

Insights podcast: Pets and life satisfaction

With Adelina Gschwandtner and Ashleigh Brown

Chris

Hello and welcome to Insights – the podcast from Understanding Society. Understanding Society is a longitudinal survey that captures life in the UK in the 21st century. Every year, we ask each member of thousands of the same households across the UK about their daily lives. Each episode of Insights looks at what researchers do with the data we gather. What do they find, and how can it change things?

I'm your host, Chris Coates, and in this episode, we'll be discussing research into the link between pets and life satisfaction, and how it's possible to put a monetary value on the benefit of having a cat or dog. I'm talking to Adelina Gschwandtner, a senior lecturer in Economics at the University of Kent, and Ashleigh Brown, Scientific and Policy Manager at the RSPCA.

Adelina, to start with, could you talk us through what we already know about pets and life satisfaction, and how you wanted to add to that?

Adelina

So there is a wealth of studies showing the positive impact of pets on mental health, on physical health, and on human life satisfaction. However, there are also studies which stem from the pandemic who find a negative relation between those two, and some who don't find a relation at all. So I was intrigued by this result, and I was suspecting that there might be, for example, reverse causation going on, because during the pandemic many people who were lonely, who were depressed, decided to adopt a pet. So, there would be a negative correlation between mental health and happiness and pet companionship.

So I wanted to try to disentangle the direction of causation, and I have to say that most studies until now are purely correlational. So they just look at correlations and not at causation. There are a few randomised, controlled trials, but usually with a very low number of observation, and this is one of the big advantages of the Innovation Panel, which is part of the Understanding Society dataset, that it has a large number of participants, so we were able to follow a significantly larger number of people who have cats or dogs as their companion.

And, moreover, in order to be able to disentangle this direction of causation, we use an instrumental variable approach, and for that we need to find an instrument for pet companionship – and some people claim that finding a good instrument is like finding gold dust. But having a wealth of variables, so not only a large number of participants in the data set, but also a wealth of variables, we were able to identify this instrument, and to use it and to disentangle the direction of causation. And you know, when we do that we actually find a direct causal effect of pet companionship on human life satisfaction is positive and strongly significant. So we can answer the question whether pets are good for us with a resounding 'yes'.

Chris

So, as I understand it, there are quite a lot of ways that we can benefit from having a pet, you know, reducing stress and children getting self-esteem from caring for an animal dog walkers, getting exercise and meeting people. So is it quite complicated to pick out exactly what's happening to us when we have a pet?

Adelina

So the method that we are using is brilliant because it enables to estimate this effect without people being aware of it, because if we were to directly ask people, you know, then there is the danger of various biases like social desirability bias. People would give you the answer that they expect you to, to want from them. But the method is actually quite straightforward. It manages to estimate the direct impact – the benefit minus the cost – because, you know, I'm fully aware that having a pet as a companion comes with many, many benefits, but also with some costs, and not only financial ones, but also emotional ones, especially when the pet gets sick or when they die. The beauty of this method that we are applying here is that we can estimate the net impact of pets on human life satisfaction, and we are able to answer this question, whether they are good for us, with a resounding 'yes'.

Chris

Ashleigh, did you want to come in there on the benefits of pet ownership?

Ashleigh

Yes, absolutely. Firstly, I'd like to thank Adelina's team and Understanding Society for acknowledging the importance of including pets in socioeconomic research. We are a nation of animal lovers. We know that there's many millions of dogs and cats living in the UK, and the role of companion animals in people's lives is certainly very valuable for us to understand. And one of the things that was very interesting to me when I read the study is that some of these findings resonate with findings that we have within the RSPCA. So the RSPCA runs an annual survey called the Animal Kindness Index that investigates attitudes to animals. When people were asked – people who hadn't volunteered with animals in the past year – when they were asked what they would find motivating to encourage them to volunteer with animals, they actually ranked third highest the benefits to their physical and mental health. And to me that suggests that there's a really good recognition amongst the general public that this kind of animal companionship can benefit us. And I think Adelina's work is really important in adding some hard figures and facts that complement the findings that we've seen ourselves.

The other thing that struck me when I read the study was, it reminded me of this Japanese concept of *ikigai*, which translates roughly into having a sense of purpose to our lives. And it's something that's been found really important in human longevity. And I can really see that pets, companionship, ownership could be a great source of *ikigai*.

Chris

Yeah, I can testify to that. So back to you, Adelina, one of the things that caught my attention was you were able to quantify the value of pet companionship to life satisfaction.

Adelina

Yes. So the method that I'm using in this paper is also a method that I teach called environmental valuation, and in which we try to put a monetary value on things like trees like forests like clean air, like clean water, things that normally do not have a direct monetary value. So I thought, why not trying to apply to pets and it has been used before in order to also put a price tag on friends and family and social capital. So I wanted to see how this would apply to pets. It's a quite established method in environmental valuation, and it has been also applied to estimate life events, you know, like being married or like talking to your neighbours, or like meeting with friends and family on a regular basis. And you know there are values there. But more importantly, these values are comparable with the ones obtained

in the literature for meeting with family and friends regularly, or even with having a partner, you know, a wife or a husband, which I think in a way, makes sense, because many people, when asked, say that they see their pets as their family members, or like friends. And also there is a substitution effect to some degree. People who are single, who remain alone after they are widowed, they find a lot of support in pet companionship. The values we obtained for pet companionship are comparable with other values for social capital. So pets are very important for our physical health, mental health, but, but also as the social catalyst and as a companion.

Chris

So, Ashleigh, is this interesting research from your point of view? Does this help to inform your work?

Ashleigh

Yes, absolutely. I found this research very interesting. Firstly, as an animal charity, of course, the focus of the RSPCA is animal welfare as the priority, recognising the intrinsic value of animals as sentient beings rather than any monetary value or economic benefits. However, with that being said, first of all, it can be helpful to us to help shift attitudes to animals at the societal level. Quantifying the economic impact of pet companionship can help provide an alternative motivation for people to see that animals are worthy of our respect and care. For some demographics, motivation for valuing and respecting animals might be increased by having this additional understanding of the benefits that companion animals can bring.

And I think we see examples of this in action in other fields, and this relates very much to the point Adelina just made about her work in environmental evaluation. So when people understand the value of something, either to themselves or to the society that we live in, this can make us more motivated to protect it. And from the environmental sector we've got things like the role of trees in relation to carbon capture, the value of clean air in relation to respiratory health, and we see that knowing these invisible ways that these assets can benefit us, can really help in making us want to respect and protect them more. So I think a similar process can also apply to animal welfare.

Another way this type of research can be very helpful to RSPCA, and charities like us, is at the practical advocacy level. So one of the ways we work at RSPCA is using science-based policy to help us improve the lives of animals. Many individual owners are not likely to have economics as their primary motivation when they're considering animal ownership. But there is certainly one group of people in our society who almost certainly factor this very highly in their decision making. And that's our politicians and our parliamentarians. Policymakers' decision making is often, quite understandably, driven by the economic arguments and outcomes. And so being able to quantify economic impacts allows us to leverage those economic arguments when we are advocating for animal welfare policy.

Another thing that those of us working in animal welfare are always very interested in is the practical application of scientific research, and how we can apply this on the ground. And when I read this study I wondered whether the research around personality types, and how these intersect with pet ownership, could be usefully applied to help people make more informed choices about a pet's suitability. So as the RSPCA deals with relinquishment and abandonment of animals, any ways that we can try to reduce the likelihood of people parting ways with a pet, because it turns out that they're an unsuitable match for each other, is something that's very much of interest to us and other animal charities involved in rescue and rehoming, and that was something I was very keen to hear Adelina's thoughts on. Do you think there's a role for this research around types of personalities that are well suited to different types of pets?

Adelina

Yes. We were again very fortunate that in the wealth of variables that Understanding Society is collecting are also the personality variables. The results could be driven simply by personality. Somebody might be by nature happier, and then this would drive the life satisfaction independently of having a pet, or alongside having a pet. So it was very important that we could control for personality, and our results actually align very well with what the literature has found until now: people who decide to take a dog normally are more extroverted, and people who decide to have a cat are, I wouldn't say introverted. The result we got is open to new experiences, but this aligns very well with the image that we have of introvert: at home reading, or performing art, music, and so on. So what we obtained, which is quite new, and other studies have not obtained in the past is that both dog and cat people normally show a higher level of conscientiousness than people who do not.

You know, having a pet includes a responsibility. People who have pets, there's not only a sense of purpose, but also more structured day to day, which you know might lead to them being more conscientious. So it could be that they were more conscientious to start with, and then they decided to adopt a pet. But I fully agree that personality is related with pet companionship, and I think it's a brilliant idea – before deciding what type of pet you'd like to adopt, try to consider the personality type of you or your children, whoever is going to interact mostly with a specific pet.

Unfortunately, we just have data about cats and dogs, because these are the most prevalent pet types. However, I would so much welcome having more data in future about other types of pets like rabbits, and like fish, or birds which are quite widespread as well. And another point that I was thinking. So one of the implications of the present result would be, you know, to encourage people to adopt pets. However, it's very important to point out that it has to be the right pet, and you have to have the time and the means to care for the specific pet, and this should not be a decision that's taken lightly. Not everyone is in a position to be able to adopt a pet. Unfortunately, for example, the renting regulations in the UK sometimes prohibit having a pet in a rented accommodation, something that I would very much like to see change. But if somebody is not in the position to adopt a pet, one way by which you know they could benefit is by volunteering to take care of the pets of family and friends, visiting family and friend, who have pets, or volunteering in a shelter, because that alone will increase their life satisfaction.

Ashleigh

Actually, the point that you made there about responsible pet ownership, it struck me that one of the risks of quantifying animals value in economic terms is that it can potentially promote an instrumental view of animals, and by instrumental I mean viewing animals primarily as tools for human benefit, and their value, as opposed to their intrinsic value. So I was really interested to know whether you had any thoughts, Adelina, on how those risks of encouraging this purely instrumental view of animals can potentially be mitigated.

Adelina

I would never withstand that pets have a value beyond the intrinsic value, it's just difficult in a way to quantify it, and the danger when, when not quantifying it, even if people might say, you know, the value is incommensurable, or something like that, is that in the end it will be 0 or very low when it comes to a legal decision. So I like you to point out to a petition that is trying to change the fact that in legal cases, pets in the UK are considered as objects, like a table, or like any other asset, and they are valued at their purchase value. So this is into my opinion, the danger. It's similar with the environment, you know: people say it is very

important, but actually, if there isn't any monetary value associated with it, the risk is that the value is going to be considered to be 0.

For example, now, if there is a custody case in a divorce, you know, all the partner had to do that is leaving to compensate the other one who keeps the pet at their purchase value, which often is very low, and it doesn't really help, because, you know, there are veterinary costs that the person remaining alone might not be able to afford. In fact, I know, I have friends who have divorced and then couldn't afford the veterinary bills any more, and have had to give the pet away. Even though I fully agree that pets have intrinsic value, coming from the environmental valuation corner, I believe that putting a value on it is better than having none.

Another thing that one needs to consider, and we do not have this in our study, is the wellbeing of the pets. This is something that, you know, it's very hard to quantify, because there is no data. Finding a way to include data that might reflect the wellbeing of the animals is something that I would very much welcome.

Chris

Thank you. Your point about the monetary value, it ties in with what Ashleigh was saying earlier about how taking that angle can help with communicating with politicians, and I wondered: is there anything that the RSPCA is looking for from the Government in particular, at the moment?

Ashleigh

Well, the mission of animal welfare improvement is, of course, never ending. There's always lots of positive changes that we'd love to see, and there's lots of things that RSPCA is advocating for at any given time. But at the moment, in relation to companion animals in particular, the most significant priority for us at the moment – and something that's the focus of my own work at RSPCA – is this issue of extreme conformation. And by extreme conformation I mean breeding pets with physical features that are exaggerated and unnatural.

And some examples that we see are things like the flattened faces which we call brachycephalic skull formation. So that's when the snout that – ordinarily a dog or a cat would have a more protruding snout – the animal has been bred so that that is excessively flattened, and that often goes along with protruding, quite bulging eyes, and we also see features like excessive skin folds, elongated back, shortened limbs, excessive musculature, dwarf varieties. Common dog breeds affected are things like French bulldogs, pugs, Boston terriers, the English bulldogs, dachshunds. And even in cats we see breeds like the Persians. Some of the exotic and British shorthairs, the Scottish fold where they have deformed ears.

So all of these breeds have been intentionally bred that way to show these exaggerated physical features. And that's purely for aesthetic reasons, despite any impairment that this causes to their health and welfare. And in addition to it being of concern to us in the charity sector, it's also emerged as a key concern amongst the public. So I spoke earlier about RSPCA's animal kindness index. In the results this year, 45% of the respondents indicated that ending harmful breeding was their priority in relation to animal welfare. We also see this coming through very strongly from the veterinary profession as being a key issue for them, and the PDSA, which is another charity, the People's Dispensary for Sick Animals.

So we're looking to the government to take action to ensure meaningful protection for these animals, and some of the things that we're looking for and hoping to see

would be strengthened licensing around the breeding of animals to make sure that only healthy parents are ever bred from. We would like to see clamping down on illegal breeding activity, and we know that this is often interconnected with other forms of criminality, so there are ripples in other aspects of our society as well. We would like to see strengthening of the Animal Welfare Act to make sure that animals aren't suffering as a result of this extreme conformation. And we would like to see tighten up of loopholes in our microchipping systems for pets to make sure that the ownership of animals is always very clear, and there's strong traceability for animals, and that strengthens our ability to prosecute people who do breach animal welfare legislation. So this will certainly continue to be a key focus of the RSPCA's work.

And I'll just touch on how this intersects with life satisfaction. It seems to me that the benefits of pet companionship are likely to be reduced in relation to animals with these extreme conformations, and we also know that the costs on the other side of the equation are hugely inflated compared to healthier breeds. And by cost I mean both the financial costs, these animals tend to have a much higher likelihood of needing veterinary interventions or surgeries to try to alleviate some of the suffering that they have, treatment for recurrent problems that they're more likely to have. These all come with big costs. And really importantly are these emotional costs, so observing animals suffering, for example, struggling to breathe, in pain with spinal problems, not able to join in with other dogs playing, struggling to regulate their temperature in hot weather, being constantly tired or exhausted because they can't sleep well. All of these things are terrible for an animal lover to observe.

It's also important to mention that often the people buying these breeds are not aware of the welfare and health impacts or the huge financial and emotional costs. And so we feel this is really unfair to animals, and it's also really unfair to the owners and families.

Chris

Ashleigh, we've only asked the question about pet ownership once since the study started in 2009. Would you like to see some more research on, on pet ownership and more data on that?

Ashleigh

Yes, absolutely. The more research that is done on animals and animal welfare, the more this can benefit the work of charities like RSPCA. Some areas of particular interest in relation to companion animals would be factors that drive people's decision making about pet acquisition and pet relinquishment. That has a very direct link to the RSPCA's work in rescue and rehoming. So that would be something that would be helpful for us to see more of. And, as I mentioned before, the RSPCA does also conduct our own survey, the Animal Kindness Index, looking at attitudes to animals more broadly, which isn't restricted to companion animal species. And if people are interested to find out more about that, those reports from that survey are available on the RSPCA website.

Chris

OK, yeah, we'll give people a link to that. So, Ashleigh, is one of the messages we want people to take away that they should basically do what my family did and not buy from a breeder, but get a rescue cat, or you know a dog if they're dog people?

Ashleigh

Yes, firstly, I'm delighted to hear that you have a rescue cat, Chris, and thank you very much for giving that particular cat a chance at a happier life. Absolutely. The SPCA strongly

encourages people to adopt rather than shop for pets. Adelina already mentioned earlier that pet ownership is absolutely a decision that shouldn't be undertaken lightly, and I completely echo that. It's really important to recognise the costs, both financial and emotional costs, as well as the wonderful benefits that we can get from pet companionship and make a really informed decision. Our colleagues, working in our rehoming centres at RSPCA, they're so well placed to be able to explore people's individual motivations, their needs, their preferences, their lifestyle, and – linking with Adelina's research – their personality types and help people identify a pet that really is a great match for them, and hopefully that would result in increased life satisfaction for the people who adopt that pet and avoid that relinquishment and abandonment that we sadly see when a match is unsuitable between a pet and an owner. So, please: adopt, don't shop.

Adelina

So if I may add a last command to all that, I fully agree with Ashleigh, I used to have for 18 years adopted pets. They lived a long and happy life, and made me very happy. And now in the UK, for the first time I have one pure breed cat. And I must say, in terms of how much I love them or happiness they give me, they are equal. I love them all. But you know the purebreed does come with a lot of health issues and increased veterinary costs and with a shorter lifespan. So that, that is something that I highly encourage people to consider.

Overall, I would say, the results of our study- we have always mentioned in our study, we never, said pet ownership. We said pet companionship, and we always said that the humans are the caregivers of these pets. But in the light of the results that we obtain, and the very strong, positive impact that we obtain of pets on human life satisfaction. Really, the question arises, who is taking care of who? Because I do believe that also pets take care of us, and maybe they do so to a higher degree than we take care of them.

Chris

What a perfect note to end on. Thank you, Adelina and Ashleigh. That's all for this episode. You can find out more about how Understanding Society is changing practice and informing policy by visiting our website understandingsociety.ac.uk and by following us on social media. You can find the Animal Kindness Index results by visiting rspca.org.uk and navigating to 'what we do' and then 'latest'. Or you can just search 'animal kindness index' from your browser of choice. Thank you for listening and remember to subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.