

community links

making links

fifteen visions of community

Aaron Barbour Philip Beadle
Gordon Brown David Cameron
Russell Davies Patrick Dunne
Kevin Harris Alex Loukos
Mohamed Nazam David Robinson
Stafford Scott Jan Sharkey-Dodds
Anne Shewring Max Weaver
Michael Wojas





'Dog breaks ice'

The sociability of dog-walking

Kevin Harris

IN THE EVERYDAY LEDGER of neighbourhood life, dogs usually only feature in the debit column. That's mainly because they're noisy, but they can also be scary – even terrifying – and used as a threatening weapon.

They can get out unleashed and leave an unhygienic mess on our pavements or cause stress among livestock in the fields. Those breeds which have the guarding gene can give you a hard time if there's a fence they think they have to defend.

What's more, the phenomenon of the professional multi-dog-walker, surrounded by a tangled pack of excited hounds, is officially seen as anti-social in some places. A byelaw in the London Borough of Wandsworth, for example, requires a special license for anyone wishing to walk more than four dogs at a given time in certain areas. As a society, we seem to accept dogs only with grumpy reluctance. If they weren't of demonstrable and remarkable value in supporting disabled people, dog owners might risk being ostracised by the majority who have little insight into other, more subtle benefits.

So as it's a nice day, I thought I'd pop out and have a sniff round, and find out what the word is on the park.

All the dog-owners I spoke to were immediately delighted to talk about the sociability of dog-walking: all were positive, and several were effusive, about the benefits.

First thing I do when I come to the park is to look around and see if there's anyone I know, and if there isn't I feel a bit disappointed and I don't stay so long.

Yeah, fantastic, when we get together we have such a good time.

I asked one owner if she or her family had anticipated this effect before a dog came into their lives:

It never entered my head, it was a shock, a real surprise. They open up a new world, a world I didn't know existed ... It's another dimension to my life that I didn't know was available ... When we first had the dog we were astounded at how amazing dog people are, and they have so much to say ... To think we went so many years without knowing about this culture.

Another was solidly aware of the benefits because she lives on her own:

I talk to people who I would never have any social tie to at all. Because it opens up a conversation, having a dog, it starts conversations.

One person suggested that, when someone's dog dies, they're very likely to be sensitive to the potential impact on their social networks. Some people get another dog very quickly, but for those who don't, a dog's death can be a significant milestone in their emotional life.

Who do you talk to? *You talk to anyone, everyone.*

What, *everyone*? Like any blood-stained hatchet-carrying maniac who happens to be standing in your path?

If I was walking with my dog in the woods and there was a man on his own I'd be terrified. But if he had a dog, however weird he looked I'd be alright ... You just feel safe when there's a dog. There was only one time, when my dog started growling at a man, then I was afraid and made off. They know, dogs can tell some things ... I can't see that a person with a dog would be a nasty person, because they're considerate about another animal.

Research suggests that perceptions of a person's likeability are enhanced by the presence of a dog. June McNicholas and Glyn Collis reported two studies in 2000 in which they used dogs trained not to attract attention. Their second study was carried out in city centre locations which would not normally be associated with dog-walking, using a range of combinations of dog and its male handler standing at given points as if waiting, for thirty minute periods. At different times the handler was dressed scruffily or smartly; the dog looking well-looked-after or rough; and at others the man waited without the dog. The researchers recorded the numbers and kinds of interaction with other humans.

The most marked effect was the difference between having a dog and not having a dog. Out of 1,170 interactions, only 57 occurred when the man was alone: even when the handler was scruffily dressed, interactions increased by over 790%. When he was smartly dressed, they increased by over 1,000%. As the researchers put it, 'the dog removed or permitted the circumvention of inhibitions against striking up casual conversations.' You wanna meet people, get a dog.

If I pass someone with a dog I would just say hi or something.

I'll talk to men, I'm a little more wary of men. I don't think the men are less sociable or less garrulous, they'll pass the time of day. There was one man, we met up for several weeks, our dogs played well together, he told me about his girlfriend, I didn't necessarily try to meet him but I was pleased when I did see him, I'd smile. That wouldn't be acceptable without a dog.

So are these mostly weak ties, or do strong ties develop? If we were to measure social ties by whether names are known, it's clear that few strong ties are made while dog-walking. At least not between humans.

You always find out the name of the dog before you find out the name of the owner.

Very often, it seems, dog-walkers maintain a comfortable level of detached familiarity over several years without knowing one another's names. The conversations I had and heard were laced with phrases like 'Angie's mum' or 'Poppy's dad.' One owner explained how she got to know another: 'her dog gets on well with mine – Alfie is Honey's girlfriend.'

It's likely that non-owners exclude themselves from this world because they don't see themselves as dog-lovers. Do the walkers see themselves in this way?

I'd never have said I was a 'dog person.' I wouldn't necessarily be fond of anybody else's. I just think it's such an amazing group of people. I wouldn't say they were necessarily my sort of people – not people I would choose as friends in the sense of close friends, just people to say hello to, to help out if you can. I wouldn't extend it, it's very much in a box: acquaintances. I don't invite them round, they're just acquaintances. Probably they are weak ties, but pleasant. I wouldn't send them Christmas cards.

It's not just ties with dog-walkers. Non-owners, or owners without their dogs, will be sparked into conversation with strangers by the presence of a dog.

I do the same, with or without my dog, I'll stop and talk if there's a dog.

One woman spoke of knowing more people in her village because they had to slow down in their cars to pass her as she walked with her dog along the narrow lanes – slow enough for recognition, a smile and a wave. These people she would meet at the shops, in the village or in town, and feel benefit from the low hum of background recognition.

Of course, some weak ties are stronger than others. One group I met, referred to affectionately as 'the older crew,' told me they usually have a Christmas party together. They clearly lingered for longer as they walked and were relaxed in each others' company.

How practical are these ties? Can they be activated in time of need? A group of women were talking as their dogs played (I felt like I was in a Larson cartoon) and one received compliments on her new hairstyle. Of course, the styling had been done by a fellow dog-walker; who, it turns out, also teaches yoga. So a couple of regulars are now going round for yoga sessions. The teacher told me: 'I've got a lot of clients from the park.'

The 'older crew' were telling me how one of their number had a winter crisis: her heating system broke down, so a few of them went round with individual heaters. Yet very few instances of instrumental support like this were mentioned: there was one story about fixing an aerial, but otherwise people seemed unable to recollect any practical activation of their ties. Of course, people were missed if their regularity was broken:

If I didn't see someone for a few days ... it depends how well you know them, I'd send a text to say are you OK?

Aha, so in this case at least, there has been an exchange of mobile phone numbers. The research reported by McNicholas and Collis, carried out in urban contexts, not in parks, concluded that 'people are motivated by the presence of a dog to exchange greetings and brief comments, but not to participate in longer exchanges.' Although dog-walkers in parks certainly seem to engage with one another for longer spells and repeatedly, the overwhelming impression is that not only are these mostly weak ties, they are celebrated as such and therein, somewhere, lies the psychological benefit.

The women who meet at nine o'clock, having dropped their kids off at school, mostly work part-time and apparently know a little about one another's work. This would be the kind of topic safely touched on from time to time, allowing the exchange of snippets of background information without too much risk of friction. Holidays and trips away were discussed also, because it makes sense to mention an absence of more than a few days in advance, and often there's a need for the dog to be walked by someone else in the owner's absence. My mother always used to talk about the news with her fellow dog-walkers – doubtless monitoring constantly for politically-unsafe topics to be avoided – because she valued the way this connected her into the wider world.

In some ways this question – 'what do you talk about?' – puzzled people. Not that it wasn't an obvious thing to ask, but some seemed to find it odd to reflect on it, as if the topics of conversation were irrelevant.

We don't get into anything heavy, like we don't get into politics.

If what matters are mundane, frequent acts of connection, then perhaps you need conversational topics that do not preoccupy, themes that don't have you pondering or worrying for the rest of the day. The relative triviality of topics may be an important component in the health benefit of dog-walking. Just one correspondent hinted at conversations that develop over time:

It might just start with hello, awful weather, then if the dog stops you might say a bit more. The dog breaks the ice. You might just start with the weather or the dog's behaviour but then you get sometimes on to the most profound things ...

Dogs make demands, which can be scary for new owners. Anticipated or not, exercising the beast is a requirement and it's said that few dogs get as much exercise as they really need. For the people I spoke to, the trade-off in terms of sociability easily compensates for the aggravation of, for example, having to wash and dry a dog which has been playing in the mud on a wet day.

First it starts as a duty and then it becomes social.

When I was ill I couldn't face seeing people, but I used to force myself to take her [the dog] out, it was a reason to get me out and to meet other people, which perhaps you would retreat from, I didn't want to see anyone but I had to, because the dog had to be walked ...

Dog owning comes across as very parental, and owners take pride in the behaviour of their charges – and feel embarrassment if they misbehave – just as parents do of their children.

Watching groups form and dissolve in a busy park at a busy time, I was fascinated by the optionality of engagement. Pairs and triples and quartets came together, stopped, splintered, changed direction, reconstituted themselves in different combinations – partly influenced by their conversations, the activity of the dogs, the width of the path, the direction of the wind and rain, their need to get back, their readiness to linger. I was stood on a hill with most of the park visible before me and it was as if I were watching an experiment in networks. The very fluid nature of these unstructured interactions gave them a sense of complete relaxation.

The older people seemed more committed to their group, the group was clearly more firmly formed. They went round mostly together, their choreography altogether less arbitrary. Here, I thought, we have the experiment in community rather than network. For older people, it could be, there is more of a risk in not maintaining the social connections that arise, whereas younger people can often more easily take a tie or leave it, with a greater probability of re-establishing or replacing it.

A couple of people indicated to me that being able to avoid others could be an important consideration. For most, dog-walking is not completely set in a routine, reflecting the value placed on the *escapability* of encounters.

This is crucial. You could say 'I haven't got long today so I'm taking the short route ...'

If you weren't sociable you'd walk your dog at different times. Sometimes I wonder, will I meet so-and-so, I may not want to, sometimes if I was feeling thoughtful I'd take a different route. But then I meet someone doing the same thing!

You don't feel beholden to stop and talk. It's non-committal, you're not obligated to have a conversation.

If I don't feel sociable I don't come here. Some days I really don't fancy all that interrogation.

So what are the downsides? Most correspondents really had to scratch around to unearth any downsides to dog-walking. Perhaps cliques or freaks?

When I first came I got submerged and it started to feel a bit like a clique ... I think there are cliques. Are they giving off some signals which are saying 'don't walk with us'?

There's a woman who walks someone else's dog, two or three times a day, I reckon she hangs around to meet people, she could talk your ear off, she'd be out most of the day, with someone else's dog, and if you didn't feel sociable you'd keep away ...

Perhaps the unpredictability, the time-consuming demands of having a conversation-piece in tow?

When I walked with the dog into town I would have at least 40 people would stop and talk to me, it would be continuous, non-stop. It became problematic – if I was in a hurry I wouldn't take her with me. You'd have whole families stop and talk and tell you a bit of their lives. [Refers to dog] She's a crowd-puller this one.

The language that people use when they speak to their dogs is usually simplified: short sentences, repetition of nouns (especially the dog's name), and extensive use of the present tense. Research from the USA (published in the *Journal of Social Psychology* in 1993) suggests that some of this carries over into conversations with humans encountered during dog-walking: the dog plays a role in capturing attention on the here and now.

This relates to the reflections of one correspondent who expressed an acute awareness of time and seasonal change – for example in late winter as day-by-day the mornings become gradually lighter:

Dog-walkers often talk about the park, the trees, the sky. You really notice the seasons. I know the seasons, I'm really aware of that and what the weather's like.

Surely, reports of the beneficial effects of dog-walking are not solely attributable to exercise and being outdoors. They seem to come also from the stress-relieving effect of having things almost forcibly simplified. The dog imposes a temporary but resounding 'de-complication' of life the owner has to interact (or be ready to interact) with the dog, whose preoccupations are entirely focussed on the present.

And this simplification carries over into encounters with other humans and their dogs. The human who is conditioned to efficiency and pressured by time, tries to go in straight lines: but the dog, moving smoothly along irregular invisible trails, preoccupied with the data-barrage of scents or sounds, can pull its owner off-line. When other dogs and dog-walkers are around, sometimes only the most determined owner can stick to their programme. Usually these are the ones on the early shift, on the timed march before setting off to the office.

Early on summer mornings I've sometimes seen one man with his ears wired to a handheld gadget, striding after his dog in the park, apparently catching the news, the financial markets perhaps, with a mug of coffee in one hand. I've even seen one owner nibbling a large piece of toast, hovering impatiently near a park entrance, sociability on hold. Thus do domestic moments spill out into the neighbourhood.

But for the less preoccupied, the suggestion here is that dogs stimulate informal, non-committal human contact and that people find that wonderfully refreshing. (These connections seem to be of far less interest for instrumental reasons to do with the reciprocal juggling of neighbourly relations, than as general, reassuring) low-level connections which in themselves have acknowledged psychological and emotional benefit.

It makes me a part of the community. I'm a person who lives on my own. It gives me an opening into the community. I don't have to join a club, I don't have to go at a certain time, I don't have to have a commitment.

Dog-walking is principally about the importance of the casual, the value of informal association with a comfortably vague 'community.' Dog-walking is about being human.

- **Kevin Harris** regards himself as 'interested in sociability, but just not cut out for it.' (What he really said was 'Nah, not interested, mate.'). He claims to be a 'borderline' person who is happiest on the fringes of groups. This suggests someone more comfortable in networks than communities – these include a loose network of community development consultants; and the camaraderie of long-distance runners. So we suppose this leaves plenty of time for work (www.Local-Level.org.uk) and for blogging about neighbourhoods (<http://neighbourhoods.typepad.com>).