Anna VARGA, Elena FEDOROVICH

Domače živali in njihova vloga v življenjskem ciklusu družinskega sistema

Pets and Their Part in the Family System Lifecycle

Abstract

In the following case study of family lifecycle, we use family system approach to show the part that pets (dogs) have in every process of maintaining homeostasis and family system development. In this article, you will find clinical analysis of psychological dysfunction in the families both with a pet and without it giving example of how a pet (dog) engaged in the family system could take part in separation process, or stabilize the monadic stage, or represent triangulated system element.

Key words

pet, dog, anthropomorphism, systemic approach, homeostasis, separation, triangulation, family psychology

Povzetek

V članku podajava študijo primera družinskega življenskega ciklusa, tako da iz vidika sistemske družinske terapije prikaževa vlogo domačih živali (psov) v vzdrževanju homeostaze in razvoja družinskega sistema. S klinično analizo psihološke disfunkcije v družinah z in brez domačih živali pokaževa, kako domača žival (pes) sodeluje v procesu separacije, v stabilizaciji samske faze in kot element triangulacije.

Ključne besede

domača žival, pes, antropomorfizem, sistemski pristop, homeostaza, separacija, triangulacija, družinska psihologija

VARGA ANNA: PHD, PROFESSOR, HEAD OF DEPARTMENT OF SYSTEM FAMILY PSYCHOTHERAPY IN THE INSTITUTE OF PRACTICAL PSYCHOLOGY AND PSYCHOANALYSIS, MOSCOW.
E-MAIL: AVARGA@YANDEX.RU, TEL: +7 (499)2301170, (903)7230311, 6821114.

FEDOROVICH ELENA: PHD, SENIOR RESEARCHER OF ANIMAL PSYCHOLOGY LAB IN MOSCOW STATE UNIVERSITY, DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY
E-MAIL: LABZOO_FEDOROVICH@MAIL.RU, TEL: +7 (495) 6295968, (495) 6119398, +7 (916) 1212792

Introduction

Systemic approach (von Bertalanffy, 1968; Wiener, 1954) perceives family as social system (Ackerman, 1970; Bateson, 1972). Most authors (McCarthy, 1994; Papp, 1983; Satir, 1983) claim the family system functioning to be controlled by two laws: the law of homeostasis and the law of development. The law of homeostasis was first devised by Walter Cannon in 1930 (Cannon, 1978). He introduced this term as a name for »*co-operated physiological processes serving to support most of the body's stable conditions*.« Later, the term applied also to an open system's potential to maintain dynamic stability of its internal condition.

The word *homeostasis* was brought not only in biology but also in ecology, cybernetics, and family system approach. As a social system, family ought to maintain its stability; it should also develop and adapt to the environment changes. Homeostasis works via negative feedback. In this case the feedback contributes to keeping stability and reduces the gap between system operation and its status quo. Homeostatic regulation options vary a lot in family systems. The most widespread ones are conflict, diseases, social dysfunction of one of its members, triangulation, and substitution (Варга, 2009/Varga, 2009; Бейкер, Варга, 2005/Baker & Varga, 2005, Haley, 1980).

Positive feedback increases deflection from stable state and causes irreversible changes in the system. Open systems need both feedback mechanisms for effective operation. In family systems, positive feedback forms the basis for a jump to the next stage of the family lifecycle.

During their work, psychologists and psychotherapists (Варга, 2009/Varga, 2009; von Bertalanffy, 1968; Carter, McGoldrick, 2005; Newman & Newman, 1998) noticed that most families follow common sequence of stages. The stages can be associated with changes in family structure or body, or to the process of psychological development of the family members. At each stage, an individual must change their attitude to successfully adapt to the new life conditions. If homeostatic regulation has too much influence i.e., the balance of stability and development is tilted, people don't change their attitudes enough and/or they do it too late. In such case, family 'gets stuck' on some stage and becomes dysfunctional or gets into a crisis.

The following stages of family lifecycle are described (Rakel, 2002):

1. Independent single life or monadic stage.
2. Couple or dyadic stage.
3. Children or parenthood state.
4. Children separation (separation).
5. Retired couple or »empty nest«.
6. Single life of an elderly; new monadic stage.

Functional family goes through all the phases above in accordance to social and biological norms; entering a new phase doesn't cause the family system to fall apart. In a dysfunctional family, the stages timing is often incorrect or the family can break while getting to another phase: for example, it happens after a child is born or after the children leave their parents' home. In fact, there are few families which are always functional or always dysfunctional. A normal family can become functional or dysfunctional according to their overall life situation and current stressors. During dysfunctional phase, homeostatic regulation is achieved by means of behavior disorders of one or more family members. Reference materials give numerous and various exam-

ples of symptomatic behavior contributing to maintenance of pathologic homeostasis (Haley, 1980; Madanes, 1984; Satir, 1983; Selvini-Palazzoli, Boscolo, Cecchin & Prata, 1978). In our practice, we face an extraordinary phenomenon of family homeostasis contributed not only by people but also by family pets.

During recent decades, so called industrial societies have shown both escalating urbanization and »pet phenomenon«: the number of animals – mostly dogs – kept by urban families with no specific pragmatic purpose is growing dramatically. City inhabitants declare significance of their animal companions by their willingness to spend long time with them, to suffer inconvenience like noise, mess, broken stuff, inability to spend a vacation out of home, etc., and invest huge funding in their upkeep (Bernstein, 2005; Melson & Fine, 2006). The evidence of animals taking a special role in the life of their owners is given by the fact that 68% to 97% city inhabitants name them members of the family (Heidenberger, 2000; Kruger & Serpell, 2006). The term pet was introduced in 60s for such animals, unlike the others serving practical needs as house guards or food (Folge, 1987).

We want to emphasize the fact that pet phenomenon develops in many countries in parallel with growing urban prevalence (Swabe, 1996). Though large families often keep animals in rural zones, the message of having a »*special, deep and intimate relationship*« with pets comes considerably more often from people who live in the cities and have small or single-parent families or come from the family with divorce background (Holub, Tyrlik, Janackova & Ernstova, 2005; Poresky & Daniels, 1998). The respondents from city families considerably more often report emotional involvement and deep attachment to their pets; they engage their pets in family life schedule and spend money for their treatment or upkeep more willingly than people from rural areas (Serpell, 2002; Swabe, 1996).

The concept of pets as part of urban family is also facilitated by the idea of anthropomorphism – assignment of human qualities to non-human subjects or objects – which is much supported by modern urban culture (Wynne, 2007). Growing tendency for 'hominization' of the animals is most distinguished in urban population. The more they detach from nature, the more necessary becomes anthropomorphism for satisfying human-to-animals relations as »*explanatory lubricant which is essential to maintain the dialog*« (Horowitz & Bekoff, 2007). Anthropomorphism appears to be almost the only way to describe, to explain, and to predict the animal behavior – especially for animals kept as pets (Gorszyca, Fine & Spain, 2006; Serpel, 2002). Most specific qualities related to the people's inclination to anthropomorphism are juvenile and neonatal strokes in pets' appearance. However, behavioral stimuli to hominization is even stronger – thus, anthropomorphic features are assigned most easily to the animals that show distinctive behavior aspects of successful non-verbal communication of humans like behavior signs of being ready to response or keeping visual contact or muzzle and body emphatic reactions and adjusting to the human rhythm etc. (McNicolas & Collis, 2006; Mitchell & Harm, 1996). According to some writers (Horowitz & Bekoff, 2007; Wynne, 2007), anthropomorphism is an 'intercultural tendency'.

Hypothesis

In our practice of family psychotherapy and correction of dog behavior we noticed that pet's functioning in the family comply with the same rules as humans'. They participate in every process of homeostasis maintenance and family system development. We suppose that pet dogs fit into family system as its elements and take similar part in it as human family members. In

dysfunctional families, dogs maintain the dysfunction.

Clinical Study

Here we shall consider dysfunctional versions for stage-change scenarios of family lifecycles with participation of both humans and pet dogs.

Dysfunctional version of the first stage features problems in building a family or inability to find a partner. Normal age for building a family is largely determined by socio-cultural standards. Like in other European and American countries, the average marrying age in Russia increased by four years recently (Захаров, 2006/ Zakharov, 2006). Monadic stage lasts longer now.

The concept of homeostatic regulation for single life is based on building alternative connections and relations with other people or substitutes. Common sense brings up typical scenarios of old bachelors' or spinsters' lives like work addiction, preoccupation with one's health, helping relatives, etc.

You can often hear from young people from certain circles something like »I'm married to my work« Complaints of problems with creating a family occur a lot in our practice of family therapists. The most widespread case is a young woman of 32-34 years old without marital experience. She's closely connected to her parent family.

V. (34). Her father is a hard worker and good earner; her mother doesn't work, she's into alcohol abuse. V. spends all her spare time with her mother; she takes her to vacations and tries to control her alcohol abuse. Besides, V. works a lot as well. The family lives in Moscow suburban but she works in Moscow and is absent from home for 12-13 hours on working days. Instead of looking for a partner, V. is busy with her alcohol-dependent mother. V. is co-dependent herself.

Here's a most typical example of person's relationship with parents as an alternative to relationship with potential partner.

G. (32) is a striking example of a similar alternative relationship. She has had several significant relationships with men but it never got to marriage. It's four years since G. moved in to her friend who lives in another town. G's friend is almost 10 years older than her. She's divorced with a teenage daughter. G. moved in with her after she met a young man from the same city over the Internet. She fell in love though the young man is married and makes no secret of this fact. They didn't end in romantic relationship and G.'s not even in love any more. She found a job and stayed at her friend's. Thus, G.'s life consists of working and helping her friend with her kid and her household. However, her friend spends a lot of time with men; she's living through either passionate love or tragedy of separation. G. is her confident, adviser and helper without any private life of her own.

This is an outstanding example of homeostatic overregulation of monadic stage by substitution: G.'s friend is a devil in leading private life while G. is taking the rap for her. Similar regulation process can involve pets as well.

We found this case while working with a family case.

I., male, is about 40 and lives with his mother. He has a female pit-bull. The dog is extremely aggressive to other dogs and walking her is a complicated routine - so, I. walks her mostly at night. Besides, the pit-bull makes puddles and goes her 'number two' in the apartment. I. is very active in the Internet; he makes lots of female acquaintances there. On the dates he declares commitment and wants to get married. The relationship he discussed during his therapy lasts two years. I. says that he's in love and wants to move in with his girlfriend. It's clearly impossible since he lives with his mom in a small apartment. His girlfriend's apartment is large, and it's presumably great but the one condition she makes is that I. doesn't bring there his dog. I. refuses to leave the dog with his mother. Thus, his relationship doesn't become marriage. At the same time, he maintains his Internet affairs. In this case the dog makes an excuse for his inability to marry his girlfriend.

The dog here is a substitute which helps maintain monadic stage.

The second phase of the lifecycle – couple building – is very important for the family. At that moment, the couple sets up their psychological marital agreement, both public and unspoken, and makes the rules of their future family life.

The law of homeostasis – whose purpose is keeping the status quo – often shows in both future spouses as inadequate pre-wedding doubt and anxiety increase. The anxiety often persists in the early period of marital life. It's hard to change life style and habits. There're a lot of examples for young couples who returned to pre-marital lifestyle and moved back to their parents in case of persisting conflicts.

R. is a young woman, freshly married; she is knowledgeable and energetic person and came to us to get an advice about her dog. R. couldn't leave her dog at home for a long time. She explained it with her fear for the pet: as soon as she leaves, the dog can start "crunching her paw." Three months ago the dog hurt its forepaw. However, the therapist found out that the paw was completely healed; no trace of the injury remained. During the therapy, we learned that before R.'s marriage the dog played a role of her companion: they 'fled' her parents' home together and moved together from one rented apartment to another. R. paid a lot of attention to her dog; after work she ran home to see it and spent all her spare time walking it. Now, after her personal life improved, R. experienced guilt towards her dog without being aware of it. She didn't need help from animal handler.

Saying that the dog is just a dog and people should live lives of their own didn't lift her guilt. Success was achieved by the idea that dogs need 14-16 hours of sleep instead of 8 hours for humans. This message provoked a stormy emotional reaction from R.; she felt relief. R. revised this idea several times asking if it was true. At the final meeting, the therapist spoke to both young marrieds about the dog's role in R.'s life and told them that R.'s concern about her dog largely expressed the anxiousness present at current stage of their family life (creation of marriage union). They received a task to find a new role for the dog in their family together.

There are multiple clinical researches and studies dedicated to the crisis and problems of dyadic life. We know (Baker & Varga, 2005) that two-people family system is an unstable structure given easily to tension and anxiety related to the relationship. Projection of dyadic anxiety to the child is a widespread way to reduce the dyadic tension. System family approach started as a method of helping children who became subject to like projection, so called triangulated children. They are called triangulated because they get engaged in emotional relationship of their parents

and change the dyadic structure turning it into a triangle. Most works in family system approach are dedicated to children who maintain the family homeostasis with his or her diseases (Baker & Varga, 2005; Haley, 1984; Satir, 1983).

V. (see the case above) is a triangulated child. According to her memories, she's had friends in kindergarten and elementary. Girls would come to visit her home and she would visit them back. She was about twelve when her parents first started to ban her friends from the house. V.'s father objected her long phone talks. At the same time, her mother's alcohol addiction appeared and the parents were ashamed of it. That's why they cut their own social circle and separated V. from other children as well. The parents confronted each other a lot; the father started to delegate his caregiving task to V.: if he found her mother drinking he accused V for letting it happen. The mother addressed to V. with her complaints about the father creating an alliance against him. The family system turned to triangle: V.-Father-Mother. V. became a caregiver for her mother instead of the father giving him a leave from family problems. She turned to a sort of emotional separator between her parents increasing the distance between them and reducing the tension in the couple which helped keep the marriage going. During her college studies and work, V. never made new friends. Separating from parents is impossible from her; she considers this treason.

Problems can appear in dyadic life both at its early phase and at the stage of »empty nest« when the children grew up and separated from the parents. In this case, a pet might reduce the tension in the couple.

»I was acquainted to a retired couple who dedicated themselves to their dog called M. They took her around to every place they went. They didn't travel abroad for almost 20 years since they refused to leave M. in the nursery for the time of their vacation. Their mere lives were revolving about their dog as well. They came to me repeatedly in a great fear for M. Ear scratch, cough, slight limp – everything made a reason to visit a vet. Every time they came to me they broke to discussion. »If you didn't take her for that long walk she wouldn't catch cold.« They always argued about the dog but at the same time they kept telling me how sweet she was.

Sure, M. slept in their bed but as she grew older her health weakened and problems appeared. When she turned 17 she developed incontinence. The owners weren't as preoccupied as I expected. Independently, each of them claimed the dog their best friend. When the problem appeared first, they covered their bed in plastics so that M. could keep sleeping with them. Now they were packed to keep her in their bed! The bed's lower end was covered with tarp, on top they laid bath towels and changed them every morning along with cleaning the dog.

M. was dying… At last, her load of problem became overwhelming: she got heart murmurs, her liver grew to occupy half of abdominal, and her stamina withered to a minimum. I supposed that it was time to let me put her out of pain.

But they didn't want to be free; they couldn't do it. Finally M. died, almost reaching the age of 18. Her owners were in deep sorrow. They cried heart out when they brought me her body and tried to console each other holding each other's shaking hands. However, they divorced after a year (Folge, 1987: 51-53).

The third stage of the family lifecycle starts with the birth of a child or children. This is a critical point as well because the family has to reshape psychological marital agreement, to re-

distribute functions and change their life style. According to statistics, (www.1stat.ru) the divorces fell mostly on this stage of lifecycle. However, this stage brings lots of complications and conflicts as well even to those families that kept from breakdown. One of dysfunctional versions of this stage is the family's refuse to take the new child's needs and individual features into account. The family ignores the urge of change related to the child's birth. The parents might leave the sleeping baby at home in the evening. Sometimes this behavior is justified like: »I always thought freedom and independence to be extremely important. That was the way you (daughter) were brought up. When you were a tiny girl, we left you alone at night. You would wake up and cry but no profit! No one home! So, you would go to sleep again.« (Boris Nemtsov's interview in *Roditelskoe sobranie* (2003). 3:18) Difficulties of transfer to the third stage can explain the fact that the family with a newborn child wants to take a dog as well. Pet specialists realize that the moment of a child birth is not a right point to take a dog. The family's typical excuses are: »we want the baby to be good-natured« or »my wife stays at home with the child anyway".

Family G. (Husband: 48, second marriage; has two children from the first marriage; Wife: 28; male child of 8 months). The family invited the pet specialist to consult about taking a dog. Both of them were stressed in the beginning of the talk, the husband interrupted the specialist and told lot of stories about his childhood and »his« dogs (he lived in the Northern region and the dogs weren't living in the apartment). Both spouses say that dogs are essential for children's education. When the expert tries to explain them that the dog couldn't fill their real need and his wife is already very busy while the puppy needs a lot of time and attention they cut it off saying »yes we know«. After a week's time, the husband calls back to say that »we took a dog of another breed, exactly as you told us«.

The next crisis point is the separation of the children after they grew up. If the child performed extra functions like being involved in triangulation, or maintaining the homeostasis by his or her behavior disorders then the separation becomes very complicated. The parents don't want to increase their interpersonal distance to the child – actually they can't do it; they try to attach the kid more than ever. The most spread practice is discrediting the kid's acquaintances, or anxious monitoring of the kid's health. The parents might project hypochondriac attitudes or try to convince the kid of the world's extreme danger and the kid's own life incompetence. At this age, the kid's normal psychological need encourages him or her to exceed the bounds of the family and to create his or her own identity (Erikson, 1993). Therefore, keeping the child in the family can cause various kinds of protest behavior. The separation might take a very inventive form.

S, 16, misses school classes, and has bad grades. She spends her time with people unknown to her parents, doesn't show up until late and doesn't answer her cell phone. The family is hypochondriac; every one of its members has some case and their first response to stress is feeling bad, sickness, blood pressure risings, cardiac attacks etc. Obviously, S's behavior caused extreme stress and health issues in her parents. Roughly saying, S's emancipation tries were »killing« her parents. The solution came in S's pregnancy: she kept it secret up to about 6th month and then she brought forward a baby girl. This was Wisdom of Solomon. Now, S was attached to the parents' house not by their tyranny but by maternity. The conflicts were resolved and the parents started to care about the baby. They sympathized with S and gave her freedom to entertain. Thus, the baby became a separation agent and replaced S as her parents' child. In the field of family psychology, this exchange is called substitution.

Pets can play the same role of separation agent.

I.'s family moved to Moscow from the town N when I. was 2. Her mother and father divorced twice and married again; when I. was 13 her father moved back to N and never returned.

I. always asked her mother to permit her a dog. Since she was 15 or 16 she used to bring cats or dogs home but her mother gave them away because »I. didn't know how to care for them.« When I. was 24 she brought home Dana (she called her after her father Daniel). Her mother »was totally against« it and »resisted desperately«. »But she was already sick«, – explains I. and that's why she »managed to keep Dana«. According to I., »it cost her real fight with her mother«. Dana was a 5 months old puppy; I. says that she »saved her from her former owner who was emotionally cold person. I. can't imagine that Dana could still live there.«

I. describes her dog as the »only soul mate she had« or as »another side of herself.« »She was the first creature for whom I. had complete responsibility. With her, I. realized that I. repeated many kinds of Mother's behavior: I. used to force her to eat, used to get angry. The dog was »weak, languid, listless« and I. felt guilty for »driving her to this«, I. kept giving excuses.«

When her mother died, I. spent 5 years with Dana alone. Leaving for business reasons, she »hired a nurse« asking a friend who had a good contact to Dana to stay in her apartment: »it was better for the dog.« »Every day I. used to think how she fared without me.«

She says about her husband that »he treats the dog well« and »he joined their relationship system.« After her child's birth, I. experiences guilt towards her dog because she is no longer the center of her world.

Discussion

We described the cases of dysfunctional stages in the family lifecycle and illustrated how the pet dog can participate in the family life at various lifecycle stages.

Due to certain physical features – and more crucial, due to certain behavior and care requirements – dogs become the most popular pets in urban families (Bernstein, 2005; Melson & Fine, 2006) except for some countries like Australia. Nowadays, human society and human-made urban environment make natural ecological niche for domesticated dogs as a specie while certain adaptations they had to undergo to live with humans caused remarkable changes in communicative, group, cooperative behavior of the dogs as well as in behavior focused on the maintenance of contact with humans (Kubinyi, Virányi & Miklósi, 2007; Miklósi, Pogardi,Topált & Csányi , 2000). Pet dogs pay close attention to human behavior and facial gestures; they notice human eye line and other behavior hints like hand gestures (Byrne, 2003; Hare & Tomasello, 1999; Kubinyi, Pongracz & Miklósi, 2009; Range, Virányi & Huber, 2007). During long time, the dogs were selected for breeding by certain features – both in behavior and appearance – proving their infantile dependence on humans and willingness to the subordinate role in the group (Topált, Miklósi & Csányi, 1997). Evidently, certain forms of behavior in dogs who live in urban families as companions stimulate their owners to demonstration of affection and active interaction, e.g., playing (Horowitz & Bekoff, 2007; Topált, Miklósi & Csányi, 1998). Dogs would »solve«their everyday problems mainly for their owner's benefit. Dogs have a certain type of descriptive behavior serving to draw the owner's attention to the objects of the dog's interest or problem situations that

the dog can't solve without aid (Miklósi et al., 2000; Miklósi, Topált & Csányi, 2004). The more the owner humanizes his dog, the more dependent is the dog's behavior in the situations that should be solved by independent decision (Topált et al., 1997). We see that dogs can show the behaviors that »meet the operational criterion of attachment«; they also shorten the distance and look for contact with their owner when in a situation of uncertainty (Topált et al., 1998). Neither the wolf which is the dog's closest relative nor wild (feral) dogs shows such behaviors (Byrne, 2003; Kubinyi et al.; Miklósi, et al., 2000).

Keeping dogs as companions in the city and walking them make it possible for people to benefit from the most important pet's function: facilitation of communication with other people, realization of need for affiliation and social integration. Most widowers or widows who report receiving large support are dog owners (McNicolas & Collis, 2006) because the upkeep of the dog requires steady daily schedule and thus they had »a reason to get up every morning«. The feeling of being normal originated in meeting other people who walked their dogs and didn't know about their loss; this feeling made contrast to discomfort and even tendency to avoid those who used to know the deceased. For most townspeople, their relationship with pet dogs could play central role in their daily schedule and be more permanent, more important, and more consistent than their relationships with other people (McNicolas & Collis, 2006).

Pet dogs are part in non-verbal communication channels of the family system serving to emotional interaction of the members. Haptic contact to the animal makes an essential part of this interaction. It provides 'emotional confirmation' (as in *Catherine Dolto*, (Дольто, 2007) which is extremely important according to all the dogs' owners. (»*He's always happy when I come home*« or »*she is so sweet when she cuddles me*.«) Besides, the mere nature of pets' non-verbal communication and the quality of feedback people receive from them make it almost inevitably safe (since it's non-evaluative, sensitive to the human's slightest emotion, and mostly positive) for human recipient and allows them to decrease anxiety or stress level. The trust in communication with animals increases even more due to the missing double binds – the gap between verbal and non-verbal data – in this communication (Kruger & Serpell, 2006; McNicolas & Collis, 2006).

Thus, dogs being social specie (according to its gregariousness) are easily engaged in family groups. Their rich behavioral repertoire, their attention to human emotions and requests, their tendency to copy and »manipulate« their owners with their behavior to solve their own problems – all that makes it possible for humans to implement various group scenarios with participation of the dogs. Thus, the primary motives for modern people who're trying to decide on taking a dog in the city are the ones related to solving different problems of trusting relationship with significant others (Федорович, 2001/Fedorovich, 2001; Федорович, Непринцева, 2001/ Fedorovich & Neprintseva, 2001).

Clinical analysis of the above cases of psychological dysfunction in families both with a pet and without it shows that the pet is able to perform multiple functions in the system – like its human elements. The dog might take part in separation process, or stabilize the monadic stage, or be a triangulated system element, depending on the stage of family lifecycle. In every case, the dog maintains the homeostasis of the family system as one of its elements. Dogs have a capacity to maintain the specific kind of communication adopted in the family. Here is an outstanding example.

O. asked the trainer to teach obedience to her one year old male Rottweiler. After 6 lessons, the trainer taught the dog basic commands. Though the dog had obviously made significant

progress in the training, the owner complained that at home, his behavior went from bad to worse. She stopped do her »homework'«saying that it didn't work at all. According to O., the dog started to behave aggressive with her and her 18-year old daughter. For example, when the dog slept on the carpet in the middle of the room, both she and her daughter had to stay on the sofa; they couldn't pass the dog that raised his head and growled. The Rottweiler learned to open the fridge and rake the food out with his paw; O. couldn't prevent him from doing that because he "gave her an evil look" and growled.

Finally, O. came to the trainer with her hand bandaged – the dog bit her – and said that she has handed him away as soon as she returned from hospital. In two days she called back to consult about the breed of a new dog. She refused all the advice to take non-aggressive and obedient dog. Soon the trainer learnt that she took in a male bloodhound which requires even more knowledge and consistent effort in obedience training.

One year earlier, before taking a Rottweiler, O. divorced her husband. She initiated the divorce herself motivating it by her husband's physical aggression to her and their daughter (Федорович, Непринцева, 2001/ Fedorovich & Neprintseva, 2001).

This case shows that the woman's victimized behavior was complementary to both her husband's and her dog's aggression. Analyzing her attitude at trainer's class, we see that the more the dog became obedient, the less she liked it. O. rejected the changes; she didn't do her homework and missed classes because of »being sick«. She complained about the dog's aggression but she still missed the classes; she asked for advice but never followed it. She provoked the dog's aggression at home.

In the family, pets become part of family system (Triebenbacher, 2000); on one hand, they help maintain the homeostasis but on the other hand, they follow the system's rules like any other element (Варга, Федорович, 2009/Varga & Fedorovich, 2009). The dogs can do it due to the following drivers:

1. The potential of being involved in non-verbal communication in the family (Федорович, Варга, 2009/Fedorovich, Varga, 2009)/
2. Emotional and physical qualities showing their infantile attachment to the owner supported by direct artificial selection while producing modern dog breeds.

People started to assign new roles to the dogs because progressive urbanization and growing significance of nuclear family compared to that of multi-generation one caused growing emotional hunger and psychological problems of urban people. Our clinical studies of families with a pet (dog) proved that animal companions contribute to both positive and negative feedback on equal basis with humans and that they can promote family system development as well as its stagnation.

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