

Goffman, *pets*, and *people*



An Analysis of Humans and Their Companion Animals

Lisa Sarmicanic

Whether in public or at home, our companion animals play a significant role in our lives. They lend authenticity to the performances we put on for others, but they are also our allies on the homefront. It is when we are alone with our animals that their true power becomes apparent: the ability to help us see ourselves more clearly. It is in the home, I argue, that companion animals become objects of both our self-definition and fantasy.

Over the last few decades, the attitude of humans toward pets/companion animals has changed dramatically. The word “pet” is “generally applied to animals that are kept primarily for social or emotional reasons rather than for economic purposes” (Serpell and Paul 1994, 129). One of the most salient characteristics of pets, as opposed to other domesticated animals, is the lack of a direct commercial utilization (Bonduelle and Joublin 1995). The worth of most domesticated animals is measured by the practical services and economic resources they provide. The value of owning a pet appears to derive from the relationship itself.

The current use of the term “companion



animal” as an alternative to “pet” further emphasizes the difference between our relationship with animals domesticated for economic reasons and the animals we choose to take into our homes and hearts. Rather than simply looking after a pet, many guardians of companion animals enter into some form of relationship with them that is analogous to a human-human relationship. It has been suggested that the most common role a companion animal can fulfill is that of friend to its owner (Hirschman 1994). Companion animals are also frequently described as family members (Voith 1985), or even as surrogate siblings or children (Sanders 1990; Hirschman 1994). Finally, companion animals assist in the achievement of

trust, autonomy, responsibility, competence, and empathy toward others (Beck and Katcher 1996).

A number of scholars have claimed that the concept of self is often pivotal to relationships with companion animals. For example, in his study of dogs and their caretakers, Sanders (1993) argues that, just as caretakers of the disabled construct a “fully enabled human” identity for them, so also do dog owners construct a “humanlike” identity for their pets. Janet and Steven Alger (1999) observed cats taking the role of the other. That is, they observed cats contemplating the feelings and expectations of other cats and acting accordingly. These findings have led them to question George Herbert Mead’s insistence that animals lack a conscious sense of self (Mead 1934). In a similar vein, Leslie Irvine (2004) suggests that the boundary separating humans from animals may be somewhat shaky. She proposes moving beyond Mead’s language driven model of selfhood to one that incorporates a system of experiences that have the fea-

Lisa Sarmicanic is a doctoral student in the sociology department at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. She has presented several papers on the impact of companion animals on human selfhood and identity. She currently lives in Las Vegas with her husband and four cats.

tures of agency, coherence, affectivity, and history.

In this paper I will use Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) as support for my argument that animals serve as living additions to the complex sets required for what are known as front stage performances. I will also draw on Goffman's work to support the argument that animals reflect the selves we create as humans. For Goffman, the front region includes items such as furniture, scenery, and stage props. He argues that we need these to carry out our performances successfully. Although props serve a useful function, Goffman does not suggest that they are imbued with personal energy or reflective of the self. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, authors of *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (1981), see objects as more than simply props. They maintain that "men and women [retrieve their identities] by first creating and then interacting with the material world. The nature of that transaction, they believe, will determine, to a great extent, the kind of person that emerges" (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981, 16). Using their work I will attempt to fill in the gaps left by Goffman regarding the social and emotional aspects of objects.

Erving Goffman and the Dramaturgical Model

Goffman, sometimes regarded as the intellectual successor to Georg Simmel and his formal approach to sociology, was interested primarily in what he termed the "interaction order." He sought to understand how people accomplish meaning in their lives by studying how they act, interact, and form relationships. He was especially interested in how people construct their self-presentations and carry them off in front of others. His concept of dramaturgy suggested that there was some form of intentionality or deliberate thought behind the planning and execution of these performances. He believed that such performances were geared toward people achieving the best impression of themselves in the view of others. For Goffman, presentation of the self went beyond the simple role taking

envisioned by Mead to a highly manipulative form of role playing (Adler and Adler 1994).

Goffman came to his conclusions while maintaining a position of self-imposed marginality. He preferred social distance from which he could observe the action of those around him with clinical detachment. He also distanced himself from the academy by refusing to present his scholarly ideas at conferences, preferring instead to write essays detailing his work (Adler and Adler 1994).

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Goffman takes the familiar sociological concept *role* and puts it "on stage" by placing the analysis of human behavior in a theatrical setting. He takes the dramatic situation of actors and actresses on stage and applies this theatrical representation to the everyday lives of ordinary men and women who are acting out their roles in the real world.

Goffman focuses on *impression management*, or the ways in which the individual guides and controls the impressions others form of him or her. While we generally strive to convince others of our competence, it is not always possible to do so successfully. Instead our performances are sometimes marred by unmeant gestures, inopportune intrusions, and faux pas. Unmeant gestures consist of minor, inadvertent acts that may convey impressions inappropriate at the time (Goffman 1959). The individual responsible for contributing the unmeant gesture, Goffman insists, "may chiefly discredit his own performance by this, a teammate's performance, or the performance being staged by his audience" (1959, 209). Inopportune intrusions occur when an "outsider accidentally enters a region in which a performance is being given, or when a member of the audience inadvertently enters the backstage" (1959, 209). Here the intruder is likely to catch the performers unaware with the result that performers are "witnessed in activity that is incompatible with the impression that they are under obligation to maintain to the intruder" (1959, 209). Finally, "intentional verbal statements or non-verbal acts whose full significance is not appreciated by the

“Intentional verbal statements or non-verbal acts whose full significance is not appreciated by the individual who contributes them to the interaction” are known as faux pas.

individual who contributes them to the interaction” (1959, 209) are known as faux pas.

To avoid such problems, Goffman maintains, it is crucial that each member of the performance team be dramaturgically disciplined. A dramaturgically disciplined performer “is someone who remembers his part and does not commit unmeant gestures or faux pas in performing it. He is someone with discretion; he does not give the show away by involuntarily giving away its secrets” (1959, 216).

Two additional concepts that Goffman has drawn from the theatrical tradition include the “front” and “back” regions. Goffman claims that a region may be defined as “any place that is bounded to some degree by barriers to perception” (1959, 106). In the Western world, Goffman argues:

When a performance is given it is usually given in a highly bounded region, to which boundaries with respect to time are often added. The impression and understanding fostered by the performance will tend to saturate the region and time span, so that any individual located in this space-time manifold will be in a position to observe the performance and be guided by the definition of the situation which the performance fosters. (1959, 106)

Goffman uses the term “front region” to refer to the place where the performance is given. The front is that part of the individuals’ performance which “regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance” (1959, 22). The front region includes the “setting,” involving “furniture, décor, physical layout, and other items which supply the scenery and stage props for the spate of human action played out before, within, or upon it” (1959, 22). Beyond this, “if we take the term ‘setting’ to refer to the scenic parts of expressive equipment, one may take the term ‘personal front’ to refer to other items of expressive equipment, the items that we most intimately identify with the performer himself . . .” (Goffman 1959, 23–24). Items of personal front may include “insignia of office or rank, clothing, sex, age, racial characteristics, size and looks; posture, speech patterns, facial expressions, and bodily gestures; and the like” (Goffman 1959, 24).

Every bit as important as the front region is the “back region” or “backstage” which may be understood as “a place, relative to a given performance where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course” (1959, 112). Often the

back region of a performance is located at one end of the place where the performance is presented, being cut off from it by a partition and guarded passageway. By having the front and back regions adjacent in this way, a performer out in front can receive backstage assistance while the performance is in progress and can interrupt his performance momentarily for brief periods of relaxation. The back region will be the place where the performer can reliably expect that no member of the audience will intrude. (Goffman 1959, 113)

The back region is the place closed to and hidden from the audience where the techniques of impression management are practiced. It is also a place where the performer can drop his or her front, forego speaking lines and “step out of character.” Backstage is where actors can be themselves.

Companion Animals as Team Players

Companion animals play a significant role in the front region and help to make

our performances convincing. For Goffman, “The performance of an individual in a front region may be seen as an effort to give the appearance that his activity in the region maintains and embodies certain standards” (1959, 107).

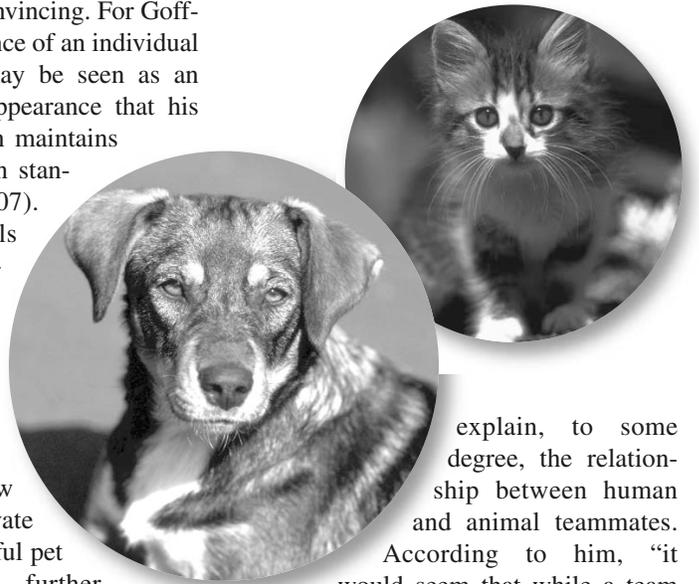
Companion animals assist us in maintaining the appearance of standards. Animals who are well behaved and friendly reflect well on us as humans. Companion animals who know a trick or two elevate our status as successful pet custodians even further.

Humans and companion animals form alliances in an effort to put on mostly positive performances. (Whether or not animals are conscious actors is highly debatable and unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper.)

In thinking about a performance, Goffman states, “it is easy to assume that the content of the presentation is merely an expressive extension of the character of the performer and to see the function of the performance in these personal terms” (1959, 77). Goffman uses the term “performance team” to refer to any set of individuals who cooperate in staging a single routine. Humans and companion animals become a performance team when visitors drop by or when they, together, leave the confines of home. Take for example, a trip to the dog park. Here some dogs listen and others do not. Some dogs do what their guardians ask of them and others do not. As evidence of how companion animals can either be part of a performance team or serve to thwart the performance consider the following:

Ellen, a grad student in her mid-thirties, was opinionated and brash. . . . She’d watch a dog beg someone for a biscuit, and she’d huff, “I would never let my dog beg.” She’d see an owner trying to call her dog, watch the dog dart away as soon as the owner got within reach, and she’d say, “My dog would never do that.” (Knapp 1998, 75)

Using Goffman’s insights about performance teams, it is possible to



explain, to some degree, the relationship between human and animal teammates.

According to him, “it would seem that while a team performance is in progress, any member of the team has the power to give the show away or to disrupt it by inappropriate conduct. Each teammate is forced to rely on the good conduct and behavior of his fellows, and they, in turn, are forced to rely on him. There is then, a bond of reciprocal dependence linking the teammates to one another” (1959, 82). A companion animal may not know specifically that it is giving the show away or disrupting it by inappropriate conduct. But they do know when they have displeased their guardians. Companion animals are keenly aware of the body language and tone of voice used when humans are happy and how these change when they are upset.

For a performance to be successful, the actors must control the impression they wish to convey to the audience. Goffman believes that “if [an] individual’s activity is to become significant to others, he must mobilize his activity so that it will express during the interaction what he wishes to convey” (1959, 30). Creating the impression that human and companion animal are in sync with one another is part of managing audience impressions. When our companion animals are well behaved and do what we ask of them, the impression that we are a team is achieved.

Companion Animals as Backstage Buddies

Backstage, companion animals become more than teammates. They assist us in creating illusion. It is also

where our pets spark images of perfection, where dreams and childhood wishes become entangled with reality. That such things take place in this realm is not surprising since it is here that “the capacity of a performance to express something beyond itself is painstakingly fabricated; it is here that illusions and impressions are openly constructed” (Goffman 1959, 112).

The backstage is where companion animals are most frequently found. When we are backstage we can be ourselves, let the mask slip, and relax. Here companion animals become friends, allies, and co-conspirators. We practice covertly the tricks we would like them to perform in front of others. We train them to walk on a leash without pulling, to sit, stay, and come when they are called. Occasionally, companion animals are taken to schools to be trained, bringing us and them into the front region yet again. But even in these instances, the ultimate goal is to teach our animals how to behave when we are before an audience. Thus the backstage area is useful to both humans and animals. There, “the team can run through its performance, checking for offending expressions when no audience is present to be affronted by them; here poor members of the team, who are expressively inept, can be schooled or dropped from the performance” (Goffman 1959, 112).

Not all the time spent with our animals backstage is consumed with creating favorable impressions, however. Often, we simply want to enjoy their company. We play with them, groom them, talk to them, and gaze at them. Petting companion animals lowers our blood pressure and helps sooth our nerves before and after front stage performances. There is perhaps no other time that we are more at ease, more ourselves, than when we are with our companion animals. When we are with our companion animals we are touched by their innocence and trust, something lacking in many of our human relationships.

Backstage is also where we dream our dreams of fantasy pets. When we are with our companion animals, illusions are created. For Caroline Knapp, author of *Pack of Two*, a new puppy

seemed like the answer to all of life’s problems:

Dog equals love. A very specific brand of love: a warm-and-fuzzy variety, pure and simple, low-maintenance and relatively risk-free. A dog will return us to more idyllic times, to summer afternoons we spent romping with the family dog as children. A dog will do for us what Lassie did for Timmy, provide constancy and protection and solace, our very own saint in the backyard. (1998, 24)

When we take these notions to heart we come to see our pets’ behavior as a reflection of our self-worth and success. If we do not connect with our companion animals on a given day, we view ourselves or our animals as failures.

Dog equals love.

The emotional investments we make in our companion animals sometimes lead to unreal expectations. We see anything as possible. When bonding with a pet, our dreams of perfection surface; “getting an [animal] can be all tied up with that Disney ideal, and the very personal fantasies and yearnings that lurk behind it” (Knapp 1998, 25). Often we hope to re-write history, to make for ourselves a past that we wish we had. The pet of our fantasies also suggests a positive future: “The family dog offers the promise of stability: the house in the suburbs, the picket fence, the golden retriever in the back of the station wagon. The outdoor dog offers the promise of fidelity and companionship: the trusted Lab trotting by your side” (1998, 25).

Companion Animals as Part of the Self

Companion animals assist in front

stage performances and help us plot our strategies backstage. They spark memories and inspire dreams. Pets become a part of the self. They are imbued with our energy, which lives on in them. The self that dreams of a perfect pet is one concerned not only with the outer social world but also with inner-directed thoughts and emotions. Goffman’s notion of self touches on such feelings, but he is primarily interested in outward behavior. During the period when we are in the immediate presence of others, few events occur which directly provide the others with conclusive information. For Goffman, “many crucial facts lie beyond the time and place of interaction or lie concealed within it” (1959, 2). For instance, “The true or real attitudes, beliefs, and emotions of the individual can be ascertained only indirectly, through his avowals or through what appears to be involuntary expressive behavior” (1959, 2).

Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton in *The Meaning of Things* (1981) discuss versions of the self that are concerned with the social and the personal. It is often taken for granted, that underneath the persona or mask that we present to the world, there is a real person that is different from all others (it should be noted, however, that the existence of a “real” self apart from any type of presentation has been and continues to be hotly debated). Americans in particular, who believe in rugged individualism, hold this commonsense assumption. The personal self develops through internalizing the social environment and is fully infused with the social. So when a transaction is valued because it has outcomes for the individual, it must be understood that the individual is still a social being (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981). Goffman is familiar with the social elements of self. He does not, however, link the personal self, the social world, and the importance of objects. According to Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, “objects provide an environment charged with personal meanings. When an object is imbued with qualities of the self, it expresses the being of that person, whether in written words or a chair that was crafted or a photograph. It becomes an objectified form of con-

sciousness . . .” (1981, 190). Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton argue that “through objects, a part of the self comes to be embodied in the consciousness of others and will continue to exist long after the consciousness that molded them has ceased to exist” (190–191). They use the example of a wake or funeral to demonstrate their point: “Here family, kin, and friends of the departed person are the living representation of the deceased. Although the personal self has ceased to exist, the social self has a continued existence in those who will remember and through those artifacts that in whatever way give testimony to that person” (1981, 191). The same may hold true for the companion animals in our lives. Although companion animals often die before we do, those that outlive us surely have memories of times spent together. Given this notion, it is not hard to imagine that some version of the social self lives on, embodied in the consciousness of our companion animals.

Companion Animals as Living Props vs. Companion Animals as Catalysts for Self-reflection

Companion animals are fixtures in both the public and private spheres and sometimes function as additions to the sets required for front stage presentation. According to Goffman, the front region includes items such as furniture, scenery, and stage props. He believes that we need these to carry out our performances successfully. While props serve a useful function, Goffman does not suggest that they are imbued with personal energy or reflective of the self. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton see things or objects as more than stage props.

Within the home we are surrounded by items that are functional, special, and sentimental. According to Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, humans “display the intriguing characteristic of making and using objects. Man is not only *homo sapiens*, he is also *homo faber*, the maker and user of objects, his self to a large extent a reflection of things with which he interacts. Thus objects also make and use their makers and users” (1981, 1). To fully understand humans, they contend, “we must

understand what goes on between people and things. What things are cherished and why” (1981, 1).

Fascinated by the empirical relationship between people and things, Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton interviewed eighty-two families in the Chicago metropolitan area. To assess differences in preference across the life cycle, they included children, parents, and grandparents in their study. Only children (or members of the youngest generation) mention pets at least once when describing objects of special significance. The reason for this may be that children and adolescents relate to objects in terms of physical manipula-

Perhaps rather than being seen as “objects,” companion animals should be seen as catalysts for self-reflection, as living, breathing reminders of who we were and who we have become.

tion. That is, they find most special those items with which they become actively engaged. According to Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, “the objects children cherish share a proclivity for action [with] many of them meant to invite kinetic involvement” (1981, 96). Television, stereos, and musical instruments (along with pets) also top children’s lists.

Members of the middle and older generations do not mention pets as

objects of significance. This is not surprising when you consider that “grandparents single out [as special to them] things that do not require physical interaction [such as] photographs, books and so on” (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, 1981, 96). Also important is the fact that replies from the middle generation closely mimic those of older respondents. This information does not reveal the whole story, however. Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton argue that “the self of mature adults tends to be structured around networks of past and present relationships, which are often embodied in concrete objects . . .” (1981, 102). Middle and older generation respondents frequently display an approach to human existence known as *vita contemplativa* (Arendt 1958). Here the achievement of selfhood is based on conscious reflection. Given this information is it possible that animals (though not mentioned) trigger in respondents many of the same memories that treasured old photographs and books do? That is, do pets also prompt us to reflect upon our lives in meaningful ways? I believe the answer is yes. Perhaps rather than being seen as “objects,” companion animals should be seen as catalysts for self-reflection, as living, breathing reminders of who we were and who we have become. For example, I have a fifteen-year-old cat named Criminal whom I adopted from the San Francisco SPCA when I was an undergraduate at San Francisco State University. Since then I have lived in Bakersfield, California and Las Vegas, Nevada. He has been with me through every move, every exam, every failure, and every triumph. When I look at him I am reminded of living in San Francisco, of working on my bachelor’s degree, of lousy relationships, new discoveries, foggy mornings, and late nights. In short, I am reminded of the person that I was and the person that I am now.

Conclusion

Companion animals are our teammates front stage and our collaborators backstage. Idealized versions of the perfect pet remind us of better, simpler times. Like Sanders (1993), Sanders and Arluke (1993), Alger and Alger (1999,



2003), and Irvine (2001, 2004), I am interested in notions of self and how they are linked to our relationships with companion animals. My work differs from the aforementioned authors in certain ways, however. Rather than exploring how humans create identities for their animals or if animal selfhood is possible, I focus primarily on how companion animals shape human self-perception. Using Goffman's dramaturgical model, I examine the ways in which companion animals help us to pull off tricky front stage performances. Not to be forgotten is the fact that companion animals are with us every step of the way. From this vantage point they are able to see us at our best and our worst. This combination, this version of self, is what we see reflected back to us when we gaze into the eyes of our pets.

According to Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton, pets, as objects or catalysts for self-reflection (as I prefer to call them), are imbued with qualities of the self. More than mere props, com-

panion animals are living beings who add their energy and spirit to constantly evolving environments charged with personal meaning. Companion animals are witnesses to the lives we lead. They stand as historical records to who we are and who we imagine ourselves to be. Though sometimes "dramaturgically undisciplined," they reveal to us a version of the self that cannot be gleaned from any other source.

REFERENCES

- Adler, P., and P. Adler. 1994. Observational techniques. In *Handbook of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- Alger, J. M., and S. F. Alger. 1999. Cat culture, human culture: An ethnographic study of a cat shelter. *Society & Animals* 7:199–218.
- . 2003. *Cat culture: The social world of a cat shelter*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Arendt, H. 1958. *The human condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Beck, A., and A. Katcher. 1996. *Between pets and people: The importance of animal companionship*. Rev. ed. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press.
- Bonduell, P., and H. Joublin. 1995. *L'animal de compagnie*. Collection 'Que sais-je?' Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- Council for Science and Society. 1988. *Companion animals in society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M., and E. Rochberg-Halton. 1981. *The meaning of things: Domestic symbols and the self*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goffman, E. 1959. *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Hirschman, E.C. 1994. Consumers and their animal companions. *Journal of Consumer Research* 20:616–32.
- Irvine, L. 2001. The power of play. *Anthrozoos* 14:151–60.
- . 2004. A model of animal selfhood: Expanding interactionist possibilities. *Symbolic Interaction* 27:3–21.
- Knapp, C. 1998. *Pack of two: The intricate bond between people and dogs*. New York: Delta.
- Mead, G. H. 1934. *Mind, self & society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Sanders, C. R. 1990. Excusing tactics: Social responses to the public misbehavior of companion animals. *Anthrozoos* 4:82–90.
- . 1993. Understanding dogs: Caretaker's attributions of mindedness in canine-human relationships. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 22:205–26.
- Sanders, C. R., and A. Arluke. 1993. If lions could speak: Investigating the animal-human relationship and the perspectives of nonhuman others. *Sociological Quarterly* 34:377–90.
- Serpell, J. 1986. *In the company of animals: A study of human-animal relationships*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Serpell, J., and E. Paul. 1994. Pets and the development of positive attitudes to animals. In *Animals and human society: Changing perspectives*, ed. A. Manning and J. Serpell, 127–44. London: Routledge.
- Voith, V. L. 1985. Attachment of people to companion animals. *Veterinary Clinics of North America: Small Animal Practice* 15:289–95.

Copyright of ReVision is the property of Heldref Publications and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.