



Dog Behaviour and Owner Perception: Implications for Management and Canine Welfare

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ABSTRACT

Dogs are an important part of many households and owners understanding of dog behaviour may influence the way they handle and manage their dogs. The present study was conducted to study selected characteristics of dog ownership, management practices and owner perception of canine behaviour. A cross-sectional online survey was conducted using a structured questionnaire among dog owners. Information was collected on feeding practices, source of the dog, purpose of keeping the dog, time spent with the dog and different behavioural characteristics. Most owners (85%) reported spending four hours or more with their dogs each day. Mixed feeding was the most common feeding practice (77%). Friends or family were the most common source of dogs (46%), followed by breeders and stray dogs (23% each). Most owners kept dogs mainly as a hobby (62%). The behavioural responses varied between owners, particularly for barking, hyperactivity, overexcitement, fear and aggression-related behaviours. The findings suggest that owner perception is an important part of understanding canine behaviour. Better awareness of normal and problem behaviours may help owners in appropriate management and may contribute to canine welfare.

Keywords: dog behaviour; owner perception; dog management; companion dogs; behavioural problems; canine welfare.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Dogs are increasingly kept as companion animals and are often considered an important part of the family. However, dogs may have different roles in the household. They may be kept mainly for companionship, but can also be expected to provide protection or other benefits. Gillet et al. (2024) reported that dogs can have both social and non-social roles and that these roles were related to owner characteristics and management practices.

Dog behaviour is an important part of the relationship between the dog and its owner. Behaviours such as barking, chewing, escaping, fear and aggression may be considered normal in some situations but problematic in others. The perception of the owner is therefore important when assessing behavioural problems. Lord et al. (2020) reported that owners differed in the behaviours they considered problematic in young dogs. O'Farrell (1997) also highlighted the importance of owner attitudes in the assessment of dog behaviour problems.

The dog-owner relationship can also be influenced by characteristics of both the owner and the dog. Meyer and Forkman (2014) found that owner characteristics were important in the dog-owner relationship. Similarly, Pirrone et al. (2015) reported that both owner and animal factors could influence problematic behaviour and the owner's response to it.

Therefore, understanding canine behaviour should not be limited to the dog alone. Owner expectations and management practices also need to be considered. The present study was conducted to assess selected dog ownership and management practices and to document owner perception of different canine behaviours.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

An online survey was conducted using a structured questionnaire prepared through Google Forms. The questionnaire was circulated among dog owners.

Information was collected regarding feeding practices, source of the dog, purpose of keeping the dog, time spent with the dog and perceived behavioural characteristics.

The behavioural section included house-training problems, escaping, compulsive behaviour, aggression towards people and other dogs, chewing or destruction, food or toy protection, separation anxiety, fear, barking, hyperactivity, overexcitement and territorial behaviour. Owners recorded their perception using response categories ranging from “not typical at all” to “totally typical.”

Data were summarized using frequencies and percentages and presented graphically. The behavioural responses represent owner perception and should not be considered clinical diagnoses.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Dog management

Mixed feeding was the most common feeding practice, reported by 77% of owners. Non-vegetarian feeding was reported by 15%, while 8% reported vegetarian feeding.

Friends or family were the most common source of dogs (46%), followed by breeders (23%) and stray dogs (23%). Only 8% of dogs were obtained from pet shops.

Regarding the purpose of keeping dogs, 62% of owners reported hobby as the main purpose, followed by other purposes (23%) and protection (15%).

Most owners (85%) reported spending four hours or more with their dogs each day, while 15% spent approximately 1–2 h.

3.2 Perceived behavioural problems

The owners showed different perceptions of the behavioural characteristics included in the questionnaire. For several behaviours, such as escaping, compulsive behaviour and aggression towards people, most responses were towards the “not typical” categories.

Escaping was considered “not typical at all” by 50% of owners, while 35.71% considered it “not typical.” For aggression towards people, 42.85% considered it “not typical at all” and 28.57% considered it “not typical.”

Chewing or destructive behaviour was also mostly considered uncommon, with 42.85% of owners selecting “not typical at all.”

Other behaviours, including barking, separation anxiety, fear, hyperactivity and overexcitement, showed more variation between responses. This indicates that

owners differed in how they perceived these behaviours in their dogs.

4. DISCUSSION

The present survey gives a small picture of how owners manage their dogs and how they perceive their behaviour. Most owners reported spending four hours or more with their dogs every day. This suggests that the dogs had considerable contact with their owners. However, the amount of time spent together alone cannot be considered a measure of good welfare. The type of interaction, exercise, training and opportunity for normal behaviour are also important.

Most owners reported keeping dogs as a hobby. This shows the importance of the companion role of dogs in this group. However, a dog can have more than one role. For example, a dog may be treated as a companion but may also be expected to protect the house. Similar multiple roles of dogs have been reported by Gillet et al. (2024).

The behavioural results were particularly interesting because owners did not perceive all behaviours in the same way. Some behaviours were rarely considered typical, while others had responses distributed across different categories. This may reflect differences between dogs, but it may also be related to differences in owner expectations.

The same behaviour may not be considered a problem by every owner. Lord et al. (2020) reported similar differences in owner perception of behavioural problems in young dogs. O'Farrell (1997) also suggested that owner attitudes are important when assessing behaviour problems.

Management can also influence the relationship between the owner and dog. Bennett and Rohlf (2007) reported relationships between owner involvement, training activities, shared activities and potentially problematic behaviours. Therefore, understanding the owner's routine and management practices may be useful when dealing with behavioural complaints.

From a welfare point of view, owner perception should not be considered the same as an objective assessment of the dog. A dog may be described as well behaved while still showing fear or anxiety. Similarly, an active dog may be described as hyperactive by one owner but considered normal by another. This is why behavioural assessment should consider the situation in which the behaviour occurs.

5. CONCLUSION

The study shows that dogs may have different roles in the lives of their owners and that owners differ in their perception of canine behaviour. Most owners in this survey spent several hours with their dogs each day,

and keeping dogs as a hobby was the most common purpose.

The variation in behavioural responses suggests that owner expectations are important when considering whether a behaviour is viewed as a problem. Understanding both the dog's behaviour and the owner's management practices may help in providing more appropriate advice and improving canine welfare.

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