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## **The Everyday Dog Owner**

### *Knowing and Living with Dogs*

If the encounters that people experience in their daily lives, those with companion animals are second only to those with other humans in frequency and importance. According to recent data from the American Veterinary Association, some 37 percent of American households contain an average of 1.7 dogs (over 52 million dogs) and 38 percent contain an average of 2.2 cats (around total of 63 million cats).<sup>1</sup> A study by the American Animal Hospital Association found that 69 percent of dog owners and 60 percent of cat owners say they give as much attention to their companion animals as they would to their children. The majority of dog and cat owners (54 percent) said they felt an emotional attachment to their pets.<sup>2</sup>

This chapter focuses on dog owners' understandings of the companion animals with whom they share their lives. Based on routine, intimate interactions with his or her dog, the caretaker comes to regard the animal-other as a thinking, playful, empathetic being who is well aware of basic rules and roles that govern and comprise the relationship. The owner also sees the dog as consciously acting so as to achieve the animal's goals in the course of routine social exchanges with people and other canines. In other words, the dog is seen as a purposive social "performer" possessing at least a

## Knowing One's Dog

### The Dog as Conscious and Thinking

Grounded on their ongoing, intimate contact with their dogs, the owners with whom I spoke had little doubt of their animals' cognitive abilities and all could recount examples of what they defined as thoughtful behavior. Dogs' thought processes were generally seen as fairly basic. As one owner observed when asked about his dog's intellect, "Well, he's not exactly a Rhodes scholar." To a certain extent, owners saw intelligence as varying from animal to animal and from breed to breed. Because they were dogs and not humans, the companion animals were typically described as engaging in thought processes that were "wordless."<sup>4</sup> Their thoughts were presumed to be nonlinear, composed of mental images, and driven largely by emotion. When asked if she thought that her malamute could think, one owner cited a parallel example in her own experience when she replied:

Yes, I do. I don't think their heads are empty. I think their thinking process is different from ours. I think they think on emotions. If the environment is happy and stable, they are going to act more stable—pay more attention to what you are doing. They are going to be more alert. If everything is chaotic they would not be thinking externally, but be more concerned with themselves internally—protecting themselves and not paying attention to my cues. I would call that thinking, but it is not what you would call linear thinking. It is more of a stimulus thinking. The reason I relate to that is that I was real depressed for a long time. And when you are really really depressed and your mental abilities are not sharp, you are not really thinking. You are just responding to emotional stimuli. I think that is how they are—they respond with emotion. But I would call that a type of thinking. They are making decisions based on those emotional cues.

No matter what the mode of thought defined by caretakers, most agreed that the issues their dogs thought about were rather basic. Owners saw their dogs as focusing primarily on events and matters of central concern to their ongoing physical and emotional experience:

I think that [my dogs] are here just to get approval. [They are here for] feeding or to get petted or get their ears rubbed. I think they think enough not to get yelled at, not to get into trouble. That's the way dogs are. I don't think they can reason like people.

Some owners did see their animals as going beyond these basic physiological and emotional concerns. One typical sort of description offered by caretakers focused on their dog's play activities and the adjustments he or she made while being trained. In the course of play and training, the dog's purposive modification of behavior was seen as demonstrating a basic ends-means process of reasoning. For example, one owner proudly described how his hunting dog acted intelligently while learning to retrieve objects from the water:

This is the smartest dog I have ever had. We are having him trained professionally, and we were with the trainer with my dog and some of the other dogs he was training. He said, "Look here. I'll show you how smart your dog is." He threw the retrieving dummy out into the middle of this long pond there. My dog jumped in and swam to the thing, grabbed it in his mouth and took a right turn. He swam to the land and walked back to us with the dummy in his mouth all proud. He was the only one smart enough to walk back. The other dogs all swam out, retrieved the thing, and swam all the way back.

In the course of watching my own dogs play, I was struck by the adjustments they made—adjustments that, were they made by humans, would clearly indicate thought. Following the introduction of a new puppy into my household, I made the following entry in my auto-ethnographic observations after returning from a walk in the woods:

Today Isis [my three-year-old Newfoundland] appeared to come to a realization about how she had been attempting to play "chase" and this prompted her to alter the play process somewhat—essentially altering the assumption of roles. On each of the walks so far, Isis has attempted to initiate chase by acting as the chaser. She runs off at a rapid pace, turns back, runs toward Raven [the puppy], bowls her over, runs past, etc. This doesn't work because of the size and strength difference. Raven just cowers, runs to one of us for protection, cries out. So, this time when Raven made a run at her at one point in the walk, Isis ran off a little ways until Raven followed. Isis then ran further and soon Raven was in hot pursuit. Isis led her a merry chase over fallen trees, through thickets, into gullies. It was particularly interesting to watch because Isis was adjusting the game on the basis of her knowledge of Raven's, as yet, limited abilities. She would run just fast enough so that Raven wouldn't get more than a few feet behind and would occasionally slow down enough that Raven could grab hold of some hair on her side or legs. Isis would also toy with the other player by jumping over larger falls or into gullies with deep, vertical sides—obstacles she knew were beyond Raven's limited abilities.<sup>5</sup>

Because play is such an important element of dog activity and is typically highly interactive,<sup>6</sup> I will examine it later when discussing role-taking and manipulation of others in the course of interaction.

### The Dog as Emotional and Empathetic

As mentioned above, owners typically understand their dogs as having subjective experiences in which some form of reasoning is linked with emotion. The most common theme that emerged from my encounters in the veterinary clinic and interviews with owners was that dogs are eminently emotional beings. Their rich emotional lives involved a wide range of basic feelings. Dogs were, for example, described as experiencing loneliness, joy, sadness, embarrassment, and anger.<sup>7</sup> The owners I interviewed often focused on this last emotional experience—anger—because it was linked to incidents in which dogs responded in ways owners saw as indicating vindictiveness. For example, one owner described her shar pei puppy's displeasure at being abandoned and his playfully vengeful response to her absence:

It's funny, usually after I have been at work all Friday I don't go out unless I am sure that somebody is going to watch him. But one time I left him alone and when I got home HE WAS ANGRY. He just let me know.

[How did he let you know?]

He'd follow me around and he would look up at me and he would just bark. It was like he was yelling at me. And I would say, "What is it with you?" and when I would stop talking he would look at me and bark—like "You left me. How could you do that?" You could read it in his face. When he was younger and I would go to work and leave him during the day he would find some way to let me know that he wasn't pleased. . . . Like he would shred all his newspapers. Every day was something new. He would move his crate, or he would flip his water dish, or something like that.

I routinely asked owners whether they thought that their dogs had a "conscience." Though there was some considerable variation among respondents with regard to how effective their animal's conscience was in constraining unwanted behavior, all saw their dogs as having at least a sense of the rules imposed by the human members of the household. In turn, they all could offer accounts of incidents where their animals violated the rules and subsequently responded in ways indicating the