



# *Qualitative Sociology Review*

Volume III, Issue 1 – April 2007

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## Without words to get in the way: Symbolic interaction in prison-based animal programs

### **Abstract**

George H. Mead ([1934] 1967) contended a person's sense of self develops from language-based interactions with other humans in society. According to contemporary sociologists, a person's sense of self is also influenced by non-verbal interactions with human and non-human animals. The present research extends Sanders (1993) work that examined how dog owners relate to their pets and come to develop a unique social identity for them. Through interviews with participants in prison-based animal programs (PAPs), this research explores whether inmates engaged in a similar process of assigning the animals with which they work a human-like identity. The implications of the relationships that develop in terms of desistance, which Maruna (2001) argued requires a redefinition of a person's self-identity, are discussed.

### **Keywords**

Symbolic interaction; Animals in prison; Human-animal interaction

The interconnectedness of human and non-human animals is increasingly being considered by sociologists (Beck and Katcher 2003; Jerolmack 2005). But if this emerging field of study is to maintain legitimacy, it is necessary to "show how incorporating animals into our investigations of society will enhance understanding across many avenues of sociological inquiry" (Jerolmack 2005: 651). To that end, the present analysis considers the implications of prison-based animal programs that pair incarcerated people with domesticated animals, a trend in prison programming that has gone largely unstudied. The social identity the animal takes on for the program participant is examined according to Bogdan and Taylor's (1989) model, which Sanders (1993) applied to dog owners. Then, the ensuing effect the dog has on the development of the human participant's prosocial sense of self will be considered. Maruna (2001) argued a changed self-identity, as someone who is "making good," is necessary for desistance from crime. The present piece concludes with a discussion of whether the animals in these programs can influence the human participant's view of self and thereby play a part in the process of desistance described by Maruna (2001).

"The increasing importance of animals in our everyday lives" (Jerolmack 2005: 652) has not been restricted to people in the free world. Prison inmates are also being provided with the opportunity to develop relationships with animals while

incarcerated in what have been called prison-based animal programs, or PAPs (Furst 2006). While PAPs offer the psychosocial and physical benefits associated with animal-assisted therapy (AAT), the prison programs considered the present piece differ in several aspects from AAT with other populations, such as the elderly or abused children. Most importantly, the animal is not present primarily for the therapeutic benefit of the inmate. The animals are not used in conjunction with clinical methods, such as psychoanalysis, in order to more effectively communicate with patients (inmates). In prison, the programs do not have a clinical or psychological counseling component. Participants interact with animals, but usually with the goal of training them. While there are several program models, the most common is the community service design where participants train and care for animals, including dogs and wild horses, which are then adopted out to the community. Second most common is the service animal socialization model where assistance/work puppies or dogs are raised and taught basic commands before the dogs go on to specialized training such as for explosives- or drug-sniffing, or to work with people with physical disabilities. The programs, most of which have been implemented since 2000, are in 40 out of 50 states (Furst 2006).

In developing body of research that examines human-animal interactions, “the most innovative work making the ‘zoological connection’ in sociology today has emerged from the social constructivist/symbolic interactionist tradition” according to Jerolmack (2005: 652). As such, the present piece approaches the examination of the effects of animals on the self-identity of volunteers in a prison-based animal program (PAP) from a “neo-Meadian sociology of mind” perspective (Collins 1989). Although Mead ([1934] 1967) “denied that animals can engage in ‘minded behavior,’ numerous human-animal scholars have set out to demonstrate that animals have ‘selves’ in the Meadian sense and can share symbols with humans” (Jerolmack 2005: 652). Once this mutual understanding is established, according to Mead, what follows is the ability of each actor in the interaction to impact the other. While Mead maintained that the lack of shared language limited interactions between humans and other animals, it is argued here that the lack of language may characterize human-animal relations as uniquely situated to impact prison inmates who often have histories of being punished and rejected with words.

The effects of program participation on the inmates’ self-concept will be discussed in terms of Maruna’s (2001: 7) work on criminal desistance. Maruna argued that in order to “desist from crime ex-offenders need to develop a coherent, prosocial identity for themselves.” For Maruna, the repaired ideas of self are incorporated into a “recovery story” or “redemption script” that establishes desisters as good or conventional. It is through the “help of some outside force, someone who ‘believed in’ the ex-offender, [that] the narrator is able to accomplish what he or she was ‘always meant to do.’ Newly empowered, he or she now also seeks to ‘give something back’ to society as a display of gratitude” (Maruna *ibidem*: 87). The present research considers whether participation in a PAP can contribute to the creation of a positive self-identity for the inmate volunteers.

## **Symbolic interaction and formation of self**

G. H. Mead’s ([1934] 1967) writings were a critical reaction to the purely behavioral approach to psychology that was widely accepted at the time. Today, however, his thinking is increasingly considered not distinct enough from the work to

which his contribution responded, particularly as his theory applies to animals. According to Mead, human self-consciousness or one's sense of self appeared because "we are, especially through the use of the vocal gestures, continually arousing in ourselves those responses which we call out in other persons, so that we are taking the attitudes of the other persons into our own conduct" (Mead [1934]1967: 69). For Mead, non-human animals are limited to the use of non-vocal gestures that allow them "to adjust to the attitude of others, while changing the attitudes of others" but in a manner that is "unconscious and non-rational. The gesture is being done without an intention of causing certain reaction: the organism is not conscious of its significance" (Konecki 2005: 69). The act "is carried out automatically and habitually" according to this model of behavior (Collins 1989: 12).

Mead theorized that humans, as a result of evolution, use vocal gestures, or language, that enables them to "carry out a true conversation of significant gestures, and hence engage in internalized conversation and imaginative rehearsal" (Collins 1989: 13). He argued that only vocal gestures are able to bring about common definitions between actors or "what we term the meaning of a thing, or its significance" (Mead [1934] 1967: 72). For an individual, when the response of another person "becomes a stimulus to control his action, then he has the meaning of the other person's act in his own experience. That is the general mechanism of what we term 'thought'" (Mead *ibidem*: 73). It is only through language, he said, that the actor can experience "the response which he is calling out in the other individual, a taking of the role of the other" (Mead *ibidem*: 73). Language, therefore, is necessary for this inner conversation, and thus an awareness of self, to occur. Even Herbert Blumer ([1969] 1998), who refined Mead's ideas and coined the phrase symbolic interactionism, limited the notion of self to humans. He argued that it was due to interpretation that symbolic interaction was unique to humans since "humans interpret and mutually 'define' their actions instead of simply reacting to them" as do animals (Konecki 2005: 71).

### ***Contemporary response to Mead***

Mead ([1934] 1967) was quite clear about the separation he perceived between human and non-human animals. "We say the animal does not think. He does not put himself in the place of the other person and say, in effect, 'He will act in such a way and I will act in this way'" (p. 73). However, his reliance on language as the defining factor for selfhood has increasingly come to be regarded as arbitrary. Collins (1989) referred to this as "a mysterious dividing line between humans and animals. Although humans start out as animals who make nonsignificant gestures, somehow they leap to the ability to add an inner" conversation (Collins *ibidem*: 13). Alger and Alger (1999) argue the demarcation between humans and other animals is necessary to:

construct beings, who can be used, unimpeded by moral considerations. Those we call animals can be experimented on, forced to work for us, exploited for our entertainment, and eaten. It allows us to forget our common evolutionary background and the enormous number of similarities between us. (p. 203-4)

Contemporary scholars have produced a wide variety of research that counters Mead's contentions regarding animal subjectivity. Beyond the work of sociologists,

researchers from fields including neuroscience, evolutionary anthropology, behavioral biology, and the latest, cognitive ethology or the study of animal self-awareness, can also point to evidence of animals experiencing selfhood (Marino 2006). A review of three (Alger and Alger 2003; Arluke and Sanders 1996; Irvine 2004) relatively recent ethnographic book-length works by sociologists exploring animal self-hood has already appeared (see Jerolmack 2005). The present review will present the theoretical basis for Sanders (1993) and describe how the framework can be extended and applied to PAP participants. In addition, how the unique, largely non-verbal, nature of human-animal interactions may be particularly able to impact prison inmates' self-concepts will be considered. Finally, the implications for criminal desistance according to Maruna's (2001) perspective are discussed.

### **Selfhood in others**

Sanders (1993) based his work about companion animals on research regarding how nondisabled people in relationships with people with severe disabilities define that person's humanness (Bogdan and Taylor 1989). According to Bogdan and Taylor, "the nondisabled view the disabled people as full-fledged human beings. This stands in contrast to the dehumanizing perspectives often held by institutional staff and others in which people with severe disabilities are viewed as non-persons or sub-human" (Bogdan and Taylor *ibidem*: 138). The authors examined inter-subjectivity between the severely disabled and their caretakers and found the caretakers, despite a lack of language, continued to recognize the other as a human with a unique self.

Bogdan and Taylor (*ibidem*) identified four aspects of the nondisabled person's perspective that enable the maintenance of a human identity for the severely disabled person. First, the nondisabled person attributes thinking to the disabled person. Despite usually significant physiological limitations, the disabled person is regarded as intelligent, even if unable to fully communicate thoughts. Second, the disabled person is viewed as an individual with a unique personality comprised of likes and dislikes, feelings and motives, a life history, and a physical appearance. Third, the nondisabled person regards the disabled person as reciprocating or contributing to the relationship. In addition to companionship and the opportunity to meet others in the community, the nondisabled person may derive a "sense of accomplishment in contributing to the disabled other's well-being and personal growth" (Bogdan and Taylor *ibidem*: 144). Finally, the disabled person is given a social place and regarded as a "full and important member" and participates in the "rituals and routines of the social unit" (Bogdan and Taylor *ibidem*: 145).

Sanders (1993, 2000) investigated "how a close relationship with a companion animal shapes the human caretaker's identity" (Sanders 2000: 406). He found that through "routine, intimate interactions with their dogs, caretakers come to regard their animals as unique individuals who are minded, empathetic, reciprocating, and well aware of basic rules and roles that govern the relationship" (Sanders 1993: 207). Sanders found evidence of the same four features in the process by which people construct a subjective identity for their pets as identified by Bogdan and Taylor (1989). Pet owners attributed thinking to the animals and regarded their animals as intelligent and having free-will. Frequently, they cited "their dogs' play activities, and the adjustments they made while being trained. The dog's purposive modification of behavior was seen as indicating a basic ability to reason" (Sanders 1993: 213). Pet owners also viewed their dog as an individual with "unique personal tastes.

Informants typically took considerable pleasure in talking about individual likes and dislikes in food, activities, playthings, and people” (Sanders *ibidem*: 215-6). In addition to the “subjective experiences” described above, pet owners reported that “they frequently understood their relationships with the animals as revolving around emotional issues. ...One indication of the intensely positive quality of their relationship with their animals were the owners’ perceptions that their dogs were attuned to their own emotions and responded in ways that were appropriate and indicated empathy” (Sanders *ibidem*: 218). Given the value placed on the relationship, it should be no surprise that dog owners reported “they actively included their animals in the routine exchanges and the special ritual practices of the household” (Sanders *ibidem*: 219). Sanders thus concluded that the preceding are “categories of evidence used by dog owners to include their animals inside the ostensibly rigid but actually rather flexible boundaries that divide minded humans from mindless others” (Sanders *ibidem*: 221). It should be noted that Alger and Alger (1997, 2003) extended Sanders’ findings on dog owners to cat owners and found a similar process of viewing cats as minded actors.

### ***Implications for prison inmates***

While the evidence establishes an intersubjectivity between animals and people irrespective of language, it is this very lack of language that may facilitate the relationships developed through PAPs. In fact, it may be that interactions not reliant on a common language are of particular benefit to prison inmates who often have long histories of people’s words being used to reject and punish them. That is, without language to offend or cause harm, interactions between people and animals can feel less judgmental and therefore more therapeutic for incarcerated people. Indeed, prison inmates and animals may even be regarded as sharing a history of being excluded from the category of “human”. As Sanders (1993: 210) reminds us “‘primitives,’ African Americans, and members of various other human groups routinely have been, and continue to be, denied the status of human...and studies of interactions in total institutions...are filled with descriptions of the ‘dehumanization’ of inmates by staff members, principally on the grounds that the inmates do not possess the requisite level of mind.”

### **Desistance**

Developing ideas proposed by Sampson and Laub (1990) in their life course theory of criminality, which argued desistance results from trajectory-changing life events (e.g., employment, marriage), researchers are increasingly examining criminal desistance as rooted in the transformation of a person’s self-identity. Maruna’s (2001) concept of self-identity proposed that all adults create an “internalized life story – or personal myth – to provide their lives with unity, purpose, and meaning. The construction and reconstruction of this narrative, integrating one’s perceived past, present, and anticipated future, is itself the process of identity development in adulthood” (Maruna 2001: 7). Maruna found that long-term, persistent offenders routinely maintained antisocial self-concepts that were reinforced by the messages heard from the “voice of a society that has largely given up on the person” (Maruna *ibidem*: 79). Ex-offenders unable to successfully desist from crime were found to “feel powerless to change their behavior....They do not want to offend, they said, but feel that they have no choice” (Maruna *ibidem*: 74). The “fundamental and

intentional shift in a person's sense of self" (Maruna *ibidem*: 17) that Maruna found in successful desisters occurred when ex-offenders experienced "social and interactional processes of empowerment and reintegration" (Maruna *ibidem*: 13).

Hans Toch argued this transformation in self is encouraged by participation in what he calls "altruistic activity" or "activity designed not for profit or gain but to assist some underprivileged people who stand in manifest need of assistance" (Toch 2000: 270). Similarly, the strengths-based approach to corrections outlined by Maruna, LeBel and Lanier (2004) refers to this idea as generative activity which allows "convicts and ex-convicts to make amends, demonstrate their value and potential, and experience success in support and leadership roles" (Maruna, LeBel and Lanier *ibidem*: 140). Participating in these types of activities can provide "a sense of purpose and meaning, allowing them to redeem themselves from their past mistakes, and legitimizing the person's claim to having changed" (Maruna, LeBel and Lanier *ibidem*: 133). The growth that can result can lead the offender to reject his "past offender identity" and adopt "a new identity and a new self and a new set of goals" (Toch 2000: 276).

It is this new sense of self that Maruna (2001: 1) argued is key for desistance because in order to "desist from crime, ex-offenders need to develop a coherent, prosocial identity for themselves." He found that desisters had changed or repaired their ideas of self and argued that desisters must not only be able to explain their reform in terms of their experiences to others, but also "perhaps more importantly, ex-offenders need to have a believable story of why they are going straight to convince *themselves* that this is a real change" (Maruna *ibidem*: 86, italics in original). The "recovery story" or "redemption script" created by ex-offenders often establishes them as good or conventional and through the "help of some outside force, someone who 'believed in' the ex-offender, the narrator is able to accomplish what he or she was 'always meant to do.' Newly empowered, he or she now also seeks to 'give something back' to society as a display of gratitude" (Maruna *ibidem*: 87). Maruna, LeBel, and Lanier (2004: 142) found desisters often adopted a role as a wounded healer, having experienced "the transformation of identity from victim to survivor to helper."

## Present study

Thus, previous research has both examined the role of non-human social interactions in the development or reformulation of human self-identity, and assessed the contributions of one's sense of self to engaging in prosocial versus antisocial behavior. The present study examines whether participants in PAPs engage in the process of assigning the animals they work with a human-like identity by applying the model first outlined by Bogdan and Taylor (1989) and applied to dog owners by Sanders (1993). Then, respondents' self-reports regarding the treatment effects of their participation are analyzed for evidence that a redefinition of self, that Maruna (2001) argued is a precursor to desistance from criminal activity, occurred. The data were collected as part of a previous study of two PAPs in one northeastern state. The interviews were re-coded for evidence of the four dimensions of the human's "perspective that helps maintain the humanness of the other in their minds" (Bogdan and Taylor 1989: 135).

The present piece is an extension of Sanders' work because the relationships formed in PAPs differ from those in traditional pet ownership in a number of ways. Perhaps most significantly, the duration of the relationships between people and

animals in PAPs is briefer because participants care for the animals for a limited period of time, generally about one year. It is unknown if the development of a human-like identity will occur when the relationship is known from the outset to be temporary and relatively brief. In addition, while the participants of the PAPs interviewed in the present study were paired with specific dogs, they were also often responsible for caring for others' dogs. In one program, participants swapped dogs with participants from their sister-program located in another facility so the dogs would become accustomed to being around different people and situations. The process of assigning a dog person-status when one is also part of a team caring for a group of dogs, rather than the sole long-term owner of a particular animal, is unstudied.

## Research methods

Interview data were collected from inmates at two separate prisons who were volunteering in their facility's PAP. The first program, in a maximum-security facility for females (housed in a low-security area of the compound), pairs offenders with puppies who are socialized in preparation for advanced training in explosives detection. The program has been in place since March 2001 and is administered by a non-profit organization founded in 1997 that also oversees the program at five other sites in two other states. At the time of the interviews in spring 2005, there were 13 dogs and 22 inmates participating, 15 as primary handlers and seven back-up handlers. Among the 15 primary handlers interviewed, the average age was 38.2 years and ranged from 24 to 50 years-old. Seven participants identified themselves as white, five as black, and one each Hispanic, Native American, and biracial. The average length of program participation was 22.4 months and ranged from six to 60 months.

The second program, in a medium-security facility for males aged 17-25 in the same northeastern state, pairs offenders with greyhounds rescued from being destroyed after the end of a racing career (usually 2-3 years) who are socialized for placement as pets in homes in the community. The program has been in place since May 2002 and is administered by a non-profit organization that is focused on finding homes for ex-racing greyhounds. At the time of the interviews there were seven dogs and 18 inmates participating, seven primary handlers, seven back-up handlers, and four trainees. Seven individual interviews with each primary handler and a focus group with 14 participants were conducted at the facility. Among the seven primary handlers, the average age was 25.6 years old and ranged from 21 to 33 years-old. Six participants identified themselves as Hispanic and one as Black. The average length of program participation was 18.1 months and ranged from nine to 36 months.

Access to the participants' disciplinary records was not possible. However, the prison administrators at the female facility and the executive director of the affiliated non-profit reported that in the five years the program had been in place, one participant was removed due to disciplinary misconduct and no participants had recidivated after release. At the male facility, the administrators and program director reported that in the approximately four years the program had been in place, one participant was removed for disciplinary misconduct.

## **Interview data**

As Alger and Alger (1997) applied Sanders' (1993) work to relationships people have with their pet cats, the present research applies Sanders' work to the relationships that develop between temporary caretakers participating in PAPs and the dogs with which they work. The implications of the animal identity construction process and the resulting effects on the PAP participants, in terms of Maruna's (2001) findings regarding desistance from crime, are also presented. They were unaware of any participants having recidivated<sup>1</sup>

### ***Dog as thinking, intelligent being***

Participants' responses to the dogs' behaviors indicate support for the idea that the animals have free will. Participants reported controlling their own behaviors in response to the free will or actions of the dogs. More than half of the female sample said they were less angry and more patient as a result of their participation. "I was angry," said one woman, "and this is slowing me down and has taught me to be calm. We go at the pace of the puppy." Three male respondents also reported increased impulse and/or emotional control. For example, according to one participant, "I think before I react. I'll think 'Why is the dog acting that way?' and then I do something." Participants' responses indicated support for the idea that the dogs are capable of learning and progressing in their training.

Unlike with traditional pet ownership, the main purpose of the relationship in the PAPs is the training of the dogs. For the female participants, successful training meant the dogs will go on to specialized explosives training; for the male participants the dogs will be adopted by families. The participants' discussions of their dogs reflected this focus. Many participants were enthusiastic about describing their dog's intelligence and special skills. Through their participation, the women have learned that the dogs have innate abilities; the dogs were bred specifically to excel at their training and are usually the offspring of previously successful working dogs. One female participant told of how her dog progressed through the program more quickly than any other dog, which she attributed to his nature as a particularly gifted and intelligent creature, and denied she had any special ability as a trainer.

### ***Dog as an individual***

Participants' discussions of the dogs indicate support for the idea that they regard the animals as unique. Participants from both programs keep records of their dog's individual progress. Women create a Puppy Book that follows the dog's development from a puppy and accompanies the dog upon leaving the facility. The book contains samples from the dogs' first nail clipping and grooming as well as the dogs' baby teeth and pictures of them dressed for various holidays (such as Christmas and Easter) and in paper birthday hats during celebrations. During a tour of the participants' dormitory where they live with the dogs, two participants proudly shared their Puppy Books with the researcher. One woman commented that the books are much like the baby book she kept as a new parent. In the program at the male facility, participants keep a written journal about their dogs that is given to the adopting family. Participants include information such as how the dog progressed with training, the dog's favorite toys and tricks, and any behavioral quirks, such as chewing certain objects, that the dog may still possess. In addition, during interviews



at both facilities, participants consistently introduced the researcher to the dog after introducing themselves.

### ***Dog as emotionally giving***

There was agreement that the dogs they worked with provided emotional support to the participants. According to one female participant, "To come to a place with no hope or joy and get unconditional understanding is amazing." Another said, "He doesn't criticize me or talk back or want to pick a fight. No matter what I say, here is here for me." One woman described her relationship with her dog as "better than any I'll have with a person." Approximately half of sample from each program identified the companionship of the dog as the major benefit of participation.

Participants reported that their interactions with their dogs help alleviate their depression or improve their mood. As one woman emphatically stated, "These puppies make me happy." According to another participant, "I have my 'jail days' when I'm depressed and angry but I see that little face and the wagging tail and they're happy to see you and it just can't be a bad day." Another said the program has given her "happiness and a purpose to life." The ability of the dogs to fulfill participants' emotional needs was demonstrated by the woman who reported that she no longer gets "upset with my kids for not writing enough; I just talk to my best friend here [referring to the dog]."

The male program participants reported receiving similar emotional support from the dogs as described by the females. One male participant reported that, "I took Anger Management and Behavior Modification Therapy but they weren't as helpful as this program. I can show real emotion toward the dog. I have better sessions with the dog than I do with the doctor I see here in therapy. I'm more comfortable with the dog." One male participant said, "I let my barrier down with the dogs because they're not gonna judge me." According to another male participant, "I will talk to him after a tough call with my daughter; it definitely helps with stress." Another male respondent said simply, "I talk to my dog – she is better than a person." Thus, participants from both programs indicated having emotional needs met through their interactions with their dogs.

### ***Dog as having a social role***

Participants' responses indicated support for the idea that the dogs they work with take on social roles in their lives. Participants recognized their dogs' ability to serve as social facilitators; they told of increased communication with fellow participants, other inmates, and staff and administrators regarding their dogs. According to one female participant, other women "will ask about your dog when you wouldn't usually talk to them." Participants in both programs reported conversations about the dogs' health and training progress as common topics. One female participant related that, when she was seen walking the prison grounds without her dog, who was recuperating in the cell after being spade, "everyone was asking where she was. They were all worried about her, and if something bad had happened to her." This participant also told of how others "all greet her before me when we're walking around grounds." Describing increased interaction with facility staff and administrators, one woman said "we talk more about the dogs and they'll ask how they're doing. I talk to them about her health and stuff." In addition, the dogs

increase communication between participants. Among the female participants, one woman said, "We share concern over the dogs." A male respondent noted, "We have more trust with each other in the group." A second participant reported that "we get along for the dogs. If you took the dogs away we wouldn't be a community." Another participant agreed and said that "Without the dogs we wouldn't talk to each other as much."

Participants also reported the dogs had positive effects on their relationships with family members. One woman said, "My family loves it. I talk to them about the dogs on the phone. My mom always asks me about them. My family focuses on the dog when they come visit. They're proud of me and they see the changes in me." Another reported that her children are "less anxious about me being locked up. They get to see the dog when they visit and they'll even request a specific dog for me to bring." Male participants also reported that their families are interested in the dogs and they discuss the dogs with their families. According to one, "When my family calls me they check up on the dogs and me."

Another indication of the social role the dogs take on for the participants is the sadness they reported they will feel when their dogs leave the facility. "I do experience sadness with the program. It is tough to leave them; it's like separating from my kids all over again," according to one woman. (As with most programs, the two programs included here work to quickly pair the participant with another dog.) For some, as suggested by the female participants' puppy books, the dogs may serve as surrogate children. Dressing the dogs for holidays and birthdays also indicates the dogs take on social roles for the participants.

### ***Contributions to the development of a prosocial identity***

The interview data presented above support the idea that a process of identity formation occurs for the participants in these PAPs similar to that occurring in the pet owners included in Sanders (1993) and Alger and Alger (1997). Given the human-like identity assigned to the dogs, the interviews with PAP participants were analyzed for evidence that the programs can impact desistance. Maruna (2001) found that desisters "portray themselves very much in control of their current and future life direction. This change in personal agency is frequently attributed to empowerment from some outside source" (Maruna *ibidem*: 13). Interview data were examined for evidence that participants developed a new, prosocial identity, which Maruna argued, is incorporated into the "recovery story" or "redemption script". It is worth noting that because participation is contingent on maintaining a clean institutional record, participants in these programs are actively demonstrating desistance, albeit while still incarcerated.

When participants were asked what they learned about themselves as a result of their participation, the overwhelming response was feeling empowered by the program. One woman reported knowing, "I can get through anything. As uncomfortable as life can be, it is bearable. I can achieve anything I want to." Another said she learned "I'm not as stupid as I was always told I was. I have a lot to offer, to the community and to other women in the program, and to the dogs too." Another participant said she learned "to voice my opinion and not be a carpet. I say what I want people to know." Still another woman reported that, "If I can bring my dog to her full potential, I can reach mine." One woman described the program as "a tremendous life lesson. I'm trusted with something alive. We've lost trust being in here and to get it back we'll do this hard work." Another participant summed up the

program by saying “it will turn your life around. It will make you happy and proud.” The sense of empowerment can also be seen in others according to a participant who noted she has seen “girls come in with no confidence and when they leave they’ve had success with a dog.”

While using different language to describe their experiences, the male participants’ responses also indicated their participation enabled them to view themselves as prosocial. One participant said “you feel mature taking care of something else.” Another agreed and said “the dog depends on you and you look out for the dog. You take care of the dog first and then yourself.” Referring to the other program participants, a respondent said that “we share concern over the dogs. We are overprotective with the dogs.” Several of the participants referred to the program “as a learning experience.”

The interview data also appear to support more recent work on the process of desistance. Maruna, LeBel, Mitchell, and Naples (2004: 278) found that clients in their study defined rehabilitation as “being trusted with additional responsibilities over others.” In the present study, participants, staff, and administrators alike noted the programs’ ability to instill a sense of responsibility in participants. In many PAPs, including the two examined here, participants begin as back-up handlers and progress to primary handlers who not only have more responsibilities associated with the dogs but also oversee junior participants. According to Maruna et al. (2004: 278), desisters experienced “the demonstration of trust as a means of encouraging self-change.”

Both groups of participants commented on the program’s ability to provide them with the opportunity to engage in a worthwhile activity with benefits beyond those they personally receive. Here the data support Maruna’s (2001: 11) finding that desisters often adopt the role of the “wounded healer” and come to find altruistic behavior rewarding. According to one participant, “Your life is on hold while you’re in here and this helps make the time not for nothing.” Another participant recognized that she will “never have a block of time without responsibility like this again. This gives me more credibility on my journey to being a whole person again.” It appears their participation can serve to counteract some, if not all, of the negative impact incarceration has had on their self concepts, as demonstrated by the woman who said, “These dogs are being trained for something fabulous – to save lives. This is my way of giving back even though society doesn’t think much of convicts.” According to a male participant, “We hurt people on the street and now we’re helping the dog; it’s sort of like penance.” Another male participant added that, “you’re not helping anyone being in prison – you’re useless. At least with this, part of our work goes into helping other people and society.”

## **Conclusion**

The present research provides evidence that PAP participants engage in a process of developing a social identity for the dogs they work with similar to that identified by Sanders (1993) in dog owners and Alger and Alger (1997) in cat owners. Despite the relatively limited length of time and more communal nature of the relationships formed in PAPs, participants appear to assign the dogs they are paired with a human-like social identity that in turn impacts their own human self-identity. The respondents included here described positive effects as a result of their participation in the PAP and recognized they were capable of, and enjoyed participating in, prosocial behaviors. In addition, the interview data also reveal

support for Maruna's (2001) finding that desisters are often wounded healers. The self-reported data presented here indicate PAP participation may be able to provide a foundation for successful criminal desistance.

Mead's assertions are increasingly being replaced by researchers who agree that for symbolic interaction to occur "there does not appear to be a requirement of conversation or use of language" during interactions that influence one's self-identity (Alger and Alger 1997: 70). Contemporary relationships between people and animals are regarded as "analogous to intimate human relationships and human-pet interactions proceed along the same lines as do human-to-human social exchanges" (Sanders 1990: 84). Today, empirical evidence from a variety of scientific fields supports the idea that animals are not simple autonomic creatures whose behavior is determined by involuntary impulse or instinct.

The non-verbal nature of the social interactions people have with animals is often used to dismiss this type of contact as less valuable and/or legitimate than interactions between people. However, there are a number of human subpopulations that have been previously ostracized or considered deviant by the dominant culture, including people with disabilities and those institutionalized in prisons and hospitals, whose members in particular may benefit from the unique, non-verbal type of interactions that take place with animals. Without the language of rejection or judgment, interactions with animals are bound by the very limits of symbolic interaction that Mead ([1934] 1967) interpreted as discounting non-human animals from playing a role in the development of human self.

There are policy implications for this evolution of sociologists' research that has moved beyond Mead's traditional concept of a language-based process of defining one's self. As the ability of animals to influence a person's self-hood has become more widely recognized, animals should increasingly be included in treatment programs aimed at people with a range of psychosocial needs. Beck and Katcher (1996: 38) point out that it is "when people face real adversity, affection from a pet takes on new meaning." Few in our society face the level of hardship experienced by many of the over two million people incarcerated in our prisons and jails. While we have only just begun to examine the extent of the effects experienced by PAP participants, we know that not only do the humans benefit, but so too do the animals, and those they go on to serve, as well. It is difficult to identify other programs being administered in prisons today that can make a similar claim of creating a win-win-win situation.

For those still apt to dismiss the ability of animals to influence a person's sense of self, it may be useful to look at the animal kingdom for of an interspecies interactionist effect on selfhood. Koko, the gorilla known for communicating with people using American Sign Language, has had a series of cats she cared for and played with (see: [www.koko.org](http://www.koko.org)). Other interspecies pairings that have been reported include a 45-year old orangutan who bonded with a cat after her partner died, a hog that paired with an antelope after his mate passed away, and a baby hippo who replaced his lost mother with a tortoise (Turner 2006). If two different non-human animals have been shown to be able to positively influence each other, why would the same effect not be present when one of the two different animals happens to be human?

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## Endnotes

- i It is worth noting that many departments of correction have policies in place that forbid employees from contact with former inmates in the community.

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## Citation

- Furst, Gennifer (2007) "Without words to get in the way: Symbolic interaction in prison-based animal programs." *Qualitative Sociology Review*, Vol. III Issue 1. Retrieved Month, Year  
([http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org /ENG/archive\\_eng.php](http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org /ENG/archive_eng.php))

Most prison dog programs begin on a trial basis. Even though considerable planning and preparation goes into a program launch, the various stakeholders need to tolerate a certain amount of ambiguity... Without words to get in the way: Symbolic interaction in prison-based animal programs. *Qualitative Sociology Review*, 3(1), 96-109. Retrieved February 28, 2019 from: [http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/Volume6/QSR\\_3\\_1\\_Furst.pdf](http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/Volume6/QSR_3_1_Furst.pdf). Spirit Animal Symbolism. Animals are omnipresent in our lives whether they are pets or live in the wild, yet we often lack a clear understanding of their symbolic nature and what they could mean. When we relate to the spirit of animals, they may offer us powerful insight. In the world of spirit animals, animals can symbolize: Aspects of your personality. Skills or traits that we have cultivated successfully or have yet to develop. Discover ourselves, get a felt sense of our strengths and weaknesses, the skills we have developed and our potential. Loosen up our personality and habits and open up to transformation. Open up to new perspectives on our relationship with nature and the earth as a whole. Feel the power of the animal and be inspired by its qualities. Symbolic Interactionism is the way we learn to interpret and give meaning to the world through our interactions with others. Scott Plunkett. The symbolic interactionism analysis society by the descriptive meanings that people have given to objects, events and behaviors. The behavioral pattern of the people will be based on these descriptive meanings because people behave according to their descriptive beliefs rather than objective truth. These descriptive beliefs and meanings are nothing but interpretations given by the people thus the theory suggests that society is based on the interpreta