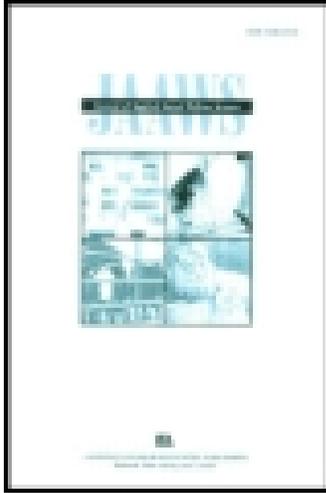


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Emily Weiss <sup>a</sup> & Shannon Gramann <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> ASPCA® Shelter Research and Development ,  
Benton, Kansas

<sup>b</sup> ASPCA® Shelter Research and Development , Hales  
Corners, Wisconsin

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# A Comparison of Attachment Levels of Adopters of Cats: Fee-Based Adoptions Versus Free Adoptions

Emily Weiss<sup>1</sup> and Shannon Gramann<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>ASPCA® Shelter Research and Development, Benton, Kansas

<sup>2</sup>ASPCA® Shelter Research and Development, Hales Corners, Wisconsin

Nonhuman animal welfare professionals have been critical of adoption programs that do not charge a fee for adult cats, despite the high euthanasia rate for cats due to a reported lack of homes. The argument against the free cat adoptions cites a devaluation of the cat, which may affect the adopter's perceived value of the cat and subsequent care. It may also attract low-income adopters who are perceived as unable to fulfill the financial responsibility of acting as caregiver (owner) of a companion animal (pet). This study examined adopters' attachment to their cats in relation to the payment or waiver of an adoption fee using the Lexington Attachment to Pets Scale and perception of the shelter. No significant differences were found between groups on either measure. Programs such as this create an opportunity to positively affect cats in animal shelters by finding more homes; programs such as this also affect cat overpopulation by putting more altered cats into the community.

Nonhuman animal welfare professionals often express concern about potential adopters and debate adoption standards (Shore, Douglas, & Riley, 2005). In the meantime, approximately 4 million cats are euthanized each year (Patronek, Glickman, Beck, McCabe, & Ecker, 1996) or stay at the shelter for several months awaiting adoption (Miller-Dowling & Stitely, 1997). Because only 11.5% of owned cats in the United States are acquired from animal shelters (New et al., 2000), adoption opportunities are limited for adult cats.

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Correspondence should be sent to Emily Weiss, 2672 SW Indianola, Benton, KS 67017. Email: emilyw@aspca.org

When the opportunity presents itself for a cat to be adopted, there are no guarantees that the adopter will meet the shelter's set criteria. Taylor (2004) interviewed managers of animal welfare organizations in the United Kingdom and discovered that approximately 50% of people coming to their facilities seeking to adopt an animal are denied based on their answers to preliminary questions in a phone interview. Not only were they denied adoption but the shelter also labeled the potential adopters as "bad homes." Strict policy-focused adoption standards, similar to the standards in the United Kingdom, and the lack of truly successful adoption programs likely are large contributors to the cat crisis in shelters across the United States.

The exploration of less conventional interventions, such as reducing or eliminating adult cat adoption fees, can be successful and beneficial to many cats and significantly affect the cat crisis experienced by many shelters. According to DiGiacomo, Arluke, and Patronek (1998), "As long as euthanasia is claiming healthy, adoptable animals, effective intervention must still be sought" (p. 4). By promoting cat adoptions, making cats accessible to a larger population of people, and maintaining the likelihood for the bond to be formed between the adopter and cat, the cat crisis could be decreased.

To the best of our knowledge, waiving the fee for the adoption of an adult cat was developed at the Wisconsin Humane Society (WHS), often considered one of the top humane societies in the United States. The idea of a fee-waived adoption program was motivated by the knowledge that many in the community were acquiring free-roaming cats or cats from "free to good home" newspaper ads, neighbors, and the like. In most cases, these cats were not spayed or neutered; new guardians did not have the tools to effectively resolve common behaviors that education during adoption could provide, increasing secondary abandonment and thus contributing to cat overpopulation. In addition, waiving the fee created an opportunity to discuss the plight of cats and encouraged adopters to select an adult cat over a kitten. The implementation of this program resulted in increased adoptions of adult cats at WHS.

Without any data to support their assumptions, many animal welfare professionals discount adoption programs that have the potential to dramatically affect shelter cats. Skeptics are opposed to the idea of a fee-waived cat adoption program because they believe that placing a monetary value on a cat will increase the adopters' perceived value of their adopted cat. The perception is that the decrease in value would result in a lack of attachment and poor care. There is little research pertaining to the cost of a companion animal (pet) and its correlation to the caregiver's (owner) attachment; however, research has shown that cats obtained free of charge from the previous owner are at a much higher risk of relinquishment to shelters than cats given as a gift or cats who are purchased or adopted (Patronek et al., 1996). Other research has found that 81.8% of cats in U.S. households are obtained free of charge and

are not statistically more likely to be relinquished, whereas cats obtained from friends are at most risk for relinquishment (New et al., 2000). Due to the large quantities of cats obtained for no fee, it can be assumed that the majority of cats relinquished to shelters were acquired for free by the owner; however, it does not suggest a direct correlation to the risk for relinquishment. In regard to the human–nonhuman animal bond and attachment, research has identified that it is a multifaceted relationship driven by many factors. Shore et al. (2005) reported that even “pet owners who stated they are not very attached to their pet provide the same quality of care as people who are moderately to highly attached to their pet” (p. 9). “The cat receives food, medical care, and protection as well as attention and other benefits that make for safe and secure lives and satisfactory human–animal relationships” (p. 10).

The quality of care is more influenced by owner characteristics such as owner’s gender, level of education, previous cat ownership experience, and the owner’s number of friends and emotional bonds to people (Adamelli, Marinelli, Normando, & Bono, 2005). It was noted that the level of attachment was associated with the cat’s age at the time of adoption and the number of emotional bonds the owner has with other people (Adamelli et al., 2005).

Skeptics also express concern that a fee-waived adoption program will attract low-income adopters who are not financially fit to provide proper care. Although providing proper care for any animal is an important consideration to make when trying to find a shelter animal a home, the allocation of funds is more significant than the household income of the adopting family. Risley-Curtiss et al. (2006) found that women’s childhood and current social group membership (social class; urban, suburban, or rural ethnicity and national origin) did not appear to be correlated to the efforts in meeting pets’ needs. When evaluating the human–animal bond and commitment to pet in relation to household income, there has been significant research. Poresky and Daniels (1998) found no statistical difference in attachment to pets between different household income groups; Johnson, Garrity, and Stallones (1992) found that low-income pet owners were more attached to their pets than any other income group. Even more significant is that the

income bracket of a pet owner is not a significant predictor of commitment to pets even though willingness to expend financial resources is a prominent factor; thus a person in a high income bracket may or may not choose to spend monetary resources on their pet and the same could be said for the low income bracket. (Staats, Miller, Carnot, Rada, & Turnes, 1996, p. 92)

Animal welfare organizations take the adoption process as perhaps the greatest responsibility of their jobs (Taylor, 2004). Without research supporting their assumptions, animal welfare agencies risk coming to conclusions that may not be correct. Disregarding new adoption programs minimizes opportunities for animals to find homes.

In order to explore if animal welfare professionals have valid concerns regarding the free adult cat adoption program, there was a need for more research to investigate how people value their free adult cat in comparison with those who paid a fee for their cat. Using the Lexington Attachment to Pet Scale (LAPS; Johnson et al., 1992) we measured attitude of two groups of adult cat adopters; one group paid a \$75 adoption fee and the other paid no adoption fee.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Participants

A sample of 173 adopters of adult cats at the Animal Refuge League of Greater Portland (ARL) in Westbrook, Maine, participated in the study. The participants were in one of two groups: the no adoption-fee group (NAF, 95), which consisted of adopters who paid no fee for their adult cat (1+ years) or the adoption-fee group (AF, 78), which consisted of adopters who paid a \$75 adoption fee for the adoption of their adult cat. The NAF adopters adopted between the dates of July 1, 2006, and December 31, 2006, and the adopters of the AF group adopted between January 1, 2006, and June 31, 2006, and the month of January 2007. Because there was a larger sample size for the NAF group, the AF adopters of January 2007 were added to the study in the attempt to obtain equal amounts of data for each study group. ARL was implementing the fee-waived adult cat adoption program prior to the study and was asked by us to participate in the research; therefore, the adopters were not randomly assigned to a group and when the adopters came to the shelter to adopt was not controlled. Whether or not they paid an adoption fee was a function of when ARL was running free cat promotions. The adoption program was publicized on the shelter's Web site and in the local newspaper. Other than the adoption fee, adopters in both groups received the same adoption experience.

ARL is an American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA<sup>®</sup>) Meet Your Match<sup>™</sup> shelter that uses an "open-adoption" philosophy. Adopters are given a survey for the shelter personnel to learn more about their lifestyles so that the appropriate cat can be matched to their needs. Adoption counseling is dialogue based in order to give the adopters the information they need to ensure success in the home; adoption denial is avoided except in extreme cases. The shelter offers postadoption support to assist in resolving any possible problems that may increase the likelihood of the animal being returned to the shelter.

In order to maintain adequate income during the implementation of the free adult cat adoption program (NAF period), ARL increased the kitten adoption fee from \$75 to \$100 due to the public's high demand for kittens.

## Methods

Attachment of owner to cat was investigated using the LAPS (Johnson et al., 1992). The LAPS was transcribed into the Internet-based surveying program SurveyMonkey. Because the surveyed group was specific to cat adopters, the word “pet” in the LAPS was changed to “cat” (Table 1) in order to avoid confusion for adopters with multiple species of pets in their home. Instructions also guided the participants to respond to the statements regarding the cat they recently adopted from ARL. Two statements investigating the possible differences in attitude toward the shelter between the two groups were added to the end of the survey:

1. I believe that the shelter from which I adopted my cat perceives cats to be valuable; and
2. I would return to the shelter in the future to adopt another animal.

TABLE 1  
Lexington Attachment to Pet Scale Statements

- 
- a. My cat means more to me than any of my friends.
  - b. Quite often I confide in my cat.
  - c. I believe that cats should have the same rights and privileges as family members.
  - d. I believe my cat is my best friend.
  - e. Quite often, my feelings toward people are affected by the way they react to my pet.
  - f. I love my cat because he/she is more loyal to me than most of the people in my life.
  - g. I enjoy showing other people pictures of my cat.
  - h. I think my cat is just a cat.
  - i. I love my cat because it never judges me.
  - j. My cat knows when I'm feeling bad.
  - k. I often talk to other people about my cat.
  - l. My cat understands me.
  - m. I believe that loving my cat helps me stay healthy.
  - n. Cats deserve as much respect as humans do.
  - o. My cat and I have a very close relationship.
  - p. I would do almost anything to take care of my cat.
  - q. I play with my cat quite often.
  - r. I consider my cat to be a great companion.
  - s. My cat makes me feel happy.
  - t. I feel that my cat is a part of my family.
  - u. I am not very attached to my cat.
  - v. Owning a cat adds to my happiness.
  - w. I consider my cat to be a friend.
-

For each statement, the response choices were 1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *somewhat disagree*, 3 = *somewhat agree*, and 4 = *strongly agree*. At the time of adoption, the adopter's email address was collected and the link to the survey sent via email. The minimum amount of time the cat was in the home prior to surveying was 1 month, the maximum was 14 months, and the mean was 7.5 months. The survey was sent to 550 adopters: 322 adopted during the NAF period, and 228 adopted during the AF period. Table 1 displays the LAPS survey questions.

Adoption rates for cats during the AF and NAF periods were compared. Further, those periods in 2006 were compared with the previous year's data (2005).

As shelters have limited housing, the potential for displacement of kittens was monitored. The adoption and euthanasia rates for kittens during the NAF time period and the same time period in 2005 were compared.

### Statistical Analysis

Statistics were calculated using the SPSS (V. 16.0) statistical software package. LAP scores between the NAF and AF group were compared using an independent samples *t* test. The same analysis was conducted on the additional questions added to the survey to measure adopters' attitudes toward the shelter.

## RESULTS

### Sample's Features

Attachment was studied between the two groups of adopters, and no other variables were measured. Due to the method of surveying, 95 (17.2%) of the 550 emails sent out were returned to the sender due to a change in email address, problems with the recipients' servers, or spam blockers. In addition, adopters had the choice to begin the survey but not complete it. SurveyMonkey allows its members to electronically monitor activity and survey progress. Only the data from completed surveys were analyzed. Of the AF group, 88 adopters (38.5%) began the survey and 78 (34.2%) completed the survey. Of the NAF group, 107 adopters (33.2%) began the survey and 95 (29.5%) completed the survey.

### Attachment to Cat

Independent samples *t* test of the LAPS scores for the two groups found no significant difference in attachment score ( $t(171) = .134, p < .05$ ). Table 2 summarizes the data.

TABLE 2  
LAPS Total Mean Score Comparison

<i>Group</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Standard Error Mean</i>
NAF	95	70.65	10.089	1.030
AF	78	72.96	10.086	1.142

*Note.* LAPS = Lexington Attachment to Pet Scale. NAF = No Adoption-Fee group. AF = Adoption-Fee group.

The LAPS scores for each adopter could total between 23 and 92 points given that the answers were coded 1–4 in SPSS. The AF group mean score was 72.96; the NAF group mean score was 70.65; each score indicated a strong attachment on the scale.

### Perception of Shelter

Two additional questions measured the adopters' perceptions of the shelter:

1. I believe that the shelter from which I adopted my cat perceives cats to be valuable; and
2. I would return to the same shelter to adopt another animal in the future.

The total mean score for each additional statement ranged from 1 to 4.

Independent samples *t* test of the score (1–4) for additional statement 1 resulted in no significant difference between the two groups ( $t(171) = .868$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and for additional statement 2 resulted in no significant difference between the two groups ( $t(171) = .694$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Table 3 summarizes the data for these variables.

TABLE 3  
Additional Questions Total Mean Score Comparison

<i>Statement</i>	<i>Group</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Standard Error Mean</i>
I feel that the shelter from which I adopted my cat perceives cats to be valuable.	NAF	95	3.89	.371	.038
	AF	78	3.88	.426	.048
I would return to the shelter in the future to adopt another animal.	NAF	95	3.88	.382	.039
	AF	78	3.91	.488	.055

*Note.* NAF = No Adoption-Fee group. AF = Adoption Fee group.

TABLE 4  
Adoption Rates of Adult Cats

<i>Time Period</i>	<i>Adoption Rate (%)</i>
January–June 2005	62
January–June 2006 (AF)	64
July–December 2005	72
July–December 2006 (NAF)	84

*Note.* NAF = No Adoption-Fee time period. AF = Adoption Fee time period.

### Adoption Rates for Adult Cats

The adoption rates for adult cats during the AF and the NAF time periods were compared. Further, those time periods were compared with the shelter’s 2005 data. Table 4 summarizes a mild increase (2%) in adoption rate during the AF period compared with the corresponding time period in 2005 as well as the 12% increase in adoption rate during the NAF period compared with the same period in 2005.

### Adoption and Euthanasia Rates for Kittens

The adoption and euthanasia rates for kittens during the NAF time period and the same time period in 2005 were compared. Table 5 displays the adoption rate of kittens remaining the same during the two time periods and a mild increase of 1.2% in the euthanasia rate during the NAF period.

## DISCUSSION

The focus of the research was to examine potential differences in attachment between two groups of adopters that differed only in whether or not a fee was

TABLE 5  
Adoption and Euthanasia Rates of Kittens

<i>Time Period</i>	<i>Adoption Rate (%)</i>	<i>Euthanasia Rate (%)</i>
July–December 2005	85	5
July–December 2006 (NAF)	85	6.2

*Note.* NAF = No Adoption-Fee for adult cats.

paid for the adoption of an adult cat. The data support the null hypothesis as—based on their LAPS score—there was no significant difference in the two groups' attachment. Due to the equality in attachment levels between the NAF and the AF group, it can be assumed that, within at least the first few months postadoption, both groups of cats will likely receive the same quality of care, likely have owners with a similar level of commitment, be equally as likely to stay in the home, and likely be valued equally. More long-term studies are needed to see how level of attachment changes over time and whether there is a difference in the change between the AF and NAF groups.

Although high attachment to pet does not guarantee that owners will keep their pets, it may drive the owners to exhaust other options for their pets prior to relinquishment. Attachment to pet is positively correlated with level of commitment to a pet and indicates a resolve to keep a pet in spite of challenges that require expenditures of personal resources such as patience, time, effort, and money (Staats et al., 1996). It would be fruitful to further study the relationship between commitment and level of care.

It is interesting to note that the additional statements added to measure the adopters' perceptions of the shelter also resulted in no significant difference between the groups. In informal conversations with many shelter groups, E. Weiss (first author) found that some shelter professionals believe that the public will perceive the shelter as not valuing their cats. This data set does not support their concerns.

Although Patronek et al. (1996) cited that pets acquired for free from the previous owner were most at risk for relinquishment to the shelter, this study focused on a population of participants who may be different from the general public: those who intentionally traveled to the shelter to adopt a cat. It is possible that this subset of cat owners differs significantly in how they value their pet from those who obtain a free cat from a friend upon request. The process of adopting an animal from a shelter involves counseling, paperwork, and ongoing support, which indicate clear motivation to acquire a pet—although it is likely easier to go to someone's home and avoid the shelter procedures.

This study gathered information pertaining only to level of attachment: basic adopter population demographics for each group would help to investigate differences, if any, between the groups. Other variables such as adopter's age, gender, income group, and previous cat ownership were not considered and would be useful topics to explore further in the future. Additional questions pertaining to the quality of life of the cat postadoption would give further insight into potential differences between the groups. Furthermore, more AF adopters completed the survey (34.2%) compared with the NAF group (29.5%), which could potentially reflect a lower attachment to cat; however, no conclusions can be drawn. It may be a reflection of the high number of emails that were returned to sender (17.2%) due to spam blockers, change in email addresses, and problems with recipients' servers. This is speculation. A conclusion cannot be drawn because the numbers

of emails returned to sender were not measured per group (AF and NAF); only a total number was noted. Finally, the low return rate of surveys sent out (173 of 550) may also affect the overall results.

The increased rate of adoption for adult cats during the NAF period is encouraging. Some initial concern about a fee-waived cat adoption program included the potential for displacement of kittens with an increased fee for their adoptions. The data on adoption rates for adult cats, paired with the kitten data reflecting no change in the adoption rate, bolster the potential for a fee-waived program in that fees can be recovered by increasing kitten fees. There was a mild increase of 1.2% in the euthanasia rate of kittens during the NAF period in 2006 compared with the same period in 2005. ARL does not euthanize animals for space but for health and behavior issues. It is likely that the slight increase in the euthanasia rate is due to another issue and not related to the implementation of a free cat adoption program. It would be beneficial for future research on this topic to track reasons for euthanasia decisions regarding both adult cats and kittens. The current data suggest that increasing the kitten-adoption fee does not significantly increase risk for those kittens.

Although there was an increased adult cat adoption rate during the NAF period, it is important to note that shelter professionals speak of a pronounced population peak during the second and third quarters annually (April through September), which potentially affects adoption rates. Both the NAF and AF groups had a period of time that overlapped with the peak population season (AF in Quarter 2 and NAF in Quarter 3). Further data need to be collected to identify the potential seasonal effects on adoption rates during AF and NAF periods.

The implementation of a fee-waived adult cat adoption program in shelters around the country could have a profound impact on the lives of shelter cats. Millions of shelter cats are destroyed each year due a reported lack of homes; however, it can be argued that the lack is not of homes but of successful adoption programs and too harsh criteria for adopters.

With this researched program, adopters who may otherwise obtain a cat from another source, such as the “cat for free” ads in the newspaper, can adopt a vaccinated and spayed or neutered cat for free. These very appealing qualities in the adoption program may draw more adopters to shelters using these programs, which may result in an increase in adoptions and a decrease in euthanasia rates. In addition, the increase of altered cats being adopted into the community potentially can dramatically affect the overpopulation issue.

## CONCLUSION

With the exploration of a less conventional method of adopting cats into communities, a successful adoption program has emerged. The many stakeholders who

benefit from the program include the animals, the shelter, the adopter, and the community. Implementing a free adult cat adoption program in shelters around the country could dramatically affect the lives of thousands of shelter cats who otherwise either would reside in the shelter for months awaiting adoption or be euthanized. The ultimate goal of shelters is to adopt their animals into loving homes with families who are committed to the success of their pet. The free adult cat adoption program may accomplish these goals, and shelters can feel confident in implementing the program.

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