



Measuring dog-owner relationships: Crossing boundaries between animal behaviour and human psychology



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ABSTRACT

Previous research suggests that dogs (*Canis familiaris*) form attachment bonds to their owners and that the strengths of the attachment can vary. However, it does not seem reasonable to believe that all dogs share the same attachment style, considering their differences in genetic background, their previous experiences and the many different caregiving strategies that are known to exist among humans. Rather, the level of security felt by dogs towards their owner probably varies, as seen in children towards their parent. The aim of this review is to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of current approaches of investigating the dog-human relationship in order to contribute to this rapidly developing field. The main focus is related to trying to increase our understanding about the dog's experience of the relationship. Current knowledge about the dog-human relationship is reviewed and discussed. Concepts from human psychology are used to clarify some of the terms that are also used in anthrozoology, thereby giving stronger theoretical support to our suggestions of how to adapt and apply methods to further develop assessments of dog-owner relationships. We highlight potential factors that deserve more attention in future studies to improve our understanding of the dog-human relationship, and we suggest a more coordinated approach, with a unified terminology, to develop an overarching framework. Suggestions for the future to achieve this include focusing on attachment styles at the individual dog level, rather than talking about the 'average' dog. Furthermore, a dyadic approach is suggested, where both the attributes of the dog (its attachment style) and the owner (its caregiving strategy) are incorporated when assessing the relationship. One way to do this is to focus on the balance between the dog's separation distress and how effective the owner's caregiving strategy is in calming the dog when reunited. The consequence, from an applied point of view, is owners becoming more aware of what type of attachment style their dog has and what caregiving strategy they have. Knowing this may contribute to identifying sources of conflict in past or present relationships, so helping owners form more successful and positive relationships in the future. It may also contribute to better matching when rehoming shelter dogs.

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1. Introduction

Many people report that they are as emotionally involved with their dog (*Canis familiaris*) as they are with their family or friends (Archer, 1997; Barker and Barker, 1988; Voith, 1985) and the dog-owner relationship has been suggested to resemble that between a child and its parents (Topál et al., 1998; Serpell, 2004). Experiences from relationships, especially early in life, are important for an animal's social development and its ability to cope with its surroundings (e.g. Foyer et al., 2014; Gazzano et al., 2008a; Sachser et al., 2013 for a review).

A relationship, that is to say the bond the owner has to the dog and *vice versa*, is a multi-faceted and complex phenomenon. This review aims to combine relevant factors related to bonding, both from the dog's perspective as well as the owner's.

In the past, efforts have been made to answer whether or not the bonds dogs have to human caretakers constitute an attachment or not. Research has shown that dogs do express attachment behaviour towards their owners, as tested in the Strange Situation Procedure (SSP) (e.g. Mariti et al., 2013; Palestrini et al., 2005; Palmer and Custance, 2008). However, in current anthrozoology literature, the difference between attachment behaviour and attachment bond seems unclear. While the former can be expressed to many people or objects and in a variety of contexts, the latter is a developed strategy directed only to a few individuals (Bowlby, 1958). One section of this review compares the similarities and differences in how terms from human psychology are used in anthrozoology. For example, we question the use of the terms 'stronger' or 'weaker' when referring to an attachment (e.g. Marinelli et al., 2007; Mariti et al., 2013; Rehn et al., 2014a). These are rarely (if ever) used in human psychology, where the focus is on the style of the attachment, not the strength of it. Moreover, so far the majority of studies have summarised data from individual dogs and focused on responses at the group level, to for example, provide evidence of an existing attachment bond or to compare responses between different types of dogs, rather than taking into consideration variation at the individual level. This averaging across dogs may mask different strategies between different dog-owner dyads. Worthwhile underlining here is the exception in the initial work of Topál et al. (1998), who categorised dogs into different 'types' based on their behaviour in the SSP, i.e. the anxiety, acceptance and attachment factors (see also e.g. Fallani et al., 2006; Marinelli et al., 2007). In human psychology literature, three organised attachment styles are well defined in infants. These are all functional in that they act to successfully regulate emotions in situations with the attachment figure (e.g. the parent). The development of these different strategies is mainly influenced by the caregiving behaviour of the attachment figure. Hence, we propose a dyadic approach when investigating the relationship between dogs and their owners, taking into consideration attributes of both the dog and the owner.

In this review, we propose that the next step in anthrozoology research is to use all the potential information within attachment theory, to reveal whether or not *different* types of relationship styles exist among different dog-owner dyads and how they might be

identified. Furthermore, we give suggestions for which factors may contribute to the development of different attachment styles in dogs, hence deserving more attention in future studies of the dog-human relationship. We will 1) describe the terms associated with relationship quality, as defined in the human literature, 2) survey the available anthrozoology literature to compare and evaluate current experimental methods to measure the relationship between dogs and humans. Lastly, we will 3) propose where the focus should lie in future assessments of dog-owner relationships.

2. Relationships, affectional bonds and attachment

A relationship is generally referred to as an association between two individuals over time (Hinde, 1976a). Even long-term, 'stable' relationships are dynamic in the sense that they are constantly affected by the regular interactions that occur between the involved individuals (Hinde, 1976b). In other words, and perhaps not very surprisingly, the quality of a relationship is highly dependent on the direct effects of day-to-day interactions as well as on the indirect effects of external factors contributing to the individual's physiological or psychological state.

Relationships may result from or lead to an affectional bond, defined as "a relatively long-lasting tie in which the partner is important as a unique individual and is interchangeable with none other" (Ainsworth, 1989). Unfortunately, the term 'bond' is sometimes equated with a 'relationship' within anthrozoology literature. In contrast to a relationship, which is dyadic, a bond refers to the characteristic of an individual, i.e. it describes one individual's bond to another individual (Ainsworth, 1989). This way, it is possible to claim that an owner is affectionately bonded to his/her dog, without having to account for whether or not the dog is bonded to the owner.

2.1. Attachment and caregiving

Attachment is defined as an affectional bond with the added experience of security and comfort obtained from the relationship (Ainsworth, 1989). It is applied to many long-lasting bonds in humans, such as those experienced by an infant to its mother, that of a person to his/her romantic partner or to close friends (Crowell et al., 2008; Hazan and Shaver, 1987). Attachment has also been applied to dog-human relationships, although sometimes without accurate consideration of the specific criteria that must be met for it to be labeled an attachment (see Kobak, 2009). Bowlby (1969) developed attachment theory based on fundamental principles in ethology, evolutionary biology and cognitive science. He formulated the operational criteria of attachment to include the concepts proximity maintenance, safe haven and secure base.

While the background to the attachment system is well accepted as it deals with the individual's own survival chances, the background to caregiving behaviour seems to be somewhat more debated (Bell and Richard, 2000). The evolutionary background to caregiving behaviour is related to the benefits of parental investment (e.g. Trivers, 1972), and it is motivated by activation of neural

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