

BREEDS AND BEHAVIOR

“THEY’RE NOT LIKE OTHER DOGS” – OR ARE THEY?

By Janis Bradley

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I’m interviewing a new client whose dog tends to bark and charge and nip the heels and dangling hands of retreating strangers. Her dog is smallish and stocky, with a coarse medium-length coat of mottled blue-gray, black, white and brown. His nose and ears are pointy. While I reassure her that his behavior actually makes sense from his doggy point of view, a little voice in my head whispers, “What did she expect? She got a Cattle Dog.” I have little difficulty discounting the client’s own plaintive claim that she’s had Cattle Dogs all her life and this is the first one who’s acted this way. “You were lucky until now,” my little voice says, assuming those dogs were somehow the exceptions. But when another client complains that his large, square-headed, short-coated, yellow dog is growly around his food bowl, I take his statement that “none of my other Labs have done this,” at face value. The current dog is clearly the exception. After all, my little voice says, “everyone knows Labs love people.”

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My little voice is probably wrong.

Often, we assume that each breed carries its own set of hard-wired impulses, which are particularly difficult to alter, even with sound behavior-modification techniques. We even expect these presumed genetic predispositions to carry over to mixed-breed dogs who physically resemble a particular breed. Dog professionals are as prone to these biases as everyone else. We’ve learned them as part of the conventional professional wisdom, and our experiences seem to confirm them - not surprising, since current behavioral and neuroscience studies show that human brains consistently prefer data that support what we already believe and disparage anything that contradicts it. To top it off, a nodding acquaintance with the burgeoning field of canine genetics research indisputably demonstrates connections between genetics and behavior. One new study even appears to have found the locations on the map of the canine genome that account for pointers pointing and herders herding.

So why not use breed as a way to choose the particular puppy or dog who’s likely to help us fulfill the dream of taking a perfectly behaved, friendly dog to cheer the lives of people in nursing homes, be endlessly tolerant with our kids or have the kind of indefatigable enthusiasm for retrieving that makes a good contraband-sniffing dog? How about using breed stereotypes to guide public policy decisions on whether some dogs are more likely than others to present a danger to people, or simply to assess whether that dog coming toward us means us good or ill?

The source material for this article is a paper by Janis Bradley, published by the National Canine Research Council, entitled “The Relevance of Breed in Selecting a Companion Dog.”

Turns out it's not that simple.

First, there is the "what kind of dog is that?" question. Probably at least half of the estimated 77.5 million dogs in the U.S. are mixed breeds. It's common practice among people working in rescues and shelters to identify the dogs in their care as "predominantly breed X" or as an "X/Y" mix. Recently, when scientists used DNA analysis to test the accuracy of such labeling, they found that among dogs labeled by adoption workers, only one dog in four actually had the named breed confirmed as significantly - much less, predominantly - represented.

This would not be a surprise to any geneticist or indeed, anyone who has ever glanced at Scott and Fuller's venerable 1960's study of canine development and breed characteristics, which found that breeding, for example, a Basenji to a Cocker Spaniel often resulted in puppies with little or no resemblance to either parent.

And even reliable identification of the ancestry of a mixed-breed dog by itself wouldn't help us predict an increased likelihood of known, genetically driven traits - say, the blood-clotting disorder that plagues Dobermans or the heart defects of Cavaliers. The parents of any mixed-breed dog have, by definition, waded out the closed gene pool that makes purebred dogs such fertile ground for genetic research. The inevitable inbreeding of purebred populations, combined with the phenomenon called genetic drift, gradually decreases overall genetic diversity; more and more animals have fewer and fewer variable traits, including characteristics that aren't deliberately selected for or against. But as researchers found with a colony of wolves in Sweden, even inbreeding so severe that it causes infertility can be reversed by the introduction of just one outsider. So, if we could demonstrate such a thing as "acting like a Beagle" or "acting like a Basenji," there would be little reason to expect either one from the offspring of a Beagle/Basenji pairing.

But what about those purebred Basenjis and Beagles and Cattle Dogs and Afghans and Golden Retrievers? Can't we expect them to behave consistently in ways that resemble work at which they were once selected to excel?

Yes and No.

The case of my Annie, the lovely, fawn-colored Greyhound camouflaged in a pile of pillows on my couch as I write this, may be instructive. She came into rescue directly from the breeding farm. It's obvious why she never made it to the racetrack. When my other Greyhound, Henry, a racer successful enough to stay alive until retirement at four, barks and quivers at the living room window at the sight of a squirrel or takes off in an ecstatic (albeit futile) pursuit of a jackrabbit at the local off-leash park, Annie looks up blandly and then, with a clear "*Whatever,*" goes back to her interrupted sniffing or chewing or resting.

And yet, every single one of her ancestors, going back scores, perhaps even hundreds, of generations, was hyper-motivated to chase. They would not have had the opportunity to reproduce otherwise.

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Racing Greyhounds are bred for two things only: a keen inclination to pursue small, fast-moving furry things and the physical ability to do it at a great speed. Racing industry insiders estimate that only about 70 to 80 percent of the dogs who result from this ruthless selection process are keen enough to race. Now, a 75 percent incidence of a trait sounds pretty high. You'd certainly take those odds in Vegas at the roulette wheel. But his is a trait that's already extremely common across the species; it is, in all likelihood the most widespread of the predation behaviors of hunting, stalking, chasing, killing, dissecting and eating first

observed and described by the famous wolf ethologist, David Mech. Most dogs already do this.

So these days, when people look fondly at the breed they fancy or angrily at the one they fear and say to me, “They’re not *like* other dogs,” I remind my little voice to recite, “Well, actually, they kind of *are*.”

If you take more complex behaviors that are actually selected against in the wild, like compulsively fighting other dogs and failing to respond to the doggy body language equivalent of “crying uncle,” for example, your odds of reliably producing the behavior through artificial selection go down dramatically. This explains how so many of the so-called “game-bred” dogs from fight busts (like the ones rescued from Michael Vick’s fighting operation) have gone on to live companionably with other dogs as relative couch potatoes in normal homes.

Reliably increasing the likelihood of complex behaviors through selective breeding isn’t easy. And racing Greyhounds are one of only a handful of dog breeds where this is still even attempted. Since the advent of modern purebreds in the late 19th century and the subsequent closing of breed registries, selection criteria have focused almost exclusively on appearance. Qualities of temperament are sometimes mentioned, although not in ways that can be practically applied in the show ring, where - as biologist Ray Coppinger has pointed out - the behavior required is standing, and to a lesser degree, trotting alongside a handler. Most purebred dogs come out of this selection system.

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Janis Bradley, author of Dogs Bite, but Balloons and Slippers are More Dangerous and Dog Bites: Problems and Solutions was a founding faculty member and taught for ten years at the San Francisco SPCA Academy for Dog Trainers, which gained a reputation as the “Harvard for Dog Trainers,” where more than 400 students were prepared for careers as dog professionals.