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Identity Work Among Dog Owners  
(Under the Direction of LINDA GRANT)

Using interview data from twenty-six dog owners in Northeast Georgia, this paper examines the identity work involved in owning and being intensely committed to dogs. The commitment these owners exhibited indicated that their dogs were not “just” pets, but were regarded as significant others in their lives. Owners constructed the identities of their dogs, often by either directly or indirectly defining them as human. The relationships with the dogs also had implications to the owners’ self-concepts. First, owners used their dogs to maintain their self-concepts. They also saw their dogs as reflections of their selves. Lastly, owners used the relationships with their dogs to enhance their self-concepts. In conclusion, this research substantiates the social construction of identity as well as of humanness. Furthermore, dogs are used as props to display aspects of their owners’ self-concepts. Unlike traditional props, however, they display internal characteristics that are more difficult to observe.

INDEX WORDS: Dogs, Pets, Identity work, Self-concept, Identity construction, Construction of humanness, Identity maintenance, Identity enhancement, Props
IDENTITY WORK AMONG DOG OWNERS

by

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

In *How to Be Your Dog’s Best Friend*, the Monks of New Skete (1978) suggest unique alternatives to raising a dog. The substitution of the term “raising” in place of “training” is but the beginning of their many suggestions. Shifting away from traditional punishment and reward methods to train a dog, the Monks of New Skete offer a more holistic method that stresses training “as a way of relating to your dog” (The Monks of New Skete 1978, 13).

The success and popularity of *How to Be Your Dog’s Best Friend*, led to the Monks second and more detailed dog manual, *The Art of Raising a Puppy* (The Monks of New Skete 1991). This book is reminiscent of “intro to parenting” books such as *What to Expect The First Year* (Eisenberg, Murkoff, and Hathaway 1996), dividing puppyhood into stages, with detailed descriptions of each stage and the puppy’s accompanying state of mind to enable a more successful understanding between owner and dog. Again, this book emphasizes that the success of the dog-owner relationship is dependent more on the owner’s attitude toward training than on the actual level of skill in training methods.

The Monks of New Skete’s methods highlight the change in dog ownership that has taken place. Owners are taking (and are expected to take) a more active role in dog ownership. Training is not just beneficial, but essential to owning a dog (The Monks of New Skete 1978). There are also greater expectations of the owners, such as respecting their dogs from the onset of the relationship. For instance, the Monks spend part of both
books advising the owner to take time to choose the dog’s name for reasons of respect (The Monks of New Skete 1978 and 1991). Also, dog ownership entails great commitment and expense for many today. In addition to marketing two successful dog-training manuals, there are the essentials of training classes, supplies, crates, and high-quality foods that the Monks recommend for all owners (The Monks of New Skete 1991).

As *How to Be Your Dog’s Best Friend* and *The Art of Raising a Puppy* illustrate, interactions in training are different than in the past. Interaction in general with one’s dog is different today. The activity and culture of pet ownership has drastically changed, becoming a greater priority in the lives of many owners today. The priority and importance of owning dogs is not something exclusive to the Monks of New Skete.

There are currently 55 million pet-owning households in America today (U.S. Census Bureau 1997). As the practice of pet owning has altered, the family has gone through parallel changes as well. With the increasing frequency of delayed marriage and commuter relationships, high divorce rates, and longer life expectancies, more people are living alone (U.S. Census Bureau 1997). For those who do adopt the married lifestyle, they often decide, whether based on work, financial, or convenience reasons, to delay or forgo the addition of children to their family. Also, neighborhoods are not as close-knit as before. The community is not as cohesive nor as great a source of support for the individual as it once was (Putnam 2000). A growing speculation is that because of the changing structure of the family and the community at large, pets are one means of adapting to this change. They may be seen as filling the roles of today’s absent children, spouses, and familiar neighbors.
Given the recommendations of the Monks of New Skete in training strategies and the resulting new forms of interaction between dogs and owners, I am interested in the ownership practices of committed dog owners. I seek to understand how the owner constructs an identity for the dog and what consequences this has on the owner’s self-concept.
CHAPTER 2

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite the breadth of social interaction that past research has examined, there remains another important, though overlooked, set of relationships that are yet to be fully studied--relationships with pets. More attention has been focused on interactions in formal, distant, less personalized contexts, such as between strangers (Cahill, Distler, and Lachowetz 1985; Goffman 1963; Wolfinger 1995), co-workers (Caldwell and Burger 1997; Jacobs 1986), and other less attached people, while other, more emotionally and economically “invested” relationships, such as those between owners and their pets, have been excluded. It is puzzling that interactions that consume such a great part of many people’s lives have remained greatly unstudied.

Studying relationships with pets can offer an understanding of a new dimension of interaction, an intimate one that predominately occurs within the confines of the family household. An analysis of pet-human interactions may contribute to a fuller understanding of basic social interaction and to the construction of the self in interactional contexts.

The importance of pets in America today is indisputable. Despite the prominence of pet keeping, little research has been conducted on this social phenomenon. The research that has focused on pets has tended to focus on the therapeutic aspects of people’s relationships with them (Hoffman 1991; Siegel 1993; Walsh and Merton 1994). Another line of research focuses on which segment of the population is more likely to be
attached to their pets, as well as what types of pets in particular promote attachment (Albert and Bulcroft 1987 and 1988). The social sciences are beginning to realize the benefits of studying the social aspects of owning pets. Clinton R. Sanders is one of the few sociologists currently conducting research on the relationships between people and their dogs (Robins, Sanders, and Cahill 1991; Sanders 1990; Sanders 1993; Sanders 1999).

In this study, I limit my focus to dog owners for a number of reasons. Since relatively unstudied, it is important to focus on one “subset” of pet owners. It is plausible that ownership--its activities, meanings, and other details--varies among dog, cat, and fish owners. Also, it is important to focus on a popular pet. Over one-third of Americans today have dogs, setting the U.S. canine population at about 55 million dogs (U.S. Census Bureau 1997).

It seems as if relationships with dogs may substitute for traditional human to human interaction. While human contact is oftentimes distinguished as essential to one’s life, dogs can apparently satisfy the need for socialization at times. Dogs also appear to affect the owner’s relationships with others. Dogs can encourage socialization between unacquainted strangers, as the dog acts as a conversation starter or an invitation to approach the owner. In such instances, dogs can function as a social facilitator and lead to the expansion of the owner’s social circle. For example, Robbins, Sanders, and Cahill (1991) found it common for dog park “regulars” to develop personal friendships with others initially met because of the dog.

At the same time, however, the dog can limit the owner’s social group. Much like couples with children, dog owners tend to gravitate toward other dog owners, weakening
bonds with non-dog owners. At the very least, the dog owner’s group of friends must at least be dog “tolerant” for the relationship to continue.

The dog plays a role in the owner’s self-concept in a variety of ways. First, dogs shape the interaction experiences of the owners (such as those described above). Secondly, as the dog and owner proceed in public together, the reactions of outsiders on one member of the pair affect the other as well. Thirdly, some owners validate the bond with the dog as a legitimate relationship. Relationships with others, especially significant others, have traditionally provided a backdrop for one’s sense of self, as they help shape one’s self-concept (Rosenberg 1979). Because a number of today’s owners consider their dogs to be significant others in their lives, their dogs may be playing a role in forging their self-concepts. Furthermore, seeing the dog as a significant other also points to a more general sociological phenomenon—the social construction of identity and the self-concept. I seek to understand how the owner constructs an identity for the dog, as well as how the relationship with the dog affects the owner’s sense of self.

This research springs partly from Caroline Knapp’s *Pack of Two: The Intricate Bond Between People and Dogs* (1998), in which she describes her surprisingly intense attachment and comfort she found in her dog in light of personal problems she was experiencing in her life at the time. Upon reading the finding that more than half of all dog owners give their dogs human names (Knapp 1998), I realized that there was something of sociological interest to be gained in investigating these relationships.

The participants in this study have rather intense and committed relationships with their dogs. I neither argue nor assume that the owners I spoke with are representative of the dog owning population at large. However, they are by no means
rare cases either. Simply put, this sample represents owners who are unmistakably and self-evidently attached to their canine companions.

My research is exploratory, analyzing an undeniably important relationship for many people in contemporary life, but one which has drawn limited attention from social scientists. I concentrate on owners who have strong, deeply emotional relationships with their dogs. Again, such owners might or might not be typical of most dog owners, but they are the ones whose relationships with their dogs are most apt to be central in the formation and maintenance of the self-concept. It is these relationships that best illustrate the roles that dogs play as significant partners in interactions with human beings.

I intend to investigate the relationships between dogs and their committed owners to uncover why they are important to so many and what they contribute to the owner that other relationships fail to. Is there something qualitatively different in relationships with dogs than those with other human beings? Or do they share similarities? Are the rewards and benefits different? How does the owner view the dog as the counterpart in the relationship? Compared to more traditional relationships, what do these relationships contribute to the owner’s sense of self?
CHAPTER 3

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

*Pet Research*

Research on people and their pets has traditionally been confined to research on the therapeutic benefits in interacting with them. An unintentional breakthrough by child psychologist Boris Levinson led to his first coining the term “pet therapy” (Knapp 1998, 205). After traditional approaches failed, a group of withdrawn children became socially connected when a dog wandered into Levinson’s office. Since then, animal therapy has proved remarkably successful, aiding in positive changes in both physical health for children and adults (Hoffman 1991; Siegel 1993), acting as a buffer against the impact of stressful life events, and in mental health particularly, by increasing self-esteem and reducing depression (Walsh and Merton 1994).

Other notable research focuses on the population most likely to be strongly and emotionally attached to their pets. Studies have shown that pet attachment is highest among the single, divorced, and widowed (Albert and Bulcroft 1987). Additionally, remarried persons, childless couples, newlyweds and “empty nesters” tend to be more highly attached. Attachment is greatest among the dog-owning population of pet owners (Albert and Bulcroft 1988).

Ethnographic studies have shown that dogs act as social facilitators for their owners in public settings. They expose their owners to encounters with strangers and help establish trust among the recently acquainted (Robins, Sanders, and Cahill 1991).
Additionally, Sanders has examined the process by which owners compensate for their dogs’ misbehavior, oftentimes while in public. The general process by which this is accomplished is categorized under the umbrella term referred to as “excusing tactics” (Sanders 1999). As owners can be embarrassed by their dogs’ behaviors and be censured by others, these patterns denote a close connection between the dog and one’s own identity. Sanders has found a link between dog ownership and issues of the self-concept. Before discussing his findings in great detail, however, past research on the construction of humanness and the self-concept must be addressed.

**Social Construction of Humanness**

The common conception of humanness is socially constructed. Though requisites of humanness can vary, a few core characteristics are thought to be the ability to communicate and reason, as well as possessing a personality and emotional feelings. Though these requisites are consistently agreed upon as constituting humanness, there are exceptions to the rule. For instance, groups such as prisoners, slaves, and women that exhibit the essential characteristics of humanness have nevertheless been historically considered less than human (Spiegel 1988). Also, research on the disabled and their significant others has shown how individuals lacking characteristics thought to be fundamental to humanness can be defined as human nonetheless (Bogdan and Taylor 1989). While the severely disabled lack the ability to communicate, they can still be designated as human. The classification as human is accomplished by attributing the disabled with the capacity to think. They are seen as being able to reason and understand. Family members can create the “semblance of linguistic competence” for their uncommunicative relatives by repeating the unintelligible utterances made by them
(Pollner and McDonald-Wikler 2001, 400). Though they state they are simply “repeating” their words, they are actually creating the others’ responses themselves. The disabled are also regarded as individuals, with personalities, emotional feelings, and the capability to provide company. Lastly, the disabled are incorporated into the non-disabled others’ social group as legitimate members (Bogdan and Taylor 1989). The above actions succeed in “imparting an aura of intelligence and responsiveness” to the disabled, enabling their social designation as human (Pollner and McDonald-Wikler 2001, 401).

Similar strategies can be used among dog owners. For instance, between half and three-quarters of pet owners “define companion animals as ‘persons’ or as having ‘person status’” (Sanders 1999, 9). Like seriously disabled human beings, pets are socially defined as persons, with emotional experiences similar to humans, personal tastes, and narrative histories. Owners “construct the personhood of the animal by seeing him or her as a unique, communicative, emotional, reciprocating, and companionable being” (Sanders 1999, 10). Dog owners see their dogs as “minded” creatures, thereby rejecting the “undue emphasis traditionally placed on language as the foundation” of being human (Sanders 1993, 223).

The communication skills of other animals have been raised as well. Bierens de Haan (1929) has conceptualized language as consisting of a set of essential characteristics that animals’ communication lacks. Human languages are “vocal, articulate, and have some conventional meaning, they indicate something, are uttered with the intention of communicating something to somebody else, and are joined together to form new combinations” (Bierens de Haan 1929, 249). Animals communication falls well short of
all of these criteria. While human language has conventional meaning, there is “no direct relation between meaning and the nature of the sound” within animal communication (Lindesmith, Strauss, and Denzin 1999, 50). Unlike humans, the sounds of animals “do not name objects or situations, but express ‘sentiments’ and ‘emotions’” (Lindesmith, Strauss, and Denzin 1999, 50). Animals also lack the ability to combine sounds in new combinations to form phrases” (Lindesmith, Strauss, and Denzin 1999, 51).

Chimpanzees and gorillas have a history of “learning” how to communicate with humans in human terms via American Sign Language, with Koko the gorilla among the most widely known. While some have taken this as proof of animals’ drive to communicate and learn human language, others see it as the “learning of patterns of behavior that produce rewards” (Lindesmith, Strauss, and Denzin 1999, 52). Hence, although some are able to “see” the use of language by primates, this is accomplished by adhering to a much broader definition of communication (Lindesmith, Strauss, and Denzin 1999, 48). While primates can exhibit a resemblance of language through learning sign language, other animals cannot. It takes an even broader interpretation to “see” language in other animals.

In addition to communication, other times socially desirable characteristics of human beings are “readily projected” onto dogs as well (Bergler 1988, 19). The personhood of the dog is furthered by “involving their animals in both the routines and the special rituals of the family” (Sanders 1999, 28). For instance, dogs’ birthdays are often celebrated; and they are often included in Christmas and other religious holidays. In short, the more the animal is seen as a human, the more it is treated as one (Hirschman 1994, 627).
Alternately, the case may be that humanness is *misapplied* in instances such as these. Individuals “often make the mistake of assigning human attributes to the behaviors of particular animals” (Lindesmith, Strauss, and Denzin 1999, 37). Though individuals “apply human words to the actions of animals, the animals themselves do not” (Lindesmith, Strauss, and Denzin 1999, 38). Furthermore, the terms individuals use to describe animals connote “human action (that is, purposeful behavior)” (Asquith 1984, 38).

*Identity Construction*

In addition to the concept of humanness, the self-concept is socially constructed as well. To begin with, the self-concept is often described as the “totality of the individual’s thoughts and feelings having reference to himself as an object” (Rosenberg 1979). It refers to what people think themselves to be, not necessarily the characteristics they actually do possess (Felson 1992).

Although the sense of self is often presumed as being lodged in the individual and hence of purely psychological understanding, the sociological relevance of the self-concept, as others have pointed out, is not “obscure” (Rosenberg 1981, 593). Although the self-concept may be internalized within the individual, it emerges from social interaction experiences (Mead 1934; Rosenberg 1981). Furthermore, the self-concept individuals fix for themselves has major consequences for their subsequent behavior (Felson 1992). People who see themselves in a particular way tend to act in accordance with that role (Felson 1992). Of further sociological interest is the identity work individuals engage in to “create, present, or sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept” (Snow and Anderson 1987, 1348).
Theories of the social construction of the self-concept were advanced in George Herbert Mead’s *Mind, Self and Society*. Mead asserted that the individual takes the role of the other upon entering a social encounter (Mead 1934). In doing so, the individual essentially sees the self from the perspective of the other. However, since this “seeing” is based solely on the perceived individual’s conjecture, a more realistic interpretation is that an individual sees herself as she *imagines* others see her (Cooley 1902). Such was the premise behind Cooley’s concept of the “looking glass self,” in which he theorized that self-concepts are dependent on the interpretation of others’ views of them. Over time, an individual will see himself as he believes others see him (Rosenberg 1979, 63). Because it is so difficult to determine this ourselves, there is “no more critical and significant source of information about ourselves than other people’s views of us” (Rosenberg 1979, 64). Furthermore, once individuals figure out who they are, they need “consensual validation” to maintain their self-concepts (Rosenberg 1979, 64).

As the above concepts are abstract and difficult to measure (let alone observe), an aspect of these early theories of the self-concept most often tested is that of reflected appraisals, holding that “as a consequence of seeing ourselves from the perspectives of others, our self-concepts will come to correspond at least partially to other people’s views of us” (Rosenberg 1981, 597). The notion of reflected appraisals has been consistently supported through experimental research (see Miyamoto and Dornbusch 1956). Research has also established a consistent link between one’s self-concept and how he believes others see him (Rosenberg 1981). Furthermore, what others *actually* think about the individual does not correspond as accurately to the self-concept as what the individual
believes they think of him (Rosenberg 1981). Thus, our interpretations of others’ images of ourselves are central to our self-concepts.

Although research has shown that individuals do tend to see themselves as they actually are seen by others, there are instances where this is not the case (Rosenberg 1979). The key to this puzzle regards a crucial aspect overlooked in early theories of the self—the role significant others play to the development of the self-concept. As members of society, individuals are subject to interactions with several others, and, consequently, derive the potential for several conflicting perceptions from those others. Without doubt, individuals cannot accept the opinions of all others. To overcome this problem, people must limit whose opinion they will value. Rosenberg argues that a reason such discrepancies described above exist is because “the attitude toward the other, as well as the attitude of the other, may play a role in self-concept development. In other words, not all significant others are equally significant” (Rosenberg 1979, 83).

Past research has assumed that particular relationships will automatically make the partners involved significant others. Past researchers have assumed that parents, spouses, classmates, and friends always function as significant others (Rosenberg 1979). Although they very well may be, it is a mistake to assume such is the case for all, thereby eliminating the possibility of other potential candidates as being significant others. Putative significant others, traditionally the mother, father, and other close family members, are not necessarily the significant others in reality (Rosenberg 1979). It is not only what others think of us that creates the sense of self, but perhaps more importantly, the significance they play in our lives and what they mean to us personally (Rosenberg 1979). As a result, the more important significant others tend to have a stronger input as
to the determination of individuals’ concepts of the self, but who those significant others are is a highly personalized choice.

Interestingly enough, a pet is oftentimes depicted as a significant other (Sanders, 1990). Like more traditional (i.e., human) significant others, animals are seen as providing the owner with important, rewarding social experiences. Interactions with dogs are also considered “real exchanges” between the owner and dog (Sanders 1999, 9).

However, unlike traditional significant others, the difference of power between dogs and their owners is immense. To begin with, owners do not and can not interact with their dogs in the same manner as with traditional significant others. A language barrier exists between the two, making communication obviously more difficult to accomplish. In light of the lack of verbal communication with the dog, the power held by the owner alone allows him to infer what the dog is thinking. Whereas individuals in traditional human-to-human relationships use the content of the conversation to shape their self-concepts, dog owners use their inferences to do so. As such, there is a greater likelihood for dog owners to “misread” the interaction altogether, not to mention a greater likelihood to get away with doing so. The dog has only a limited ability to challenge or contradict the owner’s interpretation of the meaning of the interaction. Accordingly, the interactions with the dogs are reflective of the owners’ interpretations. This is an advantage that individuals gain by interacting with a dog rather than a human other.

Identity Maintenance

Once the self-concept is constructed, most people work towards self-consistency. Self-consistency is the attempt or “motive to act in accordance with the self-concept and to maintain it intact in the face of potentially challenging evidence. People behave in a
fashion consistent with the pictures they hold of themselves and interpret any experience contradictory to this self-picture as a threat” (Rosenberg 1979, 57). Face-work is a similar concept wherein individuals take action to make their display of the self consistent with the image they hold of themselves (Goffman 1967). “Maintaining face” is accomplished through measures that confirm an “image of him that is internally consistent” (Goffman 1967, 6).

Several strategies can be enacted to attempt to maintain one’s self-concept, either in situations where it may not be readily apparent and in the face of contradiction. Identity maintenance can be attained through selective interactions and redefining the situation. Maintenance can also be achieved at the onset of the interaction through the presentation of the self and impression management.

Selectivity of interactions and selective recognition can further one’s maintenance of the self. Backman and Secord (1962) have shown that individuals attain congruency in their self-concepts via selective interactions with only a chosen few others. Individuals interested in maintaining congruency tend to select and interact with others whose behavior requires only a minimum change. In other words, people prefer the company of those who agree with their personal view of their self-concept. They interact more frequently with those whom they perceive to hold views of them that are congruent with their own self-images (Backman and Secord 1962). One’s self-concept can also affect the individual’s sensitivity to information from others (Markus 1977). In attempting to maintain their self-concept, people are likely to recognize only that information derived from interactions that is consistent with their self-concepts (Markus 1977).
One’s self-concept also bears on the interpretation of information they receive in social interaction. Individuals tend to interpret interactions in a way that is consistent with their “existing self constructs” (Markus 1977). Again, it does not require actual consistency since individuals can work to create consistency even when it does not exist (Markus 1977). In addition to the flexibility of interpretations, one can blatantly see what she wants to see, often through redefining an observation. To further achieve congruence of the self-concept, the individual may misperceive altogether the other’s behavior. This often occurs with partners with whom the individual interacts with frequently (Backman and Secord 1962). Furthermore, the more the individual likes the other, the more she will “distort” perceptions of the others’ responses to attain congruency (Backman and Secord 1962).

It seems logical that the easiest way to maintain one’s self-view is to present the wanted characteristic upon entering a given situation (Goffman 1963). Individuals are motivated to make “particular” impressions on the others they are interacting with (Tesser and Campbell 1983). One way to prompt impressions is through the use of props (Schlenker 1972; Snow and Anderson 1987). Props can include items such as clothing, artifacts, or items that serve as identity markers and that help to convey a desired impression by adding “just the right touches to performances (Schlenker 1972, 274). One’s dog can be, “in a sense, a decorative addition to the self” (Sanders 1999, 6). If one wants to be seen in a certain light, then he would most likely attempt to present that self-concept upon entering a social setting.

For example, Snow and Anderson (1987) found that homeless persons used distinctive strategies to avoid stigma and to project desired self-concepts. A common
activity was to engage in various forms of “identity talk.” For instance, the strategy of embracement leads to “consistency between the self-concept and imputed or structurally based social identities” (Snow and Anderson 1987, 1354). Using this strategy, the individual will stake a claim on his self-concept by embracing a particular identity verbally and expressively. Among the homeless that Snow and Anderson studied, embracement was displayed by one “immediately announc[ing] that he was a tramp or a bum” upon introduction (Snow and Anderson 1987, 1354). Furthermore, the homeless persona can be held consistent by “shap[ing] their dress code” to fit their wanted self-concept (Lankenau 1999, 305).

**Identity Reflection**

An additional type of identity work is characterized by the process of projecting a self-concept or aspects of one onto another individual. For instance, individuals have been shown to make blatant mistakes in cognitive perceptions in order to conform to judgments of others (Asch 1956). These purposeful mistakes apparently comfort the individual by minimizing differences with others. Other reflection processes, such as “deindividuation,” speculate that blending in or, more to the point, being indistinguishable from others is gratifying (Diener 1979; Zimbardo 1969). A “false consensus” is demonstrated in the tendency of certain individuals to exaggerate the extent to which they behave the same as others (Ross, Greene, House 1977).

People have historically used cultural products to form their own self-concepts, whether it be cars, clothing, or other items (Belk 1988). People tend to use the pet in the same way. The pet itself furnishes information about the owners (Bergler 1988, 22). The type and temperament of pets “work to demonstrate features of owners’ identities”
The “traits, behaviors, and appearances of the animal are seen as being those of the owner,” thereby mingling the identities of both owner and dog into one (Hirschman 1994, 618). For example, aggressive animals display aggressive owners; feminine animals demonstrate more feminine owners. Perhaps an extreme example is owners of guide dogs. Such owners directly define the dog as an extension of the self (Sanders 1999, 57). The guide dogs are not considered animals, not even pets, but instead a set of eyes for the blind owner. Other owners ascribe more “aesthetic” qualities to their dogs. By associating socially desirable characteristics with their dogs, the owners are ascribing those same desirable characteristics to themselves (Bergler 1988, 21).

**Identity Enhancement and Identity Bargaining**

Other strategies are used, not specifically to maintain an attractive self-concept, but to enhance the perception of one’s self-concept. The individual doesn’t “simply ensconce himself behind his lines of defense but he ventures forth actively and aggressively. He does not merely protect his reputation, he also searches for fame; he does not merely strive to avoid others’ negative opinions but works equally to elicit their positive opinions” (Rosenberg 1979, 56). To some it does not suffice to simply maintain a self-concept, but rather to further it for the better.

The strategy of identity bargaining is the “process of mutual accommodation where people come to an agreement on who each of them will be in the encounter” (Weinstein 1969, 757). Through identity bargaining, people decide who will be who which, in turn, determines how one can act and will be seen by others (Blumstein 1973). The outcome is often “achieved through manipulation of symbolic content of the encounter” (Blumstein 1973, 347).
A strategy of the self-concept that often emerges during identity bargaining is altercasting (Schlenker 1972). Altercasting is the procedure of creating or projecting an identity for the other to assume (Blumstein 1973). Social influence is often used when possible to place the other into a specific role (Schlenker 1972). By creating a role for another, the individual can easily fall into the corresponding and desired position. The result is a strengthening of the pursuits of one’s own goals, i.e., results in their achieving their desired self-concept.

When one is in the presence of an individual celebrated for a particular characteristic or accomplishment, it may help boost one’s self-concept as well (Cialdini et al. 1976; Tesser and Campbell 1983). Outsiders tend to “look similarly upon things that are merely connected to one another, even in relatively trivial ways” (Cialdini and Richardson 1980). Such tendencies describe the outcome of “basking in reflected glory.” However, basking in reflected glory can only be accomplished if the celebrated trait is not related to one’s own character--in that case, it would be a threat to one’s sense of self. Through basking in reflected glory individuals can “control the impression others form of them simply by associating publicly with people who are attractive and avoiding those who are unattractive” (Schlenker 1972, 274). The rewards granted to one’s partner creates the same “rub off” effect for the associated other (Schlenker 1972; see Lankenau 1999).

Animals enable identity enhancement in a quite similar way. The presence of an animal tends to have a positive impact on the owner’s social self-concept (Beck and Katcher 1996; Sanders 1999). People in the company of pets are perceived by others as more socially attractive as well as having more desirable personal characteristics (Beck
and Katcher 1996). Pets also have been found to boost the owner’s feeling of self worth and to ease their anxiety in social situations (Sanders 1999).

Application of the Identity Literature to this Study

The existing literature on identity is relevant to understanding the relationships people share with their dogs, as will be shown. As mentioned previously, active work is required to create the self-concept initially. The presence (and sometimes the acknowledgment) of others is essential to its formation. Once constructed, additional work must still be done to achieve a particular outcome regarding one’s self-concept. One’s self-concept can be cemented through a combination of the identity maintenance strategies of selective interactions, selective recognition, redefining the interaction, and with the use of props. Processes of identity reflection most often include incorporating products as signs of one’s self-concept, as well as attempts to appear similar to others around her. The self-concept can also be altered for the better through identity enhancement strategies, most often through altercasting and basking in reflected glory.

Past research has shown that the above-cited strategies are often used by many individuals during social interaction. It has also shown that these strategies tend to be successful in securing one’s self-concept. Another commonality in previous research is that it has dealt solely with human to human interaction. While there have been differences in those interactions (for instance, different levels of attachment and intimacy between the individuals involved), researchers have failed to venture outside of human-to-human interaction.

This study will overcome this limitation by analyzing how these up-to-this-point successful strategies can be applied to relationships between owners and their dogs and
whether they can be successful in this context. Dog ownership may provide a means to extend the existing identity literature. As the relationships with dogs are different from human-to-human relationships, they may provide further insight as to how identities are constructed and strategies of identity work. In this study I will focus on probing two issues: (1) how the owners see and define the status of their dogs and (2) the role dogs play in their owners’ self-concepts.
CHAPTER 4

METHODS

Data used in this analysis were obtained from twenty-six semi-structured, in-depth interviews with dog owners residing in Northeast Georgia. Conducted between March and November 2000, the interviews lasted between forty and eighty minutes in length, with most lasting approximately 50 minutes.

Social science researchers recommend using the interview method to obtain data when investigating a previously unstudied process (Rubin and Rubin 1995; Schutt 1999). Although research has been done on dog ownership, only a few issues regarding this phenomenon have been researched. Furthermore, no published reports were found that focus on issues of the self-concept among dog owners.

Participants were recruited in a two-phase method. In the first phase, I actively sought out potential participants. I frequented a few local public parks that I knew were popular sites where people took their dogs. I also recruited informants whom I saw walking their dogs either near my apartment complex or in the downtown area. A majority of the interviewees approached using this method were college-aged females.

To obtain a more diverse sample, I drafted recruitment flyers to be posted at various locations throughout the town. The flyer consisted of a bold typed, attention-getting heading of “Hey Dog Owners” followed by a short description of my proposed study and my need to interview current dog owners. The bottom of the flyer consisted of

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1 See Appendix A for a copy of the recruitment flyer used.
several pull-tabs with my contact information for potential interviewees to get in touch with me to set up an interview time. The flyers were posted in a variety of areas to attempt to get a wide range of participants. For obvious reasons, I attempted to post a few flyers in areas where dog owners would be more likely to see them. I went to several veterinary offices and asked for permission to post the flyers. Other flyers were posted at a local pet supply store on a board filled with dog training and obedience advertisements and other such items.

I also posted flyers in areas that were not dog-specific. Flyers were posted in two restaurants, one of which was in the downtown area and the other in a residential area. A few were posted in coffee shops around the town as well. Lastly, some flyers were posted in laundromats at various points in the city. Some were posted at laundry facilities contained in apartment complexes, while others were at public-use laundromats.

This method worked far better than I had anticipated. In comparison to the informants recruited in the first phase, participants recruited via the flyers displayed a greater variety of background characteristics.\(^2\) A greater number of men were recruited using the flyer method, making the sample more balanced in terms of gender. The age range of participants grew substantially wider. Participants ranged from early twenties to mid-forties. I was also able to locate more people in non-single households.

The interview script was composed of questions regarding several aspects of the human-animal relationship.\(^3\) I began each interview by asking about the name, breed, and other specifics of the dog. To get an initial frame of reference of their routine, I asked participants to “take me through a typical day” with their dogs. I then asked what

\(^2\) See Appendix B for a table of all participants, their dogs, and other relevant details.

\(^3\) See Appendix C for an outline of the interview schedule used during the interviews.
the owners’ dogs were like, as well as details concerning their histories with pets. This was followed by my asking what prompted them to get a dog initially and that dog in particular. The next queries focused on lifestyle changes: how is life different now that you have a dog? What are the most positive aspects of dog ownership? The most negative? I then asked about routines shared with the dog, such as access the dog has to the home, sleeping arrangements, and what occurs when the owner leaves for school or work. I was interested in any changes the owner had experienced since obtaining the dog. I left this question vague to allow the owners the opportunity to mention a combination of any emotional, habitual, or social life changes. I was also interested in monthly expenses incurred in owning a dog. The final set of questions dealt with demographics, including age, education, occupation, living arrangements, as well as relationships with family and friends. Interviews were concluded by asking the owners to tell me of one of their best memories with their dog or at what point it was in the relationship that they realized their dogs were important to them.

Although I did have a list of interview questions prepared in advance, not all interviews proceeded in the exact same manner. Some owners provided great detail in narrative fashion without my having to ask follow-up questions. In other cases, I probed responses for further questioning when necessary, either for clarification or for more detailed information. It was fairly common for an owner to tell me a story as an example of a point he or she was trying to make. Other times, in telling a story about the dog, the owner would slide into another topic. I always allowed the conversation to drift where it may, in hopes of getting more descriptive and vivid data. This open-ended method is as
much an issue of respect for my participants as it is of advantage to me in conducting this research.

Using the semi-structured interview method has several advantages in researching this question. First, having the liberty to ask spur-of-the-moment, follow-up questions and diverging from the interview schedule helps the researcher understand what is important from the perspectives of the owners themselves. It would be foolish, not to mention irresponsible, as a researcher to assume that I knew, going in, what issues in particular the owners would have the most to say about, as well as what topics were of highest priority in their relationships with their dogs. Allowing the owners to discuss their chosen topics at length enriches the data. Just as importantly, it provides me with a greater understanding of what in particular about the relationship is important in the minds of these dog owners themselves. After analyzing the first six interviews, I benefited from seeing what commonalities they shared; this helped me add a few seemingly essential questions to the remaining interviews conducted thereafter.

All interviews were tape recorded in their entirety. I also transcribed each interview myself to begin the process of analysis. All quotes to be presented are from transcriptions made directly from the interview recordings. They resemble the participants’ words as closely as they said them during the original interview. Grammatical errors were left unedited so as to give their printed words a more accurate voice in this analysis.

The interviews were analyzed using Glaser and Strauss’ grounded theory approach (1967). After (and essentially while) the initial six interviews were conducted, I actively analyzed the interview transcripts to uncover common themes. I also focused
on other potentially significant themes that were introduced by participants in the initial batch of interviews. This analysis provided a rough framework from which to work as well as several findings “in development” to explore in subsequent interviews. Once interviewees seemed to provide no more new information, I assumed that the saturation point had been reached (Glaser and Strauss 1967) and ceased conducting interviews.

Although many issues were discussed by the dog owners with whom I spoke, I focus here on the most common and pervasive themes shared with a majority of these participants. Although these particular dog owners were different from one another in terms of age, occupation, and lifestyle (to name just a few distinctions), the major themes to be presented were a part of a majority, if not all, of their accounts. Furthermore, the interview excerpts to be presented reflect common sentiments among many of those with whom I spoke.
CHAPTER 5
DOGS AND PEOPLE

I will provide evidence showing that the dogs were regarded as important others in the owners’ lives. Furthermore, relationships with dogs resembled other, more traditional relationships, such as those with families, friends, and children. This research suggests that owners engage in two distinctive, but interrelated, forms of identity work in the relationships with their dogs. The first involves the status of the dog. I will show how owners constructed the identities of their dogs through interpretations of interactions with dogs and projections of aspects of the owner’s self. The second portion focuses on issues relating to the self-concepts of the owners themselves. I will illustrate how the relationships with the dogs affected the owners’ self-concepts. I will provide evidence showing the strategies owners used to draw from interactions with their dogs as reinforcement of their private conceptions of the self. Then I will show how they used their dogs as a reflection of self. Lastly, I will show how it was possible for owners to use the dog to enhance their self-concepts.

Not Just a Pet

The dog owners I spoke with unanimously expressed the sentiment that their dogs were more than “just a pet.” They described their dogs as important others in their lives to whom they had deeply emotional ties. They were extremely committed to their dogs and went to great lengths to provide the dog with a comfortable, satisfying life. Despite
the limitations imposed by owning a dog, the owners felt that the dogs were well worth
the trouble and expense.

Commitment to the Dog

Most owners were extremely “committed” to their dogs. For instance, after
deciding on getting a puppy, Polly⁴ realized that her then-current residence did not allow
pets. “So I decided to move. It was all I could do,” she decided. In her eyes, moving
was the only option after she got her new puppy, Chloe. Finding a new home for her
recently acquired puppy was completely out of the question.

Other owners discussed similar, though less drastic, measures they decided to take
because of their dogs. For instance, lunch hours were used as an opportunity to briefly
see the dog midway through the workday. The routine of certain owners included
rushing home to feed the dog, allow the dog to relieve itself, followed by a short walk,
before rushing back to work. This was a daily routine that preempted the traditional (and
more relaxing) lunch break.

Vacations became a rarer occurrence after getting a dog because “you can’t just
pick up and go.” Spontaneous weekend trips ended up being not-so-spontaneous since
the owners had to anticipate how details would be handled, as Zach relates:

It’s more of a responsibility. Definitely. You have to really consider the logistics of what you’re doing. If I’m going out of town and my wife wants to go out of town at the same time and we’re going to different areas, it’s always, “Who’s gonna watch the dog? Who’s gonna take

⁴ Names of owners and their dogs have been changed.
the dog with them?” And then whenever we go on road trips, we always take the dog along. We have to logistically think where we’re parking the car, so we don’t park it somewhere hot and make sure the windows are down, make sure we’ve got water for him, make sure we’ve got food for him. We’ve got to always think about if we’re gonna go somewhere, can the dog go? I mean, will they allow dogs in this area or not? If not, then what is our fallback plan?… Logistical issues you’ve got to think about. How do you deal with negotiating this big animal throughout different spaces?

Other owners had a slight feeling of dread of visiting friends and families once they became dog owners. Owners of primarily indoor dogs were sometimes part of extended families that prohibited the animals’ coming inside. This was a stressful time for both the owner and dog, as the owner was constantly checking on the temporarily displaced “outdoor” dog. Even more traumatic were those trips taken without the dog altogether. Anna said:

For the first few years that [my fiancé] and I lived together, we didn’t travel at all. We couldn’t go home. Our parents live in the same hometown and we couldn’t go home because neither one of us would put our dogs in the kennel. And then finally, one time, it was getting ridiculous, so we
put them in the kennel. And we were both a wreck for four
days and we decided we were never doing it again.

Time spent away from home (and hence the dog) was oftentimes significantly reduced
after getting a dog. Guilt was the major contributing factor. Monica said:

Well for me, when especially on a weeknight, I feel like
you get home, I don’t want to go anywhere else. I don’t
want to go out to dinner because I feel like they’ve been
alone so much and then we have to leave them again. I just
feel like once we get home, they kind of expect us just to
stay there. And it’s a bad feeling when you have to say,

“Bye, I’m leaving again.”

Going to Great Lengths for the Dog

Owners initially went to great lengths to acquire the dog, to make it comfortable
and happy, often expecting nothing extrinsic in return. Some stated they had a particular
breed in mind once they decided to get a dog.\(^5\) Most admitted that it was no easy task to
find the breed of their choice. Moreover, the breeders they typically found were not
located in the general vicinity of their residence. Living in New York at the time,
Meredith and her husband met a couple who got their black-coated retriever from a
breeder in North Carolina. They made a trip to that same breeder to get one of their own.
Most owners of full-breedes were similar in that they did have to travel to get their dogs--
though rarely as far as Meredith did.

\(^5\) Even a few owners of shelter dogs stated that it took several weeks of visiting several shelters before they
“felt any sort of connection” with a particular dog.
Acquiring the dog was just the first step in a series of expenses for dog owning. Virtually all the owners regularly took their dogs to a veterinarian and took preventative measures to safeguard their dogs’ health. Some dogs required a special diet that could be costly; Anna described it as “the equivalent to feeding your dog lobster.”

*Limiting, but Worth It*

Despite the great and unending expenses and stresses that the dogs caused their owners, all were quick to point out that their dogs were well worth the effort, time, and money required to maintain them. In response to my asking, “What do you think now about your decision in getting her?,” Trent had this to say:

> I can tell you this: I will never have one regret. I don’t care what she does. I mean, there’s times when she’s run away and I’ve had to chase her for forty-five minutes at 12:00 at midnight, in flip-flops trying to run for forty-five minutes, trying to catch her. But it’s all—it’s so worth it.

*The Relationship with the Dog Parallels Other Relationships*

Based on responses from the owners with whom I spoke, the relationship with the dog parallels other relationships. Many comments resembled what others have traditionally said about human relationships. Owners expressed that they valued specific components of the relationship that are similar to human relationships, such as the comfort provided, activities, and company. The commitment and responsibility they felt towards their dogs resembled human relationships as well. Relationships precipitated feelings of personal maturation and bonding similar to human relationships. These relationships particularly seem to resemble those with family, friends, and children.
The Value of the Relationship

All participants described their dogs as important others in their lives. They valued a variety of aspects in the relationships with their dogs. A recurring theme dealt with the owners’ seeing their dogs as a source of comfort. An important side benefit in acquiring the dog was the accompanying alleviation of stress. This aspect was especially evident on bad days, as Beth stated:

Some days I’ll just have this horrible day and I’ll come home and be crying on the couch and Austin will just come up with this goofy look and lick my tears and I’m like, “Ahh… I’m alright. It’s not that bad. Let’s go to the park!”

The company of the dog elicits positive feelings in the owner. Furthermore, the dog acts as a stress reliever, replacing sadness with joy.

Sometimes, however, the comfort experienced wasn’t necessarily by choice. The demands of dog ownership often commanded owners to take time off for their dogs. Although it could be a burden at times, the comfort provided by the dog overshadowed any potential negative feelings harbored toward such high-maintenance dogs. As Beth further stated:

I’m definitely more relaxed because he forces me not to obsess about work and take him out [instead]. So he’s made me more relaxed because I have more “forced” fun time.
Beth, as did other owners, noticed a change in her self once becoming a dog owner. Furthermore, this shift in the self, in accordance with most owners, was always a positive shift. The dog always made them a better person. In Louise’s words:

I’ve met people. Every time you walk your dog somewhere in a public place, you meet other dog owners, which is fun. Dog people just have a connection. And so, yeah, I think Shep’s helped me to be a little more outgoing… I was shy. And she is a great way to start talking to people. So yeah, she’s made me a little more outgoing.

Louise described herself as “pretty shy,” but credits her dog as helping her to become more “outgoing.” By virtue of Shep’s facilitating interaction with strangers, Louise was forced to meet new people each time they went out in public together.

Of further value, owners discussed the value they placed on the physical activities they participated in with their dogs. Many owners had never been so physically active as they were once they acquired their dogs. Again, because many dogs demand exercise, the owners became more active themselves.

The aspect of the relationship a majority of the owners placed great importance in was the companionship itself. Those who lived alone said that having a dog in the household made them “feel” like they were never alone. The company of the dog sometimes satisfied the need to socialize. Some owners felt like the canine companion
was in some ways superior to the company of another human.\(^6\) Louise, for instance, had this to say about taking a cross-country vacation with, Shep, her border collie:

That was the most fun I’ve ever had with her… We had so much fun. The best company is a dog because I felt safe with her and I had company--I guess you could say--in the car with me. Yeah, I didn’t feel alone, but yet you weren’t with someone who talked your ear off or made you talk about stuff you didn’t want to talk about.

*The Responsibility of Dog Owning*

Owning a dog made most participants more responsible individuals. There was a realization that the animal was a dependent creature whose livelihood, health, and happiness hinged on the owner’s actions. Trent’s view summarizes what most owners felt as well:

Actually, it helps you learn a little more responsibility because you’re actually dealing with--you’re dealing with another life. If you don’t feed the dog, the dog is gonna starve. If you don’t do the right thing, the dog is gonna pass away. You don’t want that to happen, so you try, you strive to do the right thing for your pet. And that makes you feel better as a person because you’re learning responsibility. You’re learning a lot of things.

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\(^6\) The owners I spoke with were by no means social recluses, interacting only with their dogs. A majority of them placed great importance in their social circles and a fair number indicated that they had an excess of friends.
Similarly, the relationship precipitated a feeling of the owner “growing up.” Ginger got her dog early in her college career. With the barrage of college rites of passages she was experiencing—socializing and meeting new people, staying out late, taking road trips, and other aspects contributing to an inconsistent schedule—she admitted that her second semester of college probably wasn’t the most opportune time for her (or anyone) to get a dog. In hindsight, however, Ginger saw getting her dog, Madison, as helping her grow up:

I definitely did not expect it to be as time consuming and as involved as it was, especially when she was a puppy, just with the potty training and that kind of thing. I think that now, in retrospect, I wish I had waited longer because I wasn’t really mature enough to handle all the responsibility that came with it. So there was a big wake up call to realize how much she depended on me and how I couldn’t just do whatever because I had to make sure she was taken care of too… And that hasn’t turned out to be a bad thing.

It’s been good for me in the long run.

A good number of participants were similar to Ginger in that they felt overwhelmed upon getting the dog. It was typically described as a major lifestyle change that occurred virtually overnight, disrupting the routine of owners. This was especially true of owners who got their dogs at the spur-of-the-moment.

Some owners admitted that they contemplated returning their dogs after the first few days because they thought they wouldn’t be able to handle the responsibility. Such
thoughts were fleeting, however. Gwen drew parallels between the feelings of being overwhelmed with her spontaneous decision in getting a dog and dealing with an unplanned pregnancy. She saw the situation as a decision she made (although without much planning) and as her responsibility to just deal with it. In hindsight, most owners realized that the experience wasn’t as traumatic as they believed it to be at the time.

*Facilitating Family Bonding*

Other owners described situations in which the dog helped bind their family together. The family dogs became a common focal point within Ivy’s family. The family as a whole spent more time together in large part because of their dogs. The entire family engaged in mutual activities with the dog, from taking walks together to having living room play time. This was especially beneficial in Ivy’s family as she mentioned that her daughters were at the age where children traditionally distance themselves from their families and spend a majority of their time with friends.

When I asked Liz what she thought about her decision to pick up the stray dog she found, she had this to say:

> I think it was a great decision. Actually, at that point, [my husband and I] had been having a hard time in our relationship and I was actually considering leaving and moving to where I came from in New York. But then we found Black Dog and it kind of all got resolved because we had something to focus on. So it was probably a great decision [to keep him]. [laughs]
Liz credits her dog as saving her marriage. Black Dog acted as a therapeutic mechanism, relieving stress from the marriage. As in Ivy’s family, Liz’s dog acted as a “glue” for she and her husband. However, in Liz’s case, the dog helped alleviate the problems she and her husband were experiencing. The implication of her statement is that her marriage likely would not have survived had Black Dog not been in the picture.

*The Construction of the Dog’s Identity*

Next I will illustrate how owners actively worked to construct the identities of their dogs. In viewing them as important figures in their lives, many owners had a tendency to view their dogs as closer to the human than to the canine species. More to the point, owners would actively construct the dog as humanlike.

*Seeing Dogs as Human*

Responses from dog owners suggested that they believed their dogs to be *persons*, not *things*. Although part of the animal kingdom, dogs were seen as closely linked to the human species. Noelle noted:

So it’s company and it’s somebody that’s always there.

You know, somebody who--*somebody*? I refer to him like he’s a person.

Noelle was one of the few owners who took notice of exactly what she was saying about her dog, Eddie. Upon hearing her thoughts verbalized (her expression of Eddie as “someone”), she abruptly cut herself off and pointed out her tendency to refer to Eddie as human. Noelle was not alone in referring to her dog as a human. A vast majority of those I spoke with had similar conceptions of their dogs.
Additionally, a great number of owners saw their dogs not only as humanlike, but also as occupants of traditionally human roles. Many owners considered their dogs to be their friends. Some went so far as to say the dogs were their closest and most reliable friends. I asked Art, the owner of a service dog, if he saw Max more as a pet or a service dog. He responded, “More as a friend.”

Although Noelle was initially surprised by her constructing Eddie as human (in her quote excerpted earlier), she furthered his humanness by saying, “I don’t have that significant other, you know… So I call him my boyfriend.” Although Noelle’s response was partly in jest, Trent similarly (and more seriously) described the similarities between his dog, Mary, and his girlfriend (who was present during the interview and, judging by the expression on her face, appeared to take his words as a sincere compliment):

You come home and see her and it lifts the spirit. It makes you forget about a little something [that’s bothering you] because you concentrate on something totally different and totally forget what’s going on. Same thing with the girlfriend too. [Interviewer laughs] It’s true though. It’s the same thing. It really is. I mean, it’s a different shape and a different form and probably a different feeling on the inside, but it’s basically the same thing. [Both are] gonna make you forget about what [is bothering you]. They’re gonna try to make you forget. They want you to concentrate on them.
The comfort gained in the relationship contributes to seeing the dog as human. The sensitive nature of dogs—their apparent perception of their owners’ moods—promotes them beyond the realm of animalness.

When asked what about her dogs makes them a good addition to her life, Christina responded:

There’s just something about them that just fills our life.
Like I said, I don’t know what we did without them before because they are just so much a part of who we are and what we do. We really started identifying ourselves as Layla’s parents or Bandana’s parents, depending on who we’re talking to.

It was fairly common to hear childless individuals refer to their dogs as their children. Likewise, owners who did have “real” children admitted to seeing their dogs as their “second set of kids.”

These owners were able to differentiate, however, between the value of human life and that of an animal. In speaking with these owners, they primarily stressed, not that their dogs were more valuable than human life, but that they considered them to be significant figures in their lives.

Making Dogs Human

Not all owners were as direct in defining their dogs as human. Some owners tended to use more indirect measures to construct their dogs’ humanness. They would project traits characteristic of humans onto their dogs. By seeing these human characteristics in their dogs, they were essentially bridging the gap between the species.
Naming the Dog

The process of naming enables the dog to be seen as more human. First, giving the dog a name creates a sense of identity. Currently, over half of all dog owners give their dogs a human name (Knapp 1998). Of the owners I spoke with, few had distinctly non-human names. Upon first “fostering” her dog, Liz decided against giving him a name. She simply referred to him as “Black Dog.” She expressed how she didn’t want to give him a “real” name because she didn’t plan on keeping him. Accordingly, the action of naming is itself a form of bonding. Once deciding to keep the dog, she decided to keep the name. The purely descriptive (and somewhat plain) name was transformed into a term of endearment.

Most owners, on the other hand, adopted meaningful, charismatic names from the beginning. A good majority did have “human” names, which were inspired either from characters in movies, in honor of a friend, or were those that they had “always liked.” Along with a number of participants, Noelle concluded the discussion of the name assignment by stating that upon first seeing her dog of choice, he “just kind of looked like an Eddie.”

The Dog Having Mind

In their descriptions, the dogs were characterized as having minds, something normally regarded as exclusive to humans. Their thought processes were considered to be similar to humans’. Anna said:

It’s amazing what they can understand… I can say things to them like, “go over there” or “come over here” or “don’t do that” and it’s like they get it. I don’t know how. I don’t
know if I’m gesturing the same way every time, but there’s
certain phrases that they just get.
Anna saw her dogs as having the intelligence and mental capability to decipher human
language. Again, she wasn’t extreme in saying they could understand every word she
spoke. They just seemed to understand the “important stuff.”

As Beth spoke about expenses of dog owning, she mentioned that toys were of
minimal expense:

The only thing he likes is rawhide. He doesn’t really like
anything else. He’s afraid of squeaky toys, so that doesn’t
go over well. And he won’t chase a ball or a frisbee or
anything like that. He gets offended by that.

Beth’s dog, Austin, is characterized as having the mental capacity to understand when
someone was patronizing him with a toy, a characteristic of high mental mindedness.
Not only is this a component of mindedness, it is one incorporating advanced levels of
thought.

Several owners characterized their dogs as manipulative, another quality
associated with having sound mind. Gwen described her dog named Maggie as:

…such a con artist. Like Joe [her boyfriend] could’ve
gotten home twenty minutes before me and let her out and
played with her. And I get home and she’s like, “Please,
can we go outside? I’ve been inside all day.” And she acts
like she’s completely neglected and nobody ever plays with
her.
Gwen saw Maggie as trying to trick her to get what she wants, more attention. Other owners saw their dogs as “playing innocent” once caught in the act to avoid punishment. These instances were interpreted as purposeful acts on the part of the animal, reflecting a humanlike ability to engage in complex, sometimes manipulative, thought.

*Granting Dogs Human Privileges*

Others elevated the status of their dogs by granting them human privileges. Dogs were seen as autonomous beings. The owners weren’t superiors in a sense. Some dogs slept where they wanted, ate when they wanted, and “made” additional decisions themselves. What actually was greater leniency on the part of the owner was defined as the dog’s decision-making capabilities.

House-owning rights normally available to humans only were also given to the dogs. The common assumption that humans take precedence over animals was null and void among some owners. They felt as if the dog was an individual deserving of the same (if not more privileged) rights and benefits of human others. Ginger spoke about conflict that arose when a group of friends visited her at her apartment:

And I feel like that’s her house, so I make people accommodate to her more than I make her accommodate to other people. Maybe that’s not a good way to be, but that’s how I am. And this girl had her beer on the floor and Madison knocked it over and she got real upset. And she was like, “Can’t we just put the dog outside or in your room or something?” And I just got really upset and I said, “No, this is her house. No, I can’t just put her away
because you’re here. And if you don’t like it, then don’t come back.” And I really haven’t been friends with that person since then.

Of particular interest, Ginger sees Madison not only a pet, nor just a “roommate,” but in a more human light as “co-owner” of the home. Just as Ginger is not obligated to defer to her guests, neither is her dog. In fact, Madison takes precedence over the human others. She is not confined to a separate room or expected to concede in any way. The guests are required to defer if any uncomfortableness arises. Furthermore, the dog is more important than some of her human friends, since Ginger severed the relationship after the conflict. It was not an issue she contemplated before reaching her decision. She had no remorse, displayed by the fact that she felt she unquestionably made the right decision.

*The Dog’s Personality*

Many owners also perceived their dogs as having individual personalities. Noelle, after contemplating several species of animal as the right pet for her, decided on a dog. She decided specifically on a shar-pei after seeing one pictured on a postcard. As I was still a bit unclear as to what prompted her decision on a dog in particular, I asked, “Why was it a dog you decided you wanted? What was it? Was it the postcard that did it? I mean, do you think if that had been a postcard of a cat, you would’ve ended up with a cat?” She quickly responded, “It’s like dogs know their names and they have personality.” Other owners who had a history with pets other than dogs were uniform in seeing the dog in particular as a bearer of personality.

Each owner was able to expressively describe what his or her dog was like. Oftentimes after such a description, I would ask, “Do you think your dog has his/her own
Overwhelmingly, the owners agreed that each dog “definitely” (the initial response of many owners) had a distinctive personality that was all their own. Only one owner had trouble responding to the personality question. Kristen, a self-confessed “former” cat-person, responded, “I guess [Perry has a personality]. She has a dog personality. I would say she’s unique. I don’t know about having a personality, but she’s unique.” After getting over this hurdle, she did describe what made her pug unique. Her description was more or less consistent with the other owners as it focused on her being friendly, happy, and lovable.

The characterizations of the dogs were as diverse as the owners themselves, covering the entire spectrum of traditional personality types. A majority described their dogs as friendly, happy, fun-loving dogs. That, however, was where the similarities ended. Some dogs were depicted as show-offs or “hams,” performing when guests were in their presence. A few dogs were categorized as mellow, often happy to just sit on the couch with their owner all night, while others were quite the opposite in that be described as having boundless energy, jumping off the walls at all times. A few women saw their dogs as clingy, while other owners had more autonomous dogs.

To make personality more reflective of traditional human personality types, owners sometimes included negative traits in their descriptions of their dogs’ personalities. This shows that they actually do see the dog as an individual, since characterizations were not always flattering, attractive, or even congruent with their own personality. Like others in their social circles, they saw the positives and the negatives in

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7 I decided to use this question rather than “What is your dog’s personality like?” to give the owner the opportunity to express that a “personality” was not seen as part of the pet.
their dogs. The dogs were not seen as perfect, but as individuals with idiosyncrasies that were part of their individual natures.

**Providing Voice**

The language barrier between humans and dogs was another obstacle owners were successful in coping with in the relationships. A frequent tendency among dog owners was to provide the dog with a “voice.” Some owners would directly give their dogs voice by speaking “for” them. Throughout the interviews, some owners would ask their dogs a question and subsequently respond for them. As I sat down to talk with Aimee, she informed me that her Yorkshire Terrier, Jade, was pregnant. She then spoke for Jade (in a different voice, no less), saying, “I’m fat and I hate it. I’m just so fat.”

Another approach to give voice to the dogs was by acting as translator. Many owners stated that they knew what particular barks, growls, and grunts meant. They could often tell what a dog was trying to communicate to them by their tone. For instance, some dogs would greet their newly-returned owner with an “I-missed-you” howl. Noelle interpreted Eddie’s incessant barking as follows:

He gets mad when I leave. Like I’ll leave for a while and then when I come back, he’ll be like, [makes barking sounds]. He’ll bark at me and he’ll paw at me like, “What do you think you’re doing?… Where the hell have you been? [laughs] I’ve been waiting for you to get back!”

Still other owners would give voice to their dogs through interpreting their actions. Obviously, the wagging tail and jumping up and down upon their owner’s arrival were
seen as the dog expressing their joy and happiness. However, owners were also similar in translating more irritating and destructive behavior into words. Trent said:

I had a job where I work[ed] from 9 [a.m.] to 9 [p.m.]. And I’d come home and see her and she’d be really mad. You could just tell. Maybe she’d go to the bathroom or something, just left me a message saying, “You left me here for twelve hours!”

Trent didn’t interpret Mary’s going to the bathroom as an accident. She did not relieve herself simply because she couldn’t hold it. Rather, it was as an act of resistance, expressing her displeasure in being left alone for an extended period of time.

**Implications of the Dog to the Owner’s Self-Concept**

The relationships owners shared with their dogs often impacted their own self-concepts as well. Owners were able to use the relationship with their dogs to maintain, reflect, or enhance their self-concepts, as will be shown below. Success in doing so was partly dependent on distinguishing the dog as significant others, which was accomplished by emphasizing the important roles the dogs played in their lives.

**Maintenance of the Self**

In speaking with my participants, there was a common theme that the dog helped to maintain their sense of self. While relating his pet history, Bruce mentioned that he grew up with both dogs and cats. When asked if he would ever consider getting a cat in addition to his current dog named Dylan, he said:

No. No. *Because of him [Dylan]?* No, not that. I just don’t want [a cat]. They’re too feminine, you know?
Some owners (particularly females who owned cats in the past) expressed the idea that dogs are traditionally masculine animals, while cats are feminine. Bruce essentially uses his dog—a man’s animal—to maintain his masculinity. To own a cat would threaten his manhood. A dog, on the other hand, furthers his masculine sense of self.

Interestingly enough, Bruce’s dog is a smaller breed, weighing about ten pounds fully grown. As this is one of the smaller (effeminate) breeds, he takes action to overcome this potential threat. He counters Dylan’s small size by outfitting him with a very masculine addition of a spiked collar.

Owners were able to use their dogs to highlight a particular trait they saw in themselves. Ginger said:

I have the personality that I’m kind of motherly. I want to eventually have children and that sort of thing. So she’s kind of my “pre-baby” baby. [laughs]

Ginger actively creates the role of a child for her dog. By default, she is destined to fill the corresponding role of the mother. The relationship with her dog allows for the opportunity to display a trait that she feels is characteristic of her true self. Other owners acted similarly in placing their dog in the child role as they filled the role beyond and more prestigious than simple caretaker—that of the parent.

While owners acted in maintaining their self-concepts, Aimee used her dog to substantiate her state of mind. Aimee had this to say about Jade:

When I’m happy, she’s happy… As long as I’m happy, she’s okay. But if I’m sad, she’s pretty sad too.
Jade is a mechanism to help maintain Aimee’s state of mind. Whereas other owners discussed the dogs’ abilities to distract them from sorrow and help cheer them up, Aimee’s dog keeps her feelings consistent. Jade legitimates what Aimee is feeling. She makes her state of mind more concrete.

Maintenance work sometimes took the form of defending the animal from outside “threat.” Among the dog owners I spoke with, a threat to the dog was essentially taken as a threat to the self. Owners reacted in protecting the dog in the same way they would normally defend the self. When I asked Dan how he and his wife decided on Lola in particular from her litter, he said they actually did not have a choice in which dog would go home with them as all the other puppies were spoken for. Lola was the last one available because, according to Dan, “she was the runt of the litter.” His wife, Monica, overheard his comments and accused him of “being mean.” Once Dan’s interview was concluded, I briefly questioned his wife. She had this to say:

Well, I disagree. She wasn’t the runt of the litter. I never heard the word “runt” anywhere. I think the way that happened was, we went to the breeder and all the dogs had been spoken for and she was the only one available. But I didn’t take it that she was the runt. She really wasn’t. She was a good size and in proportion with the other dogs.

Obviously, Monica took Dan’s comments (whether heartfelt or in jest) as a legitimate threat not only to Lola, but to herself as well. She did a great deal to counteract Dan’s earlier comments, first by accusing him of “being mean,” then by presenting the facts as she understood them regarding Lola. She worked to redefine the discrediting perception
of Lola through her lengthy discussion aimed at making her argument legitimate. Monica
did all she could to restore Lola’s threatened identity. The way an individual usually
defends the self is similar to the way Monica defended Lola. It appears as if the owner
and dog’s identities are tightly bound together. In these cases it seems that the dog is a
reflection of the owner’s sense of self.

**The Dog as a Reflection of the Self**

As some owners were talking about their dogs, they sometimes spoke of them as
reflections of themselves. Sometimes comparisons were direct, as in the owner seeing
the dog as “exactly like myself.”

Zach was very much aware of the apparent similarities between he and his
rottweiler named Zeus:

> He’s just like me. He’s very active. He’s very adventure oriented. He wants to do whatever. When I kayak down the river, he jumps in the river and swims class 3, 4 rapids with me. When I went rock climbing, he would actually climb rock faces that he could get up, to get up to me. He goes hiking. He can outlast any of us hiking. We backpack with him. He has his own backpack and his own lifejacket. He wears both whenever he does whatever adventure we’re on. And he snow camps and he snow hikes and he backpacks and he rock climbs and he paddles. He does whatever. He’s an adventure dog.
His comments show that the relationship with Zeus involves not just the dog’s inclusion in activities, but the idea of it as a hobby *shared* by both the owner and the dog. The activities are used to shape the dog’s personality by relating it to something Zeus “likes” to do, rather than as something forced to do. It also displays the owner’s personality, reinforcing it to observers (or in my case, listeners).

Anthony, a college athlete, described his American pit bull terrier named Bettencourt as “pretty much an athlete.” He pointed out that “six months [of the year] he trains, six months I do.” Again, the dog is quite similar to his owner--they share the same routine, leisure pursuits, and, hence, the same sense of self.

Other times the reflection of the self was more indirect and implied. Whereas some owners pointed out specific similarities, others described both themselves and their dogs as similar without directly saying, “we are exactly the same.” I asked the recently-married Shirley about her husband’s essentially adopting her dog in marrying her. She said:

> It was very important for me to find someone who loves animals as much as I do because there is no way that I could end up with someone who does not like animals… You know, he’s gotta have a love for animals. And that is the most important thing. I could be with--and looking back, I don’t think--with the exception of one person I dated--that everyone I dated like animals, had a serious relationship with. Nobody had a problem with Haley. In fact, they all loved her. So it’s kind of like my child. If
you don’t accept my child, you don’t accept me. And the one jerk that I dated that didn’t like her, it didn’t last. Because I knew, I said, “There’s something wrong with this person.” If you don’t like my dog, forget it.

As her self-concept is bound in her relationship with her dogs, her husband’s love for animals is an expression of his love for her. Her dogs are such a part of her self-concept that a prerequisite for a serious and long-lasting relationship with her is that he loves animals. The “one jerk” who didn’t like her dog didn’t have a chance with Shirley because he was essentially negating a significant aspect of her self-concept. To love her dogs is to love Shirley.

Some owners admitted certain similarities between their dogs and themselves. Evan described both himself and his dogs as attention seekers who crave performing in front of audiences. Christina said she was most like her dog, Missy, in that they both “always try to look cute.” In a separate interview, her boyfriend, Dave, said he was most like Bandana. They were similar in being more cautious, reserved, and “slow to approach things rather than just jumping into [them].” He later confirmed this aspect of himself when, at the conclusion of the interview while discussing friendships, he said he doesn’t make friends as easily as his girlfriend as it takes time for him to “thoroughly trust somebody.”

Not all owners were as self-aware of the similarities they shared with their dogs. Ginger’s family and friends were the first to point out similarities between Madison and her:
Welllll, I think a lot of people think that we act a lot alike actually. [laughs] *A lot of your friends?* Yeah, my friends and my parents. They’re like, “Oh, she’s just like you.” She’s real like, “I’m the boss” and I’m a lot like that too!

[laughs]

In speaking of dogs in terms similar to the way they view themselves, owners were able to legitimate and defend their self-concepts.

A few owners spoke of fears they “shared” with their dogs. Aimee said she and her dog were afraid of fires. Although this seemed to be rooted in her fear of an apartment fire starting while she was away and no one saving her dog, she saw it was a common fear of both herself and Jade. Louise, once convinced that Shep was terrified of thunder, reached a new conclusion:

Thunder undoes Shep. When [I was away, my neighbor] came and got her when there was a thunderstorm because I had told her that she was so scared of thunder. And she went next door and Shep didn’t flinch--she didn’t do anything! Nothing! Maybe *I’m* scared of it.

In this case, the dog was used as a reflection of the owner’s fears. Louise’s interpretation of Shep’s behavior was used to express the very fears she felt herself.

Lastly, owners with children of their own were likely to see their dogs as reflections of their children rather than of the self. Ivy’s daughters had the privilege of choosing the dogs the family would go home with. She relates what happened as the dogs grew older:
My younger daughter--Buddy is her dog, the merle one, she picked him. And they’re kind of similar. They’re very outgoing and crazy and always wanting to do things. And my older daughter always wants to look pretty and she has nice clothes and she’s like a lady. And Shadow, her dog, is like that. He’s pretty when you look at him… He just likes to sit there for people to pet him. Yeah, we noted and even kept saying from the beginning that they picked dogs that matched their personalities--because it was my children picking those dogs, actually.

Enhancement of the Self

Owners also had a tendency to use their dogs to further their own self-concepts. In comparison to other pets, dogs were particularly more beneficial in heightening one’s self-concept. As Aimee noted:

Cats are just there when you get home. And dogs, you want to go home to them… Cats are just hanging out. They’re there when you want them to. [Dogs] seek your attention, where with cats, you go to them. And you want their attention.

Dogs enable identity enhancement more than cats. With cats, owners must seek their attention. They must take action to bond with the animal. With dogs, the relationship is more mutual. The dog anticipates the reunion just as much as the owner does. The
distinguishable “nature” of the dog gives owners greater discretion in reformulating their self-concepts as will be illustrated.

Owners often used their initially getting the animal to promote their self-concepts. Shirley, for one, talked about complications in deciding on getting her dog, Haley:

I couldn’t take her because I was living in an apartment at the time and the [pet] deposit was three hundred dollars and I couldn’t afford it… [The woman who originally owned her] said, “Because if you don’t, we’re gonna have her put down.” And I thought, “Oh my God!” And I called her right away. I thought, “I’ll find the three hundred dollars to put down for the deposit”—which I did. They let me pay it in installments. So that’s how I got her. She was doomed for death.

Shirley had recently graduated from college and was starting her profession as a (low-paid) public school teacher when she first obtained Haley. Although she stated it wasn’t in her best economic interest to get her, she went through with it. Had she not, Haley’s life would have been no more. Shirley continued:

I kind of like to think that I’ve been their safe haven. Haley was gonna be put down. Probably only a matter of time until Lucky would’ve got hit by a car. Bandit was left to die… I feel that I have saved them and given them the best life possible, the best quality of life. They get their meals, their food. Like I said, they’re not lacking anything. And
all of my pets are overweight. They’re happy and what do pets like more than anything? They like to eat! And, of course, they get lots of attention… I just like to feel like I gave them a second chance. All of them had a second chance because of me.

Shirley, time and time again, has rescued stray animals from death with no apparent ulterior motive. Though the attention on each specific pet may not be as focused as it is divided among several animals, it is a far better fate than their previous state of abandonment. Stray animals that once had to hunt their own food (or starve doing so) are compensated for their past malnourishment by Shirley with an abundance of food—so much as to the point of being overweight.

Other times the owners related stories of the dog adopting them rather than the traditional owner-adopting-the-animal scenario. A “very skittish [dog who] wouldn’t go within twenty feet of anyone but me,” as Polly describes her current dog named Chloe, followed her home one day after work. Refusing to ignore the stray, she took her in. Polly’s story alludes to Chloe’s sensing that Polly was a trustworthy person. The sense of trust is further verified by the fact that the dog would not go near anyone else.

Unforeseen circumstances precipitated Paul’s acquiring his dog. Though Smokey was full grown and raised by another individual, he did not show stress once Paul became his owner. However, had it been someone other than he taking over the role of owner, Paul is convinced the transition would not have been so smooth. Because it was him, though, the dog experienced no stress in what should have been a quite traumatic life change.
Shirley, Polly, and Paul were “accidental” or “unplanned” owners. They did not actively seek out dogs; rather, circumstances surfaced that provided them the opportunity to own a dog. Owners of stray or shelter dogs were able to use the dogs’ beginnings as evidence of their good and altruistic nature. It was relatively easy for these types of owners to use such instances to enhance their self-concepts.

Meredith spoke of her experience regarding the commitment required in owning a dog. She gave the following suggestion for dog owners:

My idea is that you should treat them good. You should be as good to them as you can. I kind of treat her like she’s a person. She thinks she’s a person… So I’ve probably been a terrible owner because I haven’t treated her like a dog.

Meredith openly criticizes her role as an owner, citing not treating her as she should be treated--as a dog. Though she sounds critical, she actually ends up flattering herself. She follows her advice regarding owning a dog. Actually, she goes above and beyond her recommendation. She treats the dog as well as she can--with the same type of treatment she would provide for a human being.

Several owners talked about the devotion their dogs held for them. The attention they received from their dogs was also used to further their appeal. I commonly heard owners revel in their discussions of their dogs preferring their company or their touch to all others. The dogs constantly showered them with attention--even when the owners didn’t instigate the attention themselves (through calling them over, offering them treats, and so on).
Other owners, Noelle for one, talked about outsiders having problems calling her
dog to them and asking, “What’s wrong with your dog?” She responded by calling Eddie
over successfully on the first attempt and saying, “Nothing’s wrong with him.” In
Noelle’s mind, nothing is wrong with the dog indeed; he just prefers her to all others and
needs little or no coaxing to go to her in the first place.

Sometimes devotion had unhealthy side effects. Shirley was forced to administer
the psychotropic drug Prozac to Haley to alleviate her “separation anxiety from me”
while away at work. Though it is a problem on the surface, it further shows Haley’s
devotion and attachment to Shirley. Her attachment is so great that she needs medication
to deal with the times she is not by her owner’s side.

Complimenting the Dogs

Owners gained attention in owning a dog, not only from the dog itself, but often
from increased interactions with people in public. These instances sometimes led to the
enhancement of the owner’s self-concept. Although the dog is the main motivation to an
unacquainted person instigating the interaction, the owner receives the benefits--the
attention--as well. Noelle credited Eddie’s unique appearance as facilitating interaction
with others. This attention to him, of course, brings attention to her.

The character of the dog, when praised or complemented, helps to enhance the
owner’s self-concept. Compliments on beauty, friendliness, or other qualities, give the
owner satisfaction as well. One of Dave’s dogs, Bandana, competes in agility
competitions and recently won his first title. Dave also stressed that Bandana is well on
his way to gaining additional titles in the near future. Dave’s pride in Bandana stems not
only from his titles, but also from the sense of accomplishment in training Bandana.
himself. He stressed that Bandana is one of the few mixed breeds in competition. As mixed breeds are commonly regarded as having less mental capability and being less “trainable,” they started with odds stacked against him, though ultimately succeeding.

On a similar note, Noelle spoke of doing research on shar-peis before going out and buying one. Originally bred as “Chinese fighting dogs [that] used to guard the palaces,” shar-peis are notorious for having an overly aggressive temperament. However, Noelle noted:

He’s never bitten anybody, never been aggressive while I’ve had him. He’s really pretty chill which is abnormal for his breed. But I think it’s all in how you train a dog, so…

Eddie is of an aggressive breed, yet is a calm dog. The early socialization and training she conducted herself overcame his innate aggressive nature. She was more powerful than Eddie’s biology.

As I was concluding the interview, Zach told me an “interesting little tidbit” about his experience with his dog, Zeus:

We had our house burn down several years back. And the cats and dogs were in the house. And I had trained Zeus how to open and close a door in the house and that door was basically what separated the burned component of the house from the unburned component of the house. And the dog was in the burning component of the house and since we taught him that trick, he went ahead and opened that door up and let him and the cats through into the unburned
component of the house and saved all of their lives and allowed him to get to the point where the neighbors opened up the door at the other side of the house and let him out.

Oh Man! So he pulled a full-on Rin-Tin-Tin, Lassie-type episode and saved the herd. Wow. Why was it that you did teach him how to open up the door? Because he would always get stuck behind that door. That door was one of those doors that kind of self closes as you’re walking through it. And he would get stuck on the other side of the door and would whine because he couldn’t get to us on the other side of the door, so finally I taught him how to open and close it because I got sick of getting up and opening the door for him. Out of sheer laziness, on my part.

[Interviewer laughs] Uh-huh. No real functionality to it, other than to save me from having to get up and walk. And so he used that trick to his advantage in the middle of a burning fire.

Zach takes pride in crediting his dog as “saving the herd.” However, his success is due to his teaching him how to open the door in the first place. Essentially, a compliment to his dog is a compliment to the self.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

Centrality of the Dogs to the Owners’ Lives

The dog owners I interviewed placed great value on the relationship they shared with their dogs. They saw their dogs as important interaction partners in their lives. They were extremely committed to their dogs, as these relationships required active caretaking. It was typical for owners to admit to spending great amounts of money and time with their dogs, as well as sacrificing some of their freedoms to sustain the relationship. Once becoming a dog owner, the responsibility associated with the role disrupted their previous routines and sometimes altered their social interactions with others. For many owners, the dogs became one of the most central others in their lives.

As such, the relationships with dogs have several similarities to human relationships. Like many human relationships, the relationship is formed by choice. The owner either actively searched for the pet or, through a set of circumstances, “adopted” one. Many of the dog relationships are of a personal and very intimate nature. This was evidenced by the owners’ sharing the same living spaces with their dogs. Not only were dogs almost exclusively “indoor” pets, but they shared the same rooms and often the same beds with their owners. To further integrate them into the owners’ lives, the dogs also engaged in the same activities of their owners, whether they included vacations, outdoor activities, or simply lounging on the couch watching TV. Lastly, owners
received the same benefits with their dogs that others do from human relationships. Dogs acted as stress relievers and provided genuine company to the owners as well.

However, the relationships with dogs also presented obvious distinctions from human relationships. First, these relationships were sometimes recognized less as “true” relationships by outsiders. Family members that refuted these as “real” relationships had to be convinced that the animal was not “just a dog.” Owners had to legitimate the value of the relationships with their dogs.

Secondly, the relationships with dogs were more one-sided in comparison to human relationships. To compensate for this problem, the owners elevated the dogs to a more equal level as them. Also, while these owners were intensely committed to their dogs, it took less dedication to maintain these relationships than it would for relationships with humans. It was possible to put these relationships “on hold” during busy times at work or until final exams were completed in college courses. It may be easier to commit to dogs than people for individuals with hectic lifestyles. The dogs will always “forgive” their owners if they are too busy or ignored them during stressful times.

**Construction of the Dogs’ Identities**

A great tendency was for the owners to construct humanlike identities for their dogs, either directly or through somewhat indirect means. The owners, working from a position of power and control in the interaction, had the authority to grant humanness to their dogs. Through whatever reasoning necessary, they found a way to legitimate the placement of the dogs into the same category as human beings.

Owners would directly construct the dog as human through defining them as such. It was not rare for an owner to see their dog, not as an animal, but as human. Owners
would further the dogs’ humanness by placing them in important roles. No longer exclusive to humans, the dog was labeled and treated as a family member or friend.

Characteristics normally reserved for humans were granted to dogs as a method of indirectly constructing them as human. A method of bonding with the animal, giving dogs human names obviously adds to their humanness. Dogs were seen as possessing an advanced level of thinking and, consequently, a mind. Sometimes it was seen as so well-developed as to handle complex, higher order processes, such as manipulation. Owners granted dogs privileges that were altogether human. At times the dogs even took precedence over human others. Some owners did not ask their dogs to defer to human outsiders and were granted greater authority. Dogs were described as having their own unique personalities. Their distinctness enabled the formulation of dogs as individuals, another human quality. Owners commonly were able to break the language barrier. They allowed for communication when it otherwise would not be achieved.

Through a variety of strategies, owners were able to compensate for their dogs’ animalness. They actively and subtly constructed their dogs as a higher order of animal--more human than canine. The strategies described above further substantiate the social construction of identity as well as of humanness.

**Consequences to the Owners’ Self-Concepts**

Once defining the dog as human, owners were then able to use this designation of the dog to bolster their own self-concepts. The self-concept is shaped by significant others that, up to this point, have traditionally been human. Seeing the dog as a “fellow” human further legitimates the conclusions the owners reached in interactions with their dogs as accurate and genuine.
Evidence showed that dogs were used to maintain an owner’s self-concept. Traits that owners believed constituted their self-concepts could be reaffirmed through relationships with their dogs. This was done by assigning the dog to a role requiring the owner to fill the corresponding role with the “needed” trait. Lastly, owners would do all they could to avoid negative repercussions as a result of being with the dog. When conflict arose with others over the dog, the owners tended to side with their dog, granting greater priority over the human other. Owners would defend the dog as they would defend the self.

Some dogs, in their owners’ descriptions, appeared to be reflections of the owners’ selves. Some owners placed their dogs in roles they themselves occupied. Other times the dog as a reflection of the self was less direct. Owners described their dogs in similar terms that they described themselves.

Dogs were particularly helpful in enhancing the owners’ self-concepts. The behavior of dogs acted as ego-boosters for the owners. The excitement owners saw in the wagging tails and jumping up and down of their dogs upon their arrival home added to their perceived self-worth. Such instances were interpreted as expressions of feeling wanted, being missed, and being altogether important. Owners of stray dogs used their dogs’ unfortunate past to enhance their self-concepts as altruistic rescuers. These owners commonly saw themselves as the dogs’ saviors. The intense devotion dogs had for their owners also enable identity enhancement. The dog preferred their owner to all others. This favoritism was interpreted as again relating to trust and feeling comfortable and safe with the owner.
Identity enhancement was not just the result of the owners’ interpretations of their dogs’ behaviors. By facilitating interaction in public, the owners benefited from the attention their dogs received. Therefore, dogs helped owners attain benefits from interactions with human others as well. When the dog is complimented or rewarded--either in formal competition or in passing by others--the owner is rewarded as well.

**Contributions of this Research to the Identity Literature**

Results of this research show that humans have the power to grant humanness when they see fit. This seems to be done in instances to overcome inadequacies of those “deserving” of an elevated status. The more worthy particular individuals are perceived, the more likely they will be granted human status. The designation of personhood also seems to be dependent on attachment. Increased attachment may increase the likelihood of being defined as human. Furthermore, the common understanding of humanness is not as definitive as it was once thought to be. Further implications of the construction of humanness will be discussed later as it relates to outcomes in the owners’ self-concepts.

In analyzing the relationships between owners and their dogs, the presentation of the dog is a presentation of the self. The experiences of owning a dog seem to be a more covert means of identity presentation. The dogs can become the owners incarnate and seem to be used as props for the owners’ self-concepts. They highlight certain qualities the owner wants to announce to outsiders. Whereas other props are mere decorations, dogs are living creatures that can be used to give more credence to the owner’s claim. The dog is stronger than a material product in evoking a particular impression upon others since it is a living being rather than an inanimate object.
Also, dogs seem to display their owners’ more internal, unobservable qualities. Among committed owners, dogs are not used to display status affiliations, but rather they display more emotional characteristics. For instance, while material products (such as cars or name-brand clothing) are often used to display class status, a dog can more easily display qualities such as trustworthiness and nurturance.

Traditional strategies to maintain or enhance one’s self-concept with human others depend on the human other to cooperate with the interpretation (or at the very least not question it). Elevating the status of the dog to the human level allows the dog to play a part in the owner’s self-concept. As near-humans, the dogs’ perceptions of their owners are considered as legitimate. Since owners and their dogs are intimates, the dog “knows” the owner and can offer an accurate account of the owner’s self. The dogs act as an alternate set of significant others in the owners’ lives. As the self-concept is more contingent on the opinion of significant others, relationships with dogs can facilitate a more stable self for the owners.

Having the power and authority to construct the identity gives the constructor the same power to interpret aspects of the relationship. Much in the same way that parents may not really know why their baby is smiling, laughing, or showing signs associated with happiness, they interpret it as they wish. The father may say of the child’s random actions, “She’s so happy to see me!” It appears to be the same act occurring with dog owners. However, it goes even further than that. It is easier to recognize happiness in another human (even if a baby) than it is in the non-human species. This difficulty in discerning happiness (or even the presumption that dogs can be happy) can work to the dog owner’s advantage. The owners have more leeway in interpreting the dogs’
behaviors. Whereas a parent would have difficulty characterizing a screaming child as happy, a dog owner could label a dog’s unending barking as her being “excited to see me” (rather than the equally valid interpretation of her being “mad at me”) with less chance of an outsider discrediting the claim.

Also noteworthy, dogs are not capable of explicitly contradicting the owners. Owners have no legitimate means to confirm that the dogs’ displays of excitement are in response to seeing the owners themselves rather than in anticipation for food or other less-than-flattering alternatives. The interpretation is completely at the discretion of the owners. Furthermore, non-owners do not have the authority to negate the owners either, as the owners are the individuals who “know” their dogs better than anyone else. Were similar strategies used with human others, there is a great likelihood they would be unsuccessful.

This research, though limited to dog owners, still more generally underscores the distinctive nature of interactions within imbalanced relationships. The monopoly of power invested in one individual gives that individual the prerogative of the lone and legitimate interpretation of the relationship. When individuals have the utmost liberty to interpret interactions as they wish without fear of contradiction, they can shape it in ways that provide for the betterment of their self-concepts. While they may not be consciously exploiting the less powered individuals, the more powerful partners use their influence as an advantage in the interaction. These individuals have less at risk in these relationships, as they decide the outcomes of them. The powerless individuals, however, have little influence as to how they are represented.
The general issue at work in this research is how differing levels of power can be used by the powerful individual to facilitate more easily the success of various identity strategies. The results of this research can potentially be generalizable to other relationships with a power imbalance. Such interactions may provide the more powerful individual with the authority to interpret the interaction and results as they wish. The less powerful other has less command to respond and contradict the conclusions of their powerful interaction partner. The identities of the powerful individuals are less threatened in these types of relationships, while the less powerful’s identities are more at the discretion of their partners. Therefore, the powerless individual has more at stake in imbalanced relationships. Differences in age, status, or in this case, species, help the superior to expedite the intention of his or her choice.

**Limitations**

It is important to note the limitations of this study. While owners I interviewed were quite similar to one another in terms of their relationships with their dogs, they are probably not characteristic of all dog owners today. Their intense levels of commitment and attachment may not be common to dog owners throughout the population.

Also, these owners, though greatly committed to their dogs, did have a social circle outside of their relationships with their dogs. The dogs, therefore, did not constitute the only important interaction partners in the lives of these owners. The strategies these individuals used with their dogs were not obviously able to be used with all the significant others in their lives. These strategies only reflect the outcomes in one facet of the owners’ social circles. Furthermore, I cannot say how significant the outcomes of these interactions are to the owners’ self-concepts overall. I do not know
how internalized the benefits they received really are, or how other interactions may or may not counter those benefits.

**Future Research**

While this research used a sample of dog owners who were relatively uniform in their commitment and attachment to their dogs, it would be interesting to compare less committed owners to the results presented here. Also, do relationships with pets other than dogs differ? Do owners of other animals define their pets as human as well? What do other types of pets do for their owners’ self-concepts?

As this research has shown, the practice of pet keeping involves a complex set of processes that necessitate further investigation. While unlike traditional human interaction in some ways, the study of the role of animals in society can contribute substantially to the sociological understanding of social interaction. It is time for researchers to examine further not only what animals do for us, but to explore more deeply what we do in our interactions with them as well.
REFERENCES


APPENDICES
Hey Dog Owners:

I’m a grad student at UGA and need your help. I’m conducting research on people and their pets and would like to include you in my study.

If you own a dog and are willing to be interviewed (should last about 45 minutes), please call or e-mail me.

We can even meet at a coffee shop (or wherever you prefer) for the interview and I’ll pick up the tab.

Thank you.

Michael

555-1431
mramirez@arches.uga.edu
# APPENDIX B

## TABLE 1: OVERVIEW OF PARTICIPANTS AND THEIR DOGS
**(IN ORDER INTERVIEWED)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Owner</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Home Occupancy</th>
<th>Dog(s)(^a)</th>
<th>Breed</th>
<th>Length of Ownership</th>
<th>Where Received</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sheryl</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Clyde</td>
<td>Labrador</td>
<td>Over 1 year</td>
<td>Displaced(^b)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trent</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mary</td>
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<td>Over 2 years</td>
<td>Breeder</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>Cohabiting</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Molly; Rufus; Ali</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
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<td>Married</td>
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<td>Gender</td>
<td>Relationship</td>
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<td>Length of Ownership</td>
<td>Where Received</td>
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<td>Gwen</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Cohabiting</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Maggie</td>
<td>4 years</td>
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<td>Married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Jake; Lady; Sammy</td>
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<td>Aimee</td>
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<td>Single</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Jade</td>
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<td>Liam</td>
<td>27</td>
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<td>4 years</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Eddie</td>
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<td>Lola; Cruise</td>
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<td>White</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>Zeus</td>
<td>--</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* In cases in which more than one dog is owned, the names, lengths of ownership, and where received are listed respectively.

b This term implies that the dog was not originally that of the current owner. Most often a friend/acquaintance was no longer able to care for dog and the now-current owner “took over” responsibility.
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

What is your dog’s name?
Why did you choose that name in particular?
What breed is it?
Why did you get that breed?
How long have you had him/her?
Did you get him/her as a puppy? If not, when?
How old is your dog?
Before I get into the rest of the questions, could you tell me about a typical day with your dog?
Do you see your dog as having his/her own personality?
How does your personality compare with your dog’s?

What history do you have with pets?
Have you always owned dogs?
Have you owned pets besides dogs?
What tempted you to get a dog in the first place?
Why did you decide on this one in particular?
What do you think about your decision in getting a dog right now?
Is he/she a good addition to your life? Why or why not?
How is your life different now? Tell me the good and the bad.
What have been the most positive aspects of dog ownership for you?
The most negative?

In what areas of the house is the dog allowed?
Where does the dog sleep?
What happens when you leave for work/school?
Where does the dog stay when you leave?
Are there any special routines that you follow before you leave?
Have you noticed any major changes in your habits since the addition of your dog?
Does he/she affect your social life at all?
What expenses are made each month for your dog?
How much do the dog’s necessities cost? (food, vet visits, toys)

Now I’m going to ask you some background questions.
Tell me about your family. What are your relationships like with your family?
Do they live nearby?
How often do you see them?
How often do you talk to them?
What about your friendships?
Would you say that you have a lot of friends or a smaller, close circle of friends?
What is your living situation like?
What is your marital status?
Do you have a roommate?
Do you have a job? Is it full-time or part-time?
Are you a student?
What is your education level?
What is your age?

Is there anything else that’s important about your relationship with your dog that I’m overlooking?

I usually concluded the interview with one or both of the following questions:
What is one of your best memories that you have with your dog?
When was it that you realized that your dog was important to you?