Dogs and People in Aboriginal Communities: Exploring the Relationship within the Context of the Social Determinants of Health

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Aboriginal people and dogs have a very long association. The archaeological evidence suggests that the dingo, which was intentionally brought to Australia, was present from about 3500 years ago. Dogs introduced by European settlers quickly replaced or interbred with dingoes at Aboriginal settlements. The outsiders’ view of Aboriginal dogs appears to be polarised into two distinct groups. Dogs are either described as a health risk and a reservoir for a range of diseases, or are glossed over as being sacred and ceremonially important. Neither view has really examined the complexity of Aboriginal relationships with the dog, or the fact that attitudes towards dogs might be variable from region to region, and that attitudes to dog and dog ownership are not culturally static. This paper provides a review of the anthropological literature concerning people’s relationships with dogs and the perceived function of dogs in communities, supplemented by insights from research in South East Arnhem Land. It will then relate these findings to dog health and dog control programs and stress the importance of developing these within a community development framework.

Key words: Dogs; Aboriginal Australians; South East Arnhem Land; Relationships with Dogs; Public Health

In memory of Phil Donohoe, who was killed in a tragic accident in December 2006. As the executive officer of Animal Management in Rural Remote Indigenous Communities (AMRRIC), Phil encouraged us to write this paper.

As Hamilton wrote in her 1972 paper, ‘Aboriginal man’s best friend?’, the dogs in Aboriginal communities tend to make a dramatic first impression on outsiders and it is unlikely that there is an anthropologist who has not been chased or bitten at some point during their careers. Despite this, after a brief flurry of attention in the late sixties and early seventies (Hamilton 1972; Jones 1970; Kolig 1973; Meggitt 1965; White 1972), dogs have appeared to be not worthy of anthropological attention. Perhaps it was considered that all that needed to be said on the subject had been. This is a serious oversight, as the above authors tantalisingly point to a wide range of practices and cultural attitudes towards dogs, and that such attitudes have the propensity to change (see especially Jones 1972). Further, there is considerable interest in the health of dogs in communities, the effects that dogs might have on the health of humans, and the best way to implement dog control, or health improvement programs. Anthropological involvement in such debates has been minimal. In this paper, we argue that it is important to be aware of how dog and human interactions in Aboriginal communities might be changing, in order successfully to implement programs that are going to be successful and supported by the community. We also argue that it is important to regard dogs and their health and wellbeing within a framework that
encompasses an understanding of the social determinants of health and community development.

**The Human/Dog Relationship**

Dogs were the first animals to be domesticated. Conservative dates for this association, based on human and dog remains being buried together in a grave in Israel, are dated to be 13,500 years BC (Tarcon & Pardoe 2002). Archeologists, such as Tarcon and Pardoe, however, suggest that the relationship is far older, perhaps 100,000 years, and that the interaction brought important developmental changes and benefits for both species, for example, they argue that humans learnt about pack hunting and the advantages of living in closely bonded groups from wolves (Tarcon & Pardoe 2002).

The French anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss, discussed the importance of dogs in describing how we describe and classify our world. Dogs and other animals, such as birds, are ‘good to think with’ he argues, and they tell us something about human social life. According to Levi-Strauss (1966, p. 204), “birds love freedom, they build themselves homes in which they live a family life and nurture their young, and they communicate by acoustic means recalling articulate language”. He argues that because of these analogies to the world of humans, the world of birds can be seen as a metaphorical representation of the world of humans, so that when humans name birds ordinary human names are used. Domesticated dogs are quite different. Because dogs, at least in French society, are raised primarily for the companionship they provide to humans, the names given to them must reflect the fact that they are different from humans, yet in some sense part of human society. To Levi-Strauss (1966, p. 205), this means that dogs will not be given ordinary names, but rather names that are akin to “stage names, forming a series parallel to the names people bear in ordinary life”. These include names such as Fido, Sultan, Azor, which are similar to human names, although rarely held by humans. The importance of this discussion about naming is that the names we call various animals and plants are from an underlying structure that informs us about the organisation of our society. The way we name birds in comparison to dogs, gives us clues about the ways in which we behave and think about them. In the case of dogs, their nearness to human society must be checked by deliberately giving them almost human, but not quite human names.

Of all animals, dogs are the most closely bonded to, and dependent on, humans. This closeness and length of association has resulted in the dog acquiring a unique status among animals. In many human societies, dogs are regarded as ‘not quite humans’ or as Serpell describes, as an “interstitial creature, neither person nor beast, forever oscillating uncomfortably between the roles of high status animal and low status person” (1995, p. 254). This is what Douglas would regard as a marginal and ambiguous state (1966, p. 118). People who do not fit properly into society are regarded as potentially dangerous and polluting and capable of inflicting misfortune involuntarily. It is clear in many cultures that dogs are also considered in this way. They might be invaluable in hunting, but still feared and distrusted, or at least considered to behave in ways that are unsettling to the social order.

**Aboriginal/Dog Associations**

The ambiguity of the dog’s status is evident in Aboriginal conceptions of their status and the mythology associated with them. Maddock writes that dogs in Aboriginal societies are classed as humans, but they constantly break human social laws, by mating indiscriminately and not following kinship rules (1972, p. 97). ‘They act like dogs’ is said of Aborigines who disregard marriage restrictions (Maddock 1972, p. 97). A similar idea emerges in Berndt and Berndt’s oral histories describing the
trickster Bomoboma (NE Arnhem Land). This particular character is considered to be abnormal because he flouts social rules by having a series of illicit relationships. This breaking of rules and unpredictable behaviour is described as “running about like a dog” (Berndt & Berndt 1999, p. 407).

Kolig (1973, p. 123), describing the beliefs of the Wolmadjeri people of south Kimberley, argues that the main function of dogs is to warn humans about the approach of evil spirits. In the mythology of the region, the dog is represented as a dangerous animal, and this is the reason why people are loath to kill them.

Meggitt’s study of the Walbiri in the period 1953-1954 offers some insights as to the relationship between dingoes and humans. The Walbiri captured dingoes as pups and tamed them, and on reaching maturity, the dingo usually returned to the bush. Although the Walbiri stated that the reason for acquiring pups was to train them to assist in hunting, Meggitt found that hunters who relied on skill and stealth were more effective without dogs (Meggitt 1965). Dingoes tended to forage for themselves, and it is for this reason Haydon argues that although dingoes might not have been great contributors to the diets of people, it was a low maintenance helper in the food quest and therefore worthwhile (Haydon 1975). Although Meggitt (1965) found that people were unwilling to kill any tamed dingoes, they had no such compulsion about wild dingoes, as they became involved in procuring dingo scalps for monetary reward.

European dogs were quickly adopted into Aboriginal life, even among the Tasmanian Aboriginal people who had not had dingoes previously (Jones 1970). Unlike dingoes, European dogs were less likely to hunt for themselves and became dependent on their owners. They did not return to the bush on reaching maturity, and bred within camps.

Jones describes the situation in Tasmania where Aboriginal people were only exposed to dogs from the period 1798-1804 because the dingo had not reached Tasmania. Despite this, dogs were readily incorporated into Aboriginal life and people changed their hunting techniques (Jones 1970).

Not only did the Tasmanian Aborigines not use dogs, they did not even know of their existence. In this total ignorance of the animal they were probably unique amongst the ethnographically known peoples of the world. Yet within a few years of seeing their first dogs, the Tasmanians had recognised the potentiality of the animal, formed close bonds with it, and had incorporated it fully within their culture (Jones 1970, p. 259).

In Yalata, in South Australia, White observed that the people there made a distinction between hunting dogs and the rest. Hunting dogs were well trained and fed by their owners, while the others were not. Although neglect was evident for the non-hunting dogs, no one would kill a dog. White argues that hunting dogs made an important contribution to the food quest and that they were particularly effective in cornering and bringing down large kangaroos (White 1972). Indeed, White argues that the use of European dogs represents a significant innovation in hunting technique, which greatly improved the hunters’ success:

The high proportion of successful kills made by the dogs, once kangaroos are sighted, leads me to believe that good hunting dogs have increased the supply of game food available in comparison with the old tribal times (White 1972, p. 203).

In contrast, Hamilton, working with the Jankantjara people of the Everade Ranges, argues that the domestic dog’s contribution to the food quest is small. She comments that dogs are more often in competition with people for food due to their foraging activities and theft of food (Hamilton, 1972). Affection for puppies was the main reason for keeping dogs:

Puppies provide a special emotional release for nurturing behaviour which normally would be expended on human children, but which is limited in its full expression in an environment which does not support a large human population (Hamilton 1972, p. 294).
Another insight into the dogs’ status is that dogs and children often appear to be rivals, they fight over food and they have a high level of interaction that is largely unchecked by adults. As children get older, they try to assert their dominance over dogs. It is often pointed out that children can be cruel to dogs, for example:

Puppies do not receive such tender care at the hands of the children, however, and probably the major cause of pup mortality is the constant ‘play’ that they suffer. No matter how devoted one might be to a pup, a child usually has precedence, and if a two year old cries to be allowed to carry a new-born pup about by its neck then no one will gain-say it (Hamilton 1972, p. 289).

Dogs, however, often snatch food away from unsuspecting children:

Children learn early to eat standing up and holding their hands high; the small hand hanging at the side with a piece of food in it is a quick target for the dogs (Hamilton 1972, p. 290).

Perhaps the most important insight into the status of dogs is shown when a dog is killed, either deliberately or accidentally. Berndt and Berndt (1999, p. 345) describe a mythological fragment that contains an important warning that retribution for the killing of dogs will be severe:

But offences against dogs, which are regarded almost as members of a family rather than as personal property, might have violent repercussions. In Western Arnhem Land, for instance, in one mythical case, several large camps are said to have been wiped out after a man’s special pet dog was unknowingly killed and eaten.

**Human-dog interactions in an Arnhem Land community**

The following discussion of human dog interactions in an Arnhem Land community is based on anthropological work carried out in the community between 1999-2006. The South East Arnhem land community of Ngukurr is home to about 900 people and 280 dogs in 2006. This represents about three dogs per household. Many, but not all of these dogs are named and incorporated into the local kinship system. The kinship system in Ngukurr divides the world into two moieties. A moiety is one of two descent groups in a given population who usually intermarry. A descent group is a kin group whose members are recruited by one of the principles of descent; for example, matrilineal, patrilineal, or so on. In Ngukurr society the two moieties Dua and the Jiridya are further divided into semi-moieties and again divided into subsection or skin names. At birth, each child is given a skin name, which establishes that child’s place within the descent group and sets rules for how the individual interacts with everyone else in the group.

There are strict rules governing marriage. A preferred marriage pattern is for a person to marry their mother’s brother’s daughter’s child. A fundamental rule regarding marriage is that it must be exogamous. You must marry someone in the opposite moiety to yourself. The result is that you will be in a different moiety from your mother and you will be in the same moiety as your father.

A person’s dog has an equivalent skin name to his or her own children. Dogs, however, cannot be expected to marry ‘right way’ and so puppies are either classified as if their mothers had chosen the correct partner (as would be done in a human wrong way marriage, which is a process described as ‘straightening up’), or they acquire a new skin name through adoption by another human. The dogs’ disregard for exogamous mating practices, are, as described by Maddock above, something that keeps them fundamentally not quite a human.

As well as a series of named dogs, there are also dogs, which are loosely attached to households, but not owned by anyone. These dogs are described as Gubalga (scavenging dogs) or Walgndulu (lost and lonely dogs). These dogs are never deliberately fed, but might obtain food through eating discarded remains or fighting more favoured dogs. Their survival is a matter of chance, with very little human intervention. For example, at one house...
only three of the nine dogs had names. The others consisted of a female dog and her puppies. The mother dog eventually left the household to scavenge at the shop. These dogs are not regarded as being useless. They combine with the other dogs to create a body of animals protecting a household from both human and spirit intruders. Sorcery is an ever-present threat in Ngukurr, as is the concern about strangers entering the community (Senior 2003). People comment that they feel much safer when they are surrounded by a large number of dogs. Protective dogs mean that visitors are forced to remain distant to the house and call out loudly to make their presence known: “When you visit houses you have to stand back and call long way, because of all the cheeky dogs”. The larger dog population as a whole, is also perceived as having special intuitive powers, for example, it is believed that dogs sense human deaths and have an important role in alerting community members: “When someone dies all the dogs start howling at once, top, middle and bottom camps all together, then you worry about who it was”.

There are two categories of important or valued dogs in the community. One is the traditionally valued category of hunting dogs, the other, we argue is an emerging category of pampered pet. Dogs that are described as hunting dogs are named, and often have an important ceremonial name. For example, one dog bears the name Mumbali that is a Dua subsection name. Hunting dogs are valuable and people often talk about buying such dogs from outside the community or from visiting non-Aboriginal people. It is not often assumed that a local scavenging or lost dog can be turned into a hunting dog. As an example of this, one of the authors (Senior) befriended a local lost dog, Spike, and eventually, after he was fed and treated for mange and other parasites, he became a strong and handsome dog. Local people offered to buy this dog and expressed their disbelief when she said it was actually a local dog in the first place.

Although people talk about the hunting prowess of dogs, the opportunities for them to demonstrate their skills are limited. The authors went on few hunting trips that included dogs. People talk about dogs being particularly useful for goanna hunting, but the number of goannas around the community has been dramatically reduced after the cane toad moved into the region. Despite the value given to particular dogs, it is often difficult for the outsider to distinguish them from the main dog population. They have considerable autonomy, are allowed to wander freely, are fed when they are close to the household and frequently look mangy and neglected.

The other groups of named dogs are pet dogs, which could not possibly have any role in hunting. In Ngukurr, there is a group of Chihuahuas, which are highly valued and treated by their owners as special pets. These dogs are generally well fed, are allowed inside the house and wear collars. One in particular wears a collar with a tag reading ‘spoilt’ and is in stark contrast to the dogs that surround it. At about the same time (in mid-2004) as this new category of dogs emerged, it became possible to buy tinned and dried dog food and dog grooming products at the local store. This change in dog ownership and grooming practices was heavily influenced by celebrities and media images, which were widely circulated in the popular media at the time. As individuals began acquiring special pet Chihuahuas they began lobbying the local storeowner to start selling various dog products. It is important to recognise that this change was driven by consumers and this highlights how important changes in health related behaviour might be influenced as much by fashion as by education (Lindenbaum 1989). Public health education campaigns must therefore be aware of the complex social and political context in which they are operating in order to maximise opportunities for changes in behaviour. While calls for improved dog health in communities are often associated with
various interventions such as sterilisation or culling, the change in some of the Ngukurr residents’ dog ownership practices suggests that changes at the level of the individual are intricately linked to the process of forming and expressing identity (Zukin & Maguire 2004).

Dogs are deeply embedded in the social life of the community; they are present at most important activities. People commented that dogs were restricted from accompanying the men to ceremony, but they were expected to follow the women, in the same way that children accompany women. Dogs also get involved in disputes between families. In a recent fight over a wrong skin marriage, the dog of one party bit an opponent. The person who was bitten swore that he would retaliate, while the owners of the dog swore that if anything happened to the dog, they would get their retribution, and thus the dispute continued.

The Importance of Understanding Dog Health in the Context of Society

The important point for this paper is that in discussing the relationship between dogs and health, we have to talk about a wider concept of dog health that includes humans. Dogs are part of the physical environment, but they are also part of the human social environment, in the relationship they form with humans. As we have shown throughout this paper, dogs are involved and interconnected in a number of human social activities. So any argument about improving the health of dogs is also one about the health of the humans with whom they co-exist. This fits comfortably with current discussions about the social determinants of health (Carson et al. 2007) and has long been recognised by environmental health practitioners in Australia in Indigenous and non-Indigenous settings.

At the centre of many discussions concerning the social determinants of health, which might include a focus on education, housing, income and racism, is the finding that Australians at the lower end of the socioeconomic hierarchy suffer more ill health and that those health differences by socioeconomic position, are apparent at all ages. While poorer people are more likely to go to hospital and seek medical care, they are less likely to take advantage of preventive care and screening services. These inequalities are apparent from the earliest of ages among Australian children. Children from lower socioeconomic groups tend to have lower birth weight, higher rates of developmental problems and are more likely to experience poorer adult health, than children from higher socioeconomic groups (Najman 2001).

The question in much of the literature on the social determinants of health has been oriented to uncovering which social determinants are related to health outcomes. The publication that has been most influential in promoting this approach, Marmot and Wilkinson’s (1999) Social Determinants of Health, sets the scene unambiguously in the foreword:

The health of populations is related to features of society and its social and economic organisation. This crucial fact provides the basis for effective policy making to improve population health. While there is, understandably, much concern with appropriate provision and financing of health services and with ensuring that the nature of the services provided should be based on the best evidence of effectiveness, health is a matter that goes beyond the provision of health services (Acheson, in Marmot & Wilkinson 1999, p. xi).

It is the focus on the social environment, rather than dog health services, or individual dog psychology and behaviour, which defines this approach. We would argue that in order to understand and to alleviate the poor health of dogs in Indigenous communities, further study needs to investigate the social environment of dogs as they interact with human environments. Studies examining the health of individual dogs need to take into account that dog health is influenced by broader structures around them, such as current environmental
and housing infrastructures, which will determine the capacity of individuals and groups to provide shelter, food, and health for dogs.

As an example, we can examine the situation of the dog Spike, described above. With veterinary attention and a good diet, he was transformed from a lost and unwanted dog to a dog that people valued. But there was a considerable cost associated with this transformation. When the first author had access to a car, she was able to take Spike to the vet in Katherine, some 300 kilometres away. Senior was also able to purchase dog food (which was not available in the community at the time) and treatments for his mange. This level of expenditure and especially the need to drive to Katherine for veterinary treatment would have been impossible for many community members who survive on government welfare payments. Currently, the community receives regular visits from a vet and the dogs appear to be in particularly good health.

One could also look at the issue of overcrowding in community houses. In some communities, arbitrary rules have been imposed, whereby households are limited to a maximum of three dogs, which reflects the restrictions in major urban centres. In urban centres, households are home to one, often a nuclear family, but this is not the case in remote Aboriginal communities where a house might be home to several families. Dogs are individually owned, and therefore imposing restrictions on dog numbers would mean that some individuals were missing out on the opportunity to own a dog. In this case, human overcrowding and dog overcrowding are strongly linked.

**Conclusion**

Any account of dog health in Indigenous communities should also take into account Indigenous health and the social determinants influencing health as they are interrelated. Understanding the socio-cultural and economic context in which dogs are situated is critical if effective programs are to be developed and delivered. As illustrated in the Ngukurr case study, dogs and humans are intricately linked and importantly this link has changed over time incorporating new perspectives and dog keeping practices. As the social and economic climate of social groups changes through time so too will their relationship to the animals they choose to share their environment. The implications of this paper for environmental health practitioners are the benefits to be gained by practitioners enhancing the skills that enable them to explore the social and cultural dimensions in a particular place.

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