

Pets as "Proxy Humans"

The companion value of all kinds of pets provides the key to their ever-growing popularity in urban industrial societies. Companionship is so central to their use in such societies that some professional animal caretakers have stopped calling pets "pets" and have taken to calling them "companion animals" instead...

Modern societies have solved many problems related to human needs such as the need for shelter, for an adequate food supply, and the prevention and cure of disease, but they have failed miserably by not providing high-quality, mutually supportive companionship. Band and village peoples used to live (some still do) in large families surrounded by neighbors--who not only knew each other but who were related by ties of descent and marriage. Companionship was not an urgent problem for them. While animals may have provided companionship in some degree, the value of this service could not have been as great as it is today.

The specific conditions responsible for making companionship the salient utility of contemporary petdom are closely related to the conditions which make dogs so useful in the deterrence of crime. People live apart, isolated from friends and family, in one- or two-person households, lacking friendly neighbors, in communities where they have no roots, and which are in any event communities in a geographical but not an interactive sense. Increasingly, young people postpone marriage or don't get married at all. When they get married, they have one or two children, and many couples have none. Divorce rates continue to rise, and single-parent households are increasing faster than any other kind. Meanwhile, people are living longer, and the "empty nest" syndrome now occurs earlier, enduring for most of a lifetime. Equally important is the quality of relationships. Competition for grades, college admissions, job promotions, and business deals undermines trust and confidence. As a victim of a computer programming fraud explained to the *Wall Street Journal*: "If you're in business you don't trust anybody. The ones you trust are the ones who'll get ya." Except for a fortunate few, most people have jobs which depend on obeying and being respectful toward bosses, managers, executives, foremen, and other "superiors", and this inevitably results in episodes of humiliation, wounded pride or self-doubt.

Companion animals partially compensate for all of these unsatisfactory human relationships. The overriding utility of pets in contemporary society is that they can substitute for people in satisfying our specific cultural lack of warm, supportive, and loving relationships. Neither "pet" nor "companion animal" objectively conveys the centrality of this function. We would not be so quick to think that the essence of petdom is uselessness if we identified today's pets for what most of them really are: proxy humans. It is because they are proxy humans that pets help us to overcome the anonymity and lack of social community engendered by big-city life. As proxy humans, they can "stir the dead air" of empty apartments, and give countless single people someone to go home to. It is because they are proxy humans that they can stand in for absent or unsatisfactory husbands or wives or children, fill the empty nest, and ease the burden of loneliness which old age so often brings in hyperindustrial cultures. And they can do all this without imposing the suspicions and penalties characteristic of real humans caught up in highly competitive, stratified, and exploitative relationships.

One might suppose that to substitute for humans, pets would have to communicate like humans. Alas, they cannot really carry on a conversation. But as Freudian analysts and Catholic priests have long recognized, levels of frustration and anxiety can be lowered merely by having someone listen or even appear to be listening to you. Pets make excellent substitutes for such listeners. The Companion Animal Clinic at the University of Pennsylvania found that 98 percent of pet owners talked to their animals, 80 percent talked to them "as a person," not "as an animal," and 28 percent confided in their pets and talked about events of the day. A nonrandom survey by *Psychology Today* magazine found that 99 percent of pet owners talked to their pets, using baby talk or confiding in them. I wish that I could