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Special-Needs Companion Animals and Those Who Care for Them

Stories of Identity and Empathy

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Abstract

Through a series of in-depth interviews asking individuals about their decisions to adopt special-needs companion animals, we discovered that a combination of anthropomorphism and empathy are at play when individuals decide to adopt them. This tendency is explained using David Blouin's typology of guardians: humanistic and protectionistic guardians anthropomorphized their companion animals, exhibited greater empathy, and were more willing to adopt animals with special needs.

Keywords

special needs – adoption – companion animals – anthropomorphism – symbolic interactionism

Introduction

George Herbert Mead's limited conception of the "self" as requiring language for meaningful interaction has prevented nonhuman animals from being seen as worthy of sociological significance (Blouin, 2012; Alger & Alger, 1997). This assertion has been challenged, and by acknowledging that animals do have a sense of self, people's views on animals and their companion animals have changed, shifting from objects or distant others to family members (Alger &

Alger, 1997). Seeing companion animals as family members reshapes the idea of the contemporary family (Schweiger & O'Brien, 2005). When people adopt special-needs animals, it provides a unique opportunity to explore the implications of this new family structure.

This study will examine the dynamics of guardians and their special-needs animals, suggesting that one's capacity for empathy influences the construction of their and their potential companion animal's identities, leading to a greater willingness to accept special-needs animals into their family. First, we review the more fundamental consequences of our interactions with animals, namely empathy and anthropomorphism. Then we present Blouin's typology of companion-animal guardianship as a potential framework to understand how empathy and anthropomorphism influence special-needs companion animal adoption. Through interview data, we hope to answer the following questions: What makes individuals choose to adopt specific companion animals? How unique are the challenges that come with caring for a special-needs companion animal? Finally, are there limitations to the empathy and anthropomorphism exhibited among special-needs animal guardians?

Based on a series of 33 interviews, highlighting the most distinct cases, we find three overwhelming themes: first, both special-needs and non-special-needs companion animal adopters rely on past experiences with animals and other family members to make their adoption choices; second, caring for special-needs animals becomes part of people's routines to the point that it goes unnoticed; and third, there are practical limits to special-needs animals' guardians' empathy and anthropomorphism. We then connect these findings to broader issues related to the roots of empathy and its implications for non-human animal and human welfare.

Empathy and Anthropomorphism

Much of the research regarding the sociological significance of animals focuses on companion animals. For many humans, companion animals are the primary source of interaction with animals. This places companion animals in a unique position, making them key agents of human-animal socialization and allowing them to be the primary conduit through which many humans develop empathy toward nonhuman animals (Daly & Morton, 2006).

Shott (1979) defines empathy as "the arousal in oneself of the emotion one observes in another or the emotion one would feel in another's situation" (p. 1328). The ability to have concern for others requires individuals to understand and share another's perspective despite being alienated from it. This

distinction reflects current research that acknowledges both emotional and cognitive dimensions to empathy (Taylor & Signal, 2005). Thus, it is possible to know what another person feels without feeling it yourself.

Sociologically speaking, empathy relates to Mead's conception of taking the role of the other (Davis, 2007). A vast body of human-animal studies literature examines how humans can develop empathy for animals, that is, how humans take the role of the animal other and thus attempt to understand animals' feelings. This empathetic process influences how we feel, cultivating emotional connections between humans and nonhuman animals, and as a result, shapes how we act. The cultivation of animal-directed empathy can often be seen in a wide range of actions, from animal rights activism, to vegetarianism, to caring for companion animals (Daly & Morton, 2006; Hills, 1995).

Often animal guardianship is one of the first instances in which children learn how to care for another being and feel empathy. Play helps to cultivate that bond. By playing with an animal, a child learns to share in a common goal and enjoyment with that animal, in turn developing a bond and perhaps an understanding of the animal's feelings (Irvine, 2004). Thompson and Gullone (2008) found that regular interactions with animals, specifically companion animals, during childhood greatly increased empathy in later years, particularly among women (Paul, 2000; Taylor & Signal, 2005). Further, empathy often leads to a lower likelihood of interpreting animal behavior as aggressive, thus leading to more acceptance of problematic behaviors, including fear, anxiety, and destructiveness (Meyer, Forkman, & Paul, 2014). This may motivate women to be focused on animal welfare at the local level, such as being involved with community animal shelters; men tend to be more focused on global animal welfare and conservation (Herzog, 2007).

Anthropomorphism is significantly different from empathy. Anthropomorphism is the process of giving animals human-like traits; thus, it is about how we *see* animals rather than how we *feel* about them (Horowitz & Bekoff, 2007). It is not necessary to empathize with an animal or consider his/her perspective to personify them and create a story about the creature's character. Although anthropomorphism is a common technique to describe animal behavior, there is limited scientific inquiry into the causes of anthropomorphism (Horowitz & Bekoff, 2007). Typically, it is treated as a dirty word, with critics suggesting that it is inappropriate to attribute human characteristics to nonhuman animals and derive anything scientifically meaningful from the nonhuman animals' behavior. Further, some scholars argue that seeing nonhuman animals as human can also lead to treating them as human, which may result in denying them their fundamental physiological needs (Flynn, 2008). Despite these criticisms, it is possible that anthropomorphizing animals tells us as much about

ourselves as it does about the animals we are trying to understand (Horowitz & Bekoff, 2007; Blouin, 2008).

Like empathy, anthropomorphism is often a byproduct of human-animal interactions. For example, when individuals play with their dogs, they tend to develop a better understanding of their animals' emotions and intentions, leading to greater levels of anthropomorphism (Horowitz & Bekoff, 2007). Conversely, anthropomorphism may also help to foster empathy, as those who anthropomorphize their companion animals are more sensitive to the idea that their companion animals are in pain (Ellingsen et al., 2010). Anthropomorphism has also been attributed to increases in animal adoptions; ascribing human characteristics to animals allows adopters to see the animals as individuals and thus to see themselves as performing an act of compassion for another being rather than buying a product (Butterfield et al., 2012).

The previous review explains the distinctions between empathy and anthropomorphism; however, it appears that the two are linked. Though the causal direction and mechanism are unclear, the stronger the tendency toward anthropomorphism, the stronger the emotional bond between the human and nonhuman animal (Waytz et al., 2010). In fact, anthropomorphism has been shown to have a significant although low correlation with empathy (Taylor & Signal, 2005). Further, Hills (1995) explains that anthropomorphism, specifically attributing human-like mental states to animals, can help to cultivate "accurate empathy," which is fostered by compassion and may be more likely to lead to actions that benefit animals.

Blouin's Typology

Blouin's (2008) typology of companion animal guardians was developed to explain the often-contradictory attitudes people have toward animals and how those attitudes are shaped by a unique cultural and institutional context, such as that advanced by leading animal welfare organizations. His typology has implications for the symbolic boundaries that are drawn between people and nonhuman animals, and, he argues, for the boundaries that people draw between themselves and other people (Blouin, 2008). Drawing on qualitative interviews of dog guardians, and based on their emotional attachments to, perceptions of, and socialization with their companion animals, Blouin (2008; 2013) identified three categories of guardians: the humanistic, protectionistic, and dominionistic.

While Blouin's (2008; 2013) typology focuses on anthropomorphism and concerns for animal welfare, it does not directly address empathy, a sentiment

that should be considered in personal relationships between humans and nonhuman animals. Nonetheless, Blouin's (2008; 2013) typology provides a useful framework for understanding the distinctions and overlap between the concepts of empathy and anthropomorphism, particularly when attempting to assess how individuals' perceptions of their companion animals shape not only how they view their animals, but the rest of animal—and humankind (Taylor, 2012).

Humanistic guardians view their dogs as family members with equal status to human relatives and tend to anthropomorphize their companion animals more than the other two types (Blouin, 2013). Humanistic guardians give their companion animals humanlike personalities and tend to talk about their companion animals as if they are children, which serves to further reinforce the anthropomorphism they are engaged in (Blouin, 2013). Humanistic guardians also seek emotional support in their relationships with their companion animals, which can help to foster and establish empathy. However, humanistic guardians are likely to only focus on the welfare of animals with whom they are personally involved with.

In some ways, protectionistic guardians are similar to humanistic guardians. The protectionists anthropomorphize their companion animals, but to a lesser degree than the humanistic (Blouin, 2008). Also, the protectionists are much more concerned with animal welfare as a whole, rather than just their companion animals' welfare (Blouin, 2013). This is the key distinction between humanistic and protectionistic guardians' development of empathy: protectionistic guardians cultivate empathy through general concerns over welfare, while humanistic guardians cultivate empathy through the anthropomorphism of animals in their lives.

The dominionistic cherish their companion animals, but do not consider them to be equal to human beings. These dominionistic guardians establish a more hierarchical relationship, with social and emotional distance between them and their animals (Blouin, 2008). Dominionistic guardians see their dogs as objects, though they are objects capable of providing affection to their guardians and others (Blouin, 2013; Butterfield et al., 2012; Wood et al., 2005).

It is also important to note that how individuals feel about their companion animals changes (Blouin, 2008; 2013). This means that individuals can move from one category to another, and that individuals can value different elements of each category. One possible example is someone who greatly anthropomorphizes their companion animals, like a humanistic guardian, and yet is also concerned with animal welfare overall, a trait associated with protectionist guardians. This variability, of course, complicates the utility of Blouin's framework, in ways that suggest the need for a refined or new typology.

Adoption Choices

Research on special-needs companion animal adoption is scarce. In order to understand the nature of what makes a special-needs companion animal, research on the adoption of special-needs children serves as a useful template. Special-needs children are those with physical and mental disorders, as well as racial identities, that may create obstacles to adoption and difficulties in integrating into households (Hollingsworth, 1999). Adoptions disrupt the family dynamic, as the new family members may have life experiences and identities that are different than the rest of the family (Mullin & Johnson, 1999). The post-adoption adjustment period for families who adopt special-needs children is typically longer than that for those who adopt children without special needs (Mullin & Johnson, 1999; Schweiger & O'Brien, 2005). However, families who adopt special-needs children tend to have tight bonds, thus making post-adoption disruption easier to manage (Rosenthal & Groze, 1990).

While special needs may complicate the decision to adopt, many families are able to look past these concerns. This has often been attributed to the adopters' altruistic beliefs, including the belief that every human life is seen as worthy of respect. Other adopters choose to take in special-needs children to support humanitarian ideals, believing that all children should be cared for by someone (Fisher, 2003).

Adopted children have different backgrounds and personal histories than their new parents, who attempt to be as sensitive as possible to the challenges their newly adopted children have faced. Yet, despite their best efforts, the majority of adoptive parents cannot fully comprehend what it would be like to be an adopted child, thus limiting their empathetic connection to their new child (Belbas, 1987). With little literature about how this dynamic might work in homes with adopted special-needs companion animals, we attempted to connect the theory and research about special-needs child adoption to the circumstances of special-needs animal adoption.

What Makes a Special-Needs Animal?

Based on an understanding of special-needs adoption, we define special-needs animals as those who have specific medical, physical, emotional, or social limitations that may make them harder to adopt. Examples would include but are not limited to amputees, blind animals, animals facing serious illnesses prior to adoption, animals dealing with social stigma, or victims of abuse who have developed behavioral problems.

Pit bulls, as well as black cats and dogs, can be seen as special-needs animals because they are the “underdogs.” Shelters have trouble finding homes for pit bulls, as well as black animals, often making them the first to be euthanized (D’addio, 2013; Pous, 2011). Pit bulls even face breed-discrimination laws designed to prevent them from living in certain neighborhoods (Campbell, 2009). Other animals such as senior animals or those who are undesirable purely on an aesthetic level may also be considered special needs, but to a lesser extent, as they do not face medical or legal obstacles that can influence post-adoption experiences.

Many people intentionally take in companion animals with special needs, knowing there will be additional challenges, including daily inconveniences, medical expenses, and early death. These guardians may choose to adopt special-needs companion animals for some of the same reasons identified in special-needs child adoption. Those in Blouin’s (2008; 2013) categories of humanistic and protectionistic guardians may be more likely to possess the requisite empathy needed to anthropomorphize and bond with a special-needs companion animal. Still, there are many unanswered questions about the motivations and consequences of special-needs adoption.

This study is designed to address the question of why individuals choose to take in special-needs companion animals. Drawing on interviews with adopters of special-needs and non-special-needs companion animals, this study examines the ways in which guardians’ empathy and anthropomorphic tendencies shape their perceptions of and relationships with special-needs companion animals.

Materials and Methods

Time was spent in a major shelter and a cat rescue in a large Midwest City as part of an earlier ethnographic study of animal shelters and adoption choices. This project shifted from its original ethnographic intentions into a series of interviews. Fifteen on-site interviews were conducted to inquire about adopters’ decisions. For the sake of anonymity, all adopters and animals were given pseudonyms. Questions asked include: “What made you choose to adopt a special-needs companion animal?” and “Did you consider adopting a special-needs companion animal before meeting the one you adopted?”

The majority of adopters were white Americans. The age range of animal guardians varied from young adults to senior citizens who spoke of being past the retirement age. Of the original 15 interviews at the shelter, 4 were with adopters of special-needs animals. Other rescues nearby were contacted

to find more adopters, and six in-depth phone interviews with special needs guardians were performed. One woman provided contact with her mother, who recently purchased a special-needs cat from a pet store.

A year later, after working with another shelter northwest in the same state, eight more in-depth interviews were performed, three with special-needs animal adopters and five who adopted animals without special needs. Snowball sampling was used from the special-needs adoptions to find two additional special-needs guardians to interview. The final 10 interviews were conducted in the summer of 2014. A total of 33 interviews were conducted: 16 with individuals who adopted companion animals with no special needs and 17 with adopters of animals with special needs. The sample consisted of 15 women and 12 men, including 6 heterosexual couples, who were interviewed together and counted as a single subject. The project received approval from the Internal Review Board of Northern Illinois University. The data collected in the previous year were accepted retroactively.

The interviews were then transcribed and coded for concepts such as past animal guardianship, emotional attachment to animals, how animal needs were met and managed, as well as questions about relationships with people with special needs. This coding emphasized what guardians believed made their companion animals distinct prior to taking them into their homes. After focusing on emotional attachment and decision-making, the responses of those who did and did not adopt special-needs animals were compared. Questions regarding the challenges of taking care of animals were primarily directed to those with special-needs companion animals but were also asked of adopters who mentioned having had animals with special needs in the past. Blouin's (2013) typology was also used to examine both companion animal-guardian relations as well as perspectives on animal welfare in general.

Picking the Animal

People do not choose their companion animals at random. Often something draws them to a particular animal. In many cases, the burden falls on the animals to be "adoptable" (Weis et al., 2012). This finding is critical to our first research question, regarding why people chose to adopt specific animals. Animals must show that they are the most ideal candidate to live in the human household. This can be problematic for shelter animals who are often seen as having personalities that are unsuitable for life in a human home (Taylor, 2012).

Blouin's (2008; 2013) protectionistic orientation may explain why some individuals choose to adopt animals who may have special needs. These individuals

believe it to be in the broader interests of animal welfare and that an animal's medical concerns need to be met for the sake of the animal rather than their guardians. Maggie, a kitten with an undefined neurological disorder, was discovered at a pet store. She was the runt of the litter and had trouble balancing and walking. Maggie's caretakers made it clear, "Normally I would never buy from a pet store. I always get animals from shelters or strays, those that need the most help, and this cat needed help." Maggie's caretaker would be in the protectionist category, as she is primarily concerned with animal welfare as a whole, rather than Maggie's plight.

Protectionistic adopters may be particularly motivated to adopt a special-needs companion animal not in spite of, but because of, the companion animal's disabilities. These special needs are part of what makes the animal who he/she is, and thus are a factor that contributes not only to the construction of the animal's identity, but also to the ideal of animal welfare. This is similar to those who adopt special-needs children, believing that it fulfills a humanitarian duty (Fisher, 2003). Thus, these protectionistic adopters may exhibit high levels of empathy without necessarily being anthropomorphic. Yet humanitarianism alone is not enough to motivate individuals to take home a companion animal. Even companion animals with special needs have to prove themselves worthy of adoption.

Special-needs companion animals may have one advantage over non-special-needs companion animals: The special needs in question may have stories behind them, adding depth to the animal's character. The adopters of Herman explained that he was discovered through a friend's post on Facebook about a group trying to raise money to have Herman's leg restored by a nearby veterinary school. The group failed and his leg had to be amputated. Because of Herman's story, the family was motivated to adopt a dog and went to the rescue where Herman was then residing. To their surprise, he provided the most positive experience:

The rest of the dogs were just interested in a treat or to play but not interested ... in people. This dog was looking at you wanting to bond and be around people.

Herman's story drew the family not just to a shelter, but to the specific shelter where he was housed. Herman's social nature was an added benefit to his already unique story that attracted his adopters in the first place. Herman was anthropomorphized, but his family expressed concern only for his welfare, rather than that of all dogs. Herman's expression of himself allowed his adopters to identify his distinct character, making him more

likeable and relatable. This provided him with an advantage over other dogs, even those with all four legs, increasing his chances of being adopted.

Marge was a blind cat taken to a shelter after a hoarding situation. Tyrion, displaying a humanistic outlook, adopted Marge, explaining that her personality mitigated any hesitation he had regarding her blindness:

[W]e saw her, saw the sign on the window with her picture saying she was blind.... [S]he was actually the most affectionate one there. You know she just came to the door to answer us—to greet us and [um] two of them—she warmed up to us really quickly.

If anything, Marge's blindness worked to her advantage.

I think it just adds to her character. Just one more reason to [pause] want to adopt, want to play with her.

The key word from Tyrion's comments is "character." The character of animals may be what drives the desire of individuals to adopt an animal and is often of major interest to animal guardians with humanistic tendencies (Blouin, 2008; 2013). An animal with a temperamental character, or one who lacks desired social attributes, is less likely to be adopted. The willingness to be social is a particularly important character trait among all animals (Weis et al., 2012). This is a challenge that all animals in shelters and some in pet stores must undergo, and those behavioral problems may create a barrier between them and potential caretakers.

Animals as Family and Friends

It is not uncommon for people to use past experiences as a guide when adopting an animal. Notably, they search for animals that remind them of former companion animals or other family members. In this way, finding a new animal is similar to seeking out like-minded friends or people that are reminiscent of past acquaintances. According to Blouin's (2008; 2013) typology, humanistic guardians, who see animals more like people, would be more likely to do this. Further, while those who adopted non-special-needs animals exhibited this tendency, it seemed to uniquely influence one's receptiveness to the idea of adopting a special-needs companion animal.

Thus, many times a potential companion animal's personality was made all the more desirable when it reminded adopters of animals they had in the past. Brienne and her partner adopted a black puppy from a local shelter after

losing their previous dog, Salt, who developed hemangiosarcoma and lost a leg. Brienne explains:

Bart stood up [and] gave [my partner] a kiss through the bars. It was love at first sight.... [My partner thought] he was channeling our previous dog which had passed away. He was ... doing a lot of things that was bringing our dog out.

But it was not just for Brienne and her partner that they chose to adopt a puppy; it was also for their dog Maude:

[We got a puppy] not for us ... but for our remaining dog Maude who's more of mother.... We brought our last dog home at 8 weeks old, and she mothered him and raised him. So we knew that she needed somebody to take care of.

Many special-needs adopters also have friends or family members with special needs. Brienne revealed that her mother developed polio as a child. Herman's adopted family has two autistic boys. The woman who bought Maggie from a store has a daughter who is permanently hospitalized due to "severe mental retardation and bipolar disorder." Her other daughter, Dany, has adopted two cats, one who eventually went blind and the other is FIV+. Other adopters had family members with special needs varying from diabetes to cerebral palsy. Though it is unclear whether the adoption of special-needs animals is seen as an homage to loved ones with special needs or is simply born out of the experience with special needs, there appears to be a link between empathy for humans and that for animals. The ability to relate to humans with special needs brings about a better understanding of animals with special needs.

Several subjects mentioned special-needs family members made them more open to the concept of adoption. Catelyn and Ned, who are also Sansa's parents, spoke of Ned's brother:

I have a brother. He was born a "blue baby," black hair and then [um] when he was younger he got hit in the head and had a skull fracture ...

Nonetheless, they also felt that they would be unable to take care of an animal with special needs:

I drove trucks so I was gone a lot of the time on the road, and Catelyn worked in the post office so she worked different hours.... [A] special needs animal wouldn't really get the attention it should need.

However, not every special-needs adopter has family members with special needs. Some simply felt strong empathy toward those with special needs. Arya, who adopted an FIV+ cat, has never had a special-needs companion animal before and claims to not know anyone with special needs. However, when raising her children she warned them:

You know, the one thing I—I told my kids.... “If there is somebody there that is, you know mentally challenged or in a wheelchair, or something like that ... [y]ou do not ever make fun of them ... I will hit you. You know I can. I will beat you to death. That is one thing I will not tolerate....” I mean I stick up for these people, because I always figure there might be a time when you’re just like them. You know?

Arya has a more humanistic outlook toward both humans and animals; the concerns of all species are more similar than they are different, and all are deserving of respect and dignity. Thus, Blouin’s (2008; 2013) conception of how individuals view animals corresponds to how individuals view other humans as well. These conceptions are especially strong among humanistic and protectionist animal guardians. The empathy that individuals have toward their fellow humans can be found in those who adopt special-needs animals. Knowing humans with special needs helped to create empathy for those who are challenged, increasing the adopter’s likelihood of adopting animals with special needs.

The Inevitable and the Unnoticeable

Our second research question, regarding the impact of special-needs companion animals on the lives of adopters, focuses on the realization that many special-needs animals require unique and additional care on a daily basis, compared to non-special-needs companion animals. The most extensive example of this was Otto. Otto was a pit bull in a permanent foster home. While originally believed to have had a neurological disorder, an MRI revealed 30 to 40% of the dog’s brain was missing. The results were learning deficiencies, a struggle to stand, vision limitations, and the constant need for medication to drain fluid from his brain. Due to the lack of strength in his back legs, the caretakers needed to put Otto on his feet roughly six times a day.

Otto’s caretaker claimed that, “He has [me and my partner] trained rather than the other way around.” His caretaker explained that they would get up multiple times in the night in order to help Otto relieve himself, due to his

lack of balance, as if he would soil himself if he was left alone. Otto's caretaker was extremely defensive regarding his special needs and insisted, "There is nothing wrong with him, he just needs extra work."

Other caretakers, who also had demanding daily routines, felt differently about their animals' special needs. In an unforeseen set of circumstances, Sansa took home two cats for her daughters, and one of the cats, Selma, has severe skin allergy problems, leading to large patches of fur falling off.

Sansa's struggles with cat care are quite extensive. Selma needs pills and an antibiotic cream on a daily basis, as well as a special food that Sansa forgoes. The special diet necessary to manage Selma's skin condition is not a possibility on her budget. She explained:

The special food that they want, it's like for a little bag like this for like 50 bucks.... [The vets] say what it is, they might want to have a different type of protein, because all the foods now are pretty much common and the cats are like ... immune to the protein or something in it. So rabbit, they wanted me to find food that had rabbit in it. There's [sic] not a lot of foods [that] have rabbit.

Sansa's situation reveals the financial burdens that may occur when one has a special-needs companion animal and exemplifies what happens when dominionistic guardians unknowingly take home special-needs animals. The needs were unexpected, unpredictable, and generally undesired. Being dominionistic, Sansa established her cats' existence in the household as complementary more than anything else and did not see Selma as a family member but as a burden. Sansa openly admitted that if she knew the cat had a skin condition, she would not have taken her in. There was frustration with the cat's medical condition, but it was also seen as an investment:

[The allergies are] a lot to deal with. Sometimes ... I wanna get rid of her but I already put 600 dollars into her.... So it's like why get rid of her? And even the vet said if we can't get it under control, the best bet would be to put her down.

Selma and Otto's conditions were more difficult to address. However, the majority of special-needs adopters were not bothered by or did not notice the additional care. Maintaining the animals' conditions had become ingrained into the lives and daily routines of their caretakers. When interviewing an elderly couple who intentionally adopted a declawed cat, I discussed the risks and consequences that come from declawing, notably arthritis, more biting, and

the increased likelihood of urinating outside the litter box. When asked, the husband bluntly said, “all cats eventually [become] special needs cat[s].”

Many of the adopters interviewed had stories of past companion animals who developed physical conditions or illnesses, even if those companion animals did not initially have any conditions. Tywin, who recently adopted a dog without special needs, pointed out that many of his past dogs were prone to injury due to body structure:

We’ve always had large dogs, Saint Bernards, mastiffs, and they have a lot of hip and bone problems.... We had one Saint Bernard that blew out its ACL ligament and then a year later blew out the one on the other leg [laughter].

Dany is the daughter of the woman who bought Maggie, adopted an FIV+ cat. But at the same time, she also had a nine-year-old cat who went blind. The blind cat would end up costing the woman over \$6,000 in medical expenses, which was a much larger financial burden than her FIV+ cat. Herman and Salt both had problems with traction and would sometimes continue to slide on wood and tile floors after they stopped running. Brienne found a simple solution and made sure to place additional rugs and towels on all such floor surfaces. Speaking in anthropomorphic terms, Brienne was able to understand and express Salt’s rapid adjustment:

[A]fter amputation [um] it was two weeks of—basically he was sedated and [had] pain pills to the point where he just laid.... Then after two weeks it became, he could do whatever he wanted. So we had to watch him to see ... and he’s like, “Whatever, I rolled over. So what, I don’t have a shoulder anymore.”

Most companion animals and their guardians were capable of adapting to the point that care was normalized. Even companion animals with multiple problems were generally able to exhibit no abnormalities on a day-to-day basis. At a year old, Ygritte’s pit bull, Mel, was in an accident and lost a leg, and yet was relatively unaffected by the loss:

I left him [at the vet’s office] that day so they did the surgery, and I picked him up the next morning and he ran up my stairs like he never missed that leg.

However, prior to the accident, Mel had a traumatizing experience. A man once insisted to Ygritte that Mel meet his German Shepard. Ygritte complied, and the German Shepard attacked Mel. The man then separated the dogs and began to attack Mel. After Mel's encounter with the German Shepard and his guardian, Mel would regularly become stressed if he saw people who looked similar to the man who had harmed him, notably men in uniform, wearing hats, and with beards. Mel's negative experience influenced his identity and produced future violent tendencies, similar to the behavioral changes of children who face abuse (Smith & Thornberry, 2006). This problem is still manageable. Ygritte will ask men wearing hats to take them off and Mel feels more comfortable after.

Referring back to Tyrion, who adopted the blind cat, he described how her blindness is essentially unnoticeable:

The first weekend we had her it was a lot of ... putting her into the litter box.... You could tell she was trying to figure out where she was.... [O]nce she [figured out] where her food, and her litter, and the chairs, and the furniture is, like I said: ... unless we tell [people she is blind] it's hard for people to really know.

To Tyrion, Marge's blindness is not seen as something that inhibits her or is a burden: if anything, it makes her unique. While there may be challenges, particularly when Marge needs to adjust to new locations, they are minimal, allowing Marge to still live a healthy life.

The Limits of Empathy and Anthropomorphism

In their interviews, animal guardians described the connections, as well as the distinctions, between empathy and anthropomorphism in their relationships with their companion animals. In doing so, they present elements of Blouin's categories of humanistic and protectionistic guardians. However, there are limits to animal guardians' empathy, and in turn, anthropomorphism, that thus reveal the limits of Blouin's typology.

In a passage evoking both empathy and anthropomorphism, Brienne explained that she and her partner do their best to make sure their dogs are fulfilled as individuals:

We treat the dogs better than we treat ourselves.... [W]e're very in tune with the dogs and their needs. We get to know them, they're allowed to develop their own personality.... [We] get them socialized and throw them at the vet any time there's a problem so we cut things off right there.

Brienne speaks of her dogs as if they possess the emotional awareness of humans and have the ability to lead fulfilling lives. If Brienne did not believe this, she most likely would not be interested in caring for these "underdogs."

Arya, who was described previously as showing great empathy for other humans, extended this empathy to her companion animals. The empathy manifested as anthropomorphism when she describes the loss of a cat:

We'd had a house cat ... after she died in [a] fire I said, "no, no more." Because I become very attached to [her] ... I cried for two weeks straight. It's like, "My poor baby died" you know? ... She was my baby.

Arya's past cat was anthropomorphized as a "baby." The loss of Arya's last cat made her reluctant to bring any new animals into her home due to the emotional damage she suffered; to her it was the equivalent of losing a child.

However, there are limits to a guardian's empathy and anthropomorphism. Shae could be considered humanistic in the way that she saw animals on a similar level to human beings, including when dealing with illness. She described companion animals as being:

[Just like] children.... They need the care and attention [that] a child does.... [When it comes to illness] it's the same [as] with kids, you really don't think about it happening until it does happen.

But there were limits to what Shae would spend when it came to her companion animals:

Would I spend like ten grand? No. Would I spend a few hundred? Yeah. A few thousand? If it was spread out over time yeah, one lump sum? Probably not.

Further, her cat did not take priority over her human daughter when it came to safety. When asked about handling bites and scratches, she noted:

I guess it would just depend on the situation. I don't believe in hitting your animals, it's the same with kids.... [If it happened] regularly [we would give up the cat].

Even when the concept of discipline was brought up, animals were to be treated as if they were children, but there was still a barrier in Shae's mind when comparing her child and her cats; her human child would not be put at risk from the cats. Her cats were to be seen as the equivalent of humans up to the point at which they would become financially unmanageable or were a physical threat to her daughter.

Discussion

This study revealed a link between empathy and anthropomorphism that makes those who are both willing and able to adopt special-needs animals do so. This would explain why interview subjects that Blouin (2008; 2013) would classify as humanistic, and to a lesser extent protectionistic, were more willing than the dominionistic to take in special-needs animals. Empathy, along with anthropomorphism, lead to a greater willingness to adopt special-needs animals and manage their care. Both humanistic and protectionistic guardians see the animals who need the most help, and thus gravitate toward adopting and caring for them, but the higher level of anthropomorphism among humanistic guardians fosters more empathy: this allows for special-needs companion animal adoption.

However, there is a limit to the impact of empathy. Some guardians were unwilling to risk extreme financial burdens or were not willing to put other humans at risk, no matter how much they empathized with animals. This finding also reveals the potential limitations of Blouin's typology. Blouin (2008) himself noted that "there are multiple ways to relate to animals; far from a single homogenous, hegemonic model" (p. 270). The limits of empathy reveal the symbolic boundaries between human and nonhuman animals that persist, despite the presence of humanistic and protectionistic guardians.

In comparing the adoption of special needs children to that of animals, we see more similarities than differences. Both child and companion-animal adoptions cause disruption in the home and help shape adopter identities. However, the differences in human and nonhuman animal adoptions are very distinct. Animals are exempt from some of the challenges of adopted children. Transracial adoptions often face significant stigma and public scrutiny because the adopted children are visibly different from their parents. This is not a problem for companion animals, who are, of course, of an entirely different species.

As a whole, special-needs adopters do not see their companion animals as any more "special" than other animals. The stigma of being an animal with "special needs" may present financial burdens and occasional inconveniences, but generally, they do not alter their guardian's daily lives any more than other

companion animals. Instead, caring for the special needs of these companions is what makes the bonds between companion animals and their guardians unique, adding depth to the relationship between human and nonhuman animals.

Conclusion

In this study, we attempted to shed light on the complex interplay between empathy, anthropomorphism, guardian orientations, and companion-animal adoption, especially that of special-needs animals. The unique bonds that emerge from these adoption choices are a result of the empathy and anthropomorphism that shapes these guardians' perceptions of these animals and their responsibility to them. While there are reasons to be reluctant about anthropomorphism, those critical of anthropomorphism who see it as a no more than a projection would do well to remember that it may engender empathy not just for our companion animals, but for all animals. As animal-directed empathy has been shown to be related to human-directed empathy (Poresky, 1990), an understanding of the roots of empathy and its relationship to anthropomorphism may offer a multitude of theoretical, empirical, and policy-related benefits.

By distinguishing the role that anthropomorphism plays in Blouin's typology, specifically as a "local" companion animal-oriented empathy rather than a "global" animal-welfare-oriented empathy, this study has identified a direction for future research connecting guardian orientations to larger issues of nonhuman animal and human welfare. For example, ethnographers might expand upon Blouin's typology to examine the categories among animal guardians who identify as animal-rights advocates and activists. It may be that the anthropomorphism and empathy their companion animals engender are the driving force of their social action. Further research could examine the specific ways in which anthropomorphism within companion-animal—guardian relationships and the resulting animal advocacy are connected to broader concerns about human welfare as well. For example, such research could examine whether those who adopt special-needs companion animals become more aware of, and advocate for, special-needs humans.

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