

QUESTIONING NORMS ABOUT HAVING CHILDREN AND OWNING PETS

The vignettes in section 13.2 drew attention to the environmental consequences of having children and owning pets and were designed in part to question social norms about such behavior. However, rather than always functioning as normative rules that prescribe pet ownership and parenthood, these social norms should probably be viewed in some cases as rules that say it is OK to have children and own pets as means to meeting particular goals. If so, behavioral economists should attempt to examine what motivates those who incur the significant private costs that pet ownership and parenthood, as these motivations may have implications for the design of policies aimed at reducing the popularity of having children and pets. This section takes some tentative steps in this direction, beginning with the pet ownership puzzle.

In the introduction to his *Handbook on the Economics of Leisure* Samuel Cameron (2011, p. 10) notes that there is a dearth of research by economists on pet ownership. Hence, despite the conspicuous role that pets play in the leisure time of many people, the *Handbook's* only subsequent discussion of the benefits of having pets was in a footnote (*ibid.*, p. 123) that referred to the beneficial impacts pet ownership brings in terms physical and mental health. These benefits arise because pet owners take more exercise, feel more relaxed and less lonely and because pets facilitate social interactions. But this begs the question of whether many pet owners might have been readily able to find other means to the ends that pet ownership serves, if they had bothered to look rather than following social norms, and whether any of these alternatives might be cheaper as well as doing less to crowd out natural flora and fauna.

The answer appears to be in the affirmative. For example, consider the follows means–ends relationships and alternatives to owning a dog:

- *As a source of mental stimulation, to relieve the boredom of one's leisure time.*

Alternatively, try to find an engaging hobby that permits the development of new capabilities and provides opportunities to challenge oneself gently, be creative and have “flow” experiences, but which costs less than it costs to feed a dog and pay for vet bills and which will not necessitate habituating to having one's home reeking of dog odor and soiled by dog hair.

- *As a self-control device for ensuring that its owner takes exercise in the open air.*

Alternatively, organize a regular social walking routine with a neighbor or friend. This could provide scope for conversation, as well as eliminating excrement management issues.

- *For company and affection, filling gaps that result from having an inattentive partner or not having a partner.* Alternatively, invested in the services of a relationship counsellor (and if that fails, a divorce lawyer) or an online dating site (where *not* having a pet may be viewed as attractive in terms of the non-compensatory decision rules of some would-be daters).

- *As a home security device.* Alternatively, invest in a burglar alarm system whose presence is signaled externally, a motion-detecting external lighting system, and security screens for doors and windows. These measures could be just as effective at deterring burglars, who by nature tend to be lazy and use simple non-compensatory heuristics to decide which homes to try to enter (see further, Garcia-Retamero and Dharmi, 2009). The absence of an annoying barking dog might promote better “neighborhood watch” social capital relationships with neighbors when the owner is away. The security screens could also serve as a means of reducing costs of keeping the property cool in the summer, by enabling windows and doors to be left open while the owner is not at home.

- *To earn social status and display control (by ownership of a large and very aggressive dog).* Alternatively, deal with status anxiety taking counselling from a clinical psychologist or by, say, taking up a team sport and earning respect from one's team-mates, rather than by purchasing an environmentally unsound substitute for a dog, such as a larger-than-usual 4WD truck that has a "don't mess with me" demeanor.
- *To get a sense of, and prepare for, life with children.* Although a pet may provide experience in toilet training and developing obedience ahead of having a child, an alternative would be to provide frequent baby-sitting relief to friends who have new babies and toddlers.

From a Kellian perspective, we may notice that these kinds of motivations for owning dogs can be framed in terms of being better able to predict and control events. A dog protects its owner from its owner's limitations and from external challenges, much in the way that a good human friend does. Cats, by contrast, generally seem to entail control loss for their owners, given their abilities to reduce their owners to servants that provide them with food. However, cats perhaps offer rewards to their owners by virtue of being fascinating in terms of how they behave (including how they get control over their owners) and the physical feats they can perform (especially as kittens). Even so, the case for cat ownership is hard to argue, given their environmental impacts and the vast range of other things in life at which one can marvel. The latter point can also be made against the ownership of exotic birds as pets, but in this case the cruelty of imprisoning these birds in cages deserves to be recognized, along with the impact on wild populations insofar as they not sourced via captive breeding.

It may appear from this discussion that it might be reasonably straightforward to design a "boost" policy to promote mindfulness about the downsides of, and alternatives to, pet ownership. Such a "boost" might provide the basis for lively discussions if implemented

within the home economics curricula of high schools. However, the effectiveness of such a “boost” would doubtless be muted due to many parents having already acquired pets, whether due to following the norms of the families in which they grew up, or for the kinds of means–end reasons listed above, or due to giving into pressure from the children to get pets because their peers have got pets. Even so, it might result in some pets not being replaced after their demise, and in fewer consumers purchasing pets in adulthood.

Social norms that promote human population growth by not frowning on those who have (more than one or two) children may prove harder than pet ownership norms to challenge successfully, given the extent to which the norm merely reinforces genetic programming to have the urge to breed or, at least, to engage in sexual activity. But these norms need to be challenged urgently, given the fact that most children will go on to have negative environmental impacts rather than turning out to be eco-warriors. The combined power of biological urges and social norms for having children is evidenced by the fact that even in an age where reliable contraceptive technologies exist, people continue to incur a wide range of inevitable, probable or possible downside of reproducing. Of course, in attempting to understand rates of human reproduction, we should also keep in mind the role of the rules of some religious faiths (including rules that deny girls education) as barriers to the uptake of contraception and the use of abortion in some economies. Given that such rules serve as a means of growing the customer base of the faith that imposes them, we may expect them not to be abandoned unless the faiths in question start finding that these kinds of rules are driving their customers to other providers of religious services.

Clearly, the economics of having families changes as per-capita incomes rise, and people do respond to these changes, establishing new reproductive norms in the process (including, it would appear, new norms about how closely to adhere to religious rules). The problem is that family size norms fail to fall as rapidly and as far as is necessary to offset changes in

child mortality rates and life expectancy that accompany rising per-capita incomes and advances in medicine. Educational “boosts” that emphasize the downsides of having children should be able to play a role in speeding up these adjustment processes in the developing world, as well as in encouraging those in rich nations to avoid having large families even if they can afford to educate them, house them comfortably in McMansions and transport them around in large SUVs and minivans/people-movers. Moves to promote having more children in advanced economies where populations are ageing and set to decline are often based on fears that there will otherwise be too few workers to support and supply output for growing numbers of senior citizens. These arguments seem highly questionable, given increasing use of automation and developments in artificial intelligence to increase per-capita productivity.

As behavioral economists, we would recognize that although having lots of children may result from following social and religious norms, and from ignorance in the area of family planning, it may also result from shortcomings in how people construe the costs and benefits of having children. In poorly developed economics that lack social welfare systems and restrictions on child labor, children may be viewed as investments by their parents, for children may make net contributions to the household budget by working instead of attending school and, having grown up, may provide support when their parents are no longer able to work. However, there is the risk that such calculations will be misguided and shortsighted, especially if economic development takes off rapidly and drives improvements in child mortality rates (so families end up bigger than planned) and the implementation of rules to limit child labor. Moreover, prospective parents may underestimate the payoffs to having fewer children but getting them better educated if they have not seen examples of neighbors whose lives have been improved by remittances from sons and/or daughters who moved away after making the most of available education opportunities.

Even in advanced economies, couples in their twenties cannot be presumed to have a good enough guide to family life from their limited personal experiences of life so far, including from observing how their parents' lives were affected by the trials and tribulations of being parents. We should not presume that would-be parents will anticipate accurately how, after raising children at considerable expense, parents may then feel obliged to provide substantial funds to enable their offspring to get on to the first rungs of the property ownership ladder and may even feel guilt later in life about spending money that they might instead have left to their grandchildren to do likewise. As children, they may not have appreciated the extent to which those who have children end up having to sacrifice many other life experiences for logistical if not also for financial reasons – such as cultural and social experiences that become impossible unless there is enough notice to organize babysitters, or interesting and exciting career moves that would require relocations that are viewed as too disruptive to the children's education.

We may also expect that prospective parents will be overconfident about their capacity to handle easily the challenges of being a parent, partly due to having memories of their own growing up that are incomplete and affected by how they resolved cognitive dissonance. As a result, they are likely to underestimate, or completely fail to consider, the probability that the children they have will reward them for the investments being made in them by developing into surly, obnoxious teenagers and rejecting any notion that their parents may have wisdom that is worthy of their attention. To the extent that would-be parents feel overconfident about their ability to determine how their children turn out, they may also underestimate their risks of suffering from stress and anxiety due to their children having health problems, getting into trouble with the law, developing addictive habits, making poor financial decisions or choices of spouses, and so on.

Life without children will be free of all these downsides. However, a “boost” aimed at limiting procreation needs also to show that it is not inevitable that such a life (even if one also does not have a pet) will seem empty and meaningless, or that, in old age, it will be lonely and overshadowed by feelings of regret that one did not have children.

References

- Cameron, S. (ed.) (2011). *Handbook of the Economics of Leisure*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Garcia-Retamero, R., & Dharmi, M. K. (2009). Take-the-best in expert–novice decision strategies for residential burglary. *Psychonomic Bulletin & Review*, *16*(1), 163–169.