

## Motivation for Pet Ownership and Its Relevance to Behavior Problems

### Column Editor

Sharon L. Crowell-Davis,  
DVM, PhD, DACVB

Department of Anatomy  
and Radiology  
College of Veterinary Medicine  
The University of Georgia

Sharon L. Crowell-Davis, DVM, PhD, DACVB\*

The University of Georgia

People choose to own animals for a variety of reasons that can profoundly affect how they raise and train animals and what their attitude will be toward behavior problems exhibited by their animals. At its deepest and most profound, the relationship between a human and an animal can be quite intimate, a phenomenon well expressed by Elizabeth Marshall Thomas in the book *Between Pets and People: The Importance of Animal Companionship*:

Not surprisingly, many of us admit our animal companions into the most intimate areas of our lives. We are not in the least embarrassed when a dog sees us in the shower or overhears an argument. In this, a companion animal provides an intimacy that exceeds any we may experience with virtually any other human being, including our spouses and children; the intimacy is on a par with that of mother and newborn infant, or of our own skins.<sup>1</sup>

At the other extreme, some people view and treat animals not merely as objects or machines but even as objects that it is acceptable to treat brutally for the sake of “entertainment” (e.g., dogfighting, cockfighting).

### WHY PEOPLE OWN PETS

In a study in the *Journal of Consumer Research*,<sup>2</sup> Hirschman groups the reasons for pet ownership into six categories. These categories are necessarily broad and oversimplify a complex set of relationships. Many reasons to own animals, particularly pet animals, overlap into multiple categories. Nevertheless, recognizing the different attitudes behind owners' major motivations for caring for, managing, and interacting with their pets can help veterinarians understand the different reactions encountered when attempting to address the behavior and welfare of a pet.

Hirschman's categories are as follows<sup>2</sup>:

1. Some people have pets so that they can perceive and relate to them as humans (i.e., the animal is a companion, friend, or family member). This is the most common reason for pet ownership.
2. Some people have pets as pieces of equipment. These animals serve a function, such as protecting, herding, or hunting.
3. Some people have pets as avocations, exhibiting or showing them. These animals are perceived as property to be bought and sold.
4. Some people have animals as status symbols.
5. Some people have animals as ornaments (e.g., koi, birds with colorful plumage). These animals are kept specifically for their aesthetic value.

\*Dr. Crowell-Davis discloses that she has received financial support from CEVA Animal Health and from Merial.

### About This Column

Behavior problems are a significant cause of death (euthanasia) in companion animals. While most veterinary practices are necessarily geared toward the medical aspect of care, there are many opportunities to bring behavior awareness into the clinic for the benefit of the pet, the owner, and ourselves. This column acknowledges the importance of behavior as part of veterinary medicine and speaks practically about using it effectively in daily practice.

Send comments/questions via email  
[editor@CompendiumVet.com](mailto:editor@CompendiumVet.com),  
fax 800-556-3288, or web  
[CompendiumVet.com](http://CompendiumVet.com).

6. Some people consider animals to be objects in their environment that function as extensions of themselves. This relationship may be a subconscious one.

In my own experience, I have encountered owners from every category. People who fall into the first category are likely to feel genuine affection and love for their pets and to respect animals as living beings. These owners treat their pets much like members of the family, whether as friends, partners, children, or child substitutes. People in this group may own purebred animals, but they may also own mixed-breed animals. If an animal has medical or behavior problems, they will do their best to care for it, even if they are not financially well off and their ability to care for the pet is limited. This is perhaps the group of pet owners that is most likely to seek assistance for even minor behavior problems. While it is not surprising that

continuing to work was not in the animal's best interest. Other owners simply adjust their expectations of the animal and focus more on the "fun" aspects of its function.

Owners in groups three through five, especially those to whom their animals are status symbols, are likely to own exotic species or purebred animals of common species. These owners are also likely to have a low tolerance for an animal's difficult or embarrassing behavior. For people who have animals as status symbols, owning the animal is equivalent to owning a Rolls Royce or a Rolex. The animal, rather than being a living being with which the owner has a close relationship, is a mechanism for displaying the owner's wealth. Behavior problems that interfere with the animal's function in this regard are likely to result in disposal of the animal.

Owners in group six may decline treatments or procedures for their pets that they would not wish to undergo

*A person's reason for keeping a pet will influence his or her tolerance of behavior problems and willingness to invest time and money in treating a pet's problem.*

pet owners will seek help for an animal to which they are attached because the animal is engaging in behaviors that are disruptive or costly—for example, a dog that howls and chews up household items during thunderstorms—owners in this group may also seek assistance because of concern for an animal's welfare. Thus, they may consult their veterinarian about a cat that hides under the bed during thunderstorms out of genuine concern for the cat's well-being and quality of life, even though the cat's behavior is not disruptive like the dog's.

Animal owners in the second group require their animals to perform a function. To facilitate what they believe to be an animal's optimal performance at minimal inconvenience or cost to themselves, these owners may be willing to use harmful training methods or other techniques. This is the basis for using shock collars on hunting dogs, racing physically immature horses that are highly susceptible to musculoskeletal injury, and inadequately feeding cats that are supposed to kill mice (in the hope that being hungry will make them better mousers). Owners in this group may give an animal away or have it euthanized because of its failure to perform rather than attempt to treat a behavior problem. However, I have known owners who changed a working animal's status to that of "pet" or "family member" when behavior problems indicated that

themselves (e.g., neutering). Alternatively, they may permit their pets to engage in behaviors they suppress in themselves for social reasons (e.g., public displays of libido).

### EMOTIONS ASSOCIATED WITH PETS

Relationships with pets may also offer opportunities to have a variety of experiences. Within this context, Holbrook et al<sup>3</sup> have described seven themes that summarize what people may experience with pets. These experiences are ends in themselves, not the means to other ends such as displaying wealth or completing a successful hunt; therefore, most of these owners probably fall into the first of Hirschman's categories. Through analysis of essays and photographs provided by pet owners, Holbrook et al concluded that pet ownership provides the following opportunities:

- To appreciate nature and to experience wildlife
- To be inspired and to learn
- To be childlike and playful
- To be altruistic and nurturing
- To have or express companionship, caring, comfort, or calmness
- To parent
- To strengthen bonds with other humans

A single human–animal relationship may incorporate one, several, or all of these experiences. When a pet has a behavior problem, its owner’s emotional investment in any of these experiences affects his or her goals and involvement in the pet’s therapy and rehabilitation. The specifics of an owner’s relationship with a pet can often be elucidated by asking questions about the function of the pet, the owner’s goals, and the owner’s feelings about the problem behavior, such as, “Why did you get your pet? What role does it play in your family? What are your goals for treating this behavior? How would you like your pet’s behavior to change?” If the pet has multiple problem behaviors, it can be illuminating to ask which one the owner feels it is most important to change, and why. Observing the owner’s interactions with the pet during the interview can also give insight into the owner’s feelings about the pet.

Owners who appreciate wildlife and respect nature often benefit from simply being educated about the natural behavior of the species. They may perceive a given behavior as a problem or a nuisance if they do not understand it, but they readily accept the behavior if they do understand it. A common example is a puppy that chews on firm objects. If the puppy destroys personal items, such as shoes, owners who do not understand the reason for this normal behavior may find it highly unacceptable and may feel that the puppy is chewing on these items out of spite. However, if these owners are educated that puppies need to chew on firm objects as their teeth break through their gums, most of them accept the behavior, readily understand that they must keep shoes and similar objects away from the puppy while it grows through this phase of development, and provide the puppy with suitable objects to chew on. In contrast, people who do not appreciate nature and the characteristics unique to other species may feel that the puppy should not chew on shoes because it is not supposed to chew on shoes. These owners are likely to be highly intolerant of many normal behaviors.

People who want to be inspired by and learn from animals take delight in watching their pets and developing an improved understanding of them. They are sensitive to an animal’s feedback behavior (i.e., its reaction to cues such as an outstretched hand) and learn from it, modifying their own behavior in return. These owners may be more attentive to details than those in the first group. For example, if a dog follows a cat to the litterbox to eat the cat’s feces, an owner in the second category

will (1) not only notice this behavior and relate it to the fact that the cat has begun to defecate in the back of the closet (where the dog cannot readily reach it) but (2) also act on that observation to provide the cat with a more acceptable place to eliminate out of reach of the dog. An owner who is less attentive to the dog's behavior may not notice what happens at the litterbox or may not relate the dog's behavior to the appearance of cat feces at the back of the closet.

Being childlike and playful with a pet can be an advantage or a disadvantage. Some pet owners do not play with their pet enough, resulting in the pet engaging in play behavior that is destructive and undesirable or developing problems that are secondary to inadequate exercise or mental stimulation. At the other extreme, some owners play with their pet too vigorously and roughly, causing fear and hyperexcitement. It is impor-

problems. Behaviors that are likely to be particularly problematic with such individuals include petting intolerance in cats that are otherwise well behaved (i.e., the cat bites the owner when it is petted for an extended period of time) and hyperexcitement behaviors in dogs.

When one of the main motivations for having a pet is the opportunity to have improved social interaction with other humans, certain behavior problems can be particularly unacceptable. For many pet owners, particularly dog owners, the pet is a beneficial facilitator of social interaction. For example, people are more likely to initiate conversation with a person walking a dog than with a person walking alone. Aggression toward non-family members, whatever the motivation (e.g., fear, territorial defense), can significantly interfere with the owner's ability to interact socially with others. Some owners are willing to alter their social life to accommodate the pet's

*At one extreme, people who keep pets as a means of exhibiting their wealth or for prestige are likely to have a low tolerance for behavior problems.*

tant for pet owners to understand the importance of adequate, but not excessive, exercise and stimulation and to interact with their pets in a way that is qualitatively and quantitatively appropriate for each animal's species, breed, age, and sex. For example, a young dog in a single-dog household needs to be played with much more than an adult female with puppies to care for, but "wrestling" play should be avoided in both cases.

Pet owners who desire the opportunity to be altruistic and nurturing will have a high tolerance for behavior problems, especially if a problem was caused by prior abandonment or abuse of the pet. However, they may have a low tolerance for a problem behavior if they believe it is due to spite, so education is critical. When educated about the cause of their pet's behavior problem, these owners can be extremely tolerant. Similarly, pet owners who are significantly motivated by the opportunity to "parent" another living being will usually be very tolerant of problems, although they sometimes express significant frustration, possibly because they see the pet's inappropriate behavior as a reflection of their own parenting ability and, therefore, a judgment on themselves.

Pet owners who are significantly motivated by the opportunity for companionship, caring, comfort, or calmness have varying levels of tolerance for different

problem. I have worked with families who discontinued having parties or even allowing visitors because of the stress caused by a pet's aggressive behavior. However, individuals who place a high value on human social interaction may be less tolerant, unwilling to adjust their social life, and more likely to place the pet in long-term isolation, give it away, or have it euthanized.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, a pet owner's reasons for having a pet are likely to significantly affect his or her tolerance of various behavior problems. To most effectively engage owners in their pet's behavior therapy, veterinarians need to (1) recognize that different motivations influence how owners treat their pets, and (2) adjust treatment strategies accordingly, when possible.

## REFERENCES

1. Thomas EM. Foreword. In: Beck AM, Katcher A, eds. *Between Pets and People: The Importance of Animal Companionship*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press; 1996:ix.
2. Hirschman E. Consumers and their animal companions. *J Consum Res* 1994; 20:616-632.
3. Holbrook M, Stephens DL, Day E, et al. A collective stereographic photo essay on key aspects of animal companionship: the truth about cats and dogs. *Acad Marketing Sci Rev* 2001;5(5). Accessed July 2008 at <http://www.amsreview.org/articles/holbrook/holbrook01-2001.htm>.