

## **DOG BREEDS: THE CANINE VERSION OF A SOCIALLY CONSTRUCTED RACE**

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Unknown to most outside of specific fields of science, dog breeds do not represent a biological classification; rather hobbyists are responsible for defining canine characteristics into groupings collectively referred to as a “breed”. Worldwide, there are over 500 recognized dog “pure” breeds (Coppinger) and perhaps as many as 2300 breeds identifiable as mixed breeds (McCort, 2013). However, all dogs have in common one ancestral origin – the ancestral gray wolf. Biologists would maintain that dogs are a subspecies of the gray wolf, or descended from some common ancestral canid, and that the concept of breed does not meet scientific taxonomic standards. Nonetheless, certain breeds of dogs are outlawed in communities in the United States (under “breed specific legislation”) and home ownership insurance policies may refuse to insure a home because of the breed of dog residing there while landlords may deny certain breeds of dogs to live in a rental unit. The same process of socially constructing a breed of dog had occurred with the social construction of race in humans. The human race can also be traced back to one ancestral origin (i.e. “Mitochondrial Eve”). While many dog breeds represent breeding for selective traits through human manipulation, other breeds (known as landraces or “natural breeds”) came about due to adaptations to the ecological niche. Just as minority-group human beings have experienced racism due to visible physical traits ascribed social meaning, dog breeds are routinely treated differently because of appearance representing a phenomenon that will be called “breedism” in this paper. Moreover, pet owners of certain breeds of dogs are also discriminated against. This paper will examine how the concept of breed was socially created and how this social construct has led to discrimination against owners and their dogs.

**Keywords:** Breedism, Dog breeds, Breed discrimination, Breed specific legislation.

### **A Social Construct**

Sociologists have long maintained that the concept of ethnicity is a cultural construct. Ethnic differences such as values, norms, language, dress, customs and technology are created by humans through social interaction. Moreover, while race has been defined as a biological construct, because there are physical differences passed down genetically, the meanings ascribed to those characteristics are, nonetheless, socially constructed. Humans give social meaning to physical traits such as skin color. Research in human migration patterns, based on mitochondrial DNA, show that all humans originated in Africa (e.g. National Geographic’s Genographic Project, started in 2005). That is to say, human history has a common point of origin. Differences in human skin color, hair color and texture, eye color, etc. are believed, by scientific consensus, to have largely been the result of geography. Mainstream sociologists maintain that

there is only one race - the human race. Humans, however, have used these visible physical characteristics as a way to control scarce resources

In a similar vein, all dogs descended from an ancestral Gray Wolf (*Canis Lupus*) showing a genetic variation of 1.8% (Savolainen, 2002). Humans are believed to have begun to domesticate dogs approximately 10-15 thousand years ago and dogs were one of the first animals to be domesticated. While debates exist as to whether the process was artificial or natural selection, in both scenarios, human intervention played the defining role (i.e. the intentional taking of wolf pups and domesticating them vs. wolves scavenging as a result of human settlement and becoming accustomed to humans).

Geneticist Mark Binns, of the Animal Health Trust, interviewing with the BBC, said “it looks as if 95% of current dogs come from just three original founding females and I guess these are the Eves of the dog world” (McGourty, 2002). Indeed, the scientific community has largely gained consensus on the fact that dogs descended from the ancestral wolf, although the specific reasons for domestication are less clear.

“Although the subject continues to be controversial, most authorities now agree that all dogs, from Chihuahuas to Dobermans are descended from wolves which were tamed in the Near East ten or twelve thousand years ago”. (Savage, 1989).

“Scientists believe that wolves are the direct ancestors of today’s domestic dogs. They think that early humans domesticated wild wolves to make them useful companions and work animals. Since that time, selective breeding has produced the many varieties of domestic dogs, some of which are very un-wolflike in appearance and habit”. (Johnson and Aamodt, 1992).

This sociologist will maintain that not only were dogs employed to serve social needs or desires and that dog breed is socially constructed but that a pet’s subsequent visible characteristics through generations of human intervention and geographical influence are used to create a prejudicial bias based on phenotypes that may deny pet owners access to resources. Moreover, it will be argued that there is a strong parallelism between the experiences of human groups relative to prejudice and discrimination and the experiences of companion canines. It is noteworthy that the recognition of the social construction of dog breeds has been included in legal discourse on animal identity. Brisbane (2009) noted that:

“...the article argues that the struggle about the identity of animals is a political controversy that echoes in a range of conflicts that employ historically defined concepts of power, ownership and rights-discourse of animals and the psychology of threat and fear to constitute the identities of animals and their status as legal and ethical subjects”.

## **Human Intervention**

Although some characteristics of dogs came about because of living in certain geographical climates (following humans), humans learned how to create breeds of dogs with specific traits to benefit people. The literature already recognizes human intervention and the manipulation of dogs to serve social needs and so a short summary will suffice here.

Humans intervened in numerous ways (and continue to do so) creating the concept of “breed” or “breed type”. Characteristics such as a dog’s size, coat, temperament, “skill set” (e.g. sight hound vs. scent hound vs. herder), etc. came about largely because of human intervention (whether that intervention was active or more passive). Historical examples of how dogs were used by people for specific social tasks include: for the protection of livestock and herding, for the protection of self and the group, to pull carts and help in human migration, as a source of protein, as war dogs for use in battle, as an aid in hunting and as a statement of one’s social class.

Dogs living in similar geographical environments also began to take on a common phenotype due to the climate, topography, vegetation, diet, predators and human intervention. That is, the characteristics that led to the dogs' survival in certain geographical climates were passed along to their offspring, hence, the similarities in appearances.

### **Kennel Clubs**

Because of individual familiarity with dogs, humans have learned to recognize the differences between a Poodle and a Pekinese, a German Shepherd from a Rottweiler and a Beagle from a Chihuahua. The differences to people may seem clear cut, immediately evident and as natural as knowing the difference between a dog and a cat. Yet, most people do not know that these classifications are not scientific classifications and that neither scientists nor veterinarians created the rubric by which breeds of dogs are named. Biologically speaking, the Doberman Pinscher and the Pug are the same. The differences that we, as a group, see came about because of how a group of individuals were able to organize, step in and breed for the collectively desired characteristics and behavior.

If not by scientists or veterinarians, where does this system of dog breed classification come from if it is not taxonomic? The classification of breeds of dogs is done by hobbyists, specifically those individuals who have created kennel clubs. Kennel clubs maintain breed standards which are neither scientific documents nor "final" as there are changes in these standards not only across time but also across the different kennel clubs. That is to say that breed standards may differ from one kennel club to another and that those standards are also "updated" from time to time. These hobbyists are not basing this system of classification on science as no such classification exists. As far as science is concerned, all dogs are from the classification *Canis Lupis*, although sometimes attention is given to what parts of the world different dog types can be found.

### **Human Races as Parallel of Dog Breeds**

The standards of dog breeds by kennel clubs are based on observable characteristics such as appearance, temperament and movement. As stated earlier, the system of classification of "dog breeds" represents a social classification, not a scientific classification.

What is of interest in this paper is that humans create and re-create breeds of dogs and now humans may discriminate based on breeds. Just as is often the case with humans, dogs, and/or their owners, may be treated differently because of the way they look. There is nothing intrinsically "better than" or "worse than" one breed of dog from another. Moreover, the belief that dogs that were bred for a behavior pattern or "job" centuries ago would still behave in those same ways is highly unlikely, particularly so, given the facts that 1) most dogs today are kept as companion animals and 2) "working dogs" are an extremely small part of the dog population and usually a mix of desirable genetics. Kennel clubs maintain breed lines primarily for "show", not for work. Where dog breed lines are kept for a specific purpose, such as German Shepherds, Belgian Malinois or Dutch Shepherds (that may have a breed line for policing activities), these dogs are not entering the general population. Nonetheless, changes over time in any particular gene's influence and non-working dogs aside, there is one fact that is often overlooked – even genetics and so-called "hard wiring" is amenable to change.

A dog is a sentient being that is heavily influenced by its social environment. These influences can come in the form of explicit training, socialization and even medication and less explicitly through its diet and nutrition, the amount of mental and physical stimulation (including exercise) and living arrangements. Dogs that were bred for specific functions in hunting, such as retrievers, pointers and flushers are not tools such as in the sense of hammers, nails and wrenches. Whereas tools such as a hammer will never be intrinsically altered by its environment, a dog can, and will be. That is because a dog responds to, and learns from, its social environment. And, if one were to argue further, one can even suggest that while the hammer cannot be intrinsically changed by altering its environment (a hammer is a hammer whether it is in the garage or in a basement), the truth is that a hammer can be redefined by a person who uses it and may be used for other purposes, not just to drive in a nail. Dogs are “organic” tools capable of complex interactions with humans. For instance, the dog that does not respond to an owner’s command is not a tool that is not working properly but rather it is an agent of resistance and frustration.

Using a hunting breed dog as an example, it will be demonstrated why the notion of innateness or instincts is not only a simplistic explanation to account for canine behavior but erroneous as well. When humans saw that dogs could be “specialized” to serve a specific human need, selective breeding for specific behaviors emerged. In the case of creating hunting dogs, each part of a wolf’s hunt cycle was broken down into one, or possibly two, exaggerated skills with dogs. For example, retrievers would wait with a hunter in a duck blind and retrieve a duck that had been shot down into the water. This retrieval function was a specialized activity that was selectively bred into a dog. Pointers would literally “point” via a unique stance to show a hunter where prey was located while setters would “sit” near prey. The hunt cycle of wolves was broken down into specific components to serve a hunter’s need thereby altering something that is a complete sequence in a wolf but reduced to a singular activity in a dog.

However, just as the other components of the hunt cycle were essentially reduced or removed from dogs in favor of a specific action that same process explains why many breeds of dogs associated with hunting no longer engage in those behavior patterns in a companion pet setting. Without actively engaging in the specific activity with a “hunting dog” and fostering the development of a behavioral pattern and then rewarding that dog for successfully completing the task, there is no reason to believe that retrievers will easily learn to retrieve, pointers will freeze and stare at objects with one of their paws raised or that setters would be easy to train to “set” (sit). It is the social environment that encourages or discourages certain traits to emerge.

Furthermore, bred-in traits have an onset and offset period, by which, if the trait is not fostered and encouraged, the trait eventually may diminish to the point it may vanish. This onset period is believed to be around the ages of 4 months to 1 year for many territorial and hunting type behaviors (Ken McCort, personal communication, July 1, 2013). Therefore, it is suggested here, that in addition to changes in the “gene pool” over time and in largely being raised as companion pets, so-called bred-in instincts are often very adjustable and even mutable. So while it is true that dogs were bred for specific purposes, it is also true that such breeding is not a fixed, unalterable fact. The bred-in traits do not emerge and intensify in isolation; rather, they exist in an ever-changing social environment and it is in the context of social interaction that a dog’s behavior is perfected through training, practice and reward. Puppies do not enter the world “knowing” what it was initially bred to do. In sociological parlance, it can be suggested that a puppy represents considerable potential to become a dog just as a baby has the potential to become a socialized adult human being (e.g. Kingsley Davis’ 1947 work on the feral child). That is to say, it is the social environment that draws out or inhibits behavioral patterns.

There is one other factor to examine and that is the use of medications to alter or affect behavior. Selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) are often prescribed to humans for psychiatric conditions such as depression, mood disorders and anxiety. The so-called “puppy Prozac” may also be prescribed by a veterinarian to a canine to address stress-related issues such as separation anxiety or anxiety associated with thunderstorms, fireworks or even long distance travel. In personal communication with an animal behaviorist and ethologist, other uses for SSRIs came to light (Ken McCort, July 1, 2013). It became apparent to this author that, much as medication is used in the field of psychiatry as a way to alter brain chemistry so that the patient is more receptive to psychotherapeutic approaches by addressing any underlying psychopathology, such medication can be used with canines in a similar manner under the guidance and direct supervision of the animal’s veterinarian. The use of an SSRI may make a dog more receptive to being trained and learning new patterns of behavior, and, in fact, these drugs were first used and tested with dogs.

Secondly, are changes in the influence of genes. A breeding project by Russian Dmitri Belyaev (1959) on silver foxes (Siberian fox) was able to demonstrate that it took only 33 generations to turn a line of wild, untamed foxes into foxes that were easily made tame and social (Trut, 1999). Just as impressive was the evidence showing changes in the expression of brain genes (Lindberg, 2005).

The relationship between humans and dogs extends 12,000-15,000 or more, with much of the breeding for a specific purpose beginning hundreds of years ago. The Labrador Retriever lying on the couch in today’s living room likely shares very little, other than appearance, with its distant relatives who needed to work in order to be kept, fed and taken care of by humans. Outside of kennel clubs or breeders with a specific purpose for maintaining a breed line (and these dogs are highly unlikely to enter into the general population of dogs), breeds that are visibly identifiable today no longer are engaging in the original behavior pattern that they were selected for unless trained or otherwise encouraged to do so.

## **Breed Discrimination**

Sociologists define discrimination in terms of categorical rejection, maintaining that discrimination is behavior that categorically denies individuals with shared group membership the same opportunities or benefits that others are provided. In contrast, prejudice is categorical rejection based on the attitudes or beliefs that groups in power hold of individuals sharing minority group membership.

Breed discrimination follows the same definition – the categorical rejection of an animal, here referring to “dogs”, who share perceived or actual breed membership. Likewise, prejudice against certain breeds of dogs exist as well as evidenced by the fact that humans believe that certain dogs are more likely to be aggressive than other dogs, or that certain types of people “own” certain types of dogs. For instance, the “gang banger” or “criminal” profile placed upon owners of pit bull-type dogs or the poodle as a “sissy” dog.

When pejorative and prejudicial attitudes lead to discriminatory behavior, or when discriminatory behavior is manifested out of a mob-rule mentality, policies reflecting eugenics may be enacted. Such policies may be found in “breed specific legislation” (BSL). This “breedism”, defined here as the categorical rejection of a (perceived or real) breed of dog rather than recognizing that each dog is an individual with its own unique history and personality, is akin to the other “-isms”, such as racism and sexism. Stereotyping a dog based on its appearance

fails to recognize the significance and heavy influence of the social environment on a dog's behavior and gives undue weight to genetics.

Breed specific legislation which found its heyday in the 1980s is being challenged in some communities while being discussed as possible new ordinances in others. Breed specific legislation exists not only in the United States, but is found worldwide. Organizations, such as "Stop BSL" track the changing legislation surrounding breed specific legislation noting where BSL is being proposed and where an existing ban has been lifted (i.e. stopbsl@org).

Other policies, by which specific breeds of dogs are discriminated against – and by extension their owners – include renters being denied housing by landlords, dog owners being denied homeowner's or renter's home insurance and people even being denied the opportunity to become foster parents. Because of prejudice, certain breeds of dogs are routinely euthanized in animal shelters with some not even entering the animal shelter but rather, being euthanized "on the spot" when arriving at a shelter as a stray or by owner surrender.

Because of a dog's appearance, rather than its behavior, owners of "banned breeds" are denied, a priori, the same rights and opportunities that are accorded to owners of "permitted" breeds. The dynamics of prejudice and discrimination that are found in racism are mirrored in breedism.

## Conclusion

It was because of human agency – and the biological response to that agency – that resulted in the evolutionary differentiation between wolf and dog. While the physical living environment dictated many of the physical characteristics that emerged across breed of dogs, such as the thickness of a coat, had the relationship between wolf and human not initially emerge, the immense variety seen in dogs today would simply not exist. There can be little doubt that human beings and canines have become mutually dependent upon one another. Nonetheless, in some cases, what some humans have helped create, some now destroy out of fear and prejudice.

Future research should attempt to further explore the "nature vs. nurture" debate that exists not only in the human population, but also in the canine population. While dogs may be "hard-wired" through selective breeding to focus on specific tasks associated with early domestication to serve human needs, such as hunting, herding and retrieving, this "hard-wiring" is amenable to change. Like humans, dogs are influenced by their social environment, by their level of mental and physical stimulation and by their degree of social interaction with humans and other animals. Additionally, just as human behavior, physiology and even life span are effected by diet and nutrition, so too are our companion canines effected by what they consume. Moreover, medication which alters brain chemistry plays a role in canine behavior, just as it would on the human brain.

Other possible areas for research include the examination of discrimination against owners of stigmatized breeds, the functions of stigmatizing certain breeds, the redefinition of "mutt" to "designer dog", and the different euthanasia rates in shelter by breed (e.g. "highly adoptable dog" vs. "unadoptable") among others.

That human beings and their behavior, their personalities, their cognition, their skills and talents are a combination of biological, psychological and sociological effects, so too, it is argued here, is it true of our canine companions. Through socialization, training, interaction, diet and nutrition, veterinarian care and medication use, dogs that have been companions to humans through much of human history have had very human-like experiences. It is not anthropomorphic to recognize these parallels between the social experiences of dogs and those of

humans. The experiences suggested to exist for dogs (just as with humans) range from being used as a tool to serve social needs, to being subjected to discrimination and prejudice and to being considered a loved member of a family. Future papers will explore these experiences from a sociological perspective recognizing the offerings that other disciplines provide to a more comprehensive examination of the social world of canines.

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