

5-2003

## Research Proposal: Dogs as Reducers of Anxiety in Social Situations

Jennifer L. Sytsma  
*Lindenwood University*

Follow this and additional works at: [https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/psych\\_journals](https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/psych_journals)



Part of the [Psychology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Sytsma, Jennifer L. (2003) "Research Proposal: Dogs as Reducers of Anxiety in Social Situations," *Undergraduate Psychology Research Methods Journal*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 2 , Article 19.  
Available at: [https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/psych\\_journals/vol1/iss2/19](https://digitalcommons.lindenwood.edu/psych_journals/vol1/iss2/19)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Psychology, Sociology, and Public Health Department at Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Undergraduate Psychology Research Methods Journal by an authorized editor of Digital Commons@Lindenwood University. For more information, please contact [phuffman@lindenwood.edu](mailto:phuffman@lindenwood.edu).

## Dogs as Reducers of Anxiety in Social Situations

Jennifer L. Sytsma

Lindenwood University

For many years animals have played a large part in the average family unit. Animals become more than just pets and begin to be considered a family member or a best friend. With such close relationships developing between owner and pet it would not be far fetched to say that animals could act as a social mediator for those who suffer from chronic anxiety in social situations.

I believe that pets can greatly reduce stress and anxiety during social interactions with those who suffer from social anxiety. Since dogs are the most commonly seen pets in an outside setting most studies have been with dogs rather than other pets such as cats. A study done by McNicholas and Collis (2000) looked into how dogs are a catalyst for social interactions. Two studies were conducted to tests the strength of this effect. In the first study, a highly trained dog was used to ensure that the dogs unruly behavior did not attract unwanted attention from passers-by. The participant was asked to take the dog with him or her (both sexes were used as participants in the study to rule out gender influence), during his/her normal daily activities. These activities were not confined to conventional dog walking, and the participants were encouraged to bring the animal wherever they went. It was found that being accompanied by a dog significantly increased the frequency of social interactions with strangers.

In Study 2, the participants also used a well-trained dog; however, in this study researchers tested how physical appearance of the dog and owner affected frequency of social interaction. Participants were asked to wear either dirty and torn clothes or a suit,

and the dog they were walking wore either a torn leash and studded collar, or matching leash and collar. The appearance of the dog had little effect; however, the owner who wore a suit interacted with others significantly more than the owner wearing torn clothes.

A second study by Lowell and Keats (1992) stated that the company of a dog is better than the presence of a close friend in reducing stress. In this study, dog owners were asked to complete a series of difficult math problems in a limited amount of time. Researchers discovered that when the owners' dog sat beside him/her the participants scored far higher and could complete the task in a faster time than when his/her best human friend or no one sat beside him/her. The researchers also observed that the dog had a calming effect on its owner. The researchers monitored breathing and heart rate before, during, and after the test and discovered that all three were lower in the presence of the dog. Both of these studies help support my hypothesis that dogs will help lower stress and anxiety in social situations for those with social anxiety.

## Method

### *Participants*

Participants will be four females and four males ages 20 and older who suffer panic attacks due to social phobias. These participants will be recruited through ads in a newspaper as well as Internet and television advertisement. The participants will be extensively pre-tested by a licensed psychologist and will be required to meet the diagnostic criteria for panic attacks and social phobia according to the DSM-IV. Participants will also be pre-tested to ensure that they are in fact comfortable around dogs. Participants will be required to interact with a dog similar to the one that will be used in the study in a laboratory setting. Their respiratory and heart rate will be

monitored to detect any signs of stress or discomfort stemming from the presence of the dog. Those participants who are uncomfortable around dogs will not be used in the study.

### *Materials*

Since most animals seen in a public area such as a park, are dogs, I will use only dogs in my study. I will use four well-trained Labrador retrievers all will be black in color. This particular breed will be chosen due to the fact that they are recognizable by most people as a friendly breed and they are very approachable. All of the dogs will be black in color in order to rule out any bias due to color favoritism. Each dog will wear a red collar and red retractable leash.

The participants will be asked to gather in a building with two large rooms with chairs and tables. Eight consent forms would be handed out, one for each participant. After filling out the consent form each participant would be given a paper so I would be able to contact them with the results of the study if they were interested. The participants would be brought to a large park located near the original meeting place where there would be plenty of people walking, jogging, and so on. Approximately ten confederates would be used to approach the participants and engage them in conversation.

A self-report diary will be given to the participants to fill out before, during, and after they go out to the park with their dog. They will be wired so their heart rate and respiratory rate could be monitored at all times. I will have approximately 50 sheets of paper that will be divided into sections so I can record heart and respiratory rate at different intervals and also a section for me to record any signs of anxiety or positive social interaction. I will use a pen to record any information. At the end of the experiment a survey with 15 questions asking participants to rate how they felt during the social

interactions presented by confederates will be handed out to each participant. Eight of these surveys will be used, one per participant.

### *Procedure*

Before the procedure, the participants will be asked to read and sign the consent form. Four participants (2 males/2 females) will be introduced to the dogs, while the other four (2-males/2 females) will be the control group and will go out into the park without dogs. The participants who will be accompanied by dogs will be introduced to their animal and given at least 30 minutes to get acquainted with the animal. Then the participants will be asked to fill out the first entry in their self-report diary describing how they are feeling. After they complete the first entry in their diary their heart and respiratory rate will be taken and recorded.

The participant will then be asked to go out alone into the park and take the dog for a leisurely walk. At this time confederates will be asked to approach the participant. The first participant will briefly stop, compliment the participant on their dog, ask a simple question such as “what is the breed of the dog,” and walk away. Those participants without dogs will be approached by a confederate and asked a simple question such as, “Do you have the time?” or “Can you give me directions to the restrooms?” The heart and respiratory rate of the participant will then be taken and recorded. Each confederate will take his or her turn approaching the participant. Each confederate will spend more and more time talking to the participant and interacting with them. At one point three confederates will be surrounding the participant attempting to engage him/her in conversation. Each time a person is interacting with the participant

his/her actions, respiratory and heart rate will be observed and recorded. Any random person who approaches the participant will be observed and the data recorded.

The participant will be asked to record in his/her self-report diary how he/she feels after each time he/she interacts with a person. After 30 minutes of walking in the park the participant will be asked to report back to the original meeting place. Once returned to the room with tables and chairs the participant will be asked to fill out the last entry in the self-report diary and his/her respiratory and heart rate will be taken. The participant will also be asked to fill out a survey which will ask 15 questions regarding their stress levels when they were approached by people, and whether or not they felt less, more, or the same amounts of anxiety in situations presented by confederates.

One by one each participant will follow the same procedure. The four participants entering the park without animals will talk to the same amount of confederates, and will spend the same amount of time in the park as the participants accompanied by animals.

### Implications

If the results of the experiment support my hypothesis I would expect the participants accompanied by animals to experience less anxiety and lower stress levels than those participants who were not accompanied by animals. I would also expect the participants with animals to exhibit less signs of anxiety such as increased heart and respiratory rate, fidgeting, sweating, and unnecessary body movement during social interaction.

If the results of the experiment did not support my hypothesis I would expect to find that there is no difference in anxiety and stress experienced by the participants with

dogs and those without. Both groups would find no difference in anxiety with an animal then they would normally without one.

I believe that if my hypothesis is supported then those people who suffer from social phobia could benefit from having a canine companion with them during situations that require them to interact with others. It would allow them to have more freedom and help them to overcome their social anxiety.

#### References

McNicholas, J. & Collis G.M. (2000). Dogs as catalysts for social interactions:

Robustness of the effect. *British Journal of Psychology*, 91, 61-70.

Lowell, P. & Keats, H.D. (1992). Dogs: truly best friends. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 3, 23.