

A Consideration of Pets Becoming Family Members

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ABSTRACT

A pet generally refers to an animal maintained for companionship. In recent years in Japan, there has been a growing feeling that pets, such as dogs and cats, are equivalent to members of the family. However, the factors underlying this phenomenon are not well understood. Therefore, this study analyzes the treatment of pets based on previous research and discusses the results.

Keywords: Treatment of pet, Companion animal, Familiarity, Differences between livestock and pets

INTRODUCTION

A pet generally refers to an animal maintained for companionship¹. Although they may have the intelligence of a child or lower, their actions often soothe and entertain their owners (Table 1)². In the past, pets were treated similar to livestock such as cows and pigs worldwide. However, according to the current understanding, livestock are kept for practical purposes, such as assisting in hunting and farming, while pets are animals that do not necessarily provide practical benefits to humans. In recent years in Japan, there has been a growing recognition that pets such as dogs and cats are equivalent to family members for their owners (Table 2)³. Children sometimes treat pets like their younger siblings, while the elderly sometimes cherish them like their own children or grandchildren. Similar to humans, they may be buried in graves after death. Some even try to leave their assets to their pets⁴. People enjoy various interactions with their pets and appreciate their appearance and sounds. Although their vocalizations differ from those of humans, pet owners may interpret them in ways that suit them, sometimes even sharing their feelings or seeking advice. From an objective standpoint, can pets, belonging to a different species than humans, truly become members of the same family? (This is questionable) To what extent do pet owners truly understand their pets, who look different and speak a different language? Even if one's own pet is considered a member of the family, other people's pets or wild animals such as crows and pigeons are not treated the same as humans. Only pets that one owns receive special treatment. Owners strive to understand what their pets are trying to communicate through their actions and vocalizations. The factors underlying these behaviors are not well understood. Therefore, this study analyzed the treatment of pets based on previous research and discussed the results.

Treatment of pet in general

A 2003 survey found that 48% of households in Japan with two or more people owned some kind of pet¹. The pets kept included: dogs (60%), cats (29%), fish (11%), and birds (7%, multiple responses). Over time, the number of dogs and cats has increased, whereas the number of birds has declined.

Humans and pets are supposed to have a master-servant relationship. Livestock is similar to pets, but the boundary between them is inherently ambiguous. Sometimes, livestock are defined as animals raised for commercial or practical purposes, whereas pets are considered companion animals raised for entertainment or other non-practical purposes. However, the definition of practicality is not strict and some animals are raised for both practical and companion purposes (Table 2)¹. Furthermore, some animals have both periods where they are raised for practical purposes as well as for companionship. One example is when an owner rears an animal solely for food, as is the case for livestock. However, this alone does not always explain the situation. For example, pigs and chickens are raised as livestock by farmers, and are destined to become food sources for humans. They are sometimes given names, eat and sleep with humans, and are buried in graves when they die. In this case, the animals were not processed for meat. The latter implies that they were treated solely as pets. Even with animals raised as livestock, there are cases where they are given names, and livestock farmers who raise them shed tears when they are shipped out for meat processing. It can be argued that there is a slight emotional connection to them as there would be with pets, making it difficult to separate them completely.

In the case of dogs, their treatment can vary widely, even for a single individual, ranging from practical tasks such as house security to tasks such as sleeping next to a family member³⁾. Some dogs fostered as family pets for a certain period before taking on roles, such as police dogs, while others live as pets and become involved in animal-assisted therapy (mainly non-wild individuals, such as dogs, cats, and hamsters, whose sanitary conditions can be checked and managed).

Since pets are animals and not people, they are legally treated as property, regardless of how much their owners treat them like family. Even if a person causes the death of a pet, it is treated as property damage and not murder. Some pet owners seem dissatisfied with this; however, this is what the Japanese law. To prevent animal cruelty and abandonment, the Law of Humane Treatment and Management of Animals was enacted in 2019, preventing the indiscriminate harm or killing of animals, including wild animals.

In this way, when people view their pets, some owners may consider them family members. However, we do not know how pets perceive humans. Depending on the animal species and age, it is believed that some animals, depending on their intelligence, understand that they should be treated like family, and may even establish a hierarchy within that family (for example, the owner who feeds them is higher in rank, whereas those who do not pay attention to them are lower). They may not fully understand language and other similar concepts but may perceive this in the same way as a newborn baby.

Love for robot pets and their significance

Instead of keeping live animals as pets, some people use robotic pets as substitutes. Robotic pets come in various forms, including dogs, birds, and even dinosaurs. It might be a misnomer to call them pets; however, baby robots also exist. These react by making sounds or moving when people talk to or touch them. Some even speak human language, behave like children, celebrate birthdays, nod in agreement, and offer advice. In other words, it is a toy equipped with sensors that recognize human voices and touches. This can also be considered similar to an AI speaker. The price varies depending on the number of sensors and response performance, ranging from a few dollars to several thousands. Those who buy these are people who find it difficult to continuously feed and clean up after living pets or babies, live in apartment buildings where pets are not allowed, or have circumstances that prevent them from having children but still want a pet (or something similar to a child)⁴⁾. Furthermore, some people acquire robots for trial or practice before having a pet or baby. Naturally, this depends on the owner; however, people also sometimes shower affection on such robots and treat them as family members (Table 3). The fact that robots react to the actions of their owners and are in a vulnerable position depending on their care (survival) (although in reality robots are not living creatures,) may evoke something akin to maternal feelings in people⁵⁾. In particular, when children take care of robots, they often treat them as if they were their siblings, and at times, emotional changes can even bring them to tears²⁾. This principle is not limited to robots; it can also be applied to plants and motionless stuffed animals. Elderly people may also treat robots as if they were their own children or grandchildren. This cannot be explained simply by the fact that it is a living thing. If anything, it seems that, if emotional connections can be made, they will be treated like family, and this does not seem to be related to whether or not they are living beings. Empathy arises not only from the robot's movements, but also from the operator's imagination -from imagining what the robot is thinking- leading to feelings of affection and a desire to protect it. For those who believe that robots are simply machines and are therefore incapable of emotions, a robot can never become like a family member. Although robots require less care than living animals and will not die even with reduced interaction, we believe that depending on the mindset of the person interacting with them, they can be perceived as something similar to a human, even like a family member.

These reasons are not just because they are living beings; the same can be said of plants. However, the pets discussed here tend to become more like family members because their gestures and levels of dependence are more easily visible through their behavior. With plants, hunger, or illness, is difficult to discern visually, but with living animals, such as pets, their condition is easier to understand. In our view, robotic pets can be considered somewhere between living pets and dolls/plants in terms of companionship objects.

Recent pet-related issues in Japan

In recent years in Japan, the idea of valuing all life has become more widespread, and with the establishment of animal welfare laws, more people are reluctant to treat animals carelessly or as mere objects. Among those who respect animals, there are cases where people use the same language to describe the sex and feeding of their pets as they would for humans, treating them as if they were human (e.g., feed → meal, using honorifics when referring to them)¹⁾. With the growing trend of viewing pets as family members, some people wish to leave their inheritances to their pets. Some people build graves for their pets, while others process their pets' ashes into jewelry to wear so they may keep them close. Friction can arise between people who respect pets as living beings and those who view them as mere tools, and sometimes these conflicts can escalate into legal disputes.

It is common for pets to be maintained in a manner that does not suit their nature. For example, a vegetarian owner may feed a

carnivorous pet a diet primarily consisting of vegetables, subsequently causing them health problems. This cannot necessarily be considered a lack of love or abuse. Some pet owners feed their pets only on diets with unbalanced nutrition, resulting in frequent visits to veterinary hospitals because of conditions such as diabetes. In the case of a dog that is very attached to its owner, the dog may wish to please them by eating even when it is full. These dogs may overeat, become obese, or suffer from obesity-related health problems.

Some pets experience stress because of excessive contact, leading to conditions such as neurogenic alopecia areata or stomach ulcers. Pets can also be victims of animal abuse committed by owners to relieve stress and vent frustration. The display and sale of live animals in pet shops can be considered abuse depending on the animal's age, length of the shop's opening hours, intensity of the shop's lighting, and the temperature and humidity of the environment. In the UK, the display and sale of puppies is prohibited regardless of their age. In the US, the display and sale of puppies up to approximately 60 days of age is prohibited, and in Japan, the sale of puppies under 56 days of age is currently prohibited. It may seem that in Japan, the display of age and other information in stores has decreased compared to before in order to circumvent these regulations. Since newborn animals look cute, there is an underlying desire to display live animals in stores.

In recent years, a number of pet owners have brought their pets to stores and public transportation without using pet carriers (a special bag or case for safely and comfortably transporting small pets). Such incidents not only cause discomfort to those around them and can cause young children, in particular, to become frightened of animals, but they can also pose health risks to people with animal allergies. It is considered basic etiquette for pet owners to refrain from bringing their pets into places where they are explicitly prohibited (although it is also true that some people engage in problematic behavior by insisting that their pets are family members).

CONCLUSION

Pets are living animals, and unlike mere objects, they require consideration of various aspects, including nutrition, environment, health, and mental wellness. Pet owners must care for their pets from the time they acquire them until their death. In this process, pet owners recognize that their pets are highly dependent on them for their own survival and are weaker than themselves. It is thought that they develop feelings similar to those felt by parents⁵⁾. Many pet owners talk to their pets in the same way they talk to humans, therefore acting as substitutes for humans, relieving frustration. This can alleviate feelings of loneliness and help organize thoughts. Pet dogs sometimes encourage their owners to exercise, such as training gymnasium coaches, and this increased physical activity through interactions with pets can contribute to the owner's longevity. Thus, the advantages of owning a pet include healing, relief from loneliness, and the development of interest and compassion (in the owner) through caring for them. Owning a pet can foster healthy emotional development in children, such as compassion²⁾.

Even if the pet is a robot pet, if people perceive it as vulnerable and shower it with affection, they can become family members. We also feel that people who experience emotional loneliness, such as not having a family nearby or feeling misunderstood by those around them, are more likely to shower their pets with affection. We were unable to investigate the comparison or degree of these factors in this study; therefore, these will be the subject of future research.

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Table 1 Role and impact of pets

| Type | Details |
|--|---|
| Emotional support | Pets provide unconditional love to their owners and alleviate feelings of loneliness. Dogs and cats, in particular, are sensitive to their owners' emotions, offering comfort in times of sadness and sharing in joy in times of happiness. |
| Mental and physical health | Interacting with pets reduces stress and promotes relaxation. Owning a dog increases the owner's exercise through walks and playtime, contributing to their health. |
| Social connection | Owning a pet fosters interaction with other pet owners, strengthening social connections. It's also possible to make new friends through pets. |
| Development of sense of responsibility | Caring for pets helps owners develop a sense of responsibility. For children in particular, caring for a pet provides a valuable opportunity to learn important values. |
| Educational role | Owning a pet teaches the importance of life and the value of care. Through managing their pets' health and providing daily care, pet owners can grow and improve their self-management skills. |

Based on the content of reference 1).

Table 2 How to treat pets in different relationships with people

| Item | Details |
|--|---|
| Combined use with livestock | Animals are kept in enclosures, but they are given names and taken for walks. While livestock are destined to become human food, pets are exempt from this fate and are kept in their owners' houses. |
| Also serving as a house (if it's a dog, a guard dog) | For security purposes, some animals are kept in sheds built outside the house. This is not considered a pet; keeping a certain percentage of animals inside the house falls under the category of a pet. |
| Working as a shopkeeper | Even pets, by wandering around the store or napping there, can become like idols or mascots to the store's customers, essentially taking on a certain role. |
| Before becoming a police dog or drug detection dog | As part of their training, they may be fostered by adoptive families and kept as pets for a period before actually starting work, learning affection for humans. Afterward, they undergo training such as police dog training before taking on their duties. |
| Animals involved in animal-assisted therapy | Among pet animals, only those that meet certain criteria—such as being well-hygienic, not being aggressive, and being friendly—may be used to assist in medical treatment at hospitals. Interacting with pets can help patients regain the ability to move their limbs and express their emotions more vividly. |
| Family | Pets kept by their owners are livings that should obey their owners as masters. However, pets treated as family members are allowed to be selfish, eat like humans, and sleep in the same bed as their owners. Some animals even begin to believe they are human and act accordingly. |

Based on the content of references 3) and 5).

Table 3 Reasons for treating pets like family

| Item | Details | Problem |
|---|--|--|
| A pet's life depends on its owner | The sense of responsibility that comes from knowing that the pet's life would be in danger if the owner doesn't feed it creates a master-servant relationship between the owner and the pet. The same applies to treatment during illness and exercise such as walks. | If people are concerned about their pet's health, it's better to feed them three meals a day at appropriate times, just like humans, rather than feeding them whenever the owner wants. The amount of food should also be adjusted with their health in mind, and they shouldn't be given food indiscriminately just because they want it (which can lead to ill health). If owners don't notice and treat their pet's illness, it can lead to serious illness. Just like humans, exercise is important for maintaining their health. |
| Pets listen to their owners | Because pets spend a lot of time with their owners, owners can talk to their pets about things that don't require an answer, which can help them process their worries and relieve stress. | It's said that pets can become stressed if they are constantly subjected to verbal abuse from their owners. |
| Owners can see every aspect of their pet's life | Pets are kept within the owner's sphere of activity, such as indoors or in the garden of their home, and the owner can observe every aspect of their life. Surveillance cameras are sometimes installed in homes, allowing owners to observe their pets in real time, even from a distance, and to talk to or feed them. | Depending on the type of pet, they don't necessarily want constant attention from their owners, so constantly being by their side or talking to them can cause discomfort. |
| Pets are younger than their owners | The entire family is considered the owner, and while there are exceptions including infants, this usually includes at least one person who is financially able to pay for food and medical expenses, and this person is typically older than the pet. | In many cases, the pet dies first, but when elderly people take in pets to alleviate loneliness or for other reasons, there are cases where the owner dies first, leaving the surviving pet behind and facing difficulties in their daily life. |
| Pets are in the places where their owners want them to be | While it could be said that the owner is restricting the pet, pets are generally only allowed to stay in places permitted by their owner. Therefore, pet owners can interact with their pets in the places they choose. | Being restricted in where you are can lead to a lack of exercise and increased stress. If the owner does not feed them properly, pets cannot find and eat food on their own, leading to starvation or obesity. These days, automatic pet feeders and other devices exist, which can somewhat reduce the burden on pet owners. |

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