

Catch Me If You Can!: A Qualitative Inquiry into the  
Characteristics of Human-Canine Play

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### **Abstract**

Defining the interactive and subjective elements responsible for canine well-being are routinely missed in the literature. Since the human-animal bond is known to influence health and well-being factors in both participants, this study focused on describing and understanding the elements within positive play between guardians and their canine companions. Through ethnographic methods, data analysis revealed five major themes present in play. Those of behavior, emotional expression, personality, motives, and self-awareness, which are interdependent and show the foundations for fostering *I-Thou* experiences.

## Introduction

Assessing and evaluating canine well-being and health can take many forms. Recently, researchers have begun examining the co-evolutionary nature of the relationship between dogs and humans, which seems to point to a unique participatory type of relationship between species that has evolved (Kerespesi, A., Jonsson, G., Miklósi, Á., Topál, J., Csányi, V., & Magusson, M., 2005; Rooney & Bradshaw, 2003). This unique relationship between humans and dogs has lead many researchers to study the physiological and behavioral variables responsible for influencing both human and canine health and welfare. (Cohen, 2002; Friedmann & Son, 2009; Wells, 2009). For example, some of the health benefits that dogs induce in people are reductions in blood pressure (Anderson, Reik & Jennings, 1992; Katcher, Friedmann, Beck, & Lynch, 1893), heart rate (Freidmann & Son, 2009), cortisol (Horvath, Doka & Miklosi, 2008), depression, and isolation (Wells, 2009), while increasing oxytocin (Nagasawa, M., Kikusui, T., Onaka, T., & Ohta, M., 2009), immune response, and normalizing disabilities for increased social engagement with others (McNicholas & Collis, 2000). For dogs, their health benefits seem to also rely upon the quality of interaction they receive from people. Yet, few studies have focused on the qualitative aspects of this relationship.

The limited research into this subject has shown that when dogs are approached with enthusiasm, positive motivation, and lots of petting they benefit with reductions in similar stress factors as humans do. Additionally, it has been reported that their confidence increases (Rooney & Bradshaw, 2003) and solving cognitive challenges becomes easier and quicker when their guardian is present (Cooper, Ashton, Bishop, West, Mills, & Young, 2007). The prime interaction that allows the opportunity for all these variables to be expressed is within guardian-companion play. Play between dogs and their guardians offer both participants the chance to

engage in positive enthusiastic behaviors that commonly induces physical contact as a part of the interaction that provides the highest potential for health benefits. In observational studies where stress was measured through salivary cortisol, those people who spoke to and physically interacted with their dogs in a positive way showed the most significant decreases in stress (Bergamasco, 2010; Horvath, Doka & Miklosi, 2008). So it seems that high quality interactions, where each participant views the engagement positively, is required in order to induce the corresponding physical benefits.

There are two additional psychophysiological components of play, that of oxytocin and temporal patterning, that seem to maintain the bond between guardian and companion. Oxytocin has been associated with increases in attachment and lowering stress (Nagasawa, et al., 2009). Through the mechanism of mutual gazing it was found that guardian oxytocin levels increased and those levels were the most significant in those human-animal (HA) pairs deemed highly attached. These relationships were additionally characterized by less talk than others. Temporal patterns in language and behavior are exhibited when HA pairs participate in problem solving tasks and emerge quickly at the onset of the task (Kerepesi, et al., 2005). Such patterns are commonly found in team sports where mutual coordination is intrinsic to success. These studies imply that dogs and humans unconsciously begin to synchronize their actions and reactions in accordance to the other's actions to create a sense of ease and flow, or what could be viewed as mutual support. These findings from play studies suggest that dogs and their guardians move toward syncing their behaviors and mutually react to each other's responses in order to create a harmonious state of mutual support and aid, which in turn reduces stress level and increases attachment.

Since these findings suggest that play itself seems to heighten our bond and co-evolutionary alliance, it seems important to understand the mechanisms and unique characteristics of HA play that would support these outcomes. Unfortunately, there has been a prominent gap in our understanding of HA play where a detailed description of the subjective experience may allow for a deeper appreciation of the motives, customs, personalities and habits (Wallace, 1970) of those guardians who are highly bonded and routinely play with their dogs. Consideration of these qualitative elements through ethnographic based research may lead to insights and meaning that allows for a more holistic understanding of the complexities within this relationship. While an ethnographic approach has not been readily utilized by HA researchers, its structure and worth have been well established by leading primate researchers like Dr. Jane Goodall's examination of wild chimpanzees and Dr. Francine Patterson's work with Koko a lowland gorilla in captivity who had learned sign-language. Both have systematically enhanced our scientific understanding of sub-cultures using the foundations of ethnography. It is in this vein that the current pilot study is based upon. The necessity of direct participation with this sub-culture was believed to be the most viable method taking into consideration the time limitations and professional background of the researcher.

### **Method**

The purpose of this ethnographic pilot study was to understand and describe the overarching themes used by canine guardians in describing HA play and their beliefs about the mechanisms necessary to provide positive beneficial play. Previous animal welfare studies have utilized the Free-Choice Profiling method (Wemelsfelder, F., 2001,2007; Walker, J., Dale, A., Waran, N., Clarke, N, Farnworth, M., & Wemelsfelder, F., 2010) to gain lists of adjectives commonly used by welfare agents to describe animal behavior and subjective experience (e.g.

nervous, inquisitive, silly, etc.). Expanding up this method, the current pilot study used an interactive focus group made up of average canine guardians who regularly play with their dogs. While previous ethnographic studies (e.g. anthropology) have routinely consisted of the researcher living amongst the specific population for long periods of time, this form of interaction is not possible with the group under study. This specific sub-culture can be seen together around dog-focused activities (i.e. training sessions) or locations (i.e. dog parks), yet none of these situations easily provides the researcher with enough time or opportunity to talk with subjects, nor to deeply understand the mechanisms being studied.

In order to address these restrictions, a 1-hour focus group format was devised to bring culture-sharing members together with the expressed intention of gathering individual experiences and subjective description. This format allowed immediate access to average guardians with the added ability to explore specific areas that arose during discussion. The format consisted of semi-structured, open-ended questions to solicit descriptive characteristics of positive play sessions. In addition, the participants were shown 3 different short videos depicting HA play and asked open-ended questions at the end of each. The researcher conducted the 1-hour group session, which was also videotaped. Audio transcription of the video was performed by the researcher in order to analyze vocabulary, behavior and group dynamics. Since the interviewing technique is a qualitative, emergent approach, the outlined questions (Appendix A) were modified or altered based upon responses by the participants in order to define and understand the phenomena more fully.

Consistent with Creswell's (2007) description of ethnography's basic assumptions (pp. 17), the researcher continuously flows between the two states; one of being an outside observer and second, that of being an active member of the subculture being studied (Berger, 2010). In

this flow of research, the researcher herself becomes an active participant and is subject to what Berger (2010) describes as “Key Emotional Episodes” (KEE) commonly reported in long-term studies where the researcher’s behavioral response to an event is bound within the context and rules of the subculture they are studying. The significance of this topic in the current study is that the researcher holds her own beliefs and ideas about the topic of play due to her profession within animal welfare and health that must be acknowledged. Yet, a certain amount of objectivity with the data and participants was maintained in order to allow for divergent themes and beliefs to arise. As Berger (2010) and Creswell (2007) suggest, the ethnographer cannot be separated from the research and under certain situations KEE may actually provide further interpersonal understanding of the subculture’s complexities. While this researcher is not claiming to have experienced a KEE, it is worth noting that on occasion one participant (D) in particular directly asked for the researcher to answer to the question at hand and to follow with relevant personal experiences. This is of note due to it creating an added level of trust and openness to the conversation. In reflection, had I not left the role of outside observer to become an active participant in this group, the descriptions and authenticity of the data could have been severely challenged or damped.

Analysis of the data were based upon Wallace’s (1970) use of ethnography which defines it as the “organization of diversity” as “the actual diversity of habits, of motives, of personalities, of customs that do, in fact, coexist within the boundaries of any culturally organized society” (p.23). The videotape was transcribed to generate themes and rich description. Analysis revealed 7 inter-related classifications of “good” play labeled: (1) behaviors, (2) emotional expression, (3) motives, (4) characteristics, (5) personality, (6) awareness, and (7) mind-body correlations.

## Participants

Four adult canine guardians participated with a mean age of 50 years (ages ranged between 45 to 55 years) and only two of the participants knew each other. The group was comprised of three women and one man to address the lack of gender differences in previous studies. Three of the participants (2 women and 1 man) were known to the researcher and the remaining one woman was a stranger. Socioeconomically, all guardians were low to middle class and were Caucasian. All were employed in a variety of careers. Of the women, one was a middle school English teacher (Y), another was an administrator for a plumbing company (J), and the last was a self-employed tax accountant (M). The one man (D) in the study was a self-employed metal artist. All had been exposed to dogs while growing up and currently, 3 out of the 4, had multi-dog households made up of rescue dogs. The one woman (J) who only had one dog was the only one with a purebred dog from a breeder. All participants lived in the San Francisco Bay Area and self-reported to be highly attached to at least one of their dogs in the home.

The diversity between known and unknown, male to female, was actively sought to address potential biases and to provide an accurate representative sub-group of canine guardians. During the 1-hour session all participants were addressed using only their first names, after gaining consent, and the researcher presented no identification information to keep anonymity. All personal information that arose during the interview was solely given by that participant. Consent forms were collected prior to the beginning of the interview and the session was held in a rented office space in Santa Cruz, CA in a location void of distractions and interruptions. After gaining additional verbal consent for videotaping and answering all questions, the camera was



turned on to record. Following protocol and standards of practice, the study had undergone and passed review by the Saybrook University's Internal Review Board.

### **Overarching Themes**

Analysis of the transcription revealed 5 major themes related to behaviors, emotional expression, motives, personality, and self-awareness. Even though each category brings specific details to the topic, none are separate from the others. Each category is interdependent upon the others in order to provide a true representation of the HA play experience.

#### Behaviors

All participants agreed that a positive play session shows key physical qualities that result in a shared experience. Physical movement or activities that leave the dog looking exhausted, relaxed, laying down or un-stressed were descriptions used to conquer up a sense of physical fatigue that needed to be fulfill by play. The word "exhausted" was used over and over to describe the physical effects of play. Participant M described it as:

"I would define it as when we are done or get home he plops, he falls down and he's just barely lifts is head up to look around. Yeah, when he's real tired."

Participant Y described this element as a mutually derived pleasure:

"What it feels like to me is again that feeling that they have these big happy grins on their faces and their tongues are hanging out. And I think that's just contagious for me. And then we'll all go home and flop down and I feel really relaxed and I think they do to. Then we just bask in the after glow because we're so happy. And it's a wonderful experience."

Another variation of this is how D describes this end result as a gift he can give his dog:

“There’s some reward that you see when [play is] accomplished. And for me I think there’s recognition that I want that too in some ways. I mean wouldn’t it be nice to run really hard and then just klonk. That’s a good feeling. To feel that you can give your dog that gift I think there’s recognition there that you’ve given them something.”

All the physical descriptions include a certain level of mutual exchange between guardian and dog. Examples of play that resulted in this “exhaustion” varied between participants greatly, but all stated the necessity of the guardian to be emotionally and physically engaged in this activity in order for the play to be deemed “good” or beneficial for the dog. Other terms commonly used to were “enthusiastic”, “having fun”, “giving her all”, “interactive and personal”, and feeling “really connected”. Additionally, the importance of verbal cues was presented when one of the videos shown to the group was very quiet. Participant M by classified this lack of verbal information:

“Well it was interesting that you couldn’t hear. So I couldn’t tell if she was having fun or not. If there was a lot of growling going on I would have said Taffy [the dog present in the video] was having a good time.”

This theme of focus upon the dog’s needs being met was seen throughout the discussion. All 7 elements needed to be present with an emphasis upon the dog’s well-being and needs playing center stage. Yet, they all understood the mutually derived benefits of doing so.

### Emotional Expression

The element of emotional expression was understood through how guardians attached certain emotional states (i.e. joy, happy, fun, satisfying, being in the moment) to the act of play itself, as well as, the emotions they portray in their dogs. Overall they explained this element as

having a sense of flow or give and take during play where they take cues from their dog and vice versa. Kerepesi et al., 2005, has described this component of human-canine relationship in the form of temporal patterns that develop during mutual tasks, which can take on a sense of ‘flow’ or mutual ease between guardian and companion. One participant described being in the moment with his dog by:

“It starts off with him. It’s about him and then it turns into about us and I’m having fun. You know it’s like a whole thing. Like [being] a dog. Like when you see a dog playing. I mean you can get to that level too as it turns out.” He additionally pointed out, “You’re both reading each other too I think. Because it can go further in either direction, there’s options there. And you’re kind of looking at your dog to figure out if he want to take it somewhere else or your throwing out other possibilities.”

Additionally, guardians talked about positive emotions and attachment when mutual gazing was described. This supports Nagasawa and colleagues (2009) findings on oxytocin levels increasing after simple gazing between guardians and their companions. Several participants described what Y said:

“It makes me feel really special, loved and worshiped and adored. You know, I’ll have things that I would never get from my husband who is a very goo man, but not a dog.”

M talked about adoration by stating:

“My biggest joy with him is when he’s not next to me bothering me and I look at him and he’s looking over at me like I’m the greatest thing in the world. Love you so much even though it’s less interactive.”

J described it as:

“[At] night she’ll, she’s crate trained so she sleeps in the crate at night, but before she goes to the crates she’s on the bed with me for a long time and sometimes she’ll lay so that she’s completely on top of my body. She’s about 29 lbs. and that is just like, its like she must be worshiping something. [It feels] wonderful. Better than any man I’ve ever been with.”

The second largest emotional sensation that was described was also said to be an intangible feeling between one and their dog when both are present and in the moment. Y participant describes this best:

“That intangible thing we don’t have words for. It’s like we all know its there but we all don’t seem to know how to say it. Just that when you look at your dog.... And you’re really connected.”

This author suggests that this “intangible” state is what Martin Buber, the philosopher, describes as an “I -Thou” experience (Buber, 2000). Unlike the I-It experience where the other is looked upon as an object, the I-Thou experience is one which is unbounded by words or language.

Buber describes this moment between two individuals when we “place ourselves completely into a relationship, to truly understand and "be there" with another person, without masks, pretenses, even without words. Such a moment of relating is called "I-Thou." Each person comes to such a relationship without preconditions. The bond thus created enlarges each person, and each person responds by trying to enhance the other person. The result is true dialogue, true sharing.”

(American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, 2012). This I-Thou experience commonly described by guardians may account for why many of them use the term ‘family members’ and how the human-canine relationship can be, as participant J earlier described, “better than any man I’ve

ever known”. Dogs, due to their ability to be present and in the moment, may create the foundations in which more I-Thou experiences are had and thereby influencing one’s perceptions of human-to-human engagements and the lack of such I-Thou experiences.

### Motives

One’s motivation for play can be many. Yet, participants maintained that it is a multi-level experience that defines a good play session. The most easily understood is that of the need for exercise and how this can stimulate increases in the guardian’s level of exercise as well. Going outside and being within Nature was a common setting for play. Y explained it:

“I think that that part of why we love them so much is that we get ourselves so removed from nature. And with them we get to live with nature everyday. And I think that’s a gift that we wouldn’t have otherwise.”

Additionally, all participants readily agreed with the paraphrase by the author of “How the dog perceives the person would dictate how they engage with that person.”

Participants communicated the importance of motivation of the human, being influential in not only how the play would proceed, but also how the session would be physically and emotionally defined for the dog. Thereby confirming what Horváth and associates (2008) reported in canine cortisol results when varying levels of affiliative behaviors are present in play. Horváth and colleagues (2008) showed that canine cortisol levels decreased significantly when positive affiliative behaviors were exhibited during the play session. Whereas, when controlling or non-affiliative behaviors were present, cortisol levels did not decrease and in certain circumstances actually increased (i.e. older dogs).

### Personality

Participants talked about how one's personal history can define or influence how they engage with dogs during play. While there are varying forms of play, such as chasing to throwing a stick, good play seems to be dependent upon the style of both dog and guardian, which may also carry certain biases that get played out during play sessions. For example, the group dialogued around the role of gender (both of the guardian and the dog) and if gender plays a role in the different approaches or styles of play. Several reported having a negative bias or prejudice towards small or little dogs (e.g. Terriers and Chihuahuas) and found them to be "hyper insecure types", "needy" and "intimidating" in groups. Yet, there was no clear agreement if human or dog gender may play a part of one's play style. Instead the group offered the explanation that one's personality type defines how they will engage with any dog. For example, M describes the difference between herself and her sister:

"It's not divided between men and women, male-female lines, it's just I think personality. So like my sister won't get on the ground and do that push thing with little dogs, but I will. They love it. So I don't think it's a man-woman thing, it's personality."

D participant explained it in these terms:

"There are nurturing men. I nurture our dogs and that's a rewarding thing too. When it comes to that root instinctual thing, I like that opportunity to get in there and mix it up. And that comes from just me. And I think that's the same thing we share with our dogs. We share that part of ourselves that's just very simple."

This discussion extended into the personality types of the dogs. It was explained that certain play activities were done base upon the desires or personality of the dog. So if the dog,

regardless of size, wanted to chase balls or rough-house, then that's what the participants reported in doing. Yet, there was an acknowledgement of how one's own personality can equally drive the type of play style expressed by the guardian as M so pointed out.

### Self-Awareness

In questioning participants about how their relationships with their dogs may or may not influence their other relations, the majority (all of the women participants) stated that they showed less desire to socialize with others, felt a general criticism by non-dog guardians about the HA bond, and that they have become more focused on seeing and meeting the needs of their dogs than in the past. Y expressed her shift in awareness by stating:

“I like to watch my dogs, study my dogs, I just feel like everything good that I can be I learned from my dogs. I feel that they just make me a better person [when] I follow their example and try to be more like them.”

And J explained it:

“You know how when you were talking about how you didn't even want to go out with your friends [referring to Y's earlier comment]. It took me a lot to come here tonight. Because I would rather stay at home with my dog.”

This self-awareness seemed to develop over the course of time in the guardian, primarily dependent upon maturation and how bonded they felt to their current companion.

Additionally, the group acknowledged the variations in play styles and personalities; yet found a common theme between them all that they stated. Y describes this theme as:

“On the surface we all have these different styles and ways of playing, but then there's this common underlying thing that I think I'm hearing all of us say. That

there's this very, you used the word [referring to D], primal and very in the moment, very real, an underlying foundation that's the same for all of us."

J picked up on this in:

"It's like this vein that runs through all of us that connects us to those animals. And if you're not a dog lover, you think we're crazy. But if you get a dog and learn to love the dog then you become like that around all dogs."

This last quote epitomizes much of the criticism that guardians receive from the general public and might significantly underscore their reasons for becoming less social. Yet, it could be suggested that since the HA bond possesses many significant health and well-being attributes that also induce an I-Thou experience, it might be that the criticism is derived from our lack of understanding of this relationship and its significance upon the participants.

### **Discussion**

While very little has been known about HA play, this pilot seems to not only confirm many results reported in HA cortisol (Horváth, Dóka, & Miklósi, 2008) and oxytocin studies (Nagasawa, Kikusui, Onaka, & Ohta, 2009), but provides a more in-depth and holistic study of how successful guardians describe positive play that are affiliated with these physical results. Five major themes emerged when examining the data, those of behavior, motives, personality, self-awareness and emotional expression, which are inter-related and influence all aspects simultaneously. It is further suggested that this relationship and specific activity provides the foundation for I-Thou experiences that seems to enhance the HA bond and make aware their desire for such relations with others. The limitations of this pilot are those of small size, low gender diversity, as well as, low socioeconomic variety. While this pilot is representative of many of the health studies on HA, there is still a clear lack of male guardian participation within



the field. Additionally, it would be of great value to explore cultural and social differences that may either support or question the findings of this study. Lastly, longitudinal studies examining the maturation of high attachment and the various forms of play may lead to a deeper understanding of how this significant co-evolutionary relationship continues to develop and modify itself over time.

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## Appendix A: Focus Group Questions

The following list of questions will be used to guide the discussion of the topic under examination. Questions will be semi-structured and open-ended and may be modified based upon participant responses in order to solicit further information about the characteristics and complexities of the topic. Questions will be asked pre and post-video exposure, as well as, in-between each video.

### Pre-video:

Why do you play with your dog?

How does it feel in the moment when you play?

What do you notice in your dog?

How does playing with your dog affect your life?

Expanding questions:

What kind of physical and/or mental changes have you experienced?

Do you think you've gained any health benefits from this engagement?

Has play changed how you interact with other people or animals?

Do you think you play differently now versus the past? If so, please explain.

How might environment influence the play?

Do you think gender influences how one plays with a dog?

What makes a bad play session?

How do you each currently define a good or positive play session between a guardian and their dog?

What kinds of benefits do you see dogs gaining from play?

### After each video:

What was good in that video?

What did you see happen between the person and dog?

Was there anything negative or lacking in that video?

How did this video differ from the previous one?

Was there something you saw that you could relate to from your own life? Please explain

Post-videos:

How, if applicable, has your original description of play changed after watching the videos and discussing this topic?

How might these insights alter how you see or engage with animals in general?