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 basis 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 postures 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 longitudinal health study. Because such studies are 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., dog: 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 

4. One enduring problem in intervention studies is to determine
the power of the (x) variable. The stimulus variable in animal/
human housing 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 stimulums
and may be a more desirable option. Controlled family studies us-
ing 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 con-
sequences 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 griev-
ing process is suggested. Measures of stress using standard-
ized 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 prob-
lems. 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 incar-
cerated 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 nega-
tive effects on humans are recommended. In doing such scholar-
ly work consider the pet in the role of playmate, trustworthy
companion, friend, and the developmental period of the indi-

8. Given the high incidence and prevalence of pet ownership the
significance of pets in the lives of individuals, family mem-
bers, and families; and employment of pets in various custo-
dial and therapeutic settings, there is a need for diagnostic and
treatment models and new service options. Human service per-
sonnel during intake interviews should have as an integral com-
ponent of their diagnostic checklist a history of current and
past pet ownership. The Human Service System should pro-
vide 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 evolved when required. Foster care and adop-
tion, procedures used with dependent children may be useful
in managing the care of dependent pets.

9. Reports suggest that cases of family violence, 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 develop-
mental resources, being dependent friends and thus encour-
aging 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.

REFERENCES

Ellen Ryan, licent, July 12, 1984.