



Sizing up physical activity: The relationships between dog characteristics, dog owners' motivations, and dog walking



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ABSTRACT

Objective: Regular dog walking is likely a symbiotic relationship between the needs of the dog and its owner. This relationship has seen limited attention. The purpose of this study was to examine the relationships between dog characteristics, dog owners' perceptions of responsibility and attachment to their dogs, and the qualities of dog owner exercise motivations (self-determined regulations) with dog walking behavior.

Method: Participants were 228 adult dog owners who completed an online survey that included demographics, dog walking, dog responsibility/attachment and exercise regulations.

Results: Using mediation procedures, the results showed that the owner's sense of dog walking responsibility and walking relationship was completely mediated by identified (indirect $\beta = .06$; bootstrapped lower CI = .02, bootstrapped higher CI = .17) and intrinsic ($\beta = .05$; bootstrapped lower CI = .01, bootstrapped higher CI = .15) regulations but these regulations could not account for substantial variance in the dog-related factors. Instead, intrinsic regulation ($\beta = .27$), identified regulation ($\beta = .20$), dog size ($\beta = .22$), and energy level of the dog ($\beta = .13$) all contributed to explain 30% of walking behavior.

Conclusion: A sense of responsibility to walk the dog, generally the most reliable correlate in past dog walking research, appears to align with more self-determined forms of motivation than controlled. The findings, however, support the premise that dog walking behavior may be a complex mix of human and dog-related factors. This dog and owner relationship may need consideration for successful future dog walking promotion initiatives.

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Regular physical activity (PA) offers many health benefits including protection against cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer, obesity, hypertension, and depression (Warburton, Nicol, & Bredin, 2006). The World Health Organization (WHO, 2015) recommends at least 150 min of moderate-to-vigorous intensity physical activity (MVPA) per week as optimal to improving fitness and health, and to reduce the risk of non-communicable diseases and depression. Walking is undoubtedly one of the best forms of PA that can be achieved easily by many people without high costs involved (Fogelholm, 2005). Walking is a natural, convenient, and multi-purpose activity that helps with disease prevention and contributes to the maintenance of physical independence and well-being throughout the years; walking also serves as a low-cost and environmental-friendly mode of transportation (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2015). Without the need for

special skills or equipment, walking appears to be one of the best options for increasing physical activity in sedentary and/or older populations.

A popular walking activity appears to be walking with one's dog. Indeed, dog owners have been found to walk at least 1.6 times per week more than non-dog owners, with similar findings replicated across studies conducted in various countries (Christian et al., 2013). While these findings are interesting, only 27% of dog owners were walking frequently and long enough per week to accrue 150 min of dog walking per week (Reeves, Rafferty, Miller, & Lyon-Callo, 2011) and more than half of dog owners are still not walking their dogs (Christian et al., 2013). Understandably, as the incumbent costs and responsibilities may not be appropriate for people without dogs to obtain dogs to facilitate walking, interventions targeting dog walking – among existing dog owners – stands as a viable approach to increasing physical activity.

When examining the promotion of dog walking, it is important to consider that it may be unique from ordinary walking without a

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dog because dog walking depends and arises on a partnership between the dog and its owner. Dog-specific outcome expectancies regarding the benefits of dog walking for the dog, self-efficacy, and social support were identified by dog owners as important factors to dog walking (Richards, McDonough, Edwards, Lyle, & Troped, 2013). Further, a recent review on the correlates of dog walking showed that the dog-owners who perceived strong attachment and responsibility/obligation to walk their dogs were more likely to walk their dog (Westgarth, Christley, & Christian, 2014). Presently, the state of canine literature involving human related factors does not provide information to depict how the perception of responsibility and attachment to one's dog relates to dog owners' motivation, and the construct may represent considerable breadth in its characterization from attachment to responsibility and obligation (Westgarth et al., 2014).

Self-determination theory (SDT) is a model for understanding the quality of motivation that underlies human behavior and it has had strong validation in PA research (Teixeira, Carraça, Markland, Silva, & Ryan, 2012). SDT proposes that motivation can be viewed as a continuum from amotivation to purely extrinsic, to intrinsic. Intrinsically motivated activities are regarded as fun and enjoyable (e.g., a dog owner who walks their dog because they find dog walking a pleasurable activity). On the contrary, extrinsic motivation is defined as engagement in a behavior in order to attain some outcome separable from the activity itself, while amotivation reflects a lack of motivation and non-regulation altogether (e.g., a dog owner who views walking their dog as a waste of time). Extrinsic motivation also follows a spectrum from controlled to more autonomous forms. At the most controlled end of the spectrum lies external regulation, in which a person's actions are compelled or driven by externally controlled rewards or punishments (e.g., a dog owner who walks their dog because they reckon others would not be pleased with them if they did not) followed by introjected regulation, which is based on internal rewards and punishments (e.g., a dog owner who feels like a failure if they have not walked their dog). Further along the spectrum lies identified regulation, in which the person identifies with or personally values the behaviors they engage in (e.g., a dog owner who regards the health importance of walking their dog regularly). This represents a more autonomous form of extrinsic motivation as behaviors regulated through identification are hypothesized to persist independently of environmental rewards and will be better maintained. Finally, integrated regulation represents the most autonomous form of extrinsic motivation and concerns the assimilation of identified regulation so that engaging in the behavior is fully congruent with one's sense of self (Markland & Tobin, 2004).

Self-determined regulations have not been examined within dog walking research and gaining insight into the qualities of exercise motivation among dog owners in relation to their dog walking behavior should help us better characterize where dog responsibility and attachment fall along that spectrum. For example, fulfilling walking as part of a larger identity of pet care (identified regulation) or, by contrast, the feeling of responsibility could help formulate feelings of obligation and duty and engender more guilt-bound motivation (introjected regulation). One would hope that perceptions of attachment and responsibility drive more autonomous forms of walking motivation than controlled, but this research question needs attention.

In addition to the findings of dog responsibility as a key correlate of dog walking, Westgarth et al. (2014) also show that dog-related factors may be important to dog walking behavior, potentially independent of owner-related motivation for walking. Dog owners who owned dogs needing more exercise based on breed recommendations, younger dogs, and dogs of medium-to-large sizes, were found to walk more per week than dog owners who owned

less active breeds of dogs, older, or smaller dogs (Degeling, Burton, & McCormack, 2012). To date, no study has yet examined the perceived energy level of the dog and how this would impact the motivation of the dog owner. While the exercise requirements of dogs are often correlated with breed type (Degeling et al., 2012) and chronological age of the dog (Westgarth et al., 2014), one would assume that each dog possesses its own level of energy (Bastian, 2015) that is partially independent of breed type, dog size, and chronological age. Thus, it may be helpful to understand the relative contributions of individual dogs' energy level to the qualities of exercise motivation among dog owners.

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the relationships between dog-related factors, dog owners' sense of dog responsibility and attachment, and qualities of human walking motivations (self-determined regulations) that may impact dog owners' walking behavior. Based on the extant research and theory, we hypothesized (a) dog responsibility and dog attachment will correlate with more autonomous forms of motivation than controlled regulations; (b) dog walking will be predicted by more autonomous than controlled regulations; (c) energy level of the dog will be associated with dog walking behavior independent of dog size and age; and (d) the relationship between dog characteristics and responsibility aspect and behavior will be at least partly mediated through autonomous forms of motivation but some aspects of dog characteristics may have direct effects on dog walking.

1. Method

This study received ethical approval from the Human Research Ethics Board at the University of Victoria. Participants were given details of the study and asked for their informed consent online before proceeding to answer the questionnaire which was published online between December 2013 and January 2014. Due to the anonymity of the survey and incentive involved, the survey settings were set to reduce the chances of multiple responses from the same respondent; access to the survey was limited to one time per computer.

1.1. Participants and procedures

Participants were English-speaking male and female adults, aged 18 years and above, who lived in Greater Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, and who owned at least one healthy dog between 1 to 7 years of age. The *Canadian Veterinarian Association* (2007) classifies dogs between 1 and 7 years as adult dogs; hence, dogs under 1 year of age and senior dogs beyond 7 years of age were excluded due to the larger variability in health status and physical ability to walk regularly and consistently with their owners.

Recruitment took place primarily through the social media channel of Facebook. The link to the online survey was sent to several local dog rescue organizations and canine-related pages on Facebook asking for the link to be shared on their page and passed on freely. Posters with details of the study, researcher contact information, and a link to the online survey were posted in venues such as recreation centers, the local university campus, libraries, and selected veterinary clinics. In-person recruitment and flyer handouts also took place in dog parks. For every completed response that matched the eligibility criteria, one dollar in Canadian currency was donated to a local dog rescue of the respondent's choice.

1.2. Instrumentation

Demographic information of participants such as age, sex,

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