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# More than man's best friend: A look at attachment between humans and their canine companions

Samantha E. Kennedy  
*University of South Florida*

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More Than Man's Best Friend:  
A Look at Attachment Between Humans and Their Canine Companions

by

Samantha E. Kennedy

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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Department of Sociology  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Christy Pontcelli, Ph.D.  
Spencer Cahill, Ph.D.  
Margarethe Kusenbach, Ph.D.

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**More Than Man's Best Friend:  
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**ABSTRACT**

According to the American Veterinary Medical Association, there are currently more than 60 million pet dogs in the United States. This is an increase of nearly eighteen percent since 1991, coinciding with a growing area of research on human's relationships with companion animals and companion animals' place in society.

For years dogs have been thought of as "man's best friend" because of their loyalty and faithfulness. The increasing popularity of activities such as canine daycare and puppy school suggests that dogs have become more than a best friend to some and even an integral part of the American family unit. The bond and emotional connection between humans and canines is a unique relationship, yet the depth of that relationship is not fully understood academically.

In order to contribute to our understanding of this special bond, I conducted seven in-depth interviews with canine companions. My research allowed me to explore how contemporary Americans understand their relationship with their companion dogs. Not only was I able to shed more light on how people think about and treat their canine companions, but I also investigated what benefits are reaped from relationships with dogs. Based on my informants' reflections and stories, it became clear that their canines were more than just pets. The people in my study described dogs as their best friends,

babies and even sons. My interviewees described canine companions who are active participants in their families and in human social life in general. Those who hope to understand this life cannot afford to ignore the canine companion's changing and important contributions to society.

## **Introduction**

I have always considered myself an “animal lover.” I grew up with cats, and when I was in high school, my family and I introduced a dog to our feline household. The dog bit and growled at me repeatedly (and still does today when I return home). Needless to say, I never formed a strong bond with that dog.

When I moved into my own apartment, three years ago, I decided that I needed a furry companion who would also help me feel safer in my home. After a few hours at a local animal shelter, Mattie and I headed home. Mattie had been returned to the shelter twice for unknown reasons, but from the moment she stuck her paw up to shake paws with me, I knew that she had my heart and mine would be her last home. My veterinarian guessed that Mattie was two years old and is a thirty-pound Border Collie-Chow mix. While her fluffy body and extremely friendly temperament would not do much to fulfill my security needs, she would/does provide a type of companionship and love that I had not previously known. From that day forward, I entered into a new relationship that was similar to many human relationships that I have known. At the same time, our relationship is very different from human-human relationships.

How is a human-dog relationship similar and yet not really comparable to a human-human relationship? What distinguishes the two? These questions are important simply because of the shifting demographics of companion dogs in the United States.

In the United States there are currently more than 60 million pet dogs, an increase of nearly eighteen percent since 1991. In addition to the rising numbers, owners spent

approximately thirty-eight percent more money on their canines in 2001 than they did in 1996 (AVMA, 2002). This increase in spending comes with an increase in activities and options available for our canine companions. Dogs, who once lived in the backyard, now have human-like luxuries available to them. There are dog spas, “doggie daycare,” dog parks, play grounds, pet hotels, and high-tech medical procedures. On the home-front, dogs are included in holiday festivities.

For years, dogs have been thought of as “man’s best friend” because of their loyalty and faithfulness to their companions. The increasing popularity of activities such as canine daycare and puppy school demonstrates to us that dogs serve an integral function in the American family unit. In some cases, dogs appear to be surrogate children. Whether a person thinks of a dog as a best friend, child or a companion, the contemporary bond between human and canine is unique. While the relationship may be likened to that between humans, it does not fully parallel human-human bonds. What have others learned about relationships between humans and companion animals?

## **Historical Context of Dogs in Society**

Smokie and I represent the bond and relation that exists between human life and natural life.  
- Rod Michalko, *Two in One. Walking with Smokie, Walking with Blindness*

There is much debate about the historical role of dogs in human societies. If dogs provided a service, were they also companions or friends to humans? Were they just furry bodies that spent most of their non-working time outside with the other animals? The historical roles of dogs can help us understand the modern canine role in our society. Are dogs today inherently different from dogs years ago? Have the roles they played fundamentally changed or is there more of a continuum depending on the changing needs of the people?

### **Companion or Worker?**

Some historians and scholars argue that the compassionate relationship between humans and pets evolved with our modern society. They argue that, with industrialization, human residences became more urbanized and more animals were brought into people's lives as "pets" to ease the isolation and loneliness of city-life as well as to bring aspects of rural life into the cities (Olson and Hulser, 2003; Menache, 1998). Menache (1998) states, "the bravery expected from dogs in ancient cultures is today replaced by affection, as an antidote to the loneliness inherent in urban life". Olson and Hulser (2003) demonstrated that domesticated animals (dogs, cats, birds, and fish) have a longstanding history of living with members of the human aristocracy or upper class in more urban areas. These animals served as status symbols for the people they



lived with. This trend is apparent in the large number of pets found in family portraits of the wealthy over time.<sup>1</sup> While it appears that some animals “lived the good life” two-hundred or more years ago, Olson and Hulser argue that the life of companion animals has actually improved over time.

City dwellers, then and now, have loved their pets, but our notions of the good life with our animal companions have changed dramatically.... Companion animals eat different foods, sleep in different places, see different doctors called veterinarians—and even enjoy some very different public rights—than they did 200 years ago. (Olson and Hulser, 2003:133)

Today, this relationship transcends class barriers, and animals are companions to people from all levels of society. Even homeless people are frequently found caring for companion animals.

The increasingly compassionate dimension of human and animal relations may have paralleled the rise of urbanism, but may not be due to industrialization and urbanization. “Pets,” especially companion dogs, might not have been the “antidote” for urban loneliness, but may have filled a void left by their decreasing utilitarian function. In the cities, dogs were no longer needed to herd sheep and guard livestock.

While the evolving role of dogs in human social life is evident, some argue that animals, especially dogs, have played many essential roles in humans’ lives as far back as Biblical or ancient times (Menache, 1998). Canines have served numerous utilitarian functions, such as guardians, hunters and warriors. According to Menache (1998), “The *canis bellator* or *canis pugnator* was assigned crucial military roles, a practice that probably originated in the Orient.” The Latin phrases translate to “dog fighter” or “fighting dog,”<sup>2</sup> suggesting a canine soldier who went to war with human soldiers. Menache argues that these dogs were both working dogs and companions to their owners

and others around them. This suggests that an emotional relationship has always existed, but that in the past the emotional relationship was secondary to the work relationship.

A modern example of this multidimensional relationship between humans and animals is the assistance dog. Assistance animals are “working” animals used for the rehabilitation of prisoners and nursing home patients, as well as lifesaving assistants for the blind, epileptic, or other physically challenged individuals. Assistance dogs clearly foster both a working and personal relationship with their caretaker, providing both emotional and physical support. Previous research has indicated that there is an intense emotional bond between humans and their assistance dogs (Sanders, 1999). This exclusive bond and dual role is best described in a book by Michalko (1999), a visually impaired man, who discusses his relationship with his “dog guide,” Smokie.

Smokie is my guide, my partner, and my friend. More than anything else, however, Smokie is my teacher. He guides in the true and ancient sense of that term; Smokie teaches as he guides. I will never be able to repay the debt I owe him. My gratitude to Smokie is as eternal as my love for him. (1999:xi)

It is because of their intense emotional bond that a working relationship can truly be successful.

Do dogs either have to serve a utilitarian function *or* be a companion in our modern society, or could there be several dimensions to the relationship? Assistance dogs are often a clear example that dogs *can* play many roles for their human companion. I would argue that even the companion dog serves a utilitarian function, just one that might be more emotional than physical. According to the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, the word utility means something that is “kept to provide a useful product or service rather than show or as a pet” ([www.m-w.com](http://www.m-w.com)). Many people seem to think that in order

for something to have a working or utilitarian function that it must produce some sort of economic or physical result. If that is the case, then most “pets” would no longer serve such a function. Nevertheless, if we use an alternate definition where utility means “something useful” (www.m-w.com) then the modern companion animal could serve many utilitarian functions. Companionship, health benefits (both physical and mental), as well as the assignment of status and prestige are examples of functions that companion animals serve in our contemporary society. One can even argue that historically animals were utilized for some of these same functions. While it may have seemed frivolous for royalty or the elite in society to “own” domesticated animals, these pets provided their caretakers with status, making it clear to others that they had wealth and power.

### **Social Scientific Literature**

Despite the growing importance of companionate human-canine relations in contemporary Western societies, social scientists were late to make them a topic of study. Literature on assistance animals has helped to bridge the gap between dogs that are seen as four-legged, furry creatures and dogs that are seen as fully-functioning, emotional companions. Until the past two decades, in-depth research on humans and animals (particularly dogs) was primarily conducted by psychologists and medical researchers inquiring about the benefits of animals in the rehabilitation of hospital patients and nursing home residents (Kahn, 2002; Heimlich, 2001; Haynes, 1991; Muschel, 1984). Such studies have contributed to the growing number of volunteer organizations like Project PUP (Pets Uplifting People)<sup>3</sup>, a facilitator of pet visits to nursing homes and medical facilities. The majority of these studies are deductive and quantitative in nature.

In the coverage of these studies, several Likert-type scales were created to gauge pet attachment. The Lexington Attachment to Pets Scale (Johnson, Garrity and Stallones, 1992) is one example of this. The scale provides a numerical value of a person's level of attachment to a variety of domesticated animals. Many of the pet attachment scales, such as the one already mentioned, used adaptations of human attachment measurements. While scales may provide quick statistics, they do not offer detailed insight into the complex relationship between humans and their animal companions. Like many surveys, the researchers were able to obtain large amounts of data, but the respondents were only allowed limited answers. Also, most of the scales collapsed "companion animals" into one general category including dogs, cats, birds and fish. For the purposes of my study, I wanted to focus only on one type of animal, dogs, since humans may have varying relationships with different types of companion animals. Questions of how human-canine relationships may differ or be similar to humans' relationships with other species of animals should be left for future research.

One of the reasons why so little sociological research has been conducted on human-animal relationships in our society is that many social scientists have failed to appreciate that "pet" animals play integral roles in our society. For example, Albert and Bulcroft (1988:544) suggest that, "perhaps pets have been overlooked in family studies because it is difficult for the objective and rational social scientist to consider them as potential 'members' in the family system." Their point may be of wider applicability. A number of earlier sociological works focused on how dogs help facilitate interaction among people, but did not look at the relationships between dogs and people (Robins, Sanders and Cahill, 1991; Hart and Boltz, 1993). If researchers are unwilling to

acknowledge that a “real” relationship exists between humans and animals, and are unwilling to consider the many social implications of these relationships, then there is very little to study. The unwillingness is due, in part, to social scientists assuming that meaningful relationships cannot exist between those who do not share a common set of symbols, or language (Arluke and Sanders, 1996; Sanders, 2003). Clinton Sanders, one of the leaders in the study of human-animal interaction, identifies the scholarly costs of such blindness:

In failing to recognize the fact that we live in an interactional community composed of both human and nonhuman members, we have ignored an area of social life that is commonplace, emotionally rich, and of significant analytic interest. (2003: 421)

Sanders and most caretakers would argue that they consider their dogs to be active participants in social interaction, thereby opening up clear lines of communication. If the canine guardians think of their dogs as competent and contributing social actors, then so should social scientists.

In her recent book *If You Tame Me* (2004), Leslie Irvine argues that not all people have the same “connection” with animals but those who do often have a “complex relationship.” Irvine explains:

A complex relationship implies that we must come to know a great deal about the other being with whom we share the relationship. If we consider the relationship complex, then our interaction will require a commitment to learning how the dog or cat sees the world and functions within it. In turn, this presupposes that animals have minds and feelings that help them to know and function. (2004:65)

Many people make the effort to truly connect with their companion animal; those who do tend to have different understandings of animals and also reap different benefits.

Individuals who make an effort to create what Irvine calls “animal capital,” generate a

“meaningful, nonexploitive companionship with animals” (Irvine, 2004). Animal capital includes being knowledgeable of your companion and what he or she may need to sustain a happy and healthy physical and emotional life. Proper nutrition, emotional satisfaction and appropriate veterinary care are just a few of the examples that Irvine notes. Simply providing the essentials like food and healthcare does not mean that one has created a meaningful relationship with the animal (even commercial livestock are provided with both). Providing both physical and emotional support, without strings attached, takes the relationship to a different level.

While some of the physical aspects of “animal capital” are directly linked to people’s economic capital, the emotional aspects are free of cost and of more interest to social scientists today. The most recent edition of the *U.S Pet Ownership & Demographics Sourcebook* documented that over half of all dog owners surveyed considered their dog to be part of the family (AVMA, 2002). Though this statistic may be skewed by sampling biases, it provides some idea of the strong connection between many caretakers and their dogs. Other studies have noted that the levels of attachment are higher between people and dogs than any other animal (Albert and Bulcroft, 1988; Stallones, 1990; and Johnson, 1992). Part of this strong attachment is not thinking of the dog as just a pet, but as a more human-like companion. Arluke and Sanders discuss the process by which caretakers construct the identity of their animal into a family member:

Naming the new pet begins its transformation from a generic puppy into a specific member of the family. The name affords the dog an identity and makes it easier to talk about and direct activities toward it as though it were part of the family. (1996:11)

Beyond receiving traditionally human names, dogs partake in rituals, like birthdays and

family photos. Dogs also appear to provide their human companions with many of the same feelings that humans provide to other humans. According to Sanders:

The animal is a person in the sense that his or her perspective and feelings are knowable; interaction is predictable; and the shared relationship provides an experience of closeness, warmth, and pleasure (Sanders, 2003).

Both sides of the human-animal partnership appear to benefit emotionally from the relationship. While most literature on emotions does not focus on non-human emotional relationships, Arlie Hochschild's (1983) classic work describes "feeling rules" and emotional exchanges between intimate individuals. Arguably, these concepts are applicable to human-animal relationships as well.

Clearly, animals contribute enormously to human life. The spreading interest and perceived value of studying these contributions has been made more evident by the formation of an *Animals and Society* section of the American Sociological Association. While animals have apparently been our companions, in some manner or another, as far back as recorded history can document, our studies in the area of human-animal interaction are just beginning. While there are many important questions that still need to be addressed, my research shed more light on several aspects of the human-animal bond, especially the connection between "everyday" people and their companion dogs. For example, how do contemporary Americans understand their relationships with their companion dogs? How do they think about and treat their canine companions? Lastly, what benefits do they reap from these relationships?

## **Methods<sup>4</sup>**

In order to better understand people's relationships with their dogs, I conducted seven in-depth interviews with dog companions. These interviews allowed me to delve into the relationships between humans and their dog companions. Interviewees resided in a metropolitan area of the Southeastern United States. Based on my regular dog walks, I gathered a convenience and snowball sample consisting of friends and neighbors with dogs. Like most parents with children, most dog companions were more than willing to discuss their canines and their relationships with the dogs. The interviews were conducted over a five-month period in 2004.

Most of the people I encountered shared important characteristics. They were young to middle-aged, white, and middle to upper-middle class. While I appreciate that factors such as race, marital status, having human children, and histories of animal companionships might influence how individuals define their relationships with canine companions, time constraints limited my sample size and composition to the willing and easily available. Additionally, my sample is small, so generalizations I draw from these interviews are highly speculative. However, it is my hope that these conclusions will provide guidance for future research involving larger and more diverse samples.

My participants (see Appendix A for details of my interviewees and their canine companions) ranged in age from 25 to 57 years old. Their occupations varied from accountant to teacher to computer programmer. Three women in my sample were married. Of those three, spouses of two agreed to be interviewed as well. Interviewing



both spouses provided different vantage points regarding the same dog. In both cases, the wife was much more talkative than the husband. Only one couple from my sample had human children. Their children were now in their twenties and their present dog was adopted after the youngest child had left home. Only one of my interviewees was non-white and self-identified as Black-Hispanic. At the time of the interview, no one had more than one dog, but several had more than one type of companion animal living in their household.

The interviews were conducted wherever the participant felt most comfortable, some at their homes with their dog present, another at a restaurant, and the remainder at my home. Each participant was interviewed once and interviews generally lasted one hour. Every participant verbally agreed to have his/her interview tape recorded and later transcribed.

Interview questions were organized into four sections: demographic characteristics of the interviewee, characteristics of his/her dog (and other animals in the household), shared routines and activities, and lastly, a summary of their relationship (See Appendix B for the interview outline). Most of the questions were open-ended. For those questions that were not opened ended, I encouraged the interviewee to speak freely and elaborate on his/her initial answers. In most cases, people were very willing to give thorough answers to the questions posed, as well as sometimes go off on tangents, providing a wealth of additional information. I tried not to constrain my participants in any manner.

While the specific order of my questions and their exact wording varied, I opened each interview by asking about demographic characteristics and then closed the interview

by asking the participant to briefly describe to me his/her relationship with his/her canine companion. This final question was meant to provide interviewees with the opportunity to bring up anything we had previously not addressed and provide a summary of their relationship.

I reviewed my tape recordings and completely transcribed each interview. I used the time as I was transcribing to start noting important or interesting parts of our conversation. Since all of the interviews had a common structure, it was not difficult to divide the interviews into similar content areas. Line-by-line analysis was initially used for open coding of my interview content (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This provided me with prominent points and common themes which were classified into categories for comparison and contrast across interviews.

## **The Human Canine Connection**

In a traditional sense, the “usefulness” of dogs may have waned over time, but according to the caretakers whom I interviewed their dogs clearly served a purpose in each of their lives. Repeatedly, interviewees spoke of a mutually beneficial relationship between themselves and their canines. Clearly, both humans and canines serve important roles in each other’s lives. This reciprocity extends further than just the human providing the dog with the essentials to survive and the dog providing the human with companionship. The caretakers I interviewed also expressed strong ideas regarding ownership versus guardianship of their dogs. Additionally, they described a clear sense that a form of mutual understanding existed between them and their dogs.

### **Ownership vs. Guardianship?**

The term “guardian” denotes a positive relationship and mutually beneficial bond between two living beings, where constant care, attention, and affection are necessary for a thriving relationship. It instills respect for and appreciation of our companion animals.

- Dr. Elliot Katz, president of In Defense of Animals ([www.idausa.org](http://www.idausa.org))

Russel Belk (1996) argues that the term “pet” is no longer a proper designation for dogs who reside with humans and that “companion animal” is more fitting. Companion dog is a term that distinguishes a working or service dog from a household family dog. The word “companion” is used because it indicates more of a friendship/familial relationship between the dog and his/her human counterpart.

The changing role of the dog has also created new terms for a person providing

care for a canine. Historically people have been referred to as the “owner” or even “master” of a dog. According to the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary the term “owner” means “to have power over” and the word “master” is “one having control” over “especially... a slave or animal” ([www.m-w.com](http://www.m-w.com)). Both words carry negative connotations, suggesting a relationship with an unequal distribution of power. Ownership also implies that an animal is “private property” and, as with other forms of property, may be disposed of however an “owner” sees fit. While a dog may be “owned” privately by one person, a dog’s wellbeing is often of public concern, making a person more a “guardian” or “custodian” of the animal. If the dog, just a like child, is not being treated well, officials can assume guardianship and seize the “property” for the dog’s (or child’s) own benefit.

Some cities, such as San Francisco, California and Boulder, Colorado have recently gone as far as to change the wording of their animal ordinances from “owner” to “guardian” (Irvine, 2004). Such changes in terminology have slowly spread across the United States, including the entire state of Rhode Island ([www.avma.org](http://www.avma.org), 2003). While there are debates regarding the implications and definition of the term “guardian,” “supporters of the word change suggest it will engender better treatment of animals by reshaping how owners see themselves in relation to their pets” ([www.avma.org](http://www.avma.org), 2001).

Instead of owner, many people today consider themselves to be their dogs’ “caretaker,” “companion” or even a more familial term, such as “mother” or “father.” Others say that such labels are just semantics, and while they may call themselves dog “owners” they have relationships with their dogs that are richer than that designation implies.

During my interviews, very few of my informants used the term “owner” unless I introduced the term. When asked about the concept of dog ownership, many of my informants were quick to point out that they didn’t consider themselves to be owners. Others expressed indifference about the term, yet they clearly did not “own” their dog in the traditional sense of the word. Gilberto, a 26 year-old man who lives with his girlfriend and several animals, noted, “I have no problems with the term owner. It’s all legality anyway.” Yet later in the interview he stated, “I think of him (Bruno, the dog) as my son.” This may appear to be a contradiction, but for many, the term “owner” is simply ingrained in our vocabulary, and not necessarily associated with a negative meaning. People who use the term owner in conversation, or for official use, may not be attributing the same negative meaning to the word that it has historically carried. Nevertheless, some would argue that the word carries a negative connotation and by continuing to use the term “owner” the negative meaning is perpetuated in our attitudes and actions. Overall, participants in my study tended to identify and discuss their animals in more familial terms.

Tony, a 49 year-old, single man also considers himself to be the “father” (but not owner) of four animals: a dog (Patchy), a cat, a bird and a hamster. In his interview, Tony had a strong emotional reaction to the term “owner”:

People talk to Patchy and use the term “master” or say your master this or that. I’m going what? I’m the dad. This is my little girl. I hate owner. Master makes me ill because it evokes brutality in my mind...If there is an owner, Patchy owns me...I’m so far away from me owning Patchy; just to let you know you have never heard me say that Patchy is a dog. Puppy, which evokes feeling, or little girl, or my daughter, but I don’t use the word dog. It can have a bad connotation.

From the viewpoint of others like Tony, people and animals should be viewed as one-in-

the same, where we shouldn't need separate categories to distinguish them. Tony uses more positive terminology to describe his father-son bond with Patchy than Gilberto uses to describe his relationship with Bruno. While both men consider themselves to be fathers to their dogs, both Tony and Gilberto have very different concepts of their relationships.

### **Members of the Family or (Wo)Man's Best Friend?**

“Guardian” and “caretaker” are two of the newly created legal designations used to replace the term “owner” in both California and Colorado, but many people I interviewed used more intimate terms to describe their relationship with their canine. Jessie and Amanda, both married women without human children, were quick to describe their dogs as their children when asked about the relationship. Jessie, 26, said (while laughing), “She’s (Suki) my child. She’s my baby.” Likewise, Amanda, 34, similarly described her dog Champ as “my baby, my little girl. She’s my daughter.” Their descriptions of their relationships appear representative of the majority of animal companions surveyed in the United States. According to one survey, 83% of animal companions consider themselves to be “mom” or “dad” to their animals.<sup>4</sup> When talking to Suki, or about Suki to others, Jessie and her husband Doug, very naturally refer to each other as “mommy” and “daddy.” When discussing a game that they play with Suki, Jessie noted, “In the morning on weekends if you say ‘get your daddy’ or ‘get your mommy’ she knows what that means and she’ll run and get whoever you are telling her to get.” While Doug never directly referred to Suki in the interview as their child, the way he was flipping her around and blowing bubbles on her stomach while we talked was very similar to how a parent might play with a young child. Additionally, I have observed him

using the words “mommy” and “daddy” frequently during previous encounters.

Tony, who talks about his dog in similar terms, provided more detail when describing his relationship with Patchy.

She’s my daughter...It is the same thing as if a kid, human baby, is adopted, it doesn’t come from your body but it is no less your kid. Yeah, Patchy doesn’t come from my body, but she is no less my kid. I honestly believe that nobody can care about their child more than I can care about my child.

His intense feelings clearly demonstrate that his relationship with Patchy is one much stronger and emotionally richer than just a traditional dog-owner relationship.

To take the familial roles a step further, several people explained that they refer to their parents as the dog’s grandparents. Even Gilberto, who was not opposed to using the word owner, makes reference to Bruno’s “grandparents” when he said (partly in jest), “I drop Bruno off every weekday morning at his grandparent’s house for a day of relaxing spa treatment...or just to play with other humans and cats.” Throughout the interview, he frequently referred to Bruno’s “grandparents” when discussing who cares for Bruno during the day while he and his girlfriend are at work, or when they go out of town.

Amanda describes that when she and her husband first adopted Champ, her father was living with them; in turn “grandpa” has played a significant role in Champ’s upbringing.

Don (Amanda’s husband) and I would be at work all day, so Dad would have five hours alone with her. He would do all of the training. This is the first dog that my dad and I had ever had. He didn’t like leaving her alone for five minutes. If he was running errands he would race back to her. So now whenever we say “grandpa”, Champ goes nuts. She is glued to my father.

Similarly, my own dog Mattie has been my parent’s (who have no human grandchildren) “grand-dog” since the day I brought her home. My parents spoil her with treats every time they see her and even ask if she can come spend the weekend with them. If people

think of their dog as their child and consider themselves to be the dog's mother or father, then it seems only reasonable for the dog to have other human family members, such as brothers, aunts, and grandparents.

Parent-child relationships were not the only type of human-like connection with dogs apparent in my interviews. Sue and Sage appeared to have an equally strong bond with their dog Rica, as the others in the study did, but both used different terms to describe their relationships with her. Sage noted that, "Rica is like my buddy. Wherever I go, if possible, she is with me. Sort of a companion dog." His spouse, Sue, elaborated more on her relationship with Rica:

She is my best friend. She always wants to walk with me. She always keeps me company. She never tells my secrets. I talk to her all the time; she is always happy to see me and is great company.

Sue and Sage were my only interviewees who had human children, who are adults and living elsewhere. They were also the only two to describe their relationship with their dog in a non-familial manner. Unfortunately my sample is too small to determine if this is a common trend among those who have dogs in addition to human children. I would guess that, particularly, those who have children presently living at home may think of their dog in different terms.

It goes without saying that dogs and human children are different, but we do provide for them in many similar ways. While we make plans for both over vacation time, and provide both with food and shelter, we do not prepare our dogs to leave home in order to be productive members of society. We may not save money for college for our dogs, but we do provide monetary and human capital for the dogs to go to puppy and even specialty schools for etiquette and agility training. We can purchase health



insurance for our dogs and even pay substantial amounts of money for our canine companions in daycare, just as we do with human children. These sorts of comparisons can be assessed with monetary calculations and the law. Despite the concrete differences, people with canine companions do perceive, talk about and interact with their dogs in emotional and relational ways that parallel human-human relationships.

### **Actions Speak Louder Than Words<sup>5</sup>**

Tony, Jessie and Amanda not only stated that their dogs have assumed child-like roles in their lives, but also made this apparent through their actions. All three celebrated holidays and birthdays with their canine companion.

Every year we buy presents and wrap them up for her and she rips them open. Yeah, she definitely had a good birthday. We try to take her places she loves on her birthday. She gets special treats and toys and stuff. (Jessie)

We celebrate her birthday! We take her to the pet store and she can pick out whatever she likes. Whatever she walks up to we check out and buy...On Christmas day we buy her a present. We hang her stocking. We put a little Santa Claus hat on her. (Amanda)

If a reader didn't know that the above statements were about a dog, s/he could very easily assume that Jessie and Amanda were talking about a small child. This just further demonstrates that descriptions of humans and dogs are becoming increasingly blurred.

Nutrition is another distinction between the traditional "pet" and the modern companion animal. Instead of purchasing the "generic" grocery-store dog food, many caretakers are now faced with a variety of options at an array of prices. Some are able to buy gourmet and organic foods from specialty pet stores, while others buy top-line food from large, chain pet stores that encourage the dog to be part of the shopping experience. Jessie and Doug, who are both vegetarians, not only give Suki all organic dog food, but

supplement her food with a dog-stew that they prepare themselves.

We get a special dog stew and I make that up for her every now and then. Sometimes she gets bored with her regular food....She eats hybrid dog food. I give her scraps from my meals too. (Doug)

Tony also worries about Patchy getting “bored” with her normal dog food and often supplements her food with the “last bite of everything” he eats.

She eats only premium dog food. It is Nutro, one of the better lines...Unfortunately, the good line of Nutro dog food has lamb in it and I am against eating lamb because they are so cute. The second line doesn't have lamb. They told me that it is definitely an inferior line so I guess she better eat the lamb. I have to give it to her. (Tony)

Interestingly enough, Tony, Jessie and Doug felt like they needed to put their dogs' needs over their own moral conflicts regarding food and diet.

Not all of the dog companions whom I interviewed felt like they had to purchase top-of-the-line dog food for their dogs, but the examples above demonstrate the variety of feeding options available to dogs and caretakers. Sage, for example, said that Rica just eats “standard pet shop food,” but this should not be taken as an indication that he cares about Rica less than the others cared about their dogs. Providing your dog with top-notch, specialty food is only a good indicator of the caretaker's economic capital.

Deciding what to do with your dog when you go away is another dilemma that many caretakers faced. Two of the dogs in my study, Champ and Patchy, previously lived in animal shelters. Both of their caretakers expressed that their dogs would “never” be kenneled again. Champ has lived with Amanda and her husband for five years, and in that time they have never had to worry about making alternate living arrangements for her when they went away.

That hasn't happened yet. Should it happen and I would be faced to put her in a kennel, I would find a pet resort and fork out the money for a pet resort. There is no way I would put her in a kennel. Wouldn't happen. (Amanda)

With the exception of Sue and Sage, all of the other caretakers have close family or friends watch their dogs when they go out of town. Sue and Sage are a special circumstance due to the fact that Rica has a history of pushing through windows and escaping from the house, one time mauling a small dog in the neighborhood. Sue noted:

If possible I take her, if not she has to go to a vet because I am scared to put her with a family or anybody else, so she goes to the vet.

Sue and Sage believe that it is in Rica's (and their own) best interest to keep her kenneled in the house when they are away during the day and at the veterinarian for longer periods of time. For all of my interviewees, taking the dog with them was always preferable to leaving the dog at home, with friends or strangers.

All of my interviewees expressed sentiments that their dog was more than just a "pet" to them. They all used traditionally human-like relational terms when describing their bond with their canine companion, as well as making evident, through their actions, the strength of their connection. Thinking of animals in human-like constructs breaks down interspecies barriers, constructing relationships of equals rather than of masters and subordinates.

### **Mutual Understanding**

We can learn from those who love their pets that communication is not limited to abstract thoughts of human speech, but can and does happen in startling places and across surprising boundaries.

- Kennan Ferguson, *I ♥ My Dog*

Leslie Irvine argues that part of accumulating "animal capital" is knowing your dog's needs and desires. To the canine "mothers," "fathers" and companions that I talked

to this did not seem to be a chore, but a fundamental part of their relationship. Not only did the people seem to understand their dog, but most felt like the dog truly understood him/her. This mutual understanding between the caretaker and the dog comes from our ability to teach and the dog's ability to learn a set of symbols, such as a language or hand signals. While walking with my dog one day, I ran into a man who informed me that his dog was completely deaf and only communicated via hand signals. He told me that the only difference in having a deaf dog is "when you walk in the door to your home she stays sound asleep and you have to wake her up." Just like having a hearing impaired child, this man had to adapt his language style so that he and his dog could communicate properly. If most call this ability "learning" when referring to a child, then why do we call it "training" when referring to a dog?

Some would argue that the difference is that the communication is one-sided, but from the point of views of the caretakers I spoke with, this communication definitely went both ways. When asked if he and Patchy understand each other well, Tony responded:

Absolutely. If she wants to go another direction she doesn't tug. She just stops and looks at me and waits for me to say "okay" and then goes. And she, I think, she understands an awful lot. A lot more than people give animals credit for...She understands everything. She understands when I am sad or upset.

Tony indicates that there is an intentional communication between him and Patchy, one where he has not only taught Patchy to understand him, but he has taken the time to understand her. Part of this mutual understanding seems to be in a large way due to attributing freewill and many "human" feelings and emotions to the dog. This helps us have a stronger connection with the dog since these terms put it in a clearer (and only)

way for us to understand. Terms such as love, happiness, sadness, are all human constructs. So while we can't understand what a bark may really mean, we can understand what we interpret it to mean.

Many of my interviewees discussed that goodbye rituals are particularly hard. Not only is the caretaker saddened to leave the dog for a few hours, but to her or him, the dog appears clearly upset by the pending separation.

When I leave for work she always gets really depressed and pouts and lies down on the ground so I have to lean down to pick her up and say goodbye. (Jessie talking about Suki)

We go for a 20-25 minute walk first thing in the morning... then I come back and she hopes that I don't step into the shower because she knows that when I do, she gets very depressed and she jumps on the bed. It is very sad. (Tony talking about Patchy)

In many intimate human relationships, when one half of the relationship believes that he/she is in "emotional debt" (Hochschild, 1983) to the other, the debtor usually tries to even out the situation. Similarly, Jessie tries to make up for missed time with Suki by cutting down on her afterwork and social activities in order to spend more time with her.

According to Jessie:

I never want to go out after work. I work all day and if somebody asks me to go out afterwards I say "no" because I want to go home and be with my dog. And it is not like I come home to let her out and leave. I feel like if I have been gone all day I owe it to her to then come home and be around in the evenings and spend time with her and try to play with her.

The notion of "owing" means that there is some sort of "currency" exchange going on between the pair; in this case the currency is an emotional type involving time, affection and love. In the instance of Tony and Patchy, he tries to spend as much time as possible with her during his free time so that it makes up for when he is gone.

During the day, if I am in my apartment, I am touching her, either with my hand

or my foot or she is on the couch with me. I give her a minimum of 100 kisses on the nose each day...I think she knows. I know she knows because when I stop and pull my head away she puts her nose back up. (Tony)

Hochschild (1983) would call this the “emotional gift exchange” and Exchange Theorists would argue that “intimate couples are very concerned with the rates of exchange in their relationship and whether or not those rates are equitable” (Cook, et. al,1990;161). Being part of an exchange relationship assumes that both parties contribute to the exchange, once again implying that the dog is an active participant in the relationship. If this is the case, then what happens when one side of the exchange relationship does not live up to the deal? Unfortunately, the dog is probably less likely to purposefully abandon the person than the person is to purposely get rid of the dog when the emotional exchange is violated. Perhaps being conscious of the “rates of exchange” helps explain, at least in part, why some like Jessie would deliberately monitor and limit afterwork activities.

Emotional exchanges were also common when my interviewees had to punish their dogs. Amanda, when discussing disciplining Champ said:

We never hit her, we wouldn't. We just dominate her and I just tell her that she has been a bad girl and she looks very sad. I'm not kidding you. Then about two minutes later, I give her a kiss and tell her I love her.

Kissing the dog after punishing her would once again be an example of repaying an emotional debt. I would argue that humans have long provided for our domesticated animals' physical needs such as food and shelter, but it has only been with the recent emergence of companion animals that we have truly felt like we “owed” them more -- understanding and feelings.

## **Reciprocity**

Animals are part of the American culture and by working with animals in prisons, inmates are receiving vocational training and psychological rehabilitation.

- Earl O. Strimple, *A History of Prison Inmate–Animal Interaction Programs*

Up until this point, I have focused on how caretakers express their affection and think about their special bond with their dogs. What is equally important is what caretakers feel the canine companions give back to the relationship. Most did not acquire their dogs with one specific reason in mind, but most seemed overjoyed and surprised with everything the dog had to offer. Themes of love and companionship were present in all of my interviews, but several shared very specific stories detailing what their dog had given back to them.

She has stopped my temper...It is like night and day. Things don't bother me as much anymore. Any problems that I have, it is like I can control them. I mean I wasn't the type of person who would just blow up at everything. When I had a temper it would just build up and I would get very cold. It just hasn't happened since I have had her. (Amanda talking about Champ)

She has gotten me through two really bad breakups with girlfriends and she is always there for me...People look at Patchy and say "Oh, you are such a lucky girl." I'm the lucky one. She has given me so much more than I have given her. She is unbelievable. (Tony)

In both of the above situations, the dog has been therapeutic to the person and aided in his/her healing. In Amanda's case, Champ has clearly been emotionally soothing for her, although Amanda was not able to describe fully how Champ has transformed her.

There is documented evidence of the benefits of pets for people who are sick, or living in an institution such as a nursing home or prison (Strimple, 2003). Having pets, such as dogs, often help humans' emotional wellbeing, as well as teach them valuable life skills such as responsibility and patience. Sue also shared an experience when Rica

provided great comfort. This act was not directed towards Sue, but towards a friend of the family who needed encouragement.

My girlfriend is going through the trauma of putting her fourteen year-old Lab to sleep. She is just very sad. She wasn't crying, but she was just very, very sad and was telling me this story. Rica came and sat on her lap. She jumped on her lap and would not leave her alone and then she put her head on her. She has never done that before or since with this friend who is at my house on a regular basis...She was comforting her. And we cried. And Rica made it worse because she was just so sensitive to it. I think she really knew. (Sue)

How does the dog know how to console someone who is sad? How exactly has the dog helped a person through a time of need? These questions may be very hard to answer because experiences like these are difficult to document and clearly analyze. Yet, what is important is knowing how the human component of the human-dog relationship interprets the dog's actions and reactions to specific events.



## **Conclusion**

Today, more than years past, people appear to look to companion animals for emotional comfort and understanding, rather than more pragmatic services. This shift signifies the belief that dogs can be fully functioning social companions. This arguably requires a different kind of understanding and communication, more than just mere training and commands. If the person is not able to clearly interpret the dog's actions and believe that the dog has a solid understanding of him/her, then a strong two-way relationship cannot exist.

The people whom I interviewed revealed that many, like themselves, find emotional fulfillment in their relationships with their dogs. This suggests that they have been able to achieve a special type of communication and understanding between their canine companion and themselves. To some, especially those who have never had an animal as a companion, this relationship may seem to be an illusion. Those who have never held strong emotionally intimate relationships with other humans might claim the same. Feelings and communication always entail interpretation of ambiguous expression by the different parties involved. Who can say that one person's interpretation is more correct than another's? Even with the ambiguities, the importance of emotional connections, whether between humans or between humans and canine companions, is not lessened.

Whether referred to as a child, best friend, or puppy, my interviewees clearly illustrate that dogs are participants in human social life. With this being the case, those

who hope to understand that life cannot afford to ignore the canine companion's changing and important contributions to society. We already know more about specific human-animal relationships, such as working dogs and animals used for rehabilitation, but my study contributes to a smaller body of literature focusing on everyday people and their dogs. With the growing number of canine households, more studies like mine are necessary to better understand the roles that dogs, and other companion animals, play in our modern society.

## Notes

1. Olson and Hulser's essay "Petropolis: A Social History of Urban Animal Companions" was also an exhibit at the New York Historical Society in 2003 that displayed visual works and memorabilia depicting the evolution of pets in New York city. The article contains many photographs of artwork.
2. The translation is from the website: [www.translation-guide.com](http://www.translation-guide.com).
3. Project P.U.P. is an all volunteer organization in the local area in which I conducted my research. <http://coop.co.pinellas.fl.us/PUP/pup.htm>
4. Before commencing the interview process, I applied for and received an exemption from the University's Internal Review Board (IRB #102864Z) clarifying that my thesis research would not pose any mental or physical harm to my participants.
5. Survey results were compiled in *Sky Magazine*, January 2005. The data sources were from the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, the American Veterinary Medical Association, and the American Animal Hospital Association.
6. This is borrowed from the title of Clinton Sander's recent article "Actions Speak Louder than Words: Close Relationships between Humans and Nonhuman Animals", *Symbolic Interaction*. 2003.

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## **Appendices**

### Appendix A: Interviewees and Their Canine Companions

Human Name	Age	Sex	Occupation	Dog Name	Dog Breed	Notes
Jessie	25	F	Sales Admin	Suki	“mutt”- possibly Shitsu-Daschund mix	Married to Doug
Gilberto	26	M	Market Research Project Manager	Bruno	Boxer	Only non-white participant (Black/Hispanic) Only purebred dog.
Doug	28	M	Computer programmer	Suki	“a little mutt”- Shitsu-Daschund mix	Married to Jessie
Amanda	34	F	Accountant	Champion (Champ)	Rotweiler/Chow mix	Married- spouse not interviewed
Tony	49	M	Financial Advisor	Patches (Patchy)	Australian Cattle dog/ African Basenji mix	Single
Sue	55	F	High school math teacher	Rica	Mixed breed- Chow/ Shepard/ Lab mix?	Married to Sage. Only people interviewed with human children, who no longer live at home.
Sage	57	M	Land Investor	Rica	Mixed breed	Married to Sue.

## Appendix B: Interview Outline

### Demographics

- What is your first name?
- What year were you born?
- What is your occupation?
- What would you consider your race?
- What would you consider your marital status?
- Do you live with any other humans? If so, what is their relationship to you?
- Do you have human children? How many? How old?

### Dog Demographics

- How many animals do you currently have in your household? What are they?
- How many dogs? What are their names and ages—
- What are the breeds of your dogs?
- Do you have nicknames for you dog/s?
- Have you had your dog/s since it was a puppy or did you adopt them after they were grown? How many years have you had them?

\*\* Only one dog—

do you remember a moment in your relationship when you felt truly bonded with your dog?

- OR have you even experienced a moment like that?

\*\* If only have one dog now—have you ever had multiple dogs in the past?

- Do you remember if you bonded with one of the dogs over the other?
- Do you remember a distinct point when you bonded with that one animal over the other?

\*\* If multiple dogs now- do you feel more strongly or more bonded with one of your dogs over another?

\*\* If multiple types of animals—do you feel more strongly towards (or more bonded with) one of your animals over the other? Explain—

- Have you always had animals in your life? Always dogs?
- Was there ever a point in your life where you didn't have any animals? Why?
- How did you obtain your current dog/s? Breeder, adopt, found—do you always do that with animals?
- Has your dog ever been through any sort of formal training or “puppy school?”
- How do you feel about the term “owner”



## **Appendix B (Continued)**

### **Routines and Activities**

- Could you please describe your current daily routine with your dog/s
- Do you have any traditions with your dog/s?
- Do you know and/or celebrate his/her birthday? What kind of things do you do?
- Do you and your dog/s take part in any other festivities?
  - Could you show me or describe to me where your dog sleeps? Eats? Spends most of his/her time when you are there?
  - Does your dog have a lot of toys? Could you show me some of them? What is his/her favorite?
  - Does your dog have a favorite activity?
  - What do you do with your dog when you go away or on vacation?
  - Do you take your dog places with you?

### **Wrap up-**

- Would you consider yourself an “animal lover?” Elaborate on that...

Briefly, could you tell me how you would describe your relationship with your dog/s?