

Anthropomorphism: How it Affects the Human–Canine Bond

Sarah Elizabeth Boni

Companion Animal Sciences Institute

va_siegers@hotmail.com

Boni, S. E. (2008). Anthropomorphism: How it affects the human–canine bond. *Journal of Applied Companion Animal Behavior*, 2(1), 16–21.

The human–animal bond is defined as “a mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and other animals that is influenced by behaviors that are essential to the health and well-being of both” (American Veterinary Medical Association, 2001). This definition perhaps illustrates an ideal that some may say has yet to be achieved. While the symbiotic relationship between man and dog is often described as one of mutualism, a relationship in which both species benefit from the interaction, one could argue that the relationship is closer to amensalism, where one species hurts the other unknowingly. Coppinger and Coppinger (2001) have used the example of pure-bred dogs in describing the amensalistic relationship, stating that they live in genetically inbred populations that will eventually destroy them. Some would even go so far as to call the relationship parasitic, where one species (canines) benefits at the expense of the other. It appears that there is no single term capable of encompassing the entire human–canine relationship. As every relationship is unique, so it should be uniquely defined. However we choose to define it, our relationship with the canine species is largely due to our anthropomorphic views of them.

Anthropomorphism is defined as the “attribution of human mental states (thoughts, feelings, motivations and beliefs) to nonhuman animals” (Serpell, 2002). According to Mithen (1996), the roots of anthropomorphic thinking are found in early *Homo sapiens*. The ability to understand and anticipate the behavior of others by using self knowledge, known as “reflective consciousness” (Humphrey, 1983), evolved due

to its enormous survival value in allowing people to become better hunters. Mithen also states that without anthropomorphism the domestication of animals would never have been possible. In order to capture and domesticate an animal, humans would have needed to anticipate the actions of that animal, which would have required an understanding of how they think. Anthropomorphic thinking allowed humans to incorporate dogs into their social milieu. Without the beliefs that our dogs “enjoy” our company, “miss” us when we are gone or feel affectionate towards us, our relationship with dogs would lose much of its value, becoming superficial and essentially meaningless.

Over time, the role of the domestic dog has changed considerably. Whereas dogs once functioned as working animals (guarding, shepherding, hunting etc.), the primary function of many dogs today is in a more general capacity: that of companion. A 1996 survey conducted by the American Animal Hospital Association (AAHA) found that 75% of pet owners considered their animals akin to children (AAHA, 1996). Dogs have been moulded by humans physiologically, morphologically and behaviorally to fill the unique role of providing a nonhuman source of social support (Serpell, 2002). Anthropomorphic thinking allows our companions’ behavior to be viewed in human terms. And from this way of thinking humans have benefited greatly.

Much research has been devoted to the various ways in which companion animals can improve human quality of life. Studies have shown the owners of companion animals to have

lower blood pressure (Baun, Bergstrom, Langston, & Thoma, 1984; Friedmann, 1979; Vormbrock & Grossberg, 1988), increased rate of survival after a heart attack (Friedmann, 1995; Friedmann, Katcher, Lynch, & Thomas, 1980; Friedmann, Thomas, & Eddy, 2000), and lower susceptibility to stress (Allen, Blascovich, Tomaka, & Kelsey, 1991; Serpell, 1991). Having animals present in therapy has been shown to increase attendance rates (Beck, Seraydarian, & Hunter, 1986) and increase the sociability of hospitalized patients (Corson, Corson, Gwynne, & Arnold, 1977). Animal-assisted therapy has been used with survivors of sexual abuse (Lefkowitz, Paharial, Prout, Debiak, & Bleiberg, 2005) and to help patients to relax and feel safe in treatment (Kruger, Trachtenberg, & Serpell, 2004). Animals have also been shown to increase general psychological wellbeing, by making people with animals appear more approachable (Sachs-Ericsson, Hansen, & Fitzgerald, 2002) and encouraging social relationships (Serpell, 2000).

Although the benefits to humans are undeniable, little research appears to have been conducted on how these anthropomorphic relationships impact on our animals; in fact, anthropomorphic selection (selection in favour of physical and behavioral traits that facilitate the attribution of human mental states to nonhumans) may be responsible for many of the welfare problems afflicting our companions (Serpell, 2002). Breeding for traits that appeal to our emotional perceptions has led to companion dogs suffering some debilitating consequences. The English bulldog is one of the most extreme examples. Thompson (1996) described the English bulldog as resembling a “veterinary rehabilitation project.” Due to a congenital defect known as chondrodystrophy, or abnormal cartilage development, the English bulldog suffers from numerous health conditions, including heart failure due to chronic oxygen deprivation (Panckeri, Schotland, Pack, & Hendricks, 1996). As a result of producing the cosmetic appearance of a “pushed in” face, we have compromised the breathing of brachycephalic breeds such as pugs, Boston terriers, Pekingese and boxers, which suffer from various respiratory disorders. These breeds

are more susceptible to heat stress as a result of respiratory obstructions, and can suffer from multiple eye problems due to their shallow eye sockets. They also have an increased risk of periodontal disease due to overcrowding of the teeth. Merle is a dilution gene that lightens patches of coat over a dog’s body and is found commonly in Great Danes, Australian shepherds, collies and various other breeds. Dogs with merle coats or coats containing excessive amounts of white run an increased risk of being born blind and/or deaf. Yet these dogs continue to be bred for the very characteristics that disable them.

Tail docking, ear cropping and dew-claw removal originated as means to prevent injury to dogs. While hunting or working, these appendages were at risk of being snagged and torn. Nowadays these procedures are considered elective surgeries and, as of 2003, the AAHA opposes them when performed for cosmetic reasons. Not only are they of no benefit to the animal but they can result in impairment. Dogs rely heavily on postural communication, and those without tails or with unnaturally positioned ears have a reduced ability to communicate effectively. Despite these factors, docked tails and cropped ears are still required in the conformation ring. Tail docking is performed when the pup is between 3 and 5 days of age (British Veterinary Association, 2006). At this young age, it is impossible for the breeder to know which pups are of show quality and which are not (S. Eviston, personal communication, January 3, 2008). Therefore, this painful cosmetic act is performed on all pups regardless of their future purpose. Advances are, however, being made; docking and cropping have been banned in a number of European countries.

With regard to behavior, the role of anthropomorphic attitudes becomes less clearly defined. Although there is currently no proven link between behavioral problems in dogs and anthropomorphic treatment by the owner (Voith, Wright, & Danneman, 1992), there is little doubt that anthropomorphic views of canine behavior and learning can complicate and delay resolution of existing behavioral issues. According to Serpell (2002), the second most common

behavior problem seen by animal behaviorists is separation distress. Dogs have been bred for centuries to increasingly depend on humans, resulting in dogs that become extremely distressed when left alone. The results of a study by Topal, Miklosi, and Csanyi (1997) showed that dogs who were viewed anthropomorphically by their owners showed more dependent behavior and decreased performance in problem solving. The authors concluded that this decrease in performance was due not to lack of cognitive ability but to the dogs' strong attachment to humans. Dominance theory has perhaps the greatest potential to directly harm the human-canine bond. Konrad Most was influential in introducing the concept of social dominance to popular dog training. Most believed that the only means for a dog trainer to establish himself as "pack leader" was through physical confrontation between trainer and dog "in which the man is instantly victorious" (Most, 1910/1955). Besides imbuing the dog with adversarial motivations, Most's misleading interpretations not only justify but condone abusive training practices. Despite these and other problems, Most's dominance theory is still widely accepted by many authorities (Lindsay, 2001).

Although interest in companion animal behavior has increased over the past decade, it also appears that our anthropomorphic views of animals have also increased. Dogs are carted around in strollers and designer handbags; they wear rhinestone-studded collars and have more clothes than some people. Their birthdays are celebrated, and some pet stores even have gift registries. While dressing a dog in designer clothes may be in itself harmless (it could even be seen as beneficial, indicating a high level of attachment on the part of the owner), other events show a marked decrease in our awareness or consideration of canine behavior. The media is increasingly fascinated with stories of dog attacks. Whereas at one time they showed an interest in reporting events that might have explained an attack, most attacks reportedly now occur "without warning." While all canine attacks are tragic, they are also a learning opportunity; to ignore the potential insight that could be gained from studying the circumstances

surrounding these attacks is a double injury to both dog and victim. A recent study found that 53.2% of owners relinquishing their dogs for euthanasia and 51.3% of owners relinquishing their dogs for adoption agreed that dogs misbehave to spite their owners (Kass, New, Scarlett, & Salman, 2001). Such anthropomorphic views with regard to problem behavior contribute to unrealistic expectations and inappropriate actions taken to correct those problems. A similar study found that the top reason for relinquishing a dog to a shelter was behavioral problems. Of those problems, 72% were aggression directed towards humans and/or other animals (Salman et al., 2000). The study also found the population surveyed to possess very poor knowledge about the animals they owned.

The demands placed on companion dogs are enormous. Modern dog owners demand that canine companionship be achieved within the often inflexible framework of their lifestyle. In a survey of dog owners who relinquished dogs to a shelter, the top reasons for relinquishment other than behavioral were owner lifestyle, owner unprepared or had inappropriate expectations, and animal characteristics (shedding of hair, wrong sex, wrong size etc.) (New et al., 2000). Companion animal groups are lobbying for their dogs to have more access to public places where dogs are not usually permitted. A group in Ottawa, Canada, recently began a campaign to allow dogs on public transport (National Capital Coalition for People and Dogs, 2007). Harmless as this may seem, questions arise about whether the stress to dogs of riding on a bus and the possible consequences to canines and humans have even been taken into consideration; the principal argument is that, since other major cities allow dogs on public transport, why should Ottawa be any different?

In her book *The Culture Clash* (1996), Jean Donaldson states that the "anthropomorphic view has outlived its usefulness" and that the greatest gains for animal welfare are to be found in understanding behavior and learning theory. This is perhaps a simplistic point, given that there is little incentive for people keeping

animals as companions to educate themselves in this manner. Donaldson believes that we can continue to love our dogs and still see them for what they are; even if we abandon our anthropomorphic views, there remains plenty about our companions to continue to fascinate and intrigue us. As humans, our compassion and empathy for others are strongly linked to our ability to perceive them as similar to us. When we take away from dogs insight and

consciousness, we strip them of their human status. Still, our society is learning to be increasingly tolerant. We are opening our eyes and viewing cultures and people that are foreign to us with more acceptance and even respect, different though they are. It is possible then to believe that we can love and cherish our four-legged companions for the amoral, fur-bearing creatures that they are.

References

- Allen, K. M., Blascovich, J., Tomaka, J., & Kelsey, R. M. (1991). Presence of human friends and pet dogs as moderators of autonomic responses to stress in women. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *61*, 582–589.
- American Animal Hospital Association. (1996). *National pet owner survey*. Denver: AAHA.
- American Veterinary Medical Association. (2001). *Position statement: The human animal bond*. Retrieved October 3, 2007, from <http://www.avma.org>
- Baun, M. M., Bergstrom, N., Langston, N. F., & Thoma, L. (1984). Physiological effects of human/companion animal bonding. *Nursing Research* *33*(3), 126–129.
- Beck, A. M., Seraydarian, L., & Hunter, F. (1986). Use of animals in the rehabilitation of psychiatric patients. *Psychological Reports*, *58*, 63–66.
- British Veterinary Association. (2006). *Policy brief on tail docking*. Retrieved December 18, 2007, from http://bva.co.uk/policy/issues/pol_brief_docking.pdf
- Coppinger, R., & Coppinger, L. (2001). *Dogs: A startling new understanding of canine origin, behavior and evolution* (p. 26). New York: Scribner.
- Corson, S. A., Corson, E. O'L., Gwynne, P. H., & Arnold, L. E. (1977). Pet dogs as nonverbal communication links in hospital psychiatry. *Comprehensive Psychiatry*, *18*(1), 61–72.
- Donaldson, J. (1996). *The culture clash: A revolutionary new way of understanding the relationship between humans and domestic dogs* (p. 11). California: James & Kenneth Publishers.
- Friedmann, E. (1979). Physiological responses of people petting their pets. *American Zoologist*, *19*, 915.
- Friedmann, E. (1995). The role of pets in enhancing human well being: Physiological effects. In I. Robinson (Ed.), *The Waltham book of human–animal interaction* (pp. 33–54). Tarrytown, NY: Elsevier.
- Friedmann, E., Katcher, A. H., Lynch, J., & Thomas, S. (1980). Animal companions and one-year survival of patients after discharge from a coronary care unit. *Public Health Reports*, *95*, 307–312.

- Friedmann, E., Thomas, S. A., & Eddy, T. J. (2000). Companion animals and human health: Physical and cardiovascular influences. In A. L. Podberscek, E. Paul & J. A. Serpell (Eds.), *Companion animals and us* (pp. 125–142). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Humphrey, N. (1983). *Consciousness regained*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kass, P. H., New, J. C., Scarlett, J. M., & Salman, M. D. (2001). Understanding animal companion surplus in the United States: Relinquishment of non-adoptables to animal shelters for euthanasia. *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*, 4(4), 237–248.
- Kruger, K. A., Trachtenberg, S. W., & Serpell, J. A. (2004). *Can animals help humans heal? Animal-assisted interventions in adolescent mental health*. Philadelphia, PA: Center for the Interaction of Animals and Society.
- Lefkowitz, C., Paharial, I., Prout, M., Debiak, D., & Bleiberg, J. (2005). Animal-assisted prolonged exposure: A treatment for survivors of sexual assault suffering posttraumatic stress disorder. *Society & Animals*, 13, 4.
- Lindsay, S. R. (2001). *Handbook of applied dog behavior and training: Etiology and assessment of behavior problems* (Vol. 2). Ames, Iowa: Iowa State University Press.
- Mithen, S. (1996). *The prehistory of the mind: A search for the origins of art, religion and science*. London: Pluto Press.
- Most, K. (1910/1955). *Training dogs*. New York: Coward-McCann (reprint).
- National Capital Coalition for People and Dogs. (2007). *Pets on public transit*. Retrieved October 16, 2007, from <http://nccpd.org>
- New, J. C., Salman, M. D., King, M., Scarlett, J. M., Kass, P. H., & Hutchinson, J. M. (2000). Characteristics of shelter relinquished animals and their owners compared with animals and their owners in US pet owning households. *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*, 3(3), 179–201.
- Panckeri, K. A., Schotland, H. M., Pack, A. I., & Hendricks, J. C. (1996). Modafinil decreases hypersomnolence in the English bulldog, a natural animal model of sleep-disordered breathing. *Sleep*, 19, 626–631.
- Sachs-Ericsson, N., Hansen, N. K., & Fitzgerald, S. (2002). Benefits of assistance dogs: A review. *Rehabilitation Psychology*, 47(3), 251–277.
- Salman, M. D., Hutchinson, J., Ruch-Gallie, R., Kogan, L., New, J. C., Kass, P. H., et al. (2000). Behavioral reasons for relinquishment of dogs and cats to 12 shelters. *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*, 3(2), 93–106.
- Serpell, J. A. (1991). Beneficial effects of pet ownership on some aspects of human health and behaviour. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, 84, 717–720.
- Serpell, J. A. (2000). Animal companions and human well-being: An historical exploration of the value of human-animal relationships. In A. H. Fine (Ed.), *Handbook on animal-assisted therapy: Theoretical foundations and guidelines for practice* (pp. 3–19). San Diego: U.S. Academic Press.

Serpell, J. A. (2002). Anthropomorphism and anthropomorphic selection beyond the “cute response.” *Society and Animals: Journal of Human–Animal Studies*, 10(4), 83–100.

Thompson, K. S. (1996). The fall and rise of the English bulldog. *American Scientist*, May–June 1996, 220–223.

Topal, J., Miklosi, A., & Csanyi, V. (1997). Dog–human relationship affects problem solving behavior in the dog. *Anthrozoos*, 10(4), 214–224.

Voith, V. L., Wright, J. C., & Danneman, P. J. (1992). Is there a relationship between canine behavior problems and spoiling activities, anthropomorphism, and obedience training? *Journal of Applied Animal Behavior Science*, 34, 263–272.

Vormbrock, J. K., & Grossberg, J. M. (1988). Cardiovascular effects of human–pet dog interactions. *Journal of Behavioral Medicine*, 11, 509–517.

© 2008 AABP. This journal may be printed once by the purchaser, for personal use only and may not otherwise be copied or transmitted in any manner in part or in full without permission from the Managing Editor. Quotes of fewer than 200 words are allowed as long as the source is properly cited.