

## Why Let the Dogs Out? An Exploration of Human-Animal-Human Relations in Turin, Italy

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I've known Lapo for a long time; it is a social relation that dates back many years, even more so because he belongs to my aunt and uncle. Amongst my earliest memories of Turin, my aunt walking her dog in Piazza D'Armi is one of the most prominent. On occasions I would join this daily habit, and participate in the encounters that Lapo had with other dog acquaintances, and the encounters that my aunt had with several human, dog-loving friends. It wouldn't be until recently that this practice, a main feature of many other city-dwellers' lives, would strike me as more than just a matter of practicality or an implication of pet-keeping in an urban setting.

I often asked myself, 'why would one want a dog in the city, knowing that you have to walk it several times a day, and often in bad weather? Why would one want to have a dog in the city, knowing that you have to clean up after it, live in an enclosed space with it and make incredible efforts to train it?' Social anthropology provided a methodological approach with which to carry out an ethnographical enquiry on human-animal relations in Turin, and the base through which I would begin to comprehend the meaning of such relationships.

Human-animal relations have been comprehensively studied throughout time and from different angles. During the turn of the millennium, increased anthropological attention has been placed on the topic, drawing from previous academic research areas such as psychology and biological behaviourism. Predecessors to innovative outlooks of owner-pet relations, like Donna Haraway's *Companion Species Manifesto*, are enquiries about animal perceptions and relations among pastoralists, like Stammers' and Takakura's studies of nomad pastoralist groups in Eurasia and Africa. An enquiry into the nature of people's perceptions about dogs, particularly of pet owners and non-owner counterparts, has been successfully carried out in the context of ethnographic methodology by Michaël Singleton. Several other anthropologists and researchers from varied academic areas have contributed to enriching our knowledge about this specific topic, amongst them, James Serpell, Elizabeth Paul, Anthony Podberscek and Tim Ingold.

Particularly helpful to my own research was the study done by Wolch et al. (in Philo and Wilbert 2000) on animal perceptions in inner-city Los Angeles. The structure of this article provided a solid

guideline from which to structure my own encounters project. My aim in undertaking this study was to understand how dog owners define the relationships they have with their pets and how the context of an urban setting influences different aspects of these relations.

### **The politics of dog-town**

Piazza D'Armi is situated between two well-known neighbourhoods in Turin, beside the city stadium and surrounded by several apartment homes. It is within this park that the leisure time of many of the city's inhabitants thrives; an activity that cannot escape any observer's eye is dog-walking. One section of Piazza D'Armi is especially designated for dog owners' use, and it includes three separate, fenced enclosures and a large green area with trees, benches and water fountains. No dog owner in the vicinity of the park is unaware of this place.

Upon my arrival in Turin this spring, I paid a visit to Lapo and my aunt and uncle. Unsurprisingly, my aunt was about to take her dog out to the park—it was half past five in the afternoon, and she had just come back from work. As we walked towards Piazza D'Armi, Lapo sniffed his way around the streets, unleashed, like many of the dogs moving from one place to the next within the city. When we arrived to the enclosed section of the park, Lapo leapt joyfully, running towards Spina, a lovely female German-shepherd. Meanwhile, my aunt waved to Spina's owner, a middle-aged, tall woman, and they resumed a conversation that they must have been having the previous day. Lapo and Spina made their ways towards the fenced entrance to one of the three closed spaces, the furthest right, and the two owners turned to their respective dogs with understanding expressions.

Before opening the gate, the two women enquired about the dogs present inside the enclosure:

*'Are there any puppies?'*

*'How many adult males are in here?'*

*'Are there any females in heat?'*

*'Is everyone happy with us keeping our dogs unleashed?'*

I learned that these are standard questions that everyone entering the enclosure must make before opening the gate. I noticed a high number of people were content about not using leashes, however, for this very reason it was important that each owner got a superficial description of other dogs' temperaments. When I asked my aunt about this custom she explained that disagreements amongst dogs occur when there is one female in heat and more than one adult

male dog inside the enclosure. Puppies can be problematic because they are learning how to behave amongst other dogs, and the presence of larger breeds and adults can often make them nervous. On that first day there were several adult females and two adult males, as well as one puppy. Both my aunt and Spina's owner knew the other people there, so we entered, making sure no dog tried to come out of the gate while we went in.

The politics of greeting were adjusted to fit these encounters. People acknowledged dogs before their owners, calling them by names and stroking them. After these exchanges the person will raise their gaze and greet the owner; conversation will flow well while the dogs enjoy the open area and play with each other. I found that people very seldom will be sitting down, and although this was never explicitly stated during interviews, I believe it was a measure taken to be aware of one's own dog and its movements, and for the dog to find his or her owner with more ease when summoned. Clutton-Brock talks about these subconscious attitudes as cultural constructs. He emphasises that there is a cultural dimension to pets' behaviour, and that 'domestic animals live in as many different cultural situations as humans and... their learned behaviour is responsive to all these differences... In absence of predators, domestic animals adapt to the culture of their humans' (in Manning and Serpell 1994: 29-30). The carefree attitudes that I witnessed in the park are, in my opinion, a reflection of the dog-culture this group has developed. It is important to notice that not all dog owners participated in the encounters within the first enclosure; indeed, there was an unspoken rule which determined that the second (middle) enclosure was used mostly for dogs who looked more aggressive, and that were in fact kept on a leash outside the enclosed space. Whether or not this is a reflection of the owner's personality is hard to determine. Podberscek and Gosling carried out an enquiry into the personalities of British pet owners and their pets, and found that it is 'the traditional "dog trainer" view that anxious, tense and neurotic owners sometimes *cause* their pets to become more aggressive' (in Podberscek et al. 2005: 156).

Observation was a helpful and essential aspect of my research, during which I realised that there was a set pattern in dog owners' practices, especially when entering the enclosed spaces. However, this told me little about what perceptions the owners had about the relationship with their dogs; the following section will explain the method I used to carry out interviews, from which I gathered the core results for this project.

### **A stranger on the park bench**

In the first chapter of 'Amateurs de chiens à Dakar', Singleton states that 'before understanding, one must pick up and learn. To embrace the logic of a place one must become familiar with its languages' (Singleton 1998: 33).<sup>1</sup> Observing and learning what sort of interaction needs to occur to create a social exchange within the dog enclosure of Piazza D'Armi was important. However, engaging with the dog owners that frequented the park was invaluable to my encounters project. Singleton, in fact, also states that '[people's] imagination constructs the connection between culture and nature in an articulate manner, and thus influences the value people associate, in particular, to dogs' (Singleton 1998: 67).

Going to the park with my aunt and Lapo was an advantage; having a dog places one within the social stories occurring in the enclosure by default. The first real challenge I encountered during the period of the project was relating to dog owners without the aid of having a dog. Although observing the movements of the people that made use of this space was central, I realised that it was uncomfortable for people to see a stranger sitting on a bench; no person visits this area without a dog.

I created a scheme by which I could approach dog owners without breaching any norms or codes of conduct. Having done previous reading related to the subject of modern dog ownership, I followed some of the guidelines from Singleton's ethnography on dog-enthusiasts in Dakar. I also incorporated notions associated to companion animals, conveyed by Haraway in her *Companion Species Manifesto* (2003), to my questionnaire. This combined a highly methodological approach to carrying out pet-related research with a moral and political interpretation of human-animal relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The result was a set of questions similar to those that Singleton asked in Dakar, supported by more abstract questions regarding the way people classify their relations to dogs from spatial, temporal and emotional perspectives.

I also asked each informant to relate their dog's personality to a series of qualities from a list. This I drew from a part of Singleton's study, where he statistically ordered qualities that people in Dakar attributed to their dogs (Singleton 1998: 68-70). Among others, these included loyalty, guardianship, noisiness, greediness and jealousy.

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<sup>1</sup> Translations from the French are my own.

With a notepad ready to be scribbled over with answers, I took a brave step and lifted myself from the bench. Observation had taught me the how to approach the people in the enclosure; one greets the dog before the person. My first two informants were having a break from their conversation, and I was lucky enough to have one of the two dogs they had with them come up to me curiously, sniffing my leg and wagging her tail in approval. I approached the owners, told them I was a student from the University of St Andrews and briefly stated the purpose of my research. The Basenji and Labrador looked up at me as quizzically as their owners, so I proceeded by asking them the dogs' respective names. The Basenji was called Jack and the Labrador was called Emma. I didn't ask the owners' names, and went straight to posing them my questions.

### **A walk on the furry side of things**

I wanted to understand why people get dogs, how they choose them and what meaning is attributed to a relationship built with an animal once it enters a person's living space. Jack and Emma were both very special to their owners, each for different reasons. Emma was the first dog her owner ever had, and she chose Emma because she perceived Labradors to be 'easy' dogs. Jack was the second dog his master had, and was chosen for his 'looks'; Jack's owner was one of the only people who reported having chosen his pet for aesthetic reasons. Both Jack and Emma were family dogs.

I would relate this first encounter back to the several, subsequent others: it was the first account showing evidence of a pattern I would find in most other informants' relationships with their dogs. An aspect of urban human-animal relations I studied is the matter of proximity within lived environments; I enquired about perceptions of human-animal relations in the rural setting to understand whether owners would still share their living space to the extent they did in their apartment homes. No informant indicated a desire to change their dog's presence within a home, regardless of the possibility of having a garden. It was implicit, however, that they wouldn't limit their pet's time in the open air; I think this respectful attitude towards the animals' space was evident in gestures I had previously observed within the enclosure, particularly the scarce usage of leashes. Contrary to some of my expectations, urban dog owners do not coexist with their animals in a state of co-dependency; rather, they sense each others' need for company—a need clearly defined by temporal and spatial limits. Dog-walking in the park describes one of these set

boundaries; it is a moment in which dog and master acknowledge and enjoy each other's company, perhaps to a higher extent than within the household. This notion is supported by Haraway's belief that 'play between humans and pets, as well as spending time peaceably hanging out together, brings joy to all the participants. Surely that is one important meaning of companion species' (Haraway 2003: 38). When asked to categorize the time spent with their dogs, all informants agreed that they considered their mornings and afternoons in the park as 'free time'. One informant did admit, however, that the temporal limits with her dog could be redefined if she lived in the country, replacing the time spent at the park with time doing household chores.

The context of family life and human-animal relations was also relevant to my study; an enquiry into this provided an insight on how other people in the owners' families interacted with their dogs. I was interested in how younger family members related to their dogs, but also if there were issues of jealousy for dogs with multiple owners. Several interviewees were parents, and a high number of them reported positive relations between their children and their dogs. A case that particularly struck me was that of Artú, a Newfoundland puppy that kept timidly nudging his owner's leg to have her play with him. I found the reasons which drew Artú to his owner very touching; she was fighting a case of depression subsequent to her mother's death, but she was also helping her nine year-old son to battle a fear of animals. Serpell and Paul in fact note that 'pet-owning children [are] found to possess fewer fears of animals than their non-owning counterparts' (in Manning and Serpell 1994: 138). The social story between the boy and Artú was reciprocal—the son was becoming more comfortable around Artú, but the puppy was also learning how to live in an enclosed space and to interact with his new human carers.

As previously mentioned, I included 'jealousy' into the list of dog qualities (drawn from Singleton's study). Less than half of the informants believed their dogs to be jealous of their owners' interaction with others, and those who agreed that their dogs were guilty of this trait, said they were jealous upon the approach of strangers but not of multiple owners. This greatly contrasts with Singleton's finding about dog ownership in Dakar, where most informants declared that keeping a dog is a choice taken for security reasons against thieves (Singleton 1998: 71), causing dogs to be extremely jealous of their owners and of their owners' property. It can be thus agreed that dogs do respond to the cultural and social environments they inhabit, as suggested by Clutton-Brock (in Manning and Serpell 1994).

Finally, I was intrigued by the impact that buying dogs, as opposed to adopting them, has on relations amongst pets and owners. The results here were highly divided. A substantial amount of informants shared the opinion that adopting a dog was a not a viable option, as abandoned dogs have suffered traumas that might leave them emotionally stunted or make them aggressive. Buying a dog can be viewed as a less impulsive action; months, if not years, of thought are put into this step, and indeed it was mostly first-time owners that seemed to prefer buying over adopting. On the other hand, those that had adopted dogs expressed very passionate views regarding what it means to buy pets. One woman who had three adopted dogs believed that buying dogs was unethical, since there are many abandoned animals waiting for a home. She added that she believed people buy dogs for their pedigree, and that such aspects of an animal don't influence the affection one feels for it. One other interviewee who had an adopted dog mentioned that, although adopted dogs do have traumatised pasts, helping them to recover is a challenge that makes the relationship more rewarding.

### **Love your dog, love your neighbour**

Elizabeth Paul carried out a study on the correlation between positive attitudes towards people and positive attitudes towards companion animals (in Podberscek et al. 2005). I asked the first person I met in the dog enclosure of Piazza D'Armi, Spina's owner, what value had her dog added to her life; she bluntly answered that she now loved and understood other people more than before she owned Spina. If there was one unanimous finding during the period of my project is that all people who frequented the dog enclosure had made more than one acquaintance through the shared experience of dog ownership. Indeed, some informants affirmed that they had forged some of their closest friendships at the park. Out of the thirteen case studies I followed to a fairly close extent, only one informant said she had not met other dog owners to the degree that other informants had, and this due to free-time constraints. Looking back on my notes, I realise that the tree of relations found in the enclosure are immense. Serpell puts forward that animals have increasingly become 'agents of socialization' (in Fine 2006: 11), and further that 'pet animals [have] a special role to play in the acquisition of sympathetic tendencies' (in Manning and Serpell 1994: 137).

Indeed, not only did I feel sympathised with while doing my research, but I also found that regardless of the different perceptions that each individual had on the nature of human-animal relations, they formed a group that included pure-bred Golden-retrievers as well as unspecified mixed breeds. There was certainly a Durkheimian dimension to the encounters amongst these people, the 'social fact' here being dog ownership. Without disregard for the shortcomings of Durkheim's theory, it can be argued that dog owners do share a collective representation (that of their dogs) and that this becomes the basis from which 'a form of collective life' can be sustained (Durkheim 1982).

It is perhaps most important to note Ingold's observation that when exploring modern human-animal relations one must take into account that 'urban society... individualizes and marginalizes people' (Ingold 1998: 57). Meeting other individuals through a shared experience such as that of dog ownership can perhaps help fight the 'blasé' feelings described by Simmel in *The Metropolis and the Mental Life* (1964). It was evident to me that some barriers were brought down within the park's enclosure, and individuals who seemingly had very little in common could relate to each other easily by displaying interest in the others' dog. Just like Artú's owner confessed that she had overcome her shyness by relating to other dog owners, it was also Emma's and Jack's owners who very proudly informed me that the hub of social interaction in the park happens amongst dog owners.

On the last day of my stay in Turin, it felt like summer-time; needless to say, the park was swarming with people. Lapo rolled on the grass while my aunt bid her friends, who had also, by now, become my friends, goodbye. It made me sad to think that their routines would go on and I would be now extracted from them.

Knowing several aspects of my methodology were flawed, for instance, the interviewing technique, I tried to ensure I was taking some lesson back with me. Although I still don't feel compelled to experience dog ownership in an urban setting, I now understand what compels others to do so. It goes past restoring feelings of loneliness or the search for putative family members; *it is the creation of bonds that go beyond the human element but that also place individuals closer to it*. Stammer and Takakura very justly note that 'the social significance of animals is a process of conversation in which animals give meaning to groups of people and individual humans through particular characteristics and practices based on animals' (Stammer and Takakura 2010: 3). Indeed, it is a process by which individuals learn new codes of conduct, both in the household and



out of it, and where pets form a reciprocal relation with their owners but also manage to establish a bridge of socialisation amongst other dogs and dog owners.

I take with me lessons about the social sphere that non-human beings can create, and how this does not reflect co-dependence, but rather, an affined sense (of smell) for interaction.

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