Assessment of personality in dogs

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Abstract

Many existing assessments of dog behaviour fail to acknowledge that there can be many motivators for specific behaviours. Biting, for example, can be inspired by anger, fear, anxiety or playfulness, depending upon the situation and the individual dog. In order to understand motivational factors that drive typical behaviours, it is necessary to examine the psychology of dogs. In humans, psychologists use the term personality to describe the relatively consistent behavioural tendencies of an individual. A person who is described as agreeable is highly likely to act agreeably across a number of situations, even though the exact behaviours exhibited may change. Behavioural scientists have established that many nonhuman animals also exhibit personalities. These species include dogs, with research based on owner descriptions showing that dogs vary across five personality dimensions: Extraversion, Amicability, Training Focus, Motivation and Neuroticism. It is not yet known whether any of these personality dimensions are associated with the tendency of a dog to bite or engage in other inappropriate behaviours, however it is instructive that owners do not report a single dimension of aggression or fearfulness. This supports the view that many factors may combine to motivate biting behaviour, including personality, but also previous experiences and current circumstances. The objective in this presentation is to discuss the need for assessments to include a sophisticated analysis of all relevant factors. Only then will we be able to accurately predict how an individual animal is likely to behave in a given situation.

Why assess canine personality?

Dogs hold a unique place in our society. They fill the roles of companions and work partners, help with raising children, take part in recreational activities and protect human property. The management of dogs is made difficult because of human attachment to them. However, dogs can be dangerous to humans. Estimates suggest dog bites cost the Victorian community over a million dollars annually (Ashby, 2001), illustrating the financial costs of aggressive canine behaviour. Barking, growling, lunging and biting are all frowned upon and can result in dire consequences for dogs convicted of these behaviours. Tolerance for some behaviours that are normal for dogs but dangerous for humans is low. Current state and territory dangerous dog legislation demonstrates how high the bar for dogs is set. There is a need to be able to assess dogs to identify those that have a tendency to display desirable and undesirable behaviours.

Assessments of canine behaviour have tended to concentrate on the absence or presence of discrete behaviours, such as biting or barking (Netto & Planta, 1997). Concentrating on absence or presence of discrete behaviours ignores that many behaviours are displayed in response to a wide range of motivations. Biting, for example, is observed during play, in response to fear provoking stimuli, in defense of resources such as food, or in defense of puppies (Overall, 1997). The tendency of an individual to display any particular behaviour is affected by the interplay of their genetics or temperament, experience and the current environment. This means that an individual dog may display different discrete behaviours in the same situation or the same behaviours in different situations. Measuring if a dog displays an undesirable behaviour, such as biting, in a test situation, therefore, may not indicate the tendency of a dog to use the behaviour in other situations. What is needed is the ability to measure broader characteristics of an individual that affect how they behave in a more comprehensive sense.

Describing the full range of differences in behaviour between individual dogs is a daunting task. However, psychologists have been examining individual differences in human behaviour for many years. There are several theories to explain differences in behavioural tendencies among people, which are usually attributed to the underlying psychological structures which make up what is called the individual's personality. Personality can be considered the combination of temperament and experience. It is generally accepted that individual persons show different behaviour in different situations. However, most people can be partially described by their tendency to generally behave in a particular manner. A person who typically greets everyone with a smile and warm welcome can be described as friendly, while one who avoids meeting people can be considered shy or even aloof. This tendency of people to display characteristic behaviour patterns is described by the construct of personality. One definition of personality describes it as "... *that pattern of characteristic thoughts, feelings, and behaviours that distinguishes one person from another and that persists over time and situations.*" (Phares & Chaplin, 1997, p. 9).

Two essential ideas arise from existing definitions of personality. First, personality is relatively stable across time and different situations (Costa & McCrae, 1992a); even though the exact behaviours displayed may differ due to the effects of affect, motivation and needs, previous learning and the current environment (Ahadi & Diener, 1989). For example, a conscientious person may display this personality characteristic by handing class work in at school on time as a child and by being punctual to work as an adult. An impulsive person may suddenly choose to try a new route home from work or may choose to take a holiday at short notice. While the behaviours are different, the overall way of responding is consistent for the individuals in the different situations. Second, personality characteristics are not simply static attributes of persons but have consequences for the person in the way they

The validity study showed that the personality dimensions have validity, although some relationships need further investigation. The results from the two reliability studies support the MCPQ-R as reliable for assessing canine personality along the five identified dimensions.

The Test-Retest Reliability study supports canine personality as a stable characteristic of dogs but work is needed to understand the subtle changes in personality that occur as dogs develop and age. It is recognised that humans, while maintaining an overall personality profile throughout their lives, show subtle differences over their life time (Conley, 1984).

More studies are needed to explore the stability of the personality dimensions identified by the CFFM over time and the consequences these dimensions have for dogs in the way they interact with the social world. Perhaps there are ranges for scores on some dimensions that are associated with frequent expression of desirable behaviours. Or perhaps there are personality profiles that are associated with undesirable behaviours. A large study of Australian dogs is currently underway that aims, among other things, to identify canine personality profiles associated with stable bonds between dog owners and their dogs.

Conclusion

The CFFM describes canine personality using five dimensions, labeled Extraversion, Motivation, Amicability, Training Focus and Neuroticism. A 26 item owner administered questionnaire, the MCPQ-R, measures how dogs vary along these dimensions. Initial validity studies suggest the MCPQ-R was not measuring irrelevant characteristics, such as owner education, or dog sex. Initial reliability tests support the MCPQ-R as a reliable test for measuring differences in canine personality as rated by the dogs' owners. Further testing of the model is required to fully describe the dimensions of the CFFM and to test the validity of the CFFM and the MCPQ-R. It is also necessary to test if all the dimensions of canine personality have been described. However, the CCFM offers a unifying model for canine personality and the MCPQ-R is a practical, easily administered questionnaire for describing the personality of the domestic dog.

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Dr Jacqui Ley BVSc(Hons), MACVSs(Veterinary Behaviour) CMAVA PhD, is the inaugural Hills Resident in Veterinary Behavioural Medicine and is currently working with Kersti Seksel and the Sydney Animal Behaviour Service in Sydney and the Melbourne Veterinary Specialist Centre in Melbourne. She graduated from Melbourne University in 1995. While studying she recognised veterinary behavioural medicine as an area of veterinary medicine that brought together her interests in animal behaviour, animal training and the functioning brain. She obtained her membership to the Veterinary Behaviour Chapter of the Australian College of Veterinary Medicine in 2000. Jacqui has completed a PhD describing a model and a questionnaire for assessing canine personality at Monash University as part of the Animal Welfare Science Centre. Jacqui has been involved in teaching the Graduate Certificate in Animal Welfare at Monash University. She has presented to dog owners, dog trainers, dog walkers, veterinarians and veterinary nurses, and dog clubs about owning dogs, understanding dogs, cats and other pets and helping them fit into our confusing and complex world.