

The depriving face of control in urban animal management

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ABSTRACT

In administering legislation which attempts to make for an equitable and proper line between the ownership of animals and its associated benefits and responsibilities, field officers and supporting staff in urban animal control often encounter reaction and hostility from members of the communities they serve. Such encounters can be distressing and perplexing in the sense that officers are confused by an array of confronted hopes and expectations that the public are understanding and supportive of their work, that individual owners will see the necessity of their actions when these are taken, and, that their own support staff - their bosses and colleagues in other sections of the administration - are knowing and caring about the difficulties under which they work. But, the rules of work are rarely Marquis de Queensbury and, coupled with uncertainties about their own approaches to the administering work, any such confusions will lead to job-dissatisfaction and challenges to personal esteem for animal control officers. In this paper, a framework is proposed from which confrontations may be better explained and preventive action considered.

The purpose I have in putting this paper together is to attempt to theorize a framework from which knowledge, understandings and skills may be assembled and organised in ways which advance productive, urban animal control. Further, it is my hope that such a framework might explain current tensions which arise when animal control officers (ACOs) act to deprive individuals of a condition(s) of their ownership in the face of removing or reducing deprivations of quality of life features for others in communities. Possibly, the framework will help move the system from any such explanation towards prediction, and control.

THE LABELLING OF THE SOURCE OF TENSION

I have chosen the work, "deprivation", carefully. It will probably seem odd to begin with, as few will have used it in a day-to-day view of their jobs. However, in a sense it is the most descriptive word for those actions which result in a lessening of some held condition. The quietening of an habitual barker, the constraint of an unfettered wanderer, the removal of ignorance from an unaware owner, all these are deprivations.

Deprivation is a state of loss. The deprived has a change of status caused by the loss of something previously held, or, or an opportunity to hold that something. This is not a preferred state. It is one resisted by all of us. It is a state in which ACOs are seen as aggressors by many in the communities they serve. They are the deprivors. This perception leads to hostility reaction where individual members of the community are involved, and neutral or passive support where they are not.

It is also one in which many of these same officers frequently see themselves in relation to effective and consistent support and back-up from their employers, allied services such as the police and the court systems, and the community at large. Our officers feel that this support and back-up constitute a proper and necessary condition of their work. Many feel also that it is one which is frequently withheld or withdrawn. They are deprived because of this, even if it is only a perception. Consequently, deprivation is a state which underpins most problematic areas in the work and job satisfaction of ACOs.

OWNER DIMENSIONS FOR THE DEPRIVATION FRAMEWORK

Owner dimension 1: ego projection

The first dimension in the deprivation framework is ego-projection. It permits us to differentiate people on the basis of their perceptions of what it is that ACOs do. This includes, for example, perceptions of who is targeted by actions in urban animal control, who is likely to be affected by them and the extent to which an owner imagines himself/herself to be an inseparable part and parcel of the animal's world of thought, deed and action. Importantly, it is descriptive of how the various parties seen to constitute the targeted and affected group are identified, prioritised and defended.

For example, those who feel that their dog has a right to be out of its home yard will present very differently when visited by the ACO, from those who believe that they have a right to have their dog out of their home yard. Both may be equally resistant. However, in the former case, the resistance will be based on a perceived need to defend an animal's actions, to champion the mutt or the pure-bred, the miscreant or the misunderstood. This owner is likely to be attached to his/her animal, but attached in a more ego-independent way than in the latter case. The animal and person will have a clear separation in terms of conscious or sub-conscious identity.

For those who are in an eg-dependent relationship with their animals, where the owner's identity is strongly tied to that of the animal, resistance to any intervention from the ACO will be somewhat different. Whilst still likely to match the other at the various points on an intensity of action continuum, this owner's reaction will have more to do with a perceived encroachment upon himself/herself in terms of what he/she had done leading to the intervention. There will be a strong need for this owner to save face and/or to restore his/hers perception of lost pride.

Predictions from this dimension of the owner-deprivation framework include the greater sensitivity of the former to approaches which centre of replacing the deprivation of the animal (no longer permitted to be let out) with a counter-balance eg your involvement, counsel and advice on how to set up a dog-on-leash walking routine or any such thing which gives the appearance that you care about this animal.

Unlike this owner, those with a hefty eg-projection component won't give a damn for your advice on what to do. Instead, they are more likely to be incensed that you would presume to advise them on this matter. If they do try to address the problem, it will be in ways of their own making. They will be most positive to interventions which inform that there are matters which need attention, and which seem to acknowledge their prominence in how this can best be done eg being open-ended, "There are confirmed reports of such-and-such which means that any prosecution under Section X will lead to". "What can we do about this?".

In putting "ego-projection" into the framework, I have used a graduated scale of intensity. At one end of the scale are the folk who feel that animals rights are very much the same as their own rights. What is being projected here is a sense of morality aligned to what is known to be right and proper for the owner (and presumably, for other "reasonable" people). The owner is able to go out, so why not the dog! That the dog defecates over neighbour's lawns is an unfortunate but natural behaviour. The "natural" for these people will always finesse the "unfortunate".

At the other end of the scale are those for whom the pet dog, cat or goldfish is incidental to the self. The pets exist as extensions of the owners in the sense that the owners are the conductors of full-blown orchestras of decisions. They have chosen the pets. They have decided on training, diet, sleeping place and the like. In the day-to-day world of the animals too, the owner sees himself/herself as calling the tune! It is the owner who decides rather than the dog, when the dog should go out - albeit, unaccompanied and problem-bent. In both cases, the separation of identity of pet and owner can sometimes become quite clouded in the minds of owners. Perhaps, also for the pets!

Thus, any problems arising in relation to an outsider's control of his/her animals eg the ACO visiting to discuss a neighbour's report of a problem, are seen as problems of the self. The report of his wandering defecating dog and an instruction to constrain it, are really assaults of his/her rights to choose to do something about this and current performance in doing it. In conversations with these people, their use of the first-person, personal pronoun will feature - particularly, but not always, the singular.

I have set out the first dimension on a graduated scale below. Several descriptors could be placed between the extremes shown here and I trust to your fine-tuning of these should you think other position-points are useful.

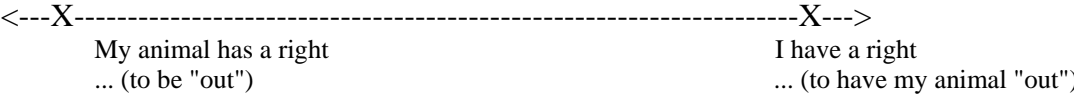


Figure 1. A scale of ego-projection

Owner dimension 2: ego intensity

The second dimension of the framework is ego-intensity. It accounts for the degree to which an owner senses he/she has control over an animal's action, regardless of the owner's projection in relation to his/her identity and the animal in question.

At the extreme left side of this dimension, an owner will believe that he/she should not stop the dog from wandering (though the word, "wandering", will not be a preferred one for this owner). A lesser intensity allows some owners to say that they "can't" keep their animals in. Supposedly, they try. But, as I mentioned previously, "nature" is such a strong force! This dimension has to do with where people believe the major forces controlling their own behaviour lie. Some of us have no doubt that these forces rest within. We, ourselves are responsible for the regards and punishments which shape our actions. We are the "internals".

Others of us consider these shaping forces of our behaviour lie outside us and to a major extent are beyond our control. People, Government, God, spouses, taxes, bosses, the recession, destiny, Murphy (of Murphy's Law), the stars, our children and pets - all contrive in ways we cannot, or dare not, challenge to determine for us what we do and how we do it. We are the "externals".

I have represented this dimension on a scale similar to the first. However, I have distinguished an extreme position from a more moderate one as shown below:

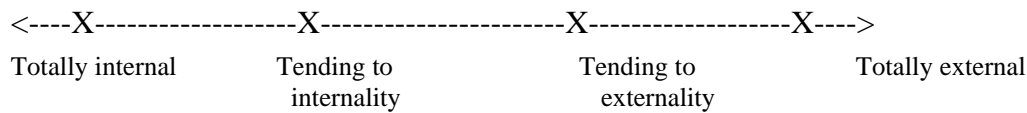


Figure 2. A scale of ego-intensity

The juncture of these two scales provides a foundation for the framework in terms of owner-behaviours. It allows us to imagine what might happen in situations requiring action from ACOs with members of the public whose animals are seen by those officers, or by others of the public, to be offensive in some way. It does not let us imagine how those same situations will change because of factors other than these "owner" factors.

EGO PROJECTION	LOCUS OF CONTROL			
	<i>Internal</i>		<i>External</i>	
	Totally	Tending to	Tending to	Totally
My animal's rights	X1	X2	X3	X4
My rights for my animal	X5	X6	X7	X8

Figure 3. Matrix of the two, Owner-Dimensions

As outlined in earlier parts of this text, the most striking of the cells in the matrix are those of the extreme positions - X1, X5, and X4, X8. Owners who do not take such extreme positions are likely to be joys to work with - relatively speaking.

SOME NON-OWNER DIMENSIONS FOR THE FRAMEWORK

Before any attempt is made to use this matrix as an explanatory framework, it must be said that there are problems with any simplification of complex human behaviour. The reduction of a maelstrom to a spit is not an unreasonable metaphor for trying to describe, from a 2 x 2 table, the interactions of an owner and an ACO at points of contact during a complaint action or investigation. The mixture of facts, opinions, emotions, language, power-lays and, most importantly, perceptions, is a heady one.

I have attempted to build up a model on an initial basis of owner-only behaviour. This is useful in looking at one side of the picture. The attempt hopefully will profile issues in ways which enable fruitful discussion and automatic correction in building an increasingly serviceable framework. There are two major problems with the matrix at this stage of its presentation, hence my manoeuvre in calling it a matrix of owner-factors rather than a model at this point.

Officer dimension 1: flexibility of approach

First, I have not made any provision for the differential ways in which ACOs input into the situations where owners are confronted by a complaint or its investigation. This, of course is a crucial variable in explaining how those situations develop. rather, I have chosen to make it an assumption of the framework that training and experience tend to even-up those differences such that "a procedure" will be recognisable as the how-to-do-it-action that most officers would employ in a given situation.

To help account for those differences which might be too apparent to sweep away in this regard, however, I have caricatured from my own research an organisation (Bartlett, 1991; Bartlett, Barton & Turner, 1990), four approaches which might be descriptive. They are the lister, the problem-solver, the cause-effector, and the comparer. We will try to analyse how an officer's tendency to one of these will influence outcomes of those situations.

The lister is an offer who plans and executes a visit to an owner against a list of items. The items may be steps in a procedure, or a sequence of the meaty bits of a Council regulation, or the major points raised in a complaint about the owner's animal. this is a very desirable behaviour, and one which carries its own rewards in terms of efficiency. It is so much better than an unstructured approach for these reasons. However, when it restricts an officer to a "get-in, say what must be said, get-out" type person, there will be problems associated with effectiveness.

The problem-solver is an officer who takes his/her list a little further. In addition to knowing what minimally must be said, this officer will approach an owner with items of the list spread across both the problem issue (eg a barking dog - the nature of the complaint, the regularity of the problem, the supporting evidence) and possible solutions (eg systematically checking the dog's conditions, training of the dog, discussions with the neighbours). To do this, the officer needs to use two-way communication, not only saying what must be said, but also listening and responding to what the other party has to say. For this reason, there are some additional risks involved and the approach will not be a preferred one for those who are very conservative, those who have been recently burned or those who really don't like their job.

The cause-effector also takes a problem-solving approach, seeing his/her work as usually involving a problematic situation, and his/her role as a forceful one in finding a proper solution. What is added by this officer is a theme in discussing both problem and solution parts of the situation, which we call a "causal-chain". Rather than seeing the complaint as the only problem to be dealt with, this officer will know that the complaint is itself an "effect" (result) of another set of circumstances (cause). He/she will know, too, that any solution which follows from his/her intervention will be an ongoing part of the cause-effect chain, and will include this concept in any discussions and action with the owner. In a sense, the cause-effector is really a sophisticated version of the problem-solver - who, in turn, is a step up from the lister. And, all of these are an advance on nothing!

The comparer is someone who searches for and presents alternatives as a matter of course in any planning and/or action involving working with the public. He/she incorporates all the best features of the other styles in canvassing options for what might be done. He/she involves an owner in sorting, prioritising, and selecting from these, and capitalises on open-endedness whilst searching for real and permanent solutions to real problems. He/she is least likely to be seen as officious. But, he/she may well be seen, usually mistakenly, by colleagues as wishy-washy and soft-nosed.

Of course, it would be wrong to suggest that officers are one type or another. Rather, it is probably that all four types (and possibly the fifth "nothing" types, as well) are recognisable as having been used in different situations at different times. Whilst there are tendencies we all have to slide into a groove or style in our work, the real value of knowing, understanding and being skilled in several styles is that it enables flexibility of adjustment to the range of complex situations which develop as we are in them. So, I have included in the approach dimension a combo category for those fortunate enough to have the ultimate flexibility.

Officer dimension 2: back-up

Second, the reality of back-up cannot be overlooked in any overview of an officer's work. Accordingly, I've attempted to include it as a fourth dimension in the framework. An officer with a tentative idea on what might be done (approach), and with an expectation of back-up (back-up), will go into a meeting with an owner quite differently than when either or both of these officer-dimensions are missing. Whilst a position of full back-up is one which should normally be expected, our worlds are far from perfect places and two intermediary positions have been included on this dimension to sustain reality!

The following is a bring-together of the two officer-dimensions:

BACK-UP	FLEXIBILITY OF APPROACH				
	Lister	Problem-Solver	Cause-Effector	Comparer	Combo
Full	Y1	Y5	Y9	Y13	Y17
Tending to full	Y2	Y6	Y10	Y14	Y18
Tending to none	Y3	Y7	Y11	Y15	Y19
None	Y4	Y8	Y12	Y16	Y20

Figure 4. Matrix of the two, Officer-Dimensions

Clearly, the best of the cells in this second matrix from the officer's point of view are those which give greatest flexibility of approach (those to the right-hand side) and fullness of support (those at the top). Thus, Y9, Y13 and Y17 are the desirable targets.

THE COMPLETED FRAMEWORK

These four dimensions constitute the framework. when an officer can make a tentative description of an owner from the "2X2 owner-dimension matrix" from a preliminary discussion, and account for his/her own actions from the "2X2 officer-dimension matrix" he/she is in a better position to explain a situation, or to anticipate how a situation might unfold.

A framework resulting from combining the matrices may be designed by reader of this paper to reflect their critical appraisal of its purpose and the utility of its components. In a generic sense, it would look something like this:

POSITION ON OFFICER- DIMENSION MATRIX	POSITION ON OWNER-DIMENSION							
	X1	X2	X3	X4	X5	X6	X7	X8
Y1								
Y2								
Y3								
.								
.								
.								
.								
Y18								
Y19								
Y20								

Figure 5. A framework for explaining and predicting action and reaction in the "depriving" function of an ACO's work

Let us look at whether or not Figure 5 provides a helpful framework by referring to data provided by ACOs at the recent Townsville conference. the following extracts are taken from lengthier accounts given of problems met on a daily basis:

- "... One particular dog had jumped the fence. When the owner came out to collect the dog, he was very aggravated ... (A week) later, I noticed this same dog outside the fence. I began to write out a notice requesting the owner to contact me so that I could inform him that his dog had been outside the fence. The owner came out and started to abuse me severely. He accused me of whistling his dog from behind the fence ... he threatened to smash my glasses, then my face. I informed him that any physical abuse would lead to him going to court. (He became) more aggravated. He rang the CHO and complained that I had abused him ..."
- "Any (developments) involving accusations from (owner) receives no support from councillors ... (they) often reprimand officers in complete ignorance and contrary to his/her duties (as, must keep ratepayers happy)."
- "Police are ignorant of by-laws pertaining to wandering dogs and responsibilities of owners ... (they) often take an owner's word before an officer's."
- "Many residential impounded dogs are purchased by the original owner, to avoid paying registration fees."
- "Persistent offenders (are) seldom, if ever, prosecuted. Officers are often encouraged to overlook the situation."
- "... (There is) a lack of moral, legal and official support from authorities (eg council, police) when the screws are really on."
- "No hard action taken, leading to a lack of enthusiasm and dedication (from ACOs)."
- "Freezer boxes come into the shire and there is always an influx of hunting dogs. ... never registered, but hidden ... live on the back of vehicles in confined spaces, which hurts the animal ... (they) develop high adrenalin and become savage. When the freezer box is closed down, the dogs become a real problem.:
- "Insulting and abusive language to my face."
- "Threats."

I have selected the first of these samples as an illustration to readers of this paper. On the "2X2 owner-dimension matrix", the officer's description is of an abusive liar, a man ready to assault him both physically and through mischievous action in the officer's workplace. The dog seems quite incidental in the owner's actions. The nature of his response and its intensity are suggestive of an X5 rating on Figure 3, one of the worst possible. The officer seems to have become a problem-solver rather quickly, though the problem he attended to is certainly not the one that prompted his visit. It is not mentioned by the officer whether his employer gave any immediate back-up, so it is difficult to position the action on the second of the matrices. (The dog died some weeks later after again jumping the fence and being hit by a vehicle, not, as I understand it, the officer's vehicle!).

In reviewing this action - a process I urge as a matter of weekly routine - the value of reflection begins with looking at what's missing. From the owner matrix, there is a pretty clear picture of an internally-oriented, projecting individual who is likely to remain a headache for the ACOs of that council. He doesn't seem to be a headache for the council! Follow-up action must include a proper investigation of the officer's claims. If the presented picture is a correct one, then the council must take the headache on board and act. Not to do either of these things is an option for the council. However, it is a dangerous option, not in the least sense in terms of its fracturing effect on the officer's morale.

From the officer-matrix, there is a need during the review of check on the officer's own follow-up (the officer seems to have been still keenly monitoring developments whilst working a different part of town) and perception of support from his supervisor and the Chief Health Officer.

Thus, the framework provides an organisational basis for bringing together the available information about the situation. In so doing, it allows explanations and makes for planning in relation to further action. It is not foolproof. Nor is it totally comprehensive. However, it does seem to be relatively systematic and representative of the major players in the scenario under review.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I have two points which I would like to make. first, I think ACOs should know that deprivation will always elicit a non-accepting or negatively-adaptive behaviour from the one deprived. A sense that the deprivation is just, and therefore acceptable, may come with time, if that time allows for appropriate changes in what is known, understood and can be handled.

Education strengthens the possibility of change. It does not ensure it. Nor, does it make it happen immediately. So, unfortunately we cannot wait for a better educated public with an anticipation that any one of its members will be more pleasant on an initial contact.

ACOs will always find the person confronted by the depriving function of their work, initially reactive. And, the depriving function is both unavailable and a major part of this work. Our officers must understand this and build-in some useable and useful coping mechanisms.

Just as their own reactions in the face of real or perceived withdrawal or withholding of support for them in the field from bosses, allied services and the community, exemplify this phenomenon, so to the "normal" reactions of people informed of a complaint, issued with a warning, or otherwise visited by a depriving officer will be negative.

To balance this awful chain of negatives, it may be useful to include in the job-profile of ACOs some deliberate positives. Recontacting Mrs Jones whose labrador hasn't been the subject of report in three months since your visit, or school visits to congratulate children actively engaging in animal control may provide some positive complement. In other words, when you can't dodge the rotten parts of the job - and you can't in the case in point - then find some compensatory ones.

Second, I have resisted strongly an urge to turn this paper, and the framework, into a call for the renaming of ACOs to better reflect the fact that owners are their principal source of work. "Animal-Owner Control Officers" would be a more appropriate name, though I've not thought through the social consequences of this in relation to viable alternatives.

The meat of this problem area is that the framework, along with the practices of our officers, pretends that the focus of this work is urban animals. We know it is not.

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[UAM 92 Index Page](#)