver & Cavazos, 2008), as well as country of origin, religion, educational level, and amount of time in the United States (Schoenfeld-Tacher & Kogan, 2019), are potential variables affecting Latino views towards pets. In a study comparing the human–animal bond between Hispanic and non-Hispanic owners in different locations, Hispanics were more likely to describe their pets as “family” than were owners of other ethnic groups (Schoenfeld-Tacher et al., 2010). These findings contradict the assumption that acculturation affects how Hispanic individuals perceive their pets.

Compared with other ethnic groups, Latinos have been found to experience a higher sense of safety from pets, visit a veterinarian less, and are less likely to spay or neuter their pets (Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006). Nevertheless, this study reported that there were no significant differences in identifying companion animals as family members and receiving emotional support, unconditional love, or companionship from pets among different ethnic groups. Similarly, Schoenfeld-Tacher and Kogan (2010) reported no significant difference in how Hispanic and non-Hispanic White owners viewed their pets, as family or working, considering strength of attachment or evaluation of the animal. Based on these studies, it seems difficult to accurately predict the impact of cultural background on the human–animal bond.

Therefore, this study attempts to add to the literature on the understanding of the Latino attachment to companion animals. Specifically, companion attachment and having a companion animal were evaluated among Latino undergraduate students in two human services field majors—social work and rehabilitation services. This study explored the presence of companion animals in households, differences in the level of attachment to companion animals, and the relationship between attachment with attitudes and beliefs about the human–animal bond.

Methods

Participants

After obtaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, students enrolled in junior- and senior-level major courses were invited to complete a pen and pencil survey about their perceptions of companion animals. All participants gave informed consent, and no personal identifying information was collected to protect anonymity. Respondents were 170 undergraduate Latino students from a state university located in a border town with Mexico.

Instrumentation

The instruments were provided directly to students in different undergraduate rehabilitative services and social work face-to-face courses. If participants had been offered the opportunity to participate in the research in other classes, students were reminded that they could complete the survey only once. A survey was created to collect three types of information: demographic characteristics, attachment with companion animals, and knowledge and attitudes about the human–animal bond. In the demographic section, students provided their

age, ethnic group, gender (female/male), and major. The students also indicated whether they currently have—or have had—a companion animal and the specific type of animal.

To measure student knowledge and attitudes about the human–animal bond, we adapted the Attitudes Towards Animals Scale (Castillo et al., 2019). After performing a factor analysis to determine the dimensionality of the scale, three items were removed from the original 17 items to reflect more accurately positive attitudes, negative attitudes, and law-based attitudes of the participants (Castillo et al., 2019). Sample statements include “Animals facilitate meeting other people,” and “I would be uncomfortable eating in a restaurant with a dog nearby.” Participants rated each statement on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree = 1 to strongly agree = 5. The reported Cronbach’s Alpha for the scale was .74.

In order to measure the construct of attachment to companion animals, we developed an instrument that incorporated key concepts from the Lexington Attachment to Pets Scales (Johnson et al., 1992; Anderson, 2006) and the Comfort From Companion Animals Scale (Zasloff, 1996). Only 13 items from the two scales were finally retained in the instrument including the items, “I consider my pet to be a friend,” and “Quite often, my feelings toward people are affected by the way they react to my pet.” The scoring was based on 5-point, Likert-scale responses ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree with higher scores reflecting more positive views of companion animals. The measure had a range of 0 to 65 ($M = 50.38$, $SD = 9.36$) and a Cronbach’s alpha of .89.

Procedure

The Institutional Review Board approved the ethical research protocol prior to our commencing the study. The research team obtained permission from faculty members of two academic departments in the College of Health and Human Services to visit their classes to administer paper-and-pencil surveys. Participation in the study was voluntary and no incentives were offered. The eligibility criteria were as follows: (a) self-identified as Hispanic or Latino; (b) currently enrolled in junior- and senior-level rehabilitation services or social work courses; and (c) being at least 18 years of age. We explained to students the purpose of the study, their rights as participants, the anonymity and confidentiality of the information they shared, and the instructions for filling out the questionnaire. The amount of time estimated to complete the survey was approximately 15 minutes.

Data Analysis

After preliminary analyses to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity, the relationship between attachments was investigated using Pearson’s product–moment correlation coefficient. For the purpose of this study, only those who self-identified as Hispanic or Latinos and who had—or have had—a companion animal were included in the analyses. An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) analysis was performed to evaluate attachment between majors. In addition, stepwise regression evaluated potential predictions of participant attachment to companion animals. We also performed descriptive statistics were.

Results

A profile of the sample (Table 1) indicated that there were more female students with companion animals (138) than male students (32). About 86.1% of participants were between the ages of 18–24, with 54.5% in a social work program and 45.5% in rehabilitative services. Social work majors with companion animals comprised 87 females and only 6 males, while rehabilitation services majors were 59 females and 18 males. The smallest representation of male students was in social work. The most popular companion animal among undergraduate students was dogs—totaling 122—with only four students having a cat alone and 40 students having both cats and dogs as companion animals at some point at home. In this sample, almost 63% of

undergraduate students had dogs, 33% cats and dogs, and less than one percent cats alone and other companion animals.

Table 1. *Demographic Characteristics of Participants*

Variable		Frequency or Mean
Gender	Female	138 (81.2%)
	Male	32 (18.8%)
Age		$M = 23$ ($SD = 5.6$)
		Min = 18
		Max = 48
Major	Social Work	78 (54.5%)
	Rehabilitation Services	65 (45.5%)

Besides cats and dogs, undergraduate students listed other types of companion animals. In the second most common types of animals, 45 students named fish as companion animals, followed by birds with 37, turtles with 26, rabbits with 25, and hamsters with 11. These groups of animals were present in 74% of student homes. The last group of companion animals consisted of reptiles, farm animals, and other furry friends with the top three animals: chickens (9), iguanas (6), and goats/ducks (5). This group represented about 30% of companion animals among participants. However, only one student had turtles, another one had rabbits, and a third student had birds without having dogs or cats.

The general attachment to companion animals was higher for female students (.90) compared to male students (.81). However, there was no difference between groups in their level of attachment to companion animals. The mean of relational and emotional attachment for female and male students were found to be very close; however, males reported higher means than females for both attachments. The standard deviation of relational attachment was lower among males (.70) than females (.90) implying a much greater spread of attachment among females. Similarly, the standard deviation of emotional attachment was greater for females (.89) than for males (.76) implying a greater spread of this type of attachment, as well, in females.

In this study, differences among students based on their major of study were also considered. The mean of relational attachment was higher among rehabilitation students (4.23) than among social work majors (3.88). Similarly, rehabilitation services students had a higher mean for emotional attachment than social work students with a mean of 3.88. These results suggest differences among students based on their educational training.

Two different items that measured attachment were identified from the survey statements. The two factors involved statements about interpersonal relationships (relational attachment) and emotional (general) attachment. Based on an ANOVA analysis performed on SPSS (Table 2), emotional attachment showed a significant difference among major groups, that is, rehabilitation services and social work. However, there was no significant difference between the student groups when evaluating relational attachment.

Table 2. ANOVA for Attachment Among Undergraduate Students

		<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Relational	Between groups	3	7.2	2.40	3.31	.02
	Within groups	192	138.70	.73		
	Total	195	145.92			
Emotional	Between groups	3	4.91	1.64	2.22	.09
	Within groups	192	140.76	.74		
	Total	195	145.67			

Note. $p < 0.05$

A Pearson product–moment correlation was run to determine the relationship between attachment attitudes and law-based knowledge towards pets. There was a moderate, positive correlation between attitudes with both relational and emotional attachment, which were statistically significant, ($r = .45, p = .001$) and ($r = .48, p = .001$) respectively. In the same way, attitudes had a small positive correlation with law-based knowledge ($r = .28, p = .005$). Negative attitudes had a moderate, positive correlation with relational attachment ($r = .52, p = .001$) and emotional attachment ($r = .49, p = .001$). The results of the stepwise regression analysis revealed that attitudes ($b = .37, p < .05$) and negative attitudes ($b = .35, p < .05$) were statistically significant predictors of relational attachment. Furthermore, when emotional attachment was regressed, it was found that attitudes ($b = .34, p < .05$) and negative attitudes ($b = .32, p < .05$) were significant predictors. The overall model fit was $R^2 = .30$.

Discussion

Companion animals have a strong presence across different U.S. households. The aim of this study was to explore the affiliation between human–animal attachments and evaluate the relationship between attachment with—and attitudes toward—companion animals among Latino participants. In addition, majors of study were considered to evaluate the level of attachment among students. Consequently, this research contributes to the existing literature that empirically evaluates the human–animal bond among future helping professionals.

The rate of companion–animal ownership in the Latino student sample of this study was very high at 90%. In a previous study, over one-third of U.S. Latinos were estimated to have at least one companion animal (Landau et al., 2016). Like Latino participants in previous research, the participants were most likely to have dogs as companion animals (Faver & Cavazos, 2008; Poss & Bader, 2007; Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006; Schoenfeld-Tachere & Kogan, 2019; Schoenfeld-Tacher et al., 2010). Moreover, participants reported having other companion animals than dogs or cats—a similar finding when comparing Latinos to other groups (Granderson, 2017). Participants also mentioned a variety of companion animals representing diverse species that demand different caretaking responsibilities.

Perhaps due to the nature of the majors of study in human services, the majority of participants in this study were females. In contrast to previous studies (Smolkovic et al., 2012; Winefield et al., 2008), male participants reported higher attachment levels to their pets on the attachment scale than female participants did. Participants reported having a significant level of relational attachment with companion animals, as previous studies demonstrating that companion animals are often regarded as family members and part of support systems (Antonacopoulos & Pychyl, 2010; Crawford et al., 2006).

Rehabilitation services students reported a higher level of attachment—relational and emotional—than social work students did. These findings may suggest the influence of students' program major on their bond with their companion animals since both programs teach about animals in the profession. However, at the time of the survey, the rehabilitation services program was the only one offering a semester-long course on the human–animal bond. Moreover, attitudes toward the human–animal bond positively predicted student attachment with companions. These findings support previous studies that demonstrated positive relationships between human attitudes toward connection to animals (Hawkins et al., 2017).

Limitations and Strengths

A notable strength of this study is that it considered multiple companion animals among students from a minoritized ethnic background. The present research has a number of limitations for consideration at any given point. The sample consisted of university students who have a higher level of education and acculturation than other Hispanics in the community. As a convenience sample, the respondents were limited to a few training programs with a higher proportion of women than men and a higher number of dog owners than other companion animals. In addition, all participants had companion animals and most likely have an interest and passion for animals. The assessment tools were also limited for obtaining information about other potential factors affecting student level of attachment to companion animals. For instance, there were no questions about caregiver responsibilities, length of relationship with animals in questions, or interpretation of relationship. Hence, these findings cannot be generalized.

Since attachment to companion animals can be influenced by various cultural and individual perceptions, a qualitative approach could provide information to define a more culture-specific measure for Latinos. Future research can also evaluate the impact of length and type of relationship with different types of animals to clarify the human–animal relationships, as well as the impact of training on the integration of animals in services. Finally, future studies can evaluate animal assisted intervention, prevention, and treatment programs specific for Latino clients and the well-being of companion animals in Latino households.

Implications for Training and Practice

Because companion animals continue to increase in numbers across Latino households, future human service professionals need to include animals in their practice. As reported in this study, different types of companion animals are an important part of Latino student homes. Education can influence attitudes towards animals, improving animal welfare orientation, and enhancing the utilization of animal-assisted interventions among human service professionals (Silcox et al., 2014). Since significant and no significant research findings can help understand the impact of human–animal relations (Herzog, 2011), human services professionals benefit by increasing their awareness and knowledge about companion animals. Consequently, human services training programs should consider incorporating material on the human–animal relationship into curricula.

As previously reported, Latinos tend to perceive companion animals as family members (Schoenfeld-Tacher et al., 2010); as a result, practitioners can evaluate relationships, family dynamics, and responsibilities. Information about human experiences and relationships with companion animals can improve a comprehensive assessment by identifying the role of animals in the client's life. The treatment and well-being of companion animals may reveal the level of family stress (Faver & Cavazos, 2008) and the place of powerless creatures in the family system. Through such evaluation, human service professionals can learn about relational patterns; family organization; couples' relationships; communication and problem-solving processes; and coping strategies with stressful situations (Walsh, 2009). By assessing family structure and behaviors, human services professionals can create an accurate picture of their clients' current situation and facilitate problem identification.

Previous research has established that the link between animal abuse and family violence requires practitioners to include information about companion animals when assessing children and families (Faver & Strand, 2007). Inclusion of human–animal relationships in practice can improve the treatment and understanding of individuals and families. This information can help practitioners identify potential abuse in the family, treatment options for animal abusers, and animal-assisted programs for at-risk clients (Risley-Curtiss et al., 2010). Since Latino clients may be reluctant to talk about abuse or neglect in their family, identifying deliberate harm to animals may suggest potential risk or undisclosed abuse of human family members (Walsh, 2009). Moreover, animals can help to enhance service delivery for clients exposed to potential neglect and abuse. Research has demonstrated a number of benefits of pet attachment for people in general and especially for special populations, such as the elderly, at-risk youth, and people who have suffered trauma (Blazina et al., 2011).

Besides, human services professionals can utilize companion animals or assisted animal interventions in treatment. The presence of animals, referred to as “social lubricants,” can aid to facilitate social interaction with others, as people with animals are more likely to engage with others in community activities, public places, and interventions (Morley & Fook, 2005; Well, 2019). Hence, a human service professional can invite clients to bring their companion animals, as well as incorporate trained animals to create a welcoming environment and a sense of comfort. The inclusion of animals in systemic assessments and interventions can enrich the provider–client relationship (Walsh, 2009). Clients may feel more comfortable working with a professional who recognizes the significance of companion animals in personal experiences. Mental health practitioners can infuse a working knowledge to support and integrate the human–animal bond in services specifically for Hispanic clients who regard companion animals as family members (Schoenfeld-Tacher & Kogan, 2019).

While there are other benefits related to animal assisted intervention and human–animal interactions, training programs can incorporate material and activities to increase exposure to approaches that utilize animals in practice. Efficient human education can increase the level of empathy toward animals (Rusu et al., 2019) and enhance services by understanding the benefits and effects of animal assistance, including social connections creation (Adamle et al., 2009; Hanrahan & Boulton, 2022), a reduction of stress levels (Barker et al., 2016), and blood pressure and anxiety level decreases (Wood et al., 2018). For instance, students in training can have opportunities to complete their field experience work in clinical sites and agencies that use animal assisted therapy to understand the value of these interventions (Silcox et al., 2014). According to Fernandes et al. (2021), training programs also need to validate student high satisfaction rates with animal collaborative events and discuss creative ways to provide animal assisted activities. Future professionals can learn about animal assisted activities and interventions in training, which will increase their likelihood of incorporating animal knowledge in practice.

Conclusion

Companion animals can, in fact, influence the lived experienced of ethnically minoritized groups in the U.S. context. Based on data analyses, Hispanic household may have diverse species of companion animals, which require different caretaking responsibilities, time demands, and costs. In this study, male participants reported higher attachment levels with their companion animals on the attachment scale than their female counterparts. Participants also reported having a significant level of relational attachment with their companion animals supporting previous studies that companion animals are often regarded as family members and part of support systems.

As Hispanic households continue to increase in the United States, human services professionals can enhance service delivery by recognizing the role of companion animals in these communities. Thus, the findings from this study may suggest the influence of training on students’ bond with companion animals since program

curriculum included material about animals' role in professional practices. Training programs can intentionally prepare future professionals to utilize companion animals or assisted animal interventions in treatment.

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