

Both Ends of the Leash

A Glass Half-Full

All emotions may not be equal,
but they *are* equally powerful

Patricia B. McConnell

Buster came into the office with a record, and it wasn't a pretty one. He'd bitten several times, and the bites were serious, always given when Buster was being prevented from getting something he wanted. "I know I shouldn't say this," said Buster's guardian, "but it's almost as though he was angry at me. I know anger is a human emotion, but I swear he looks just like an angry person right before he bites."

If you're looking for a conversation-starter, just ask the people you're with if they think animals have emotions such as anger, happiness and jealousy. I guarantee an interesting, if not heated, interchange. The beliefs about emotions in animals vary from "of course animals have emotions" to "of course they don't; emotions are unique to humans."

What's going on here? You would think that most of us would agree about something as basic as emotions. However, beliefs about the existence of emotions in dogs and other animals run the gamut from absolutely yes to absolutely no. And these opinions are not split along "scientist" versus "non-scientist," as is often assumed – you're just as likely to hear someone down the block argue that emotions are exclusive to humans as you are to read it in an academic journal.

The fact is, we seem to be very emotional about our emotions – we often have trouble discussing them with the pure, logical thought processes we like to think we're good at. In part, this derives from our discomfort with attributing emotions to other animals, a discomfort influenced by the work of early behaviorists, particularly B.F. Skinner. Skinner was part of a movement that was attempting to make psychology a rigorous science, and he opposed inquiry into anything that could not be measured quantitatively. Since emotions are internal, subjective states, and in Skinner's time couldn't be quantified, he argued against talking about them in



animals. It's important to note that he argued with equal passion against talking about emotions in people – he wasn't one to put humans and animals in separate categories. Others took his argument one step further, aligning with the beliefs of some philosophers that there was no point in studying emotions in non-human animals – because animals don't have any.

It's true that there are good reasons to be cautious about attributing emotions to animals. We're not always very good at it, imagining that a puddle on the carpet means our dogs are angry with us, when they were actually just anxious, or simply not house-trained. At times, we project our own emotions onto our pets, ignoring all evidence that they may be sad because we are feeling happy (and vice versa).

However, there's no logic in arguing that we should ignore emotions in animals just because we're sometimes wrong about which ones they are experiencing. Additionally, it is no longer true that we can't apply scientific rigor to the study of emotions. Recent progress in neurobiology has allowed us to do elegant research on emotions, and the evidence is overwhelming that we share much of our emotional life with animals – including our dogs.

Emotions are primitive things, centered deep inside a primitive part of the brain. This area is called the limbic system, and it is universally found in animals such as primates (including humans), dogs and mice – it's so universal that it's actually called the "mammalian brain." We know that primal emotions like fear and happiness are critical to survival. After all, emotions allow us to decide between flight or fight. Granted, a modern version of that age-old

dilemma might be whether or not to criticize your boss, but it all gets down to the same thing: Emotions inform our rational brain about the best course of action. Those decisions don't have to be conscious, but they do have to be informed. People who have lost the connection between their rational cortex and their emotional centers are unable to make the simplest of decisions, such as where to file a piece of paper. It turns out that our "rational" brains are helpless without our often-demeaned emotional side – surely a satisfying and empowering fact for those of us who wear our emotions on our sleeves.

Remember this primal power if (or perhaps I should say when) someone snorts at the idea that dogs have emotions. Remind them that the basic emotions like fear, anger and a sense of well-being are primitive mechanisms designed for the survival of animals who live in complicated, changing environments. Remind them also that dogs share the same brain structures, the same neurotransmitters, the same hormones and the same external expressions of emotions that exist in people. Even love and attachment are biological processes, chemically fueled by dopamine, which leads to the rush we feel during infatuation, and oxytocin, the hormone that warms the heart and buckles the knees when we look at an eight-week-old puppy. Your dog has the same set of hormones, and they work the same way inside his body as they do inside yours. Even sheep are more attentive to and protective of their lambs if they have higher levels of oxytocin, and reject their lambs aggressively when their bodies are prevented from utilizing the oxytocin coursing through their systems.

Emotions may be primitive, but that doesn't mean they are simple – which is why I would never downplay the profound differences that must exist between the experience of fear or love in a human versus the same experience in a canine. An important aspect of emotions is the thought that goes along with them, and it would be absurd to argue that a human's thoughts – fueled by our outrageously expanded cortexes – are the same as a dog's. All emotions are not equal, at least not in terms of the brain power required to experience them.

Surely the most primitive of emotions – disgust – is experienced in profoundly similar ways in both people and dogs. "Yuck" looks the same on the face of a dog as it does on the face of a human, and it's

designed to keep us alive by avoiding things that could make us sick. Fear must be next in the progression of basic emotions – how could we possibly stay alive if we weren't afraid of getting hurt?

Indeed, most biologists agree that all mammals experience what are called the "basic emotions," such as disgust, fear and anger. Things get a bit more complicated when we talk about "social emotions," which include jealousy and guilt. Many highly respected scientists, whose work I greatly admire, argue that only humans can experience jealousy, a belief fueled by the concept that jealousy requires self-awareness and an understanding of the mental life of others. I don't agree – jealousy seems profoundly simple to me: "I want it, but you've got it. I hate that." Doesn't seem very complicated. On the other hand, guilt is an emotion I suspect we often mistakenly attribute to our dogs. Guilt requires an understanding of social moral codes, something that does seem complicated and perhaps only relevant to human interactions. And yet, how often do we imagine that our dogs feel guilty when they greet us at the doorway and behind them we see a couch chewed to tatters?

And what about anger, the emotion that began this column? I suspect that dogs can experience something very similar to what we call anger. I'd guess that most dogs don't get angry very often, at least not compared with humans. They may not give us unconditional love every second of every day, but their docility and patient acceptance of us is still legendary.

However, at the moment, it's the shared emotion of fear that needs our attention. The archaic "you-must-achieve-dominance-over-your-dog" perspective is experiencing a resurgence, and we are encouraged to use physical force to coerce our dogs into submission. You can get individuals to obey you by scaring them, at least some of the time – just ask kidnapping victims. But these "obedient" individuals radiate fear, and are compliant not because they've been raised to be polite and well-mannered, but because they've been threatened with physical harm if they aren't.

If we share basic emotions like fear and joy with our dogs, which the most rigorous of scientific study

suggests that we do, then we need to use those big, wrinkly brains of ours to find a way to relate to dogs that brings out the best of emotions, not the worst. Of course, the way we experience emotion is different than that of dogs, and those differences are important. However, what's similar is equally important, and should inform our relationships every day. I'm reminded of the "glass half empty/glass half full" aphorism. I'm convinced that the glass is half full – and I also think it's a very big glass. The liquid within it can be bitter or sweet – it's up to us.

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