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The Multispecies Family. Animals as Members of the Contemporary Family

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Non-human animals have had a profound influence on diverse human societies throughout history, playing a fundamental and evolutionary role, not only for utilitarian or exploitative purposes, such as transportation, security, health, food, clothing or labor. In spiritual aspects, they have also been considered and, notwithstanding cultural differences, many traditions throughout the world have honored the relations between humans and animal life, acknowledging they make part of the connection with the natural and spiritual world.

The special relationship between people (human animals) and some non-human animals has undergone an ongoing evolution, beyond domestication, up to forging significant relationships based on affection, bonding, coexistence, companionship, and love. For over the last 50 years, non-human animals closer to human beings have been one of the natural components with the most significance and socioeconomic, scientific, and cultural relevance in any given country. In the West, for example, the consideration given to them has had a notorious incidence in daily lives, and more and more people are looking after their companion animals' welfare, at the same level with esteemed family members. In fact, based on surveys conducted in various countries, a drop in natality can be evidenced as directly proportional to a substantial increase of non-human animals in families. In other words, we tend to have more animals than children at home. This has entailed economic and political changes and opportunities, such as a wide range of "pet-friendly" places

(hotels, restaurants, etc.), stores offering specialized services like cat-café, non-human animal parties, dog spas, hair, clothing and accessories stores, customized birthday cakes, pet insurance, and so on). Nowadays, non-human animals are admitted in public transportation as “passengers,” rather than charge, and they are even admitted in many work places acknowledging their manifold benefits to working environments. All in all, it is safe to state that this has brought a favorable and significant change of attitude towards animals across society. Mass media, in their presentation of animals’ image have also had a decisive incidence in this change of mentality, but it seems necessary that human beings find again some current foundations on which they can base their coexistence.

Therefore, this relationship has been strengthened and extended up to the point of including and recognizing non-human beings as members of family nuclei, albeit unofficially. Their inclusion in the family group entails both a reciprocal adequation for the animal and other family members (abiding by preexisting rules, roles, and restructuring of the old family system dynamics, etc.). This allows for a new dimension in the study of families, since companion animals play active roles, and functional demands governing interactions between family members include and/or affect animals, and could even push them to play important roles in family configuration. In fact, some research has shown that non-human animals are acknowledged to perform specific and distinctive tasks. Thus, their inclusion may enrich the study of and work with families. In this line of thought, belonging to a family is not exclusive from human beings, but is forged through close interactions, cohabitation and mutual commitment. This issue aims to open a forum of discussion from different disciplinary approaches, allowing to conceive a critical global and multicultural reflection upon the paradigm of animals living within human family nuclei, that is, in the so-called multispecies or interspecies families, with members from different species.

For further information or to submit your complete article along with its abstract (in English or Spanish), please contact: Carmen Caravaca Llamas, carmen.caravaca@ua.es and/or José Sáez Olmos, jose.saez@unir.net

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