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Human-Companion Animal Relations in Tehran: Anthropological Perspectives on Domestication Dynamics

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Original Article

Abstract

Background and Aim: This study investigates how domestic dogs in Tehran are transformed into regulated urban companions through intricate cultural, class-based, and biopolitical processes. It seeks to understand how changing patterns of human-animal relations and urban lifestyles in contemporary Iran reshape the place of animals within everyday social life.

Data and Method: Utilizing a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, this qualitative research combines field observations and historical documents with semi-structured, in-depth interviews conducted with dog keepers, veterinarians, animal rights activists, and shelter managers in Tehran. The gathered data were analyzed and interpreted through Phenomenological Thematic Analysis.

Findings: The analysis identifies five distinct mechanisms structuring dog domestication within the urban context of Tehran: the suppression of animal instincts, the emergence of dogs as classed commodities, stratified care practices shaped by socioeconomic status, anthropomorphization as familial subjects, and the biopolitical regulation of excluded animals through institutional shelters. These findings demonstrate that domestication functions as a deliberate cultural and political project rather than a merely natural or biological process.

Conclusion: Domestic dogs in Tehran emerge as hybrid beings produced at the intersection of intertwined systems of care, discipline, and class-based power dynamics. Ultimately, this study contributes to urban and human-animal anthropology by conceptualizing companion animals as active social subjects actively shaped by modern urban rationalities in contemporary Iran.

Keywords: Companion Animals, Nature, Human-Animal Relations, Anthropomorphization, Civilizing Process.

Key Message: Companion dogs in Tehran do not merely integrate into urban households; rather, they are actively reconstructed by civilizing, economic, and biopolitical mechanisms. These forces discipline their bodies, stratify their lived experiences along socio-economic class lines, and transform them into potent symbols of specialized care, social status, and controlled nature within the modern metropolis.

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Introduction

The dichotomy between urbanized areas and natural environments has long been a central feature of modern epistemological thought. Within this framework, cities are often conceptualized as purely social systems devoid of nature, while nature itself is regarded as an uncivilized and unstructured realm. This binary has profoundly conditioned modern urban lifestyles, producing characteristics such as dense housing, traffic congestion, crowded sidewalks, limited space, and unpleasant smells (Mumford, 2007, pp. 726–727). Conventional definitions of urbanity reinforce this separation, assuming that nature has no legitimate place within city life. However, empirical observation reveals that the urban and natural spheres are not entirely distinct. Nature exists within cities in many forms—from trees and parks to birds, domestic animals, and even the embodied presence of urban dwellers. As Simmel (1989, p. 59) suggests in *Ruin*, the interplay between human will and natural forces can produce a harmonious equilibrium, challenging the deterministic assumption that civilization and nature must remain in opposition.

The controllability of urban nature, as emphasized by Botkin and Keller (2003), is a key concern of modern urban management. Yet, urbanized nature extends beyond the simple inclusion of greenery or animal presence in the cityscape; it embodies a deeper symbiosis between human rationality and the natural world (Hubbard, 2017, p. 247). Urban nature is shaped not merely by ecological management but also by moral and political rationalities that seek to cultivate security, order, and civility. Drawing on Foucault's conceptualization of biopower, this process entails both the inclusion of "suitable" subjects—both human and nonhuman—and the exclusion of those deemed disorderly. Within this framework, specific animal species, by virtue of their biological and behavioral traits, become more adaptable and desirable participants within the urban milieu.

The coexistence of animals within cities represents a complex and stratified phenomenon. While some wild species remain confined or marginal—such as those in circuses, cages, or the urban periphery—others, including stray dogs, cats, and rodents, have adapted informally to the rhythms of city life. Nevertheless, the most prominent form of animal urbanity today is found in domesticated companion animals. Dogs, in particular, have become the most common and symbolically charged urban companion species. Their loyalty, intelligence, and trainability have made them integral to human households worldwide. Yet, in cultural contexts such as Iran, religious proscriptions and legal restrictions complicate this relationship. Dogs are often categorized as ritually impure (*Najis*) in Islamic tradition, and the practice of keeping them as companion animals can carry distinct socio-political connotations.

Consequently, authorities have imposed various regulatory restrictions on their visibility in public spaces, including fiscal penalties and confiscations (Fars News Agency, 2021). These interventions further entangle the practice of companion animal keeping within moral, political, and class dimensions.

This study explores how domestic dogs in Tehran are reconstructed through mechanisms of control, castration, and behavioral management to conform to urban expectations of civility. It argues that the domestication and adaptation of dogs in the modern city are not natural evolutions but sociocultural processes driven by rationalized systems of exclusion and normalization. By examining how animal features are suppressed and human-like traits are cultivated, this research seeks to uncover how companion dogs become both products and participants of urban rationality—living embodiments of the city’s effort to civilize nature itself.

Literature Review and Theoretical Considerations

In Iran, few studies have examined companion animals—particularly dogs—and most existing research has focused on clinical, medical and veterinary perspectives, addressing issues such as the effects of pharmaceuticals and new dietary regimens. However, a small number of studies within the humanities, especially in psychology, have examined the situation of dog keepers. Ziadloo et al. (2022) have shown that individuals who own companion animals tend to exhibit higher self-confidence and adaptability, as well as lower levels of social anxiety, compared to those without companion animals. Some research has also focused on the behavior of domestic dogs. Tamimi et al. (2013) adopting a behavioral approach, found that the most common challenges faced by dog keepers include aggression, jumping, and excessive barking. These behaviors were associated with factors such as breed, access to a yard, and keepers’ responses to undesirable behaviors.

In sociological studies, Taghavi (2020) demonstrates that the high financial and social costs of marriage and childbearing, together with the lower demands of dogs compared with children, have contributed to the growing tendency towards dog-keeping. Najafi-Asl (2024) identifies the weakening of religious values within families, imitation of Western values, and emotional deprivation as contributing factors to this trend. Grisoni and Mashkour (2016) argue that the adoption of Westernized practices of keeping companion animals in Iran should not be regarded as mere imitation; rather, it is a hybrid and contested process shaped by the specific context of Iranian society.

The findings of Jalali et al. (2010), based on research conducted in parks located in affluent districts of Tehran (Districts 1 and 3), show that at the time approximately 87% of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the presence of dogs in public parks, citing religious and hygienic reasons (Jalali et al., 2010). Their results indicate that even fifteen years ago, strong religious sensitivities towards companion animals persisted in Tehran's affluent neighbourhoods. Moreover, Bagheri et al. (2022), in their qualitative study, report that dog keepers in Ahvaz have experienced various forms of exclusion and negative reactions in public spaces. They also argue that dog keeping among certain social groups functions as an expression of the broader religious divide within Iranian society.

Unlike previous studies that have primarily focused on the psychological characteristics of companion animal keepers or the cultural and religious consequences of keeping companion animals, the present research centres on the animal itself as a social subject. It seeks to demonstrate how the animal is reconstituted within processes of rationalization and civilization.

Michel Foucault's (2009) insights into the history of madness offer a valuable theoretical framework for understanding the dynamics of human behavior and societal norms. According to Foucault, European societies since the Medieval Period have established a dichotomy between wisdom and madness. Wisdom is defined in opposition to "mania or dementia." Foucault's objective is to delineate this contrast by creating opposing anti-wisdom notions. He seeks to map the procedure with the Medieval Period as its origin, ultimately leading to the equality of wisdom and madness. In his book, "Madness and Civilization", Foucault explores the emergence of the discourse of rationality, which excludes irrationality or unreason. He delves into the processes through which wisdom is established by excluding fools and other marginalized groups, such as the insane or lepers. Foucault argues that this exclusionary process is inherent in every discourse, as it involves the creation of confrontations and the formation of perceptions.

Foucault adopts a meticulous and comprehensive approach to examining the formation of concepts, demonstrating that those who challenged wisdom faced exclusion just as the insane did. Drawing on his book, Foucault reveals that the insane were initially forcibly removed from the city and confined in dungeons and cells, later housed in the same institutions as the poor, unemployed, and criminals, as if all were considered the same. He aims to contribute to the genealogy of differentiated notions such as wisdom, indiscretion, madness, fault, or illness (Foucault, 2009, p. 50). His exploration of the relationship between wisdom and madness, as well as the mechanisms of exclusion, can offer insights into the exclusion of animals and

nature from urban spaces. Norbert Elias another prominent thinker, has also delved into various aspects of this phenomenon more concretely.

Elias is a highly acclaimed scholar celebrated for his research on the impact of culture on daily life. His work centres on the historical evolution of behavioral norms and ethical standards, with a particular focus on shame (Hatami Kheljan & Mousavi, 2025). Elias's investigations highlight how specific actions, such as appropriate eating, chewing, and sleeping habits, initially originated among the upper echelons of society before trickling down to individuals of lower socioeconomic standing. Moreover, Elias delves into the marginalization of bodily processes such as urinating, belching, and exhibitionism, associating them with uncivilized and animalistic behavior. A prime example is the Medieval period, when drinking water with a full mouth was regarded as animal-like and therefore disapproved of, as evident in books on etiquette and character (Elias, 2000, p. 74).

Elias argues that over time, certain functions and behaviours once considered normal became associated with uncivilized, animalistic, and shameless actions. As the boundaries of what was considered shameful expanded, many natural bodily functions were removed from public life and restricted to the private sphere in various ways (Elias, 2000, p. 118).

According to Elias's findings, during the Middle Ages there was a noticeable shift in the way animals were viewed and treated in urban societies. This shift extended to the consumption of animal dishes, which came to be considered uncivilized and shameful (Elias, 2000, pp. 74, 101). To conceal any visible signs of animal body parts, the appearance of dishes changed over time. It was once common for people to eat meat directly off the bone with their teeth, but this behavior was compared to what dogs do, which invoked a sense of heinousness. The dog metaphor served as a reminder to citizens of the importance of distancing themselves from animal-like actions. This concept highlights how shame, urbanity, and civilization shaped the removal of animal traces and repugnant representations from various urban contexts. The goal was for citizens to recognize their civilization, marking a transition that took place in the period following the Middle Ages.

Using the perspectives of Elias and Foucault, we can analyze the concept of animality in relation to urban animals. While cities are often associated with humaneness and civilization, the question arises as to where animals fit into this context. Despite the development of notions such as standard civilization, how can animals be integrated into the urban space, particularly in Tehran? It is worth noting that Tehran was once known to have a significant population of stray dogs, as observed by Western explorers (Floor, 2007, p. 82).

Finally, it is crucial to examine how animality and animal characteristics have influenced the formation of new definitions and approaches towards animals, especially in the framing of wisdom and civilization in urban living.

Methods and Data

This study adopts a hermeneutic phenomenological approach within the framework of historical anthropology. Its primary aim is to understand the lived experience of dog keepers in Tehran—a form of experience in which the process of domestication is viewed not merely as an individual act but rather as a cultural-historical phenomenon (Jalili et al., 2022). The inherently historical nature of this experience necessarily leads the research towards a brief examination of the genealogy of the issue. Accordingly, the data sources for the findings consist of two main categories:

1. **Field and phenomenological data**, derived from in-depth interviews with dog keepers, animal welfare activists, veterinarians, and managers of animal shelters in Tehran. These interviews focus explicitly on participants' lived experiences, emotions, and perceptions of human–animal relations.
2. **Historical data**, including travelogues and historical texts on companion animals.

Data were analyzed using Phenomenological Thematic Analysis. This qualitative research method integrates the logic of phenomenology with the procedures of thematic analysis to understand the lived meanings of human experience by identifying and interpreting key themes (Van Manen, 1990; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In this process, preliminary themes were first inductively derived from interviews and historical evidence. In the second stage, these themes were compared and interpreted in light of relevant theoretical frameworks to reveal connections among participants' lived experiences, the cultural history of the phenomenon, and the theoretical perspectives of the study. Thus, each final theme emerged from a dialogue among the contemporary experiences of companion animal keepers in Tehran, the cultural history of human–animal relations (particularly with dogs), and the theoretical foundations of the research. In some themes, the historical and theoretical components may carry more analytical weight than the empirical or interview-based aspects.

Phenomenological Thematic Analysis is a method through which the researcher seeks to describe and interpret people's lived experiences of a phenomenon by identifying patterns of

meaning, or themes. While phenomenology focuses primarily on understanding the cultural and historical experience of the phenomenon, thematic analysis emphasizes the systematic extraction of themes from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Table 1. *Stages of the Coding Process*

Stage	Phenomenological Task
Familiarization	Repeated reading of interview transcripts and bracketing of preconceptions (epoché) in order to view the experience from the participant's perspective.
Extraction of Meaning Units	Identifying phrases or sentences that express the lived experience.
Initial Coding	Labeling key segments of the text that reveal specific meanings of the phenomenon.
Clustering Codes	Grouping similar codes to form meaning clusters and to uncover the structure of experience.
Developing Themes	Deriving main themes that represent the essence of the experience—each theme answering the question, "How is this phenomenon experienced?"
Interpretation	Linking themes to their historical, cultural, or theoretical contexts—that is, understanding the experience within its ontological horizon while maintaining researcher reflexivity.

The field data were generated through in-depth interviews with dog keepers from different districts of Tehran. Table 2 provides a brief overview of the socio-demographic and economic characteristics of the participants and their companion animals.

Table 2. *Socio-Demographic and Economic Profiles of the Research Participants*

Participant's Name	Living Place	Dog Breed	Duration of Keeping	Approx. Monthly Costs (USD)	Approx. Market Price (USD)
Tara	Sa'adat Abad	Akita	1 year	310	2,000
Tida	Sa'd Abad	Teddy Bear Pomeranian	2 years	230	4,000
Arya	Elahieh	Tibetan Mastiff	3 years	385	23,000
Saghar	Fereshteh	Boxer	3 years	310	950
Rastin	Fereshteh	Shiloh Shepherd	2 years	370	750
Amir Reza	Bagh-e-Feiz	Dalmatian	1.5 years	115	1,150
Sena	Andisheh	Cane Corso	2 years	115	1,150
Farya	Jordan	Akita	5 years	92	2,000
Sarah	Gisha	Cocker Spaniel	3 years	92	950
Mahan	Navab	Rottweiler	5 years	46	1,150
Hamin	Eskandari	Cocker Spaniel	9 years	38	950
Mahdiyeh	Azeri	Chow Chow	6 years	77	2,500
Mahtab	Sadeghiyeh	Newfoundland	1 year	38	1,150

Findings

Through the process of phenomenological thematic analysis, a set of secondary codes was first extracted from interviews and historical materials and then integrated into broader analytical themes. Table 3 presents the main themes and their associated secondary codes that constitute the structure of the findings.

Table 3. *Secondary and Main Codes of the Study*

Main Theme	Secondary Codes
<i>Domestication as a Process of Civilization and the Control of Animality</i>	• Anthropocentrism in domestication • Transformation and expansion of animals' functions throughout history • Emergence of domestic dogs among aristocrats and rulers • Shift toward fulfilling human emotional needs
<i>Removing Animals' Instinctive Characteristics</i>	• Compulsory physical alterations • Behavioral engineering through training • Directed breeding and artificial selection • Moral education of the animal for domestic life • Adaptation to the controlled urban environment
<i>Animal Aristocracy and the Class Process of Domestic Companion Animals</i>	• Commodification of the human–animal relationship • Breed-based discrimination and pedigree valuation • Privatization of animal care and consumption • Consumerism and social distinction • Ethics of consumption and the aesthetics of care
<i>Animals' Anthropomorphism</i>	• Substitution for the role of a child • Interpretation of animal behavior through human models • Imposition of childlike social norms • Completion of the de-animalization–anthropomorphization cycle
<i>The Shelter as a Tool of Urban Biopolitics and the Regulation of Excluded Animals</i>	• Urban cleansing justified through medical and moral discourse • Reproduction of hierarchies and commodifying standards • Moral/medical duality in the discourse of animal control • Biological exclusion and new forms of animal discrimination

The domestication of animals involves their adaptation to human communities and separation from their natural habitat (Clutton-Brock, 1999, p. 238). This process depends on several factors, including compatibility and persistence of animals, their performance, and species flexibility. According to archaeological evidence, dogs have been domesticated for

over 30,000 years (Ovodov et al., 2011), while biological studies suggest that the divergence between wolf and dog lineages occurred around 27,000 years ago (Skoglund & Ersmark, 2015). Initially, working dogs served two main purposes: protecting humans and their belongings, and assisting in hunting. Over time, the domestication of dogs led to the development of different breeds with specific traits and adaptability, and to the emergence of companion animals in households. This long-standing relationship between humans and animals has contributed to the creation of photogenic dogs and beloved companion animals.

The text distinguishes between companion dogs and service dogs. Companion dogs are typically not trained for guarding or hunting but instead serve as domestic animals. The tradition of keeping companion dogs dates back to the royal families of Britain and Europe. Sophie Gordon notes that throughout history, kings and queens have shown affection for their companion dogs, which have since become symbols of royalty and aristocracy. In some cases, governors have even used companion dogs as diplomatic gifts to represent nobility (Gordon, 2007, pp. 8-12).

The Royal Family's collection of photographs provides a glimpse into the history of numerous dogs belonging to the Royal Family, with Queen Victoria herself labeling each dog by name. Among the most famous of these dogs are Caesar, who belonged to King Edward VII, and Dash and Susan, who were cherished companion animals of Queen Victoria (MacDonogh, 1999, p. 104). Additionally, various paintings within British palaces contribute to the rich tradition of dogs within the Royal Family. For example, the 1635 painting *A Portrait of Three Senior Children of King Charles I* by Sir Anthony van Dyck depicts dogs as a recurring motif, as does Edwin Landseer's 1840 painting of Princess Victoria with her adored Spaniel, Dash. These artistic works not only provide insight into the history of the Royal Family's relationship with dogs but also suggest that the presence of dogs within the interior spaces of their residences has been a longstanding tradition since the 16th century. Over time, as dogs became symbols of aristocracy, their presence gradually became more commonplace within the homes of the middle class.

In ancient Iran, a popular pastime involved the practice of keeping various animals. Historically, even wild carnivores such as bears and lions were used in street shows (Ghezel Ayagh, 2000, p. 300). Despite being domesticated, these animals were largely confined to alleyways and neighborhoods and were often treated with disgust. The cruel treatment of animals, particularly dogs and stray cats, was frequently criticized in Qajar-era travelogues, leading to resentment among Europeans. Consequently, no dogs or cats were found inside homes during this time (Richards, 2000, p. 199). The hygienic and distinct nature of home

interiors made it difficult for animals to enter, since they were considered unhygienic. However, over time, during the Naseri Era and several centuries after the domestication of companion animals in Europe, Naser al-Din Shah Qajar became the first sovereign to allow cats inside the interiors.

During the Qajar dynasty, it is believed that foreign ambassadors were among the first to introduce dogs and cats as companion animals to Iranians. According to Joseph Arthur de Gobineau, a friend at a foreign embassy brought three Spanish dogs, one gazelle, and a dozen white rabbits from Baghdad to Tehran (de Gobineau, 2004, p. 108). However, in the beginning, these animals were met with reluctance, especially dogs, which were regarded as unclean, when it came to welcoming them into the interior spaces of homes. Dogs were first kept as companion animals by the Pahlavi Royal Family, primarily Mohammad Reza Shah, similar to Europe (Alam, 1992, p. 753). However, interviews suggest that the popularity of keeping dogs as companion animals in the broader community dates back to the 2000s.

In contemporary society, companion animals play a much more dynamic role than merely being passive companions. They have transitioned from primarily functional roles to serving as mental and emotional support for their keepers. Unlike working animals or laboratory animals used for medical or safety purposes, companion animals are not subject to potential exploitation. They are not instruments for human use but valued members of the family who bring cheerfulness, intelligence, and charm to the home. While companion animals provide mental and emotional support, they can also serve functional purposes, as seen in the use of dogs for therapy and caregiving. Their roles go beyond companionship, as they can help address mental health issues such as loneliness, urban life challenges, isolation, melancholy, and lethargy (Khera, 2016). Although companion animals are not entirely without function, their significance is best understood in terms of their capacity to address mental states.

1. Removing Animals' Instinctive Characteristics

Maintaining natural phenomena in controlled home and urban environments involves various forms of alteration, castration, and adaptation. For example, domesticated dogs undergo physical changes as a result of such adaptations; their body size, skull structure, skin, jaws, and even color have changed over time (Zeuner, 1963, p. 560). These adaptations have occurred naturally as a result of changes in lifestyle and dietary routines. For instance, apartment and city living have made it unnecessary for dogs to have thick skin, sharp teeth, and strong jaws, as they are now fed cooked and delicate foods. Thus, companion dogs have become slimmer and smaller, with a more subdued appearance. Throughout this process, dog

breeds that do not meet new consumption demands may be eliminated, leaving them no chance of being domesticated. Over several hundred years of living in homes, specific breeds of dogs have developed and reproduced to be more compatible with urban and domestic life.

While it is possible to domesticate animals, it is important to note that some of their inherent characteristics may not disappear entirely within a short period. Regarding dogs, some owners have turned to harsh methods, such as mutilation, to help them adapt to city living. This can involve several painful procedures, including tail docking, castration, removal of canine teeth, vocal cord removal, and nail trimming. Unfortunately, such practices deprive dogs of their essential abilities to protect themselves, mate, mark their territory, and express themselves through barking or whining. Furthermore, many people use strict training techniques with punishments and incentives to tame these animals, often resulting in invasive surgical interventions to eliminate specific traits. Sana states:

"Nowadays, there are shock collars that can emit a beep to remotely stop dogs from engaging in unwanted behaviors. This technological innovation enables more precise and immediate feedback during animal training, leading to significant improvements in various aspects of animal training (June 8th, 2023)."

The domestication of dogs involves teaching them commands such as sit, come, stay, shake hands, lie down, and urinate in appropriate locations as instructed by their keepers. This training helps reduce aggression and encourage good behavior, making them well-suited to live with humans. However, dogs remain animals and possess inherent characteristics that cannot be completely eliminated. Despite efforts to remove animal traits, such as aggression, they still retain certain natural features. These changes can be observed in both their physical appearance and behavior.

House dogs are trained to exhibit good behavior, including not attacking strangers, not barking excessively, and not biting. They are also taught to be patient and not to urinate on walls or doors. In small living spaces, dogs must adapt to their keepers' requirements, leading to adaptations that are often described as "miniature" or "toy-like."

In urban areas like Tehran, veterinary services cater mainly to companion animals, especially dogs. These services include medical care, physical examinations, anesthesia, pharmacy services, and surgical treatments. Urban veterinarians also help dogs adapt to urban living and their keepers' living environments. Based on our observations, this stands in contrast to traditional rural veterinary offices, which primarily serve livestock.

2. Animal Aristocracy

The companion animal industry has grown markedly worldwide, significantly improving animals' quality of life. In the United States, for instance, the companion animal population included approximately 76.3 million cats and 87.3 million dogs in 2025 (American Veterinary Medical Association, 2025). In 2024/2025, about 71 percent of all households in the United States owned a companion animal. This represents around a 10 percent increase from 1988 (American Pet Products Association [APPA], 2026a). Similarly, in the United Kingdom, the Pet Food Manufacturers' Association (UK Pet Food, 2018) estimated that 45% of British citizens owned companion animals, including 9 million dogs and 8 million cats in 2018. According to APPA (2026b, Figure 1B), the total U.S. pet industry expenditures reached 158 billion dollars in 2025, and this amount represents a significant increase of approximately 113 billion dollars compared to the years 2009. Although statistical data for Iran is limited, field interviews and observations, especially with pet shop keepers, confirm a similar trend of escalating companion animal keeping and related expenses in the country.

The cost of purchasing a companion dog can vary greatly and is subject to change. Based on conducted interviews, certain purebred dogs, such as the Tibetan Mastiff, Löwchen, Pharaoh Hound, Akita, Samoyed, and Rottweiler, can be priced at over \$1,000, with some cases reaching up to \$25,000. The range of services available for companion dogs is extensive and covers various aspects. Facilities and services for companion dogs can be categorized into four main areas, including equipment, attire, food, and activities:

1. Food and rewards
2. Care and hygiene
3. Training and exercise
4. Games

In Iran, a variety of items are available for companion dogs, falling under different categories such as bedding (blankets, beds, and crates), clothing (coats and pullovers), travel gear (car beds and safety seat belts), entertainment (toys and kennels), and specialized health and nutrition equipment (toothbrushes, massagers, combs, and cleansers for ears and eyes). Sara says:

"You can find various items for dogs in Iran, including pensions while traveling and the best veterinarians, etc. Dogs, like humans, have many needs (June 30th, 2024)."

In Tehran, the majority of dog services are provided by privately owned companies. The expenses associated with owning a dog can vary greatly, but according to the interviews conducted, they can amount to as much as 380 dollars per month in some cases. This figure is more than the average monthly expenditure of an urban household in 2020 (Statistical Centre of Iran, 2020). Families in lower-income brackets typically have lower dog-keeping costs, with a minimum budget of approximately 23 dollars per month. Dog keepers generally prefer preparing homemade food for their companion animals. They also prefer buying food supplies in bulk rather than purchasing packaged and imported items.

The allocation of expenses toward companion animal care services is often justified not only on ethical grounds but also on scientific ones. Companion animal counseling centers provide education and training to keepers to enhance their animals' welfare and promote companionship. Ethically responsible dog keepers who cannot provide full-time care hire professional dog walkers to ensure their dogs receive adequate outdoor exercise. Some medical associations recommend muzzling dogs in public to prevent them from consuming potentially harmful leftovers on the streets. Regulations on dogs' freedom to roam vary across nations, with some mandating tethering during breeding seasons. The Industrial Association of Pet Care Producers advocates occasional outdoor walks in nature for large, dangerous dogs to respect their right to a free life. However, some of these policies appear contradictory, as they entail subjugating and breeding a group of animals while simultaneously promoting their welfare.

3. Domestic Companion Animals' Class Process

The process of classifying domestic companion animals involves creating different sets of conditions for dogs within a deliberate socioeconomic system in Tehran. The upper class, due to their higher economic status, believes they can provide numerous advantages for their domestic dogs. As the economic situations of social classes improve, the size of dogs and their body structures tend to increase. Keeping larger purebred dogs is often associated with the better economic status of their keepers; as a result, these dogs have more facilities and services available to them. It is common for many of these dogs to be sent to the countryside once a week for exercise and fresh air, while some keepers hire individuals as dog walkers to provide daily outdoor walks for their companion animals. These arrangements offer the dogs an opportunity to socialize and engage in physical activities outside of their homes. Arya says:

"I own a Tibetan Mastiff, which is originally a mountain sheepdog from Tibet. If you do not walk them outdoors, they will become depressed, and it may even

lead to death. Thus, these dogs have to be regularly walked outdoors (July 1st, 2024)."

The cost of dog walking for Arya's giant \$23,000 dog is \$385 per month, which is significantly more than the monthly basic income plus benefits of a laborer (\$223). Arya pays a young man \$9.5 per day to walk the dog, including weekends, to prevent the animal from becoming depressed. It seems reasonable for Arya to pay \$285 per month to ensure proper care for the dog. Unlike some domestic dogs in less privileged areas of the city, Arya has chosen not to neuter his purebred dog because he believes that castration may have negative physical and mental effects on the animal. Rastin says:

"We often take our dog to our garden on the outskirts of the city because the atmosphere there lifts its spirits. The fact that it can rule over a territory of its own over there is good enough. Of course, our house is also spacious enough to accommodate the dog (July 8th, 2024)."

The effort to normalize the living conditions of domestic dogs is a costly endeavor that is heavily promoted by companion animal supply companies, health institutions, and animal rights activists. This has become a focal point for the upper echelons of society. In contrast to lower-class domestic dogs, which are often confined to small spaces, dogs belonging to the upper classes live in spacious homes, and regular walks are a vital part of their routine. They are also typically not neutered or subjected to vocal cord mutilation to avoid disturbing neighbors. Upper-class individuals believe that manipulating their companion animals' organs is unjustifiable, even when ethical considerations are taken into account. Tida says:

"You see, one who keeps a pet at home must acknowledge the responsibilities that come with it. It is like one's own child. If one's house is small, one is impatient, or one doesn't have enough financial resources, one should not decide to keep a pet (July 5th, 2023)."

Although personal ethics may play a role in this matter, it is important to recognize that the social gap among companion animal keepers also plays a significant role. The level, type, and severity of provisions imposed on companion animals can vary depending on the keeper's social status, highlighting the impact of socioeconomic factors on animal welfare.

4. Animals' Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism is the practice of assigning human qualities and characteristics to non-human entities or phenomena. This concept appears in various forms of art in pre-modern

societies, both domestically and internationally. Ancient works of art, such as the Persian Griffins and the Assyrian Lamassu, exemplify animal anthropomorphism. Ancient literature likewise highlights this concept, with notable examples including the books *The Assyrian Sacred Tree* [Derakht-e Asourik] and *Kelileh o Demneh*. As societies moved from the mythological era to modernism, driven by the world's disenchantment, there has been a shift away from personifying elements and phenomena. This shift is considered reasonable by some, as it departs from the anthropomorphizing tendencies of the past. In pre-modern societies, the fluidity of encounters and mixed perceptions of the world led individuals to view all-natural elements as having different forms of existence and consciousness, resulting in the widespread anthropomorphism of nature.

Anthropomorphism in pre-modern communities served as a reflection of human interactions with the world, rather than merely an aesthetic appeal. It was common in popular culture and folk literature to personify non-human entities. One notable example is Gholam-Hosseini Sa'edi's book *Ahl-e Hava* (1966), which explores the cultural models of distinction and personification within tribal societies. These cultures went so far as to distinguish and personify even formless elements, such as the south winds, portraying them as embodiments of good versus evil, Muslim versus infidel, or daemon versus fairy.

The text discusses the contrasting views on animal treatment in scientific experiments and consumerist societies. The scientific approach often objectifies animals, treating them as insensate objects and leading to brutal experimental practices. By contrast, consumerism fuels the personification of animals as family members, blurring the line between human and animal experiences and promoting the use of human tools and accessories for animals. These practices contribute to the anthropomorphism of animals in modern society. Sara says:

"I call Jessy my daughter. Now, my true daughter, Kimya, also calls her Sister Jessy (March 4th, 2024)."

Furthermore, companion animal keepers often use endearing terms and speak in a childlike manner to express their deep love and affection for their companion animals, particularly dogs, who are often treated as if they were human children. This is evident in expressions such as "I'd die for you," "my son," "my love," and similar phrases. Physical displays of affection, such as kissing and hugging, are also common, as are referring to their dogs as "my kid" and comparing them to human children. As a result, dogs are often integrated into the family and treated as if they were human members. Tida says:

"I caress it so much every day. If I don't, it spoils itself and flatters itself. A dog must be held dear. It will get depressed if ignored (February 28th, 2024)."

However, this shift in social norms can lead to controversy over the castration of dogs, as they are expected to exhibit polite behavior, be free of sexual desire, and maintain cleanliness. Like an only child in a nuclear family, a dog's character traits become a significant topic of family discussions. This further underscores the significant role dogs play in the lives of their keepers and the extent to which they are viewed as family members. Feria says:

"Our kid is very cute. It is adored by the whole family and has even stayed as a guest for a couple of days. However, due to its sensitivity and tendency to become depressed and uneasy instantly, I hurriedly went and brought it back home (March 5th, 2024)."

The anthropomorphism of dogs is a commonly observed phenomenon in which they are often personified based on human traits and public affection rather than being recognized for their unique characteristics. Companion animal keepers often describe their furry friends using human emotions such as missing someone, depression, boredom, anxiety, loneliness, tiredness, and sadness. This process involves removing animal features, often through castration, and attributing human (childlike) traits to the dogs instead.

However, it is important to note that not all dogs display these traits and characteristics, particularly breeds considered non-domestic due to features such as being mongrels, having large body structures, low trainability, or lacking physical attractiveness. These dogs often live-in informal settings, such as the urban periphery, and are occasionally collected by the municipality and transferred to city shelters. It is vital to acknowledge that while dogs may exhibit human-like emotions and behaviors, they should still be recognized and celebrated for their unique qualities and individuality.

5. Animal Shelters

The word "shelter" has etymological roots in the two words "shield" and "-ure," with "shield" connoting protection and "-ure" referring to an action or process. In hilly terrains, shelters are typically rooms or cabins that offer protection from harsh weather conditions such as snow and blizzards. During times of war, shelters in cities are commonly linked to protection from military attacks. Nevertheless, presently, shelters are primarily intended for animals, especially stray creatures like stray dogs.

Stray dogs are those that have been forsaken by their keepers and found wandering in public areas (Sternheim, 2012, p. 3). Although urban stray dogs are less prevalent than non-urban stray dogs, they receive more attention and cause more anxiety because of their presence in urban settings (Chandran & Azeez, 2016). Supporters of animal rights contend that a significant proportion of stray dogs were once companion animals that were abandoned. As a result, it is vital to take responsibility for the protection of domesticated animals to help reduce the number of homeless creatures (World Organisation for Animal Health, 2009, p. 313).

Shelters are typically located on the outskirts of urban areas and are often adjacent to facilities such as waste management systems, sewage treatment plants, orphanages, and health facilities. Rabies is a major concern for health officials regarding the transmission of diseases from dogs to humans (Guilloux et al., 2018, p. 90). Therefore, the primary objective of these shelters is to safeguard both the health of people and the well-being of stray dogs that inhabit urban environments. Once captured, these dogs are transferred to shelters, where they undergo a series of procedures, including isolation, vaccination, and treatment for injuries, fractures, or illnesses. To control their population, the dogs are also sterilized through castration. Following these procedures, the dogs are made available for adoption, with interested parties required to make a payment. If the dogs do not get adopted, they will spend the rest of their lives at the shelter. These shelters are typically run as private institutions or charities, with funding often coming from public donations and the sales of dogs residing in the facility.

The capture of animals is often justified by two main discourses: ethical and medical. In the medical discourse, stray dogs in urban areas are viewed as a potential health hazard to humans; hence, the capture and elimination of these dogs is considered a necessary measure to protect public health. On the other hand, in the ethical discourse, mainly championed by the middle class, stray dogs—also known as unsupervised and helpless—are perceived as disadvantaged and in need of human support to survive. In Iran, numerous initiatives have been launched to support animals, which aligns with the concept of hegemony in both ethical and medical discourses. It is important to note that these justifications may differ across contexts, and ongoing debates exist regarding the most appropriate and humane approaches to tackling the issue of stray animals.

The process of finding a home for dogs in shelters reflects the city's approach to abandoned animals, which is based on a natural/rational duality. From this perspective, the city embodies rationality, civilization, urbanism, and control, while anything regarded as irrational,

uncivilized, unregulated, or anonymous is eliminated from the urban environment. Stray dogs are typically found in hills, deserts, and other abandoned areas away from cities, entering formal urban areas only at night. They strategically avoid heavily populated areas in both location and time. Despite these limitations, they can survive within cities by using their nocturnal activity and establishing territories in non-residential and informal spaces. Surrendering dogs to shelters is more advantageous than other alternatives. These dogs receive sufficient food, although their diets are inconsistent and may include items like pasta, stale bread, and carrots. Despite being neutered and lacking their own territories, they are provided with a safe and healthy environment in shelters.

Although these dogs are technically allowed to return to cities, the likelihood of this happening is higher for healthy, younger dogs, especially those belonging to specific, highly regarded breeds. In essence, dogs with advantageous traits, such as age, health, appearance, sex, and breed, have a better chance of being adopted by a new caregiver. As a result, shelters give priority to dogs that are apartment-friendly and have distinctive labels, such as being younger, healthier, and of a better breed. To promote their efforts and attract potential adopters, shelters often share success stories of dogs that have been successfully rehomed in apartments and villas in countries like Canada and the USA (for example, see the website of the Vafa Animal Shelter). It is important to note that these success stories do not represent all dogs in shelters. A shelter is a temporary residence for dogs and should not be mistaken for a prison. Nevertheless, many dogs lacking the desired qualities, such as youth, health, or an agreeable appearance, end up making the shelter their permanent home.

Conclusion and Discussion

In this study, we moved beyond conventional approaches—such as psychological assessments of the effects of dog keeping (Ziadloo et al., 2022)—that primarily examined the psychological or personality-based causes of people’s tendency to keep dogs. Instead, this research focused on the experiences and social consequences of dog keeping, centering on the animal itself.

The findings reveal that the domestication of dogs is not merely about accepting a new member into the household; rather, it is part of a broader civilizing process—within Norbert Elias’s theoretical framework—through which dogs’ instincts are disciplined and their animality is gradually suppressed. The study also shows that this process of civilization is realized through the exercise of rationality and biopower over the bodies and behaviors of

dogs: the elimination of “irrational” behaviors in domestic dogs and the exclusion or abandonment of others deemed unfit for domestic or urban life.

The research identifies five key dimensions through which the domestication process unfolds: 1. De-animalization, achieved through enforced physical and behavioral modifications; 2. Animal aristocratization, wherein dogs are transformed into luxury commodities; 3. Class stratification, which ties the animal’s quality of life to the social position of its keeper; 4. Anthropomorphization, through which dogs are assigned familial or companion roles such as “child” or “playmate”; and 5. Sheltering and rehoming, function as mechanisms for excluding animals that lack the necessary traits for cohabitation in domestic and urban spaces.

In the social sciences, previous studies such as Najafi-Asl (2024) and Taghavi (2020) have mainly focused on the social and religious motivations behind dog keeping—such as Westernization, emotional deprivation, or the financial burdens of childbearing. However, the present study demonstrates that the domestication of dogs in Iran results from the intersection of class dynamics, medical discourse, and instrumental rationality. It is, therefore, a hybrid and complex phenomenon, not reducible to mere Western imitation or emotional need—an interpretation that, to some extent, aligns with the findings of Grisoni and Mashkour (2016).

The findings of this study indicate that the process of domesticating companion animals in modern societies is not a natural transformation but rather a cultural, economic, and biopolitical mechanism. Animals are detached from their biological position and redefined within the city’s anthropocentric order. This reconfiguration occurs through the disciplining of the animal’s body, artificial selection and breeding (as opposed to natural selection), and the regulation of instinctual behaviors. Ultimately, these processes produce class-based hierarchies in which aristocratic animals stand on one side and sheltered or abandoned animals on the other.

The pet industry in Tehran—simultaneously grounded in both the ethics of care and consumerism—illustrates that the human–animal relationship under modernity embodies a complex synthesis of empathy, companionship, power, and domination. The companion animal is no longer merely a natural being; it becomes a natural–rational entity whose value is determined by its breed, appearance, and conformity to urban lifestyle standards.

Beyond the findings of Bagheri et al. (2022), who examined the social exclusion of dog keepers, this research reveals a broader and deeper hierarchy of exclusion that may also

encompass the dogs themselves—particularly those lacking socially valued traits such as pedigree or aesthetic appeal. The results suggest that the domestic dog has been redefined and constrained within the framework of urban culture and rationality. Much like urban parks, the domestic dog represents a tamed and regulated form of nature—a remnant of the natural world that persists within the city but is confined within the cultural, moral, and rational boundaries of modern human life.

This study set out to answer a fundamental question: Through what mechanisms does the domestic dog in Tehran acquire the possibility of urban and domestic existence? Drawing on field evidence, historical data, and the theoretical frameworks of Elias and Foucault, the study demonstrated that the domestication of dogs in Tehran is not merely a personal choice, a Western cultural influence, or the natural outcome of canine domestication. Rather, it is the product of a rationalized mechanism grounded in the exclusion and disciplining of what is deemed less “civilized.” In this process, the animal is neither entirely natural nor fully cultural. It becomes a mediating being—a disciplined yet living form of nature whose survival depends on its adaptation to human order. The city, through its apartments, parks, and shelters, generates a new lifeworld in which control and compassion coexist. The dog, reconstituted through training, medicalization, and care, thus embodies the simultaneous domestication of both nature and the human self.

The study further reveals a fundamental paradox in the rationalized human encounter with dogs. The urban human turns to dogs to fill various voids—including the absence of nature—yet, through systematic and rational forms of power, deprives the animal of its inherent naturalness. Consequently, the contemporary domestic dog is no longer a purely natural being but the ultimate product of the industry of citizenship: a being that, before being “natural,” is a culturally and rationally reproduced subject.

Finally, this research is among the first sociological studies in Iran to focus on the animals themselves, examining the meanings and forms of suffering imposed on them. Given the rapid expansion of the pet industry in Iran and the country’s long historical relationship with animals, this dimension of sociological inquiry appears to have been largely neglected by social scientists. Hence, this study may serve as a starting point for broader discussions about the place, experiences, and meanings of animals within the lived world of Iranians.

Ethical Considerations

Compliance with Ethical Guidelines

All ethical considerations relevant to social research and human–animal studies were carefully observed throughout this study. Participation in the research was entirely voluntary, and all participants were informed about the aims, procedures, and intended use of the data before providing consent. The confidentiality and anonymity of participants were fully protected, and all identifying information was removed from the interview transcripts and research records. The researchers ensured the accuracy of citations, respected intellectual property rights, and adhered to established standards of qualitative data collection, storage, and reporting.

Given the study's focus on human–animal relations, special attention was paid to animal welfare and the avoidance of any form of harm, distress, or unnecessary interference with animals.

The research was conducted in accordance with the principles outlined in the *Guideline for the Care and Use of Laboratory Animals in Iran* (Ahmadi-Noorbakhsh et al., 2021). and the *CIOMS–ICLAS International Guiding Principles for Biomedical Research Involving Animals* (2012). As this study was observational and interview-based, no experimental procedures, physical interventions, or biological manipulations were performed on the animals.

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Authors' Contributions

The authors collaborated jointly on the conceptualization and development of this manuscript. The methodological design and fieldwork interviews were primarily executed by Fardad Ahmadi, while the theoretical and conceptual synthesis, along with the historical analysis, were carried out by Rasoul Mohsenzadeh. Both authors have reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

There are no financial or personal conflicts of interest regarding this article. This manuscript has not been submitted to any other journal for publication. The interviews and data for this research have been documented with complete transparency; the audio files of selected interviews are available from the authors upon reasonable academic request.

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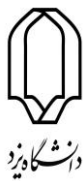
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روابط انسان و حیوانات همدم در تهران: دیدگاه‌های انسان‌شناختی در مورد پویایی‌های اهلی‌سازی

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مقاله پژوهشی

چکیده

زمینه و هدف: این پژوهش بررسی می‌کند که چگونه سگ‌های خانگی در تهران از طریق فرایندهای فرهنگی، طبقاتی و زیستی-سیاسی به همدمانی شهری و تحت نظارت تبدیل می‌شوند. این مطالعه با بهره‌گیری از نظریه تمدن‌سازی نوربرت الیاس و مفاهیم عقلانی‌سازی و طرد نزد میشل فوکو نشان می‌دهد که چگونه بدن‌ها و رفتارهای سگ‌ها برای انطباق با هنجارهای زندگی شهری معاصر ایران دگرگون و بازسازی می‌شوند.

روش و داده‌ها: این پژوهش با رویکرد پدیدارشناسی هرمنوتیک انجام شده است. داده‌ها از طریق مصاحبه‌های عمیق با صاحبان سگ، دامپزشکان، فعالان حوزه حیوانات و مدیران پناهگاه‌های حیوانات در تهران و نیز با استفاده از اسناد تاریخی و مشاهدات میدانی گردآوری شده‌اند. داده‌ها با روش تحلیل تماتیک پدیدارشناسی تفسیر شدند.

یافته‌ها: تحلیل داده‌ها پنج سازوکار اصلی را در فرایند اهلی‌سازی سگ‌ها در تهران شناسایی می‌کند: سرکوب غرایز حیوانی، ظهور سگ‌ها به عنوان کالاهایی طبقاتی، مراقبت نابرابر بر اساس وضعیت اقتصادی-اجتماعی، انسان‌انگاری و تبدیل سگ‌ها به اعضای خانواده و تنظیم زیستی-سیاسی حیوانات طردشده از طریق پناهگاه‌ها. این یافته‌ها نشان می‌دهند که اهلی‌سازی نه یک فرایند طبیعی، بلکه پروژه‌ای فرهنگی و سیاسی است.

بحث و نتیجه‌گیری: سگ‌های خانگی در تهران به مثابه موجوداتی هیبریدی ظهور پیدا کرده‌اند که در بستر نظام‌های درهم‌تنیده مراقبت، انضباط و قدرت طبقاتی شکل می‌گیرند. این پژوهش با مفهوم‌پردازی حیوانات همدم به عنوان سوژه‌های اجتماعی فعال که تحت تأثیر عقلانیت‌های مدرن شهری در ایران ساخته می‌شوند، به ادبیات انسان‌شناسی شهری و انسان‌شناسی روابط انسان-حیوان کمک می‌کند.

واژگان کلیدی: شهر، طبیعت، سگ، عقیم‌سازی، همگون‌سازی.

پیام اصلی: سگ‌های همدم در تهران صرفاً وارد خانوارهای شهری نمی‌شوند؛ بلکه از طریق سازوکارهای متمدن‌ساز، اقتصادی و زیستی-سیاسی به‌طور فعال دگرگون می‌شوند. این سازوکارها بدن‌های آنان را منضبط می‌کند، زندگی‌شان را در امتداد خطوط طبقاتی سامان می‌دهد و آن‌ها را به نمادهایی از مراقبت، منزلت اجتماعی و طبیعت مهارشده در شهر مدرن تبدیل می‌کند.

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