

Animal Issues

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The Human-Animal Bond and Self Psychology: Toward a New Understanding

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to introduce and define self psychology and its concepts (self and selfobject) so that they can be applied toward a new understanding of the human-nonhuman animal bond. The paper utilizes selected literature from both self psychology and the human-animal bond fields. The paper contains four primary conclusions:

1. Self psychology provides a unique model for understanding the depth and meaning of human-animal relationships;
2. Companion animals and humans can be equally important in their selfobject roles;
3. Self psychology can offer a model for understanding individual differences in attachment to companion animals; and
4. A future direction includes finding ways to assess self psychology constructs in order to measure the depth and function of the selfobject relationship.

Although the benefits of companion animals to human health have attracted a lot of scientific interest and research (Friedman, Thomas, & Eddy, 2000; Garrity & Stallones, 1998), theoretical conceptualizations of why the human-pet bond is beneficial are lacking.

Researchers in the field of human-nonhuman animal studies have been accused of having no theoretical foundations (Kidd & Kidd, 1987). Kidd and Kidd reviewed the primary theories of the human-companion animal bond. These included theories from sources such as ethology, learning theory, developmental psychology, social psychology, and object attachments. Kidd and Kidd state that the theories are based on three types of models: animal-animal, human-human, and human-object, which are seen as being similar to human-animal relationships and attachments. These models can be used individually or in combination. Kidd and Kidd conclude by saying: "The best that can be said is that sometimes, under some circumstances, and in some ways, human-animal relationships are analogous to animal-animal, or to human-human, or to human-object relationships" (p. 143). Finally, they conclude that although all the theories explain some of the human-animal bond, none of them adequately explain the bond because they all are incomplete. In addition, it will be difficult, if not impossible, to come up with a unitary theory of the human-animal bond that will be acceptable to all the various disciplines involved in this interdisciplinary field of study.

Recent attempts toward defining a theory for the human-animal bond include such ideas as social/psychological support (Collis & McNicholas, 1998) or various ideas from evolutionary psychology (Herzog, 2002) such as biophilia (Wilson, 1984). Also from an evolutionary perspective, Serpell (2002) suggests that our innate tendency to anthropomorphize has led us to view companion animals as giving social support. He suggests we have an innate tendency to keep companion animals because they enhance our own health and quality of life by providing us with social support.

In spite of the fact that no theory to date has been able to explain the complex human-companion animal bond, this still is an endeavor worth pursuing. As Kidd and Kidd (1987) point out, a good theory would help to organize data and results as well as generate reliable predictions. Therefore, this paper will explore and define one important psychological theory called self psychology, which can help explain the human-companion animal bond.

A few theoretical papers exist where self psychology has been applied to the human-animal bond, but these publications do not appear to have reached a large audience. (Alper, 1993; Wolf, 1994). Both Alper and Wolf were writing primarily about children and from a psychotherapeutic view. The pur-

pose of this paper is to draw attention to how self psychology can be used to illuminate many aspects of the human-animal bond for people of all ages. As Alper states,

An analysis of the human/companion animal bond from a self psychological perspective will help to give a framework for a deepened understanding of the bond and of the past and current significance of humans' relationships with their animals. (p. 258)

Brief History of Self Psychology

Self psychology grew out of psychoanalytic theory and was developed by a psychoanalyst, Heinz Kohut (1913-1981). Kohut broke from traditional Freudian theory by focusing primarily on the development of early childhood personality structures via the relationship to the mothering figure. Basch (1984) discusses how self psychology's focus on the quality of the early relationship with the mothering figure is supported by other psychological theories that focus on attachment, such as John Bowlby and Margaret Mahler. Kohut also believed that this early infant-mother relationship set the stage for later relationships and focused strongly on empathy as the key to understanding the early issues, particularly in disorders of self-esteem such as narcissistic disorders.

Basics of Self Psychology: The Self & Selfobject

In self psychology, two of the main concepts are "self" and "selfobject." The self is a psychological structure that is the core of the personality and gives a person a sense of well-being, self-esteem, and general cohesion (Wolf, 1988). Wolf also states that the self is made up of ambitions, values, ideals, inborn talents, and acquired skills. There can be tension or harmony between these aspects of the self. For example, a person could place a very high value on reaching an ideal image of career success but lack the ambition or talents to follow through. This would cause tension inside the person. To maintain a healthy sense of self, people need certain responses from the environment that will maintain and promote this sense of self. These psychologically sustaining responses might include empathy and soothing, affirming, sustaining, or calming responses. These responses are provided by "objects" (people,

animals, things, experiences, or ideas) in the surrounding environment and are called selfobject functions. Research has shown that companion animals can have a calming effect on people who are in stressful conditions (Allen, Blascovich, Tomaka, & Kelsey, 1991). The calming effect of the companion animal may be considered a selfobject function that for some people helps maintain an aspect of the self.

According to Wolf (1988), to be defined as a selfobject, the being or experience must “evoke, maintain and give cohesion to the self” (p. 63). A selfobject often is conceived of mistakenly as (a) the actual person (such as a mother), (b) a living nonhuman object (such as a companion animal), (c) an experience (such as religion), (d) an object or thing (such as a car or home), or (e) an idea (such as a political ideology). However, it is not the actual object that is considered the selfobject. Rather, it is the individual’s inner psychological experience of some aspect of the selfobject that is felt to maintain, bring out, or hold together the sense of self (Wolf, 1988). A child may be able to show sadness only in front of the family dog. The child’s sense of self is affirmed by the dog’s perceived attentiveness and acceptance of her emotion.

Technically, the dog is not the selfobject, but the supportive function the dog provides to the child is the selfobject function. Some important aspect of the particular external “object” stirs an inner experience (feeling validated and connected) inside the person. The objective, external aspects of a selfobject, (whether a person or animal), would make little difference for the self or person. Therefore, the only way to observe such a selfobject function would be through introspection and empathy with the person experiencing the self-object function (Kohut, 1984).

To be considered a selfobject, the person, animal, thing, idea or experience must play a crucial role in sustaining the self of the person. According to Wolf (1988), to be defined as a selfobject, the being or experience must “evoke, maintain and give cohesion to the self.” (p. 63). Therefore, the reliance or dependency on a selfobject can be quite intense and crucial to a person’s sense of wellbeing. Kohut (1971) believed that sometimes the selfobject even may be experienced as not separate but as part of the self. The person may feel a sense of falling apart, or “fragmentation,” when the selfobject is lost. A companion animal may serve as a crucial selfobject to a person so that when separated from the animal, the person feels a sense of emptiness, depres-

sion, or disintegration until re-united with the animal. Given the internal turmoil that is possible when losing an important animal as a selfobject, it is easy to understand why people spend thousands of dollars on medical expenses trying to keep their animal companions alive. In such a case, the person may be (consciously or unconsciously) striving desperately to maintain the core of the whole personality by keeping the companion animal alive.

According to Wolf (1988), objects fill many of our needs but are not necessarily selfobject experiences. If the selfobject experience with a person or object is not that crucial to the person's sense of self, then it is not a selfobject experience. A selfobject may fill needs such as nourishing, sexual gratifying, teaching or protecting. These interpersonal functions may support someone, but they are not necessarily crucial for the integrity of the person's self structure (Wolf). An example of this might be a dog who is kept strictly for the protection of the home and family. The owner may appreciate the protective function the dog serves but will not experience a sense of falling apart if the dog is missing. In this case, the dog was not functioning as a selfobject who maintained the cohesion of the owner's sense of self.

A person's subjective, psychological reality of emotional reliance could be stronger for an animal or experience than for a person. Persons may interpret their cat's behaviors as conveying love and feel love in return. The person's internal, subjective experience of love is the important element, not whether the cat's behavior really means love. That cat may be the only selfobject in the person's world who brings out this internal experience of love. This experience of love can be more real to the person than any other experience of love that person has known with persons, animals, or experiences. Thus, the inner experience for the person (or self) is more important than any external realities of the situation such as the debate as to whether animals are capable of feeling emotions (Herzog & Galvin, 1997) or if it is possible or beneficial to have animal companions as substitutes for people (Serpell, 1996).

Kohut (1984) made clear that the responsiveness from selfobjects is the "oxygen" for the psychological life of the self and is required throughout the lifespan. Kohut believed that the need for a selfobject is not limited to childhood and is not overcome with maturation. The need for selfobjects remains as an individual matures. However, what does change are the form and level of

abstraction of the selfobject relationships as well as the needs of the self (Basch, 1984). Kohut saw the development of the self as an ongoing, lifelong process that requires the necessary selfobject relationships to sustain the process (Basch). In self psychology, psychopathology is understood as originating from encountering frustrating, depriving, or out-of-tune selfobjects, particularly in early childhood. It is essential to the wellbeing of a person or self to have nourishing selfobject responsiveness throughout life, whether it comes from a person, animal, experience, object, or idea.

Three Types of Selfobject

Kohut (1984) defined three types of selfobject functions that help to keep the self intact. These include mirroring selfobjects, idealizable selfobjects, and alter-ego selfobjects. Wolf (1988) defines these three types of selfobjects:

1. Mirroring selfobjects sustain the self by providing the experience of affirmation, confirmation, and recognition of the self in its grandness, goodness and wholeness;
2. Idealizable selfobjects sustain the self by allowing it the experience of being part of an admired and respected selfobject; needing the opportunity to be accepted and be part of a stable, nonanxious, wise, powerful protective and calm selfobject; and
3. Alter-ego selfobjects (also called twinship selfobjects) sustain the self by providing the experience of essential likeness of another's self (p. 55).

Alper (1993) demonstrates how a pet can function as a mirroring selfobject to a child.

In the privacy of her room, Hilary conducted poetry readings in which her dog was the enthusiastic audience. The dog sat attentively through the readings, and when Hilary enthusiastically asked, "Did you like it?" the dog would wag her tail, lick her mistress, and jump up and down. She responded with enthusiasm and activity, a rough equivalent of the attuned responsiveness Hilary's parents were unable to provide. The dog provided Hilary with a positive image of herself, reflected back her own natural joy in her creative productions. Her internal experience of excitement was validated, allowing her to develop an awareness and appreciation of her own creativity. Through her dog, Hilary saw mirrored a worthwhile, interesting,

and expressive self, and it was this mirroring response that made her feelings and actions meaningful. (p. 262)

Alper (1993) gives the following example of a pet's serving as an idealizing selfobject.

. . . Hilary revealed that she had spent a great deal of time training them in obedience classes and entering them in professionally judged competitions. This aspect of her relationship with, one dog in particular, was, I believe, central in providing an idealizing selfobject function. . . . Showing her dog, an extension of herself, provided Hilary with an avenue for the development of her thwarted narcissism, channeling it into a form that was given public and familial approval. The dogs provided her with an opportunity to feel proud and worthwhile. (pp. 261, 262)

In this example, Hilary was able to identify with her dog's greatness, which ideally would allow her to absorb and internalize a sense of self worth that evolves into healthy narcissism (Alper, 1993).

The alter-ego (or twinship) selfobject is described by Wolf (1994). Wolf used the following passage to describe the alter-ego function a yearling fawn played for a young boy named Jody:

He [Jody] leaned over to drink. The fawn, following, drank with him, sucking up the water and moving its mouth up and down the length of the trough. At one moment its head was against Jody's cheek and he sucked in the water with the same sound as the fawn, for the sake of companionship. He lifted his head and shook it and wiped his mouth. The fawn lifted its head too, and water dripped from its muzzle. (Rawlings, 1938, p. 200)

Functions of Selfobjects

Various authors have attempted to categorize selfobject functions in different ways. Some selfobjects can create actual change and growth inside the structure of the self, while other selfobjects help to maintain the *status quo* of the self but do not create a change. This has been defined mostly in relation to how psychotherapists can function as a selfobject that stimulates change to the self-structure of their patients. The technique of psychotherapy as described by self-psychology is beyond the scope of this paper. However, the functions of selfobjects can be explored here.

Kohut talked about archaic and mature selfobject relating but never completely defined the terms (Tonnesvang, 2002). The main differentiation between the two types of relating is the ability to empathize with the selfobjects and see them as independent others with needs and lives separate and different from their own. Hagman (1997) referred to this as “self-centeredness” versus “other-centeredness.” If persons are relating to their companion animals as archaic selfobjects who are, more or less, extensions of themselves, they may be able to relate only in an anthropomorphic way. This could lead to treating an animal completely as a human and ignoring the true species needs of the animal—giving a dog more rights than humans in the household and overlooking a dog’s need for a hierarchy in the pack. This type of overindulgence may be a result of archaic selfobject relating, that is, not being able to see the “other-centeredness” for the dog and to put themselves in their paws.

Although Kohut talked about only two types of selfobjects (archaic vs. mature), more recent authors have elaborated on the various types and functions of selfobjects. Gilbert (1994), specifies the types of selfobject functions that can be provided only by people and the functions that also can be provided by animals, objects, situations, places, and ideas. First, Gilbert defines four selfobject functions: (a) nuclear, (b) archaic, (c) compensatory, and (d) sustaining. She defines them as follows:

Nuclear selfobjects are those used by the infant and young child to establish the basic nuclear self. Archaic selfobjects are those that later in life fill acute needs resulting from deficits in the nuclear self. A compensatory selfobject provides a structure-building experience that makes up for some of the deficits. Sustaining selfobjects are those that the self uses for everyday maintenance. (p. 43)

Gilbert (1994) contends that people must provide the selfobject functions that actually build self (or personality) structure. Nuclear (such as a mother) and compensatory (such as a psychotherapist) selfobjects can create new self structure. According to Gilbert, only two humans could carry out this process. It would be hard to imagine any animal who could serve as a substitute mother and provide for the needs of a young infant, such as the needs to be held and nurtured. In addition, an animal would not be capable of the active, verbal working through of relationship problems that might come up in psy-

chotherapy. However, animals can serve as archaic or sustaining selfobjects who can help restore the self or maintain it. Therefore, animals as selfobjects play some of the same crucial and necessary roles as people. The animals, however, would not create underlying structural changes to the self. Daily play sessions with a dog may bring out playful, child-like feelings that would help sustain happiness in a person. The dog could be providing a sustaining selfobject function.

The idea that animals as selfobjects may not create change in the self does not make them necessarily less important than people as selfobjects. People as selfobjects may or may not create structural changes to the self. Probably most relationships with other people serve as archaic or sustaining selfobjects and do not cause structural change. In addition, not all self-psychologists agree with Gilbert's (1994) classifications. Some self psychologists would argue that animals can create structural change in a person (A. Goldberg, personal communication, December 9, 2003). All types of selfobjects are valuable for maintaining the stability and vitality of the self and are necessary throughout life.

Developmental Selfobject Needs and the Child-Pet Bond

Companion animals can play an important role in providing the selfobject needs of developing children (Alper, 1993). In part, this may be because children are more at ease in crossing species lines and have an intuitive understanding that we are both human and animal (Melson, 2001). This is true, especially when the parents somehow are deficient in providing idealizable, mirroring, or twinship selfobject needs. Alper states that in families where the parents are unable to provide emotional attunement (mirroring) or adequate idealizable figures with whom to identify, the child will be unable to form a positive, stable, and consistent sense of self. This can mean that the child will be lacking a healthy, positive sense of self and be more susceptible to feelings of emptiness, fluctuating self-esteem, and fragmentation (Alper). In families where the range of allowable emotional expression is limited, children may find it safer to explore their emotions with their companion animals. This is because companion animals, "do not criticize, retaliate, feel overwhelmed, or reject the child who is expansive in showing off their newly found self" (Alper, p. 259).

When a parent cannot adapt to the changing needs of a child, the more flexible child will adapt to what is available (Atwood & Stolorow, 1984). Although sometimes this may include extended family members, neighbors, or teachers, often it is the companion animal who is seen as part of the family. Alper (1993) points out that in many cases the family companion animal can provide a means to healthy emotional balance and continued development. "Aspects of the child's self that otherwise may have been thwarted or sequestered defensively may be affirmed and kept alive *vis-à-vis* this essential self-selfobject bond through the relationship with their pet" (p. 268). "It is a relationship in which they receive the longed-for gleam of love and delight the dull eyes of their primary caretakers do not reflect" (p. 260).

Self Psychology and Companion Animal Loss

Self psychology as a theory is especially pertinent to explaining the devastating effects many people feel at the death or loss of their companion animals. Theoretically, people and animals can have equal amounts of importance as selfobjects to a particular person. It is possible for an animal to be the main or only sustaining selfobject in a person's life. This means that the person's sense of self is tied intimately to the person's companion animal. Anything that threatens the well-being of the companion animal, such as illness or death, possibly could be a threat to the person's entire sense of self. This may help to understand why many people are willing to go to great lengths to save ill or dying companion animals.

The loss of a primary selfobject can have devastating effects on a person (Shelby, 1993). Although Shelby was describing the loss of humans as selfobjects, the same could be said for companion animals who function as primary, sustaining selfobjects for people. Shelby stated,

Mourning begins with a state of acute disorganization of the self, with a resultant lack of coherence and disequilibrium in self-esteem, brought about by the loss of a relationship in an individual's life. Central to the disorganization and self-esteem difficulties are the massive loss of selfobject functions that the survivor experienced within the context of the relationship, the loss of the shared experience or dialogue that occurs within a relationship, and any specific meaning that the loss entails. (p. 177)

According to Shelby's (1993) definition of mourning a selfobject loss (above), the person who has relied on a companion animal as the primary sustaining selfobject, would be entering a state of fragmentation, disorganization, and lack of self-esteem. The "massive loss of selfobject functions" could refer to all the emotions a person felt in the presence of their deceased companion animal such as love, respect, self-worth, nurturance, or competence. It is a special and unique relationship, built on shared experiences, which is not easy to replace. Further, it is a loss not easy to overcome, especially because of the environment's lack of support for mourning the loss of a companion animal (Lagoni, Butler & Hetts, 1994).

One of the most important elements in overcoming the loss of a selfobject is the presence of a supportive selfobject matrix or environment that understands the meaning of the loss (Shelby, 1993). Very often, individuals trying to come to terms with the loss of an animal companion are met by unsympathetic responses from friends or family who may trivialize the relationship with the companion animal (Lagoni, et al., 1994). Such responses often are based on a lack of appreciation of the meaning and depth of that human-animal relationship. Thus, the lack of support from the environment following the loss of a companion animal could be a major contributing factor to unresolved grief (Lagoni et al.). Unresolved grief may lead to physical and emotional illnesses as well as unnecessary suffering (Shelby).

Understanding exactly what role the deceased companion animal played in the person's internal self structure would be helpful. If persons experienced the animal selfobject as part of them, then they may feel as though a part of them actually has been lost. If the animal as selfobject acted as a mirror or catalyst for emotionality, then the person might feel as though some or all emotional life has been lost. The person experiencing the loss may benefit from a dialogue that would help to reveal the meaning and function of the animal in that particular person's life. Knowing exactly which (if any) self-object function(s) the animal filled could be helpful to the person experiencing the loss as well as people trying to help the bereaved.

An example of losing animal selfobjects is a woman who lost her three beloved elderly horses the year before. She said that burying her "friends" had been too painful for her to go through again so she said, "No more horses." Then

someone told her about foals needing rescue. Her first response was, once again, “No more horses.” After seeing their pictures, however, she cried about them with her husband. Then, suddenly, she was filled with excitement as she decided to get two foals. She felt a new sense of purpose and began getting ready for the foals. Now, two months later, she says her barn is full of life again and she is busy with caring for her foals and “loving every minute of it.” The following statement shows the positive change in her. She wrote:

I just know that everyday I’m thankful they are here. Everyday they are happy to see me come to the barn. They already know the sound of my walk and whinny when I approach the barn even though they can’t see me yet. I can’t find the words to say how much my foals are loved! . . . It’s kind of like the end of my winter. They have been my spring. They made me bloom.

In the above example, the foals are functioning as mirroring selfobjects that bring out the woman’s capacity to love and nurture. It seems as though that part of her had been lost since the death of her horses.

Animals as Selfobjects for Special Populations

Kohut focused a lot on the treatment of people with early selfobject failures, such as those with narcissistic disorders. Examples of early mothering figures as selfobjects that could create early childhood issues would be those who are alcoholic, abusive, or neglectful for various reasons. The more early and pervasive the selfobject derailments and failures are, the more the person will need to rely on selfobjects for a sense of self-esteem and cohesion. People with early issues, such as a narcissistic disorder, are more prone to fragmentations and problems with intimate relationships. A companion animal may be able to provide more consistent, demonstrative, and positive mirroring than people can. This mirroring could help to give them a greater sense of cohesion and esteem in order to relate to people in a more appropriate way.

People with histories of trauma or abuse also may rely more heavily on their animals as selfobjects. Some evidence for this is that people with higher levels of dissociation have higher levels of pet attachment (Brown & Katcher, 2001). High levels of dissociation often correlate with histories of trauma such

as physical or sexual abuse. According to Herman (1992), people with histories of abuse often have issues with self-esteem, trusting other people, social isolation, and feeling unsafe. Herman says, "A secure sense of connection with caring people is the foundation of personality development. When this connection is shattered, the traumatized person loses her basic sense of self" (p. 52).

This lack of a sense of self may make them more prone to seek out reliable, trust-worthy, sustaining, and safe selfobjects such as companion animals. Companion animals may be able to be consistent and trustworthy selfobjects in a way that humans cannot.

Other populations that may rely heavily on companion animals are isolated populations, such as the elderly. Elderly persons may be less mobile and have few companions (Beck & Katcher, 1996). Companion animals can provide a sense of family and friendship, an opportunity to care for something, recognition by another being, a sense of security and stress reduction (Beck & Katcher). Because of these benefits, support has been growing for laws that would protect the right of the elderly to own companion animals in the community as well as to have animal contact in nursing facilities (Beck & Katcher). In some cases, companion animals are the only selfobjects available to them.

Discussion: Companion Animals as Selfobjects

Cultural norms also may affect people's desire and interest in bonding with a companion animal as a selfobject. Recent research shows that different cultures have widely varying attitudes toward animals (Wolch, Brownlow, & Lassiter, 2001) and that different ethnic groups have varying levels of pet attachment (Brown, 2002). Views toward animals depend on factors such as social, cultural, and environmental conditions (Lawrence, 1995). The line of distinction between human and nonhuman life is not based on evidence but on beliefs that are "... affected by cultural preferences, personal values, and moral sentiments—traits not entirely open to rational persuasion" (Jasper & Nelkin, 1992). These factors may help determine how socially acceptable it is to have a companion animal as a primary selfobject, fulfilling traditionally human types of support. Future research may help to understand cultural differences and the prevalence and acceptance of using companion animals as selfobjects within each culture.

Self-psychology can complement the concept of social support as a model for human-animal relationships. When the dimensions of social support are broken down into components, it is easy to see how self psychology can explain the concepts. The dimensions, as defined by Collis and McNicholas (1998), were called “emotional support, esteem support,” and “opportunities for nurturance and protection,” and all can be understood as selfobject qualities that could be provided by companion animals. The Collis and McNicholas social support components that animals probably could not fulfill would be “practical, instrumental” or “informational” support, partially because of their lack of linguistic abilities. In addition, Bonas, McNicholas, and Collis (2000) found that although humans scored higher in terms of providing overall social support, there were some measured items where animals scored higher than people in terms of giving support such as “companionship,” “nurturance,” and “reliable alliance.” The participants also reported less conflict in their relationships with animals. Commenting on the Bonas et al. research, Serpell (2002) points out that one of the main reasons that animals did not score higher on other items (“intimacy” or “instrumental aid”) is because they lack linguistic abilities. However, the lack of linguistic abilities also is what makes animals unable to lie, criticize, or betray trust (Serpell).

Despite the animal’s lack of linguistic abilities, people still use anthropomorphism when dealing with animals. This anthropomorphism also could be the factor that allows people to see animals as selfobjects who are equal to or (in some ways) better than humans as selfobjects. Research is showing that humans do relate to companion animals as though they are equal to people in some ways. Serpell (2002) points out that a 1996 survey by the American Animal Hospital Association showed that 75% of pet owners consider their animals akin to children; nearly half the women in one survey said they relied more on their dogs and cats than on their husbands or children. Serpell (1996) states that most pet owners truly believe that their companion animals feel the same feelings that they do, such as feeling “love” for them, “admiration” for them, “missing” them while away, “joy” when they return and “jealousy” when their attention is given to others. It is this anthropomorphism that allows people to derive social, physical, and psychological benefits from animals (Serpell, 2002).

Recently, there has been a growing and extensive medical literature showing the positive effects of social support on human health and survival (Serpell,

2002). Because companion animals are being viewed as similar to people in terms of giving social support, they can be useful also in promoting human health and survival.

Future Directions for Self Psychology and the Human-Animal Bond

It may be helpful for health care providers to be able to assess the meaning and strength of the human-animal bond through an assessment of the self-object functions the animal provides. Psychoanalytically oriented theories have been criticized for not lending themselves to quantitative measurement. The same can be said for self psychology, mainly because the concepts, such as self and selfobject, are abstract (sometimes unconscious) and, therefore, difficult to measure in an objective way. In addition, the selfobject needs of a person can be recognized only by empathy and introspection from the therapist in a therapeutic relationship (Kohut, 1984). If persons are not conscious of their selfobject needs, it is doubtful that they would be able to evaluate and quantify their selfobject needs in an objective way. In spite of these difficulties, however, a valid measurement tool—were it developed—could be a valuable way to measure the selfobject functions of a companion animal.

Having a tool to measure selfobject needs would be especially helpful to individuals providing animal-assisted therapy or animal-assisted activities. Health-care workers—veterinarians, psychotherapists, physical therapist, nurses, or occupational therapists—could benefit by knowing information such as the type of selfobject the animal provides: mirroring, idealization, or alter-ego selfobject. If the animal serves a mirroring function to the individual, the health care provider may be able to empathize more fully and help the person gain insight into this and explore additional ways of getting those particular needs met. Such information may help to predict who might benefit most from interactions with animals and who will have the most difficulty with mourning the loss of their companion animals.

Understanding the various selfobject functions of types of animals may lead to a better understanding of human-animal relationships. A rescued animal would provide a good, mirroring, selfobject function for some people. An animal who has been rescued might mirror love and gratitude for the rescuing

person. This could make the person feel that he or she is a good, compassionate, and kind-hearted person. Therefore, a rescued animal may provide a positive mirroring selfobject function that a purchased animal may not provide. Similarly, a prize show animal, fighting animal, or breeding animal may provide an idealizing selfobject function that an “ordinary” animal would not provide. Of course, it is generally incorrect to stereotype groups of people (or animals), but it could be helpful to understand various aspects of the kinds of attachments possible within the field of the human-animal bond.

Self psychology also may provide a key to understanding the ability to care for the animal half of the human-animal bond, the animal’s welfare. Kohut (1984) talked about archaic and mature selfobject relating. The main differentiation between the two types of relating is the ability to empathize with the selfobject and see them as an independent other with needs and a life separate and different from their own. A person who is capable of empathizing only in an anthropomorphic way (archaic selfobject relating) may miss the animal’s species-specific needs, such as a dog’s need for a hierarchy within the pack. Mature selfobject relating would more likely lead to caring for the animal’s specific needs rather than just the human needs. For example, a person with a need for their cat to be a twinship selfobject may feed the cat the same food they eat, thus overlooking the cat’s need for proper feline nutrition.

If it is true that animals serve as valuable selfobjects giving social support, then understanding the nature and depth of human-animal relationships would be crucial to promoting the health benefits of animals. Future research may show which populations benefit most from their relationships with animals and which benefit the least. It is possible that only those with the ability to see the selfobject value in companion animals can benefit physically and emotionally from interactions with them. In addition, it would be important to explore how to go about promoting the human-animal bond (or self-selfobject relationship) in populations that currently are not receiving these health benefits.

Summary

Self psychology as a theory lends understanding to why people may place such a high value on their relationships with companion animals. People may

be relying on the animal as a selfobject to bring out or mirror the love and joy in their world. They may even experience the animal as an integral part of themselves. Losing these perceived aspects of oneself is much more traumatic than simply losing an animal. Understanding the selfobject functions the animal has been providing will help make people more empathic toward those who depend so heavily on their companion animals or are mourning the loss of their companion animals. Sometimes a companion animal may be a person's strongest link to life itself.

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