



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Veterinary Behavior

journal homepage: www.journalvetbehavior.com

Research

Attention of dogs and owners in urban contexts: Public perception and problematic behaviors

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 27 May 2014

Received in revised form

7 January 2015

Accepted 26 January 2015

Available online 31 January 2015

Keywords:

attention

dog

owner

problematic behaviors

public perception

urban areas

ABSTRACT

This study aimed at (1) characterizing problematic behaviors expressed by dogs during walks in urban areas, (2) assessing how owners and non-owners perceive the phenomenon, and (3) evaluating if such problematic behaviors are associated with peculiar dog-owner attention patterns. Of 176 dogs filmed, 7 expressed excitement, 10 avoidance, and 5 aggression. Owners of problematic dogs considered their dogs less reliable and declared paying higher attention to them than owners of nonproblematic dogs. However, no difference was found in the perceived expression of problematic behaviors and in actual attention levels. This suggests that although somehow aware of their dogs' particular need for attention, problematic-dog owners are incapable of complying appropriately with such requirement. Non-owners perceived owners as less attentive and dogs as less reliable than what was perceived by owners but reported a similar occurrence of problematic behaviors. As for problematic dogs, their levels of attention to owners were not different from those of nonproblematic dogs. Aggressive dogs were the only ones in which attention levels varied significantly during the problematic behavior as they never looked at their owner during the aggression episodes. Avoidant dogs showed a trend for increased frequency of gazes to the owner during avoidance episodes, suggesting an attempt to establish communication with the owner, although the short duration of gazes may question their efficacy. Although we cannot provide a detailed analysis of factors that contribute to dogs' problematic behaviors in public, we identify a crucial point in the owners' lack of awareness and inability to deal with them.

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Introduction

Behavior has a significant influence on the full integration of dogs into human societies. It assumes particular importance in public contexts, in which the presence of dogs concerns parts of the human population that may have variable inclinations toward them. Non-dog owners, for instance, have generally a less positive attitude (Endenburg and Knol, 1994) and are more likely than owners to perceive dogs as a disturbance (Dumont, 1996). Although only a fringe of the population may declare to dislike dogs in the

absolute sense, a much larger part recognizes behaviors, such as barking and making noise, and traits, such as aggressiveness and disobedience, as plausible reasons for disliking dogs (Boyd et al., 2004). The perception of problems associated with the presence of dogs in public may be particularly evident in urbanized areas (Dumont, 1996). Moreover, misbehavior in a public setting is perceived as a violation of the public order and tends to degrade the social identity of owners and to disrupt their interaction with other people (Sanders, 1990).

When it comes to identifying factors relevant to the problems associated with dogs in public contexts, owners are often identified as one of primary importance. On the one hand, owners are directly responsible for their dogs, they should make all the efforts to assure the well-being of their dogs, and at the same time, stop or prevent behaviors that could be annoying or dangerous for others. Awareness of the dog's normal behavior and the ability to recognize the dog's emotional states by the owner is critical. In fact, many dog

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owners may not be aware of normal dog behavior (Landsberg et al., 2003), and the disregard or the lack of knowledge of dogs' biological and sociopsychological needs are among the causes of behavioral problems of dogs (Turner, 1997). On the other hand, common behavioral problems, including aggressiveness, fearfulness, and excitability, have been associated with diverse characteristics of the dog-owner relationship, such as engagement in training, type and level of shared activities, and also the level of attachment of owners to their dogs (Arhant et al., 2010; Diverio et al., 2008; Jagoe and Serpell, 1996).

The reciprocal attention between dogs and owners is one particular aspect of the dog-owner relationship that is likely to play a key role in the course of problematic behaviors. On the part of owners, a certain level of attention would be necessary to monitor their dogs, recognize potential signs of problematic behaviors, and taking the necessary remedial actions. On the part of dogs, higher attention levels would facilitate the detection of communicative signals by owners, which could help preventing or interrupting problematic behaviors. Moreover, they selectively pay higher levels of attention to humans with whom they have a close relationship (Mongillo et al., 2010; Horn et al., 2013). Such high levels of attention to owners are easily elicited in situations of emotional challenge, such as the exposition to a frightening stimulus (Merola et al., 2012), which may also give rise to problematic behaviors, including aggression or fear responses. Although we previously observed that in the course of a walk in an urban context very limited attention is paid by dogs to their owners and vice versa (Mongillo et al., 2014), attention levels may be different during the expression of problematic behaviors. The characterization of reciprocal attention in relation to problematic behaviors could therefore provide a valuable indication on the role of the dog-owner communication in such circumstances.

The present study deals with different aspects of behavior expressed by dogs in a public context. In the first place, we aimed at characterizing behavioral problems, in terms of their type and prevalence, by observing a large sample of dog-owner couples walking in different areas typical of the urban context. We also assessed how the phenomenon is perceived by both the same owners that we had observed and a corresponding number of people not accompanied by dogs. Finally, we wanted to assess whether the expression of behavioral problems is associated with different patterns of attention between dogs and their owners in comparison with both moments in which no problematic behavior is expressed and with dogs who do not express problematic behaviors at all.

Materials and methods

Subjects and procedure

This study was carried out in the city of Padova (Italy), where short videos were taken of 176 dog-owner couples walking in various areas of the city, including areas of the old city center (CC)

and the grassy embankments of the city canals (green areas [GA]). Details about the areas and the sampling are provided in the article by Mongillo et al. (2014). Immediately after they had been filmed, a second experimenter approached the dog owners to ask their explicit consent for collecting data from the video and to collect information regarding their dogs' sex, age, and size. On this occasion, owners were also asked to rate (1) how much attention they had paid to their dogs in the last few minutes, (2) how often had their dog being expressing problematic behaviors in the last few minutes, (3) their dogs' reliability. Responses to items 1 and 3 were given on a 5-point scale, where 1 denoted the poorest and 5 the best rating. For the rating of problematic behaviors, scores went from 1 (never) to 5 (always).

In the same areas and in the same hours in which owners were interviewed, the experimenter interviewed an equal number of people walking without dogs (non-owners; $N = 176$) and asked them to rate, on a 5-point scale, how much attention dog owners walking in those areas generally give to their dogs, how reliable dogs are, and how often problematic behaviors are expressed by dogs in those areas. Non-owners were also asked whether they currently possessed a dog or had owned one in the past.

Data collection

Video recordings were imported into Observer XT software (Noldus Information Technology, Wageningen, the Netherlands) and data were collected from all videos by continuous sampling on focal subjects as described in Mongillo et al. (2014). Data were collected from the usable part of the video (i.e., when dogs' and owners' head orientations were clearly visible). There was no difference in the relative duration of the usable part between problematic ($81.8 \pm 22.1\%$) and nonproblematic dogs ($74.3 \pm 21.0\%$; $U = 1.55$; $P = 0.120$) nor between the interval in which the problematic behavior was observed (PB; $89.3 \pm 21.3\%$) versus the intervals in which no problem was observed (NoPB; $78.9 \pm 23.5\%$; $Z = 1.53$; $P = 0.125$). Data collection supplied 3 measures of dogs' and owners' attention: average length of gazes (gaze length [GL]), their frequency (gaze frequency [GF]; gazes/minute), and the percentage of time for which dogs' and owners' gaze was oriented to their respective partners (looking time [LT]). Interobserver reliability of attention measures was assessed by computing correlations between data collected by 2 independent observers on 20% of the videos ($N = 36$) and was found to be good for all the parameters of dogs' and owners' attention (Spearman rho > 0.7 ; $P < 0.01$ in all cases).

The Observer XT was also used to record whether the dog was showing a problematic behavior, which included behaviors that were indicative of distress or fear as well as behaviors that were potentially annoying or dangerous for other people and animals. Problematic behaviors were recorded according to 3 categories (excitement, avoidance, aggression; Table 1), and dogs showing any of these behaviors (hereafter referred to as problematic dogs) were accordingly classified as excited, avoidant, or aggressive. To assess

Table 1
Description of the recorded categories of problematic behavior

Category	Description
Excitement	Heightened activity or excessive reactivity to stimuli, including unsolicited approach with jumping on people and exuberant approach to other dogs, with no signs of aggression or avoidance.
Avoidance	Overt freezing, avoiding or backing away from a person, dog, or other stimulus, accompanied by one or more of the following signs: lowered and nonwagging tail, caudally rotated and flattened ears, lowered head, lowered body posture, with no signs of aggression.
Aggression	Approach to other dog or person accompanied by barking and/or growling and/or biting and/or attempting to bite and/or snapping and by offensive postures and facial expressions (forward directed ears, erected and stiff tail, extended front limbs and neck, straight approach) or by the signs described in the "avoidance" category.

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