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The Responsible Dog Owner: The Construction of Responsibility

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ABSTRACT Policy and campaigning messages related to dog ownership and welfare center on the concept of responsible ownership. However, the perspectives and experiences of pet owners and how they perceive and perform their responsibilities has not been studied in depth. This qualitative study used conversations about owning and walking dogs in order to elucidate beliefs and views about responsibility in dog ownership. Data comprised 12 in-depth interviews with dog-owning households, 14 short interviews with dog owners while walking their dogs or representing their breed at a dog show, and autoethnography of the first author's experiences owning and walking dogs. All participants considered themselves responsible dog owners, yet there was great variation in key aspects of their dog-owning behavior. The feelings of responsibility were rooted in the valued unconditional and reciprocal love that owners believed underpinned their human–dog bond. Dogs were described as dependents, similar to, but different from, children. In deciding how to look after their dogs, owners sought to balance their views of dogs as kin, having individual needs to be met, with consideration of the needs of others. Four processes through which issues of irresponsible dog ownership may arise were suggested: owner–dog relationship being too weak or too strong; differences in interpretation of what is best for the dog; difficulties predicting and avoiding situations of conflict; and differences in tolerance of negative impacts of dog ownership. While “responsible dog ownership” has considerable appeal as a concept, how it is perceived and interpreted varies so extensively that simply telling owners that they should “be responsible” is of limited use as a message to promote behavior change. Facilitating “responsible dog ownership” and reducing “irresponsible dog owner” behaviors relies on a detailed understanding of the variables which influence how the dog's role is constructed within the family and the wider society.

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Keywords: animal welfare, dogs, human–animal interaction, ownership, policy, qualitative research

For what you have tamed, you become responsible forever
Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*



The issue of responsible dog ownership is commonly discussed in regards to solving societal nuisance and animal welfare problems perceived to be due to irresponsible owner behavior. In order to better understand why dog owners behave in ways which others perceive as irresponsible, this paper explores the understanding of dog owners regarding what they feel responsible for and why. Based on these findings it then hypothesizes how issues relating to perceived irresponsible ownership may arise, and why telling owners that they must “be responsible” may not be an effective messaging approach.

Animals are becoming more deeply integrated into the human family whilst subject to increasing control (Fox & Gee, 2019), such as where and how dogs can be walked. For the purpose of this paper we define people who live in a household with pet dogs as dog owners but recognize others favor the concept of guardianship and question the use of the term “pet” (McKenna, 2013). It is argued that the act of bringing dogs into human families generates specific responsibilities toward them (Hens, 2009). The moral responsibility placed on owners is highlighted by dog care and training advice depicting dogs as their owners’ creations (Nelson, 2016). A dog’s behavior is often viewed as the responsibility of the owner or is in response to external factors beyond the animal’s control (Rajecki, Rasmussen, Modlin, & Holder, 1998; Rajecki, Rasmussen, Sanders, Modlin, & Holder, 1999; Sanders, 1994). In contrast, owners may attempt to distance themselves from their personal responsibility for their animal when an animal exhibits anti-social behavior (Ben-Michael, 2005; Sanders, 1990).

Based upon these views, the notion of responsible ownership is central to policy and campaigning messages relating to animal welfare and societal impacts of dog ownership (Dogs Trust, 2016; The Kennel Club, 2015). For example, The Kennel Club state in their “Canine Code” that “man’s (sic) relationship with a dog is a two-way street, and we need to make sure we are benefiting them too. The best way to do this is to be a responsible dog owner” (The Kennel Club, 2015). The term is applied to discussions involving an increase in dog attacks on people (BBC, 2011), a rise in cases of animal cruelty (Ward, 2012), reports of abandoned strays (Knowles, 2011), and disgust over dog fouling and zoonotic disease risk (Keeble, 2012). This perception of an increasing societal dog problem has brought “irresponsible dog ownership” and “dangerous dogs” into focus for politicians and campaigning groups (BBC News, 2010; Defra, Eustice, Truss, & APHA, 2015; Parliament, 2012), and established the view that the “key to tackling the problem [of dangerous dogs] is being a responsible owner” (BBC Newsbeat, 2009).

When it comes to addressing issues of dog attacks and nuisance, informal measures and educational messaging are preferred approaches over use of statutory measures such as legislative powers (Defra, unpublished research). The use of the term Responsible Dog Owner(ship) echoes other areas of “responsible citizenship,” where governments are increasingly trying to activate self-governance and compliance; for example, in the formation of citizen watch groups (van der Land, 2014). The notion of responsible dog ownership is a multi-faceted social phenomenon embedded in the use of codes (do this, don’t do that) intended to shape daily human–animal interactions (Brown & Dilley, 2012). Although the term is much used by stakeholders it is rarely defined. If one were to try to make a generic list of characteristics associated with being a responsible dog owner, it might include having control over the dog, providing

appropriate nutrition and exercise, removing its feces from public places, neutering, correct identification and micro-chipping, and taking care of the dog's health and wellbeing (Dogs Trust, 2016; The Kennel Club, 2015). These descriptions appear to be underpinned by a desire to make owners behave in certain ways that are perceived by various stakeholders as good practice.

Whilst invoking responsible dog ownership appears to have considerable merit, its lack of specifics and potential for individual interpretation limits its use as a campaigning message. Responsible dog ownership may be interpreted differently between people and between groups and over time (Fox & Gee, 2019; Howell, 2012). Muzzling was at one time a legally enforceable action to prevent the spread of rabies, and it became a badge of a well-cared-for dog and responsible owner. Over time, liberal arguments meant “cruel” muzzles were then replaced by the expectation of using a leash (Howell, 2015). Indeed the ideals of responsible ownership practices continue to evolve as dogs become more integrated into the family in a humanized way (Fox & Gee, 2019). A recent Welsh Government consultation identified a “lack of a clear or widely accepted definition illustrated by the diverse range of responses provided during the verbal evidence when organisations and representatives were asked what responsible dog ownership means to them” (RSPCA Cymru, 2016, p. 11). Furthermore, the working definition that the Welsh review group eventually adopted does not describe what particular actions a responsible dog owner should take; instead it uses unspecific and subjective descriptions such as “meeting health and welfare needs” and “adhering to good practice.” The interpretation of whether a dog is “under control” inscribed within UK law has long been challenged as obscure and impractical (Howell, 2015). Even where there are clear associated governmental regulations concerning dogs, such as registration and identification, they are proving difficult to enforce (Rohlf, Bennett, Toukhsati, & Coleman, 2010).

Approximately half of UK households own a pet, with one in four owning a dog (24%) (PFMA, 2017). Dog ownership is even higher in other countries (48% of households in the US (APPA, 2017), and 39% in Australia (AMA, 2016)). Thus the topic of dog ownership is relevant to a significant proportion of society, not least because the presence of dogs in public can impact on people other than their owners. Scholars have theorized the moral obligations humans should hold toward dogs (see (Hens, 2009)), but there has been less academic discussion of how obligations regarding dogs extends beyond the responsibilities toward the animal itself and into wider society. Most importantly, there has been limited sociological research exploring the perspectives and experiences of dog owners (Sanders, 1999), especially in the UK where recent research suggests that owners are developing new means to express their love and care for dogs (Fox & Gee, 2019). Without greater knowledge about how dog owners perceive and make decisions in relation to their dogs, it is unlikely that problems seen to be the result of “irresponsible” dog ownership can be addressed.

Finch researched family responsibilities and obligations toward extended family members such as grandparents and brother/sister-in-laws (Finch, 1989a, 1989c; Finch & Mason, 1993). She suggests that the notion that people recognize what their responsibilities to family members/kin are and simply carry them out is crude and unrealistic. Likewise, it is unlikely that owners automatically feel responsible for their animals, as Donna Haraway suggests:

Human beings are not uniquely obligated to and gifted with responsibility; animals [...] are response-able in the same sense as people are; that is, responsibility is a relationship crafted in intra-action through which entities, subjects and objects, come into being. (Haraway, 2008, p. 71)

It has been argued that “[dog owner] behaviors regarded as ‘irresponsible’ are almost always the result of a person’s beliefs and motivations, rather than an intention to maliciously cause problems” (Jenkinson, 2011). Responsibility requires knowledge (Brown & Dilley, 2012) in order to recognize an issue and know what can be done about it in order to then act responsibly. Further, it also requires a capacity to respond, and in this case across the added complexity of the human–animal encounter, and often relies on being able to control the behavior of the dog (Brown & Dilley, 2012).

Thus it is critical to understand how responsible dog ownership is understood and practiced by different people, including lay-expert dog owners. Without this knowledge, using the phrase “responsible dog ownership” will have little traction in delivering the behavior change intended through policies and campaigns. This paper uses the context of discussions about the practice of, and motivations for, dog walking as a way of accessing and examining facets of responsibility in dog ownership. Just as home is a key space through which more-than-human family relations are negotiated (Power, 2008), we propose so is the often considerable time spent walking with the dog. This new paper is related to our previously published study (Westgarth, Christley, Marvin, & Perkins, 2017) which presented how owners viewed dog walking as a mechanism for meeting their own needs as well as those of their dog, and the negotiation between meeting owner and animal needs that occurred. In this new paper we explore how owners presented dog walking as a facet of responsible dog owner practice and discuss why they felt responsible, to whom, and what they did that they felt was responsible practice.

Methods

The methods for the study have been described in detail elsewhere (Westgarth, et al., 2017). Briefly, 38 dog owners were interviewed about their relationship with their dogs and involvement in dog walking using an interview schedule with a primary focus on motivations and barriers to dog walking. There were in-depth interviews with multiple members of ($n = 12$) households, including participation in a dog walk with them, and shorter interviews with dog owners recruited whilst walking ($n = 10$) or at a dog show ($n = 4$). Applicants were purposefully sampled in order to include regular and infrequent dog walkers, families with or without children, a variety of dog types, and people with different sociodemographic backgrounds. Typical interview discussions were around questions such as “What are the most/least enjoyable parts of owning a dog?”, “Can you describe a typical dog walk,” and “How important do you think exercise is for dogs and why do you believe that?” The data collection was supplemented by autoethnography (approximately daily diary entries) of the first author’s own experience of dog walking with three dogs and a baby over a two-year period and also documenting discussions had with others about dog walking and dog ownership during this time. Interviews and diary methods are a useful method in human–animal interaction research to explore everyday practices and interactions (Power, 2008) and thus were considered suitable for studying dog walking. The study was approved by the University of Liverpool Veterinary Ethics Committee (VREC121) and informed written or audio-recorded verbal consent was obtained prior to interviews.

All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed fully. Autoethnographic diary entries and interview transcripts were coded line by line and continually compared in order to develop common themes related to the perceptions of responsibility as presented here. Data coding was inductive and the interpretation of emerging themes was discussed regularly between the two main authors. A grounded-theory approach was used for the principles of collecting

and analyzing data concurrently, using theoretical and purposeful sampling depending on the emerging requirements, and letting the data speak independently before application of interpretive theory (Charmaz, 2006; Green & Thorogood, 2009, pp. 195–228).

Results

This section reports the ways in which dog owners conceptualized the responsible dog owner and presents themes regarding how they viewed responsibility in dog ownership. Owners primarily used the term responsibility when talking about decisions made regarding care for their dog; thus they believe that their responsibility is to the dog and less to others who may be impacted by the dog. This was explained in terms of the emotional connection and kinship that they felt they had with their dog. Their relationship was based on unconditional and reciprocal love and dependency of the dog on the owner as a family member. This resulted in a desire to act in a way that was perceived as best for the dog. When the dog was taken into a public area, the priority for the dog owner was to protect the dog from harm; consideration of the needs of others was seen to be secondary, although dog fouling was raised as an important issue not to be tolerated. While owning a dog sometimes inconvenienced the owner, this was easily tolerated because of what was gained by owning a dog. Finally, owners negotiated whether they perceived themselves as responsible owners by justifying their overall actions rather than specific points for which irresponsibility might be argued.

Responsibility, Morality, and Doing the Best for the Dog

The term “responsibility” was commonly used by participants, without prompting:

Well there is responsibility for another animal [...] you are responsible for everything to do with his welfare, his upbringing, his training, EVERYTHING. (Charles)

It's the responsibility. The dog needs to be walked. (Emily)

Interestingly, walking the dogs out of a sense of “duty” or “obligation” was very rarely reported, perhaps because these words imply a less pleasurable and more formalized experience than dog walking is perceived to be. The concept of **duty** was only applied to those circumstances in which dog walking was viewed as more challenging:

In the winter the majority falls to mum and that's because she sees it as, sort of, duty bound. (Nina)

All participants considered themselves “responsible” dog owners, yet they varied in how often they walked their dogs. Not walking the dog and keeping it indoors was generally deemed to be cruel, and walking it was the right thing to do (**morality**):

I think we want to make them happy, don't we, want to do the right thing for them, don't we. (Fiona)

You can't keep him indoors, clearly it's cruel, and to be a dog owner you've just got to be responsible, that's the best way to say it. (Adam)

While owners worked hard to take the dog's needs into account, the owners questioned the extent to which they were successful and felt **guilty**, driving the sense of responsibility:

I personally find it can be stressful and I do worry; because we go out to work all day I have a dog walker who comes for an hour and takes them out for an hour every day. I do feel quite guilty sometimes that they are left on their own all day. (Eva)

I feel horrible that I can't take him for a walk like I used to. (Mary)

Participants often used the phrase “**best for the dog**” when describing how a dog's needs are perceived and fulfilled:

If you've got a strong relationship with your dog you want to do what's best for them. (Mary)

Although dog walking was viewed as a fundamental element in the responsibility of caring for a dog, there were circumstances in which owners felt that the responsible thing to do was not to walk their dog; for example, if they perceived it made them unhappy (Westgarth et al., 2017). One owner interviewed in a park described his responsibility as allowing his dog to remain as “*natural*” and “*animal*” as possible. For him this meant not ever putting his dog on a lead and not neutering. These actions were designed to enable the dog to live as a dog despite its presence in a highly human-oriented world. These actions may be perceived by others as irresponsible dog owner behavior.

Unconditional and Reciprocal Love

A strong emotional and familial connection with the dog was presented as the basis for the sense of responsibility felt by owners. Responsible behavior was felt to be a way of showing **love** for the dog:

Because we love them so much and if we didn't really love them then we wouldn't take them to the park, but because we love them and we've got to take them to the park. (Matthew, child)

The love between owners and dogs was described as reciprocal:

I know I give him love but the love that he bestows on me, I just think it's such an honour when an animal does that. [...] You're there for them but they are there for you. (Mary)

Not only was this love perceived to be reciprocal, but it was also defined as unconditional.

I mean, you are getting unconditional love, it doesn't matter. You know, they don't bother. They're not bothered if you've got plenty of money or you're skint. That's it, they're there. (Barry)

Membership of the Family: Dependency

In order to explain the dependent nature of the dog on the owner, owners often located their relationship in kinship, likening the dog to a child or grandchild (a **dependant**).

It's part of the family isn't it. It's like having another child. They're totally dependent on you like children are. So it's your responsibility to make sure that they're healthy and happy. (Charles)

I know it sounds stupid but he is almost like my grandson. I treat him like a child. (Helen)

Dogs were said to be most similar to a young toddler, but with added benefits such as not needing to be constantly supervised:

Honestly he is 75% percent of the work [of the child] he is; the only difference is I can leave him for a couple of hours and it won't hurt. (Diane)

They don't answer back and you can lock them in a room if they're naughty (laughter). (Fiona)

They're dependent on you for everything. Like a baby. But the babies grow up and get their own [independence]... that's why it finishes then, when they start toddling. I want this, I want that. A dog never does that. (Barry)

Given their dependency on human beings, dogs were not held accountable for their actions; they were described as having limited **agency**:

It's not their fault they are not walked and it is my fault when they trash something. (Samantha)

At the same time as recognizing their powerful feelings for the dog and using language that is most often reserved for relationships with other human beings, dogs were not simply a replacement for human relationships. One participant was clear that although the dog was dependent on her, it was not a child substitute:

People have said to me in the past "Oh it's a nice substitute to children." But I've never looked at it like that. Because I've never wanted children, so I can't substitute something I've never really wanted. (Alice)

Participants were keen to emphasize the status of their dog as an animal not a human:

I like dogs very, very much. I like working with them, I like being with them and I like owning them, but, in a way, I don't think I'm awfully sentimental about them. They don't know it's their birthday, so why would I buy them a birthday present? (Grace)

I still appreciate that he's an animal and has to be treated like an animal. (Mary)

Mary went on to suggest that her dog was part of her family, and as such her needs must be taken into **consideration**:

They're a vital part of the family and their needs need to be taken into consideration, no matter what you do, that's part of being the family. (Mary)

However, owners varied in where their dogs' needs were placed in **priority** compared with the needs of other family members:

Everything we do, we think about how it is going to affect them and what we need to do to make sure they are alright first. (Patrick)

In our family, he is last on the pecking order but his needs are still taken into consideration a lot. (Mary)

The themes of priority and **commitment** may be related; some participants, in particular those who appeared to place the needs of their dog in high priority, spoke about the commitment they had made to their animals when they first acquired their dog and the long-term implications of this:

I got him for the long haul. (Diane)

I think the worst thing anybody can do, would be to get an animal and then not take responsibility for it. (Helen)

Thus responsibility for a pet dog, once assumed and accorded the status of a family member, could not be easily relinquished. Even though dogs were regarded as owned by the whole household, members were identified who either had a particular relationship with the animal or who had a particular responsibility for them, a sense of **belonging** to that individual:

We all own her, but mum is her favourite. (Matthew)

Delegation of Responsibility

Responsibility for walking the dog was the most frequently reported aspect of the dog's care that was **delegated**. Some participants used extended family members or, less often, friends to walk the dog when the main dog walker could not. Less commonly, a commercial dog walking service was used. But delegation of walking was considered problematic, posing risks both to the dog walker and to the dog:

And I said to her, "No." I said, "I'm sorry. I know you do this for a living and you may do it fine with little dogs. But these are big strong dogs," I said, "I would be so responsible if anything happened to you." (Steph)

A major consideration when delegating dog walking was whether the person to whom the activity was being delegated could be trusted to look after the dog appropriately. This applied to commercial dog walkers as well as to family and friends:

Nina: Admittedly we don't really trust Dad's judgement when it comes to Astor really.

Interviewer: You wouldn't let him out [on a dog walk] on his own?

Helen: Oh God no.

—

This little one, going back to her issues, she is really comfortable with her [dog walker]. (Eva)

Private Relationships in a Public Area

While the management of the dog in the home was a private affair, taking the dog into social and public spaces held the potential for the emergence of conflicting views on responsible dog ownership. Once outside of the home the need for **protection** of the dog from harm, from people, animals, or environments was often discussed:

He is part of the family so you just get protective over your dog, like a child. If somebody was going to threaten your child you would be straight in there. (Charles)

Responsibilities extended to **consideration of others**, such as other dog owners as well as members of the public. Activities included: avoidance, such as walking their dog in environments which were less likely to trigger confrontations with other dogs; prevention, such as managing behavior by putting the dog on a lead; and cleaning up after the dog:

I think also the worst part now is that people are not responsible. They don't clean up after their dogs, which is scandalous. (Owen)

One owner had the dog on a longline and gave us a wide berth, so to be considerate I put her on the lead so that she would not run up barking. I try to be considerate towards other owners when I can, as I appreciate it when others are considerate towards us. (Ethnographic diary)

Although participants talked about consideration of others, for some owners this was a means to again protect themselves and their own dog from others. For example, in the quote from the ethnographic diary above, it is clear that consideration for others is at least in part driven because “I appreciate it when others are considerate towards us.” Again, maintaining public spaces free from dog feces benefits both owners and the non-dog owning public alike. In summary, strategies used to prevent and avoid conflict with others when in public spaces may be badged as consideration for others but also protect both the individual dog owner and the wider group membership from unpleasant consequences.

Tolerated Inconveniences

Respondents reported undertaking activities that were not always pleasurable but which were viewed as part of responsible dog ownership. In particular in relation to dog walking, there were the issues of bad weather, picking up feces, and dirt coming into the house. One female family member described with some humor how she was left to deal with the feces, suggesting that responsibility for all that comes with a dog is negotiable and parts can be person-specific:

They suddenly become my dogs when they've had a poo. (Fiona)

Tolerance was a part of responsibility; it was overwhelmingly felt that any negative consequences of dog ownership were outweighed by the benefits gained from dog ownership and as such were tolerated as an inconvenience:

But it doesn't bother me. I've resigned myself for the simple fact that while I've got him, he is giving me so much pleasure that a bit of dog hair ... I'm not bothered. (Charles)

It's a price worth paying. (Barry)

Negotiating What is Responsible Practice

Owners' views on responsible dog ownership were constructed in the context of their own behaviors. While dog walking was generally considered to be a fundamental feature of responsible dog ownership, some owners offered justifications for not walking their dog. For one participant, taking on dogs that no-one else wanted provided a way of keeping a dog, despite for health reasons the owner not being able to exercise it. In this way the morality of saving the animal seemed to trump its need for exercise:

We used to do a lot of walking, hillwalking and things, but when I got arthritis, I then had to say, “Okay, I've got to do the best for the dog as well.” My answer to that was to take the dogs that no-one else wants or that need special care. (Grace)

In another example, skipping a dog walk was seen to be acceptable if alternative activities were provided to keep the animal stimulated and active:

There are a lot of people that probably shouldn't have dogs, because they don't have the time to take them out and walk them. For us, [...] walking the dogs isn't a priority because we know, from past experiences, that there are other things we can do, to keep them happy and occupied [...] so if we skip a walk, then they have more of the puzzle feeders or we do some nose work, or scent games or they get a box to destroy. (Nadine)

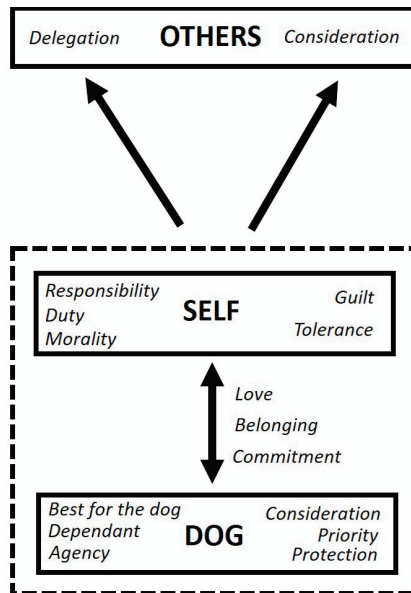


Figure 1. Owners' views of the dog, self, and others, highlighting key themes reflecting responsible dog ownership.

In summary, owners reported that dog walking was a key component of responsible dog ownership but did not always act in line with these views. In addressing this divergence, dog owners justified their actions either by reference to other behaviors which made up for the lack of walking or by reference to the dog's best interests. For the nervous dog, or the dog with mobility issues, it was argued that the dog's best interests were served by not walking. In this way, not walking the dog was constructed as a responsible act. Within the private home environment, decisions were shaped by perceptions of the needs of the animal and owner within the "family." Once outside the home, in public, further negotiation was required; dog owners' loyalty still primarily lay with the needs of the animal, but some allowance was made for the needs of others.

The key themes described above can be represented as primarily concerning the dog, owner or others, and the relationships between them (Figure 1). The placement of themes within this diagram demonstrates that the construction of responsibility by dog owners is rooted in the dog–owner relationship and the views of the needs of the dog and owner, rather than the needs of others in society. From our findings we suggest four processes through which problems regarding responsible dog ownership may arise: as a result of the owner–dog relationship being too weak or too strong; differences in interpretation of what is best for the dog; difficulties predicting and avoiding situations of conflict; and differences in tolerance of negative impacts of dog ownership. These will be discussed in more detail below.

Discussion

Responsible dog ownership is a construction that emerges at the intersection of the needs of dogs, owners, and society. Our findings demonstrate that feelings of responsibility are underpinned by the love between the human and their animal and the dependency of the animal on the human. The themes described in this paper reflect how dog owners make decisions about

the responsible way to own a dog. Considerable weight is usually given to what are perceived to be the dog's best interests. As stated in Power (2008, p. 549):

... dogs were not just “little hairy people” that needed to fit within existing routines, but instead, participants’ plans and activities were altered and extended to incorporate the needs, preferences and pleasures of dogs.

The themes presented here do not represent the coded practices articulated in policy and stakeholder documents regarding responsible dog ownership (except perhaps broadly the issues of consideration for others with regard to control and fouling). Issues regarding interpretation of responsible dog-ownership practice arise because there is no single set of dog-owner relationships on which to base clear guidance—it depends on the context. Further, as these relationships move out of the home and into public spaces, the rules that have been negotiated privately do not tend to take account of others except where they impinge on the owner's relationship with their dog. Any intervention or educational initiatives seeking to change owner behavior must understand and work with owner perceptions of responsible behavior if they are to be successful.

Our study does confirm that the language of “responsibility” toward dogs has a greater resonance for dog owners than the concept of “obligation” (Lim & Rhodes, 2016), but it is difficult to tell whether this has been influenced by the wider public discourse regarding responsible ownership. Given the importance that owners attach to the needs of dogs, perhaps the most effective use of responsible dog-ownership messages will be in terms of improving animal welfare by making owners care for their dog in certain ways. However, this is not without some complexities.

Our findings highlight four processes through which perceived irresponsible dog ownership may arise. The first concerns the dog-owner relationship.

Consequences of the Owner–Dog Relationship Being too Weak or too Strong

The dog-owner relationship has been theorized to be the fundamental base on which the need to act responsibly is built (Haraway, 2008; Hens, 2009). In this study we evidenced that the owners' sense of responsibility toward their dog is built through kinship-like interaction with them in the home environment. Our findings fit with research demonstrating that affect and emotion are central in driving perceptions of responsibility (Lerner, Goldberg, & Tetlock, 1998; Nichols & Knobe, 2007). Our study confirms that dogs are perceived as members of the family, a form of kin (Charles, 2016; Riggs & Peel, 2016). Dogs are both shaped and brought within human family and home, but also the concept of family is broadened to include dogs as themselves within everyday routine and practices (Power, 2008). This interpretation of kin overrides genetics; it is about a significant other, but not just a “friend” either (Haraway, 2003). As argued elsewhere (Hens, 2009), we also found that although our participants likened dogs to being somewhat like having a child, some were also clear that it was not entirely the same.

Finch describes kinship toward extended family members as a social practice; it is not an automatic relationship but a negotiated responsibility (Finch, 1989b). She also argues that living together strengthens kin obligation, as does substitution, for example, when a person has never had children (Finch, 1989a). There are arguably parallels here with the roles of dogs sharing our households and, perhaps, as child/grandchild substitutes in particular circumstances. Our findings elucidate that this kinship with dogs, and feelings of a two-way emotional relationship built through a history of interaction, is what generates a sense of responsibility toward them.

Given that we found the emotional bond between the owner and the dog generated the feelings of responsibility toward it, our findings suggest that problems regarding the dog–owner relationship and responsible dog-ownership practice may manifest in two ways. Firstly, a) the emotional bond between dog and owner (also known as attachment) may be too weak and thus the perceived responsibility for the animal and priority given to it low. Power (2008) suggests that the human–dog relationship is threatened when dogs do not conform to the expectations to fit *within* human families and norms of behavior in the home (Power, 2008), thus occupying a space outside family membership; we additionally suggest this perhaps causes reduced feelings of responsibility toward the animal. Conversely, b) the attachment to the dog and perceived commitment made may be too strong. We showed that responsibility, once taken on, is not easily relinquished because owners perceive a strong commitment to the dog as a sign of a responsible owner. This may be problematic in a number of situations: for example, if the owner and dog would be better off apart and the animal rehomed elsewhere, or the owner cannot walk the dog but refuses to outsource this. Further, if the relationship is strong, the priority given to an animal’s needs may easily outweigh any consideration of the needs of others. For example, confining cats is more motivated by protecting the cat than protecting their wildlife prey (Toukhsati, Young, Bennett, & Coleman, 2012). In these situations, insiders and outsiders to the relationship may have different views as to what the responsible action should be.

Differences in Interpretation of What is Best for the Dog

We found that dog owners are driven by what they perceive to be in the best interests of their dog; therefore the second reason why owners may not appear to adhere to supposed responsible dog-ownership practices is due to differences in interpretation of what is best for the dog. Owners may undertake the behaviors or actions promoted through calls for responsible dog ownership (e.g., choosing to neuter, or putting the dog on a lead), but they also may choose not to because in their view it is not the responsible action to take. Perceptions of the individual dog’s welfare may, in some cases, be a barrier to promoting a desired responsible dog ownership practice. Our findings corroborate those of other authors who conclude that “Responsible ownership can therefore entail not exercising dogs” (Degeling, Rock, Rogers, & Riley, 2016) if it is felt to be detrimental to animal welfare. Thus it is important not to underestimate how an owner may be perceiving the needs of and benefits for their particular animal when evaluating whether they are acting in a responsible manner.

Difficulties Predicting and Avoiding Situations of Conflict

We observed the importance of being able to predict, and thus prevent and avoid, conflicts involving dogs in public spaces in order to act responsibly. Therefore, there may be practical constraints in being able to predict the potential for infraction of responsible dog-ownership guidelines and then do something about it. This requires prior knowledge and preparatory practice – termed previously as “response-ability” (Brown & Dilley, 2012). In order to do this, dog and owner must know each other well, such as being able to understand and communicate at some level how the other thinks and is likely to behave in any given situation. If not, it is likely that the dog will not understand how it is expected to behave, and the owner will be poor at predicting what the dog may be about to do and also be ineffective at controlling/managing it in a problematic situation. Owners may also be limited by what resources are available to them, such as financial or access to suitable walking environments, which affects

how they can care for their dog. The assumption that education and increased knowledge is all that is required for behavior change, neglecting the need for practical skills and ability, is a significant gap in efforts to increase responsible dog ownership.

Differences in Tolerance of Negative Impacts of Dog Ownership

Finally, we found that tolerance of the negative parts of dog ownership had to occur when owning a dog, but this was not perceived as problematic as the benefits to the owner outweighed this. Thus dog owners are likely to be much more tolerant of the negative consequences of dogs in society than others outside that dog–owner relationship. Some consequences of dog ownership are perceived as undesirable by owners, for example dirt, hair, and feces, because they “challenge the home’s appearance as a safe, clean and orderly space” (Power, 2008). However, on the whole negative aspects of dog ownership are perceived as mere inconveniences by owners, outweighed by the value and benefits gained from the relationship (Campbell, Smith, Tumilty, Cameron, & Treharne, 2016). Others outside this relationship are not benefitting from it and are likely to be less tolerant of the dog and the consequences of its presence, particularly if their emotional affect toward a particular dog, or dogs in general, is low. We suggest this crossing of the dog–owner relationship from private to public is the fourth reason why there may be a mismatch between the owner’s self-perception that they are behaving responsibly within their dog–owner relationship, and the view of an outsider more greatly concerned with the impact of the dog on others and the environment.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research Needs

In summary, in common with Finch’s work on family kinship, responsibility toward dogs is not automatic but is negotiated through interaction (1989a). We suggest that policies created to bring about responsible dog ownership, and the assumptions integral to them, do not align with the perceptions and practices of actual dog owners. Here we have shed some light on responsibility through conversations mainly focused on dog walking. More research is now required in order to understand the fuller construction of responsible dog ownership in other aspects of dog care. In particular our findings that place an emphasis on dogs’ or owners’ needs rather than responsibilities to others, require further examination to see whether they hold when the focus of the study is solely on responsible dog ownership.

This study has other limitations, primarily arising from the sample selection of people who were willing to talk about their dogs. Although some admitted rarely walking them, they were not generally participants who might commonly be labelled as “irresponsible” owners, such as those who openly let dogs foul or act aggressively toward others. However, it could be argued the type of owner who knowingly seriously violates the perceived guidelines of responsible dog ownership are at least rare, even mythical. In addition, this study does have a number of strengths. We interviewed dog owners in depth and this material was supplemented with observations. The interviews usually included multiple household members, if not the whole family, in many of the discussions rather than gaining only the perspective of a single individual about the dog. This is important as household members had different accounts of owning and looking after the family dog, and it was clear that discussions and negotiations around the care of the dog occurred. The participants included both males and females, both adults and children, across different social classes, and both people who rarely walked the dog and those who were regular dog walkers.

Conclusion

This study suggests that what appears to be factual descriptions of responsible dog ownership practices that should be easy to follow are, in reality, a complex interplay of beliefs grounded in issues of ethical practice; perceived best interests of the dog; and the nature of the social relationship with the dog. Responsible dog ownership means different things to different people at different times. It emerges from a blurred intersection of the needs of dogs, owners, and others, where often the dog comes first. A wider and more intensive study of the nature of a variety of dog–owner relationships is required to further understand how notions of responsibility are, or are not, engendered within them. This research emphasizes that simply telling owners to be responsible will not work because they already believe that they are responsible dog owners.

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Conflicts of Interest

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