Book Review

Review of Bures, Regina M. and Nancy R. Gee. *Well-being Over the Life Course: Incorporating Human-animal Interactions*. 2021. New York: Springer Publishing. pp. xv, 109. Price: $66.92 (Paperback)

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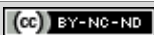
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In the book *Well-Being Over the Life Course: Incorporating Human-Animal Interaction*, authors Regina M. Bures and Nancy R. Gee—both researchers specializing in Human-Animal Interaction (HAI)—present eight narrative chapters, primarily drawing on their own research contributions, to explore the nuanced ways humans interact with animals across various life stages and aging processes. The central aim of the book is to demonstrate how HAI can support or improve human well-being and health from infancy to old age.

The structure of this book consists of different chapters, with each chapter addressing distinct aspects of HAI in relation to human health and well-being. In the thematically diverse chapters, the authors employ a human life course perspective to examine how human-animal relationships evolve, tracing this journey from childhood through older adulthood. In what is meant to be a comprehensive review, Bures, Gee, and colleagues synthesize existing research findings on HAI and in each chapter critically discuss studies conducted in this field. Authored by the two researchers, the work systematically integrates insights to highlight the multifaceted role of HAI across the lifespan. The authors' distinctiveness as researchers is reflected in the structured format of each chapter. Every chapter includes an abstract, keywords, and references, underscoring the book's specificity in both its thematic focus and scholarly presentation approach right from the start.

In the opening chapter of the book, "Well-being over the Life Course: Incorporating Human-Animal Interaction," the authors establish the conceptual framework for the piece. Here, Bures introduces the concept of human-animal interaction (HAI), with a focus on pets. She argues that human-animal relationships have evolved over millennia, with domestication shaping human lifestyles and transforming animals into companion species. This dynamic interplay propelled HAI into a multidisciplinary field of study, marked by its complexity and interdisciplinary appeal. The section stands out for its emphasis on the multidimensional nature of well-being and health, integrating physical, psychological, and HAI-related dimensions into a cohesive understanding.

This foundation seamlessly transitions readers into the next chapter, "Integrating Pets into the Family Life Cycle." In this particular chapter, Bures provides empirical evidence of animals' integration into human families. Expanding on HAI, she introduces the family life cycle concept, illustrating how pets—particularly dogs and cats—have become embedded in family structures. Surveys cited in the book reveal that pets contribute significantly to social and emotional well-being across life stages, from young adulthood and child-rearing phases to empty nest periods and aging families. Research underscores pets' consistent presence in family dynamics, with Bures asserting that pets are inseparable from modern family life. The explanation of this chapter is so compelling that, upon finishing it, we feel that wherever families exist, pets are inevitably a part of them.

The repercussions of these bonds are explored in the third chapter, "Companion Animal Caregiving and Well-Being," Bures explains that the relationship between animals and humans is deep and powerful. Because pets are perceived as family members, their death can trigger intense psychological distress, grief, and sorrow. She cites studies revealing that some owners even feel that their pets continue to exist somewhere in another realm, believing in an afterlife for them. In conclusion, the authors note that the dissolution of such bonds—whether through loss or death—can lead to lasting emotional trauma, underscoring the critical role of HAI in understanding mental health.

In the subsequent chapter, "Health over the Life Course and Human-Animal Interaction," the authors demonstrate how HAI influences healthy development and aging across the lifespan. Here, Bures, Esposito, and Griffin present scientific evidence through three large-scale U.S.-based studies designed to examine animals' roles in human life trajectories. The authors conclude that research on human-animal relationships is—and will continue to be—an evolving field. Beyond affirming the importance of animals in human development (from childhood to older adulthood), the surveys also reveal critical insights into variables requiring deeper assessment when studying HAI's impacts. It becomes evident in this chapter, that while existing evidence is scientifically robust, HAI research demands even more precise data to advance understanding.

In the next chapter, "Human-Animal Interaction and Child Health and Development," the book features a contribution by Megan K. Mueller, a developmental psychologist. Here, the author narrows her focus to examine how HAI specifically contributes to children's well-being. Mueller presents evidence suggesting that the presence of pets enhances social-emotional, cognitive, and physical development in children and adolescents. There is also a critical caveat: while beneficial, introducing animals into children's lives demands improved caregiving skills to navigate potential conflicts inherent in human-nonhuman learning processes. Additionally, Mueller highlights that pet ownership—despite its positive impacts—can impose financial and time burdens on caregivers, leading to stress. Based on these findings, the authors argue that integrating animals into human relationships carries inevitable trade-offs, requiring adaptability that may or may not succeed. The chapter serves as a nuanced reminder of these complexities.

In the following chapter, "Successful Aging and Human-Animal Interaction," Nancy R. Gee examines HAI's role among older adults aged 65 and above. Gee presents scientific evidence demonstrating that pets can mitigate or alleviate age-related challenges, including cognitive and physical decline, social isolation, and health deterioration. Physical activities such as walking pets significantly enhance older adults' health. There is also a reduction of loneliness—a prevalent issue in this demographic— through companionship with pets. Furthermore, studies cited in the chapter suggest that regular interaction with pets may even improve memory function in older adults. Gee concludes, however, that while animals offer substantial benefits, their integration into older adults' lives requires careful consideration and preparedness. Health status and financial stability are critical factors to assess before advocating

pet ownership for this age group. The chapter thus balances optimism about HAI's potential with pragmatic warnings about the responsibilities involved.

In the chapter "Animal-assisted Interaction Designed to Improve Human Well-Being Across the Life Course," Nancy R. Gee presents an insightful discussion of a model that integrates animals into therapeutic practices, termed Animal-Assisted Interaction (AAI). Gee explains that various issues affecting humans—long-standing concerns in fields like health and mental well-being—are increasingly being addressed through animal involvement. These include challenges faced by children, school-aged youth, young adults, adults, and older adults, as outlined in the chapter. Gee's analysis highlights the sophistication of human efforts to leverage animals as solutions to health, psychological, and social challenges. For instance, trauma-related disorders, such as PTSD, are now being targeted through AAI techniques. By emphasizing the versatility of animals in therapeutic contexts, Gee underscores their transformative potential across diverse populations and life stages.

In the concluding chapter Gee reiterates the book's core purpose is to serve as a concise exploration of Human-Animal Interaction (HAI) that invites further theoretical, empirical, and analytical enrichment. Gee reminds readers that while the book is brief, the topic of HAI demands deeper scrutiny as pets increasingly permeate human life—not just in sheer numbers, but qualitatively, entering realms of human experience previously unexplored. Gee also emphasizes lingering gaps in the field, urging future research to prioritize methodological rigor, ethical frameworks, and interdisciplinary nuance. Crucially, as seasoned HAI researchers, the authors advocate for studies that uphold rigorous standards while safeguarding the autonomy of both humans and animals. The conclusion underscores that advancing HAI scholarship requires balancing scientific curiosity with ethical responsibility, ensuring animals are partners—not mere tools—in this evolving dialogue.

From our perspective, *Well-Being Over the Life Course: Incorporating Human-Animal Interactions* is a literature review that synthesizes existing scientific evidence on our current understanding of HAI. The authors, Bures and Gee, have crafted a work emblematic of scholarly rigor—rooted in robust references and clear directives for future research. The book's significance lies not only in its meticulous compilation of evidence (even if Gee humbly frames it as a "brief" exploration(p.99)) but also in its expansive scope, addressing human life stages from childhood to older adulthood. Its limitations, largely tied to gaps in existing literature, are understandable given the novelty of HAI as a field pioneered by researchers like Bures and Gee. In essence, the book invites scholars to delve deeper and contribute fresh evidence, having already established the foundational premise that HAI holds positive implications for human well-being.

Notably, the book serves as a roadmap for researchers, scholars, and students across disciplines—even those without specialized backgrounds in HAI. Each chapter, along with the concluding section, generously outlines specific avenues for future inquiry. However, much of the cited research originates from Global North contexts, leaving unexplored the unique dimensions HAI might hold in Global South settings. Despite this, the book provides a strong empirical and theoretical foundation for advancing HAI studies in diverse cultural and socioeconomic landscapes.

What makes this work particularly compelling is its potential to inspire ethnographic research—complementing the quantitative surveys and findings it highlights. Ethnographic approaches could enrich HAI narratives with deeper, human-centered stories, mirrorin the book's own success in weaving rigorous scholarship with accessible insights. By bridging these methodologies, future studies may further illuminate the profound, multifaceted bonds between humans and animals.