

# Emotional Experiences Of Dog Owners Facing Disciplining Situations With Dogs

J. Ben-Michael

University of Nijmegen, PhD-Centre, P.O.Box 9104, 6500 HE Nijmegen,  
The Netherlands,

## Introduction

Dogs are regularly subjected to the same kind of treatment (Katcher et al, 1983; Cain, 1985) as human infants (Hart and Hart, 1985, Mallon, 1993). Each dog owner regards his dog in his own particular way, which makes ones own dog seem special, almost a person.

Accordingly, it is not unusual that the average dog owner thinks of their dog in human terms; they not only regard their dog as part of the family (Voith, 1983, Sussman, 1985), but as their child (Mallon, 1993). The behaviour of a dog is an important determinant of the success of this relationship, as problematic behaviour by the dog can impede and weaken the dog-owner relationship (Fogel, 1990, Clark and Boyer, 1993, McBride, 1995).

## Dimensions of rearing behaviour

Because dogs are treated frequently as humans it may be natural to assume that owners use 'human' rearing and disciplining methods with their pets, especially where dogs are involved (Fogel, 1990, Neville, 1990).

Parents differ in their rearing behaviour in two major dimensions: *support* in terms of warmth, love, acceptance, nurturing, intimacy, responsiveness, anthropomorphy and *control* in terms of parental behaviours which limit, direct, or correct the child's action and as a consequence, interfere with the ongoing stream of behaviour or actions he is engaged in. The control of behaviour can be differentiated in terms of intensity of control, restrictiveness, and quality of parental control. (Maccoby, 1980, Maccoby and Martin, 1983, Rollings and Thomas, 1979). Janssens and Gerris (1988) and Siebenheller (1990) suggested three child rearing strategies:

(a) Authoritarian approach: in terms of parenting with an accent on coercive, threatening and commandatory interference of the parent. The parent gives orders, show anger, withdraw privileges, punishes, enforces desired behaviour.

(b) Inductive reasoning approach: where the accent is sometimes on inducing and sometimes on reasoning. The parent suggests desired behaviour, points out undesired consequences, explains, helps to solve the child's problems, shows desired behaviour.

(c) Undemanding and uninvolved approach: when the child has desires and demands, the parent interferes little (when he interferes he tells the child only once to stop) and lets child make his own decisions, to face the consequences and to solve his own problems.

The simplified approach in dealing with dog rearing and disciplining which animal behaviourists employ and advise includes two major possibilities: punishing the undesirable behaviour or rewarding the good behaviour. Though, disciplining methods employed by animal behaviourists are based mostly on conditioning procedures, or hormonal and pharmacological manipulations (Hart and Hart, 1985; O'Farrell, 1986, 1994; Fogel, 1990) they are also accompanied with aspects of support (affection, attachment, intimacy, love). (Hart and Hart, 1985; Fogel, 1990). Because of the common belief that animals do not understand

reasoning, induction techniques are not considered by animal behaviourists as a disciplining techniques for dogs. Nevertheless, it is possible that in a case where the dog is highly anthromorphized by the owner, 'common' disciplining techniques may include the expectation that the dog understands the punishment or the inductive elements of the owner's reaction (Fogel, 1990; O'Farrell, 1992).

### **Interactions, emotions and, disciplining behaviour**

Many studies in the field of parent-child interaction are characterised by an interactionistic approach. In an interactionistic approach human behaviour is considered to be a result of the interaction of personality traits and situation characteristics (Gerris, 1984, Magnusson, 1988). In a Dutch study, Siebenheller (1990), performed his research on perceptions, emotions and discipline reactions in problematic child-rearing situations within the classical interactionistic model. He concluded that situational characteristics as well as personal characteristics appeared to be important antecedents of parental reactions in problematic child-rearing situations.

Various recent studies describe the influence of emotions on parenting: Dix et al (1986), suggested that the emotional reactions to children may be cognitively mediated; Siebenheller (1990) showed that the characteristics of the situations resulted in differences in reported emotions (such as anger, annoyance, rejection) by parents and Korzilius (1996) established that emotions are guided by cognitions and can influence disciplining behaviour.

The current study deals with the relationship between the dog and the dog owner according to the interactionistic approach: the owner is studied in various dog rearing situations in which he is confronted with a problematic situation. This study is focused on the dog-owners and the main aspects within are the owner's emotions and behaviours (disciplining strategies).

To obtain more information about the characteristics of a problematic dog rearing situation, about the frequency of occurrence, the extent of such problems, and the magnitude of the various components of owner emotions and reactions, the following questions were addressed:

1. How often do problematic dog rearing situations occur?
2. What is the extent of problematicity in the dog owner perception of dog rearing situations?
3. What is the content of situation specific owner representation: emotions and reaction?

### **Subjects**

#### **Dog owner characteristics:**

The sample consisted of 116 dog owners. Of those 116, 83 persons completed and returned the questionnaire. The subjects were contacted through requests in local and regional newspapers, university newspapers, and through appeals on local and regional radio stations. The group consisted of 72% (n=60) females and 28% (n=23) males with 73.5% (n=61) couples among them; 49.4% (n=41) of the owners have children. The mean age of the participants was 44.3 (range: 22-76; SD=12.09). The participants belonged mainly to middle and high socioeconomic classes: 57% had an education higher than high school, 58% (n=48) have paid work with 56% (n=46) of those in employment worked more than 15 hours per week.

Dog characteristics:

The mean age of the dogs was 6.39 (SD=4.02); 43% were males and 57% were bitches.

### Procedure

Dog owners (N=116) were offered a situation-reaction questionnaire which consisted of 16 brief prototypical descriptions of various every dog-rearing situations and asked:

1. To what extent they thought each of the situations was problematic (on a 4-point scale, e.g. not at all problematic, not so problematic, problematic, very problematic).
2. How often each situation occurred in their dog-rearing practice (on a 5-point scale, e.g. never, rarely, sometimes, frequently, very frequently).
3. How intensely they experienced 13 emotions (disappointment, anger, annoyance, concern, irritation, compassion, anxiety sadness, pity, acceptance, remorse and, shame (on a 4-point scale, e.g. no, not so much, much, very much).
4. The actual disciplinary reactions they showed in each of these situations; the owner could make a choice from one to three applicable reactions from a set of 9 prototypical disciplinary reactions. These disciplinary reactions most frequently appeared in Voith (1983), the books of Fogel, (1990) and O'Farrell, (1986, 1992) and collected by interviewing the subjects who participated in this study.

### Results

Based on hierarchical cluster analysis (Ben-Michael, 1997), sixteen situations were constructed: two prototypical situations per cluster. Each prototypical situation is a short description and always includes a problematic behavioural aspect. The selected situations were chosen to be familiar and identifiable to as many owners as possible.

The dog-owners were asked about their emotions and reactions in these situations. They reacted as follows:

Cluster A - The fearful dog: the owners were accepting or anxious and mostly reacted by comforting the dog or being inactive.

Cluster B - The aggressive/dominant dog: the owners were irritated and angry and demanded compliance or punished.

Cluster C - The "mating" dog: the owners were mostly irritated, demanded compliance or tried to distract the dog.

Cluster D - The emotional dog: the owners were irritated or angry at the dog and demanded compliance or punished it.

Cluster E - The bored/lonely dog: the owners angry and disappointed; when disappointed they tried mostly to comfort the dog and when angry the mostly punished the dog.

Cluster F - Eating habits of the dog: the owners irritated or angry at the dog and demanded compliance or punished it. the owners angry and disappointed; when disappointed they tried mostly to comfort the dog and when angry the mostly punished the dog.

Cluster G - The unruly dog: the owners angry and disappointed; in both cases they mostly punished the dog.

Cluster H - The disobedient dog: the owners were irritated or angry at the dog and demanded compliance or punished it.

About 35% of the owners complained that aggression and disobedience are frequent (from sometimes to very frequent) and more than 50% of the owners regarded these behaviours as problematic (problematic and very problematic).

## Conclusions

The results show that dog-rearing situations elicit various emotions and it can be concluded that the content of a number of dog-rearing situations is apparently such that it evokes the same kind of reactions in the majority of dog-owners, whereas other situations are less apparent and owners vary in their behavioural reactions.

1. Pertaining to the most frequent reactions over all child-rearing situations it turned out that owners mostly demand compliance and often react by addressing the dog severely. Further owners also use distraction and punishment as disciplining methods.
2. Punishing the dog was specified as the first option to use when the dog misbehaves.
3. The methods least used are rewarding the dog and being inactive.
4. When reactions per situation are considered some patterns become visible:

When the dog is in an emotional state owners tend to assist, comfort and distract him. These situations evoke strong feelings of acceptance and even anxiety and compassion.

When the dog is unruly and disobedient most of the owners react by punishing the dog, demanding compliance, addressing the dog severely and trying to distract him. These situations evoke strong feelings of irritation and anger, together with disappointment and embarrassment.

When the dog shows agonistic behaviour the owner uses power-assertion methods such as punishing, demanding compliance and addressing the dog severely. When the dog misbehaves outdoors owners choose more to punish than address the dog and demand compliance. These situations elicit feelings of irritation and anger together with disappointment and powerlessness.

These results are in agreement with studies of Janssens et al. (1992) about children and Hart and Hart (1985), Fogel (1990) and Neville (1990) about dogs.

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