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Title page

‘Animals just love you as you are’: experiencing kinship across the species barrier

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‘Animals just love you as you are’: experiencing kinship across the species barrier

Abstract

This paper explores how affective relationships between humans and animals are understood and experienced. It argues that, although the context of close relationships with pets has changed, affective relationships between humans and animals have a long history. The affinities between people and their pets are experienced as emotionally close, embodied and ethereal and are deeply embedded in family lives. They are understood in terms of kinship, an idiom which indicates significant and enduring connectedness between humans and animals, and are valued because of animals’ differences from, as well as similarities to, humans. Kinship across the species barrier is not something new and strange, but is an everyday experience of those humans who share their domestic space with other animals. Rather than witnessing a new phenomenon of post-human families, multi-species households have been with us for a considerable length of time but have been effectively hidden from sociology by the so-called species barrier.

Key words

Affective relationships, animals, connectedness, kinship, pets, post-human families, species barrier

The other day, when out walking with my dogs, I met a woman who had recently returned to Britain from the Antipodes with her husband and children. We began talking about her dog who, it transpired, had made the journey with them. She explained that she could not have left the dog behind as she was part of the family. This woman is not alone in expressing such sentiments. Surveys consistently show that pet keepers see their pets as family members; a recent Harris poll in the US reports that 91% of pet ‘owners’ regard their pets as family members (Harris, 2011) and in Australia, a national survey found that 88% of pet keepers thought of their pets as part of their family (Franklin, 2007:16). Women are more likely than men to ascribe family membership to a dog or cat and many people report feeling closer to their dogs than to other family members (Pew, 2006; Cohen, 2002). Research suggests that, as with human family members, pets are defined as kin due to the quality of the relationship (Tipper, 2011) and the support they provide (Charles and Davies, 2008). However, while close, emotional bonds between humans and their pets are often understood in familial terms, they may be experienced as having a different quality from those with human kin (Cohen, 2002; Walsh, 2009). In this paper I explore this further, developing an analysis of close, affective relationships between people and their pets and investigating how they are understood and experienced. In order to do this I draw on written responses to a Mass Observation directive on animals and humans which I situate in the context of claims about a transformation in human-animal relations. I argue that, although the context of close relationships with pets has changed, such relationships are not new and that it is problematic to interpret them as heralding the emergence of post-human families. On the contrary, multi-species households have been with us for a considerable length of time but have been effectively hidden from sociology by the so-called species barrier.¹

Transformations in human-animal relations

Historians have linked the rise of pet keeping in Britain and the US to processes of urbanisation in the 18th and 19th centuries and the associated exclusion of working and food animals from cities, culminating, in the first half of the 20th century, in the replacement of the draught horse with motor power (Thomas, 1993; Kete, 2007; Ritvo, 1987; Philo, 1998; Greene, 2008). Thomas, in his account of changing sensibilities towards animals, associates pet keeping with affective ties to individual

animals and sympathy for animals in general, while Ritvo suggests that fondness for animals was made possible by the industrial revolution's 'taming of nature' which meant that the natural world was no longer seen as a threat to human existence (Ritvo, 2008). Grier, in her study of the history of pets in America, links the nineteenth century 'domestic ethic of kindness' towards animals to bourgeois sensibilities and the civilising process; learning to be 'kind' to animals was an important part of the socialisation process for middle-class children, particularly boys (Grier, 2006). An increase in pet keeping is therefore associated with the rise of the bourgeoisie and processes of urbanisation; it has been linked to a shift in the basis of human-animal relations from function to affect (Berger, 2009; Thomas, 1993) and, according to Thomas, became 'a normal feature of middle-class households, especially in the towns' in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Thomas, 1993:110).

Pets are often defined as not having a function, in contradistinction to animals bred for food or draught animals, although, as Grier points out, pet keeping co-exists with other forms of human-animal sociality and is not conditional upon an unfamiliarity with strictly utilitarian uses for animals (Grier, 2006:239). This notwithstanding, human-pet relationships 'are based primarily on the transfer or exchange of social rather than economic or utilitarian provisions' (Serpell, 2005:131). The other distinctive features of pets are that they live inside the home, they are named and they are not eaten. Naming individuates an animal, endowing it with attributes that are conventionally seen as human; this practice blurs the species barrier and became common in Britain in the 18th century (Thomas, 1993). The idea that pets are like children, faithful servants, and friends also has a long history, emerging in Britain at the end of the seventeenth century (Thomas, 1993:117-9) and in the US in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Grier, 2006: 198-9).

A second and more recent period of transformation in human-animal relations dating from the 1970s has also been identified and characterised as post-domesticity (Bulliet, 2005) or post-modernity (Franklin, 1999; Emel and Wolch, 1998). It is associated with the emergence of a post-humanist sensibility which recognises neither the impermeability of the species barrier nor the pre-eminence of humans over other animals (Cudworth, 2011). What is of interest for the purposes of my argument is the way in which an increase in pet keeping is theorised as a response to ontological

insecurity (Franklin, 1999), and the links between this type of theorising and theories which have been influential for the sociology of families and personal life which, as Smart points out, has been marked by a tension between ‘broad, generalised theoretical statements and small-scale, detailed empirical study’ (Smart, 2007:8).

In relation to family change the theories of Beck and Giddens have been particularly influential (Smart, 2007; Charles et al, 2008) and some of their ideas have been taken up in order to explain changes in human-animal relations. A key element of these theories is that family and community solidarities are being undermined and that this results in a loss of ‘traditional’ sources of support (Beck, 1992) and ontological insecurity (Giddens, 1990). In order to compensate for this people turn to animals for companionship and intimacy; pets provide the ontological security which is no longer forthcoming from relations with humans which are fragile, fluid and contingent (Franklin, 1999).

In contrast to theories of family change, empirical research shows a more nuanced picture: family and community solidarities are resilient, people choose who to relate to and who to ‘count’ as family (Charles et al, 2008), and processes of individualisation have not resulted in a universal disconnectedness from kin, neighbours or friends (Smart and Shipman, 2004; Duncan and Smith, 2006; Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004). Families may be ‘changing in structure’ but ‘they still provide love and support for family members and kin’ (Smart, 2007: 13). Moreover there is growing evidence that the social relations constituting domestic groups incorporate animals as social actors. Thus, in a recent study of family formation and kinship networks a significant number of people spontaneously included animals in their families; this was a particularly interesting finding as interviewees had not been explicitly asked about animals (Charles et al, 2008; Charles and Davies, 2008). Similarly, children think of animals as important social actors in their lives, endowing them with as much significance as human kin and possibly finding them easier to identify with due to their similar social positioning (Tipper, 2011).

As well as being seen as family members animals are also included in friendship networks (Spencer and Pahl, 2006) and many people form close and intimate relationships with them (Gabb, 2008; Irvine, 2004; Cudworth, 2011). Gabb argues

that pet-human relationships are valued in their own right (see also Fudge, 2008; Haraway, 2008) and, furthermore, being a valued family member is reflected in the fact that private domestic spaces (bedrooms and bathrooms) are open to companion animals. Intimate networks, she concludes, can encompass non-human animals not only for children (Tipper, 2011; Morrow, 1998) but also for adults, although perhaps adults are less willing to reveal inter-species intimacy because of the disapproval such revelations may attract (cf. Charles and Davies, 2008; McDonnell, 2011; Voith, 1985).

Findings such as these have led some to suggest that we are witnessing the emergence of hybrid families (Franklin, 2007) or post-humanist households (Smith, 2003; Power, 2008) where humans are de-centred and the species barrier has no meaning. But even studies that focus on the ways in which animals are treated as family members may inadvertently reproduce both the species barrier and assumptions that it is only humans or human-substitutes who can be construed as kin (Greenebaum, 2004). In what follows I address these issues through an analysis of how correspondents to the *Animals and Humans* directive wrote about their relationships to pet animals. I first describe the study and then focus on the different ways correspondents wrote about their childhood relations with animals, the ways in which relations between humans and their pets are understood, and the processes of animals being and becoming family. I end with some reflections about the emergence of post-human families.

The study

This paper draws on 249 responses by panel members to a Mass Observation Project (MOP) directive on humans and animals.² The Mass Observation Project is based at the University of Sussex and sends out two or three directives a year to over 500 correspondents who are asked to write as much or as little as they want in response to a series of questions and prompts. Correspondents see themselves as ‘ordinary people’ whose writing offers an insight into daily life and provides an accurate and reflexive historical record (Sheridan et al, 2000:213; Kramer, 2011).

The correspondents are not representative of the overall UK population and there are more contributions from women, older people and those living in the south of England. This is despite the recruitment criteria for the panel which aim to attract a

‘diverse cross-section of “ordinary people”’ (Bytheway, 2005: 465). Between October 2008 and September 2009 ‘the MO panel increased from 462 to 588. Of these 61% are female and 39% are male’ (MO, 2009). In line with this, correspondents to the Animals and Humans directive were 63% women and 37% men, 46% were over 60 (46% of women and 48% of men) and 19% of women and 20% of men were under 40.

The directives are divided into two parts, the first part being the longer one; I commissioned a part I directive which was distributed to panel members in August 2009. As can be seen in Figure 1, correspondents are asked to supply details of their sex, age, marital status and occupation but this does not always happen; in a few cases even age and sex were omitted. The directive asked correspondents to write about the meaning of animals to them -- the part animals played in their childhood; whether they play a part in their lives now; living with animals; working with animals; animals and wellbeing; animals as food; animal welfare; sport; TV and films; wild animals - and to reflect on some general statements such as: It is often said that a dog is a person’s best friend. Do you think there is any truth in this?

[Figure 1 about here]

All the responses were read and re-read in order to carry out a thematic analysis. They vary in length: some are less than a page and some are many pages long, some are handwritten and some are typed. Many have the quality of diary entries and can be quite intimate and revealing. This may be because they are completely anonymous and there is no fear of moral censure, something which is particularly important given the moral ambivalence surrounding pet-human relationships (Charles and Davies, 2008). They provide detailed accounts of close relationships with animals and have the quality of ‘life stories and autobiography’ (Smart, 2007:186); indeed many of the correspondents told their life stories through their accounts of the animals they had been involved with since childhood. What is also notable is the intensity of the emotions that are written about and the way ‘personal meanings... enter the text ... as a means of reflecting everyday life’ (Smart, 2007:185). MOP’s emphasis on subjective experience means that the emotional dimensions of correspondents’

relationships with animals are revealed in ways that are not usually associated with sociological studies of families and personal life (Smart, 2007:184).

Correspondents evidently thought deeply about the questions in the directive and one, through writing his response, decided that he would become vegetarian (G4296). As well as being reflexive, correspondents sometimes take issue with a directive and its assumptions (Kramer, 2011; Sheridan et al, 2000) and several were critical of the implied human-animal distinction in the directive's title.

I think you are pulling a cute trick in your outline questions here by positing animals as distinct from humans, thereby blurring the inescapable fact that humans are animals too – inescapably, and all too clearly. (J3248, M, 62, research consultant, married)

These criticisms are well put and in what follows it becomes clear that this distinction is not very meaningful for many who responded to the directive.

Childhood and animals

There are two themes that emerge from correspondents' accounts of their childhood relationships with pets: affective relationships with animals exist in the context of utilitarian ones and animals occupy positions in social relations that are analogous to those occupied by humans. The utilitarian context of affective ties emerged most strongly in the accounts of older correspondents, many of whom had been children before and during the second world war, while correspondents of all ages wrote about strong childhood attachments to individual animals who were seen as siblings, best friends, confidantes and companions (see also Tipper, 2011).

In the older correspondents' accounts, animals were often described in functional terms: they were, in the main, sources of food, working animals and sometimes they were pets. Working and food animals were disposed of when their time came with little sentimentality, either to be eaten or because they had become redundant. Indeed, in Britain, up to and including the second world war, many households kept chickens and rabbits for food, something which was encouraged by government as part of the war effort (Molloy, 2011). Animals who were pets – whether this was a particular

rabbit or chicken or a family's dog or cat -- and with whom children had entered into relationship were different. Adults remembered their childhood selves as experiencing acute grief at their loss; their attachment to their pets was deep and they were regarded as individuals who were unique and irreplaceable. This was particularly problematic for children who became attached to animals who were destined for the pot and reveals how animals become pets within a network of social relations which, in the case of 'petstock', are liable to change (cf Grier, 2006; Wilkie, 2010; Wrye, 2009).³ This changeability was remembered as having profound consequences.

During the war – 1939-46 [sic] – my parents kept rabbits and chickens to exchange or sell for other food. I grew fond of one rabbit, a beautiful white angora with pink ears and eyes. But like all the others, once it was fat enough, it was killed and strung up to eat. I have never been able to eat meat since those days and have been vegetarian ever since. (H260, F, 79, married, retired shop manager).

This woman's account is not one of sentimentality about animals, her view of animals is that they are 'just that' and 'not to be compared to a human in any way'. However she was so affected by this particular rabbit's fate that she never ate meat again.

The accounts of older correspondents both contrast and resonate with the accounts of those whose childhoods were more recent and for whom the context of attachment to individual pets was different. In the later accounts animals are not kept as a source of food, neither do many people write about them in terms of the job they do, instead the emotional attachment they feel for particular animals comes to the fore.

As a child we had two dogs; a poodle called Simba and a Labrador called Prince. I wasn't responsible for looking after them but both used to sleep on my bed. Prince was a very badly trained black Labrador and used to pull and choke himself. He loved eating off plates. As a small puppy he used to eat toilet roles [sic]... He died when he was nine and I loved him. (L3298, F, 51, divorced, local government officer)

As well as the strong affection she expresses for a particular childhood dog, Prince, this account reveals the absence of physical boundaries between animals and humans;

these dogs did not live outside, they shared people's domestic space, including their beds. This is typical of many of the accounts of later childhoods where animals are neither working for their keep nor a source of food. In later childhoods the accounts are more purely about affect while the earlier ones emphasise utilitarian *as well as* affective relationships with animals.

Whatever the wider social context, children forged strong emotional connections with animals and these relations were understood in terms of kinship and friendship (cf Tipper, 2011). One of the older correspondents wrote about the dog she had as a child:

All through my childhood he was there as companion and comforter. I was an only child, and so I regarded him as my brother. (F3641, F 69, married, former teacher)

And in another account a kitten named Stripey became a 'best friend'.

We had moved house several times and I had started a new high school. I didn't find it especially difficult to make new friends but for a while I didn't have that all important 'best friend' that adolescent girls need. In the meantime Stripey seemed to fill that role; I talked about her in school as though she were an actual friend; it can't have been that bizarre (as it now sounds) though as I was never teased about it. (H4294, F, 41, married, housewife)

These animals occupied 'the same place in emotional, cultural, locational and personal senses' as significant humans (Smart, 2007:46). In the first case a dog was 'regarded' as a brother by someone who was an only child and, in the second case, a kitten became a 'best friend'. This might suggest that animals become important when positions in social relations are 'empty' but there were many accounts of close relationships with animals in the context of siblings and friends. This woman, for instance, wrote:

My family had a cat before I was born and he was like a part of the family. He died when I was about 13 and we all grieved for him for a long time. It was like losing a friend. (F3725, F, 38, cohabiting, oracle analyst/programmer)

Such experiences were also part of the fabric of adult lives. In several of the accounts correspondents likened pets to young children and, in a few cases, spoke about them as substitutes for human companions and/or family members (see also Charles and Davies, 2008; Anderson, 2003; Shir-Vitesh, 2012).

Connectedness

Emotional attachments were to particular animals; indeed individuation is important in developing an affinity for an animal and is symbolised in naming (Horowitz, 2010:296; see Wilkie, 2010 for an account of this process amongst farm animals). One man reflected on this.

Had we [as children] been able, we would have thought that these animals displayed the appropriate criteria for personhood. This was the case particularly for dogs. It was local custom to refer to dogs by their given names – Spot, Rover or Prince – plus the surname of the family that owned them: Spot Smith, Rover Atkins or Prince Jenkins. . . . Dogs had distinct characters. On the farm, Laddie was quiet and clever, while Bruce was boisterous and aggressive; Flash from Chapel Row was sly, and the dog in the Post Office was fierce. (J3248, M, 62, research consultant).

As well as symbolising a process of individuation, his account suggests that naming indicates incorporation into social relations and the ascription of personhood to animals. Correspondents wrote about their animals not only as individuals but also as having different characters and personalities. This meant that their relationships with them varied considerably and that the ‘interpersonal dynamics [were] specific to *that* relationship and *that* person’ (Mason, 2008:37). One woman wrote that she had always had dogs all with ‘their own personalities’ and ‘once the children had grown up and left home’ she and her husband began a phase of having two dogs, one each, initially because of the attachment that one of the dogs (William) spontaneously formed with her husband.

Our daily routine and subsequent lifestyle was geared around the dogs who were rarely left alone, and who almost always went on holiday with us. ... Sadly, my husband died when William was 4 yrs old and I was left with him and Sarah to care for. They were an absolute blessing for me, especially Sarah who sensed my sadness, and for the first three months I was on my own, slept on my bed every night. I had a very close relationship with Sarah, which lasted for 12 + years and she left a big gap in my life when she died. I still had William, but our relationship was more that I took him for walks, and fed him, he was not as close to me as he had been with my husband. (M2061, F, widow, retired nurse)

This woman clearly experienced her relationship with Sarah, a cocker spaniel, as special and very close, close enough for Sarah to be able to comfort her in her bereavement; William was less able to do this even when Sarah died. The different quality of these relationships is attributed to the character and personality of the individual dogs and the nature of the relationship she had with them. Her account also illustrates the emotional support that is received from pets and how people organise their lives so as to accommodate the animals with whom they live (see also Smith, 2003).

As well as being about a particular animal, connectedness has different dimensions which 'represent different ways of imagining and practising relatedness' (Mason, 2008:32). Correspondents wrote about ethereal or spiritual and sensory dimensions of affinity when describing relationships with particular animals in an analogous way to how people represent kin connections with particular human others (Mason, 2008). One woman talked about falling in love; she had separated and moved in with a new partner and they decided to get a cat.

We took all the children, my two and his two, to the Cats Protection League to choose one. The children wanted a kitten; the husband wanted an old cat. I stood back while they perused the cages. I suddenly realised that I was being miaoued at. I turned round to experience love at first sight. The cat was tabby and white, long straight legs, but still a kitten's body. He made such a row; I said, 'Found him. It's this one. He wants us'. This perfectly beautiful specimen came home a few days

later and stayed for ten years..... At times when my husband, my kids and I were at loggerheads, as usually happens in families with teenagers, I would say that had Mickey been human I'd have packed my bags and run away with him! (E743, F, 58, married, teacher)

This sudden attachment is to an individual cat and is described as 'love at first sight'; a way of understanding connectedness that has been noted for horses (Smart, 2011; Cassidy, 2005; Birke, 2007) as well as for animals re-homed from shelters (Irvine, 2004). Furthermore, she chooses the cat but, in an important sense, the cat has already chosen her; evidently this is not uncommon and was also described by other correspondents (see also Alger and Alger, 2003). Another correspondent invokes a spiritual affinity when she writes about her cat's death.

I was absolutely devastated! I mourned that cat for weeks, just as I would if it had been my child. I'm absolutely convinced that she was put on this earth to be with me and that we were like soul mates. (F2949, F, 55, divorced and cohabiting)

The sensory dimension of affinity was brought out when correspondents wrote about their relationships in terms of touch and physical contact, pointing to the centrality of embodiment to human-animal connectedness (see also Smart, 2011; Fox, 2008; Tipper, 2011). Relationships were often described in terms of intercorporeality.

Out of all the cats I've owned I had a very special relationship with one cat in particular. She was black and white and we rescued her when she was a kitten. She was just like a toddler and she'd stand on her back legs and put her front paws up to be picked up. When I picked her up she'd put one leg either side of my waist and one paw on each shoulder. I have to say that I felt real love for this cat, more than I've ever felt for an animal before or since. (F2949, F, 55, divorced and cohabiting)

In describing this 'special' relationship an embodied interaction is chosen with the cat being likened to a toddler who 'asks' to be picked up and wraps herself around you when she is. And as we have already seen in an earlier account, Sarah (the cocker

spaniel) provided comfort partly through the physical closeness of sharing a bed. It has been suggested that touch may be a particularly important aspect of relationships with pets for children (Tipper, 2011), but the MOP accounts suggest that it is equally important for adults.

For all the correspondents connectedness was created rather than given; it was constructed through interaction with a particular animal and was often attributed to the actions of that animal. A telling account of grief was provided by a man who would rather not have had any pets. He is 'repelled' by the idea that dogs can be a person's best friend and write, 'In relations with animals, I never lose sight of the fact that I am the dominant partner, and that I have much greater capabilities' (J3248). However, some time ago they had acquired a cat 'ostensibly as a pet for my daughter' and, to his surprise, he found it a 'cute little thing', 'it attached itself to me, and was disdainful of other family members' and 'became my constant companion' (always referred to as 'it'). The cat died and he comments:

By careful calibration with other deaths, I can report that we found it as upsetting as the deaths of human, including friends and family members. (J3248, M, 62, married, research consultant)

This account suggests that he finds the cat 'cute' because it singles him out and, in some way can be seen as recognising and confirming his superiority, even over the other human members of his household (of whom there were at least two, his wife and daughter). In interaction with the cat his sense of himself as an individual is reaffirmed (cf Irvine, 2004). However, he recognises that the grief the human members of the household felt when the cat died was no different from grief experienced when humans die, an observation meticulously made and blurring the boundaries that he has so clearly established between himself as superior human and animal as incapable of being a 'best friend'.

What emerges from these accounts is that connectedness involves intense emotions and that it is understood in terms of different dimensions of affinity. Affinities are ethereal and embodied and experienced in relation to particular animals who have some key characteristics of personhood. Animals are also experienced as actively

shaping their connectedness with humans; they co-constitute human-animal relatedness (cf. Haraway, 2008).

Social actors

Becoming part of a family, a social group, is a two-way process, as with any relationship, and the animals that feature in the correspondents' accounts play an active part. As with the cat who 'singled out' the man above for special attention and the kitten who called to the woman at the animal shelter, animals are understood to be social actors who make choices and act upon them if they are able (Arluke and Sanders, 1996; Anderson, 2003; Fox, 2008; Jerolmack, 2009; Anderson, 2003; Charles and Davies, 2008). We saw earlier that cats 'choose' people, and there are numerous stories in the responses about cats leaving home to go and live with someone else, being left behind when people move as they are perceived to be more attached to places than to people, or adopting families and becoming part of their households, thereby choosing one family over another. Individual cats living in the same household can also differ in their 'choice' of whether to be part of the family or not. One woman wrote about the difference between her two cats.

We have one female tortoiseshell who is just like a little baby, never really ever growing up, and one black tom. The black tom came from my partner's cousin. They had to move to a smaller house because of financial circumstances nine years ago and they asked us to have him. For two years he wouldn't integrate into the family, preferring to sit in a room on his own. Then he started to join in a bit and now he's totally inseparable from us. (F2949, F, 55, cohabiting)

The black tom only chose to become part of this family after two years of sitting on his own. Here is an account of a dog who chose to relate more closely to the writer than to her husband and son; Lily, a wire haired fox terrier, has a key role in defining her place in the group.

She is meant to be the family dog and my husband thought it would be good for our son to grow up with a dog. The reality is that she is my dog – I walk and feed her and she normally prefers my lap..... Having a dog is a bit like having a toddler but one that never really grows up or learns to speak. Although of course I talk to

her as though she was a sentient human being. My husband is convinced that Lily is the love of my life and that I have eyes for nothing and no one else. (A3434, F, 44, married, early retirement from stock market)

The strength of the attachment between the writer and Lily is such that her husband understands it in terms of a love affair.

Almost human

Processes of individuation and attachment were clearly important for animals to become family members and, for some, depended upon the animal's ability to exercise choice; constraint in the form of bars and cages indicated a lack of connectedness. Correspondents wrote about emotional ties making animals 'almost human' and being part of a social group leading to the formation of 'human-like bonds' (see also Greenebaum, 2004; Russell, 2007: 34). This raises the question of whether it is only because animals are anthropomorphised that meaningful relations with them can be established. It is undoubtedly the case that many so-called human capacities are attributed to animals, and it has been suggested that humans act towards the animals with whom they engage 'as if' they share meanings and have a sense of self (Jerolmack, 2009). There is, however, evidence in the correspondents' accounts that relationships with animals were valued not only because animals were 'almost human' but also because they were not (cf. Fudge, 2008). Animals were sometimes found to be better at being family than were human animals; they were 'more family than family' and the emotional bond was experienced as stronger and more enduring than that with some human family members.

To me they are family. I love them unconditionally (as I do my son) and I care for them a great deal. They are very soothing to have around (most of the time). They seem to love and need me – and that's mutual. In some ways it's simpler than life with humans – more straightforward. ... And, given the way my brother stopped talking to me Dec 1999, I have found cats far more of a comfort and far more 'family'. (G2640, F, 57, divorced, civil servant)

This reinforces survey findings that animals may provide more affection than human family members (Pew, 2006) and suggests that it is not only the quality of the

emotional attachment that is important but its difference from the attachment provided by human family members. Animals give people something that human animals do not, an uncomplicated affection which has been likened to that given by very young children (Beck and Katcher, 1996; Shir-Vitesh, 2012) who, as Tuan suggests, may also be constructed as pets in relations of domination and affection (Tuan, 1984).

Animals just love you as you are and they don't argue – they accept you as you are and in return they give you their trust and friendship and faithfulness. (J1890, F, 77, married, retired newsagent assistant).

Many people wrote about getting something from animals that they were unable to get from humans – not only or even if they were on their own, lonely, or deprived of human contact. At the same time, the emotions triggered by animals who are part of family groups are the same as those triggered by human members of families and, in this sense, animals are treated as human (cf. Fudge, 2008). This goes as far as sibling rivalry and, as we saw earlier, a man feeling that the cat, rather than him, is the love of his wife's life. What also emerges from these accounts is that animals are experienced as reciprocating and providing emotional support (Bonas et al, 2000; Serpell, 2005). Furthermore, the provision of support is an important element of kinship (Becker and Charles, 2006; Finch and Mason, 1993) and has been identified as one of the ways in which animals become family (Charles et al, 2008; Charles and Davies, 2008; Borneman, 1997).

Discussion

Correspondents described strong, affective relationships with pet animals, sometimes in the context of a range of other, more utilitarian relationships and sometimes as the only type of relationship experienced. Moreover, historians and writers have observed and commented upon the significance of such relationships at least since the industrial revolution and there is evidence of their existence in much earlier times (Woolf, 2002; McDonnell, 2011; Kean, 2007; 2011; Grier, 2006; Thomas, 1993). This suggests that affective relationships between humans and animals neither exist in isolation from other forms of animal-human relations nor are they a new phenomenon. With the rising affluence of the post-war years, however, pet keeping has increased (Franklin, 1999), there has been a tendency towards keeping animals inside rather than outside

the home (Grier, 2006) and the positive impact of close emotional bonds between people and their pets has been recognised (Walsh, 2009). Rather than the recent emergence of a new phenomenon associated with post-modernity, however, this suggests the continuation of a longstanding trend towards an increasingly widespread experience of affective human-animal connectedness.

If this is the case then we need to think carefully about the idea that pets provide humans with a sense of ontological security. The accounts presented here suggest that relationships with animals can be experienced as providing more stability and consistency than those with human family members but also that they are deeply embedded in family relations and are often understood in terms of kinship. Animals are clearly experienced as a source of emotional support, comfort and security for their human keepers which lends credence to the idea that they may provide a sense of ontological security. This does not, however, mean that they are necessarily substitutes for particular categories of kin or filling places in social networks that have been emptied out. In many cases, close relationships with animals exist alongside rather than instead of relationships with human kin and friends and there is evidence that animals are more frequently found in households with children than in other types of household (Beck and Katcher, 1996:45; Franklin, 2007:10; Serpell, 1996:40; Bonas et al, 2000; Charles and Davies, 2008; Swabe, 2005; Cohen, 2002). Rather than indicating a substitution of animals for those humans who are allegedly missing from families and kinship networks, perhaps the use of kinship terms to indicate ‘meaningful connections’ (Tipper, 2011) underlines the fact that kinship is the idiom of connectedness and belonging; it is the language we use to indicate significant and enduring connectedness in personal lives even across the species barrier (Grier, 2006; Thomas, 1993).

The social groups in which such connectedness is located are multi-species, consisting of both human and other animals and, in this sense, they can be regarded as post-human. Indeed, the close connectedness between people and animals and the affective bonds that they share suggest that the species barrier is irrelevant to how connectedness and relationality are understood. However, if we take post-humanism to mean a ‘transformation of our practices and ideas about “humans” and other animals’ and accept that it challenges the exclusivity of ‘human’ and ‘animal’ (Fudge,

2008: 104-5), we need to consider more carefully whether we are witnessing the emergence of post-human families. Julie Smith, in her account of her post-humanist household, ‘recognizes herself as both head and hand, as mind and body, human and animal. And in this recognition of her ambiguous status, she asserts her capacity to live with rabbits’ (Fudge, 2008:105). Animals (and humans) are understood as both human and animal, similar and different (see also Fox, 2008). This recognition disrupts the human-animal distinction, echoing the comments of the correspondents who objected to the way the directive was set up and illustrating that this distinction is not an impediment to human and other animals forming the trans-species social groups that we call families.

The responses to the MOP directive make clear that, rather than its being peculiar and in need of comment that non-human animals are part of the social groups that we refer to as families, what is peculiar is that the close affinities between human and other animals have been so effectively hidden from view by the so-called species barrier that, until relatively recently, sociologists have been able to think of human societies as precisely that, without taking into account the myriad daily practices through which human and other animal lives are entwined. Kinship across the species barrier is not something new and strange, but is an everyday experience of those humans who share their domestic space with other animals and, rather than witnessing the emergence of new, post-human families, it is usual for domestic groups to include both human and other animals and for affective, inter-species connections to be formed between them.

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Figure 1: Mass Observation Directive – Summer 2009

Part 1: Animals and humans

This directive is about the part played by animals in your life, from your childhood until the present day. You may live and work with animals or rarely encounter them – whatever your circumstances we are interested in your experiences with animals and any stories you can tell us which throw light on the part they play in your life.

As usual, please start each part of your directive reply on a new sheet of paper with your MO number (NOT name), sex, age, marital status, the town or village where you live and your occupation or former occupation.

Remember not to identify yourself or other people inadvertently within your reply.

¹ Following Marc Bekoff and for ease of exposition I use the term animal when referring to non-human animals while recognising that, of course, human beings are part of the animal kingdom (Bekoff, 2007)

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³ Of course this also happens in other circumstances such as the birth or adoption of a child when a much-loved pet may be ejected from the family group (Shira-Vitesh, 2012).