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# Changing Conceptions of Care

## *Humanization of the Companion Animal–Human Relationship*

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### Abstract

This paper explores the changing nature of companion animal-human relationships in Britain over the past 30 years. This period has seen rapid change in attitudes and practices towards companion animals, with notable advances in medical treatment, nutrition, and understanding of non-human animal behavior, as well as re-evaluations of the position of animals within the home. Based upon in-depth interviews with companion animal caretakers and professionals involved in the companion animal industry, we examined these changes in the United Kingdom. Major themes were identified: Humanization, Commercialization, Medicalization, Responsible Companionship, and Alternative Companionship. These changes have had largely positive effects on companion animal health and welfare, but also bring new expectations of the companion relationship, which humans and nonhuman animals may be unable or unwilling to fulfill. While dominant discourses of responsible companionship prevail, the process of change is ongoing and reflects emerging trends in human society towards diversification and alternative lifestyles.

### Keywords

companion animals – humanization – commercialization – medicalization – responsible companionship – alternative companionship

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## Introduction

Companion animals share our homes and as such constitute one of the closest and most common forms of human-animal interaction in modern Western society. Recent data suggest that 46% of British households (Pet Food Manufacturers Association, 2014b) and 68% of US households (American Pet Products Association, 2014) contain at least one companion animal. Recent years have seen a profound shift in attitudes towards companion animals, who have become re-imagined as individuals and sentient beings, worthy of study and attention (Fox, 2006, 2011; Nast, 2006a; Haraway, 2008; Fudge, 2008; Charles & Davies, 2008). This shift has coincided with a commercialization of the companion animal industry (Nast, 2006b; Holbrook, 2008; Mosteller, 2008), with a wide range of animal-related products and services becoming available.

This paper examines changing attitudes and practices in relation to companion animals in Britain over the past 30 years. This period has seen a shift from viewing companions as "animals" to being seen as "kin" or members of the family (Bekoff, 2007; Mason & Tipper, 2008). While the changing nature of companion-animal keeping has been noted in the literature (Franklin, 1999; Irvine, 2004; Nast, 2006a; Potts, 2013), there have been few systematic studies that seek to explore these changes in a particular cultural context. The current study attempts to fill this gap by providing an in-depth qualitative exploration of the perceived changes based upon interviews with animal caretakers and professionals involved in the companion animal industry.

By focusing upon individual perceptions and experiences, the study examines the mechanisms of social change through which new norms and expectations of human and animal behavior are formed, and the complex and contradictory processes through which people make sense of their relationships with the more-than-human world. The rich nature of a qualitative research approach adds context to existing statistical data on changing human-animal relations and provides fertile ground for future explorations of the similarities and differences across cultures.

While the focus of the current study is on Britain, allowing for an in-depth examination of the key areas of change without the complications of a cross-cultural context, we make comparisons to other countries where similar data are available. Britain provides an interesting case study for this research because of its long history of companion-animal keeping and reputation as a "nation of animal lovers." However, many of the emerging themes are likely to be relevant to other Western societies and provide interesting comparisons with areas that have more recent companion-animal keeping cultures, such as China.

## Background

Human-animal companionship has a long history, with evidence of dogs living alongside humans at the end of the last ice age 12,000 years ago (Budiansky, 1995). Companion-animal keeping in Britain became particularly popular during the Victorian era, when the idea of keeping animals merely for pleasure or companionship became widespread (Ritvo, 1987). However, it is in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries that we have seen the most rapid changes in attitudes towards companion animals. Nast (2006a, 2006b) notes a meaningful shift in post-industrial contexts, with a reconsideration of companion animals from a "species apart" to "profoundly appropriate objects of human affection and love" (Nast, 2006a, p. 894). Franklin (1999) argues that ontological insecurity, the sense that one can no longer count on permanence in key areas of one's life, manifests itself not only in rising rates of companion-animal keeping, but also in new types of post-modern relationships with animals that have transformed them from "pets" into "companion animals" and "owners" into "caretakers" (Franklin, 1999, p. 86).

Caretakers' love for their companion animals makes them a key consumer target market, with many caretakers regarding their animals as form of "extended self" (Hill, Gaines, & Wilson, 2008). A recent report (Pets at Home, 2014) suggests that UK companion animal caretakers spent a total of £5.4 billion on products and services for their companions in 2012. The companion animal food market alone totaled £2.17 billion in 2012, accessories totaled £0.78 billion, and veterinary services came to £1.6 billion—an increase of 2.3% a year from 2006.

The changing nature of companion animal-human relationships also affects behavior, with animals increasingly integrated into the home and family through shared everyday rituals such as sleeping in human beds or celebrating the animal's birthday (Mosteller, 2008). Living together with another species on a daily basis necessitates a certain intimacy and recognition of individuality in non-humans, challenging Cartesian notions of the human-animal divide (Irvine, 2001; Fox, 2006). Franklin (1999) suggests that the importance of companion animals is that they offer us a different type of relationship to the ones enjoyed with our human friends and families, providing their caregivers with a "stable and uncritical source of affection in an increasingly unstable world" (p. 86).

Studies have shown numerous human benefits from companion animals, from the simple pleasure of a close relationship with another species (Haraway, 2003; Downey & Ellis, 2008; Fox, 2011) to a variety of personal and social health benefits (McNicolas et al., 2005; Walsh, 2009). Dog companionship has been

linked to increased levels of physical activity, providing health benefits for both humans and dogs alike, in an era when human (and non-human animal) obesity presents a huge public health problem (Johnson, Beck & McCune, 2011, Westgarth et al., 2012). Companion animal guardianship has been shown to facilitate social interaction and a sense of community, providing caretakers with a greater sense of "social capital" (Wood, Giles-Corti, & Bulsara, 2005). Recognition of the health and social benefits of companion-animal keeping has led to the rise of animal-assisted therapies and interventions in a range of settings such as schools, hospitals, nursing homes, and prisons (Fine, 2010; Gee et al., 2012; Mills & Hall, 2014).

Advances in animal nutrition and health care have brought vast benefits in terms of longevity and quality of life (Kraft, 1998), but they have also brought new debates regarding appropriate treatments. In affluent countries such as Britain, medical intervention is an issue at all stages of animal lives, from initial check-ups and vaccinations to major decisions on neutering and acute illnesses, and eventually terminal illness and euthanasia. There is much difference of opinion regarding the extent to which humans have the right or obligation to intervene in animal lives, with decisions often coming down to not just moral grounds or social acceptance, but also to issues of cost as more complicated and expensive treatments become available (Brockman, Taylor, & Brockman, 2008; Gilly, 2008). This is particularly the case in the UK where human medicine is largely funded by the public health system and people are unprepared for the high cost of private veterinary care.

As animals live longer and veterinary medicine advances, animals are increasingly diagnosed and treated for diseases of later life, such as arthritis, renal disease, cancer, and diabetes (Rock & Babinec, 2008). Such growth of medical treatment has corresponded with the rise of the companion animal insurance industry in recent years. The UK pet insurance market grew by 35.5% between 2008 and 2012, with average household expenditure on veterinary care rising by 22.2% (Timetric, 2013).

While animal nutrition has greatly improved over the past 30 years, with impressive advances in pet food research and more specialized diets becoming available, new concerns have emerged surrounding the epidemic of obesity among companion animals (German, 2006). Following trends in human society, a recent report by the UK Pet Food Manufacturers Association (2014a) suggested that at least 45% of UK pets are now overweight or obese, increasing risks of conditions such as diabetes and heart disease. Companion animal caregivers have been prosecuted for animal abuse due to extreme obesity (Hankins, 2009), raising questions over appropriate care and limits of "pet-love" (Nast, 2006b). Specialist low-calorie diets are now available, and routine

veterinary care involves regular weight checks and educating caretakers about appropriate portion control and ideal body condition.

Other issues have emerged in the increased control of animal bodies in public space. Whereas once dogs in the UK were allowed to roam freely, today they are subject to strict controls outside of the home that allow them to be seized as "strays" if they are found unaccompanied by their caregivers (Srinivasan, 2013). Concern over possible public health risks from dog feces and sensational media attention on "dangerous dogs" (Weaver, 2013) has led to a culture of "responsible pet ownership," where owners are expected to clean up after their pets and keep them under control at all times. Conflicts over the use of public space have led to local by-laws/ordinances, which designate certain areas as dog-free or on-leash areas and limit the use of public space by pet owners.

In other countries such as the US and Australia, dogs are already more restricted, and off-leash areas are often confined to specifically designated "dog parks" (Instone & Mee, 2011; Urbanik & Morgan, 2013) or unofficial spaces such as beaches (Holmberg, 2013). This creates segregated "more-than-human" spaces within the city, which are often the subject of fierce debate (Walsh, 2011). Compulsory micro-chipping of dogs in Wales from 2015 and England from 2016 will serve to further regulate animal bodies and place responsibility upon the caregivers for their control, care, and behavior.

In the following sections, we discuss the methods used in the study, before examining the research findings in relation to existing statistical data and previous academic research on the subject.

## Materials and Methods

### *Participants*

The study was based upon qualitative in-depth interviews with companion animal keepers ($N = 20$) and professionals involved in the companion animal industry ($N = 21$), including veterinarians ($N = 4$), scientists involved in animal health and nutrition ($N = 4$), representatives of national charities ($N = 2$), animal behaviorists ($N = 2$), dog trainers ($N = 2$), professionals in the dog industry ($N = 2$), cat sitters ($N = 1$), dog breeders ($N = 1$), dog wardens ($N = 1$), groomers ($N = 1$), and veterinary nurses ($N = 1$). The sample size was based upon previous qualitative research on companion animals (Power, 2008; Blouin, 2013), and was designed to be large enough to allow for diversity of opinion and sampling on the basis of age, gender, geographical location, type of companion animal and professional experience, while remaining small enough to

allow for in-depth qualitative analysis within the time-scale of the project (Green & Thorogood, 2013).

Participants were largely self-selected via advertisements in local veterinary clinics, internet forums, and word of mouth, and were therefore likely to have a vested interest in companion-animal keeping. Professionals came from a range of backgrounds and all but two also lived with companion animals themselves. Companion animal keepers had a mean of 3.7 animals ($SD$ = 3.77), with female participants more likely to have a greater number of animals ($M$ = 4.36, $SD$ = 4.27) than males ($M$ = 2.17, $SD$ = 1.60). Professionals involved in the study generally had fewer animals ($M$ = 2.19, $SD$ = 1.89), with females again more likely to have a greater number ($M$ = 2.92, $SD$ = 2.11) than males ($M$ = 1.22, $SD$ = 0.97). The overall number of animals ranged from 1 to 17 and covered a variety of species, although dogs ($N$ = 26) and cats ($N$ = 24) were the most popular (see Table 1 below).

Participants were more likely to be female (caretakers: $N$ = 14, professionals $N$ = 12) than male (caretakers: $N$ = 6, professionals $N$ = 9) and were mostly of White British ethnicity ($N$ = 37). The mean age of companion animal caretakers was 50.65 ($SD$ = 16.69) and 46.86 ($SD$ = 11.33) for professionals. As this was an exploratory study aimed at identifying overall trends, no specific sampling was done on the basis of socio-demographic characteristics; however, in future work it would be interesting to compare attitudes to companion animals on the basis of age, gender, or ethnicity, as well as across cultures.

TABLE 1 *Number of participants with each type of companion animal*

| Type of companion animal | Companion animal keepers | Professionals |
|---|---|---|
| Dogs | 14 | 12 |
| Cats | 15 | 9 |
| Birds | 3 | 0 |
| Hamsters | 3 | 0 |
| Lizard | 2 | 1 |
| Rabbits | 2 | 0 |
| Fish | 2 | 0 |
| Chinchilla | 1 | 0 |
| Ferret | 1 | 0 |
| Guinea pig | 1 | 0 |
| Tortoise | 1 | 0 |
| No companion animal at present | 0 | 2 |

### *Materials and Procedures*

Prior to the commencement of research, ethical approval was gained from both the university's and funder's ethical review boards. No animals were directly involved in the research, and human participation was voluntary and subject to informed consent. Professional participants were asked directly to participate via email or phone, while companion animal caretakers (from southeast and northern England) were asked to contact the researchers to take part in an interview.

Participants were provided with information regarding the study and asked to participate in a semi-structured interview by telephone or in person depending upon preference and geographical location. Eighteen interviews took place in person, either at participants' places of work or in their homes, and 23 were conducted by telephone. Interviews lasted between 25 and 129 minutes, with mean of 42.5 minutes (*SD* = 19.29) for companion animal keepers and 57.86 minutes (*SD* = 29.62) for professionals. Interview schedules were deliberately broad, allowing respondents to lead the discussion. This flexibility accounts for the wide variation in interview times, with professionals potentially having already formed opinions on the subject. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim, and then analyzed using NVivo software (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013) to draw out key themes and discussions.

Transcripts were coded using NVivo to identify key themes emerging from the primary data. These themes were then coded further to produce higher level concepts emerging from the research (Dey, 1993). The codes were cross-referenced to draw out common or contrasting examples and illustrative quotes to support the wider theories (Green & Thorogood, 2013). This type of analysis produced a rich qualitative description, detailing individual motivations, ideas, and constructs associated with companion-animal keeping, and providing a foundation for future work on the subject. The key themes emerging from the research are described in the Results.

## Results

Interview data largely confirmed the previously noted changes to companion animal-human relationships, illustrating how UK companion-animal-keeping practices have been altered in a rapidly changing human society. Overall several key themes, shown in Figure 1 below, emerged from the analysis. While the first four themes have been noted to some extent in previous literature, less has been written on the idea of "alternative companionship," which perhaps reflects more recent human trends towards "natural" diet and healthcare, anti-consumerism and "alternative" lifestyles. All themes are

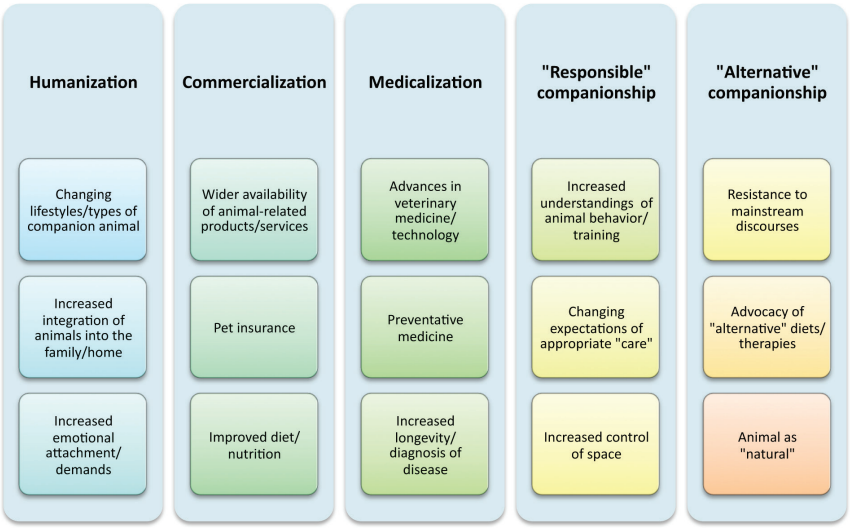


FIGURE 1 *Themes emerging from the data.*

discussed in more detail below, drawing upon illustrative quotes emerging from the primary data.

## Discussion

### *Humanization*

#### Changing Lifestyles/Types of Companion Animal

Overall companion animal populations have increased during the past 30 years, with an estimated 25 million companion animals (excluding fish) living in the UK in 2014 (Pet Food Manufacturers Association, 2014b). Dog populations have increased from 6.1 million in 1984 to 9 million in 2014, while cat populations have increased from 5.9 million to 8 million (Pet Food Manufacturers Association, 2014b). There has also been a rise in non-traditional pets such as reptiles. Certain types of animal, such as caged birds, have fallen in popularity during this period, perhaps reflecting increased concerns over animal welfare, or the desire for a more "interactive" relationship.

Such changes can be linked with changing social structures and lifestyles, including urbanization, longer working hours and increased mobility, as one professional noted:

> I would say cats have grown over the years . . . probably reflecting societal changes, people maybe not able to take the dogs out for walks, more councils are limiting where you can let a dog off the leash, so they are looking at smaller dogs if they are in urban areas, or not having dogs but other kinds of pets. (Professional, Pet Food Industry)

Popularity of various breeds tends to go in cycles with recent trends being for French Bulldogs and designer cross-breeds such as Labradoodles and Cockapoos. Such fashions are often influenced by the media, or perceptions of how certain animals fit into peoples' lifestyles or self-identities (Ghirlanda et al., 2013). Such issues highlight the position of animals as a "commodity" or fashion accessory, seemingly at odds with trends towards recognition of animals' "personhood" and individuality (Fox, 2006).

> As soon as we get a celebrity, for example Jonathan Ross with a French Bulldog, suddenly we get enquiries about French Bulldogs and then it's absolutely unbelievable to us, because taking on dogs is an important decision and yet people will seem to choose a breed at a whim. (Professional)

These tensions demonstrate ongoing issues of power within human-animal relationships and the complex and contrasting sets of rules by which these relationships are governed (Blouin, 2012). In addition to trends towards "designer dogs," the idea of the "Heinz 57" mongrel seems to be disappearing, with a newfound obsession, fueled by the advent of genetic testing, with defining dogs' origins (Weaver, 2013).

> Mongrels don't really exist anymore, do they? Because they're either designer crosses, I mean an intentional cross, or even when people get them from rescue, they'll say, "Oh, you've got a Husky cross Rhodesian Ridgeback" and you say, "Oh, how do you know?" And they say, "Well, he was found as a stray, but rescue said he's that," but they've got no proof, it's probably just a mongrel! Nobody wants a mongrel. (Trainer)

### Increased Integration of Animals into the Family/Home

Bekoff (2007) notes that whereas in the past animals may have served a primarily functional purpose, or more recently they have been viewed as companions or friends, in today's society they are often viewed as "kin" or members of the family.

> There is a much greater expectation now that the pet is seen as part of the family. We live more solitary lives and we have smaller families, so when there's an animal in your family it's not just one more body kicking about. (Caretaker)

Spatially, people felt that animals were much more accepted into the home environment than they were 30 years ago, although this may be accompanied by a loss of freedom:

> In earlier times animals were lucky if they made it into our kitchens, now they are in our bedrooms and even in our beds! Many owners specifically design their own living spaces around the needs of the animal, or choose their accommodation based on those needs. (Caretaker)

> We are told that if we are to be responsible pet owners we should keep our cats in at night, so they don't get run over. . . . Of course if a two-year-old cat gets run over, it's a tragedy, but what's better? To live a bloody fantastic two years doing what you want to do, or live miserably for 15 years without fulfilling even your basic needs? (Behaviorist)

Such issues once again raise questions of power in human-animal relations and the rights and obligations of humans to decide upon the "best interests" of the animal (Potts, 2013). As animals become increasingly "humanized" and incorporated into the human family, they become further "domesticated" to meet human ideals of animal behavior. However, these ideals themselves are fluid and highly contested with caretakers using various personal, social, and cultural reference points to inform their relationships (Blouin, 2013).

### Increased Emotional Attachment/Demands

Increased human investment in companion-animal keeping (both emotional and financial) means that caretakers may demand much more of their animals, and where expectations do not conform to reality, they may experience disappointment, behavioral problems, or relationships that break down:

> People have emotional higher demands of the relationship with their animals now. . . . I suspect this is a product of the way life is now . . . to a certain extent, people are having to fill gaps in their social and emotional life with a pet. People expect a certain type of behavior, and then if the animal doesn't conform to that, they are disappointed. (Behaviorist)

While caretakers generally saw themselves as realistic in their own expectations of relationships with their companion animals, they felt that other caretakers had gone "too far" in their humanization of animals and were not appropriately considering their needs:

> These little dogs where people dress them up and put them in their handbags and they're like an accessory, I think that's pretty cruel as well. Like not respecting that they're a dog, treating them like they're like a doggy sort of thing. (Caretaker)

***Commercialization***

Increased Availability of Pet Products/Services

This shift in attitudes to pets has been accompanied by commercialization of the companion animal industry in a post-modern consumer society:

> The money makers have realized that people are besotted by their animals and it's not just the food, but it's all the trappings, the leads and the harnesses and the cat beds and the toys and the treats . . . the pet section in the supermarket now is as big as any other, isn't it? (Caretaker)

Even while self-critical of their own purchases, some caretakers find it difficult to resist "treating" their animals:

> A lot of the things that are available are silly, but I have to admit, I have bought personalized bowls for my cats with their names on. And one of my cats is wearing a diamante collar. It's ridiculous, but I can afford it. . . . I think it's change of mindset—we are not afraid to spoil ourselves nowadays and we can spoil our animals too. (Caretaker)

In addition to products on the shop shelves or the internet, a wide range of companion-animal-related businesses have taken off as increased disposable incomes and willingness to invest money in animal companions create new customer demands:

> I think it [cat sitting] is a model that works very well in London because there is dense population, a lot of people who are from different places and lead busy lives, so there's not the same sense of community, neighbors looking after the cats. People are comfortable, so they travel a lot and can afford to have the peace of mind of a professional looking after their animals while they're gone. (Sitter)

### Improved Diet/Nutrition

The past 30 years have also seen dramatic changes in companion animal foods and nutrition. Supermarket shelves are now filled with a wide range of foods and treats for caretakers to offer to their companion animals.

> There was some research done in the seventies which was concerned with how much of animals' food was taken in with prepared pet food as opposed to table scraps . . . it would have been like 50%, and now that has gone up to around 85% that are fed with commercial food. . . . People are feeding less what they would have fed the family, more a focused diet that meets the needs of the animal. (Professional)

Pet foods have also changed from standard tins and flavors to a growing variety of premium and super premium products tailored to specific breeds, groups or nutritional requirements:

> There has been a shift to more focused diets that meet the individual needs of the animal. The big growth area at the moment is breed-specific diets and those that address certain disease risks, such as urinary or joint care. I wouldn't be surprised if in twenty years you will have specific tailored food for your dog, based on DNA testing. (Professional)

While many caretakers may still feed the "standard" products found on the supermarket shelves, increased nutritional knowledge means that other caregivers are making careful considerations and choices regarding their animals' diets:

> We've gone through a lot of changes over the years in terms of diet. The dogs at the moment have a natural diet, so it's raw meat, bones, eggs and some veg as well. With the cats, I feed a mixed diet because it's more convenient and looking at research I think there are health benefits as well. They get fed separately because he's on a urinary tract diet for bladder problems. So that's something that's come from going to the vets and finding out a bit of information on what the best diet is for him. (Caretaker)

Sales of treats have also increased as people look for new ways to interact with their animals. Research has shown that caretakers of obese pets are particularly likely to use treats or table scraps as a means of interacting, demonstrating their love through food (Kienzle, Bergler, & Mandernach, 1998).

> I love therefore I feed, it's a very Western world thing, and you know, unfortunately these are highly palatable biscuits and . . . it's easy to bolt down a lot of calories before you realize you're full. (Behaviorist)

As concerns over pet health and obesity grow, treats are now marketed for specific purposes, so people can feel good about "spoiling" their animals.

> People think "well, I want to look after my dog's teeth but I can't make that commitment to tooth brushing so I'll buy a product that the dog can chew on" and it's a convenience product, but it also gives owners that reassurance that "oh, I'm actually doing something good for my pet" and then they're enjoying it too. (Professional)

***Medicalization***

Advances in Veterinary Medicine/Technology/Preventative Treatments

Veterinary medicine has advanced greatly during the past 30 years, and all manner of specialized medical treatments are now available. Where once animals were usually only taken to the vets in case of accident or illness, or for major procedures such as neutering, today there is an increasing focus on preventative treatment mirroring the treatment available to human patients:

> Veterinary medicine has . . . become much more professional and clients have much greater expectations. There is much more we can do for the patients, and we're seeing them on a more regular basis, hopefully catching conditions before they develop (Veterinarian).

The advent of the pet insurance industry has funded research into ever more complex procedures, and as pets become increasingly integrated into the family, human companions are more willing to pay for their treatment:

> Years ago, if your cat was poorly, they just got put down, I suppose these days there's more of a choice, you can take out pet insurance and that way you can make sure that your animals are covered. (Caretaker)

However, over half the participants felt that some treatments were going too far or that they personally would be unwilling or unable to pay for some of the more expensive options available:

> Medical treatment of animals has gone too far in my opinion. Animals have no sense of future, they live in the here and now. Yet they are subjected to treatments that cause major discomfort over extended periods of time "to save their lives." Animals have no concept—and hence no fear—of death, only of suffering. Many animals are being tortured under the pretense of saving them, because their humans cannot let them go in a dignified animal-worthy manner. (Caretaker)

Increased Longevity/Diagnosis of Disease

Advances in animal medicine and nutrition have significantly improved companion animals' health and longevity; however, in an increasingly affluent society, animals are also following human trends in diseases of aging and obesity:

> People are often not aware how much they are harming their pets by feeding them. It's an area where we really need more education, to say look you could be taking two years off their life by overfeeding them. Often the owners might be overweight themselves, so it a real case of trends in human society reflecting themselves in the animal population (Veterinary Nurse).

As animals live longer and medical technologies advance, certain diseases are becoming more common and increasingly diagnosed and treated (Rock & Babinec, 2008):

> There is a kind of raised awareness of stuff that maybe people hadn't even considered [was] a problem before. Like when dogs get old and get a bit stiff, people are just like, "Oh, it's because they're getting old." Actually, there's a lot that can be done for creaky joints and arthritis. Even alternative therapies like hydrotherapy and acupuncture, which are now covered on the insurance. (Veterinary Nurse)

> Especially with cats, even four years ago . . . it was rare to see a cat in their early twenties, but now we've got quite a few on our books . . . so we are seeing a lot more things like hyperthyroidism, chronic kidney disease, dementia. . . . (Veterinarian)

***Responsible Companionship***

Increased Understanding of Behavior/Training

Understandings of animal behavior have improved dramatically over the past 30 years, with an extensive growth in the market for animal behaviorists.

Such changes are linked to changing expectations of the human-animal relationship and ideas of "responsible" companionship:

> A lot of owners are feeling a social pressure to be seen as responsible dog owners. Dog ownership has had a lot of bad press over the last decade or so with rogue dogs biting people. So people are feeling a lot of pressure to ensure that firstly, their dog is seen as well behaved and can be a responsible part of a humanized world, and secondly, that they are responsible owners, in that they are taking good care of the dog and making sure it is in a healthy condition. (Professional)

Training methods have also changed, with an increased focus on reward-based training rather than dominance. Such changes can be seen as part of a wider transition towards understanding animals as minded individuals who play an active role in the companion relationship (Irvine, 2004).

> When I first started, it was all about choke chains and being the leader of the pack. . . . Now there's a lot more focus on reward-based training and people are seeing how effective that can be. (Trainer)

### Changing Expectations of Appropriate Care

The sense of responsibility is largely improving companion animal health and welfare, and can be seen as an ongoing process of "civilizing" animals to live as part of a human society (Belk, 1996). However, it comes with added financial and social responsibilities to live up to a particular ideal of the companion animal-human relationship, which people or animals may not be able to or wish to fulfill. Ideas of "responsibility" are also contested with many respondents pointing to a demonization of certain types of animals such as "status" dogs (Harding, 2014), often based on issues of human class:

> When I had my Labrador, she would be on her own a maximum of four, five hours a day, when I was at work, whereas you look at your gang member with his Staffie, that dog's never on his own. They're actually exercising their dogs for the ten, twelve, fourteen hours that they're out of bed every day and they are being socialized in a wider network. So who's the more responsible [one]—me or the adolescent in the hoodie and gold chain? (Dog Warden)

### Increased Control of Space

Changes in UK society over the past 30 years have led to a changing perception of dogs in public space, from a culture where "latchkey" dogs were often let

out to wander unaccompanied, to one where caretakers are expected to be in control of their animals at all times:

> I think in our first year, we picked up something like fifteen hundred stray dogs, the majority of which were returned to owners because they were what we started to refer to as "latchkey dogs" . . . if you had a dog, it was acceptable to open the door, let it walk itself and it will come home at night. Over the twenty-seven years we've looked to educate people and that isn't acceptable now . . . last year we hit our lowest intake, which was about a hundred and ninety dogs. (Dog Warden)

Growing population, traffic, and media attention regarding dangerous dogs have led to increasing calls to restrict dogs in public space in a more similar manner to the US.

> The classic, you get these kneejerk reactions [to] "child been bitten by a dog" and yet we know from all the stats that actually it's most likely that if a child is going to get bitten or injured or killed by a dog, it's going to be a dog they know and it's going to be in their own home. So politically you get something like that and then it's like, "Oh, well, that's happened there. So we really need to restrict dogs in green space." (Professional, Dog Industry)

Such discourses are often resisted by companion animal keepers and the animals themselves, leading to ongoing debates over freedom and responsibility (Srinivasan, 2012).

> In the UK we come from this assumption is that if you've got right of access to land, that your dog can come with you and . . . the default position is the dog is off lead. But the more restrictions we get, like on lead restrictions or dog bans in parks, it doesn't reduce the demand, it just displaces it. So you get a concentration of off-lead access, or people will ignore restrictions, then that kind of perpetuates the perception that there are more problematic dog owners. (Professional, Dog Industry)

***"Alternative" Companionship***

Resistance to Mainstream Discourse/Alternative Therapies/ Animal as Natural

While an ideal of the "responsible owner" may exist in mainstream society, the exact boundaries of this are constantly changing and being resisted by ever changing research and information. Particularly in the "Google age," caretakers

are now taking much more responsibility for finding out their own information regarding the options available. In a similar manner to human health, medical professionals are no longer seen as the absolute "experts," and companion animal caregivers are questioning conventional wisdom on animal health and nutrition.

> Knowledge has prompted me to make changes, mostly from the internet, less so from my own vet, as his time is so expensive and his experience much less than people whom I've met online on forums. (Caretaker)

> Cats are obligate carnivores, so cat food should contain at least 80% meat and far fewer carbohydrates than most cat foods offer. I now choose to feed my cats a raw diet rather than the expensive but inappropriate options promoted by vets and supermarkets. (Caretaker)

Some companion animal caregivers are deliberately choosing not to conform to set ideals of responsible ownership, such as yearly vaccinations or pet insurance, because they feel that commercial interests are playing on the emotions of human companions:

> I vaccinate less than I did twenty years ago, as research tells me clearly that core vaccines are efficient for 3 years and yearly boosters are not necessary. I am now less likely to take pets to [the] vet for minor ailments because medicine and advice is so readily available on the internet. (Caretaker)

> I have never bought insurance, and from what I read, less and less people do now. As veterinary medicine advances, so do the insurance premiums. I put a sum aside monthly for unexpected vet bills and have a credit card on hand especially for animal emergencies. (Caretaker)

Not surprisingly, these self-proclaimed "experts" are themselves questioned by professionals who see inherent dangers in following unverified advice. It is probably safe to say that as research continues to advance, so will individualization and choice, and new forms of alternative relationships with companion animals will continue to emerge.

## Conclusion

The past 30 years have seen a profound shift in attitudes towards and treatment of companion animals in the United Kingdom, with huge advances in

medical treatment, nutrition, and understandings of animal behavior, as well as re-evaluations of the position of animals within the home. Such changes can be seen within a context of increased commercialization, medicalization, and privatization of human society, as well as increasing academic and political interest in animal welfare and cognition (Franklin, 1999). These processes may not always be apparent, as changes are often gradual, driven by social, media, or "expert" advice, creating new norms and social expectations of the companion relationship (Nast, 2006a).

These changes have often been characterized as the shift from "pets" to "companion animals" (Irvine, 2004), recognizing animals as active partners in the relationship and allowing for new forms of "everyday post-humanism" through which animals and humans come to understand one another in the course of their everyday lives (Fox, 2006). However, in reality a variety of rules still govern human relationships with companion animals, and issues of power and control have not disappeared, but moved away from active "domination" (Tuan, 1984) towards more subtle forms of control in the regulation of animal bodies (Redmalm, 2013). While the changes discussed in this article can largely be seen as positive in terms of animal health and welfare, animals are often subjected to new forms of medical, behavioral, spatial, and legal surveillance through which they are produced as suitable "citizens" of modern human society.

Not only are perceptions of companion animals changing on a societal level, but they are also becoming increasingly differentiated on an individual level. Blouin (2013) argues that relations with companion animals usually fall into one of three categories: dominionistic, humanistic, and protectionistic, with interviewees in our study showing elements of each when describing their own and others' changing relations with animals. New forms of human status are also increasingly defined through relationships with companion animals, a term Irvine (2004) coined "animal capital," through which responsible owners differentiate themselves from those perceived as having lesser relationships with their animals.

Furthermore, research and advice is constantly developing, so there is no one defined method of being a responsible companion, but multiple ways for humans to demonstrate their affection for their animals, with a variety of alternative forms of companionship emerging in recent years, mirroring trends towards alternative lifestyles in human society. Further research is needed to explore these variations in more depth and provide comparative studies with other cultures to understand the similarities and differences involved.

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