



Dogs, Cats, and Meaning in Life

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Introduction

- Pet ownership predicts well-being (Boa & Schreer, 2016). But research has not examined the potential link between pet ownership and meaning in life. Meaning in life consists of 3 facets: the sense that one’s life matters (significance), that it is goal-driven (purpose), and that it makes sense (coherence).
- Although sometimes considered a particularly profound experience, meaning in life is related to common experiences such as being in a good mood or engaging in daily routines (King & Hicks, 2021).
- The present study sought to extend our understanding of pets and well-being to the important dimension of meaning in life.

Hypotheses

- Hypothesis 1: Pet owners will report higher meaning in life (MIL) and subjective well-being (SWB), compared to non-pet owners.
- Hypothesis 2: Pet ownership will be related specifically to significantly higher reports of significance, compared to purpose and coherence.
- Hypothesis 3: Dog owners will experience a higher level of significance compared to cat owners.

Methods

Procedure

- All participants ($N=799$) were recruited through Amazon technical Turk to complete an online questionnaire. Participants answered yes or no to the question, “Do you own a pet?” ($n=634$ pet owners, 165 non-pet owners). Participants answered questions on MIL and SWB. Items were rated on scale from 1 (low agreement) to 7 (high agreement).

Measures

- MIL: Meaning in life was measured using the Tripartite Meaning scale, a 16-item measure (Costin & Vignoles, 2019). The scale includes subscales tapping the three facets of meaning, including purpose, coherence and significance as well as general meaning in life. Pet owners also completed ad hoc items created to tap the extent to which a pet was seen as supporting each facet of meaning in life: purpose, coherence, and significance. Participants who owned pets also rated how pet ownership contributed to each facet of meaning specifically.
- SWB: Life satisfaction was measured using a 5-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1991); for positive affect participants rated relax, happy, content, and excited and for negative affect, participants rated stress, sad, disappointed, and angry. SWB was calculated as the composite of these variables (negatively weighting NA).

Results

- Correlations between pet ownership (coded 1 vs. 0) partially supported predictions. Pet ownership was positively related to SWB, $r=.14$, $p<.001$, and feeling of coherence, $r=.08$, $p=.023$. However, it was unrelated to global meaning in life, purpose, or significance.
- Next, we compared dog owners and cat owners. A 2 (dog: yes vs. no) X 2 (cat: yes vs. no) analysis of variance (ANOVA) showed no interactions but rather a series of main effects. Specifically, for all but the coherence facet of meaning, dog ownership was associated with higher well-being, all p ’s $<.03$. F ’s (2,796) ranged from 33.17 for SWB ($p<.001$) to 5.21 ($p=.023$) for the significance facet of meaning in life. Means for the comparisons of dog vs. cat owners are shown in *Table 1* and *Figure 1*.

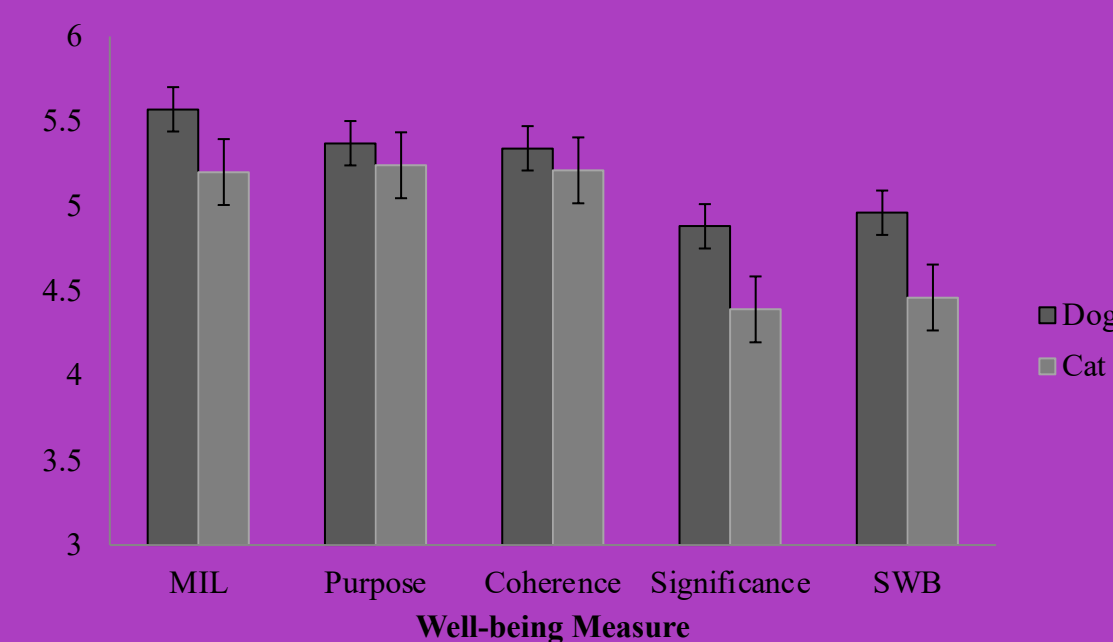
Results

Table 1: Comparisons of Cat and Dog Owners on well-being variables

Measures	Cat Owners ($n=178$)	Dog Owners ($n=320$)	$t(496)=$
Well-being			
MIL	5.12(1.70)	5.58(1.33)	-2.54*
Purpose	5.24(1.48)	5.37(1.33)	-0.96
Coherence	5.21(1.30)	5.12(1.21)	0.77
Significance	4.39(1.80)	4.88(1.57)	-3.03*
Subjective Well-Being	4.46(1.21)	4.96(1.48)	4.09**
Pet-Related Meaning			
Purpose	4.86(1.53)	4.90(1.51)	-0.26
Coherence	3.66(1.64)	4.01(1.52)	-2.39*
Significance	5.38(1.21)	5.51(1.21)	-1.09

Note. MIL=meaning in life. * $p<.05$; ** $p<.001$.

Figure 1: Well-being measures for dog and cat owners



Note. Error bars are 95% confidence intervals.

Discussion

Pet ownership was positively related to SWB but not meaning in life. We did find differences in dog vs. cat owners on well-being and significance. These results suggest the benefits but also potential limits of pet ownership as a contributor to well-being. We are planning future studies that will examine if the type of pet matters, different personality factors, and attachment style.

References

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