Owner perceptions of companion dog expressions of positive emotional states and the contexts in which they occur

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Abstract

Promotion of positive experiences in companion animals is essential for maximising good welfare. However, the dearth of published literature on the experience and expression of positive emotional states in companion dogs suggests they are less well understood than negative emotions. Owner knowledge can provide a basis for generating hypotheses for experimental research, and can inform education initiatives. An online survey of 445 dog (Canis familiaris) owners in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland was used to identify key contexts and behaviours perceived by owners to be associated with positive emotions for companion dogs, and to examine factors which influence owner reports of key behaviours. The contexts most commonly associated with positive high arousal (PHA; ‘happy and excited’) were anticipation of walks or food and with positive low arousal (PLA; ‘happy and relaxed’) were resting and gentle stroking. Respondents’ behavioural profile for canine PHA involved barking, head held high, wide open and ‘bright’ eyes, ears pricked, tail wagging, mouth open, and active, playful behaviour. For PLA, respondents collectively described their dogs as silent, head resting, eyes closed or slightly closed, ears ‘down’, mouth closed and a calm/relaxed activity level. Notably, PLA states were described in less detail than PHA, suggesting the former may be less well understood or difficult to interpret. Dog breed and age, and owner experience and level of attachment to their pet significantly influenced respondents’ likelihood to report certain behavioural indicators, and may influence assessments of pet behaviour and underlying emotion. Further work is required to determine the validity of the behavioural expression and contexts perceived to be associated with positive experiences in dogs.

Keywords: animal welfare, behaviour, companion dogs, owner assessments, positive emotion, survey

Introduction

Animal welfare is concerned not only with physical health, but also with psychological well-being (Fraser et al 1997). An owner’s duty of care towards their pet covers broad aspects of welfare and behaviour, including the promotion of quality of life (Yeates & Main 2009). Emerging research suggests positive experiences may mitigate stress and sustain or improve animal health and cognition (Brydges et al 2011; Colonello et al 2011; Zebunke et al 2011). Yet, for many species, identification of contexts and behaviours which are reliably associated with and indicative of positive emotion is still required to accurately recognise and promote positive experiences (Boissy et al 2007).

For domestic dogs (Canis familiaris), specific behaviours are being increasingly studied as putative indicators of positive emotional states (eg tail wagging: Quaranta et al 2007; vocalisation: Farago et al 2010). However, scientific exploration of the full repertoire of canine behaviour which may indicate positive states, or indeed of those contexts which reliably induce them, has yet to be achieved. In the absence of further understanding, the information that owners can provide, although not without limitations, is useful for hypothesis generation and experimental design (eg Pongracz et al 2001; Morris et al 2008; Lit et al 2010); with implications for better assessments of canine welfare and the dog-owner relationship.

Companion dog owners self-report good understanding of canine emotional states (Kerswell et al 2009) and owner knowledge is often used as a proxy for assessment of animal well-being (eg Wojciechowska et al 2005; Ireland et al 2011). However, there are factors which may improve or impair the accuracy of pet behaviour descriptions. Although effects on behaviour associated with positive emotions have not been specifically examined, perceptions of pet behaviour may be biased by anthropomorphic views of animals (Kiesler et al 2006; Bradshaw & Casey 2007). Fidler et al (1996) found that people with experience of owning a dog or a cat used more descriptions of desires, feelings and understanding when describing the behaviour of dogs in video footage, compared to those with little or no experience of pets. Strong attachment to pets may also influence descriptions of pet behaviour; owners that were more attached to a pet reported more favourable perceptions of that pet (El-Alayli et al 2006; Woodward & Bauer 2007).