



Human-Sled Dog Relations: What Can We Learn from the Stories and Experiences of Musers?

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Abstract

In this qualitative study, the elements and quality of musher–sled dog relationships were investigated. In-depth interviews with a narrative design were conducted with eight mushers from northern Minnesota and northwestern Ontario. The mushers were asked to contribute ideas by sharing stories and experiences of working with dogs, as well as art or photographs. While all the participants had their own ideas about musher–sled dog relationships, six themes emerged. The mushers stated the importance of getting to know the dogs, their respect for their sled dogs' abilities, the idea of a two-way communication that takes place, the importance of trust, the notion of partnership, and what can be learned through working with sled dogs. This study supports other research suggesting that humans and animals engage in interspecies relationships and that these can be quality relationships with multiple elements. The importance of researching and teaching about dogs as subjects is discussed, as well as the significance of humans having direct experience with other animals.

Keywords

animal subjectivity, companion dogs, direct experience, empathy, human-animal relations, humane education, musher, sentience, service dogs, sled dogs, working dogs

Introduction

My experiences as a musher and wilderness trip guide led to my interest in exploring the relationships between humans and working sled dogs. This study represents my attempt to shed light on musher–sled dog relationships. In it I aimed to explore, through the use of in-depth interviews and the sharing of stories, what mushers believed were the key elements in, as well as the quality of, musher–sled dog relationships (Kuhl, 2008). Part of my rationale for engaging in this research was to focus on the shared lives of humans and dogs—a relationship that goes back 100,000 years (Vila et al., 1997). I was interested in disrupting anthropocentrism by acknowledging the potential for human–sled dog interspecies relationships to be both deep and rich, with educational value.

Literature Overview

The field of human-animal relations is a relatively new field of study (Hines, 2003). In fact, researchers rarely study the shared experiences of humans and animals. Generally the focus is either on animal behavior, where animals are seen as subjects (ethology), or on the effects of animals on humans (e.g., the positive impacts of service dogs) (Lestel, Bruois, & Gaunet, 2006). Yet, no species community is truly isolated. According to Lestel et al. (2006), we need more research “that attempts to account for the shared lives that grow up between humans and animals. Simply studying the effect of the one on the other is not enough” (p. 156).

The field of human-animal relations spans several disciplines, and research can be found within the fields of biology, psychology, sociology, social work, anthropology, geography, health science, philosophy, and education (Lestel et al., 2006; Hines, 2003; Gerbasi, Anderson, Gerbasi, & Coultis, 2002; Shapiro, 2002). Within the topic of human-dog relations, a review of relevant literature reveals that the majority of studies examining the interactions between humans and dogs seem to fall into two areas.

The first area is the study of dogs as companion animals and service dogs. Many researchers, especially over the last few decades, have studied the effects of the dog–human relationship on humans. This is often referred to as Human Animal Bond research or HAB (Hines, 2003). Wilson and Barker (2003) also refer to this area of study as Human-Animal Interaction research or HAI. Wilson and Barker (2003) provide a succinct overview of some of the researched benefits of animals for humans:

A companion animal (i.e., a pet) may reduce anxiety, loneliness, and depression and thus delay onset, decrease severity, or slow progression of stress-related conditions. Pets may serve as a stimulus for exercise, provide social support, and serve as an external focus of attention. They function as companions, social facilitators, and adjunct therapists. Pets are also a source of tactile comfort for all age groups by increasing sensory stimulation while decreasing blood pressure and heart rate. (p. 16)

It is important to note, however, that the research into HAB for the most part focuses on the benefits of human-animal interactions for humans.

The second area of research that considers human-dog interactions falls within the study of dog behavior, cognition, and social learning (generally pursued within the fields of ethology or psychology). One research team in Hungary, led by Vilmos Csanyi, has published a substantial literature on the abilities of dogs that allow them to communicate and work effectively with humans. They contend that their research supports the idea that, through

domestication over time, dogs may have developed traits that allow them to communicate and interact especially effectively with humans (see, for example, Miklosi, Pongracz, Lakatos, Topal, & Csanyi, 2005; Pongracz, Molnar, Miklosi, & Csanyi, 2005; Miklosi, Topal, & Csanyi, 2004; Kubinyi, Topal, Miklosi, & Csanyi, 2003).

A smaller proportion of the research into dog–human relations focuses on the *shared* interactions of dogs and humans. A good example is the work of Sanders (1993, 1999, 2003, 2006), who conducted several studies probing the idea of dogs and humans sharing a relationship, where both are seen as sentient individuals. Along similar lines, Irvine (2004) looks specifically at human–animal (including human–dog) relations, arguing that these interactions take place between two subjective beings. Finally, research conducted by Myers (1996) focuses on the shared interaction of children and animals (including dogs) in a preschool classroom.

A review of the human–working dog relations research reveals that there are still some important gaps. Although research exists that explores the employment of police and service dogs for assistance or therapy (Sanders, 2006; Sachs-Ericsson, Hansen, & Fitzgerald, 2002), many other human–working dog groups would be interesting to investigate. My research regarding humans (specifically mushers) and working sled dogs attempts to fill part of this gap.

Methods

I chose a qualitative methodology that is best suited for research where the purpose is to “learn the details of the complexity of the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2005, p. 45). The design was borrowed loosely from narrative research where, according to Ellis and Bochner (2000), there can be a more open and collaborative relationship between researchers and their participants than in some of the more traditional research methodologies. They believe that using narrative allows the researcher to express a more realistic picture of the true fluidity, diversity, and complexity of social interactions, and I thought this method was appropriate for exploring the relationships between two species.

Data was obtained through seven in-depth interviews (lasting about an hour) with eight mushers (five men, three women) from either northern Minnesota or northwestern Ontario. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed and thematically coded. I gathered my participants through snowball sampling, starting with a few mushers I knew personally, and asking these mushers to suggest other individuals who might be willing to participate.

While my method was interviewing (I had a list of questions to help stimulate discussion if needed), I incorporated a narrative style by having the mushers (whenever possible) tell stories and share anecdotes involving them and their dogs. Not having the time or resources to employ an observational methodology (e.g., ethnography), I believed that having the mushers tell stories (rather than answering a series of questions) could bring the complexity, fluidity, and diversity of relationships to light better than a formal question-and-answer-style interview. I realize there is a danger when researching interspecies relationships in (mis)representing the perspective and “voices” of the more-than-human animals that form part of this conversation (Russell, 2005). I believed, however, that a narrative-style interview would help to include the “voices” of the dogs better than a formal interview style. Nonetheless, I recognized that the stories the mushers told, despite involving the dogs and human-dog interactions, were of necessity biased toward the perspectives of the mushers.

I also gave the mushers the opportunity to submit photographs and artwork that they felt offered insight into their relationship with sled dogs, to provide another window into understanding musher–sled dog relationships. Using art in educational research is not a new concept. Eisner introduced the term *arts-based education research* (ABER) to describe research and evaluation in the field of education that includes art as a source of data and/or as a way of representing data for communication (Barone, 2005; Eisner & Powell, 2002; Eisner, 1997).

Emerging Stories and Themes

While the mushers held some common ideas, at times a theme emphasized by one musher was given less consideration or a different twist by another. Every musher had different reasons for working with sled dogs (e.g., enjoyment, as part of their livelihood, recreation, competition, education) and contexts in which he or she did so (e.g., racing, tour companies, expeditions, trap line), as well as different techniques or ideas about training and working with dogs. Certain ideas and common stories did emerge, however, as represented by the six themes described below.

Theme One: “You’ve got to get to know your dogs”

The mushers often stated that a good working relationship was based on really getting to know their dogs—a perspective that can be subdivided into

three areas. First, all the mushers made reference to the dogs having distinct personalities and individual characters. Second, the mushers talked about the importance of spending time with and bonding with their sled dogs. Finally, the mushers often spoke “for” the dogs, describing their dogs’ feelings, moods, preferences, motivations, or thoughts.

One thing all the mushers seemed to like to tell stories about was different dog characters. There were obviously dogs to whom the mushers had a special attachment because of the dog’s character or personality. It was clear from the mushers’ stories that they felt each dog was unique, possessing an individual personality. For example, one musher said, “Every dog has their own story. Even pups that haven’t been raced yet they still have their story and uniqueness that make them special.” Another musher stated, “And it’s also the individual. You can generalize all you want, but you’ve got to know each individual dog.”

When talking about dog personalities, the mushers often made reference to different dogs’ preferences, what the dogs liked or didn’t like, their motivations, and what made them “tick.” For example, one musher talked about how he rewarded different dogs based on that particular dog’s preferences:

And you always have to kind of look at what drives each individual dog. Some dogs are very food-driven, some dogs just want a pat on the head, some dogs don’t want to be touched, but they like other things.

This idea of dogs having unique personality is consistent with the discoveries of other researchers, including Sanders (1999), who found that those who both live and work with dogs discover that they have unique personalities and the ability to be cominded actors in interspecies relationships. Irvine (2004), who studied human-animal relations while observing people and other animals at a shelter, also found that companion animals have unique selves that they bring to interspecies interactions.

Because the mushers felt their dogs to be individuals with personalities, “you need to get to know them” was a phrase I heard often when mushers spoke of the elements of a good musher–sled dog relationship. According to the mushers in this study, this was done by spending time and bonding with the dogs. Some referred to the *need* to make time with the dogs, while others mentioned the inevitability of spending hours, months, days, and years with them due to the nature of dog sledding. Five of the mushers told me about the bond that forms when they raised their own pups from birth. For example, one musher said, “I think a lot of it is bonding with them at a young age. I find

that raising my own is more beneficial. I get to bond better with them, and they just seem more willing to work for me.”

During the interviews, the mushers often spoke for their dogs—expressing what they believed the dogs were thinking and feeling, as well as their likes, dislikes, and motivations. Sometimes they would even *quote* what the dog was thinking or feeling during stories. For example, when referring to one of his sled dogs and her experience during a cold night on the Yukon River, one musher stated, “[She] lost her spunk. Got cold. Got really cold, and that’s when she was like, ‘It’s too cold, I’m too small!’” voicing what the dog might have been feeling and thinking.

I think part of speaking for their sled dogs had to do with the mushers trying to know and understand them. A good example is one musher who was running some “high-strung” dogs. She was having trouble when she first hooked the dogs up, and she explained it like this: “They would bite their neighbor. Because ‘it’s your fault we’re not moving, come on, let’s go!’ and that was their way of—they thought that that would get them going, was to bite the neighbor.”

Arluke and Sanders (1996) discuss how, like the mushers in my study, people often “speak” for their companion animals. This was something Sanders discovered while observing people and their companion animals at a veterinary clinic as well as something reported to him by veterinarians, who often observed clients speaking for their animals. Arluke and Sanders (1996) suggest that, rather than representing anthropomorphism, the practice of “speaking for” demonstrates that the human understands the companion animal well enough to figure out what is on his or her mind.

Theme Two: Respect

The second theme that emerged was respect. The mushers obviously had a lot of respect for their sled dogs, and this seemed to be a key element of the relationship. All eight mushers at some point talked about the respect they had for their sled dogs’ abilities. Most often cited were athletic abilities (like power and endurance), the dogs’ work ethic and enthusiasm, the toughness of sled dogs, and their amazing navigational abilities.

“They’re just unbelievable athletes and have nothing to lose and know nothing but *do* excel to their potential” was how one musher described it. I often heard stories about how long, far, and fast the sled dogs were able to go on expeditions or races. Similarly, many of the mushers described their dogs’ amazing work ethic. Mushers told me how after excruciatingly long runs the

dogs were often enthusiastic to return to work after only a short rest. In all the interviews, mushers shared their respect for the enthusiasm their sled dogs had to work, run, and pull. One musher, describing a long-distance race in which he participated with his sled dogs, said:

I mean, after going eight hundred miles, and you know you may be exhausted, but really they're the ones doing the work. And to see them get up and still be excited to go after that distance makes me as a person feel pretty stupid to even think I'm tired.

In a similar vein, the mushers often described sled dogs' toughness both in traveling great distances and in enduring harsh and extreme conditions. For example, a musher who did a four-month expedition with dogs spoke of the strength and hardiness of her lead dogs:

And those two never stopped pulling or going forward. And to me that is amazing. Headwinds, where you could barely see the dog team ahead of you. There was no reason for them to do it other than they loved pulling and they loved you.

Finally, five out of the eight mushers extolled their dogs' amazing navigational abilities and shared stories of lead dogs "finding their way." For example, one musher stated: "And their memories are amazing, as far as where a trail goes. Or they remember, if they've been on that trail once, they remember where it was. They know where they are all the time. Their navigation senses are incredible." One of the funniest navigation stories I was told was about a musher going out with a dog team to find a really old, overgrown trail. At one point he crossed a clearing and disagreed with his lead dog about where the trail took up at the other end. Initially, they headed off in the direction he believed the trail to be, but ended up having to turn around. The story continued:

And now I've got to extricate these dogs from all the brush, it's a big pain. Get back into the clearing, and I let her go, and she ran right to where she thought the trail was, and down the trail we went. And the whole time I was extricating them from the bush she was like, "Bark, bark, bark, bark!" She was scolding me like you wouldn't believe.

When talking about their sled dogs' abilities, the mushers seemed to respect the dogs, in part, because they acknowledged how these abilities were beyond and/or different from human capabilities. When discussing early humans and their relationships with dogs, Irvine (2004) similarly suspects that people "saw that animals were like humans in many ways, but also different enough to be able to explain and accomplish things that humans could not" (p. 35). I would imagine (as in the case of mushers and sled dogs) that when humans are rely-

ing on dogs in a working situation this feeling of respect for abilities unique to dogs would be especially pronounced.

Theme Three: Two-Way Communication

Overall, the mushers believed that two-way communication takes place, the main components of which are body language, cues, and an ability dogs have to “sense” things about the musher. One common idea I heard was that it is the musher’s *responsibility* to understand and communicate with dogs. Six of the eight mushers said it was the musher who must adapt to the dogs to both understand and read dog “language” and communicate in a way their dogs would understand. For example, one musher stated, “It’s our responsibility to understand them and respond to them . . . in their terms. That they understand. We’re not expecting them to understand where we’re coming from. We have to understand where the dogs are coming from.”

Mushers explained that they could understand and communicate with sled dogs by reading dog body language. For example, one musher explained:

Dogs are masters of body language. I mean that’s how they communicate. In order to be a good trainer I think that’s a huge part of what we need to do is understand that body language that they give off. Because on a race like Iditarod, when we’re running down the trail, they can’t say, you know, “I don’t feel good,” or “something isn’t right.” But standing on a sled you can look down the line and you can see if someone has any issues just by the way they’re holding their ears or the way they’re holding their head or the way, you know, their gait.

While mushers often emphasized the importance of reading dogs’ body language, the dogs’ ability to pick up on human body language was also discussed. For instance, one musher commented:

They can read your mind, and it’s not that they can read your mind. But, we’re very guarded as humans—talking—you know we think of things to say before we say [them]. However, you personify what you’re thinking and feeling through your body language. And that’s their life, and they read you and they watch you every second of their life, all the time.

The mushers discussed the use of verbal voice commands such as “gee” to tell the leaders to turn right, or “haw” to indicate a left. Many of the participants explained, however, that communication with dogs isn’t so much about the actual words that are used as it is about the “cues” the dogs are picking up on. For example, one musher shared a story about a guy who was teaching his dogs the “Ready, let’s go!” command, a command often used to start the team.

Before he would say the command he would clear his voice and before long, the dogs used the cue of him clearing his throat as a start command. Other participants similarly emphasized that it was important for the musher to understand what cues he or she was using, as dogs are aware of cues and sometimes pick up on unintentional ones.

The other idea I heard with regard to communication was the dogs' ability to sense things about humans. This "sense" was described by four of the mushers, although it was not really qualified beyond being called a sense. Their dogs' ability to sense things usually pertained to emotions. For example, one musher stated, "If I'm having a bad day, they sense that on me, whatever the situation may be."

Historically there has been a hard line drawn between humans and other animals. Because animals were seen as incapable of communicating through human language, they were not accorded the ability for self-consciousness or true interaction (Alger & Alger, 1997). The belief in the necessity of human language for true communication is being contested, however, by recent research into humans and other animals (Irvine, 2004; Sanders, 2003; Alger & Alger, 1997). The mushers I studied clearly believed they communicated and interacted with their dogs without human language. Likewise, Irvine (2004) found, while observing at a shelter, that human language was not necessary for interspecies interaction and communication. Sanders (2003), along with Allen and Bekoff (2005), discuss how play between dogs and humans is a good example of communication without human language. Play, shared focus, taking the role of the other, face-gazing, and eye contact are all used to communicate. Similarly, Myers (1996), who spent time observing preschool children interacting with animals in a classroom, found that interactions had many nonverbal aspects. He noticed that the children were able to adapt and react to the nonhuman animal's body and patterns of movement, as well as the animal's level of arousal (e.g., calm while ferrets were bottle-feeding or excited when a dog was chasing a ball). The idea of body language being an important element of interspecies communication, then, is not a new one.

Theme Four: A Relationship Built on Trust

Seven of the eight mushers I interviewed talked about the importance of trust. One musher stated: "If you're going to perform at a high level, you have to have a margin of trust with your dogs and your dog team. So having that trust is everything." Some mushers talked about how they tried to build a trust bond between them and their dogs, and many stories centered around the idea of trust. There were stories about what happened when the mushers trusted their dogs (or didn't), as well as stories about what happened when the dogs

trusted the musher (or didn't). For example, one woman told a story about being out in a wilderness area with her dogs. It was late in the evening, and the trail was covered by six inches of fresh snow. There was a snow squall, and she was contemplating camping rather than traveling, when she noticed her lead dog attempting to find the trail. In white-out conditions the lead dog managed to navigate back to the truck, and the musher commented, "Wow, that just totally taught me that you need to really trust them. They trust you. But in situations like that, they definitely will do it."

Trust is not a theme I have found in other human-animal research, with the exception of a participant quotation from Sanders's (1999) research looking at the relationships between guide dogs and their human partners. For one participant in Sanders's (1999) study, trust was an important element of the partnership between him and his guide dog. The participant stated, "So, that experience really helped me to say, 'I need to trust this animal with everything that I have.' I truly believe that the dog can sense whether you trust him or not and, if that trust is not there, then the team is probably not going to work" (p. 44). It is interesting to note that, as with mushers and sled dogs, this idea of trust emerged in a working relationship.

Theme Five: Partnership

During the interviews, the mushers described a kind of partnership with their dogs. This partnership was one between two thinking, feeling beings, both with their own roles in the partnership. One musher described it like this:

You realize you aren't doing it alone and that you're tied to this animal that pulls your stuff along, pulls you along, provides great joy. And in exchange you are feeding them, you are taking care of them, you're cleaning up their poop.

As to the musher's role in the partnership, mushers talked about what a huge responsibility and commitment having sled dogs is. For instance, one musher explained:

The commitment you have, it's not about the one walk a week or throwing them some kibble every day, it's not that. You need to be there for them, you need to pay attention to them, love them, care for them, work them when it's time. It takes hours every day. Every day of the week. All year long, 24-7.

Other elements of the musher's role in the partnership (besides the daily care) that were discussed included diverse ideas regarding training the dogs as well as notions about responsible breeding.

While it was not always stated explicitly in the interviews, it was clear that the dog's role in the partnership was to work/pull. This idea came through when participants explained that sled dogs are instinctually driven to run, love to pull, and are naturals at pulling from birth. The implicit expectation that the dogs' role was to pull also emerged when mushers told me stories about dogs who weren't working/pulling. While this expectation was often implicit, a few mushers stated it outright. For example, one participant said in regards to his dogs: "If you don't work hard, you make me mad. And I tend to not like you as much if you don't work hard, you know? Because I'm counting on you. That's our relationship."

A final element of partnership described by the mushers is something I decided to call companionship. Five of the eight mushers talked about their enjoyment of being out on the land with a team of dogs in remote and/or wilderness areas. One musher said, "I guess my thing has just been traveling the land with my dog team and enjoying having the dogs" and another musher said his motivation for mushing was, in part, being out on the land, "out in the middle of nowhere, just you and the dogs."

Theme Six: Learning

I was interested to hear what mushers had learned through working with dogs. One musher said, "It's just phenomenal what I've learned. I mean I'm a completely different person because of training sled dogs my whole life." As in the case of this musher, the answers were sometimes vague, and the answers were diverse, with the exception of two common lessons learned, which are outlined below.

First, four of the mushers felt that because they work with dogs they appreciate their amazing capabilities. Oftentimes, the working relationship was compared to a relationship with a companion animal, and several mushers felt they appreciate dogs more than the guardian of a companion animal might because they see all the amazing things dogs are capable of. For instance, one musher said:

We have the utmost respect for what these dogs are capable of, and their knowledge and, you know, we trust them. When you're *working* with your animal you really treat them like that, with a lot of respect. . . . And I think a lot of people lose that with their pets. They don't realize the talent and capabilities that the dogs have.

Along with this idea of appreciating dogs' abilities and potential was the idea that dogs should be given more credit by people in general. One musher

stated: "They're amazing. And people don't, they never give them enough credit. People will always look at dogs and think, 'Aw, it's just a dog.'"

With regards to learning, five of the mushers said that, having worked with sled dogs, they felt they were better able to work with people. Examples included improved abilities to get along with children as a parent, students as a teacher, coworkers, and fellow humans in general.

Discussion: Implications and Connections

Dogs as Subjects and Social Beings

Historically, even in some current Western research (Noske, 1997; Evernden, 1985), nonhuman animals have often been regarded as mechanistic objects. The findings from my research do not support studying other animals as objects. For the mushers in my study, it was clear that they saw their dogs as interacting, sentient beings. This is evident from the ideas that emerged, such as dogs being individuals with personality, capable of interspecies communication and active participation in a dog-human partnership.

Evernden (1985) writes about how our own experiences with an animal can often come into conflict with the dominant Western viewpoint that animals are merely objects. Instead, direct experience of other animals can lead humans to understand that they are living, interacting subjects. He suggests that human experiences and feelings about other animals are just as real and relevant as scientific research that often views animal others as objects. He asks, "How can we permit this reversal of the primary and the secondary, our own direct experience of the world and an abstraction about it which for most of us really amounts to second-hand information? Why is the gossip of experts more real than immediate experience?" (p. 78).

My findings about mushers and sled dogs support Evernden's (1985) idea of animals as subjects, and I propose that research about dogs needs to take into account their subjectivity. There is, in fact, a shift taking place in research where more researchers are exploring the idea of dogs (and cats) as interacting beings and "subjects" (see Sanders, 2006; Irvine, 2004; Alger & Alger, 1997; Arluke & Sanders, 1996). The mushers' belief in the subjectivity and unique personalities of their dogs reaffirms the findings of other researchers, including Irvine (2004), who spent time observing and interviewing people who visited animal shelters. She found that the people in her study experienced other animals as having distinct "selves." For example, the people and animals she observed varied their interactions with each other based on the individuals

involved by inferring a “subjective sense of self in the other” (p. 144). She comments that:

[Evidence of] agency among animals helps explain why our experience of them as subjective beings is not solely the result of sentimental anthropomorphism. Our interactions will vary depending on the animal, which suggests that animals shape our response to them in ways that are beyond our projection. (p. 133)

Another example supporting the more-than-human as “subject” is research conducted by Sanders (1999) exploring the relationships between humans and companion dogs, guide dogs and their human partners, guide dogs and their trainers, as well as veterinarians and dogs. This research led him to state: “Those who live and work with canine companions regard them as individuals who display the unique habits, traits, and perspectives that compose personality” (p. 138).

Understanding other animals as subjects is an important step in breaking down the human/nature, human/other divide. In his guide for humane education, Selby (1995) points out how conceptual segregation or separation of certain human groups from others, like the separation of humans and other animals, helps to prop up various forms of oppression (e.g., race, gender, and class). Perhaps building relationships with others, be they other people or other species, helps break down false ideas and the sense of separation that contributes to these forms of oppression? In the case of the mushers in my study, understanding that sled dogs are subjects and/or individuals with personalities led them to a greater respect and appreciation of dogs.

The Importance of Direct Experience

Another finding of this research is the significance of direct interspecies interaction. Researchers have found that direct contact with other animals leads to more realistic understanding about other species as well as more positive feelings about them. For instance, Ross, Medin, Coley, and Atran (2003) compared groups of children from urban and rural environments and a Native American reservation (Menominee) and suggested that children who have more direct contact with nature develop more ecocentric and less anthropocentric ideas about other life. Similarly, Fawcett (2002) found that children who had brief, direct contact with animals had more positive feelings about three wild animals (frogs, raccoons, and bats) and shared more stories of friendship and kinship with other animals. Another study addressing direct experience is that of Fidler, Light, and Costall (1996), who found that people who had experience growing up with a cat or dog were more likely to describe

dog actions (after watching videotaped episodes of dog–human companion interactions) in terms of desires, feelings, and understanding, demonstrating that direct experience had influence over how dogs and cats were understood/perceived. My research into human–sled dog relations also found that direct experience led mushers to understand their dogs as sentient, social beings with individual personalities and the ability for relationships involving respect, two-way communication, trust, and partnership.

Another benefit of humans having direct experience with animals could be an increased ability for empathy. Sanders (1999) discusses how empathy—the ability to understand things from another’s perspective—is a key element of human-dog social relations. He writes:

[B]y imaginatively putting ourselves into the perspectives of the dogs with whom we have relationships we shape our encounters with them and, if we remain open to the practical evidence afforded by our experience, can reasonably come to see dogs as intelligent and full-fledged partners in social interaction. (p. 147)

Studies have found that when humans can empathize with other animals, this can also translate to human-directed empathy (Ascione, 1993). Ascione (1993) reviews research that suggests, for instance, that humane education programs that develop children’s knowledge and attitudes about animals can translate to feelings of empathy toward humans. The ability to have empathy for their sled dogs may be one reason that some mushers in my study expressed an improved ability to work with human others (their children, coworkers, or fellow humans in general).

Conclusion

One musher said at the end of his interview, “The relationship you have with the dogs, individually and as a team, is far away the most critical element to everything about the whole dog sledding experience.” In some ways, this quotation is an apt summation of this study, which revealed that a musher–sled dog relationship can have multiple elements that are deep and rich in quality. My study supports other research suggesting that humans and other species of animals can engage in interspecies relationships. According to the mushers in my study group, dogs are sentient beings worthy of respect and consideration.

Based on my research, I suggest that there are some unique elements of a working human-dog relationship as compared to one with a companion animal. In this study mushers suggested that their working relationship with dogs

involved partnership, trust, and an increased respect for the abilities of another species. It would be valuable if more researchers investigated working relationships between humans and dogs to see whether similar themes and ideas emerge. Humans have many relationships with other animals, and working relationships seem underrepresented in the research.

Upon completion of this study, I have come to the conclusion that building relationships with other animals is vital, because of the implications for how humans perceive and treat both other animals and fellow humans. Researching and teaching about animals as subjects rather than objects is an essential shift that needs to take place. I suggest that an important part of understanding other animals is taking the time to listen and learn from the stories of those who spend their lives working and interacting with another species.

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