"Leads" to Expanded Social Networks, Increased Civic Engagement and Divisions Within a Community: The Role of Dogs

Catherine Simpson Bueker
Emmanuel College

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw

Part of the Animal Studies Commons, Social Psychology and Interaction Commons, and the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol40/iss4/12
"Leads" to Expanded Social Networks, Increased Civic Engagement and Divisions Within a Community: The Role of Dogs

CATHERINE SIMPSON BUEKER
Emmanuel College
Department of Sociology

Dogs play a distinct role in their impact on human relationships and processes because of the unique role they play in American society, existing in a liminal space of "almost" human. Both the level of emotional attachment and the requisite daily care make dogs important players in bringing humans in contact with one another and mediating human relationships. This study examines the role that dogs play in mediating relationships between and among humans. By analyzing 24 in-depth interviews, as well as Letters to the Editor, editorials, and other items in a local newspaper, and observing public meetings around dog usage at a local park, I identify a range of ways that dogs influence social relationships and processes, even for those who do not have dogs in their homes. On the positive side, I find that dogs act as "tickets" for people to socialize and develop relationships, they facilitate the diversification of social networks, and they act as an avenue to political participation. On the negative side, dog ownership and dog breeds can become the basis for clique formation, stereotypes, and boundary formation, serving as grounds for exclusion.

Key words: dogs, political participation, socialization, cliques, park usage, social capital

Dogs act as companions, protectors, guides, and members of the family. Companion animals, generally, facilitate the emotional and physical well-being of their human companions (Allen, Blascovich & Mendes, 2002; Fox, 2006; Power, 2008; Risley-Curtiss, Holley & Wolf, 2006b; Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006a).

But dogs play other powerful roles in the public realm, even for those who are not dog owners (McNicholas & Collis, Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare, December 2013, Volume XL, Number 4)
Humans and animals have long existed together in social networks, even when they do not appear to have an immediate connection (Philo & Wilbert, 2000).

At the most basic level, dogs tend to increase the quantity of human interactions (McNicholas & Collis, 2000; Wood, Giles-Corti, & Bulsara, 2005; Wood et al., 2007). At times, these increased interactions are positive for both the individual and the larger community, via increased social and civic engagement and the growth of social capital, but they can also have negative consequences (Toohey & Rock, 2011). Dogs can serve as “markers” and “dividers” in our culture, both for dog owners and non-owners. Dogs, and more specifically certain breeds of dogs, represent life styles and personality traits to the outside world (Drew, 2012; MacInness, 2003; Tissot, 2011).

Through a mixed-methods approach utilizing in-depth interviews, content analysis of newspaper items, and participant observations, this study explored how dogs directly and indirectly mediated human relationships in an upper-middle class suburban community.

Previous Research

Placing Humans within Animal Studies

The field of animal geography has, in recent years, grown substantially. Two significant compendiums over the past fifteen years have brought together scholarship that has examined a number of new issues in regards to human–non-human interactions—exploring issues of animal agency, the placement of animals within and across societies, and the existence of animals on a continuum rather than a binary “human–non-human” mode (Philo & Wilbert, 2000; Wolch & Emel, 1998). Animals, often at the heart of public policies and economic endeavors, have only recently been understood in this way (see e.g., Brownlow, 2000; Woods, Philo, & Wilbert, 2000).

Scholars in the field of animal geography have called for additional lines of research to better understand how animals shape the urban landscape in the form of multi-use parks, dog runs and zoos, how they facilitate contact between people, and how they shape the political discourse (Emel, Wilbert &
"Leads" to Expanded Social Networks

Wolch, 2002; Jones, 2000; Wolch, 2002; Wolch, Brownlow & Lassiter, 2000). These studies, although certainly pushing for a broader agenda, are empirically limited. They are theoretically, rather than empirically driven, applying little data to their questions. They also tend to focus on human–animal relationships, as opposed to focusing on animals as mediators of human relationships.

Animal research that has explored the role of animals in shaping certain human processes, such as the political discourse, has tended to focus on political initiatives that are abstract and intellectual in nature (Brownlow, 2000; Woods et al., 2000). For example, people walk for greyhounds or boycott the tuna industry. These illustrations are very different from the human–animal companion relationships that may lead to local civic and political engagement. The purpose of this study is to examine the implicit and explicit roles that dogs play in dog-initiated political, civic, and social activities within a neighborhood.

Placing Animals within Human Studies

In recent years, the fields of medicine, sociology, psychology, social work, and social welfare have begun to examine the critical role that companion animals play in the lives of their humans. Studies have examined how humans come to understand their animals and the relationships they have with them (Fox, 2006; Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006a, 2006b), how humans fit dogs into their lives and homes (Power, 2008), and how they control their dogs outside of the home (Laurier, Maze & Lundin, 2006). Dogs are described as “companions,” “pack animals,” “children,” and “family” (Fox, 2006; Power, 2008; Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006a).

Research has also explored the impact of dogs on the physical and emotional health of humans. Animal companionship is overwhelmingly identified with positive mental-health (Allen et al., 2002; Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006a, 2006b) and physical outcomes for humans (Cutt, Knuiman, & Giles-Corti, 2008; Toohey & Rock, 2011; Wells, 2009). Cross-national longitudinal research in Germany and Australia has similarly found physical and mental health benefits for those with animal companions (Headey & Grabka, 2007).
Certain sub-sets of the population may particularly benefit from having an animal companion. Single people versus those who are married, as well as women versus men, appear to gain greater psychological benefit from dog ownership (Cline, 2010). Additionally, dogs may be particularly beneficial to the elderly population (Scheibeck, Pallauf, Stellwag, & Seeberger, 2011).

**The Human/Non-Human/Human Connection**

One area of recent research has revealed the impact that animal companions, most often dogs, have on the relationships between owners and non-owners and on the community at large. A large scale study conducted in three Australian suburbs found that dogs appeared to have myriad positive effects on the communities in which they resided (Wood et al., 2005, 2007). They encouraged social interactions between owners and non-owners, expanding social networks. Dogs are also associated with the building of social capital, generally defined as the web of relationships and the feelings of reciprocity that bind individuals and communities together (Putnam, 2000), as well as with increased civic engagement.

The findings that dogs are associated with the growth of social networks and social capital are particularly important. The influence of social networks on the individual has been well established in recent decades, with research strongly suggesting that our networks influence everything from our access to jobs to our level of happiness to our overall health (Christakis, 2009; Granovetter, 1973; Putnam, 2000). These individual social networks feed into the level of social capital that exists for both the individual and the larger community, as social capital flows through these networks (Lin, 2005). Higher levels of social capital within a community are associated with everything from higher levels of civility and political engagement to better overall health outcomes and lower rates of crime (Bruhn, 2005; Putnam, 2000).

However, a meta-analysis reveals that the effect of dogs on non-owners varies significantly by context and sub-group (Toohey & Rock, 2011). Within socially cohesive, higher income neighborhoods, both owners and non-owners experience increased physical activity, social interaction, levels of reciprocity, and social capital. The effects are not so consistently
positive in less affluent neighborhoods, with women, ethnic minorities, and the elderly negatively impacted by dogs. These sub-groups may be less likely to venture out due to the presence of dogs in the neighborhood (e.g., due to fear of the dogs), thereby limiting their ability to exercise, socialize, and build their own social networks and levels of social capital (Toohey & Rock, 2011).

Recent studies exploring the role that dogs play in urban gentrification in the U.S. find that dogs unintentionally create and maintain social, racial, and class divisions (Drew, 2012; Tissot, 2011). These mixed results beg the question of the role that dogs play in mediating social relationships in a White, upper-middle class suburb where there appears to be less active boundary making. What role do dogs play in influencing social processes, such as group formation and political activity? Do they increase civic engagement and social capital, or do they unwittingly create divisions and feelings of mistrust? Finally, what allows dogs to play this important role?

Methods

The Context

This study grew out of a controversy over the uses of an approximately five acre mixed-use park in a predominantly White, upper-middle class suburb outside of a large city in Massachusetts. As a community member living in close proximity to the park, I received correspondence from the ‘Committee’ overseeing developments at the park, including a ban on dogs running off leash in October, 2008. I attended the first public meeting in December 2008 as an interested neighbor. However, my interest quickly became sociological in nature, as more than 50 individuals appeared on a snowy weekday night to air their grievances regarding the ban. Both the large turnout and the hostility between those who supported the ban and those who did not piqued my interest as a student of civic engagement.

The park at the center of the controversy includes a playground, a field used for both soccer and lacrosse practices and games, a baseball diamond, and a small basketball court. A paved walking path follows the perimeter. The park can be reached on foot via several walking paths. One road dead ends
Into the park and provides about one dozen parking spaces. In mid-October, 2008, the Committee banned dogs from running off-leash at the park. Reportedly the Committee was responding to a growing number of complaints lodged by close neighbors of the park, parents of small children, and sports coaches, each who held a different set of complaints in regards to the dogs and their owners.

Within days of the ban, letters to the editor and guest columns appeared in the local newspaper, protesting the leash decision by the Committee. A group calling itself M-WOOF emerged, requesting repeal of the leash law. This off-leash group had three clear leaders and several dozen participants. They began to meet regularly, write additional letters to the editor, and strategize about how best to respond to the Committee decision. It was at the December meeting that more than fifty residents from both sides came together to discuss the dog leash issue.

A compromise program, developed over the course of multiple meetings in December, January, and February, was piloted in late winter 2009. The pilot program included: limited off-leash hours in the mornings and evenings with the schedule varying by season; a limit of eight dogs off-leash at any one time during the off-leash hours; a limit of two dogs per person; a requirement that all dogs be under voice control at all times; a residency requirement for all dog owners who have their dogs off-leash; and a strict ban on dogs in the playground (minutes from February, 2009 public meeting of the Committee). Fines of up to $200 could be levied for the failure to meet any of these requirements. As of summer 2012, this program remained in place.

*The Sample*

The bulk of the data for this study come from 24 in-depth interviews with residents of the town who were involved in the discussions over the park. The interviews took place from January 2009, immediately after I had been granted approval from the Institutional Review Board. I was able to gain access to those involved in the debate as a known member of the community who did not take a position on the issue. Names of participants and their dogs, as well as location and groups, have been changed to protect confidentiality.
The sample of 24 participants grew out of a hybrid approach, combining a purposive or judgment sample with a snowball sample. I began by contacting those I knew were involved in the off-leash group through their very public positions in the newspaper and at public hearings. I used email, telephone and face-to-face contact to make the initial request. At the end of each interview, I asked them to supply names of others in the off-leash group who they thought would speak with me. In total, I contacted nineteen members of the group; sixteen agreed to be interviewed, including two of the leaders. Thus sixteen individuals make up the off-leash sample. They are all dog owners.

I contacted the on-leash people who had been involved in passing and maintaining the leash requirement through similar means—face-to-face conversations, email, and telephone—and asked if they would be willing to speak with me about their involvement in the park debate. I first approached the most public members of the group and then asked for referrals. There were fewer active on-leash individuals; they tended to be less organized and more nervous about speaking with me than the off-leash group. As a result, the on-leash sample is smaller. Of the eight on-leash respondents, three had dogs and one had a cat at the time of the interview. An additional member of the sample has since brought a dog into his home.

The question of sample size often comes up in qualitative research, with the concern of not having interviewed enough people or having stayed out in the field for long enough to fully understand the dynamics or identify the trends. Although there is no "magic" number in terms of sample size, qualitative work relies on the notion of "redundancy" and the identification of trends in interview data (Ely, Anzul, Friedman, Garner, & McCormack Steinmetz, 1997). Such was the case in this sample where I began to see clear repetition within the interviews among both off-leash and on-leash participants.

**Interviews**

The interviews relied upon a structured questionnaire. Respondents on both sides of the issue were asked the same core questions, including "Why did you become involved in the park discussion?" "In what ways did you participate in
the public debates?" "What does the park mean to you?" Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was audio recorded with the written consent of the subjects. I conducted interviews in a range of settings, from the homes of the participants to the library to the local coffee shops in town, largely at the discretion of the subjects. A research assistant transcribed the interviews verbatim into Microsoft Word.

Documents
I supplemented the 24 in-depth interviews with additional documents. These documents include 17 Letters to the Editor, three guest columns, two editorials, and five articles, all appearing in the local newspaper and spanning the period from April 26, 2006 through June 2, 2011. I examined all items in the local newspaper that discussed the park issue as it related to the dogs, regardless of whether the article explicitly fit within an identified theme. I also reviewed minutes from public meetings on the topic and attended a series of public meetings throughout 2008 and 2009. The additional sources allow for a triangulation of data (Yin, 1994). Due to confidentiality concerns, titles of newspaper items are not included, but can be accessed from the author.

Analysis
I took a grounded theory approach to analyzing the data, first looking to the data and then tying the trends to larger theories when applicable. In this framework, one begins "in the data," and attempts to set it within a larger sociological framework to make sense of the data one has collected (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). The approach is inductive, rather than deductive.

In order to assure objectivity, my research assistant and I independently coded a random sample of the interviews to look for themes in the data. After we had each independently coded the same six randomly sampled interviews, we met to discuss the themes we had identified. Although we had slightly different terms for some of the themes, we found significant overlap in our respective codes. One could consider these the initial codes (Lofland & Lofland, 1995).
Table 1. Descriptives of Sample, N=24

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym &amp; Gender</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Distance from Park</th>
<th>Length of Residency</th>
<th>Dog Owner</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alice (F)</td>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>&lt;1/2 mile</td>
<td>10+ years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annette (F)</td>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>2+ miles</td>
<td>1-3 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Store owner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy (F)</td>
<td>50-64</td>
<td>&lt;1/2 mile</td>
<td>10+ years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Nurse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan (F)</td>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>1-2 miles</td>
<td>10+ years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Project Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael (F)</td>
<td>50-64</td>
<td>1/2-1 mile</td>
<td>10+ years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>VP, Telecom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Louise (F)</td>
<td>50-64</td>
<td>2+ miles</td>
<td>10+ years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Consultant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David (F)</td>
<td>50-64</td>
<td>1-2 miles</td>
<td>10+ years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Graphic Designer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kate (F)</td>
<td>65+</td>
<td>&lt;1/2 mile</td>
<td>10+ years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rose (F)</td>
<td>50-64</td>
<td>1/2-1 mile</td>
<td>4-7 years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean (F)</td>
<td>50-64</td>
<td>&lt;1/2 mile</td>
<td>10+ years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>IT director</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally (F)</td>
<td>50-64</td>
<td>&lt;1/2 mile</td>
<td>10+ years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara (F)</td>
<td>65+</td>
<td>&lt;1/2 mile</td>
<td>10+ years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Psychologist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jill (F)</td>
<td>50-64</td>
<td>&lt;1/2 mile</td>
<td>10+ years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Community Health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terry (F)</td>
<td>50-64</td>
<td>1-2 miles</td>
<td>10+ years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Sales</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John (M)</td>
<td>50-64</td>
<td>&lt;1/2 mile</td>
<td>10+ years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Doctor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam (M)</td>
<td>50-64</td>
<td>1/2-1 mile</td>
<td>10+ years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>CEO</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul (M)</td>
<td>65+</td>
<td>&lt;1/2 mile</td>
<td>10+ years</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Part Time Accountant/Retired Insurance Exec.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connie (F)</td>
<td>65+</td>
<td>&lt;1/2 mile</td>
<td>10+ years</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian (M)</td>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>&lt;1/2 mile</td>
<td>8-9 years</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maggie (F)</td>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>&lt;1/2 mile</td>
<td>10+ years</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy (F)</td>
<td>50-64</td>
<td>&lt;1/2 mile</td>
<td>10+ years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Part Time Accountant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marilyn (F)</td>
<td>50-64</td>
<td>&lt;1/2 mile</td>
<td>10+ years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Realtor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gideon (M)</td>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>&lt;1/2 mile</td>
<td>4-7 years</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Financial Advisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George (M)</td>
<td>50-64</td>
<td>&lt;1/2 mile</td>
<td>10+ years</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Financial Advisor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I then returned to the interviews and through an iterative process, focused the codes to a greater extent, with more formal or "focused" groups developing (Lofland & Lofland,
I coded the data using the software OpenCode. I used the same coding categories to code the newspaper items and minutes from the public meetings.

Results

Sample

The overall sample is White and heavily female. The residents range from being middle class to upper-middle class. The off-leash sample includes more women and more people who are unmarried. Table 1 highlights key participant demographic information.

Forming Human Connections and Building Social Capital

Interestingly, the most common theme that emerged from the data was the importance of the park in terms of human connections, in keeping with earlier research (McNicholas & Collis, 2000; Toohey & Rock, 2011; Wood et al., 2005, 2007).

One of the great fears in American society today is the decline in human interactions among people, resulting from overly busy lives, long commutes, two parents in the workforce, and the increased use of technology (Putnam, 2000). The lack of basic contact translates into an inability to form real and meaningful relationships, and an inability to create social networks. The decline in such connections has negative implications at the individual level, where lower levels of social capital translate into fewer opportunities, less knowledge, and less overall life satisfaction. The decline in individual connections eventually impacts the larger community, where we see lower levels of civic engagement, lessening feelings of communal responsibility, and a greater fragmenting of society.

Putnam (2000) describes two different types of social capital which exist. "Bonding social capital" reinforces relationships and feelings of reciprocity among similarly situated individuals, whereas "bridging social capital" brings people together who would normally be found in different spheres due to life cycle or circumstance. The data collected suggest evidence of both types of social capital building as a result of both the dogs and the dog controversy, but with the increased social capital primarily accruing to the off-leash proponents. These findings
on the building of social capital and the unequal accrual of it are in keeping with prior research (McNicholas & Collis, 2000; Toohey & Rock, 2011; Wood et al., 2005, 2007). Women, and in particular, unmarried women seem to disproportionately rely on their dogs for forming these relationships, a trend identified in Cline’s (2010) work.

The theme of dogs as social connectors was particularly common and strong among off-leash participants, with 12 out of 16 off-leash participants discussing the importance of the park in terms of human contact. In the course of many interviews, individuals thought back to their initial encounters at the park and in these cases, the dog’s role as the initial “ticket” to social relationships became clear. Alice, a married woman in her thirties who was involved in the off-leash movement, discussed her early experience at the park. She said:

When we started going with Spot there was already a pretty tight knit group of people who were there, seemingly always at the same time with the same group of dogs … to me, it was like having a new baby in the playground. They would kind of start to welcome you in and you were sort of accepted and they found out her name before they found out your name.

Susan, an off-leash participant, talked about getting her dog. She said she felt that she had finally “joined the club and the club had ended,” referring to her disappointment that the park had restrictions in place that made human socializing more difficult. She was able to develop some relationships through her park usage with her dog and talked about the way the park connected her to other town residents. Jill, an active off-leash group member, recalled becoming reacquainted with an old friend at the park. “All of a sudden I saw her. I hadn’t seen her in probably fifteen years. I saw her and said ‘Oh, Patty! I haven’t seen you in fifteen years.’ She had a dog. I had a dog and we connected.”

Although a seeming contradiction, the role of the dog in mediating the human interactions is barely touched upon or even implicit among many of the off-leash proponents. Ironically, the dog appears as a peripheral actor once initial
contact has been made. Annette, a local shopkeeper, said simply, her dog “needed his exercise, but truthfully that was secondary. The primary point was to socialize. I’m at work and you know, it would give a little infusion into my day.” Three other members of the off-leash group made similar comments. David, an off-leash supporter, looked at the issue a bit more seriously, coming close to using the language of academics. He stated:

The social networking issue is, I think, a serious one. I think it’s become a primary means of socialization for humans, not just for the dogs. I’ve heard a number of dog owners say the same thing. These are particularly folks who are in retirement and people who might have a physical disability, no matter how minor...I think it’s a very important social issue to some people. It’s somewhat to me because I am out of work, but to me, it was a nice way to touch base with people.

Six off-leash group members cited instances of social groups developing out of the park, suggesting the dogs encouraged the development of closer social ties and community building. Annette talked about a group of park goers going to see a play in which another park-goer’s daughter had a role. David and Sally discussed walking with the “regulars” at the park every morning. Rose talked about a Thursday afternoon cocktail party that would take place each week. Jill discussed a group of four women who would go out for lunch once a month. Jean was particularly devastated by the on-leash requirements and resultant change in the culture of the park. She discussed a holiday on which a number of single women went out for dinner. In one letter to the editor, a woman described the “extraordinary sense of community” at the park (Letter to the Editor, January 28th, 2010).

Interestingly, two members of the off-leash group cited greater connections as a result of the park controversy. They both discussed feeling less a part of the community prior to the debates. Alice said “It is interesting because we keep to ourselves pretty much and made friends through this whole dog thing.” Barbara, a longtime resident, said in reference to
"Leads" to Expanded Social Networks

the park controversy, "It’s been a good thing. I think it’s been an interesting community effort. I’ve been surprised. It’s one thing that has made me feel a part of the neighborhood and a part of the town."

For a handful of off-leash people, the relationships became significant. Six people discussed their park relationships in very meaningful ways, sometimes giving examples of critical outcomes. Annette, when asked about her relationship to the park, responded "And if you ever needed help on any level, you felt like you had friends there. So, it’s not going to happen at McDonald’s that you find those delights." Michael, Sally, and Jill used the term "family" to describe the nature of the relationships that formed at the park, evidence of growing social networks and feelings of reciprocity, the key ingredients of social capital. Michael, a retiree who frequented the park, but stopped going because of the fighting, stated:

There was a woman who had a few surgeries and while we were there people would go visit to make sure she was alright. Again, people cared about one another...People would be concerned about each other if someone didn’t show up. There were some people [who] would look for them and if they didn’t show up people would check on them to make sure they were alright because they’re normally there. It became sort of an extended family kind of thing.

This type of "checking in" on one another was similarly observed by Wood et al. (2007) in their study of dogs and dog ownership in the Australian suburbs.

The interviews with off-leash supporters also revealed significant evidence of bridging social capital, with multiple people talking about the expansion and increasing diversity of their social networks as a result of park usage. This is in keeping with prior research on the impact of human interactions resulting from dogs (McNicholas & Collis, 2000; Wood et al., 2005, 2007).

Individuals in support of the off-leash policy talked about meeting people of different ages, marital statuses, religions, political opinions, and professions. One prescient letter to the
editor (April 3rd, 2008), written before the leash rules were put into effect, stated that it was a place where people of all ages and types could socialize. Another letter to the editor (November 13th, 2008) stated “it’s been one of the greatest joys of [Mayfair].” This person goes on to discuss the celebrations around the births of babies, new puppies, and good friends. A guest columnist wrote “there are wonderful experiences that occur every day at .... the park” (November 13th, 2008). She went on to say, “I’ve seen children learn to ride bikes—first on training wheels, and then without them at the park. Strangers become acquaintances and sometimes close friends there.” Lucy, a member of the off-leash group, stated:

It’s just the people you never knew existed that lived one street over. And I think another part that I think anybody knows if you go up there with a dog is that you meet the young people that you certainly have nothing else in common with. You hear about what’s going on in the schools and what the issues are...it just brings people together who would otherwise never know each other.

Louise, another woman in the off-leash group, stated:

I know old ladies and I know people with babies and I know professors from the ... College and the guys who run the DPW trucks. I don’t have a good chance to meet people and hang out with them socially who are like that and it was a very good thing.

Alice, another member of the off-leash group, made a similar comment about the diversity of her network. Michael, a leader of the off-leash group, reiterated this feeling by saying “I found it really interesting because it’s such a cross section of people there.” Jean, an off-leash group participant, made a point of saying “But that’s the thing, most of my experiences were not with dog people. They were just so nice and involved and chatty.”

Discussions of socialization and contact came up among on-leash participants, as well, with 4 of 8 on-leash participants discussing this theme. Brian, who lives close to the park and
worked in favor of the on-leash requirements, compared the role of dogs and children in the community. He felt that both act as a basis for socialization and "camaraderie." Paul, Nancy, and George, all on-leash supporters, similarly saw the role that dogs play in connecting people.

Among the on-leash supporters, the discussion of dogs as social connectors was much more theoretical in nature, rather than a result of their own experiences. George stated “I feel that society, if there’s a link or common denominator like a dog, people will go from rude to human being in two seconds.” Nancy’s discussion of dogs as connectors is related to how important the dogs were to the people on the other side of the issue. She said:

I think there are a large number of people who lost something that was very meaningful to them. This offered a social gathering to get together and talk about this issue they had in common. That was key. Really, there are so many spaces, but at [the Park], you could show up and just know that there were going to be people to walk and talk with. It was really important to people. Friendships [were] forged in the park and when it was taken away, feelings were hurt. In their eyes, it was through no fault of their own.

There was very limited evidence of the on-leash participants gaining in bonding social capital. However, one man involved in the on-leash push said of his involvement, “I’ve developed stronger relationships with my neighbors. We came together as a unified group with a common message.” He goes on to say that he feels like he could go to them now if he had a problem and needed help, suggesting some evidence of bonding social capital among the on-leash faction.

Those involved in the on-leash side of the debate did not appear to develop bridging social capital. Maggie, a member of the on-leash constituency, did discuss an off-leash member congratulating her on the birth of a new baby and the interactions being cordial, but there was not the sense of longer-term or more meaningful relationships growing out of the park for the on-leash participants.
Dogs as Avenues for Engagement

Dogs mediate human processes and relationships in another way: by engaging people civically and politically. The effect of animals on national and international public policy has been identified in prior work (Emel et al., 2002; Jones, 2000; Wolch, 2002; Wolch et al., 2000), as has the specific effect of dogs on smaller-scale civic engagement (Wood et al., 2007).

The development of the off-leash lobbying group, the letter writing campaigns, attendance at public meetings, and even runs for elected office by two people involved in the discussions, suggest a high level of political engagement. The high level of activity grows out of three different routes, directly and indirectly related to their dogs. People love their dogs and want to protect them; they use the park to exercise their dogs and have incorporated this usage into their daily lives; and they have developed close personal relationships at the park, resulting from their frequent usage.

Interestingly, of the sixteen off-leash people interviewed, only four spoke about their dogs as their reason for political involvement. However, the four people who were politically motivated by their dogs were passionate in their discussions, referring to their animals as "children" and "family," in keeping with prior research (Fox, 2006; Power, 2008; Risley-Curtiss et al., 2006a). Two people talked about "standing up" for the ones they love. Alice stated:

I'm just speaking for a dog who can't speak for himself. And I think maybe that had something to do with it. We were all giving voice to our animal that didn't have a voice, you know. And I don't know, it would be interesting to, for me, to know if other people who were involved in this were ever involved in other things or if this was just...because it's so close to your heart.

Two other off-leash group members, Sam and Jean, made similar comments.

For others, their political engagement was an indirect result of having dogs as companions. As political scientists well know, people engage in issues that impact their daily lives (Verba & Nie, 1972). Barbara, a member of the off-leash group,
That's the thing that makes me participate—when I feel something affects me personally...if it's a cause that I can, you know, I see makes a difference for me and also touches people I care about then I put my time and energy into working with that cause.

Two members of the on-leash group, Paul and George, similarly cited the personal nature of the issue as the motivation behind their involvement.

For dog owners, having a regular space in which to exercise their dogs is an essential and daily issue. Michael, a member of the off-leash group, stated “I was going every day. I would go very early and it would just be a way of starting the day.” Four off-leash supporters cited daily usage and five others cited twice daily usage. Three other members of the group stated they would go three to five times per week. For these twelve individuals, the park was a very regular component of their schedules and thus struck a personal chord with them. At least one Letter to the Editor (January 28, 2010) cited similar usage. For these individuals, aspects related to dog ownership brought people into the political realm and encouraged them to engage.

Still others in the off-leash group became politically involved as a result of the social networks and more substantial relationships that developed as a result of dog ownership. As is evident from the earlier discussion, people formed important human relationships at the park, relationships they were unwilling to give up easily. Although this road into the political arena is not directly the result of having a dog, the evidence presented earlier suggests that many of these relationships only developed through people initially and consistently using the park because of their dogs.

Some off-leash participants became civically engaged beyond the park issue, but their involvement clearly resulted from it. Two individuals ran for elected positions on the Committee and another individual took a voluntary position on a town-wide board.

Those on the on-leash side of the debate were similarly
active—writing letters, engaging in public hearings, and contacting town officials. They were also drawn in by the dogs, and what they saw as the imposition of the dogs on their lives and in the park, speaking to the issue of contested spaces (Drew, 2012; Jones, 2000; Tissot, 2011; Wolch et al., 2000).

Six participants on the on-leash side of the debate cited the noise, "wild dogs," and dog feces as their reasons for involvement. They initiated and were drawn into the debate as a result of the dogs, even though they may or may not have been dog owners themselves.

**The Dark Side of Dog-Mediated Human Relationships**

Another clearly identified trend is more negative, highlighting how dogs may encourage interpersonal hostility, stereotyping, and exclusion and boundary making within a community.

Besides the obvious example of the fight over the park, the interviews revealed some less obvious ways that dogs negatively impacted human interactions, in keeping with prior research (Drew, 2011; Tissot, 2011).

Five people interviewed from both sides of the debate discussed the issue of cliques. For some, the formation of cliques was clearly tied to dog breed. An on-leash proponent stated:

> Just like any social environment cliques started... People started disliking certain dogs as well as their owners. So cliques formed, like the Golden Retriever group, and they started not liking other groups, like the mutt group. Even at one point, the owners of the mutt group were referred to as mutts.

Marilyn, another on-leash activist, talked about her initial experience with her dog, years before the controversy started. She stated:

> We got a puppy around that time and it was a no brainer to head over to the field. At that time, there were three women who had kids at Smith School, like my kids, and we used to meet at the park. But they didn't like my dog. The little terriers, you know, tend to get nippy and bark a lot.
Jean, a member of the off-leash group, clearly felt the stigma associated with her dogs and described the setting as a "microcosm of humanity." She stated:

There was a lot of prejudice against my dogs because they looked wolfy. People just assumed they were going to chomp on something or someone...It was my first real exposure to prejudice. I started working in the '70s as a woman in a man's world and I didn't get as much prejudice as my dogs! From the negative viewpoint, it really is very cliquey. It's hysterical. The people who own the Golden Retrievers think their dogs are precious and perfect.

This woman also stated that she limited her political activism because she was concerned about people's reactions to her dogs.

For three of the people who touched on the issue of cliques, feelings of exclusion were not specific to individual dogs or breed. Barbara, an off-leash proponent, said the park was:

What it looked like in elementary school. For the dogs, it seems like the playground situation, and sometimes being the owner of a dog feels like that, too...I was not really, like, part of the group. I was not, if there was, like, a key equivalent of the popular crowd, I was not known to these people. They didn't know me. They didn't know my value.

John, a member of the off-leash group, stated "I never truly felt I was part of one group or another...I think last summer they [the off-leash group] all had a barbecue and I was never invited, so I don't really consider myself part of the inner circle."

Connected to the issue of clique-formation and exclusion is the notion of stereotyping. Stereotypes based on dog ownership appeared in multiple interviews, among both on-leash and off-leash individuals. Stereotyping removes a person's independence and individualism, with broad generalizations made based upon one characteristic.

In this vein, dogs were seen as markers of human friendliness and warmth. George, a dog owner, park neighbor, and
on-leash supporter, stated "Dog people are normally cool people." A woman on the off-leash side said "I sort of look at people now, if they have kids I think ‘Are you a dog owner or not? Are you going to get angry with me?’" She continued on "If you have a dog, I think of you as a nicer person and I never sort of really felt that way."

In other instances, a person who is at the park without a dog triggers negative feelings. Jean, an off-leash advocate, stated “I know this sounds terrible, but I will admit to looking at some people there [at the park] and thinking of them as interlopers. This really does sound horrible when I say it out loud!” Alice, another woman on the off-leash side of the argument, stated “When we walk down the streets that abut the park, our family, the three of us, will have a conversation about ‘I wonder if those people were pro-dog or not pro-dog.’” An on-leash participant stated she was concerned that people would think she was not a nice person because she does not particularly like dogs.

Discussion

Previous studies have identified dogs as important companions and friends, who are dearly loved by their humans (Fox, 2006; Power, 2008; Wolch, Brownlow & Lassiter, 2000). Research has also documented the physical and mental health benefits that accrue to dog owners, and in some cases, the larger community (McNicholas & Collis, 2000; Toohey & Rock, 2011; Wood et al., 2005, 2007). Other research has, however, documented some of the negative effects that dogs may have on communities, particularly more urban, more diverse, and less affluent ones (Drew, 2011; Tissot, 2011; Toohey & Rock, 2011).

The interviews, articles, and observations in this study show evidence of both the positive and negative effects of dogs on the larger community. The positive themes identified here—the growth in social interactions, bonding and bridging social capital, and civic engagement—have been identified before (McNicholas & Collis, 2000; Wood et al., 2005, 2007). In this instance, the positive outgrowths accrued disproportionately to the off-leash advocates who formed a clearly defined group, with few of these benefits appearing for on-leash proponents.
"Leads" to Expanded Social Networks

The negative effects of dogs on the larger community have also been documented, but not in a community such as this. Prior research has identified divisions and isolation resulting from dogs in the neighborhood, but within poorer, more diverse, urban areas (Drew, 2011; Tissot, 2011; Toohey & Rock, 2011). Dogs are used to create lines in gentrifying neighborhoods (Drew, 2011; Tissot, 2011) and divide people over the use of space (Jones, 2000; Wolch et al., 2000). The findings from this study suggest that dogs can lead to such tensions over the use of public space, even in an upper-middle class community such as this. This is an important finding, given the increased understanding of how public space influences social contact and potentially the growth of social capital (Wood & Giles-Corti, 2008).

Why Dogs?

Although one cannot place all of the credit or blame on dogs, they certainly play a role in each of these processes and it would be difficult to find another vehicle, beyond possibly children, that carries so much weight (Wood, Giles-Corti, Zubrick, & Bulsara, 2012).

A growing body of evidence finds that dogs exist in a liminal space in western society (Fox, 2006; Power, 2008; Wolch et al., 2000). We have moved beyond the binary “human–non-human” paradigm, with dogs viewed as closer to humans than many other animals. This view of dogs as something more than simply “non-human” is evident in this study of the park, with people describing their dogs as “more than gerbils,” “like children,” and “as part of the family.” The unique role that dogs play in people’s lives make them particularly influential in these events and processes.

The development of social relationships and the expansion of social networks are heavily influenced by dogs, as a result of the time and regularity associated with their care. Dogs need to be exercised frequently, placing many of the off-leash people at the park on a daily basis. The off-leash people discussed their contact and friendships with those who are not dog owners, but are at the park regularly for some other reason.

Relatively, dogs play a role in people’s civic and political engagement. The immediacy and the relevancy of the issue to
people's lives show the way in which dogs are able to draw people into the civic realm and serve as an avenue of political engagement. For those on the off-leash side of the issue, people became engaged because they love their dogs. They are also reminded on a daily basis of what the restriction means for their animals (an inability to exercise) and for themselves (a change in routine and an inability to connect with friends). For those on the on-leash side, the noise and feces associated with dogs and experienced by them on a regular basis engages them. In a particularly telling statement, one neighbor who advocated for on-leash rules said, "I couldn't believe how organized, passionate, and motivated people were. There was never any activism like that for President Obama or Senator Brown. That's kind of sad. I guess this is just a much more sensitive issue." Verba and Nie (1972) argue that personal relevancy is essential for political engagement.

The identification of dogs as an additional avenue to civic and political engagement is an important finding. Although previous scholars have explored other types of animal-related political engagement (Brownlow, 2000; Woods et al., 2000), the political involvement documented here is fundamentally different. As one off-leash advocate said when asked about previous political engagement, "Yeah, I mean I've done walks here and there. Like we had a greyhound. I did a 'Save the Greyhound Walk' that somebody else organized and I went on, but it was also kind of from the community service angle." These national and international movements, even when built around animals, tend to encourage engagement through different means and likely have lower rates of direct involvement and commitment. The debate over dogs and the use of public space in this instance appeared to encourage more direct involvement and engagement, beyond this particular case, with two members of the off-leash group running for elected offices and one taking on a voluntary town-wide position.

Finally, this study identified the role of dogs in clique formation, stereotyping, and boundary making, for those on both the on-leash and off-leash sides of the debate. Race, socio-economic status, and gender have long stood as the major divisions in society (Lamont & Fournier, 1992). Recent research on gentrification has found dog ownership to correspond to some
of these long standing bases for stratification, with dog owners being primarily White and upper-middle class in economically and racially mixed urban environments (Drew, 2012; Tissot, 2011). This study finds further evidence of such trends, but expands upon what has been seen before by examining a predominantly White, upper-middle class neighborhood. Even in this more homogenous and stable environment, dogs serve as shorthand to onlookers. Having a dog serves as "evidence" of warmth and openness to some, but entitlement and selfishness to others. Further, people make assumptions about an individual's personality based upon dog breed, with lines of demarcation even drawn among dog owners.

Conclusion

This study has attempted to build on the growing body of work that sees animals as being intimately connected with one another. The significant contribution from this work is in its identification of dogs as mediators of human relationships and processes, as a result of their close proximity to humans and preferential placement on the animal spectrum created by people. I have identified ways in which dogs serve both positive and negative roles in an upper-middle class White suburb in the United States through their ability to encourage social interactions and the growth of social capital and civic engagement, but also through the ways they are used to create cliques and stereotypes.

Future Directions

Because this is only one mixed-method qualitative study in one particular community, one must apply these findings with caution. It is not clear whether the trends identified here would be found in other communities, particularly those that are larger and more diverse racially and/or economically. It is also not clear whether other types of animals, such as cats, would lead to similar debates among people.

More work needs to be done to understand how animals mediate relationships among people in a variety of settings. Further, we should consider ways in which dogs may help to
repair human relationships and communities. For example, do the dogs that stand as symbols of White, upper-middle class gentrification do anything to unite groups across racial, ethnic, or economic boundaries? Is there a way for dogs to encourage connections in fragmented communities? Do those who become civically and politically engaged as a result of their dogs stay politically active over the longer term and in regards to other issues? These are just some of the questions that need to be examined in future research.

References


