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It's raining cats, dogs and diapers! The intersections of rising pet ownership and LGBTQ+ coupledom

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Abstract

Over the past few years (2017-19) there has been a steep rise in queer parenthood and same-sex 'marriage' along with a significant increase in pet ownership in western countries. This paper will explore shifting trends in pet ownership and the ways that young LGBTQ+ couples are planning their futures together, around and through their pets. This futurity and investment in household often serves to consolidate heteronormativity and the traditional discourses of family planning.

Introduction

Social sciences research on human–animal relations is, generally speaking, clustered into four areas: ontological security, deficiency, substitution, extension. Animals, it is argued, can provide constancy and a sense of security in otherwise precarious contemporary times (Franklin, 1999). They help to compensate for the deficiency in interpersonal relations, providing the missing love and companionship that people need (Irvine, 2004) and/or feature as child substitutes who are lavished with abundant emotional and financial investment (Greenebaum, 2004). Turning around this negative 'something missing' argument, family sociologists have shown how animals often feature in children's accounts of family (Mason and Tipper, 2008), with adults similarly recognising them as part of their extended networks of kin (Charles and Davies, 2008). There is also growing appreciation of the ways that human-animal relations can have profound benefits to older people's health and wellbeing (Gee and Mueller, 2019). For older LGBTQ people, they can provide non-judgemental attachment that helps to combat feelings of loneliness and isolation (Muraco et al., 2018).

In an earlier article I argued that animal–human connections move us beyond 'like kin' or intimacy deficit models. Instead they materialise 'embedded multidimensional emotional–social worlds in ways that embrace otherness in relationships' (Gabb, 2011: 1.2), creating 'queer families of companion species' (Haraway, 2003). Times have nevertheless moved on. The analytical merits in decentring human-animal relations remain salient, with critical posthumanist perspectives helping to unpick naturalization processes and the ways these convey power and constitute western kinship (Riggs and Peel, 2016). Queering the analytical lens, we can clearly see how love and intimacy are all too often reduced to hetero-kin formations and this permeates the ways we make sense of human–animal relations (Weaver, 2015). The seismic socio-legal changes that have impacted upon LGBTQ+ parenthood and partnership over the past decade do, however, require a critical update to the field of animal-human relations and queer kinship studies.

LGBTQ+ parent families

In the last decade there have been significant advances in lesbian and gay partnership rights, and growing wider acceptance of LGBTQ+ relationships (Gabb, 2018). Marriage is now something that can be imagined and planned for by all couples in a growing number of national contexts. The heteronormative thrust of these socio-legal changes have to a large extent been reflected by LGBTQ family research leading to warnings about the establishment of 'a new gay norm' (Moore and Stambolis-Ruhstorfer, 2013). The queer

rhetoric that underpinned ‘families we choose’ (Weston, 1997) has been superseded by dyadic heteronormative discourses, albeit framed around a two-mums or two-dads model. Parenting opportunities have opened up and are being pursued by lesbians and gay men in increasing numbers. 20% of lesbians and 5% of gay men now have children living at home. 60% of Millennials or GenY (i.e. those born 1980s–late 1990s) are already parents or plan to have children (Roth and Paisley, 2013). While recent statistics from the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HEFA) reveal a 12% increase in IVF treatment for female same-sex couples and a 22% increase in treatment for surrogacy (Kelleher, 2019).

Child-free queer households are significantly more likely than child-free heterosexual households to have pets. Interestingly for my argument here, though, is that couples are more likely than single people to have pets, and once couples commit to each other and formalise their partnership through marriage, they are more inclined to also jointly commit to pets. Differences between cats and dogs are notable here too, with couple cat ownership rising by 5% while corresponding dog ownership amongst ‘married’ queer couples has increased by 11% (Riese, 2018). Here, therefore, I want to focus on shifting trends in pet ownership and consider how young couples are planning their futures together – around and through their pets. LGBTQ+ human–animals relations thus shed light on imaginations of family and enduring long-term relationships which reflect and consolidate heteronormative family discourse rather than pose any queer counter-cultural reference point.

People and their pets

In the UK (2017-18) 45% of the population owns a pet, an increase of 5% since 2016. 26% own a dog, while cat ownership stands at 18% (Statista, 2018). Research conducted by the Pet Food Manufacturers’ Association (PFMA) shows a 400,000 rise in the number of dogs which now stands at nine million. This equates with just over ¼ of all UK households owning a dog. The number of households with children that include a dog has seen the steepest increase, rising by 11%. The PFMA has therefore identified the rise in dog ownership among families as the key factor in the increase in pet ownership (King, 2018). Market research into LGBT pet ownership found that lesbians were twice more likely than gay men to own a pet (Roth and Paisley, 2013), but queer women are no more likely to own a dog than heterosexual women (Riese, 2018).

Information on pet ownership is typically generated by the marketing and advertising industry interest. Western nations spend over £4bn per annum on pets and pet products. So pet surveys completed in this market-driven context are inevitably motivated by sales; surveys of the LGBTQ population are prone to the idiosyncrasies of sample self-selection, especially so when completed by community and media outlets. Some degree of caution must therefore be exercised over the statistics cited above. They do, however, illustrate some interesting trends in pet ownership that provide useful contextualisation for demographic and socio-cultural shifts in LGBTQ+ personal life and household arrangements.

Partners, pets, and family planning

The queer urban myth of ‘cats (and their dykes)’ (Reti and Sien, 1991) remains an enduring stereotype, with free spirited feline self-sufficiency making cats an essential accoutrement to all lesbian’s lives, providing a mirror to their owners’ challenge to the hetero-patriarchal social order. In contrast canine counterparts are characterised as a human’s best friend,

being loyal and devoted companions. Intuition, fostered by cultural narratives, tells us that families need a dog because they can teach children valuable life skills and be an integral part of the household. To begin to probe these myths and the presence of dogs and cats in household formations, I now draw upon extracts of data from young LGBTQ+ people, in their 20s and 30s, taken from a larger study on long-term couple relationships.ⁱ These data show how the intimate ambitions of young queers are often shaped by and understood through growing up and settling down with pets and planned-parenthood routinely included (Gabb and Fink, 2015).

Human–animal connections were cherished and typically identified as a sign of couple stability, bestowing futurity to the relationship project (Gabb, 2018). Like other studies previously mentioned, participants tended to identify animals as part of their family:

Sam: it's like a little family, you see, there's us and the two cats

Kaylee: it's our little family kind of thing.

It is interesting to note here how both Sam and Kaylee equivocate in their descriptions of animals as kin: these households are *like* a family or a family *kind of thing* rather than family per se. Their prefix of 'little' before family personalises this relational unit but it also renders these families as secondary to an authentic other. Kaylee goes on to talk about the ways in which human–animal relations are special because they operate at an emotional level, providing something that is often lacking in interpersonal relations. The otherness of animals, enriches the connection rather than cleaves it apart through species difference (Gabb, 2011).

Kaylee: [Animals] have this way of reaching where people can't reach emotionally. And I think they've made me a much - a warmer person. So they are very special... They make you laugh (both laugh). They distract you. They give you something which [sighs] – I guess a person can't give you. And [erm] you feel responsible but not in a negative way; it's not heavy responsibility you know... it just makes you a better person in general. It makes you more emotional I guess... I think it's a space of communicating with each other as well, because they're ours, you know like we got them when we were together and we're raising them up to be good cats (both laugh).

After expounding the virtues of human–animal relations, however, Kaylee then shifts gear. She pauses, before moving on to talk about responsibility, something that is more than the practicalities of pet ownership. It is a consequence of the *emotional value* of the human–animal bond. Her train of thought next seamlessly drifts into the ways that the couple's cats consolidate the human partnership. These animals are mutually shared between the two women and, together, they are committed to providing a good life for them *within* and *through* the couple relationship.

Young people spoke with great fondness of the specialness of human-animal connections. Pets were part of their relationship configuration and also facilitated a glimpse into the future, *when* partnership and parenthood coalesce:

Usha: [Cat] he likes being in between us.

Leah: Yeah

Usha: Because then he gets the maximum physical contact...God knows what'll happen when there's children....

Usha and Leah are thinking forward, to the time when a cat and child will co-reside with them and equally share their lives – and bed! When other young LGBTQ+ couples talked about their *imagined future* together, however, dogs were more likely to feature than cats. In these instances the investment of time and the financial and emotional expense of pet ownership were often equated with that required by parenthood.

Leanne: We have talked about getting a dog, but a dog is, like, a big commitment, like a child, really... a dog, it is always dependent on you, isn't it? It's like having a child, a baby forever.

A dog and child are interchangeable in Leanne's reasoning, so too Mona (below). A child and dog will both be dependent and require commitment 'forever'. There is a sense of trepidation in Leanne's sentiments, and in the surrounding interview the couple's otherwise fond banter at times becomes sharp. Here, then, couple's imaginations of pet ownership and parenting are tested out and mapped onto relationship futurity:

Mona: I do really, really want [a dog] though, but it would be selfish for us to get one because, you know, we want one... [It's] the same thing with kids... whether we had children or whether we had a dog... you've got to stay up with the puppy or the baby and you're bereft of sleep, and you just find the inner strength and you sort of, you have to rely on each other a lot more, with a lot less patience I guess with everything. And, you know, you come across so many new issues that you've never come across before and you have to really properly trust each other and rely on each other... It wouldn't be a factor in me deciding whether or not to have kids or a dog... it would make a huge impact on our relationship but I think in a positive sort of way. There would be challenges but it would be a positive, definitely a positive. Positive. I think it would enrich our relationship, I think.

Mona is evidently fully cognisant of the challenges that ensue when introducing a puppy or a baby into the household. She goes on to talk about how the couple's capacities to rise to these challenges are something that 'would make us stronger'. Like Leanne, 'kids or a dog' are collapsed together. For Mona, both will equally enrich the relationship, *she thinks*. The challenges will be positive, something that she repeats three times, perhaps signalling her apprehension around how these new arrivals would inevitably test the relationship. What is clear and uncontested though is the planning and deliberation being devoted to the time and place of children and/or dogs in this couple's future relationship and the ways that this would strengthen their commitment to each other.

Concluding thoughts

Over the past decade in the UK, as in many countries across the world, there have been significant socio-legal advancements in equality rights and social attitudinal changes

(Duncan and Phillips, 2008). While couple relationships remain diverse (Gabb and Fink, 2015) there has been an almost inexorable move towards 'compulsory coupledness' (Wilkinson, 2012) that marginalises non-dyadic configurations. The imagined life trajectories of LGBTQ+ young people typically include long-term partnerships and parenthood. Routes into parenthood may vary from one couple to the next, but what remains constant is the act of decision-making – whether or not to have children, and if so, how to become parents (Gabb, 2018). Pets often feature centrally in this contemporary LGBTQ+ life narrative.

Human-animal relations are simultaneously valued for the qualities which they bring to the child-free couple relationship and also to imagine being a family. Pets enable young queer people to test out parenting capacities and the robustness of the couple relationship. They confer futurity to the couple relationship by demonstrating commitment to the partnership project. The familiar saying 'a dog is for life and not just Christmas' permeates our cultural psyche and such sentiments serve to reaffirm the cross-species family venture. The rise in pet ownership amongst the LGBTQ+ community thus reflects socio-cultural changes and the concomitant increase in queer parenthood, and vice versa. The rise in dog ownership perhaps says even more. It points to and reflects a shift in the lifecourse decision-making that is taking place amongst queer Millennials and thus, I suggest, represents a useful starting point for analyses of contemporary LGBTQ+ families and queer kinship.

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