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Not all dogs are equal: perception of canine welfare varies with context

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Abstract

Community attitudes drive societal expectations, influencing government and industry regulations that determine standards of care for industries reliant on animals. It is important for dog industry stakeholders to understand public perceptions and attitudes, to inform management strategy priorities relating to animal welfare. This study sought to determine if the welfare status of dogs (Canis familiaris) is important to people and whether the perceived level of welfare varies with dog context (eg companion, protection, stock herding, assistance, sporting, free-roaming, wild, etc). Over 2,000 self-selected adults completed a voluntary, internet-based questionnaire. Responses were received from more than twelve countries and from a range of stakeholders with varied experiences. Perceived welfare status of dogs varied significantly across 17 dog contexts and roles, from extremely low (eg fighting dogs) to very high (eg guide dogs). Over 95% of respondents agreed that the welfare of dogs was very important to them. Demographic features of respondents did not relate to meaningful differences in reported importance of canine welfare or ratings of perceived welfare of dogs. The constructs underlying how people perceive the welfare of dogs appear complex and multi-dimensional. As public scrutiny forces reassessment of the welfare status of animals used in various contexts, proactive management of perceived welfare issues by companion and working dog industry stakeholders, including government, industry organisations, advocacy groups, and animal welfare researchers, is likely to be key to the sustainable participation of dogs in these roles.

Keywords: animal welfare, attitudes, dogs, public, sustainability, working dog