

## **Situated Activities in a Dog Park: Identity and Conflict in Human-Animal Space**

**Patrick Jackson**

Sonoma State University  
Jackson@sonoma.edu

---

### **Abstract**

This study examines how people engage with the dynamic environment of the dog park in the face of unclear or ambiguous rules and emergent norms. Using participant observation, the analysis shows how, in the formal dog park, caretakers become “control managers” who must negotiate problems related to a variety of dog behaviors, especially mounting, aggression, and waste management. In this process, caretakers use various strategies to manage their own and others’ possible perceptions and understandings of appropriate behavior for dogs in public places.

### **Keywords**

animals, animals and society, conflict, dog parks, ethnography, observation, role distance, situated activity system

Companion animals are closely intertwined with the lives of their human caretakers. Over 60 percent of U.S. households have at least one companion animal, and, while cats are more numerous, dogs are found in more households (American Pet Products Association, n.d.). The extent of human attachment to dogs is signified by the extensive use of human names for them, the frequency with which caretakers view dogs as a member of the family (GfK Custom Research North America, 2008), and the extent of bereavement following their death (Stewart, 1983), among other factors (Sanders, 2003). For most people dogs play a companionate role and facilitate relationships with other people (Messent, 1983). Empirical research supports the observation that dogs and cats have the cognitive capacity for the development of sustained relationships (Irvine, 2004). People perceive close emotional bonds to their dogs (and cats), view them as sentient beings, and engage in interactive play with them (Alger, J. M., & Alger, S. F., 1999; Hart, 1995). Research suggests that animal companions may have therapeutic benefits for children

and the elderly, and those with physical or psychological illnesses (Arkow, 1998; Beck & Katcher, 1996; Melson, 1988).

Another major indication of the growing importance of companion animals to humans in the past 20 years is the allocation of public space for dog parks that has occurred through active lobbying by dog caretakers (Lee, Shepley, & Huang, 2009). A formal, public dog park is an area of public space (often fenced) where companion dogs can lawfully be off leash. The first public dog park was created in 1983 (Richards, 2008), and their numbers have increased to about a thousand today.<sup>1</sup> While the number of dog parks has increased, there is limited research about them outside the literature on public planning. Wolch and Rowe's (1992) early case study of a Southern California dog park shows how it was contested, documents the protracted battle to create and maintain it, and makes suggestions for future planners. Foster's (2006) report evaluates a state law permitting unleashed dogs on beaches. Lee et al. (2009) use a survey approach, supplemented by observation, to examine whether proximity to a dog park affects human choices regarding whether to walk their dog or drive, as well as their attitudes and perceptions about dog parks.

There are few studies of dog parks that focus on human-animal interaction. Robins, Sanders, and Cahill (1991) studied a group of dog caretakers who informally claimed an area of a public park. Their study explored how dogs facilitate interaction between humans, a process they refer to as the dynamic of inclusion. This occurs, for example, when the companion dog provides an alternative focus of attention during interaction, thereby serving as a vehicle to judge whether the newcomer can demonstrate responsibility in managing his or her dog.

Despite the lack of ethnographic, sociologically informed studies of human-dog interaction in dog parks, it is obvious that the nature of social interaction in this formally defined space for human-dog interaction is unique and worthy of study. The purpose of the present research is to develop an understanding of how people in a dog park attach meaning and significance to their experiences there. This paper addresses various questions: What do people expect of themselves and their companion dogs in this relatively new public space? What formal and informal norms structure the behavior of dogs and humans? What do these rules and norms tell us about "appropriate" behavior for dogs and the expectations for how caretakers should manage it? Going further, are dogs in the dog park a reflection of their caretakers and, if so, what issues of identity management arise in their caretaker role in the park? In light of these topics, what insights can be had into the successful structure and organizational framework of a formal dog park?

### **Situated Activities Approach**

The theoretical perspective of Erving Goffman has been successfully employed in various other contexts to understand human and animal interaction (e.g., Ramirez, 2006; Irvine, 2004). Here, Goffman's (1961) discussion of a "situated activity," a kind of focused interaction, provides an established framework for analyzing interaction that can be adapted to humans and animals and appears especially appropriate to understanding the formal dog park. A "situated role" is "a bundle of activities visibly performed before a set of others and visibly meshed into the activity those others perform" (Goffman, 1961, p. 96).

Here I wish to understand how people and their dogs do things (activities) together in the (situated) dog park environment. A situated activity by definition involves people who may not know each other in any other walk of life—they are only there and involved with each other in the setting because of what they have in common—their companionate dogs. Situated activities are interesting because people have to learn what the norms are, how to interpret unique or unusual situations, often with little formal guidance, and they must engage in activities while striving to maintain their personal identities.

Goffman (1961) also observes that a situated activity is "a somewhat closed, self-compensating, self-terminating circuit of interdependent actions" (p. 96). This means that people in the dog park perform their roles as they enter, stay, and leave the setting. In any situated activity there is also likely to be role differentiation, meaning that there are multiple activities occurring, consecutively or simultaneously, leaving the possibility that people may experience role conflict with themselves or others. People can embrace a role by demonstrating their attachment to it and their ability to perform it, and by their involvement or engagement in the role activity. Within the dog park, people may assume multiple roles and activities. Moreover, while in the dog park a person is mindful of how she or he is perceived by others and "actively participates in sustaining a definition of the situation that is stable and consistent with his image of himself" (Goffman, 1961, p. 104).

As a final comment on this approach, it is notable that the situated activities in the dog park are visibly performed before others. Such an area, by definition, contrasts greatly with the common place where dogs are often kept and managed—the home—where "[t]he proprieties of public deportment and the standards of public morals may be dispensed with" (Cavan, 1963, p. 18). Alternatively put, a dog park makes public what is characteristically done in the privacy of home or backyard and poses issues of how people will define appropriate rules for themselves and their dogs in a public setting.

In the remainder of this paper, I first describe the qualitative methods employed in the study. I then apply the situated activities perspective to the major activities of the park, including social engagement and control management. I conclude by describing the benefits of a situated activities approach to understanding the formal dog park, the limitations of the research, and the promise of future inquiry.

## **Methods**

My interest in the dog park emerged from my own experiences as a dog caretaker and my training as a sociologist specializing in crime and deviance. Initially, I frequented a dog park with my dogs, a golden (Sam) and a collie (Stoker). While participating in the setting, I recognized the complex social relations of the dog park from a researcher's perspective and the necessity of a more formal, ethnographic approach to understanding interactions—and especially conflict—in the setting. The value of an ethnographic approach to the study of human-animal interactions has been articulated by Arluke and Sanders (1996) and J. M. Alger and S. F. Alger (1999).

This research project formally began late in November 2007 and continued through the end of March 2009. The dog park I frequented is located in a public park, itself near a highly educated, primarily white, middle-class community in a small city. I visited the dog park, which was open most days of the year, an average of three days a week in winter, five otherwise, accompanied by Sam and Stoker, at different times of each day of the week. Some days there were two visits. Observations occurred during peak and off times, in mornings and afternoons, and at three work parties held in the dog park.

My role was that of a participant observer. While at the park I observed, listened, and talked with people. I did not inform anyone that I was doing research, but I was open about my position as a college teacher. I usually recorded field notes after I returned home, but I sometimes did so on-site when few people were around. I wrote notes on the demographics of the setting and the major patterns of activity, including the frequency with which people came and left, the number and types of dogs and people in the park, my guess at their ages, and my prior familiarity with people. This was easy during slow periods with few people and dogs but somewhat more challenging when the dog park was at peak use. In addition, I recorded topics of conversation that I had with people as they related to the park, dogs, and other people. I also noted the spatial distribution of people and dogs. Dogs who drew the attention of people at the park, whether for reasons of aggression,

entertainment, or peculiar habits were also important. I took notes on caretaker distraction, problematic situations between dogs and people that were within earshot or that were reported to me during conversations, how these appeared to be resolved, as well as on people who observed the dog park from the fence adjacent to a trail that passed the park. I stopped observing when I found no additional data. I approached the field notes data through the established method of developing initial codes based on emergent themes in the data and then gradually applying more focused codes (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).

### **Social Engagement**

A fence enclosing approximately a half acre of land defines the boundaries of the situated activities of the dog park. The park is bordered on one side by trees and a parking lot. Upon entering a special double gate, the caretaker closes the outer gate, removes the dog's leash, and together the person and dog move into the park. Analytically speaking, opening the outer gate with a dog begins the situated activities of the dog park. I refer to this set of activities as "social engagement." However, it is important to keep in mind that a second set of activities, called "control management," is also possible at this precise point. As Goffman notes, two sets of activities "mesh" with one another. For analytical purposes, I treat them separately, discussing control management in a subsequent section.

Instigating social engagement by entering the double gate to the dog park defines a caretaker as someone who is "open" to interaction as opposed to being at "civil inattention" (Goffman, 1961, 83-84; for an example, see West, 1997). In most cases this also extends to other humans accompanying the caretaker. Whether intended to or not, dogs often play an important role in facilitating interpersonal relationships as a bridging and extending factor or "catalyst," as noted by Messent (1983) and McNicholas and Collis (2000), in different contexts.

In the dog park, this canine goodwill undergirds the acceptance of people even in the absence of other human connections. Among strangers or acquaintances the topics are usually safe and easy—theirs or others' dogs, activity within the park, kennels, food, sickness, grooming, veterinarians, etc. People ask direct questions about others' dogs, e.g., "Which one is yours?" "What's his/her name?" with follow-up questions about age, habits, and the like. This is the kind of normal, easy, safe interaction characteristic of people just arriving at the dog park.

People are as likely to know the name of the dog as the caretaker. (When people come to the park more frequently, they can get to know one another's names.) Knowing a dog's name in the space is nonthreatening and facilitates interaction. Whether the interaction goes to more intimate exchange is contingent upon the usual human social dance; during this study, numerous long-term relationships did develop in the dog park.

Caretakers demonstrate their companionship with their dog through active mutual play; shared attention, including eye contact; and by "giving voice" to what their dog is thinking or experiencing—all key characteristics of human-animal friendships discussed by Sanders (2003). These expressions are not prescribed activities of a caretaker's role but instead ones that appear to be accepted by most. "Giving voice" means that caretakers state what they feel their dog may be thinking or what they intend to communicate to their dog; they can ask their dog a question and voice what they believe their dog would answer. Alone with their dog or in the presence of others, they indicate their dog's likes and dislikes, habits, and history and thereby demonstrate their special understanding.

Whatever meaning this may have to the caretaker, uninhibited public display through "giving voice" provides evidence to others in the dog park of the caretaker's active connection with his or her dog. There is quite a bit of this in the dog park. As Greenebaum (2004) found in a dog bakery, some people in the park verbally anthropomorphized their dogs as a part of their human family, referring to themselves and other caregivers as "Daddy" and "Mommy" and their dogs as "babies." For others, however, there is very little or no such interaction, especially for those with large, old, or less active dogs, who might instead be talked about in the third person. Overall, giving voice is a significant aspect of park interaction, and it was at times difficult to keep the many conversations straight—i.e., those between humans and those that were shared with dogs, or both.

Even though many do not engage in direct play with their dog(s), they may watch them interact with other dogs, which is sometimes a new experience for the caretakers and perhaps for their dogs. They may also still interact with their dogs, anthropomorphizing while encouraging their involvement with other dogs. As a group of us sat together, various people made comments that gave voice to their dogs:

I don't know you, so I'm barking [as a coon dog barked repeatedly at another dog].  
Let's have some fun [as their dog walked up to another].  
I'm gonna check you out now [as their dog smelled another].

After a few minutes of similar statements, a young teenage boy sitting next to a man who could have been his father, said, "People speak for their dogs here."

Some dogs stay close to their caretaker, but many interact with other dogs, chasing or running together, engaging in playful behavior, rolling on the ground, digging holes, etc. Sam walks the fence perimeter, eats grass, and marks, later interacting with other dogs while Stoker retrieves balls. Other dogs walk or lie in the water or mud, splash water in pools and bowls; even on a cold winter day a small breed submerges in the water. There is often a more or less continuous stream of active dogs, and for various reasons (e.g., lack of training, previous abuse) there are some problematic dogs whose behavior is not serious enough to warrant approaching a caretaker but that gives cause for people to be situationally annoyed. For example, some dogs urinate on the seats people sit on. Another may view a tennis racket as a play object to be snatched as people try to hit balls. A few continuously bark, jump up on people with wet or muddy paws, or repeatedly nuzzle people but soak them with saliva in the process. Overall, however, most caretakers appear to enjoy their time at the park, socializing with or watching people, encouraging their dogs to exercise, and watching their dog(s) and others enjoying the experience. These interactions provide evidence of people's engagement with the scene, other people, and dogs.

### **Control Management**

The second major set of situated activities in the dog park involves caretakers demonstrating control of their varied dog-related responsibilities. The typical duties associated with the caretaker role outside the park are transformed as they enter. This important development frames the context of the lived experience of the caretaker.

As part of a situated activity, caretakers must be careful to act out their roles and maintain their identity in the park. Past research shows how the identity of dog and caretaker are linked. Following Sanders (1990), in situations where an actor and "marginally socialized member" (p. 87)—here the caretaker and her/his dog—have a conjoint identity, the link—the "with" (Goffman, 1971, p. 19)—that exists between them defines the caretaker as responsible for dealing with potential threats to their shared identity. In reference to Goffman's (1959) concept of the performance team, Robins et al. (1991) note that "like young children, dogs are notoriously unreliable members of performance

teams” (p. 22). Thus, caretakers must do the work to maintain their conjoint identities, and this work can be challenging.

But there is more to it. Part of what makes the situated activities of a dog park unique is that the responsibility for the “with” becomes a more formal role requirement—with legal implications—when the caretaker and companion dog enter the park. Written rules (although few in number) posted outside the park publicly state that caretakers (“owners”) are responsible for supervising their dogs, including disposing of waste. Thus, the written rules suggest that there is more at stake in the maintenance of personal identity. In Goffman’s (1961) terms, they add a “commitment,” “[a caretaker] doing or being something that irrevocably conditions other important possibilities . . . and rendering him vulnerable to unanticipated consequences of these undertakings” (pp. 88-89). Of course one can argue that such liabilities are inherent in any situation with a dog, but the public proclamation at the entry, and the formality of the space itself, adds a legal overlay or stipulation to caretaker responsibility for their dog(s) and puts caretakers more in tune with this commitment.

In fact, management of the “with” is even more complex in a formal dog park for other reasons, too. The dog park is very different from the usual place where dogs spend their time (homes), and caretakers are much less able to control the environment, which contains structural features associated with increased conflict like gate entry (discussed below), as well as a higher density of unleashed dogs than is typically experienced outside a dog park. This can lead to new situations in a confined space in which there is no easy avoidance or escape. The typical “fight or flight” response can then translate into aggression.

Moreover, the posted rules at the park do not precisely define what is expected or inappropriate dog behavior. It is also unclear whether people read or understand dog park rules. Based on apparent rule violations that I observed in the dog park—e.g., no puppies, no food, no infants, no unsupervised children—people frequently broke the rules. Next, it is also ambiguous how caretakers are supposed to manage their own and others’ dogs in the dog park. For example, if a dog is mounting your dog, are you required to intercede? If a dog is about to enter the park and is snarling at yours, should you intercede? Management of a dog in this context is unfamiliar to many because dog care is usually done at home or with only familiar dogs or other pets. At home, for example, I don’t vigilantly wait for my dog to do his business and then run outside to clean it up, but in a dog park, that response is suggested, especially when park volunteers or other responsible dog park citizens are present.

To complicate matters even more, social control in the dog park is exercised by caretakers and not by formal agents of social control. There are no rangers,



police, or other officials present who manage problems as they arise, although they can be called in to handle a situation. Finally, in the dog park the management of the “with” is done in public and—in light of the presence of (sometimes many) other dogs and people—the size and scope of the territory that includes the situated activity is thereby enlarged. The increased surveillance, in turn, can open the potential for threats to caretaker identity, including situations of potential embarrassment, shaming, or humiliation, should performance not meet public expectations.

In sum, given these unique characteristics of the formal dog park, when viewed as a situated activity, the identity of caretakers is imbued with enough legal and social significance that their role is more appropriately described as that of “formal control manager.” While this control manager role is more accountable than the less formal caretaker of the “with,” caretakers are also situated within a setting that lacks formal rules and shared understandings about the dog park and appropriate dog behaviors. Thus, the work for the caretaker as control manager involves managing emergent definitions of dog problems and cleanup.

### **Problem Management**

Control managers must respond to issues related to their dogs as they or others identify them. Granted, not all dog behaviors that might warrant a human response consistently receive it, and behaviors that do are not necessarily egregious violations. It is difficult to know, for example, when untoward behavior like aggressiveness is imminent (King & Long, 2004). In the dynamic dog park environment, knowledge about aggression may only be gained through experience. At the same time, control managers appear knowledgeable of risk or liability. After a large dog knocked down an old man one day, one person spontaneously commented, “You’ve got to make sure your insurance is up to date when you’re in here.” Others made similar kinds of statements.

While it is not possible to state precisely what triggers caretakers to respond to particular perceived problems—that would require a different study design—I can discuss the routine situations that did engage control managers’ attention and their recurring ways of resolving these situations. This is what I mean by the situated activities of caretakers: what they do and how they do it—not necessarily their underlying motivations.

The typical places or situations where there are problems related to dogs are: the gated entry point into the park; the response to mounting, as people try to manage perceived aggressiveness or problem behavior by dogs; and feces cleanup. In these situations people actively manage problems by using several

strategies. Each is defined below; they include avoidance, lumping it, remedial talk and humor, engaging third parties, and role distance.

### *Avoidance*

Avoidance occurs when people steer clear of situations, people, or dogs by simply not going near them or somehow preventing contact. Most people and dogs enter the dog park without problems, but the entry gate frequently presents an element of unpredictability as dogs inside await the newcomer's entry. It is very common for 3 to 5 dogs to be waiting there, but 15 to 20—and as many as 30—have been observed, which is a spectacle that gets the attention of even seriously distracted caretakers. The situation appears far more intense when the park is busy. A frequent situational solution to the problems associated with gate entry is *avoidance*. For example:

Tank enters the park with a prong collar. His caretaker tells him loudly, "Be calm," gets down on one knee, looks Tank in the face, and hugs him at the shoulder. Tank then goes directly to the dog he was staring at while in the double gate and follows the dog around at high speed, his head at the other dog's shoulder, snarling. Everyone in the park is looking at Tank, who then similarly chases after another of the five other dogs who are freely roaming. A woman who had just come in with three spaniels looks at the "aggressive" dog, looks at me and her dogs, and says, "Come on boys, we'll come back when there are little dogs to play with."

As this case illustrates, the people most likely to leave are those with vulnerable dogs, such as small or young ones, and those relatively new to the park or who are, for whatever reason, incapable of defending themselves.

Another form of avoidance occurs among the unknown number of people who avoid entering the park altogether. While some stand outside the fence and observe before leaving (or entering), others slowly drive by the dog park in their cars and are clearly looking inside the park. I observed these situations numerous times. One such caretaker who came into the park volunteered, "I always do a drive-by. There are some creatures here I don't want my dog around."

### *Lumping It*

This is a related form of avoidance, which means making a personal sacrifice (Felstinger, 1974), where one or both parties walk away from a potentially protracted disagreement because it is not worth the effort to resolve; this implies a mutual recognition of conflict. Lumping it is a frequent strategy of managing conflict in situations involving disagreements about mounting:

When we were standing near the gate about to leave, a brown dog stood nearby, and a black Lab mounted her. Four people (two women, one holding a year-old infant; a roughly thirteen-year-old boy and a man, who were standing together) laughed, but the caretaker of the brown dog didn't like it. She walked up and hit the Lab four or five times with a large plastic bottle with water in it, repeatedly yelling, "Stop it, mutt, that's not nice!" Eventually the Lab got off, and the woman left quickly with her dog, seemingly exasperated. One of the caretakers sitting there said to me, "I would rather dogs just be what they were meant to be so everyone just learns the way things are." She said she didn't "see anything wrong with what happened."

This dramatically illustrates how a control manager lumps it. Avoidance is not possible; an unhappy caretaker hastily departs without interacting. Mounting can be viewed as an example of what Arluke and Sanders (2009) refer to as "breaking frame" (p. xv). This suggests that the dog park is viewed by some as an extension of the home social environment, while for others it is a place where dogs can be allowed to be dogs, contesting the domestic "frame."

#### *Humor, Triangling, and Remedial Talk*

While laughter permits the release of tension, as illustrated above, another way of managing conflict is humor. For example, one woman yelled, "Stop that, you dirty old man!" in response to an older dog mounting her companion dog. In other circumstances there is no criticism or negative commentary. Among three men:

While we were talking, the black dog mounted the golden and then the bull terrier after the golden shrugged it off. People were laughing. The terrier caretaker said, "Some people get upset by this." The golden's caretaker said that he didn't. The bull terrier caretaker added, "I don't mind watching. It's the most exciting thing in my day. I'm not getting much at home." Everyone laughed.

As suggested by this example, males were somewhat less likely than females to respond negatively to mounting. There were several instances consistent with this observation—for example, in response to one female control manager who ran about 15 feet to separate two dogs who were not hers ("Stop that," she said, "this is a dog park, we don't do that kind of thing around here"), the male caretaker of one of the dogs appeared disinterested, while the other volunteered to me, "I wonder what she's all worried about? Whatever." How much less men respond and under what circumstances are unanswered empirical questions. There were exceptions—for example, when an older dog mounted another, and a woman cackled loudly and shouted to her partner,

“Look, honey, the old guy’s going for it.” In any event, many people in the park expressed their varied interpretations of mounting through humor.

As noted earlier, conversations between humans and dogs can be a conduit—referred to by Cain (1983) and noted by Robins et al. (1991), as “triangling”—for informing others of something of significance. On a different day, the caretaker from the above example who separated the dogs who were not related to her, witnessed her dog, a Ridgeback, become the object of another dog’s attempt at mounting. Her dog snarled loudly and snapped at the offending dog. She yelled at the offending dog, whom she had apparently encountered before: “Don’t do that. Stop it. I told you that Musho doesn’t like that. You should mind your manners.” This might have been intended to prevent greater harm—perhaps by her own dog.

Remedial talk between control managers is another common way of managing conflict. One day a fight occurred between an older dog (Moe) who had been to the park many times and an exuberant younger one (Zald) with little park experience. The two had a loud and prolonged altercation before they could be separated and then the humans, who knew one another, talked. The woman with the older dog immediately walked up and said, “Moe is old and doesn’t go looking for trouble.” The younger dog’s caretaker accepted the blame and said, “I never seen [*sic*] him like that.” After his dog returned a ball, he said, “Bad dog, lie down, sit down. We’re going early because of you,” as the dog lay on the ground. As he then took leave of the park, he said to another park visitor, “He shouldn’t be that way. We always leave when he behaves that way. Shame on you, Zald.” The woman said, “He’ll be better the more you bring him.”

Zald’s caretaker demonstrates responsible caretaker attitudes to Moe’s caretaker, and displays to the other visitor what Sanders (1990) refers to as “demonstrative disciplining” (p. 86), in which caretakers publicly discipline their dog to demonstrate their attempts to control the dog responsibly.

### *Third-Party Involvement*

Where avoidance, talk, humor, or even lumping it are insufficient, some situations result in third parties like animal control, police, or a veterinarian being brought in from outside the dog park. These are less common instances in which there is harm to a dog or caretaker and/or there is an exaggerated human reaction to a perceived harm. For example, most of one dog’s ear was bitten off by a female dog protecting her pup, whose caretaker apologized and paid the veterinarian’s bill. Paying a vet bill appears to be a frequent third-party involvement when a dog is harmed (cf., Wogan, 2008).

Other situations involve further escalation. In one, an apparent victim's caretaker called in animal control. In this case, the offending dog's caretaker offered to pay the vet bill, but when he was providing credit card information by phone to staff, he said he couldn't come to the clinic because was tending to a cut on his hand. Shortly thereafter he received another phone call from the caretaker of the victimized dog, who accused him of planning to sue her because of his cut. In apparent response to this, she called the local animal control agency and complained about his dog being aggressive. Animal control then went to his home and cited the caretaker for having an aggressive dog.

Two people related to me the only instance of human-on-human physical assault during this study, as I arrived when the police were leaving:

A man in a tank top walked up and slapped a heeler mix who he felt was too rough with his poodle. A man standing next to him, who was the caretaker of the heeler, yelled at him, "How would you like it if I slapped you?" The man with the tank top yelled a profanity and pushed the other man to the ground. Witnesses jumped in to prevent further problems. The victim reported it to a park ranger, and the sheriff and the local police came to the dog park.

### *Role Distance*

This term refers to how people express themselves while managing the "dirty work" of cleaning up after dogs. Control managers are responsible for feces removal, since it accumulates rapidly and may pose obvious health issues. The posted rules are clear that caretakers "must clean up after their dog." Collection appears as a priority in the dog park—there are always bags, equipment, and receptacles there for collection and disposal, and many do use them, but, as with other responses to dog problems, not all control managers do cleanup. Why some people do or don't pick up after their dog is an open question (Webly & Sivit, 2000). Here I examine collection and disposal as another situated activity of caretakers. Observation of this activity reveals its expressive character, what Goffman (1961) refers to as role distance—i.e., behaviors engaged in during situated activities that "suggest that the actor possibly has some measure of disaffection from, and resistance against, the role" (p. 108).

In the dog park situation, how much a control manager is required to attend to feces cleanup is highly variable; the expectation is a given. My observations indicate that some people do not clean up, at least not immediately, because they are not aware of the excrement, delay picking it up for whatever reason, or, in some cases, choose to ignore it completely.

When a dog is observed in the act, park visitors will sometimes call it to a control manager's attention. When a "poop patroller" is present, she or he

may state loudly or yell, "Someone's dog just made a mess," or "Someone's dog is pooping." Other park users gave the "poop patroller" label to a member of the dog park volunteer group, and I use the term here to refer to anyone who calls out the existence of another dog's excrement. When first hearing these statements from a poop patroller, I quietly hoped that it wasn't one of my dogs. The looks on people's faces suggested that many often felt the same way. Sometimes people moan or blurt out things like, "Oh shit. I hope it's not Duke. I'm not in the mood," or "Not again," or "Not me, I just did my duty."

Responsive caretakers may look at a patroller and say, "Not mine," or "I'm afraid you'll have to look somewhere else," or (when it's their dog) they may reply, "That's mine," "Oops, didn't see that," or "Thanks, got it." Others respond in a mildly irritated way—for example, "I'm aware," "Yep," "Uh huh," or "Yeah, I can see." If poop patrollers know the caretaker's and/or dog's name, and some do, they will yell the name(s) from a distance or—as is often the case—if the caretaker is engaged in conversation or distracted in another way (by listening to music with ear buds, text messaging, spaced out, etc.) approach him or her and say, "Your dog just made a mess," or something similar. When it appears they think that the caretaker is ignoring the situation, the language is the same. Sometimes two or more people will systematically look for the caretaker of the dog, walking around from person to person or group to group, telling the appropriate person that her or his dog just made a mess and giving an approximate location.

Once alerted, the person whose dog made a mess must then find it—or try to. People often appear to be enjoying their alternative situational activity (e.g., talking). Having the public gaze attention directed to them, often when they haven't been adequately supervising their dog, draws undesirable attention to control managers. Having then to go out and publicly search for feces, which might well be in the midst of others, may add unpleasantness or mild humiliation to the feeling or may at a minimum be tedious. Sometimes people are unable to find the feces to which they've been directed and on their return appear to feel compelled to offer accounts, for example:

I think somebody imagined it.

I couldn't find Ardie's, so I picked up an old one. What's the difference?

People appeared less attentive to excrement removal when park volunteers were not there, especially during peak times. Even at less busy times, when engaged in a conversation or distracted by something, many people often appeared oblivious to their dog unless there was a behavior problem; some actively looked away when their dog was making a mess.

The feelings of at least some control managers about poop patrollers were revealed by their humorous response to a situation one day, when two members of the dog park group were watching dogs in front of them and one of their own defecated behind them. At that time, a man who had been previously told by poop patrollers of his dog's mess, and who was getting into his car, paused while watching the event unfold and then honked his car horn twice, which got everyone's attention. The 20 or so park users heard the man mockingly yell, while trying to stifle his laughing, "Your dog just took a dump behind you. You better get it." He laughed as he drove away, and various caretakers chuckled.

Doing "dirty work" maintains the definition of the situation as a public dog park and allows a control manager to demonstrate her or his competence, even though it may be mildly humiliating. Coupled with this is embarrassment for failing to perform her or his responsibilities, but embarrassment is an expression or reflection of conflict (Goffman, 1956): in the formal dog park, the conflict is between social participation and control management—for example, people get distracted by interactions with others and neglect to manage their dog appropriately.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The growth of dog parks as an organizational form suggests a greater recognition of the recreational needs of caretakers and their companion dogs. The present ethnography shows how people engage with its dynamic environment in the face of ambiguous rules and emergent norms about the dog park and what constitutes appropriate behavior for dogs. A situated activity framework is helpful in understanding the activities, processes, problems, and experiences of people and their companion dogs in one such park.

People are drawn to the park because of their companion dogs, even though they have differing ideas about their management and control, including definitions of acceptable dog behaviors like mounting, displays of aggressive play and their management, as well as attentiveness to picking up after their dog. Even so, caretakers publicly perform social participation and control manager activities. There is a year-round, vibrant, dynamic, and social environment within the dog park. People often actively socialize with one another, variably demonstrate their attachment to their dogs through play and giving voice, and appear to engage with others, sometimes at the expense of their control manager duties.

The role of caretakers is transformed such that their major situated activity is that of control manager, which gives them heightened responsibility for

their dog in a public situation with structural features that generate problems, such as gate entry, mounting, aggression, and cleanup. People cope with problems through avoidance behaviors, talk, humor, role distance, and, less frequently, involving third parties. Role conflict is apparent, as people are distracted from monitoring their companion dog, which may cause problems for other dogs or people. The annoying behaviors of some dogs can be a source of more or less continuous stress or tension because of the unpredictability it adds to the situation. Moreover, caretakers have to work to maintain their identity while experiencing the mild embarrassment or humiliation that can occur when performing dirty work.

What are the public expectations for caretakers as their companion dogs appear to do, or actually do, things that people are taught *not* to do in public—such as engage in sex, eliminate, or act aggressively? Most caretakers likely have only limited (home or domestic) experience with companion dogs; they interact with them in the privacy of their home or on a leashed walk and, as noted earlier, most treat them as a member of the family. In the dog park context, in Goffman's terms, caretakers as control managers then actively define the "transformation rules" that allow information from the domestic interaction frame to play a role in defining the world within the park. Simply stated, caretakers actively define what it means to be a dog in the public realm of the dog park.

Viewed through the situated activity lens, the formal dog park provides a public gaze into a world created by humans and their companion dogs. In this situation the control managers' collective responses sometimes dramatically enact the ambivalence with which people view their companion dogs. This is seen most clearly in the case of mounting. One case already examined involved a caretaker/victim who appeared exasperated when a dog mounted hers, and, after hitting the offending dog repeatedly with a water bottle, she hastily departed from the dog park while onlookers laughed. This suggests a power struggle over competing values—ambivalence in light of divergence in people's perspectives on how a dog should be allowed to act in a public setting. Conflicted responses to mounting are a recurring phenomenon in the dog park. Ambivalence in this sense is best viewed as something revealed by the situational context of the dog park rather than something hidden in the psychological dispositions of individuals (Merton, 1976).

The findings of this research also have implications for further inquiry about dog parks. Future research could clarify whether a situated activities approach would aid in understanding larger and/or more numerous unfenced dog parks. In the latter case, one would expect that territoriality issues involving both



human and nonhuman animals would increase. It is very likely that the kinds of social participation activities engaged in will also differ by dog park, social class, region, etc. and that such parks will link to local communities in different ways. Likewise, social control may differ considerably in other jurisdictions, with more active involvement of park rangers, police or animal control, dog or human training, and the use of other third parties in managing disputes. Studies of these variations could help to understand to what extent the problems of the dog park are attributable to the inherent limitations of self-help or the relative absence of paid professional management.

This study suggests that dog parks not only provide insight into canine behavior, but also into human-animal and human-human interaction. Thus, while dog parks may appear as urban playgrounds for dogs, the interactions that take place there have implications that extend far beyond the fence that defines their boundary.

### Acknowledgments

My sincere appreciation goes to Cindy Stearns for her support of this project. I would also like to thank Leslie Irvine and the reviewers of *Society & Animals* for their detailed criticisms. This study has not been supported by grant funds.

### Notes

1. There is no authoritative data source on the number of dog parks. The lowest estimate is around 700, cited by Lee et al. (2009) and a Wikipedia entry (n.d.). My estimates are based on the following data: as of July 27, 2009, there were between 1,406 and 3,664 open and fenced dog parks in the United States; the lower estimate includes only fenced dog parks. One source (U.S.A. Dog Parks) lists 686 dog parks nationwide, and another (Dog Fun Directory) lists 1,679 (each manually counted and excluding non-American parks). The first includes parks where leashes are required. Reporting of dog parks is completely voluntary, and the data should be viewed accordingly.

### References

- Alger, J. M., & Alger, S. F. (1999). Cat culture, human culture: An ethnographic study of a cat shelter. *Society & Animals*, 7(3), 199-218.
- American Pet Products Association. Industry Statistics & Trends: Pet Ownership. Retrieved January 20, 2010, from [http://www.americanpetproducts.org/press\\_industrytrends.asp](http://www.americanpetproducts.org/press_industrytrends.asp).

- Arkow, P. (1998). *Pet therapy: A study and resource guide for the use of companion animals in selected therapies* (8th ed.). Stratford, NJ: Humane Society of the Pikes Peak Region.
- Arluke, A., & Sanders, C. R. (1996). *Regarding animals*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- . (2009). *Between the species: Readings in human-animal relations*. New York: Pearson.
- Beck, A., & Katcher, A. (1996). *Between pets and people: The importance of animal companionship*. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press.
- Cain, A. (1983). A study of pets in the family system. In A. Katcher & A. Beck (Eds.), *New perspectives on our lives with companion animals* (pp. 71-81). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Cavan, S. (1963). Interaction in home territories. *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, 5(1), 1-27.
- Dog Fun Directory. Retrieved July 27, 2009, from [www.ecoanimal.com/dogfun](http://www.ecoanimal.com/dogfun)
- Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. L., & Shaw, L. L. (1995). *Writing ethnographic fieldnotes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Felstinger, W. (1974). Influences of social organization on dispute processing. *Law & Society Review*, 9(1), 63-94.
- Foster, L. K. (2006). *Dogs on the beach: A review of regulations and issues affecting dog beaches in California*. California State Library. Retrieved December 12, 2009, from <http://www.library.ca.gov/crb/06/06/06-006.pdf>.
- GfK Custom Research North America. (2008). Conducted by GfK Roper Public Affairs & Media. Retrieved July, 2009, from <http://www.petside.com/article/ap-petside-poll-most-owners-say-they-can-talk-pets>.
- Goffman, E. (1956). Embarrassment and social organization. *American Journal of Sociology*, 62(3), 264-274.
- . (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- . (1961). *Encounters*. New York: Bobbs-Merrill.
- . (1966). *Behavior in public places*. Glencoe, IL: Free Press.
- . (1971). *Relations in public*. New York: Basic Books.
- Greenebaum, J. (2004). It's a dog's life: Elevating status from pet to "fur baby" at yappy hour. *Society & Animals*, 12(2), 117-135.
- Hart, L. A. (1995). Dogs as human companions: A review of the relationship. In J. Serpell (Ed.), *The domestic dog: Its evolution, behaviour and interactions with people* (pp. 161-178). Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press.
- Irvine, L. (2004). *If you tame me: Understanding our connection with animals*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- King, T., & Long, T. (2004). Dog parks: The good, the bad, and the ugly. *Chronicle of the Dog*, 11(6), 1-5. Retrieved November 18, 2009, from <http://www.apdt.com>.
- Lee, H.-S., Shepley, M., & Huang, C.-S. (2009). Evaluation of off-leash dog parks in Texas and Florida: A study of use patterns, user satisfaction, and perception. *Landscape and Urban Planning*, 92, 314-324.
- McNicholas, J., & Collis, G. M. (2000). Dogs as catalysts for social interactions: Robustness of the effect. *British Journal of Psychology*, 91(1), 61-70.
- Melson, G. F. (1988). Availability of an involvement with pets by children: Determinants and correlates. *Anthrozoös*, 2, 45-52.
- Merton, R. K. (with E. Barber). (1976). Sociological ambivalence. In R. K. Merton (Ed.), *Sociological ambivalence and other essays* (pp. 3-31). New York: The Free Press.
- Messent, P. (1983). Social facilitation of contact with other people by pet dogs. In A. Katcher & A. Beck (Eds.), *New perspectives on our lives with companion animals* (pp. 37-460). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

- Ramirez, M. (2006). My dog is just like me: Dog ownership as gender display. *Symbolic Interaction*, 29(3), 373-391.
- Richards, D. (2008). Fighting for a dog park. In I. E. Newkirk (Ed.), *One can make a difference* (pp. 187-190). Avon, MA: Adams Media.
- Robins, D., Sanders, C., & Cahill, S. (1991). Dogs and their people: Pet-facilitated interaction in a public setting. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 20(1), 3-25.
- Sanders, C. (1990). Excusing tactics: Social responses to the public misbehavior of companion animals. *Anthrozoös*, 4(2), 82-90.
- . (2003). Actions speak louder than words: Close relationships between humans and non-human animals. *Symbolic Interaction*, 26(3), 405-426.
- Stewart, M. (1983). Loss of a pet—loss of a person: A comparative study of bereavement. In A. H. Katcher & A. M. Beck (Eds.), *New perspectives on our lives with companion animals* (pp. 390-404). Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- U.S.A. Dog Parks. Retrieved July 27, 2009, from [www.usadogparks.com](http://www.usadogparks.com)
- Webley, P., & Sivit, C. (2000). Why do some owners allow their dogs to foul the pavement? *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 30(7), 1371-1380.
- West, C. (1997). Not even a day in the life. *Qualitative Sociology*, 20(4), 447-456.
- Wikipedia. Dog parks. Retrieved August 23, 2009, from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dog\\_Park](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dog_Park).
- Wogan, L. (2008). *Dog park wisdom*. Seattle, WA: Skipstone Press.
- Wolch, J., & Rowe, S. (1992). Companions in the park. *Landscape*, 31, 16-23.