

Using Visual Sociology Methods to Study the Relationship Between Dogs and Humans

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Abstract

Human interaction with animals has become increasingly significant in the contemporary everyday life of individuals. A decisive factor for this is loneliness. This situation has allowed for an unprecedented account of nonverbal communication, in its quantitative as well as qualitative dimensions. In the past as today, it is necessary to do a thorough sociological analysis by rejecting the Cartesian assumption that the absence of language corresponds with an absence of intelligence. Communication occurs between interactive subjects however, whenever they share culture, emotions and historical contexts. Our research argues that with visual data, interactions between humans and pets, who socialize and share culture, is grounded in a common yet non-verbal language.

Keywords: Photo-voice, age; symbolic interaction, emotional support, non-verbal communication.

“Just as animals’ intelligent and emotional behavior, anatomical and physiological structure and function, and group life, have their correlates in human behavior, so the dividing line between animal and human culture is likewise vague and arbitrary” (Bain, 1929, p. 555)

1. Premise

Some sociologists, such as Harriet Martineau (1865) and Frances Power Cobbe (1872), favored [this line of] the research of communication between humans and animals during the XIX century, but the sociologist who investigated this question to a greater extent was Max Weber. Weber was

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particularly cognizant of the method's potential: "In so far [as the behavior of animals is subjectively understandable] it would be theoretically possible to formulate a sociology of the relations of men to animals, both domestic and wild. Thus, many animals 'understand' commands, anger, love, hostility, and react to them in ways which are evidently often by no means purely instinctive and mechanical and in some sense both consciously meaningful and affected by experience" (Weber 1947, p.104)

Notwithstanding Weber's position, twentieth-century Europe disregarded the sociological impact of animals for a long time, quite the opposite of what happened in the United States. According to George Herbert Mead (1907), although animals were social beings, their interactions involved only a primitive and instinctual 'conversation of gestures' (the dog's growl or the cat's his for example). In Mead's view, animals lacked the ability to employ symbols, were unable to negotiate meaning and take the role of co-interactants, and their behavior was directed toward achieving simple goals such as acquiring food or defending their territory. In the absence of language, their behavior was devoid of meaning, and they were mindless, selfless, and emotionless.

Mead's approach eventually provoked the first sociologically critical stance on these dynamics. In general, this approach still applies to the majority of social scientists today. They believe that human relations with animals exclude meaningful and mutual communication and indicate a subordinate relationship with the animals, believing that they are only interested in securing their food source. However, this stance cannot explain why we observe animals imitating the behaviour of their owners, or how and why many animals, particularly dogs, interact with unfamiliar children. How can we explain that animals in veterinary clinics communicate with each other through shared symbols? Without addressing the prior interpretation, how can we interpret the meaning of a large dog's soft approach in front of a disabled woman in a wheelchair, or his submissive posture in front of a person with a mental disease (Sanders, 1993) New perspectives on this research have shown the relevance and social implications of interactions between humans and animals: "Human interaction with nonhuman animals is a central feature of contemporary social life." (Sanders, 2007, p. 2).

Man has always observed animals in the construction of his own culture, and therefore the animal became a taxonomic operator, cognitive operator, and perceptual operator. From this beginning a large analysis of human ethology began. For example, the work of Eibl-Eibesfeldt (1989), a follower of Konrad Lorenz, who has assessed how, among the many innate characteristics of man, those of preferring ordered structures, coding perceptions through a cognitive point of view (gestalt psychology), or in creating meaning by putting together and rebuilding symbols when the signifiers are missing. Eibl-Eibesfeldt noted

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that man tends to see animals even where they are not, that is, to use the animal as a cognitive operator (see photo 1 and photo 2: Signifying symbols).

Figure 1 Signifying symbols



Photo 1

Photo 2

For example, if I see a cloud, and I don't know what to name the shape it has, I will most likely give it an animal's name, constructing the form in my mind through animal morphology -theriomorphism to build a hermeneutics - an interpretation of the world. Animals have always been a part of our cultural lexicon and individual mental images from our first childish drawings through which we learn about and represent the world. Cartoons and films we have watched and continue to watch are therefore important visual datum that allows us to know and experience emotions that have not otherwise been illustrated in a world marked by technological imperatives.

Our research reveals ways that emotions in the human world are expressed through in the shots of the owners who self-portray and portray their animals. Through the photos provided by pet owners, we have verified many of the benefits of human-animal relationships. If we do not look for a reason, that is, if we do not try to give an epistemological foundation for why man interacts with the animal world this way, we will never fully understand the meaning and significance of these relationships. We could try to make an empirical evaluation of some characteristics, but we will not be able to explain them, and they will not fall within the context of social science; which not only deals with describing a natural and spontaneous phenomenon, but also tries to explain it and provide plausible explanations and interpretations of that particular phenomenon.

Within the scientific paradigm, it is known that description, observation and explanation go hand in hand. Until we can find an epistemological explanation for why humans need animals, we will not truly understand their relevance in terms of social transformation in the relationship between humans and animals, or the process of animal domestication. Domestication appears to

involve a form of symbolic language through which we interpret the behaviour of our animals and encourage them to imitate us. This is evident in the growing interaction between dogs and their owners today. This raises the question of how it is possible that dogs' relationships have not been transformed by modern capitalism and consumer culture in an era that some describe as one of 'cold intimacies'. According to Illouz (2007), emotions have become a commodity, turning intimate interactions into something more rational and instrumental, influenced by technology, psychology, and market logic. Paradoxically, however, the growing bond between humans and pets in the digital age is fuelled by technology and the social changes it has brought about. This is not a contradiction, but an evolution in which pets provide emotional stability in an increasingly virtual and fast-paced world. The main reasons for this intensified bond are an antidote to digital loneliness: despite hyperconnectivity, loneliness is on the rise. Pets offer constant companionship, unconditional affection, and emotional support, acting as 'emotional regulators' during times of stress or isolation. Pet humanisation: 91% of people consider their pet to be a true family member and often treat them like a child (anthropomorphising them). This paradigm shift increases both emotional and financial investment. Therefore, the relationship between humans and 'pets' is the closest and most humanised across species, and dogs are the most domesticated animals after humans (Masson, 1998). It is estimated that in September 2025, Ipsos revealed that owning a dog or cat in Italy is a cross-generational phenomenon. In fact, for people aged 26 to 60, a four-legged friend provides stronger emotional support than a community of friends and family. In 2024, over 37% of Italian households owned a pet, with an estimated 25.5 million pets living in homes. Dogs and cats are the most common pets, particularly in central Italy and small towns. The emotional bond between people and their pets is growing ever stronger, to the extent that pets have become integral members of the family (Istat, 2025).

The dog's presence challenges the idea that family and kin are exclusively human (Charles, 2014) and typically involves sharing household space in close proximity, which is often intimate (Cudworth, 2021). Nevertheless, the nature of the relationship between people and their dogs can vary significantly. The data for this paper indicates a close relationship between people and their dogs.

2. Object and methods

For the reasons outlined above, our research aims to demonstrate why the number of domestic animals is increasing in an era of pervasive technology. The study seeks to explore why many people are turning to historically neglected

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emotions, such as those experienced in the relationship between humans and animals. Why do people choose to live with dogs? What opportunities, emotions and sentiments do people experience when they live with dogs? Are there differences relating to sex, age or education? First, we will consider the relevance of relationships with domestic animals and their emotional role in people's lives at all ages. Rather than using historical analysis, this demonstrates how different life stages are perceived based on the informative capacity of the images. As Secondulfo (1993) points out, these images isolate and freeze a fragment of reality, which can then be analysed in depth. To explore this, we have used photography, which can be viewed from two perspectives: as part of a complex sociological methodology, and as a text that can be evaluated, analysed, and decoded in various ways (Banks, 2007; Rose, 2014). Both views imply the assumption that photographs offer a representation of knowledge and a connection to an empirical truth.

Photographs have become the most common form of visual data in studies employing visual methodology. This demonstrates their potential to describe and explain various phenomena. In our case, for example, they can be used to analyse new forms of emotion, sentiment and perception relating to domestic animals.

In this study, we have chosen to present a series of images illustrating or symbolising people's daily lives with their pets or moments spent with stray dogs. This study has been accompanied by calls for methods that can better address human–animal relationships (van Dooren et al., 2016) and consider the 'voice' of animals through visual and sonic data (Birke, 2014; Hamilton & Taylor, 2017) although not present in this article for reasons of space. In this work we use the terms photovoice and photo-elicitation to refer to any method whereby participants are asked to take photographs that represent something about their daily life with their dog as the basis for an interview. In the process, photographs are selected for discussion by the interviewer and/or participant, and the participants then contextualize them by telling stories about what the photographs mean, or what emotions or memories they evoke. Many visual materials were collected, with the anonymity of users ensured by removing any identifying details from the images they produced.

From this data, the researcher identified the emerging themes. This article specifically explores the use of photography as a participatory visual technique for describing and understanding people's views on their lives, spaces, and time spent with their animals. Important aspects of daily life often remain unexpressed, which is why we must turn our attention to the social life that unfolds beyond the normal rhythm of daily existence. Photography enables participants to present their life experiences for interpretation. It has the potential to foster engagement (Robinson, 2011) and facilitate communication

of feelings, meanings and understandings. In our view, words provide meaning to images arising from people's specific emotional states. The images produced offered researchers the opportunity to analyse them, and as Pauwels (2015, p. 217) states: “Verbal clarification can shed light on aspects of which even the image creators were unaware during the creation of the image”. Recognising the capacity of images to enrich cognitive construction processes (Harper, 2000), the researchers selected sample images that corroborate the themes to be reflected upon in this work using an avalanche sampling method. For this reason, our sample is not intended to be representative, but simply to serve as a starting point for reflection.

During the coding and analysis process, we focused on the content of the photographs and the subjects' explanations. Excerpts from the accompanying text were selected for inclusion in the image captions in this article, providing an interpretation of the sentiments and emotions of owners of dogs.

A total of 39 people took part in the study, including 21 women and 18 men. Seven of these participants are aged between 26 and 35, nine are aged between 36 and 45, six are aged between 46 and 55, 10 are aged between 56 and 65, and seven are aged between 66 and 75. The group structure is represented in Table 1 below. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Salerno between October 2025 and January 2026. Participants were randomly selected from among individuals encountered in public places with their dogs. The only inclusion criterion was owning a dog¹. The researchers explained their research to the dog owners and asked if they would be willing to share photos of their dogs with the other participants. Those who agreed to participate were given a consent form. The interviews took place in pubs, cafés, and the interviewees' homes. Dogs were present in all cases. The interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. It is important to note that nobody refused to participate. Focusing on the dogs and the relationship between owners and their pets encouraged participants to be receptive, open and willing to share how they came to own their dog, often accompanied by compliments such as 'I like your pet' or 'I find

¹ The inclusion criteria explain why the research focused on the relationship between dogs and humans. The multi-purpose survey *I Cittadini e il Tempo libero* (Istat, 2024) found that 10 million Italian households have pets, with dogs being the most popular choice. Furthermore, potential research participants could easily be identified among dog owners, as cat owners are rarely seen walking their pets. While much research by ethologists has explored the differences in relationships between canid and felid mammals and humans, this aspect is not relevant to the topic under discussion and will not be covered in this essay. For further reading on this topic, see Zhang et al. (2024) and González-Ramírez and Landero-Hernández R. (2021), among others.

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your dog very cute'. We asked participants to provide social demographic data, specifically their gender, age, educational qualifications, occupation (employed or unemployed), and how many years they had lived with their dog.

Table 1. Research participants

Participant	Age	Sex	Educational Qualification	Occupation	Number of photos provided
No. 1	73	M	Master's degree	Retired	5
No.2	70	F	Middle school diploma	Employed	5
No. 3	74	F	Middle school diploma	Retired	2
No. 4	31	M	Academic degree	Employed	12
No.5	29	F	High school degree	Employed	3
No.6	69	F	Middle school diploma	Retired	2
No.7	58	M	Master's degree	Unemployed	2
No.8	57	F	High school diploma	Unemployed	4
No.9	68	M	High school diploma	Retired	1
No.10	69	M	Middle school diploma	Employed	1
No.11	38	F	Master's degree	Employed	5
No.12	39	F	Master's degree	Unemployed	3
No.13	37	M	High school diploma	Employed	2
No.14	65	F	Middle school diploma	Retired	1
No.15	54	F	Middle school diploma	Employed	2
No.16	43	M	Academic degree	Employed	3
No.17	63	M	Middle school diploma	Employed	1
No.18	63	F	High school diploma	Unemployed	2
No.19	62	F	Master's degree	Employed	1
No.20	57	M	High school diploma	Unemployed	2
No.21	61	M	Master's degree	Employed	3
No.22	59	F	High school diploma	Employed	1
No.23	59	M	Middle school diploma	Employed	1
No.24	32	M	High school diploma	Unemployed	4
No.25	43	F	Master's degree	Employed	1
No.26	39	F	High school degree	Employed	2
No.27	36	F	High school degree	Employed	10
No.28	55	M	High school degree	Unemployed	3
No.29	51	M	High school degree	Employed	6
No.30	53	F	Master's degree	Unemployed	2
No.31	51	F	Master's degree	Employed	1
No.32	51	M	High school degree	Employed	4
No.33	29	M	Bachelor's degree	Employed	1
No.34	75	F	Middle school diploma	Retired	1
No.35	37	M	Academic degree	Employed	6
No.36	36	F	Bachelor's degree	Unemployed	2
No.37	26	F	High school diploma	Employed	2
No.38	35	M	Bachelor's degree	Unemployed	1
No.39	33	F	Bachelor's degree	Unemployed	7

We either recorded the interviews with a smartphone or took notes while the participants explained their photographs of the dog(s). In some cases, participants sent us photos of themselves with their dog via social media.

We transcribed the verbal data in Word and imported it into the NVivo 11 programme for processing. We employed open, selective and axial coding techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). We also introduced the photos to the programme and classified the visual data according to sentiment, emotion, and affirmation during the photoelicitation process.

3. Results

What did the participants say about their reasons for choosing to live with a dog? The analysis of their answers highlights eight main reasons for getting a dog, as shown in the matrix in Figure 2 below: 1) Companionship; 2) Emotional support; 3) Helpfulness; 4) Strengthening social ties; 5) Opportunity for meetings; 6) Loyalty; 7) Loss of a loved one; 8) Aspect of caregiving.

Figure 2. Reasons for choosing to live with a dog

Companionship	Helpfulness	Strengthening social ties
Emotional support	Opportunity for meetings	Loyalty
	Loss of a loved one	Aspects of Caregiving

The majority of respondents said that they got a dog for companionship and emotional support, as well as to meet new people. A smaller number of respondents said that they got a dog after experiencing the loss of a loved one or a sense of purpose.

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What experiences do participants have when looking at photographs of dogs, and what opportunities, emotions and sentiments do these photographs evoke? Although the variety of photographs initially seemed very wide, we grouped perceptions of relationships with dogs into twelve main categories: 1) fear of humans; 2) the animal's well-being; 3) fear of losing their dog; 4) aspect of caregiving; 5) they are not opportunists; 6) a key player in the family unit; 7) facilitators of new meetings; 8) pets as an alternative to parenting and missed opportunities; 9) a life companion; 10) service dog; 11) a dog's temperament is just like its owner's, not the other way around; 12) pet therapy is better than human assistance. We identified thirteen main categories of perception (see the table below).

Table 2. Categories of perception about their dog and relationship

Category	Number of respondents
Fear of Humans	1
The animal's well-being	7
Fear of losing their dog	3
Aspect of caregiving	2
They are not opportunists	1
A key player in the family unit	4
Facilitators for new meetings	5
Pets, alternative parenting methods and missed opportunities	4
Life companion	1
Service Dog	5
A dog's temperament is just like its owner's, not the other way around	2
Pet therapy is better than human assistance	4

We will show a few illustrations for each of these categories (see Figures 3–14), alongside participants' explanations, to demonstrate how owning a dog can express personal sentiments and opportunities in life.

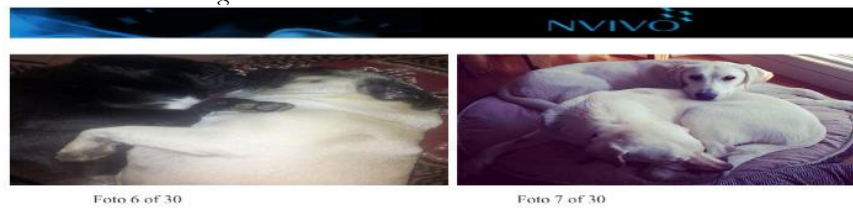
Figure 3. Fear of humans



Here we can see in the photo 3 a man feeding to two stray dogs. It is very interesting how the white dog in photo 4 allows the black dog to approach the food by looking back at the man who brought them food. In photo 5, after

that the man has moved away the two dogs share the food without conflict. In our interviews, those who commented on these photos described this behaviour as indicating a strong bond between the two strays and their ability to exert control over humans. Some even used the term 'distrust of humans' (I_No_5). Others said, "that man looks after the dogs" (I_No._38)

Figure 4. *The animal's well-being*



Some pet owners sent us photos of their dogs at home. Photos 6 and 7 show pairs of dogs of different breeds sharing the same sleeping space. In Photo 7, one of the dogs can be seen standing guard and protecting the other while it sleeps. This behaviour is similar to that seen in Photo 7, where a child sleeps in its mother's arms. The comments on these photos were mostly summarised by respondents under the categories of protection and safety in their environment.

Figure 5. *Fear of losing their dog*



Photo 8 shows a dog on the verge of death lying on the ground while a vet treats him. Photo 9 shows the dying dog's companion sensing his friend's suffering and refusing to leave his side. This is the animal's way of trying to avoid loss and pain. Photo 10 shows the dog's owner with the dog's face tattooed on his arm — an example of the human symbolic paradigm. The image conveys the pain of loss, evident in both the animal's face and the owner's gesture. This photo, provided by interviewee no. 21, evokes a range of emotions that can be grouped under the heading: "A human's fear of losing their dog to illness is equal to that felt for a family member".

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Figure 6. *Aspect of caregiving*



These two photos have gone viral online. We have annotated them based on information provided by our interviewee. In photo 11, you can see that the owner has tied the two dogs together, enabling the sighted dog to guide the blind one. In photo 12, the blind dog approaches the other dog as if to thank him with a kiss, in a sign of gratitude.

Many people have questioned whether dogs can serve as guides for other dogs as well as for humans, but those who own dogs say that these photos prove it.

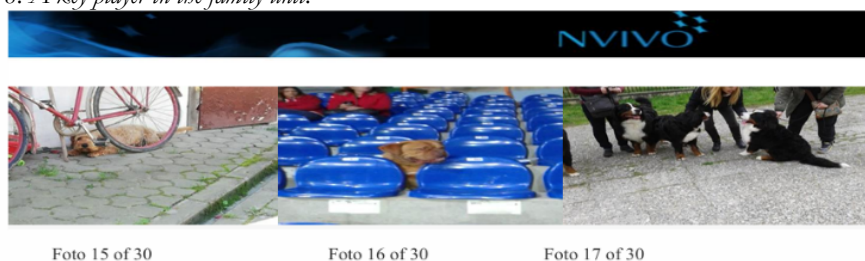
Figure 7. *They are not opportunists.*



The person who showed us these two photos described them as follows: “We watched those two dogs for hours. When the red dog realised his friend had died, he lay down next to him”, as if to say: “You won’t be alone” (I_No.2). Just like a human, that dog couldn’t accept the loss. Other people who commented on the photos also said: “That animals love more than we do” (I_No. 9).

Some animals kept as companions can bring their own personalities into relationships with humans (Irvine, 2005), and there are genuine possibilities for companionate exchange. These pictures show that intra-species care work is one such possibility. Human households also exemplify various types of dog–human relationships.

Figure 8. *A key player in the family unit.*



Today, human existence and interactions increasingly include our four-legged friends, as we can see here. These photos were contributed by the owners themselves.

Photo 15: “He understood that I was going for a bike ride and wanted to come with me” (I_No.4).

Photo 16: “He moved closer to the basketball court to watch my son play” (I_No.23).

Photo 17: “A photograph of my wife, who seemed to greet the other cattle dogs from the same litter” (I_No.7).

In summary, the owners consider their pets to be significant members of the family.

Figure 9. *Facilitators for new meetings*



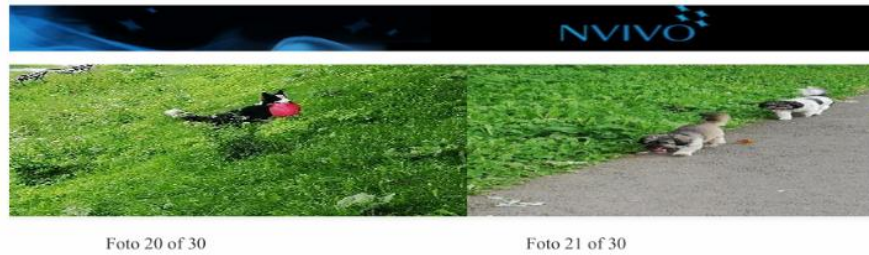
These two photos (18 and 19) show animals of different sizes and breeds playing together. The owner of the dog sniffing the golden retriever in photo 18 said: “Golden retrievers are perfect for pet therapy, and they make great companion dogs, especially today. They are very patient, as you can see here — my Poodle is really cheeky.” (I_ No. 10).

When dogs meet in the park, new friendships are formed among their owners, as well as providing moments of playfulness and friendship. The property of agency in dogs implies having control over one's own actions and awareness of the consequences of those actions. Among animals, one area

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in which agency appears is social play with owners or other dogs. The success of an attempt to play depends on how well the initiating animal communicates their intention and receives feedback from their owners (Irvine, 2021).

Figure 10. *Pets, alternative parenting methods and missed opportunities.*



Photos 20 and 21 show pet owners who have immortalised their dogs and documented them playing as if they were their children. These images prompt us to consider how pets can fulfil their owners' need to parent in contemporary society.

Both men and women have said this: “Having a child and having a dog are very similar experiences, especially when you get the dog as a puppy.” (I_No.29)

“After my kids left home, yes, Rick became the little one in the house who needed to be raised” (I_No. 34)

Figure 11. *Life companion*



The same situation in photo 22, the dog appears to adopt the same posture as a child who wants to remain in their busy mother's arms while she works. In photo No, an owner is trying to teach her dog to walk on two legs. In a society where people have fewer children and get married later in life, pets often become essential 'life companions' by filling the emotional void.

Figure 12. Service dog



The Corsican dog is renowned for its intelligence, as well as for its use as a guard and fighting dog. These figures illustrate an unprecedented relationship between generations. In photo 24, the dog realises that the elderly gentleman needs help positioning the child on his back, so he sits down to make it easier for the child to climb up. In photo 25, the dog leads the child on a walk as if he were riding a horse. Finally, in photo 26, the dog does not lose sight of his little friend. Knowing that he cannot enter the house when there are guests, he remains outside and continues to guard the child. These three photos were provided by interviewee (No. 1) and we asked all our interviewees to comment on them. The discussion was interesting because everyone recognised the dog's role in helping the child and supporting the grandfather in caring for the little one.

In other words, these photos provide evidence to support Leslie Irvine's argument that non-human animal behaviour is not purely instinctive, but rather that non-human animals modify their actions and become more human (2007).

Figure 13. A dog's temperament is just like its owner's, not the other way around



Photo 27 shows another example of the Corso dog in the home when there are no children or guests present. The dog has clearly been socialised to watch television.

Photo 28 shows a hunting dog; it is well known that are not particularly suited to companionship or domestic life. However, in this photo we see that even a bloodhound, known for being an exuberant and restless hunting dog, can transform into a companion dog. When socialised to provide comfort, he becomes less impetuous and seems to reject his hunting instincts. In all our

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interview, many respondents stated that dogs quickly learn to live differently to how we humans classify them. "Take the Cane Corso, the Rottweiler, the Neapolitan Mastiff and the Maremmano, for example. We humans think they must hunt, guard and serve as defenders, but we forget that it is our training and teaching that makes them docile rather than aggressive" (I_No.16). "The beauty of dogs is that if you train them properly, they will never betray or anger you — they're just there to play and have fun." (I_No.39)

Socialising animals through symbolic interaction changes the behaviour of humans and non-humans alike. Therefore, images can be used as a further methodological tool to expand on Blumer's well-known concept of symbolic interaction as the construction of "...social products, as creations that are formed in and through the defining activities of people as they interact" (1969, p. 5), not only between humans, but also through their interactions with pets. In all our interview, many respondents stated that dogs quickly learn to live differently to how we humans classify them.

Figure 14. Pet therapy is better than human assistance.



These photos feature two extraordinary dogs. In photo 29, the owner tells us that he owes his life to his dog: "A few years ago, I had a heart attack and my dog raised the alarm, which meant I got help" (I_No.23).

Photo 30 shows two large dogs who are the only companions of a man with serious psychiatric problems. "The sweetness, patience and love of these two dogs is the best therapy for this man. They are trained to sense his mood and prevent him from harming himself or others when he becomes aggressive." These words were reported by the owner's wife, who took the photo (I_No_15).

This emotionally charged depiction of the animal mind is rooted in a generative context that intensifies the mutual experience of what Collins (1989) has termed 'natural rituals'. Coordinating these natural rituals requires the human and animal subjects to take the perspective of the other. Certainly, in the eyes of the owners and dogs alike, this translates into mutual recognition of their shared existence (Sanders, 1993).

4. Discussion and final remarks

Regardless of age, gender, educational background, employment status or unemployment, our respondents expressed their feelings towards their pet in the same way. Dogs are seen as lifelong companions and sources of emotional support across all age groups. This shows that the bond between humans and dogs is timeless and ageless, transcending generational differences.

However, our article highlights differences in how young people, adults, and older adults perceive the role of their pets in promoting their well-being.

When the researchers received photos from participants aged 26–35, they depicted the participants with their dogs and friends in situations where the relationship with the dog was also a means of expressing their identity. See Photo 10: during the PhotoVoice session, the owner told us that he did not need to explain to his friends what was happening to his puppy because they all immediately understood that he was about to part with it.

The grief is symbolically represented by a tattoo that identifies and recognises him amongst his peers.

In photos 21 and 22, provided by interviewee No. 29 and No. 34, it is clear that the animal is a companion that provides emotional and cognitive support. From adulthood onwards, the dog becomes a source of commitment and sustained interest, which, in other words, offers the possibility of slowing down cognitive decline, as research shows.

We know that age-related cognitive decline is an increasingly pressing public health concern, which can start in early adulthood and accelerate with age. While the precise mechanisms of cognitive ageing are still being investigated by much research, it is important to explore potential ways to support cognitive health throughout life. Regarding individual lifestyle factors, research has shown that pet ownership is a potentially protective factor for cognitive health that has received relatively little attention so far. Around 38% of Europeans own pets, with similar rates estimated among older adults aged 50 and over (Applebaum et al., 2023; Mueller et al., 2018).

Dog ownership has been associated with slower cognitive decline compared to not owning a pet. These findings suggest that owning a dog might act as a protective factor, slowing down cognitive decline and contributing to healthy cognitive ageing.

However, our research suggests that participants in the 46–55, 56–65, and 66–75 age groups emphasise this mutual support aspect in their comments on the provided images.

A telling example is the statement from interviewee No. 2: “I look after him, but he looks after me. The fact that we go out two or three times a day,

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even just for a short walk, is good for me too, as I have been a widow for some time.”

Also, we did find one difference in pet care: women are more often responsible for walking the dog or feeding it. This could be interpreted as care work, an activity to which women are more inclined. This is a topic that was not covered in this article, but which nevertheless emerged from the interviews.

Following Haraway (2008), some scholars have approached animal work as a cooperative endeavour involving animals as active agents. In Table 2, we can see that, for four participants, dogs are key players in the family unit; for five participants, their dogs facilitate new meetings; and for four participants, dogs are pets, alternative parenting methods and missed opportunities.

In our research, other participants could see dogs as 'working' by using their sensory perception skills in particular situations, e.g. as a service dog for five participants, or as pet therapy for four participants, which is better than human assistance. For example, dogs are used in professional care settings, such as therapy dogs that have undergone behavioural assessments to work in schools or care homes, and service dogs that provide assistance to people with disabilities (Pets as Therapy, 2020). Such work is extremely demanding (Smith et al., 2021). Dog companions are required to engage in emotional management work similar to that in security or therapy contexts. Haraway (2003, p. 38) therefore suggests that being a 'pet' is “a demanding job for a dog, requiring self-control and canine emotional and cognitive skills”. Dog companions live tightly circumscribed lives and are expected to behave better than the average human child and be as self-reliant as an adult (Bradshaw, 2012, p. xx). Hochschild (2012) referred to the private management of emotion by humans, particularly women, as 'emotion work', whereas managing feelings in order to display emotion publicly for pay was termed 'emotional labour'. Companion dogs must manage their emotions to a high degree in both public and private contexts. Assuming we agree with Hochschild that emotional labour constitutes work, Haraway is correct in suggesting that being a companion in a human household could be considered a 'demanding job'.

Companion dogs must manage their emotions to a high degree in both public and private contexts. Assuming we agree with Hochschild that emotional labour constitutes work, Haraway is correct in suggesting that being a companion in a human household could be considered a 'demanding job'.

Multispecies caring labour involves the pleasure and effort of spending time together, which emerges through everyday practice. Such care is, to some extent, 'agentially distributed' and exists within “a dense network of relational obligations” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017, pp. 18–22). While it is important to keep in mind the power imbalances of the human-centred social world, the relational and distributed nature of caring labour characterises the care

exchanges between humans and dogs. As the above data suggests, dogs not only receive care, but also give it, whether that be through regularly providing affection and company, or intervening to mitigate human distress, divert conflict between human household members or be life companion.

We believe that socialised animals will internalise man-made symbols and, lacking the language to express them, will use non-verbal cues and gestures to demonstrate their domesticity. Therefore, contrary to many pre-existing certainties, animals are revealed to have a socialised mind, even if not through language. They are socialised to a specific everyday experience and culture that includes other animals and humans, with whom they learn, internalise, use and share culturally formulated symbols. We often recognise how humans substitute cultural references with those of animals, creating surrogate representations of our partners, doctors, children, and friends. However, we are less willing to talk about how we use animals as substitutes or surrogates, or how we miss them when we are deprived of them. We live in a complex set of contradictory and conflicting relationships with non-human animals. Humanity cannot live without animals, which requires us to be aware of culture — not as a closure of the human species, but as an evolving set of questions and characteristics that are intricately linked to the lives of other species. Animals experience the world differently, are immersed in it differently, and have a different perception of it. However, this does not lead only to imitation; humans have not built their own culture simply by imitating. However, we must temper our assumptions with animal alterity and recognise the centrality of animals in our ways of thinking and behaving in the world. Our species is driven to build relationships with animal otherness. The epistemological basis of our interest in animals is that humans are not self-sufficient beings; they have developed throughout their evolutionary history through relationships with others, including partnerships with animals. Therefore, they have deep motivations to do so. Non-human animals are extremely fascinating to humankind, and we find it difficult to escape their presence.

We not only observe but also feel the need to adopt and possess animals. From an early age, we have access to thousands of symbolic references, but we prefer those from the animal world. We believe that this forms the basis of a presence that is rooted in symbolic exchange. This awareness is preliminary to new visual sociological analyses that were previously believed to be subordinate to the limitist approach and the construction of meaning in relationships between humans and pets. We would like to reiterate what Griffin has already emphasised, namely that the capacity for symbolic communication is far greater than previously thought, and that “the growing understanding of the versatility of animal communication makes the distinction between animal communication and human language a less critical criterion of human

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uniqueness” (Griffin, 1992, p. 22). The images included here provide further clear evidence that an absence of shared verbal language does not prevent us from communicating and symbolically representing conscious and mental experiences, as well as sentiments and emotions. Therefore, although this exploratory study is intended to be followed by more in-depth research, it demonstrates how the relationship between humans and pets can be analysed in terms of social interactions, and how meaning is attributed to experiences by individuals and pets. Rather than focusing on structural or normative factors, this approach focuses on the interpretative processes that occur during interaction between owner and animal, as documented and explained through photovoice.

The meaning of the human–dog relationship is enacted based on meaning, rather than in response to external stimuli, through an interpretative process that occurs during social interactions. Here, social action is defined as the interaction between human and dog, whereby they adapt and respond to one another by interpreting shared symbols with which they are both familiar.

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