

THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE AND MEANING
OF SNAKE COMPANIONSHIP

by

Elizabeth G. Ringeisen

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for Departmental Honors in
the Department of Sociology
Texas Christian University
Fort Worth, Texas

May 3, 2013

THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE AND MEANING
OF SNAKE COMPANIONSHIP

Project Approved:

Carol Thompson, Ph.D.
Department of Sociology
(Supervising Professor)

Jeff Ferrell, Ph.D.
Department of Sociology

Sarah Hill, Ph.D.
Department of Psychology

TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
REVIEW OF LITERATURE	2
METHODS	5
Ethnography	6
Entering the Setting and Participants	7
Content Analysis	7
Challenges of Ethnographic Work	7
Grounded Theory	9
ANALYSIS	9
Craigslist	10
Ethnographic Observations	13
Adam and Jason	14
Laura and Harriet	15
Janie	16
Anthropomorphizing	18
Managing Stigma	17
Becoming a Snake Person: The Importance of Community Ties	21
Can We Understand Snake Selfhood?	23
Agency	24
Coherence	25
Affectivity	26
Self-History	27
Snakeness	28
Snake Companionship	30
CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THIS WORK	31
REFERENCES	33
ABSTRACT	35

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to thank Dr. Carol Thompson for all of her help and assistance as I struggled through my research. Without her supervision in directing and redefining my ideas, this thesis would certainly not exist. I cannot express enough gratitude for the ways she has guided me, both as a research and as an individual. In addition, the instruction and guidance of Dr. Jeff Ferrell have been a tremendous help, particularly in shaping my understanding of ethnography and phenomenology. I would also like to thank my informants for graciously letting me follow and observe and attempt to analyze their lives. I cannot ever repay them for the patience and kindness they showed in teaching me and allowing me to become part of their world. I also thank my friends and family for their continued support and encouragement. Lastly, although they will never read or understand it, I must thank my snake companions for curling up on my shoulder during long nights of writing, making me smile when I am feeling tired and discouraged, and reminding me why all of this hard work is worth it.

INTRODUCTION

In spite of recent increases in the amount of research concerning human-animal interaction and relationships (Brandt, 2004; Irvine, 2004; Shapiro, 1990; Twining, Arluke, and Patronek, 2000), virtually no sociological research exists on snakes in the everyday lifeworlds of humans. The few social scientific studies pertaining to human attitudes towards snakes are found in psychological journals and concern only the dimension of fear, making no mention of snakes as companion animals. However, the reality is that there is a rich and intricate world of human and animal interaction centered around snake ownership and breeding.

In light of the generally negative portrayal of snakes in the Western imaginary, I argue that those who have chosen snakes as companion animals belong to a subculture whose activities are considered deviant by conventional society. From a sociological view, members of deviant subcultures, whether owning stigmatizing companion animals like pit bulls (Twining et al., 2000) or snakes, using marijuana (Becker, 1953) or being a tattoo collector (Vail, 1999), share the common fate of being stigmatized by conventional society. With regard to snake ownership, the stigma is deeply connected to a cultural disdain for snakes that arises out of Judeo-Christian religious thought and widespread ignorance by the public about snakes as a species. Snake owners confront and manage their stigma every day and through their shared knowledge of and love for snakes; owners and breeders form close and unique relationships. In addition to the important relationships that snake owners and breeders form with one another, the life of a snake owner is also characterized by the bond between human and snake.

This thesis will explore the world of human-snake interaction and human relationships that are derived from associations with snakes. First this work will look at the social construction of snakes in the Western imaginary. Second, relevant research will be reviewed. Then, using qualitative methodologies, I will explore the lifeworld of those who have chosen snakes as animal companions in order to uncover what it means to have a snake as a companion animal and to explore the social consequences of snake ownership. This includes discussing the epistemological challenges of “knowing” snakes.

Due to the stigmatic nature of owning snakes as well as the epistemological challenges that occur when establishing a relationship with an animal which presents only a limited array of behaviors that allow for humans to ascertain what a snake is thinking or doing, much of the experience of having a snake as a companion animal is socially located, requiring the existence of others to encourage and support as well as define what it is to be a “snake owner.” In spite of the necessity of social bonds with other snake owners, these relationships do not entirely account for the experience of living with a snake as a companion. As will be discussed in later sections of this thesis, the relationship between human and snake is also a vital element as individual snake owners often exhibit affection for their companion animals. Ultimately, it is the dynamic interplay of these relationships, with snake owners and snakes, that contributes to the snake-owning identity as both a member of a deviant social group and as one who has formed a social bond with the animal.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Throughout the Western imaginary, snakes have been socially labeled as an animal to fear and hate (Prokop, Özel, & Uşak, 2009). Prokop et al. (2009) propose that a

widespread fear of snakes across cultures and throughout history as well as an existence of this fear in primate relatives suggests that a fear of snakes developed in humans and primates as a result of evolutionary history. Alie, Davis, Fielding, and Maldonado (2007) found in their interviews of attitudes towards pets in Dominica that snakes were least liked. Prokop et al. (2009) reported that among a sample of Turkish and Slovakian university students, females were more likely than males to show a negative attitude towards snakes, and although students studying biology tended to have more positive attitudes, they were not significantly different than non-biology students in their knowledge of snakes and belief in untrue stories and myths about them. However, the authors did find that students who kept more pets at home had more empathy towards and practical knowledge in taking care of animals. Prokop et al. (2009) assert that keeping pets results in emotional and cognitive experiences that can be generalized to even less popular animals such as snakes and therefore suggest that increased exposure to snakes would contribute to more positive attitudes about them.

In general, research on human attitudes towards snakes beyond analyzing fear is scarce. However, since snakes are not the only animal to be viewed in a negative light, research on the companionship experiences with other stigmatized animals is of particular relevance. Twining et al. (2000) in their study of pit bull companionship assert that owners of pit bulls “inherit” the breed’s stigma and must search for ways to manage it in their everyday lives. In a series of ethnographic interviews, the authors found that most respondents felt frustrated over their companion animal’s stigma and utilized a variety of methods to manage it, such as debunking popular myths or even humorously emphasizing counter-stereotypical behavior. Twining et al. (2000) also note that many

respondents (as well as their companion animals) attempt to serve as a type of “ambassador” for the stigmatized animal, advocating on behalf of the entire breed in order to educate the public and promote the breed.

Additionally, Twining et al. (2000) remark that the stigma carried by pit bulls most likely affects the outcome or success of the companion animal relationship. Due to the stigma of the animal, owners become something of social deviants. When attempting to understand how individuals become involved in stigmatizing lifestyle choices it is useful to refer to Becker’s (1953) classic study on marihuana users. He asserts that deviance is socially located, learned, and encouraged. New marihuana users, for example, after being exposed to the deviant behavior, must learn the meaning of concepts such as “getting high” from other users in order to fully participate (Becker, 1953). Their continued involvement in deviant behavior is also group-dependent, as users rely on others to help them redefine experiences and concepts (Becker, 1953). Ultimately, for someone to become a regular marijuana user they must come to view the world of marijuana smoking as pleasurable and personally meaningful. Similarly, Vail (1999) focuses on the learned deviance of collecting tattoos, something that carries a significant stigmatic discomfort. Vail (1999) draws a distinction between “having tattoos” and “being tattooed,” arguing that collectors gain a new identity as social deviants and actively reconceptualize life in their new status.

Although the deviant status of snake owners and their interactions with one another form an integral part of their identity, at the root of what it means to have a snake as a companion animal is the relationship between the human and the snake itself. Again, specific research relating to human-snake interactions or even on the snake’s conception

of “self” is scarce. Researchers such as Irvine (2004), however, have written on animal selfhood in general, particularly in the examples of dogs and cats. Irvine (2004) argues that the self is social, emerging through relationships; therefore, when humans desire to form bonds and interact with animals, they are unconsciously recognizing animals as an “Other” complete with its own sense of self and subjectivity. Irvine (2004) further states four characteristics of selfhood present in preverbal humans as well as animals with sufficient brain systems: agency, coherence, affectivity, and self-history. Although snakes have primitive brain structures in comparison with mammals (Bear, Connors, & Paradiso, 2006), I will later argue that snakes do have a limited sense of selfhood in that, like many species of mammals, they do possess agency, coherence, and affectivity.

Additionally, Shapiro (1990) asserts that animals exist in a reality that, for them, is not defined by language and semantics but by bodily action and movements through physical space. This embodied sensitivity in which, for example, a human communicates with a dog through an awareness of actual or intended movements and an understanding of the other’s situation, is termed “kinesthetic empathy” (Shapiro, 1990). Brandt (2004), in her research concerning communication between horses and people, also maintains that horses and riders understand one another through a shared “language,” using the body as a medium. Communicating with snakes, however, presents its own unique challenges, which I will later discuss.

METHODS

In this research I employ ethnographic methods and content analysis in order to develop a “thick description” of amateur snake owning and breeding, as described by Clifford Geertz (1973). Through the use of “thick description” and grounded theory, a

researcher is able to form new theories based on themes and patterns drawn from a large amount of data in the form of field notes, content analysis of the informal archives of a group, etc. My focus in this research is not on searching for support for existing theories and ideas but on obtaining highly valid, detailed descriptions of the lifeworlds of snake owners and breeders.

Ethnography

This analysis is based on two years of participation in a subculture of snake owning and breeding. My first encounter with snakes came in the summer of 2011 after finding out via Facebook that my best friend, Laura (pseudonym), had purchased three Burmese pythons from a professional snake breeder in Oklahoma. At that time, I had never even held a snake before. When we moved into an apartment together in the fall, Laura (as well as her boyfriend Adam) introduced me to their snakes, patiently answering my questions and instructing me in the ways interact with snakes. Within a few months, Adam asked me to take care of a young boa constrictor, the offspring of one of his own. I soon formed a bond with the snake, and when Adam offered to let me keep him in exchange for a beer, I accepted.

In addition to this boa constrictor, I now count two ball pythons as my companions, and since the fall of 2011, I have participated intensely in the snake community in the area in which I live, including attending local reptile breeding conventions and exhibitions and purchasing snakes from amateur breeders. Through my knowledge and familiarity with snakes as well as my observations of and interactions with snake owners and breeders I will elaborate on the experiences and motivations of the amateur snake owning and breeding community.

Entering the Setting and Participants

My long-established relationship with Laura, my key informant, aided me in the process of observing the subculture of snake owners as well as provided me with other contacts in the area. Adam was also a great help with a wealth of knowledge and experience of raising, breeding, buying, and selling snakes, readily explaining things without any provocation. Both freely allowed me to observe their interactions with the snakes and with one another and take photographs and notes.

Content Analysis

Content analysis is an unobtrusive method which allows for the analysis of content from pre-existing text, in this case an informal archive of snake inquiries and advertisements on the popular Craigslist and the observations of snake owners as they interact with their snakes and with one another. I also attempted to identify vocabularies of motive for obtaining snakes for companionship as well as hypothesize about the underlying feelings and reasons behind snake owners' actions and behaviors.

Challenges of Ethnographic Work

Ethnography as an approach to understanding the social world provides what Clifford Geertz describes as a "thick description." What Geertz is writing about in his work is the idea that by engaging in ethnographic fieldwork, anthropology, sociology, and other fields can develop highly valid descriptions of a human behavior that explains not just the behavior but its social context as well. These thick descriptions make the behavior of a group or individuals understandable and meaningful to those outside of that research setting. This is a highly empathetic approach to research and one that fits perfectly with the study of snake companionship, primarily because their social stigma

and negative status in the human imaginary makes voluntary association with snakes unimaginable to the ordinary person. In addition, unlike dog and cat owners, those who own snakes typically do not bring them out into public, so identifying snake owners is next to impossible unless one is part of the subculture. I am also employing a great deal of autoethnographic content in this research as I am immersed as an insider in the research setting.

Overall, my insider status and familiarity with snakes has aided me greatly in my observations and interactions in the community. For example, when meeting with an amateur breeder from Craigslist in order to purchase a snake from him, I noticed that at first he treated me as if I might have little knowledge of snake breeding, informing me that the particular ball python morph he was selling me (a fire) would, when bred with another fire, produce a patternless white snake.

“The black-eyed leucistic, the holy grail,” I commented, referring to the snake’s prized status among breeders. Almost immediately, the man began a conversation describing his current breeding projects, no longer bothering to explain basic terms or the significance of a snake he was attempting to hatch. In this case, as in many others, my knowledge of snake owning and breeding aided me in establishing authentic relationships not as an outside observer but as someone who is familiar with not only the joys and satisfactions but also the trials and tribulations of snake companionship.

On the other hand, my preexisting acquaintance with snake “husbandry” also provided unique challenges. I began the research with many assumptions and familiarities. It is easy to overlook small things which carry meaning. A snake feeding, for example, is just another Thursday night chore. On the surface, there is nothing particularly interesting

or informative about the activity, but in reality, many things can be learned from carefully watching this ritual. To this end, I attempted to see everything as if for the first time and identify my own underlying assumptions in order to better understand the phenomena I observed.

In addition, my analysis of my field notes is informed by my personal beliefs and experiences. For example, it is very possible that I identified something as being important to the subculture when in actuality it only holds personal significance to me. However, I strived to set aside my own emotions in order to not project them onto those I was observing, and I tried to understand the snake owning and breeding subculture solely based on my observations.

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory is a way of generating theory, from the ground up, in qualitative research and is a common tool for generating analysis in ethnographic work. Grounded theory refers to a process of taking large stocks of field of data, such as field notes and texts, and identifying and refining key ideas and themes through a process of inductive comparison and categorization. All information in the field is potential data: field notes, informal interviews, lectures, seminars, group meetings, email communications, newspaper articles, etc. The goal of grounded theory is to generate new concepts and to explain human behavior (Glaser, 1992).

ANALYSIS

As mentioned earlier, my analysis explores the subculture of the amateur snake owning and breeding community as well as the experience of having a snake as a companion animal. To understand snake “commerce,” I examine Craigslist

advertisements concerning the selling of snakes and snake-related items and services in the area to uncover any underlying themes or patterns. Next I explore what it means to participate in the snake owning and breeding community, drawing from my observations and interactions with other owners and breeders as well as my own experiences in the field. Finally, I will analyze my interactions and relationships with the snakes themselves using previous research concerning animal selfhood and kinesthetic empathy as a framework.

Craigslist

In order to get a picture of the snake owning and breeding community in the Fort Worth area, I analyzed a number of online classified ads for snakes and snake related items on Craigslist. After browsing a number of listings, I could see from analyzing the content two categories of advertisement forming: those placed by people who owned snakes as companion animals, those placed by amateur breeders and collectors.

Among the first group, the usual title of the advertisement only indicated that there was a snake for sale with no details about its genetic morphs, implying that it is a “normal” morph. The listing itself typically included only information about the size and age of the snake and sometimes (but not always) the sex. The person making this type of ad usually also made remarks on the temperament of the snake, saying it is docile, gentle, tame, etc. One example even listed that the snake “liked to play.” An explanation for selling the snake (e.g. “my boyfriend doesn’t like snakes,” “the kids have gotten tired of it,” “we’re moving,” etc.) was also usually contained in the advertisement. Any pictures included had a more casual appearance, showing the snake in its tank, being held, or crawling across the floor. In addition, the price was higher than I would expect for the

type of snake. For example, most of the normal ball pythons listed had an asking price of at least \$100. I find this to be significant because in the breeding community (amateur and professional), normal ball pythons sell for less than \$20. A larger pet store chain such as Petsmart or Petco, however, usually sells them for at least \$70. Therefore, I would expect that someone attempting to sell a normal ball python for \$100 purchased it from a pet store for a similar price because he or she is not involved in the breeding community.

The titles of the advertisements from the breeding community usually included information about the morph of the snake and its sex and birth year. Some titles also noted that the snake was “proven,” meaning it has bred in the past. The main body of the advertisement usually included the snake’s genetic morph, birth year (sometimes even exact date of birth), size (typically length but sometimes weight), how often it eats, and what it eats (in terms of size of rodent and whether that rodent is live, freshly killed, or frozen and thawed). Most of these listings do not include any information about the temperament of the snake; extra information was usually stating that the snake was healthy or great at eating. No reason for selling the snake is typically given, but the most commonly disclosed reasons were that the owner is either downsizing his or her collection or is going in a different direction with breeding projects. Almost all of the snakes in this category were of a special morph. The one normal ball python I saw listed was in a group of snakes for sale and described as a “dinker” ball python. “Dinker” is a term used among breeders to describe a normal ball python with an unusual pattern who might contribute interesting genes to another generation. Pictures had a more professional look as they were usually just of the snake against a plain, solid background color.

Other snake-related advertisements were usually for equipment such as tanks, snake hooks, and feeding tongs. Some listings announced the availability of rats and other rodents for feeding snakes. One advertisement in particular interested me. The listing described a new dating website for single reptile owners, and part of the ad stated that members “won’t have to explain defrosting a rat in [their] fridge.” Someone else in creating this website had clearly noticed the existence of a large community of people with shared hobbies, experiences, and vocabularies of motive.

Overall, the Craigslist advertisements seemed to reveal a dichotomy between snake owners: “casual” snake owners who most likely purchased their snake from a pet store and most highly value temperament and personality traits, and amateur breeders and collectors who choose snakes based on genetics in order to add to their collection and/or start a breeding project. Based on the different information included in the advertisement, “casual” owners appeared more emotionally attached to their snakes while amateur breeders objectified the animals as investments.

To further elaborate the way that these two groups relate to snakes, I systematically observed snake owners. Each of my contacts has more than one snake, purchased them from breeders (whether amateur or professional), and has breeding aspirations or has bred snakes in the past. Based solely on the information from analyzing the Craigslist ads, one might expect that these snake owners, who have breeding intentions or experience, would tend to objectify snakes rather than treating them as companion animals and/or anthropomorphizing, and although this is true to some degree, the separation is not so black and white. While all of the amateur snake breeders I observed exhibited some degree of objectification of their snakes, likely due to their ties

to a community which on the whole values snakes for their color and pattern variations, some also showed signs of affection and emotional attachment to the snakes, such as in their use of anthropomorphic language or the ways in which they house and care for their snakes. In the following section, I will explain and categorize the different types of snake owners based on their levels of objectification and empathy towards snakes.

Ethnographic Observations

To investigate the way those who breed snakes treat and relate to their animals, I visited the residences of four local snake owners with whom I was acquainted: Adam, Laura, Harriet, and Jason. I will describe the attitude towards snakes of each of these individuals in the section below. It is useful to use the following types, derived from grounded theoretical method, in characterizing the general relationship each snake owner has to his or her snake/s.

	Objectification- High	Objectification- Low
Empathy- High	Conflicted	Pet Owners
Empathy- Low	Amateur Breeders	Uninterested/Detached

As illustrated in the previous section, “pet owners” are characterized by their high levels of empathy and anthropomorphism of snakes as well as their lack of communal ties. They place value and importance on the perceived personality of a snake and its suitability as a companion animal. Amateur breeders, on the other hand, typically make no mention of a snake’s temperament in their advertisements, instead focusing on the value of the snake for breeding projects or a collection. Through ethnographic observations of individual amateur breeders, however, I found that many snake owners exhibit both high levels of objectification and high levels of empathy and

anthropomorphism, resulting in what I term the *conflicted association*. In the following sections I will elaborate further on this concept and the relationships owners and breeders have with their snakes and one another.

Adam and Jason

Adam has twelve snakes, and he keeps two of his girlfriend Laura's snakes. The snake enclosures are kept in two different rooms, and all of the enclosures are either glass terrariums or wooden enclosures specifically built for housing snakes. (This is in contrast to the other three owners who keep their snakes in plastic storage boxes and bins of various sizes with air holes poked in the sides or lids.) Most of the snake enclosures were somewhat unkempt as they contained small piles of dried urates and feces as well as shed skin, especially those with larger and/or more aggressive snakes.

While I was visiting, upon seeing the dirty conditions of the enclosures, Laura complains to Adam, especially about the tank in which her own snakes are kept. She says that he would never clean their enclosures if she didn't tell him to.

Adam's friend Jason does not provide hides or even water dishes for his two snakes. Each is kept in a separate plastic tub, but he only has one heating pad for them. He says he rotates which container sits on top of the heating pad. He used to have a larger collection of snakes but sold most of them because his ex-girlfriend did not like them. He plans to sell his remaining snakes eventually.

Based on the generally dirty and untidy conditions of Jason's enclosures for his snakes, it is likely that he highly objectifies the snakes but does not anthropomorphize them. His lack of empathy characterizes him as an amateur breeder, one who views snakes as objects to be collected or sold. The conditions of Adam's enclosures would also

indicate his association with snakes as an amateur breeder, but further observations, detailed in later sections, suggest that he is instead of the conflicted association.

Laura and Harriet

In contrast, Laura and Harriet (another of my friends) keep their snakes' enclosures clean of all excrement. Like Adam's enclosures, each box contains a place for the snake to hide and a small dish full of water. Laura keeps all of her snakes in separate enclosures, but Harriet houses her two ball pythons together. She says she is purposefully trying to keep them small, both so she can continue to keep them in the same box and to save money on rats.

Both Laura and Harriet seem to view their snakes in a conflicted manner. While they purchased the animals for the express purpose of breeding them, the manner in which they care for their snakes and interact with them suggests a high level of emotional attachment and anthropomorphizing of the animals.

As a whole, the conditions in which the snakes are kept seem to indicate the degree to which the owner is involved and invested in the owning and breeding community as well as his or her possible emotional attachment to the snakes. This becomes clearer in light of later observations and related anecdotes of how they interact with the snakes. For example, although Adam may initially appear to not exert much effort into taking care of his snakes, he and Laura told me of how one of his female ball pythons almost died. The heating pad underneath her tank once overheated and badly burned her underside. Adam rubbed medicine on her for days until the burned skin partially shed off. Without his attentive care, the snake most likely would have died.

Even though Adam may not keep the enclosures of his snakes clean, such stories illustrate how he does look after his snakes.

Janie

During the time I spent observing Laura and Adam, they often argued over whether or not Adam should sell one of his snakes. Janie is a highly aggressive female boa constrictor who is too hostile to be handled and hasn't even grown enough to breed. Laura says Adam promised to sell Janie when he purchased his newest snake. She nags him multiple times about selling Janie and finally tries to put an advertisement on Craigslist herself. Adam removes this listing, saying that he doesn't want to list his phone number or email address online, he doesn't have any good pictures of her, and he's unsure of what price to ask.

Laura points out that Janie takes up space and eats valuable rats even though she can't breed or even be handled. She's not a good investment, Laura says. Adam complains that Laura is trying to make him sell his "pet." Laura counters that he "doesn't even like her."

It is interesting to note how they each support their arguments. Laura says that from a purely objective standpoint, Janie does not have value because she cannot produce clutches. Adam, on the other hand, seems to have an emotional attachment to Janie, and Laura points out that this is irrational because Janie is so aggressive. If there is a true division between casual snake owners who value their snakes for sentimental reasons and amateur breeders who value a good investment of rare genes which can be bred, Adam should view Janie as a poor investment and sell her. His motivations for owning snakes thus appear to overlap both categories.

Anthropomorphizing

Although Laura and Adam interacted with their snakes in a number of ways, one of the most significant events was an attempt (not always successful) to feed one or more snakes. Many of the snakes are picky eaters or otherwise had trouble with eating, and although Adam and Laura only feed the snakes at most once per week, each feeding session could take several hours. Both demonstrated considerable patience in heating and reheating rats to the right temperature and using feeding tongs to wiggle the rat in front of the snake to simulate life. This is also the most frequent occasion that Adam and Laura would anthropomorphize the snakes.

Both characterized the snakes as either “good” or “bad” for eating or refusing to eat and called the ones who wouldn’t eat “jerks.” Laura once even suggested that her ball python didn’t want to eat because she didn’t want to be the fattest snake since she is a female.

Laura also told me of how her boa constrictor accidentally bit her during a feeding. She admits that it wasn’t the snake’s fault, but she sent her home with Adam as a form of punishment for the snake in spite of the fact that, given the nature of snake cognition, the boa constrictor will not learn from the incident.

In addition, Laura frequently made comments about how “cute” a snake is in regard not just to its appearance but also to its behavior. One action she particularly enjoys is when a snake lifts its upper body off the ground and swivels its head around to explore its surroundings. Laura and Adam have termed this behavior “periscoping” due to the snake’s resemblance to a periscope.

The words Adam and Laura use to describe and talk about their snakes reveal much about their attitudes towards them. They assign attributes of “good” or “bad” based on a snake’s actions and identify certain snakes and behaviors as being “cute.” Their shared vocabularies of motive show an emotional attachment to the snakes deeper than a simple evaluation of whether or not the snake is a good investment for a breeding project.

Managing Stigma

Due to the negative portrayal of snakes in society, an important aspect of the lifeworlds of snake owners is the attempt to deal with the consequences having a stigmatized companion animal. As Twining et al. (2000) note, the human guardians of a stigmatized animal often “inherit” the animal’s negative image in society. This “courtesy stigma” as Goffman (1963) refers to it, requires management. As such, managing this stigma or even attempting to improve others’ attitudes about snakes encompasses much of the experience of a snake owner.

Not all members of society harbor hatred towards snakes. Many people who have had no direct contact with snakes or no opportunity to learn about them are curious and willing to learn more. Even if they are initially hesitant, they usually express a desire to touch or hold the snake after a few minutes of observation. They see that the snake poses no threat to them.

Others, however, seem to have a deeply held fear and animosity towards snakes. Adam and Laura would often laugh with me about the commonly heard urban legends. It seems everyone’s cousin’s friend had a snake who tried to eat her. People ask me if snakes can ever really be domesticated and whether they are just plotting to kill me the entire time. Again, this sort of questioning is at once frustrating and amusing.

“Look, he’s obviously a dangerous predator,” Laura would often say sarcastically when a ball python would startle and curl into a ball or attempt to strike at a rat and miss. This use of humor to emphasize the contrast between stereotyped expectations and actual snake behavior is not unlike the coping mechanisms used by pitbull owners (Twining et al., 2000). Adam, on the other hand, tends to use more rational arguments when talking to those who believed untrue rumors about snakes. Often, he points out in reply that many more people are killed or injured each year by dogs than by snakes, especially non-venomous snakes. In fact, according to Responsible Exotic Animal Ownership (2009; 2013), only ten deaths, or about .43 per year, reported in the United States from 1990 to 2012 were caused by non-venomous snakes as compared to the average of 33 deaths per year due to attacks by dogs. Additionally, these deaths were caused by the negligent care of large snakes and did not include any members of the general public (Responsible Exotic Animal Ownership, 2013).

Despite the occasionally humorous nature of people’s concerns, the negative attitude towards snakes in society has troubling implications for snake owners. Especially in light of concerns about the impact of released Burmese pythons in the Everglades, many bills at both the state and federal level have been introduced in order to limit or even ban the sale, transportation, or ownership of snakes. Such bills, if passed, would have far-reaching consequences for both amateur and professional snake owners and breeders. For this reason, politics are a common topic at reptile expositions and conventions, and many snake owners and breeders support the United States Association of Reptile Keepers (USARK), whose mission is to “facilitate cooperation between government agencies, the scientific community, and the private sector in order to produce

policy proposals that will effectively address important husbandry and conservation issues” (United States Association of Reptile Keepers, n.d.). Since its founding in 2008, USARK has helped defeat many state and federal bills, made successful cases to remove several species of snakes from the Injurious Wildlife listing, and has established the herpetological industry as an estimated \$1.4 billion cottage industry (United States Association of Reptile Keepers, n.d.).

Even considering these legislative victories, the stigma of having a snake can have negative consequences in other aspects of snake owners’ lives. For example, I asked Laura and Adam for advice when looking for an apartment. I was trying to think of a good way to inform a possible landlord that I own three snakes and wanted to know if they had any tips.

“Don’t mention the snakes!” Adam immediately told me. Laura agreed, saying she doubted if any landlord would allow it. Even though my snakes are silent and odorless and would not cause any property damage or threat to other residents, I would most likely not be allowed to keep them due to their stigmatized status. Adam and Laura, who are also in search of a new place to live, said they plan on hiding their snakes from the landlord.

In sum, managing the stigma that comes with having a snake as a companion animal makes up a significant part of the lifeworlds of snake owners and breeders. At best, they can debunk urban legends and educate people about snakes; at worst, they face unfair treatment at both a personal level and when battling new government bans and restrictions. Recently, the Facebook page Serpent Encounters (2013) posted the following statement about the stigma of snakes in society:

Us [*sic*] snake lovers feel as passionate about our snakes as others do about their dogs or cats, or whatever pet they choose to have. We get offended when we hear about or see images of snakes being abused or neglected just for being a snake. While our choice of pets may not be the most popular, we protect them in the wild and in our homes just as any pet owner would any other pet. Our pets are part of our family, and many times we are looked at as different because of our choice. Our snakes are just as important to us as others view their dogs or cats. Yet, most people would not purposely hit a dog with a shovel if they saw it in the yard, or intentionally aim for a cat with a car as it crosses the road on a warm day. If everyone gave snakes the same gratitude as the animals they choose to love, what a difference it would make in our world. Each of us snake lovers have a certain responsibility to take every chance to teach and encourage others to give a snake the same respect.

Becoming a Snake Person: The Importance of Community Ties

In his classic article on marihuana users, Becker (1953) asserts that deviance is not located in a single or even a combination of personal traits, but instead finds its root in social learning and social reaction. New marihuana users must first learn from veteran users how to frame their experiences; later, these social ties remain important in a person's continual use of the drug (Becker, 1953).

In accordance with this, the primary difference between "casual" snake owners and those who are to some degree involved in the amateur breeding community is the presence or lack of these social bonds. Whereas someone who purchases a snake from a pet store may have no one to support them in caring for their new companion animal, a

person with ties to a community of owners and breeders has access to the guidance of more experienced owners. This person acquires a wealth of knowledge concerning snakes, ranging from what the community prizes (e.g. a specific morph of ball python) to viewing snakes as desirable companions instead of an animal to be feared.

Additionally, a certain “redefinition” of the self must occur in order for one to truly become a member of the amateur breeding community. Much as the tattoo collectors in Vail’s (2004) research learn to redefine themselves as collectors and not simply people with tattoos, snake owners adopt their hobby as part of their personal identity. Particularly due to the stigmatized nature of having a snake as a companion animal, it is important for new snake owners to reconceptualize life in light of their new deviant status.

Even after the initial learning process has taken place and the new snake guardian feels fully comfortable in interacting with his or her companion snake, communal ties remain vital. (One reason for this may be the support and encouragement required, especially as the snake begins to grow larger. Many snake owners acquire a baby or juvenile as their first snake, and as the snake matures and gets bigger, its care involves many new challenges in feeding, housing, and handling. There may also be a need for general support when having a stigmatized animal as a companion.) Many times, involvement in the community encourages the purchasing of new snakes, but a lack of participation usually leads to the selling of existing snakes.

Due to personal and unrelated reasons, Harriet’s friendships with those who first introduced her to the snake owning community ended. After several months, she decided

to surrender her boa constrictor to a reptile rescue society, stating that she could no longer adequately care for the large snake and wanted her to find a good home.

Jason's lack of support from his ex-girlfriend led him to sell nearly all of his snakes. Although his choice of companion animal presented him with stress in his personal life to the point where he felt the need to sell his snakes, Jason still keeps ties in the snake breeding community. He has expressed a desire to one day own and breed snakes again.

The experiences of Harriet and Jason as well as the advertisements listed by many of the "casual" snake owners on Craigslist reveal the fundamental importance of communal ties. Although the relationship between human and snake is an irreplaceable part of the experience of snake owners and can even exist in resistance to the objectified advice of others in the snake community, as evidenced by Adam's resistance to sell Janie despite her lack of economic value as a breeding snake, the support and encouragement that comes from other snake owners and breeders plays a key role in whether or not a person will continue to live with snakes.

Can We Understand Snake Selfhood?

Even though the degree to which a snake owner participates in the breeding and owning community through attending conventions and maintaining friendships with other owners and breeders significantly affects that person's experience of having a snake as a companion animal, the bond formed between human and snake is necessarily an essential part of what it means to be a "snake owner." Crucial to the establishment of the relationship is the question of whether or not and to what degree snakes have a subjective self. Irvine (2004) conceptualizes four self-experiences which provide the basis for this

sense of self: agency, coherence, affectivity, and self-history. Although snakes, like other non-human animals, cannot verbalize these senses of selfhood, I have observed evidence that most if not all of these facets do exist.

Agency

As conceptualized by Irvine (2004), agency is the capability for self-willed action, the presence of desires and intentions, the sense of having these desires and intentions, and the control over one's own actions as well as a recognition of the consequences of these actions. More broadly, it is an awareness of the subject self as opposed to Others.

The actions and movements of a snake are more than just reactions to others and to their environment. Their actions are willful, based on desires and motivations which are not easily altered. If, for example, I wish to keep my male ball python from entangling himself in a vase of flowers, I can pick him up and move him to another part of my desk, but he will continually choose to return to the flowers. I can physically relocate him, but I cannot change his desires.

It is also common for my snakes to attempt to leave their boxes or to resist returning to them. I will often find them pushing against the lid in an attempt to get out. My boa constrictor in particular never wants to return to his box, even if he has just eaten and needs to lie on his heating pad for several hours to digest his meal. He will wrap his tail or neck around anything outside of the box, clinging on tightly as I attempt to uncurl him. This is different from his behavior even at times when I move him to another part of my room; he recognizes his box and my intention to put him inside of it as well as what the consequences of this action will be (i.e. he will no longer be free to roam). Even once I have successfully placed him in the box and secured the lid, he presses his head against

the lid in search of a way out. Again, this is more than just a thoughtless reaction; the snake moves around his enclosure and pushes against the lid in an attempt to get out in an action not readily motivated by some external stimulus. On his part, the snake wishes to go somewhere and takes action in an attempt to fulfill these desires. This movement implies that he understands that if he were able to lift the lid of the box, he would be able to move around the room freely; in other words, he understands the consequences of his actions. While this may not be definitive proof of agency, it certainly seems suggestive of it.

Coherence

For an animal, coherence is the recognition of the boundaries of the self in regards to others (Irvine, 2004). While this sense is difficult to establish without language, one way in which animals demonstrate an understanding of these boundaries is in the act of hiding. In order to comprehend the meaning and effectiveness of hiding, an animal must first recognize that the self is an object which can be concealed from others (Irvine, 2004).

Snakes in general spend a majority of their time, especially during the day, hiding in a safe place. In fact, ball pythons are so named due to their tendency to curl into protective balls when threatened or scared. Although an initial reaction of drawing back or coiling into a ball when surprised by a sudden movement may be purely instinctual, most of the time the decision to find someplace to hide is a conscious action on the part of the snake. When my snakes are awake and alert and in full health, they show no apparent desire to hide themselves from others. Oftentimes they will actively engage with humans, smelling them or turning their heads to look at a person who is stroking them.

Even when hiding, snakes demonstrate an awareness of the boundaries between self and Other. If I open my female ball python's box to refill her water bowl while she is hiding in her plastic igloo, for example, she will commonly reach her head out from the opening to investigate while keeping her body inside the igloo. This behavior demonstrates that hiding is not a simple game of "If I can't see you, you can't see me." The snake recognizes that she is an embodied self which can be either shown to or hidden from others.

Affectivity

Affectivity encompasses an animal's capacity to feel emotion (Irvine, 2004). For animals such as snakes which do not verbalize, make much (if any) noise, and do not have facial expressions, vitality effects, or the specific ways in which animals feel, play an important role. Vitality effects also include the individual characteristics of an animal such as how he or she acts on a regular basis.

It is difficult to say with any confidence whether or not snakes feel a full range of emotions without the risk of anthropomorphizing, but I would argue that snakes certainly exhibit behavior to indicate at least basic states of fear and vulnerability or of safety and relaxation. For example, although it is possible to tell through physical characteristics such as clouded eyes or a slightly muted coloration that a snake is about to enter a vulnerable period of shedding, I am also able to identify this transition based on the snake's behavior. When handled, the snake appears lethargic, moving around less and displaying an unwillingness to explore the environment in favor of finding somewhere dark to hide. In contrast, a snake who does not feel vulnerable or threatened will often actively look and move around, flicking his or her tongue rapidly to smell the air.

Additionally, the snakes with which I am familiar appear to have different core characteristics and vitality effects. My boa constrictor, for example, seems to have a more temperamental personality. He is the only one of my snakes who will hiss or rise up threateningly on occasion when disturbed, especially during his times of shed. On the other hand, my female ball python has never, to my knowledge, hissed or attempted to strike defensively. When she feels threatened, it is more likely that she will hide her head. While these differences in behavior might be attributed to differences between the breeds, there are also notable distinctions between both ball pythons. My male ball python is usually more active, pushing his head against the lid of his box and readily exploring his environment when let out. My female does not exhibit this behavior quite as often, and when she is handled, she tends to stay wrapped around my arm or shoulder instead of moving off to investigate the area.

Self-History

The final component of selfhood involves the continuity of experience through memory (Irvine, 2004). It is this factor that transforms simple interactions into meaningful relationships. As Irvine (2004) notes, although animals may not have a comprehension of time, they do remember things which they have previously experienced, and these memories create both a self-history and a history for those with whom they interact.

Given the primitive structure of a snake's brain, it is again not easy to confidently assert that snakes can and do remember certain people. They certainly become accustomed to being handled and learn that humans are not a threat. Scientifically, this

may seem to be the limit of a snake's capacity for self-history, but anecdotally, there may appear to be more.

Firstly, I have noticed that my snakes react differently to being handled by someone new. The ball pythons in particular tend to curl into balls for a few minutes before cautiously unfurling to investigate. After such a meeting, they quickly return to their hides when returned to their boxes. In contrast, my snakes act in a much more relaxed manner when held by me or by one of my roommates or close friends. They waste no time assessing if they are safe, wrapping themselves around the person's arm and actively smelling the air.

Additionally, some snakes in particular seem to have an affinity for their guardian. One of Laura's Burmese pythons, for example, will consistently seek her out when given free range of a room. My female ball python also exhibits this same behavior. When the two of us are interacting with someone else, she will often make her way back to me. She will squirm around restlessly in another's hands but remain calmly stationary in mine. This may not be substantial proof for the capacity for self-history in snakes, but this behavior is often convincing enough for the humans who form meaningful relationships with them.

Snakeness

Attempting to establish a bond or relationship with a snake presents many challenges, especially in the realm of communication. Not only are snakes unable to verbalize any intentions or motivations, but they are limited in their capacity for body language as well. Unlike dogs, cats, and horses, snakes do not have ears, limbs, or even eyelids with which to communicate, and although they have tails, these are mainly used

for grasping. They also usually do not make any sounds. Two of my snakes have never hissed, and the other rarely does, displaying this behavior most often when he does not want to be disturbed. As such, snake owners must be especially attuned to the body language of a snake: how it moves (or doesn't move), where it looks, its rate of breathing, and the movement of its tongue.

The ways in which humans interact with snakes are also limited in comparison with human communication with dogs and cats. One of the most common questions people ask me is, "Do you ever give your snakes special treats?" Most snakes have a limited diet of rodents and only eat about once a week. Eating serves only to provide nutrition to the snake, and as such it cannot be used as a means reward. Snakes also do not play with toys the way more common companion animals do. The only objects I give my snakes are a water bowl and a plastic igloo where the snake can hide.

The central time in which I communicate with my snakes is when I feed them. Many snakes have different preferences in how they are fed. My boa constrictor, for example, prefers to play with his food, even though I always feed him rats which have been humanely killed, frozen, and then thawed. He often will not eat the rat unless I use the feeding tongs to wiggle it as if it were alive, and even then he might constrict the rat, drag it around for a few minutes, release it, and look back up at me. At this point, I pick the rat back up and offer it to him again, wiggling it as before and sometimes even keeping my grasp on its tail after he has struck, engaging in a slight tug of war. After a few rounds of this, he will finally consume the rat. My female ball python, on the other hand, is rather skittish when it comes to eating. She displays a reluctance to strike when the offered rat is merely wiggled. I must make certain to carefully hold the rat still.

Snakes may not communicate in more conventional methods, but I can tell through kinesthetic empathy the various intentions of a snake, such as whether or not a snake is willing to eat. This knowledge of snakes and how to understand interpret their behavior, or what I term “snakeness,” only comes about through exposure and firsthand experience with snakes as well as observing and learning from more experienced snake owners.

Snake Companionship

Another question I am sometimes asked is whether or not it is possible to form a bond with a snake. After all, the brains of snakes are very different from those of mammals, most likely limiting their capacity to think and feel. Personally, although snakes may be incapable of feeling love, it is enough to know that they feel safe around me. They push against the lids of their boxes at night in order to get out, and they are content to spend hours curled around my shoulder or my hand. They do not feel that I am at threat and make no attempt to hide or escape from me. I have even fallen asleep with my boa constrictor, waking to find him still wrapped around my arm even an hour later. In many ways, the knowledge that my snakes do not perceive me as a threat satisfies me. I wish only for their happiness, even if this is as simple as their safety, health, and wellbeing. Whether or not my snake companions feel love for me is irrelevant.

Ultimately, it is impossible to know whether how a snake or any other animal feels about its human guardian or if he or she can even feel at all. In fact, the same can be said about any relationship between humans. Despite what a person may say or how he or she may act, it is impossible to know how that person actually feels. In this light, perhaps it is less important to know that one’s feelings are indeed reciprocated. For someone who

has a snake as a companion, the bonds formed hold deep meaning. When one of Laura's ball pythons suddenly died, she was overcome with grief and sorrowfully stated that no one could ever understand how much he meant to her. To an objective outsider, the relationship between snake and human may not seem "real," but for snake owners like Laura and me, the bond formed with a snake is a genuine and significant part of life.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THIS WORK

The short ethnographic research I have conducted in the amateur snake owning and breeding community reveals a complex set of attitudes among its members. On the surface, amateur breeders value only a snake's genetics and ability to breed, viewing them only as a type of investment while it is only casual "pet owners" who care about the snake's temperament and suitability as a companion animal. Direct observations, however, show a more sentimental side to amateur breeders' interactions with their snakes, suggesting that breeders can also grow emotionally attached to their snakes as individuals and companion animals, valuing more than financial prospects.

The stigmatized status of snakes also greatly affects the lives of snake owners as this stigma is commonly transferred to the humans themselves. Many attempt to cope by educating others, relying on the snake owning and breeding community for support, and seeking to defeat anti-herpetological legislation. Still, the struggle to gain acceptance for snakes as companion animals defines much of the experience of a snake owner, and a lack of social support may lead some to sell their snakes.

Although social ties to the snake owning and breeding community greatly assist snake owners, it is important to not understate the significance of the bond between human and snake. Despite the limitations of attempting to establish a relationship with a

reptile, the connection is very real and meaningful for a snake owner. As demonstrated by Adam's refusal to sell Janie, it can even withstand the rational discouragement of others in the snake breeding community. Both the communally encouraged objectification of snakes and the individual's bond with the animal contribute to the unique lifeworlds of snake owners.

It is important that more research should explore the unusual dynamics of this community in order to understand how a person relates to snakes, to other snake owners, and to outsiders who might hold negative attitudes towards snakes. From a societal standpoint, the snake-breeding industry constitutes a thriving economy and a growingly vocal community as groups like USARK work to gain legal and social approval for snakes and those who care for them. From a personal point of view, as *Serpent Encounters* (2013) states, it is the responsibility of snake owners to spread knowledge and strive for widespread acceptance of the animals we love.

REFERENCES

- Alie, K., Davis, B. W., Fielding, W. J., & Maldonado, F. G. (2007). Attitudes towards dogs and other “pets” in Roseau, Dominica. *Anthrozoös*, 20(2), 143-154.
- Bear, M. F., Connors, B. W., & Paradiso, M. A. (2006). *Neuroscience: Exploring the brain* (3rd ed.). Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins.
- Becker, H. S. (1953). Becoming a marihuana user. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 59, 235-242.
- Brandt, K. (2004). A language of their own: An interactionist approach to human-horse communication. *Society & Animals*, 12(4), 300-316.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures: selected essays*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Glaser, B. (1992). *Basics of grounded theory analysis*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Irvine, L. (2004). A model of animal selfhood: Expanding interactionist possibilities. *Symbolic Interaction*, 27(1), 3-21.
- Prokop, P., Özel, M., & Uşak, M. (2009). Cross-cultural comparison of student attitudes towards snakes. *Society and Animals*, 17, 224-240.
- Responsible Exotic Animal Ownership. (2009). Total numbers and odds of an accidental death in the USA by cause of injury in 2005. Retrieved from http://www.rexano.org/Statistics/Death_Odds_Exotic_Animal_2005.pdf

- Responsible Exotic Animal Ownership. (2013). USA: Captive constrictor (aka non – venomous) snakes statistics human fatalities 1990-2012. Retrieved from http://www.rexano.org/Statistics/Constrictor_Captive_Snake_Fatality.pdf
- Serpent Encounters. (2013, March 25). In *Facebook* [Official page]. Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Serpent-Encounters/110283522398687>
- Shapiro, K. J. (1990). Understanding dogs through kinesthetic empathy, social construction, and history. *Anthrozoös*, 3(3), 184-195
- Twining, H., Arluke, A., & Patronek, G. (2000). Managing the stigma of outlaw breeds: A case study of pit bull owners. *Society & Animals*, 8, 1-28.
- United States Association of Reptile Keepers. (n.d.) United States Association of Reptile Keepers. Retrieved from usark.org
- Vail, A. (1999). Tattoos are like potato chips... you can't have just one: The process of becoming and being a collector. *Deviant Behavior*, 20(3), 253-273.

ABSTRACT

This paper will explore the world of human-snake interaction and human relationships that are derived from associations with snakes. Through ethnographic analysis, “thick description,” and grounded theory, I will explore what it means to have a snake as a companion animal and the social consequences of snake ownership. I will also categorize snake owners based on levels of objectification and empathy or anthropomorphism in their interactions with snakes as well as discuss the ways in which snake owners commonly manage their stigmatized status in society. Finally, I will investigate the epistemological challenges with “knowing” snakes or possessing “snakeness” as snake owners attempt to form meaningful relationships with their companion animals.