

Title: The Relationship between Pets and Children and Their Influence on Communication and Social Interactions

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Purpose: The purpose of this study is to evaluate to what extent pets and children contribute to fulfilling social interactions.

Introduction

Justification and Objectives

This study is designed to compare pets and children and their roles within the modern household. It will attempt to study the human/ animal communication and how it contributes to successful human relationships. With an ever growing problem of environmental sustainability and population overhaul, it is interesting to see if professional young adults choose pets as a substitute for starting a family with children. The study will also explore whether young married couples and professional adults' value having pets as much as parents value having children. This study will evaluate the social interactions in which pet owners, parents and single adults engage within both personal and professional relationships. Then, it will attempt to measure the level of social dependency, more specifically comfort and companionship that pets and children fulfill. Ultimately, if the study proves successful, it will determine if more professional young adults choose to raise pets instead of children due to social, relational and economic benefits.

This field of study is in its infancy. Social researchers have just begun to explore the different types of human-animal communication, as well as the benefits that come along. Previous research is limited to how pets benefit humans as therapeutic resources. However, the previous work is weak in evaluating how pets have molded part of a new family dynamic. This study presents literature on pets and children within the household, modern day family dynamics and household spending, pet ownership and parenthood. The areas of pet ownership will focus on the human / animal communication, while the parenthood section will focus on human / human communication. This study also delves into research specifically about the social interactions that individuals engage in and whether or not their pets and/or children contribute to more positive and fulfilling interactions with other humans.

Literature Review

Modern Day Family Dynamics and Household Spending

Family dynamics have changed throughout the years and having pets has become more socially accepted. Historically, pets were seen as being purposeless. Today, pets have become part of a lifestyle. While social norms have changed and pet ownership has become more common, the number of couples having children seems to have declined. It is important to mention that with the every growing number of pets within the household, the modern day family has been modified to include human and pet communication. Since communicating with a pet can be easier than communicating with other humans, the desire to raise pets has increased. Additionally, the communication among parents and children is not always the most favorable so it seems that many young couples choose to raise one or more pets in place of having children. This type of communication becomes an important part within the family. As a result, this communication may sometimes cause individuals to reduce their desire to have children of their own. The Consumer Products & Services Trend Report, (2004) indicates that “the fastest growing segments of pet owners are empty nesters and young professionals who postpone starting families but want a substitute” (Morias, 2004). This could arguably mean that pet ownership maybe more favorable than parenthood among these modern day couples and their new households.

Elizabeth C. Hirschman makes the argument that “Animals may serve as *children*, preparing prospective parents for the responsibilities of raising human children” (as cited by Beck & Katcher, 1983). Hirschman continues on about how pets can serve as “*child substitutes* for childless couples or for parents whose human children have left home” and that “pets could be viewed as *cheap children*” (Hirschman, 1994, p 618). Based on this literature, pets are not always used to replace children, but as supplements to children. Since pets and children certainly have their similarities,

some young adults choose to raise pets to get hands on experience of how to raise a child. It is interesting that pets and children are often viewed so similarly. Both pets and children provide humans with companionship, comfort, love and what that all comes with is communication.

According to Schwarz, Troyer and Walker (2007), "The number of U.S. households with pets increased from 52 million to 69 million between 1988 and 2002. The 2002 total included an estimated 65 million dogs and 78 million cats among the pets, comparable in magnitude to the Census Bureau estimate of 72 million children under the age of 18" (Schwarz, Troyer, & Walker, 2007, p 2). There is clearly a benefit to being a pet owner. Many scholars believe that the relationship between pets and humans contributes to the human's social well-being in both personal and professional relationships. This is certainly one benefit of having a pet and one good reason for an increase in the number of pet owners throughout the years. With statistical backing as significant as this, it is crucial to understand the true benefits of pet ownership and explore future possibilities of a new type of family dynamic.

The American Pet Products Association, APPA (2009), estimates that "62% of U.S. households own a pet, and most of them are willing to spend vast amounts of time and money to keep Sparky and Fluffy happy." The APPA goes on to state that the pet industry has tripled in the past 15 years with an estimated spending of \$45.4 billion this year. The APPA calculates an "increase of \$2 billion since 2008 -- despite the crippling recession" (American Pet Products, 2009). To supplement this idea of increased spending on pets, Colin Jerolmack (2009), an NYU sociology professor who studies animals in society, states that "People are fascinated by pets. We act and spend on them as if they were our children. We've civilized them to the point that they are no longer a part of wild nature" (American Pet Products, 2009). About a century ago, pets were used as resources. Dogs were used for hunting and cats were used to scare off mice. Modern day

pets still behave the same way, however their role has expanded and they have become part of the human house hold.

As pets have become civilized family members, Siskind (2008), publisher of the online magazine, “Dog News Daily” states that "The lifestyle changes are dramatically influencing the products and trends." He argues that as we have humanized pets, we have taken it to the point where we treat them like humans and provide them with the same quality of food, clothes, beds and health care as we would for our human children. The large reason for this special treatment is that pets fulfill a human need for companionship, friendship and love. Some pet owners describe the love from their pets like it is the love from a child. This creates a human desire to take great care for the animal that fulfills their social and emotional needs.

A Forbes magazine article, “The Pet Culture” (2009), informs us that the pet industry is sky rocketing and opening up the market for new pet products and services. “On the market now for pets are braces, orthopedic beds, strollers, car seats, electric toothbrushes and fashion ensembles from faux-mink coats to jewelry and leather jackets!” *Anything else?* Sure. Implants, anti-depressants, and anxiety pills are all available for pets to feel better, too.

Pet Ownership

Humans benefit from having pets because their human need for companionship is fulfilled. The phrase “a man’s best friend” refers to the kind of friendship and loyalty pets give their owners and vice versa. As it turns out, many communication experts have spent some time studying the benefits of pets to humans. As described by Schvaneveldt, Schvaneveldt, Young and Kivett (2001), pets “offer companionship, assist persons with disabilities, facilitate therapy, and play an important role in the bereavement process” (Schvaneveldt, Schvaneveldt, Young, & Kivett, 2001, p 34). Most studies limit their research to the area of pet therapy, however. Although this area is

very significant, what remains untouched is the idea that pets have taken a role as children within the household and actually contribute to their owner's social well-being. People rely on pets for companionship and love. Everyone needs a friend and it turns out pets are good candidates for social and emotional support. When a human has a strong relationship with their pet it contributes to having and maintaining other strong human relationships.

McNicholas and Collis (2000) wrote that pets positively impact their owner's lives and "may enhance social interactions between people, increasing or strengthening social networks and social provisions thus elevating psychological well-being" (McNicholas, & Collis, 2000). What this clearly states is that pets not only benefit humans by being their friend, but also by helping them make more human friends as well. It is very common for pet owners to interact with other pet owners who share many common interests with one another just as parents typically get together to have adult time while their children play together, too. It also appears that humans find a sense of serenity when they spend time with their pets. The carelessness, fun-loving spirit of pets, such as cats, dogs, birds and many other animals aids in a type of therapy and allows the pet owner to feel the same for a short period of time. When humans are relaxed and in a good spirit, they tend to get along with more people, be in a better mood and in turn have stronger social networks and social interactions.

A major factor in everyday life is that there is never enough time in one day and humans are very busy. As less time can be allocated to spending with friends and family, humans depend on our pets for convenient companionships. The previously cited, Jerolmack (2009) speculates that pets have become so important to us due to people's decreasing connection to each other. People rely on pets for companionship and to fulfill their needs for a friend.

A debate has begun to unfold as more public parks are being transformed to ½ playgrounds and ½ pet grounds where pet owners can take their furry friends. As pets play with their new friends, pet owners engage in social interactions with other human pet owners. This type of social interaction is not only beneficial for the pet's health, but also for the pet owners' well-being. As more parks are being shared, many parents are fighting back because they believe their children are more important than pets. On the contrary, pet owners value their pets and enjoy the freedom of utilizing designated areas to take their pets while engaging in human conversations with neighborhood friends at the same time.

Parenthood

As most parents will admit, having children of your own is a one of a kind experience. Parenthood is a large responsibility but certainly a learning process and it has no end. Children develop certain behaviors, beliefs and values from their parents which help them in social interactions, both at home and in public settings such as school and work. Children also learn skills that help them interact with their parents, teachers and peers. At the same time, parents also develop their own social skills through the experience of raising children while juggling their own adult life. Often times, parents make friends with other parents so their children can play together allowing all of the parents to have a social life of their own.

More importantly, parents highly influence their children in social development through their one-on-one communication. Open communication between parents and their children promotes stronger coping skills when faced with emotional and negative experiences. Gentzler, Grau, Kerns and Wiemer (2005), state that parents who are able to have open communication with their children serve as a model for them. On the contrary, studies have found that unsupportive parental responses, hostile communication and invalidation of the child's feelings teach the

children to not share their feelings or problems with others (Gentzler, 2005, p 592). As children grow up, they learn new things and become more socially and emotionally intelligent. An important stage in children's lives requires parents to take care of them as they learn about themselves, others and the world around them. Positive communication, in any type of relationship is beneficial to an individuals' social well-being. When parents and children are able to get along and have positive communication with each other, they are happier and less stressed out.

Research Question

On a sociological level, this study attempts to assess how pet ownership is beginning to play the same role as parenthood and attempt to find out if pets actually function as children within the modern household. On a communication level, the study will focus on the social interactions that pet owners engage in, with pets and other human friends. More specifically, this study will answer the research question, *to what extent do parents and pet owners experience fulfillment within their social interactions?*

Methods

Sample

The participants in this study were professional adults who were above the age of 18. The average age of the participants was 26 years old. The participants also consisted of randomly selected males and females with very diverse sexual orientations and relationship status'. The participants consisted of 13 males (33%) and 26 females (67%). The sample includes individuals who are married, divorced, single and dating. The average adult surveyed was involved in dating relationships (63%) or were single (24%). Additionally, the sample included participants who were heterosexual (75%), homosexual (15%), and bisexual (10%) in orientation.

Of the participants surveyed, 36 were pet owners (90%) and only six were parents. Only one person surveyed (2.5%) did not have pets but was a parent. Five out of the six parents surveyed had both pets and children, while only three did not have children or pets at all (7.5%). The participants rented or lived in dorms (55%), owned their own homes (17.25%) and lived with their parents (27.5%). The subjects were randomly selected on one college campus during a weekend event. The participants were from various colleges, including both four year universities and two year junior colleges throughout California.

Procedures

To conduct this exploratory study, an exhaustive three page survey was developed to include statements about how the participants felt about their relationships and social interactions. The study measures four dimensions of social interactions and within each dimension there were four indicators.

Data was collected in a group setting on a college campus. The survey was not administered at one time to the whole group, but rather, given to smaller groups of individuals at different times, throughout a full weekend. The survey was administered to each person to read the statements, answer honestly and work at their own pace. The survey was not timed however it took each participant an average of four minutes complete. After the survey was finished, the participants were thanked for volunteering their time. Participants were not compensated in any way.

Measures

The independent variables (IV) in this study are pet owners and parents. The study also obtained data from respondents who were neither pet owners nor parents but still interact in social

situations. The survey is broken down into two sections to measure the IV. The first section focuses on parenthood. The section contains nine statements about parent-child relationships and asks the participants to evaluate how they feel about the statements on a Likert scale. The scale is broken down into five categories; Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often and Very Often. 1 = Never and 5 = Very Often. The ninth question asks for the first names of the participants children. This question was optional and may be used later in the results section of this study.

The second section of the survey focuses on pet ownership. This section makes eleven statements that the participants evaluate on the same Likert scale based on how they feel about their pet relationships. Once again, the eleventh question asks for the names of the participants pets. This question was also optional and may be used in the results section, as well.

The dependent variable (DV) in this study is the participants' responses to the statements about social interactions, section 3 in the survey. In order to evaluate the DV of 'Social Interactions' as a whole, the study conceptualizes it by breaking it down into four independent components. These components are, 'Social Relationships,' 'Romantic Relationships,' 'Family Relationships,' and 'Professional Relationships.' Within each category there are three dimensions that help measure each level of social interactions which are Attention, Communication, and Friendship. The indicators within these dimensions are the actual statements that are asked on the questionnaire. For example, under the category of 'Social Relationships,' the statement under the dimension of Communication is "I am a very social person." (For the full survey refer to the appendix). The participants were asked to evaluate their feelings about the statements on a Likert scale. This scale is broken down into five categories as well; however the categories are Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree and Strongly Agree. 1 = Strongly Disagree and 5 = Strongly Agree.

Data entry and data analysis were done using a statistics program called “Statistical Package for Social Science,” or SPSS.

Results

Results from this study were gathered using SPSS program to sort and analyze the data. First, a descriptive analysis was done to understand the key independent variables involved in the study. Next, three comparative analysis tables were created to compare the independent and dependent variables and how they are correlated with each other.

Table 1

VARIABLES	N	MEAN	S.D.	RANGE
status	38	3.42	0.92	3.00
sex orientation	40	1.35	0.66	2.00
gender	39	1.67	0.48	1.00
age	40	26.18	10.25	43.00
home situation	40	2.10	0.67	2.00

Table 2**Correlations**

		comfortp	petcomp
comfortp	Pearson Correlation	1	.789**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	36	36
petcomp	Pearson Correlation	.789**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	36	36

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3**Correlations**

		friendsp	petchild	communication
friendsp	Pearson Correlation	1	.711**	.019
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.914
	N	36	36	36
petchild	Pearson Correlation	.711**	1	-.159
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.355
	N	36	36	36
communication	Pearson Correlation	.019	-.159	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.914	.355	
	N	36	36	40

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 4
Correlations

		comfeelc	comfortc	communication	attention	friendship
comfeelc	Pearson Correlation	1	.000	.884*	.733	.567
	Sig. (2-tailed)		1.000	.019	.097	.241
	N	6	6	6	6	6
comfortc	Pearson Correlation	.000	1	.103	.599	.174
	Sig. (2-tailed)	1.000		.846	.209	.742
	N	6	6	6	6	6
communication	Pearson Correlation	.884*	.103	1	.075	.214
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.019	.846		.647	.185
	N	6	6	40	40	40
attention	Pearson Correlation	.733	.599	.075	1	.334*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.097	.209	.647		.035
	N	6	6	40	40	40
friendship	Pearson Correlation	.567	.174	.214	.334*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.241	.742	.185	.035	
	N	6	6	40	40	40

*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The findings from the comparative analysis (Table 2) show that 79% of the surveyed participants rely on their pets for comfort and companionship. Additionally, the comparative analysis (Table 3) found that 71% of pet owners communicate with their pets as if they are their best friends and also as if they are human children of their own. The study did not successfully evaluate the correlation between the relationships with pets and fulfilling communication with other humans, however.

Of the total participants, only six out of the 40 total surveyed were parents. The comparative analysis (Table 4) measured that 88% of parents surveyed relied on their children for

comfort, as well. In correlation, these parents engage in more fulfilling communication with other humans in social, romantic, family and professional relationships.

It was very interesting to see how the participants named their pets in comparison with the names of human children.

Correlate the names of children and the names given to pets

Correlate how much money is spent on parents and children

Discussion

Implication

Although this study did not fully answer the research question it had originally proposed, it did provide some insight on how humans and animals actually do complement each other. As mentioned previously, professional adults have a lot on their plate every day. Finding alternatives for comfort and fulfillment is a crucial part in any humans' lives. The results support previous research about how pets provide their human owners with comfort and companionship. Moreover, the parents surveyed also gain comfort from their children. It is safe to say that pets and children have many parallels. They fulfill a lot of the same needs that humans depend on. Laughter, comfort and the simple pleasures of being around someone, or something that you love and care about help relaxation and ease of mind. Having children and/ or pets allows adults to unwind, relax and let go of the hard day while preparing for the next day's challenges to come. As previous scholars have argued pets and children are therapeutic to humans. Pets and children benefit social and emotional well-being in very similar ways.

Limitation

The results from this study are limited due to the fact that it needs a larger number of participants to complete the survey. Forty is too small of a sample size for a study with this magnitude and affects both the validity and reliability of the findings. The data collected did not provide for accurate information in regards to pet and human communication. Although the information is true for these 40 people, it cannot be generalized as the norm for the whole population of parents and pet owners. The survey did not provide accurate data in section 2 about pets because many of the participants have animals other than dogs and cats. Although dogs and cats are the most common household pets, this study neglects the fact that humans have also domesticated other animals such as birds, fish, snakes, lizards, frogs and even rodents, just to name a few, that do not require additional attention.

Suggestions for future research

Updated research must be done as a follow up to examine the current social norms of pet ownership in households. The literature is still in its infancy and statistics about household pets were collected several years prior to this study. Additionally, the questionnaire must be revised in order to more successfully measure the social interactions and communication that humans engage in with both animals and other humans. The questionnaire will require a complete makeover to focus less on the emotional dependency and more on the social fulfillment and well-being.

Conclusion

To summarize, this study proposed the research question, *to what extent do pet owners and parents experience fulfilling social interactions?* Although the results did not accurately measure the extent of fulfilling social interactions that pets contribute to, it did find that humans and pets

complement each other. Humans rely on pets for comfort and companionship just as they do with their children. The study also found that pets and children benefit their owners and parents social and emotional well-being. Future studies must be done to continue this area of research. Knowing how pets and children function within the household and how they contribute to fulfilling social interactions will help professional adults decide if they want to start a family with animals, children or both.

SAMPLE

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