

Dogs may be pessimistic too

October 11 2010



(PhysOrg.com) -- A study has gained new insight into the minds of dogs, discovering that those that are anxious when left alone also tend to show 'pessimistic' like behaviour.

The research by academics at the University of Bristol, and funded by the RSPCA is published in [Current Biology](#) tomorrow (12 October). The study provides an important insight into dogs' emotions, and enhances our understanding of why behavioural responses to separation occur.

Professor Mike Mendl, Head of the Animal Welfare and Behaviour research group at Bristol University's School of Clinical Veterinary Science, who led the research, said: "We all have a tendency to think that our pets and other animals experience emotions similar to our own, but we have no way of knowing directly because emotions are essentially private. However, we can use findings from human psychology research

to develop new ways of measuring animal emotion.

"We know that people's emotional states affect their [judgements](#) and that happy people are more likely to judge an ambiguous situation positively. What our study has shown is that this applies similarly to [dogs](#) – that a 'glass-half-full' dog is less likely to be anxious when left alone than one with a more 'pessimistic' nature."

In order to study 'pessimistic' or 'optimistic' decisions, dogs at two UK animal re-homing centres were trained that when a bowl was placed at one location in a room (the 'positive' position) it would contain food, but when placed at another location (the 'negative' position) it would be empty. The bowl was then placed at ambiguous locations between the positive and negative positions.

Professor Mendl explained: "Dogs that ran fast to these ambiguous locations, as if expecting the positive food reward, were classed as making relatively 'optimistic' decisions. Interestingly, these dogs tended to be the ones who also showed least anxiety-like behaviour when left alone for a short time.

"Around half of dogs in the UK may at some point perform separation-related behaviours - toileting, barking and destroying objects around the home - when they're apart from their owners. Our study suggests that dogs showing these types of behaviour also appear to make more pessimistic judgements generally."

Dr Samantha Gaines, Deputy Head of the Companion Animals Department from RSPCA, said: "Many dogs are relinquished each year because they show separation-related behaviour. Some owners think that dogs showing anxious behaviour in response to separation are fine, and do not seek treatment for their pets. This research suggests that at least some of these dogs may have underlying negative [emotional](#) states, and

owners are encouraged to seek treatment to enhance the welfare of their dogs and minimise the need to relinquish their pet. Some dogs may also be more prone to develop these behaviours, and should be re-homed with appropriate owners."

More information: Dogs showing separation-related behaviour exhibit a 'pessimistic' cognitive bias, Michael Mendl, Julie Brooks, Christine Basse, Oliver Burman, Elizabeth Paul, Emily Blackwell and Rachel Casey, published in *Current Biology*, 12 October 2010.

www.cell.com/current-biology/

Provided by University of Bristol

Citation: Dogs may be pessimistic too (2010, October 11) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-10-dogs-pessimistic.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.