
My Dog Always Eats First: Homeless People and their Animals. Leslie Irvine, Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2012.

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Leslie Irvine asserts in her Introduction to the poignant *My Dog Always Eats First: Homeless People and their Animals* that the United States is a nation of animal lovers. Over 70 percent of households have pets as do millions of homeless individuals. Estimates range from a conservative 1 in 10 to a high of up to 1 in 4 members of subpopulation having at least one cat or dog (pp. 8-9). While homeless people with pets are not always visible, there is no question that members of the public are aware of, and often vocally criticize, these pet owners. Irvine, a social psychologist at the University of Colorado at Boulder, uses her failed attempt to purchase a dog from a homeless man as a stepping off point for examining the lived experiences of 75 men and women who are committed to the welfare of their pets (from 1 to 15 animals), frequently at the expense of their own meals and comfort (p. 55-57).

The study is informed by Irvine's long-standing convictions about and research regarding the "importance of animals in human society" (p. 9). Over the course of eight chapters, she uses a structural-functional framework to explore a number of topics regarding the identity, social interactions, and economic and material circumstances emerging in this unique situation, including: (1) Why do these individuals have pets? (2) How do they care for them, including what sacrifices do they make and what, if any, assistance do they receive? (3) What kinds of emotional bonds form between owner or "guardian" and pet? (4) What are the benefits and drawbacks of owning a pet? (5) How does owning a pet factor into the owner's sense of self? This study shines an important light on a poorly understood dimension of the lifestyle of a growing number of urban residents whose lives are shaped by "poverty and a lack of affordable housing" (p. 33).

Irvine analyzes narratives collected in five cities (Boulder, Colorado; Berkeley, Sacramento and San Francisco, California; and Miami, Florida) with individuals the author divides into four broad categories. The recently dislocated (n=17) are having the most difficulty as they learn to cope with the realities of a job loss or eviction; most hope that homelessness will be a temporary condition. Straddlers (n-17) are in a liminal state, having moved between being homelessness and housed at least twice in recent years. Irvine distinguishes between two types of outsiders (n=25), individuals who are chronically homeless and quite literally live "outside of mainstream society" (pp. 35-37). Among these are nine "settled" men and women who have been "on the streets" for at least 5 years and have semi-permanent alternate accommodations such as living in vehicles or junkyards. Sixteen other individuals, including a number of youth, are "travellers" who move around, often "couch surfing" with friends or family. The fourth category includes sixteen "housed" individuals who were recently homeless but now are "domiciled" or reside in a treatment program. As explained in Chapter Two, these data are supplemented through interviews with a range of service providers for pets (including veterinarians and students and shelter workers), personnel at shelters and agencies for members of the homeless population, and surveys of domiciled (e.g., non-homeless) residents. She stresses the importance of working with gatekeepers to gain entry into a community whose members have learned to cope with criticism and verbal abuse (pp. 21-22).

Irvine found that homeless pet owners wanted to discuss their animals (p. 26), and their narratives are the strongest element of this text. All insisted that their pets are well fed and well cared for, with some asserting that beyond “eating first,” these animals benefit from having near constant companionship and the greater “freedom” of being outdoors relative to pets with homes. Thus, although a number of researchers maintain that there is no evidence that having pets improves their owners’ lives (p. 106), Irvine finds strong bonds between her interviewees and their pets. At least one-third of her informants describe their pets as “friends,” and to a lesser extent, as their “children.” In some cases, the pets have been “lifesavers” or “life changers,” who have given their owners inspiration to live, including seeking treatment for substance abuse. Many dog “guardians” have received “service tags” for their companions (p. 31) that allowed them to enter locations such as shelters, soup kitchens and government agencies (pp. 8-9).

Fully acknowledging the possibility that critics will accuse her of “romanticizing homelessness” by asserting that agency can develop through pet ownership (p. 172), Irvine maintains that bonds with animals are vital to the “construction of [homeless peoples’] positive moral identities” (p. 158). Her compelling argument ends with a number of recommendations that would help homeless people and their pets, including developing affordable housing that allows pets, and increasing the numbers of shelters accepting pets and veterinary clinics providing low cost if not free medical care.

This engaging book makes an important contribution to the literature about the lifestyles of the homeless population, whose circumstances are arguably among the greatest social problems in US cities of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Irvine’s vivid descriptions of attachments to pets complement the importance of social bonds raised in classic ethnographies of homelessness, including Elliot Liebow’s (1993) *Tell Them Who I Am*, Robert Desjarlais’ (1997) *Shelter Blues*, and Irene Glasser and Rae Bridgman’s (1999) *Braving the Street: The Anthropology of Homelessness*. It is suitable for lower and upper division courses as well as graduate seminars.

Keywords: homelessness, urban studies, human-animal relations

References

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