

Think you understand your dog? **Think Again**

People reacting to videos showing dogs' responses to positive and negative situations tend to pay more attention to situational cues than dogs' actual behavior, a study found.

By EMILY ANTHES | *The New York Times*

Dogs can't talk, but their body language speaks volumes. But people aren't always good at interpreting such cues — or even noticing them, a new study suggests.

In the study, the researchers presented people with videos of a dog reacting to positive and negative stimuli, including a leash, a treat, a vacuum cleaner and a scolding. Asked to assess the dog's emotions, viewers seemed to pay more attention to the situational cues than the dog's actual behavior, even when the videos had been edited to be deliberately misleading. (In one video, for instance, a dog that appeared to be reacting to the sight of his leash had actually been shown a vacuum cleaner by his owner.)

"When it comes to just perceiving dog emotions, we think we know what's happening, but we're actually subconsciously relying on a lot of other factors," said Holly Molinaro, a doctoral student at Arizona State University and the first author of the new paper, which was published in the journal *Anthrozoös*.

That bias could mislead owners about their dogs' well-being, Molinaro said. People who want to be attentive to their dog's experiences and emotions need to "take a second or two to actually focus on the dog rather than everything else that's going on," she said.

Molinaro and her adviser, Clive Wynne, a canine-behavior expert at Arizona State, decided to create videos that allowed people to see a dog's behavior without seeing what was unfolding around it.

Molinaro began recording videos of her family dog, Oliver, a 14-year-old pointer-beagle mix, interacting with Molinaro's father. In some of the videos, Molinaro's father did things that Oliver was likely to respond to positively, such as show him his leash or a toy. In others, he did things that were likely to elicit more negative reactions, such as gently scold Oliver or present him with Molinaro's cat, Saffron. ("He was not a

fan," she said.)

Then Molinaro made versions of each video that removed all of the situational context, leaving footage of Oliver, alone, on a black background.

The researchers asked hundreds of undergraduates to watch both sets of videos and assess Oliver's emotional state in each clip. When the subjects evaluated the original videos, they rated Oliver's emotions as more positive in the positive scenarios than in the negative ones. But when the context was removed, they rated Oliver's emotions as equally positive in both types of situations.

Then, they took things a step further by splicing together footage from different situations — showing, for instance, Molinaro's father presenting a vacuum alongside footage of Oliver's response to seeing his leash.

Viewers seemed to be swayed more by the context than by Oliver's behavior. When Molinaro's father was depicted doing something positive, subjects judged Oliver's emotions to be positive, even if he had been filmed reacting to something negative.

"There's no evidence at all that people actually see the dog," Wynne said. "They seem to have a sort of a big blind spot around the dog himself."

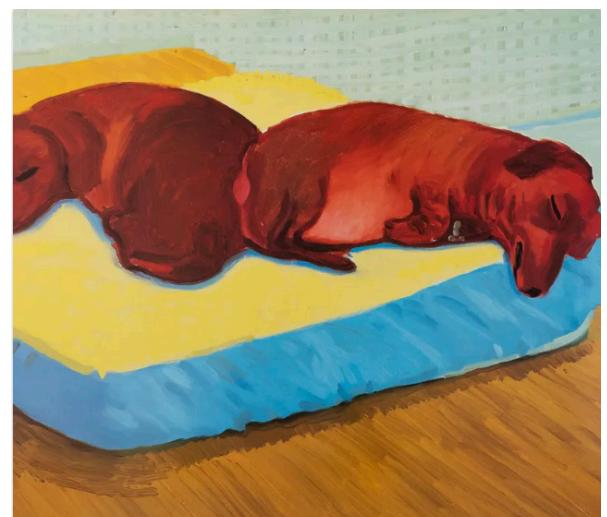
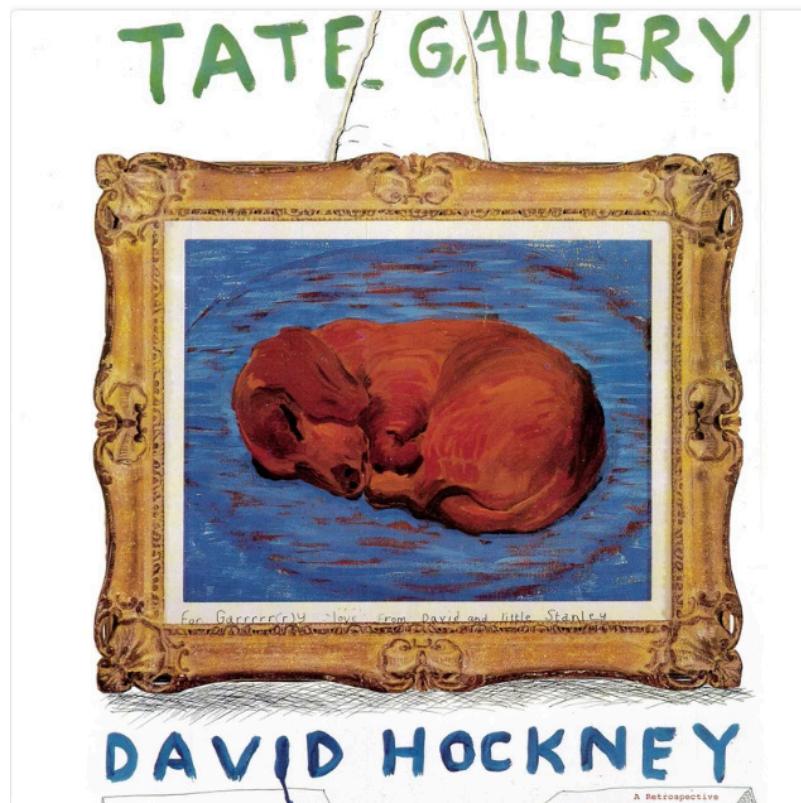
The study has limitations, including that it was based on the behavior of just a single dog. People might also perform better when asked to evaluate the emotions of their own dogs, Wynne said, and probably would have noticed signs of intense terror or trauma. (They did not subject Oliver to any extremely negative experiences.)

Still, he hoped that the study would be a wake-up call for pet owners. "I'm taking it to heart in my own life," said Wynne, who recently adopted a retired racing greyhound. "I'm making it a project to learn how she expresses herself," he added. "Because if I know what makes her happy and unhappy, well, then I can guide her life toward greater happiness."



David Hockney Does Dogs

Hmmm. It appears that with just one notable exception, Hockney's definition of "dog" is "Sleeping Dachshund(s)!"



The Lighter Side

