IS THAT DOG BEING NAUGHTY?

Well, that depends on who, and how, you ask

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**APPLIED GOAL:** improve the human-canine relationship and promote successful adoptions

- 6% of dogs in the US will enter shelters each year (ASPCA, 2015)
- 31-55% of those dogs will be euthanized (Salman et al., 1998)
- Of those adopted, 15% will be returned

**BASIC (RESEARCH) GOAL:** explore which behaviors are problematic for dog owners, and which factors influence attitudes towards problem behaviors
Reduce canine relinquishments

• Why? “Behavior problems” – Initial surrender and adoption returns (Diesel, Brodbelt, & Pfeiffer, 2010)

• However, only 20% of people who subsequently adopted the same dog, reported the same behavioral problem (Mondelli et al., 2004)

• Only half of the problem behaviors indicated by the relinquishing owner were observed by the new adoptive owners (Stephen & Ledger, 2007)

• Providing educational materials increased relinquishment rates (Weng et al., 2006)
IDEA: FOCUS ON PERCEPTION OF PROBLEM BEHAVIORS

Experiment 1
INVESTIGATING “PROBLEM BEHAVIORS”

Which behaviors are most upsetting to pet owners?
INVESTIGATING “PROBLEM BEHAVIORS”

Does size of dog affect perception of behavior?
INVESTIGATING “PROBLEM BEHAVIORS”

Do canine professionals differ from the lay public in their perceptions of problem behavior?

“Aww, smiling dog!”

“Oh no! Aggressive dog!”
INVESTIGATING “PROBLEM BEHAVIORS”

Which behaviors are most likely to cause an owner to re-home their dog?
## PROCEDURE

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### Behaviors Presented

1. House soiling
2. Destruction
3. Hyperactivity
4. Fear
5. Escape
6. Leash reactivity
7. Dog aggression
8. Home aggression
9. Child aggression
10. Jumpy
11. Good (control)

*Note: Each behavior was presented 3 times for a total of 33 videos per participant*
BEHAVIORS PRESENTED - POTTY
BEHAVIORS PRESENTED - DESTRUCTION
BEHAVIORS PRESENTED - AGGRESSION
What word(s) would you use to describe this dog?

Imagine that you saw your own dog doing the same thing as shown in the video. Please tell us how you would feel or what you would do in response.

Feel annoyed or upset

Not at all

Very much

Be likely to seek out a new home for your dog

Not at all likely

Very likely

Feel amused

Not at all

Very much

Feel sorry for your dog

Not at all

Very much

Be likely to return or surrender your dog to an animal shelter or rescue

Not at all likely

Very likely

(Optional) If you would like to express other thoughts or concerns, please note them here:
RESULTS – EXPERIMENT 1
RESULTS

• Main effects of both profession and dog size
• Interactions between dog size and profession
• Majority of participants said they were unlikely to re-home a dog
• Professionals generally felt sorrier for the dogs
SIGNIFICANT MAIN EFFECT FOR “ANNOYING”
MAJORITY SAID THEY WERE UNLIKELY TO RE-HOME A DOG
RESULTS

Interactions between dog size and profession

![Graph showing annoying scores for potty by dog size and profession]

- Pro
- Lay
Lay and Professional Potty Ratings

Proportional Responses

Newhome Rating

0  20  40  60  80  100
PROFESSIONALS WERE NOT AMUSED BY ANYTHING
JUST KIDDING!
PROFESSIONALS GENERALLY FELT MORE SORRY FOR THE DOGS
<table>
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<th>PROFESSIONALS</th>
<th>LAY PUBLIC</th>
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<td>“Anxious, stressed.”</td>
<td>“Bored, deliberate.”</td>
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<td>“Need more information.”</td>
<td>“Pissed!”</td>
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<td>“Does not get out enough.”</td>
<td>“Little shithead.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Embarrassed, untrained.”</td>
<td>“Mad at owner.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>“Not housebroken.”</td>
<td>“Another dog peeing indoors?”</td>
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DESCRIPTIONS (CHILD AGGRESSION)

PROFESSIONALS
• “Fearful, uncomfortable”
• “Stiff, defensive.”
• “Extremely unsafe around children.”
• “Intolerant, aggressive.”
• “Feeling threatened and stressed.”

LAY PUBLIC
• “Cute dog playing with child.”
• “Playful.”
• “Happy.”
• “Family-oriented”
• “Cute, fun!”
TWO PRIMARY INTERPRETATIONS

1. We need to educate the lay public to better detect problem behaviors!

2. We should stop pointing out problem behaviors to the lay public in order to improve adoption and relinquishment rates
DOES LANGUAGE MATTER?

Experiment 2
METHOD

Materials
4 problem behavior videos from Experiment 1
• House soiling ("potty")
• Destruction
• Home aggression
• Child aggression

Participants
• 200 naïve participants (lay audience only)

Procedure
Mixed-subjects design
• Participants saw 4 videos in random order
• Each video had 1 of 4 types of labels (positive, pejorative, descriptive, owner’s fault)
Potty
“This video shows…”
- A clever dog who has learned to poop while hiding to avoid a scolding
- A disobedient dog pooping in the house
- A dog pooping in the house
- A dog whose owner did not potty-train

Destruction
“This video shows…”
- A playful dog who has figured out a way to entertain himself
- A dog being willfully destructive
- A dog chewing on blinds
- A dog who has not been provided with enough to do

Home Aggression
“This video shows…”
- A patient dog trying to control his irritation
- An aggressive dog
- A dog showing its teeth when a person presents a hand
- A dog responding to a person repeatedly provoking him

Child Aggression
“This video shows…”
- A dog trying to be tolerant of a child’s unwanted groping
- A dog who is child-aggressive and dangerous around children
- A dog snap at a child after having its tail pulled
- A dog who was left unsupervised with a young child who pulls and pokes at the dog
• Participants were more amused by the “potty” behavior when the label was positive versus descriptive.
• Participants felt sorrier for the dog pottying when the label was owner's fault versus positive.
LANGUAGE AFFECTED ATTITUDES TOWARDS DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOR

- Participants were more amused by destruction when the label was positive versus descriptive.
- Participants said they were more likely to rehome a dog for destruction when the label was pejorative versus positive or owner's fault.
TAKEAWAYS

• Language can affect people’s attitudes and perceptions of common canine problem behaviors – animal professionals should be mindful.

• Lay population is most bothered by home-related issues such as house soiling and destruction of furniture – and attitudes towards these issues are most susceptible to be influenced by language.

• Lay population does recognize “aggression” but is less bothered by it than professionals – why?
LIMITATIONS TO ADDRESS

• Real videos from YouTube, not experimentally manipulated
  • Videos differ in ways beyond size
  • Cannot control for lighting, distance from camera, coat color, etc.
• Labels may have been too simplistic or unrealistic
• Remember: this is what people say they would do or how they would feel – not what they are actually doing!
MANY THANKS!

NATIONAL CANINE RESEARCH COUNCIL
A RESEARCH & POLICY THINK TANK

Sarah Huerta
Undergraduate Research Assistant
How can we use this information to improve the human-canine relationship?