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Pets along a continuum: Response to "What is a pet?"

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The Commentary in this issue reveals that the concept of pet eludes a simple definition. Eddy provides two definitions of the noun version of the word "pet:" "a domesticated animal kept for pleasure rather than utility;" or a person that is either a "pampered and usually spoiled child" or "a person who is treated with unusual kindness or consideration" (*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* 1976, p. 857). The first definition of pet in *Webster's New Collegiate*, the only one considered here, focuses on an animal that provides pleasure, while specifically excluding a utilitarian contribution, *and* suggests that the animal must be domesticated, indicating that the animal's reproduction was under human control or management. Not discussed in the Commentary is the controversy concerning whether the term, pet, should be used at all. It sometimes is argued that pet should be replaced by the term, "companion animal." Considering its brevity and universal use in society, it seems unlikely that the term, pet, will decline in use, even though the term, companion animal, will ascend, reflecting the growing significance and appreciation of pets; this issue is not addressed further here.

I consulted two other dictionaries for their relevant definitions—virtually indistinguishable from each other. *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary* (1979, p. 1341) defines pet as " an animal that is tamed or domesticated and kept as a favorite or treated with affection." *The New Shorter Oxford…* (1993, p. 2175) defines pet as "an animal domesticated or tamed, and kept for pleasure or companionship." These definitions seem closer to the mark. For example, the problem presented by Eddy, of whether to consider a parrot a pet, is solved: as a tamed animal, the parrot would be a pet.

I suggest taking a less limited view of the concept of pet than offered by *Webster's New Collegiate*, indeed, a broader view than all three sources. In the United States and Europe today, the concept of pet is better considered along a continuum of levels, reflecting the growing status of companion animals. Eddy's Commentary describes conventional pets as they are kept in suburban homes, yet overlooks some more complex roles of animals. The Commentary

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presents specific animals having a particular role, and later shifting to another role, without addressing animals fulfilling multiple roles simultaneously.

The range of pets

Conventional pets, dogs and cats, generally fit the Commentary's definition. These pets represent many types of owners, including those keeping show animals, highly bonded owners, and people simply feeding their animals without other interaction (Serpell 1996). Exotic small pets are kept by a growing number of people, including parrots and other birds, as well as fish and reptiles. Birds were discussed in the Commentary, as examples of non-domesticated animals treated as pets. These animals all would fit within the broader definitions offered by *Webster's New Twentieth and The New Shorter Oxford.*

Overlooked in the Commentary are working partners, including horses, camels, and elephants, that provide transport or carry loads and fill a role as companions that may include strong attachment. Reproduction is managed in horses, with selection for behavioral traits, including racing ability. Camels, being fully domesticated, are only bred in captivity (except for some feral animals); no apparent selection occurs for behavioral traits (Gauthier-Pilters and Dagg 1981). Asian elephants live close within human society, but generally breed without human management; domesticated females are bred by wild bulls (Hart and Sundar 2000).

Working dogs fill a growing number of roles. Guide and service dogs are understood as sharing roles both as companions and working partners in the U.S. and Europe, if not beyond (Miura, Bradshaw and Tanida 2002). In contrast, police dogs may reside either in a kennel (probably not as pets) or within the officer's home, with a high level of mutual attachment (probably as pets when off duty).

Pets' complex roles

The complex range of relationships with pets is easily seen with working animals that share companionship with the handler. One question that arises is whether working animals perform better, or not as well, when they also are pets (companion animals). Institutional housing is typical for dogs in the military, or used in detection of explosives or prohibited agricultural products. The dogs are not expected to be pets. Some handlers of agricultural-inspection dogs believe, though without testing, that living in someone's home would interfere with the dog's fine olfactory discriminations. Yet, many handlers find themselves deeply attached to these kenneled dogs.

In U.S. police work, dogs lead a double life with officers, going to work for part of the day, and then joining families at home. In Japan, only special

handlers, rather than police officers, deploy canines when needed; dogs are housed in kennels (Y. Mori, personal communication, 2000). Military and police work requires that the selected dogs have a high sustained drive to work at challenging tasks; such dogs may be so aggressive as to be unsuitable for families. We found, however, that officers whose dogs slept inside the home more often felt their dogs were predictable (Hart et al. 2000). For these officers, being a working police canine and a companion did not appear to conflict.

Service and guide dogs experience a similar dichotomy during the day in work and companionship. Once the harness comes off, the mannerly guide dog becomes a bouncy, tail-wagging and playful animal—unrecognizable to someone who previously has only experienced the dog as guide. A guide agrees to work, and can decline, as sometimes happens when a dog decides not to work any longer (L. Contreras, personal communication, 2003). The working partnership is a two-way agreement, with companionship as part of the reward. Both parties choose to engage in this special partnership.

An animal that can be viewed as an unconventional pet, but that perhaps has the most enduring working relationship with humans, is the Asian elephant (Hart 1994). Managing their own reproduction, elephants technically are not domesticated and would not fit the requirement of *Webster's New Collegiate*. Yet, they generally are termed domesticated because they have lived so closely with humans for many centuries (Zeuner 1963; Clutton-Brock 1999), fitting the domesticated or tamed requirement of *The New Shorter Oxford* and *Webster's New Twentieth*. Elephants are kept for reasons usually not explicitly stated, including religion, ceremony, companionship and work. In contrast to *Webster's New Collegiate, The New Shorter Oxford* and *Webster's New Twentieth* do not preclude the animal contributing beyond pleasure or companionship, whereas Webster excludes utility; these definitions differ again as to including elephants as pets. Offering the animal unusual kindness or consideration arguably is seen in relationships with elephants. Mahouts, the drivers of working elephants, spend many hours each day in the company of the elephant, providing care and feeding, with effort far exceeding minimal nutritional requirements. Mahouts cook preferred dishes, handing them warm to elephants, or cut vegetation into elephant-bite sized pieces (Hart and Sundar 2000). Following modest corrections to elephants, mahouts invariably offer food treats.

When mahouts spent their lifetimes with particular elephants, they knew each other and could predict each other's behavior, given the relationship's duration and the cognitive ability of both (Hart et al. 2001). Mahouts describe that the safety of mahouts has declined as managers now

shift around mahouts among elephants, rather than the pair staying together indefinitely (Hart and Sundar 2000).

Pets and their relationships with humans affected by context

Pets retain behaviors that are seen in feral and wild ancestors. Cats leave scratching and urine marks despite their solitary housing indoors. Dogs harbor a strong interest in cats and other dogs, seemingly unaffected by their relationships with people. Dogs and cats housed indoors can become highly socialized, conforming to human requirements for indoor living. Dogs and cats have propensities for den sanitation habits in their defecation that can be shaped for compatibility with humans: only certain locations are acceptable for urination and defecation.

The extent to which a person comes to know a pet reflects the time investment and the variety of contexts and shared activities. Participating in a square dancing group with a Bernese Mountain Dog requires coordinated partnership and cooperation that enhances the relationship. It is useful to view pets by considering the wide range of relationships, and their relative value to the persons. An epidemiological survey revealed that elderly, pet owning women in rural settings were less happy than non-owners; in urban and suburban settings, the converse was found, with pet owning women being more happy than non-owning women (Ory and Goldberg 1984). These data raise a question as to what profiles of behaviors and interactions were associated with pet ownership in the various geographic settings.

A rich relationship with an animal, like that with a person, expands for the person and the animal with the experiential diversity, the time spent together, and the complex interactions. Grief for a particular animal reflects the length and involvement of the relationship (Hart, Hart and Mader 1990; Mader and Hart 1992). Combining work and companionship can enhance the relationship (Mader, Hart and Bergin 1989; Hart, Zasloff and Benfatto 1996). With the increasing modes and variety of interactions, each comes to know and value the other.

Conclusion

In the past twenty years, pets have become more valued in society. New service roles have been developed for dogs to assist people. Cats given interaction with humans as kittens are affectionate with people as adults, a trait making them rewarding pets (Zasloff and Kidd 1994). These evolving relationships, and our knowledge about them, are moving targets that can best be conceived along a continuum, reflecting the range of complexity and context that shapes the quality of the relationship of a person and pet.

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