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A Comparison of Bahamian Cat and Dog Caregivers on New Providence

William J. Fielding
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This article offers the first comparison of actions and attitudes of Afro-Caribbean caregivers who keep only cats or only dogs. A total of 330 Bahamian caregivers found that women primarily keep cats; men primarily keep dogs. Cat keepers were more attached to their companion animals but no more sensitive toward nonhuman animal-welfare issues than dog keepers. When considering actions toward pets, the study noted few differences between the two types of caregivers. Both types reported low neutering rates and lack of confinement. Findings suggest that although both cat and dog caregivers thought themselves good pet caregivers, both types would benefit from animal-welfare education. In communities where cat populations pose a threat to indigenous wildlife and current care-keeping practices may be a cause for concern, caregivers may need education as to the implications of their actions. Given the similarity in dog-keeping practices in the West Indies, the findings about cat caregivers reported here may be applicable to other Afro-Caribbean communities. Further research on cats should be done to allow better understanding of the dynamics and behavior of cat populations on small islands.

Dogs and cats are the two most popular companion animals on New Providence. In one study of 468 people, 52.1% of households kept dogs and 22.6% kept cats (Fielding & Plumridge, 2005a). Dogs were officially described as a nuisance in 1841, when a dog-licensing law was passed (Fielding, Mather, & Isaacs, 2005). They continue to be the most common nuisance in residential areas to this day.

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(Fielding, 2008a), which has resulted in dogs rather than cats attracting the attention of researchers. To date, cats have attracted less attention than dogs in The Bahamas and groups such as the Department of Agriculture’s Ad Hoc Committee on Responsible Animal Ownership have tended to focus almost exclusively on dogs. In The Bahamas, there appears to have been no study that specifically focuses on cats, but some effort has been made to estimate the percentage of households with cats (Fielding & Plumridge, 2005a) and the number of cats kept (Fielding, & Plumridge, 2005b).

In The Bahamas, although keeping cats is less common than keeping dogs, there are concerns that cats pose an important environmental threat on small islands (Patronek, 2002); elsewhere, it has been noted that cats may be responsible for killing large numbers of birds (Woods, McDonald, & Harris, 2003). In some Bahamian islands, cats prey on endemic ground-nesting parrots (Keith & Guam, 2000) and iguanas (Government of The Bahamas, n.d.). This has resulted in a cat-neutering program on the island of Abaco in order to protect wildlife (Sermon, n.d.). Concern has been voiced by some animal welfare groups that, as the roaming dog population is brought under control, the cat population may rise and so become a nuisance. Elsewhere, for example in the United States, growing feral cat populations have been reported (Mott, 2004), which again suggests the importance of studying them.

The care offered pets in The Bahamas usually satisfies the basic necessities; for dogs, this would be, food, water, and shelter—a level termed “essential care” (Shore, Riley, & Douglas, 2006). Further, many dogs are kept outside for protection of the home, and many can also roam freely (Fielding & Plumridge, 2005b); this situation is not conducive to strong bonds between nonhuman animal and caregiver. Elsewhere, it has been shown that “yard” dogs receive different levels of care from “house” dogs, but both groups of dogs receive “essential” care (Shore et al., 2006). The limited interaction between pets and caregivers in Dominica has given rise to the concept of “passive ownership” (Alie, Davis, Fielding, & Maldonado, 2007). However, it should be noted that different dogs within the same household may receive different standards of care depending upon the size and type (breed, crossbreed, mongrel), so the picture is not simple (Fielding & Plumridge, 2005b). Therefore, many factors interact to influence the level of care offered and the interaction between caregiver and dog. The unplanned breeding of dogs (Ortega-Pacheco et al., 2007) results in excess puppies; this contributes to pet overpopulation (Fielding & Plumridge, 2005a). These puppies, combined with lack of confinement of owned dogs, probably constitute the “stray” dogs seen on the streets (Fielding et al., 2005). Other studies from the region—Antigua (Dipeolu, 2006), Barbados (World Health Organization, 1979), St. Maarten (Romney, 2004), and the Yucatan (Ortega-Pacheco et al.)—indicate similarities in human-dog relationships to those found in The Bahamas, namely.
1. Maintaining low neutering rates;
2. Denying dogs access to the home;
3. Allowing dogs to roam; and
4. Keeping dogs to provide household security.

Based on the similarity in care offered dogs across different Caribbean countries, it may be expected that cat care might also be similar. In Dominica, cats are generally given less care than dogs; they are likely to roam freely and be intact. A small-scale study in the town of Marsh Harbour, on the Bahamian island of Abaco, indicated that cats were unlikely to receive care that differed much from that accorded dogs. Residents reported feeding both cats and dogs whom they did not “own,” which indicated that people offered minimal levels of care to roaming animals (Fielding, 2000). These aspects give rise to concern about the possible proliferation of the cat population and the potential impact cats may have on fragile island ecosystems.

Despite neutering programs in The Bahamas, the percentage of dogs neutered remains low, partly as a result of caregivers projecting their sexuality on to that of their dogs (Fielding, Samuels, & Mather, 2002) and cost (Humane Society International, 2001). Neutering programs have typically focused on dogs, probably because they are perceived as the most immediate nuisance and receive regular negative coverage in the press (Fielding et al., 2005).

Moreover, cats, like dogs, can represent an evolving public health hazard (such as avian influenza A H5N1; Food and Agriculture Organization, 2006), which is usually overshadowed by dogs, probably as a result of well-publicized fatal dog attacks; in The Bahamas there have been three such attacks since 1991 in a population of about 300,000 (Burrows, Fielding, & Mather, 2004). Public health issues associated with animals, especially those who bite, may worry tourists (Dolnicar, 2006), and these concerns cannot be overlooked in a tourist-based economy such as The Bahamas.

Although dogs must be licensed, cats are merely covered in general legislation with regard to the treatment of animals in the penal code (Anonymous, n.d.). Both the government’s Animal Control Unit and The Bahamas Humane Society play important roles in enforcement of laws relating to animal welfare. Despite the attempts by local animal welfare groups, there is limited education in schools on animal welfare. This probably contributes to a large proportion of the community being ill informed on animal welfare laws and its legal responsibilities toward caring for pets (Fielding, 2007).

This study presents the results of a survey of Bahamians who keep only cats and dogs. Consequently, it provides a first comparison of the actions and attitudes of dog and cat caregivers in an Afro-Caribbean society. As such, it attempts to put the attitudes of dog owners in a new cultural and comparative context.
A survey form devised by Carlisle-Frank and Frank (2006) was used after slight modification to allow for the Bahamian context. Questions focused on the types and sources of pets, attitudes toward the family pet, treatment of companion animals, and general beliefs and perceptions of animals in general. Most questions required simple yes/no/not applicable or agree/disagree answers, but a 7-point scale was used for expressing satisfaction with the pet (very satisfied to very dissatisfied). A few of the original questions were amended to account for local parlance and pet-caring practices. Results from other Bahamian studies on animals (Fielding & Plumridge, 2005b) and input from a class of social science students at The College of The Bahamas were used to make these changes. It was also considered that many people might not understand the term “sentient” used by Carlisle-Frank and Frank, so this was replaced by two questions designed to obtain the equivalent information. Some additional questions were added on the disposal of dead pets, the primary purpose of keeping pets, and roaming on the street. A list of questions included in the study is given in Table 1.

The college students were exposed to training and role play in class before conducting face-to-face interviews at numerous locations across the island of New Providence, the island on which Nassau, the capital, is located. Only Bahamian pet caregivers who were 18 years or older were selected in a convenience sample. Locations at which people would ordinarily be expected to have to wait were chosen. Examples would be utility companies (when people are queuing to pay bills), public washing facilities, and banks. A quota was imposed on the sample to ensure that equal numbers of males and females under and over 35 years of age were included. Our experience in previous studies has shown that, without a quota, it is easy to obtain a sample dominated by females and underpopulated by older males compared with the national age-sex distribution of adults. A question relating to motor vehicle ownership was included as an indicator for income. In 2000, 27% of households owned no motor vehicle and households without a motor vehicle had a median income of $13,900, whereas those with a motor vehicle had a median income of $36,900 (Department of Statistics, unpublished data).

Although the original target population included any pet caregiver and resulted in 614 interviews, we concentrate on the findings from respondents who kept only cats or kept only dogs in order to make the interpretation of the data unambiguous. Where respondents mistakenly thought that the question was not applicable to their pet, the response was coded as a missing value, unless it indicated ignorance of the subject matter. For example, some people thought that it was necessary to register (license) cats, when in fact the correct option is “not applicable.”
TABLE 1
Information Collected in The Survey Form

Number and type of pets
Source of pets
Satisfaction with pets
Do you consider your pet a member of your family?
Do you consider your pet your property?
Do you feel attached to your pet?
Do you identify with your pet?
Where applicable are your pets spayed/neutered?
In the past 2 years, how many times, if any, have any of your pets gone missing (lost forever)?
In the past week, have any of your pets had uncontrolled access to the street?
In the cases where registration ID required, are your pets registered and/or licensed?
How many pets/companion animals have you had to give up due to moving home, family problems, or other relationship, personal, or family problems?
Where applicable, do your pets have identification such as microchips, tags?
Do you permit your pets to live indoors with you/the rest of the family?
If you celebrate birthdays, do you celebrate your pets’ birthdays?
If you have a family photo album are your pets’ photos included?
Are your pets’ names included with other family members on Christmas and/or greeting cards? (If you send out cards.)
Where applicable, do you take your pets on family walks, outings, drives, picnics, vacations, or day trips?
How often do you tell your companion animals that you love them per week?
Do you believe that long-term chaining of dogs should not happen?
Do you believe that spaying/neutering should be done to stop overpopulation and suffering of animals?
Do you believe that pets should not live long term in cages?
Do you believe that viewing pets as possessions is wrong?
Do you believe that we should not make a deal out of protecting pets?
Do you believe that we should help animals because they are dependent on humans/are helpless?
Do you believe that animals have feelings with needs/interests of their own?
Do you believe that animals can feel pain?
Does your household own a motor vehicle?
Do you consider yourself a good caregiver to your pets?
The single main reason for having pets.
Method of disposal of your dead pets.
Gender
Age group

Note. Questions adapted and used with permission from Carlisle-Frank and Frank (2006).
RESULTS

Of the entire 614 respondents who owned pets of any sort, 67.4% kept at least one dog, and 25.9% kept at least one cat. In dog-owning households, a mean of 1.9 dogs ($SE = 0.07$, $N = 405$) were kept; in the case of cats, households kept a mean of 1.8 cats ($SE = 0.10$, $N = 157$).

The following results focus exclusively on the subset of 330 respondents of the original sample of 614, as these people kept only cats or kept only dogs. These 330 respondents were almost equally divided by age (under 35 years of age and 35 years and over), and sex as required by the quota. Of these respondents, dogs were found in 81.5% (or 269) of households and cats in 18.5% (or 61). Respondents kept a mean of 1.8 ($SE = 0.07$) dogs or a mean of 1.8 ($SE = 0.12$) cats. Most (95.5%) of the participants owned a motor vehicle.

Cats were kept by 27.2% of the female pet keepers and dogs by 72.8%, whereas 11.2% of male pet keepers had cats and 88.8% kept dogs. This shows a real sex-related preference, with women being more associated with cats and men with dogs (Fisher’s exact test: $n = 330$, $p < .001$). Age was not quite associated with a pet preference (Fisher’s exact test: $n = 330$, $p = .054$), but 14.5% of younger respondents kept cats compared with 22.8% of older respondents.

Source and Disposal of Pets

Cat and dog caregivers showed different patterns in their sources of pets (chi-squared test $= 59.6$, $df = 5$, $n = 416$, $p < .001$). Cat caregivers were more likely than dog caregivers to adopt their pets, whereas dogs were more likely to have been purchased or obtained from someone known to the caregiver (Table 2). The pattern of disposal of dead pets was not significantly different for both cats and dogs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>% Cat Caregivers (No.)</th>
<th>% Dog Caregivers (No.)</th>
<th>Chi-squared (N = 416, df = 5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adopt</td>
<td>45.8% (28)</td>
<td>8.5% (28)</td>
<td>p &lt; .001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase</td>
<td>23.0% (14)</td>
<td>35.7% (118)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gift</td>
<td>14.8% (9)</td>
<td>20.3% (67)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend, family, co-worker</td>
<td>9.8% (6)</td>
<td>19.4% (64)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offspring of another pet</td>
<td>9.8% (6)</td>
<td>13.0% (43)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other, including stray, answered an advertisement for a “free pet”</td>
<td>4.9% (3)</td>
<td>10.1% (30)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Respondents could nominate more than one source.
and dogs. About 10% of caregivers disposed of dead animals by burning them and about 5% put dead pets in the household garbage (Table 3).

Main Reason for Keeping Pets and Pet Attachment

Caregivers were asked their single main reason for keeping their pet. Cats were more likely to be kept as companions (61.0% of caregivers) than dogs (38.9% of caregivers); dogs were kept primarily for protection (47.7% of caregivers). Some cat caregivers (13.6%) claimed that they kept cats for protection. Broadly similar percentages of cat and dog caregivers (13.6% and 8.4%, respectively) kept their pets to provide an interest, that is, to provide a focus of attention.

The level of satisfaction and attachment of caregivers toward their pets was similar except that cat caregivers were more likely to express love to their pets than were dog caregivers (Table 4). However, it should be noted that, for each item listed in Table 4, the percentage of cat caregivers compared with dog caregivers—indicating attachment/satisfaction—was always in the same direction, that is, in favor of the cat caregivers, an unlikely result (binomial test, \( p = .003 \)) if the two groups were equally attached/satisfied.

Care Toward Cats and Dogs

Both cat and dog caregivers considered themselves “good” caregivers. The care offered to cats and dogs was similar except for three areas:

1. Allowing the pet to live indoors;
2. Registering pets; and
3. Including pet in family activities (Table 5).

With regard to registration of pets, similar percentages of caregivers claimed to have their pets registered, whereas 5.6% of dog caregivers and 21.3% of cat
TABLE 4
Levels of Satisfaction and Pet Attachment of Cat and Dog Caregivers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attachment/Satisfaction</th>
<th>% Cat Caregivers (N = 61)</th>
<th>% Dog Caregivers (N = 269)</th>
<th>P Value, Fisher’s Exact Test, N = 330, Unless Stated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Satisfaction with pet(s)</td>
<td>98.4% (60)</td>
<td>90.0% (242)</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consider pet(s) member(s) of family</td>
<td>91.8% (56)</td>
<td>81.0% (217)</td>
<td>0.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel attached to pet(s)</td>
<td>90.2% (55)</td>
<td>78.1% (210)</td>
<td>0.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify with pet(s)</td>
<td>73.8% (45)</td>
<td>65.8% (177)</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pets included in family photo album a</td>
<td>65.6% (40)</td>
<td>47.2% (127)</td>
<td>Chi-squared, p = .03, df = 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(if any)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Express love to pet at least once a day</td>
<td>65.6% (40)</td>
<td>46.8% (126)</td>
<td>0.01b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consider pet(s) property</td>
<td>55.7% (34)</td>
<td>62.8% (169)</td>
<td>0.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrate pets’ birthdays, if household celebrates birthdays</td>
<td>32.8% (20)</td>
<td>21.6% (58)</td>
<td>Chi-squared, p = .16, df = 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pets’ names included with family names on greeting cards, if family sends out cards</td>
<td>23.0% (14)</td>
<td>18.2% (49)</td>
<td>Chi-squared, p = .64, df = 2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

aThis included digital images on cellular phones or computer screens. bOnly these outcomes would be considered statistically significant at the 5% level when using the Bonferroni correction.

caregivers thought that registration/licensing was not required. In other aspects of care, neutering levels, identification, and relinquishment, cat and dog caregivers were almost indistinguishable (Table 5).

Attitudes Toward Animals

Overall, there appeared little to separate the general attitudes of cat and dog caregivers toward animals (Table 6).

DISCUSSION

The figures presented in the tables should be viewed as containing comparative indicators and not values that apply to the general population of cat and dog caregivers as only participants who kept only cats or only dogs were included in the results. The original sample of pet caregivers was selected via a convenience sample and so may contain unknown biases. From that original sample, respondents who kept only cats or only dogs were selected for this article so as to ensure that their attitudes and actions would be pet specific. It should be
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Care Aspect</th>
<th>% Cat Caregivers (No.) (N ≈ 61)</th>
<th>% Dog Caregivers (No.) (N ≈ 269)</th>
<th>P Value, Fisher's Exact Test (N = 330) Unless Stated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respondents consider themselves good caregivers</td>
<td>98.5% (60)</td>
<td>95.9% (258)</td>
<td>0.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pets taken on family trips, walks, outings</td>
<td>42.6% (30)</td>
<td>66.8% (179)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001, N = 329a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have ID on pets, where applicable</td>
<td>50.9% (31)</td>
<td>53.2% (143)</td>
<td>Chi-squared, 0.63, df = 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neuter pets</td>
<td>49.2% (30)</td>
<td>46.8% (125)</td>
<td>0.78, N = 328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pets permitted to live indoors with the family</td>
<td>90.0% (54)</td>
<td>40.8% (108)</td>
<td>&lt;0.001, N = 325a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Register pets, where thought applicable</td>
<td>32.8% (20)</td>
<td>39.3% (105)</td>
<td>Chi-squared, &lt;0.001, df = 2, N = 328a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pets had uncontrolled access to the street in the last week</td>
<td>32.8% (20)</td>
<td>36.1% (97)</td>
<td>0.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relinquished a pet due to personal problems</td>
<td>31.1% (19)</td>
<td>29.0% (269)</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lost a pet</td>
<td>26.2% (16)</td>
<td>24.3% (66)</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*aOnly these outcomes would be considered statistically significant at the 5% level when using the Bonferroni correction.

It should be remembered that many households in New Providence have more than one type of pet, as seen by the fact that only 330 from the original group of 614 pet caregivers had only cats or only dogs. The percentage of respondents without a motor vehicle was lower than that reported in the 2000 census, which suggests that relatively few lower income households were included in this sample. This may be explained by the fact that more people have acquired motor vehicles since 2000 or that Haitian nationals, who officially make up 8% of the population and represent the majority of the poor (Department of Statistics, 2002, 2004), were excluded from the study. Further, there is the possibility that interviewers were inclined to select people who appeared better off.

Cat and dog caregivers appear to prefer obtaining their pets from different sources. This probably reflects the fact that a surplus of puppies are produced (Fielding & Plumridge, 2005b), which results in people “giving away” pets and so may explain the large percentage of dog keepers who obtained their pets as a gift or from a person known to them. Of note is the reluctance of dog keepers to adopt animals from a shelter or animal welfare group. This was also noted in Dominica (Alie et al., 2007); in that case, there was an unwillingness to pay to adopt a dog, even if the dog was neutered and vaccinated. Despite the
### Table 6
Atitudes of Cat and Dog Caregivers Toward Animals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitudes Toward Pets</th>
<th>% Cat Caregivers (No.) (N ≈ 61)</th>
<th>% Dog Caregivers (No.) (N ≈ 269)</th>
<th>P Value, Fisher’s Exact Test (N = 330) Unless Stated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Animals have feelings with needs/interests of their own</td>
<td>98.4% (60)</td>
<td>92.9% (250)</td>
<td>0.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animals can feel pain</td>
<td>95.1% (58)</td>
<td>98.5% (264)</td>
<td>0.12 (N = 329)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pets should not live long term in cages</td>
<td>91.8% (56)</td>
<td>84.8% (228)</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long-term chaining of dogs should not happen</td>
<td>88.5% (54)</td>
<td>78.7% (211)</td>
<td>0.11 (N = 329)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We should help animals as they are dependent on humans</td>
<td>82.0% (50)</td>
<td>86.6% (233)</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pets should be neutered to stop overpopulation and suffering of animals</td>
<td>80.3% (49)</td>
<td>76.2% (205)</td>
<td>0.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declawing cats for convenience of people is wrong</td>
<td>72.1% (44)</td>
<td>69.9% (188)</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Viewing pets as possessions is wrong</td>
<td>61.7% (37)</td>
<td>51.7% (139)</td>
<td>0.20 (N = 329)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We should not make a big deal out of protecting pets</td>
<td>13.1% (8)</td>
<td>17.8% (48)</td>
<td>0.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Presence of many dogs on the streets of Nassau—partly as a result of the lack of confinement reported in this study and elsewhere (Fielding et al., 2005)—relatively few caregivers took in animals from the streets. In the case of dogs, this is probably because most, if not all, roaming dogs already have a caregiver (Fielding, 2008b); in the case of cats, it can be difficult to tame a cat who has had little or no human interaction.

On the presumption that disposal of a dead pet is indicative of attachment (Varner & Johnson-Varner, 1983), the data suggest that some caregivers probably have little attachment to their pets, appearing to regard a dead pet as garbage. In a study of stray dogs in an inner-city area of Nassau, 62.6% of 131 respondents reported that dead stray dogs were put in the garbage or taken to dump sites. This suggests that when there is little attachment to dogs, they can indeed be treated as garbage when they die (Smith, Singh, Oliver & Sarjudas, unpublished data, 2006). As burning can be taken to refer to backyard burning, this method might also indicate lack of attachment as some people also burn garbage—even though there is a regular garbage collection in Nassau.

Cat caregivers appear more attached to their pets than do dog caregivers. Dogs appear to be kept as working animals (to provide protection). This use of dogs is consistent with dogs being kept outside (Fielding & Plumridge, 2004) and
so may contribute to a lesser bond between dog caregivers compared with cat caregivers. By allowing cats to remain indoors, caregivers automatically present greater opportunities for bonding than when pets are kept outside, as in the case of dogs.

It should be noted that the closer attachment that cat caregivers had toward their pets compared with dog caregivers may be influenced by gender effects; women were more likely than men to keep cats. Elsewhere, it has been found that women interact more than do men with cats (Mertens, 1991). Gender differences toward animals have been noted in many studies (Herzog, 2007). In The Bahamas, gender differences have been noted with respect to neutering dogs (Fielding, Samuels, & Mather, 2002) and pit bulls (Burrows & Fielding, 2005) and may reflect cultural issues; for example, I have seen only one young female walking a pit bull—but many young men. It would require a larger scale study to tease out the influence of sex and pet on attachment. We cannot offer an explanation why some respondents kept cats for protection, unless they were viewed as protection from rodents.

Although both cat and dog caregivers considered their pets part of the family, this feeling does not extend to giving the pet a place inside the home. In some cases, caregivers do not feel that the dog is “clean” or that the home is large enough to accommodate the dog. The discrepancy between attitude and action would be worthy of further research. The treatment and interaction between caregivers and their pets indicates that dog caregivers are less involved with their pets than are cat caregivers. The major exception to this was the inclusion of pets in family outings, activities in which cats were less likely to be included. Further research is required to characterize the nature of these outings to determine how often the outing is to merely exercise, rather than include, the pet in a clear family activity.

However, on key care issues such as neutering and confinement, both types of caregivers treated their pets in a similar way. Previous studies in The Bahamas (Fielding, 2000) and elsewhere confirm this (Alie et al., 2007) and also indicate that cats also received limited health care. This indicates that similar messages, in terms of pet education, need to be conveyed to both cat and dog keepers. When comparisons are made of this Afro-Caribbean community with the treatment and interaction of American cat and dog owners, it is clear that there are large differences between the caregivers in the two countries. For example, 66% of American dog caregivers and 85% of cat caregivers neutered their pets (Ralston Purina, 2000) compared with 47% of dog and 49.2% of cat caregivers in this study. Again, 74% of American dog and 60% of cat caregivers considered their pets family members (American Pet Product Manufacturers Association, 2005) compared with 81.0% and 91.8% of dog and cat caregivers in this study. Why these differences arise would be of interest given the large number of Americans who visit The Bahamas (U.S. Department of State, 2007).
Both cat and dog caregivers were against declawing of cats—a finding at variance with cat caregivers in Canada (Landsberg, 1991)—but less so than the long-term chaining of dogs. These findings need further exploration; however, in the case of chaining dogs, the response may be linked to some dog caregivers considering it cruel to confine dogs (Fielding et al., 2005).

The fact that some cat keepers claimed to have registered their cats may indicate a willingness to provide what respondents thought was the “correct” answer or mistaking the details that a veterinarian would collect on the pet as registration as dogs can be licensed at veterinary clinics. This confusion can arise with the dog license tag and the rabies vaccination tag supplied by veterinary clinics; caregivers think that the rabies tag is the license tag or that they do not need both. As noted in an earlier study (Fielding, 2007), there is considerable ignorance about the laws concerning animals. The discrepancy between education and action is highlighted by the fact that although many caregivers thought pets should be neutered, only a minority of them actually got their pets neutered. This inaction occurs despite the availability of a free and well-publicized neutering program in New Providence (Proud Paws, n.d.)

This comparison between cat and dog keepers has highlighted the need to address basic animal welfare issues to both types of owners. Although cat keepers appear more attached to their pets than do dog keepers, the practical care offered to each type of pet is broadly similar as are their general attitudes and beliefs toward animal welfare. In particular, the importance of neutering and confinement is clearly required if wildlife and the wider community is to be protected. That almost all caregivers thought they were good pet caregivers suggests that it may not be easy to get them to change their “good” practices.

CONCLUSION

Despite the difficulties of researching cat care practices, it is clear that more information is required about cat keepers. For example, why are relatively few cats neutered? Although a similar question has been explored for dogs (Fielding et al., 2002), similar studies need to be made with respect to cats and other aspects of their care.

The relatively low neuter rates for cats indicate that should a greater percentage of litters survive to breeding age—particularly if the litters are abandoned—then the problems caused by feral cats could become more acute. Issues such as these may be useful in encouraging additional research on cats. They may help to better identify the potential or actual problems posed by cats in Afro-Caribbean communities and—in particular—small island states, allowing policymakers to act before cats are considered a threat rather than a companionable pet.
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