

Why pet owners don't always do the right thing

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Abstract

Companion animal management behaviours are typically enforced through local government regulations, and it is the task of Animal Management Officers (AMOs) to ensure that owners within their municipality comply with these regulations. While most pet owners comply with animal management regulations, there is a minority of owners who, for a number of reasons, are not compliant. It is this subset of people that AMOs must engage with on a daily basis. Understanding the psychological basis of non-compliance is the first step towards encouraging proactive change. By applying information gained from literature reviews and research papers, centered on human-animal interaction research, and theories of deviance and civil disobedience, this paper will assist AMO's in gaining a better idea of why pet owners do the things they do.

Background

Pet ownership is a common practice in Australia with approximately 53% of households owning at least one cat or dog (Australian Companion Animal Council, 2006). While the practice affords social and health benefits to owners and the broader community, there are numerous disadvantages associated with having such a large pet population. For example, stray cats and dogs may cause car accidents and harm or kill other animals including livestock and wildlife. Since many of these problems are the result of owners' mismanagement, regulations are necessary to control owners and their animals in order to promote the welfare of the community.

In order for these regulations to be effective, compliance must be achieved. Non-compliant pet owners are often assumed to be irresponsible owners. A dichotomy is drawn between irresponsible owners, who always do the wrong thing, and responsible owners, who always do the right thing. Based on this dichotomy, understanding why pet owners do the wrong thing is simple. Irresponsible owners do the wrong thing because they are blatantly disobedient to authority and have little respect for the welfare of others while responsible owners do the right thing because they value and uphold the law, care for pets under their care and value promoting the welfare of the community. Accordingly, achieving compliance appears to be relatively straightforward – punish the bad owners and reward the good owners.

Evidence shows, however, that there is no simple dichotomy between irresponsible and responsible owners. There are many responsible owners who sometimes do the wrong thing. These non compliant behaviours may be inadvertent. For instance, owners may be unable to locate their cat in order to comply with night time confinement laws, or dogs may escape from their property through no fault of the owner. Non-compliant behaviours may also be acts of deliberate non compliance.

A recent survey conducted in Melbourne found that, even in a sample of committed dog owners, 2% did not confine their dog to their property and a further 10% did not register their dog (Rohlf, Bennett, Toukhsati, & Coleman, 2009).

Clearly, if the distinction between irresponsible and responsible owners is more complex than a simple dichotomy, a greater understanding of the factors underlying pet owner regulatory behaviour is necessary if compliance is to be achieved.

Deterrence theory – the traditional view of regulatory compliance

According to the traditional view of regulatory compliance, people weigh up the costs and benefits of their actions. They balance the cost and benefits of compliance with the costs and benefits of non-compliance when deciding whether to comply with regulations. Based on this calculation, people choose the action that has the higher net return (Sutinen & Kuperan, 1999; Winter & May, 2001). This traditional perspective underlies the current legislative environment, where enforcement and deterrence through fines are designed to alter a person's calculated cost benefit ratio. This calculus is affected by the likelihood of detection (frequency of inspection) and by the certainty and size of the sanctions imposed (Winter & May, 2001)

This is especially the case within the Animal Management arena. For example, pet owners are fined if they are found to own an unregistered dog or cat. Additionally, compliance is induced by the presence of various incentives, such as low cost registration for microchipped pets. Based on these regulatory controls, compliance is achieved if the chances of getting caught are perceived to be high and if the punishment is severe enough to offset the benefits of noncompliance.

Deterrence theory is sufficient so far as it can explain a number of compliant and non-compliant behaviours. There is no doubt that there are people who do not comply with animal management regulations because they are not sufficiently deterred from the behaviour. Van de Kuyt's (2004) survey on compliance with dog and cat confinement in Melbourne revealed that one of the reasons why people did not confine their dog or cat was because they believed that council did not enforce dog confinement requirements. Evidence also suggests that people comply with regulations if they believe that the likelihood of getting caught is high. Van de Kuyt's (2004) survey also revealed that the more frequently cat owners reported seeing animal management officer patrols in the streets, the less likely they were to report that they would purposely let their cat out for exercise.

There are, however, various shortcomings associated with using the traditional deterrence theory to explain pet owner compliance. Pet owners are remarkably compliant. For example, according to an Australian survey, 91% of dog owners reported that they comply with dog leash laws (Headey, 2006).

These high rates of compliance cannot be fully accounted for by a traditional view of compliance. There are four reasons as to why this is the case. First, the likelihood of being caught disobeying animal management regulations is quite low. Ensuring 100% compliance for registration would require that AMO's door knock every single home in their municipality and check for the presence of a dog or cat. Even if councils could afford such an undertaking, proving that the dog or cat actually belongs to the householder and that they are simply not minding someone else's pet would be difficult. Second, even if pet owners are caught disobeying animal management regulations, the chances of being fined for non-compliance are low. According to Cutt, Giles-Corti and Adams (2006), AMO's typically let owners off with a warning rather than giving them a fine for first offences. A third reason for the inadequacy of the deterrence theory is that compliance with many of the animal management regulations actually incurs a cost to the animal owners. For example, confinement of cats may mean purchasing expensive cat enclosures. Fourth, punishments via fines are not usually severe enough to outweigh the benefits not registering. To illustrate, if you own a 5 year old desexed dog and live in an area where registration of this dog costs \$40 annually, and you get away with not registering him or her for 5 years you will have saved \$200. If you get caught you may incur a fine of \$80. Economically speaking you're still in front by \$120!

In light of these reasons, if the traditional view of compliance were true than it is probably more of a mystery why pet owners comply with any animal regulations at all. The traditional perspective of compliance behaviour of people weighing up personal gains and losses is therefore inadequate in explaining these behaviours.

How do psychologists explain compliance?

When psychologists study compliance they find that people in general are surprisingly obedient. They will often comply with a request even when there is nothing for them to gain. Telemarketers and door to door sales people rely on this aspect of human nature. If people weren't so compliant these jobs would not exist. The field of Social Psychology is abounding with many examples where people comply with requests even to the extent that doing do causes them distress. This was demonstrated by a famous and somewhat disturbing study conducted by Stanley Milgram in 1974 (Comer & Gould, 2010). He found that two thirds of his participants would obey a researcher to inflict electric shocks to a person, even against that person's will. Clearly, not all people are compliant and there is a great deal of variability between people and their levels of compliance. Psychologists interested in these social phenomena have found a number of variables which influence levels of compliance. These variables are particularly relevant for explaining why pet owners sometimes do the wrong thing as well as why they, so often, do the right thing. The factors influencing compliance include: knowledge and skills, perceptions of legitimacy, and social norms.

Knowledge and skills

An important factor underlying compliance with regulations is knowledge. Accordingly, people are more likely to obey regulations if they have a clear idea of exactly what the regulations are.

The current situation of companion animal management, however, is set up in a way which may create confusion amongst well meaning pet owners. As we all know, in Australia, local governments are empowered by State government to regulate and enforce companion dog management. Empowering local governments with the ability to manage companion dog ownership has the benefit of local laws being able to reflect a region's unique issues. For example, variation in housing density may impact the number of dogs able to be kept per property, so having local laws to reflect differences in urban, versus rural areas is fair (i.e., owners living in rural areas may be able to keep more dogs than owners living in inner city or urban areas). Variations in dog management between states and local government, however, results in a great deal of variation between local governments. For example, while all local governments require owners to register their dog(s) with a municipal council, some require yearly renewal of registrations while others require lifetime registrations. Such variation may result in confusion among dog owners as to their civil responsibilities, which may especially be the case for pet owners who frequently move between localities. Some pet owners may therefore do the wrong thing simply because they do not know what the right thing is. For example, only 30% of cat owners know that it is illegal for their cat to wander onto someone else's property without permission (Van de Kuyt, 2004). In another study, Hammond (2003) found that 20% of respondents to a Townsville based survey were not aware of any requirements for stray or wandering dogs. Ensuring pet owners are equipped with appropriate and clear guidelines as to what the regulations are within their municipality is therefore an important means to addressing issues with noncompliance. This may include erecting signs or the production and distribution of responsible pet ownership brochures.

Even if pet owners know what the right thing to do is, they may still be unable to comply if they lack the necessary skills. Consider nuisance barking for example. Barking is a major management issue. A nation-wide survey of 2,332 Australian residents found that 30% of participants reported being 'moderately annoyed' or 'highly annoyed' by barking (Australian Environment Council, 1988). It is also one of the most common noise complaints received by councils. For instance, in 1998 barking dogs represented 80% of all noise complaints received by Brisbane city council (Henry & Huson, 2004). Barking can be equally frustrating for owners who may have the desire and motivation to address the problem but lack the skills required to do so. Effective management of disruptive barking, however, is notoriously difficult. Although an array of devices has been made available to owners to curb this issue, the efficacy of these devices is limited and controversial (Juarbe-Diaz, 1997; Moffat, Landsberg, & Beaudet, 2003). Effective management of barking requires an in-depth investigation of the underlying causes of the behaviour. Such investigative skills are often beyond the capabilities of dog owners and professional services may be needed to address the issue.

Social influence

A second important factor determining compliance is the influence of others. For many of us, there is an inherent desire to earn the approval of others.

People do this by conforming to norms. Norms are the behavioural expectations of a social group. Failure to conform to social norms can often result in negative consequences for the transgressor from the group. These sanctions can range from subtle forms, such as sideways glances or withholding of favours, to verbal or even physical punishment which may ultimately result in ostracism from the group (Sutinen & Kuperan, 1999). Norms have been found to influence a variety of civic behaviours including littering (Kallgren, Reno, & Cialdini, 2000), recycling (Schultz, 1999) and parking violations (Adams & Webley, 1996).

Norms influence regulatory behaviour in a number of ways. The degree to which people will comply with regulations depends on whether people *think* others comply, whether they see others comply and whether they *believe others approve* of their compliance. It must be acknowledged, therefore, that the influence of norms on behaviour can be a double edged sword when it comes to compliance. Depending on the social group pet owners subscribe to, norms can either induce compliance or obstruct it.

Normative influences on pet owner regulatory behaviour have not been extensively researched but available evidence suggests that they do exist, especially for dog owners. Many AMO's are aware of this fact. Interviews with AMO's reveal that there are strong norms operating within dog parks (Cutt, et al., 2006). These norms may govern a range of behaviours, such as when it is appropriate to have a dog off lead and picking up after one's dog. Several studies researching the determinants of littering have found that dog owners who believe that friends do not pick up after their dog were more likely to allow their dog to foul public areas (Webley & Siviter, 2000). They are also more likely to pick up after their dogs if they were prompted by another community member or if the behaviour was modeled by another person (Jason & Zolik, 1985). Even registration rates are influenced by normative considerations. A recent survey investigating the determinants of responsible dog ownership revealed that dog owners are more likely to register their dog if they believe the practice is approved of by family and friends (Rohlf, Bennett, Toukhsati, & Coleman, 2010).

The influence of social norms on regulatory behaviour has several implications. Informing owners that the majority of people comply with regulations may be useful in informing owners that compliance is the norm. Encouraging pet owner social interactions may also be another way of communicating compliance norms among individuals.

Legitimate authority

A third factor influencing compliance is legitimacy. Legitimacy is the perceived obligation to obey authority (Tyler, 1997). If pet owners perceive the governing authority as legitimate they are more likely to comply with the regulations imposed on them, for they believe that they ought to follow all of them, regardless of the potential for punishment. Important factors determining the degree to which people view an authority as legitimate are the extent to which they believe the authority treats people respectfully, is trustworthy and neutral (Tyler, 1997). The extent to which authorities are viewed as legitimate has been found to influence compliance with a number of behaviours including tax evasion and environmental conservation behaviours (Kuperan & Sutinen,

1998; Murphy, 2005). Unfortunately, no research is available in the area of pet owners' level of compliance and the degree to which pet owners view regulatory authorities as legitimate. It is likely, however, that pet owners will be more likely to abide by animal regulations if they are given evidence that their values are upheld and that they are respected members of the community. Further to this, they may be more likely to obey if they believe that authorities are neutral, and if they trust the motives of authorities. In contrast, pet owners may be less likely to comply with animal management regulations if they have had negative experiences with AMO's in the past and if they view the regulations or the regulatory process as unfair. Fostering ways to increase legitimacy in the eyes of pet owners is therefore a worthwhile endeavor. One of the ways some municipalities have done this is by engaging pet owners in the regulatory process through the creation of pet owner reference groups. Municipalities may also wish to consider involving AMO's in community events in a positive manner. This may ensure that owners are interacting with local AMOs in a positive manner rather than only when something goes wrong.

Personal morality

A fourth factor influencing compliance with companion animal regulations is personal morality (Tyler, 2006). If animal management policies are consistent with pet owners' underlying moral obligations to their pet then they are also more likely to comply. Pet owners will comply with a host of behaviours if they believe that they are consistent with their moral obligation towards their pet and towards other members of the community. Dog and cat owners will confine their pet because they believe that by doing so they will prevent their dog or cat from being a nuisance to others and from being harmed (Rohlf, et al., 2010; Van de Kuyt, 2004). However, sometimes animal management legislation conflicts with pet owners' obligations towards their pet. For example, very few cat owners support 24 hour cat confinement because they believe that the practice is detrimental to the welfare of cats who, they believe, are supposed to be free to roam (Van de Kuyt, 2004). Additionally, some dog owners may also disobey leash laws because they believe that their dogs should be exercised off lead. Ensuring urban animal management regulations are made with pet owners' obligations towards their pets' welfare in mind may therefore represent another important means of improving compliance.

Conclusion

Establishing why pet owners sometimes do the wrong thing is a complex task. Pet owner compliance behaviours are not just the results of weighing up the pros and cons of regulatory behaviour. Rather, compliance is the result of knowledge and skills, normative pressures, perceptions of legitimacy and the degree to which laws are in line with moral values. The most important implication arising from such an understanding is that establishing compliance with pet owner regulations may not necessarily require enforcement. Much regulatory behaviour may be controlled through other means so that pet owners are induced to comply voluntarily.

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