

Birds are not More Human than Dogs: Evidence From Naming

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This study tested Levi-Strauss's hypothesis that birds are more likely to be given human names than are dogs or other pets. The hypothesis was not supported. Instead, dogs (and cats) are much more likely to be given human names. The results were interpreted in terms of the relationships people feel with different kinds of pets. Pets housed outside the home are least likely to be given human names. Inside the house, pets kept in cages are less likely to be given human names than are pets allowed to roam freely within the home.

Introduction

In 2007, 63% of the households in the United States owned at least one pet (about 71 million homes), an increase from 56% in 1988 (APPMA 2007). Interestingly, about twice as many households have pets than have children (AVMA 2202; APPMA 2005; 2007). In many of these households, pets may be substitutes for children (Slovenko 1983) as indicated by the way their caretakers refer to themselves as their pet's "mom" or "dad" (AAHA 2006). Feeding pets the same food as they eat, and celebrating their birthdays (Beck and Katcher 1983) also reflects the close "family" relationship caretakers feel toward their pets.

Dogs are the most popular pets, followed by cats, fish, birds, small animals (rats, guinea pigs) and reptiles (APPMA 2007), but it is not uncommon for a given household to have more than one species as pets (Kidd and Kidd 1998). Regardless of the kind of animals in a household, there is no difference in the strength of the attachment caretakers feel to their pets (Albert and Bulcroft 1987).

Although attachment varies little, Levi-Strauss (1966) noted that the kinds of names caretakers give their pets differ in how commonly they

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are given human names. Levi-Strauss contends that birds are more likely to be given human names than are dogs, because, like humans, birds build homes, have family lives, nurture their young, engage in social relations with members of their own species, and communicate with one another acoustically in a way that resembles articulated language. Levi-Strauss maintains that because the world of birds is metaphorically thought of as more closely resembling the human world, pet birds are more likely to be given human names than are domestic dogs. Although dogs are also part of human society, Levi-Strauss maintains they do not form an independent society and are therefore more likely to be given “stage names” rather than names people bear in ordinary life.

The same contentions about birds resembling humans have also been independently made by Barber (1994) and Skutch (1996), who note that some bird species seem to speak meaningfully rather than merely “parrotting” words. Kidd and Kidd (1998) also note that human-bird interactions are often more warm and caring than human interactions with other pets, including dogs, cats, or horses, because in addition to Levi-Strauss’s characterizations, many kinds of birds are able to reproduce human speech forms and sounds.

Although Levi-Strauss’s argument about pet naming has been challenged by Leach (1973) and Gardner (1972) as relating more to France than to English-speaking countries, Carroll (1980) found that birds did in fact have a much higher percentage of human names than did dogs or cats in Mother Goose nursery rhymes. Most, if not all these nursery rhymes, however, were compiled prior to the 20th century, some as early as the 17th century (Le Men 1992). Carroll’s results may therefore reflect naming practices and pet affinities that have long since been replaced.

Method

Pet names for birds, dogs, and cats were obtained from the “Top Pet Names” section of BabyNames.com (2007). Since there were many more names for dogs and cats, the list for these animals was restricted to the first 200. Each name was then compared with human names obtained from the Social Security Name Index (2007). The results were analyzed using the Chi Square statistic.

Results

The frequency of human names among the various species is shown in table 1.

Table 1. Frequency of Human Names by Species

Species	All Names	Human Names	
	No.	No.	%
Dogs	200	95	48
Cats	200	83	42
Birds	137	31	23
Fish	183	41	22
Small Animals ¹	461	94	20
Reptiles ²	58	11	20
Horses	187	26	14

¹ Ferrets, Gerbils, Hamsters, Guinea Pigs, Rabbits

² Snakes, Turtles

These differences were statistically significant at the .001 level.

A comparison between birds and dogs indicated that the percentage of dogs with human names was significantly higher than the percentage of birds with human names ($X^2 = 21.5$ $df=1$, $p < .001$). The difference in frequencies of human names for dogs and cats was not statistically significant.

Discussion

Caretakers indicate their affinities to pets by giving them human names (Levi-Strauss 1966), a practice that has been increasingly common since the turn of the 20th century (Slovenko 1983). Levi-Strauss contended that humans are more likely to give birds human names because their society resembles ours metaphorically more than dog society, but the present results did not support this argument. Instead, dogs and cats had the highest percentages of human names for the seven species that we compared. When we specifically compared birds and dogs, dogs had a significantly higher percentage of human names than birds.

In light of the present findings, an alternative hypothesis regarding the naming of pets is that humans are least likely to give human names

to pets such as horses that do not live in human households. Pets that do live in houses are more likely to be given human names than pets (such as horses) that live outside, but pets kept in cages (birds, fish small animals, reptiles) are less likely to be given human names than are those allowed free movement within the home, specifically dogs and cats. This hypothesis is further supported by the absence of any significant differences in naming between dogs and cats, the two species generally kept indoors but not in cages.

The fact that dogs and cats are not constrained by cages, and are often given human food, means that dogs and cats are considered members of the family to a greater extent than other pet species and hence are more likely to be given human names than are other species.

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