

IAMS Study - Program Assessment: Puppies Behind Bars

Jeffrey Kleinberg, Ph.D.

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Introduction

The purpose of this study was to measure the extent to which the psychological profile of prison inmates changes as a result of serving as puppy raisers. The research was aimed at assessing changes in the inmates' self-image, interpersonal relations and outlook on life. Prior to the project, it was hypothesized that as a result of their experience as puppy raisers the men would feel better about themselves, act more sociably and would have a more optimistic view of the future.

To determine if the hypotheses were supported, two inventories were selected that could be easily administered and scored: the California Personality Inventory, published by the Consulting Psychological Press and the Test of Optimism, created by Martin Seligman (currently the president of the American Psychological Association). In addition, a brief written questionnaire developed by the principle investigator and administered by the project director was employed to obtain the puppy raiser's observations on the personal meaning of program participation. Prison staff also recorded their views about the extent to which program participants were positively influenced by the experience.

In brief, the puppy raisers were found to have been positively affected by involvement in the project as compared with the control group. While the small sample size did not produce statistically significant results, there was nevertheless a consistently positive trend observed in the personality dimensions tapped by the CPI and in levels of optimism captured by the Seligman survey. This evidence of personality development on the part of the puppy raisers compared favorably to the results seen among the inmates in the control group. Narratives written by the puppy raisers substantiate the positive impact of program participation observed in the test results. Further support for the notion that the experimental group developed emotionally comes from the prison staff who described many changes in maturity, responsibility and cooperativeness observed in the program participants.

The Results

Data were collected on 10 puppy raisers. The control group consisted of 11 inmates for whom complete data were available.

The puppy raisers improved on 9 of the 10 CPI dimensions, indicating a tendency to become psychologically healthier as a result of participation in the project. In contrast, control group participants showed progress in only 2 of the 10 CPI scales included in the study. (The findings cannot be expressed in more definite terms due to the lack of statistical significance found in these pre- and post-test comparisons, which can be attributed to the small sample sizes. It should also be noted that CPI results were not obtained on three of the puppy-raisers because they could not answer a sufficient number of items for the test publisher to produce reliable scores.)

In general, the puppy raisers developed in the following positive directions, as seen in their CPI pre- and post-test comparisons: they became more sociable, more self-accepting, more empathic, more responsible, more comfortable in accepting ordinary rules and regulations, more tolerant of the opinions of others, more dependable, more

fair-minded and felt a greater degree of physical and mental well-being than did their control group counterparts. (In one dimension, Self-control, the puppy-raisers displayed a small and insignificant drop in their pride in being self-disciplined, while the control group displayed a slight, but insignificant increase in that scale.)

Examining the results on the Test of Optimism, the puppy raisers again showed greater gains in comparison with the control group on the Optimism Scale. Both groups gained in the Hope Scale, with the control group actually showing a small but greater improvement than did the puppy-raisers. These results should be viewed cautiously because of the small sample sizes and the lack of reliability and validity data available on this instrument.

The self-reports of the puppy-raisers and the observations provided by some of their supervisors, discussed below, provide additional information on the effects of training the dogs.

Self-reports

Excerpts follow from the self-reports that relate to the changes experienced by at least some of the puppy-raisers:

Subject 1: "There's a few changes, I myself went through. It's not about me anymore, it's about thinking for two, the puppy and myself. In the beginning it was hard. For so many years I was taking care of myself in prison, I worried about me, and only me. Then here I am one day waiting for a puppy, I was so nervous I wanted so much to do the right thing for him. I was so happy once they placed a seven week old puppy in my arms. I felt a change in myself. I feel now I'm not such a bad person after all. If the prison can give me a living, breathing life (a puppy), I can't be all that bad of a person as society makes every one in prison out to be a vicious, dangerous person. We can change, everyone can change. The change starts within you, we can't change the past, but we can change the future.... These puppies love you unconditionally, they are such a positive influence, it can soften the most hardened criminal and bring a smile to their face. Look what it has done to me. I was a person who was full of hate, bitterness, anger, and I would fight on the drop of a dime. Now that's all changed due to this program. I no longer think of just myself but of my companion [the puppy] also.... I truly never thought I could love and care for something other than myself in prison. I was proved wrong. "

Subject 2: "Being a Puppy Raiser is not as easy as one may think. It takes dedication, responsibility and a willingness to help others. You must also be able to demonstrate the skills that you have learned in front of a group. You should also be able to take constructive criticism when it is given. You also must be able to give of your self to the dog as much as is needed and sometimes more than that. Raising a dog for the blind is not an easy task and should not be considered as a whim. The puppy comes first and for some this is a hard concept. As a result of being a puppy raiser you learn to get along with all types of people whether you want to or not. Sure there are men in the program that you just will not see eye to eye with but for the sake of the dog and the program one must look past personal differences.

You must also be able to handle other convicts and staff comments. Certain people will go out of their way to make real nasty comments about you the dog and the program. You must learn to ignore these comments. It took me a long time to not let certain comments that were said bother me. One must remember that STICKS AND STONES MAY BREAK MY BONES BUT NAMES WILL NEVER HURT ME.....

I have learned how to talk better and get my point across. As I became more involved with Puppies Behind Bars... I became more self-confident.... Before I joined the program I lived a very quiet and solitary life. I never wanted to be in the spotlight or be noticed. Now with the dogs I am in the spotlight."

Subject 3: "As a puppy raiser you put the needs of the dog first. You organize your daily routine around the animal. You are taking on a 24 hour responsibility you shouldn't jump into it fool hardy or you will start resenting the dog. The biggest change is learning how to give to something else, I think it is excellent training for parenting. You learn to teach with patience and love and the results are spectacular."

Subject 4: "The main change is [the] reawakening of emotions that are vital to a conscious human being. Love, compassion, devotion. All too often they are discarded not only by prisoners, but by many 'modern rational men.' Suddenly these feelings re-enter one's heart; and it is no longer possible to live without them. Prison life typically encourages negativity and destroys faith in oneself. A puppy that is growing and learning under your very eyes miraculously restores hope and faith."

Subject 5: " When I came into the program, I had very low self-esteem and thought very low of myself. After being in the program for ten months with these puppies, it has made me realize that my self-esteem is a sense of value and worth that comes from positive self-image. Self-esteem begins with me and extends to all that I do.... It is only in me that I can build or destroy my self-esteem. I am only as great as I think I am. This is the impact these dogs have [had] on my life in prison."

Subject 6: "I have learned that I have not mastered negative feelings such as anger, jealousy, and envy, nor have I mastered positive feelings such as love, compassion, and forgiveness.... Raising [the dog] has provided me with a rich opportunity for self-improvement, and I intend to make the best of it."

Subject 7: "The impact [the program has had on me] has been small. As a person I don't think I have changed. But instead of sitting in my room reading a book I have something to fully occupy my time. It gives me something to care and love. It also gives me someone to talk to. (She doesn't talk back!) She might not understand what I'm saying, but [by] the way she is looking at me she is listening. The hardest part is when they go."

Subject 8: "[The program] gave me a sense of 'real' responsibility. When an eight-week old puppy is entrusted into my hands the caring and nurturing is comparable to me caring and nurturing a child."

Subject 9: "You go from taking care of yourself to mainly taking care of the puppy, and yourself second.... I love dogs and I'm really happy to be able to care for them and bring them whatever happiness I can."

Supervisors' reports

Report 1: "[The subject] has been more self-confident as he saw his success with the program and his ability to handle a dog. [The dog's] well-being was very important to him and he was very protective of her, determined she should have her best opportunity.... I have been impressed with his attention to each dog's particular needs and personalities.... When an officer was feeding [his dog] without permission while he was dieting, [the subject] spoke with the officer. When the officer continued to interfere with the [dog's] training, [the subject] enlisted my aid.... I am pleased that [the subject] puts first things first with no quarrel."

Report 2: "Yes, [the subject] changed.... Before he got [the dog] he was only concerned with himself...."

Report 3: "[The subject] is more active and much more upbeat.... [The subject] was often depressed. He seems to always be in a good mood these days. When I give an assignment to him, he has more confidence...."

Report 4: "[The subject] spends more time out of his room than he did before becoming a dog handler and socializes more...."

Report 5: "[The subject] is very attached to his animal.... The puppy program has given him a sense of pride by letting him be part of it."

Report 6: [The subject] is very proud of his dog and has become very patient in caring for her. He always puts his dog before himself.... He puts 110% of his attention to his dog's training and care.... This program has given him a sense of pride that he would not have been able to receive if he was not able to take part...."

Report 7: "The Puppy Program has had a calming effect on [the subject's] personality. He has a more relaxed and positive attitude in general."

Report 8: "[The subject] has a positive attitude. [He] is [now] very social with the other inmates ... and tries to encourage others to participate."

Report 9: "[The subject] is always willing to help any handler in the raising of the dog at anytime."

Summary and Recommendations:

Participants in the Puppies Behind Bars Program seem to have improved in their self-esteem, interpersonal relations and general outlook on life when compared with a non-participating group of inmates. These findings based on the results of two psychological inventories, although not statistically significant because of the small sample size, were substantiated by the comments of the participating inmates and by the positive observations provided by their staff supervisors.

Because of the positive trends noted in this pilot project, it is recommended that a more extensive Puppies Behind Program be implemented. Additional research on the impact of the program would then be possible.

Appendix A

The Design of the Study

The research design consisted of (1) a pre- and post test administration of two written inventories to measure changes in personality variables and optimism presumably stemming from serving as puppy raisers; (2) self-reports of the puppy-raisers describing the impact of the program on them; and (3) reports written by prison staff discussing their observations of the participants' behavior and attitudes during the time they were caring for and training the dogs.

1. The Pre- and Post-Test Design Employing Written Inventories

A pre- and post-test design was adopted to capture the differences in personality dimensions and levels of optimism that could be attributed to serving as puppy raisers. A control group was also established to compare the puppy raisers' changes with those of a group of inmates in the same facility who were not involved in the project.

It should be noted that the results reported here are to be regarded as tentative, given the small sample sizes, the difficulty in sorting out any positive experiences that might have influenced the control group, the survey -nature of the Test of Optimism, which lacks reliability and validity indicators, and the lack of statistical significance found in the data analysis. Furthermore, it should be noted that norms for the male prison inmate population are not available, making it difficult to make statements with certainty about the reliability and validity of the CPI.

The California Personality Inventory, developed by Harrison G. Gough, is aimed at assessing "individuals by means of variables and concepts that ordinary people use in their daily life to understand, classify, and predict their own behavior and those of others.... The everyday variables for which the inventory is scaled (for example, dominance, sociability, self-control and flexibility) may be thought of as folk concepts - that is, concepts that arise from and are linked to the processes of interpersonal life, and that are to be found everywhere that humans congregate into groups and establish societal functions" (CPI Manual, 3rd Edition, 1996, p. 1).

Form 434 of the CPI consists of 434 items that may be categorized in 26 dimensions and takes about 60 minutes to complete. A typical item is "A person needs to 'show off' a little now and then." The subject is asked to indicate True or False to each item.

The scales deemed most relevant to the hypotheses of the study are:

Sy (Sociability)

Sa (Self-acceptance)

Em (Empathy)

So (Socialization)

Ami (Amicability)

Re (Responsibility)

Sc (Self-Control)

Wb (Well-being)

To (Tolerance)

Wo (Work orientation)

Male norms provided for the scales were derived from a sample of 3,000 men.

The Test of Optimism aims to determine the individual's explanatory style. According to Seligman (1990): "We all [have] a style of seeing causes, and if given a chance we'd impose this habit on the world" (P. 43). He goes on to answer the question of who gives up when confronted by obstacles and who persists towards a goal? Seligman asks: "How do you think about the causes of misfortunes, small and large, that befall you? Some people, the ones who give up easily, habitually say of their misfortunes: 'It's me, it's going to last forever, it's going to undermine everything I do.' Others, those who resist giving in to misfortune, say: 'It was just circumstances, it's going away quickly anyway, and, besides, there's much more in life'" (Pp 43-44). Seligman suggests: "Your habitual style of explaining bad events, your explanatory style, is more than just the words you mouth when you fail. It is a habit of thought, learned in childhood and adolescence. Your explanatory style stems directly from your view of your place in the world - whether you think you are valuable and deserving, or worthless and hopeless. It is the hallmark of whether you are an optimist or a pessimist" (P. 44).

The test is designed to reveal one's explanatory style. It consists of 48 items, each of which describes a situation and asks the subject to imagine being in that situation and to choose one of two likely reactions he or she might have to it. For example, one situation is "You fail an important examination." The subject is asked to choose either A, "I wasn't as smart as other people taking the exam," or B, "I didn't prepare for it well." The pattern of the subject's response indicates a tendency to see the possibility of overcoming difficulty by working at it (Option B) or giving up, sensing that it is hopeless to continue the effort (Option A).

In this research, two scores were obtained for each subject: A Hope Score (HoB), indicating whether the individual sees pervasive and permanent reasons for failure, implying hopelessness, and an Optimism Score (G-B), indicating the individual believes he or she causes good thing to happen.

2. Self-Reports

The puppy raisers were asked to respond in writing, anonymously if they wished, to the following questions:

1. What changes, if any, do you think someone goes through as a result of being a puppy raiser?
2. What impact, if any, do you think the program and the dogs have on life in prison?
3. Observational Reports by Prison Staff

Work supervisors and guards of the puppy raisers were asked to respond in writing to the following questions:

1. Do you think the inmate has changed since he became part of the puppy program?
2. Can you cite any specific examples of the changes mentioned above?