

REVIEW

## Well-being Over the Life Course: Incorporating Human–Animal Interaction

Regina M. Bures and Nancy R. Gee (eds), Springer, Cham, Switzerland, 2021, 109 pp., pbk £44.99, ISBN 13:978-3-030-64084-2

Lisa Davison

University of Stirling, Stirling, UK

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*Well-being Over the Life Course* is among the Springer Briefs in Well-being and Quality of Life Research, a collection of works providing succinct summaries of contemporary research and applications within the field. The book consists of eight chapters predominantly authored by the editors Dr Regina Bures and Dr Nancy Gee. As the title suggests, the link between human–animal interaction (HAI) and wellbeing is examined over the lifecourse, therefore some chapters focus on HAI among children, others among adults and older adults, but not necessarily chronologically. Key themes that are evident throughout the book include the positive impact of HAI on physical and mental health; benefits of HAI on wellbeing and loneliness; and the importance and need for robust longitudinal research.

A range of well-established theories are mentioned throughout. In the introductory chapter, Bures presents connections between HAI and lifecourse theory, including the concept of linked lives. Furthermore, in the second chapter ‘Integrating Pets into the Family Life Cycle’, Bures refers to attachment theory and Duvall’s eight family lifecycle stages (p. 12). Although within the chapter, three distinct phases are examined, ‘young adults and childless couples’, ‘families with children’ and ‘empty nest and ageing families’, which arguably considers attachment to pets at key lifestages, rather than over the lifecourse continuously. Limitations are acknowledged about the lack of longitudinal research, which could facilitate more precise implementation of a lifecourse perspective by understanding the mechanisms between HAI as a child and examining outcomes throughout their lives.

The discourse about HAI and wellbeing is generally positive; demonstrable impact is reported in areas of social, emotional, cognitive, psychological, and physical health and wellbeing. This could be a result of the acknowledged positive publication bias, or an indication that broadly animals are good for health and wellbeing. Nevertheless, it was reassuring that in the third chapter ‘Companion Animal Caregiving and Wellbeing’, Bures addressed some of the potential negative aspects of HAI, including how time-consuming caring for a pet can be, particularly older or

sick pets, and the emotional and financial strain this can have. Comparison is drawn with care-giving literature, referencing care-giver burden, but largely the negative consequences of HAI appear isolated to those already with human caregiving responsibilities, or when pets exhibit poor health.

Chapter Four, 'Health Over the Life Course and Human–Animal Interaction', authored by Bures and Drs Layla Esposito and James Griffin, identifies population-representative data sources in the United States of America which can be used to research HAI, and highlights research gaps and limitations. In subsequent chapters, 'Human–Animal Interaction and Child Health and Development' (Chapter Five) authored by Dr Megan Mueller, and 'Successful Aging and Human-Animal Interaction' (Chapter Six) authored by Gee, HAI with children and older adults are discussed, respectively. Mueller highlights key risks and challenges to interactions between animals and children, and relates this to developmental science. Moreover, Gee discusses pet ownership among the over sixty-fives, linking to physical activity and benefits for mental health and loneliness.

Research on a range of animal-assisted interactions (AAI) are reviewed, predominantly with dogs. However, in the seventh chapter, 'Animal-assisted Interactions Designed to Improve Human Wellbeing Across the Life Course', Gee discusses other species, *e.g.* equine therapies for physical health and social competence in child development (p. 88), and in special populations such as adult women overcoming trauma (p. 93). Nevertheless, there is a fundamental need for more diversity in AAI research, both researching different animals, between and within species, and participants, in the form of cultural and socio-economic diversity. However, in the conclusion chapter, when discussing 'cultural considerations' (p. 102), it is acknowledged that people with a dislike towards animals, fears or allergies may not be suited to HAI and would unlikely experience the benefits generally observed in those who have a desire to engage with animals.

There is a great focus in the book on companion animals and several chapters broached the subject of therapy animals, however, there was little mention of emotional support animals (ESA), or service animals, *i.e.* guide or medical alert dogs. Despite identifying in several places throughout the book that animals provide emotional support and discussing the use of animals in courthouses to support children and vulnerable adults, in the conclusion chapter, it is suggested that 'attachment to pets has gone to the extreme' (p. 100), referring to those who 'profess an inability to function without their pet's emotional support' (p. 100). While different to service animals such as psychiatric service dogs, ESAs have been shown to mitigate symptoms of mental health conditions, improve use of health services, reduce suicide attempts and are encompassed under the umbrella term of assistance animals (McMichael and Singletary, 2021). Understandably, the book is designed to be a brief overview of research and application, however, the use of assistance animals is rapidly growing in both research and practice, and thus the limited acknowledgement within the book could be perceived as a substantial limitation, considering the positive impact assistance animals have on human wellbeing.

Overall, the book provides a useful overview of HAI and the variation of wellbeing over the lifecourse, with focus on child development and ageing populations, and consideration for animals' health and needs. Gee concludes by identifying requirements for longitudinal research, to examine the needs and behaviours of

both humans and animals as they age, and advocates for the development of specific HAI theories. Students and researchers can use this book as an appropriate baseline for current knowledge on companion animals and implement the authors' recommendations in their own work or studies. Furthermore, researchers who contribute towards large population-based surveys may be inclined to endorse the authors' recommendations to include pet-related questions in longitudinal and panel surveys to enhance research in this field further. The obstacles to researching pet ownership are made clear, including positive publication bias; selection bias due to the difficulties establishing the conditions required for randomised controlled trials; and low-quality methodologies due to small sample sizes, lack of diversity and predominantly cross-sectional research with no means for causal analysis. This book provides a foundation to progress future research and address such limitations.

## Reference

**McMichael MA and Singletary M** (2021) Assistance, service, emotional support, and therapy dogs. *Veterinary Clinics: Small Animal Practice* **51**, 961–973.

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