GREETINGS IN THE FIELD:

FACILITATING INTERACTIONS IN DOG WALKING

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I emerge from my front door after my dog - Della – who squeezed through the door as soon as I started to open it and raced up the gravel path. I keep my eye on her, making sure that she waits at the top instead of running across the road. On seeing Della, a little wooly-looking dog on the other side of the road starts prancing about, clearly wanting to come over. Its owner comments on how it wants Della's toy. Whilst laughing at her comment, I check where Della is looking and see that she has no interest in the dog and is only intent on getting to the field, scan the road for oncoming cars and judge whether the other dog is far enough from the line in which Della will be running that she won't get distracted and change direction. On deciding that the coast is clear a tonal 'On you go!' sends Della hurtling towards the gate of the field.

Scarlett[1] – who had also lived in Chad – explained to me, 'Chadians don't like dogs and don't really tame any animals […] you'd look like a nutter if you walked your dog.' In contrast, domestication of dogs is widely accepted in Britain and dog walking takes place in a huge variety of settings. The observation part of this fieldwork took place in an area of fields and forest in Dunblane, Scotland, which is situated between a dual carriageway, a motorway and a housing estate[2]. Both locals and people from further afield come to walk their dogs here and you can expect to meet other dogs and their owners during your walk. My house is opposite the opening to one of the fields and I often walk my own dog – Della – in that area. For most of my fieldwork, the weather was typically Scottish, with grey mist obscuring the beautiful views of the Ochil Hills and the light rain feeling icy when the wind blew it into your face. Because of this, I focused on observing the few dog walkers that I encountered, watching how they interacted with their dogs and with me, and considering the things that I thought about whilst in the role of dog walker. I conducted some interviews whilst accompanying informants on a dog walk as I thought this might give an insight into things which occurred to them in the moment, and offer a fresh perspective, and I interviewed other dog walkers in person and over Skype. I initially interviewed dog walkers who walked their dogs in the aforementioned area, but also branched out to dog walkers of other places.

Originally, I used unstructured interviews to study the methods which dog owners used to control their dogs. During these interviews I noticed that I was reacting to the informants' attitudes, consciously trying to put them at ease, in particular, by phrasing my questions to ensure that I didn't come across as judgmental and sometimes submitting anecdotes of my own dog's failings in response to theirs. This made me consider why I felt the need to do this, and why informants often seemed to feel that their dog's behavior was a reflection on them. Through exploring the ways in which informants imagined, rationalized and explained their actions, I tried to gain an understanding of what exactly they were trying to achieve and the thinking behind this. Overall, my findings suggest that dog walkers view themselves as playing the role of mediators between their dog and things they encounter on a dog walk, ensuring that its behavior is appropriate, agreeable and safe.

[1] Name changed at informant's request.
[2] See picture (Google Earth, 2013).

I will show how they try to support their dog by: ‘thinking for’ their dog in different situations where they may not adequately do so themselves; monitoring their behavior to help negotiate encounters with others; adapting their communication to suit the dog’s understanding and interpreting their thinking for others. Thus, a dog encountering or causing problems indicated a failure on the part of the owner to successfully support them and, in some cases, was even viewed as a negative reflection of their character.

I found this mediation and protection from problems to be displayed in the use of a lead. This establishes a physical link between owner and dog, allowing them to directly control their movements and actions and feel secure in the ability to do so. Indeed, one owner – Claire – commented on how she felt it also made Della feel more secure when Della was feeling afraid. Although using a lead can definitely present problems if the dog does not behave well or 'pulls', it was generally viewed as a way to prevent your dog from running into or causing trouble. When asked why he put Benji on a lead, another informant - Ian - replied, ‘well, you could say why is any dog on a lead, but I guess just ‘cause I wouldn’t trust him when walking along the pavement to not, say, run onto the road or into someone’s garden […] He probably doesn’t see anything wrong with, say, going and peeing on someone’s garden, if that makes any sense?’ Claire commented on how she was going to start putting Della on the lead in the morning due to the possibility of her chasing a pigeon across the road. When I asked why, I got the matter-of-fact response: ‘The power of the pigeon [means] she won’t think. I need to think for her on that one. [I] don’t want her to get run over.’ These descriptions draw attention to the lack of trust which is often associated with the use of a lead. Ingold (2000: 69) describes how ‘imposing a response’ signifies a ‘breakdown in trust’ in the interactions between a hunter and an animal. Whilst Ingold described how this lack of trust was viewed as a more negative thing, the different context meant that the informants I spoke to seemed to view distrust as a realistic and sensible perspective. Informants generally seemed to suggest that they used the lead in situations where they were aware of a potential danger – such as a road, cyclist or horse – to their dog which they suspected their dog would not consider for themselves. The lead was a physical way of ensuring that their own knowledge of possible hazards was imposed upon their dog. Because they felt their dog was potentially not mentally able to consider

avoiding these threats and adapt their behavior accordingly, the owners felt a responsibility to control their behavior for them, and the lead offered a means of doing so.

This awareness of the environment on their behalf was also seen when dogs were off the lead. In order to ensure her control over their safety, Becky spoke of how her friend, T.L.[3] is always aware of where her dogs are, describing how she is always calling to them if they go out of view. This viewpoint was echoed by several informants. Only then could they assess possible dangers and ensure that their dog didn't chase a deer across the dual carriageway or cut themselves jumping over a barbed-wire fence (both concerns of one of my informants). Foucault talks about permanent visibility as a form of power which negates the need for physical restrains such as bars or chains in the acquisition of dominance (1991: 201). However, this rests on the individual's consciousness that they are being observed, which is not the case with dogs. The importance of surveillance here lay in keeping not only the dog, but the dog *coupled with* the dog's environment in sight, in order to control their dog's interaction with possible dangers. This attitude is also seen in the Tamang-speaking communities of north-central Nepal where their word *chaaba* means 'to look in the sense of watching animals and children in their activities in a manner of supervisory surveillance, looking out for dangers or straying individuals' (Campbell, 2005: 84). In a similar way, for dog walkers, keeping their dog in sight gave them a feeling of control over how their dog interacted with the environment, ensuring that they did not literally run into trouble.

When encountering other dogs whilst opting to keep your dog off a lead, this takes on a more intimate dimension, with owners reading their dog's body language to ascertain and react to their intentions. Ian said he judged whether Benji was going to be 'okay' or whether he was going to snap and Ian should 'grab him' based on whether Benji's tail was wagging, indicating that he was happy, or between his legs, signifying that he wasn't. For Scarlett, the signs she adhered to were more subtle. For her, she could tell that the other dog was going to go for her dog – Halu – based on their demeanor, explaining, 'it sounds silly, but they just look mean in the way they walk and in their faces.' Keil and Downey (2012) discuss how 'the ability to "read" the behavior of nonhuman animals requires

[3] Initials used at informant's request.

repeated interaction and focused attention on behaviors and parts of the dogs' bodies that reveal intent and response within social interaction'. It is this attention to subtle signals and signs that also facilitates the enskillment of Icelandic fisherman (Pálsson's, 1994: 917). Kendon discusses how c*ommunicative acts* allow one to interpret others' intentions before they are carried out (Kendon, 1997). Among humans, these can be as simple as one person in a standing conversation stepping backwards to indicate to the others that they wish to finish the conversation, allowing for everyone to understand their intentions so that the conversion can be mutually concluded without awkwardness (cf. Lockard, Allen, Schiele & Weimer in Kendon, 1997: 331). Dog walkers had little to say about their interactions with owners, explaining that it was more important to pay attention to the dogs as they were more likely to cause trouble. In order to do this, owners worked at understanding and interpreting the (unconscious) *communicative acts* of their dogs in order to negotiate encounters with the least hassle, predicting when to leave them alone and when to step in to avert trouble.

But how successful is this attempt and do all dog owners find it easy? The differing accounts given by my informants suggest that experiences can be very variable and that reading your dog can be quite tricky. Paul spoke of how he never knows how Della is going to react and how she sometimes 'reacts very strangely', whilst Ian described how he was 'on edge' whilst walking Benji. Causing trouble with other dogs is something which my informants wished to avoid; for example, Scarlett expressed how she didn't want to pay another dog's vet bill, experience the embarrassment of having to separate Halu from another dog and was also worried about protecting her. This has some similarities to Youssouf's (2009) discussion of the Tuareg people of the Sahara and their greeting exchange when meeting strangers in the desert. The situation there is fraught with the possibility of the other person giving false information, or even pulling them off their camel, both of which would have extremely severe consequences (*Ibid*.: 806). The Tuareg must delicately navigate the greeting and interpret the signs from the other person in order to decipher who they are and what information they have (*Ibid*.). In a similar way, dog owners must proceed carefully in interpreting the subtle signs their dog is making which give them clues as to what they are about to do, and whether they need to intervene of not. In some ways, keeping your dog walking freely can be a bit of a gamble in the sense that it puts more

responsibility on the owner. Their role as the mediator in the encounter means that the dog's behaviour reflects on their ability to interpret the signs, anticipate the reaction and generally do the job well, and the encounter has the potential to descend into embarrassing and messy chaos if this goes wrong.

Communicative competence also relates to communicating with one's dog verbally because owners must be able to consider what the dog will understand from what they say, and adapt their communication to suit their needs. For example, Ella commented that, 'if you don't punish a dog while it is doing something [naughty] or immediately after, it'll have forgotten and you'll just be yelling at your dog.' In addition, I witnessed Claire's use of voice modulation when Della was approaching the edge of a road: her 'SIT, DELLA. COME HERE!' used a moderately loud, much deeper voice than usual, a slowed pace and short pause in between words to ensure that they were clearly intelligible. Once Della had done as she asked her 'Gooood giiirrl' was much more elongated, smooth and accompanied with Claire kneeling down and stroking her. In the words of Becky, good communication in this context is about learning to 'talk dog'. The dog owners I spoke to vehemently informed me that it was vital for their dog's wellbeing to always remember that they are dogs with animal understanding, a view echoed by some Dutch veterinarians. They expressed the belief 'that some, though by no means all, pet owners fail to accept the quiddity of the animal', suggesting that not doing so is doing them a disservice (Swabe, 2005: 104). Keil and Downey (2012) discuss how 'in order to properly train a dog, you have to grasp how the dog is perceiving you in a way that helps you to give better commands' continuing 'a good handler […] disciplines his or her communication and bearing so that it is unequivocal and easily read by the animal, which requires the human to control his or her own emotional state and unintentional, nonverbal communication through channels like posture and the volume of the voice'. This links to Saville-Troike's (1982: 21) discussion of how skilful and successful communication rests not merely on the 'language code' but on other aspects of behaviour such as the way in which words are said. Dog owners were very aware of expressing their awareness of communicating appropriately, regularly affirming their knowledge of its importance. This led them to take care to consider how their communication would be understood by their dog, adapting it accordingly to ensure that it was intelligible and effective.

The mediation which an owner undertakes between their dog and other humans is displayed through their translation of what their dog is thinking. Informants seemed to take pleasure in recounting their dog's thoughts to me as it showed that they were able to successfully understand and interpret its behavior. Keil and Downey (2012) suggested that being skilled at communicating with dogs leads to a 'greater tendency to "mentalise" or impute motives to the animals'. In many cases, I found that dog owners anthropomorphised their dog, 'translating' what it was thinking to me. For example, Claire described how Della would commonly react when called to come. She said, 'she stops, hears you and thinks, "no, I'd like to do something different" and then you yell again and, on the second yell she thinks, "oh okay, I'll go"' continuing 'you can almost see her looking back and ahead and thinking what she wants to do.' This extends beyond dog walking to interactions in general; for example, Carole described how she knew that her dog – Coco – was considering digging up the potatoes she was planting, saying, 'she would look at me and look at those containers […] I could almost see her little brain going "hm, I could jump in there and dig all that out!"' (she later texted to inform me that Coco had done just that – 'the tinkerbelle!!!!'). This has some similar aspects to Willerslev's (2007) discussion of the Yukaghir hunters in north-eastern Siberia. They too attempt to place themselves 'imaginatively within the character of the animal' and 'internalize an animal's viewpoint' and they accomplish this through practical engagement (Willerslev, 2007: 93). However, the difference lies in the fact that the Yukaghirs practice mimesis and, for them, there is a real risk of transforming into this animal if they take this process too far, something which the dog owners I talked to did not consider. Despite this, those I spoke to seemed pleased to be able to interpret their dog's thought processes, and appeared to really enjoy explaining them to me, often acting out their mannerisms or putting on a voice to aid the rendition. The dog walkers seemed to take pride in knowing what their dog was thinking, in the sense that they had built up a connection with the dog which they could demonstrate.

Finally, Becky said 'a relationship with a dog is very revealing about a person's personality; the way they are, the way they treat them, manage them.' My research suggested that this opinion was held by several dog walkers: an owner's success at supporting their dog was perceived as reflecting, not just upon their ability at dog walking, but upon their character in general. After hearing about how Claire watched Della to ensure

that she was okay, I asked her whether she thought that all owners did the same for their dogs and received a fairly definite and immediate ‘no, some of them couldn’t care less what their dog is doing.’ When I later checked my interpretation of her comment as a put-down remark, she agreed that she felt critical of them, and invited me to share in her opinion by asking how I would feel in a similar situation. Paul independently shed light on this whilst relating an incident involving Della and another dog where he said the other owner had no idea that his dog was in trouble. With reference to this he talked about owners who 'looked out for their dogs' and those who didn’t. Their negative attitudes towards those who were not aware of their dogs and hence, unable to come to their aid where necessary, seemed to go deeper than viewing them as bad mediators. Several of those I spoke to generalized failing to be aware and successful at conciliating encounters for one’s dog to signifying that they couldn’t be bothered and didn’t care, impacting on their character.

In conclusion, my research suggested that dog owners feel that they should support their dog when dog walking. This perception manifests itself in several ways, perceptions and attitudes. Informants talked about how they used a lead in situations where the dog would not consider and avoid possible dangers for themselves, resulting in the owners feeling the responsibility to do so for them through the use of a lead. When running freely, this control and protection was maintained through visual contact which allowed them to assess their environment for potential dangers. In encounters with other dogs, dog owners discussed how they used different non-verbal signals from their dog to enable them to predict their dog’s actions and react to them to avoid trouble where necessary, something which often proved difficult to do, causing tension in their attempt to avoid the embarrassment of their attempts failing. Owners again tried to think through their dog’s understanding when communicating verbal orders to them, stating that they had to adapt their efforts to make them comprehensible to the dog. They showed pleasure when their attempts to interpret their dog’s ‘thoughts’ to other humans proved accurate. Finally, when dog owners failed to demonstrate this awareness it was seen as reflecting, not only upon their ability to control their dog, but upon their individual personality. Overall, it can be seen that the perceived importance of ‘thinking for’ one’s dog is deeply embedded in the practice of dog walking and the methods which individuals employ to ensure that it goes successfully and avoids negative outcomes.

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