

# **Fears and Barriers to Having Children: Choosing Dog Ownership as an Alternative?**

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# Background

- The role of pets has changed in the lives of people in developed world societies in the 21st century. pets → companion animals (Turner 2006; Volsche 2018).
  - Since the 1970s we have moved towards new forms of intimacy between humans and companion animals → 'hybrid' households (Franklin 2006).
- The second demographic transition (Lesthaeghe and van de Kaa 1986)
  - Prioritising the family → emphasised the individual (Spéder - Kapitány 2006).
  - Decrease in the marriage rates, accompanied by an increase in divorce rates, a delay in motherhood, and a rise in the percentage of individuals who opt for a child-free lifestyle.



# Research aims & questions

## Aims:

- Research suggests that most dog owners who define their pets as family members tend to view them as having the status of children (Owens-Grauerholz 2018; Shir-Vertesh 2012; Laurent-Simpson 2017), which raises the question of **how pet ownership may influence reproductive choices**



# Theoretical Framework

# Theoretical Framework: The diverse role of companion animals in family dynamics

- Shir-Vertesh (2012) revealed four patterns through which families interpreted the status of their companion animals:
  - animal as pre-child
  - animal as child substitute
  - animal as semi-child
  - animal as significantly different from a child
- Flexible personhood: The arrival of a human child often prompts parents to reconsider their relationship with their dog, sometimes stripping it of its status as a 'child' or 'surrogate child'.
- Simultaneously, changes in the family dynamic can prompt a re-evaluation of the dog's role, sometimes strengthening the bond and raising its status to that of a child.

# Theoretical Framework: Childlessness and pet ownership

In Laurent-Simpson's (2017) study, the focus was specifically directed towards dog owners, aiming to explore various aspects including the rationale behind their decision to remain childless.

- the active preference for animal companionship over having human children
- the deliberation of cost-benefit analyses pertaining to the decision on human parenthood
- the role of the human-animal bond in fulfilling nurturing inclinations that might otherwise be directed towards human offspring
  
- A majority of childfree participants did not attribute their decision not to have children to their animal companions; instead, reasons included factors such as education, career pursuits, and time constraints.
  
- They often regarded their companion animals as a meaningful alternative to having a child.

Peterson & Engwall (2019) interviewed 15 childless women. Those interviewees who had dogs, reported that their maternal instincts were not aroused towards young children, but towards their dogs.



# Data and Methods

# Data and methods 1

- Explorative research → qualitative method
- Two research groups together
  - Ethnologists and sociologists
  - Led by Enikő Kubiny & Ivett Szalma
- Sample
  - Age 25-45
  - From Budapest and its suburbs
  - Higher education
- 28 semi-structured interviews

Participant demographics

Group		Number of participants
<b>Age group (years)</b>		
	25–29	5
	30–34	10
	35–39	6
	40–45	7
<b>Highest education level</b>	Secondary School	2
	Post-secondary education	1
	University/Bachelor's degree	17
	University/Master's degree	8
<b>Place of residence</b>	Capital city	21
	Other town or city	6
	Abroad	1
<b>Partnership status</b>	Married	15
	Cohabitation	7
	LAT	1
	Single	5
<b>Parental status</b>	One child	13 (6 children under 3 years old, 6 children aged between 3-12, 1 child over 12 years old)

# Data and methods 2

- Focus of the interview
  - Exploring the influence of dog ownership on reproductive choices
  - Similarities and differences between experiences of dog ownership and raising children
- Reaching participants via our social networks → snowball method
- Interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes
  - Mostly face-to-face interviews
- Coding the interviews (Excel)
  - All members of the research group
  - Finding key themes emerging from the text connected to dog ownership and fertility

# Results

# Dogs 'roles in the lives of the participants I.

- All of the participants regarded their dog as a family member.
- Some of them considered them as their children.

*"We also say that he is the **zero/null child**. [...] We didn't really buy it for practice, but otherwise, I think it's not a bad preparation for having a child. [...] I'm sure this desire to have a baby appears in how we see the dog, a little bit."* (Bianca, 30-year-old, midwife, childless)

- The arrival of a baby can affect the role of the dog as a „null child” as its place is taken by the child (changing roles).

*„[...] if there's a choice in a fire, in there, that's terrible, and I think it's a little more realistic when the question was, what if our child becomes allergic to dog hair? And then obviously we try all sorts of things, but if it really ends up that it doesn't work, then, unfortunately. So then our child wins.,* (Nora, 32-year-old, psychologist, mother)

- After children are older the dog's role can change back into a „child”

*"Our children have grown up, so essentially they [the dogs] are our children now.,* (Emily, 45-year-old, married, mother)

# Dogs 'roles in the lives of the participants II.

- Some participants who are either mothers or do not have children regard their pet to be "something like a child", in between a substitute and a null child.

*"That's a really stupid way to put it, because since I've had kids, I know it doesn't mean [to have dogs] like having kids, but somehow it's like having kids."* (Lucy, 42-year-old, mother)

- At the same time, some of the participants see their dogs as something radically different from a child.

*„[...] Yes, a family member, too. For me at least, however, it has nothing to do with having children. Well, it's not true that it has nothing to do with it, because obviously there are parallels, but I have been longing for children since I was a little child, and having children is so important in my plans, that I could never imagine that having a dog or a pet could replace it."* (Sophie, 27-year-old, student, childless)

- In several cases dogs were seen as substitutes for children.

*"She's like a newborn baby. So that's it. I've got a baby to post photos about and show everyone how sweetly she sleeps, curled up next to the radiator, tucked in."* (Zoe, 36-year-old, graphic designer, married, childless)

# Cost-benefit analysis of having children vs. having dogs

## Financial difficulties

- Financial restrictions surfaced as a key obstacle, with participants concerned about the costs connected with raising a child.
  - *"Well, the current situation, that everything is so costly, and that a child needs a lot of things, and that he has to be brought up, right. So, I find the financial aspects of having children tough".* (Dolores, a 28-year-old interior designer who cohabitates and does not have children)
- Several interviewees who are planning to have children hope to be able to possess their own home
  - *"I don't want to have a child in a rented flat; it would be nice to have some stability in my housing."* (Barbara, a twenty-eight-year-old financial officer living in cohabitation without children). She also stated that childbearing incurs numerous fees, ranging from nappies to a baby carriage to a proper education, which she cannot currently afford.
- Dog breed can adapt to the financial situation
  - *So, the Mancsi should have been a Rottweiler. I declined at the time. That was out of my price range. So it's a big dog, it eats a lot, and I didn't have enough money. So I did not chose that breed of dog"* (Margaret, a twenty-seven-year-old English tutor who lives in LAT)

# Cost-benefit analysis of having children vs. having dogs

## Emotional burdens

- *“Emotionally, you have to be there all the time. And having to put my own stuff on the back burner here, and I find that hard, so I have a freak-out every couple of months. Which obviously could be done differently, but just not being there yet to deal with it.”* (Alice, a thirty-four years old, full-time mother, married, who has a six-year-old child).
- *Well, being on call from 0-24, it's very demanding physically and mentally”* While she sees that this is not the case with a dog, *“I would say that it's a very big difference between keeping a dog and raising a child, for example, that you can leave a dog at home for 3-4 hours if you want to go somewhere, you don't have to explain that you can't leave a small child like that”* (Khloe, forty-year-old, national relations, married, has a four-year old child).



# Cost-benefit analysis of having children vs. having dogs

## Work-life conflict

- *“One of my colleagues who went to give birth last year, and actually I took over her place, and I can go to such courses instead of her, and since then she has come back in part-time, but she can't go to the courses, so she noted to me that this is because she has a child.”* (Maya, a thirty-year-old payroll administrator, who is married and childless)
- *“The best possible job because I have the dogs next to me... I don't think I could teach if I had a child. Because I can't say I'm teaching a class and then, sorry, I'm breastfeeding, so that's out of the question”* (Margaret, a twenty-seven-year-old English tutor who lives in LAT and childless)

# Cost-benefit analysis of having children vs. having dogs

## Partnership

- Numerous interviewees stated that they acquired a dog without any partner and were able to manage the responsibilities of dog ownership independently. None of the interviewees had chosen or were choosing to have a kid alone. They believed that this responsibility required at least two people.
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- *“The hardest thing is to find the right partner who you know will be your partner in this area and who you can raise these children with.”* (Brooke, a forty-three-year-old nurse who is married and has a ten-year-old child)

# Cost-benefit analysis of having children vs. having dogs

## Macro factors

- *"Well, it affects my anxiety, but it doesn't affect my motivation to have children, because I just can't imagine that this anxiety, this climate anxiety, this anxiety about the future, is going to override whether I want to have children or not."* (Sophie, a twenty-seven-year-old student, who is single and childless)
- *„Things as going in the wrong direction in many ways, we're not so pessimistic that we wouldn't, say, take in a brother or sister".* (Khole and her partner are planning to have a little brother or sister with their current child).
- Multiple respondents indicated that they made the decision to acquire a canine companion among the Covid-19 pandemic.

# Differences and Similarities between having dog and having children

- Several interviewees pointed out similarities in the desire for care and maternal instincts invoked by dogs and children.
  - *"There really are maternal instincts with the child, and I think with the dog as well.,* (Emily, a forty-five-year-old entrepreneur, who is married and has a 14 year old daughter)
- An important distinction highlighted by many interviewees between a dog and a child is the difference in lifespan.
  - *"If you have a child, so you have somebody smaller to look after, [...] they don't die first, but the one you're looking after grows up and outlives you. And your dog is a bit like that in a similar role because you're looking after such a small, defenceless thing and that's bound to die before you."* (Sophie, a twenty-seven-year-old student, who is single and childless)
  - Interviews suggest the age limit for having children is around 40, while some view keeping a dog past 70 as irresponsible due to concerns about the owner's potential demise.
- Another significant disparity between owning a dog and raising a child is the assurance that a parent can rely on their child for support in later stages of life, especially during retirement.
  - *"It's so difficult from the point of view of child substitute that you can't replace the child in this way either, because you can count on a child in retirement, but not your dog because it probably won't be there by then."* (Pamela, a twenty-six-year-old dietitian and web developer who is childless and who partially lives in cohabitation with her partner)

# Conclusions

- We found, in line with previous research that each interviewees regard their dogs as family members (Laurent-Simpson 2017). Moreover, most people see their pets as having the status of children, as shown in research by Volsche et al (2022) and Laurent-Simpson (2017).
  - Many young couples and individuals who are on the verge of starting a family frequently view their dog as their first child, believing that it will help them prepare for the responsibilities of motherhood.
  - At the birth of a child, dogs frequently relinquish their position as the primary focus of attention within the household, as described by moms who have young children.
  - The least common pattern was, when childless young women consider their dogs something radically different from a child.
- The women mentioned numerous reasons that make it difficult to have children and these difficulties did not appear in having a dog.
- The primary distinction between raising children and owning a dog is that women have the capability to independently care for a dog, as a dog imposes less responsibility compared to a young child.
- Some of these barriers are not targeted by family policy, as they are outside its scope, such as finding a suitable partner, or although there are family policy instruments, they are not effective enough, such as the provision of financial security.

# Limitations

- Only women with a high level of education in a large city were included. It would be important to see how the reproductive decisions of women with lower levels of education might be affected.
- Also, this is a cross-sectional study, so it is not possible to get a complete picture of how the role of the dog has changed after a major life event.

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# Thank you for your attention!



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