

Multiple Ownership of Animals in New York City

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Abstract

This study reports the analysis of records and personal interviews of 34 people (31 cases) who owned at least 10 animals that came to the attention of either of the New York City Department of Health and the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA). The average number of animals in the study population was 34 cats or 23 dogs per owner. The three cases of mixed-species involved a total of three dogs, two cats, two alligators, several large lizards, many poisonous snakes, nine rabbits, twelve turtles, one turkey, several ducks, and one tarantula. The single "other species" case involved more than 50 pigeons and other wild birds flying freely in an apartment. Owner male-to-female ratios were 3:8 (there were two unknowns and one couple); for owners of cats, 4:7 (with two couples) and owners of dogs, and 1:3 for mixed and other species owners. Females were most common multiple owners; males were most often involved in ownership of dogs.

The socioeconomic data suggested bias in reporting as most cases recorded by agencies involved members of the lower and lower-middle class. Inquiries confirmed that multiple-animal ownership extends across the entire socioeconomic spectrum.

Multiple owners often prove unable to dispose of new litters even when appropriate homes are available. This difficulty may reflect the subject's imagined parental role toward his animals. Owners often found reason for refusing adoption, or they retrieved animals from adoptive homes, asserting that the new owners had failed to provide the animals with their favorite foods. Sometimes they objected to the adopter's marital status, sexual preference, or race and even alleged cruel treatment.

Intense personalization of animals was exemplified in different forms of anthropomorphism. One woman kept scrapbooks of her animals' lives, celebrated their birthdays and anniversaries and conducted special burials for them. Another elderly woman, unable to bear separation from her dead cats, eviscerated them and dried them on her fire escape. The "cat boards" were kept in cupboards throughout her apartment. One owner preserved the animals by stuffing them.

Several subjects volunteered interpretations of their collecting behavior. One stated that she was attempting to resolve her own adoption, which she recreated with the animals. In every case, the formation of large collections began after the subject had left the parental home and had established their own permanent residence, most commonly in the late teen's or middle twenties. Loneliness and social isolation have often been suggested as primary motives for much ownership of pets. It is hoped that the present study will stimulate the thinking of anthropologists, psychiatrists, child development specialists, and public health professionals concerning the cultural, psychological, and medical importance of multiple-animal ownership.

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