

The Culture of Dogdom

📅 Wed, 8/18 10:03AM ⌚ 50:15

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

dogs, people, smell, leash, humans, wolves, understand, horowitz, talk, thought, barking, started, names, study, bond, person, species, chew, read, interested

SPEAKERS

Tricia Johnson, Kitty Boone, Alexandra Horowitz, audience member



Tricia Johnson 00:03

It's Aspen Ideas to go from the Aspen Institute. I'm Tricia Johnson. Researcher Alexandra Horowitz stepped out of her New York City apartment one day and began to observe how people speak to their dogs. Horowitz is a dog scientist who runs the dog cognition lab at Barnard College.



Alexandra Horowitz 00:20

First of all, everybody talks to the dog. And that's a. And b, it's wonderful. It's just like, I think it's very lovely that we do. We're in constant conversation with our dogs, and this is fascinating to me, since they never respond.



Tricia Johnson 00:35

How much can our furry friends really understand? Horowitz says it's less about the words we use and more about the context. Ahead, she describes the psychology of dogs. Aspen Ideas to Go brings you compelling conversations hosted by the Aspen Institute. Today's discussion is part of the Murdock Mind, Body, Spirit series from Aspen Community Programs. The relationship between dogs and their human owners is unique and complex. The way we speak to our dogs is perplexing and delightful and our bond with them has emotional depth, perhaps even more so during the pandemic when many of us relied on their companionship. Horowitz says the story of humans and dogs is 1000s of years old,

but far from understood. She is one of a growing number of dog researchers who are working to get to the bottom of it. In an upbeat and light hearted conversation, she speaks with the Aspen Ideas Festival Director Kitty Boone about the odd and surprising ways we live with dogs. Here's Boone.

K

Kitty Boone 01:37

So Alexandra Horowitz without going into great length here, is a researcher. She got her BA in philosophy at Penn, then got her doctorate in psychology. Before we get started, I just really was reading your bio and thinking how did you go from being a philosophy major to a dog scientist?

A

Alexandra Horowitz 01:59

Yeah, you know, there weren't, there wasn't such a thing as a dog scientist when I started my studies, right. And it's actually still kind of a funny phrase, dog scientist. But when I did philosophy, I was interested in questions of mind, you know, how do we know about mind and then later, I decided to study cognitive science and bring some kind of more scientific approach to that. And I was very interested, I got very interested in non animal, non human animal mind. And I think I'd always had a sensitivity about animals. But I didn't think I'd study them, right. I didn't want to be a vet, there was no other way to study animals. But when I got very interested in the non human animal mind, I thought, well, there's got to be some behavior that they do that can tell us about what they know or understand. And I thought play behavior would be the behavior I would study. Well, I was looking at non human primates because that's what everybody studied. You study chimpanzees, you study bonobos, you study our closest relatives, because they're the likeliest ones to show something similar to our minds, we thought. Meanwhile, I was trying to find bonobos and chimpanzees who were playing, and they play, but not not when you're watching often, and they're not always available. And meanwhile, I lived with a dog, Pumpernickel. And I was taking her out to the beach in San Diego when I was in graduate school, several times a day. And she was playing. And it took me about six months before I realized, I should be studying that species. That's the playing species. And something about play will tell us about mind just as it does in infants, right. And young children when they play. They're like learning to be people, learning to interact with others. And so suddenly, I was studying dogs, studying dog play, what a great gig. But when I finished my dissertation, I realized I was I was more interested in dogs qua dogs than I was in, you know, what was what was play telling us about their mind. I just wanted to know everything about dogs. And it was right when there were few other people around the world like Brian Hare, who was here last time thinking about dog mind, and we all at once became dog scientists. And now there's actually a big field of, of dog cognitive

science. So now you can be an undergraduate major in cognitive science and, and study dogs.

K

Kitty Boone 04:25

As we talk about the culture of dogdom, it seems relevant to share some statistics with you and I just thought it was interesting that what happened during the pandemic was that, you probably read about this, is it pet adoption just went pretty much off the charts. So much so that there were shelters around the country that were out of dogs and cats, something like 891,482 animals, cats and dogs, were adopted in 2020. And of those, 452,000, just about a fair split, were dogs. And the other interesting statistic that this person reported was that the number of foster dogs went off the charts to close to 55,000 families or people fostered animals in 2020. So it seems to me that there are a few reasons why somebody would have adopted a dog: emotional support, companionship, and licks. And I just want you to respond a little bit. Is that what it's about is why you think everybody adopted dogs, so many? It's not that we don't adopt dogs all the time, we do. But it just seemed like it just went off the charts in the last year.

A

Alexandra Horowitz 05:37

Yeah, well, I think there was this fascinating phenomenon that happened. And I think mostly for the good for dogs, which was that we suddenly really saw the value that they are in our lives, right, we all knew how valuable they were in our lives. But suddenly, it was brought into stark relief. And that's for a couple of reasons. One, that as you mentioned, the emotional support, but the licks too has a true component to it, right, we were not able to contact other people, but who can we contact and be in touch with all the time, it's our dogs, right, they will suffer our petting them non stop, they want to be by our sides, they want to always be in the room or touching us, laying their head on our lap or foot. That kind of contact I think served as a proxy for human contact when we were alienated from each other. So at some level, I think people realized this is the place that they have in our lives, and we want to bring more of them in. And then people thought, oh, I have a lot of time, this is, you know, it is a great idea to bring a dog into your family when you're at home and can slowly acclimate them to the world of humans, and maybe the world of humans when you're not at home all the time eventually. But that is an ideal time to bring dogs into our home. So I think it was our appreciation for them, a realization that as a species, they are our perfect companions, even in the time, the worst time, you know, that we might live through in our lives.

K

Kitty Boone 07:13

So we talked about the relationship with dogs and humans. But let's go way back for a minute way, way back, 1000s of years back. Can you talk a little bit about how humans started connecting with dogs and what it was about the dog that became the most domesticated animal?

A

Alexandra Horowitz 07:33

We don't have the perfect answer to how it all started. But there are a couple of theories. And we think it's at least 14,000 years ago, because we have archaeological evidence of people have dogs buried with people that far back. So there are a couple of possibilities. One is that dogs kind of self domesticated, wolves sort of self domesticated themselves. Wolves who were less fearful of humans than wolves are naturally started approaching places where people lived and found that there was this great resource around people, which was that we had started generating trash, great food niche for them, they could eat that trash, some of the puppies, the wolf pups, might have been taken in by people, and raised and sometimes even eaten at the time, but maybe raised to adulthood, and then slowly we started breeding them. That's one possibility. Another possibility is that from the get go, humans intentionally selected this species, some wolves, who were again, slightly less fearful than other wolves, and started specifically breeding them to be companions, but to be guards and hunting companions more than anything. And so why wolves or dogs, these proto dogs over any other animal? Well, I think there were a couple of reasons. One is they're social. So they have a social life that's similar to our social life in that they live in family packs. We live in family packs, so they have allegiances to members of their pack. Some of these animals had a lot of behavioral flexibility so that they could view not just other wolves as members of their family pack, but also a non wolf species like humans, and so they could if they were introduced early enough into our family packs, could see us as part of the family and behave like they would to members of their family. That's another thing and then eventually, as we started breeding them, they had attributes that we really desired. And one of them that's talked about a lot with dog scientists is that when they look at us, they follow our gaze. So if you're out in the wild, you're out for a nice hike, and you see a bear, what the bear is not doing, you hope, is looking you in the face. Right? If they are that's a bad sign, that's a threat. Right? And you want to get out of there. Similarly with a wolf, direct gaze is viewed as a threat. And that's the case with most animals, non human animals even today, a wolf even today, right? But not with us, right? I mean, I wouldn't stare at somebody I don't know. But making eye contact is, is the predicate for understanding. It's how we communicate with each other. It's how we show affection to each other. It's, it's a show of cooperation and respect and understanding. And these early dogs, probably were able to look at people's eyes. And then they could start to use those eyes for information, start to understand what we were saying, follow where we were pointing to get information about what was around them,

and then they resembled us, then they seem like us. So they took maybe accidentally, maybe through our domesticating them an early step, which made them perfect companions for us.

K

Kitty Boone 10:59

But you also, it's what I just love about the way you write about it, they transformed us as well. And you say in kind of a profound statement that the domestication of dogs actually changed the course of human sapiens, Homo sapiens.

A

Alexandra Horowitz 11:15

Yeah, there's even a theory that we we could be considered sort of domesticated ourselves right alongside with dogs, that we became more even tempered, more cooperative, that some of the things we do now in the 21st century are a result of our transformation just in line with the dogs' transformation.

K

Kitty Boone 11:40

What did that domestication do to us? Did it make us more simpatico? I mean, how do you think it? How did it change us? I mean, clearly, they became helps in hunting so maybe it moved us along the food chain a little bit. I know what dogs do to me, I'm just curious about, you know, 10,000 years ago, how we evolved slightly differently because of dogs.

A

Alexandra Horowitz 12:04

You know, my colleague Brian Hare talks about dogs as the friendly species and, and humans as successful also, because we are fundamentally friendly. So he takes a real non Machiavellian approach, saying that the reason we've succeeded is because of our cooperativeness. And maybe dogs pushed us in that direction.

K

Kitty Boone 12:24

Oh, that's so interesting. So let's talk a little bit about what bonds mean. You suggest that the dog-human bond is both connection, but also built of reciprocity, and that we have a unique relationship with dogs. And maybe we've talked about this a little bit. But what defines that is that they say that when you when you look at a dog's eyes, and that dog looks back at you, in the eyes, there's this rush of oxytocin and you fall in love. What is it about human dog connection that's particularly unique?

A

Alexandra Horowitz 12:59

They do seem to have hijacked this system, which works for humans, where when you have an infant, you know, infants who are very needy, and really dependent and require adult help, and very cute, but require our help to survive. That just by looking at an infant, we get a rush of oxytocin, which kind of creates a bond, a parent-child bond. And dogs have seemed to have hijack that system. So that similarly, when we look at dogs, or when we touch dogs, or pet them, we get that rush of oxytocin. So that's maybe the neurological foundation of the bonds. But I think the bond is the feeling of mutual understanding, and cooperativeness and affection. Right? I think that's the core of the bonds, that we see something, we see our better selves in dogs, and we want to be affiliated with them, and they suffer affiliation with us. And we both wind up with this attachment and affection for each other.

K

Kitty Boone 14:07

And different kinds of people have different kinds of attachments to different kinds of dogs. I already mentioned I'm a Labrador person. I am sure there are a million breeds of dogs represented by people in this room. Are different kinds of dog breeds different in the way they attach to humans?

A

Alexandra Horowitz 14:25

Well, it's certainly the case that dogs are our mirror in some respect, right. And some people, they're having these fascinating these lovely studies, a little off your question, that people look like their dogs. You might have a sense of this, but it actually bears out when subjects are asked to match photos of people and across cultures, match photos of people with their dogs, they they can do it at rates greater than chance and it's not because, oh, the long blonde haired woman and the Afghan hound, it's not that, it's like the noble bearing of a dog and the very regal man or the sit up straight, right? I was trying to shake myself more regal or a goofy looking, you know, Golden Retriever and a kind of goofy looking guy. You know, it's these sort of sensibility issues. So we do, we seem to either pick dogs who we feel represent us in some ways or, here's my theory, we make ourselves more like our dogs over time. So there is that matching between people and different breeds or mixed breeds. And we even match dogs in our personalities and our temperaments. So people who rank higher on neuroticism, for instance, tend to have more neurotic dogs.

K

Kitty Boone 15:47

Okay, okay. Okay, that is it. Can we just talk about that for a second? I mean, is it assumed that if you see a dog that you think is neurotic, that maybe the owner is, all of a sudden has some characteristic that you never knew about that person before?

A

Alexandra Horowitz 16:06

What I mean is that it's a correlation. Yeah. I'm not I'm not saying anything about the causal era, though, there. But yes, right. Agreeable people who rank high in agreeableness have agreeable dogs and so forth. So yeah, there is some ways in which our dogs reflect us.

K

Kitty Boone 16:22

One of the things that people say to me frequently, and of course, it's, you know, flattering to no end is, you're dogs are so happy. I don't know if dogs really smile. But are some dogs just naturally happy dogs versus other dogs that are more serious?

A

Alexandra Horowitz 16:40

Yeah, yeah, sure. There are definitely more serious minded dogs. And there are dogs who are depressed dogs, right. I mean, dogs can get into a state of depression, but there are dogs who are naturally more easygoing, and dogs, instead of happy, I would probably use easygoing or intent, right, very keen, working dogs who have the one thing they need to and the drive to do it. They don't look happy, per se, unless they're doing that activity. And then they're very happy, right, and dogs who are more easygoing, seem to have that temperament no matter what they're doing.

K

Kitty Boone 17:16

What was the book that I read about the woman whose dog was a German Shepherd breed who could find a body. A cadaver dog. And the interesting thing about getting into that story was how that dog got that job. Because the dog seemed very, just seemed a little bit neurotic. And the trainer was like, would you give your dog a job, like this dog needs a job. Anyway, it's just interesting to see, and Australian Shepherds, there's one in our neighborhood, a little puppy who just herds all of the dogs in the neighborhood, just instinct. It's so interesting to see how they behave.

A

Alexandra Horowitz 17:55

This is what I think is so fascinating about how we live with dogs now is that, you know,

many of them have been bred for quite a long time to do a specific job that we're not asking them to do anymore. And we need to give them something else to do. And this is something that people now spending a year in constant presence with their dogs, which they might not have before, are seeing, that their dog kind of seems bored during the day, or it doesn't have anything to do or needs something to do. And I think that's absolutely the case. It's interesting that we're now seeing it, where people hadn't seen it before.

K

Kitty Boone 18:29

Well, one of the things you write in a kind of hilarious chapter, I thought, was how we speak to our dogs. How do we speak to our dogs? And what does it say about us? And when I was reading this, I immediately changed the way I would speak to my dogs. I'm very conscious of what I'm saying to them. And I was sharing with Alexandra that I listen to books when I walked my dogs, and I don't use earphones. So the dogs are extremely well read. Really good mysteries and a little Tolstoy. And if they run away, you know it's a really boring passage now. Tell us a little bit about what you've learned about how people speak to their dogs, and sitting in the park in New York City.

A

Alexandra Horowitz 19:14

This was such a fun chapter to write in my last book, things people say to their dogs, because I think it hadn't really hadn't occurred to me how much I talked to my dogs. As much as I am an observer of dogs, I wasn't observing myself sometimes with my dogs. But I would go outside my apartment in New York City. And I realized that, you know, you'll see suddenly a dozen dogs on the street. And as I would approach people, they would talk to their dog, they would say something to their dog. And I started thinking about that. And then I started writing down what everybody was saying. And then it became, you know, I was like, following people listening to things that they were saying to their dogs. And when people would come into the lab to do studies with their dogs. You know, I would take note of what they said to their dog, and it's first of all, everybody talks to their dog. That's a and b, is it's wonderful. I think it's a very lovely that we do. We're in constant conversation with our dogs. And this is fascinating to me since they never respond. Sometimes people will respond for them. So there's a whole sub way of people, people talking to their dogs, where they also fill in the dog's voice.

K

Kitty Boone 20:25

You've got to give us some examples.

A

Alexandra Horowitz 20:32

You want me to do my dog's voice?

K

Kitty Boone 20:34

No, no, just like, how they're feeling in the dogs voice?

A

Alexandra Horowitz 20:38

Constantly when people are walking with their dogs they say, well, if you don't do your business, we're gonna have to go home. And then they'll wait for the dog to say something. The dog says nothing. And they'll say, all right, well, I told you, I warned you about this, we talked about this. Well, I know we have to get home, I told you earlier. So it's back and forth like this. And that's the type of way people talk to their dogs. They also, you know, kind of admonish them. I remember one gentleman walking his dog and his dog was being sniffed by another dog and seemed a little shy about being sniffed. And the guy said to his dog, he said, come on, be a man. It's so perfect. And then there are people who talk to their dogs as a proxy for talking to somebody else. So if there was a disagreement that you and I were having, Kitty, and your dog Trout was here, I might say, well, Trout, Kitty isn't being very friendly now, is she? As a kind of indirect way of talking so that we let them in on this conversation we're having, which I think is a beautiful manifestation of how deeply they're in our psyche at all times. So they don't really understand the words, but they understand tonality, certain commands, we don't think they understand. Well, you know, there are a couple of mostly Australian Shepherds who are Border Collies, sorry, who do understand a lot of words. I'm sure that many of you have read about Rico or Chaser who know 1000 words for toys, so many words for toys that their owners have to write the name of the toy on the toy so they can remember what the word for the toy is. Bring me Einstein, bring me dyno bring me, you know, the Grinch, or whatever it is, or, or go touch dyno, and they're, they're terrific at it. But those are dogs who are sort of heavily trained in understanding those words. Now, it's not their native language. And we don't speak to them in a way that they can understand particularly right. If I asked my dogs, if they want to go outside, you know, I'll ask, do you want to go out? Should we go for a walk? Do you want to? Do you need to go do your business? I'll say lots of different things they don't. And so it will take a dog a long time to pick up. And what they'll pick up is the sort of tone of the sentence, right? The place where I say that sentence, like my manner toward them, so they're very attuned to the things that we don't think carry the meaning. We think meaning is all in the words. But for them, the meaning is on all the other things, all the context, and they're working very hard to understand it, right. But yeah, the guy who says to his dog, be a man, you know, I don't think any of that is communicated to the dog.

K

Kitty Boone 23:34

Can they read our emotions?

A

Alexandra Horowitz 23:37

Yeah, they're very good. They're very sensitive to changes in our emotional state. And there has been interesting research. I mean, a lot of people might assent that when, if you're upset, say you're crying, you're sad, that often a dog will come and provide comfort. And it's not obvious that the dog knows that you're sad. And that approach will make you feel better. But in fact, the dog does notice that something's different about you, you're doing something different, you're probably giving off a smell that is different than usual. And they're concerned about it. And they go and then their proximity brings you comfort. So they are sensitive to that. There are dogs who can distinguish between faces of angry and happy people in determining, you know, whose advice to follow. For instance, they choose the happy person not the angry person, if you've ever wondered why when you're angry, your dog like runs away, you know, they're very sensitive to that. So they do understand emotions in those broad strokes ways as they have those emotions themselves.

K

Kitty Boone 24:39

Can they also understand when you're sick?

A

Alexandra Horowitz 24:42

Yeah, we smell sick, right? I mean, it's funny because we actually often can detect the smell of disease on someone else, but we don't use our nose in those ways. But dogs, dogs do. And so you know if your dog comes up to one morning and smells you know is very concerned about your breath, say, I would say yeah, that's probably you're probably getting a little bit of a cold, you might want to have a little more vitamin C that morning. They are really good detectors of difference. And they're very sensitive to smells in a way that we are not, as we know. As the cadaver detection dogs tell us. How does knowing that you have a cold or frankly, cancer, which I've heard dogs can detect. Yeah.

K

Kitty Boone 25:22

How does that manifest into a behavior towards us?

A

Alexandra Horowitz 25:27

So the very first cases of dogs detecting cancers were were accidental. And they were written up in The Lancet, this medical journal in Britain. And they were both cases where the person noticed that the dog was just being really annoying, in a specific way, like, just kept smelling my left leg, just wouldn't let me alone. And the other one, it was the armpit, just wouldn't stop smelling at it. After months and months, you know, they will go to the doctor, one of them had a melanoma on the left leg, which was caught and was removed early enough and the other one had breast cancer. So the dog had just showed persistent interest in the area that smelled different. Now I'm not saying that you should all look for your dogs to be cancer detection dogs, but the dogs who are being trained to do that, they have very specific alerts. So they'll be asked to sit next to the odor of disease carrying cells, for instance, and they're really good at it. I mean, that they can do it naturally. They only need to be trained to be motivated, basically, right, to be interested in constantly doing this. And we have to be trained to listen to them. Because we're mostly, you know, if a dog was sniffing my knee a lot one day, I'm not going to think anything of it. But if we knew that they're trying to communicate with us about this, then we would realize that that's something I should attend to.

K

Kitty Boone 26:54

Okay, you also spend, in your book, a really wonderful chapter on names for dogs. And so I thought we should talk a little bit about, What's in a Name. And I, you know, already shared, the silly name of my wannabe son's -- he thought that someday he would be a fly fisherman, so, you know, I have a dog named Trout. The problem is that he is the best swimmer and he would swim in a puddle if you asked him to. He is the most appropriately named dog I can imagine. But there's a lot of funny things about names and you talk so beautifully about names and it's just hilarious.

A

Alexandra Horowitz 27:35

I love thinking about what we name our dogs because, well, first of all, it's a time of great pleasure you know, choosing a name for a dog. But it shows something about us as a society how we've treated dogs over the last hundreds of years, right, dogs used to all be the kind of Rex, Spot type of names. Now most dogs, maybe not Trout, but you have a Jack as well, right?, have half human names. And not only do they have human names, but often I've found that dogs are named after an important relative. I've heard about a lot of dogs named after a deceased grandparent, just as you might name a child after someone whose revered in your family, now the dogs are getting that name and I think this is just evermore indication of how deeply they've worked their way into our family. That wasn't the case 50 years ago, right? There were more Blackies, this type of name,

right. Now it's Charlie, Daisy, right? The top 10 dog names are all but one I think are human names. So I find that to be an you know, I've really enjoyed and maybe Trout lived up to his name right? Because as we sometimes imagine that children will live into their names and often asked to give advice on what you should name a dog right as though it were would predestined them to some great future. I just say just it has to be something you're willing to say a lot. That's, that's the science of it.

K

Kitty Boone 29:09

So you do have a dog, a new dog named Quiddity, which I think you need to explain a little bit because that is like not a name on the top 10.

A

Alexandra Horowitz 29:20

We have a Finnegan, which is a popular name. Are there any Finnegan owners here? There sometimes are. And Upton. They are very literary dogs. And Quiddity is our new puppy and was named by my son who wanted to call her Quid and quiddity means essence, the essence of a thing, and she surely is the essence of a puppy. So we thought that was a perfect name for her and it's not a human name so I'm bucking my own trend. She responds to all the other dogs' names too.

K

Kitty Boone 29:53

Lots of syllables. I always thought that you should name a dog one syllable, thus Jack and trout, but I don't like to say Trout actually.

A

Alexandra Horowitz 30:04

My favorite people's names are ones who have the very long sort of official name, right? In addition to the nickname, right? So their name might be Pickles, but his name is actually you know, Mr. Esteemed Pickles of the Buckenham Pickles the Third, right? And they'll bring out that long name and very serious occasions. Just in the house, I call him Pickles.

K

Kitty Boone 30:11

So there's no really advice you can give this crowd about how to think about...

A

Alexandra Horowitz 30:35

I mean, you know, some people will say you want something that's distinct from the other words you're going to say, right? It's going to begin that language that you use that you want the dog to understand, you're going to put the name at the front of it. So you want it to be in some way distinct, but I think it's just should be something that's meaningful to you that lets them be part of your family, just as you would name another member of your family.

K

Kitty Boone 30:57

Does my dog love me? I mean, how do we know that dogs...There's no question that we all love our dogs. I'm sure of that. That's why we're all here. But do they really love us back? Like, what does that look like and feel like for them?

A

Alexandra Horowitz 31:12

Right? Well, you know, what's interesting is that until very recently, scientists would be loath to say that dogs love. Why is that? That's because we think that any kind of emotive word must be anthropomorphizing. And I do think it's important not to over anthropomorphize. In other words, not to assume that dogs just are having the exact same experience as we are. But if you look at dog's behavior, there's no other way to describe most of their behavior towards us, then affection or love, right? I mean, the looking for you, when you're missing the huge, excited, enthusiastic greetings when you return, the wanting to be near you the feeling distress of being separated from you, kissing around the face, responsiveness to you, all of those things are kind of evidence of love. What does it feel like? My guess is it feels very much like what it feels like for us minus some of the intellectualizing that we do about our love relationships.

K

Kitty Boone 32:18

You've all seen those incredible, make you cry videos of the parent coming home from Iraq, and the dog, just going bananas and hasn't seen that person for a year, which makes me ask about memory, and sort of these remarkable stories of dogs traveling 200 miles or 2000 miles to get home. I mean, it's really fascinating behavior. But what's built into that dog's instinct?

A

Alexandra Horowitz 32:46

We still don't really have a way of proving that a dog has an autobiographical memory, but all meaning they sort of sit around and think about their life, the way we think about our life, right? I mean, they have the time or they ruminating on that, that trip they took to

the dog store, but we know they remember, they remember people they remember places they remember routes, they remember components of things that have happened that we might not have been aware of right. One of the things I love about those, sometimes those videos where somebody is returning home, especially someone who's been in the military, so they've gone quite a long time, is that sometimes you see this kind of feature of the dog human relationship, which we don't think a lot about, sometimes they're not recognized right away, the person gets out of the car, and the dog barks, right isn't sure it's just a person getting out of the car, maybe in a uniform. But then like the wind changes, or they get close, and the dog can smell the person, right? So not only do they have a memory, and that's when it all changes, that's when they go bananas when they've smelled so I think a lot of their memory is in smell and if you think about your smell memories, I mean, if I asked you for your earliest smell memory, it's probably very evocative right of a whole scene. Right just the smell of talcum powder. And suddenly my grandmother is there it you know, sitting around this horseshoe table that she had and she's cutting up tomatoes and and Manet's because she liked to serve tomatoes and manna and like the whole thing is right there just at the smell. And my guess is that for dogs smells are similarly evocative but of, you know, of everything, not just in these punctuated ways that we have a couple of distant smell memories, but that their memories made up mostly of smell memories. Oh, that's interesting. Can dogs be humiliated? Yeah, we were talking about this before because the dog costumes because that came up. And I and and dog costumes are part of you know, how do we treat dogs. I think one of the reasons we want to live with dogs is because they are animal because they are other and yet there's something familiar about them. And I'm always very confused when we treat them like ersatz humans, right? Where we, you know, give them birthday parties, that's fine, but, or we dress them in elaborate outfits. Okay. But sometimes, you know, you do see in the dogs, this real reluctance. And I think there is a level of humiliation in being put in costumes and forced to being trotted out. This uncomfortable costume they can't control. It's pressing down on their body. Their doxon who's now a hot dog. Right? That I think I think it is. It's, it's, it's interesting to me, because people who do that love their dogs. I have, but no question about it. But it's not necessarily respecting the dog's point of view.

K

Kitty Boone 35:54

Okay, we've got to talk about the leash. It was either your book or another where the author talks about the sense of smell, and maybe it's yours, right? Is it in your book, is this one? Where by virtue of putting dogs on leashes, one of the reasons they use smell so much, what is it 200 million sensors and their nose or whatever it is in their nose, and we have something like 200,000. I mean, it's like the difference in a dog's ability to smell is so much more pronounced than it is in humans. And one of the one of the things that could be happening by virtue of putting a dog on a leash and pulling them away from smelling

because you're in a hurry, or whatever it is, is that they're losing that power of smell. So that's one thing that struck me when you wrote about that, but can you talk to us a little bit about behavior on leashes and the role of the leash and when to leash and when not to leash? Your views of the leash?

A

Alexandra Horowitz 36:52

Probably 100 years ago, people started selling a lot of leashes and dogs were now more integrated into urban communities, coming into houses more, not living as much outside and it became natural that the way we control the dog is with a leash. But I'm with Mary Oliver. In one of her poems, she talks about the pleasure of watching dogs play off leash, you know, that's one of my great visceral pleasures. I just feel happy. Watching dogs play together, off leash. A leashed dog is part of our current contemporary culture. But there are problems with it. When we put a leash on a dog, we're restricting what they can naturally do, we're potentially restricting their ability to smell, in other words, to see the world because we're not interested in they're smelling the thing, we're not that interested in the smells that they discovered. We might be limiting their ability to socially interact normally with other dogs. Because dogs can behave a little more reactive or aggressively on leash, we instinctively try to keep them away from other dogs as a result, and then they don't get to interact with another dog and just have that normal social interaction that they would. So it's not something which is going away anytime soon. Although, you know, we'll say there are other cultures where leashes are very uncommon. And they, it still works, right. The way we have chosen is the leash. So I just want us to be conscious of the fact that by putting a dog on the leash, we're circumscribing what they can do, and we're changing their behavior. There's a lot of energy that travels down the leash. There was one study of dogs working with their handlers in smelling trials, actually. And when the handlers got very stressed as gauged by their cortisol levels going up, the dog's cortisol levels went up too. It's as though it literally travels down the leash -- when we're unhappy, they're unhappy. And so just imagine how much we're bringing to our interaction with our dogs all the time, via this seemingly benign, but maybe not so benign appendage between us.

K

Kitty Boone 39:07

You have a lab. It's not really, there's no pun intended. She has a laboratory. But it's not really in a kind of a room. Your laboratory is the world really, it sounds like to me. You study dogs. What's the ultimate goal of your lab? What insights would you really love to discover in your lab?

A

Alexandra Horowitz 39:36

I guess, ideally, what I would discover through doing simple experiments, through watching dogs interact with each other in their natural environment, interact with people is, is what it's like to be a dog. You know, what is it? experientially What does it feel like from the dogs point of view, that would be the ideal that I would be able to appreciate their perspective. pletely right? So not just say, How smart are they? You know, do they understand what I'm saying? But what's their perception of this room? You know, like, what do they know about their own past and future? What do they know about me that I don't know? about myself? Right? What's their point of view? That's kind of everything that I'm aiming toward.

K

Kitty Boone 40:22

If there were one thing that you would love to see dog owners do what would it be?

A

Alexandra Horowitz 40:27

Well, it might be something you're already doing. But I would say it's, let them sniff. That's part of a broader kind of, let them be dogs, which doesn't sound very profound, but it is because of the many ways we don't let them be dogs. We already control everything about their lives, right? When they can go out, when they eat, who they can see, when they can be with us, when they can't, when they can play, when they can pee, when they're supposed to sleep, all these things we control about there, they have very few choices. Their world is wrought of smells, right? And they love living in that world. So the more that you can, on your walk, let them sniff the thing that they want to sniff once in a while, let them get close to that other dog and sniff that other dog because that's how they say hello, I think the better life they will have.

K

Kitty Boone 41:25

Okay, do we have any questions?

A

audience member 41:28

So my question is, when a dog has a sickness, do they tend to hide their pain from us?

A

Alexandra Horowitz 41:36

They are sort of naturally stoic. That's partly that they may be part of this vestigial impulse

from their ancestry as wolves that to be sick is to be weak, right, and to be weak is to be difficult member of a pack, right, no longer helpful in the pack. So you don't show weakness until you have to show weakness. So that might be sort of a vestigial stoicism that we see in our dogs. And also, it's difficult for us to read their expressions of pain. I mean, we have a lot of trouble reading our dogs are great readers of our behavior. But it's it's very tough for us to read their behavior. But times that a dog doesn't want to be touched, for instance, a time that dog moves away from him doesn't want doesn't go for contact but wants to be by themselves. I feel like that's partly stoicism and partly just their only way of telling you that contact or touch is difficult for them now.

A

audience member 42:40

My dog is Jackson and he's a Maltese. He's just mad for food, 24 seven. And so I had somebody, one day I was at the park and this young girl said to me, well, you know, dogs don't know that they're going to get another meal. And I said, they don't? Point being that, I mean, he's consumed by it at all times.

A

Alexandra Horowitz 43:09

So is your question, why is that the case? (Yeah.) So this is a great example of every dog is different, right? I mean, for many dogs training with food is perfect, because they're ravenous, about, you know, a dog who was who just has this consumptive appetite, I would say, you probably should use food as a reward because it will be very rewarding, right? You could restrict her, her his food. Jackson's a he? Yeah, his food, too, just times that you're going on a walk and you want him to stay by your side? or whatever it is, I think you could do that. Do they know that they're not know that they're getting another meal? I don't know. I don't, it's hard. I have to be kind of agnostic about that. But, you know, if you know this about your dog, I would say you should use that then to like, create a better life for them use it as a reward, punctuate the day with the food and don't have it available all the time. And he'll learn that it's coming, the next meal is coming.

A

audience member 44:08

So with regard to letting dogs be dogs, barking, you know, sometimes in our culture, we feel like don't bark so much. And the second one was leash, there's, you know, I can see how so many people walk their dogs without a leash. And then we always use a leash. And that's hard for the dog.

A

Alexandra Horowitz 44:31

So what to do about so barking is a great example of you know -- wolves don't bark, really, they barely make a barking sound at all. So why do dogs bark? Probably because of us. In other words, as a species, one thought is that they're trying to mimic at some level human speech. So I find it very poignant. That mostly we find barking, noisy, right and annoying because it's probably their way of Kind of communicating with us. And there are really different types of barks. And I think we feel differently about barks if we realize that they have different meanings. And that they're saying something, you know, if the dog is barking and you acknowledge what the dog, you know, a dog is barking in an alarm bark, because there's another dog coming up, recognizing that's what's happening. You know, you can even help the other dogs person by saying that, yeah, my dog has identified your dog. That's what he's doing. That's what she's doing. Realizing that it's that makes it more understandable, right? I'm not saying you should just let your dog bark all the time. And I'm saying it's a communication and it has a context. And knowing what it is starts make it starts to make it make sense. Similarly, with leashes, if you can't have your dog off leash all the time, you can't. But you try to find contexts where that will work for you and the dog and other people and dogs. And you just move into that space as much as possible. So it's just a matter of meeting the dog on their terms, right, as opposed to all us always bringing our ideas of you should be quiet, you should be on leash and controlled, and restricting their life. That would be my suggestion.

K

Kitty Boone 46:13

The concept of time. Do dogs know that they've been alone for 20 minutes versus two hours?

A

Alexandra Horowitz 46:20

There's some people think that they don't because because each time you get a really great greeting, right, when you come back in the door, you go, you went to do the laundry, like, yeah, you're back or like I've been gone for a week. Yeah, there was a research group, who looked at the intensity of the greeting when a person was gone for 20 minutes, or I think it was an hour or two hours. And they actually found that the the intensity of tail wag was higher, the longer they that that the person had been gone. So they are actually marking that there's a difference between those times that you're gone. I'm not sure you know how subtle it could be.

K

Kitty Boone 47:01

Right back here. sir. You have a question?

A

audience member 47:03

My dog's name is Riley, a German Shorthaired Pointer. I have two questions. One, when we talk to her, she puts her head down to the side. And we don't know what she's thinking. And the second more veterinary-wise is why do dogs love to chew on things humans don't like to chew on? What do dogs get out of it?

A

Alexandra Horowitz 47:24

Speak for yourself. So the head thing is, is as some people might have surmised is to hear better, right. So they, they will turn their head to get another kind of Vantage on the scene like we might turn you know, try to move around the piece of art or something to see it, it's slightly different way. So maybe your dog is looking for is just listening for something that's meaningful to them. Or maybe there's something that sounds like it's meaningful, but they're not sure. So cocking The head is a really nice example of that. And, you know, their ears are amazing, if you really watch their ears carefully. They're almost like horse ears, they can rotate all the way around, they, you know, they'll go up and down or flat back against they're so expressive, but a lot of their movements have to do with trying to localize and understand the sound. So that's probably what the head cocking is. And the other one was about chewing. Oh, well, you know, their mouth or that is their hands. their mouth has double duty, right? It is the way they interact with things. And it's it's the agent of getting smells and food in water into their body. But as the former, it's just their preoccupation. Do you ever hold on to something, rub something in your fingers? Or do you manipulate things with your hands? I think since they don't have that dexterity with their paws, they use their mouth that way. Then Then there's subsets of why do dogs chew like when they're teething? Right? They're likely to want to chew things and giving them something which is called to chew is actually just satisfying in that very literal way. But I think chewing is manipulating the world with their agent of manipulation and since they don't have hands.

K

Kitty Boone 49:06

Okay, well, I want to thank Dr. Horowitz for coming and sharing her wisdom. Thank you.

T

Tricia Johnson 49:20

Alexandra Horowitz is the author of "Our Dogs, Ourselves." She teaches psychology at Barnard College of Columbia University and runs the school's Horowitz Dog Cognition Lab. Kitty Boone is vice president of Public Programs at the Aspen Institute and executive director of the Aspen Ideas Festival. Their conversation was held in Aspen, Colorado as

part of the Murdock Mind, Body, Spirit series held by Aspen Community Programs. Make sure to subscribe to Aspen Ideas to Go wherever you're listening. Follow Aspen Ideas year round on social media at Aspen Ideas. today's conversation was designed by the Aspen Community Programs team Zoe Brown, Katie Carlsen, Cristal Logan, and Jillian Scott. Our music is by Wonderly. I'm Tricia Johnson. Thanks for joining me.