Conceptualising dog owner motivations: The Pet Care Competency model and role of ‘duty of care’

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Abstract

The current literature on the behaviour, health, and management of companion dogs (Canis lupus familiaris) indicates that their welfare is often compromised. While there are many factors that have the potential to influence the welfare of companion dogs, carer behaviour is highly influential. Therefore, in order to improve the welfare of companion dogs, it is vital to understand the general and specific human factors that underpin carer behaviour. One such factor that has received little attention in the scientific literature is ‘duty of care’. This paper will firstly review several extant, empirically validated models of human behaviour including the Cognitive Hierarchy model, the Schwartz Theory of Basic Human Values, the Theory of Planned Behaviour, and Hemsworth and Coleman’s Animal-Carer model. Secondly, by combining aspects of moral obligation and care, a strong theoretical argument will be presented for the role of ‘duty of care’ as a fundamental motivational driver of animal-carer behaviour. Finally, by integrating ‘duty of care’ with the aforementioned existing models, a hypothesised model of Pet Care Competency is presented, providing a more detailed representation of animal carer motivations than previously documented. Drawing together this wide range of behavioural research and psychological theory, the Pet Care Competency model provides a strong conceptual framework for future empirical investigation. Once the relevant values, beliefs, and attitudes that underpin ‘duty of care’ and contribute most strongly to an individual’s Pet Care Competency are identified, this model can be utilised to inform behaviour change programmes that aim to improve carer behaviour and, consequently, dog welfare. By employing this model to identify and target the key elements of carer motivation, a more enduring outcome may be achieved than traditional knowledge-based interventions. This work has the potential to significantly improve the outcomes of animal welfare education and intervention programmes, warranting further exploration.

Keywords: animal welfare, attitudes, behaviour, dog, ‘duty of care’, Pet Care Competency

Dog welfare and management

The practice of keeping animal companions is widespread throughout almost all human cultures (Serpell & Paul 1994). Indeed, 62% of households in Australia (Animal Medicines Australia 2016), 40% of households in the United Kingdom (Pet Food Manufacturers’ Association 2019), and 67% of households in the United States (American Pet Products Association 2019) accommodate a companion animal, the most popular being the domestic dog (Canis lupus familiaris). While the welfare of animals kept in commercial settings, such as food production, has become an issue of increasing societal concern (George et al 2016), the welfare of companion animals has received far less attention from both the general public and the scientific community (Hosey & Melfi 2014). Pets are typically perceived as having good welfare and most pet owners consider that they care for them appropriately (Rohlf et al 2010a; Howell et al 2016). However, the limited information that is available on dog behaviour, management, lifestyle-related diseases, relinquishment, cruelty, and neglect, suggests that pet dogs today face significant welfare challenges. For a comprehensive review of companion dog welfare, see Stafford (2007), Sonntag and Overall (2014), Sandoe et al (2016) or Hubrecht et al (2017). While many factors have the potential to influence the welfare of companion dogs, carer behaviour is likely to be the most influential (Stafford 2007). Dogs have been selectively bred for millennia to maximise their affinity with, and consequently their dependency on, humans (Serpell 2017). Modern ownership practices render pet dogs almost completely reliant on their human carers to provide for both their physical and psychological needs. By keeping them in a captive environment and controlling access to key resources, humans dictate almost every aspect of their lives. In many cases human carers control when and what dogs eat; their access to healthcare; opportunities for exercise, exploratory, and other natural behaviours; when and where they eliminate; what behaviours are deemed acceptable; and if, when, and with which individuals they can socialise or procreate.