

Understanding Relations between People and their Pets

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Abstract

As evidenced by the popularity of animal behavior shows and books, online viral pet videos, and the presence of dogs or cats in two-thirds of American homes, pets clearly play an important role in many Americans' lives. At the same time, however, millions of pets are abandoned, abused, and euthanized every year. What should we make of these seemingly conflicting realities? How do Americans really feel about and treat their pets? And what explains the differences? In recent years social scientists have begun to investigate the various and changing interactions between humans and animals. In particular, a growing body of research examines humans' relationships with pets, most often dogs and cats. This paper reviews recent research in this field. After discussing what differentiates pets from other animals, the paper begins with a review of research investigating the meanings and roles of pets in people's lives and the nature and benefits of human–pet attachments. Secondly, it reviews research on the factors that help explain why some people have a higher regard for pets than others. The paper concludes with a discussion of some of the limitations of existing research and some suggestions on how to expand future investigations.

Introduction

There is little doubt that millions of Americans adore their pets. In fact, according to Michael Schaffer (2009, 8) in his book *One Nation Under Dog*, relationships between people and their animals are more intense (and expensive) than ever before:

America's housepets have worked their way into a new place in the hearts, homes, and wallets of their owners. In a relatively short period of time, the United States has become a land of doggie yoga and kitty acupuncture and frequent-flier miles for traveling pets, a society where your inability to find a pet sitter has become an acceptable excuse to beg off a dinner invitation, a country where political candidates pander to pet owners and show dog champions are feted like Oscar winners.

Myriad accounts in both academic research and the popular press echo Schaffer's observations. Sociologist Jennifer Greenebaum (2004), for example, interviewed people who think of their pets, not as mere dogs, but as friends, children or “fur babies.” This “new way of thinking about pets” she argues, is supported and reinforced by both the marketplace and other pet lovers—not least of whom, the fellow dog lovers her respondents meet at their neighborhood, *dog* bakery's weekly “Yappy Hour” (2004, 132). Similar accounts are even more plentiful in the news. A recent *New York Times* article reported, for example, that pets have become “The Emotional Power Broker of the Modern Family,” serving alternately as sources of conflict or unity, depending on whether family members agree about “what a pet should be” (Carey 2011).

For every story or study about how much people love and spoil their pets; however, there seems to be another about animal abuse, exploring issues ranging from pet

abandonment and neglect to sensational cases of animal hoarding and dog fighting (Ascione and Shapiro 2009). A substantial body of academic research, for example, investigates potential connections between animal cruelty and violence toward humans, trademarked “The Link” for short (see Patterson-Kane and Piper 2009 for a review). Sociologist Arnold Arluke (2006) points out that despite the prevalence of animal cruelty there is little agreement on how to even define it. Arluke (2006, 5) argues that the conflicted attitudes found among the various groups he interviewed, including college students who harmed animals as adolescents, animal hoarders, shelter workers, and animal protection officers, reflects “... a society that is uncertain and confused about the nature and importance of animals” (see also Arluke 1989).

Because animals occupy such a prominent position in so many areas of society (e.g., language, food, the economy, etc.; see Irvine 2009b, 372) nearly all Americans have some interactions with animals. For a majority however, the most complex and intimate of these experiences are with pets. A recent report asserts that more than 70 percent of American households have a pet, and almost half consider them family (AVMA 2007). A 2000 study of Americans (Purina Pet Institute 2000) reported that 95 percent of dog owners hug their “companion animal” on a daily basis, and more recently, a Pew survey reported that more American dog owners are closer to their dog than their own mother or father (Taylor et al. 2006). Yet, despite the importance of pets, there remain substantial differences in how people relate to and treat them. Every year, for example, six to eight million dogs and cats are surrendered to shelters and three to four million are euthanized (HSUS 2011). And for every person who adores their animal companion, there may be another who thinks of their pet as merely a useful tool, or who does not like them at all.

So what should we make of these seemingly conflicting stories? How do Americans really feel about and treat their pets? How can we explain the differences? And are there really just two types of pet owners, those that love and spoil their pets, and those that abuse them or abandon them to the street, as much of the news, and some of the research would have us believe? In the following paper I review the growing body of social scientific research that examines these issues. After discussing what differentiates pets from other animals, I begin with a review of literature that describes Americans’ attitudes toward, and treatment of pets. In particular, I review research investigating the meanings and roles of pets in people’s lives and the nature and benefits of human-pet attachments. In addition, to helping us better understanding how (and why) a large segment of the human population spends significant time and money on animals, this research offers contributions to intractable questions within the sociology of culture. The relationships between animals and their human caretakers, for example, provides an interesting case for exploring how symbolic boundaries provide a link between beliefs, behaviors, and culture (see Lamont and Molnar 2002 and Zerubavel 1996). Furthermore, these investigations offer insights into how people use culture to think and act, especially when they are exposed to more culture (e.g., various and conflicting cultural logics and scripts) than they actual use (see Swidler 2001 and Vaisey 2008).

After examining literature on the varieties of human-pet relationships, I review research on the factors that affect, and help explain why some people are closer to, or have more regard for, their pets than others. I conclude with a discussion of some of the limitations of existing research and some suggestions on how to expand future investigations. In particular, I argue that too much media and research portrays human-pet relations as existing along opposite and conflicting extremes. In reality most human-pet relations are more complex, and contingent upon an array of social, cultural, and interactional factors. I also argue that literature in the sociology of culture offers a particularly

fruitful resource for better understanding both the varieties and contradictions within human–animal relationships. Throughout this paper I focus almost exclusively on humans' relations with dogs and cats. As the “prototypic exemplars of co-habiting animals,” cats and dogs are by far the most plentiful, and the most commonly studied, (Staats et al. 2008, 270).¹

What is a pet?

Thomas (1983) claims there are three criteria that differentiate humans' relations with pets from relations with other animals: pets are allowed in our homes, they are given names, and they are never eaten (see also Eddy 2003). Franklin (1999) asserts that pets are animals that people acquire and treat the way they do infants and children. Indeed much of pets' appeal may be their childlike qualities. Many pet owners prefer to adopt baby animals and may be drawn to them because they elicit parental tendencies (Franklin 1999; Serpell 1996). Additionally, Serpell and Paul (1994) make a distinction between the emotional and economic functions of animals. They argue that pets, unlike other domestic animals such as livestock, are not valued for their utility, but for the emotional support they provide.

Another major distinction between pets and most other animals is their tameness. The history of pet keeping in all likelihood began with the domestication of the wolf in the Near East about 12,000 years ago, followed by the domestication of pigs and cattle in parts of Asia about 9000 years ago, and the domestication of cats 3000–4000 years ago in Egypt (Serpell 1996). Although there are competing explanations for how certain animals were domesticated (see Budiansky 1992), the primary account is that early hunter-gatherer societies introduced the infants of wild animals into their societies. Through selective and accidental breeding those animals that were best suited for living with people, mainly because they were neither aggressive nor afraid of people, were bred with other relatively tame animals of the same species. Slowly, this process produced actual physical changes in animals. The domesticated animals began to resemble the infants and adolescents of their original species. In contrast to their wild counterparts, domestic animals tend to be relatively docile, curious, non-territorial, and less distrustful of other animal species (Budiansky 1992).

Up until the late 18th century, domestic animals were often viewed disparagingly and in almost exclusively instrumental terms. There were, however, notable exceptions (Irvine 2004; Ritvo 1988). Members of the aristocratic elite of Ancient Greece, Ancient Rome, and Medieval Europe often kept pets. And, despite religious mandates specifically forbidding pet keeping, monks, nuns and other religious leaders also commonly kept animals, as evidenced by images in illuminated manuscripts and the creation of dog breeds in monasteries (Irvine 2004; Menache 1997, 2000).

According to scholars, the widespread ownership of pets among the middle classes began around late eighteenth and early 19th century (Irvine 2004; Ritvo 1987, 1988; Serpell 1996).² Evidence of the increased prevalence of pets, especially dogs, during this time includes increased profits from the dog tax and new publishing opportunities for books about dogs (Ritvo 1988). The first formal dog show, held in Newcastle, England in 1859, and the founding of the Kennel Club in 1873, offer additional telling examples. Ritvo (1988) argues that this major change in the acceptance and popularity of pet keeping was made possible by a shift in humans' relationships with and attitudes toward nature. Primarily because of increasing urbanization and scientific and economic development, nature was less and less often perceived as threatening and beyond human control (Ritvo 1988).

Although pets have been a common fixture in middle class homes of Western societies for about two centuries, their prevalence and status seems to be expanding in recent decades. As evidence, Franklin (1999) cites increases in pet populations, expansion in pet services industries, increased media attention, and a rising awareness of the benefits of companion animals. In Britain, for example, there were increases in the number of dogs, from 4.4 million in 1963 to 7.3 million in 1991. Similar figures for cats show their numbers increasing from four million to seven million during the same period. In the United States the percentage of households who own dogs increased from 31.6% in 1996, to 39% in 2010 (AVMA 2007; HSUS 2011). The percentage of households that owned cats increased from 27.3% to 33% during the same period (AVMA 2007; HSUS 2011). Additionally, veterinary expenditures have also increased. From 1996 to 2006 payments increased from 7.0 to 16.1 billion for dogs and from four to 7.1 billion for cats (AVMA 2007).

The role and meaning of animals in human lives

Sociologists often argue that attitudes toward animals are social constructions, which people create, change, and learn about through their encounters with media, institutions, and other people (Arluke 2010; Herzog 2010). Such approaches have been crucial in explaining both *how* and *why* human-animal relationships differ so much over time, and from place to place – for instance, in explaining why some groups sleep with their dogs and others eat them (Podberscek 2009). Arluke and Sanders (1996, 2009, xx) argue, for example, that societies rank animals, like almost everything else, on a “ladder of worth.” Most humans rank highest on this “sociozoologic scale” followed by pets, which are valued for their relative tameness and acceptance of their place as close to, but lesser than humans. Lower levels are occupied by less desirable animals, and even humans, who prove themselves “vermin” or “predators,” when they fail to yield to their subordinate statuses. Although situated squarely within the symbolic interactionist tradition Arluke and Sanders approach overlaps with work in the sociology of culture on how people draw (and often act on) symbolic boundaries between “worthy” and “unworthy” people (see Lamont 1992, 2000; Steensland 2008).

Sanders (1993, 1999, 2003) investigations into how relations between humans and animals emerge from day-to-day interactions are notable examples of this focus on the *meaning* of animals. He suggests that social constructions of animals are significant determinants of the nature of relations and interactions. Dog owners, as Sanders and others point out, vary in the extent to which they view their dogs as “subjects” or “objects.” (See also Greenebaum 2010; Tuan 1984). Some clearly view their dogs as similar to people, with whom they have valuable relations whereas others see their dogs simply as “things” that provide useful service. Still other dog owners view their animals as both simultaneously; as subjects when cuddling on the couch and as objects that can be relinquished if they become a nuisance (e.g., because they have become too expensive, potentially dangerous, or are no longer needed; see Irvine 2009a, 7).

Despite these variations, Sanders (1993, 1999) reports that dog owners generally have a very high regard for the relationships they have with their pets and often describe their dogs as people or as possessing human qualities. Sanders (1993, 211) writes that dog owners “routinely used their day-to-day experience with their dogs to define their animals as minded social actors and as having, at least, a ‘person-like’ status. Caretakers typically saw their dog as reciprocating partners in an honest, non-demanding and rewarding social relationship.” Interestingly, he also points out that caretakers are aware that many people, especially non-dog owners, do not think as highly of dogs as they do. He writes:

At the same time that owners presented their dogs as thinking, emotional, creative, role-taking individuals they realized that conventional social definitions tended to situate dogs outside the bounds of humanness. Companion canines are customarily regarded as objects, toys, creatures whose ostensibly human characteristics are “actually” the result of anthropomorphic projection on the part of overinvolved owners. However, intimate experience and the practical recognition that treating their animals as minded and competent coactors *worked* as an effective context in which to understand and accomplish ongoing collective action convinced owners that rigidly placing dogs outside the social category of “person” was unwarranted (Sanders 1993, 220).

It is worth noting that if some more recent scholarship (Greenebaum 2004; Schaffer 2009) is any indication, such “strange” notions, such as the belief that dogs and cats are people too, may no longer be unusual at all.

Pet love and attachment

While many sociologists approach attitudes toward pets as social constructions, others, including many psychologists, are guided by the belief “that we live with pets because they make us feel loved” (Herzog 2010, 95). Thus, a second major theme of existing research is a focus on the potential benefits of human-animal relations, as well as the relative strength of the human-animal bond. Much of this research tends to be more quantitative in nature, relying on series of survey questions to assess relationships, rather than interviews or observation. Albert and Bulcroft (1988) produced two such quantitative measures that have been used fairly widely by researchers to understand human pet relations. Their pet attachment scale assesses how close people are to their animals, whereas their anthropomorphism index measures the extent to which people think of their pets as people. These and related survey questions have indicated in most cases that a majority of Americans have very close relationships with their pets, perhaps increasingly so.

One of the most extensive bodies of research investigates the potential health benefits (physical, social and psychological) of interactions with pets, especially for vulnerable populations, such as children, the elderly, and the institutionalized (see Herzog 2011; Walsh 2009; Wells 2009). Studies report a range of benefits of pet ownership and animal interactions, including, but not limited to, longer survival rates after a heart attack (Friedman et al. 1980), fewer trips to the doctor (Heady 1998; Siegel 1990) and lower levels of anxiety, loneliness, and depression (Folse et al. 1994; Garitty et al. 1989). In a series of studies, for example, Kurdek (2008, 2009) demonstrates that dogs are sometimes an important source of psychological attachment for young adults because they can serve as a “safe haven” during difficult times. In one study, Kurdek (2008) reports that university students who were closely attached to their dogs were just as close with the animals as other people. In another, Kurdek (2009) claims that young adults were more likely to turn to pet dogs than fathers and brothers (but not mothers, friends, or romantic partners) in times of distress. Similarly, Staats et al. (2006, 2008) report that university students, professors, and middle age adults choose to own dogs primarily because they help them stay active and keep them from being lonely. Staats et al. (2008, 279) claim that “animals provide social support and companionship to humans at various stages of the life cycle.”

Although the notion that “pets are good for us” is backed by a plethora of research, and has nearly become conventional wisdom, it remains an unsettled issue among researchers. Herzog (2011, 236) argues that because of a surplus of contradictory scientific findings, pointing to pets as both a hindrance and a help to human health, “the existence of a generalized ‘pet effect’ on human mental and physical health is at present not a fact but an unsubstantiated hypothesis.” Aware that the relationship between pet ownership

and psychological health may not be as straightforward as some have surmised, researchers have begun to develop more nuanced approaches to tease out the intricacies of human-pet relations. In a recent study of Canadian dog owners and non-owners, for example, Duval Antonacopoulos and Pychyl (2010) found that pet owners were less lonely, but only among those with high levels of human social support. Overall, pet owners, and non-owners, who lived alone, had similar levels of loneliness and depression. Furthermore, pet owners with low levels of human social support and high levels of pet attachment, were actually significantly more lonely and depressed.

Explaining relationships between people and their pets

In addition, to describing the content and variations in human-pet relationships, research also focuses on the potential “causes” in order to explain changes over time, national or cultural variations, or biographical and demographic variations. The determinants of attitudes are extensive, but most research focuses on cultural and demographic factors, including race and ethnicity, gender, and family structure (see Kellert 1980, 1994 for information on determinants of attitudes toward animals more generally). Although rarely if ever the thrust of this research, these studies offer compelling examples of how exposure to various cultural logics and scripts inform people’s beliefs and behaviors (Swidler 1986, 2001).

Exposure to animals

Experience with animals – or the lack of it – likely has significant effects on humans’ attitudes toward animals. For example, one popular argument is that people have developed more romantic (and unrealistic) views of animals as American society has urbanized, resulting in increasing separation from farming, hunting and the natural world (Budiansky 1992). Some research has investigated whether having pets produces more positive views toward all animals, and although this association seems likely, most have not demonstrated a link (Ascione 1992; Patterson 1981; Serpell and Paul 1994; Signal and Taylor 2006). Two published studies, however, do find a positive association between pet owning and attitudes toward animals more broadly. In one study, 8–12 year olds who had pets were less fearful of animals than age mates without pets (Bowd 1984). In a second study of Canadian adults, pet owners were more likely than non-owners to oppose hunting and animal research, and more egalitarian in their views of wild animals (Kafer et al. 1992).

My own research also indicates that childhood experiences affect adult relationships with animals (Blouin 2008). A majority of my respondents mentioned they acquired pets as adults, in large part, because they had them as children, and/or that their childhood (and their parents’) attitudes toward pets affect how they relate to animals now. Also notable are studies which investigate how experiences with pets can profoundly affect how people relate to them, for example, in some cases, “people come to understand” them as individual persons, while appreciating aspects that make them different from people (Fox 2006, 535; see also Power 2008).

Demographic factors

Demographic characteristics such as race, class, gender, or family status represent distinct group experiences and differential socialization. Furthermore, they represent distinct structural locations with differential access to resources (e.g., different understandings of,

and experiences with, animals). Thus, they are potentially important determinants of people's attitudes toward, and relations with, animals.

Race, class, and ethnicity. A handful of studies indicate that race, class, and ethnicity are related to attitudes and treatment of animals. In his ethnography of a low-income, urban neighborhood Anderson (1990) claims that within the black community dogs are more often viewed as a source of protection than as pets.³ Anderson (1990, 222) writes that "in the working-class black subculture, 'dogs' does not mean 'dogs in the house,' but usually connotes dogs tied up outside, guarding the backyard, biting trespassers bent on trouble." As a result, some African-Americans may be disgusted and perplexed by whites' or middle-class blacks' friendly relations with dogs (e.g., letting dogs run free in their homes and displays of physical affection). Furthermore, Anderson (1990, 222) observes that whites and some blacks are, "on some level," aware of the intimidation their dogs cause, and use them as protection in their homes and on the streets. Similarly, Tissot (2011, 274) argues that upper middle class whites who move into primarily black, working class neighborhoods display their preferences for "elegant," "sophisticated," or tiny "minimalist," breeds rather than the "strength and aggressiveness valued by working class dog owners" as a way to assert their own class-specific values and display their wealth.

Despite suggestions by some (also Kellert and Berry 1980) that blacks generally have more negative or utilitarian views toward animals than whites, some more recent research finds no racial differences (Siegel 1995; Risley-Curtiss, Holley, and Wolf 2006) Risley-Curtiss et al. (2006), for example, report that African-Americans are just as likely as other groups to say that their pet is part of the family and to receive emotional support and companionship from their pet. These contradictory research findings suggest that attitudes toward animals may be better explained by social class and different rates of exposure to pets, than by race. (Caron-Sheppard 1995; Dolin 1988; Kellert 1994). Blacks' relationships with animals are likely just as diverse as other groups'. In focus groups with African-American women, Wolch et al. (2000) find evidence of both "anthropocentric" and "biocentric" attitudes toward animals (Kempton et al. 1995). The biocentric attitudes, which include more positive attitudes such as viewing animals as part of nature, viewing them as having interests, and believing that people and animals should peacefully coexist, are more common than the more negative and utilitarian "anthropocentric" attitudes. In addition, to expressing common "anthropocentric" sentiments such as that "some animals are pests" and "that animals are inherently inferior to humans," more than half of the focus group participants expressed "pro-animal rights commentary," arguing, for example, that humans should help and protect all animals regardless of species (Wolch et al. 2000, 84–7).

An emerging body of research specifically addresses potential connections between ethnicity and animal attitudes and practices (Elder et al. 1998; Jerolmach 2007; Lassiter and Wolch 2005). Based on focus groups with low-income, immigrant Chicana and Latina women in Los Angeles, Lassiter and Wolch (2005) find that many of the women's attitudes toward animals and animal treatment have changed dramatically since they moved to the United States. Interestingly, many of the women who had come from poor rural backgrounds in Mexico and Central America, where animals were very common but not held in high regard, have adopted "prevailing ideas about human obligations for animal welfare" (p. 282). Nonetheless, despite this rejection of the "violence of their rural heritage," these women continue to keep numerous animals as pets, including animals such as goats and chickens that are usually kept only as livestock in most parts of the United States, as a way to stay connected "in tradition and memory to their rural past" (p. 282).

Gender. A larger and more consistent body of research suggests there are gender differences in attitudes toward, and treatment of, animals. Women are generally reported to have more empathetic or positive attitudes toward animals than men (Herzog 2007; Herzog et al. 1991; Ramirez 2006; Signal and Taylor 2006, 2007). Herzog (2007) who conducted a meta-theoretical analysis of previously published studies, provides the most comprehensive assessment of gender differences in human-animal interactions (assessing both direction and size of gender effects). He reports that women more often oppose animals' use, are slightly more attached to animals, and are much more often involved as activists for animal causes. Men exhibit more negative attitudes and behavior, for example, participating in hunting, and animal abuse, much more often than women, on average.

A study by Ramirez (2006) provides a more in-depth look at how gender may affect relations between people and dogs. Based on interviews with 26 dog owners, Ramirez (2006, 373) suggests that "people rely on gender norms to organize their relationships with their dogs." He finds they do so in two distinct ways. First, men and women generally value different things about their relationships with their dog. Women most often view themselves as "parents," whereas men view themselves as friends or partners, but rarely as parents. Interestingly, men and women usually select dogs of the same sex and describe their dogs in ways that "mirror qualities that each gender values in romantic relationships" (p. 385). For example, men tend to focus on appearance and women on personality. Secondly, dog owners use their dogs to "display gender qualities" (p. 386). Ramirez argues that men exert their masculinity through routines with their dogs that involve physical activities such as hiking or exercising, whereas women more often "ground their relationships with their pets on intimacy" (p. 386).

Family status. Family status or life cycle is one of the more important predictors of relations with animals. Turner (2005, 12) argues that "the role the animal plays within a family is largely dependent upon the developmental period within which the family is currently functioning." For instance, Turner asserts that pet attachment will likely be relatively high among unattached young adults, the newly married, and "empty nesters" and low among parents with young children, in part because human children may replace pets as the children of the family. These findings are echoed by other studies (Albert and Bulcroft 1988; Taylor et al. 2006). Albert and Bulcroft (1988, 543) reported, based on a survey of Rhode Island pet owners, that "Attachment to pets is highest among never married, divorced, widowed, and remarried people, childless couples, newlyweds, and empty-nesters. Never married, divorced, and remarried people, and people without children present, are also most likely to anthropomorphize their pets." My own study found that people with children have lower levels of regard for, and attachment to, pets (Blouin 2008). One interview respondent's comments about how her attitudes changed when she became a mother are particularly instructive of how and why family status can matter so much: "I did treat my cats more like children than probably most people, but I think that since I've had children I've changed my attitude a lot towards that. I think just something clicked in me. They're animals, they're not children (Blouin 2008, 156)."

Some limitations and future directions

Research on human-animal relations has flourished in recent decades, but much work remains. In my view, there is still an overemphasis on the extremes. Furthermore, these extremes (and the contradictions in attitudes and behaviors they highlight) are sometimes treated as though they only exist between different people or groups (not within them).

My own research, based on interviews with dog owners, suggests that people's relationships with their animals are complex, and cannot easily be characterized as abusive or caring; nor do people always fall along a single continuum based on their level of attachment or concern for pets (Blouin 2008, forthcoming). For one, people's relationships with animals can change. Several individuals I interviewed admitted to what Carlisle-Frank and Frank (2001) call *switching* (i.e., moving from one type of relationship or attitude to another). Krista, a young mother, for example, explained that her relationships with dogs and cats changed dramatically after she had children. Heidi, another young mother explained a similar change that accompanied having children: "when I was younger and I had dogs they were always my buddies and I went and played with them, but it's different now that I have kids (Blouin 2008, 116)." Other pet owners I interviewed described similar transformations that accompanied changes in their lives – growing older, getting married, getting busier with education or work, moving from a rural area to a more urban environ, and so on. Cultural sociologists have long noted that people are exposed to much more "culture" than they actually use, much of it contradictory (Swidler 2001). Researchers of human-animals relations would benefit from applying this theoretical approach. I also think that research on human-animal relations has much to offer the sociology of culture, such as explanations for how and why people select among competing cultural scripts and logics in their relations with animals, and in other aspects of their lives.

A second problem with characterizing people as either "caring" or "abusive" is that individuals who express similar levels of attachment to, or concern for their pets, often disagree fundamentally on what constitutes proper pet treatment or appropriate human-animal relationships. For example, individuals or groups (especially those with animal rights or animal welfare sympathies) regularly charge that some pet owners are spoiling or even abusing their dogs, by overfeeding them, dressing them in costumes, and letting them sleep in beds with people. A related charge is that treating animals as children or pseudo-people (i.e., anthropomorphizing them) is unnatural and unfair to animals. These pet owners, who "spoil" their pets sometimes respond in kind that other pet owners (who by most any measure have similarly high levels of regard for pets) are overly detached and callous in their relations with pets, or even that they are abusive for "crating" their dogs or for employing certain disciplinary or training techniques. Similarly, some potential dog owners report being confused to learn that pet shelters, run by people, who, in their view, "supposedly" care for animals, would rather euthanize more animals than adopt an animal out to someone who plans to keep their dog outside.

Other examples of people or groups who are similar in their attitudes toward and relations with animals, but who also have major disagreements, abound. As reviewed above, a significant body of research addresses pet abuse, abandonment, and euthanasia. The thrust of much of this work is that people with low regard for animals are largely to blame for the problems. On closer inspection the issue is more nuanced. Some people, for example, relinquish their pets out of a sense of compassion for the animal, because they can no longer feed them properly, or care for them appropriately. Other people may give up animals, not because they do not care about them, but because they view them as lesser, but still valued, members of their family, and feel compelled to spend their time and resources on human family members.

Although rare, bestiality (or zoophilia) offers another complex portrait of human-animal relationships. Research suggest that people who have sexual contact with animals (relations with dogs, being one of the most common) often have very close, emotional attachments to their pets (Beetz 2002, 2004; Miletski 2002). In a study of mostly young,

male zoophiles, Williams and Weinberg (2003) report that most claimed to have an emotionally deep and loving relationship with the animal. Yet, according to the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), the largest animal welfare organization in the world, such relationships are cruel and abusive. In fact, the HSUS actively supports the creation of laws that criminalize bestiality and zoophilia (Miletski 2006). While research may not be able to, nor wish to answer questions of what are the best or most appropriate forms of human-animal relationships, future research should attempt to better describe, and explain the complexities and contradictions within these relationships.

Conclusion

As the following review demonstrates, pets clearly are an important part of many Americans' lives. For some they are important family members or friends that make them feel loved and appreciated. At the same time, relations are often fraught with waste, violence, distrust, and misunderstanding. Millions of pets are put to death, in some cases even outlawed, because they are deemed unsafe, or simply not wanted. Furthermore, despite pets' reputed health benefits, thousands of pet owners are harmed by their own animals through bites, falls, and communicable diseases every year (Herzog 2011).

Much is made in the literature, and rightly so, about these conflicting and ambiguous attitudes toward, and relations with, pets. In many cases, however, these discrepancies are highlighted to describe or to help explain why some people love their pets and others abandon or abuse them, as though there are only two types of pet owners. In my view, this dichotomous approach, and regular focus on extremes in attitudes and treatment, presents an overly simplistic view of human-animal relationships. More importantly, it obscures both the complexity and ambiguity of all relations, whether on one end of the spectrum or the other, or somewhere in between. I argue that conflicts and ambiguities run deeper and are reflected not simply in differences between people (or groups of people), but in conflicts and inconsistencies within individuals (and within similar groups). Sanders (1993, 1999, 2003) rightly points out that some people view their pets as objects and others view them as subjects. However, it is also likely that many people view their pets as both subjects and object simultaneously (Irvine 2009a). Pet owners' attitudes may change over time, change between different pets, or even change with a single pet, as situations in their lives also change.

In addition, to expanding the scope of empirical research to include issues beyond the extremes, and to dig deeper within and between these extremes, I argue that additional methodological and theoretical formulations are also needed. Quantitative measures have generally depicted relations as existing along a single continuum, for example, in terms of the strength of the human-animal bond or level of attachment, neglecting the possibility that relations are actually more complex, and multi-dimensional. Tuan's (1984) reference to a continuum ranging from dominance to affection and Greenbaum's (2010) view of dogs as subordinates or persons (i.e., pets or companions) are examples of approaches that are fruitful, but have limitations. Future research should also pursue the possibility of discrete types of pet owners, or styles of pet ownership, which may overlap on some issues (e.g., high levels of regard for pets) and conflict on others (e.g., specifics of how pets should be fed clothed, and integrated into the family). Future research may also consider how people's understandings of what is a pet (e.g., child, animal, tool, companion) affects, not only attitudes, but also how people treat and relate to them. Furthermore, much work remains to parse out the various factors that inform these attitudes, behaviors, and relationships – including, in particular, the impact of cultural sources (e.g., logics and

practices espoused by animal welfare groups and other institutions) and interactions with pets and other pet owners.

Herzog (2010) points out that although scientists prefer simple explanations, social phenomena are not always straightforward. Why people keep pets, and the relationships between people and their pets, are complex issues with both proximate (focusing on the “*hows* of behavior”) and ultimate causes (focusing “on the *whys* of behavior”) (Herzog 2010, 95). Prior work provides a great deal of insight into why pets are popular, but it does not adequately explain the range of variations in human-pet relationships. Although research has grown substantially in the past couple decades, the study of human-animal relations remains a rich and fertile field, with abundant unexplored ground and many open questions. Future research should continue to map out relations between people and pets, while paying particular attention to the full range of relations. Continued theory building should better address the shifting nature of human-animal relations across cultures and within societies, communities, and individual’s lives.

Short Biography

David Blouin is an Assistant Professor of Sociology at Indiana University South Bend. His primary areas of teaching and research include culture, quantitative research methods, human-animal relations, and the scholarship of teaching and learning. He has recently published work in *Teaching Sociology* and *Sociological Imagination* on service learning and undergraduate research pedagogies. His current research investigates the cultural, demographic, and biographical bases of relationships between people and their pets. He holds a BA in sociology from Wittenberg University in Ohio and a PhD in sociology from Indiana University, Bloomington.

Notes

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¹ The Humane Society of the United States (2011) reports that Americans own 78.2 million dogs and 86.4 million cats.

² See Irvine (2004) for a discussion of the prominent theories for why humans keep pets.

³ In 2006, African-Americans were less likely to own pets than member of all other racial and ethnic groups (AVMA 2007). Additionally, a Pew Study of 3000 Americans (Taylor et al. 2006) found that only 30% of Blacks and 39% of Hispanics were pet owners, compared to 64% of whites.

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