

The Effect of Owner Weight Status on the Relationship between Owner and Dog.

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Introduction

As in humans, obesity is a common and dominant nutritional disease in the veterinary field (Markwell 1994, Buffington 1994). Previous work by Kienzle (1998) demonstrated that owners of obese dogs were more likely to anthropomorphise their animals by allowing them to sleep in their bed and talking to them more often. That study also revealed that owners of overweight dogs were often overweight themselves but this variable was not entered into the analysis. In humans, data show that if both parents are obese children have an 80% chance of becoming obese and if one parent is obese children have a 30% chance of developing obesity (Epstein 1996). These data however are confused by genetic susceptibility. The aim of this study therefore was to determine the effect of owner overweight on the human-animal relationship in lean and overweight dogs.

Research Methodology

122 dogs and owners were recruited. Owners and dogs were categorised into 4 groups (Table 1): A = overweight owner with overweight dog, B = lean owner with overweight dog, C = overweight owner with lean dog, D = Lean owner with lean dog) according to owner BMI and canine BCS. Overweight was defined as a BMI of $\geq 27 \text{ kg/m}^2$ and lean as a BMI of $\leq 25 \text{ kg/m}^2$. In dogs, overweight was defined as a body condition score (BCS) of ≥ 7 and lean as a BCS of ≤ 5 using a well validated scale (Lafamme 1997). Each owner completed 2 questionnaires (Table II) assessing psychological aspects of the owner-dog relationship (Bergler 1988) and approaches to health and nutrition (Kienzle 1998).

Table 1: Treatment groups in study

| Group | Description | N |
|-------|------------------------------|----|
| A | Obese owners with obese dogs | 43 |
| B | Lean Owners with obese dogs | 15 |
| C | Obese owners with lean dogs | 16 |
| D | Lean owners with lean dogs | 26 |

Table II: Key points of the questionnaires
I Psychological evaluation of dog ownership (Bergler 1988)
II Psychological evaluation of dog ownership (Kienzle 1998)

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| • Having a certain breed |
| • Taking to the dog |
| • Enjoying watching the dog |
| • Having more outdoor exercise |
| • Having the dog in bed |
| • Being protected |
| • Being able to train the dog |
| • Being tired down by the dog |
| • Problems with going on holiday |
| • Scolding of/room or bed |
| • Experience with disease |
| • Problems with noise |
| • Trouble with neighbours |
| • Difficulties in care of dog |
| • Spending more time for walks, play, grooming, playing |
| • Time for adopting for and preventing food |
| • Treats (leak, jelly, food) |
| • Frequency and subject of conversation with the dog |
| • Number and time of meals and snacks |
| • Type of food |
| • Shopping for food |
| • Presence of dog during cooking and during meals of the owner |
| • Knowledge and knowledge on dog nutrition |
| • Preventative health care for the dog |
| • Value to the vet |
| • Importance of vaccinations / deworming |
| • Veterinary consultation, National consultations etc. |

Discussion

The results of this study are in agreement with that of Kienzle et al (1998) in that owners of overweight dogs have a tendency to anthropomorphise their pets and show affection through feeding. For a number of questions the weight status of the owner exaggerated the effect with the greatest differences between overweight owners of overweight dogs and lean owners of lean dogs. This may be due to overweight owners having a greater tendency to have overweight pets. In this study 69% of dogs recruited matched their owners weight status suggesting that the interactions between obese parents and children (Epstein 1996) that lead to increased risk of obesity may also be reflected in the owner/dog relationship. Our data showed that owners of overweight dogs were more likely to humanise their dog, by rating talking to their dog and having the dog in bed, with them as more advantageous. Dogs that sleep in or on the owner's bed are associated with a greater risk of biting someone and dogs that owners of overweight dogs are more likely to humanise their dog, by rating talking to their dog and having the dog in bed, with them as more advantageous. Further work is needed to determine the influence of relationships dynamics between dogs and owners. In this study owners of overweight dogs were more likely to see their dog sleeping with them in bed as advantageous suggesting the dog's status and its ability to manipulate its owner into feeding it more often may be a contributing factor to dog obesity levels.

References

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Results

As with the previous study, our data showed that owners of one overweight dogs (groups A & B) were more likely to humanise their dog by rating talking to their dog ($p < 0.01$ Eta² = 0.212) and having the dog in bed with them ($p < 0.01$ Eta² = 0.268) as more advantageous. Furthermore, the effect was stronger when the owners of the Furi themselves were overweight themselves (group A). Obese dogs own weight dog were overweight themselves (group A). Obese dogs have a greater access to their owner's core territory may indicate the dog's ability to manipulate their owners and enjoy relatively high status.

Lean owners with lean dogs (group D) were less likely to offer food rewards ($p < 0.01$ Eta² = 0.328) and more likely to feed their dog only once per day ($p < 0.01$ Eta² = 0.100) than overweight owners with overweight dogs (group A). Owners of overweight dogs (groups A & B) were more strongly that they communicated with their dog through feeding ($p < 0.05$ Eta² = 0.728) but expressed less of an interest in nutrition ($p < 0.01$ Eta² = 0.180) and were more likely to choose a food type based on price ($p < 0.03$ Eta² = 0.138) and availability ($p < 0.04$ Eta² = 0.160).