

## Can neuroimaging in dogs have practical implications?

Commentary on [Cook et al.](#) on *Dog Jealousy*

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**Abstract:** Jealousy, or at least aggression, can be observed in dogs using neuroimaging techniques, but this response attenuates quickly following repeated exposure to the aggression-inducing stimulus. This may have a practical application. Early socialisation as a puppy, and habituation as an adult dog, could help prevent undesirable behaviours such as predatory behaviour. It is unclear whether these processes are the same, and affected only by the dog's age. Neuroimaging could help us understand whether the same neurological processes underlie socialisation and habituation, and whether self-rewarding behaviours such as predatory behaviour could be stopped using socialisation/habituation techniques.

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As a general rule, I am wary of extrapolating subjective experience from neuroimaging data. An EEG waveform or an fMRI scan simply cannot explain what the colour red looks like, or what a bell sounds like, or whether a dog feels jealousy the way that humans do – or even, for that matter, whether two people experience jealousy in the same way. So I raised an eyebrow when I read the title of Cook et al.'s (2018) recently published target article suggesting that jealousy in dogs could be measured using fMRI techniques. In their text, however, the authors are appropriately circumspect about what their results might actually mean, and clearly specify that the neurological responses were most clearly related to aggression. This is similar in some ways to research showing that dogs and their owners both experience increases in oxytocin during interactions (Nagasawa et al., 2015). Do dogs therefore love us the way we love them? That remains an open question. It will require a phenomenal level of research ingenuity to describe subjective experience purely through neurological responses.

In my view, Cook et al.'s most intriguing finding is not the amygdala activation when 'another dog' is given a treat but the very rapid habituation that occurs in some of the dogs when the condition is repeated. These dogs were reported by their owners to be more aggressive than the others, which led the authors to suggest that these results could provide support for 'exposure therapy' as a treatment for undesirable behaviours. *That* is the part of the target article that really caught my attention.

My mentor and I have recently completed a study about whether it is possible to stop predatory behaviour towards small animals in greyhounds retired from the racing industry. Predatory behaviour is one of the key factors reducing a retired racer's chances of being rehomed as a pet, so stopping it could improve adoption outcomes. According to survey and interview responses from dog behaviour modification practitioners, there are two common

suggestions for stopping it: adequate socialisation to small animals when the greyhound is a puppy and carefully monitored, regular, safe exposure (i.e., habituation or exposure therapy) to small animals as an adult dog (unpublished data). These two recommendations may actually represent the same underlying process, which varies in practice depending on the age of the dog.

Puppy socialisation involves exposure to a wide range of experiences, objects, people, places, and other animals within the first few months of life (Battaglia, 2009). During this time, called the 'sensitive period of socialisation', puppies are particularly open to these new experiences. Because of this inherent openness at this age, an intensive process of exposure to any specific person/place/thing may be unnecessary. It is possible that habituation, which is an intensive process of exposure to a particular stimulus during the dog's adulthood, is an extension of the socialisation that should ideally occur during the sensitive period. If this is the case, perhaps it requires more careful attention than early-age socialisation because the adult dog is not as amenable to this process as the puppy, owing to changes associated with development.

Currently this is all conjecture, but neuro-imaging could help disentangle whether habituation is just the more difficult, adult dog version of socialisation. The fMRI data could be used to compare responses to various stimuli in well socialised and poorly socialised dogs, although it would require a lot of reflection to define what is meant by 'well-' and 'poorly-socialised' in the context of modern pet dogs sufficiently trained to sit still in a magnet. In a perfect world, studying fMRI responses in puppies as they move through the socialisation process would be very instructive but challenging from a logistical perspective; puppies typically have no interest in participating in scientific research, in my experience.

The neurological underpinnings of predatory behaviour differ from those of aggression (Panksepp & Biven, 2012), so it would be useful to know whether habituation practices with predatory dogs would result in an attenuation of the neurological response to predatory behaviour like that observed in the amygdala by Cook et al. Aggression is a fundamentally negative affective state, whereas predatory behaviour is generally positive (Panksepp & Biven, 2012). Would this make a difference to neurological habituation? If a dog finds predatory behaviour too rewarding inherently, perhaps habituation will never occur, or it may require too many of the finite resources of rescue and adoption organisations to be realistic. On the other hand, if specific techniques prove to decrease latency to habituation as indicated by fMRI data, these could then be implemented in practice.


Cook et al. present some very interesting results. Besides advancing our understanding of how dogs experience the world, applications of this technique could ultimately help improve dog welfare.

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LE PROBLÈME DES  
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THE OTHER  
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