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Dr Jo Righetti is an animal behaviour consultant, and through her business Pet Problems Solved, provides services to pet owners, vet clinics, animal shelters, local governments, universities, commercial companies and media around Australia.

Jo is a proud Ambassador of Animal Welfare League; Assistance Dogs Australia and Nestle Purina. Dr Jo's latest project is a radio show, Talking Pets, where she is joined by animal experts, business owners and pet lovers on live radio and pet podcasts. Jo enjoys chatting to people about their pets on social media channels and lives with 4 cats, a dog and several chickens.

Abstract

When the going gets tough...

Dedicated pet owners may remain attached to their companion animals, regardless of any negative life experiences. Online surveys of these owners revealed that experiences such as the difficulty of finding rental properties, the impact of pet laws, the costs of pet ownership and any human relationship breakdowns had little impact on the human-animal relationship. Behaviour problems were the most commonly experienced negative aspect of pet ownership, followed by lack of time available by dog owners and the influence of other animals on cats.

Ninety-six percent of Australian cat and dog owners love their pet and similar results were found with overseas pet owners. The use of products, services and interactions with their pets provide insights into how and why these dedicated pet owners maintain their relationship with their pet within their homes and may be less likely to surrender their pet when the going gets tough.

Full Paper

Introduction

Surveying pet owners with a high level of attachment may help us understand why dedicated owners remain attached to their pet even when the going gets tough. Most relationships, including the one between humans and companion animals, undergo difficulties at times and these tough patches may be the catalyst to relinquishment of pets, or perhaps the failure to look for the pet should they go missing.



Having a secure attachment to a companion animal may enable the owner to put difficult times in perspective and continue to live together. Understanding the lifestyle and commitment of the dedicated owner may help us understand why these owners choose to remain within the relationship and, perhaps, why others choose to end it.

Methods - Pet owner surveys

A series of pet owner surveys were conducted online, via Survey Monkey, and included a survey of pet owners (Righetti, 2013), a dog owner survey (Righetti, 2016) and a cat owner survey (Righetti, 2017). Pet owners were recruited through social media channels, answers were not compulsory and pet owners could choose to remain anonymous if desired. Responses were obtained from over 2800 pet owners worldwide and results presented here are primarily based on responses by Australian dog (736) and cat (292) owners.

In addition to their levels of attachment, participants were asked about their perception of their pet as a family member. They were also asked if potentially negative experiences had affected their relationship with their pet. Negative experiences included finding suitable accommodation, local laws, neighbourhood complaints, their personal relationships, relationships with other pets, their health, the pet's health and the pet's behaviour.

Pet owners also indicated the activities they took part in with their pet and their engagement within the home. For instance, owners were asked if they gave their pet presents at birthday or Christmas time, if their pet slept in their bedroom or on their bed and if they walked their dog or attended canine sports. They were also questioned about products they purchased for their pet including collard and leads, food and water bowls and beds.

Results

It must be love

Most respondents (89%) were female and almost all claimed to love their pet, with 96.2% of dog owners and 95.9% of cat owners stating that they loved their pet. Most also claimed to be knowledgeable about their chosen pet with only around 3% stating very little knowledge.

While almost all cat and dog owners were extremely attached to their pets, when asked to consider if this was reciprocated by their pet, 85.3% of dog owners consider that their dog loved them, while a lower percentage of cat owners 69.3% believed this to be the case. A further 13.3% of dog owners and 30.3% of cat owners believed that their pet liked them, thus these dedicated owners certainly feel a reciprocal friendship.

Humanisation of pets

Humanisation of pets is a trend in recent years (EI, 2014) and pet owners may consider their pet to be a baby/ child or even a partner. When questioned, respondents of these surveys considered themselves in their relationship with their pet to be as a parent, a friend or simply a pet (Table 1).

Table 1: Relationship of pet owner to pet, as perceived by the pet owner

% of pet owners	Dog Owners	Cat owners
Parent of their pet	38.4	42.6
Friend	34.4	27.2
Child (the pet as parent)	0	0.3
Sibling	1.1	0
Partner	5.3	3.1
A pet	20.8	26.8



When questioned about their perceptions of how their pets viewed their owners, more dog owners (20.4%) believed their dog viewed them as a life partner, perhaps not surprising given the lifespan of the dog. Similar results were found in overseas respondents.

Impact of negative life events

A negative life event could potentially threaten the bond between owner and pet or at least make life together more difficult. Pet owners could potentially relinquish their pet during these stressful occasions.

Pet owners who completed these pet surveys are highly engaged with their pets, therefore, when potentially negative aspects of life make the going tough, it may be valuable to see to what extent these impact on their relationship with their pet (Table 2).

Table 2: Potential negative influences on relationship with pet

% of pet owners	Dogs (n=692)	Cats (n=272)
Accommodation	7.51	8.46
Human relationships	6.94	4.41
Other pets	11.27	17.65
Lack of time	20.52	12.87
Fitness levels	10.12	4.04
Pet health	7.23	12.5
Pet behaviour	25.43	20.96
Finances	5.06	6.25
Complaints	6.65	1.84
Laws	5.2	74
None	44.22	51.47

The over-riding conclusion was that many dog owners (44.2%) and cat owners (51.8%) felt that nothing interfered with their relationship with their pet. While pet owners may experience negative life events, these rarely impacted on the relationship with the pet.

Behaviour problems were the most commonly experienced negative aspect of pet ownership, followed by lack of time available by dog owners (Righetti 2016) and the influence of other animals on cats (Righetti 2017). A significant number of owners

When compared with overseas owners, the most striking differences was that a higher percentage (41.2%) of US cat owners lacked time (Righetti 2017). Behaviour problems were less commonly mentioned in UK dog owners, with only 11.4% (n=123) claiming an impact on their relationship with their dog.

Behaviour problems with pets

The first pet survey (Righetti, 2013) questioned cat and dog owners about the types of behaviour problems experienced (Table 3). Anxieties and fears, of various sorts, were the most commonly reported behaviour issues



Table 3: Types of behavioural problems reported by pet owners

Behaviour problem	%Pets		
	Serious	Mild	Total
Noise	12.35	38.25	51.6
Toileting	11.64	38.07	49.7
Aggression to humans	6.53	17.62	24.15
Aggression to animals	14.74	35.06	49.2
Separation anxiety	18.74	36.29	55.03
Noise phobias	16.5	35.19	51.69
Other fears	14.8	28.6	43.4
Destructive behaviours	10.24	41.73	51.97

Since behaviour problems were commonly mentioned, pet owners were asked about how these impacted their relationship with their pet (Table 4). Most people could live with their pet's behavioural issues with very few choosing to rehome (n=2) or euthanase (n=3) their pet.

Table 4: Impact of behavioural issues on relationships with pets

Impact of behavioural problems	% of pet owners (n = 514)
Love my pet	66.54
Makes life difficult	12.26
Serious impact on our relationship	3.7
Rehomed pet	0.39
Euthanased pet	0.58
No problems	16.54

Pet activities and products

Surveyed pet owners were, overall, consistently good at using the various methods of pet control and identification, although the provision of name tags could be improved (Table 5). Insurance uptake was not high but may be increasing in the future.

Dog owners regularly walk their dog (96.8%) and give commands (88%). Many dog owners (76.8%) and cat owners (70.3%) give their pets gifts at birthdays or Christmas time. Cats tend to sleep on their owner's bed (86.1%) more than dogs (63.6%).

With other pet products, food and water bowls, beds and toys were commonly supplied, with cat owners tending to purchase greater numbers of food bowls and toys. Designer merchandise was not a priority with 13% of cat owners and 10% of dog owners purchasing expensive/bling pet goods.



Table 5: Pet products used by surveyed pet owners

Products	Cats	Dogs
Microchip	94.59	97.03
Lead	33.78	98.84
Collar	57.77	97.8
Name tag	37.5	79.46
Insurance	16.55	27.91

When the going gets tough

When the going gets tough, dedicated pet owners do not get going. They almost all hold on to their pets, no matter what life events impact. Behavioural problems impact the most.

Dedicated pet owners choose to live with their pet regardless of the issues faced. They feel love towards their pet and supply almost all their pet's needs. Since most are not over-spending on non-necessary yet expensive items e.g. bling items, most have not entered the realm of the publically perceived 'crazy pet person'.

Since less dedicated pet owners are unlikely to volunteer to answer a pet survey, we have no direct comparisons of pet owner routines, purchases, problems or relationships. We can hypothesise that those less dedicated pet owners may be the ones who relinquish their pets at shelters when the going gets tough or who fail to go looking when the animal goes missing.

As always, research poses more questions than it answers. The questions that may now be relevant are:

- Can we turn non-dedicated pet owners into dedicated ones?
- Should pet owners who are less likely to be dedicated ones, not own pets?
- Can we survey owners who relinquish pets about their lifestyle?

References

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