

What 'walkies' says about your relationship with your dog

January 19 2017, by Louise Platt And Thomas Fletcher



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Dogs love "walkies." And unless it's pouring with rain and blowing a gale, so do their owners. But there's much more to this daily routine than you might think. In fact, it's actually a complex process of negotiation, which reveals a great deal about our relationship with man's best friend.

In many ways, the walk reflects the historical social order of human domination and animal submission. But research suggests that it also allows humans and dogs to negotiate their power within the relationship. In fact, our [recent study](#) found that the daily dog walk involves complex negotiation at almost every stage.

The UK, like many countries, is a nation of pet lovers – 40% of UK households are [home to a domestic animal](#). And for dog owners (24% of UK households) that means a lot of [walking](#). Dog "owners" walk [23,739 miles](#) during an average dog's lifetime of 12.8 years and reportedly get more exercise from walking their dogs than the [average gym goer](#). Despite this, we actually know very little about how walking and the spaces in which we walk help forge our relationships with dogs.

The wonder of walking

Walking is necessarily a mode of transport for getting to school or work, but it is far more than movement alone – [it's not "just" walking](#). Walking with a dog is beneficial for [mental and physical well-being](#), but the process of walking with an animal also involves detailed interactions. Dogs, like other animals, are sentient beings that [think, feel and have their own personalities](#) – and we need to "listen" to and negotiate with them [about how the walk is experienced](#). The walk is a shared experience, after all.

While clearly acknowledging the health benefits, humans also walk their dogs because they take great pleasure in seeing their dogs have fun. Indeed, our study showed that there is a widespread belief among [dog walkers](#) that dogs are happiest when out in the open, and it is here that they are able to best demonstrate their "dogyness." (It is important to note here that while not all dog owners walk their dogs, our participants shared an enthusiasm for getting out and about with their pets.)

But [dog owners](#) also adapt the timing, length and location of the walks depending on the perceived personality of the dog and what they think the dogs like and dislike the most. One respondent felt that as her dog had been rescued she had a "right" to a good life and giving her a long walk daily was part of this care-giving. There was also the sense that people *knew* where their dogs liked to walk and walkers spoke of "their stomping ground" and "favourite park," suggesting that over time, dogs and their companions find spaces that work for them as a partnership or team.

But there are other factors at play, too – not least, how the owner's own feelings influence the walk. For example, we found that some walkers – especially those with larger breeds – experience anxiety in certain situations, such as encounters with small children, and that these anxieties influence walking patterns.

To lead, or be led?

Indeed, we found that whether dogs were permitted to walk off-lead was highly constrained by their human companion's interpretation of the dangers. For example, a number of the participants spoke of feeling worried if their dog went off sniffing out of sight. However, this "rummaging and exploring" was viewed as "the dog's time" (as a human might talk of "me-time") and seen as an important for allowing their pet freedom. As a consequence, many owners allowed it, despite their anxieties.

On the other hand, one participant walked a greyhound, a breed that might have a natural instinct to chase smaller animals. There was a tension that had to be managed between letting the greyhound run, which brought the owner joy, alongside an anxiety that she may chase and kill a small animal.

These different factors mean that the imperative for dogs to be exercised and have fun is sometimes in conflict with the preferences of their human companion(s) to keep their dog safe or to heed their natural instincts. A healthy balance is only made possible through the two-way relationship between the dog and their human companion. This is something which is developed over time and through experience – a shared look, say, between human and dog which is [implicitly understood](#).

Fair-weather walkers

Third parties also influence the nature of the walk. A popular image of dog walkers sees them out and about, chatting with other walkers, their dogs engaging in similar "conversations." But the social nature of the walk is certainly not a given. Many people simply do not want to socialise with other humans (or their dogs); and some believe their walk would be easier and less stressful if their route was human and dog-free. Participants who had busy lives wanted to get the walk done without distraction. Another respondent, who walked a large pack of dogs, recognised that this would be intimidating for others, so preferred to find quiet places for walks to allow the dogs the freedom to run uninterrupted.

And so a successful walk is based on a mutual understanding between the human and the dog. But it is also greatly influenced by those "others" they meet. Some they are happy to engage with, others they are not. For example, we found that a culture of judgement exists among dog walkers towards those who are seen as "fair-weather" or "weekend" walkers – those who were not out every day come rain or shine or walkers that the regulars did not recognise.

Regular dog walkers identify those who are seen as not showing the same commitment to their companions and these "others" are routinely alienated from the community and excluded from the "dog chat."

Regular walkers also knew each other to stop and chat, too – even if they only knew the name of the other walker's dog. The overwhelming focus of all participants, however, was on their dogs.

In its most mundane form, dog walking is about humans enhancing a dog's (and also their own) quality of life. Understanding how humans attempt to fulfil the needs and wants of their [dogs](#) is, therefore, vital. Despite the routine nature of walking, when accompanied by a dog, it becomes anything but ordinary and reveals something quite special about our relationship with some animals.

This article was originally published on [The Conversation](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: What 'walkies' says about your relationship with your dog (2017, January 19) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-01-walkies-relationship-dog.html>

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