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## **A Meeting of the Minds: Collaboration between scientists and canine professionals**

Although humans have been keeping dogs as companions for thousands of years, researchers only began to focus what we know about pet dogs in the last few decades (for a nice review see Benschky, 2013)<sup>1</sup>. The growing multi-billion dollar pet industry<sup>2</sup> has drawn attention and resources, generating interest in studies on everything from nutrition to training practices. Scientific research helps us better understand dogs, the human-dog relationship, and how to best support, train, and care for our furry friends. New discoveries stand to benefit both people and animals, while reducing risks, improving quality of life, and strengthening human-animal bonds.

Research has traditionally been done by scientists, individuals with the education and expertise to insure the rigorous demands of the scientific method are met. But while scientists are a necessary part of every experiment, a research team can greatly benefit from additional perspectives. Collaboration between applied canine professionals and academics/researchers can fast track transitioning theories into tools and techniques with proven effectiveness that can be immediately relevant for pet owners, behavior consultants, and dog trainers.

Besides having a chance to influence the direction of scientific inquiry, dog professionals stand to gain substantially as professionals from teamwork. Additional benefits include opportunities to co-author scientific papers and present talks or posters, which can mean added exposure for you and your business. Research, and the accolades that come with it, can expand your credibility as a dog professional with both your clients and colleagues. Dog professionals may have the chance to develop new skills in like scientific writing, grant writing, and critical thinking. The interactions with scientists is also an invaluable cross-disciplinary learning experience for everyone involved.

### **What the Dog Professional Brings to the Table:**

- 1) Expertise with the handling, training, and care of pet dogs. There is no substitute for the hours and years of hands-on learning dog professionals log working with people and animals.
- 2) Expertise at assessing safety and risk, recognizing signs of stress, and an ability to predict situations in which a dog could feel overwhelmed, scared, or uncomfortable. These skills are critical during experimental design, in making sure any project will be minimally invasive and minimally aversive for the animals involved.
- 3) A keen understanding of the questions or problems that are most relevant for dog owners and their pets. An ability to make sure that limited research resources focus on the questions most important to the people and dogs of our communities.
- 4) Access to pet dogs, clients, training facilities, shelters, rescues, etc.

### **What the Researcher Brings to the Table:**

- 1) Expertise in experimental design and the process of conducting research. There is no substitute for the hours and years of hands-on learning and experience researchers log designing, testing, and running experiments.
- 2) Expertise with scientific writing, both the reading and writing of papers and posters. Finding and interpreting background and supporting research is a critical skill for any research

project. Equally important is the ability to communicate the findings of your own work, including knowledge about conferences and publications that might be interested in your work.

3) Access to educational or research institutions and expertise writing grants and finding funding. There is always a cost to research, and the ability to find and access funding is essential. Similarly, scientific rigor demands the ethical oversight and credibility lent by the academic community.

4) Expertise in a particular field and/or specific techniques or technologies, including data analysis, and a deep understanding of background concepts key to your project.

You value collaboration and you know what skills you bring to the table as a dog professional or researcher, so how do you go about finding or building a team? It's not as hard as it may sound. Do your homework before you start networking to make sure you have a sound understanding of what you are looking for and what you can offer. Consider the following first steps in building a team:

For the dog professional:

1) Start reading. Abstracts and scientific posters are a great place to start. An abstract is a very brief summary of an entire research project. It contains some background information, the methods the researchers used, and both the question and answer the research set out to tackle. Abstracts are free to access, a great way to quickly gather information, but typically contain very dense and technical writing which can feel awkward or intimidating initially. Poster sessions at conferences are a combination of abstract, visuals, and performance. Posters include all those key details found in an abstract, but also graphs, charts, or photos to help you understand the results. As an added bonus, researchers are usually on hand to answer questions or even walk you through their work (and are enthusiastic to do so).

(Quick Tip) Where can you find abstracts? Google Scholar ([scholar.google.com](https://scholar.google.com)) is a great starting place to quickly search for academic resources on a topic of interest.

2) Either sift through research until you find a project that poses a clear follow up question, or, sit down and come up with a clear question you are interested in answering and hunt for someone doing similar research.

3) Reach out to the researchers you've found and start asking questions. When reaching out, connect with the corresponding researcher listed on the paper. This may be a student or a faculty member, and keep in mind that there may or may not be plans for continued work in that area. The key to reaching out is to make sure you clearly demonstrate you've read and engaged with the research. Recognize they may or may not be interested in collaboration, so be polite as you explain your background and what skills you might be able to offer in a future project. Recognize and respect the experience and expertise of the scientists. And anticipate that rejection could absolutely happen. Be open to having researchers point you on towards other possible leads.

For the researcher:

1) Find the local resources, or search for specialists farther afield. The Association of Professional Dog Trainers ([apdt.com](https://apdt.com)), Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers ([CCPDT.com](https://ccpdt.com)), and International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants ([IAABC.org](https://iaabc.org)), all offer trainer/consultant search options to help you ferret out professionals in your area. You may also want to search for specialty organizations working with service dogs, detection dogs, search and rescue dogs, etc..

2) Reach out. Anticipate rejection is a possibility - remember these organizations are focused on their missions, the idea of collaboration may be overwhelming or outside the scope of their work. Ask for recommendations or referrals of other groups or individuals who may be interested in collaboration. When possible, have a clearly defined question or be able to explain what type of help you are looking for. Be respectful of the needs, comfort and possible stress for both the human and animal participants. Be open to accepting the expertise the professional brings to the table.

Once you have found your research team, you can begin brainstorm the topics that you are most interested in pursuing together. It is often helpful to clearly define roles of each person on the team. For example, you can establish who will work with dogs directly, who will be responsible for data analysis, and who will work on different sections of writing. Collaboration through the meeting of scientific and applied dog professionals helps keep the science of canine cognition fresh and practically oriented. Building friendships in the process is often an added bonus.

*Bios:*

*Kate Anders, CBCC-KA, CPDT-KSA, CDBC, stumbled into the world of scientific research as a fluke in 2012 when a favor for a friend grew into an amazing opportunity. Over the years she transitioned from running someone else's experiment to helping design and carry out new research projects. She has presented her research at the APDT Conference twice and won awards for her posters on both occasions. While she works as a behavior consultant specializing in child-dog conflicts, Kate finds great fulfillment in the volunteer work she does with her research team.*

*Julia Manor has a PhD in Psychology, specializing in animal cognition, and works as a professor at Ripon College. Her thesis work looked at memory in pigeons and she has worked with a variety of animals from bees to polar bears. In addition to her academic work, Julia has been training dogs for over 16 years and worked as the Training School Supervisor at the Animal Humane Society in Minnesota. Most recently, Julia's research on empathy in dogs has garnered international attention and won 1st place at the 2017 APDT conference poster session.*

*Together, Kate and Julia have been putting their minds together for the purpose of better research now for over two years. Their collaborative research on heart rate variability in dogs is helping shape our understanding of the mind-body connection, and has practical implications for both training and behavior modification work. Their work has resulted in several posters and a recent publication<sup>3</sup>.*

- 1) Bensky, M. K. (2013). A review and synthesis of dog cognition research: the world from a dog's point of view.
- 2) The American Pet Products Association:  
[https://www.americanpetproducts.org/press\\_industrytrends.asp](https://www.americanpetproducts.org/press_industrytrends.asp)
- 3) Craig, L., Meyers-Manor, J. E., Anders, K., Sütterlin, S., & Miller, H. (2017). The relationship between heart rate variability and canine aggression. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, 188, 59-67.