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The Origins of the Pet Play Fetish

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Fig. 1: BBC-Documentary. The German title says: "The Animal within Humans: Programmed to Have Sex"

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1. Human Puppies

I was first introduced to pet play in 2015 at the Berlin gay-lesbian street festival. There I saw a parent chit-chatting with a puppy handler while the “puppy”—a human dressed as a dog—was “barking” at a child who was laughing uncontrollably. The following years saw a strong uprise in this fetish. Pet play, especially pup play, became a beloved fetish, and I was fascinated by it. I wanted to understand why more and more people got pleasure—often sexual pleasure—out of dressing up as non-human animals. And why was the dog the most commonly used species for pet play?

I will try to answer these questions by first defining fetishes, pet play, and pup(py) play. I will then continue by applying both classic sociological theories (namely Berger & Luckmann’s Social Construction of Reality as well as Bourdieu’s Habitus) and theories from the rather new academic field of Human-Animal Studies to delve deeper into possible social origins of pet play. I will try to demonstrate how the human-animal-dualism in Western philosophy might lie at the core of what I call the *unintended social construction* of pet play, which I also call the *anti-habitus*. Finally, I will try to show how the dog has a strong symbolistic value in most people’s everyday lives, so much so that this animal becomes the most commonly used species for pet play.

I have tried my best to include pup players in the development of this theory, which is, at the moment, nothing but that: A theory. I am not saying that this will be *the* truth of why people engage in pet or pup play. It is merely an idea using classic sociological theories as well as those from Human-Animal Studies to propose why people *might* engage into pet play. I am also not saying that this here is true for every single pet player. Lives differ a lot and so do motivations for pet play.

2. Definitions

Pet Play, or Animal Roleplay, is a form of roleplay where humans take on the persona of non-human animals or their handlers, often but by far not always within a sexual context. Pet Play has many connections to the BDSM community, as it often plays with elements of discipline or dominance and submission.

Pup Play, or Puppy Play, is a specific form of pet play, where humans take on the persona of dogs or other canines, especially puppies, as well as their handlers. It seems that dogs are the most commonly used species for pet play, and in this theory, I will try to propose an answer to why that might be.

Pet and pup play are not always sexual. Some people also engage in exclusively non-sexual pet play; others might change between sexual and social pet play. Apart from sexual pleasure, studies also found other motives for joining in pup play, which are

1. relaxation, therapy, and escape from self,
2. adult play and vibrant physicality,
3. extending and expressing selfhood,
4. and relationships and community.¹

Especially the motive of relaxation, therapy, and escape from self is linked to what pup players call *headspace*, which they allow themselves to fall into. In studies, pup players described this headspace was almost a “Zen-like, preverbal state” that allowed them to relax after a hard day at work.²

I want to make clear that pet play is not bestiality or zoophilia. Pet play is consensual sexual or social play involving exclusively consenting human adults. Finally, I also want to make clear that I do not regard pet play as a pathology, to the contrary. It is my and other scholars' belief that pet play, just like other forms of BDSM, kinky, and social play, might even present therapeutic benefits, ranging from relaxation and mindfulness to even trauma-healing effects.³

In this essay, I will specifically look at the sexual fetish aspect of pup play. For this, I first need to define sexual fetishes.

2.1. Sexual Fetishes

Often definitions of fetishes link it to objects like, for example, in foot fetishes. My definition takes a much broader approach. I define a fetish mostly as happening in one's head. It is about practices and thoughts that often (but not always) provoke sexual arousal. Fetishes, as I define them, go beyond the pure act of vaginal, oral, or anal sex, as well as beyond pure masturbation, cybersex, or any form of pure stimulation of physical organs for sexual pleasure. They provoke sexual arousal not or not only by physical contact but also—and this is crucial—by *the idea in the fetishist's head*.

Take an example: If a socialized male who also identifies as male enjoys having receptive anal sex because he enjoys the feeling of something penetrating his anus, then I do not define this

¹ Compare Langdrige & Lawson 2019, p. 2205.

² Compare Langdrige & Lawson 2019, p. 2208.

³ Compare e.g. Andrieu et al. 2019.

as a fetish. However, if this male somewhat feels that it is degrading for a man to be penetrated in his anus, and this idea of degradation contributes to his arousal, then this is what I would define as a process of fetishization. The man thinks in one way or the other (either because he believes so, or because society tells him so) that he shouldn't let somebody else penetrate him. And this taboo is what makes it arousing for him. That's what I call a fetish.

2.2. Personal & Cultural Sexual Fetishes

I differentiate between personal or individual and social or cultural sexual fetishes. Social or cultural sexual fetishes are those that exist relatively often among a higher number of people within a given culture. In Western culture, one could name for example BDSM, watersports, sex with faecal matter (also called *scat*), specific role plays, sex in public areas, and yes, also pet and pup Play.

Personal or individual fetishes, however, are those that only exist among a tiny number of people or maybe only within one person within a given culture. For example, if somebody gets aroused by watching someone else eating an apple, or by paying someone else's dentist bills. I met people who are aroused by that fantasy. But it's so rare that I would classify those as personal fetishes.

The border between the two is blurry at best. For this theory, I focus on cultural, sexual fetishes, i.e. those that exist quite regularly within a given culture. This is because I analyze fetishes with sociological theories of socialization.

3. An Approach to Understanding the Origins of Fetishes

3.1. Socialization

Socialization is the process which teaches us subconsciously to act, speak and even think according to what is considered "normal" in our culture. Socialization causes us to internalize these patterns of behaviour and thinking until they become our "second nature." Even if there are no biological origins for these patterns, they still will feel "natural" to us.

We then also learn to internalize those norms, rules, and values.⁴ The outer force is turned into an inner compulsion. First, we feel the pressure from other people around us. Then we unconsciously feel it inside ourselves. I want to show that this might be the origin of at least some cultural, sexual fetishes, as they often play with taboos, the forbidden, or things we are not supposed to do, feel or think. In other words, cultural fetishes are the opposite of what we are socialized as. Or at least, they play with it in one way or the other. Thus, they might be, what I call, an *unintentional byproduct of socialization*.

3.2. Habitus

The concept of the habitus, as it is mainly used in sociology today, goes back to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. The term *habitus* describes a specific world view as well as the particular way people act in certain situations.⁵ The habitus is socialized. For example, Bourdieu describes the willingness of a working-class man to accept his standard of living as something normal for his position in society as part of his habitus. The same goes for his consumption habits, his food choices, his manners and customs, the TV programs he watches and his interest in sports. The habitus is an acquired, relatively coherent set of potential world views and activities. It's the "natural" and the "obvious," the *doxa* how Bourdieu calls it, that will guide the person's thinking, seeing and acting. The habitus of a working-class man, as well as the collectively shared habitus of the whole working class (or any class), is steadier and more permanent than their situative wishes and interests. The habitus is the embodiment of the permanent social structure and social organization within their personalities.⁶

Bourdieu also describes the habitus as a matrix that guides and controls our actions, thoughts and perceptions. Human beings of a specific group (for example of a particular generation, or professional group) therefore share a collective habitus compared to another group. The same can be said of one society as a whole compared to another society. Within this might lie a key to understanding which kinks exist in which culture and why they do so.

Central to Bourdieu's theory is the term *doxa*. It describes the via socialization internalized fundamental beliefs and values that form part of the habitus. These values are so deeply ingrained in our subconscious that we won't even think about questioning them. They are so profoundly subconscious that we won't even explicitly recognize them. They will instead act unrecognized: Nothing is more unspeakable, non-communicable, more indispensable, and more inimitable than the incorporated, embodied values.⁷

⁴ Compare e.g. Fuchs-Heinritz et al. 2007, p.605-606.

⁵ Compare for this and the following e.g. Bourdieu 2014, p. 277-354, or Bourdieu 2015, p. 139-202.

⁶ Compare Münch 2004, p. 422.

⁷ Compare Bourdieu 2015, p. 200.

Precisely because the doxa works so much unrecognized, it might be one of the origins of certain sexual fetishes. One of those fundamental values of the doxa is, for example, one which tells us to act “human” and not “like an animal.” And a so-called “civilized” (contrary to “wild”) behaviour includes, for example, to walk upright on two feet, not to belch, to cover our mouth when we yawn, and to use a toilet behind closed doors and make everything disappear as quickly as possible. Nothing must remind us of that “natural”, “animal-like” process anymore. We virtually learn to deny our own “naturalness”, which is part of ourselves. And it is precisely these denials that often lie at the core of a number of our sexual fetishes: from piss play to pet play. It's like these fetishes are the exact opposite of that internalized habitus, which is why I like to call them *anti-habitus*.

The anti-habitus, i.e. the fetish, is the exact opposite of the habitus. Because the doxa is encoded into our subconsciousness, we will also always feel a constant subconscious pressure to act in precisely the way we have learned to do. So it could be that the opposite (anti-habitus) of what people have learned to do (habitus) might arouse some. Habitus and anti-habitus are two sides of the same coin. One might even not be able to exist without the other. Each attempt to suppress the anti-habitus might, therefore, be predestined to fail. Each effort to contain a fetish might not only remain unsuccessful but could even possibly increase the desire for it.

4. The Origins of Pup Play

Now let's apply this to Pet and Pup Play. But first, we need to look at a few key findings from Human-Animal Studies.

4.1. The Social Construction of Animals

I tried to explain how our socialization might unintendedly produce our fetishes. And one of many elements that play a massive role in our socialization is our notion of species.

In Western philosophy – which has a substantial influence on our culture, our thoughts, and our behaviour – there are countless dualisms: men vs women, whites vs BIPOC, heterosexual vs homosexual, God vs Lucifer, culture vs nature, humans vs animals, reason vs emotions, ratio vs instincts/desires, and so forth.

One of the probably oldest dualisms is the culture-nature-dualism, which can also manifest itself as the human-animal-dualism.⁸ Culturally, we often see animals as the opposite of humans. But scientifically, humans are part of the animal kingdom. They are one animal species among

⁸ Compare Buschka/Rouamba 2013, p. 25.

many. But when we talk about animals—and it is this meaning that is dominant—then we mean millions of different species, from worms to gorillas, but with humans excluded⁹, even though gorillas have more in common with humans than with worms. “Humans are animals and at the same time, the opposite of animals.”¹⁰

This human-animal-dualism is central to the idea of domination over nature by (Western) human culture. The animal becomes the key symbol of this domination over nature. Social scientist Birgit Mütterich, therefore, stated that by seeing an animal as a product of a blind, unconscious natural process, and by that in contrast to the cultural human being, we enable its submission, objectification and industrial mass exploitation.¹¹

It would be too much here to go into the complete historical details of Western philosophy. However the human/culture-animal/nature-dualism can be found in the majority of Western philosophies, starting in the antiquity, going through Christianity, and up to Kant, Descartes and the era of enlightenment. The age of enlightenment brought an amplification of this dualism. Here humans were described as the moral, rational beings while animals were seen as driven by instincts and impulses, an idea that remains until today. Over the course of this dichotomy, humans construct themselves in clear differentiation to non-human animals as superior, morally pure, clean, good, non-violent and non-deviant.¹²

This dichotomy is internalized by all of us over our socialization. To better understand this, we can use another theory from sociologists Berger and Luckmann: the social construction of reality. The social construction of reality occurs over three stages: externalization, objectification, and internalization.¹³

We created (or externalized) the construct of humans as the opposite of animals (as well as of culture as the opposite of nature). With this construction & externalization “human/culture vs animal/nature,” we also created the first step towards the pet play fetish. Without this juxtaposition of human vs animal and the belief that a human being is the opposite of an animal, a human being cannot put themselves in the supposedly contradictory role of the animal within a fetish.

This, then, is followed by objectification: the belief that humans are the opposite of animals becomes a universally valid, social “truth”. Even if this has little to do with scientific findings: it nevertheless becomes an invisible self-evidence, a law that is no longer questioned. And that also - and this is decisive here - puts external pressure on people to submit to this belief.

⁹ Compare Mütterich 2015, p. 50.

¹⁰ Original German quote: „Menschen sind Tiere und gleichzeitig das Gegenteil von Tieren.“ (Mütterich 2003, p. 18)

¹¹ Compare Mütterich 2003, p. 17.

¹² Compare Buschka/Rouamba 2013, p. 25.

¹³ Compare Berger/Luckmann 2013, p. 49-191.

This leads to the internalization of the idea that human beings are the opposite of animals. The belief inscribes itself into the subconscious of every human being within their socialization. The external pressure becomes an internal pressure. From now on, people unconsciously control themselves in order to act and think according to this faith.

The internalization leads to an inscription of this belief in the habitus of every human being. These behaviours, these patterns of thinking and acting based on the world view of human/culture-animal/nature dualism become “second nature”, the habitus of the western socialized human being. I have already described how, through objectification in the social construction of reality, belief in the human-animal opposition becomes a socially created “truth”. It is this truth, this “natural” and this self-evident, that becomes the doxa, that is, these fundamental beliefs and values of human culture's control over nature and animals. This doxa, which is deeply inscribed in our subconscious over the internalization, then guides the nature- and animal-controlling thinking, seeing and acting.

However, this not only leads to the control and subjugation of animals “outside human beings,” but it especially also leads to the control and subjugation of what we have learned to see as “the animal within ourselves.” Apart from the domination over nature, the enlightened human being is

Fig. 1: BBC-Documentary. The German title says: “The Animal within Humans: Programmed to Have Sex”



Source: Dolling 2003

also compelled to dominate over their inner nature. The subjugation of the inner nature is seen as a necessity for civil subjectivization in modern times.¹⁴ Socialization teaches us to behave “civilized” (i.e. not like “wild animals”), to comb our hair, to cut our nails, to shave unwanted body hair, to dress neatly, to hide body smells, to not eat with bare hands, to use a toilet behind closed doors. And above all, socialization teaches us to control “the worst part of the animal within us”: our sexuality. Every human being not only has to participate in the subjugation of the outer nature but to achieve this, they also have to subjugate their inner nature: Domination over nature includes domination over humans.¹⁵

The idea of the human being in European history is expressed in its differentiation to non-human animals. With the non-human animal's irrationality, we try to prove our human dignity.¹⁶ It is one of the greatest taboos for humans to fall back into the status of an animal after they have “liberated” themselves with the

¹⁴ Compare Sebastian/Gutjahr 2013, p. 102-103.

¹⁵ Compare Horkheimer 1991, p. 106.

¹⁶ Compare Horkheimer/Adorno 2004, p. 262.

greatest effort from the state of total deterioration of nature.¹⁷ Remarkably, many of our kinks are directly or indirectly linked to that image of nature and “wild animals.” It’s those denotations that make “wild sex” wild. Piss-sex, BDSM, exhibitionism, sex with faecal matter, and so on: Either, all these fetishes are linked directly or indirectly with natural/body processes, or they remind us of our own naturality, of the “animal within.” Or they may also be related to the loss of the control over that “animal within”—a control that we have so laboriously learned via our internalized socialization.

4.2. The Unintended Social Construction of Pet Play

So the definitions of *animal* and *human*, of *nature* and *culture* make up a big part of our socialization. We have to control both the outer nature, for instance, in the form of animals, as well as inner nature, for example, the so-called “animal within.”

It seems that some people get pleasure, often even sexual pleasure, from doing the exact opposite, i.e. from taking on the role of a non-human animal in pet play. So how is this possible?

My suggestion is that this form of socialization inevitably leads to internal pressure. We have to consistently control these inner tensions between what we are (i.e. one animal among many) and what we are supposed to be (i.e. the opposite of an animal). These tensions, therefore, have the potential to discharge themselves in play, sometimes in sexual play, by letting ourselves fall into precisely that which we are supposed to avoid altogether. In other words: it might arouse us to allow what we should continuously suppress. The forbidden, the danger, the taboo develops at the same time an incredibly strong potential of arousal, relief and/or relaxation. Because we must always control our “inner animal”, it can be incredibly arousing or liberating for some people to allow the forbidden, to let themselves fall, to “become an animal”. The pet play fetish is born.

4.3. Why Dogs?

But out of all the species, why are dogs the most commonly used one? Of course, there are similar fetishes with other animal species, such as cats, horses, pigs, foxes, etc. I once saw an interview with someone who wanted to be butchered like a pig. Ironically, he grew up on a farm, which, again, supports the theory that these fetishes are a byproduct of our socialization. However, no animal species seems to be better suited for pet play than dogs. And I believe there is the following reason for it: No other animal species' domestication is more visible in most people's everyday lives.

¹⁷ Compare Sebastian/Gutjahr 2013, p. 105.

I quote a 36-year-old male pup player I interviewed for this theory, asking him why he likes to roleplay a dog and not other animal species:

“Dogs are always on a leash. Of course, you can put any other animal on a leash as well. But with a dog, it is just most natural. And above all the training, (...) that's something you associate with - for me - I associate it much more with the dog. (...) Cats... yes, I don't know, for me every other animal is not as interesting (...) [as a dog], who really follows its master foolishly faithful. (...) For me, the beauty of being a puppy is to sit between the legs of a master. And to stay there for a longer time and do nothing. Which in my opinion, is something that neither cats really do (...). Cats are rather seen as egomaniacal.”

The domestication of the animal is much more evident in the submissive dog than in the less human-oriented cat. Pigs, cows, and other farmed animals are also socially oppressed by the billions, and their subjugation is much crueller in factory farming than the comparatively gentle domestication of the dog. However, this happens in windowless buildings, to which most people have no access. Their suppression is stronger but invisible. Thus, it does not have that much of an effect on most people's socialization. What remains is the most visible form of domestication of the animal: the dog.

The popularity of the dog for the pet play fetish is due to the social visibility of its open domestication. This does not mean that the domestication or suppression of other animal species may not be visible to some people with different lives, experiences, childhoods and backgrounds. Other animal species might also potentially be suitable for the pet play fetish (which for some they are). For the control and subjugation of nature, of the (inner and outer) animal, of the instinct, the wild, the danger, for this control by humans, by their reason, their culture and their civilization, the dog remains the most crucial symbolic animal. The dog might offer the highest potential for releasing the inner tensions created by the human/culture vs animal/nature dualism. One might argue that breaking out of this dualism by slipping into the role of a dog thus might offer a strong potential for liberation.

5. Anti-Habitus

We are continually surrounded by a constant, profound, omnipresent, all-encompassing control of external and internal nature. We internalize the doxa of the control over nature in our subconscious so that we also consistently and profoundly control ourselves and the “animal within us.” Even if this pressure usually works completely unconsciously, it is still there. And it lies upon us like an oppressive shadow. Maybe that's one of the reasons why some pet players describe pet play as liberating.

That might be how the anti-habitus, i.e. the fetish, is born. The pressure from the internalized doxa is released. The doxa, on one hand, creates the habitus of controlling nature and animals. On the other hand, however, it also needs a diverting counter-side due to the tensions arising from this: the anti-habitus. The fetish takes over this role. The anti-habitus (i.e. to put oneself in the position of the animal) is the opposite of the habitus (i.e. the control of the “inner animal”). To do the opposite (anti-habitus) of what we have learned to do (habitus) might thus arouse people. Any attempt to suppress the anti-habitus might be predestined to fail. Any attempt to suppress a fetish might not only fail but might actually increase the desire.

It remains irrelevant whether the human-animal dualism and the idea of an animal within humans correspond to a scientific reality or whether it is a social construct. The sociological Thomas Theorem states that every human action has real consequences, no matter how unreal the definition of the situation that led to the corresponding actions was: “If [people] define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.”¹⁸

The animal within us, all these dualisms are not physically real. They are social constructs. But because they are perceived as real by humans, the consequence of the inner tensions is real. And so are the fetishes that might arise from them.

Society itself thus might *inadvertently* create the fetish as a *byproduct of socialization*. It might create it by trying to suppress it. The more it tries to suppress it, the stronger the desire for it might become. The more we are supposed to control this animal within us, the more arousing it might be to slip into the role of a non-human animal.

There are some questions that still arise from this: Does pet play reproduce the human-animal binary? Or does it challenge it? In other words: Does it reinforce social dynamics of oppression? Or does it much rather have the subversive power to overthrow speciesist patterns of thought? Further research would be necessary to not only control the theory presented in this essay but also to find answers to these questions.

¹⁸ Thomas 1928, p. 572.

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