
Dog-Human Encounters on Campus: Visual Evidence, Power Relations and Organisational Rationality

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Abstract

Since the early years of the twentieth century, work organisations have largely been places where animal bodies are absent or invisible. Recently US and UK universities have facilitated therapy dog visits to improve students' well-being.

In this paper we analyse data on therapy dog visits to a UK university library as a starting point for thinking about other than human animals in universities and the wider politics of animal-human relations. Rather than focusing solely on the well-researched benefits of these encounters for students, we put the experiences of the dogs and their guardians centre stage, along with those of the library staff and the students. The paper draws on still and video images of dog-human encounters during five therapy events held at a UK university library in 2015-16, along with interviews with library staff, guardians and students.

We use the images to explore

- (1) different ways of representing the events through publicity and other still photographs; and
- (2) the dogs' reactions to the instrumental rationale that governs the programme, their scope for expressing consent or resistance to it and the power relations within which they are enmeshed. We are particularly concerned with the possibilities of and problems with reading the dogs' reactions through visual imagery.

Keywords: therapy dogs, touch, campus, power relations, visual evidence

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