



The Role of Pets in Preserving the Emotional and Spiritual Wellbeing of Ukrainian Residents During Russian Hostilities

Miliutina Kateryna¹ · Andrey Trofimov¹  · Zelenin Vsevolod² ·
Andrushchenko Tetiana² · Karamushka Liudmyla³

Accepted: 6 September 2022 / Published online: 21 September 2022

© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Science+Business Media, LLC, part of Springer Nature 2022

Abstract

This paper examines the role of pets in preserving the emotional and spiritual wellbeing of Ukrainian Residents during Russian Hostilities. On February 24, 2022, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, which resulted in a huge number of refugees, both in the country and outside the country. This, in turn, has caused pet owners to rethink their priorities in many ways. This paper is focused on the influence of these animals and relationships with them on maintaining the emotional state and the decision-making process of the Ukrainian residents during the war. In addition, the functions that pets perform in families were considered: educational, reproductive, leisure, etcetera. In Ukraine, pets are considered family members, so many families refused to leave their homeland because they could not leave their cats and dogs alone. Thus, there was/is no mass abandonment or killing of animals in Ukraine during the war.

Keywords Pets · Russo-Ukrainian war · Evacuation · Emotional and spiritual wellbeing · Family system

✉ Andrey Trofimov
trofim060468@gmail.com

Miliutina Kateryna
Pulse-r@yandex.ru

Zelenin Vsevolod
sevacello@gmail.com

Andrushchenko Tetiana
tanya_atv@ukr.net

Karamushka Liudmyla
Lkarama01@gmail.com

¹ Department of Psychology, Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv, Kyiv, Ukraine

² Department of Political Psychology and International Relations, Faculty of Psychology, National Pedagogical Dragomanov University, Kyiv, Ukraine

³ Laboratory of Organizational and Social Psychology, G. S. Kostiuk Institute of Psychology of the NAES of Ukraine, Kyiv, Ukraine

Introduction

On February 24, 2022, a Russian attack and full-scale hostilities began in Ukraine. This led to a humanitarian catastrophe in a number of cities and towns of Ukraine, as well as to a huge migration of the population both within the country and outside. The number of refugees to Europe from Ukraine amounted to 3,626,546 people at the moment on 22.03.2022. Data is updated daily by 12:00 CET. Data on border crossings by Ukrainians comes from various sources, most often from official border crossing points. Despite attempts to cross-check the statistics, border crossing data may not be accurate. This is due to some factors. Firstly, sometimes indicators are not updated in real time, but after some time, as new information about the past days has been received. Secondly, due to free movement within the Schengen visa area, cases of crossing borders with other countries, not only with Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, which have borders with Ukraine, are less often recorded. And according to some reports, a fairly large percentage of Ukrainians did not stay in bordering countries, but moved on to next ones. Thirdly, those Ukrainians who cross the border and return home are not considered in statistics. At the same time, a large number of people remained in the war zone and in cities that are subjected to regular shelling and bombing.

Pediatricians Lava et al. (2022) believe that the most affected by the war, both physically and mentally, will be children and teenagers.

In evacuation, in basements and houses next to people there are their pets: cats, dogs, rats, guinea pigs... In our study, we focused on the influence of these animals and relationships with them on maintaining the emotional state and the decision-making process of the Ukrainian residents during the war.

Literature Review

There has been very little research on the role of pets, specifically in terms of maintaining the emotional state of people during the war. Sacks (2021) describes the presence of companion animals in Union army camps during the American Civil War. It alleges that soldiers turned to animals of all kinds (including cats, dogs, mice and pigs, as well as less common species), despite official sanctions against such practices, to allay boredom and distract from the looming horror. Most importantly, pets have helped soldiers reconnect with their humanity in the midst of a necessarily inhumane act of warfare. The study is based primarily on letters and diaries from federal soldiers, as well as sketches and photographs, to demonstrate not only the ubiquity of animals in military camps, but also their importance to people in war.

According to Gardiner (2018), during World War II tragedy occurred. An absurdity began to happen in Britain. The British government formed the National Air Raid Precautions Animals Committee (NARPAC) that convinced the government and fellow citizens that it would be rational to get rid of all pets

when the war broke out. The Committee explained this by saying that “to have a pet while the nation goes to war is an unaffordable luxury”. The result was the death of more than 750 thousand dogs and cats. The event went down in history as the “British pet massacre”.

Britain declared war on Germany on September 3, 1939. However, the inevitability of the conflict was clear at the beginning of the year. Under these conditions, the government, realizing that it is worth preparing for air raids, instructed NARPAC to draw up a defense plan. One of the strangest tips was just the recommendation to destroy pets. The committee believed that the owners of the animals would share their rations with them, and even the service considered it irrational to waste time on pets. Is it worth giving warmth and care to cats and dogs when this time can be spent collecting torpedoes and machine guns for the country? Officials decided that no—it is an unaffordable luxury!

The Committee launched an extensive propaganda campaign. The owners were offered to “humanely” kill their pet with a slaughter gun. Polite members of the committee provided a rental service for such devices. Having a cat or a dog at home, while Hitler was standing at the gates of the Motherland, was simply a shame.

During the coronavirus epidemic, a study was also conducted on the role of pets in the lives of their owners. Thus Puzier & O’Brien (2021) argue that pets should not be in the platform for virtual conferences «Zoom», while Wood et al. (2005) describe the positive impact of pets not only on their owners, but also on other people in the community, e.g. neighbors, even if they do not have animals.

A study on the role of pets in the life of Ukrainian families in 2018 was conducted by us, Vlasova et al. (2018). The functions of the family are historical and connected with the socio-economic conditions in society, therefore, the nature of the functions also changes over time. It is logical to assume that the more someone is involved in performing these functions of the system, the more likely it is part of the system. Let us analyze how cats and dogs fit into the functions of the family.

Reproductive. The satisfaction of the need for offspring can sometimes be transferred to the animal. Some owners call a dog “My little son”, “baby”, dress it up in clothes, etc. This behavior is more typical for young families who “train” before they have a descendant and for elderly couples who are at the “empty nest” stage. This helps to harmonize relations in the family or to clarify the prospects for the development of a young couple.

Educational. In this function, cats and dogs are very active. Socialization of an animal is the responsibility of its owners. Cats and dogs have their own sensitive periods of development, during which they are most sensitive to educational influences. Education takes place both in the family and on the site, under the guidance of trainers and dog handlers. A well-bred dog is safe for owners, other people and animals, a well-bred cat successfully fits into the home’s space and relationships with people. In this case, the opposite happens—a dog has a socializing effect on other members of the family.

The household function of the family includes caring for the life and health of pets. The responsible owner selects correct feed, makes vaccinations, if necessary, takes the animal to the veterinarian, monitors its safety, etc. Care of the animal includes a rather large number of household activities—day-care service or cleaning

the tray, feeding, grooming, cleaning, etc. Dogs and cats also take part in household functions (especially in rural houses)—they guard the house and yard, cats catch mice and rats. In many places, dogs help hunters and shepherds, since it was introduced from time immemorial. In an urban home, the animal acts more as an object of care than an assistant in domestic affairs.

Psychological communication—communication with an animal can positively influence the psychological development of a person, it causes a sense of responsibility for the life of another one, develops manifestations of empathy and kindness. Participation in the interspecies community evokes a sense of unity with other living beings in the world. For many owners, the experience of harmony and unity with the animal becomes truly a practice of psychological experience.

Social-status function is aimed at reproducing the social structure; it does not always concern animals. As a result of our study, we found out that 68% of persons had animals in the parent family and they have them now. 12% of persons had animals, and as a result, they decided not to bring animals anymore (poorly disciplined animal, cruel treatment, a vivid impression of the animal's death), and 20% of persons did not have animals in the parent family, but after separation they themselves got cats and dogs. The tendency to reproduce the interspecific group that was in the parent family still prevails.

Economic function is receiving material assets by one family member from others. In this function, animals are both consumers of material goods, and their producers. For many breeders of thoroughbred cats and dogs, selling kittens and puppies is the main source of income.

The sphere of primary social control extends to people and animals; one of the most important tasks is socialization of the animal and the control of its behavior. If the animal is not included in this function, it becomes uncontrollable and dangerous for other animals and humans.

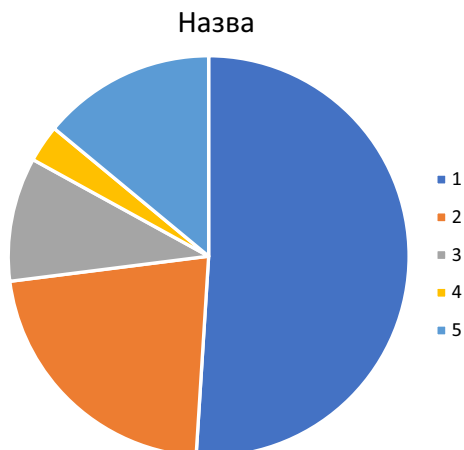
Leisure is the most important function, for which an animal is usually brought. They play with it, walk with it, do agility, and so on. The presence of a cat or a dog structures the rest of the owner, makes it healthier and more active. Makes you move more, observe the daily routine, go for walks with your pets.

Emotional (receiving mental protection and support) is exactly what a person gets while being on friendly terms with his pet. Cats and dogs can regret and console a man. They help to relax and laugh. Special relationships connect children and their pets.

The sexual function of animals in modern urban conditions is either regulated by the masters (in pedigreed animals), or animals are generally deprived of it in the process of sterilization. Normally, animals do not affect the sexual function of the owners.

Thus, it can be concluded that in the modern world (especially in urban conditions) dogs and cats take an active part in the life of the family, they are involved in most of the functions of the family and bring to it many new and interesting things. An additional function is communicative—communication of family members with each other and with surrounding people. People develop receptivity to non-verbal communication of animals, pets learn to understand people, react not only to special commands, but also to the context of interaction between people. An additional result is the formation of groups of “dog owners” who regularly communicate

Fig. 1 The histogram of the distribution of the number of pets in respondents. We analyzed the process of interaction between people and their pets, depending on the stages of family development 1-cats, 2-dogs, 3-hamsters or rats, 4-parrots, 5-two or more different animals (Color figure online)



during the walking of dogs. Discussion of tricks, state of health, and behavior of pets is one of the typical topics for communication and rapprochement of people, both in real life and on the Internet.

One of the tasks of our study was to analyze the place of animals in the family system, depending on the stages of development of the family. The results of a certain study has been presented previously during the VI International Conference “Mental Health: Global challenges of XXI century” (2022).

148 respondents were examined with the help of the “family atom” technique and the narrative method: the analysis of the story “We and our pet”. The respondents were persons with higher education; their age was from 23 to 60 years, there were 130 women and 18 men. The owners were not breeders, they did not breed animals purposefully, most owners described their relationship with animals as good, problem-free, no one turned to specialists to correct the behavior of the animal. They had cats, dogs, parrots, and rats. About 75 families had cats, 24 of them had two or three cats. In 32 families there lived dogs, 7 families had 2 dogs. 15 respondents had rodents: 10 families had decorative rats (both in one and in pairs), 5 families had hamsters. 6 owners had large parrots, which were perceived as family members. In a rather large number of families, as many as twenty, animals of different types lived: cats and dogs, a cat and a rat, a dog and a parrot, etc. The owners did not consider such combinations problematic; they and all their animals lived together quite happily. The percentage distribution histogram is shown in Fig. 1.

We analyzed the process of interaction between people and their pets, depending on the stages of family development.

Research Methods

In the present study, which was conducted in February–April 2022, during the war with Russia, 115 families were interviewed, originally residents of Kyiv and Kyiv suburbs affected by the bombing. The sample included families with at least one pet.

The free in-depth interview method was used, as well as the multidimensional psychological well-being model proposed by Ryff (the 42-item Psychological Wellbeing). The analysis of publications in social networks of Ukraine was also carried out.

Results

Of the 115 families, 45 remained in Kyiv, 12 moved to another region of Ukraine, 58 are in evacuation in European countries. When interviewing those respondents who stayed in Kyiv, one of the motivations to stay in the city was just the presence of animals (38 respondents). The respondents had: large dogs (5 families), cats (1 cat in 6 respondents, 2–3 cats in 15 respondents, more than 3 cats in 4 elderly respondents), 8 respondents had both cats and dogs. Those who moved from their permanent place of residence were dominated by cats (1–2 cats) and small dogs. But there were also large dogs, and 3 families had 3 cats. One of the factors that helped make the decision to evacuate was that animals were allowed on trains and buses in Ukraine and were allowed to cross the border. Only 7 families from migrants and refugees left their animals at home and these were rather complicated stories: 2 families left in the first days of the war, leaving their animals with friends and relatives, 5 families were urgently evacuated during the bombing from Bucha and Hostomel and could not catch or take animals with them. A common experience of the respondents was problems with food and animal carriers. This is indirectly confirmed by the dynamics of Google requests during the outbreak of hostilities. The number of requests for pet carriers increased to 100 per day, despite the fact that most owners have them and have “familiar” stores to purchase them. Pet food was seen as a must, often more important than food for oneself: “I will find something or starve, and the cat has kidney problems and needs special food.”

When studying the influence of the presence of pets on the psycho-emotional state of people during the war, one can notice an ambiguous effect depending on the age of the respondents: 15% of adults experienced an improvement in their emotional state (residents who remained in Kyiv), 23% had a sense of shame (associated with inconvenience, that animals cause to other people), 42% have a feeling of anxiety (associated with concern for the life and health of an animal), 20% have a feeling of guilt in relation to abandoned and (or) dead animals.

In children, the reactions were opposite, according to parents, the presence of animals nearby and playing with them calmed 56% of children, caused laughter or a smile for 14% of them, 20% had feelings of grief and guilt in relation to the abandoned and (or) dead animals.

According to the sixth nationwide sociological survey on 19.03.2022, the plans of Ukrainians for the post-war period are shown on Fig. 2.

As can be seen, 25% of adult respondents plan to acquire a pet.

The influence of pets on the level of subjective well-being of migrants is noted. The migrants and refugees who took their pets with them showed an increase in the level of subjective well-being, which is reflected in Table 1.

Out of 70 families with pets, 35 adults have found work, 12 people did not stop working online, 13 are engaged in volunteer activities helping other refugees, 10

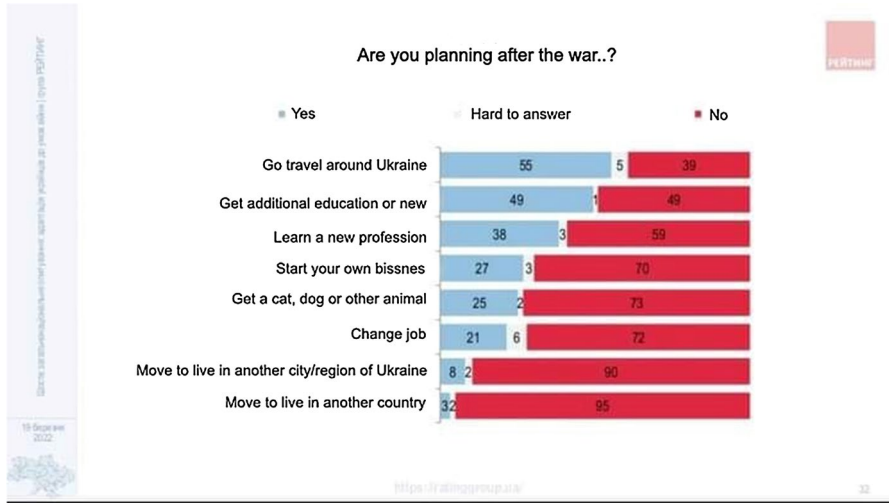


Fig. 2 The plans of Ukrainians for the post-war period

Table 1 Dynamics of subjective well-being of migrants

Scale	During 1.03.22–10.03.22		During 1.04.22–5.04.22	
	Mean	Standard deviation	Mean	Standard deviation
Positive relationship	43	7.22	58	7.49
Autonomy	26	6.86	47*	5.82
Environment Management	27	6.23	38	7.19
Personal growth	45	4.85	43	7.44
Goals in life	23	5.25	38*	7.09
Self-acceptance	28	6.79	37	5.15
Psychological well-being	182	23.30	261*	22.83

*Differences are significant according to Student’s t-test

women continue to use the help of charitable organizations and volunteers. It can be concluded that the presence of pets as an object of care and an emotional resource helps to accelerate the process of returning the subjective well-being and employment of migrants and refugees.

Discussion

During the 20-twenty-first century, there has been a significant change in the role of pets in human life. Hamlett et al. (2021) write that in the twentieth century British family life has changed due to changes in family size, relationships and the development of new expectations regarding emotions and behavior. But in this important

social transformation, one factor has gone almost completely unnoticed by family historians—the role of animals in family life. Sociological and psychological studies show the ambiguity of the relationship between owners and pets on the example of British families in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. To analyze the features of these relationships, three diaries were used, which were kept from 1925 to 1960. It can be said that the diary method has certain limitations and disadvantages. At the same time, it remains almost the only source of information about the life of families with animals at that time. Considering the nature of the records, which could be distinguished by their carelessness and inconsistency, one can also note a special emotional component and manifestation of the owners' affection for their pets. This permits to learn and study the meaning and role of pets in different periods of the diary author's life. All three diaries trace the emotional attachment of the owners to their pets, which allows us to formulate an idea of how this manifests itself in the relationships of modern family life.

In our study, the majority of participants perceived cats and dogs as members of their families, and 22% of them spoke about their parents' pets, with whom they lived through their childhood difficulties. As in our study, Soares (2021) indicates that pets are good for the mental health of children who have lost their parents or are going through difficult times in their lives. This article uses two of the largest boarding schools for children operating in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a lens through which to examine the importance of animals and pets in the home and family life of poor children. Using institutional periodicals, this article explores how institutions have used animals as pedagogical and politicized tools to shape children's emotions and behaviors, and to create idealized representations of family life and childhood. An examination of photographs of institutions and children's correspondence reveals how animals figured in the daily lives of institutionalized children and the meanings young people placed on their relationship with these animals. By examining the interaction of working-class children with animals, the article makes an important contribution to the rapidly expanding science of interspecies relations in nineteenth-century Britain, which until now has been largely focused on keeping middle-class pets. Meanwhile, considering the use of pets as a pedagogical tool for children from poor families in an institutional setting has additional implications and makes a new contribution to the history of emotions and family history, providing a new understanding of the social, emotional and material experiences of children.

According to Lytle (2021), the predominance of animals in people's lives is constantly growing. Many pet owners consider their pets to be part of their family. Animals can make you feel better both physically and mentally. They have been used in therapeutic practices, both in one-on-one sessions and in group settings. While there are several benefits to owning a pet, it can create barriers to accessing health care and housing and can be a deterrent to exiting situations of abuse. The two roles that pets play in people's lives create a dynamic that is prevalent in several professional fields, including social work. Social workers have already begun to recognize the dominance of animals in people's lives with the creation of Veterinary Social Work and the inclusion of pets in their family/environment. This includes asking questions related to pets during pre-assessments. Recognizing the benefits and barriers of pet ownership can open doors to address the challenges pet owners face. More animal

and human research is needed to improve the validity of existing data and study unexplored questions. In our work, we also observed a similar ambivalence—on the one hand, animals helped maintain the normative emotional state of children, on the other hand, difficulties with their transportation prevent timely evacuation from dangerous areas.

Limitations

We recognize that this study had a number of limitations. We have not explored owners of other types of pets, although we understand that they can also be perceived as family members. Also, the role of pets with regard to assisting pastoral/spiritual carers with the well-being of health care staff could be further explored (Carlyle & Watson, 2020).

Conclusion

In Ukraine, pets are perceived as members of the family system. In the context of the war, their influence was ambiguous. People tried not to abandon their animals, which led to the refusal to evacuate to safer areas. Adult pet owners experienced feelings of shame, guilt, and anxiety, while in children, the presence of a friend and object of care significantly reduced anxiety. There is no mass abandonment or killing of animals in Ukraine during the war.

Research prospects. The prospect is to study the impact of pet care on the risks of developing PTSD in the military, civilian adults and children.

Funding The authors have not disclosed any funding.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors have not disclosed any competing interests.

References

- Carlyle, D., & Watson, K. (2020). “Dog” is “God” Spelled Backward: “Poppy Jingles”, the Staff Well-being Spaniel. *Health and Social Care Chaplaincy*, 9(2), 315–324. <https://doi.org/10.1558/hsc.41120>
- Gardiner, A. (2018). The great cat and dog massacre: The real story of World War II’s unknown tragedy. In *The Great Cat and Dog Massacre: The Real Story of World War Two’s Unknown Tragedy*. University of Chicago Press. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685306-12341570>
- Hamlett, J., Hoskins, L., & Preston, R. (2021). Pets and family relationships in twentieth-century British diaries. *The History of the Family*, 26(2), 266–287.
- Lava, S. A., de Luca, D., Milani, G. P., Leroy, P., Ritz, N., & de Winter, P. (2022). Please stop the Russian-Ukrainian war—children will be more than grateful. *European Journal of Pediatrics*, 1–3.

- Lytle, A. (2021). The Therapeutic and Psychosocial Effects of Pets on Individuals in the USA. BGSU. <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu>
- Puzier, L., & O'Brien, K. (2021). No pets on zoom: Learning to apply parliamentary procedure in virtual meetings. *College and Research Libraries News*, 82(9), 436.
- Sacks, M. S. (2021). “They are truly marvelous cats”: The importance of companion animals to US soldiers during the civil war. *The Journal of the Civil War Era*, 11(2), 224–254.
- Sixth national survey: Adaptation of Ukrainians to the conditions of war (2022). <https://ratinggroup.ua/>
- Soares, C. (2021). ‘The many lessons which the care of some gentle, loveable animal would give’: Animals, pets, and emotions in children’s welfare institutions, 1870–1920. *The History of the Family*, 26(2), 236–265.
- UNHCR. *Operational Data Portal. Ukraine refugee situation*. <https://data2.unhcr.org>
- Vlasova O., Milyutina K., & Lunov V. (2018). Pets in human life. *Accent Graphics Communications*, 2018–182
- Wood, L., Giles-Corti, B., & Bulsara, M. (2005). The pet connection: Pets as a conduit for social capital? *Social Science and Medicine*, 61(6), 1159–1173.

Publisher’s Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Springer Nature or its licensor holds exclusive rights to this article under a publishing agreement with the author(s) or other rightsholder(s); author self-archiving of the accepted manuscript version of this article is solely governed by the terms of such publishing agreement and applicable law.