

## Yes, Your Dog Really Can Tell How Competent You Are

Now we know there may indeed be a meaning behind that side eye you sometimes get from your dog. Not only may she be judging you for being too selfish and not putting her needs first, her assessment may actually be leading her to gravitate toward people she views as more capable.

**Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker**

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### STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Dogs are so in-tune with our actions that they can tell whether we're competent enough to complete a task for them, such as feeding them dinner
- If we're not competent, they'll be less likely to approach us, especially if they're female, according to a team of researchers from Kyoto University in Japan
- In a study of 30 dogs, compared to the male dogs, the female dogs stared at the competent human significantly longer when the container had food in it
- The female dogs, in particular, were also more likely to approach the competent person than the incompetent one when they opened a container with food
- The study suggests that not only can dogs recognize different competence levels in humans, but this ability influences their behavior as a result

It's one of the things we love most about our four-legged friends — the fact that they don't judge us, no matter what. Or do they? As the first domesticated animal,<sup>1</sup> it seems our dogs are so in-tune with our actions that they can tell whether we're competent enough to complete a task for them, such as feeding them dinner.

If we're not, they'll be less likely to approach us, especially if they're female, according to a team of researchers from Kyoto University in Japan.<sup>2</sup>

### Female Dogs Prefer to Associate With 'Competent' Humans

"Competence" in humans refers to characteristics like creativity, confidence, intelligence and skills. It's one measure that we often use to evaluate each other on a social level.<sup>3</sup> Dogs, too, may be giving you the side eye if they deem you're not one of the competent ones, and may gravitate to those they view as more capable. According to the study, which was published in the journal *Behavioural Processes*:<sup>4</sup>

*"Dogs are highly sensitive to human behavior, and they evaluate us using both their direct experiences and from a third-party perspective. Dogs pay attention to various aspects of our actions and make judgments about, for example, social vs. selfish acts."*

For the study, 30 dogs took part in an experiment involving two actors and two lidded containers. The “competent” human removed the container’s lid easily, while the “incompetent” person struggled to remove the lid and, ultimately, failed to do so. They then repeated the scenario using a container with food and an empty container.

Compared to the male dogs, the female dogs stared at the competent human significantly longer when the container had food in it. The female dogs, in particular, were also more likely to approach the competent person than the incompetent one when they opened a container with food.<sup>5</sup>

“This result suggests that dogs can recognize different competence levels in humans, and that this ability influences their behavior ...,” the researchers explained. “Our data also indicate that more attention should be given to potential sex differences in dogs’ social evaluation abilities.”<sup>6</sup>

## **Other Species Also Judge Each Other**

Dogs and humans aren’t the only ones who may make judgments about others, leading to the formation of reputations. Known as “social evaluation” or “social eavesdropping,” chimpanzees, ravens and cleaner fish are among the species known to conduct social evaluations. As for why, “It makes sense to prefer helpful individuals and avoid harmful ones when choosing a potential partner,” the team explained.<sup>7</sup>

Bottlenose dolphins and bonobos may even socially evaluate abstract agents, while, in captivity, chimpanzees, tufted capuchin monkeys and marmosets are known to socially evaluate humans. For instance, in 2013, comparative psychologist James Anderson at Kyoto University, who was also involved in the featured study, and colleagues revealed that capuchin monkeys will refuse food treats from unhelpful, selfish humans.<sup>8</sup>

According to those researchers, “In humans, rejecting a gift may signify rejection of the interaction or relationship; our data raise the possibility that a similar effect may be seen in other species.”<sup>9</sup>

Given this knowledge, it makes sense that dogs, too, would have this ability, given their long domestication and closeness to humans. In fact, the researchers suggested, your dog may be judging your actions every single day:<sup>10</sup>

*“During this long process of co-existence with humans, dogs have acquired relatively sophisticated abilities to read human behavior and communicate with humans ... They also have innumerable opportunities to learn about human behavior through direct and indirect interactions with humans, making it conceivable that dogs socially evaluate humans on a daily basis.”*

## **Dogs May Also Judge You if You’re Not Fair**

In separate research Anderson and colleagues again evaluated monkey and dog reactions in a series of social situations.<sup>11</sup> Like capuchin monkeys, dogs also preferred to take food from a passive bystander than from a person who did not help their owner.

The ability to weed out a “bad apple” from a crowd, and not interact with them, serves multiple benefits, not only in helping the animals avoid potential harmful social interactions but also in discouraging others from behaving unfairly. The growing evidence that dogs are able to evaluate human behaviors and choose who to associate with as a result only adds to the many reasons why so many humans are drawn to their canine companions.

Much like children, all they ask for is love and respect. If you give it to them, they'll reward you with unconditional love in return. As Anderson and colleagues noted:<sup>12</sup>

*"The studies reviewed here have shown that, like young human children, monkeys and pet dogs are not merely passive observers of other individuals' interactions. Instead, in some circumstances at least, they pay attention to the outcome of the interaction, evaluate how the actors behave, and make use of that information in reaching a decision about which individuals to interact with or to avoid."*

## Sources and References

<sup>1, 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 10</sup> [Behavioural Processes November 2022, Volume 203, 104753](#)

<sup>5</sup> [NextShark October 20, 2022](#)

<sup>8, 9</sup> [Nature Communications March 5, 2013](#)

<sup>11, 12</sup> [Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews January 7, 2017](#)

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