



Article

# Framing 'Friend': Media Framing of 'Man's Best Friend' and the Pattern of Police Shootings of Dogs

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**Abstract:** The representation and framing of events by news sources plays a critical role in the way society comes to understand a given phenomenon. For example, the use of force by police officers against civilians is covered regularly by news media outlets. Far less widely examined, however, is the excessive use of force against companion animals or pets. Thus, to understand the ways in which police use of force against animals is framed in the media, we conducted qualitative content analyses of 189 print news articles published in diverse regions of the U.S. over the course of a six-year period (2011–2016). Drawing on symbolic interactionism, analysis reveals that the media's representation of incidents of police shootings of dogs speaks not only to the social value dogs have in society, but also to the acceptability of friendships between humans and dogs. Specifically, we argue that some dog–human relationships are more socially acceptable than others and, therefore, shootings against some dogs are perceived as less acceptable than others. Ultimately, we find that news media representation and the ways in which incidents are framed reify existent social hierarchies. This research contributes to growing bodies of literature on police violence, the shift in perspectives on animals in society, and the power of the media to affect public perception of incidents.

**Keywords:** dog–human friendship; companion animals; interspecies hierarchy; media and crime

## 1. Introduction

The social definition of a dog as a companion who lives in one's home or as a member of the family is relatively new. After World War II, as economic prosperity, and therefore disposable income, grew within the U.S., pet-keeping increased in popularity (Swabe 1999; Jones 2003). Dogs historically, and still today, held various social statuses. They have been working animals on farms or ranches, in the entertainment industry as racing or show dogs, and in human families as companions (Sanders 1999; Irvine 2004). Though the move to companion is more recent, the idea of the dog as 'man's best friend' is deeply embedded in American society today. The evolution of social definitions of species, such as dogs, illustrates the changing relationships humans have with other species. In this article, we use this shift in the societal definition of the dog to highlight the contemporary allowance of a new type of friendship: the dog–human friendship. This relationship represents a transition in the social value and societal understanding of species, dog and human alike.

The role and social value of dogs within families is shaped and challenged by social institutions. In particular, as society experiences increased incidents in which police shoot family dogs (Olsen 2016; Gaffney 2018), law enforcement plays an increasingly important role in the public's perception of dogs. Accordingly, the use of force by law enforcement is a source of interest and concern among the civilian public. With this in mind, news media, another influential social institution, continues to follow and report situations in which police use what is deemed as excessive use of force against

human civilians (Sacco 1995; Lersch and Mieczkowski 2005; Harris 2009; Klahm and Tillyer 2010). However, the use of force by police extends past humans, though, and also includes nonhuman animals. Recent media publications, citing the Department of Justice, estimate that law enforcement kills approximately 25 dogs every day in the United States within a single year (see Scott 2016; Chappell 2018). Accordingly, we examine how journalists, and thereby media, present the narratives involving police use of force against nonhuman animals, specifically, those in which police shoot companion dogs who are family pets.

In reporting on numerous instances of animal cruelty, news media shapes the public's perception of animal-related crimes (Grugan 2019). Simultaneously, law enforcement has experienced an increased rate of visibility, largely due to news media coverage of police shooting incidents and entertainment media focused on crime (Donovan and Klahm 2015). Thus, the police are increasingly noticed for violent interactions occurring in the course of their duties. For example, the social awareness of the police shootings of black and brown individuals is now perceived as more commonplace due to the attention given in the media. Consequently, average citizens are more exposed to the notions that race, social class, and neighborhood community factors—which policing studies have long documented as significant in understanding police use of force—can play a role in incidents of police violence (Garner et al. 2002; Terrill and Reisig 2003). We draw a parallel to this instance of police violence, but examine the phenomenon of the shootings of companion dogs instead of humans and the role media plays in drawing attention to them. Notably, we do not claim a causal relationship between the shootings of mostly young men of color and the shootings of companion dogs; however, paralleling Bierné's (2018) sentiment that nonhuman animals are valued much less highly than humans, we argue that marginalized groups broadly—such as young men of color and nonhuman animals—are devalued when compared against other groups of human lives. As a result, the killings of young men of color and theriocides fail to receive equivalent attention by the public. Given the current social landscape regarding public exposure to acts of police violence, we acknowledge the role the media plays in not only covering such incidents, but also how they frame the incidents.

Drawing on symbolic interactionism, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of print news articles covering cases of police shootings of dogs within the United States. Findings demonstrate that the media's portrayal of incidents of police shootings of dogs sheds great light not only on the social value of dogs in society, but also on the acceptability of friendships between humans and dogs. Specifically, we argue that the media's representation of incidents in which police shoot dogs suggests that certain dog-human relationships are more socially acceptable than others based on the placement of the dog and the human within their own species hierarchy as constructed by U.S. society.

In this article, we explore the history of dogs and humans, noting that while the dog-human relationship has a well-documented past, the recognition of dog-human friendships is lacking. We begin with a review of the literature on social changes that were necessary to foster an emerging narrative that nonhuman and human animals could be friends. Next, we explain the stratification of a species hierarchy that places certain nonhuman animals, along with certain humans, as more or less 'friend-worthy'. We use the theoretical lenses of media framing and symbolic interactionism to examine the significance of symbolic frames in shaping these friend designations. We then explain the methodological approach employed in the present study before presenting the findings. Data cover a variety of themes found in print media articles that influence how readers of these news publications assess not only the dog-human relationship, but also the outcome of the violent police interaction as well. In this way, we contend that print news media commands very real power to shape how humans decide which dog-human friendships are more or less socially acceptable and, as a result, how the public evaluates incidents, such as police shootings of dogs, which involve these friendships.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. *The Historical Relationship of Dogs and Humans*

Much of the literature on early dog–human relationships focuses on a symbiotic relationship of survival. Evidence of dogs and humans as hunting partners or as reciprocal protectors substantiates this focus (DeMello 2012). However, the interesting relationship in the present study extends beyond simple survival. We focus on friendships—the actual relationship between the dog–human dyad—and the ‘friend-worthy’ characteristics held by a given dog or human within a dyad based on the perceived social hierarchies of each species. ‘Friend-worthy’ characteristics include access to individuality, empathy, and justice. In other words, when we grant dogs and/or humans the symbolic label of ‘friend’, we frame their stories in ways that personalize them as sentient beings undeserving of suffering violence.

It is difficult to determine when exactly dogs and humans first became friends, companions, or family members, especially considering how social context matters. In many current social environments, dogs are defined as working animals and are not seen as being equal friends with humans; in other situations, dogs can be defined as food (Singer 1975; Arluke and Sanders 1996; Sanders 1999; Swabe 1999; Jones 2003; Irvine 2004; Herzog 2010; Hamilton and Taylor 2013). Regardless, an undeniable shift in the social definition of dogs within U.S. society has clearly occurred.

### 2.2. *Dog–Human Friendships*

The notion that dogs and humans can experience meaningful relationships is relatively commonplace in contemporary U.S. society. Cultural mantras such as ‘man’s best friend’ permeate the American social landscape (Sanders 1999; Irvine 2004). Film depictions that range from humorous (e.g., *Beethoven*) to distressing (e.g., *Marley & Me*) showcase the wide range of emotional connections humans can share with dogs. Similarly, literature contains many examples of this friendship (e.g., *Where the Red Fern Grows* and *Merle’s Door*). The capitalistic economy even has a market for dog caretakers to engage in consumerism on behalf of their pets, with birthday or holiday gift-giving now a norm within this relationship. Healthcare and veterinary services also enjoy a growing marketplace niche as canines have evolved into a species that receives significant attention and care from practitioners (Swabe 1999; Jones 2003). Numerous institutions and areas of social life presently have the dog–human friendship embedded within them. Yet, the idea that dogs, or any animal for that matter, could be friends, is fairly recent. The following demonstrates how animals, specifically dogs, came to be embraced as friends, while also addressing how not all animals are deemed as ‘friend-worthy’. Notably, we also include a discussion of human animals as friends to dogs, as well, because humans are also on a species hierarchy and their label of ‘friend’ likewise influences our assessment of the dog–human interaction. Finally, we argue that even certain breeds within socially approved species are deemed unworthy of friendship relative to all humans, resulting in an intra-species hierarchy.

#### 2.2.1. Can Animals be Friends?

Historically, similar justifications for why animals were abused and exploited were also used to deny human–animal friendships. Scholars such as Mead (1934) proposed that humans and nonhuman animals were inherently different; that nonhuman animals lacked language and other skills that humans possessed. This distinction, according to Mead, placed animals on a different, inferior, cognitive level than humans. If animals lacked language, then they lacked the ability to communicate with us in similar ways. This reasoning has been used to claim that humans corner the market on language and, consequently, on relationships that rely on shared communication methods.

However, contemporary scholars demonstrated that nonhuman animals, including dogs, possess mindedness and thereby can engage in intersubjective interactions with humans. Sanders (1999), in his ethnographic monograph *Understanding Dogs: Living and Working with Canine Companions*, determined that dogs not only help humans create and maintain a social self for themselves, but dogs also possess

a sense of personhood of their own. Sanders (1999) found that those who lived and worked with dogs fully acknowledged that their dog had a personality, goals, preferences, and emotional intelligence that allowed them to be in meaningful relationships with them. Similarly, Irvine (2004), in her book *If You Tame Me: Understanding our Connection with Animals*, challenged the historical notion that humans and nonhuman animals, specifically dogs and cats, cannot relate intersubjectively because animals lack a sense of self. Her study of shelter animals provides compelling support debunking the claim that to suggest nonhuman animals possess a sense of self is simple anthropomorphism.

Bierne (2018) applies these more current conceptualizations of self and personhood in animals to the phenomena of human killing of nonhuman animals (in varied forms and contexts), which he identifies as theriocide. In his work, *Murdering Animals*, he examines the rights of animals and questions humans as “the only beings worthy of entitlement to rights” (Bierne 2018, p. 3). He contends that the presence of speciesism leads humans to categorize nonhuman animals as subordinate and, as a result, human-induced deaths of domesticated and wild animals are neither seen as wrong nor illegal and, ultimately, remain invisible. Bierne (2018) argues for advancement in the recognition of animals to not only have the right to life, but to their own lives, and not the lives humans think a given nonhuman animal should live. Additionally, founded in his claims of self and personhood, Bierne (2018) claims animals have the right to be treated with respect and not as property. Assertions such as these challenge the omnipresent species hierarchy and more easily allow for the possibility of development and recognition of friendship between animal and human.

### 2.2.2. Species Hierarchy

While much social redefinition has allowed animals, specifically dogs, to be seen as friends, it is crucial to note that not all animals are given this title; not even all dogs are afforded it. Nonhuman animal species have long been placed into hierarchical statuses. Whether humans consume the animal or not has been used as a justification for the animal’s social value or lack thereof (Singer 1975; Herzog 2010). The animal’s social role as a companion (e.g., dogs), working tool (e.g., cattle), object of disgust (e.g., rats), or threatening fear tactic in cultural imaginings (e.g., pit bull terriers) also has been used to determine an animal’s place in a hierarchy (Arluke and Sanders 1996).

Whereas the above criteria draw on animal purpose and social role in determining its place within a hierarchy, Brickel (1985) proposes a view of the animal hierarchy based in social learning. He contends that humans do not have an innate understanding of certain species or breeds as socially valued while others are not. Rather, humans learn, in a systematic way within Western culture, “that certain classes of animals (e.g., dogs and cats) exist primarily to be loved [and] other animals (e.g., snakes) are to be feared or avoided” (pp. 33–34). Not only does the media emphasize these disparate messages, but, likewise, Brickel contends that families support the construction of the animal hierarchy, and even a hierarchy of breeds within a given species, through selection, monitoring, and omission of certain animals and breeds during the formative years in children’s lives. While the institutions of media and family offer a context of learning within childhood, especially, Brickel (1985) suggests that “it is up to the animals themselves to encourage bond maintenance” (p. 40) through exemplifying qualities that are socially valued. The demonstration, or lack thereof, of these characteristics (e.g., warm, soft, playful, fun, or otherwise affectionate) and the ability for humans to bond, or not, with the animals as a result, offers a mechanism through which adult humans continue to accept different species, and even breeds within a given species such as dogs, as ‘friend-worthy’ or not.

Like Brickel (1985) who identifies traits required by animals to be categorized as ‘friend-worthy’, Bierne (2018) offers a list of characteristics that deny animals the ‘friend-worthy’ designation and, instead, present them as problematic and disposable to humans. Interestingly, this list is embedded in a discussion of state theriocide, which Bierne explains takes place when either the state or its appointees, including law enforcement, private shelters, military, and state departments, kill animals. In offering an example, Bierne (2018, p. 28) discusses state theriocide occurring indirectly when private shelters “euthanize animals who are homeless, elderly, unwell, unwanted or deemed dangerous to

humans". This list of traits, taken together with the list suggested by [Brickel \(1985\)](#), bolster the claim of a species hierarchy.

Though centered in different explanations for the existence of an animal hierarchy, the explanations above share the notion that only some species are granted the title of friend and, furthermore, within a species, only some types of the species (e.g., breeds) are granted the title. So, while dogs have reached a high status level compared to other animals, many dogs are still seen as unbecoming as friends for humans. Notably, the work of [Payne et al. \(2015\)](#) is of particular interest to the current study considering its goal of explaining why some dog–human dyads are successful in terms of mutual benefit to both human and dog while others are not. Payne et al.'s review of recent research includes the finding that the physical traits of a dog, such as ear shape and coat color, affect human ratings of dog behavior and personality as well as work supporting the notion that human factors generally have more influence on the dog–human bond than canine factors. The implications of these findings are significant as they suggest that physical features of dogs, unrelated to the dog's actual personality or behavior, can lead to human discrimination against certain dogs and/or breeds. This reifies the presence of a human socially-constructed hierarchy of dogs. Also, this work offers criteria upon which humans, as dog caretakers and trainers, can be hierarchically understood as a species within the dog–human dyad.

Like the work of [Payne et al. \(2015\)](#) and others, [Blouin \(2013\)](#) examines the dog–human dyad. [Blouin \(2013\)](#) offers a typology of three cultural types or orientations of dog owners (i.e., dominionistic, humanistic, and protectionistic), which can, along with the work of [Payne et al. \(2015\)](#) described above, serve as a foundation upon which a creation of a hierarchy of dog caretakers can be understood. Blouin's orientations consider how humans relate to their dogs, care for their dogs, and what views the human has of animals generally. Humans within the dominionistic orientation view dogs as lesser than humans in value and status, are most likely to have less attachment within a dog–human relationship, and ultimately, often view dogs as 'objects' rather than as 'subjects'. In comparison, both the humanistic and protectionistic orientations place great social and emotional value on dogs. A critical distinguishing aspect of these orientations is that humanistic caretakers often view themselves as 'parents' of their dogs. As a result, they may spoil their dogs based on what the human perceives as needed and/or beneficial to the dog. However, in this way, the human often prioritizes their own interests over the dogs and, at times, this may lead to anthropomorphizing the dog (e.g., with costumes, toys, fancy collars). Ultimately, while the actions of a humanistic dog owner are unlikely to be deemed as harmful to the dog by society, the placement of oneself in the role of parent allows the human to hold a socially valued role that has been modeled within family and social settings from childhood ([Brickel 1985](#)). In comparison, protectionistic caretakers view dogs, and all animals, as having personhood and, as a result, engage in direct care and broader social activism with the intent of benefitting the animals. This orientation views humans and animals as equal and, as a result, works to highlight and elevate the status of animals without requiring "surrogate personhood" as does the humanistic orientation ([Blouin 2013](#), p. 287). In this way, [Blouin \(2013\)](#) contends that the protectionist orientation exhibits biocentric attitudes, respectful of all nature, in comparison to the anthropocentric views of the humanistic orientation.

Aside from the dog–human dyad specifically, humans can be placed into social hierarchies based on many characteristics. Often, their perceived social value is key in determining their placement on such a hierarchy. As with certain breeds of dogs, marginalized humans are also not always seen as 'friend-worthy'. In the same way nonhuman animals were historically, and often are presently, not granted full personhood, human social groups such as the disabled, the homeless, the elderly, and children are also not granted such status. Additionally, felons and others charged with criminal behavior are often stigmatized, stripped of full personhood, and denied complete participation in society ([Goffman 1963](#)). This latter group is of particular interest to the present study as a central focus of our work is on the institution of law enforcement. Law enforcement already has a historical relationship with social groups that fall low on the social hierarchy scale of value. Here, though,

our interest is on nonhuman animals, specifically dogs, who are either granted or denied higher social status through the label of 'friend'. While the actions and attitudes of law enforcement and the criminal justice system communicate a social hierarchy of humans, we argue this same institution applies a similar hierarchy formula to dogs. Likewise, other social institutions, such as media, further shape these social hierarchies. Indeed, just as the media has helped to illuminate the incidence of police shootings of a marginalized social group—individuals of color—so too has the media aided in generating exposure, albeit differentially framed as acceptable or unacceptable and reflective of the interspecies hierarchy, of the incidence of police shootings of companion dogs.

### 2.3. Media Framing

The media is an increasingly influential institution. Its power to frame stories is the central focus of much scholarship. As Sacco states, "because they are able to legitimate some views and to marginalize others, the news media are an important part of this framing process" (Sacco 1995, p. 149). Communication scholars have documented numerous examples of framing, along with their consequences for social discourse (see, for examples, De Vreese et al. 2001; Dimitrova et al. 2005; Olausson 2009). Within the discipline of sociology, symbolic interactionists have analyzed the importance of language and dramaturgical elements to social scenes that are characterized by other concepts such as scripting, which notes that social interactions have their own guidelines for actors, settings, and narrative (e.g., Goffman 1959; Berger and Luckmann 1967; Gagnon and Simon 1973). Because the present study analyzes news media, not the original words of either police or dog caretakers, media framing and symbolic interactionism serve as strong analytic lenses. While some articles directly quote dog caretakers and police officers, these stories are still understood through the journalist's perspective. The focus is on this medium as the means by which the public receives information about these cases and, consequently, experiences an emotional reaction shaped by it. Since the authors examine the reporting of police shootings of dogs and the social designations of acceptable dog–human friendships, this also means that the media is powerful in shaping social discourse around human–animal friendships in general.

In recent decades, scholars have more frequently used framing as a conceptual tool. Carragee and Roefs (2004) note that the definition of frames can vary among such scholars. They emphasize that framing needs to be linked to political and social power. Thus, framing is not simply a media effect, but a part of larger ideological processes. This critique employs early symbolic interactionist notions of social construction and meaning making as part of structural forces (see Goffman 1974). The working definition of frames applied in the present study attempts to reflect this critique as the authors also agree, "Although specific characterizations of frames differ, meaningful definitions emphasize the ways in which frames organize news stories and other discourses by their patterns of selection, emphasis, interpretation, and exclusion" (Carragee and Roefs 2004, pp. 215–216). Following the call of Entman (1993) in his seminal article *Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm*, scholars employing framing can use this concept to examine the power of a communicating text, one that chooses certain aspects of a perceived reality to make them more prominent. Therefore, in deconstructing media frames around the police shootings of dogs, the authors deeply engage in the deconstruction of power structures within policing, the hierarchical social definitions of nonhuman animals, and the influence of the media as a social institution.

### 3. Methods

Using inductive qualitative content analysis, the authors examine how news sources represent various aspects of events involving police shootings of domesticated dogs. Qualitative content analysis goes beyond examining frequencies of words, phrases, and imagery, and instead allows researchers to condense raw data into categories and themes based on interpretation (Erlingsson and Brysiewicz 2017). This process, by its nature, involves inductive reasoning whereby themes and categories emerge from the data based on the researcher's careful examination and sustained comparison.

### 3.1. Data Collection and Sampling

For this study, original data consisted of editorials, news articles, and commentary from print newspapers published in English between 2011–2016 across the United States. The authors used the search interface ProQuest Newsstand (now Newsstream) to input the search terms “police AND (dogs or pets) AND shoot”. Filtering for relevance, the authors selected the first 1000 articles as a preliminary selection. From these, 189 distinct publications remained after the authors limited the sample to news articles published in 2011–2016 in the United States, and that involved police shooting activity against non-police dogs.

### 3.2. Data Analysis

Employing the analytic strategy proposed by [Matthes and Kohring \(2008\)](#), we examined each article for several frame elements. These elements, Matthes and Kohring contend, come from the widely accepted definition of frame introduced by Entman (original emphasis): “To frame is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating context, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described” ([Entman 1993](#), p. 2). Within this definition, Matthes and Kohring identify the following elements comprising a given frame: (1) a problem definition which “can consist of an issue and relevant actors that discuss the problem”; (2) a causal interpretation which “is an attribution of failure or success regarding a specific outcome”; (3) a moral evaluation which “can be positive, negative, or neutral and can refer to different objects”; and (4) a treatment recommendation which “can include a call for or against a certain action” ([Matthes and Kohring 2008](#), p. 264). Ultimately, after examination for the above elements, we engaged in hierarchical cluster analysis wherein there were “high differences between the clusters and low differences within a cluster” ([Matthes and Kohring 2008](#), p. 264). Each cluster represented a media frame.

Applying the above method, the authors treated each news article as a singular unit of analysis. The first author began by performing initial coding of the first 40 articles. During the initial review, the first author identified the frame elements and also drew on [Charmaz’s \(2014\)](#) constant comparative method, noting the police reason for responding to a call, the breed of the dog involved, the reported reason for the shooting of the dog, the dog’s outcome from the incident, the officer’s outcome from the incident, and the police department’s response. This allowed for an additional level of systematic comparison of each unit of data with those already in any given cluster, while also allowing for the integration of additional categories and codes identified through interpretive memos.

Following the initial coding by the first author, the authors engaged in testing the coding scheme and preliminary hierarchical clusters for validity. Both authors agreed on the same set of 20 articles to code independently. The authors then met to discuss and calibrate their analyses. Inter-coder reliability was strong. In cases where one researcher disagreed with the initial coding by the other, both authors performed a second reading, followed by discussion to thereby lead to a final coding and cluster designation.

After completing the calibration, the authors split the full sample of 189 articles equally and coded articles for specific aspects of interest, including frame elements as well as characteristics that personalized animals, characteristics that affected perceptions of human beings, and words and phrases related to the relationship and role animals played within a social context. Both authors engaged in memoing during coding of each article.

## 4. Results

In this paper, we argue that through use of a variety of strategies, print media draws on and reifies existent nonhuman animal and human hierarchies. Specifically, certain social characteristics, practices, and roles are emphasized to effectively position both individual dogs and individual humans as more or less socially valued and, therefore, ‘friend-worthy’. Drawing on the work of [Brickel \(1985\)](#); [Blouin \(2013\)](#) and [Payne et al. \(2015\)](#), we use the concept of friendship to describe the relationship

between the dog–human dyad and, in comparison, employ the concept of ‘friend-worthy’ or the ‘friend-worthiness’ of either dog or human, when discussing the ways the dog or human meet or fail to meet, characteristics on the perceived social hierarchies of their species. As a result, when considering a given dog–human relationship within a particular shooting incident, the shooting itself is deemed either more or less justifiable based on the value placed on the individual dog, the individual human, and importantly, the connection and relationship they share. In other words, the news article frames the shooting as either something the readers should care about or not. Below, we identify and discuss the ways print media frame certain friendships between humans and companion dogs as more or less socially acceptable and, therefore, particular shootings of dogs as more or less justifiable or problematic.

#### 4.1. Incorporating Stereotyped Descriptions

News media sources included a variety of descriptive characteristics, not including those provided within quoted portions of the articles from dog caretakers<sup>1</sup> or law enforcement, of both the dogs involved in the shooting incidents as well as of their caretakers when one was identified. As a result, media sources often reify existing hierarchies within each particular species (dog or human) and encouraged reader perceptions of shootings as more or less justifiable based on the social value granted to the parties individually, but, even more poignantly, when taken as a companion animal–caretaker pair. Often these descriptions were specific and most articles included at least one form of description of the dogs involved in any given incident, including the dog’s breed, name, age, weight, and, at times, the dog’s health condition prior to the incident. The following are examples of succinct descriptive characteristics included in articles:

- “involving a 12-year-old arthritic golden retriever named Boomer” (Nipps 2011)
- “tan pit bull named Debo” (Valentine 2011)
- “A 15-month old dog named Amore” (DeBolt 2013)
- “The pit bull, a 5-year-old male named Tank” (Graham 2014)
- “12-year-old male ‘pit bull’” (Mester 2014)
- “staffordshire pit bull terrier named Jackson Smore” (Anderson 2014)
- “6-year-old Basset hound/beagle mix, Willy Pete” (Craig 2014)
- “the 6-year-old pit bull-terrier-boxer mix, named ‘Wheezy’” (Day 2015)
- “The dog, a 90-pound German shepherd” (Gerez 2015)

While the above represents the types of descriptions of dogs occurring most often, overwhelmingly, when the breed of the dog was provided it was a pit bull or pit bull mix. Occasionally articles included other “bully” breeds (e.g., rottweilers, German shepherds, bull terrier, or mastiff), but it was more often, breed was noted when the dog shot was a pit bull or, in opposition, if the dog shot was a stereotypically easy-going, non-aggressive breed (e.g., labrador retriever, golden retriever, basset hound, brittany spaniel). Noting the breed in this way, either only in cases involving a stereotypically aggressive breed or harmless breed, emphasizes the ways media draws on pre-existing notions of the breeds to influence readership understanding of the shooting incident. Similarly, when articles included the name of a dog, the age (often either when the dog could be deemed a puppy or a senior), and the (poor) health status of a dog, it personalizes the dog and draws on readership emotion to influence their perspective of the dog as ‘friend-worthy’ and thereby judge the shooting of the dog as justifiable or not.

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<sup>1</sup> The authors use the terms “caretaker” and “guardian” in their own analysis of the published materials to acknowledge the personhood animals have. When there is incorporation of the word “owner”, it reflects the use by journalists within the articles under analysis.

In order to examine the consequences of this descriptive writing, take the comparative cases of two differently framed articles such as the one listed above about the 12-year-old arthritic golden retriever named Boomer and the incident concerning the 90-pound German shepherd. In the former article, the journalist and/or news editors begin by framing the shooting as a social violation requiring reform through use of the article's title: *Dog's Death Influences Police Policy*. This article sets the stage for the readers with its introductory sentences: "Police officers have shot and killed a half-dozen dogs this year in the city. But it was the seventh fatal shooting, involving a 12-year-old arthritic golden retriever named Boomer, that gave St. Petersburg police Chief Chuck Harmon pause" (Nipps 2011). This initial frame introduces the readers to a social problem by providing information about the larger pattern of police shootings of dogs. Then, by noting the consideration of the police chief, the individual in a position of power to implement institutional change, the social problem is justified as a valid issue of concern. The article goes on to describe that "a campaign to demand that police be trained in dealing with animals" was initiated by this dog's caretakers and has since become a "movement [which] includes an online petition at change.org and a dedicated Facebook page with more than 3700 followers" (Nipps 2011). In this article, the dog's caretaker was quoted saying: "'My wife was crying when she heard [of the police department's policy change],' Glass said. 'It's a mixed thing because Boomer had to sacrifice for positive change'" (Nipps 2011). Here the inclusion of the caretaker's perspective helps to further personalize this dog, who has already been described with a name, age, and medical condition. This article did note that Boomer, albeit a stereotypical friendly breed, "initially seemed 'social,' according to [the officer's] report of the incident" yet "became 'vicious,'" after an officer tried to examine his identification tag (Nipps 2011). The article also relayed that "an internal investigation examining the Oct. 1 incident in which Officer Misty Swanson, 25, shot and killed the dog, police ruled the shooting was justified" (Nipps 2011). Even though the dog's actions could have been framed as justifying the shooting, and although an internal investigation ruled the shooting was indeed justified, the article still frames the story as a social wrong, a part of a larger systemic problem, and needing a social remedy in the form of policy change.

Alternatively, in the latter article focused on the 90-pound German shepherd, the title sets up quite a different frame for readers: *Evanston Police Officer Shoots Dog*. Article titles, such as this one, read as factual and confer less emotion than articles like the one previously discussed. The dog in this article is identified only by weight and breed in the title and, later in the article, by a young age (i.e., two-year-old). In our analysis of the data set, the choice of which descriptors to use in the articles helped to support the overall frame of the article. Whereas the previous article on Boomer personalized the dog as a stereotypical friendly breed and offered his age and medical condition to emphasize his vulnerability as a shooting victim, the article on the German shepherd does not include the dog's name, and offers descriptors that paint a picture of a large stereotypical aggressive breed. While journalists can use descriptors to relay factual information about a news story, they also can use them to frame the scene and characters within the story. However, descriptors may actually detract from other facts of the story. In this article, the author describes how an officer decided to check the basement of the house under investigation: "The dog, a 90-pound German shepherd, then came running out of the basement door after the officer opened it. The officer attempted to retreat back up the stairs but lost his balance and fell to the floor in a seated position before discharging his weapon several times. The two-year-old dog was taken to an animal hospital but then died, police said" (Gerez 2015). This article lacked information on whether the dog growled, lunged at, or bit the officer, so the actions of the dog may or may not have justified the shooting. Regardless, the reader of this news article is given limited, emotionless information that presents this story in a completely different frame than the story of Boomer, a story filled with emotion, calls for social justice, and reflections of policy changes. Yet, it was Boomer who was described in the police report as "vicious", while this German shepherd, according to the limited information provided in the news article, may have only surprised the officer who stumbled, fell, and undoubtedly was frightened of a dog with those descriptors—a dog without

personal identity representing a large stereotypically aggressive breed. These two stories help to illustrate the overall patterns we saw regarding the use of dog descriptors in the articles.

Likewise, articles included descriptions of dog caretakers to establish not only the appropriateness of a given companionship, but also then, to suggest whether the shooting of the dog within the companionship was reasonable. Among others, descriptions in these cases included: gender, age, employment status, and disability status. Below are examples of the types of descriptions articles included of dog caretakers.

- “a homeless man named Lech Stankiewicz” (Kemp 2012)
- “its elderly owner” (Quinn and Burness 2014)
- “The dog owner, who has a criminal history that includes assault, protective order violation, assault on a police officer and various weapons offenses” (Mims 2014).
- “The 28-year-old musician, who has been on the road for 12 years, had hopped a freight train from Lafayette, Louisiana, to Sulphur, Louisiana” (Curtis 2014).

As was the case with descriptions of dogs involved in incidents, articles likewise drew on existent social hierarchies within the human species to position the individuals, and therefore the shooting of their dog(s), as more or less admissible. In many cases, including those above, descriptive characteristics aligned with lower statuses on the social hierarchy, such as in cases of homelessness or criminal records, suggested these individuals were unfit dog caretakers and, therefore, unfit as friends to their dogs. Similarly, when age of animal caretaker was included, it often involved dog–human matching wherein an elderly caretaker had a dog that was inappropriate based on being an aggressive breed, large size, or young age compared to the owner, and therefore—theoretically—the owner would be unable to suitably handle.

In the incident of the homeless caretaker, Lech Stankiewicz, and the incident involving the 83-year-old “elderly owner”, the journalists begin the articles by describing the poor health situation of the owners and frame police as intervening as sources of help. In the former, the article opens by stating that, “A NEW VIDEO emerged Thursday that shows police shooting a pit bull in the head in the East Village. The graphic footage, posted to the Gothamist website, shows two uniformed cops approaching the dog’s owner Monday as he appeared to be suffering a seizure on E. 14th St. near Second Ave” (Kemp 2012). Similarly, in the case of the elderly owner, the article indicates police approached because of need by the owner: “Police shot and killed a dog Friday morning after the Staffordshire terrier attacked two people—including a police sergeant—who were trying to help its elderly owner who had collapsed in the street” (Quinn and Burness 2014).

Both articles continue to negatively frame the owners through added stigmatized descriptions. In the case of Lech Stankiewicz, the article stated: “Stankiewicz—who sources said was intoxicated—was taken to Bellevue Hospital and treated for minor injuries. He was later cuffed on an arrest warrant for an open-container summons, cops said. His sister said Stankiewicz, who was born in Poland, left the family’s Illinois home about a decade ago due to a drug problem” (Kemp 2012). The inclusion of this description minimizes the actual shooting of the dog and, instead, points readers to the status and troubles of the human within the dog–human partnership. This framing suggests the human is not friend-worthy due to his struggles with addiction and the law. While the dog–human friendship relies on responsible caregiving for social approval, addicts and criminals are often socially defined as irresponsible and unable to provide care for themselves, let alone others. Likewise, in the case of the elderly owner, the dog in this incident is contrasted to the owner’s weak status (suggested by the mention of both the age and the physical collapse), when the journalist states, “It is not yet known whether the dog had a history of aggression, though Staffordshire terriers are considered similar to pit bulls” (Quinn and Burness 2014). Then the article includes a quote from a neighbor who recalled “the owner often walked his dog in that area, and that the dog typically wore a muzzle. She said the dog was unmuzzled on Friday, however” (Quinn and Burness 2014). The inclusion of the likeness between the dog involved in the incident and that of the breed of pit bulls frames the dog in a stigmatized and stereotyped manner. Additionally, the fact that the owner muzzles the dog when in

public suggests the need for additional protection from the dog. Thus, the framing of the feeble owner and a strong, potentially unsafe dog do not make for a socially acceptable friendship.

In comparison to the incidents within which descriptors of dog caretakers were involved, many articles omitted descriptors of the owner completely. By omitting this information, writers suggest there is nothing notable or unusual about the human caretaker involved. Or, in some cases, journalists mention identification of an owner, but specifically state that information about the owner has not been released. This removes consideration of the owner, the friend-worthiness of the owner, and possible culpability in the incident from the dog caretaker. Ultimately, then, focus is placed on the dog and/or the shooting incident itself. Examples of such omissions and limited descriptions include:

- “The dog’s owner has been identified, but his name was not released” (Staff 2015).

This first example includes no information about the dog caretaker. The following example does provide a name and location of the caretaker, but no other information. Thus, the reader’s understanding of this individual as a caretaker is limited, especially compared to the more nuanced stories that include vivid description about the dog caretakers.

- “Buddy’s owner, Debra Blackmore of Hesperia, Calif” (Kaufmann 2016).

Specific information about dogs and/or humans involved in incidents was not always available. However, it was not uncommon for articles to still include broad descriptions based on characteristics of size and/or demeanor, which also encouraged particular perspectives from readership. For example, in one brief article describing an officer shooting a dog in the foot after it approached another officer, the article stated: “Police described the animal as a ‘large dog,’ however the breed was not available” (Day 2014). Likewise, articles noted the reason police originally became involved in situations when not specific to the dog. Often, these cases involved either domestic disturbances between the caretakers of the dog and/or drug usage. For example, in one article describing the shooting of a pit bull, it stated, “to investigate a report of a domestic brawl involving a resident and her ex-boyfriend” (Valentine 2011). Though the articles are not incorporating factual information or characteristics of the dogs specifically, the information provided adds situational context to the incident and portrays parties within the incident, either the dog who was shot or the caretakers of the dog as culpable, and therefore, less friend-worthy. This situates the actual relationship between the dog–human dyad—the friendship—as problematic and, therefore, the police shooting can be understood as more acceptable by the general public.

### Scripting for Social Context

While above we point to the ways demographic and descriptive factors of the dogs and caretakers emphasize their positions within the species hierarchy of which they are part, articles also more directly aligned characteristics with social stereotypes through use of descriptive language and word usage around the events of a given incident. This included use of words such as “muscular” and “strong” when describing an incident involving a pit bull. Or, in some cases, descriptors of the dog’s demeanor, pace, or way of interaction aligned with characteristics provided by the journalist. For example, in the below incident, the dog caretaker is noted as breaking a law and the description of his behavior when police arrive (e.g., uncooperative) aligns with this. Similarly, the dog involved is noted as a pit bull and then the language around the dog’s behavior (e.g., “aggressively”) draws on stereotypes of the breed:

The incident began at about 10:40 p.m. when a woman in the 1900 block of San Francisco Avenue called police to report a man violating a restraining order [ . . . ] Officers said the man, identified as Mark Phillips, 37, of Long Beach was uncooperative, and his dog, an unleashed pit bull, was barking and acting aggressively, forcing officers to move away from the front of the home. (Puente 2013)

Likewise, some articles drew on the descriptive characteristics of both the dogs and caretakers involved in an incident to create a comparison in a given incident, which effectively emphasized both

the culpability of certain dogs and caretakers and the vulnerability of others involved. The following is an example from a case occurring inside a large, chain pet store:

After a 16-year-old girl had entered the store with an approximately 90-pound pit bull on a leash. The pit bull encountered a Maltese, a small breed, on a leash. The two dogs began barking, and the owners pulled them apart, Assistant Chief Steve Deaton said. A short time later, however, the pit bull escaped its owner and ran through the store dragging its leash. It attacked the Maltese, which was still on its leash held by its owner, an elderly woman. The pitbull picked up the smaller dog in its mouth and began to maul it, Deaton said. (Robards-Forbes and Chang 2013)

The above is representative of the ways articles used descriptive characteristics of the parties involved in an incident, both dog and human, to draw on socially recognized stereotypes in order to support police-identified blame (suggested through which dog was shot) within an incident. Specifically, the article draws on age and gender of the owners as well as breed and size of the dogs. The youthful age of the pit bull caretaker, and the associated stereotype of irresponsibility, serves as partial explanation for the inability and/or unwillingness to control the dog. Likewise, the elderly nature of the Maltese caretaker emphasizes increased vulnerability based on social stereotypes of aging populations as unable to respond quickly, feeble, and weak. Similarly, the article draws on opposing stereotypes of the same gender by acknowledging both caretakers as female. The pit bull caretaker is not strong enough to control the dog (but perhaps a boy may have been) and, in opposition, the Maltese caretaker was nurturing when she picked up her companion. Finally, the article includes not only the breeds of the dogs involved, which are both socially stereotyped, but includes the size to further create a comparison. The offending dog is described by weight, reinforcing it as a large, heavy dog, while the victimized dog is described, twice, in terms of its "small" build. Through use of descriptions that hold various stereotypes, both negatively and positively valued, the article supports a particular understanding of the situation. Ultimately, this is that the companionship of the young girl and pit bull is problematic, while that of the elderly woman and the Maltese is favorable. Therefore, the police shooting of this particular dog can be viewed as more socially acceptable.

While it may appear journalists are simply providing the facts of the case, we found that many articles lacked the type of detailed descriptions provided above. The below examples are two articles, nearly in their entirety, demonstrating the lack of descriptive characteristics and word usage provided in other articles.

#### Example 1:

An Elgin pit bull was shot by police Wednesday after storming fire station 7, according to officials. Police Lt. Dan O'Shea said fire department personnel were outside when a dog ran up from across the street and chased them inside. Another pit bull mix showed up a few minutes later, acting similarly, which prompted firefighters to call the police, O'Shea said. When police arrived shortly after 1 p.m. at the station, 3270 Longcommon Parkway, one of the dogs tried to attack an officer, according to O'Shea. "We truly never want to shoot an animal, much less someone's dog or any kind of pet," O'Shea said. "However, if an officer is going to be bit, he has to take appropriate actions". The dog was wounded by the gunshot and later taken to a South Elgin animal hospital. The dogs' owner lives in the 9N600 block of Water Road. The owner, whose name was not available Thursday morning, was cited and will have to appear in animal control court in July. Elgin police wrote five citations for each dog because of their behavior and for being at large. (Mathewson 2012)

#### Example 2:

At 4:55 p.m., two Concord police responded to a complaint related to a homeless camp just off Ponderosa Avenue in Concord. When the officers found the camp, a pitbull terrier

mix immediately confronted them. Police said the officers ordered the owner to grab the dog, and when the person didn't and the dog charged and tried to attack them, they fired. The dog was hit, Concord police added, before it turned and ran about a mile before officers caught up to it. Animal Control officers picked up the dog, which was taken to be medically evaluated. The dog was still alive, but wounded, when it was transported. The dog's condition is unknown. (Nelson 2013)

Through choosing what and how much information to include, in addition to when and how to include it, journalists ultimately shape not only the reader understanding of the context during which police shoot dogs, but also, as a result, influence the social understanding of both dog–human relationships and police decision-making around shooting dogs.

By introducing humanistic characteristics of dogs into articles, journalists imbued additional social value onto particular dogs, while effectively anonymizing others. When journalists limited the description of the dog to only its breed, or in some cases solely as “the dog”, they encourage readers to distance from the dog because those involved cannot be perceived as relatable. Likewise, the use of limited descriptive characteristics offers readers the opportunity to draw on stereotypes they may hold based on what little they do know of the dog, such as when the breed is given. Similarly, through use of descriptive characteristics of dog caretakers, articles draw on the human social hierarchy to position individuals as more or less suited to care for a dog, perhaps even the specific dog they had. Based on the characteristics included, articles frequently incorporated language that matched the social stereotypes associated with either, or both, the dog and dog caretaker. Together, these decisions by the journalists influence readership views of the dog–human relationship as acceptable or not and the shooting incident as justified or not.

#### 4.2. Applying (In)Humane Rituals toward the Dog

Articles included human social rituals applied to particular dogs which humanized—and therefore personalized—the dog and also spoke to the caretaker's positioning of the dog as valued or not. This included noting such things as when a dog was buried, received medical treatment following a shooting incident, and when dogs had beds in which to sleep. By including these practices, which are more often applied to humans, dogs could be understood as more valued and, therefore, higher on the species hierarchy. Likewise, we argue that including the presence of these rituals positioned caretakers in certain ways, often mirroring Blouin's (2013) orientations of humanistic or protectionist dog owners. This type of characterization of the caretaker aligns them with Brickel's (1985, pp. 37–38) contention of social learning around positive or good animal caretaking as necessitating “that animals are to be loved and cared for, and that such actions will reward us with the affection of the animal and admiration from others” and also reflect Biernie's (2018) assertion of respect for animals. Therefore, such caretakers are perceived as higher on their species hierarchy. Finally, emphasis of these rituals indicates a well-matched, socially acceptable dog–human friendship and suggests that the shooting of the dog within said friendship is unmerited.

In one article describing the shooting by an Animal Control officer of a 3-year-old pit bull named “Cage” on his owner's front porch, the social ritual of burial was described: “After the dog was shot, Law built a wooden coffin for Cage and buried him Monday night on family property in the county” (Avant 2013). This passage demonstrates not only the humanized practice as applied to Cage, thereby indicating his social value to his caretaker, but also points to his caretaker as having high social value as a dog owner because of the steps he took in caring for his animals in such ways. In this passage, the caretaker not only buried the dog, a human ritual suggesting the dog was worthy and valued enough to be mourned and remembered, but, additionally, the place of burial, “on family property in the county”, aligns the dog as a member of the family. Finally, the owner built the coffin in which the dog was buried. This suggests the owner cared for the dog in such a way as to dedicate time, energy, and skill in using his own hands to make the dog's final resting place. This highlights the social value of

the dog to the owner, which raises the dog on its own species hierarchy, and, simultaneously, positions the owner as deserving of such a dog and in fact, is equally positioned on the human hierarchy.

Another example occurred when a police officer responded to community calls about three pit bulls running loose. Upon investigation, the officer took aim when the dogs charged. Following the incident, the owner sought medical treatment for the dogs: “The owner, Ronnett Chantel Owens, took both dogs to an animal hospital on Bestgate Road where they were treated, police said” (Staff Writer 2011). The receipt of formal medical attention and treatment following an injury is a social ritual that no animal would receive if not for a connection and relationship to a human. Partaking in this ritual includes the transfer of money on the part of the dog caretaker, which further accentuates the social value of the dogs to their caretaker. As with the case of the burial described above, the willingness of the owner to engage her dogs in these human social practices positions her as higher on the human social hierarchy. Notably, an owner’s willingness and ability to pay for medical treatment also reflects either the socioeconomic status of the caretaker, as having disposable income, or as being willing to draw on alternative economic resources, such as loans or incurring debt, on behalf of their dog. Regardless, this heightens their ‘friend-worthiness’. Taken together then, the social value of both dogs and humans in these situations, again, equate in terms of their dog–human relationship. As a result, the relationships between these particular dogs and humans are established as well-matched and as socially approved friendships. The willingness of the owners to engage in anthropomorphic practices, in the former article, and consideration of what is best for the dog, in the latter incident, suggests the caretakers benefitted from the relationship with their dog and were, therefore, willing to expend resources on the dogs. Simultaneously, the inclusion of these practices in the articles suggests to readers that the dogs benefitted from the humans in the dyad as well—both while alive and, in the former case, after death. Drawing on Payne et al. (2015), the mutual benefit within these dyads positions them as successful and, therefore, as acceptable friendships. Because of this, the shootings of the dogs can be socially understood as less fair, just, and right.

### Scripting the Dog–Human Interaction

The above section explicates the ways journalists included human social rituals applied to dogs in ways that position both the dogs and humans in higher statuses on their species hierarchies. In comparison, however, journalists also employed language and phrasing that facilitated in readership a very different understanding of dog–human relationships. Specifically, while the response to being shot and end-of-life experiences of the dogs described above engage the interaction positively, numerous articles also positioned parties involved in incidents of dog shootings as low on their species hierarchy because of the dehumanizing and inhumane descriptions of events occurring following the police shooting. This framing reflects Bierne’s (2018, p. 37) suggestion around species language and the contention that “While human ‘corpses’ garner respect for the dead and are honoured with religious, familial and other ceremonial rights, the overwhelming majority of animal bodies (‘carcasses’) are disposed of invisibly, silently and without inspection of record”. Take, for example, the following two selections, which incorporate the terminology of “destroy[ing]”:

- “The dog attempted to attack a Northport city employee and to protect the employee, the dog had to be destroyed,” Northport Police Chief Kerry Card said (Avant 2013).
- “But the last thing police officers want to do is use their firearms to destroy a dog,” he said (Trice and Gorner 2013).

Similarly, in an article describing an incident in which police had to shoot a pit bull after responding to a human-on-human physical fight resulting in a 23-year-old man running from police and, ultimately, being bitten by said pit bull in the backyard where he sought refuge, the use of the word “collected” dehumanizes the dog following its death: “A Sonoma County Animal Control officer collected the dog” (Johnson 2013). Just as inanimate objects are destroyed and trash is collected, the dogs in these articles are given less social value. Mead (1934), this language positions nonhuman

animals and humans as inherently different with nonhuman animals inferior to the human counterpart. Thus, unlike the previous discussion in which dogs are understood as embodying personhood and/or selfhood, the framing here positions the dogs as objects and catalyzes less emotion around the animal's death. As a result, readers can distance more easily from the reality that a human officer killed a dog and, therefore, the death is minimized. In these examples, the dog–human interactions following the shooting demonstrate a weak or missing relationship between dogs and humans, which limits their opportunity for higher placement on their species hierarchy. In the case of the dog being “collected”, for instance, there is no mention of an owner interceding or caring for the dog after the shooting, despite inferring the owner was home through mention of the home being accessible (e.g., door unlocked) for a citizen to run away from police through the home and into the backyard where the dog was. Consequently, this aligns the owner as dominionistic according to Blouin's (2013) typology. While this framing is not necessarily accurate, the decision by the journalist to omit discussion of the relationship between the dog–human dyad positions the owner as not invested in the dog. As Blouin (2013, p. 286) posits, “those with dominionistic views often keep their dogs outside. This physical separation provides a symbolic social distance”. This suggests the owner views the dog as an object, rather than a subject. Thus, the owner is positioned as lacking friend-worthiness based on failure to meet socially valued standards of ‘good’ dog owners. Taken together, through incorporating the perspectives of outsiders, such as members of law enforcement, who position, through their word choice, the particular dogs involved as lower on their species hierarchy, and indicate weak friend-worthiness of owners by omitting discussion of care for the animal involved, the friendship is perceived as weak; this gives readers less investment in the shooting of the dog.

Ultimately, the dog–human interactions, or lack thereof, provided within articles had strong impact on the understanding of a police shooting of a given dog as more or less “right”. In cases involving strong dog–human relationships wherein dogs held great social value to their caretakers, which resulted in various humanized social rituals, their shootings could be seen as more problematic. Yet, in opposition, when the dog–human interactions described by journalists involved no humanized social rituals, dogs were dehumanized through incorporation of seemingly inhumane language that positioned dogs as undeserving and unworthy of such practices. Ultimately, the inclusion by journalists of whether and how dogs took part in human social rituals indicates the social value of both dog and human, and speaks to the suitability of any given dog–human relationship when present.

#### 4.3. Inclusion of Social Roles, Status Position, and Performance of Ownership

When applicable, articles included specific social roles and status positions dogs and/or dog caretakers held within broader society. For example, articles noted when dogs served as therapy dogs to significantly vulnerable human populations (e.g., children, elderly, and individuals in hospice) and those who had passed their Canine Good Citizen certification to become therapy dogs, those registered as companion dogs, and those holding positions as police K9s. While the aforementioned social roles are formally acknowledged through public social structures and organizations, articles also noted informal—yet socially valued—roles dogs held, such as when they served as the protector of their caretakers and families and when their caretakers viewed them as ‘family members’. Below are examples of the inclusion of these types of valued social roles:

- “The dog was my granddaughter’s playmate.” (Miller 2011)
- “The dog was like a son to me and my girls,’ she told an officer at the animal hospital.” (Valentine 2011)
- “My best friend was shot in the back’.” (Moreno 2013)
- “She said Jackson Smore is a registered companion dog to her husband, Rick Rodecap, 56, who is disabled, and that his personal care attendant had let the dog out the back door to relieve itself around 1:30 a.m. Friday.” (Anderson 2014)
- “Dutchess, a 2-year-old rescue dog belonging to a family in Florida City, Fla.” (Robinson 2015)

While, articles also included valued social roles of caretakers, such as noting when they were parents, when they owned their home, their occupation, and if they were animal rescuers (their dog was a rescue versus breeder-purchased dog), human social roles were implicated through mention of a dog's social role as well. For example, when a companion animal is required by a human, it indicates the dog caretaker has an unmet need based on mental, emotional, or physical health status. Similarly, in cases when a dog has a Canine Good Citizen certification or is a therapy dog, it indicates that the dog's caretaker is ensuring the dog meets their natural and full potential (pointing to a protectionistic orientation (Blouin 2013)) and, thereby, provides the owner with positive status as a pet guardian. This positively valued form of human caretaking is also seen through the way humans performed the roles associated with their statuses as 'pet owners' and the responses they had following the shooting of their dog(s). Importantly, the ways dog caretakers were able to perform their social roles related strongly to their economic status positions. Below is a variety of excerpts demonstrating positively valued performances of ownership.

- "Vachon, who lives in one of the apartments, was at work at the time of the shooting but came home afterward. Vachon sat weeping in the back of a sport utility vehicle hours after the shooting as she caressed a yellow sheet that shrouded her dog's lifeless body." (Sullivan 2012)
- "Saathoff said he and his wife have consulted with Springfield attorney Stephen Hedinger about what happened to their pet." (Schenk 2013a)
- "Luu said she was told by a Police Department supervisor that the surgery exceeded the value of the dog, and suggested she just get a new pet. [ . . . ] 'It's not about the money. It's about the love.' Unable to afford the surgery themselves, the family elected to have the dog put down, Luu said. 'It's sad'." (Day 2013)
- "Brown and Hornberger spoke of the incident and are sad about the loss of their female pit bull named Princess and the injuries to the other female dog named Bella. Both were acquired as rescue dogs and were about 2 to 3 years old, spayed and microchipped. [ . . . ] Hornberger was visibly upset in describing what happened and shed tears about the loss of Princess and the injuries to Bella." (Usalis 2014)
- "A Facebook group he started called "Justice for Arzy" was quickly accumulating posts of support on Wednesday afternoon. According to Carpenter, protesters also are planning to picket the Sulphur Police Department on Saturday." (Curtis 2014)

All of the above examples demonstrate the ways caretakers of dogs were able to perform in their statuses as 'dog owners' by carrying out various social roles. In some instances, this is demonstrated through exhibiting responsibility, such as having the dog microchipped and spayed, while in other cases, this was shown through the emotional and practical responses following the shooting incidents. While all of the humans described above demonstrate highly and positively valued statuses because they met societal expectations for the roles they fulfilled, these descriptions also, however, reify the positions the caretakers hold within the existent human hierarchy that is largely built around one's economic and social capital. Specifically, the mention of the type of vehicle owned by Vachon, that the Saathoffs could afford to seek counsel from an attorney, and that Brown and Hornberger were able to pay to spay and microchip multiple dogs while the Luu family, for instance, ultimately had to euthanize their dog because they could not afford to pay for the necessary life-saving surgery, affects the performance of ownership and therefore, the understanding readers come to hold about not only the dogs' and dog caretakers' friend-worthiness, but also the suitability of their relationship. The framing of the relationship positions it as meeting or not the standard of mutual benefit (Payne et al. 2015) required for conceptualization as a successful dyad and, therefore, friendship. As a result of the friend-worthiness and/or friendship status within the journalist's framing of an incident, the shooting incident is implicated as more or less acceptable or deserving of public concern.

Contrasting the incorporation of recognized, highly valued social roles and status position recognized as highly socially valued into articles, there were also instances when particular roles and

statuses pointed more clearly to low social value and status of either the dog or dog caretaker within their given species hierarchy. While this was present in conjunction with descriptions of dogs that largely drew on identifying the type of call to which police were responding (e.g., public nuisance), it was more often the case that articles included low-value dog caretaker social roles and statuses (e.g., felon, suspect, homeless, elderly). In addition, the performance of ownership included within articles also lowered one's placement within the human hierarchy. Below are excerpts demonstrating failures at human performance of animal ownership.

- “the new charges against Zimmerman will include a failure to license the dogs, letting them run unrestrained in public and failing to have them vaccinated against rabies.” (Malawsky and Thompson 2011)
- “After Syncere was wounded, Bogansky didn't want to put the dog in her car [because the dog was bleeding]. So police drove the dog to the animal shelter, where it died while police tried to arrange veterinary care.” (Jackson 2012)

These two examples position the owners as irresponsible (e.g., not licensing and keeping dogs up-to-date on vaccinations), pretentious (e.g., caring more for an inanimate object, such as one's car, than one's still living, although bleeding, dog) and, ultimately, as uncaring for their animals. In line with Blouin's (2013) dominionistic orientation, the owners fail to meet Brickel's (1985) standard of love and care toward the animal. This results in a weak performance of ownership and suggests that the dog caretakers were undeserving of their dog companions and, therefore, were not friend-worthy themselves. This type of unmatched friendship influences the way readers understand the relationship between the dog and human—suggesting lack of an actual friendship—and may, then, also affect their perspective of the police shooting the dog.

Ultimately, as with the authors' previous discussions, these social roles also worked most effectively when collaboratively positioned to establish whether the partnership between dog and dog caretaker was matched in social value. This was exemplified in a case describing the shooting of a 2-year-old female pit bull named Cindy and the relationship she had to her human caretaker Adam Arroyo: “It was just me and her,” Arroyo said of Cindy, a rescue dog he adopted upon his return from combat duty in Iraq. “I would do anything to have her back” (Fairbanks 2015). Taken together, this duo have equal social value as Arroyo increases Cindy's social value given her status in his life and his claim of interdependence with her, as well as his social value through the roles of serving as active duty military and one who cares for rescue dogs. As is seen in the case of Cindy and Arroyo, based on the roles mentioned within articles, dogs and human caretakers are awarded more or less social status, particularly with relationship to the incident involving a police officer shooting a given dog. As a result, this positions the dyad as meeting qualities of friendship.

### Scripting the Hierarchy

While some articles included the social roles, status positions, and descriptions of ways dog caretakers performed their ownership responsibilities, others drew direct comparisons within one or both of the species as a way of further scripting the dog–human hierarchy. In articles that included this type of comparative work, journalists frequently incorporated quotations of parties involved within the incidents, such as the dog caretakers, law enforcement representatives and, at times, government officials. The decision-making power of journalists in determining whose voices are heard and in what ways they represent those voices is especially poignant when examining the construction and reification of hierarchies. Take, for instance, the case of 6-year-old Basset hound/beagle mix, Willy Pete, and his 32-year-old owner, Ginger Sweat, a wife and mother to two toddlers. The article describing the incident states:

She was putting one of the children down for a nap about 1 p.m. when she glanced out the window and saw eight officers in tactical gear coming out of the woods near her home.

One had a barking police dog on a leash, she said. That piqued the interest of her dog, who had been lying on the porch that afternoon. Her 6-year-old Basset hound/beagle mix, Willy Pete, left the porch and made his way toward the troopers. The dog, she said, suffered from arthritis in his back legs and was not aggressive. Her other dog went into the house. Sweat said she was still inside when she saw the trooper raise a weapon at her dog. 'I ran out my door, jumping up and down screaming don't shoot my dog, he won't bite, just let me get him in the house,' she said. She said the officer fired one shot toward the dog but missed. She said Willy Pete turned tail and was running back toward her. 'He ran towards me with desperation in his eyes,' she said. 'They fired again in my direction. In the direction of my home where my kids were.' She said three more shots were fired, a total of four shots. Willy Pete, she said, was hit three times. The dog went to the back of the mobile home. Sweat said she found the dog near the air conditioning unit. 'I watched my dog struggle and then die,' she said. 'I collapsed in a puddle in the floor, screaming and crying. I watched that dog born and I watched him die.' She said the troopers came to her home and one of the officers told her "Ma'am we're dog people, too, but we couldn't let them fight, she recalled him saying. 'He said, I'm sorry. Where's your shovel, I'll bury him.' She said her dog wasn't vicious and that she wouldn't have allowed a vicious dog around her children. (Craig 2014)

There are a number of characteristics included within the coverage of this incident, by both the journalist and the dog caretaker, that affect the social value, hierarchical placement, and, ultimately, friend-worthiness of both the dog and the human within this dyad. First, Sweat is identified as a mother—a socially valued role in society. Not only this, but her concern for the safety of her children positions her as a 'good mother'. Additionally, in her recounting of the incident, she stated that Willy Pete "ran towards me with desperation in his eyes". This suggests that Willy Pete found benefit in his relationship with Sweat through his view of her as a source of protection when he faced danger. Sweat also noted her emotional behavior following the incident and introduced the length of the relationship she had with Willy Pete through mentioning she had witnessed his birth. These characteristics all position Sweat as friend-worthy. In comparison to the clear ways in which the journalist's decision-making and owner's framing positions Sweat, the description of Willy Pete includes differential framing dependent on whose voice is heard. For instance, the journalist includes the dog's name, age, breed (stereotypically known to meet [Brickel's \(1985\)](#) description of animal qualities allowing for dog-human bonding), and health status. Additionally, Sweat identifies Willy Pete as unaggressive, retreating when fearful, and as family-friendly.

In comparison, the journalist presents the juxtaposition of the K9 officer and Willy Pete—pointing to the presence of the intraspecies hierarchy. In Sweat's recounting of the officer explanation for the shooting it is implied that the dogs were fighting and that Willy Pete was perceived to have initiated the fight—thus contrasting Sweat's description of the dog as unaggressive. Through inclusion of the officer's interaction with Sweat, a second dog-human dyad, that of K9 officer and human officer, is introduced. This dyad is socially recognized as a 'partnership', and the officer's choice to shoot Willy Pete, rather than his own dog who was also involved in the fight, points not only to the ways the K9 officer is more highly valued than Willy Pete, but also speaks to the loyalty of the officer to his K9 companion, which positions him as being friend-worthy. The presence of the roles and statuses of both Sweat and Willy Pete, as well as the ownership qualities of Sweat, demonstrate the ways articles effectively represented the friend-worthiness of both dogs and humans within the dog-human dyad. Through comparison to another dog-human dyad, this article speaks to the presence of an interspecies hierarchy built upon both the friend-worthiness of each entity within a dyad, but also the presence of a friendship, too. With much to unpack in this story concerning the dog and human hierarchies and friendships, it is also worth questioning why the type of home (e.g., mobile home) was called to the reader's attention; the relationship between social class and police surveillance, while not the direct focus in the analysis here, nonetheless, is an important and relevant facet. Ultimately, the story of Willy Pete likely leaves the reader feeling upset about the shooting. Due to the rich narrative of the

social actors involved in the scene, the journalist has helped to paint a picture of an individualized friend-worthy companion dog, cared for by a friend-worthy mother and pet caretaker, and juxtaposed against a working dog and human partner. Albeit perhaps unknowingly, this writer helps to create and maintain multiple species hierarchies.

In another example, the voice of a dog caretaker who initiated a social justice campaign after the shooting of his dog offers a counterargument to framing by law enforcement of the incident. The caretaker contended that law enforcement shot his dog because “[The officer] thought I was just a train-hopping punk, and he could shoot my dog and get away with it,” Carpenter said. “You messed with the wrong traveler” (Curtis 2014). Here, the dog caretaker draws on the existing human social hierarchy in their decision-making of shooting his dog. The caretaker rejects his assumed placement on this hierarchy, engaging in tertiary deviance (Kitsuse 1980), and works to establish himself as higher on the human hierarchy by reframing the presumed label (i.e., “train-hopping punk”) given by law enforcement to a more socially acceptable label (i.e., traveler). He also engages in a socially valued performance of ownership to the shooting of his dog (i.e., a social justice campaign claiming the dog was unjustly shot).

While the above passage employed the language of the dog caretaker directly, whom often positioned themselves as falling into Blouin’s (2013) humanistic or protectionistic orientations, numerous articles involved the perspectives of law enforcement. These articles created a different view of dog caretakers by emphasizing low and heavily stigmatized positions on the human hierarchy. See, for example, the below passages:

- “But if you’re looking for a felon, you may be kicking the door in and have no time to restrain the dog,” [the police department representative] said. “Every situation is different” (Laker and DeHuff 2015)
- “Pat Camden, a spokesman for the Fraternal Order of Police, said he has no quarrel with officers receiving extra training but believes that dog owners need to do a better job of controlling their pets and making sure they’re on a leash.” (Trice and Gorner 2013)

In the first of these excerpts, use of the term felon highlights the status of the dog caretaker within the human hierarchy and is used as a justification for not having concern of any dogs who may be in the home. In the second example, the spokesperson for the police attempts to place onus for the shooting of dogs on the dog caretakers, rather than on the police who respond to incidents. The shared perspective within these passages and similar articles to these is their clear indication of the humans holding lower positions on the social hierarchy of humans and as embodying failure in meeting friend-worthy traits. Specifically, law enforcement departments draw on their own socially valued roles and statuses within communities to emphasize the lower placement of other populations (e.g., felons and dog caretakers who are not police officers).

In comparison to the above perspective, some articles incorporated counter claims wherein individuals worked to negotiate or resist the claims by law enforcement about the social status of dog caretakers on the human hierarchy. For example, Colorado congressional representative, David Balmer, himself a dog caretaker said, “Landscaping companies, delivery companies—they deal with dogs all the time, and they don’t shoot dogs” (Bartels 2013). This quote by Balmer suggests that while law enforcement, which is equipped with weapons, such as guns, cannot seemingly interact with dogs without shooting them; other individuals, often with lesser positioned occupational statuses on the human hierarchy, interact with dogs much more frequently and without the use of any injury or death-inducing weapons. Ultimately, this challenges the assumed placement of police officers, and law enforcement more broadly, as high on the hierarchy.

The above speak to the ways journalists constructed and reinforced the human hierarchy within articles. Below, we point to the ways journalists also elaborated on the dog species hierarchy.

- “Blue pit bulls are generally the same size as standard pit bulls but are considered rare because of their grayish blue coloration. Cage was 85 pounds and slightly taller than the standard pit bull.

He was considered to have a “purple ribbon” bloodline that can be traced back 14 generations of breeding, Law said”. (Avant 2013)

- “On Nov. 17, about 5:30 p.m., a Champaign police officer was called to southwest Champaign where two dogs were fighting. One, a family pet, was on a leash being walked by one of its owners. The other, a stray, was not. [ . . . ] [The responding officer’s] actions that night resulted in the death of the family pet, a bullet penetrating a nearby apartment, the wounding of the stray, and an offer by the city to pay the family of the dead dog for its loss. [ . . . ] [The stray] was euthanized at the county’s animal control department about 10 days later because no one claimed it.” (Schenk 2013b)
- “Officers shot and killed a pit bull that attacked a police dog and arrested six people, including the pit bull’s owner, at a south Livermore apartment complex Tuesday after a shooting into a nearby home, officials said.” (Ivie 2013)

Here, the examples work to position the dogs shot by police in high positions on their species hierarchy. In the first passage, Cage, a blue pit bull, is rare and, therefore, special and different from other dogs, especially other pit bulls. This is particularly important given the negative stereotyping the pit bull regularly receives in media and by society more broadly. Likewise, in the second example, a clear comparison is made between the two dogs fighting. One dog was leashed and being walked by its owner, therefore it is cared for and part of a dog–human friendship, while the other dog was identified as a “stray” (i.e., uncoupled from a human) and was unleashed. The use of the dog–human relationship within this excerpt is particularly poignant as a mechanism for reify the dogs’ placements on the species hierarchy. Finally, in the last selection, the distinction between a police dog (also referenced in articles as K9 officer) and a non-police dog (often referenced only by breed, such as in the example) emphasizes the placement of these dogs within their species hierarchy based on social role. Each of these dogs meets one or more of the characteristics outlined by Brickel (1985) as possessing qualities necessary for creation of a dog–human bond and, therefore, catalyzing a possible categorization of friendship.

The ways articles established and built onto existent species hierarchies and coupled dogs and their caretakers, particularly when both held socially valued status positions, works to demonstrate the inter-species hierarchy the authors contend is present in cases of police shooting incidents of domesticated companion dogs. This inter-species hierarchy relies on the strength of the relationship between a given dog–human pairing, which is ascertained based on the individual and collective social roles, status positions, and performance of ownership of the parties involved within the pairing.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

Across articles, journalists draw on extant species hierarchies to, ultimately, build an inter-species hierarchy based on dog–human interactions and relationships ranging from non-existent to friends and companions. The framing of either or both of the dog and human within a given dyad identifies the placement on their individual species hierarchy. The individual placements collectively join to establish a position of the dog–human pairing on the inter-species hierarchy. Their location on this new, combined hierarchy impacts a reader’s understanding of the level of friendship or companionship between the dog–human pairing. Ultimately, the framing of a relationship—as well as of the individual parties involved within the dyad—affect how a reader perceives a given shooting incident, the culpability a given dog–human pairing have in the incident, and the response of the criminal justice system (during and after the shooting). Indeed, use by journalists of descriptive phrasing and word choice; inclusion of human social rituals applied to dogs; and incorporation of both positively valued and negatively stigmatized social roles, statuses, and pet ownership practices encourage readers to view particular dogs and/or particular owners as more or less deserving of the outcome of the shooting incident. Likewise, journalist decision-making to omit descriptive characteristics of dog or human as well as omission or limiting of situational context influences

what information a reader is led to perceive as important and, as a result, how a reader understands a particular shooting incident.

Research on the animal–human bond continues to grow and, amongst extant literature, includes a variety of perspectives on the ways humans understand animals, human caretaking responsibilities of animals, and the possibility of friendship between a nonhuman animal and human. As [Brickel \(1985\)](#) posited, social institutions, including that of family and media amongst others, are strong influencers in how children grow to learn about animals and the possible bond with and opposition to particular animals. Dogs, in particular, have long been an accepted animal with whom humans can (and perhaps should) associate. As a result, existing research on the dog–human dyad continues to garner attention. Indeed, our findings both support and build on the theory of social learning around the animal–human bond introduced by [Brickel \(1985\)](#), the dog caretaker typology of [Blouin \(2013\)](#), and the definition of ‘bond’ as being mutually beneficial suggested by [Payne et al. \(2015\)](#) as we contend that such works create a foundation for assessing and placement of both dogs and caretakers onto an inter-species hierarchy.

Social institutions, such as law enforcement and media, are critical in portraying and enforcing the placement of individuals and collective pairings within given hierarchies. Through responses to and portrayals of incidents involving domesticated dogs in certain ways, the social value of dogs and human caretakers, and their friendships, are socially shaped for society. Drawing on the work of [Sacco \(1995\)](#) who found that most people receive fact-based information about animals and crime from news media sources, the representation of dogs, dog caretakers, and their friendships more broadly, is important to how readers come to view police shootings of dogs as acceptable or not, civilian and police interactions as socially acceptable or not, and whether readers make connections to broader police trends involving excessive use of force. Notably, [Biernie \(2018\)](#) argues that state theriocide, like other forms of theriocide, is rarely experienced as problematic by its human participants and often remains invisible to greater society. In part, this can be explained through the lack of media attention garnered in such cases. Extant literature includes arguments about excessive use of force by police against particular human populations, particularly the racialized use of force by police against black and brown men ([Garner et al. 2002](#); [Terrill and Reisig 2003](#)). We build on this by contending that these same responses by police, a state entity, are present in incidents involving dogs, and are particularly prevalent in certain villainized breeds of dogs, such as pit bulls. The demonization of certain nonhuman animals, like pit bulls, is well documented in social hierarchies such as the sociozoologic scale ([Arluke and Sanders 1996](#)). We point to the role the media has in representing not only dogs, but also dog caretakers, families, and the dog–human friendships in which they are involved, in certain ways. As a result of the power media holds in shaping social views, the implication is then that, based on representation of both the dog and human, the relationship between them is seen as more or less socially acceptable. Ultimately, if the media frames both parties in a dog–human dyad as ‘friend-worthy’, and the dog–human partnership as mutually beneficial ([Payne et al. 2015](#)) and thereby qualifying as friendship, readers are led to view the shooting of the dog as less justifiable.

The current sociopolitical landscape is significant to our research as it points both to the association of socially devalued humans with nonhuman animals in the form of dehumanizing discourse and practice (see [Arluke and Sanders 1996](#)) and also, again, to the issue of friendships. Indeed, devalued companion dogs are often stereotyped and stigmatized as being in relationships with marginalized humans. For example, legal scholars have suggested that breed-specific dog laws that prohibit dogs, such as pit bulls, from communities by claiming public safety might have roots in racial bias because pit bulls have cultural ties to the black and Latino communities ([Linder 2018](#)). Linder suggests that, “Breed-specific legislation may be being used as a new form of redlining to keep minorities out of majority-white neighborhoods” ([Linder 2018](#), p. 51). Thus, socially disadvantaged human and nonhuman groups are often grouped together, in the popular social imagination of society members, but also in actual lived experiences; and both experience violent interactions with police.

Ultimately, this work has implications for policing approaches and practices involving both human and nonhuman animals. While we are not claiming that police violence against marginalized human populations operates in the same way as police violence against nonhuman animals, we would be remiss to not acknowledge the current social landscape. Police have historically been involved in cases of extreme use of force and have been highly criticized for it (Lersch and Mieczkowski 2005; Harris 2009; Klahm and Tillyer 2010). Much of the criticism from the general public is negotiated through the media—the source through which the public learns of these instances of violence (Sacco 1995; Donovan and Klahm 2015). Accordingly, the authors urge that future work to examine the parallel between policing black and brown men and certain breeds of dogs.

In conclusion, we examined the narrative choices of news media journalists to analyze patterns of frames implemented when presenting stories on police shootings of companion dogs. Instead of finding a singular way in which the articles discussed these cases, we found a diverse sample incorporating a variety of strategies that either worked to frame the dog and/or the human caretaker as worthy of being categorized as ‘friend’, which then linked to public outcry by framing either and/or both of the social actors within a given dyad as ‘friend-worthy’. Thus, the contemporary social definitions and hierarchical placement of nonhuman animals and their human connections are reified by the media, along with the assessment of the justifiability of the violent police interaction. For a social institution that already has a spotlight on it for its excessive use of force, the societal understanding of law enforcement, and police shootings in general, is informed with the additional exposure of police–(civilian)dog interactions. The media, an ever-increasingly powerful institution in its own right, helps to maintain symbolic species hierarchies and, in the case of the present work, creates new hierarchies resulting in the continuation of inequality.

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