

Expert Comment: 'Pets' should not be kept by humans



By Olivia Miller | 6 February 2020

Dr Corey Wrenn, a Sociologist at the University of Kent, recently expressed her views on why pets should not be kept by humans. She has now elaborated by saying:

'The sociological discipline has long recognised the power of language in, for better or worse, upholding social relations. Recognising this, sociologists (as well as feminists and other activists) have pushed for language reforms to challenge social inequality. It is thought that, by changing the way we talk about marginalised groups, we can challenge the discrimination they face. **Humans regularly refer to the dogs, cats, hamsters, and other animals who share their homes as "pets",** for instance, a term which denotes their **infantilised status as objects of resource** in a speciesist society. Although nonhuman animals certainly do not comprehend the English language and would not and could not object to the term "pet" as derogatory, when members of the dominant class (in this case, humans) utilise this language, they **symbolically reproduce the subjugated status of other animals.**

'That said, sociologists and activists alike recognise that it will take more than a reimagining of language to challenge inequality. We can refer to nonhuman animals as pets, companions, refugees, friends, family, or babies, but **as long as they are oppressed within an institution that is fundamentally oppressive,**

reformed language will only offer superficial linguistic reprieve. The institution of pet-keeping entails the near full control of nonhumans with regard to their food, water, socialisation, movement, sexuality, and health. **Worse still, millions of dogs, cats, and others are “ethanised” every year in Britain for want of home.** Many others languish in homes, backyards, or crates with little care or attention by their human “owners” who treat them as little more than decorations or nuisances.

‘Humans have an ethical obligation to care for the nonhuman animals already in existence and in a state of dependency given centuries of domestication, but **the continued purpose-breeding of cats, dogs, and other species for human pleasure, comfort, and convenience should be critiqued.** Can we imagine a world in which humans cohabit with domesticated animals while respecting their personhood and autonomy? Perhaps a change in the way we talk about our relationships with them could offer **a crucial first step in building more of a species-inclusive society in which all are safe and respected.**’

[Dr Corey Lee Wrenn](#) is a vegan feminist sociologist of social movements, who specialises in anti-speciesist protest and human-nonhuman relations in the United States, United Kingdom, and Republic of Ireland. Her research builds on social movement theory to explore relationships between humans and other animals and animal liberation efforts. Her work also explores the role of factionalism in social movements under the shadow of movement professionalisation. Frequently, she prioritises feminist theory to examine animal rights mobilisation efforts.

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Call us on +44 (0)1227 764000
All contacts

University of Kent,
Canterbury
Kent
CT2 7NZ