

Factors that impact dog selection and welfare

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Introduction

For a number of people in the United States, it has become a moral imperative to adopt dogs from animal shelters and rescues as opposed to buying them from various sources. Indeed, a survey of 670 households owning dogs found that the most common reason dogs were acquired from a given source was that “it was the right thing to do” (Bir *et al.*, 2016). Many organizations, including animal protection groups and some pet stores, encourage prospective pet owners to select dogs from shelters instead of those sold commercially. Although shelters are an important source of pets, most people still feel that they should have choices as to where to obtain dogs (Bir *et al.*, 2016). Understanding the basis for people’s decision-making when it comes to choosing both the source and type of dog they select can be helpful in meeting their expectations and creating corresponding educational materials. The objective of this paper is to examine the relationship between the traits that make a given dog desirable and the influences that these traits have on the choice of where to obtain a dog.



people obtaining pets from five shelters, physical appearance was the most common reason a particular dog or puppy was selected (Weiss *et al.*, 2012). In a separate study, breed type was one factor that predicted the selection of dogs housed in shelters (Protopopova *et al.*, 2012). Dogs with large, wide-set, colorful eyes and a “smiling” facial expression were most appealing to respondents in another study (Hecht & Horowitz, 2015). Other factors of interest to potential dog owners are the dog’s size, its breed, coat color, health and reproductive

status—i.e., whether the dog is neutered or intact (Posage *et al.*, 1998; Lepper *et al.*, 2002; Diesel *et al.*, 2008; Weiss *et al.*, 2012). While appearance may stimulate interest, direct interaction with a potential pet is important in confirming that the potential owner is selecting the right dog (Weiss *et al.*, 2012; Protopopova *et al.*, 2016). Not surprisingly, the behavior and temperament of a dog can also influence people’s choices (Posage *et al.*, 1998; Weiss *et al.*, 2012). For this reason, some people may turn to purebred dogs in the belief that they are more likely to follow certain patterns in both appearance and behavior. Although there is scientific debate as to how much consistency there is between the behavioral characteristics described in breed standards and the behavior of individual dogs of that breed (Merkham & Wynne, 2014), these expectations contribute to the appeal of purebred dogs.

What makes a dog desirable?

When selecting a dog, many people appear to focus on age. In a study of factors that people consider when adding a pet to their household, a dog was more likely to be chosen if it was a puppy (Garrison & Weiss, 2015). Puppies six months of age or younger had a shorter average stay in shelters prior to adoption than dogs over one year of age (Brown *et al.*, 2013).

Although age is important, when it comes to choosing a dog, looks and behavior also matter. In a survey of

What about source?

While age, appearance, and behavior are all important in selecting a dog, in at least one study, source was even more important than age. In that study, shelters were



both the most commonly considered (60%) and most common actual (39%) source of dogs (Garrison & Weiss, 2015). The two most recent American Pet Products Association (APPA) National Pet Owners Surveys found that breeders were the most common source of dogs among the samples of 521 dog owners in 2014 and 505 owners in 2016. However, when the different sources of animals recorded in the survey as “adopted” (shelter, rescue group and pet store adoption) are combined, higher percentages of dogs were obtained from these sources (37% in 2014, 44% in 2016) than from breeders (34% in 2014, 25% in 2016) (APPA, 2017).

The reported proportions of dogs housed in shelters that are purebreds vary widely at the national level, from a low of 5% (NAIA, 2015) to a high of 25% (HSUS, 2016). As with puppies, purebred dogs remain in shelters for shorter lengths of time (Brown *et al.*, 2013). Because the opportunity to adopt a purebred dog from a shelter may be limited by low numbers and quick adoptions due to high demand, limiting access to breeders of purebred dogs in favor of shelters potentially restricts both people’s access to pets and the opportunity to obtain pets that meet their stated preferences. The option to obtain a purebred dog from an ethical source may allow potential dog owners more opportunity to choose the dog that best fits their preferences while obtaining one from a source that is aligned with their values.

Conclusion

Dogs are not selected based on a single factor. While animal shelters and rescue organizations work hard to encourage the adoption of the dogs under their care, they may not be able to meet the demand for purebred dogs. This demand creates the need for a solution that balances consumer freedom of choice as to where (and how) to obtain a dog with ethical concerns about procuring dogs from sources where animal welfare is not adequately protected. Varying levels of welfare experienced by dogs are important to consider regardless of source and are worthy of both scientific analysis and moral deliberation. Therefore prospective dog owners should carefully examine their personal preferences for dog attributes they desire and the underlying reasons for these, as well as the care, and welfare practices used by sources from which they may consider obtaining a dog.

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