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Human and pet interaction: Companion animals and the formation of identity

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ABSTRACT

Human and Pet Interaction:
Companion Animals and the
Formation of Identity

by

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Keeping companion animals is commonplace. Each year Americans spend over 34.3 billion dollars on pet food, pet toys, and veterinary care, and within households, the person with primary responsibility for the care of a pet is usually female (American Pet Product Manufacturers Association 2004). Although literature on the human/animal bond is becoming more extensive, relatively little has been written about the dynamics of the daily social interaction between humans—specifically women—and pets. In response to this lack of literature, this study asks: What is the nature of the social interplay between women and their companion animals? And how do women integrate their companion animals into their self-perceptions?

Drawing upon the symbolic interactionist theories of Mead, Cooley, Blumer, and Goffman, and Nippert-Eng’s book *Home and Work*, I have attempted to broaden their insights to include the roles companion animals might play. Although only Mead considered companion animals in his research, the inclusion of human/pet relationships into these other theories adds a new dimension to classic symbolic interactionist thought.
This research reveals that the women in my study use boundaries, identity, and ritual to structure their relationships with their pets. For example, some women choose to restrict the movements of their companion animals within their homes (segmentors), while others place no such restrictions on their pets (integrators). Women also use bridging techniques to create a special bond between themselves and their pets. These findings shed light on the nature of social interplay between women and their companion animals.

In addition, there are three primary ways in which women integrate companion animals into their self-perceptions. First, they see themselves and their companion animals as teammates or fellow performers. Second, they believe that their sense of personal understanding and awareness of animal-related issues has been influenced by their companion animals. Third, they see their pets as family members. These three ways of connecting with pets profoundly shape women’s sense of self-concept.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

There can be no single answer to the question of why people form relationships with dogs and cats because our relationships with them have not been of a universal, standard type that could generate a once-and-for-all explanation. Leslie Irvine (2004:33).

This dissertation explores the relationship between nonmarried women and their companion animals; specifically, the sociological processes associated with incorporating nonhuman animals into women's lives. My research questions are: What is the nature of the social interplay between nonmarried women and their companion animals? For this project, social interplay consists of the social interactions and behaviors that take place between women and their pets. And, how do nonmarried women integrate their companion animals into their self-perceptions? As Irvine's quote suggests there is no single answer to the question of why people form relationships with companion animals. Therefore I use a symbolic interactionist perspective to examine the micro level individual relationships between a small group of nonmarried women and their companion animals to understand the meanings invoked in these relationships.

The keeping of companion animals is commonplace in the U.S. Each year Americans spend over 34.3 billion dollars on pet food, pet toys, and veterinary care
Both men and women benefit mentally and physically from the presence of a pet in the home. Many people also experience an emotional connection with their pets. Within households, the person with primary responsibility for the care of a pet is overwhelmingly female. Approximately two thirds (72.8%) of pet owners who have the primary responsibility for pet care are women (American Veterinary Medical Association 2002). Studying how nonmarried women relate to their pets is sociologically relevant because women are the primary caretakers of pets in the home, and the relationships they share with their companion animals have largely been ignored. In addition, I focus on this group of women because studies reveal that the time spent with companion animals is greater and the process of bonding more intense among this group than men (Peek, Bell, and Dunham 1996; Richards and Krannich 1991; Gage and Holcomb 1991).

The choice to limit the sample to nonmarried women with children that are now grown or have moved out of the family home is based on the notion that the bonds nonmarried women form with their pets are likely to be different than those formed by married women with young children. Married women with young children may find themselves unable to devote large amounts of time to their companion animals because they must respond to other demands on their time. It is likely that they are responsible for both home and family, and they may also have a full or part-time job. This leaves them less time to foster relationships with companion animals. In choosing to study nonmarried women and the relationships they share with their companion animals I am calling into question the old and tired “crazy cat lady” stereotype. This stereotype holds that certain nonmarried women would rather spend time with their cats than with other
human beings (male or female). In extreme cases "cat ladies start with one cat but decide to add 'just one more' enough times to have dozens and dozens of cats who sleep in sinks and defecate in bathtubs filled with gravel and sand" (Roosh 2007). Having more cats than you can reasonably care for is known as animal hoarding and it is something that responsible "crazy cat ladies" are strongly against, but the stereotype of "crazy cat ladies" often assumes ownership of numerous cats. The purpose of my research is to look at the lives of nonmarried women who keep companion animals and to examine more closely the associations we make and the meanings we, as a society, attach to these relationships.

New literature on human and animal interaction within the field of sociology continues to emerge, but it has only just begun to address the complex relationships that exist between women and their companion animals. It is this dearth in the literature that this research seeks to address. Specifically, this study explores how the development of the self (as in the "I" and the "me" and the "generalized other") in nonmarried women is influenced by their relationships with their companion animals.

Given the nature of this study's research questions, I use symbolic interaction as a guiding force in my research. I draw upon the work of Mead, Cooley, and Blumer, and use Goffman's dramaturgical model as a way of both understanding the self and explaining the role that companion animals sometimes play in putting on performances with their human guardians. The work of these theorists helps me answer the question of how women integrate companion animals into their self-perceptions. For symbolic interaction to take place two beings with selves must be involved. When one of the beings in question is a companion animal the discussion becomes more complicated. One way to address this is to argue that pets have selves. Another is to question the
notion that individuals must have selves in order to engage in symbolic interaction. Instead of focusing on either of these explanations I think that it makes more sense to look at if and how pets shape the selfhood of their human companions and what this means for the study of symbolic interaction. In addition, I incorporate into my discussion Nippert-Eng’s (1996) analysis of how we maintain and bridge physical and psychological boundaries in our lives.

I answer the questions posed in my dissertation by conducting semi-structured, in-depth interviews, which were audiotaped and then transcribed. In addition to using symbolic interaction as a guiding principle, I analyzed the data gathered from these interviews using a grounded theory approach. I also engaged in participant observation and took field notes.

Combining participant observation with in-depth interviewing provided a record of how space was used within participants’ homes and documented the ways in which companion animals were allowed to use this space. For example, did pets have free run of the house or apartment or were they restricted to certain areas? And what did this use of space indicate about the relationship between the participant and her pet? These forms of data provided a rich base from which to conduct my analysis.

In 2003 sociologists established the Animals and Society section of the American Sociological Association was officially established, and by 2006, over 200 people had become members. The mission statement of the section is, in part, “to encourage and support the development of theory, research, and teaching about the complex relationships that exist between humans and other animals” (American Sociological Association 2007:1). That this new section found interested and willing participants

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shows a growing curiosity about human and non-human animal interaction within the field of sociology.

A large body of psychological and biological literature exists that is focused on everything from animal intelligence and animal rights to the health benefits of humans sharing their lives with companion animals. It is important to engage with all of these perspectives because a belief in animal intelligence or animal rights suggests that people are thinking about animals in new ways, that they are entering into and exploring new kinds of relationships with them. Humans once thought of animals as incapable of experiencing emotion, but today many people believe that they feel joy, sadness, love, and even grief. We now see them as members of the family rather than as just guard dogs or mousers.

Companion animals are clearly an important part of our lives. The following statistics show, for example, that many of us both keep pets and feel closely connected to them. In 2001, 58.3% of all households in the United States owned at least one pet. Pet ownership conveys considerable benefits to family members. Pets were considered family members by nearly half of all pet-owning households, and slightly more than half of all households considered the animals in their homes to be pets or companions. Only 2.2% of pet owners thought of their pets as property (American Veterinary Medical Association 2002).

While people at all socioeconomic levels keep pets certain patterns do emerge. For example, the likelihood of owning a pet increases with household income. Less than half of all households with incomes less than $20,000 own pets. In contrast, well over 50% of households with incomes greater than $54,999 own pets. Type of residence also

5
affects pet ownership. Homeowners are more likely to own pets than renters. Over half of homeowners owned a pet compared with just under half of renters (American Veterinary Medical Association 2002). Households most likely to own pets were located in places with a population of less than 100,000 (American Veterinary Medical Association 2002).

Structure of the Study

Following this introduction is a literature review chapter, which provides the reader with an overview of what has been written about pets or companion animals in a variety of fields, including psychology and medicine. The literature review also contains a discussion about the existing literature on the physical and psychological benefits of being a pet guardian, as well as the negative aspects of pet guardianship. An examination of the connection between gender and pets follows, and finally, I finish the literature review with an exploration of the relationship between pet guardianship and the self.

Chapter three outlines the methods used in this study. The methods include gathering data via my role as an observer-as-participant and conducting in-depth interviews as well as taking extensive fieldnotes. In chapter four I discuss my first research question: “What is the nature of the social interplay between nonmarried women and their companion animals?” Specifically, how and to what degree do companion animals become integrated into the lives of nonmarried women? Further, are companion animals able to profoundly shape women’s perceptions of self? Christena Nippert-Eng and her groundbreaking work on boundary maintenance and boundary transcendence play a critical role in my analysis. Pivotal to my discussion are Nippert-Eng’s concepts...
of space and physical boundaries, the notion of companion animals as identity kits and
props, and bridging techniques used to transition from the public to the private sphere.

In chapter five I address my second research question: “How do nonmarried
women integrate their pets into their self-perceptions?” Here I analyze my data using
grounded theory and the guiding principles of several symbolic interactionist theorists. I
use concepts created by symbolic interactionist theory such as the generalized other, the
looking-glass self, performance, setting, and props to make sense of, discuss, and
comment on the data I gathered during my interviews. My goal was not to do an
extensive critique of Mead, Cooley, Blumer, or Goffman but to broaden their concepts to
include nonhuman animals in the equation. The notion that many symbolic interactionist
concepts can be extended to include companion animals (and animals in general)
intrigues me.

Mead insisted that “the organized community or social group which gives to the
individual his unity of self may be called the “generalized other.” The attitude of the
‘generalized other’ is the attitude of the whole community” (154). Mead’s notion of the
“generalized other” fails, however, to include the significant role played by companion
animals in the lives of human beings. Drawing upon my data, I demonstrate that
companion animals can indeed be influential in women’s lives and therefore can be taken
into account when discussing the “generalized other.”

Finally, in chapter six I state my conclusions based on my analysis and return to
the overarching issues of how we humans might better understand the complex nature of
the social interplay between nonmarried women and their companion animals and the
processes by which nonmarried women integrate companion animals into their lives.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter I will examine the literature on humans and pets in contemporary western society. According to Serpell and Paul (1994) "the word ‘pet’ is generally applied to animals that are kept primarily for social or emotional reasons rather than for economic purposes" (129). Similarly, Bonduelle and Joublin (1995) argue that one of the most salient characteristics of pets, as opposed to domesticated animals, is that they do not have a direct commercial use. Most domesticated animals' worth is measured by the practical services and economic resources they provide. The value of owning a pet, however, appears to derive from the relationship itself. That is, people love and cherish their pets not necessarily because they are useful, but because they fulfill humans' social and emotional needs. (Serpell 1986; Council for Science and Society 1988).

The current use of the term ‘companion animal’ as an alternative to ‘pet’ by animal welfare agencies and animal guardians further emphasizes the difference between our relationship with domesticated animals and the animals we choose to take into our homes and hearts. Rather than simply looking after a pet, many owners\(^1\) of companion animals appear to enter into some form of relationship with them that is analogous to a

---

\(^1\) Pet owner refers to a person who simply feeds and houses an animal. Pet guardian suggests that beyond feeding and housing the animal there is some feeling of responsibility toward him or her. The term "pet" is used to refer to an animal we live with and take care of. The term "companion animal" suggests that rather than simply living with an animal we have entered into a deeper, more complex relationship with him or her. The participants in my study referred to their cats and dogs as both pets and companion animals, so I will use these terms interchangeably throughout my dissertation.
human/human relationship (Samuels 2000). Studies suggest that the most common role a 
companion animal can fulfill is that of a friend to its owner (Hirschmann 1994). 
Companion animals are also frequently described as family members (Voith 1985), or 
even as surrogate siblings or children (Sanders 1990; Hirschmann 1994). Finally, 
companion animals assist in the achievement of trust, autonomy, responsibility, 
competence, and empathy toward others (Beck and Katcher 1983).

Pets in the Western World

Despite the enormous numbers of pets in the Western world and the vast 
emotional and financial investment which these animals represent (Serpell 1986); there 
have been few serious attempts to explain why people keep pets and for what purpose. It 
is only within the past two decades that the subject has attracted any significant scientific 
interest. Though actual research conducted on people and pets has only scratched the 
surface, theories on the nature of this relationship abound. One of the most widespread 
and popular of these theories is the belief or suspicion that pets are no more than 
substitutes for so-called ‘normal’ human relationships.

Time and time again the idea of pet-keeping as a ‘gratuitous perversion’ of natural 
behavior surfaces, today it is most often expressed by a general tendency to regard 
people’s relationships with their animal companions as absurd, sentimental, and 
somewhat pathetic (Katcher 1981). According to Katcher, “we are taught to despise the 
sentimental, to think of it as banal or as a cover for darker hidden emotions” (1981:46). 
When it comes to pets, these darker aspects of the self can take many forms. For 
example, some researchers believe that pet-owners are socially inadequate and that they
use their pets, in much the same way that drug-users use heroin, as artificial substitutes for reality. Others see the relationship between pets and people as an excuse for playful domination. Further, this relationship is thought by some to be essentially sexual in nature. Finally, there are those researchers who regard the relationship between pets and people as a phenomenon that consumes people's positive emotions and therefore contributes indirectly to the oppression and physical or psychological annihilation of human beings (Serpell 1986).

In recent years differences in personality between pet guardians and non pet guardians have been discovered. Russel conducted one of the earliest studies to explore methods of detecting so called 'authoritarian' personalities. One of the items in the questionnaire employed in this study was the statement, "dogs are much more admirable animals than cats." Agreement with this statement was associated more strongly with authoritarianism than replies to any other item in the questionnaire. Russel concluded that dogs are naturally more obedient and subservient than cats and, as a result, are strongly preferred by authoritarian people (Russel 1956).

The literature on pets is extensive. After a thorough examination of the anthropological, psychological, and sociological research on companion animals, I have found that the literature breaks down into five major categories: socio-historic and economic aspects of domestication and pet-keeping, physical benefits of pet ownership, psychological benefits of pet ownership, the case against pet ownership, and gender and pets. In addition to reviewing the literature available in these categories, I will also discuss the concept of self as it appears in the literature of symbolic interactionists Mead, Cooley, Blumer, and Goffman. I do this to lay the groundwork for the data analysis
chapters that are to come. Finally, I examine the research about pet ownership and its effects on notions of human identity.

Socio-Historic and Economic Aspects of Domestication and Pet-Keeping

Dogs have been present in society since the preagricultural era. The earliest fossil remains, dating from about 12,000 years ago, come from Iraq and Israel (Turnbull and Reed 1974; Davis and Valla 1978). Later finds have been discovered in the United States from about 10,000 years ago (Lawrence 1967), Denmark and the United Kingdom about 9,000 years ago (Degerbol 1961; Musil 1970), and from China about 7,000 years ago (Olsen and Olsen 1977). The available evidence suggests that the earliest domestication of the dog took place in the Near East during the pre-agricultural Mesolithic period of human culture, which followed the end of the last global ice age several thousand years ago (Messent and Serpell 1991). The source of the domestic dog is believed to be in whole or large part the wolf. The pre-domestication association between man and wolf is easy to decipher. Wolves scavenge and humans discard. People eat dogs in a number of cultures, and they probably ate wolves back in the cave. Early Mesolithic hunters no doubt stole pups or cubs from wolf dens. Without refrigeration they probably found it more practical to keep some alive than to kill them all at once and lose part of the meat to spoilage. The presence of the "wolf pups in the cave would have started the process of domestication with no other factor than humans' natural love of companion animals to drive it" (Caras 2002:77).

One of the more popular theories of domestication centers on animals as companions and is completely free of utilitarian considerations. A number of historians believe that the earliest domestication of animals occurred as a natural and inevitable
consequence of the human tendency to adopt wild animals as pets (Sauer 1952; Reed 1964; Scott 1968). Historians maintain that young wolf cubs were brought to the villages of early humans by returning hunters or children and then adopted and even suckled by human females. In these villages the animal might acquire a name and even achieve equality with other members of the family group. It is clear from archaeological records that the Mesolithic period in the Near East involved significant changes in human culture. When the ice caps melted, humans living during the Paleolithic period settled in one place and began to live better and more comfortable lives (Harris 1969). This rise in the standards of living allowed more leisure time for humans to “indulge in activities such as art, religion, and experimentation in the taming and cultivation of wild animals and plants” (Messent and Serpell 1991:10).

In addition, such societies probably had long-term surpluses of food, and this would have been a vital factor enabling them to maintain captive populations of wild animals such as dogs. If insufficient food is available, wild species will not breed successfully in captivity and captive breeding is necessary if domestication is to take place (Pfeiffer 1972). The dingoes of Australia are a case in point. Though hand reared by Australian aborigines and treated with great affection, most dingoes are so severely undernourished that they rarely, if ever, breed. Lack of proper nutrition keeps them from being able to reproduce and the hunt for food leaves them little time to raise pups. According to Meggit (1965), this may be a reason why a breed of domestic dingo has yet to arise in Australia.

Archaeological evidence shows that the human-animal bond has existed for many thousands of years. It appears that the human capacity to relate on a social level to wild
animals of other species lies at the heart of the domestication process. With regard to
dogs, useful canine skills such as scavenging, hunting, and territorial barking may have
helped to solidify their attachment but were probably not necessary for their original
formation. The change from keeping wild animals as pets to domestication was most
likely precipitated by sudden and favorable changes in the environment in specific
geographical locations (Messent and Serpell 1991).

The rich, the poor, and the middle-class have all contributed to the nurturing of
pets over the last several thousand years. In the year 1062, for example, toward the end
of the Han dynasty, the Chinese Emperor Ling became so “infatuated with his dogs that
he invested them all with the rank of senior court officials” (Serpell 1986:34). When the
Hans were displaced by foreign dynasties, the new Emperors followed Ling’s example by
displaying a great love of dogs, especially the modern Pekingese (Serpell 1986).

Though the Chinese aristocracy exhibited a distinct fondness for dogs as pets, the
working population of China did not share their enthusiasm. Around 800 B.C., in the
Book of Rites, dogs were divided into three classes: “hunting dogs, watch-dogs, and those
known as the edible variety. No mention was made of pet dogs” (Ash 1927:59). Little
has changed in modern China, as evidenced by an order from Peking’s (now Beijing)
municipal authorities to exterminate or banish almost the entire canine population of the
city, some 400,000 animals. According to reports in the British press, only police dogs,
dogs used in laboratory research, and those licensed for eating purposes were exempt
(Serpell 1986).

In Europe, Greece and Rome especially, class distinctions related to pet
ownership were less extreme. The early Greek inhabitants of the city of Sybaris were
avid pet-lovers, their favorites being long-haired Maltese lap-dogs. These dogs were paraded about the streets and taken everywhere, including to the public baths and wrestling schools. They were also encouraged to share the beds of their owners at night. The well known Roman authors Ovid and Catullus wrote poems to commemorate the deaths of their mistress' pet birds (Halliday 1922) and the Emperor Hadrian had tombstones placed over the graves of his favorite dogs" (Serpell 1986).

The death of a beloved animal was no small thing to either the Greeks or the Romans. Pet-keepers of both sexes and ages mourned their animal companions. Their social status, although sometimes unknown, ranged from Athenian aristocrat to the lowest cobbler or slave sailor. It is generally believed that pet-keeping was not a matter of social position or wealth in antiquity (Podberscek, Paul, and Serpell 2000).

The ways in which animals were buried in ancient Greece and Rome provides an illustration of this point. Animal burials closely followed the pattern of human burials in two main respects. First, when it came to the grave site, companion animals were buried not in special pet cemeteries but like human beings, where their graves could be seen everywhere and paid tribute to by those passing by. Second, tombstones of suitable size marked the burial places of companion animals, and deposits of funerary offerings not unlike those intended for human graves were made there (Kete 1994; Podberscek, Paul, and Serpell 2000). While tombstones marking the burial sites of dogs were prevalent in classical Greece and Rome, tombstones marking the burial sites of cats have rarely been identified. However, this is not surprising as the domestic cat originated in Egypt, where even household cats were considered sacred (Bodson 2000).
A more careful consideration of the factors that have contributed to the popularity of keeping dogs and cats as pets can provide additional insights into the relationship between humans and companion animals. For example, several Asian subspecies of wolves and wildcats, rather than other wild species, were the only ones initially chosen for domestication. One reason may be that once the role of companion animal had been filled by dogs and cats, there was no longer a need to search for and adopt alternative species (Messent and Serpell 1991). Historical documentation indicates that natives of the Falkland Islands tamed and partially domesticated the indigenous, wolf-like canid *Dusicyon australis*. This species was displaced and became extinct, however, when European domestic dogs were introduced. Apparently, *Canis familiaris* was better adapted to the role of companion animal than the native species (Clutton-Brock 1987).

Wolves and wildcats appear to have an advantage over other species for the coveted status of companion animal. But why is this so? Reed (1954), Herre (1963), and Scott (1988) believe that these species, especially the wolf, were already strongly preadapted in a variety of ways to roles as human social group members. The wolf is one of the most highly social species of canid. It lives communally and cooperatively hunts large game animals. Wolf packs are usually comprised of ten to 20 genetically related individuals, and the social structure is hierarchically organized by strict dominance-subordinance relationships. This type of social organization is, in many ways, similar to that claimed to exist among prehistoric hunting cultures of humans (Etkin 1982). Among the 34 other species of living canid, only the Dhole and the African hunting dog are known to be as highly sociable. This may be why wolves are often considered an important social partner of early humans. Domestic dogs' habit of recognizing the higher
status of humans’ is an ancestral trait derived from pack life and is probably necessary for the maintenance of positive relations between humans and dogs.

The dog is an animal species quite different from our own, created by humans to depend on us, interact with us, and love us. The roles dogs play in our families and cultures are now examined rather than taken for granted. As “role models” for children “they exhibit what we define as bravery, loyalty, courage, and intelligence. It is believed that responsible pet ownership can lead toward good parenting, and the companionship of a pet is known to be of distinct therapeutic value” (Caras 2002:86).

Unlike dogs, cats have never been thought of as a particularly social species, though recent studies have shown that they are more social than was previously believed (McDonald and Apps 1978; Fagen 1978). Most cat owners, however, would agree that cats can be very social and loving, while insisting upon a level of independence that is uncommon among dogs. Cats can also be extremely territorial, which helps them fit in with human habitation rituals (Messent and Serpell 1991).

While the domestication of animals began in the pre-agricultural stage of human development (between 12,000 and 15,000 years ago) humans needed domesticated animals and pets because though the modern age claimed to provide a better life for all, it produced great suffering for individuals ranging from the peasantry and the proletariat to women who were excluded from the public sphere. Domesticated animals and pets served to ease this suffering and make modern life more palatable.

Postmodernists assert that we have moved from the modern period into a new era. They contend that in the contemporary, high-tech media society in which we live and its emergent processes of change and transformation are producing a new postmodern
society. Further, they believe that technologies such as computers and media, new forms of knowledge, and changes in the socio-economic system are producing a postmodern social formation. With this new formation has come increased cultural fragmentation, changes in the experience of space and time, and new modes of experience, subjectivity, and culture (Best and Kellner 1991). A discussion of modernity and postmodernity is important because it helps to clarify what humans have experienced and why pets may be more vital to us than they were in the past.

Physical Benefits of Pet Guardianship

A common theme in the literature on companion animals is that of the physical benefits that humans experience when in the company of their pets. For example, Katcher (1994) has found that pets may serve not as substitutes for human contact but instead offer a special relationship that other human beings cannot supply. Katcher's work on the physiological stress of talk and the effect of companion animals demonstrates how pets can stand in for humans. In his study, respondents were first isolated from their animals, and then measured for blood pressure and heart rates using an automated blood pressure monitor. Researchers observed the respondents while they rested and when they were reading aloud from a deliberately uninteresting text. The researchers then brought in a dog and asked them to pet the animal. During the greeting, blood pressure and heart rates among respondents were lower than during any time in which they were reading aloud. Katcher's findings indicate the profound influence pets can have on humans' physical states (Katcher 1994).
Pet guardianship may also affect risk factors associated with cardiovascular disease. Jennings and his colleagues studied 5,741 participants receiving free risk profile screenings at the Baker Medical Research Institute (Jennings, Reid, Christy, Anderson, and Dart 1998). Of these individuals 784 were pet-owners and 4,957 were non pet-owners. Pet-owners had significantly lower systolic blood pressure and plasma triglycerides than non pet-owners. Pet-owners also had significantly lower systolic (but not diastolic) blood pressure than non pet-owners, and these findings varied by gender. Pet-owners and non pet-owners, however, did not differ in body mass index, socioeconomic indicators, or smoking habits. Pet-owners exercised significantly more than non pet-owners. These findings suggest the possibility that pet ownership reduces cardiovascular risk factors (Jennings, et al. 1998). However, the relationship may be spurious due to other biosocial factors.

Social support, pet ownership, and one-year survival after acute myocardial infarction (severe heart attack) are the focus of a related study by Friedmann and Thomas (1998). In this study the researchers followed 369 participants in the CAST (Cardiac Arrhythmia Suppression Trial) for at least one year. The study found that owning a dog and having social support were important predictors of survival (Friedmann and Thomas 1998). Although owning a dog had a positive influence on health, that effect was complementary to, rather than a substitute for, other sources of social support (Friedmann and Thomas 1998).

Attachment to pets may also account for differences in cardiovascular benefits among pet owners. For example, a study by Friedman (1995) found that those who owned both dogs and cats had less attachment to their cats than to their dogs. This

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difference did not appear to be responsible for observed differences in mortality between
dog and cat owners, however. Among men in the study those who owned only cats had
higher mortality rates (2 of 15) than among those who owned dogs with or without cats (0
of 81). For women, mortality rates did not differ significantly based on cat or dog
ownership (Friedmann and Thomas 1998).

The effect of companion animals on Alzheimer’s patients also appears in the
research literature on pets. Individuals who are suffering from Alzheimer’s and who
have pets have fewer episodes of verbal aggression and anxiety compared to Alzheimer’s
patients who do not have companion animals (Fritz, Farver, Kass, and Hart 1995).
Individuals with Alzheimer’s who were attached to their pets also reported fewer mood
disorders. The effects of companion animals on the caregivers of persons with
Alzheimer’s were also studied, but few benefits were found.

Short-term interactions of Alzheimer’s patients with companion animals have
resulted in physiologic effects indicative of relaxation, such as blood pressure, heart rate,
and peripheral skin temperature (Baun, Bergstrom, Langston, and Thomas 1984;
cardiovascular and neural-endocrine systems may be mechanisms by which interaction
with companion animals produces calming effects. Batson and his colleagues studied
therapy dogs and their effect upon Alzheimer’s patients, and they found that the presence
of a therapy dog enhanced nonverbal communication, as shown by increased looks,
smiles, tactile contact, and physical warmth. Looks and smiles can be considered
indicators of pleasure and interest, while touch is suggested as an important element of
communication. There were no significant differences in overall verbalizations when the
dog was present, but more praise did occur when the dog was in the room. This finding could mean that Alzheimer’s patients experienced an increase in communication of positive feelings or intent (Batson, McCabe, Baun, and Wilson 1998).

Psychological Benefits of Pet Guardianship

The connection between humans and companion animals is also beneficial for humans’ mental health. For instance, animals play a vital role in promoting emotional well-being. Descriptions of pet ownership often highlight emotional and esteem support as elements of the relationship (Beck and Katcher 1996; Wilson and Turner 1998). It is likely, then, that these aspects of support from a pet may have greater meaning than similar elements of support from a human being. The fact that pets are not human may be advantageous because there is little risk that the relationship will be ruined by displays of weakness or emotion (Collis and McNicholas 1998). The opportunity to nurture a living being is also suggested as a form of support (Weiss 1974). In certain circumstances pets may provide instrumental support (e.g. service animals such as guide dogs). In addition, individuals’ social networks may be provided or enhanced by pets through their role as social catalysts facilitating person-to-person contacts (McNicholas, Collis, Morley, and Lane 1993; Messent 1983).

Many researchers propose hypotheses about how pets provide social support (McNicholas and Collis 1995). Pets are always there, predictable in their responses, and completely nonjudgmental (Collis and McNicholas 1998). Companion animals are soothing and may take our minds off of our troubles (Collis and McNicholas 1998). Pets are less likely to experience ‘provider burnout’ or become fed up with the process of
being emotionally available to their guardians. As a result, pets may be a consistent source of support when human support is scarce or lacking altogether. No social skills are required to elicit attention from pets, so there may be a reduced likelihood of mismatches between required and received support. Pets may also provide relief from the strains of human interactions, allowing a freedom from the pretenses that must be erected between giver and receiver of support in order to protect the relationship (Collis and McNicholas 1998).

Social workers and psychologists who bring companion animals into nursing homes as part of their work with the elderly report that nursing home residents who refuse to interact with any of the people around them spontaneously and immediately open up to companion animals (McCormick and McCormick 1997). Horses (among other animals), for example, seem to know what people really need. They ignore the outward form and respond, instead, to a person’s inner substance. When in the presence of the mentally ill, who often see the world as full of frightening people, a horse, sensing this vulnerability, instinctively “slows down and softens its movements so as not to cause alarm” (McCormick and McCormick 1997:56).

Kidd, Kelley, and Kidd (1984) found personality differences between owners of horses, birds, snakes, and turtles. Male horse owners were aggressive and dominant, while female owners were non-aggressive. Bird owners were outgoing and expressive, snake owners were relaxed and unconventional, and turtle owners were hard-working and reliable (Kidd, et al. 1984). Other studies indicate that personality differences exist among owners of dogs belonging to different breed groups. For example, researchers have found that toy breed owners were the most nurturing and least aggressive of all dog
owners. Herding breed owners were the most aggressive; non-sporting breed owners were the least nurturing; working breed owners were the most dominant; and hound owners were the friendliest (Katz, Sanders, Parente, and Figler 1994).

In addition to revealing personality traits, pets may possess the ability to ground and balance humans. Animals stay connected to the world around them. They do not block their awareness; they stay in touch with the energy at the core of themselves and others (Lasher 1996). Animal companions encourage humans to get back in touch with themselves. With animals, humans do not have to hide or hold back aspects of the self. If a human being is afraid, dogs can pick up on this fear, enabling the human being to experience the fear more clearly (Lasher 1996). In addition, animals expand human beings’ ability to experience life, enhancing feelings such as certainty and happiness. When people arrive home from work, and their dog leaps and trembles with joy, these people, too, experience joy in a relatively pure form. This daily ritual can open up pet custodians to experiences of joy at other times (Lasher 1998).

Animals can create for humans a sense of trust in other creatures. When an animal trusts in humans, people are able to re-connect to a sense of their own trust. Because animal companions are relatively free of the cultural labels assigned in human relationships, human beings’ connections with them have the potential to free people from the limitations of this kind of thinking. On occasion roles are reversed and our animals exhibit the greater amount of knowledge. For example, Lasher (1998) insists that “although I may be dominant in the house, when I go with my dog into the woods he becomes dominant” (132).
Recently, a growing interest in human beings' relationships to other species has developed. It is not only the crossing of boundaries but also the way they are subject to continual redefinition and conflict that is of interest. Once it was common to assume that a conceptual boundary between humans and animals, like that between culture and nature, was universal. Even in societies that do share human-animal oppositions, these boundaries often do not seem to involve a hierarchy of value; boundaries between humans and animals are fluid, with animals thought of as persons (or capable of personhood) and humans thought capable of being reincarnated as animals and vice versa (Willis 1990).

Relationships between humans and pets provide a variety of benefits. A show dog or cat may also be a cherished family pet. Within a family which shares one pet, each human family member may receive different types and degrees of benefits from the presence of the animal and incur different costs of ownership (Bonas, McNicholas, and Collis 2000).

Given the propensity of humankind to be anthropomorphic with other species, it is not unusual that pets are treated as if they are human. Whether or not an animal actually has the mental states attributed to it, anthropomorphism is often a helpful strategy for explaining patterns of events and increasing the ability to predict future events. Collis and McNicholas (1998) maintain that it is unlikely that humans have evolved a set of psychological processes specifically to serve relationships with companion animals; therefore, if owners perceive pet species as if they are human and respond accordingly, then they are likely to draw on psychological processes that they use in human-human relationships. Bonas, McNicholas, and Collis (2000) observe that if
we had evolved the processes to deal with human-pet relationships we would have
established the vocabulary to talk about these relationships. As it stands now, we do not
have the terms to describe the complexity of the relationships we share with our pets.

The lack of a shared language between humans and companion animals presents a
challenge to the relationships we form. Investigation of the human-pet relationship as a
dynamic interaction between two parties is restricted by the inability of other species to
give an account of their experience of the relationship. Even when the assumption is
made that other species do have mental experiences of some kind, the subjective nature
of the mental experience may mean that we can never fully grasp how pet species
experience their relationships with humans (Bonas, McNicholas, and Collis 2000).

Investigations into relationships from the pet’s perspective should not be
dismissed, however. Rather, inquiry of this sort should be based upon observations of
behavior interpreted with reference to the psychology of a particular species. After all,
various pet species bring to the human-pet relationship differing elements according to
the cognitive (mental) capacities and behavioral repertoire of a particular species.
Moreover, human responses to different pet species are varied (Bonas, McNicholas, and
Collis 2000).

The Case Against Pets

Relationships between humans and pets do not always produce positive results.
Damning evidence against pet-ownership can be seen in two studies published in 1966
and 1972. The authors of these studies claimed that “pet-owners did not like people as
much as non-owners, that they did not feel liked by others, that they liked their pets more
than they liked people, and that urban pet-owners tended to have weak egos” (Cameron, Conrad, Kirkpatrick, & Bateen 1966; Cameron & Mattson 1972:286). There are, however, some problems with these studies. For instance, the instruments employed for assessing relative liking for people and pets was distinctly crude, and the statistical methods used were highly questionable (Serpell 1986). Despite these flaws in design, the authors assert that pet-owners are not as psychologically healthy as non-owners and that psychologically, pets seem to create barriers to effective social relationships and to the pet-owners’ mental health (Cameron, et al. 1966; Cameron & Mattson 1972). These studies indicate that, for some, owning a pet may be a substitute for seeking human companionship. Pets are seen not as feeling beings but as tools to help humans avoid difficult situations. Rather than face rejection, some pet owners may play it safe by spending time only with their animals. This type of behavior may be anti-social and indicative of adjustment problems (Cameron, et al. 1966). Investigation into whether these studies have been replicated and confirmed or disconfirmed would shed further light on this topic.

In addition to being considered substitutes for human companions, pets are also seen by certain pet guardians as frivolous and silly. Time, energy, and money spent on the physical and emotional comfort of pets can be seen as wasteful and foolish by pet guardians and non-pet owners alike. For example, the pet boutiques of Los Angeles can, for a price, supply over-indulgent owners with specially made water beds, gold plated choke-chains, and personalized leather-covered dining suites. There are also leather backpacks, taffeta bow-ties, and real or imitation mink stoles, all created especially for dogs. Pet boutiques also offer dog raincoats, frilly dresses, pet underwear, and canine
cosmetics such as nail polish, available in a wide range of colors. Some boutiques will even make all the arrangements for a pet's birthday party including invitations, special catering, and meat-loaf 'birthday cakes' in the shape of a fire hydrant (Plumb 1995).

Upwardly mobile pet-owners can enroll their companion animals in daytime 'playgroups', and when they go on vacation, they can make use of establishments such as the Pet Set Inn, known as 'One of America's Finer Hotels for Dogs'. At the Pet Set Inn, 'guests' can enjoy the luxury of carpeted, temperature-controlled apartments, each with piped-in 'new age' music and a private sun porch. In addition to pet hotels, there are summer camps catering to companion animals. Campo-Lindo for Dogs in upstate New York offers spacious accommodations and a program of recreation for pets. Each dog receives his or her own private cabin with 400 square feet of romping space, choice of meal plan, and activities ranging from fetch and catch to swimming (Plumb 1995). Cedar chip, mint-scented, and mashed corn-husk cat litters are some of the recent luxuries created for cats.

The desire to save and care for pets, to indulge and honor them, if taken to the extreme, can lead to unhealthy behavior for both pets and pet guardians. When help is extended to more animals than can reasonably be cared for, hoarding, or animal collecting, begins to take root. Hoarding is defined as the accumulation of possessions that are useless and that interfere with the ability to function. In the case of animal hoarders, people often live with dozens to hundreds of animals, both alive and dead, in apartments, trailers, and single-family homes (Patronek 1999; Worth & Beck 1981).

Arluke and colleagues using case reports from 28 states and one Canadian province, found that nearly three-quarters of the 71 hoarders they studied were single,
widowed, or divorced (Arluke, Frost, Luke, Messner, Nathanson, Patronek, Papazian, and Steketee 2000). Also, in more than half of the cases, other individuals were living in the home, including children, elderly people, bedridden people, and disabled people. Of those for whom employment status was provided, most were described as unemployed, retired, or disabled (Arluke, et al. 2002). Though the hoarding of animals is often seen among socially isolated individuals, animal hoarding has also been found among physicians, veterinarians, bankers, nurses, teachers, and college professors (Frost, Steketee, and Williams 2000). Hoarders holding jobs lived what appeared to be normal lives, with coworkers never suspecting the reality of their living conditions until animal rescue authorities were called to investigate (Frost, Krause, and Steketee 1996).

Hoarding of animals and/or possessions occurs in 20 to 30% of people with obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and also has been observed in people with anorexia nervosa, psychotic disorders, depression, and organic mental disorders (Greenberg 1990). Some research suggests that people who hoard animals may suffer from more severe impairment than people who hoard only possessions (Patronek 1999).

Hoarders’ reasons for collecting and living with animals are many. Love for animals is, of course, a common theme, as is the role of animals as children or surrogate family members. Collectors accumulate animals through a variety of means. Accidental animal breeding is “the single most common reason, ranked first or second in 56% of cases. In addition, active solicitation from the public was ranked first or second in 46% of cases” (Arluke, et al. 2002:4).
Gender and Pets

Men and women differ in their communication and the meanings that they associate with their relationships between humans so we might expect to see some of the same kinds of differences in their relationships with pets. Women are usually responsible for the care of pets within the home yet men can and do form meaningful bonds with their companion animals, as evidenced by Beck and Katcher (1996) in their study on gender and affectionate touching of pets. The researchers discovered that “men used some forms of touch more frequently than women and vice versa, but the differences were small and insignificant, according to statistical tests” (89). Beck and Katcher’s study highlights the similarities that exist between women and men and how they treat their pets.

Other studies, however, show that there are marked differences between women and men and their views on pets. For example, much of the literature having to do with gender and pets centers upon the growing recognition that domestic violence, child abuse, and animal abuse often occur in the same households. For example, in a study by Ascione (1998), almost two thirds of women seeking shelter in safehouses said that their abuser had threatened to harm or had killed a pet. A study by the Canadian Ontario Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals conducted in 1998 found that 43% of women leaving abuse situations had pets threatened and over half had pets abused or killed by their partners (2001). Women also reported that their pets served as important sources of emotional support during their abusive relationships. In fact, one-fifth of the women in a study conducted by Flynn (2000) delayed “seeking shelter out of concern for
their pet's welfare, and five out of eight women waited over two months before coming to a [battered women’s] shelter” (92).

Women and pets often suffer at the hands of male abusers so it is not surprising to find that women are dominant in the animal rights movement. Women’s participation rate in animal rights organizations is estimated at between 68 and 80 percent by various surveys of activists (Peek, Bell, and Dunham 1996). One reason for this may be that women identify more with companion animals than men do, which theorists argue is related to women’s structural location within the household order (Peek, et. al. 1996). Identifying with animal companions may increase women’s concern for animals and create a link between gender and animal rights.

Further, a strong connection exists between having pets and animals rights activism. The vast majority (about 90 percent) of participants in the animal rights movement have one or more pets (Richards and Kranich 1991). Another reason that there are more women than men in the animal rights movement may be that women feel empathy with beings perceived as undergoing similar oppression. The experience of patriarchal oppression, however, may not be the only factor determining awareness of and concern for others. Both men and women in lower socioeconomic and age structures are more likely to affirm animal rights (Peek, et. al. 1996).

Women and men also express differing views about the relationships they share with their pets. In a study by Gage and Holcomb (1991) on couples’ perceptions of pet loss, 40% of wives felt that the loss of a pet was extremely disturbing compared to 20-eight percent 28% of husbands. For both husbands and wives, the death of a pet was less stressful than the death of an immediate family member or close friend, but more
stressful than the death of a more distant relative. Margolies (1999) found that while women grieve pet loss more intensely than men, women do not bond more strongly to companion animals than men throughout a pet’s life span. Boys and girls are equally likely to own pets, and parents claim that sons and daughters spend the same amount of time playing with family pets (Melson and Fogel 1989).

Serious issues such as the death of a pet are not the only areas where men and women diverge. The mundane tasks of daily pet care are also handled differently. For example, the findings of a study by Wells (2006) indicate that dog waste management was significantly related to the owner’s gender, with more women picking up their pets’ waste than men. This finding adds support to earlier research, which revealed a tendency for men to have less concern for the environment than women (Mohai 1992; Yilmaz, Boone, and Anderson 2004).

Millions of people in the Western World are pet guardians, with women taking on the responsibility for pet care more often than men. Getting at the unique characteristics and complexities of the relationship between women and their companion animals is at the heart of this study. Many women know that they love their companion animals and would not want to live without them, but they may not always realize the ways in which their pets influence how they view themselves and make choices in their lives.

Theories of the Self in Relation to People and Pets

The self from Mead’s perspective is formed through interaction with the social world. Human beings decide what they will do in response to the attitudes of others, but their conduct is not mechanically determined by such attitudinal structures. Instead, there
are two poles or phases of the self: that phase which reflects the attitude of the "generalized other" (society, parents, friends, and people we know) and that phase which responds to the attitude of the "generalized other." The organized community or social group which gives to the individual his sense of self is known as the "generalized other." The attitude of the generalized other is the attitude of the community as a whole. For example, "in the case of such a social group as a ball team, the team is the generalized other in so far as it enters into the experience of any one of the individual members of it" (Mead 1934:154).

Cooley believed in the empirical self, a self that can be understood or verified through observation. He is best known for his concept of the looking-glass self. This idea is based on three principle elements: "(a) the imagination of our appearance to the other person, (b) the imagination of his/her judgment of that appearance, and (c) some sort of self-feeling such as pride or mortification" (Cooley 1902:55). Cooley suggests that what moves us to pride or shame is not the mere reflection of ourselves, but the imagined effect of this reflection upon others' minds (1902).

Goffman looked at the self by placing the analysis of human behavior in a theatrical setting. Taking the dramatic situation of actors and actresses on stage, he applied theatrical representations to women’s and men’s everyday lives as they act out their roles in the real world (Goffman 1959). Of significance is the notion of "impression management" or the ways in which an individual guides and controls the impressions others form of him or her. In order to achieve a particular impression, individuals must be aware primarily of their front stage performance, which gives the appearance that their activity maintains and embodies certain standards. Front stage items include those that
set the scene, such as furniture, props, and “expressive equipment” like clothing, sex, age, racial characteristics, size, posture, speech patterns, facial expressions, and body gestures. There is also a backstage region where we contemplate past and future performances. It is in the backstage area that individuals or teams can practice their performances and check for offending expressions when no audience is present. Poor members of a team, who are not up to par, can be schooled or dropped from the performance. Backstage, performers can relax, drop their pretense, forgo their lines, and step out of character (Goffman 1959).

Blumer sees societies as composed of individuals, each of whom has a self. He believed that the social forces which play upon humans are only part of the reason for human behavior (1969). The rest of the explanation is based upon the notion that humans interpret and assess situations based on a specific set of criteria. Blumer maintained that both the self and human behavior can be better understood when the central principals of symbolic interaction are taken into consideration: “(1) people, individually and collectively, are prepared to act on the basis of the meanings of objects that comprise their world; (2) the meaning of things arises out of the social interaction one has with one’s fellows; and (3) social acts, whether individual or collective, are constructed through a process in which the actors note, interpret, and assess the situations confronting them” (Blumer 1969:50).

Cooley revolutionized our understanding of the self when he formulated the concept of the “looking-glass self,” in which people see themselves through the eyes of others. Mead’s notion of the “generalized other” added to our understanding of the self. Goffman made us aware that we engage in performances of the self on a daily basis. In
the front region we attempt to sway the opinion of the audience in our favor, and in the back region we relax and practice our performances. Finally, Blumer contributed to our knowledge of the self by concretizing the principles of symbolic interactionism and making the discipline of sociology aware that societies are made up of individuals that all have selves.

The present analysis is not the first to apply symbolic interaction theories to animals. For example, Alger and Alger (2003) used the symbolic interactionist perspective to interpret data they gathered at the Whiskers cat shelter. Further, Irvine (2004) took Mead to task, and set out to show that selfhood in animals does exist by creating a model of the self that does not depend on language. I agree with Irvine and believe that some of Mead’s work should be re-examined, taking into consideration new findings in the areas of animal feeling, perception, and intelligence. Continuing this tradition, symbolic interaction concepts were used to understand how women incorporate pets into their sense of self-perception.

It is clear that much literature attempting to understand the self has been written. In contrast, very little research and writing has been devoted to the relationship between self, pets, and women. While it seems logical to conclude that the time pet guardians spend with their pets must, in some way, shape their sense of self, few existing studies prove that this is so. Studying the ways in which nonmarried women’s self-concept is shaped by their companion animals will add to the literature that is currently available on this subject.
Pet Guardianship and Its Effect on Self-Definition

Though relationships with companion animals can be fulfilling, pet custodians do not all relate to their pets in the same way. According to Fox (1981) there are four categories that describe owner-pet relationships. The first of these categories is the “object-oriented” relationship. Pet custodianship may be considered object-oriented when a family keeps companion animals simply because they believe in the old saying that ‘a house is not a home without a pet.’ Humans may also keep pets purely for decorative purposes, caring only about the animals’ monetary worth or uniqueness.

A second category of relationship between pets and humans is “exploitative/utilitarian.” In this relationship animals are used, trained, manipulated, or exploited to varying degrees for the sole benefit of humans. This category includes animals used in medical research, the military, and factory farming. Possession of an animal purely for a utilitarian function—such as guard dogs, bird dogs, guides for the blind, and dogs for show and breeding purposes— involves this kind of relationship to differing degrees. Further, a pet that is kept as a “learning experience” is exploited if the learning in not combined with empathy for the animal.

The “need-dependency” relationship is a third way humans relate to animals. This type of bond is often a major reason why people have pets, especially cats and dogs. In a need-dependency relationship, a pet satisfies children or adults’ needs by serving as a companion, a confidant, a link with nature, or a break from more superficial, impersonal, and often dehumanizing, human interactions. The deeper the emotional needs of the person, the more important the pet becomes in this type of relationship. Companion animals are gaining recognition and respect as therapeutic assistants, creating an
emotional bridge between emotionally withdrawn patients and their therapists. In
“normal” settings, too, pets facilitate and enhance interactions between family members
(Fox 1981).

Fox’s final category is known as the “actualizing” relationship. In this type of
exchange, a pet custodian relates to his or her pet as a respected significant other. The
pet custodian appreciates the pet for itself, as opposed to loving it for reasons of status,
utility, or emotional substance. For this relationship to succeed, a person’s perception
and understanding of his or her pet must shift from one of dependency to one that is less
egocentric and more all-encompassing. For many people it is easier to forge such a
relationship with an animal than with a person, since human insecurities and ego defenses
can create barriers to deep and meaningful interaction (Fox 1981). That companion
animals are given medical attention when needed and are often provided with expensive
food, toys, and even clothing or spa treatments seems to suggest that they are valuable
and play a significant role in pet custodians’ lives. Some people may lavish their pets
with gifts and attention because they consider them status symbols or are emotionally
attached to them in unhealthy ways. However, many people give care, attention, and
gifts to their pets because they consider them to be family, to be meaningful members of
the household.

Much has been written about the physical and psychological benefits, as well as
the pitfalls, associated with pet custodianship. Fox (1981) even goes so far as to explore
the various types or categories of relationships that may be forged between humans and
companion animals. Understanding what has been said about the psychological and
physical benefits, as well as the negative implications of pet guardianship, is important,
as it illustrates that human lives are on many levels and in many different ways intertwined with those of their companion animals. Once a clear connection between pet custodians and their pets has been established, it seems reasonable to suggest that pets can have an impact upon our sense of self. It is not much of a stretch, then, to envision pets in roles such as confidant, partner, front stage performer, healer (of mind and body), and emotional supporter; that, in many ways, companion animals are capable of giving to their pet custodians what other human beings have traditionally provided.

A few notable exceptions notwithstanding, little existing literature on pets delves into the relationship between companion animals and human identity or selfhood. Arluke and Sanders (1996), examine the meanings humans create regarding the animals with which they interact in a variety of settings. And, in a similar vein, Sanders (1999) discusses the idea that animals, dogs in particular, can be minded, social actors that are capable, at least at some level, of interacting symbolically with humans, of taking the role of the other. Caroline Knapp (1998) examines the varied and rich terrain of human-animal relationships by tracing canine roles from working partners to close companions. In telling her story she includes interview material from animal behaviorists, psychologists and other dog guardians. Leslie Irvine (2004) examines our bonds with dogs and cats by tracing the concepts of “animal,” “pet,” and “companion animal,” focusing on the social and cultural factors that make each term popular at certain times. In addition, Irvine sketches out a model of the self that does not depend on language and which animals can therefore share.

The work of these authors covers much new ground, yet gaps in the literature continue to exist, such as how women use space and the placement of objects to help
define their relationships with their companion animals. The ways in which theorists such as Mead, Cooley, and Goffman contribute to, as well as take away from, our understanding of women’s emotions and pets must also be explored. I intend to fill in some of these gaps by examining the sociological and emotional processes associated with including non-human animals in our lives and by combining and expanding on the literature on pets, the work of symbolic interactionists, and Nippert-Eng’s writings on physical space and setting. Of particular interest to me are answers to the following questions: What is the nature of the social interplay between women and their companion animals? And, how do nonmarried women integrate their companion animals into their self-perceptions?

These questions are especially important as few sociological studies have examined the social nature of the bond between women and their companion animals. Even fewer studies have explored women’s relationships with their pets, and the affects those relationships have on women’s selfhood and identity. Therefore, studying the connections between self-concept, social interplay, and the behavior and presence of companion animals is the next logical step.
CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

The purpose of my research is to explore the sociological and emotional processes associated with incorporating non-human animals into women's lives. Specifically, my research questions are: What is the nature of the social interplay between nonmarried women and their companion animals? And, how do nonmarried women integrate their companion animals into their self-perceptions? This study is a qualitative, inductive, and exploratory research project using a grounded theory approach to create the research design and analyze the data. Theoretically, my research questions and methodological approach are informed by the symbolic interactionist tradition and more contemporary work on the self and objects and the notion of boundaries between the two (Nippert-Eng 1996).

Research Design

I used two types of research methods to address the questions of how best to understand the nature of the social interplay between women and their companion animals and how companion animals become the objects of nonmarried women's perceptions of self-concept. First, I conducted in-depth interviews, and second, I acted as a participant observer during interviews. I chose to use a semi-structured, in-depth interview approach because it "provides a greater breath of information than other types,
given its qualitative nature” (Fontana and Frey 1994:365). I also used in-depth interviewing because methodologists have argued that interviewing of this type goes hand-in-hand with participant observation (Lofland 1971).

Interviews usually took place in the houses or apartments of interviewees; one exception was an interview conducted at the Nevada Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals shelter. I audio-taped all interviews and took field notes before and after interviews. I asked interviewees a series of open-ended questions about themselves and their pets and encouraged them to share any other information that they felt was important. Interviews took at least one hour to conduct and included only individuals with dogs and cats.

Using the existing data on human and animal interaction I generated a number of questions for my open-ended, semi-structured interviews. For example, I asked about the level of affection pet guardians felt for their animals and their perceptions about affection felt by the pets themselves. I also asked about the ways in which pets provided social support in times of need or distress, and how much time, money, and energy pet guardians believed they had invested in their companion animals. Finally, I asked participants about the meaning of pet guardianship: How would your life be different if you were not the guardian of a pet? What are the things you like best about your pet? What are the most disappointing aspects of being a pet guardian? Do you often talk about your pet with family and friends? In what ways does your pet help relieve stress? In what ways does your companion animal increase your stress level?

The responses to questions like these brought me closer to understanding the complex relationships nonmarried women had with and their companion animals.
Whenever possible interviews were conducted in the homes of participants in order to see firsthand the interactions between person and pet. The interview schedule is located in Appendix I, and the questionnaire is in Appendix II.

The second research technique that I used for this study involved participant observation while I was visiting the homes of the interviewees. The participant observation took place before and after the formal interviews. I asked interviewees if I could come by and “hang out” with them for about 20 minutes before the formal interview started and stay for 20 minutes or so after the interview had ended in order to see where their pets slept, ate, and played. When this was inconvenient for interviewees, I asked if I could visit them informally a few days before the interview was scheduled. While being shown around their homes, I noted what I saw: the living conditions, the presence of food, water, and toys for the animal. I also asked them questions about the choices they made regarding their companion animals, such as why they fed their pets certain foods or allowed them to stay indoors or insisted that they remain outdoors.

Further, I observed the ways in which pet guardians and their pets interacted. For this I watched for the use of nicknames and terms of endearment, as well as physical contact between human and companion animal (affectionate or punitive). In addition, I paid attention to the appearance of the pet. For instance, I looked for evidence of rabies vaccination and identification tags. I also paid close attention to the condition of the animal’s coat and the concern shown by the guardian for the health of the animal.

Investigating the homes of pet guardians and the interactions that take place between humans and companion animals constitutes naturalistic inquiry. An investigation of this type reflects the empirical world in its natural state instead of a
simulation or abstraction of that world. Naturalistic inquiry is important, according to Blumer, because it respects and stays close to what actually takes place (Blumer 1969).

Naturalistic inquiry is also favored by Blumer because it embraces the "dual procedures of exploration and inspection . . . clearly necessary in the scientific study of human group life" (1969:47). Blumer did not address the use of naturalistic inquiry when studying non-humans, but this process also appears to be suited to research regarding interactions between humans and animals.

The Sample

Pet guardians were located by placing ads on bulletin boards at local pet supply stores, contacting pet boutique owners about possible participants, posting ads on pet-friendly websites, from animal welfare organizations, and by speaking with local veterinarians about the potential participation of their clients. In my ads I explained to potential participants that I was doing research on the ways in which companion animals influenced pet guardians' sense of self or self-perception. I also made it clear that if they agreed to be interviewed they would have the opportunity to talk about the importance of the relationship they shared with their companion animals.

In addition to the aforementioned methods, I located participants through snowball sampling. Snowball sampling occurs when a researcher collects data from an identifiable population and increases the sample size through information provided by the people in the original sample (Neuman 1994). Snowball sampling is particularly useful for gathering information from groups which may be unfamiliar. For example, though I did not know the names of the individuals that frequented my veterinarian's office, she
was able to recommend certain clients. Those clients, in turn, recommended others who
were interested in talking with me or who provided needed information for my research.

The sample size for my semi-structured, open-ended interviews was 20 women.
I drew interviewees from the metropolitan Las Vegas area. Participants were nonmarried
women with no children or whose children had grown and had moved out of the
woman’s house. Beyond this, I chose to limit my sample to women because, having been
a volunteer with the Nevada Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals for over
three years, I have observed that most members of animal welfare organizations are
women, and it was from these organizations that I drew many of my participants.
Finally, since my research was a qualitative study based on a small sample, it made sense
to focus on a small, and very specific, demographic group.
Table 1. Description of Women Pet Guardians in the Sample Including Age, Number of Pets, and Interview Setting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>No. of Pets</th>
<th>Interview Setting</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apple Blossom</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>apartment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Begonia</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calla Lily</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dahlia</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>apartment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daisy</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>apartment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gladiola</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>apartment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jade Plant</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>apartment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalanchoe</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kentia Palm</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King’s Crown</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>apartment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nasturtium</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peony</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>apartment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saffron</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>apartment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sage</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>apartment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seaweed</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>apartment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shinleaf</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>house</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spearmint</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>apartment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunflower</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>NSPCA(^2) shelter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tansy</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>apartment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violet</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>house</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 provides descriptive information about the sample of women who participated in this study. Of the 20 women in my sample, 12 were interviewed in their apartments, seven in their houses, and one was interviewed at the Nevada Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals’ (NSPCA) shelter.

\(^2\) I used plant names for participants in my study because I am researching interspecies relationships, and I wanted the pseudonyms I used to stay in keeping with the theme of nature and the connections we have to plants and animals.

\(^3\) Nevada Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Pets’ Names</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Apple Blossom</td>
<td>SPCA Volunteer</td>
<td>Cats: Nike, Reebok</td>
<td>Divorced; more than one year of college, but no degree; on disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Begonia</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Dogs: Lacey, Hannah</td>
<td>Divorced; college graduate with a master’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calla Lily</td>
<td>Occupational</td>
<td>Dogs: Oliver, Pepper</td>
<td>Never been married; college graduate with a bachelor’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Therapist</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dahlia</td>
<td>Psychologist</td>
<td>Cat: Amy</td>
<td>Divorced; college graduate with a master’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daisy</td>
<td>Receptionist</td>
<td>Cats: Lestat, James Bond Dog: Rose</td>
<td>Never been married; less than one year of college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gladiola</td>
<td>Coffee Shop Manager</td>
<td>Dogs: Buddy, Jaden</td>
<td>Never been married; high school graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jade Plant</td>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>Cats: Little Britches, Angel</td>
<td>Never been married; college graduate with a master’s degree and a professional law degree; on disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kalanchoe</td>
<td>Mental Health Nurse</td>
<td>Cat: Patch Dog: Daisy</td>
<td>Divorced; college graduate with a professional nursing degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kentia Palm</td>
<td>Social Worker</td>
<td>Cats: Schizyx, Indy, Sable, Molly, Isis, Ares, Shadow, Hera, Nora, Bastet, Whiley, Tiny, Sweetie Pie, Squeekers</td>
<td>Never been married; college graduate with a master’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King’s Crown</td>
<td>Recovery Specialist</td>
<td>Dog: Charlie</td>
<td>Never been married; college graduate with a bachelor’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nasturtium</td>
<td>Self-Employed</td>
<td>Cats: Punk, Casey, Dot Dogs: Alex Marie, Holly Louise Goats: Steve, Angel</td>
<td>Divorced; less than one year of college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peony</td>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>Cat: Sammy</td>
<td>Widowed; high school graduate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saffron</td>
<td>Salesperson</td>
<td>Cats: Loverboy, Gremy</td>
<td>Never been married; more than one year of college, but no degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sage</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Cats: Xena, Hercules, Louis</td>
<td>Never been married; college graduate with a bachelor’s degree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Participants’ Occupations, Pets’ Names, and Personal Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Pets’ Names</th>
<th>Notes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seaweed</td>
<td>Research Assistant</td>
<td>Cat: Baxter</td>
<td>Never been married; college graduate with a master’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dog: Charlie</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shinleaf</td>
<td>Graphic Artist</td>
<td>Cat: Jennifer</td>
<td>Divorced; college graduate with a bachelor’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Birds: Rio, Blue Bell, Annie</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spearmint</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Cats: Reeses, Persia</td>
<td>Never been married; more than one year of college, but no degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunflower</td>
<td>SPCA Volunteer</td>
<td>Cats: Cosmic Goofbean, Hari Krishna, Willow, Seti, Kiri, Tyco, Maozer</td>
<td>Divorced; college graduate with a bachelor’s degree; on disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tansy</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Dog: Riley</td>
<td>Never been married; college graduate with a bachelor’s degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violet</td>
<td>Accounting Manager</td>
<td>Cats: Sister, Jack Biddle, Lulubelle, Pamela, Valerie Dogs: Bella, Gwendolyn, George Washington</td>
<td>Divorced; more than one year of college, but no degree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 provides information about the occupations of the women in my sample, the names of the pets with which they live, and their marital status and educational level.

Participants in this study were required to sign informed consent paperwork before interviews took place. Participation in the study was strictly voluntary.

Participants were also made aware of their right not to participate in this study, as well as to withdraw from this study at any time. All information gathered in this study was kept completely confidential. No references were made in written or oral materials that could link participants to the study. All records will be stored in a locked facility at UNLV for at least three years after completion of the study. After the storage time the information will be destroyed. I have included a full IRB proposal in Appendix III with information on the sample population for ethnographic observation.
Data Analysis and Interpretation

After collecting data functioning as an observer-as-participant and performing in-depth interviews, I began to sort through what I had found using the data analysis spiral (Creswell 1998). Data management is the first loop of the spiral. At the early stages of the analysis process researchers organize their data on index cards or computer files. Following the organization of data, researchers continue analysis by becoming familiar with the database as a whole (Creswell 1998).

Once the reading and memoing loop of the spiral has been completed, researchers move into the describing, classifying, and interpreting loop. In this loop, researchers develop themes and interpret the data in light of their own views or by using perspectives in the literature. In the final phase of the spiral, researchers present the data in text, tabular, or figure form (Creswell 1998).

I used the data analysis spiral in conjunction with grounded theory. Grounded theory uses set procedures for analysis such as open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Open coding is used to develop categories of information. This is followed by axial coding, which makes interconnections between categories clear. Finally, selective coding helps the researcher build a story that connects the categories.

In the open coding stage, the researcher examines the text (e.g. transcripts, field notes, documents, etc.) for important categories of information (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Next, I used a constant comparative approach in which the researcher tries to saturate the categories looking for instances that represent the category and continuing to
look and interview until the information obtained does not provide further insight into the category (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

When the initial set of categories has been developed, the researcher identifies a central phenomenon of interest and begins exploring the interrelationships between categories called axial coding. Coding of this kind involves identifying conditions that influence the central phenomenon, as well as strategies for addressing the phenomenon and the consequences of undertaking the strategies (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Once this point has been reached, the research creates a coding paradigm or theoretical model that visually portrays the interrelationships of these axial coding categories of information, and a theory is generated (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Following this process, new interview questions are constructed. They are thematically coded after transcribing and used to compare and expand upon the model which has been developed using participant-observation.

I began analyzing the data I had collected from my research participants by looking closely at my transcripts and field notes. From there I began to classify data according to the patterns that emerged. After examining the data thoroughly for patterns and themes, I then used theories and concepts by Nippert-Eng, Mead, Goffman, Cooley, and Blumer to organize and make sense of the patterns I found. Initially, I intended to conduct follow-up interviews to see if the patterns I had identified were accurate, but unforeseen circumstances made these interviews impossible. As a result, I have been forced to rely on the data collected in the first round of interviews as my sole source of information.
Managing and interpreting data presents a number of challenges for researchers. Reliability and validity are chief among the issues I will face. Reliability is the extent to which a measurement produces consistent results when measuring the same characteristic or situation repeatedly (Fowler and Mangione 2004). To improve the reliability of my study, I asked research participants questions about topics such as pet guardianship and the closeness or distance they felt when they were with their pets. Topics such as these get at information that respondents were likely to know. Further, I structured my questions in such a way as to get at the same information from a variety of directions, thereby increasing my chances of getting reliable answers. That is, I asked similar questions in an attempt to see if their answers were consistent.

Validity is also critical to accurate research. The term validity refers to how closely a measure actually corresponds to what the researcher is trying to measure (Fowler and Mangione 2004). Internal validity refers to the degree to which findings correctly explain the phenomenon in question; external validity is the degree to which findings can be generalized to other settings (Denzin and Lincoln 2005).

The issue of validity is particularly important for the idea of self-concept as I use it in this study. I have operationalized the dimension of self-concept as perceptions of oneself formed through the experience and interaction with one’s companion animal, particularly in the private sphere (Shavelson and Marsh 1986; Brinthaupt and Lipka 1992). Using this definition of self-concept, I asked a variety of questions aimed at understanding the relationship between pets and people. I was concerned with the emotional, financial, and physical interplay between humans and companion animals, and I structured my questions to get at these aspects of pet guardianship. I also tried to be as
thorough and as accurate as possible in recording the responses of participants in order not to taint the data. In other words, I made every effort to note completely what participants said so that the data I collected was a genuine reflection of what they believed.

Lack of generalizability is a weakness that can result from studies that rely on qualitative research and small, nonrandomized samples (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). I am aware of this limitation and have stated it plainly in my research. In this study, I do not attempt to make sweeping claims, but rather, I want to tell the story of how the pet guardians I have observed and interviewed feel about their relationships with their companion animals. Given that the relationship between nonmarried women and their companion animals rarely has been examined sociologically, I believe that my research contributes to this field of scholarship.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations to my study. For example, snowball sampling is not random and cannot be generalized to larger populations with accuracy. When conducting snowball sampling, I was also at the mercy of my participants and had to take their word for it when they recommended that a certain individual should be interviewed. Despite these drawbacks, snowball sampling was an effective way to increase the number of participants in my study. It also put me in touch with individuals that I might not otherwise have been able to contact or include in my research.

Engaging in qualitative research based on in-depth interviews and acting as a participant observer makes replication of my study difficult. Generalizability to larger
populations is also suspect, as my sample is relatively small and is not random. Despite
these disadvantages, I believe that in-depth interviewing and participant-observation were
the best methods to obtain data for my study. In-depth interviews yield detailed and rich
information which cannot be achieved through mail-out surveys or computer assisted
telephone interviewing. In addition, face-to-face contact allowed me to develop a rapport
with participants and to note nonverbal communication and interaction.

Due to constraints on time and resources, this study only includes interviews and
observations from 20 women. A larger sample would have provided me with greater
diversity and richer data. In addition, it should be recognized that a more diverse sample
would have provided important comparisons within and between social groups.

This research is beneficial for both humans and nonhuman animals because it may
lead to a better understanding of the animals with which we live and work. New ways of
dealing with animals in shelters, animals that perform, and animals that work for a
living—such as bomb and drug-sniffing dogs—could result from a more intimate
knowledge of animals’ emotions and motivations. Furthermore, a more complete
exploration of human and non-human relationships, bonding, emotion, and interaction
bolsters the arguments of animal rights organizations and may possibly bring about more
stringent laws regarding animal experimentation, animal abuse, and animal cruelty.
CHAPTER 4

WOMEN AND COMPANION ANIMALS: BOUNDARIES, IDENTITY, AND RITUAL

This chapter addresses research question one: What is the nature of the social interplay between nonmarried women and their companion animals? In an effort to explain the nature of the social interplay between women and their companion animals, I chose to use Nippert-Eng's book *Home and Work: Negotiating Boundaries through Everyday Life* (1996). Based on a thorough analysis of my interviews, I concluded that Nippert-Eng’s concepts of boundary work, identity kits, and use of ritual are all integral to understanding how the women in my study structured their relationships with their pets.

In *Home and Work*, Nippert-Eng examines the relationship between the self and physical space. The boundaries we create for ourselves influence the ways we think about ourselves, and these boundaries can change from setting to setting. Boundaries are socially constructed and arbitrary in nature. In order to tame the natural disorder of things, we impose boundaries on everything, including our daily activities and the places and people with whom we interact. These boundaries may be purely mental, but most often, boundaries reflect and result in physical forms that reinforce and make visible their more important mental foundations (Nippert-Eng 1996). Photographs, calendars, and keys, for example, all share something in common: they are dimensions through which
each of us draws the line between home and work. Often practical yet highly symbolic, “publicly visible yet intimately revealing, these are the kinds of things with which each of us places a mental, physical, and behavioral boundary between these two realms” (Nippert-Eng 1996:1).

Boundaries, whether mental or physical, relate to either the home or work environment and shape our sense of self by forcing us to think in different ways. Cultural groups constantly negotiate the grounds of distinction, seeking consensus on the places and ways in which boundaries reflect what we see and how we think. Nippert-Eng’s discussion of home and work boundaries and their relationship to the self can be seen as parallel to the work I have done and that Nippert-Eng’s paradigm can be extended to the relationship between humans and pets. While I did not focus on boundaries between home and work, I did look at how boundaries were set up within the home and how those boundaries spoke to the ways in which the women in my study interacted with their companion animals.

Boundary Work

The first form of social interplay that I discovered among the women in my study and their companion animals involved the use of physical space and boundaries. Nippert-Eng believes that the physical layout of homes, the ways human beings feel about them and their neighborhoods, and the distance they are from their workplace all have distinct impacts on the home-work boundary. A home’s layout is important because “space constrains the amount and types of things we can keep, use, and display there; the house itself limits our discretion to do boundary work” (1996:221-222).
Boundary work is central to Nippert-Eng's understanding of the self. According to her, "boundary work" generally consists of the "strategies we use to create, maintain, and modify cultural categories" (1996:7). For Nippert-Eng, boundary work is above all a mental activity, but it must be enacted and enhanced through a largely visible collection of essential, practical activities (1996). It is this physical side of boundary work (e.g. wearing clothing that is different at home than at work or placing a family photo on one's work desk) that reinforces and even challenges distinctions between 'home' and 'work' (1996). The notion of a territory of the self suggests that "a self does not end with a mentality. Instead we portray and reinforce that self, that way of thinking, through our bodies and our physical, tangible surroundings. As a particular sense of self extends outward, manifesting in visible artifacts and behavior, it can be located in space and time" (1996:34).

According to Nippert-Eng there are two types of boundary work. The first is boundary placement, which visibly draws the line between the realms of home and work, and the second is boundary transcendence, which keeps the line in place by allowing humans to jump back and forth over it (1996). Through boundary work, Nippert-Eng maintains, we create a more or less continuous sense of who we are in each realm (home or work). We separate and assign certain aspects of self to distinctive places and times. In this way, boundary work is the process of creating and maintaining a territory of the self (1996).

Boundary work is the key process that reflects and determines how much human beings integrate or segment home and work. It is what ultimately allows each of use to repeatedly define and refine the essence of and relationship between the realms of home
and work, what is unique to each place and what is shared between them. It is the "process that lets us create, challenge, defend and change categories of social existence within the mental and structural constraints of that existence" (1996:8).

DeVault (2003) looks at family and its relationship to physical, mental, and emotional space. She believes that despite the sense of permanence we associate with family, it is in some sense a place that people inhabit momentarily. Family members "come together, spend time, separate for activities that connect them differently elsewhere, come together, separate, and so on" (1298-1299).

Nippert-Eng and others have focused on the boundaries we create between ourselves, other human beings, objects, and space. Using her analysis of boundary transcendence and boundary maintenance as a jumping off point, it is also possible to examine the boundaries that either do or do not exist between ourselves and our companion animals. The women in my study used physical space in many different ways. Nearly all of the 20 women in my study transcended the physical boundaries that could have existed between themselves and their companion animals by allowing them access to all the living space areas within their homes. Removing boundaries between themselves and their pets affected the ways the women felt about their companion animals. For Begonia, allowing her dogs to roam around the house when she was at home helped her feel closer to them: "They pretty much have free rein – they are very clean dogs – couch potatoes. They don’t really want to go outside. They are in the yard when I am at work but inside once I come home. They slept on the bed when they were younger. Now that they are older, it is too hard for them to get up on the bed, so they sleep on the bedroom floor, or they snuggle on a blanket on the couch."
Nasturtium not only gave her pets free reign of the house, she also let her dog Alex Marie, a licensed therapy dog, sleep on her bed occasionally: “Once in a while I’ll let her [Alex Marie] up, but she’s a ‘bed hog.’ I have a California King bed and she likes to turn sideways. She likes to sleep with her butt up on the pillows. It’s like, ‘if you’d at least turn around the other way, I’d let you up more often!’” When asked if she had any pet-less rooms, Nasturtium said, “Oh they go anywhere they want. They are even allowed on the couches. Pretty glamorous, huh?” Kentia Palm scoffed at the notion of pet-less rooms, saying: “some [cats] can [have the run of the house] or they can stay in the screened indoor area. But I don’t have any cat-less rooms because it doesn’t work.”

For Nippert-Eng, the transcendence of boundaries suggests an integrated home and work life. Though boundary issues between home and work are not the focus of my study, there are certain principles outlined by Nippert-Eng that can be applied to the women I interviewed. For example, the majority of the women in my study found it preferable to transcend physical boundaries between themselves and their companion animals, suggesting that they had, in one way or another, integrated their pets into their living spaces. Some women chose not to erect boundaries because they wanted to maintain physical closeness with their pets. Others felt that maintaining boundaries was simply not possible. Either way, the women I studied used this boundary arrangement to manage and make sense of the physical space they shared with their pets.

However, while the majority the women in my study allowed their pets access to all areas of their homes, a few women placed boundaries on some areas of their living space. For example, when asked about a cat-free zone in her home, Sage said,

Yeah, M’s room is semi-cat free. They can go everywhere. Well, except for the closets. I try to keep them out of there more for convenience sake because they
have all been shut in closets at one time. Louis spent the night in the pantry a couple of years ago. And, you know, Zena kind of did the 'Lassie, Timmy's in the well thing,' you know? Now if Hercules gets shut up somewhere, the other two do nothing. You are looking for him, and you ask the other cats, and they look at you like, 'I don't know nothing about no cat. What? Are you talking to me?'

King’s Crown also limited her dog, Charlie, and indoor dog, to certain areas of her apartment: “During the day, while I’m at work, I have a gate that blocks the upstairs so he [Charlie] doesn’t go in the two bedrooms, but when I’m home, he has the whole house – he sleeps on my pillow or under the covers.”

Kalanchoe was the only woman in my study whose cat lived strictly outdoors. While her cat Patch was allowed indoors, she stayed outdoors the majority of the time. According to Kalanchoe, “Patch sleeps in the dog house, which the dog doesn’t use. She also sits by the window, and first thing in the morning, she scratches on the window to make sure that I know she is there.”

Women who maintain boundaries between themselves and their pets are akin to Nippert-Eng’s concept of segmentors. Segmentors strive to separate their home and work lives. While it cannot be said that these women are unwilling to physically integrate their companion animals into their lives, it is also not clear that the physical integration of their pets into their lives is a top priority for them. Sage and King’s Crown only restricted their pets from specific areas during specific times. Kalanchoe was the only woman who kept concrete and enduring boundaries between herself and her cat.

Beyond my concern with whether companion animals were allowed to wander participant’s houses or apartments or restricted from certain areas, I was also interested in the placement of various pet items within the home. In other words, I wanted to know
how women stored, arranged, and organized the many pet-related items they had—such as toys, food bowls, and litter boxes—within their physical living space.

In my study, 70% of the women kept pet items in many places throughout their homes. For example, Sage kept her cats' litter boxes on the outside patio. Most of the toys, cat trees, and scratching posts were located in the living room, but cat paraphernalia could be found throughout her apartment. Dahlia, too, kept her pet-related items in various places throughout her living space. Her cat Amy's, litter box, for example, was located in the bathroom, and her food dishes and cat toys could be found in the living room, dining room, and bedroom. Dahlia also placed a chair for Amy, who is strictly an indoor cat, to sit on in front of her sliding glass patio door. Shinleaf not only kept her cat Jennifer's toys and paraphernalia in nearly every room of her home, she also told me she was going to convert the master bath into Jennifer's bathroom: "It is going to be decorated for her in pink with a Hello Kitty theme because Jennifer, also strictly an indoor cat, loves the color pink."

The majority of the women in my study both gave their companion animals free run of their homes and kept pet-related items in a variety of areas throughout their living space. This indicates to me a desire to transcend boundaries between themselves and their companion animals rather than reinforce them. Freedom to interact with their pets was extremely important for most of the women in my study. As a result, most women did not want to restrict the time and energy they shared with their pets to certain areas of their homes or to specific places, such as the backyard, patio, or garage.
Companion Animals as Identity Kits

The second form of social interplay that I discovered between the women in my study and their companion animals was the way in which pets were seen as "identity kits." The ways in which people represent themselves to the world are varied. We use clothing, calendars, address books and the like to designate who we are, what we are, and how we spend our time. We also use wallets and purses as "identity kits," which serve as private locations for personally meaningful artifacts" (Nippert-Eng 1996:57). According to Nippert-Eng, we carry wallets and purses with us wherever we go because we never know when we might need much of what is in them, practically or emotionally.

When it comes to "identity kits," an asymmetrical bias exists in our culture. This is manifested in the expectation that we will keep our work and work-selves confined to the workplace more than we will keep our home and home-selves confined to the house. To varying degrees, we expect that who we are at home will penetrate our work lives, but we do not expect that our work lives will influence who we are at home. In our segmentist culture, paychecks and work-related stress are seen as the main points where work permeates our homes (Nippert-Eng 1996).

Companion animals can also function as "identity kits." While they are generally not carried around from place to place, pets help to define who we are (or wish to be). Reflected in the eyes of our pets is a version of the self that may or may not be satisfying. What is more, pets and our interactions with them, reveal to visitors in the home or passersby on the street some notion of where our values lay, how we treat those who are less powerful than ourselves, our views of right and wrong.
While not directly addressing identity kits such as purses and wallets, Guy and Banim (2000) explore the notion of objects and identity. The focus of their research is women's clothing use and its effect upon our sense of self. According to them there are many ways in which use of clothing is a negative experience for women, particularly with respect to identity issues. For example, the structural positioning of women in patriarchal, capitalist societies often generates distorted self-perceptions and, in terms of use of clothing, inauthentic presentation (2000).

Kearon and Leach (2000), in another study exploring identity and objects, argue that the growing interest in evaluating the scales of meaning of different objects has invigorated the status of the home and objects within it. Research of this sort increasingly highlights the constitutive powers of consumers to construct their own meanings and values from consumer objects (2000).

Among the women in my study, 75% believed that their companion animals had shaped their identities. An example given by Jade Plant illustrates this point: “Little Britches [one of Jade Plant’s cats] is a lot like me. She is curious. She knows when someone is not a good person. She’s let me know two times. I used to carry her around on my shoulder everywhere when she was young. Little Britches did not like a woman I had been doing business with. When she got down on the floor to make friends with her, Little Britches smacked her across the face.”

Jade Plant believed that Little Britches, an indoor cat, helped her to develop her intuitive side. While Jade Plant could or would not see that the woman she was dealing with was insincere, Little Britches had no problem expressing itself. While Jade Plant did not necessarily approve of Little Britches hitting her business partner in the face with

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her paw, she did admire her cat’s ability to trust in her feline sense of good and bad and as a result decided to more fully incorporate her own intuitive knowledge into her life.

Kentia Palm provided another example of how pets can modify their guardians’ personal identities:

I saw myself as a cat person from the time I got my first cat. I began to see them as an important part of my life and to change how I interacted with animals. Until then we had dogs at home. It opened up an understanding of how you observe the world, your own space. I can see my own environment differently. I can’t imagine my own environment without cats because of what they add in terms of grace and presence. I would like to be that confident, that physical, that graceful and long of line. Cats have a presence I find appealing. They take the world as it is. Humans are big on controlling things. Once you introduce the cat into the environment, you introduce a way of seeing things differently.

Kentia Palm saw in her cats the opportunity to learn a variety of lessons. Though she was a confident person, she believed that her cats pushed her to become even more confident and accepting of those things that she did not have the power to change. The beauty of her cats provided her with inspiration. For her they are emblems of what makes life good and worthwhile.

While about 45% of the women suggested that their companion animals had played a role in shaping their identities, several of these women insisted that their pets were a meaningful part of their identities. For example, Begonia stated unequivocally that her two dogs are an integral part of who she is: “They are part of me, a part of my identity. From about 1992 on [the time of her divorce], when everyone was gone, it was just me and the girls [her beagles].” The remaining 55% of women did not mention that their companion animals had shaped their identities.

Seaweed made it clear that being a pet guardian to her dog, Charlie, an indoor dog and hiking companion, was central to her identity:
I guess because I have had animals my whole life – that has always been a part of my identity. Ah, and of course my identity – living in Colorado for ten years in the community that I lived in – it was, absolutely my identity. Everybody had a dog – I mean you took your dog outside – everybody went outside. Charlie has as many friends in Colorado as I do. It’s a lifestyle. I was part of a lifestyle, so to speak, and so I guess in that respect my identity has been shaped by the dog.

For Seaweed, having a dog not only helped solidify her identity, it also meant fitting into the community, the people with whom she socialized and lived. All those around her were pet guardians and enjoyed an active outdoor life. Charlie was a part of that life and that way of being. Without him Seaweed may have felt left out or in some way different. Charlie, however, provided Seaweed with a sense of belonging, as well as a way of understanding who she was.

Nippert-Eng believes that “the evidence of our social affiliations is most systematically brought together in our wallets, purses, and their substitutes” (1996:57). Companion animals are clearly different from wallets and purses, yet they may, at times, serve similar purposes. We rely on our pets to help us understand what we value, what we believe is important. They are a reflection of how we treat others and how we want to be treated ourselves. Companion animals are also reminders of who we are and how far we have come. If animals represent entities which we may need practically or emotionally, (a friend to talk to and cuddle when we are lonely or depressed), or personally meaningful artifacts of the living and breathing variety then they do indeed constitute elements of our “identity kits.”

Ritual: Creating Connectedness between Women and Their Pets

The third form of social interplay that I found between the women in my study and their companion animals was the use of ritual to create connectedness between
themselves and their pets. Nippert-Eng argues that routines and rituals are necessary to bridge the gap between home and work. They allow us “to leave one cognitive territory and enter another, transforming from one self to another” (1996:147). Beyond this, a transitional, ritualized action makes crossing borders between physical realms easier. It allows us to maintain a certain stability of categories even as it may help us create new ones (1996).

Bridging the gap between who we are in one setting and who we are in another is a critical part of understanding the self. Nippert-Eng suggests that the gap between home and work is one of the most difficult to navigate. Moving smoothly from one to the other requires effort. One way of making this process easier is by using bridges. Nippert-Eng describes bridges as objects and activities that facilitate, even encourage, mental transitions between home and work, between one way of being and another. Briefcases, computers, telephones, and bag lunches are more obvious ‘bridging’ items. There are others, too: “commutes, customary morning and evening drinks and the foods consumed with them, and ritual activities and routines performed prior to leaving one realm and just before full immersion in the other” (1996:117).

Nippert-Eng also maintains that the structural aspects of home and work lead to more constraints on the home-work boundary. Each realm feels a certain way, evoking an emotional state of being that grows out of what we do, how we do it, with whom and under what conditions (1996). In addition, the people, activities, and environmental characteristics of home and work encourage us to learn, feel, and respect the differences between these places which become most apparent during transitions between realms (Nipper-Eng 1996).
Small (2000) explored personal bridging strategies among elder women. Bridges of this type were employed to adjust to, and live successfully in, quasi-communal retirement within a college campus-like setting in the urban Southwest. What Small discovered were old ways and anachronisms of the past popular culture employed by elders in this new household form. Living out these old ways in the present, the elder women interwove them into the emergent retirement community culture in which they had come to live.

Employing one of Nippert-Eng’s bridging techniques, 40% of the women in my study used rituals to create a sense of connectedness between themselves and their companion animals. For example, Peony explained her feeding ritual for her cat Sammy in the following way: “I buy him the best kibble – little cans – I say ‘come on Sammy, it’s breakfast or whatever’ and he walks right over and waits while I put the food in the dish – I’m telling you, he’s a sweetheart.” Peony and Sammy, and indoor cat, also have rituals for TV watching and getting ready for bed: “I know when I put on the TV he’s here immediately so he must know before I get here that I’ll sit on the couch after I put the TV on. Or if I am getting ready for bed and he hears me, he’s in there.” Gladiola also made a ritual of watching TV with her dogs Buddy and Jaden, both of whom are indoor/outdoor dogs, and their regular routine involved walking to a local coffee shop together. Shinleaf described the ritual she has of collecting food bowls for her cat, Jennifer: “There are 30 to 40 different bowls with different cat-decorated designs. I feed Jennifer from different bowls on different days.” Finally, Jade Plant said she was routinely watched over by one of her cats, Angel, who lives strictly indoors, whenever she took a shower.
Though it is probably true that most of the women in my study engaged in rituals involving their companion animals, less than half mentioned them. One reason for this discrepancy may be that participants took these rituals for granted, forgetting to mention them or deciding that they were not worth talking about. Another reason for the lack of attention to rituals may be that pet guardians are simply unaware of how these everyday actions bond them to their companion animals. The regular feeding, grooming, walking, and other activities that we engage in with our companion animals creates a bond that is lasting and full of meaning.

In addition to these physical rituals, 25% of the women in my study also engaged in the ritual of talking to their companion animals. Violet, for example, talked to her eight pets everyday, “I always tell them when I walk through the door, Mama’s home to see her ‘munchy bunch’ [an affectionate term she uses to describe her dogs and cats].” Sage claimed that while she rarely engaged in whole conversations with her cats, she did talk to them on a regular basis. “I will say things like ‘Hi, how are you?’ ‘What did you do today?’ and my cats will either look at me without saying anything or give me a couple of yowls.” Unlike Sage, Jade Plant stated emphatically that she and her cats have conversations, “I talk to them when I am stressed and they listen. They are always there and they know everything that is going on with me.” Apple Blossom also talked to her indoor cats, Nike and Reebok, regularly. “Nike,” she said, “knows when I’m not feeling good. I lie on the couch and talk to him. Reebok on the other hand, is not as aware. I talk to Reebok anyway. They are the only ones home with me all day.”

Some of the women in my study talked to their companion animals rather routinely, which suggests that having a living being (whether human or nonhuman) to
share thoughts and feelings with is significant to these women. It is also a way of combating loneliness, something many of the women in my study believed they would have experienced if they had not become pet guardians. King's Crown, for example, commented on how her dog, Charlie, makes her days less lonely and her existence more meaningful, "He's part of my everyday life. He shapes me. He's there, like breathing. I need him. When he is gone, like, for example, when he is in the hospital, I can tell the difference."

Conclusion

Interactions between the women in my study and their companion animals took three primary forms. First, women used space and physical boundaries within their homes to either restrict or encourage the activities and movement of their pets. They used pet-related items such as toys, food bowls, and litter boxes in different ways. Some women kept them only in specific areas, while others scattered these items throughout their homes. The women who placed greater restrictions on where their pets could roam and who kept pet-related items in isolated areas engaged in what Nippert-Eng would call segmenting activity. Under the segmented model, "work is relegated to the workplace and workday; home is relegated to the house, the evening and the weekend" (Nippert-Eng 1996:23). Like Nippert-Eng's segmentors, the women who fell into this category believed that their pets should be confined to very specific areas and interactions between themselves and their pets should be limited to those areas. Women who gave their pets unrestricted access to living spaces and kept pet paraphernalia in various places throughout their homes engaged in what Nippert-Eng classifies as integrationist behavior.
This approach to “home and work leaves all times and all places more multipurpose” (Nippert-Eng 1996:23). For example, work-related activities – such as grading papers, creating spreadsheets, and talking to clients on the phone – can be done at home, and home-related activities such as scheduling personal appointments or checking on the status of a sick child, can be done at work. The women in my study who took an integrated approach to their relationships with their pets saw interactions as more fluid. For them, pets could and should be enjoyed in any area of the home rather than in specific areas only.

Second, women saw their pets as ‘identity kits,’ capable of enhancing and expanding self-knowledge the women already possessed. Through their interactions with their companion animals, women came to see themselves as “cat lovers” or “dog people,” maybe for the first time in their lives. This is only speculation, however, as I did not ask the women specifically about their history with pets. Though many of the women I interviewed said that they had always loved animals they only began to identify closely with their pets when they acknowledged that such bonds were critically important to them. In addition, the relationships between women and their pets deepened when they learned something about themselves from their companion animals.

Third, women used rituals such as feeding pets special treats or taking them to favorite places as a way of creating connectedness between themselves and their companion animals. For the women in my study, engaging in familiar rituals with their companion animals made the women feel safe and secure. Repeating activities on a daily basis provided both women and their pets with stability in a world that is constantly changing. Of particular significance is the fact that some of the women I interviewed

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talked to their pets routinely, perhaps to achieve a level of comfort and self-importance. Talking to companion animals is also important because I believe that pets may serve as a catalyst for creative thinking. Most cats and dogs are silent during conversations, allowing us to fill in the blanks with our own ideas.

The feedback I received from participants regarding whether and how their companion animals were seen as part of their identity kits led me to explore further how pets reflect women’s sense of self. The notion that the identities of the women in my study were shaped by their relationships with their companion animals informed and structured the chapter that follows, where I explore the ways in which the women interact with their pets in ways that help shape their identities. In chapter five I look in greater depth at how women integrate companion animals into their self-perceptions.
CHAPTER 5

INTEGRATING COMPANION ANIMALS INTO THE SELF

In this chapter I will address research question two, which is: “How do nonmarried women integrate their companion animals into their self-perceptions?” Here I look at Mead’s concept of the generalized other and Goffman’s notion of teams, as well as his concepts of front and backstage performance and apply them to my data. Also, I will discuss Cooley’s looking-glass self and Blumer’s principles of symbolic interactionism in regard to women and their relationships with their pets. I chose to focus on these theorists because they all provide a framework to make sense of my data. After I completed my interviews, it became apparent to me that interesting aspects of the data reflected women’s perceptions of self. As a result, my data inductively took me in this direction.

Symbolic interaction is said to take place only between individuals with selves. In order for the women in my study to interact symbolically with their companion animals, it is necessary to assume either that animals do have selves or that a self is not required to engage in symbolic interaction. Irvine (2004) argues that animals have selves: the idea of self as experience shows how distinct senses of self and other are present in animals. It also shows how an animal’s sense of self becomes apparent to us during interaction. Humans and animals can share thoughts, intentions, and feelings. The result is an experience of self with other, as opposed to self as distinct from other.
Beyond this, Irvine states that “animals help create human identity by interacting with us as selves in relation to us” (Irvine 2004:116).

Individuals without selves may also be capable of interacting symbolically, but this is a stretch, one which requires a complete overhauling of symbolic interactionist principles. For example, Mead believes that the self is formed through interaction with the social world and that the responses of human beings are affected by the attitudes of others. This does not mean, however, that their conduct is mechanically determined by others. Communicating symbolically presupposes some shared notion of idea and concept. In order to communicate in this way, we have to have some sense of who we are and how we fit into the larger community. Without a self this is nearly impossible to do. The existence of animal selfhood is likely, but it has yet to be proven, and questioning the idea that individuals must have selves in order to engage in symbolic interaction is tricky at best. Rather than concentrating on either of these explanations, it is more productive to look at the ways in which companion animals shape the selfhood of their human guardians and how this might affect established symbolic interactionist thought.

Women’s Stories about Themselves: Integrating Women and Pets

My analysis of the data revealed three primary ways that women integrated companion animals into their self-perceptions. First, they often saw themselves and their companion animals as teammates or fellow performers. Second, they believed that their sense of personal understanding, awareness of animal-related issues, and level of happiness had been influenced by their perceptions of their companion animals. Third,
the women in my study saw their pets as family members. It should be noted, however, that the same indicators that served to integrate companion animals into women’s lives often created tensions and barriers to integration.

**Teammates**

The first way that my participants integrated companion animals into their self-perceptions was to see themselves and their pets as teammates or fellow performers. In my research, 60% of the participants appeared to have formed teams and engaged in performances with their companion animals. Acting as a performance team was a common practice among the women in my study, even though some did not engage in such team work. Nasturtium told me the story of how she and her dog Alex Marie (who is licensed to provide animal-assisted therapy to hospital patients) engaged in a performance in a hospital room:

If the curtains are closed and the doors are closed we don’t go in unless, of course, you know, we know the people there. But we walked by this one room and I said, ‘No, we’re not going there.’ She pulled me back to that room and I couldn’t figure out what she wanted, so I pulled her back to the elevator. She dragged me back to that room and I popped my head in there, and I asked if they wanted a therapy dog. And the lady said yes. Alex Marie went right up to her and put her head on the bed and said ‘Here, I’m here.’ And we stayed for a few minutes and then we left. She [Alex] walked out like, ‘OK, I did what I was supposed to do.’ Like she could talk and tell me what it was.

Seaweed and her dog Charlie have also worked as a team. When she and Charlie are with friends they make sure that everyone feels welcome:

Charlie, when he plays, is really egalitarian, and he shares. He makes sure everybody is included. If you have two or three people in the room, and he wants you to play fetch with one of his toys, he will take it to each person, and
he will just keep doing that so that no one feels left out. I have taught him to be social but being inclusive he learned on his own.

In thinking about a performance, Goffman argues, it is easy to assume that the content of the presentation is merely an expressive extension of the character of the performer and to see the function of the performance in these personal terms. This is a limited view and can hide important differences in the function of the performance for the interaction as a whole (1959). A team is nothing more than a set of individuals whose intimate cooperation is required if a given projected definition of the situation is to be maintained. It is a group not in relation to a large scale social structure or social organization but rather in relation to an interaction or series of interactions in which the relevant definition of the situation is maintained (Goffman 1959).

Performances involving women and their companion animals sometimes seemed theatrical in nature. First impressions were not always accurate, and the sense that women had formed alliances with their pets was unmistakable. Those who witnessed Daisy taking her Rottweiler Rose for a walk probably saw a woman accompanied by a large, and possibly vicious, dog. When Daisy and Rose, her indoor canine companion, were backstage in the privacy of their own apartment, however, things were very different.

The best thing about Rose is that she is a Rottweiler and that I can prove people wrong in the fact that she is a great dog. She is very sweet. She will not attack you, she loves you. She does not know she is a Rottweiler. It is all how they are raised, you know? She is not your typical Rottweiler because we raised her inside. The way she turned out is one of the best things about her. She is very affectionate. If you are upset, like if I am crying, she’ll jump on my shoulders and hug me. Stuff like that. She even sleeps on my bed.
Sunflower explained how her cat Maozer, a working cat who often attends fundraisers for the Nevada SPCA, has put on performances with a touch of drama: “I have Maozer, who is well known in the community – possibly outside the community – and his ability to reach people in the public venue of hotels, fashion shows, and malls has generated thousands of dollars of income for the Nevada SPCA. He knows who to target, yaps at them, and reaches his little hand out for them.”

Goffman labels that part of an individual’s performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance as “front” (1959). Daisy and Sunflower both engaged in front stage performances with their companion animals on a regular basis. The harmony that they felt was convincing to all observers and, as a result, performances went off without a hitch. These successful performances drew Daisy and Sunflower closer to their companion animals and created a connection between them.

Goffman defines “backstage” as a place relative to a given performance, where the impressions fostered by the performance are routinely contradicted (1959). There are many characteristic functions of the back region. For example, the back stage is where the capacity of a performance to express something beyond itself may be painstakingly created, and illusions and impressions are openly constructed (1959).

Taking Rose for a walk involves more than meets the eye. It is a front stage performance that Daisy has carefully thought about while in the back region (the apartment that Daisy and Rose share). The uniqueness of this situation does not seem to go unnoticed by Daisy. She is vocal about the bad rap Rottweilers have received in society, but she also takes satisfaction in knowing that while strangers sometimes find her
dog intimidating, the truth is that her dog is a softy. Having this information about her
dog and choosing whether to share it or not creates a meaningful bond between her and
Rose. The special information that Daisy and Rose possess makes Daisy feel deeply
attached to her dog and enhances the quality of Daisy’s relationship with Rose.

Goffinan saw the front stage area as a place where humans interacted with other
humans in order to create desired impressions. Back stage regions were spaces where
humans spent time perfecting the performances they would give in the future. The data I
have collected suggests that companion animals are also present in the front and back
regions and help, on a regular basis, to manage their human partners’ impressions of self
when in the presence of friends, family, coworkers, and even strangers. My data also
indicates that, in the majority of cases, the nonhuman team player is a dog. While cats
can and do engage in team-oriented performances, dogs are more likely to play this role.
The reason could be that women take their dogs into social settings more often than they
do their cats.

Goffinan was willing to allow that companion animals could be used as props for
front stage performances, but my research indicates that pets are far more involved in the
presentation process. Some of the women I spoke with saw their pets as partners and
teammates, and this feeling of closeness with their companion animals during successful
(meaning positive) performances may have helped shape the self-concept of these
women.
Personal Understanding

The second way that the women in my study integrated pets into their self-perceptions was by believing that their sense of personal understanding, awareness of animal-related issues, and level of happiness had been influenced by their perceptions of their pets. Of the 20 women in my study, 90% told me that they had become better, more aware individuals as a result of the relationships they shared with their companion animals. Among them was Sage, who had this to say about herself and her animals: “I think that caring for any living thing – human or animal – changes how we view the world. Having my cats expands my concern for how we treat those that are under our care, and I think that makes me more compassionate toward both anyone or anything that might be considered irrelevant or unnecessary by some.”

Seaweed also believed that she had been influenced by her relationships with her companion animals:

I think there are ‘animal people’ and there are ‘not animal people.’ What I don’t get are the people who hate animals and don’t understand. And I think that is a very specific kind of person with a specific worldview. Animals tend to instill in me a lot of compassion. I think that my relationship with my pets has affected my view of the world. I don’t exactly know if I would say that it has given my life purpose, but it has given me a chance to care for someone other than myself.

For Jade Plant, tapping into her cats’ intuition has been an important part of her own growth: “In some ways I am more cautious than I was before. I have learned from them [her cats]. They have taught me to develop my intuition a lot more. Mostly about people, how I feel about people. When I had Spike [a cat who is now deceased], I didn’t pay attention to the intuitive side of him.” The intuition that Jade Plant’s cats possess
helps her be more open to the nonverbal cues given off by humans. Her cats, who are unable to understand human speech, rely heavily on these nonverbal cues. Body language and tone of voice are important tools for her cats to determine the kindness or trustworthiness of a person. Emulating this style of deciphering human motivation has given Jade Plant another way of sizing up and understanding people.

Violet felt that the presence of her animals reminded her of how far she has come as a person: “I had a dog and cat back before I really was insightful that this was a living creature that was put in my hands – when I was younger – I felt later on I hadn’t done my best for, and I almost felt at times I was trying to make it up to them [the animals she had] by making it up to all these [the animals she has now].”

In addition to feeling that they had become more aware of themselves, a number of the women in my study also believed that their companion animals provided them with an enhanced sense of well-being. Spearmint explained why, Reeses, an indoor cat, has made a difference in her life: “I used to be kind of bitter, and not so pleasant. She [Reeses], I feel like I have a connection with her. She just, I don’t know, I feel happy all the time. So, every time I see her, even if I had a bad day or something, I see her and I’m happy again. Everything is good. I feel love from her. That’s probably why I love her so much. That’s probably why she, kind of, responds back.”

Many of the women in my study felt that they had become better people as a result of living with their pets. This can be explained in a number of ways. First, it is possible that the women mistakenly attributed their sense of personal growth to their companion animals. Also, they may have convinced themselves that a change in
personal integrity and awareness had occurred when, in fact, it had not. A more plausible explanation, however, may be Cooley’s concept of the “looking-glass self.”

Many of the women in my study believed that the presence of their companion animals had affected their worldviews as well as their understanding of who they were as people. This suggests that, for them, the principles of the looking-glass self can include the influence of nonhumans. Jade Plant’s assertion that her cats have helped her to develop her sense of intuition is significant and arguably, such a transformation could take place only if she were truly invested in the perception or perceived perception of her cats. Violet’s commitment to valuing the lives of the animals currently in her care also suggests that she has been affected by the perceptions of her companion animals. She feels that they are expecting her to be a better person and that they know she can be. In addition, Spearmint shows that the presence of her companion animals has affected the way she feels about who she is. Her companion animals have increased her level of happiness and have given her a new way of looking at herself. The looking-glass self is a useful concept for understanding why the women in my study credited their pets with helping them to become better people.

The looking-glass self may not be the only concept that sheds light on this process, however. Mead’s “generalized other” also deserves a place in this discussion. According to Mead, the social group or community which gives a person his or her sense of self is known as the generalized other. Mead believed that animals were incapable of experiencing selfhood because they could not communicate with each other using a unified language. Keeping this in mind, I propose a new way of looking at the role of animals and the generalized other. Though companion animals alone do not constitute a
social group or a community, I believe they are capable of contributing to the voice we commonly think of as the generalized other. This is not a community that pre-exists a particular agent. What I refer to instead is an influence, akin to the media, upon each of us. For example, some people watch more TV than others or listen to more radio than others. Individuals without pets may be less influenced by what they perceive pets to think and feel, yet they, too, may experience some form of conscience when it comes to the treatment of nonhuman animals. For instance, many people who are not pet guardians argue vehemently for the inclusion of parks and green spaces within city limits so that both humans and nonhuman animals can enjoy them. Some of these same individuals even support the presence of dog parks within these larger green spaces even though they have no intention of becoming pet guardians themselves. People who do have pets and share a close bond with them are much more likely to take into account the feelings and perceptions of their pets and include, as one voice among many, the voice of their companion animal.

Family, friends, teachers, and media figures all comprise the community that influences our behavior. If the people we spend time with, or even those we have never met, such as actors on television, can influence us to such a strong degree, it seems reasonable to suggest that companion animals can also affect and influence us. Many people spend more time with their companion animals than they do with co-workers, family, or friends.

The women in my study spent time doing all kinds of activities with their pets. Some took their companion animals to nursing homes to participate in animal-assisted therapy, to gallery openings, and to parties to help raise funds for animal rescue
organizations. Others took them to the mountains so that they could camp and hike together. Many took their companion animals with them when they visited friends and family or went on short excursions or day trips. And, of course, all of the women fed, played with, and, if they had dogs, walked their companion animals. Spending large amounts of time with anyone, human or nonhuman, can affect one’s belief system. Given this fact, it is not out of the question to suggest that companion animals can and should be considered among that community which makes up the generalized other.

Pets as Family Members

The third way that the women in my study integrated their companion animals into their self-perceptions was by seeing their pets as family members. Every one of the 20 women I spoke to considered their pets to be members of the family. Calla Lily felt that her two indoor/outdoor dogs were definitely family members, and she kept pictures of them all over the house to prove it. Pointing to a shelf in her living room she stated, “My Dad loves animals, too. There’s a picture of them [her two dogs] with him.” Jade Plant saw her two cats as “her kids.” When talking about them with others she claimed, “I always say things like I have to go take care of my kids.” Begonia revealed that when her dogs were in their declining years, out of concern and respect, she and the rest of her family didn’t take vacations. As she put it, “My best friends came and stayed here at my house.” In Violet’s case her five cats and three dogs were not only a part of her family, but they affected her relationship decisions as well: “I am committed to my animals to the degree that if I were to get into a relationship, they’d have to love my animals and accept them.”
The women in my study believed that their pets were family members. They spent time with them and their animals were a part of their everyday lives. The idea that their pets would not be a critical part of their world seemed never to cross their minds. In sharing time with their pets the women in my study came to realize how significantly their pets had affected them. Blumer believed people assigned meanings to objects, and although pets are not objects, the women in my study clearly created meaning out of their interactions with their pets. For example, on more than one occasion participants in my study told me that before adopting their cat or dog they had never thought about animal cruelty. After becoming pet guardians themselves, they now understood more fully the abuses animals suffer.

The women in my study integrated their pets into their self-perceptions in three significant ways: they often saw themselves and their companion animals as teammates or fellow performers; they believed that their sense of personal understanding, awareness of animal-related issues, and happiness level had been influenced by their perceptions of their companion animals; and, finally, they saw their pets as family members. However, while all of these indicators served as ways to integrate companion animals into women’s lives, some of these same indicators also created tensions and impeded integration.

Pets and Problems

Some women saw themselves and their companion animals as teammates and fellow performers, but this was not always the case. Less than 10% of the women in my study gave no indication that their pets had taken on roles as teammates or performers. This may be the case because these women did not feel closely connected to their pets,
despite the fact that they saw them as family members. Also, these particular women spent less time with their pets than the rest of the women in my study. Whatever the reason, it is important to note that even among the women who did consider themselves and their pets to be teammates, certain contradictions existed. While many of the women in my study prided themselves on the closeness they felt to their companion animals, when asked if they shared either physical or personality attributes with their pets, most of these women were unable to find any similarities. A few said that they shared similar temperaments with their pets or that they shared the same eye color, but most women could not identify any common characteristics. An exception to this was Begonia. She described in great detail how she and her two beagles were alike:

I think they have both sides of my personality. Hannah is the quiet, feeling, emotional side of my personality, and Lacey is the outgoing, rambunctious, spontaneous side of my personality. I think they represent me very well. It’s funny like, even in texture, Lacey is really soft, velvety, and that “soft” is what’s on my inside. And over there is Hannah, very coarse, what I propose on the outside; you’re not going to hurt me.

Begonia may have been able to see the similarities that existed between her and her dogs because she was one of the few women in my study capable of bridging what I choose to call the “interspecies gap.” That is, she was able to see the ways in which she and nonhuman animals could be alike. Other women in my study may have found bridging this interspecies gap – characterizing themselves as physically or mentally like their companion animals – outside of their comfort zone or something to which they had never given much thought or of which they were incapable. The idea that an interspecies gap exists is strictly my own and has not been hypothesized by any other researcher.
As wonderful as pets can be, however, they are sometimes a source of great sadness. For example, Violet explained to me why she no longer leaves her dogs and cats alone together unattended: “I don’t leave my dogs to run loose in here if I am not home. My favorite cat – her ashes are on the fireplace there – was killed when I left her alone with a dog I’d had for one year. She was the best cat I ever had. I miss her. I cried a long time after losing her. I don’t trust the dogs to behave when they are alone with the cats. They really disappointed me.”

Violet was not the only woman in my study to have felt, in some way, let down by her pets. Other women lamented the fact that their pets sometimes created chaos or destroyed belongings precious to them. Sage described the ways in which one of her cats, Hercules, caused problems for her. “Hercules takes ten milligrams of Ametriptoline a day for behavior issues. His primary problem is being aggressive with other cats, but he also sprays on the walls and furniture. We had to put up a sheet of plastic from the floor to about four feet up the wall in the computer room. On more than one occasion he has sprayed urine on the books in the lower part of our bookcases. His spraying has made my roommate and I consider finding him a new home, but we just can’t picture life without him.”

Kentia Palm also complained about the destruction caused by her companion animals. One of her major problems is that she has a lot of cats, fourteen in all. Many of her cats live in the garage or in the backyard, which she had cat-proofed with netting placed around the tops of the fence, but still, she was unable to keep her house from sustaining damage. Though she provides plenty of litterboxes for her indoor cats, they often create sanitation issues that are costly to fix: “They pee where they want to. I have
had to replace my stove, pull my carpet out, and put linoleum in. I have also replaced two couches. I can’t have nice things and have the cats. I wish I could have more furniture and decorations.” Clearly, though, Kentia Palm values her fourteen cats much more than her furniture, despite the problems her cats create for her.

The women in my study experienced personal understanding and greater happiness when they shared their lives with companion animals. But this sense of well-being came at a cost. While a number of the women I spoke to could not imagine living their lives without companion animals, the difficulties associated with having pets made them think twice about adopting additional animals. When one thinks of adopting a pet, they rarely consider the destruction that pet may cause to their home. Though the majority of the women in my study did not experience significant damage to their property, those that did felt somewhat betrayed. For example, Kentia Palm said, “When I began adopting cats, I never thought that my life would be disrupted to the extent that it has. I just wanted to give the cats that I found on the streets and in my neighborhood a good home.” This side of pet guardianship created tension in the relationships the women had with their pets, as well as a barrier to the integration process.

All the women I interviewed saw their pets as family members, and the majority of the pets in my study were treasured and valued for their special and unique qualities. Expressing to others how important their companion animals were to them was not always an easy task for some women, however. When they attempted to discuss with family and friends the closeness they felt to their pets, 40% of the women in my study faced opposition. Though family and friends would listen to stories about their pets, they made it clear that there was a limit to how much they would tolerate. For example,
Kalanchoe said, “I talk with my son about our dog, Daisy, but I don’t overdo it. I also talk to my mother because she is interested. I don’t talk much about my pets to coworkers though.”

Kings Crown said that she always talks about her dog, Charlie. Sometimes, though, she thinks she may talk about him too much: “I tell Charlie stories and people listen, but after a while they get sick of the stories.” Sage also talked about her cats to others, but she sensed that if she went on too long, people would lose interest: “Oh, I try not to talk about my cats all the time. I talk about them occasionally. I have a friend, and she and her husband have two cats, so we talk more about cats with each other. But, you know, I try not to tell the boring stories, like people with their children who do adorable things everyday. I avoid doing that with my cats.”

Most of the women in my study felt free to talk about their pets with family members, friends, and coworkers, but a few felt that they did not have the freedom to do this. They feared that if they talked about the pets that meant so much to them, others would be turned off or would eventually refuse to listen. For these women, the disconnect between what they wished they could say and what they actually could say caused a strain. They wanted to share with family and friends the everyday antics of their companion animals, but they believed that doing so would jeopardize their relationships with them. As a result, the women were forced to shut off or deny a part of the self, and this prevented them from being authentic in such situations. Not being authentically themselves led to a sense of unhappiness, as well as guardedness, about what could or could not be said. However, none of the women in my study said that they regretted becoming pet guardians.
Conclusion

The women in my study integrated their companion animals into their self-perceptions in a variety of ways. First, some felt that they and their pets were a team. They engaged in performances together and worked well with one another. Ironically, some of the same things that made possible the integration of pets into women's self-perceptions also contrasted with how they talked about their relationships with their pets. For example, though some women could see themselves and their companion animals as teams, most had a hard time seeing the ways in which they and their pets were alike. This contradiction speaks to the ways in which some women experienced closeness with their companion animals. Working together to provide animal-assisted therapy for nursing home patients, going for walks, or working the room at a fundraiser were several ways in which some women connected with their pets.

A team, according to Goffinan, is a group of individuals who must cooperate in order to maintain the projected definition of a situation. Discovering that women sometimes felt that they and their companion animals were teammates or fellow performers is important. It shows that not all allies are human and that influences upon self-concept can come from many sources. This has far-reaching sociological implications, as it forces us to look at the relationships between humans and companion animals in more meaningful and varied ways. It also illustrates that teammates do not have to be human and that performances can and do include non-human animals. On the other hand, it also illustrates that while the bond between the women in my study and
their pets was strong, many did not see their pets as capable of a wide range of emotions and personal feelings.

Second, many women also believed that they had gained personal understanding and were happier as a result of the relationships they shared with their pets. Some credited their pets with making them more aware of animal-rights and environmental issues, and most women in my study believed that their pets had made them more compassionate to both animals and humans. Introducing pets into the home brought them considerable joy. However, living with pets also caused serious difficulties for some women. Pets that damaged furniture or would not use the litterbox caused great disappointment. On more than one occasion the destruction caused by pets required costly repairs.

The women in my study believed that they had learned to be better people as a result of living and interacting with their pets. This leads me to believe that we should seriously consider adding companion animals to Cooley’s list of individuals that influence behavior and sense of self. The presence of pets was not strictly positive, however. As a number of the women in my study indicated, companion animals were sometimes responsible for damaging property and causing heightened levels of stress in the household.

Finally, all of the women in my study considered their pets to be members of the family. As family members, pets were treated with the respect and consideration that a human family member would enjoy. Pictures of beloved pets were placed around my subjects’ homes, and the perceived feelings of their companion animals were taken into account when making decisions about human relationships. Problems arose, however,
when some of the women tried to express their love for their pets to human family members and friends who were unwilling to listen. The inability to discuss their pets with others created tension for these women, and though they loved their pets, they feared alienating family members, friends, and coworkers. None of the women who faced this problem had foreseen this dilemma when they had adopted their pets.

Blumer believed that people assign meanings to objects and act upon those meanings. Social acts, whether individually or collectively, are constructed through a process in which human beings note, interpret, and assess situations confronting them (1969). The women in my study assigned meaning to the behaviors of their pets and accepted that their pets had shaped their choices in many different ways. Believing that their pets were family members, the women in my study acted toward them accordingly. Whether others thought that their pets were legitimate members of the family did not matter. The critical element was the depth of the relationship as perceived by the women themselves. Unfortunately, not everyone in the lives of the women I studied could be counted on to agree with this definition of family. Some of the women were forced to limit or forego discussion about companion animals when in the presence of human family members and coworkers.
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

In this dissertation I have explored how nonmarried women integrate companion animals into their self-perceptions. Furthermore, I have examined the nature of the social interplay between nonmarried women and their companion animals. Based upon my observations and findings, companion animals may indeed influence nonmarried women’s self-perceptions within the context of the relationships the respondents have had with their companion animals.

I analyzed my qualitative data from a grounded theory perspective using the work of Nippert-Eng and the guiding principles of several major symbolic interactionists: Mead, Cooley, Blumer, and Goffman. My goal was not to engage in an extensive rewrite of these theorists but to broaden their concepts to take into account companion animals. I was particularly intrigued that companion animals could, in fact, be included in these theories and that their addition may add a new dimension of understanding to long-established ways of thinking. For example, Mead believed that animals lack self-conscious awareness because they have no concept of past and future. Lack of a shared language, he maintained, also prevented animals from possessing selfhood. We may never know if pets have selves, but it is clear that pet guardians imbue pets with selfhood and respond to their animals as though they have selves. In this way symbolic interaction can and does take place between humans and nonhumans. Looking at symbolic
interaction as a legitimate way for humans and nonhumans to interact also raises questions about how companion animals fit into Mead’s notion of the “generalized other.” The notion that companion animals are assigned some form of selfhood by their guardians suggests that this line of inquiry deserves further investigation. Cooley, Blumer, and Goffman never considered animals in their analyses, but applying concepts such as the looking-glass self or “performance” to companion animals forces us to look at both of these concepts and our pets in new, broader ways.

In chapter four I examined my first research question: “What is the nature of the social interplay between nonmarried women and their companion animals?” Drawing upon the work of Nippert-Eng, I analyzed boundary issues – both maintenance and transcendence – with respect to the physical space restrictions women used (or chose not to use) to control their companion animals within their homes. As I examined boundaries between pet guardians and their pets, it became clear that the women in my study could be classified into one of two groups. The first group is what Nippert-Eng would refer to as “segmentors,” or those who placed great restrictions on their pets’ territorial space and limited their social interplay with their pets to specific areas in the home. The second group is what she would call “integrators,” or those who gave great freedom to their pets’ territorial space and developed their social interplay with their pets whenever and wherever they saw fit. In my study, there was little, if any, gray area with respect to boundary issues. Women either kept their pets segmented in defined niches within their lives, or they embraced their pets and fully integrated them into their lives. Notably, both types of women said that their pets enriched their lives and influenced their view of the
world, although some pets, like King’s Crown’s dog Charlie, had a more profound affect on their pet guardians’ lives than others.

Of course, Nippert-Eng’s theories go beyond boundary work and segmentor vs. integrator, so I was curious about whether or not her concepts of “identity kits” and bridging techniques (strategies used when transitioning from the public to the private sphere) also applied to the social interplay between nonmarried women and their companion animals. Through extensive interviewing I found that most women saw their pets as something resembling “identity kits”, as these women clearly identified themselves as either “cat lovers” or “dog lovers.” Although several women said they had always loved animals, it was not until they became a pet guardian to a cat or dog that they began to closely identify with their pets. Many women also reported that they learned something significant about themselves from their companion animals. As for bridging techniques, various rituals – particularly food-based rituals – were the most common. (Other rituals included walking the dog after work, playing with companion animals, and talking to them.) Women often stated that they could not wait to get home from work to see their pet and feed him or her. Such a feeding ritual seemed to create a special bond between pet guardian and companion animal, and several women in my study said that this bond led to a sense of connectedness that made them feel safe and secure, as well as needed. Talking to companion animals may also be an important ritual as pets may serve as a sounding board for frustration and anxiety, in addition to being a catalyst for creative thinking and problem solving.

In chapter five I addressed my second research question: “How do nonmarried women integrate their pets into their self-perceptions?” The women in my study
integrated their companion animals into their self-perceptions in three fundamental ways. First, all of the women in my study saw their pets as fully-integrated family members. Second, the respondents believed that their sense of personal understanding, awareness of animal-related issues, and level of happiness were all influenced by the companion animals in their lives. Third, they often saw themselves and their companion animals as teammates or fellow performers.

It should be noted, however, that some indicators that served to integrate companion animals into these women’s lives also created tension and barriers to integration. Many women in my study said they had to limit or completely ignore discussion about their companion animals when in the presence of some human family members or coworkers. The tension brought about by this dichotomy—talk freely about the pet when alone or with another trusted person, but keep talk to a minimum (or not at all) if other “untrustworthy” people are around—was a source of great stress to many pet guardians, a phenomenon that may be unique to pet guardians and their charges. Thus, pets, despite their status as family members given to them by their pet guardians, may not be considered family members by all concerned. As a result, women suffer when pets are not considered family members and thus are not worth talking about.

Women in my study also routinely told me stories about how their pets were either problematic (peeing on the walls or tearing up furniture) or kindhearted (cuddling up on the bed or gratuitous licking), and these women then told me how they were affected by their pets’ behavior. “Good” cats or dogs made their pet guardians proud, but “bad” cats or dogs made their pet guardians uncomfortable, if not upset. Altogether, 90% of the women in my study claimed that they had become better, more aware individuals.
as a result of their relationships with their companion animals. Participants Sage, Seaweed, and Jade Plant (among others) all believed that caring for a living being, such as a cat or dog, changed how they saw the world. For example, Sage’s cats made her more compassionate toward others, and Seaweed came to see the world as divided between “animal people” and “not animal people.” Finally, Jade Plant’s cats helped her strengthen her own personal intuition and made her better at understanding people. Most women ascribed meanings to their companion animals (mostly positive), and as such, they behaved toward their companion animals in a (mostly) positive way. Yet, despite the strong bond these women had with their companion animals, when probed further, most of these women did not feel their pets were capable of certain emotions or feelings. As such, pets may not be completely capable of reciprocating the love and respect they receive from their dutiful pet guardians.

Finally, 60% of the women in my study reported that they and their pets were a “team.” Some women clearly engaged in performances with their animals, like Nasturtium and her Rottweiler, Alex Marie, and their hospital visits, while others engaged their animals in subtler, more private practices, like behaving well on a walk or doing tricks for a treat. Other companion animals, like Sunflower’s cat Maozer, regularly “performed” at fund-raisers and shows and helped raise thousands of dollars for animal-related causes. Thus, teammates do not have to be human, and performances are not limited to human beings.

The findings of my study contradict the “crazy cat lady” stereotype, which suggests that nonmarried women devote all of their time and energy to their companion animals, leaving little for human beings. The women I interviewed valued the

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relationships they shared with their companion animals (both cats and dogs), but they did not exclude humans from their lives. Though all of the women I studied were nonmarried, many had been married previously, and several had grown children who visited them regularly. In addition, most of the women in my study were either students or employed, and most had close relationships with friends or neighbors.

Beyond this, I found that the women in my study viewed their companion animals as minded actors and were able to work with them to achieve goals. For these women, companion animals were friends, allies, confidants, and in some cases, teammates and co-workers. The variety of roles that pets played in the lives of the women I interviewed suggests that these women saw their companion animals as thinking, feeling, intelligent beings, capable of forming relationships. Mead posited that the self emerges through relationships. If animals are able to forge relationships of substance with humans, it seems natural to question the claim that animals do not possess a self. After all, simply by forming relationships with humans, animals are meeting part of Mead’s criteria required for selfhood. But whether or not it is ever established that animals have selves, they should not be left out of discussions about symbolic interactionism, and the influence animals have on the lives of humans should not be downplayed.

This is especially relevant because the women in my study imbued selfhood upon their animals. They acted like their animals had selves, personalities, and communication skills, and based on the meanings they attached to their companion animals, these women made decisions, responded, and interacted with their pets as though they had selves. They projected a self onto their pets, making that self real in its consequences; namely,
the women's selves were shaped and influenced through their interactions with their companion animals.

The idea that animals have selfhood will force sociologists to rethink the social world and to recognize that the social world is not exclusively a human one. Including animals in the sociological mix will enhance our understanding of symbolic interaction by extending it beyond the current reliance on language. Adding animals to this discussion will also create a dialogue about what it means to be social because, animals too, interact within social contexts (Irvine 2004).

Limitations and Further Questions

This research study, while not the first to apply symbolic interactionist principles to the relationship between humans and companion animals, is unique. There have been several studies (Alger and Alger 2003, Irvine 2004) that re-examine Mead's concepts as they relate to self and self-awareness in nonhuman animals, but these studies have not included concepts from Goffman’s dramaturgical model or the use of boundary work as defined by Nippert-Eng. While I have conducted a robust study, some limitations do exist. First is the small sample size of 20 women. Though a larger sample would have allowed for greater generalizability, it would also have prevented me from being able to speak with each woman for as long as I did and to gather the amount of information I was able to gather. I believe that it was more important to focus my attention on in-depth interviews with a smaller sample than on less intensive interviews with a greater number of women. What is needed in the future is a study which both examines the relationship between women and their companion animals and includes greater numbers of women in
the sample. Perhaps this could be achieved through a study based on survey research or a combination of face-to-face interviews and questionnaires.

Second, my sample includes only women. In my opening chapter I outlined my reasons for choosing to interview only women, specifically nonmarried women. However, a study which included men would have allowed me to make comparisons between men and women, as well as to isolate certain behaviors which might have been shared by both genders or exhibited by only one. Future research in this area would benefit from the inclusion of men in the study sample. In addition, future studies should also include data collected from married women in order to see if their perceptions of their pets are similar to or markedly different from those of nonmarried women. While it is not possible to know with certainty what kinds of differences might exist without collecting the data, I believe that nonmarried women generally have more time to devote to the relationships they share with their pets. Married women, on the other hand, are routinely expected to divide their time between their spouse, children, work, and leisure activities, thus leaving them with less time to forge relationships with their companion animals. As a result, I would expect to see stronger and more intense relationships between nonmarried women and their pets.

Finally, I believe it is important to reveal my deeply held beliefs about companion animals and the bias this may bring to my research. I chose to study women and their relationships with their companion animals because I believe that we have only scratched the surface when it comes to understanding the role of nonhuman animals in our lives. I am a woman who has been a pet guardian for over 15 years and having cats and dogs in my life has enhanced it in myriad ways. Being a pet guardian is a serious responsibility,
yet I could never consider living my life without a companion animal. I know that I am not alone in feeling this way, which is why I wanted to find out more about the bonds between people – nonmarried women, specifically – and the companion animals with whom they share their living space, financial resources, and love. I believe that my perspective on the importance of companion animals in my life and in the lives of others has influenced the choice of what to include in my dissertation and what to leave out. Also, it may have led me to see connections between women and their companion animals that other researchers would have discounted or failed to see.
APPENDIX I

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. Please describe yourself.
2. Would you introduce me to your pet(s) and tell me something about you pet’s self or personality?
3. Why did you choose to adopt/buy/take on the responsibility of being a pet owner?
4. In what ways are your financial commitments influenced by your pet(s)?
5. Do you believe that your pet is intelligent? If yes, please give examples.
6. Do you consider your pet a member of the family?
7. Do you believe your pet resembles you?
8. Do you have a nick name for your pet(s)?
9. Does your relationship with your pet(s) affect the way you view the world?
10. How would your life be different if you were not the owner of a pet(s)?
11. Do you often talk about your pet(s) with family members and friends?
12. How does your pet(s) make you feel?
13. What are the things you like best about your pet(s)?
14. What are the most disappointing aspects of being a pet-owner?
15. Do you talk to your pet(s) when you are feeling down or need to vent?
16. Does your pet enhance your sense of well-being?
17. Do you plan to add to your collection of pets in the future?
18. Have you ever regretted adopting/buying/accepting responsibility for your pet(s)?
APPENDIX II

QUESTIONNAIRE
QUESTIONNAIRE

Directions: Please answer each question as completely as possible.

1. What is your age? _________
2. What is your marital status? (Please circle your answer.)
   Married
   Widowed (when? _________, how long? _________)
   Divorced (when? _________, how long? _________)
   Separated (when? _________, how long? _________)
   Never married

3. What is the highest degree or level of school you have completed? (Please circle your answer.)
   12th grade, NO DIPLOMA
   HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATE
   Some college credit, but less than 1 year
   1 or more years of college, but no degree
   Associate’s degree
   Bachelor’s degree
   Master’s degree
   Professional degree (for example: MD, DDS, JD)
   Doctorate degree

4. What is your occupation? ________________________________
5. What is your race or ethnicity? (Please circle your answer.)

White
Black, African American
American Indian or Alaska Native
Chinese
Japanese
Filipino
Korean
Vietnamese
Native Hawaiian
Samoan
Some other race – please print race ____________________________

6. How many pets do you have? __________

Pet #1 Type? _____ Age?_____ Name? ___________ How long have you had her/him? ______

Pet #2 Type? _____ Age?_____ Name? ___________ How long have you had her/him? ______

Pet #3 Type? _____ Age?_____ Name? ___________ How long have you had her/him? ______

Pet #4 Type? _____ Age?_____ Name? ___________ How long have you had her/him? ______

Pet #5 Type? _____ Age?_____ Name? ___________ How long have you had her/him? ______

Pet #6 Type? _____ Age?_____ Name? ___________ How long have you had her/him? ______

Pet #7 Type? _____ Age?_____ Name? ___________ How long have you had her/him? ______
Pet #8 Type? ______ Age? ______ Name? ___________ How long have you had her/him? ______

Pet #9 Type? ______ Age? ______ Name? ___________ How long have you had her/him? ______

Pet #10 Type? ______ Age? ______ Name? ___________ How long have you had her/him? ______

7. Approximately how many hours a week do you spend interacting with your pet? (Please circle your answer.)

0-1 hour
1-3 hours
3-5 hours
5-7 hours
7+ hours

8. How frequently do you engage in the following activities? (Please circle your answers.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Always</th>
<th>Often</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Rarely</th>
<th>Never</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Buy special toys for my pet(s).</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Check my pet(s) into a pet hotel.</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buy special food or treats for my pet(s).</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase items from a pet boutique.</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have my pet(s) professionally groomed.</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have my pet(s) professionally photographed</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>E</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX III

INFORMED CONSENT FORM
INVESTIGATOR: Lisa Sarmicanic
PROTOCOL NUMBER: 0403-1197

Purpose of the Study
You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to examine the ways in which single, divorced, or widowed women relate to their companion animals.

Participants
You are being asked to participate in the study because you are a single, divorced, or widowed woman who owns a cat(s) or dog(s).

Procedures
If you volunteer you will be asked to do the following:
  - Fill out a brief questionnaire
  - Participate in face-to-face interviews
  - Have your picture taken with your pet

Benefits of Participation
Help me and others better understand the experience of pet ownership and the possible benefits of human/pet interaction. You will also be able to tell me anything you wish about your pets.

Risks of Participation
There are few to no risks involved in this research. It is possible, however, that some people may feel emotional about memories of their pets.

Cost/Compensation
There will be no financial cost to you to participate in this study. The study will take 1 to 3 hours of your time. You will not be compensated for your time. The University of Nevada, Las Vegas will not provide compensation or free medical care for an unanticipated injury sustained as a result of participating in this research study.
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
Department of Sociology

INFORMED CONSENT

INVESTIGATOR: Lisa Sarmicanic
PROTOCOL NUMBER: 0403-1197

Contact Information
If you have questions or concerns about the study, you may contact Lisa Sarmicanic or Dr. Kate Hausbeck (dissertation committee advisor) at 895-3322. For questions regarding the rights of research subjects, any complaints or comments regarding the manner in which the study is being conducted you may contact the UNLV Office for the Protection of Research Subjects at 895-2794.

Voluntary Participation
Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate in this study or in any part of this study. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice to your relations with the university. You are encouraged to ask questions about this study at the beginning or any time during the research study.

Confidentiality
All information gathered in this study will be kept completely confidential. No reference will be made in written or oral materials that could link you to this study. All records will be stored in a locked facility at UNLV for at least 3 years after completion of the study. After the storage time the information will be destroyed.

Participant Consent:
I have read the above information and agree to participate in this study. I am at least 18 years of age. A copy of this form has been given to me.

Signature of Participant ___________________________ Date ________________

Participant Name (Please Print) ___________________________
INFORMED CONSENT

INVESTIGATOR: Lisa Sarmicanic
PROTOCOL NUMBER: 0403-1197

I have read the above information and agree to have photographs taken of myself and/or my pet.

__________________________________________  Date
Signature of Participant

__________________________________________
Participant Name (Please Print)

I have read the above information and agree to let my photographs be used for other animal–related research projects.

__________________________________________  Date
Signature of Participant

__________________________________________
Participant Name (Please Print)
BIBLIOGRAPHY


*Anthrozoos*, 1: 90-94.


VITA

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