Hamsters and children – The sidekick family members?

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Hamsters are commonly portrayed as good "starter pets" for a child to safely practice caring and responsibility. Hamsters are purchased for children as easy and carefree animals either for the purpose of rehearsing for, or as a compromise or replacement of what are considered to be the more serious companion animals: dogs or cats.

This presentation is based on empirical work with children and hamsters, complemented by analyses of various textual materials on companion animals directed to parents. The question probed is "How does the adult-imposed culture of companion animals define children, hamsters and their relationship in a family?"

The theoretical-methodological approach follows posthumanist (non-anthropocentric) renderings of multispecies ethnography. This is to say that children and hamsters are considered as enabling and shaping the kinds of beings they can be in their shared lives and within their social context. For example, due to the adult imposed and speciesist culture of hamsters as practice animals, the relationship between a child and a hamster often becomes defined through the the child aiming prove to the parents that he/she is responsible enough. The hamster is rendered a tool.

While many children in our study are attached to their hamsters, they are also well aware of the purpose of the animal within the companion animal hierarchy and culture. Hamsters, as handy and cheap pets – "They even die relatively fast, so your child learns how to deal with loss and death" – are closer to pedagogical objects or gadgets than sensing, feeling animal individuals. We argue that this can render both the child and the hamster as sidekicks in their social contexts and in their relationship with each other. Rather than trusted and treated as complete beings, both children and hamsters become guineapigs (sic) or laboratory animals in adult-imposed experiments. These are often based on developmental psychological reasoning rather than social scientific ideas of shared multispecies communities and the viewpoint of the child or the hamster. In the case of the hamster, the entire unique life of one individual is subjected to being the object of someone else’s pedagogical desire.

*Keywords: child-animal relations, hamsters, companion animals, multispecies ethnography*