

Pet/Human Bonding: Applications, Conceptual and Research Issues

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In April, 1984, *Psychology Today* conducted a national survey probing for the relationship between humans and pets. Approximately 13,000 persons responded to the survey. The major results substantiate the findings of a large number of investigators working in the empirical vineyard, some who are represented in this volume. It is reported that pet, more than non-pet, owners have humanistic orientations expressed in compassion for others; are more satisfied and happy with their lives. Pets are well integrated into the majority of families in the United States. Eighty percent of pet owners report that they receive more companionship from their animals than from friends and neighbors, and view pets equal to family members and relatives in importance. Respondents, almost 100%, indicate that pets are important in the development and socialization of children and families should make effort to have a pet while a child is growing up (Ryan, 1984).

This landmark survey indicates the pervasiveness of the animal/human bond and the extremely high prevalence of pets in U.S. households. Survey respondents express positive feelings about pets and their roles in families. The data from this survey, important, positive and supportive of the animal/human connection, provide a base for probing the meaning and significance of pets for family members and families and what the human bond means to companion and domestic animals.

The papers in this volume do such probing. There are a few empirical reports with the majority being analytic papers covering ideological, theoretical, research and methodological issues. These "state of the art" reports indicate that the issues and problems of the animal/human bond are complex and deep. The work in this area has received sufficient media attention to attract competent researchers

and funds to work on significant conceptual issues and empirical problems. To encourage the development of sound theoretical positions and research which will deepen our knowledge of the animal/human bond and the applications of this information, the following recommendations are made.

1. Clinical studies and researches conducted without controls report that there is a reduction in mortality and morbidity as a consequence of a pet being a companion to an individual. Two types of studies are indicated to establish the viability of this conclusion. The first is a long scale longitudinal health study. Because such studies are so costly, a protocol containing questions on pet ownership can be piggybacked on one or more longitudinal studies in progress or in genesis. The second type of study to determine mortality and morbidity over a short time period requires a research design with a non-pet control group and further control of such variables as type of pet, previous experience with pets, marital and family status, health status, and social support networks.
2. The perception that pets affect the well-being of humans positively requires study regarding its universality, depth of affectiveness, and persistence. To explain any variability and to improve the predictability of outcomes when pets are introduced in therapy or home situations, specifying animal and human attributes is required. Initial studies would control for characteristics of an animal species and breeds, e.g., dogs: dalmation, poodle, bulldog, fox terrier, and examine the fit of the species with particular personality characteristics of the pet owner. Subsequent studies can examine the "fit" of the species and breeds with demographic, sociologic, and life cycle characteristics of family members and families. The probe is whether personality types, particular demographic, life cycle or sociologic variables affect the well-being of the individual or the characteristics of the animal species and breeds.
3. Observing or attending to pets is reported to have relaxing effects on those involved. Studies are required to specify what are these effects; the species and characteristics which optimize the relaxation of the attender and the optimal match of the type of pet with the personality characteristics, health, economic, and social status and life conditions.
4. One enduring problem in intervention studies is to determine

the power of the (s) variable. The stimulus variable in animal/human bonding studies is the presence or introduction of a pet to an individual or family. The question is whether outcomes such as improved self worth, interpersonal competence, life satisfaction, happiness, or marital health are a consequence of pet/human interaction or interaction between family members. The pet may be a facilitator or a cause of such interaction. The issue of cause may be unimportant if the desired consequence is obtained, e.g., improved family functioning. On the other hand similar effects may be obtained using other stimuli and may be a more desirable option. Controlled family studies using observational techniques, self-reports, interviewing and testing procedures can determine the complementary effects of pet/human and human/human interaction on selected outcomes.

5. The death of pet has been described as having stressful consequences similar to those who have experienced the loss of family member, relative, or a close friend. Comparison human and animal death studies with systematic mapping of the grieving process is suggested. Measures of stress using standardized instruments should be made. Attention should be given to such variables as family structure, stage of life cycle, age, cause of death, intensity of the relationship and availability and use of social supports.
6. Pets are increasingly used in therapeutic situations involving persons with physical or mental deficits or with special problems. Their introduction into such settings has been viewed as having some desirable impact. The pet is used as a conjunctive therapist, a facilitator of the therapeutic process. In some total care institutions pets are allowed and it is reported that incarcerated patients or prisoners are more relaxed, easily handled, and satisfied. The assignment of such animals or pet visitation programs are done by chance. There is a need for investigative and controlled studies on the appropriate match of domestic and companion animals, species and breed and other life forms, e.g., fish, with particular settings, age, sex and the physical and mental status of individuals.
7. Theoretical studies on why pets have more beneficial than negative effects on humans are recommended. In doing such scholarly work consider the pet in the role of playmate, trustworthy companion, friend, and the developmental period of the indi-

vidual; changes in the individual's perception of the situation and self; satisfying and profitable exchanges between pet and human; and the conditions of dependency and responsibility.

8. Given the high incidence and prevalence of pet ownership; the significance of pets in the lives of individuals, family members, and families; and employment of pets in various custodial and therapeutic settings, there is a need for diagnostic and treatment models and new service options. Human service personnel during intake interviews should have as an integral component of their diagnostic checklist a history of current and past pet ownership. The Human Service System should provide counselling and group therapy options for the individual whose pet is ill, disabled, or has died. Procedures for caring for the pet of a disabled or terminally hospitalized patient should be in place and evoked when required. Foster care and adoption, procedures used with dependent children may be useful in managing the care of dependent pets.

9. Reports suggest that cases of family violence, and child and elder abuse are increasing in incidence. Prevalence of abuse has always been high. Today there are fewer taboos and fewer cultural constraints about reporting such cases. One basic issue is whether a domestic or companion pet exacerbates or reduces violence and abuse in the family. Since pets serve as developmental resources, being dependent friends and thus encouraging human responsibility, demonstration projects with abusing and dysfunctional families need to be designed. Pets can be introduced to encourage loving and caring responses. Controlled demonstrations with appropriate evaluation can establish the efficacy of this intervention.

REFERENCE

- Ellen Ryan, letter, July 12, 1984.