

Sex Roles, Companion Animals- and Something More

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One of the fundamental convictions that motivates our publication of the *Journal* is that science, and the scientific method, can furnish animal welfare advocates and activists with the exact kind of testable, empirical data that must remain the primary tools of persuasion in a rational society. Precisely because animals cannot speak for themselves, and cannot tell us whether, for example, they prefer a solid concrete or a slatted floor, we can make good use of the carefully controlled techniques of classical science to derive "best guesses" about what kinds of environments foster their well-being. These may include direct methods such as structured observation and choice tests, or indirect methods such as monitoring of blood levels of stress-induced hormones like adrenocorticoids.

What's fascinating about these kinds of well-controlled scientific studies is that more than our preconceptions about animals may fall by the wayside once we peruse the results; other standardized myths about, for example, sex roles, may come into question as well.

As a case in point, several recent articles about how men and women relate to dogs and cats furnish us with some

basic lessons about how we interact with our animal companions. But, in the process, they also shed some interesting light on the precariousness of our beliefs about differences in the sexes. Finally, they provide vital instruction concerning some of the classic foibles that are inherent in the use of some kinds of scientific methods.

First, let's take a look at one way two researchers looked at how people think about dogs and cats. An earlier issue of the *Journal* (4(1):17, 1983) reported on the survey results compiled by two Missouri researchers, who queried over 900 individuals on their opinions on companion animals. Their analysis of the data showed that, among other things, "women become more emotionally involved with their animals and derive a greater sense of security from pet ownership (with both dogs and cats) than do men." Now, this is the sort of result that you might have expected yourself, if you simply walked around the room at a party and queried the attendees about their emotions vis-a-vis dogs and cats. In either case, this method, self-reporting, is well recognized as unavoidably incorporating a sizeable dose of the interviewee's own bias; in other words, people tend to an-

swer in the way they think the survey-taker would like them to respond.

But a second group of researchers, A.H. Katcher et al. (*Cal Vet* 2:14, 1983) used a different approach to find out whether there were significant differences in the way men and women interacted with their dogs, specifically, as a source of contact comfort. Two methods were utilized: a questionnaire of 10 items that provided an index of attachment to animals (typical statements: "dog sleeps in bedroom"; "owner confides in dog"), and a study of 110 subjects (veterinary clinic clients) chosen at random, who were observed for 5 minutes each. Unbeknownst to these clients, an observer recorded the percentage of time (for the 5-minute interval) spent touching, stroking, and patting their dog.

Surprisingly, in this study, both methods revealed that there were virtually no differences in the ways men and women deal with companion animals. There were slightly more positive responses to the questionnaire items among women, but these differences were not statistically significant. Similarly,

the groups of men and women spent almost equal amounts of time in contact with their dogs, although there was considerable variance from one *individual* to another.

Is it possible to state categorically that one of these studies has provided us with unbreachable truth, appropriate for chiseling in stone, while the other is merely balderdash? Alas, no; things, as usual, aren't that simple. But we can say, other things being equal, that the *techniques* used in the second study (a questionnaire that assessed opinion indirectly, and the use of an objective observer making quantifiable observations) are more likely to be reliable than those of the Missouri opinion-pollers described in the first. So it is possible to feel some confidence that Katcher et al. are onto something important—that men and women alike get tremendous emotional satisfaction out of touching and loving animals. And the *Journal's* belief that the results from well-planned and executed science are crucial to understanding the exact nature of our relationships with animals has been supported yet once more.