

Shifting attitudes on animal ‘ownership’: Ethical implications for welfare research and practice terminology

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Abstract

The roles companion animals have played in our lives has dramatically changed over the last few decades. At the same time, the terms we use to describe both the people and animals in these human-animal relationships have also changed. One example includes the use of the terms ‘owner’ or ‘guardian’ to refer to the human caretaker. While preferences by society appear to indicate increased interest in referring to companion animal caretakers as ‘guardians’, others have cautioned against its use or attempted to restrict it. Additionally, the use of animal welfare terminology has direct implications for how we conduct both welfare research and practice. Our paper examines the use of ‘owner’ and ‘guardian’ with respect to (1) the implications for changing terminology on the function, clarity and uniformity of their use, and (2) the ethical and welfare impact that coincides with each term’s use. Our goal is to

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propose terminological considerations that could influence future welfare research, as well as help guide our interactions with companion animals.

Keywords

Companion animal, human-animal bond, human-animal interactions, human-animal relationships, pet guardian, pet owner, research ethics, welfare terminology

From wild animals at the fringes of our societies to human property, and now to members of our families, our concept of the role animals play in our lives is still evolving. In the last several decades alone, the relationship between humans and companion animals, and our understanding of this relationship, has radically changed (Fox and Gee, 2016). The way people care for and treat the animals they live with is also changing, with guardians increasingly moving their cats indoors (Foreman-Worsley et al., 2021), considering enrichment needs for their animals (Grigg and Kogan, 2019; Lindig et al., 2020), engaging in training (Fernandez, 2022) and visiting veterinary professionals (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Recent studies suggest that not only do most people now consider their companion animals to be family members (Carlisle-Frank and Frank, 2006; Cohen, 2002; McConnell et al., 2017), many perceive their bond with their companion animal to be as close to that of a sibling (McConnell et al., 2011, 2019).

These dramatic changes in the relationships between people and their companion animals are likely due to changes in our societal perceptions, as well as influenced by underlying evolutionary changes that have been fostered by our prolonged exposure to human and animal shared living environments. Research now suggests important co-evolutions between humans and animals (Ottoni et al., 2017; Paxton, 2021; Schleidt and Shalter, 2003), some of which have improved communication between the species (Hare and Tomasello, 2005; Kubinyi et al., 2003; Persson et al., 2015), and enabled sensitivity to each other on a biological level (Montague et al., 2014; Nagasawa et al., 2015; Wynne, 2016). While research is still ongoing to the drivers behind these changes, one thing is for certain: the way people conceptualise companion animals is changing, and this has a direct impact on all human-animal interactions involving companion animals.

Two related factors have emerged in conjunction with these human-animal relationship changes: (1) an increased focus on applied animal care and welfare research (Fernandez and Timberlake, 2008; Fraser, 2009) and (2) changes to the terms we use to refer to companion animals and our roles in their lives (Finkelstein, 2005; Hankin, 2009). While the areas of increased companion animal care and welfare research directly relate to the terminology we use, some researchers have focused on restricting the latter, regardless of how it impacts the former. For

instance, Pongrácz and Camerlink (2022) editorialised their thoughts on the use of terms such as ‘pet owners’ and ‘pet guardians’ in scientific publications. They suggested that the term ‘owner’ should almost exclusively be used by researchers over terms such as ‘guardian’ within animal welfare journals, including *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, in which they are the two Editors-in-Chief. Specifically, they state ‘This journal is not the most appropriate forum for the revision of companion animal ownership terminology’. The reasoning Pongrácz and Camerlink give for this stance is less clear and relies on an assumption that shifting terms would inhibit functionality and be founded against current legal terminology. In addition, some organisations such as the American Veterinary Medical Association (AVMA) have argued that the term ‘guardian’ should not be used in place of ‘owners’, and suggest that doing so may be problematic for practitioners such as veterinarians. The AVMA argue that the use of the term ‘guardian’ over ‘owner’ will lead to an inability to deliver services such as neutering or euthanasia, will undermine current standards of confidentiality which currently prioritise ‘owner’ confidentiality over animal welfare, and reduce the options of ‘owners’, specifically that ‘owners will have less authority and fewer treatment options’ (American Veterinary Medical Association [AVMA], 2023).

What remains unclear is the impact changes in ownership terminology have on our relationships with companion animals, as well as the ethics and science of animal welfare. For instance, does the use of terms such as ‘guardian’ alter the merit of our scientific endeavours? Does the use of ‘owner’ over ‘guardian’ (or vice versa) impact our companion animal relationships? And does this change the moral and ethical reasoning for conducting such research, including how we review our research justifications (i.e. research review committees)? Below, we consider these points in two parts: (1) the implications for changing companion animal terminology on the function, clarity and uniformity of those terms (i.e. how this modifies their scientific use), and (2) the impact of the terms on potential ethical and welfare research and practice considerations. Our goal is to propose the use of terms that can facilitate welfare research, as well as guide our future welfare applications.

Function, clarity and uniformity of terms

The use of scientific terminology is critical for communicating our findings to both other scientists and those applying our results. The terms we choose to use can facilitate our ability to adequately test hypotheses and theories, which is an essential component of any science (Popper, 1985; Refsgaard and Henriksen, 2004). Likewise, terminology can guide what we choose to study, which is particularly true for ethically-bound endeavours such as improving the lives of animals (i.e. animal welfare science). For instance, by choosing to use terms such as

‘owner’ over ‘guardian’ (or vice versa), this can impact whether we consider an issue welfare-relevant, such as training and behaviour management procedures used with companion animals. Below, we consider some of the critical features of scientific terminology, namely that of function, clarity and uniformity of ‘owner’ or ‘guardian’ terms used to describe companion animal caretakers.

Function and clarity

Function and clarity are both important for the concepts we define within any science or practice. Function addresses the reasons we attribute to some event, such as the potential cause of a behaviour. Clarity specifies the ease in understanding a term, for instance, the use of ‘stimulus’ in animal behaviour to refer to an external, environmental event. Both function and clarity of terminology are particularly important for applied behavioural endeavours, such as companion animal welfare research and practice, where function is addressed both for potential causes and in how terms used by scientists are then applied by practitioners (Hanley, 2012; Lattal and Fernandez, 2022). In the former case, the function of any scientific term is directly tied to its clarity in use, and thus far we see no evidence that exchanging the terms ‘owner’ for ‘guardian’ creates any confusion for any research efforts or welfare practices. In fact, in one of the references above (Lattal & Fernandez), ‘owner’ and ‘guardian’ are both used synonymously, and there is no reason to believe this obfuscates the points made by the authors. Simply stated, using either ‘owner’ or ‘guardian’ as terms by companion animal welfare scientists appear to be equally interchangeable, at least in terms of the understanding they generate.

Uniformity

Similarly, uniformity applies to the consistency with which a term or terms are used. It need not necessitate exclusivity in terminology. For instance, ‘animal welfare’ is often synonymously used with ‘animal well-being’ (Broom, 2011; Rose and Riley, 2022). What is critical for uniformity is that the terms are consistently applied to describe the same scientific subject matter, not that we decide that only one of the terms: welfare or well-being, describe the prescribed area of interest. Thus, the same appears equally applicable to pet ownership versus guardianship. If both ‘pet owner’ and ‘pet guardian’ are uniformly used by welfare scientists to describe the role of people living with companion animals, then the use of either or both terms should suffice for providing appropriately defined and described terms. Where differences may be apparent or cause functional differences is in the perception of these terms by the people who use them. There is an argument to be made that the term ‘guardian’ conveys a greater level of responsibility to an animal

than ‘owner’ does, due to the term ‘owner’ relying on the animal being defined as property.

While the word ‘owner’ in context of animal companions is still an accepted part of the English language, we cannot dispute its inherent, original meaning relating to ownership of property. Property can be possessed, used and controlled as the owner wishes. While how property can be used or controlled may be limited within the confines of the legal system, property implies an object is neither sentient, nor autonomous and that welfare falls second to human economic interests and whims (Francione, 2004). Children were also historically considered property, and for hundreds of years were able to be bought, sold, abused, neglected and abandoned (Walker et al., 1999). The suffering afflicted upon children directly due to this status is undisputed. Hart (1991) argued that moving children from property to status of persons was not due to chance, but rather reflected an increasing societal belief in the inherent and inalienable rights of all individuals. This shift was also reflected in our language. Use of language suggesting ‘ownership’ of a child today would be considered problematic at best and may raise welfare concerns. Crucially, in line with society’s shift, child research terminology and perspectives have fittingly adjusted. Similarly, terminology such as ‘guardian’ in animal companionship reflects shifts in human-animal relationships, expectations and the modern role of animal companions and their humans – which is notably different than property ownership.

Ethical and welfare implications of terms

As noted earlier, there are claims that exchanging terms such as ‘owner’ with ‘guardian’ will cause harm to our relationship with companion animals through reduced treatment options, changes in confidentiality practices and invalidation of claiming animals under property insurance (AVMA, 2023), or that exclusion of terms such as ‘guardian’ from research publications has little impact on the ethics of welfare research itself (Pongrácz and Camerlink, 2022). However, we would argue that these conclusions are based on assumption and should instead be treated as empirical questions. Only research can provide answers to such opinions or claims. In addition, it is not clear that refusing the use of the term ‘guardian’ can be perceived as neutral or disconnected from the current and ongoing shift in terminology and perspective within the scientific community and society at large.

Within the human literature, how we frame an individual impacts the way we feel and therefore interact with that person. Language used within the medical field has been observed to affect attitudes of treating doctors and, ultimately, the management and outcomes of patients (Goddu et al., 2018). Care and welfare are a major concern when we talk about animals, and much like human healthcare, words can play an important role in outcomes (Valdez, 2021). The perception of

animals as being sentient instead of property is directly and positively correlated with their improved treatment (Bagaric et al., 2022; Browning and Veit, 2022; Carlisle-Frank and Frank, 2006; Carlisle-Frank et al., 2004; Veevers, 1985). How individuals conceptualise their relationship with their companion animal (e.g. as their family member or as property) has been associated with how they perceive the animal's mental state (e.g. their attitude) and the sort of environment they provide for them as well (Bouma et al., 2021). In one study, individuals who used the term 'guardian' were significantly more likely to agree that animals are sentient beings with needs and interests of their own, and that long-term caging and chaining of animals, or viewing animals as possessions is wrong (Carlisle-Frank and Frank, 2006). In contrast, those who identified with the term 'owners', within this study, were 'more likely to believe people should not make such a big deal [serious issue] out of protecting animals' (Carlisle-Frank and Frank, 2006: 237). Clearly the way we, and society at large, conceptualise our relationship with animals is linked with the terminology we choose, the way we research these welfare concerns, and ultimately the care outcomes for the animal. In particular, our concept of human-animal interactions and the human-animal relationship or bond is both reactive to, and influential towards, our terminology. In other words, the terms we use are necessarily connected to our research and practice ethics.

Debate has also centred on the welfare consequences of a legislative change from owner to guardian, with the AVMA implying that removal of the concept of animal ownership would create legal ramifications impacting all human-companion animal interactions and thus spanning multiple industries (e.g. veterinary, insurance or government; AVMA, 2023). For instance, the AVMA have suggested that replacing the term 'owner' with 'guardian' would increase the likelihood of malpractice suits towards veterinarians and that use of this term may 'reduce a person's willingness to seek appropriate services for animals in a timely fashion' (AVMA, 2005; Finkelstein, 2005; Hankin, 2009). However, it is not made clear by the AVMA how or why these negative repercussions are expected to come to fruition. This argument is rooted in bad faith, is not supported by empirical evidence, and fails to account for the nuance of creating and effecting laws. It is highly unlikely that such a change would impact or drastically change the legal implications for animal guardians/owners or other stakeholders such as veterinarians or councils, and further if any change were to occur it is likely to be in the best interests and provide greater protections for the animals in question (Ashall et al., 2018; Cupp, 2016; Hankin, 2009; Pallotta, 2019). Reported concerns, legal or otherwise, around a change towards the term 'guardian' are at best unfounded, and at worst entrenched in a mindset that is at odds with the advancement of animal welfare and animal rights (Hankin, 2009). Further research on the impact of terminology on welfare outcomes for animals and the human-animal bond are needed. However, the current research, while still young, suggests that it is the use of the term

‘owner’, and not ‘guardian’, which is correlated with negative outcomes for animal welfare and human-animal bonds.

Scientific research is vital to understanding the world we live in and progressing the quality of life of those who reside in it. To achieve that understanding and advancement, scientific research must be aware of, and connected to, the shifting attitudes of the society it functions within (what ultimately guides our ethics). Before we can make clear claims about the use of our welfare terminology, both in how it is used for research and in practice, we must treat these possibilities as empirical questions, not given assumptions. This is particularly vital for restrictions we might place on the use of specific welfare terms, since it is research itself that should guide any understanding we have of the impact of our terms.

Conclusions

Until a time when an established terminology or lexicon of terminology is determined, we believe companion animal welfare researchers should be able to use whichever term best fits within the context of their study. From a scientific standpoint, there is no loss in clarity or functionality in exchanging the use of ‘owner’ for ‘guardian’, and uniformity need not suggest terminology exclusivity. In addition, if we expect to understand the effects of these terms, we should directly study their impact when in use. Whether it is our words that showcase how we perceive our relationship with animals or whether it is our words that begin to mould that perception, the words we use should be a focal point for both welfare research and ethical examinations of their impact. There is a clear growing preference for terms other than ‘owner’ when describing our relationship with animals, especially companion animals. This preference may also be connected to better welfare outcomes for our animals. If so, this shift indicates that we, as companion animal welfare scientists, are moving towards a better understanding of, and respect for, the welfare and wellbeing of animals. ‘Owner’ or ‘guardian’, whatever words we use to describe the caretaker role in a human-companion animal relationship, the decision should be facilitated by research, ideally in line with current societal expectations. To pre-emptively restrict companion animal welfare research terminology based on untested opinions and potentially counterproductive moral guidelines is to relinquish the importance of ethics-based welfare research. The applied animal sciences have advanced to a point where we can and should contemporaneously examine and mould the approaches we take to improving the lives of the animals around us.

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