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Abstract

The evidence that people form strong attachments with their pets is briefly reviewed before identifying the characteristics of such relationships, which include pets being a source of security as well as the objects of caregiving. In evolutionary terms, pet ownership poses a problem, since attachment and devoting resources to another species are, in theory, fitness-reducing. Three attempts to account for pet keeping are discussed, as are the problems with these views. Pet keeping is placed into the context of other forms of interspecific associations. From this, an alternative Darwinian explanation is proposed: pets are viewed as manipulating human responses that had evolved to facilitate human relationships, primarily (but not exclusively) those between parent and child. The precise mechanisms that enable pets to elicit caregiving from humans are elaborated. They involve features that provide the initial attraction, such as neotenous characteristics, and those that enable the human owner to derive continuing satisfaction from interacting with the pet, such as the attribution of mental processes to human-like organisms. These mechanisms can, in some circumstances, cause pet owners to derive more satisfaction from their pet relationship than those with humans, because they supply a type of unconditional relationship that is usually absent from those with other human beings. □



Why Do People Love Their Pets?

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KEY WORDS: Attachment; Baby features; Evolutionary arms race; Manipulation; Pets; Social parasitism; Releasers.

Pet ownership is a very common human activity, and people lavish much affection and money on their pets. From a Darwinian perspective, it is a puzzling form of behavior, as it entails provisioning a member of another species, in return for which there are no apparent benefits connected to fitness. In this article, I first briefly review the evidence for the existence of strong attachments between people and their pets and discuss what forms these attachments take. I shall concentrate on cats and dogs, these being the most commonly owned

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pets in the western world. Historically, they are also those with which humans interact most closely, as they are allowed to run freely in people's homes. I then outline why pet ownership poses an evolutionary problem and examine three attempts to account for it: these are the view that strong attachment to a pet indicates a poor capacity for human relationships, that it results from modern living conditions, particularly affluence, and that pet ownership confers benefits for health and psychological well-being. I shall argue that none of these provides a satisfactory explanation for the evolution of pet ownership, and I then consider the possibility that pets are, in evolutionary terms, manipulating human responses, that they are the equivalent of social parasites. I conclude that this is the most likely explanation, rather than some form of mutual benefit. The precise human mechanisms that allow them to be manipulated in this way are then discussed: they include both features that provide the initial attraction to the animal, and continuing features of the interaction with the pet that prove satisfying for the owner. The existence of such mechanisms, which have all evolved to enhance fitness within the context of human-human interactions, can, in some circumstances, lead to pet owners obtaining more satisfaction from their pet relationships than from those with humans.

THE INTENSITY OF PEOPLE'S ATTACHMENT TO THEIR PETS

Anecdotal accounts of the importance of people's emotional attachment to their pets are numerous. Extreme examples such as legal disputes over pet custody (Freedland 1994) and a dog being designated best man at a wedding (Hickrod and Schmitt 1982) attract the attention of the media, but there are many more commonplace examples of the enormous amount of affection, time, and money that people in modern western societies lavish on their pets. Examples include offering rewards when they are lost, paying for their grooming and health care, buying them presents, and, of course, feeding them. From a Darwinian perspective, this all adds up to fitness benefits being conferred on the pet; the fitness costs to humans (i.e., the effects on their reproductive success) are difficult to quantify, but it is reasonable to assume that the impact of such affection, time, and money being directed to pets instead of human kin would not be negligible.

There are a small number of systematic studies of the human-pet relationship in terms of attachment, a concept usually applied to close relationships between members of the same species, including humans (Ainsworth 1989; Bowlby 1969). Katcher et al. (1983) designed a 10-item questionnaire consisting of statements that would indicate positive attachment to a pet dog, such as carrying its photograph, letting it sleep on the bed, frequently talking to and interacting with it, and defining it as a family member. The scale was administered to 80 veterinary clinic clients. Although no conventional reliability statistics were carried out, frequency data for the individual items indicated high levels of attachment to the dogs. For example, 48%

(Archer et al. n.d.) indicated that women showed stronger attachment to their pets than men did.

Lago et al. (1988) developed a “pet relationship scale” that was partly based on features indicative of attachment. Factor analysis revealed a main factor comprising items indicating affectionate companionship. Endenburg (1995) used a single measure that involved people estimating their strength of attachment to the pet and estimating the average attachment people had to their pets. A coefficient was calculated from the ratio of their own attachment to the standard. Respondents showed the highest mean coefficients for dogs and cats. Most of this sample of more than 400 pet owners in The Netherlands said that they had acquired their pet for company and reported that its presence generated a sense of security. Serpell (1996) also used a single-item rating scale of attachment to pets and found that most of his sample of 37 dog owners and 47 cat owners said that they were very attached to their pets.

A more elaborate 33-item questionnaire measure of attachment to a pet dog was designed by Archer et al. (n.d.), on the basis of characteristics of human attachment. The composite measure showed strong attachment by many owners towards their dogs, with a considerable proportion endorsing individual items such as viewing the pet as an important part of their lives and one that provides a sense of comfort.

Studies of reactions to the loss of a pet can also provide evidence for the strength of people’s attachment to their pet. Using the framework of attachment theory (Bowlby 1969, 1973), Parkes (1986) referred to grief as “the cost of commitment” to the lost loved one—in other words, an indirect measure of the strength of attachment. The process of grief involves the emotional distress, thoughts, and feelings that accompany the slow process of mentally letting go of an established relationship. Both anecdotal and systematic evidence indicates that there are clear parallels between the sort of reactions people show to the loss of a pet and to the loss of a human relationship.

Anecdotal evidence, from the U.S. and the U.K., includes newspaper reports (Graves 1994; Haddon 1994), psychiatrists’ case histories (Keddie 1977), surveys of veterinarians (Stewart et al. 1989), and reports by people who specifically counsel bereaved pet owners (Carmack 1985). Studies in the U.S., the U.K., and Israel of the situations in which people say they would cry, have revealed substantial numbers of respondents—male as well as female—who say they would cry after the death of a pet (Lombardo et al. 1983; Williams and Morris 1996).

Several specific investigations of grief following pet loss have been undertaken. Earlier studies (Quackenbush 1984, 1985; Stewart 1983) have tended to be mostly qualitative in their descriptions, showing parallels between grief following human death and to death of a pet. Stewart (1983) reported that a minority of her sample (18%) were so disturbed that they were unable to carry on with their normal routine, and a third described themselves as very distressed. Dunn et al. (1992) studied a sample of nearly 1,000 bereaved pet owners in the U.S. and found that grief was brief but intense. Sadness was still apparent in over half the sample 1 month after the loss, and crying and guilt in approximately a quarter.

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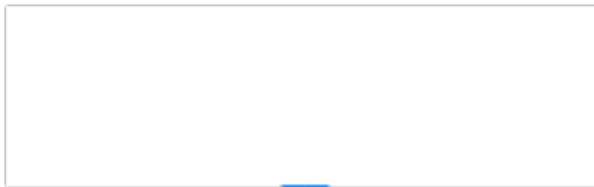
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