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Are Dogs Children, Companions, or Just Animals? Understanding Variations in People’s Orientations toward Animals

David D. Blouin
Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Indiana University South Bend, Indiana, USA

ABSTRACT This paper examines the variations in dog owners’ attitudes toward, treatment of, and interactions with, animals. Based on 28 in-depth interviews with dog owners from a county in the Midwestern United States, I demonstrate that pets are an important part of many people’s lives, often providing companionship, entertainment, and meaningful interactions; however, there are notable, distinct variations in how people relate to them. Pet owners typically exhibit one of three orientations toward pets: “dominionistic,” “humanistic,” or “protectionistic.” The dominionistic have relatively low regard for their pets, valuing them primarily for the uses they provide, such as protection. Those employing the humanistic orientation elevate their pets to the status of surrogate humans and value their pets primarily for the affective benefits they enjoy from their close attachments. The protectionistic have high regard for both pets and animals more generally. They view pets as valuable companions and as creatures with their own interests. This typology offers insights for understanding the source and variety of the often ambiguous and contradictory relations between people and pets. I argue that individual characteristics and experiences impact how people understand and relate to animals, in large part, because they represent exposure to different cultural messages. I suggest that these orientations represent three sets of distinct cultural logics, each with distinct histories and contemporary sources.

Keywords: attitudes, companion animals, human–canine relationships, pets, treatment

Companion animals (hereafter pets), primarily dogs, but with cats a close second, are becoming an increasingly important and common part of life for many Americans. In the United States the percentage of households with dogs increased from 31.6% in
1996, to 37.2% in 2006 (AVMA 2007). The American Veterinary Medical Association (2007) reports that Americans spend 16.1 billion for the care of their dogs each year (AVMA 2007). A majority or near majority of families in the United States and other countries around the world, now have a pet, most often a dog or cat (FEDIAF 2010; APPA 2011).

Dogs are not only numerous and expensive, they are often highly valued. Data collected from a random sample of dog and cat caretakers (hereafter owners) commissioned by Ralston Purina in 2000 indicate that 68% of dog owners say that companionship is the greatest benefit of pet ownership. In the same study, 95% of dog owners report hugging their “companion animal” on a daily basis. In the 1980s, two studies reported that 87% of people considered their pets part of the family (Cain 1983) and 95% of pet owners considered their pets friends (Stallones et al. 1988). More recently, a Pew study reports that more American dog owners report being closer to their dog than their own mother or father (Taylor, Funk and Craighill 2006).

Despite, or perhaps because of, the popularity of dogs, there is substantial variation in the attitudes and behaviors of pet owners. Even though most pet owners view their animals as companions or family members, six to eight million dogs and cats are surrendered to US shelters every year, and three to four million are euthanized (HSUS 2009). While many people acquire animals for companionship, others keep them primarily for protection, hunting, or as a tool for teaching children responsibility. Scholars have begun to take note of these changing and diverse attitudes and to attempt to better understand them.

Understanding Variations in Human–Canine Relations

A growing number of researchers have attempted to elucidate people’s relations with pets; many with dogs in particular (Serpell 1996; Sanders 1999, 2003, 2006; Arluke 2004, 2006; Greenebaum 2004, 2009, 2010; Irvine 2004a, 2004b; Ramirez 2006; Staats, Sears and Pierfelice 2006; Staats, Wallace and Anderson 2008; Podberscek 2009). Sanders’ (1999) investigation into how relations between humans and animals emerge from day-to-day interactions is particularly notable. He suggests that social constructions of animals are significant determinants of the nature of relations and interactions. Dog owners, as Sanders and others point out, vary in the extent to which they view their dogs as “subjects” or “objects.” Some clearly view their dogs as important subjects with whom they have valuable relations, whereas others see their dogs as objects that provide useful service. Still other dog owners view their animals simultaneously as both subjects when cuddling on the couch and as objects that can be relinquished if they become a nuisance (e.g., because they have become too expensive, potentially dangerous, or simply no longer needed; see Irvine 2009, p. 7).

Although dogs and their relations with humans are among the most highly studied human–animal interactions, a dearth of this research describes and explains the full range of variation among everyday pet owners. In fact, much of scholarly and popular investigations of human–pet relations focus on extremes (Serpell 1996; Schaffer 2009). Emphasis in both the academic and popular press is often on the indulgent or “unnatural” treatment of dogs, or it depicts animal cruelty and abuse. For example, on the one hand, reports illustrate how pet owners regularly spoil their canine “fur babies” (or best friends) with anti-depressants, organic dog food, and luxury pet spas (Greenebaum 2004; Schaffer 2009). On the other hand, studies, reports, and media highlight common occurrences such as animal abandonment and sensational cases of animal hoarding or dog fighting (Arluke 2006). Even studies depicting a range of relationships tend to depict relations as existing along a single continuum, for example, in terms of the strength of the human–animal bond or level of attachment (Salman et al. 1998; Heath, Voeks and Glickman
While these accounts represent important aspects of human–canine relations, and potentially a growing segment of American pet owners, alone, they paint an incomplete portrait of the everyday, American pet owner. This paper aims to provide further understanding of the diverse array of common variations and insight into understanding the apparent contradictions, between and within, individual owners.

Dog owners are a diverse group. They differ in how they relate to, and care for, their dogs, as well as how they view animals more generally. People's relationships with their pets cannot be understood simply as abusive or caring, as one of affection or domination, or even as representing a certain level of attachment. Instead, I argue that human–canine relations are better understood in terms of three distinct cultural types or orientations. I call these orientations "dominionistic," "humanistic," and "protectionistic." In the remaining pages I describe each of these orientations in detail, discuss their possible sources, and offer potential explanations for how people adopt one orientation or another, or switch between them.

Methods
This paper draws on 28 in-depth interviews I conducted with 34 residents of a county in the Midwestern United States, during the summer of 2007. Twenty-two of the interviews were conducted with individuals and six were conducted with couples. I recruited respondents from a pool of dog owners who participated in a mail survey about their relationships with their pets during the spring of 2006. To encourage a diverse sample of dog owners, I contacted 96 people based on their level of attachment to their dog, indicated by their survey responses. I contacted roughly one-third from each of the following categories: relatively low, average, and high levels of attachment. Interviews were conducted face-to-face at a location of the respondent's choosing: Most interviews were conducted at the respondent's home, in the company of their dog(s), and on a few occasions, other human family members. The interviews ranged from 35 minutes to three hours, averaging approximately 70 minutes in length. I recorded the interviews with the permission of the respondents, and later transcribed and coded them. While coding I employed both inductive and deductive analytic techniques, beginning analysis with a handful of codes that emerged from my reading of the literature and my own notes from interviews, and on the second reading, employing codes that had emerged from the initial analysis. All names of people and dogs have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

The respondents' ages ranged from 26 to 85 years, with an average of approximately 52. Eleven were male; 23 were female. Twenty-eight were married, one was single, two were divorced, and three were widowed. Six of my respondents had children. Twenty-one lived within the limits of a city and the remaining 13 lived in rural areas. Respondents' family incomes ranged from under $10,000 a year to above $100,000, education levels ranged from less than a high school diploma to a Ph.D. degree, and all but one, who was African American, were white.

Results
Orientations toward Dogs
Table 1 displays my typology of orientations toward animals. I argue that the dog owners in my sample generally exhibit one of three distinct orientations toward pets: 1) Dogs as beloved persons (humanistic); 2) Dogs as lower (than humans), but useful animals (dominionistic); or 3) Dogs and other animals as valuable and deserving of protection (protectionistic). These orientations represent different understandings of the meanings and status of pets and animals more generally, signifying distinct social constructions of animals. Furthermore, each group represents unique
Table 1. Descriptions of three types of orientations toward dogs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitude/Behavior</th>
<th>Humanistic</th>
<th>Protectionistic</th>
<th>Dominionistic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Status of Own Dog(s)</td>
<td>Elevated status. Equal to humans. Cherished pet, child</td>
<td>Elevated status. Equivalent or superior to humans</td>
<td>Below humans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owner’s View of Self</td>
<td>Parent, friend</td>
<td>Caretaker, guardian, companion</td>
<td>Owner, boss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of Dog(s) in Household</td>
<td>Cherished child, best friend</td>
<td>Best friend, companion</td>
<td>Useful in some capacity, such as for protection, entertainment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attitudes toward Other Animals</td>
<td>Concern is with own dog. May be partial to dogs in general, but indifferent to other animals</td>
<td>Universal concern for welfare of animals</td>
<td>Different types of animals have different purposes. Indifferent about animal welfare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animal Advocacy Involvement</td>
<td>Limited. May give to dog or cat related causes</td>
<td>Often volunteer for, and/or give money to, organizations and causes</td>
<td>Rare. May give to dog- or cat-related causes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dog’s “Home”</td>
<td>Usually inside. Sleeps in owners’ bed or has bed of own</td>
<td>Varies. Inside and/or outside. Whatever is “best” for dog</td>
<td>Often kept outside. Varies based on dog’s role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veterinary Visits</td>
<td>Often. More than once a year, but even more for older dogs</td>
<td>Often. More than once a year, but even more for older dogs</td>
<td>Rarely. Once a year or less</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relinquishment</td>
<td>Would never relinquish current dog, but may have done so in past, with less cherished pets</td>
<td>Would never relinquish. Consider such behavior mistreatment</td>
<td>Likely to relinquish dog if dog becomes inconvenient or problems arise</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reaction to Pet’s Death or Impending Death</td>
<td>Very difficult. May dissuade from having another dog in the future. Likely to attempt to delay pet’s death</td>
<td>Very difficult. Have dog’s interest in mind when dealing with end of life situations</td>
<td>Difficult, but dog can be replaced</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

relationships with animals characterized by different attitudes and treatment. In particular, I distinguish between the orientations based on how owners define the relationships (status of their dog, view of self, and role of dog in the household), their views toward animal advocacy and other animals more broadly, and views on the proper treatment of dogs (including vet care, animal acquisition, relinquishment, and euthanasia). Below I explain these orientations in detail.

The Humanistic Orientation

The humanistic orientation is characterized primarily by an intense emotional attachment to a particular dog or dogs. This category involves an understanding of animals as unique and extremely valuable persons. People employing the humanistic orientation often think of their dogs as either their children or close friends. Their relationship with the animal is an extremely important part of their lives, often as important, or sometimes more important than their human relationships. Those employing a humanistic orientation maintain that their dog is their best friend, and/or that they are closer to their dog than anyone else in the world, sometimes including spouses or other members of their immediate family.

Many of the people I interviewed insisted that their dog was “not just an animal.” Instead, for some like Robert, a married school teacher in his thirties, dogs are an important part of the family: “They’re definitely our kids and I tell people that all the time, and my dad thinks I’m crazy, but they’re our kids and I treat them like family, protect them like family … I mean everything I do that I would do for a child I would do for them.”
Those with a humanistic orientation cherish their dogs in large part because of what the dogs offer them emotionally. They value their dogs because their dogs do not judge them, they are fun to be with, they offer unconditional love and support, and because they enjoy doting on or spoiling their dogs. Like Kempton, Boster and Hartley's (1995) “anthropocentric values,” the humanistic orientation is characterized by concern with humanity and involvement with nature guided by human goals. The humanistic relationship with pets is defined primarily by what the owner wants and needs, that is, what they get out of the relationship, rather than a one-sided assessment of what the dog wants or needs. When humanistic owners talk about their dogs they discuss how much they adore the dog because it is so loving or fun to be with, rather than highlighting their responsibilities toward the dog. During the interviews, many respondents mentioned time and again how much they truly appreciate the mere presence of their dog. Henry, an elderly widower is rather typical in his comments: “I can’t be without a dog. I gotta have a dog of some kind ... I just like to have them around. It’s good company.” John, a middle-aged married man, who had recently gone a couple years without a dog, explains to me what he had missed during that time:

Oh the companionship of a dog. It takes your mind off of things ... And they’re always there. That’s the one thing that’s kind of a constant, and it won’t change until the dog passes on. They don’t care what they did or didn’t do, or what you did or didn’t do, you know, they’re just there for you. And you know people that have pets live longer. It’s emotional. Yeah, it’s nice. It’s really nice.

Even though the humanistic orientation is, in part, characterized by a focus on what the human dog owners themselves get out of the relationship, in contrast to the dominionistic orientation, which I describe below, such owners do not have an explicit utilitarian relationship with their dogs. In fact, those with humanistic views strongly disapprove of “using” their dogs. During an interview, Mary, a single woman in her twenties, who is a long-time American Staffordshire Terrier owner, recounted an episode of a television court show about a dispute over a pit bull fighting with some other dogs. Mary’s description of the episode demonstrates her disgust with the utilitarian view: “One of the things that Judge Maria Lopez said is she said ‘why'd you even own a pit bull, why not just have a gun.’ And it just infuriated me. It's like, well, a gun is not going to snuggle with you at night. It’s not going to love you unconditionally. Ugh, I just hated it.” Mary makes a similar point when explaining why college students are generally unfit dog owners:

I do feel like a dog should be treated like a member of the family, not just as a dog or as a pet. That’s why I really hate it when I see college students with dogs, because a lot of them just—I’ve met guys I’ve talked to who say they’ve gotten puppies from the animal shelter to meet girls. It’s just so wrong. And I’ve actually talked to people who say they got dogs for college to keep them company while they’re away but who plan on giving it to the shelter as soon as they’re done with college. And you can’t do that. It’s a lifelong commitment. You can’t do that to a dog.

Despite their tendency to privilege their own interests over those of their dogs, by most standards, those who exhibit a humanistic orientation do not mistreat their animals. On the contrary, they spend considerable time, money, and effort ensuring that the dogs are healthy, happy, and comfortable. This group is most likely to “spoil” their dogs, lavishing them with toys, costumes, fancy collars, and food the animals love. Humanistic owners are the ones most likely to
let their dogs sleep with them, and have them groomed regularly. In several cases, respondents like Rhonda, proudly admitted to spoiling their dogs. During our conversation, Rhonda, who is married with two grown children, shared numerous examples of the time and attention she lavishes on her dog. For instance, she had recently gotten her dog Gus a stroller so he would not tire on long walks. She also bought Gus his own set of stairs so he can climb into their bed by himself. Rhonda also showed me photographs of Gus in various outfits. In one photo, Gus is dressed as a vampire for Halloween. In another he is visiting Santa Claus at a local chain pet store. Lydia, a retired florist in her seventies, whose children are grown, also bragged of similarly spoiling her dog. She proudly admits that her dog Henry,

Definitely has been very spoiled, very spoiled. He get's anything he wants. If there is anything that we think he wants, he gets it. And of course he likes people food, so I cook special for him, where he doesn’t have the seasonings that people put in their food. Recently there was a recipe in the newspaper about a muttloaf. You make it almost like meatloaf but it leaves out some of the spices and stuff, and so now I fix that for him using turkey and hamburger. And he likes that pretty well, but his favorite food, of course, is steak. He loves steak.

Later she mentioned that Henry gets presents for Christmas and that “on his birthday we always have a special big steak for him. His birthday is April 24th. We treat him just like we would a kid.”

As these examples suggest, people informed by the humanistic orientation are most likely to anthropomorphize their animals. Not only do they elevate them to the status of humans, but they think of them and treat them as people, usually as children. As a result, this group tends to be fastidious about veterinary care. When the dogs are young they are good at keeping them up to date on shots and checkups. When the dogs are old and their health begins to fail, prescription drugs and monthly vet visits are the norm.

Finally, more than any other owners, this group has the most trouble letting go. Because of their close attachments, occasional emotional dependence, and proclivity to privilege their own needs, this type of pet owner is most likely to try to extend their animal’s life through surgeries or by delaying putting their animals to sleep. Whereas the people with a protectionistic orientation, as described below, may feel a responsibility to relieve their dogs’ suffering, this group is more likely to view euthanasia as immoral, or at the very least, as a last resort they can barely manage to consider: after all, dogs are nearly human in their eyes, and euthanasia is rarely acceptable for people. Lydia’s thoughts about her dog’s failing health are typical:

It’s been so heartbreaking to see what he’s going through now. Compared to how happy he used to be, he’d just gallop and prance, whenever you’d come home. And, now, there’s very little of that … And, I don’t know, some people, I guess, would go ahead and have him put to sleep, but I just can’t handle that. I just can’t. As long as he isn’t—if he gets down into real misery and starts losing control of his facilities, probably, we’ll have to, but as long as he can enjoy a little bit of life, I don’t think I could have him put down. To me that is just like killing somebody. I had somebody the other day tell me that well it’s just a dog. He didn’t have a soul. I said, don’t tell me that dog doesn’t have a soul. I don’t want to hear that. But I feel like he does. Yeah, I do. When God told Noah to build the ark, he didn’t leave out animals. And therefore, I believe that they have a soul. So, I just can’t bear the thought.
The Dominionistic Orientation

The dominionistic orientation characterizes dogs as animals who are lesser in value and status than humans. This orientation is rigid and hierarchical. Of the three types, this is the only one that routinely views dogs as “objects” rather than “subjects.” Even though owners with dominionistic orientations may be relatively fond of their dogs or other animals, they maintain that dogs are obviously less important than humans. The basis of this lower status varies but a common justification is their difference from humans. Some from this group assert that dogs do not have a soul, thus have no inherent interests of their own. Others may simply explain “it is a dog, not a human,” and assume enough said.

Jim, a school teacher in his early forties, who is married, with two young daughters, expressed the sentiment that dogs are clearly lesser than human. Despite his tender feelings for his dog Bella and dogs more generally, Jim draws rigid boundaries between people and dogs. Even though he feels close to Bella, she is not the number one priority in his life. He feels strongly that he has a responsibility to make sure Bella has proper medical care, food, fresh water, shelter, and some company each day—“the basic requirements,” but he knows, as he puts it, that “Bella’s a dog”:

I have a real strong grasp that there is a huge difference between them [people and dogs] and certainly my priorities are always going to be family first. If there was ever any problem with any dog that I had where I felt there was any possibility that it might be a threat to my kids or even people that come around, then I wouldn’t hesitate in getting rid of the dog. Thankfully that’s never happened but I think I have a pretty good grasp on the hierarchy of where dogs are and where people are. And to me it seems pretty cut and dry that this is where we stand—you know, I think she [his dog] knows that too … And so she knows that I’m in charge.

The dominionistic orientation is characterized by the lowest level of regard and attachment of the three orientations. Nonetheless, the dominionistic view encompasses a variety of human–animal relations. Some owners of this group are relatively attached, while others have little affection. In general, though, dominionistic views toward dogs are positive; most people in this group have chosen to have dogs because they like them for some reason. Although not always explicitly religious in nature or origin, the dominionistic orientation is similar to the religious-based environmental values Kempton, Boster and Hartley (1995) identified, in that that they reflect the view that nature belongs to humans to do with as they wish. People with a dominionistic orientation typically relate to their dogs in utilitarian terms. John, a married man in his mid-fifties and the owner of two large dogs, exemplifies the utilitarianism of the dominionistic orientation:

Well, a dog is just an animal, it’s not a human being and it fulfills a certain role in the family unit, but not the same as a human being. If you have a family member that gets seriously ill you wouldn’t put them down, but if an animal got seriously ill, like the dog that had heart—congestive heart failure, so it wasn’t gonna get any better, we put it down. You don’t want it to suffer and I think it also has to do with your outlook on life, what life is. A dog is a life, it’s an animal, it has life, similar to a human being, but it’s not a human being. If you’re religious you believe God didn’t put us here to abuse the animals, but he put them here for our benefit, for our welfare, but on a different level, than a human level—a totally different level.
For the dominionistic group, dog are lesser, although still valuable, family members that serve some purpose. Dogs generally have a clear or stated function in the household. For example, some people may appreciate dogs because they provide protection or are useful for hunting. Others may appreciate having the dog as a companion or because they provide a source of relaxation.

Dana, a middle-aged nurse with two grown children, who lives in the country on a small farm with her husband and two large dogs, expresses the “place of animals” in the world and in her life. Her comments exemplify the utilitarian nature of dominionistic relations with dogs. She lives in a rural area and appreciates that they make her feel safe by guarding her and the property from predatory and destructive animals, as well as strangers. She is also most comfortable with them outside. She says she would never be cruel to an animal and believes they should be treated well. She also believes that people have a moral responsibility to take care of animals, but not because animals themselves possess a quality that makes them worthy of proper treatment. Dana explains, “I don’t think animals have a soul, so I think it’s not a right [to be loved or cared for] for the animal, but it’s a responsibility for the owner to have some morals and values about them, if they are going to take on responsibility, to fulfill it.” Dana admittedly does not “have a lot of warmth and affection like [she] would for a person, with dogs.” She views humans and animals quite differently. This contrast seems in large part the basis for her orientation toward animals:

I’m a nurse. So, I deal with people. So, I think I have more of a compassion for people than I do animals. When I was growing up, on a farm, animals were utilitarian. They have a use. That’s what you do with them, you know, you eat cows, you ride horses you know that type of thing. So, animals or dogs have their place and that’s just how I relate to them.

Dominionistic treatment of dogs varies, but these owners are likely to spend the least time and money on their dogs. Of all dog owners, they are also the most likely to neglect their animals, although neglectful treatment seemed rare or nonexistent among those I interviewed. Many in this group provide quality care, according to legal standards. Because the dominionistic orientation characterizes dogs as less than human, these owners are less likely to anthropomorphize them, or provide their dogs with “people” things, such as clothing, human food, a place in their own bed, and so on. Those with dominionistic views often keep their dogs outside. This physical separation provides a symbolic social distance, simultaneously resulting from and reinforcing owners’ attitudes. Also, because of the distance between those with dominionistic views and their dogs, they are most likely to get rid of their dogs if trouble arises. Because they often view their dogs as objects, rather than subjects, they are more likely to relinquish a dog if it has bitten a person, whether that person is a family member or stranger, or even if the dog has simply outworn its usefulness or become a burden.

Daryl, a married man in fifties, tells of his own, decidedly dominionistic childhood experiences with dogs:

We lived on a farm, and my dad was not the most compassionate person for animals ... My upbringing was the farm was the most important thing. We had some Cocker Spaniel puppies and we went away for a day or something and when we came home they were injured. There was a pile of rocks and apparently they were playing on them or something—they got injured bad and we didn’t do vets. Dad would basically club ‘em. Then he would tell me go get the shovel and
put them behind the barn you know. So when I was growing up they weren’t, dogs weren’t necessarily so much pets to me. ‘Cause I had to bury them … So a dog is always gonna be a dog. I don’t think I’ll ever have that attachment that most people, some people can get.

Daryl’s childhood experiences clearly show why, although he has developed a fondness for the various dogs he and his wife have had over the years, in his view, “a dog is always gonna be a dog.”

**The Protectionistic Orientation**

The protectionistic orientation is characterized by a strong attachment to one’s own dogs, as well as a deep respect and concern for other animals. People who are guided by this orientation view their own animals as important and valuable family members, who should be given consideration equal to humans. What distinguishes them from the humanistic view is their love for animals not their own. The primary difference between the two is that the humanistic orientation exhibits anthropocentric attitudes and the protectionistic views are biocentric (Kempton, Boster and Hartley 1995). For example, the humanistic orientation evaluates animals based on their contributions to human welfare, whereas the protectionistic orientation characterizes animals as “part of nature” or as having inherent interests and rights (Wolch, Brownlow and Lassiter 2000, p. 84). In the eyes of the protectionistic orientation “all” animals have an elevated status and deserve consideration equal to, or at least similar to, that provided to humans. The protectionistic orientation’s high regard for animals is not determined by any personal relationship, but a belief in the universal or near universal value of animals. In fact, although most who are guided by a protectionistic orientation do have a personal fondness for animals, some do not. Those with a protectionistic orientation are most likely to assert that animals should have rights and to be involved with animal welfare and animal protection efforts and organizations. Additionally, in contrast with the humanistic view, the high status of animals does not depend on a surrogate personhood. The protectionistic orientation constructs animals as subjects, but not as people. People with protectionistic views respect and value animals for their similarities to, and differences from, humans.

The views of Robin and Leanne, a couple in their mid-forties, typify the universal concern for animals that is part of the protectionistic orientation. They are closely tied to their seven dogs and cats, but it is not just their own they care about. They feel a deep reverence for animals and believe they all are worthy of care and kindness. They view their pets as a “life-long responsibility.” Furthermore, for them, animals are not all that different from humans and deserve the same care and consideration as people. Leanne explains:

I know there’s a difference between humans and animals, but to me they’re both living souls, that are living things. Just like a bird in the yard is a living thing.

Robin sums up their view:

Well, I think for us it comes down to … it’s respect more than anything. They deserve the same respect and care and empathy that you would give to another person. That’s how we look at it.

Individuals informed by the protectionistic perspective vary in their relationships with animals, but all have high regard for animals. They tend to be emotionally attached to and bonded to their animals, but they are likely to have more animals than do the humanistic owners, so this
bond is stretched among multiple animals. Additionally, because individuals with a protectionistic view think of animals as distinct, autonomous creatures, there may be greater social distance between them and their animals than is evident in the humanistic orientation. Furthermore, because the protectionistic owners often grant animals significant autonomy, their relations are governed by their perceptions of their animals’ needs and desires, rather than their own. Thus, they are more likely to think of themselves as guardians or stewards, rather than parents.

Annie, a married school counselor in her mid-thirties, is opinionated about what constitutes proper care and treatment of animals. In addition to standard quality care, such as shelter, food, and medical care, she feels animals, even animals kept as pets, should be self-determining. She asserts that animals should be allowed to act out their natural instincts, and be allowed to be animals. For this reason, she does not believe in training or teaching her animals tricks. She believes that doing so is unfair to the animals because it infringes on their autonomy. Hence, Annie is critical of others whom she feels go overboard with their training and try to control their animals. Her brother and his wife are a case in point:

My brother, he is one of those people. He has a Golden Retriever that has to be absolute—well she knows commands, like hand signals … He and his wife had a baby so the dog had to go through accelerated obedience training ’cause they got her as a puppy just about a year before they had a child, which I thought was totally stupid. But the dog luckily is extremely intelligent and picked up on everything, but he’s one of those, that, he didn’t used to be like that until he got married. Now, all of a sudden the dog has to be totally controlled at all times … I just don’t like that. The dog has to accommodate their lifestyle. They don’t do any accommodating to the dog. It kind of irritates me.

Because those with a protectionistic orientation have high regard for animals, they provide high quality care. However, the specific content of their treatment may vary more than for the other orientations. In contrast to the humanistic who treat their animals like people, those with a protectionistic orientation base their treatment on their own perceptions of what is best and proper for dogs, whose interests and desires they often view as different from those of humans. Because people can only access animal minds indirectly, there is considerable variation in what protectionistic owners ultimately surmise about animals. As a result, pet owners like Robin and Leanne and Annie have the same general orientation, yet have very different styles. Robin and Leanne, for example, keep their dogs in crates while they are gone. Such treatment would be unacceptable if their dogs were human, but in their eyes, dogs are not. In their experience, and based on their perceptions of their own dogs and dogs more generally, they feel dogs are very comfortable and content sleeping in crates. Annie, on the other hand, does not approve of using crates. In her view, dogs and other animals need more autonomy to decide where they sleep, and enjoy spending considerable time outside, where it is “natural” for them to be.

Protectionistics pet owners, unlike humanistic and dominionistic ones, are also likely to be concerned with animal welfare and protection issues, such as pet overpopulation or endangered animal species. They donate time and money to organizations, participate in animal rescue, and adopt their own dogs from shelters or as abused or neglected animals they happen upon. Janice, an engaged nurse in her late twenties, who has three dogs each rescued from situations of neglect or abuse, is typical of the protectionistic concern for animal welfare. During our interview she described her urge to make a difference and subsequent involvement with animal rescue:
I think my sister is the one that kind of changed my whole outlook on everything, cause she was a vegetarian all through high school ... listening to all the stuff that she used to read and hear about and that's what made me be a vegetarian. I have always loved animals from even when I was a little girl ... but I think when I became older and I put human feelings to the animals because I truly believe that—I know they don't rationalize like we do and stuff like that—but they do have emotions and feelings and the older I get the more I see that. I think it was just a whole big thing that just totally turned a leaf and I saw that I need to do something to help make a difference ... I need to get involved and try to make things better and that's what I did.

Presenting Animal Orientations
Throughout I have aimed to add to our understanding of the variations in human–animal relations by proposing a typology of the distinct ways in which people understand and treat animals, particularly the ones they call their pets or companions. Although I have generally described these orientations in reference to specific people, it is important to point out that these are analytic generalizations, and do not perfectly represent individual pet owners or specific human–animal relationships. Rather than specific individuals, these orientations represent distinct cultural meanings, styles, and understandings. Although I associate specific dog or cat owners with specific orientations or types, no individuals perfectly capture the full meaning of an orientation, nor are individuals likely to be entirely consistent in their attitudes and actions. In fact, for some of the pet owners I interviewed, there is orientation overlap. Some pet owners voice opinions in one situation that are humanistic in orientation, but sound more like they are dominionistic or protectionistic in another. Furthermore, there are no discrete criteria for labeling individuals one type of owner, but not another. Individuals may straddle orientations, or draw from them somewhat indiscriminately.

More interestingly, I also find that people's relationships with animals can and do change. It was not uncommon for individuals I interviewed to admit to what Carlisle-Frank and Frank (2001) call “switching” (i.e., moving from one orientation to another). Krista, one of the young mothers I interviewed, for example, explained that her orientation toward dogs and cats changed fairly dramatically after she had children. She said that when she was younger animals had been like her “children” and that when she actually had children of her own, she did not need the animals any more. Heidi, another young mother explained a similar change in thinking that accompanied having children: “It’s different. Especially now, I mean when I was younger and I had dogs they were always my buddies and I went and played with them, but it’s different now that I have kids.” Several other pet owners I interviewed also described similar transformations in their attitudes and relations with animals that accompanied other changes in their lives—growing older, getting married, getting busier with education or work, moving from a rural area to a more urban environ, and so on.

These transformations highlight an important series of questions—namely how do people become protectionistic, dominionistic, or humanistic? And more broadly, from where do these orientations—and their overall logics and prescribed behaviors—come? Although my own data cannot offer definitive answers, they do offer some insight. Owners' orientations toward their animals are cultural constructs. As such, animal orientations are symbolic systems that exist independent of, and external to, human actors, that owners internalize through social interaction (Berger and Luckmann 1966).
The Importance of Cultural Context

Individual pet owners may not consistently act within a single orientation, and they may change their personal orientations dramatically at times, but the orientations themselves are consistent. My data suggest that individual characteristics and experiences impact how people understand and relate to animals, in large part, because they represent exposure to different cultural messages (as well as personal experiences that make such messages more or less compelling). I suggest that these three orientations represent three sets of distinct cultural logics, and related repertoires, each with distinct histories and contemporary sources.

The humanistic orientation represents a sentimental view of animals that likely has roots in the widespread proliferation of pet ownership among the middle classes, in parts of Europe and North America, beginning around the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century (Ritvo 1988; Serpell 1996; Irvine 2004a). Scholars suggest that changes in pet-keeping acceptance and practices were made possible by a shift in humans’ relationships with, and attitudes toward, nature, resulting from urbanization and scientific and economic development (Ritvo 1988; Budiansky 1992). Such changes made nature seem less threatening or beyond human control. In other words, as Serpell (1996, pp. 150–151) asserts, the proliferation of the humanistic orientation is the result of the rejection of traditional worldviews and the expansion in the authority of rational, scientific views. The logic that pervades the humanistic orientation is evident in the American entertainment media in venues such as television talk shows, the “Animal Planet” television network, and daily news coverage of amazing animal stories (Serpell 1996). This orientation is also especially prevalent in American pet industry marketing campaigns. For example, PetSmart pet stores began referring to pet owners as “pet parents” in their marketing in 2005 (Howard 2005), and an online video advertisement for Dog Guard, a manufacturer of underground electric fences, begins: “Your pet isn’t just a dog, he’s family . . . ” (Dog Guard 2010). Advertisers are well aware of the popularity of the humanistic orientation and exploit it accordingly. They are also likely partly responsible for the view’s proliferation.

The domionistic orientation likely originates from the Judeo-Christian tradition which views animals as inferior creatures over which God gave humans dominion (White 1967). The following Bible verse from Genesis 1:26, is often invoked to justify humans’ dominion over nature:

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. (Gospel Gateway 2011)

During Classical times in the Western world, the boundary between humans and animals was relatively fluid; however, as Christianity emerged and gained authority, religious leaders and philosophers such as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas argued for greater differences between humans and animals as a way to differentiate between Christians and pagans (Lawrence 1995, p. 76). Seventeenth century French philosopher René Descartes’s (1979) view that animals are automatons incapable of feeling pain and lacking consciousness or a soul reaffirmed the Judeo-Christian tradition, and remains one of the most influential views in modern times. The domionistic orientation likely remains the most prominent view governing humans’ relations with animals in the Western world, but it seems to be losing ground as an orientation for relating to pets (Scully 2002).

Finally, the protectionistic orientation likely has roots in the modern animal welfare movement, which began in England and the United States in the late 1800s. The animal welfare movement
and its variants such as the animal rights, environmental, and conservationist movements, elevated the status of nature, suggesting that, like oppressed human groups, animals of all types are worthy of moral concern and protection. The number of organizations that support and espouse this logic are too numerous to name, but one of the largest and most prominent is The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS). In Defense of Animal’s (IDA) “Guardian Campaign,” with the goal “to have every person, young or old, view and treat animals not as property to be exploited, abandoned, or killed, but as individuals who deserve consideration for their needs and their interests” (IDA 2010a), which they seek to accomplish by “incorporating the term ‘animal guardian’ into local and state ordinances,” is another good example (IDA 2010b).

Conclusion
The dog owners and guardians in this study generally exhibited one of three distinct orientations toward their pets: humanistic, dominionistic, or protectionistic. These orientations represent different understandings of the meanings and status of pets and animals more generally, and signify distinct social constructions of animals. Additionally, I argue that these orientations represent (and originate from) distinct cultural logics which are promulgated by organizations and institutions and part of different historical traditions. Ultimately, I offer that the presence of these different logics, as well as pet owners’ ability to switch between them from situation to situation or over time, goes a long way in explaining how American pet owners can simultaneously pamper their pets with spas and doggy daycare while discarding millions to be euthanized.

Research on human–animal relations has flourished in recent decades, but much work remains. In my view, there is still an overemphasis on the extremes. Furthermore, these extremes (and the contradictions in attitudes and behaviors they highlight) are sometimes treated as though they only exist between different people or groups (not within them). People’s relationships with their animals are complex, and cannot easily be characterized as abusive or caring; nor do people always fall along a single continuum based on their level of attachment or concern for pets. I argue that conflicts and ambiguities run deeper and are reflected not simply in differences between people (or groups of people), but in conflicts and inconsistencies within individuals (and within similar groups). My own approach helps explain how pet owners can be similar in their attitudes toward, and regard for, pets, but conflict dramatically in their views of proper pet care (e.g., disagree about how pets should be fed, “trained,” and integrated into the family).

Despite its contributions, the current study has some limitations. Most notably, the study employs a relatively small, homogenous, and potentially, regionally distinct sample of pet owners. Future research should expand to include a more diverse array of pet owners from different locations around the United States and the world. Further research should also investigate the potential of other “orientations” not detailed here, and investigate the possibility of distinct “sub-orientations” within those I have discussed. Most importantly, additional work remains in further identifying and investigating the cultural sources of these orientations, as well how individuals are exposed to them, adopt them, and switch among them—over time or from one situation to another.

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Notes
1. In a 2006 survey of 50,000 Americans pet owners, 49.7% consider their pets family, 48.2% think of them as companions, and only 2.1% consider their pets property (AVMA 2007).
2. Tuan (1984) refers to a continuum ranging from dominance to affection, and Greenbaum (2010) refers to views of dogs as subordinates or persons (i.e., pets or companions).
3. The list of pet owners was purchased from the Indiana University Center for Survey Research. The list, which was compiled by Experian, a private company, based on printed surveys delivered via direct mail, magazine, catalog, and newspaper inserts, online surveys, and product registration cards bundled with leading consumer goods, included the names and addresses of 1900 individuals.
4. The interviews focused on four major themes: 1) Pet histories and pet ownership backgrounds; 2) Relationships with dogs, and role of dogs in lives and households; 3) Treatment of dogs, specifically perceptions of appropriate treatment of dogs, and how respondents take care of their dogs and fulfill their needs; and 4) Interactions with, and involvement in, animal organizations. Specific questions are available upon request.
5. Studies find that women are more often the caretakers of pets, which likely helps explain why women comprise almost 68% of my sample (Fifield and Forsyth 1999; Power 2003).
6. Two of these labels, humanistic and dominionistic, I borrowed from Kellert’s typology of attitudes toward animals (1980, 1988, 1994). He describes humanistic as a “Primary interest and strong affection for individual animals such as pets or large wild animals with strong anthropomorphic associations,” and dominionistic as a “primary interest in the mastery and control of animals” (Kellert 1994, p. 167). My definitions are somewhat distinct, but close enough that the labels seemed appropriate.
7. Although arrived at separately, my argument about these orientations closely mirror Kempton, Boster and Hartley’s (1995, p. 87) contention that American environmental values derive from three sources: religion, “anthropocentric” or human-centered values, and “biocentric (living-centered) values.” See also Fine’s (1998) discussion of the different visions of nature: protectionist, organic, and humanist; and Arluke and Sanders’ (2009, pp. xvi–xi) discussion of the different types of anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism, for similar typologies.
8. Although by most standards (e.g., legal standards) those with a humanistic orientation take good care of their pets, it is important to note that some people would disagree. In particular, some dog owners, particularly those with a protectionist orientation, would argue that spoiling dogs, and generally treating them like humans, is abusive. This point is particularly important because it exemplifies distinctions between the orientations, as well as how this typology of orientations can help us better the sources of contradictions within human–animal relationships, and conflicts between different pet owners.
9. This is a relatively broad category, including both animal rights and animal welfare positions. See Greenbaum (2009) for a succinct discussion of the differences between these, often conflicting, ideologies.
10. Fine (1998, p. 7) articulates the limits of this approach well when he writes about his typologies of nature: “ultimately, humans are active meaning-creators and can devise their own set of images that do not correspond with those outlined here. One should think of these not as ways that people actually conceptualize nature, but as metaphorical resources by which interpretations of nature are created.”
11. Carlisle-Frank and Frank (2001) identify several “cognitive schemas” that they argue are associated with variations in the treatment of animals: animals as property, animals as family members, animals as thinking, and animals as stupid and unfeeling. They argue that having one or another of these attitudes may predispose a pet owner toward certain behaviors. However, they also suggest that switching of cognitive schemas may occur. For example, a person who has viewed his or her dog or cat as a valued family member may switch to viewing the animal as a piece of property that can be abandoned if it becomes inconvenient. Such switching is possible because various schemas are readily available in the morass of cultural meanings. More specifically, they suggest that while an individual may think of and treat their dog or cat as an important companion within the family, animals are often viewed as a piece of property (backed by legal, institutional arrangements) in the wider society.

References


