III Human–dog interactions

12 Dogs as human companions: a review of the relationship

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Introduction

People have been closely associated with dogs – or with their wolf ancestors – for many thousands of years, although the precise origin of the relationship is still the subject of speculation (see Clutton-Brock, 1980 and Chapter 2). Evidence from Epipalaeolithic and early Neolithic sites indicates that humans probably began taming wolves at least 12 000 years ago, and it is clear that by the time of the ancient Egyptians several distinct breeds of dogs already existed (Clutton-Brock, 1976). Currently in the United States, more than 50 million dogs reside in roughly 38% of all households (Market Research Corporation of America, 1987; American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, 1988). Of these, the vast majority are kept as social companions.

Are dogs special?

Comparisons with other species

Among the array of different species that serve as companion animals, dogs are in many ways exceptional. As early as the turn of this century, a large survey of children's school essays about pet animals had already demonstrated the dog's outstanding popularity (Bucke, 1903). The children in this survey emphasized the highly personalized attention provided by their dogs with phrases such as 'he likes me', 'guards me', 'follows me', 'protects me',' 'barks when I come home from school', 'is good to me' and so on. The children also appreciated the dog's ability to express love and affection by jumping up, running around, wagging its tail and soliciting play. In addition, many mentioned how the dog kept them company and played with them when they were feeling lonely or sad. Many of these early observations have now been confirmed by the results of more recent studies.

In a telephone survey of 436 Rhode Island residents, for example, Albert & Bulcroft (1987, 1988) found that dogs were the most popular pet. Sixty per cent of pet owners had at least one dog, and dogs were the most desired pet among non-owners. Owners who selected dogs as their favorite pets reported feeling more attached to their pets than did people whose favorite pets were cats or other animals. Dogs also seemed to be more adept at playing affectionate and emotionally supportive roles than other animals, leading the authors to suggest that perhaps dogs interacted with their owners in ways resulting in higher levels of attachment. The survey found that dog owners spent more time actively

interacting with their pets – grooming them, walking them, giving them special treats – than did cat owners (see Fig. 12.1). Dog owners were also more willing to spend any amount on veterinary treatment than cat owners, although more cat than dog owners admitted to sleeping with their pets.

In another study based on observations of people and their pets interacting at home, Miller & Lago (1990) found that interactive behavior, such as whining, begging, making noise, obeying and being near the owner, occurred at far greater frequency with dogs than with cats (see Fig. 12.2). Dogs also interacted actively with unfamiliar persons whereas cats tended to be calm and aloof (Fig. 12.3). Owners issued a mean of 0.48 orders to their dogs, as compared with 0.07 orders given to cats. However, owners told an average of 1.87 stories about their cats but only 1.32 stories about dogs. In a previous study, Lago, Knight & Connell (1983) had reported higher levels of both behavioral and physical intimacy between dogs and their owners than between people and cats, although some cat owners were also extremely attached to their pets. Seventy-one per cent of dog owners also regarded themselves as dominant compared to only 57% of cat owners. Overall, these studies suggest that dogs are better at adjusting their interactions to the owner's demands than other companion animals. Dogs exhibit highly coordinated behavior; standing, moving and sitting in synchrony with their owners to an extent rarely observed in cats.

Fig. 12.1. Descriptions of involvement and activities with dogs and cats as reported by owners. After Albert & Bulcroft (1987).

Fig. 12.2. Mean frequency that specific behaviors were performed by dogs and cats observed with their owners and a stranger at home. After Miller & Lago (1990).

Fig. 12.3. Mean frequency that specific behaviors were directed toward a stranger by dogs and cats observed with their owners at home. After Miller & Lago (1990).

When dog owners in Melbourne, Australia, were asked to supply a list of adjectives describing their dogs, and these were subsequently subjected to factor analysis, three major factors emerged: acceptance/trust, love/friendship and intelligence/obedience (Salmon & Salmon, 1983). These owners felt that the main benefits of dog ownership were companionship, protection and happiness or pleasure. Three-quarters of them felt a need to be physically protected by a dog, and the same number believed that their dog helped to protect their home from burglary.

Comparisons with human companions

Two previous studies have attempted to compare the importance of pets with that of human family members. The first, without distinguishing the species of pet, surveyed a convenience sample of 62 respondents of whom 8% reported feeling closer to the pet than to anyone else in the family. However, a much higher number (44%) reported that the pet received the most strokes of anyone in the family, and that it served as the focus of favorable attention. Many of these pet owners seemed to find it easier to offer affection

to their animals than to other family members. In many cases, the animal was also highly emotionally involved with the people in the households surveyed. Eighty-one per cent of respondents reported that pets reacted to anxiety and tension within the family by developing diarrhea, gastric upsets or epileptic seizures (Cain, 1983).

The second study sought to assess the relative closeness that dog owners felt towards their dogs by asking them to represent their significant relationships pictorially using a technique known as the Family Life Space Diagram. More than one-third of these owners placed the dog closer to themselves than to any other family member (Barker & Barker, 1988). Taken together, the results of these two studies suggest that, for about a third of owners, the dog's importance ranks on a par with that of human members of the family.

When Davis (1987*a*) asked preadolescents the reasons why their families had acquired a dog, most referred to a sort of pet deficit – simply needing a pet – as the main reason. Entertainment, the parents' need for a pet, companionship and love were also mentioned but by fewer children (see Fig. 12.4). In another study (Bryant, 1985, 1986), children of a similar age mentioned play/companionship, love/affection, physical qualities, good temperament, entertainment, reliable friend and opportunities for nurturance when asked what their own pets provided. When describing neighborhood pets, however, love and reliable friendship were omitted from the list of special traits. The three most frequent interactions with dogs revealed in a survey of ten-year-olds were: playing with, exercising and talking to dogs (MacDonald, 1981).

Fig. 12.4. Reasons families acquire a dog as reported by preadolescents. After Davis (1987*a*).

Why dogs are special

Displays of affection

Many behavior patterns of dogs seem especially designed to elicit attachment. Dogs are naturally affectionate, a trait that is more characteristic of some breeds than others (Hart & Hart, 1988), and they can even be instructed to provide affection. It is standard practice, for example, to teach service dogs that assist people who use wheelchairs to provide their owners with displays of affection in response to a verbal command (Mader, Hart & Bergin, 1989).

Darwin (1873) described the specific behavior patterns dogs use to express affection. They include: lowering the head and whole body with the tail extended and wagging from side to side, drawing the ears back alongside the head, rubbing up against the owner, and attempting to lick the owner's hands, face or ears. These ritualized greeting signals indicate to owners that the dog is pleased to see them. Dogs seek out their owners for mutual contact, and provide affection that is not contingent upon the owner's success or appearance. In this way, dogs may provide their owners with feelings of unconditional acceptance and, at the same time, enhance the person's attachment to the dog (Catanzaro,

1984; Voith, 1985). The unconditional nature of the dog's affection may also allow owners to direct or redirect anger at the dog without putting the entire relationship at risk.

Loyalty and devotion

Certain traits make dogs ideally suited to be human companions. They develop specific attachments for individuals, and remain near or in physical contact with their owners as if attached by an invisible cord. They also tend to be active during the daytime when people are active and, with appropriate training, they defer to us as dominant social partners. More important, however, are dogs' extraordinary powers of nonverbal expression by which they signal their love and regard for humans.

In order to assess the satisfaction of dog owners with various aspects of their pets' behavior, Serpell (1983) invited 57 urban dog owners to rate both their own pets and a hypothetical 'ideal' dog on 22 different behavioral traits. The traits with the highest ratings and the least variability between owners included expressiveness, enjoyment of walks, loyalty/affection, welcoming behavior and attentiveness. These ratings also corresponded closely with the owners' 'ideal' ratings. Traits with more average ratings and considerable variation between owners included playfulness, attachment to one person, friendliness to other people, territoriality, friendliness to other dogs, attitude to food and sense of humor. Serpell (1983) concluded from this that owners varied in their preferences for these traits and that they were therefore less important for insuring compatibility in the relationship.

A further important asset of dogs, although it is one they share in common with other pets, is that they lack the power of speech and are therefore unable to offer advice, judgement or criticism. Nevertheless, they are affectionate and empathic so their friendship tends to be seen as sincere, reliable and trustworthy, while at the same time lacking many of the threats associated with human friendships (Serpell, 1986*a*).

Play

According to one study (Stallones *et al*., 1988), 95% of pet owners regard their pets as friends. A similar proportion of dog owners reported playing often with their pets, as compared with only 73% of cat owners. Similarly, when asked to respond to the statement, 'the dog gives me an outlet for playfulness', 80% of 259 Swedish dog-owners agreed (Adell-Bath *et al*., 1979). In another study involving observations of people walking their dogs, some type of game with the dog was observed on 36% of walks (Messent, 1983). In general, more fetch-type games were played with medium-sized to large dogs than with small ones.

Surprisingly little is known about the amount of time people spend playing with their animal companions. In a survey of Swiss pet owners, Turner (1985) found that dog owners reported spending an average of 17.5 hours per week interacting with their pets while cat owners reported an average of only 10 hours. However, when 96 California veterinary students were asked to estimate the amount of time they spent interacting with

their pets, the dog owners averaged 35.3 hours per week and the cat owners averaged 33.2 hours. For dog owners, 44% of this time was estimated as play, as compared with 36% for cat owners (J. Angus, personal communication).

Fig. 12.5. Attraction of young children to animals. Young toddlers respond to both mechanical and live dogs, but a real dog elicits the stronger interest (Kidd & Kidd, 1987). Photograph: Joan Borinstein.

Touch

A study of three- to four-year-old children's interactions with dogs revealed that 67% of these interactions involved body contact with the dog, such as putting a hand on the dog, patting it or hitting it. In contrast, vocal and verbal behavior comprised only 9% of the interactions (Millot & Filiatre, 1986). In a subsequent study touching was again the most frequent behavior shown in the presence of a dog, accounting for 40% of all child-dog interactions (Filiatre *et al*., 1988).

In an analysis of 1105 photographs of dogs or cats in a family setting submitted to a national photographic contest, Katcher & Beck (1985) found that 97% of the pictures illustrated people and animals touching each other, generally with the heads of the animal and human close together. Over 92% showed a dyadic relationship, with one person and one animal occupying the center of the photograph. Touching was also a primary mode of interaction with a dog in a study of nursing home residents (Neer, Dorn & Grayson, 1987). Of the nine different types of interaction recorded involving the dog, grooming and touching were the two most commonly employed by residents.

The value of dogs for different types of people

Albert & Bulcroft's (1987, 1988) Rhode Island study found that households with children at home tended to have more pets than either widows or families with an 'empty nest', or with an infant. However, feelings of attachment to the pet were lowest in families where children were at home. Although pet ownership was highest among households containing large families, attachment to pets was highest among people living alone and among couples who did not have children living at home. The authors noted that the single, divorced and widowed individuals and childless couples who were most attached to their pets also expressed more anthropomorphic attitudes to their pets, particularly in relation to dogs. In a longitudinal study of older people (a population that experiences increasing losses), Lago, Connell & Knight (1985) found that persons who stayed at home and spent more time with the animal also became more attached and formed a stronger relationship with it.

An 'invisible cord' often seems to connect a dog to its owner (Serpell, 1986*a*). Almost invariably, dogs are more attentive to their owners than their owners are to them. In a study of ten families' interactions with their dogs, the associations between the dog and the adult family members were found to differ between families with and without children (Smith, 1983). In childless families the people and the dog interacted more