

Human animal bonds

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Abstract

The process of domestication involved changing animal species so that they could live and reproduce effectively while close to humans. The human abilities needed to successfully change a species' behaviour were valuable during the era of domestication and included handling and management skills. The ability to empathise with animals was probably also useful and it is easy to imagine newly captured and tamed animals living intimately with their human captors. This physical and emotional intimacy would have supported the selection of suitable individual animals for breeding and probably underpins the domestication of most livestock species. In the millennia following domestication this intimacy continued and it is obvious today in many communities. Men, in cattle people societies like the Nuer in Africa, wash their cattle and sing and recite poetry to them while women in some Papuan societies suckle piglets and Europeans share their beds with dogs and cats. The level of intimacy by humans towards animals varies considerable across societies and animal species. In societies where humans own few animals and are dependent upon them for survival the health and wellbeing of these animals is paramount and they are invaluable. In such societies close relationships between humans and animals can be easily understood. When individual animals become less crucial to survival and flock/herd size grows considerable then the level of physical and emotional intimacy decreases. This change is easily observed in European peasant societies where the sow and the cow have moved out of the family house and into separate animal houses as the size of the farm increases and more animals are owned. The shift from subsistence or barely commercial to a more industrial production system with larger number of animals per person coincides with decreased intimacy. The human intimacy with livestock seems to follow a few simple relationships; as individual animal value decrease so does the level of intimacy and as herd/flock size increases the level of

intimacy decreases. This will impact on the quality of human animal interactions and on the welfare of the animals. The existence of pets, animals which are generally without significant commercial value and are valued for their presence and acceptance of human interaction, is interesting in that they reflect some desire by humans for physical and emotional interaction with animals. This may reflect some aspect of human development, perhaps an outcome of the domestication process which resulted in successful humans having a need for intimacy with animals. The need for animals to be present in human societies may intimate some deep human biological requirement but the species used will reflect a cultural preference. The degree of need for a pet varies with some people having an excessive need for animals as seen in 'hoarders' and species collectors and other not requiring the presence of animals in their lives whatsoever. The close relationship between humans and animals has resulted in domestic animals being very aware of human behaviour. The presence of animals, as pets, in human society does not guarantee their welfare as their existence is due to a human need not an animal one.

Introduction

The definition of what constitutes a human animal bond is unclear. It relates to the relationship between humans and animals but these vary widely from relationships which could be identified as predatory, to mutual physical survival, through economic dependence, to psychological dependence and pathological obsession. Many consider the human animal bond to refer only to the human – companion animal relationship but this appears to be an extremely narrow perspective as witnessed by the intimacy between humans and livestock in some cultures. Humans have a wide range of relationships with animals and these relationships impact on humans and the target non-human animals physically and psychologically. A bond implies a relationship between individuals but perhaps the closeness of a person to a small group of individually recognised animals also constitutes a bond. A bond also suggests that the animals and the humans experience some positive outcomes from the relationship which can be measured.

Humans use animals for a wide range of purposes and their relationship with any species or animal will vary depending on its significance to their lives. Humans may have no interest or very limited interest in species which are irrelevant to their lifestyle. In communities exposed to predators or dangerous species the human interest with such animals may be great and there may be vicarious interest in the danger animals pose for human life but the relationship may be one of avoidance and thus the use of

the word bond is inappropriate. Hunting societies are interested in prey animals and may have significant cultural practices to ensure success while hunting, this is probably a one sided relationship and again bond is probably an inappropriate phrase. However the relationship between hunters and their hunting dogs, horses or birds may be close and a bond may exist between them. Pastoralists have close relationship with those species on which they depend for cultural and physical survival and persons may have intimate relationship with specific animals, usually cattle. Again the relationship between nomads, and subsistence and limited commercial agriculturalists and their animals may be close and intimate. Commercial farmers with large flocks and herds cannot have close relationships with individual animals. People, who use animals for sport or work, may have close relationships, and presumably bonds may exist with their animals. It is presumed that people who have animals as companions have a close relationship, a bond, with their animals but this presumption needs to be critically examined as abuse of companion animals is not uncommon.

The degree to which an animal impacts on the survival of the owners may influence the relationship between humans and animals but it is probably true that the more dependent people are on individual identifiable animals for survival the more effort they will put into the management of these animals and perhaps the closer the relationship will be. Thus for those humans whose animals are essential for their survival in environments suited to livestock but unsuited to agriculture the human animal relationship may be intimate and bonds may develop. For modern commercial farmers, animals are important for their economic survival but numbers may prohibit bonding. Many commercial farmers are not purely economically driven and for them owning and working with animals are important. The relationship between commercial farmers and their animals is complex, animals may be part of what such farmers consider a normal environment, and they may enjoy looking after and at animals and may derive great satisfaction from producing quality livestock. Their interest, knowledge and management of livestock may contain positive emotional components towards their stock but not intimate relations with individual identified animals. For some commercial farmers animals may be reduced to economic units of no real emotional significance and this variety in attitude needs further analysis.

The human animal bond discussed in this paper relates to aspects of the physical, mental and emotional interest which humans have in animals. The paper will deal with the bond between humans and animals in a wide range of relationships under different cultural and economic situations starting with the loose hunting relationship between

hunter gatherers and ending with the intimacy of humans and their companion animals. This paper will examine the breadth of these relationships (bonds) and will concentrate on the bond between humans and *Canis familiaris*, the dog.

Hunter gathering societies

Hunter-gathering-scavenging societies depend on a wide range of plants and animals for survival. The animals of importance include insects (honey bees, termites, and locusts), fish, birds, reptiles, and mammals. To successfully utilise this range of species knowledge about their behaviour is required and this knowledge has to be transferred across generations through activity and language. In a simple relationship, the harvesting of honey, the harvesters must know when honey will be available, whether the bees have fed on toxic plants and made toxic honey, how to access bee nests and how to take the honey while limiting stings and not destroying the resource. This relatively safe but painful exercise required knowledge, cooperation and skills but not necessarily any emotional relationship with the bees yet the apparent magic of honey production stimulates interest in almost everyone and can be used to generate conversation in almost any setting. Humans may like and admire bees but it is a one sided relationship and unlikely to be considered a bond.

Hunting large mammals is a dangerous, difficult and exciting exercise. It requires knowledge, skills and cooperation but because it is dangerous it also requires a relationship often with some religious significance to help guarantee success and safety. Success is often considered to be a giving by the target animal or species of meat to the hunter and this giving has to be ensured for the future by the correct pre and post hunting rituals. The human interest in the prey species will vary depending on the species but large significant animals will have specified rituals associated with the hunting exercise. Individuals may focus their hunting activity on specific species and adopt that species as totemic. In contrast individuals may be associated with species that they cannot hunt being of their clan. The hunter has great interest in and an emotional relationship with his target species and also with his totemic species which he may be forbidden to hunt. This type of relationship can be considered a bond, from the human perspective, intimate in that the human will spend a lot of time observing and trying to understand his prey behaviour but it is one sided.

Domestication

Domestication of the wolf to dog adds a new dimension to human-animal relationships. The dog rapidly became an important element of human society as a guard animal, a

bed warmer, a helper while scavenging and hunting and source of food in an emergency. The dog allowed people to think of animals in a different light, as a companion and assistant. It also allowed humans to develop animal management skills which were useful when sheep and goat were domesticated and they in turn encouraged better animal management and husbandry skills. The species which have been domesticated fill specific niches of basic human physical needs; food (milk, meat, blood), shelter (skins, fibres), protection, power (traction), mobility with transport, manure; and social needs (wealth, power, mana, military prowess). Further domestications allowed property protection, wealth accumulation and the generation of knowledge.

Domesticated livestock are used by different peoples; pastoralists and nomads who depend on livestock, settled agriculturalists who planted crops but also had livestock either as subsistence or commercial farmers and industrial farmers. The process of domestication is the selection of animals to reproduce that are less anxious in the company of humans and less aggressive towards humans. This when taken to its extreme results in a species such as the dog which is focussed on humans to the extent that it easily socialised to humans and is very attentive to human body language.

Pastoralists

Pastoralists use habitats which are not suitable for agriculture. They live in areas which lie between unusable country and that of agriculture such as the Sahel. A primitive type of pastoralism is that of reindeer people in northern Scandinavia and Russia. These people depend on reindeer for their cultural identity and survival. Reindeer are partially domesticated and people follow them taming individual animals for pulling sleighs and milk. They follow reindeer herds, protect them from other predators and kill them for meat, skins and everything else. Their identity depends on reindeer and their culture and survival depends on being able to husband and manage these animals. This close relationship between people and reindeer is looser than that seen in pastoralists who use cattle, goats, sheep and camels but reindeer people know about and live intimately with their animals. The relationship is one of prey / predation / protection and has elements of mutual dependence but bonds are certainly made between people and the tamed reindeer.

Pastoralist cattle people such as the Nuer in Africa depend on cattle for survival in habitats which are not suited for agriculture. For them cattle are fundamental to their survival but also to their cultural expression. Nuer men recite poetry and sing to their

cattle and their language is cattle focussed with words to describe cattle colours and horn shapes. The relationship between men and cattle is intimate, men wash and groom their cattle and their poetry and songs express love for the animals. This combination of physical and cultural dependence and emotional expression results in a relationship which is much greater than that seen in most other cultures between humans and animals.

Similar if less expressive relationships may exist between different nomadic groups and their animals. Bedouin use goats, sheep, camels and horses and the intimacy of the human to animal relationship may increase as we move along this list of animals. Within some religions particular species may be taboo and dogs and pigs are forbidden within Islam and Judaism. This prohibits the development of bonds with these animals.

Subsistence agriculturalists

Primitive subsistence agriculture usually combines crop and animal production. It takes many forms from slash and burn to permanent fields. The animals may be required for agriculture in the form of traction oxen and also a source of manure. Ruminants also process straws and stovers and can be used on fallow lands. Livestock in these communities are important but cropping allows alternative sources of food and wealth and so animals become less significant culturally, financially and emotionally. Thus the human attitude towards their livestock may be less intimate and less concerned than that of pastoralists. Established communities may have a wider variety of animals than pastoralists or nomads and own chickens, ducks and other poultry. In addition cats become an important means of rat control and dogs act as guard dogs and to protect livestock. The addition of these species and other 'pets' possibly dilutes the relationship between people and particular groups of animals. However there are notable exceptions.

Pigs are important animals in the subsistence agricultural communities in Papua. They are fed on crops shared with people and on waste materials. Piglets may be suckled by women and are often reared with a targeted social end in mind. This intimacy is probably unacceptable to many western minds but until recently pigs lived in family homes in Western Europe peasant communities and may do in some countries. This physical closeness does not seem to have led to the same level of intimacy as seen in Papua and there may have been some religious barriers to such intimacy. The cow or the sow was/is of such significance to peasant families that it would be regarded with great affection by the people involved.

Subsistence agriculture becomes commercial when farmers produce sufficient for self survival plus surplus for trading. Surplus crops and surplus livestock changes the relationship as animals will be sold out of the community. This production of animals for sale probably changes the willingness of humans to consider their animals as community members and starts the removal from intimacy which is seen and expressed obviously in the consideration of birds or animals as units in large modern livestock or poultry farms.

Commercial livestock farmers

Commercial livestock farms vary considerably in size depending on farm size, species being farmed and the existence or not of farm subsidies from government. Thus many European dairy farms have less than 10 cows whereas in New Zealand average dairy farms have about 300 cows. The level of interaction and the intimacy between humans and animals will be influenced by human: animal ratios. Modern intensive livestock agriculture started in the mid 20th century with rapid intensification of laying hen, broiler chicken and turkey, pig, beef and dairy production systems. This intensification led to a massive increase in the animal to human ratios and to the development of management systems that facilitated large economic units with minimal or limited human labour.

Users of sport and work animals

Horse, falcons and dogs are commonly used for hunting and a wide variety of animals are used for other sports such as showing and racing. The bond between owner and animal or animals will be influenced by the number of animals owned and used, the success of the individual animals and whether the sport is amateur and with limited number of animals or professional with many animals in an economic setting. Hunters may have a very close bond with an individual hunting gundog or handlers with an individual search and rescue dog or a police dog but there may be little bond between a huntsman and his pack of hounds or beagles. A similar range of relationships from distant to intimate might be seen with sport and working horses.

Entertainment animals

The intimacy between zoo animals and their keepers will vary depending on safety issues and the particular species. Conservation and re-establishment programmes may

deliberately limit human animal interactions. Circus workers usually have quite close relationships with their animals but this may be limited with large cats or bears.

Companion animals

Much has been written about the bond seen between human and companion animals usually dogs but also cats and other species. The relationship between humans and companion animals is not simple or straightforward. Most surveys of pet owners, particularly dog owners, identify companionship as the major reason for ownership and owners identify the animal as part of the family. These statements need to be assessed critically. A companion is an associate and friend and for many their dogs or cat is just that but in reality many dogs spend a large % of their time alone. About 60% of dogs live in one dog households and therefore their major social contact is their human owners. Many people actually spend little time with their dog as they are working, socialising or sleeping and actually have little time to interact with their animals.

Dogs that live outdoors, or live outdoors and indoors, position themselves to be in visual contact with their owners. As about 2 thirds of dogs in urban environments live in one dog households this may result in significant aloneness for what is essentially a social animal. Data from Melbourne suggests that many dogs spend a large % of their lives alone and a study in New Zealand showed that a small % (10%) of dogs are walked daily. Dogs are frequently described as family but how can a dog owned for 'companionship' be described as anything but a family member and what does this mean? The amount of money people are willing to spend on their pets is less than they would spend on a human family member which suggests family membership in some restricted sense. Companionship suggests interaction but the lack of interaction dilutes this concept.

The reasons why people keep cats and dogs are still poorly identified. Most surveys suggest that companionship is the major cause but this is often suggested in the survey format and in the easiest answer. Dogs are certainly owned for other reasons such as protection, barking but one survey suggested that dogs are owned because they form part of the perceived normal family environment. A lot has been written about the positive outcomes of pet ownership for health and for children and this may impact on pet acquisition but impulse buying of dogs is common suggesting poorly thought out reasoning. Personal image may be important and people may use dog or other pets to increase their attractiveness or staunchness to other humans.

Companionship of dogs for humans is probably overstated. Dog ownership by young childless couples may be a bonding mechanism between the humans. Dog owners by those living alone (25%) may replace human companionship and may be a target for nurturing and recipient of physical affection. This bonding may be one sided and may result in a feel good outcome for the dog owner and a definite bond may be developed.

The social needs of dogs have been poorly defined but dogs definitely benefit from human attention and gentle attention will reduce a dog's blood pressure. What occurs however when it is ignored for long periods of time? Dogs living alone may become anxious but this possibility has been poorly studied. Dogs have evolved to understand human body language. It is valuable for a dog to understand human behaviour and this is seen in working dogs harshly selected for livestock work. This ability suggests a need for human company especially if no other dog is present but this may vary between breeds and rearing practices. Toy breeds may be bred to bond with people and working breeds may focus on activity rather than bonding although they are bred to focus on humans to aid training. Labradors are used for guide dogs because they are capable of inactivity and this may allow the notion of bonding.

Human relationships with dogs are not new but now urban based, isolated people may depend on their dogs for more emotional support than that previously seen in large households. This need may also result in isolated animals and dogs living in a household with one adult human are at risk of developing separation anxiety.

Is the bonding discussed in the dog literature usual or rare? It may be less significant for dogs than is usually considered and may be damaging. Some owners may be incapable of maintaining a simple relationship with their dog and this may result in aggression and anxiety problems for the dog and social issues for the owner. Loving the dog too much may be destructive but little research has focussed on this possibility. The development of excessive emotional attachment to animals may have interesting negative outcomes. The no kill policy for horses in USA has resulted in unwanted horses either being transported for slaughter outside the USA or being released into wilderness areas or parks. The % of dog owners who become dependent on their dog for something to nurture and love may result in the dog becoming unmanageable and aggressive towards owner and others or anxious in the absences of the owner. Our understanding of the impact of different levels of bonding on dog or cat behaviour and welfare is still unclear.

Conclusion

Animal human bonds exist but vary considerably in intensity and detail depending on a wide range of factors. These include individual human needs, companion animal species, lifestyle for human and animal, tradition, experience and culture. The concept of humans bonding with their companion animals is not new but the development of bonds with the exclusion of humans may be problematic for the animal involved and may in some cases become a form of abuse. Many if not most towns in the developed world has an animal shelter and a pound to take in unwanted, stray and surplus animals usually companion animals and especially dogs and cats. The existence of such facilities suggests that there are problems with the relationship between humans and companion animals and that the 'bond' between humans and companion animals may be a fragile thing.

Recommended Reading

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