Metaphoric Relationships with Pets

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Using depth interviews and participant observation, the predominant metaphors that emerge in pet owners’ relationships with their animals are pets as pleasures, problems, parts of self, members of the family, and toys. These metaphors as well as patterns of interacting with and accounting for pets, suggest vacillation between viewing companion animals as human and civilized and viewing them as animalistic and chaotic. It is argued that these views comprise a mixed metaphor needed to more fully understand our fascination with pets.

Descartes (1646-1649/1976) once described nonhuman animals as dumb machines which, when they no longer prove useful, can be killed with no more feeling than should attend the disposal of a broken clock. Unlike Jainism which respects even the life of a mosquito, the classic Christian argument is that animals lack a mortal soul and that God meant man to have dominion over the animal kingdom (Rollin, 1983). In distinguishing so sharply between humans and animals these views seek to specify and exalt what it means to be human (Ingold, 1988; Lawrence, 1995).

Such Cartesian rationality contrasts sharply with both earlier animistic and totemic reverence for animals (Crocker, 1977; Houghton, 1955) and growing contemporary respect for animal rights (Regan & Singer, 1976). But more reverent attitudes toward animals may not be so distant, as suggested by elements of animism and totemism that seem evident in our current regard for animals (Heiman, 1956, Menninger, 1951; Neal, 1985; Shepard, 1978). For example, when the “primitive” Papua New Guinea tribesman Yali visited Australia, he found reason to question the apparent double standard of the Christian missionaries who taught his people that animal worship was wrong.

Yali, the spiritual leader of the Fifth Cargo Cult in New Guinea, visited the Brisbane Zoo and the Queensland Museum during an Australian visit. Designed to soften the nationalistic tendencies of the Cargo Cults, the visit had quite the opposite effect. He was deeply impressed by the European habit of keeping pets, on which were lavished a degree of care and affection unknown in a New Guinea village. Visiting an agricultural station, he was
shown how European animals were housed, and how experiments were conducted to help them adapt to the tropics. Suddenly the truth dawned on him. “The zoo animals, the pets, the bones in the museums, all were European totems. The form of Christianity taught to his people by the missionaries was false!” White men did not really have one God, a Trinity, or a common descent from Adam and Eve; he saw that, like his own people, Christians had a wide variety of totem cults including the horse, cow, dog, cat, lion, tiger, zebra, and other animals. The respect accorded them were of the same order as the taboos and totem observances that missionaries were stamping out back in the forest. It became clear to Yali that Christianity was not an invitation to his people to join in a sacred state of equality with whites, but a fraudulent attempt to deny his people their traditional truths (Nieburg, 1973, pp. 61-62).

While Yali believed that Europeans revere animals, others have seen contemporary uses of animals as exploitative. Rather than machines or totems, the metaphors in exploitation critiques involve animals as slaves, prisoners, victims, fetishes, garbage, or entertaining freaks. These criticisms are diverse. Pet owners have been criticized for displaying a sometimes pathological attachment to their companion animals (Szasz, 1968; Voith, 1981). Several studies suggest that people with pets may relate less well with other people as a result (Cameron, Conrad, Kirkpatrick, & Bateen, 1966; Cameron & Matson, 1972). Arguments favoring greater respect for the rights of animals suggest that zoos, animal breeding, and animal entertainments all treat animals in a grotesque and cruel fashion in order that humans might be amused and made to feel more powerful (Allen & Westbrook, 1979; Carson, 1972; Lawrence, 1982; Ritvo, 1987; Tuan, 1984). In a similar vein, critics charge that eating meat is little more than murder and cannibalism (Adams, 1990; Stewart, 1976; Twigg, 1983). Tuan (1984) notes that an estimated 15% of U.S. dogs and cats are put to death each year, suggesting that pets have become a part of our disposable society. Such animal rights treatments seem to go beyond charges of cruelty and imply that we are “dehumanizing” or even “deanimalizing” pets by treating them like Descartes’ clocks.

But a more common position is that pets are good for people. Here pets are seen as medicine. They may be therapeutic (e.g., Corson & Corson, 1980; Heiman, 1967; Walshaw, 1987), provide companionship (Fogle, 1981; Horn & Meer, 1984), and serve as transitional objects and a locus of affection that helps children develop a humane caring sense of responsibility (Levinson, 1972; Robin & Bensel, 1985; Volkan & Cavanaugh, 1978). Criticisms of pet ownership have been vigorously
countered (Serpell, 1986), and studies reporting negative consequences from owning pets are opposed by other studies showing that pet owners have enhanced feelings of well-being (e.g., Martinez & Kidd, 1980). The strong spirit shown in such debates is in keeping with the strong emotions we often attach to our pets. A criticism of our pets is taken as a criticism of ourselves (Sanders, 1990a, 1990b, 1991; Secord, 1968; Veveers, 1985).

These findings suggest that pets are also commonly seen as humans. In Sanders' (1993) terms, we attribute to them characteristics of "mindedness" and view them as sharing our emotions. From fables of old to contemporary comics and advertisements, animals have been portrayed with human characteristics of thought, character, and morality. One study found that animal abuse was perceived as deserving a more severe penalty than spouse or child abuse (Wickler, 1972). For many people, pets are essentially human and are treated as members of the family (Cain, 1983; Foote, 1956; Hickrod & Schmidt, 1982; Hirschman, 1994; Sussman, 1985). And the death of a pet may result in mourning very similar to that which accompanies the death of a human family member (Carmack, 1985; Cowles, 1985; Fogle, 1981; Kay, et al., 1984; Keddie, 1977; Stewart, 1983).

Method

The present study sought to better understand the way pet owners talk about and interact with their pets, and the implicit tropes they use in accounting for their pets to others and in describing the effects of these pets on their lives. I conducted interviews with 13 pet owners and students interviewed 27 others for this project. The people interviewed owned dogs, cats, horses, and birds. I also observed a dog obedience show, a horse show, a horse auction, and two special events in which people brought their pets to have them photographed with Santa Claus. Transcriptions and field notes were analyzed with the computer content coding program, "The Ethnograph" (Weitzman & Miles, 1995).

Those interviewed range in age from 14 to 68 and were chosen because they were highly involved with their pets. No attempt was made to include those with more superficial pet relationships or those whose main livelihood is connected to pets. Thus, the present findings do not reflect the entire spectrum of pet ownership. But neither are those studied extremely atypical. Normal "product" involvement seems to be very high among pet owners.

I recognize that "pet" is no longer a politically correct term and that "companion animal" is more in vogue (Hirschman, 1994). Yet these animals, even when we treat them as quasi-human equals, did not freely choose to be with us. We chose
them and most likely bought them in a manner similar to the way in which human slaves were once (and sometimes still are) bought and sold (Thomas, 1993, p. xx). They are more dependent on us than we are on them. Keeping the term pet recognizes this hierarchy of ownership as well as corresponds to the emic labels used by all informants. Ultimately, as will be seen, the pets versus companion animals metaphors reveal the dual ways in which we regard and treat these animals.

Pets as Pleasures, Pets as Problems

Why own a pet? A common rationale is that pets are one of the true pleasures life offers. Pets, like children, are seen as making life interesting. They are regarded as a source of entertainment and amusement. But unlike our children, we often tolerate some mischief and mayhem from our pets. Consider the following cat story:

In my house we have real long hallways with terrazzo floors. We wax them often. At one end of the hall there is a bedroom. Michael gets a running start in the bedroom, runs into the hall, flops on his side and slides down the hall. (How far does he slide?) About ten feet. Sometimes he spins out and catches a wall. It is so funny to watch him. The funniest thing that Michael does is he likes to jump off the top of the bed. My bed has posts and rails that are near the ceiling. Michael likes to jump up on top to the rails and when someone comes through the nearby door he swats them. This scares them. He also likes to jump off the top on to the bed when I’m in bed. (Then) he hisses and runs away. One night friends were staying in my bed, because of a wedding or something. In the morning the husband had got out of bed and left, leaving his wife in bed. Michael jumped up on the rails. He jumped off the rail, because he thought the person in the bed was Lana. Upon landing, he hissed and the scared the lady. She screamed and Michael ran down the hall that had just been waxed. (She is laughing) It was funny because he couldn’t run on the waxed floor. He is very amusing. He is constantly doing something funny.

As long as no one is seriously hurt, we excuse and encourage such silly behavior in our pets, whereas it would be considered irresponsible to encourage similar behavior from our children. The sort of humor involved in such stories is buffoonery and slapstick, not unlike that displayed by cartoon characters. It is no accident that ancient fables and current cartoons use animal characters (Campbell, 1988; Grimm & Grimm, 1944; Hamilton, 1984; Klapp, 1954; Moellenhoff, 1939;
Stevens, 1972). Animals have long been both a source of human amusement and a source of and vehicle for folk wisdom. With pets we proclaim that perhaps there is too much sense in our lives and we need a little nonsense in order to lighten our otherwise serious, ordered, and tedious existence. At the same time, small animals like cats give us an opportunity to see our small, cute, and guileless pet (and potential alter ego) improbably succeed in getting his or her way in a world of larger animals, including human adults. And the “cuteness” that provides both amusement and strategic advantage to our pets is often a result of neonatal features that have been selectively cultivated over several hundred years of breeding, resulting in large eyes, a rounded head, large ears, and a high forehead (Alford, 1984; Gould, 1979; Hirschman, 1994; Moellenhoff, 1939; Tuan, 1984). If pets are often regarded as humans, as a result of such features it is most often baby humans that we have in mind.

Given such neonatal features, as well as softness and fur, it is also understandable that holding and fondling our pets produces feelings of comfort and well-being. From the joy reported by some informants, it seems that there may be something very primal about such tactile contact.

(What gives you the most pleasure about cats?) Having them there to hold. They are soothing emotionally.

(Our dog) Buffy...loves to be petted and held. I think one thing I noticed most of all is that we really do love each other as a family and we get along really well, but we’re not really always touching each other. And I think it’s a good outlet for us. We can get Buffy. I know that when my daughter moved out, she (Buffy) was the best thing I could have. I could pick her up; I could tell her I felt bad; I could cry and she would hang onto me. She literally...like a baby clutches to its mom. And she would “hummm” (imitates dog crying) like that back. And she was just the greatest. If Chris (her daughter) wasn’t around, then I’d hang onto Buff and she was just really...she seemed to understand what was going on for a long, long time. And she was...and oh boy! I mean when they say that a dog is a man’s best friend, I truly understand that now and I just love her.

Other pet owners studied also echoed the observation that family members displace love from absent others onto their pets.

(How did you pick them [2 cats] out?) The first time, I had just broken up with my boyfriend. I had a void in my life. I wanted someone to love. So,
I went to the pet store. I saw Jaguar sitting in a cage looking lonely and scared. He was exactly what I wanted.

Not only did these pet owners readily acknowledge that they love their pets, they also felt that the animals appreciate their love and love them in return.

She was great. She was a companion to all of us. When one of us felt sad she always knew and she would always be there. My older sister told a lot of her problems to the cat.

...the cats don't care if she grows fat, thin, short, etc....I asked Mrs. X if cats brought about any changes in her life. She said definitely yes. Before having cats she felt extremely depressed, she says they give you a reason for living.

As the perception that a pet's love is uncritical and unconditional suggests, personal loyalty is an especially valued trait in pets - a trait which pet owners, especially dog owners, seem to find more reliably in their pets than in their human friends.

When he actually does die and I look back on the times and the things that we did together, it is going to be really hard because he has always been a really, really special friend to me. When I've been upset and stuff, he has been my best friend for a lot of years. I've been able to yell at him and not be yelled back at and he has always been there and he has been so loyal to me for years and years and years whenever we've had...you know, he would get up in the morning, 2:00 a.m. and go out to water with me in the middle of the night when it was cold or snowing or whatever and I'm sure that when that time comes it will really be sad....I've thought about the day that, you know, he dies and I, and it will be a, it will be a hard thing. But I just hope that it can be peaceful and that he can go without a lot of discomfort. It is a real sad thing and I try not to think about it too much....

I think Fred is a man's best friend or my best friend anyway. I think it is very true. I think I'm really lucky to have found a dog as special and as good a friend as he is and as loyal and as good with people as he is. But I think that is very real and I think my relationship with Fred has proved that.

Such sentiments among pet owners vividly defy Descartes' metaphor that animals are machines. The pleasure they afford is instead seen in these accounts as being similar to that afforded by human friends (Hirschman, 1994).
This is not to say that pet owners never find that their ownership of a pet causes them problems. Pets demand care and attention and are difficult to travel with and expensive to board. They can also be messy, do damage, and disrupt normal routines as these owners lament.

Oh yes, they have beautiful hair but it’s a pain. You have to keep a lint brush handy. I’m sitting on a towel so that when people come over I can just take off the towel and there will not be cat hair all over. Once, Jeff, a friend, came over in a navy blue suit and sat down on the couch. When he got up...we had to use the lint brush on him. He doesn’t like cats too much since then.

(Does Topaz wake you up?) Not until about five o’clock when you are getting your best sleep. Then she is outside your door howling.

Cats will track in dirt from the litter box, chew on plants, knock things over, and probably break things, just like children.

Several of these pet owners also noted that some of the fascination of their animals wore off when they lost the more attractive features they showed as puppies or kittens. This is a reason that many pets are sent to animal shelters (Tuan, 1984).

Another kind of problem reported with pets involves situations in which one family member likes the pet and another does not. In other cases the pet favors one family member over others. One 14-year-old girl resented the fact that while she was charged with caring for the family dog, she preferred to play with her brother and sister.

Then she runs off and goes and loves the other person more...she’s got this little personality like, she is really funny with me because she will do whatever Alan (her brother) wants her to do. When I want Buffy, she’ll go to Alan. But when I tell her to come to me, she’ll go to someone else...that makes Alan think he is like the owner of Buffy, you know....He thinks he is like all Mr. Master of her and whatever he says goes....And when Lisa (her sister) comes home...it really hurts...because Buffy loves Lisa more. Because Lisa is hardly ever home and when Lisa comes home, it is just like. “Oh Lisa!” you know, and Lisa doesn’t make a big fuss over her and I don’t know what the deal is. She just likes Lisa.

Normal sibling rivalry may revolve around winning parents’ praise and affection, but in this case it is the attention of the family pet that is seen to be at stake.
Despite such problems, none of the owners interviewed contemplate disposing of their pets. Their commitment is also shown in the time and monetary prices they are willing to pay for the care and feeding of these animals.

You wouldn’t believe how much it costs. At least $50 to $60 a month. I buy Kal Kan because Jaguar won’t eat dry food. And cat litter costs $5 a bag. You can use quite a few bags with two cats.

(She) boasts that there isn’t a pet store in the entire Salt Lake valley that she hasn’t been to. She will often go to buy her cats presents. Once she went into a store planning to spend two dollars, and ended up spending over thirty dollars.

Horses are more expensive to own and cost $1000 to $3000 per year for the owners interviewed. One horse owner interviewed had also built a $40,000 stable.

Not only is there a considerable monetary expense in caring for their pets, many owners also go to great effort to care for their pets. The owners of a dog that ate an insecticide-sprayed apple and got an ear infection also reported their considerable effort in more routine care of their dog’s health.

We kind of know how to watch out for certain things, so it is just like if you see your child coming on with a cold you know what to do for it. When we noticed that Buffy is licking and scratching, we immediately check her out and you can tell whether it is dry skin or whether it is an allergic reaction and we’ll, she has also had the allergy in her eyes and she probably will have again this spring....We started giving her vitamins. I think it really helped her...another thing that causes ear problems is that the hair will grow into the inner ear and it will cause problems and they have taught us how to do that and that is very painful because they just have to take tweezers and just pull that out from deep in there and it is just really sad....Last summer, Mark and I stayed up all night. He took the first six hours and then I took the rest because we didn’t want her to have accidents on the floor, you know, because she was just that sick....I think we’ve sort of learned how to take care of her, just like you do a toddler...we put lotion on her stomach every day and the everyday care is, you know, keeping her crusties (matter around the eyes) from her eyes where her eyes will drain, I’ll do that: about every two days depending on how much it is weeping and then I’ll brush her and while I’m brushing her, I’ll take notice to see if there are any sores or any spots where she might look like she is getting dry skin.
and if she does, I’ll immediately cleanse that area and put the prescribed type of cream....

Stories like these about pet problems leading to perseverance and care are stories of love and caring. They say, “We do not abandon the object of our undying affection just because he or she has become a problem.” Understandably, given such investments of time, money, and energy on our pets, we tend to become very attached to these animals and often to see them as extensions of ourselves.

**Pets as Part of Self**

Metaphorically, when we say we are attached to our pets, we imply an incorporation of the animal into our selves. This differs from traditional totemism in which a species of animal rather than a particular member of this species is revered. The pet is often seen as so much a part of us that we cannot lightly imagine being without him or her. One test of nonrational attachment to possessions is our unwillingness to substitute a functional equivalent (Belk, 1991). The pets owned by the present informants are clear examples of such non-fungibility.

Each day you could just tell we got closer and closer to the dog (a stray taken in) and it was just really neat to have one and mom was starting to really like her and after the first week, if you take this dog away, I’ll probably just have a heart attack and cry my head off, you know. And so we all started getting attached to it....

Because of attachments formed to pets, the death of these animals can be extremely troubling.

Mrs. X believes that when a cat dies she grieves for it just like she would grieve for a human. She and her husband never talk about the death of their cats because it is too painful for them to discuss.

A 21 year old woman felt that the death of her horse was worse than if her parents had died. Even the anticipated death of a pet was very difficult for owners to talk about. While some anticipated or recalled replacing a loved pet that had died with another of similar breed and appearance, others rejected such “replacements,” claiming either that the beloved pet could never be replaced (nonfungibility) or that they could not go through such grief again. These pet owners insist that it is not just that they become attached to their pets, but also that their pet becomes attached to them. Mrs. Z, maintains that her cats become attached to her first.
Mrs. Z speaks as though the cats take her in rather than the other way around. When I asked how she became involved with cats in the first place, she replied, “Well, the first cat that adopted me...”

When such a bond forms with an animal, the pet is often seen to become a part of the owner’s extended self (Belk, 1988). This is perhaps most literally the case among two paraplegic owners of horses. One of these owners was a former high school athletic coach.

There’s not a lot of things I can do anymore, but that’s (having them race) one of them. I had to quit riding about five years ago. I can still watch them run up and down the track. I started in racing by running a cutter team....I guess once you get involved in competing you don’t like to quit.

Another horse owner said of winning a race with his horse:

There’s a lot said about the win circle picture. It’s worth more than the money you get on the paycheck a week later. It’s an ego boost. Part of the training (of the horses) is getting them where they can win and building their confidence.

Dog and cat owners displayed similar pride in their animals.

And when my friends come over, they just think she is the cutest thing and she is the nicest thing and she likes being friends with people and it is nice to have a dog and people say “Oh, she is the cutest dog!” You feel proud of your dog just like you do a sister or brother.

Just as a pet’s success brings pride to the owner, as Sanders (1990a, 1990b) found, criticism of this pet brings shame when it is felt to be deserved and anger when it is not.

If somebody says that she is dumb – if Steve, my husband, gets mad and calls her a dumb dog, I get so angry.

Owners maintained that their pets fit their personalities as well as the lifestyle of their families. Rather than seeing the pet and family as mutually adapting to each other, they feel that they have simply found the perfect pet for them, as one woman explained:

...she is just small enough. She is not too large. She is not too small. She can cuddle up with us on the couch. She is a lot like us. She is our
personality...she worked out just perfect. And I didn’t know when you go to buy a dog that what you do is you try to hopefully see that you see all the litter and then you try to pick a dog that is like your personality or the personality of the family. Now, if you like to cuddle and make a lot of noise and want her to jump around with you, then hopefully you picked the one that is being the most active in the litter. But if you are kind of a quiet person and don’t like a lot of excitement, then you shouldn’t get a dog like Toffer (Aunt Bea’s dog).

Seeing pets as an extension of ourselves does not necessarily mean that these pets are seen in a wholly favorable way. Several descriptions of the personalities of loved pets suggest we also may see them as mirrors of our negative traits.

She (their cat) fits well in with the girls in our apartment. Topaz is a bitch. She is moody and likes to be left alone.

My cat, Max, is temperamental and wild. He takes after me. Jim’s is quiet and even tempered.

As extensions of ourselves, pets are not simply seen as expressions of our identities, but also as appendages. Owners empathize strongly enough with their animals to say that they feel their pain and they compare the animal’s death to losing an arm or a leg. Many also feel that their animal empathizes with them and comforts them when they are ill or depressed (Sanders, 1993). All of these feelings invite comparisons of pets to human members of the family.

**Pets as Members of the Family**

The tendency to see pets as members of the human owner’s family is pervasive in the present study. This is apparent in two major ways: through anthropomorphism of the animal and through extension of family rituals to include pets. As will become evident however, there are also limits in the extent to which our pets are afforded the status of family members.

**Anthropomorphism**

In an admittedly anthropomorphic book about dogs, Thomas (1993) writes convincingly that dogs imitate humans as well as sharing a number of human traits including loyalty, morality, romantic love, singing, smiling, family customs, status-consciousness, weighing of alternatives, playing games, sharing, and caring.
Cats too, she argues have a culture as much as human groups do (Thomas, 1994). Given these thoughts and feelings in dogs and cats, she argues that anthropomorphism is not a bad thing. Animals have long been anthropomorphized in mythology, fables, and cartoons (Berman, 1989, Berger, 1980; Langer, 1972; Midgley, 1983; Sax, 1988; Tapper, 1988), so it is not surprising to find that pet owners also project human traits onto their animals. Apparently the first step in becoming a member of the family is for the pet to come to be seen as human or quasi-human. This is seen to entitle the pet to basic human rights. For example, one woman even revised Christian theology to make physical or psychological abuse of animals a sin.

Animals are completely innocent, helpless, defenseless; but nevertheless living, breathing, feeling creatures with a full range of emotions. They can feel every bit of pain that a human can, in every part of their bodies. They also feel love, hate, jealousy, envy, etc.

On the subject of cruelty to animals, she quotes George Q. Canon, saying,

The birds and animals and fish can not speak, but they can suffer. And our God who created them knows their sufferings and will hold him who causes them to suffer unnecessarily to answer for it. It is a sin against their creator.

A part of becoming human is to have a name. For some, names are even seen to be revealed through a sacred process of revelation termed “hierophany” (Belk, Wallendorf, & Sherry, 1989).

Michael likes to watch TV. His favorite shows are Dynasty and The Colbys. If you turn the TV on to one of his favorite shows, he will sit and watch without moving for an hour. One day Michael and I were watching TV when the Life cereal commercial came on. When the commercial came to the line where the boys say that Mikey likes the cereal, the cat jumped so we named him Michael.

Even though pets cannot engage in two-way conversations with their owners, it is common for these pet owners to talk to their animals.

(Do you talk to your cats?) Yes. And they understand me. I tell my secrets and problems to Michael. He is reliable. I know that he won’t tell anyone. When I tell him my problems, he responds with a sympathetic look or like
I am are being very stupid. He is very human. He is moody and has the same needs (as I do).

The use of baby talk is common in conversing with pets and is one evidence of the tendency to see pets as infants rather than as adult humans (Hirsh-Pasek & Treiman, 1982; Sebeok, 1981). Pet owners offer this metaphor and specifically see their pets as children or grandchildren.

Mercedes [a cat] is my baby, she sleeps with me at night by my head.

I think I was, I was just ready for her. I was ready for a grandchild to be at the heels of my feet and Buffy is just – she would never take the place of a grandchild – but she is just that added thing that we needed in our family to make it complete.

Although this last informant insists that her dog could not take the place of an infant, others insist that their pets are in fact substitute children or grandchildren.

Mrs. X turned to cats when she found out that she couldn’t have children. As she puts it, “I have a strong maternal instinct, and I think my husband has a strong paternal instinct, so naturally we turned our attention to pets – they are like pre-schoolers that never grow up. They are always loving babies. No question about it, they are substitute children, and they are treated exactly like children.”

(Have you thought about getting another cat?) If we don’t get a cat, we’ll have a baby. Ha! When we get a bigger house, we will probably get another cat.

Regarding pets as substitutes for human children is common (Wallendorf & Belk, 1987). Training and caring for pets as well as feeling pride or guilt about their behavior (Sanders, 1990a, 1990b, 1991) are also seen as having a number of parallels to raising a human child.

I get hurt when she [her horse] doesn’t respond to me and I feel bad when something goes wrong. I guess I feel guilty, I guess a lot like a parent would with a child if she doesn’t look good.

I really never really understood that they were just like babies – actual babies – that they whimpered and cried, that they had to be fed every few hours, that there was a way of doing everything with a dog like there is with
a baby, bathing it, training it to go to the bathroom, training it to come on command, I didn’t understand that when we got our first dog....

As with human children, eventually pets also learn to adapt to the patterns of their owners. As these pets come to be regarded as loved members of the family, they are incorporated in a variety of family rituals.

**Pets’ Participation in Family Rituals**

For a dog or a cat, to participate in a family is to eat, sleep, and play with the family, as well as to be included in its special occasions. In feeding such a pet, owners sometimes invoke the logic that if it’s good for other members of the family, it must be good for the pet as well.

I like to treat her like one of the members of the family. I don’t mind sharing my filet with her. I don’t mind sharing anything with her if I know that it is not going to really cause her to get sick...if we have steak, I always like to make sure I get enough for her.

Several owners make it a point to feed the family pet when they eat so that the animal will not “feel left out.”

Pets are not always given free rein of the house, but whether or not they are, they commonly have special places and furnishings that are their own, just as other family members might have a room, bed, or chair of their own.

...we just generally feed him in the kitchen with us but he has a separate place that he eats at. Sometimes we will give him a bone of - a rawhide bone or something like that he can chew on and he can generally take that into the family room or the kitchen and he has a place in the family room that has got like a blanket on it that he can eat that bone down there.

He [a dog] has a place that he stays and he has his particular spot in the family room where my dad put a cedar chip mat for him to stay on. He stayed on that for years and years and that kind of wore out so he has just stayed generally in the same place and it is over by the fireplace and he can lay down and while people are watching TV and stuff. If he wants to go over, he can do that and if people get tired of him, we tell him to go get on his blanket...he likes to watch TV or whatever the family is doing.

In one case, dispute over the property rights of a dog even led to a broken engagement.
Besides eating, sleeping, and watching television with the family, dogs and cats are also commonly included in family celebrations, as with one cat owner:

...she is just like the parent who wants their children to have everything. She gives her cats Christmas presents, and celebrates their birthdays with a cake, candles, and the whole works.

It is also common to include pets in family photographs (Ruby, 1983). In the observed instances of people having their pets’ photo taken with Santas set up for this purpose, some people posed with their pets, but more often only the pets and Santa were included in the photo. Not only is this more like the Santa ritual with children, but some owners as well as Santas joked about whether the pet had been good (nearly always answered by the owner in the superlative affirmative) and what the pet wanted for Christmas (most commonly food treats and toys). A number of pet owners also brought in pets that sported special holiday clothing, including red bows, vests, stocking hats, and sweaters. Many informants carried photos of their pets in their wallets. As a member of the family, a group photo is felt to be incomplete if the dog or cat is missing.

(If you had a family portrait, would Buffy be in it?) Definitely. If the photographer didn’t want her in it, we would find a different photographer!

While there are many ways in which pets are incorporated into the family and these animals are accorded many of the same rights as other family members by their owners, these owners still do not expect the same behavior of pets and human members of the family, as Buffy’s owner explained:

(How would you compare the companionship you get from Buffy to another human relationship?) Oh, goodness. I think with another human, it is totally different because a dog can’t feed itself, it can’t express itself with words and they can’t hug you; they can’t love you like a person or be a friend to you like a person. But a dog can love you in their own special way. They all have different personalities and they all have like little different gestures and that is what is different between a dog and a human. Dogs are not people. But poodles are supposed to be able to understand more than other dogs and so I think Buffy understands most of what we say and tries to work with whatever, like if we get mad at her she knows and she’ll run off under the bed or she’ll just walk off and act like oh, no, I did something wrong. But if she likes what we say she’ll be happy and stuff.
Unlike human children, dogs and cats never outgrow their dependence on adults and are in this sense forever babies. While Hirschman (1994) found some people described pets as siblings rather than children, these were all younger people who may not have regarded themselves as fully adult. As Fiedler (1978) has observed, children are sometimes uncertain "whether they are beasts or men: little animals more like their pets than their parents" (p. 28). Such identifications are partly based on sharing diminutive status with family pets. But while human infants grow and develop, pets are forever marginalized and kept from gaining the full rights and responsibilities of adult family members. This leads to the potential application of another metaphor.

**Pets as Toys**

Tuan (1984) suggests that pets (as well as people) are used as toys when they are used capriciously or in order to gain a sense of power and control. It is this sense of disempowered plaything that is invoked with the *Playboy* "bunny" and the *Penthouse* "pet of the month" (Shell, 1993, p. 152). As with inanimate toys, pets that obey our commands (however capricious) offer a feeling of control and mastery (Bachelard, 1964; Basalla, 1982; Campbell, 1988). In earlier periods, children were treated in a similar manner until the notion of childhood as a time of freedom emerged (Aries, 1962). One way in which such mastery of children was expressed and codified was by dressing them as miniature adults (Downey, 1962). Control over pets was also shown by some owners who dressed them in clothing much as they might a doll.

> We had a lot of fun with her (a cat). We would dress her in doll clothes and put her in a baby buggy. She was so mellow that she handled anything. Sometimes I wonder if someone was slipping her Mickeys.

> Grooming is another way in which pets are sometimes treated as toys or dolls.

> I would prefer that she be trimmed like a regular poodle but my family prefers that she gets what they call a lamb cut and it is kind of an in-between what they like – sort of tends to look like a poodle cut, sometimes I get her legs a little more mutton type shape without shaving her.

Much of the toy-like treatment of pets is done out of feelings of play and love, but the fun can sometimes become sadistic.
(What did you like to do with your cat?) Tease it. Dress it up in doll clothes. One time we even cut its whiskers off. She didn’t like us much; we cut them off about that short (her fingers are about 1/2 an inch apart). I was only about eight. It was funny though. (laughing) She would walk around and she would not know how far she had to go. So she would not go through a door unless it was all the way open.

Another aspect of mastery over pets is training them to obey our commands. This is more easily accomplished with dogs than cats and is a reason given by some of the informants, especially men, for preferring dogs as pets (Kidd & Kidd, 1980).

The family also has a cat, which came into the living room at times. The cat would not come when called and showed her independence. Harold (their dog) minded very well. The family expressed a preference for dogs, especially small dogs.

I’ve never liked cats. Cats are very impersonal and they just act like they are the greatest thing on this earth and they are just really pesky. And dogs, when someone says they are man’s best friend, they are there with you all the time, they love you all the time.

As Aldous Huxley observed, “To his dog every man is Napoleon; hence the constant popularity of dogs.”

While any animal that is dependent upon an owner may give a feeling of mastery over nature, the greater deference and obedience shown by dogs is the most common reason given by those who prefer them over other pets. Those who, instead, prefer cats offer almost the opposite reasoning and suggest that their pets show a proud independence, like the cartoon cat Garfield or the finicky cat, Morris, from former cat food commercials. For one woman, the challenge of controlling a dog made her prefer cats, at least as long as she is single.

I might have a dog when I get married. Dogs need more than one person to take care of them. I can’t handle a dog. I tried when we had dogs but I could never control them. Dogs are more a family animal while a cat is a for one or two people animal.

Also unlike human family members, cats are sometimes declawed and dogs, cats, and horses are often “neutered” – a word preferred because of its gentler connotations than castration, sterilization, or tubal ligation. Because of the over-
population of unwanted dogs and cats, birth control is the most commonly given rationale for such procedures. But at least some sterilizations are intended to make animals more toy-like by making it possible to ignore their sexual natures. In addition, some castrations are intended, for the convenience of the owners, to make a pet more docile and manageable. A mix of these reasons plus a health concern were given as reasons for castrating one young man’s pet dog.

I had always thought I would always like to have one of his pups through another breed to another Labrador Retriever....I don’t know all the reasons why, but nonetheless, we did because the vet had advised us and because my mother also was very concerned about not only his health in light of that but also in hoping to calm him down. Although for a Labrador he is probably the calmest Lab I have ever seen. He is not a high-strung dog. But as far as his aggression is concerned, my mom wanted to see if we could eliminate some of that aggression. So we decided that we better go ahead and get him neutered.

But in opposition to neutering in order to render animals less “animalistic” and more toy-like, further evidence of the role of extended self in pet ownership is found in the greater reluctance of male informants to have their male pets sterilized. One man, a medical doctor, who owns two Siberian Huskies is unwilling to get male dogs because he can’t bear to have them castrated although he had no problem having their females dogs neutered.

A final evidence of the toy-like way in which pets are sometimes viewed is found in the manner in which they are acquired. Some described buying their pet as an impulse purchase. In other cases the pet was found as a stray, accepted from a friend whose pet had puppies or kittens, received as a gift, or taken over from someone else who could not keep him or her. It was the exception that the pet was acquired through careful planning. For one woman, pets were seen as part of a collection.

I have two dogs, three cats, and 100 plus chickens. (How about in the past?) I have had magpies, goats, other dogs, and more cats than I can remember....I like to collect pets. (Like some people collect knickknacks?) Yes.

Thus the familistic metaphor for pets can be too literally construed. Pets often share some of the status of other family members, but their status is most commonly an inferior one.
Conclusion

For many of the highly involved pet owners interviewed for this study, having a pet has changed their lives. They report feeling better because of their pets and are willing to change their lives and schedules to accommodate their pets. One woman will not leave her house for more than four hours at a time because she fears it would inconvenience her dog. Another woman is trying to find a way that she can use seat belts and air bags with her dog so he won’t be injured in case of an automobile accident. As with other treasured possessions, pets are often felt to be worthy of sacrifice, reverence, and defense. Some people may tire of pets and attempt to dispose of them, but not these committed owners. Nor can a pet be easily neglected as can other objects which may have lost their novelty. Fortunately, pets are never as predictable as inanimate objects and are, therefore, more likely to continue to amuse, entertain, and comfort us.

Metaphors are more than mere simplifying figures of speech. They enrich and constitute our understandings and are deeply embedded in the way we think about the world (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Nevertheless, it has proven useful in this study to push these metaphors in order to find where they break down. Even dearly loved pets, and perhaps especially dearly loved ones, are regarded as toys as much as they are as human family members. The dominant understanding of pets by these pet owners is an amalgam of both metaphors. Pets are possessions producing playful pleasure, as the toys metaphor suggests. But they also have many, though not all, of the rights, responsibilities, and characteristics of human family members, suggesting a singularized character (Appadurai, 1986; Kopytoff, 1986) quite unlike that of fungible utilitarian commodities. In this respect they serve those studied in ways diametrically opposed to Descartes’ automata.

Pets may not be full family members, but they are clearly objects of affection as well as sources of gratification. It is their metaphoric status as loved ones that keeps pets from being regarded as mindless machines, programmed computer games, or even livestock. But it is both their lack of judgmental withholding of reciprocal affection and inability to fully outgrow their infantile characteristics that differentiates them from human objects of our affections. While they are thus more than machines, they are also less than humans. And this not fully adult human status places pets in presumed need of our care as well as grants us impunity in treating them as subhuman. The “pathetic fallacy” of anthropomorphizing them may humanize our pets, but only through a metaphoric projection on our parts. This is seen most clearly when someone takes the metaphor too literally and bequeaths an
estate to a pet, has sexual relations with a pet, or otherwise acts in a way that suggests confusion over the boundary between animal and human.

Both these taboo-breaking transgressions and the opposing themes of pet ownership (human versus toy, person versus thing, independent creature versus possession) point out the opposition of the potentially dirty, messy, chaotic elements of animals as opposed to the supposedly clean, orderly, and civilized aspects of humans. Related themes include danger versus purity (Douglas, 1966), wild versus tame (Lawrence, 1982), and nature versus culture (Hirschman, 1994). Cleaning pets, dressing them in human clothes, naming them, neutering them, and assuring that they "behave," defecate outside or in regularly cleaned litter boxes, and participate in family rituals, all may be seen along with anthropomorphism as attempts to transform unclean disorder into "proper" orderly behavior. A similar process may be seen in rearing children; Bataille (1993) asks, "what are children if not animals becoming human?" (p. 65). Yet it is clear from the descriptions and metaphors uncovered here that a part of the enjoyment of animals is their perpetually infantile behavior, their dependence on our care (and seeming gratitude for receiving it), and their capacity to create amusing chaos and catastrophe. Although some pet keepers still delight in having their animals obey their orders, we may no longer be as concerned with metaphorically expressing our dominance over nature as we once were. Instead we may now keep pets to remind ourselves of our own animality and to stave off the boredom of an overly rational, sanitized, and orderly society. In Bataille's (1993) view, dirt and sexuality are part of our repressed animality. Just as we would not want our sex lives to be overly neat, orderly, and predictable, so we value our lives with pets partly because pets keep life stimulating, unpredictable, and interesting. Thus, if pets act as part of our extended self, they represent a divided self that is both civilized and tame, well-behaved and animalistic, controlled and chaotic. If this is a mixed metaphor, it reflects the way we view ourselves in the contemporary world.

Note

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