
CUJO IN THE FAMILY: OWNING AN AGGRESSIVE DOG IN
THE CONTEMPORARY UNITED STATES

by
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ABSTRACT

This thesis presents an ethnography of the experiences of owners of aggressive family dogs, discusses how (the issue of) dog aggression is constructed by the society and experienced by individuals, and examines what these processes indicate about human-animal (owner-dog) relationships and the status of the dog in the contemporary US society. My analysis is mainly based on the fieldwork I undertook in San Francisco in August 2011, but is also informed by an internet survey I conducted in December 2011 as well as some general observations about the representation of dog aggression in books, media and the legal system. I frame my discussion in terms of ideologies about dog ownership and appropriate (dog) behavior, conceptions of home, family and personal identity, and I place it within the human-animal boundary framework that has been of interest to anthropologists for decades. I hope that this thesis will contribute to the anthropological study of human-animal relationships and of contemporary US society, as well as be a potential resource for individuals dealing with dog aggression.

For Brix and Reeva
Who together have eight legs
And have taught me a lot

and for all of those who have a Brix or a Reeva of their own

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Since I can remember, I have always wanted a dog. I wanted that friend that is always around, that curls up next to you when you are sad and that you can play fetch with for as long as you want. A companion you can take for walks in parks and woods and have him enthusiastically sniff the ground, frequently checking in with you, simply to make sure you are still around. I wanted to teach my dog dozens of tricks and snooze next to him on long summer afternoons, feed him leftovers off the dinner table and show him off to all of my friends and guests. After years of badgering my parents, my wish finally came true.

My first dog, a male mixed-breed I called Brix, came into my life when I was thirteen. He was around five months old at the time, fluffy, friendly and incredibly sweet and gentle. His only problem was that he always wanted to be around me and he jumped fences and bit through leashes in order to do so. I have to admit I was somewhat flattered. We enrolled in a training class because I wanted him to be the best possible dog he could be, smart and obedient and able to be off-leash wherever we went. However, a few weeks into the class he started growling at other dogs. I was stunned and confused, worried and angry. The trainer told me to punish him by jerking on the lead when he growled, and that is what I started doing.

With time his behavior grew worse—he got into fights, he started growling and barking at any male dog he saw. His muscles would tense as he stood on the end of taut leash, his hackles would rise, and his lips would pull back to reveal a set of large white teeth. He did not seem like the my sweet puppy anymore. I was frustrated and upset beyond belief. I thought I was doing everything right, everything a good dog owner would

do—I fed him good food, I took him for walks, I took him to dog training classes—and still he was turning into this aggressive animal I felt embarrassed and uncomfortable taking out with me. My punishments therefore got more severe—I would jerk the leash with as much strength as I could, I would pin him to the ground, I would hold his muzzle closed shut so he would not bark, I shouted, I dragged him, half on the ground, half stumbling, down the road, everything just to make him STOP. But he would not. My parents told me I was hurting him, but I convinced them that I knew what I was doing—after all, I was taking him to a dog training class.

We actually graduated from those classes with flying colors and continued training for obedience and agility. He was still getting into fights, however, and I was very nervous when he was around other male dogs. With time he also started responding to me less and less until he just stopped listening to me completely. I did not know it then, but he was not being disobedient, he was simply scared, over-stressed and was doing his best to communicate that to me, only I did not know how to listen. Luckily, one day I discovered a book that told a story of a dog that was very similar to my story with Brix. It also provided me with a new, positive-reinforcement based technique of dealing with his behavior. After a while, his behavior got manageable.

However, just as I was getting used to the state of affairs with Brix, another dog joined our “pack”, a scared beauty, around nine months old at the time, whom I called Reeva. With Reeva came a whole new set of problems: she was frequently attacking Brix, trying to steal his food; she seemingly never relaxed and did not listen to me at all. Why did I keep her? Because I knew nobody else would want her. I also wanted to prove to myself that I could raise a dog properly, not “mess up” the way I did with Brix. Taught by my previous experience, I therefore decided not to use any harsh methods on her and I was determined to expose her to other dogs, to make sure she was properly socialized. Unfortunately, the knowledge I had acquired with Brix was very limited, and with Reeva I was in over my head.

During the first few months after I took her in, Reeva started attacking other dogs. I would take her to dog parks where she would play, run around and look very happy. She was getting her exercise, I got to socialize with the fellow dog owners—it was what I used to be able to do with Brix. But then, on occasion, something would happen while she was playing and a mixture of growling and squeals would travel to my ears and into my stomach where it would nestle into a thick heavy ball of fear, anger and helplessness. The only thing I could do was run over to Reeva, tear her away from whichever dog she had her jaws around and with a mumble of apologies to other owners try to flee the dog park as fast

as possible. But I would still come back the next day, for I always had excuses ready: there was food around and she was forced to fight for food while on the streets, she was too excited, the little white dog looked too much like a little white bunny. I was simply unwilling to accept the fact that I had yet another aggressive dog, that is until her behavior really started causing problems.

Reeva got into a fight with the neighbor's dog and in the process of breaking up the fight, the neighbor got bit. She blamed it on my dog but luckily did not sue. I tried to hire a trainer to work with us so our dogs would get along, but she refused. The fence that separated our yard from theirs became a war-zone. For years afterwards I felt like running away and throwing up whenever I saw her on the street, even when neither of us had our dogs. Reeva also started reacting to more and more things: people passing by, guests, bikes, dogs, birds, cats. Whenever I was around her, unless we were alone in the house, I was extremely stressed and always on the lookout for something that might send her into a frenzy. I could not even imagine her being able to see other dogs and stay calm, let alone greet them in a friendly manner. My own anxiety did not help the state of things.

When I decided to start working more seriously on Reeva's aggression issues, I met more problems. Walking a German-Shepherd looking dog wearing a muzzle and acting-up on the street earned me a lot of disapproving looks, and sometimes very harsh words. One day she got into a fight with a Rottweiler twice her size while she was wearing a muzzles. The Rottweiler's owner told me that if he ever saw my dog again he would rip her apart. I was around fifteen years old at the time. I got home after that incident and cried for a long time holding onto Reeva as she licked my face and sometimes tried to struggle out of my embrace. She was my dog, I did not know how to help her, and I was starting to realize that she was a danger, and that she was in danger. For the longest time I was afraid of my dad calling me to tell me that somebody had poisoned my dogs, or that Reeva had gotten out of the yard and had hurt someone and she had to be put down. I still worry, sometimes.

We went to another trainer, and then another and they did not tell me anything I did not feel I knew already, so I started to look further. While my experience with Brix encouraged me to try a different method of working with dogs—clicker training—my experience with Reeva forced me to reexamine completely what I thought about dogs, how I felt about dogs, how I wanted to relate to dogs. I learned more about their biology, behavior, and their body language. I learned about massage and touch therapy, strategies that help dogs calm down or stay focused, exercises that engage dogs mentally and physically. I read books upon books on those topics, frequented websites and online forums, watched videos and wrote to dog trainers in far away countries. At first I was looking for simple answers—a

diagnosis for Reeva, a five step program for helping her. With time, though, I learned “to get into my dog’s head” and come up with solutions and strategies from there. I slowly started the process of helping her.

Things are still not “perfect.” Walking Reeva is still difficult and stressful, unless I walk her when nobody else is on the street. I would never let her off leash anywhere and I do not think I will ever feel comfortable letting her interact with other dogs. As she gets extremely agitated when Brix is taken out, walking him is difficult as well. There are many moments when I wonder what would have happened if only I had not brought Reeva into my home. I am sure many things would be much easier—for me, for Brix, and definitely for my parents who are now looking after the two dogs while I am in college. On the other hand, I cannot deny the fact that I truly and deeply care for both of my dogs. They are great around the house, and they can run around the yard, they get over-cuddled and we keep teaching them new tricks. Even though I do not get to do with them all that I wanted to do with a dog, and all that I feel I should be doing with a dog, like taking them to dog parks, I think they have a pretty happy existence.

These experiences I have had with Brix and Reeva, owning them and dealing with them, have found their way into many parts of my life—this thesis being just one of them. However, while they are very personal and important to me, they are definitely not unique. There are many owners out there fighting similar, if not more difficult battles, not only trying to keep both their dogs and others safe, but also coming to terms with the fact that they own a problematic dog and that they do not know how to own such a dog. Their stories are rarely, if ever, told outside of circles of people who deal with similar issues. This is unfortunate as there is much to learn from those stories—about dogs but also, more importantly, about people.

WHY LOOK AT OWNERS OF AGGRESSIVE DOGS? ¹

In recent decades, pets have been gaining an increasingly prominent presence in the Western world, many of them being promoted from the status of animal to that of family member. This is true especially for dogs, the animal that without a doubt has the greatest

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When talking about “aggressive dog”, I take this label to mean “a dog that exhibits abnormal aggression”, abnormal aggression defined by (Butcher et al., 2002) as “normal aggressive behavior that becomes excessive or uncontrolled and is then seen as undesirable and potentially dangerous by humans.”

involvement in our everyday lives. In the United States alone there are approximately 78.2 million dogs, and around 40% of U.S. Households own a dogs (American Pet Products Association, 2012). Many dog owners share some of the most personal parts of their lives with their dogs, and even people who do not own one cannot avoid being exposed to dogs every day, be it real dogs or their various depictions.

Not surprisingly, academics in a variety of disciplines have started paying more attention to human-companion animal and human-dog relationships. Research is being done in a variety of fields and varies from investigations of types and quality of owner-pet relationships (M. Fox, 1981; Perin, 1981; Sanders, 1993; Clark & Boyer, 1993; Belk, 1996; Blouin, 2009) to various benefits of pet ownership (e.g. Anderson, Reid & Jennings, 1992; Crowley-Robinson, Fenwick & Blackshaw, 1996; Allen, 1997; Cline, 2010). Many academics are intrigued by, and explicitly point out, the importance of culture in the construction of the relationships humans have with other animals (e.g. Katcher, 1981; Perin, 1981; Nast, 2006; Blouin, 2009) and the special, human-like status many dogs have in Western cultures (e.g. Podberscek, 1994; Belk, 1996; Mullin, 1999; Dotson & Hyatt, 2008; Power 2008). In the growing field of “pet” and “dog studies”, however, a certain aspect of, or a problem in, dog-human cohabitation has escaped the academic gaze, even though it frequently finds its way into public discourse. This is a problem that I have experienced with my dogs, a problem that shapes dog ownership into something quite different from the experiences most frequently talked about and studied. It is the problem of aggressive behavior in dogs.

“Aggression is the most common and most serious behavior problem in dogs” (ASPCA, n.d.). It is often a long-lasting problem, difficult to solve and sometimes even to manage successfully. It can be dangerous, and it threatens the safety and lives of others, including the people very close to the owner—77 percent of dog bites are inflicted on family members or close friends (Phillips, 2011). Aggression reflects badly on the individual dog—and its owner—and sometimes even the breed or the species as a whole, threatening its privileged position of companion. It complicates family and neighborhood relationships and can be very difficult on the owner(s)—physically, mentally, economically and emotionally. Furthermore, it is not just the problem of the individual owner and their dog. In 1994, an estimated 1.8% of the U.S. population was bitten by a dog (Sacks, Kresnow & Houston., 1996), making dog bite injuries a serious health issue (Hunthausen, 1997). A few of those injuries are very serious, sometimes even resulting in deaths, and they bring dog aggression into the media and public discourse, making it a social issue. While there have been a variety of ethological studies focusing on dog aggression as a behavioral problem in dogs (eg. Voith, Wright & Danneman, 1992; Jagoe & Serpell, 1996; O’Farell, 1997) and some of

those have looked at how the owners might be affecting their dogs' behavior, there is a notable lack of analysis that focuses on the impact of dog aggression on the lives of people, especially the lives of the dogs' owners.

Inspired by my personal experience, this thesis will begin to fill this gap in the social science literature and investigate what I consider a very interesting, and also anthropologically relevant, question: "How and why does aggressive behavior in dogs affect people's lives their community and society?" In answering the question, I will focus on a very specific "type" of dog owners—those who are highly engaged with their dogs, feel strongly about their identity as dog owners, and are concerned with their do's aggressive behavior. They are owners not of "resident dogs," who often live in back yards and receive little attention from their owners, but "family dog" (Delise, 2007:xi.,162). While I believe that it is these owners who are most affected by their dogs' aggression, I acknowledge that their experiences are not universal and that my research might not reveal anything about how other types of owners feel or think about dog aggression. Also, most of my analysis will focus on the experiences of the dog owners and will mostly exclude the experiences of the victims (human) or the owners of dog victims. This is not to say, however, that I believe those experiences to be irrelevant to this thesis. Finally, I also acknowledge that I am approaching this topic from both an academic and a personal perspective. Some of my analysis is guided by my own experiences and some of my interviews, and conclusions might have been affected by my biases. I have done my best to recognize the instances in which this might have happened and will point them out as necessary.

While the topic of aggressive dogs and their ownership is very personal to me, it has many broader implications and is relevant to a variety of areas of anthropological study. This thesis will look at and analyze the way aggressive behavior in dogs and the issue of "dog aggression" is constructed in American culture, the way people talk about it and try to regulate and counter it, which will in turn reveal U.S. middle class conceptions of "dog," "animal," "aggressive behavior" and "family".² It will also give voice to a population whose stories are rarely told and whose experiences might not be understood by others. Their stories, in many ways similar to mine and to each other, will reveal a variety of struggles owners of aggressive dogs might face due to their dogs behavior: from their changing perceptions of their dogs and of what dog ownership is to conflicts with those around them. As such, they will also testify to the potential strength of the dog-human bond, which allows

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These attitudes are not necessarily confined to the US or the middle class, as exemplified by my Croatian experience, and it might be possible to label them as "Western" instead.

it to persevere through those struggles.

RESEARCH METHODS

The primary data I am using in my analysis comes from fieldwork and an online survey. Fieldwork for this thesis took place in San Francisco in August 2011. My main focus was on interviewing dog owners who own or have owned dogs that have exhibited aggressive behavior, and who viewed that behavior as problematic, but I also engaged in participant observation in dog parks and dog training classes, attended Vicious and Dangerous Dogs hearings, and kept an eye on easily visible or accessible messages about dog aggression, such as information in Petco (a pet supplies chain), books in bookstores and libraries (both fiction and dog-manuals) and finally reports on opinions expressed about the dog mauling in Pacifica (a city close to San Francisco) on August 11, 2011. The observational component of my research does not feature prominently in this thesis, but it helped me frame the stories I collected within a broader cultural context.

Most of the dog owners I interviewed I reached through dog trainers, but some I found through contacts I had made while in San Francisco or while talking about my thesis elsewhere. I conducted 14 interviews with dog owners, 13 female and 1 male, ranging in age from early twenties to mid sixties, most of whom live in the Bay Area. Most interviews were done in person, but some were conducted over the phone. I also interviewed seven individuals who deal with dogs professionally, either as dog trainers/behaviorists or in the context of animal-related law enforcement.

My interviews varied in length from 30 to 120 minutes, depending on how much time my interviewees had for me and also on how much they wished to tell me. In my interviews with the dog owners I tried to cover a set of 20 open ended questions questions (Appendix A), but I also frequently responded to the stories they were telling me and asked a variety of follow up questions. Before I began each interview, I would tell the dog owner about my research and also about my own dogs. In many interviews I would find myself trading stories with the dog owners and comparing experiences. I believe this, in some cases, encouraged individuals to open up more and offer comments they might not have offered otherwise, but I am also aware that my own narrative might have influenced some of the answers I received.

Following my fieldwork and preliminary data analysis, I constructed a survey (see Appendix B) that I posted online. I gathered 931 responses, mostly from Dartmouth College

students and a network of dog owners and professionals to whom a contact of mine sent the link. The answers to multiple-choice questions I analyzed using Microsoft Excel graphs, while I looked at free response answers as short narratives.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

I will approach my question about dog aggression from a number of different perspectives. I will, therefore, briefly look at the broader questions such as “What do we know about human-animal relationships?” and “How are dog ownership and dog aggression culturally constructed?” However, I will focus primarily on the question of personal experiences—“For a typical middle class (sub)urban American dog-owner, what does it mean to own an ‘aggressive’ dog?” I will try to answer these questions anthropologically by considering 1) the human-animal relationship and crossing the human-animal boundary, 2) the influence of dog aggression on social lives of humans, and 3) ideologies about dog ownership, dog behavior and more generally the concept of “appropriate social behavior” in the Western society.

1. Humans, Nature, Animals and Boundary Crossing

In their study of humans and animals, anthropologists have recently started focusing more and more on the human-animal relationship, as opposed to considerations of utility of animals to humans (Katcher, 1981; Mullin, 2002) and also on the fluidity of the human-animal boundary (Martin, 1995; Mullin, 2002; R. Fox, 2006). It is in this context that dogs are currently being considered—they are not just good to think with (as posed by Levi-Strauss in *Totemism*, 1963) but good to live with (Haraway, 2003:5), and to bond with. They are far removed from what we would consider a state of nature (Katcher, 1981), rendered unable to behave “naturally” by contemporary constructs of pet ownership (M. Fox, 1981). Family dogs are completely dependent on humans, and their behavior, sometimes very “wild”, has to fit within human cultural norms and should not disrupt the lives of their human owners. As dogs, however, they are obviously unable to be fully human and fit perfectly into their owners lives. They are constructs of both nature and culture (Haraway, 2003:17), walking the thin line between the two (Podberscek, 1994).

This position of dogs, however, is highly unstable and potentially dangerous, at least partially due to dogs’ capacity for aggressive behavior. It is aggression that serves as a reminder of the “wildness” of dogs and can strip away its “human status” (Serpell, 1995). My research will thus consider aggression as the intrusion of the “wild” and dangerous into

what we consider a safe world of culture—our communities and sometimes even our homes—and the re-definition of a dog as it transforms from being one of “us”—an honorary human—to a new kind of Other, an “aggressive dog,” or potentially even to one of “them”—a dangerous and uncontrollable animal. Such effects are most easily visible in the public and legal discourse where dogs become “vicious animals” or simply things, objects of possession, as opposed to their usual definition of a “man’s best friend.”

This effect is also visible on a smaller scale as owners recognize that their dogs can do damage and in some cases of severe aggression even become afraid of their own dogs. However, in many of my interviews, dog owners indicated that their relationship with their dog, and how they felt about the dog were not significantly influenced by their dog’s behavior, at least in long term. Most of them would also end their descriptions of their dogs aggressive behavior with a stereotypical, “But otherwise s/he is such a great dog,” seemingly showing a dissociation between the behavior and the dog, allowing the bond to resist the potential detrimental effects of dog aggression.

2. Home, Relationships and Identities

Another recent shift in the study of the owner-dog relationship has been towards an increased focus on dogs as potential social actors. As a result, more attention is being dedicated to how the construction of concepts quite central to anthropology—those of family, home and identity—change due to the presence of a dog, and how the dogs are facilitating those changes.

Most of the individuals I have interviewed said they would call their dog a family member, and while a few opted for a term such as “pet” or “family dog”, a few were also very explicit about the fact that they considered their dogs to be (like) their children. All of the dogs that were talked about were living with their owners, inside their homes. This is consistent with trends in the owner-dog relationship that have been changing over the past few decades towards an increased emotional, and also spatial, closeness between dogs and their families (Power, 2008). Such a privileged position of the dog, practically on equal footing with other members of the “more-than-human” family (Power, 2008), has a strong impact on how people experience dog aggression, to the point where the experiences of the owners of problematic dogs (as observed in my study) are very similar to experiences of parents with problematic children (as indicated by Francis, 2011). Close association between the owner and the dog also implies that the dog’s behavior reflects on the owner and as such influences personal identity and presentation of social self.

Finally the importance of home as a focal space in people’s social lives emerged as

relevant, especially in the contrast between dog aggression directed at humans and that directed at other dogs. In the case of dogs' aggression towards other (unfamiliar) dogs, home remains, or is even constructed as, a sanctuary where the dogs do not exhibit problematic behavior. On the other hand, owners of dogs aggressive towards humans will often struggle with having guests over, sometimes abandoning the practice altogether or might feel uncomfortable at home themselves, if their dog is aggressing towards them. Furthermore, the actual space that is home might change in response to the dog's aggressive behavior because efforts to manage the behavior of the dog might mean confining it to, or restricting it from, certain parts of the living space or various pieces of furniture. In both cases, the re-construction of what home is and how it can be used and by whom, directly relates to the dog's position as an (un)equal participant in the home and the family.

3. Dog Ideologies and Dog Culture

Individuals in the U.S., whether they own dogs or do not, are subject to a series of cultural constructions about what dogs are, how they should behave and what owners should get out of their interactions with the dog. I refer to these constructions as “dog ideologies.” Dog ideologies are, in a way, a subset of ideologies about animals, and human relationships with animals, and they also play a crucial role in the construction of the dog's position in a family and of individuals' identities as dog owners. As such, they are situated at the intersection of the two areas of inquiry just considered.

Dog ideologies are apparent in various sayings and messages about dogs, and while they might differ slightly in expressing what a dog should be—a smart and loyal Lassie, “a man's best friend”, an essential part of a home, or sometimes even “a four legged person in a fury coat”—there is general agreement on what a (pet) dog should not be—an aggressive animal.³ Dogs in middle class (sub)urban American families are in general always expected to be social and “happy”—any type of growling, let alone snapping or biting, is frowned upon. In a way, dogs are expected to be better “humans” than even humans are.

Dogs, however, are obviously not humans. They have their own patterns of learned and instinctual behaviors they can be expected to engage in (“practices” and “rituals” passed down, albeit genetically), through their different senses, they experience the world in a particular way (“worldview”), and as social animals they are subject to sets of “norms” governing communication and conduct. These “practices”, “worldviews” and “norms” I

³ I emphasize here that I am talking about pet dogs. Many feral dogs, backyard guard dogs and fighting dogs are often considered to be “aggressive animals” but are not the focus of this thesis

will call “dog culture”. I in no way mean to imply that this “culture” is human-like. In fact I am trying to state the opposite, but I wish to label the way dogs tend to behave in their interactions with each other (intraspecies), which then also shows in their interactions with humans (interspecies).

Unfortunately, dog culture often differs from human projections of their culture onto dogs through dog ideologies. This results in what Donaldson (1996), in her book of the same name, terms “culture clash”. It is a conflict between two cultures apparent in many aspects of dog-human relationships—from where urinating is appropriate and what constitutes a chew toy to how a dog should walk on a leash and where it should sleep. It is also a concept very useful for this thesis as the two cultures often clash over dog aggression—while humans do not want it on their pets’ behavioral repertoire, the fact is that aggression is natural, normal dog behavior, and the use of aggressive behavior for communication purposes is “appropriate” among dogs (Donaldson, 1996:57). The issue of dog aggression, therefore, seems to be predominantly a human one.

THESIS STRUCTURE

The body of this thesis consists of six chapters: three contextualize my research (Chapters 1, 2 and 6) and three present and analyze the data I gathered during my fieldwork. Chapter 1 I will lay out the theoretical background of my research in the relevant anthropological, and also ethological literature. In Chapter 2 I will elaborate further on the dog ideologies and the cultural construction of our expectation of dogs, dog ownership and dog owners and will also discuss how and when dog aggression fits within these. This will set the ground for the next three chapters that focus on stories of five owners I interviewed, complemented by others (see the next section for the summary of the five case studies).

The three ethnographic chapters correspond to the three different broad categories of dog owners’ experiences that emerged from my interviews. These categories might not be universal, they are not clear-cut and can vary in their importance from owner to owner, but they provide me with a way to focus on the main problems owners of aggressive dogs might be facing. In Chapter 3 I will look at how owners experience their dog’s aggressive behavior, especially when it first starts occurring. In Chapter 4 I will show how owning, and living with, an aggressive dog impacts owners and their lives. Chapter 5 will discuss strategies people use to deal with the aggressive behavior focusing on working with the dog to manage the problem. The three chapters do not constitute three separate or chronological

stages of experience, but the initial experiences described in Chapter 3 tend to precede the onset of experiences from Chapter 4 which, in turn, precede various decisions considered in Chapter 5.

After presenting my fieldwork data, I will return back to broader issue of the cultural construction of dogs. In Chapter 6 I will look at some perspectives on aggression in dogs that might be especially problematic for owners of aggressive dogs and dog owners in general. In the Conclusion I will then summarize my findings, point to the main issues raised in my thesis and move on to the broader implications of my thesis for anthropology and the study of human-animal relationship, ideas for future research in ethology as well as potential practical applications of my findings.

THE MAIN CASE STUDIES

As I mentioned in the previous section, my analysis is built mostly on the experiences of six owners that I follow throughout my three ethnographic chapters. I chose these case-studies as good representation of five very different situations owners and their dogs can find themselves in. Here I present the summaries of their stories for the readers convenience.

Jennifer and David, a Large Mixed-breed

Jennifer lives in a rural area outside of a city in the Mid-West, in a house with her husband who is often away for work. They had had dogs for years. She adopted David out of a no-kill shelter in 2007, eight months after one of her previous dogs had died. At the time her other dog, a golden retriever, was ten years old.

David was one year old when Jennifer adopted him, and she hoped she could train him to be a therapy dog. He was friendly and got along well with Kaya. However, after a few weeks at a new home, he started exhibiting severe guarding aggression and bit Jennifer's husband. Soon afterwards, they had called their first trainer out of the phonebook, but they decided to stop working with her after a few sessions. She seemingly did not know how to deal with aggressive dogs because David lunged at her and nearly bit her. Jennifer then left David at a board and train facility, after which some of his guarding behavior improved, but he started growling at Jennifer more and more often. David went to another board and train where Jennifer later found out they used methods she considered very cruel. She then started learning more about dog aggression on her own and is slowly

rehabilitating David.

Leanne and Chewbacca, a Labrador-Pit bull Mix

Leanne now lives in the rural New England with her husband, Jake, a veterinary technician. Both grew up with dogs. In 2004, they had adopted a Black Labrador/Italian whippet mix, Echo, from a spay/neuter clinic. He was a high energy puppy that chewed up the household, so the couple decided to adopt another dog.

They adopted Chewbacca from the same spay/neuter clinic when he was around 8 weeks old. He got along well with Echo, but did not want much to do with other dogs. He also seemed to have been abused by his previous owners. He started growling at other dogs, and he attacked Jake's parents' dog. They moved south and lived in a co-op for a few years where Chewbacca would sometimes growl at their housemates. He also bit a puppy in a dog park, which was when Leanne became very reluctant about walking. Then they moved again, back to New England, to a small apartment. Chewbacca started fighting with Echo, so Leanne and Jake decided to give Chewbacca to a friend who lived further south. After a year, however, the friend and Chewbacca moved back in with Leanne and Jake. At a family gathering, Chewbacca bit Leanne and Jake's nephew on the face. That night they decided to euthanize him.

Rachel and Dallas, a Medium Mixed-Breed

Rachel lives in a an apartment in a fairly quiet San Francisco neighborhood with her dog, Dallas, her boyfriend and his Golden Retriever. She had had family dogs her whole life, but Dallas is the first dog she has owned on her own.

Dallas was found when he was about eight months old and was adopted from a shelter by a couple. They had him for about two years but had difficulties handling him, and in 2010 they decided to give him away after the wife had a baby. Rachel was the one who took him in, and she was confident she would be able to be an 'alpha' with him and that he would be a good dog. She worked with him on her own for 6 months, but his behavior became increasingly problematic. She took him to work where he would bark and lunge at everyone passing by. He would bark if left alone in her apartment. He grew protective of Rachel and started snapping at other people and dogs. She did not know how to change his behavior so she decided to call a behaviorist. They have been working with her for a while, and Dallas is getting much better.

Eric and Oscar, a Predominantly Black Labrador

Eric and his wife Christine live in a garden apartment in a quiet residential neighborhood of San Francisco. He had grown up with dogs and had been wanting to get a dog of his own for a while. He works from home and can therefore spend a lot of time with Oscar.

Oscar was found roaming around when he was about 12 months old and was taken in by a family that owned a farm. They were friends of Eric's friends, so when he heard about the dog he decided to try and foster him for a while. He was a great dog, and after a few weeks Eric and Christine decided to keep him. When on walks, he would sometimes pull toward other dogs and growl, and he did not seem to be good at greeting other dogs. Eric and Christine concluded he just needed more socialization so they would take him to dog parks and dog-daycare. One day, at the day care, Oscar was attacked by another dog, and then a few days after that, Oscar attacked a dog himself and hurt the owner of the daycare as she tried to break up the fight. He was asked to leave the daycare. That was when Eric and Christine decided to enroll in some basic obedience classes with Oscar, as well as some classes designed specifically for reactive dogs. Oscar has had a few incidents since, but Eric is very committed to continuing working with him

Sam and Lea, a Large Chow-chow Mix

Sam lives in a suburban house in the Bay Area with four dogs. She had acquired all the dogs in 2007 when she moved to her current home with her partner (they separated two years ago), and her teenage daughter was living with her for a while as well.

Sam adopted Lea when she was a very small, very sick puppy. Lea spent the first few months at her new home mainly staying on the bathroom floor and missed the period of socialization. When she got older, she started exhibiting aggressive behavior and was mainly targeting Sam, biting her very severely once. Sam decided to hire a trainer, who sprayed aerosol in Lea's face as she was barking at another dog. Lea turn around and bit the trainer. The dog trainer angrily called Sam several times, telling her to put Lea down, but Sam did not want to do that. She then got a referral to a veterinarian who specializes in animal behavior. With some of her health issues solved and a lot of work with Sam, Lea is a completely changed dog now.

CHAPTER 2

PEOPLE, DOGS AND TROUBLE—A LITERATURE REVIEW

Dogs, and human relationships with them, have been the subject of many studies, articles and books, especially in the past few decades, with the increasing presence of dogs in people's lives. In this literature review I will focus on only a small part of this literature in order to highlight the gaps that my research is hoping to fill and to elaborate further on dog aggression and the human-animal bond. As this thesis is primarily concerned with dog owners, I will first and foremost look at what various anthropologists and other social scientist have written about people's relationship with dogs, and animals in general at least in the context of middle-class Western culture. This will contextualize my own research and highlight its relevance to the field.

I will then briefly review literature written by veterinarians and ethologists about aggressive dogs. While this thesis is not concerned with dog behavior per se, and will not make claims about why dogs are aggressive and how they should be treated for aggression I want to use this opportunity to introduce the reader to the frames within which dog aggression is considered. Also, I wish to point out various issues in the study of dog aggression that might have practical implications for individuals working with aggressive dogs, mostly due to a lack of usable findings, and show how my thesis can complement the ethological, and not only anthropological research.

Finally, I will introduce a study by Francis (2011) that mirrors my own, both in methods and findings, but looks at experiences of parents with problematic children. This study is of particular interest to me as I am intrigued by the parallel between dogs and

children and I will keep referring back to this study in order to compare and contrast my own analysis and conclusions with it.

THE STUDY OF HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS WITH DOGS

As I pointed out in the introduction, the increasing academic focus on the human-animal bond is only a recent development in the various social sciences, in a way reflecting the increasing presence of pets in our everyday lives. For a long time, even anthropology was focused solely on people's use of animals—first only material but then symbolic, after Lévi-Strauss (1962) pointed out that there is a relationship between the representation of the animal world and the social relations within a human society (p.87) and put forth the idea that animals are not only “good to eat” but also “good to think” (p.89). Leach (1964) expanded on that idea and drew a parallel between pets, whom we do not eat, and close family members, whom we do not marry, in a way foreshadowing later research into the convergence between pets and family members. It was not until the 1980s that academics began to recognize the uniqueness of our relationship with companion animals. In January 1980, at the International symposium on the Human-Companion Animal Bond, Katcher (1981) was critical of the fact that

despite the great antiquity of pets ..., despite their enormous number in Western Europe and the United States ..., despite the billions spent yearly on their care, there have been almost no studies applying current experimental, anthropological, ethological or sociological methods to the study of the phenomenon. (p.41)

He criticizes ethology for not being concerned with pets because they are removed from nature and therefore inferior to their wild counterparts such as wolves. He also criticizes anthropology which, while providing “excellent studies of the symbolic importance of animals in unindustrialized societies” (p.45) , following in the footsteps of Lévi-Strauss, does not seem to be interested in the cultural roles animals play in urban societies, as “[o]ur life with animals fits much more into the category of the sentimental rather than the primitive or the violent. (p. 46)”

Since then, Katcher's call for more studies of human-companion animal relationship has been answered. Research is being done in a variety of fields and varies from investigations of types and quality of owner-pet relationships and reasons for pet-acquisition (M. Fox, 1981; Perin, 1981; Veevers, 1985; Sanders, 1993; Clark & Boyer, 1993; Hirschman, 1994; Belk, 1996; Dotson & Hyatt, 2008; Holbrook & Woodside, 2008; Blouin,

2009) to pet-product consumerism (Greenebaum, 2004; Ellson, 2008; Schaffer, 2009); from variables relevant to relinquishing dogs to shelters (Patronek, Glickman, Beck, McCabe & Ecker 1996; DiGiacomo, Arluke & Patronek, 1998; Salman et al., 1998; John Jr. et al., 2000) to various health benefits of pet ownership (Anderson et al., 1992; Crowley-Robinson et al., 1996; Allen, 1997; Cline, 2010); from the roles pets play in abusive marital relationships (Flynn, 2000), to dogs' ability to facilitate social interaction between humans (Wells, 2004; Guéguen & Ciccotti, 2008) and humans' ability to interpret and describe dog behavior (Correia, Ruiz de la Torre, Manteca & Fatjó, 2007; Diesel, Brodbelt & Pfeiffer, 2008; Tami & Gallagher, 2009).

Of all of these, and more, the studies most relevant in the context of my own research are those that focus on the special status of the dog in human lives and the strength of the human-dog bond that status enables, or is enabled by. These studies focus on the population my interviewees are a part of—middle-class owners of family dogs and they describe well owners attitudes towards their dogs and dog ownership. While the majority of the studies I found focuses on more positive aspects of these attitudes, some do inquire about what happens when the special status of the dog is threatened or the human-dog bond is damaged.

Special Status of the Dog and the Human-Dog Bond

The status of pets has been changing over the past decades. According to the U.S. Pet Ownership & Demographics Sourcebook, 49.7% per cent of dog owners in the U.S. consider their dog to be a member of the family (AVMA, 2007), although other, smaller scale samples suggest that figure to be as high as 98 (Voith et al., 1992) or 99 per cent (Voith, 1985). Whatever the figure, it show a dramatic increase in spatial and emotional closeness between dogs and their families since the 1950's when many dogs slept outside and were more distant from their families (Power, 2008). As Nast (2006) puts it, "(t)he prototypical Fido who slept on the floor and ate scraps from the table has been replaced by Lucy, a companion with increasing legal rights who sleeps on a bed and eats upscale foods." Dogs are now let into the most private parts of our homes, such as bedrooms, spaces usually reserved only for family members (Power, 2008), they are included "in the routine exchanges and the special ritual practices of the household," (Sanders, 1993) and their role in the family has been changing from that of pets to those of family members (Sanders, 1993) closest friends or surrogate children (Dotson & Hyatt, 2008). It is clear that social scientists are now recognizing that, as Haraway (2003:5) puts it, dogs are not only good to think with, but good to live with. Their special, human-like status in many Western cultures in now

acknowledged by many academics (eg. Podberscek, 1994; Belk, 1996; Mullin, 1999; Dotson & Hyatt, 2008; Power 2008) and is considered to be an interesting example of the fluidity of the human-animal boundary (Martin, 1995; Mullin, 2002; R. Fox, 2006).

The special status dogs have in our society is clearly expressed in Sanders' (1993) study that focuses on how dog owners think about and interact with their dogs. Her research finds that dogs are now seen as creative social actors with individual personalities, cognitively capable of role-taking, whose inner lives revolve around emotions they are ready to share in their interactions with humans. Many owners Sanders interview, "frequently [understood] their relationships with the animals as revolving around emotional issues. The chief pleasure they [derive] from the animal-human relationship was the joy of relating to another being who consistently demonstrated love" (Sanders, 1993). Owners, in their intimate interactions with their dogs, recognize their very-human like aspects and that enables them to form what is basically a social relationship. What significantly helps this process is what Sanders (1993) frames as "doing mind", a process in which owners "act as agents who identify and give voice to the subjective experience of their animals." Owners constantly interpret their dogs behavior and actively express it to others through human language. It is clear that the bond between the two is very personal and powerful.

While dog owners enjoy and perform their dogs' human-like identities, it is also recognized that this practice is in conflict with what I have called "dog culture" and, to an extent, with the social conventions that situate the dogs outside of the realm of humanness and deem owner's attitudes as anthropomorphic (Sanders, 1993). Owners are aware of that, and in fact actively negotiate the animal-human divide in their daily lives, as indicated by R. Fox (2006). According to her, pets are valued as animals, while at the same time, we try to "civilize" them and make them into "little humans." Pet-keeping therefore requires constant crossing, re-crossing and disruption of the human-animal boundary as pet owners

try their best to comprehend their animals behavior and intentions, balancing various interpretations of popular animal psychology that naturalize ideas of 'instinct' or animal behavior with informal notions of anthropomorphism that deny animals absolute difference from humans and attribute them with 'human-like' intentions or emotions.

In this process, for many dog owners "the overriding argument was that of the 'pack mentality', with owners adjusting their own behavior to prevent the dogs from becoming dominant amongst their human 'pack'." At the same time, they were interpreting animals' actions as very human, attributing them human emotions and motivations, and therefore "acknowledging the animal's role in an active reciprocal relationship." (R. Fox, 2006)

This dual way of thinking about dogs is also indicated by Power (2008) who claims that in order to accommodate the dog's presence in the family, the concept of a family is often reshaped to a new type of family, a "more-than-human" family—a social unit that includes not only family members but also animals, especially dogs. (Power, 2008) However, Power also suggests that this new family could also be a 'less-than-human' family as it develops an identity of a "pack" in response to the dog's, at least perceived, active participation and constant presence in the family. The use of home space is similarly modified in order to draw the lines between the dog and the human part of the "pack" (Power, 2008). While these two ways of thinking about pets, as honorary humans and as animals, seem to be in conflict and negotiating them might be challenging, R. Fox (2006) claims that pet-owners switch between the two with ease.

One strategy that can be used in order to make co-habitation with a dog easier is training the dog, which will ideally teach the owner more about dog culture, and will help the dog participate more easily in the human society. Training is often considered in discussions about dog aggression (see next section) but various authors also look at how it influences the dog-human bond. Jones, Katcher and Beck (1984) emphasize that dogs do not behave appropriately by their nature and that they need to be trained in order to establish a satisfying and positive interaction. Hart and Hart (1984:181) also point out the importance of dog behavior for the human-dog bond. According to them, a dog is chosen for its behavior and "it is the pet's behavior that contributes to the richness of the relationship with the people with whom it will interact." Unfortunately, as found by Poresky, Hendrix, Mosier and Samuelson (1987), dog owners seem to assume that simply owning an animal will create a good quality bond with that animal which implies that they are not actively trying to construct or improve that bond, whether by training their dog, or simply spending more quality time with it, which Clark and Boyer (1993) can be as effective.

The Impact of Undesirable Behaviors

Owning a dog without actively teaching it how to behave appropriately can easily lead to the development of undesirable behaviors, and various studies have looked at impacts of problematic behavior in dog on the human-dog bond. There is some disagreement among the authors, however, on what those impacts are. Various authors claim that problematic behavior in dogs can contribute to weakening the ideal companionship (Arkow & Dow, 1984; Jones et al., 1984; Mugford, 1981; Poresky et al., 1987; Simon, 1984), but Serpell's (1996) study suggest that owner's attachment to their animals, if rated by the owner as medium or high, is not related to their behavioral expectations of the

pet or the pet's actual behavior. On the other hand, he does point out that in general, dog owners who report weaker attachments for their pets are consistently less satisfied with most aspects of their dogs' behavior compared with those who report stronger attachments. This might imply that owners who are not really attached to their dogs own more problematic dogs, but it might also be the case that they are more sensitive to their dogs' misbehavior, that is, that problematic behavior can be more detrimental to a bond weak for other reasons.

Behavioral problems in animals can and do disrupt the human-pet bond, as is evident from numerous pets in shelters, some of which are relinquished for behavioral reasons. Arkow and Dow's (1984) study of 13 shelters found 26.4% of the dogs were surrendered due to behavioral problems, second most common reason after lifestyle changes. Salman et al. (1998) found behavioral reasons to be the most common reason for surrendering pets to shelters in a study of 12 shelters. In choosing up to five reasons for surrendering dogs to shelters, 9.8% of owners picked aggression towards people, 7.8% picked aggression towards animals and 28.8 % indicated other behavior problems. Kass (2001) focused solely on animals surrendered to shelters for euthanasia. These dogs, on average, had been owned for much longer than other dogs surrendered to shelters (10.4 vs. 1.2 years) and a much lower percentage of them, 16%, were surrendered for behavioral reasons. Among those, aggression was the most common problem:

Although dogs could be assigned more than one behavioral trait contributing to their relinquishment, the most common reasons given were those in which the dog posed a real threat to safety: aggression toward people (n = 41, 42%), biting either people or other animals (n = 41, 42%), and aggression toward other animals such as chasing or killing them (n = 22, 30%).

None of the mentioned studies, however, really focus on the experience of problematic dog ownership and how it influences the owner, as authors do not go beyond stating that problematic behavior is, well, problematic. Interviews of owners surrendering animals to shelters, for example, take very little note of how the owner felt about the behavior or their decision to surrender the dog. Even articles that seemingly focus on the topic of the human-animal bond say very little, and sometimes nothing at all, about the owner's experiences. Houpt (1983), in an article titled "Disruption of the Human-Companion-Animal Bond: Aggressive Behavior in Dogs" is not concerned with the bond at all, but the behavior itself, and the dogs exhibiting the behavior. In a paper titled "The Pet Trap: Negative Effects of Pet Ownership on Families and Individuals," Simon (1984) does not deal with problems within the context of owning a particular animal, but presents a

psychoanalytical argument of how owning a pet in general can sometimes be detrimental to people's individual growth.

I was able to find only a few articles that explicitly pointed out certain issues that have to do with problematic, especially aggressive, behavior in dogs. Power (2008), for example, reflects on how undesirable behavior affects homes in particular and points out that they go against the definition of a home as a safe and orderly space and cause tensions within the family. On the other hand, Sanders (1990), is more concerned with occurrences of problematic dog behavior in public that, due to the owner's status as the responsible party of the dog-human "mutual togetherness"

has the potential of degrading the social identity of the human partner. This judgmental social response by others typically generates the uncomfortable internal experience of guilt, shame, or embarrassment within the caretaker (Goffman 1982 [1956])

The dog's misbehavior disrupts the "more-or-less cooperative, flow of public interactions" forcing the owner to "reestablish the smooth flow of interaction" and excuse the behavior in an attempt to "restore his or her positive social identity and regain those aspects of positive self definition which have been degraded by the negative responses of the human others." (Sanders, 1990) Sanders discusses the tactics owners use to do this, of which he defines seven: situating, justifying, redefining, behavioral quasi-theorizing, processual emphasis, demonstrative disciplining and unlinking. The last two are potentially very problematic for the dog and the relationship—demonstrative disciplining is conducted without considerations for the dog and unlinking shows a high level of apathy with respect to the behavior, decreasing the attachment between the owner and the dog.

In contrast to Power (2008) and Sanders (1990), Hunthausen (1997) focuses mainly on the consequences for canine welfare, such as increased use of punishment by the owner trying to get rid of the aggressive behavior, increased isolation, relinquishment to shelters or even, on a larger scale, effects on the dog population as a whole such as breed-specific legislations etc. Through his discussion, however, he implicitly tells of experiences of the owners who feel "betrayed and confused" and would excessively punish the dog, isolate him or surrender him to a shelter. Although Hunthausen (1990) simply points to the emotions humans might feel when faced with aggressive behavior, and its potential negative impacts on dogs as a species, others do offer some explanation of people's reactions. Serpell (1995) points out that aggression serves as a reminder of the "wildness" of dogs and can strip away its "human status". Podberscek (1994) build on that with his analysis of coverage of dog attacks on humans in five major British newspapers, between

1988 and 1992. He concludes that:

It is suggested that the media, public and the government response is an overreaction to the generally held ideal that the dog's position in the society is as a loyal and faithful companion. The dog's position in society therefore appears to be inherently unstable. With real or even perceived increases in unacceptable behavior by these animals, the species, or at the very least certain breeds of do, could rapidly lose public favor and acceptance.

The present literature on human relationships with dog appears very clear about the fact that dogs have a special, but unstable position in human society and human families. This status allows for very strong emotional bonds between owners and their dogs, but also has to be negotiated. It is also clear that dog's problematic behavior can impact owners and their lives and can have negative effects on the human-dog bond, even though a strong bond might be unaffected by the misbehavior. Aggression, as a potentially dangerous behavior is especially threatening to the dog's "human" status. My thesis will build on these findings as it looks at what ownership of an aggressive dog is really like and what makes it problematic.

THE STUDY OF DOG BEHAVIOR

A lot of research on the behavior of dogs has been done in the past decades, mainly by ethologist and veterinarians. This research is the main source of scientifically gathered information on dogs, their (mis)behavior and dog culture. Topics researched vary greatly and here I will present only the findings most relevant to my area of interest—aggression. The dog aggression these studies focus on is, like in the cases I am considering, 'abnormal aggression,' defined as "normal aggressive behavior that becomes excessive or uncontrolled and is then seen as undesirable and potentially dangerous by humans" (Butcher, Demeester & Radford, 2002).

One of the main foci of research about aggression in dogs has been finding out which dogs are more likely to be aggressive, what type of aggression they exhibit, and who their target is—humans or dogs, members of the household or strangers. The studies try to find correlations between different types of aggression, or abnormal aggression in general and various dog-specific variables such as the dog's sex (Borchelt & Voith, 1982; Line & Voith, 1986; Sherman, Reisner, Taliaferro & Houpt, 1996, Roll & Unshelm, 1997; Guy et al., 2001; Takeuchi, Ogata, Houpt & Scarlett, 2001; Mariette, Gaultier, Bonnafous & Falewee, 2007), size (Mariette et al., 2007), breed (Borchelt, 1982; Wright & Nesselrote, 1987; Sherman, 1996;

Takeuchi et al., 2001; Bennett & Rohlf, 2006; Mariette et al., 2007), reproductive status (Wright & Nesselrote, 1987; Blackshaw, 1991), family structure (Bennett & Rohlf, 2006), source of acquisition (Roll & Unshelm, 1997; Wells & Hepper, 2000; Bennett & Rohlf, 2006; Sullivan & Jones, 2008), reasons for acquisition (Jago & Serpell, 1996), etc.

Another factor potentially contributing to dog aggression that researchers are interested in is the owner's behavior. Many different aspects of interaction with dogs have been examined, such as general obedience (Jago & Serpell, 1996; Podberscek and Serpell, 1997; Sullivan & Jones, 2008), the amount and type of training owners engage in with their dogs (Voith & Wright, 1992; Jago & Serpell, 1996; Sullivan & Jones; 2008), allowing the dog to initiate play and win tug-of-war games (Podberscek & Serpell, 1997; Guy et al, 2001b; Sullivan & Jones, 2008), feeding regimes (Jago & Serpell, 1996; Podberscek & Serpell, 1997; Guy et al, 2001b; Sullivan & Jones, 2008) and "spoiling" or anthropomorphic activities such as allowing dogs on the furniture and feeding them from the table (Voith & Wright, 1992; Jago & Serpell, 1996; Sullivan & Jones, 2008). There is no consensus between the studies on whether any of these actually correlate with increased incidence of aggression. Also, it is interesting to note that none of the interactions considered pertain to owners' behavior in instances in which aggression could or does occur (e.g. dog meeting a strange dog, dog chewing a bone.)

What the studies discussed above show is basically that that dogs of various breeds and backgrounds living in various environments can exhibit abnormal aggressive behavior. Their analytical focus on variables inherent to the dog, or the way the owner is interacting with the dog, also indicate that the research being done is less about understanding dog behavior and more about human safety considerations and potential ideas for bite prevention. However, even with regards to the latter, they are notably inconclusive—not only is there a profound lack of agreement on certain issues, but the studies simply focus on a variety of variables that maybe correlate with behavior and do not really seek to investigate possible causes of aggression or strong predictors of future aggressive behavior that the dog professionals point to. I was able to find only a few studies that do.

Lack of socialization is, for example considered the number one cause of aggression in dogs, as pointed out by Dr. Berger, a veterinarian and a behavioral specialist I interviewed. A study done by Pageat (2004) supports this claim as it finds that fearful young dogs are at increased risk of developing aggressive behavior. Sullivan and Jones (2008) , however, disagree. On the other hand, Roll and Unshelm (1997) do find that in their study of dog aggression toward other dogs that

44% of the aggressors and victims of dog fights had few interactions with conspecifics between the age of 5 weeks and 5 months. Within this group, 35.5% of the owners reported that their dogs attack others occasionally. Dogs that grew up with another dog show this behavior infrequently (7.3%).

Therefore, there does seem to be some evidence that under-socialized dogs are at a greater risk of developing aggression.

As first time owners might be the ones least aware of the need to socialize a dog, or maybe work with it properly, it is important to note that Jagoe and Serpell (1996) found a correlation between dominance aggression, and some other behavioral issues, and first time dog ownership. While some other studies (Borchelt & Voith, 1982; Line & Voith, 1986) found no such correlation, it is relevant that none of the 24 owners of dominant-aggressive dogs in the Line and Voith (1986) study reported previously owning a dog aggressive to family members. Owner's inexperience with dogs, and especially with dog aggression might be another factor worth considering, as the lack of experience will make it more difficult for the owner to actively prevent the aggressive behavior and recognize its onset.

The dog's experience with aggression should also be considered. Roll and Unshelm (1997), for example, point out that about 67% of the owners in their study reported that their dog has a tendency to attack others and at least 88% of the dogs in the study were involved in more than one event of intraspecific aggression. This suggests that one instance of dog-oriented aggression might be a strong predictor of future instances of aggression.

Success of (different types of) treatment of aggression in dogs is another aspect of this behavioral issue not considered in depth by studies. Methods are rarely discussed, even though they are a subject of heated debate among dog trainers, but there is some evidence for negative impacts of aversive dog training methods on dog behavior (Roll & Unshelm, 1997; Hiby, Rooney & Bradshaw, 2004; Blackwell, Twells, Seawright & Casey, 2007; Herron, Shofer & Reisner, 2009). Many studies, in contrast, report success rates but those are generally based on owner reports and therefore difficult to quantify or conceptualize. Those success rates are fairly good, with around 50-94% of dogs showing improvement, depending on the study and the type of aggression (Line & Voith, 1986; Blackshaw, 1990; Sherman, 1996; Takeuchi et al., 2001). Only a few researchers look into factors affecting the likelihood of improvement (e.g. Sherman, 1996; Takeuchi et al., 2001)

In addition to discussing success rates, authors also point out that often aggressive behavior is not completely suppressed and that sometimes euthanasia is the only alternative. Studies report on rates of euthanasia between 8% and 13 % for dogs aggressive towards humans (Line & Voith, 1986; Blackshaw, 1990), and around 4-5% for dogs

aggressive towards other dogs (Blackshaw, 1990; Sherman, 1996).⁴ Reisner et al.(1994) find that dominant-aggressive dogs are more likely to be euthanized if they weigh over 18.5 kg and are exhibiting more severe aggression or if they have been purchased and their behavioral responses are unpredictable. These likely correlate with how dangerous , or how much of a liability, owners perceive their dogs to be—large dogs that aggress toward humans severely and unpredictably do seem to be the most likely candidates for euthanasia.

The owners' perspective on their dogs' behavior, and their response to the behavior, is in general lacking from these studies and is at best only briefly mentioned or implied, for example by the fact that a particular study is based on records of a behavior clinic which means all the owners involved have sought help for their dog's behavior. The only data I found about actual owner's responses to aggressive behavior, aside from statistics on euthanasia was in a study by Takeuchi et al. (2001) that looks at dogs aggressive towards humans. In it, he includes some data on the age of the dog at different points in the progression of the behavior. His data suggest that owners do not seek help for aggressive behavior at its onset, but allow it to progress to serious and even then, in the case of aggression towards owners, might still wait before turning to a professional. This is in line with Sullivan and Jones' (2008) finding that owners are tolerant of significant degrees of aggressive behavior.

All in all, while studies of aggressive behavior in dogs have the potential to be the source of good, scientifically researched information about the behavior, its causes and most effective treatments, at the present time the literature does not seem to be fulfilling its potential which is unfortunate for the trainers and owners of aggressive dogs. For the purposes of this thesis, however, the literature highlights, implicitly and explicitly, a few important aspects of dog aggression—it is not restricted to only certain types of dogs and owners, it is treatable, but not necessarily in all cases and while owners might tolerate it for a while, there is a general awareness of the risks it poses to human welfare. Furthermore, the literature reveals a lack of attention to human response to aggression and how it might actively interact with the behavior, as there is very little said about owners reactions to their dog's aggressive behavior and approaches taken to alleviating or solving that problem. My own research will start filling that gap.

⁴ While these rates might seem high, it is important to note that they come from professional institutions that specialize in behavior problems and are probably biased towards more severe cases of dog aggression.

FOLLOWING THE DOGS-AS-CHILDREN PARALLEL: A STUDY OF PARENTS WITH PROBLEMATIC CHILDREN

Since I started thinking about my research, my idea was to compare my own findings on experiences of owners of aggressive dogs with the literature on how the parents are affected by the similarly problematic behaviors of their children. Unfortunately, for a long time, I was not able to find any such studies. At the same time, I came across many that, in contrast, looked how children are affected by their parents, and as a result of that influence sometimes exhibit problematic behaviors. This is interesting in itself as it shows a similar backgrounding of the caretaker and denial of their negative experiences that I noticed in the literature on dog owners and their dog.

In the end, I did manage to find one, very recent, ethnography that mirrors mine in many ways. Francis (2011) in a paper titled “The Dynamics of Family Trouble: Middle-Class Parents Whose Children Have Problems” presents interviews with parents from 36 middle-class families that reveal their experiences as parents of children with a variety of issues. She constructs their experiences as “trouble”, that “occurs when the patterns of social life do not unfold as people believe they ought to.” This trouble, she says, “manifests *between* people, not just within them,” (emphasis in the original) and is therefore not only a private, psychological matter, but also a sociological one.

In her analysis of different parents experiences of their particular trouble, Francis (2011) recognizes five elements characteristic of those experiences:

First, parents defined their situations as troublesome. Second, they experienced a breakdown in their daily routines. Third, parents’ relationships to one another, family members, and friends became distant, uneasy, and in some cases confrontational. Fourth, parents found it challenging to maintain cherished role performances and salient identities. Finally, they experienced inner turmoil in the form of anxiety, sadness, loneliness, anger, or guilt.

As I will show in the later chapters, these are also, at least to some degree, characteristic of owners of aggressive dogs. Such common experience supports the claims about the close bonds between owners and their dogs and the dog’s position as a family member or even a surrogate child.

CHAPTER 3

THE DOG IDEOLOGIES AND DOG AGGRESSION

Thus far, dogs have done their best to adjust to the many changes and restrictions we have imposed upon them—in particular, our expectation that they will be companionable when we need them to be and unobtrusive when we don't. ... Today, ... many pets live in circumscribed environments and are expected to be simultaneously better behaved than the average human child and as self-reliant as adults. ... The new unrealistic standards to which many humans hold their dogs have arisen from one of several fundamental misconceptions about what dogs are and what they have been designed to do.

Bradshaw, 2011, p. xviii

In the Introduction, I presented the concept of dog ideologies—the way people think about dogs and their place in our society. These ideologies influence our expectations of dogs we encounter, dogs we own, of our relationship with dogs and of dog owners in general and as such they play a very important role in how we relate to and interact with dogs, and how we think about and react to their aggressive behavior.

In this chapter, I will outline some of these ideologies, focusing on those held by a particular group of people, mainly people who own pet dogs or non-dog owners who like dogs and are excited about interacting with them. While I acknowledge that there are individuals who are afraid of dogs, have other negative opinions about them or even view them as food items rather than companions, I do believe that the positively oriented dog ideologies are the predominant in the Western culture.

The description I will present relies heavily on my experience as a dog owner and a

dog training enthusiast, as well as on dozens of books and hundreds of articles and online discussions about dogs I have read, my interactions with various dog owners, conversations about dogs with many-non owners and a general sensitivity to various message about dogs. I will also try to show where some of these ideologies might be coming from and why they can be problematic.

As dog ideologies constitute a fairly broad set of beliefs and ideas, I will break them down into three categories that have different foci but are nonetheless related. I will first discuss the ideologies about the dog itself, paying close attention to the behavior and showing how, and what kind of, aggressive behavior fits witting these ideologies. I will then briefly reflect on ideologies about the dog-human relationship and also about ideologies about dog owner. Finally, at the end of the chapter I will also offer two very different example of salient dog ideologies—a very pervasive “leader of the pack” training approach and the construction of the dog in the legal system.

IDEOLOGIES ABOUT THE DOG

In the introduction to her book ‘Culture Clash’, Jean Donaldson (1995) writes

It seems that most people still buy into the Walt Disney dog: he is very intelligent, has morals, is capable of planning revenge, solves complex problems, and understands the value of the artifacts in Walt’s home. (p.9)

This still seems to be the case, now maybe even more than before. While there definitely are people who are afraid of or dislike dogs and consider them to be unpredictable, potentially dangerous or at best annoying flea-ridden animals, it is fairly safe to say that the majority of people like dogs, or at least they like the idea of the “Walt Disney dog.” After all, dogs are considered to be man’s best friends and often thought of as intelligent and gentle creatures, loyal and protective, extremely patient and empathic, moral and able to experience a variety of emotions—happiness, sadness, anger, guilt, jealousy. They are calm and out of sight when you are busy with other things, ready to play when you have time, friendly towards everyone, but not overly exuberant, always obedient. A study in Australia found the ideal dog to be “safe with children, fully house-trained, friendly, obedient and healthy. Participants also wanted their ideal dog to come when called, not to escape from their property, to enjoy being petted and to display affection to their owners.” (King, 2009)

However, this description is not that of a dog as an animal. It is not even a description of a properly socialized and well-trained healthy dog. Instead, it is an

anthropomorphized ideal dog, which is often not supposed even to act as a dog, that is, according to dog culture rules and etiquette. Instead,

[t]he dog, as a member of the family, is expected to behave according to proper human rules and etiquette ... We've integrated dogs into the fabric of our family dynamic—humanized dogs (perhaps even turned them into surrogate children), as it were—that we oftentimes forget they are dogs. (Baker Prince, 2010)

Even though in the previous chapter we saw evidence that owners do juggle dog's "humanness" and "dogness," unfortunately it seems like they do not do that perfectly or all the time. Forgetting that our dogs are dogs, or not even knowing what "being a dog" really entails, can be very difficult, both for the dog and the owner. The dog cannot know what is expected of it in human society, and that might cause the owner disappointment and frustration. Many problematic dog behaviors such as digging, barking, chewing and pulling on the leash are normal dog behaviors (Donaldson, 1995:53) and are only constructed as inappropriate within human culture.

It is clear then that dog ideologies can create unrealistic expectations of dogs that are often at odds with reality. This conflict easily leads to the situation in which people have to cope with an unexpected kind of dog. The Blue Cross (2006), Britain's pet charity, calls this "The Perfect Dog Syndrome" and frames it as a result of the owner's lack of understanding about the importance of socialization and training combined with their desire for a "perfect dog." In my interview with two trainers in San Francisco, they pointed out that they definitely see this situation a lot. One of the trainers said that "[t]here's a perception that every dog is like a labrador, that is, a low energy five year old and just in different clothing." When owners realize they have a very different dog,

it's about learning to accept it, accepting the fact that your dog is not the dog you want it to be. And that no matter how much punishing you do, or how much rewarding you do, you probably might not get the dog that you've wanted. But you have the dog that you've got.

Accepting the dog and learning how to like the dog as it is, however, is not always easy. The trainers then told me of owners that come to them "who are so exasperated they can't look at their dogs. Don't want to work with them, don't want to spend time with them, don't want to have anything to do with them. They're just sick of them." The clash between expectation and reality can make it difficult for the owners to form the relationship with their dog that they wanted.

Aggression is in many ways similar to other problematic behaviors— it is a natural, normal dog behavior, and its use in communication is "appropriate" among dogs. Unless

trained otherwise, dogs will react to stimuli in ways appropriate for their species, and sometimes that reaction will be in form of aggressive behavior (Donaldson, 1996:57). It seems unreasonable that there is a widespread expectation that dogs will never behave aggressively (O’Heare, 2007:17). Sometimes, this no-aggression expectation results in the owners’ complete lack of tolerance for any aggressive displays, even when they are very informative and dog-culture appropriate, such as a dog growling at a young dog acting like a bully. Other times, the no-aggression expectation seems to manifest as disbelief that a dog could be aggressive at all. People will, for example, often try to pet an unknown dog without asking the owner for permission or considering the dog’s body language. Sometimes, even when explicitly told that a dog is aggressive, people will still ignore the warning, seemingly believing that the dog will not aggress either towards them, because they are good with dogs, or towards their dog because their dog loves other dogs (more on this in Chapter 5). Finally, this expectation may lead new dog owners to ignore the importance of socializing their dog as they do not know or believe lack of socialization might have serious consequences as I have already alluded to in the previous chapter.

It is important to point out, however, that there are particular situations in which aggression in dogs is accepted, if not even expected, under the dog ideology. If a dog is acting to protect its owner, their property, or itself from ill-intentioned individuals, its behavior is deemed appropriate. After all, a Walt Disney dog is lauded for aggressing at a thief. Unfortunately, this appropriateness is judged by human cultural standards, often based on whether aggression is perceived as morally “good” or “bad,” which sets up unreasonably high expectations of dogs. For example, a dog should know that “[i]f the neighbor kid climbed into the yard and got bit, that would be a bad thing, but if someone was attempting to break in, the dog would be doing exactly the right thing” (from a response to my survey, see Appendix B). When being petted by children, even if she does not like it, a dog should also “have a sense of whether a human is young or not and whether it understands the annoyance it may be causing” (survey). Moral evaluation and theory of mind, however, is something humans do and of which dogs are, as far as we know, incapable.

Where do these unrealistic expectations of dogs come from? One of the sources are dog owners and their dogs. While dogs at various levels of friendliness and obedience exist, the dogs that get the most exposure and that are most visible in public are well-behaved dogs. Dogs that do not behave well in public are often kept in yards and behind closed doors, dogs that pull on their leash are walked less, and a lot of problematic behaviors such as chewing, house-soiling and digging happen within one’s home or yard. Furthermore, it

seems to me from my general experience that dog owners are more likely to share positive and fun stories about their dog's life, especially when talking to non-owners, as opposed to stories about various problematic situations their dog has put them through.

Donaldson's (1995) label, "the Walt Disney dog," provides a clue to another source of dog ideologies. Various feature and animated films and series, such as "Lassie," "Balto," "Benji," "The Incredible Journey," "Lady and the Tramp," etc. star exceptional dogs that engage in a variety of human-like activities, sometimes even talking. These dogs, however, are either very well trained and cued as to what to do in particular scenes, or are drawn, and are occasionally voiced by human actors. Joining them are the dogs that are simply drawn or written into books, dogs that appear in various sayings, such as "A dog is the man's best friend" or "Dogs are four legged humans in furry coats." This fiction creates an appealing image of a dog, as well as a habit of attributing to dogs very human feelings and thoughts that can easily lead to unrealistic expectations of a dog and misinterpretation of their behavior: a cartoon dog might look guilty after stealing food because it feels guilty—a real dog will look "guilty" because it is reacting to the fact that its owner looks like he might punish it for stealing the food.

It is important to note that not all representations of dogs in entertainment are positive. In a U.S. newspaper study, for example, 22% of cartoons and comics involving pets depicted them as a nuisance (Carmack, 1997). Rajecki, Rasmussen and Conner (2000) focused explicitly on portrayal of dogs on TV and analyzed dogs' misbehavior and humans' reactions in the movies "Beethoven," "Turner and Hootch," and "K-9," as well as in an episode of "The Simpsons" based around the dog, Santa's Little Helper. According to Rajecki et al. (2000), these portrayals of dogs send the message that "canine pets are likely to misbehave at times, resulting in human frustration, but should not be relinquished." The reason why they should not be relinquished is the happy ending—"the final scenes show human social units that are enhanced by the presence of animal companions" and that would have been made impossible if the animal had been relinquished. Rajecki et al. (2000) conclude that these movies offer corollary recommendations that counsel "human patience and sensitivity concerning dog behavior." While this indeed might be the case, showing that media does tell individuals that dogs might misbehave, it also seems to tell them that they should patiently wait for it to pass or sensitively accept it, as none of the four examples chosen portray owners devotedly and successfully training the dogs. Neither waiting out nor accepting problematic behavior is really an appropriate response.

IDEOLOGIES ABOUT DOG OWNERSHIP

As I briefly pointed out, one of the difficulties of owning a dog that does not meet one's expectations is the fact that it is difficult for the bond with such a dog to reach its full potential. Also, the expectations people might have of dogs depend on why they wanted the dog in the first place, often a result of a particular idea of ownership they might have in mind. It is therefore important to examine ideas people have about dog ownership, especially as they relate to what type of relationship they are expecting to have with their dog.

Clearly, people acquire dogs for different reasons and will have different expectations of their dogs. In a study of dog owners in Australia, 52% of owners said they acquired a dog to be a companion, 26% were looking for a family member, 7% said they simply always had a dog, 9% acquired a dog for protection, 1% for exercise and 5% for other reasons (Kobelt, Hemsworth, Barnett & Coleman, 2003). A survey in Britain found that "55% of respondents desired 'family dogs', 22% thought outdoor dogs were perfect, 9% lap dogs and 7% urban types" (The Blue Cross, 2006). My survey (see Appendix B), although not done on a completely random population sample, showed that 65% of individuals who had owned dogs at some point in their lives had acquired them for companionship, 12% to save or rescue an animal, 9% for recreation (dog sports etc.), 1% for protection, 1% for work (herding, hunting). These data show that people can vary significantly in what they personally expect from a dog, but also indicate that most owners are looking for a companion or a family member. I believe this is in general the unmarked role of the dog and that "dog ownership" implies ownership of a companion/family dog, even in cases the dog is used for other purposes (e.g. sports, showing).⁵

No matter their reasons for acquisition, all of these owners will have an idea of the form their relationship with their dog should take. Blouin (2009) proposes three basic orientations towards pets: humanist (intense, emotional attachment to a particular dog or dogs), dominionist (utilitarian, dogs as animals to serve people's uses) and protectionist (caring about pets due to preoccupation with all animals/nature in general). While I will be focusing on how dog aggression operates within the dog-human relationships of mostly the

5 In contrast to these, there are also explicitly marked uses of the dog, which I will not discuss here. They give rise to a completely different set of expectations from the dogs and different rules about interacting with them. Working dogs, such as police dogs or guide dogs are a very good example of this—special equipment and the appearance of their owner mark them as non-companion dogs, they are expected to do their jobs and most people will know not to try and distract them by initiating interaction.

first or third type, i.e. humanist and protectionist, it is important to note that all three types do appear in public discourse and that they are not mutually exclusive or completely contradictory to each other. All three, for example, share the conviction that dogs should be under complete control of their owners—something aggressive dogs are not.

Whatever their ideology about dog ownership, it seems safe to assume that most people acquire their dog(s) intentionally and therefore expect that owning the dog will somehow enhance or positively influence their lives. In some cases they might wish for a dog to guard their property, entertain their children, herd their sheep or serve another utilitarian purpose. In most cases, however, the owners will seek to form a strong bond with their dog. Owning a problematic dog, however, goes against these expectations and assumptions, as it can easily prevent the owners from having the ownership experience they desire. Many individuals I have interviewed, for example, said how they were disappointed because their dogs' behavior, kept them from engaging in activities they considered to be essential parts of dog ownership, such as taking their dog to a dog park or to a friend's house or a coffee shop, or simply lying next to their dog and watching TV. This can hinder the development of a good bond with their dog, as in the cases of owners who are “sick of their dogs”, as the dog trainer I talked to put it.

Another category of ideas people have about dog ownership are ideas about how much money and time it requires. People who have never owned a dog, or have only had family dogs as children, might, and often do, underestimate how big of a commitment dog ownership is (The Blue Cross, 2006; Cost of Owning a Dog), resulting in thousands of animals abandoned each year. Even owners who are aware of the fact that they have to, for example, socialize and train their dog are not always realistic in their expectations of how much time they might have to invest. The Blue Cross (2006) study conducted in Britain, found that “60 per cent of dog owners do not believe that dog training should be ongoing and only 54 per cent spend all day with their dog”. Furthermore, 87 per cent of dog owners who wanted their dog to be able to be socialized in a month, also wanted that dog to be good with people and children. Seventy five per cent of owners who could only dedicate 30 minutes a day to their dog expected the dog to be a family dog (The Blue Cross, 2006). These underestimates become even more of an issue in the case of a dog with problems, whether behavioral and health-related, when required commitment can increase several fold, beyond what even experienced owners might expect, let alone want. Not all owners are able to respond to such high demands. In my conversations with various trainers and behaviorists, when asked why people do not seek help for their dogs' problematic behavior immediately, all pointed out that money is definitely an issue for many owners. For others, the issue

might be time as simply enrolling in a class or getting a private trainer does not mean the problem will disappear—every day work is required.

IDEOLOGIES ABOUT THE (RESPONSIBLE) OWNER

Contemporary Western society expects that dog owners should be responsible and thus expects them to follow various practices, such as appropriate confinement of their dogs, registration, micro-chipping, desexing, participation in formal obedience training and regular socialization practices (Rohlf, Bennett, Toukhsati & Coleman, 2010), as well as more specific ones like picking up after their dog in public areas, keeping the dog healthy and reasonably well groomed. Some of these ideas have spread to the point of entering the legal system, out of concern either for public safety (e.g. leash laws) or the dog's welfare (e.g. anti-chaining/tethering laws in various states). On the other hand, some ideologies are much more personal, but are also sometimes voiced. I recall, for example, a few instances when random strangers stopped me while I was walking my dog and told me I should walk my dog on my left side, and not on my right, for that is the way a dog should be walked. Why? Probably because many decades ago, men would hold their rifles in their right hand so they needed to hold the dogs leash in their left hand. I'm not sure why those particular individuals, though, felt the need to correct the way I was walking my dog.

I am not sure what non-owners expect from dog owners, beyond wanting their dogs not to disturb the public and, hopefully, be treated humanely. I do feel, however, that owners of companion dogs, who presumably think about dog ownership much more than non-owners do, have a much more defined set of ideologies of how exactly a dog owner (or guardian, or parent) should go about owning their dog. In my interview with Officer Denny, who heads the Vicious and Dangerous Dog hearings in San Francisco and owns a dog himself, he clearly stated that the yard is no place for the dog to sleep—he should sleep in the house, even the bedroom, as a member of the family should. Even if the dog sleeps outside, owners are expected to interact with them frequently, take them on walks and to dog parks. As dogs are not supposed to misbehave, dog owners are also supposed to somehow respond to that misbehavior, as suggested by Sander's study (1990) of owners' excusing of their dog's misbehavior in public. When their dog breaks social norms, owners use a series of techniques to explain or justify the behavior, sometimes even punishing the dog only so others can see they are doing something about it (Sanders, 1990).

A DOG IDEOLOGY EXAMPLE—DOG TRAINING APPROACHES

So far I have discussed dog ideologies in very broad terms, trying to delineate some very general expectations people have of dogs, owners and of the dog-owner relationship. A more specific example of dog ideologies involves those employed by various dog training approaches that attempt to explain dog behavior and mental processes, and sometimes even re-define what an owner should be and how she should relate to her dog. Greenebaum (2010) points out that

[m]ost trainers and behaviorists believe on some level that humans have misinterpreted dog behavior and have caused poor conduct in dogs. However, there are disagreements over how dogs think and communicate, which leads to intense disputes on the leadership roles of humans and the methods needed to change unwanted dog behaviors

No matter the approach, however, she suggests that “philosophies, tools, and skill sets used in training dogs symbolize how the trainer perceives the status of dogs and the relationship between a dog and their human companion”. This I believe also extends to the owners who engage in training their dog following a certain approach and often adopt the ideology that goes with the approach.

One of the more popular and pervasive dog ideologies today is the pack-hierarchy ideology. It originated in studies of wolves, which are taken to be the best model for the behavior of domesticated dogs. It constructs a dog as a wolf in a dog’s skin that wants to be submissive to their owner but will take over the pack if the owner does not fulfill their role. The owner, therefore, has to act as a stand-in alpha wolf, the leader of the pack, and his relationship with the dog has to be one of based on a strict dominance hierarchy. In order to secure his leadership position, especially if he owns an unusually dominant dog, the owner should follow a variety of rules such as eating before the dog, not allowing the dog up on furniture, not letting the dog growl, not letting the dog walk through the doors first of walk in front of them, not playing tug-of-war with the dog or at least do not letting the dog win, ignoring the dog when you come home.

While many manuals and dog trainers will tell you what you should and should not do with your dog in order to solve or avoid problematic behavior, an ideology also tells you why. For the pack-hierarchy ideology, the answer is always simple: you, as a dog owner, are the leader of the pack, “the alpha,” and everything you do should reinforce that position so you can make sure that your dog recognizes that you are the one making the calls. This perspective, however reduces dog behavior to constant dominance seeking, potentially

making the owner very nervous about their dogs 'real' intentions and also risking a situation in which the owner does not see the real cause of a behavior, immediately assuming it is dominance related even when it is not (e.g. fear-driven aggression). Finally, this approach to dog behavior can easily be used to justify various levels of punishment for dog misbehavior that can, in some situations, be very inappropriate for actually solving the problem.⁶

DOG IDEOLOGIES AND THE LAW

I have already briefly mentioned the fact that some expectations of dog owners are written into various laws. To an extent, this has also been done to expectations of dogs. Mirroring the "no (inappropriate) aggression" aspect of the dog ideologies, the law also sees dogs as not inherently dangerous. This is exemplified by the "one bite rule" enforced in many U.S. States, that shields the owner from liability for the first bite inflicted by their dog.

The rationale of the one bite rule was that domestic animals by definition were not injurious, and therefore liability could be predicated only on the defendant's knowledge that a particular animal had a propensity to behave in a manner that was injurious to humans. Again, the rule applied to any type of injury, whether or not a bite. (Dog Bite Law, n.d.)

In contrast, another type of legislation, breed specific laws, exemplifies the ideology that some breeds are breeds more prone to aggression and more dangerous than others, despite there being lack of evidence for such claims. (More on this in Chapter 6)

The relationship between the owner and the dog is, in a way, also legislated. Unlike actual dogs that can, for their owners, be many things: nuisances, tools, pets, family members etc., dogs are, in the eye of the law, property, and their owners are responsible for their behavior. This was not always the case—for example "the earliest recorded laws in Britain implicitly invested animals with human rights and responsibilities." Actually up until 19th century, animals could be sentenced for their crimes (Ritvo, 1987:1). Also, this might not be the case for ever—as pets' special status in human lives becomes more and more established, their status is being questioned: are they people, pets or property? (Hauser, Krushman & Kamen, 2006). This shows that dogs' and other pets' legal status, like their status in human families and society as a whole is fluid and ideologically determined.

⁶ For more discussion on why this particular ideology is quite faulty and problematic, and does not describe dog behavior well see, for example, Bradshaw (2011)

Dogs' status as property can be problematic as it means they cannot, for example, be forcefully taken away from the owner and given to someone else, as opposed to children that can be taken away by social services if that is in the best interest of the child. In case of dogs, however, it is the interest of the public and the owner that receives consideration, not necessarily the best interest of the dog. And dogs can, unlike property suffer due to legal decisions. For example, if their aggressive behavior gets them reported, dog's freedom might be restricted for the rest of their life, by law, to a very short lead and sometimes a muzzle for the sake of protecting the public, even though they might be re-conditioned and trained to a level at which they do not present an immediate danger to others. For some aggressive dogs, whose transgression is just too severe, or that have been abandoned, their behavior means they will be killed, euthanized, put down, or the way legislation puts it, destroyed, just like a piece of property. While this legislation of aggressive behavior is problematic for individual dogs, for obvious reasons, it is also a great source of anxiety for their owners who often fear not only being sued, but are also worried of what might happen to their pet if its behavior, just once, crosses over some vague line between problematic and endangering others.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I presented what I believe to be the predominant dog ideologies in the Western culture. They construct the dog as a perfect companion—friendly, thoughtful and obedient—and present the dog-human relationship as inherently harmonious. This is in line with conclusions of various authors I have discussed in the previous chapter. Aggression fits within these ideologies only in particular form—as morally justified protection against danger.

I also recognized that these ideologies easily come in conflict with reality, which can be problematic for both the owner and their dog as it sets up unrealistic expectations of dogs and the dog-owner bond. This conflict will be one of my main foci in the next few chapters as I tell the stories of owners struggling to accept, understand and manage their dogs' aggression, changing their daily routines, but also their dog ideologies in the process.

CHAPTER 4

EXPERIENCING THE DOG'S BEHAVIOR

Jennifer: He was guarding a rawhide bone, and he turned into this Cujo creature which, oh my god, you know, I've never seen a dog like that. I was by myself, I didn't know how to react. ... I was terrified. I was home by myself with this dog who I didn't trust... After two months I thought I knew him but I didn't know him. I was confused. ... A part of me just wanted him to go away. ... I got him in his cage, after the incident, ... and then I dragged it into a back bedroom and just stuck him in there cause I had to get him away from me. ... All of a sudden I had anger for the dog. Like "He is doing this." ... I remember I was really mad at him. And confused as to what to do. ... I was afraid. I didn't know if I'd let him out of the cage. Was he gonna bite me? Was he gonna lunge at me?

From interview with Jennifer, about her dog David

When first confronted with their dogs' problematic behavior, very few people have as intense of an experience as Jennifer had with David. While sometimes dogs do seemingly start seriously aggressing out of the blue, most will develop the problematic behavior gradually, or their behavior will not be recognized as truly problematic for a while. Even in David's case, the described incident was actually the second time he behaved aggressively in his new home.

As the dog's behavior repeats and develops, so do the owner's experiences of it change. Their emotional responses and thought processes will differ based on the novelty and the intensity of the behavior and will also influence how they recognize the problem, or the extent of the problem, that they are forced to live with and ultimately deal with.

In general, owners will first notice behaviors such as growling, lunging or aggressive

barking. The new, threatening behavior will often shock them and they might try to dismiss it or explain it away. As owners accept the behavior as a part of their reality, they realize the impacts it can have on their daily lives and start responding to it. Many owners will struggle to come to terms with the fact that their dog is aggressive and that it can pose a significant danger to those around it. Then, as time progresses and the behavior potentially worsens or more incidents occur, owners might be forced to recognize the fact that what they are facing is worse than they originally thought. In case of a particularly memorable and threatening incident, feelings of helplessness and a sense of danger the dog might be posing emerge and can threaten the relationship the owner has with a dog.

Looking at the immediate experiences of aggressive dog behavior gives clues about various aspects of aggressive-dog ownership. In itself, these experiences show just how frightening and stressful and embarrassing dog aggression can be, illustrating the difficulty of such ownership. It also shows differences between human-oriented and dog-oriented aggression, and also the effect of the severity of aggression on the situation—a bite is of much more concern than a bark. Finally, as actual incidents of aggression are clear instances of the conflict between dog ideology and dog reality, owners' thoughts on the incidents unveil strategies for making sense of that conflict and the process of accepting the dog reality.

“WAIT, WHAT WAS THAT?”: REACTIONS TO THE FIRST INCIDENT(S)

Eric and Oscar

For the first few weeks Oscar, the black labrador mix, was with Eric and Christine in their San Francisco garden apartment; he was a calm and seemingly friendly dog. This was his “trial period” and the couple, happy with the dog, decided to keep him. However, soon after, “his true colors started to come out.” He started growling and barking during walks, pulling and getting aggressive when he came across certain dogs. His owners thought his behavior might be a leash problem, so they took him to off-leash dog parks more, where Eric noticed Oscar would aggressively greet other dogs, and he often acted like a bully. He points out, however, that although he was noticing these somewhat aggressive behaviors, or tendencies, he wasn't sure if it was aggressiveness or if Oscar was just trying to play but didn't know how.

Leanne and Chewbacca

Leanne also started noticing her Labrador-Pit bull mix's behavior only gradually. Although Chewbacca was really friendly with Echo, their other dog, Leanne and Jake soon realized that

Chewbacca didn't want anything to do with other dogs, at the dog park. He didn't fight with them, but he didn't want to interact with them. He just wanted to be left alone. And that was the case for a while, and then eventually he started being aggressive towards them if they would come up to him. And he would growl and he would snap but he wouldn't actually attack them. ... We knew at that point that he was developing aggressive tendencies.

Leanne also points out that when they took Chewbacca in from the spay-neuter clinic, they could tell he was a pit-bull mix and therefore knew there was a possibility of aggression. Furthermore, when I asked about how she felt about that time when Chewbacca started exhibiting aggressive behavior, she replied:

At that point, I was more worried about him. I was concerned that ... you know that something... I mean, we basically thought that something had happened to him as a puppy that had triggered these aggressive responses.

While in the case of Eric and Oscar, Eric was not even sure whether Oscar was being aggressive or not, Leanne acknowledged that Chewbacca's growling was aggressive in nature, only to then engage in rationalization and explanation of the behavior. This was, however, difficult for her because she was trying to come to terms with a completely unexpected turn of events. Reflecting on this process, she pointed out that

I wish we had known from the very beginning, before we even adopted either dog, that having an aggressive dog is a possibility because I don't think we did. I mean, I don't think we realized that that could even happen. We knew there were such things as aggressive dogs, but it was like a "Oh, you know, just those Pit bulls that are trained to be fighting dogs."

Here, Leanne very clearly voices the conflict she had experienced between her dog ideology—that her companion dogs will not, or simply cannot, be aggressive—and the reality of owning a dog that is aggressive, although he was not a Pit bull trained to be a fighting dog. To start resolving the conflict, she had to find an alternative explanation that would somehow normalize the behavior, such as puppy trauma.

Leanne employed a similar process when she and Jake started noticing Chewbacca's aggression towards some of their housemates in the commune where they were living.

We thought maybe it was just because it was, ... it wasn't his territory and we just didn't really know why it was, so we kind of, ... he never attacked anyone, he never went after anyone, but he would occasionally growl at people. So, at that point, we were pretty careful with him.

Leanne and Jake were obviously aware of the fact that Chewbacca was uncomfortable around people in some situations, as they were being "pretty careful with him."

Trying to explain the behavior, therefore, is not necessarily a refusal to accept it for what it really is. It actually seems to be a strategy that helps people come to terms with a realization that the dog is behaving "abnormally." Owners are looking for a particular thing in the dog's history or the environment that could help them understand why the dog is acting the way it is. This process can also help them justify their dog's behavior when in public and defend from others' judgement (Sanders, 1996). And while trying to understand the behavior is good and can be very helpful if it is done well, framing it as "just playing", the way Eric did, or "just because it wasn't his territory" also works to partially dismiss the behavior and, as long as it is seemingly justified, decrease the importance of having to try to change it.

Natalie and Hugo

When talking about the first time her Cairn terrier Hugo growled at another dog, Natalie also indicates a certain dismissive attitude, following the first reaction of shock.

The first time he attacked another dog ... I was mostly, just, astonished, and concerned about getting the dogs separated. Didn't even think about, you know, the danger to us ... And I talked to my daughter about it the next time she was over. I said "You know, we took Hugo to the dog park and this is what happened." And she's "No, you can't do that." And I didn't know whether that was true. And I didn't think much about it. Well, we didn't let him off leash ... and mostly he'd be OK. He did growl a little but...

Natalie's daughter and her husband were the original owners of the dog and had given Hugo to Natalie after he was abused by a child on the street and quickly after developed aggression, towards people and dogs. Even though she was familiar with the dog's behavioral history she was still astonished to see him attack another dog. And while that incident, together with the conversation with her daughter, were seemingly enough for her to change her own behavior, and keep Hugo on leash, she did not seem overly bothered by the behavior, potentially due to the dog's small size and perceived low level of aggression.

Natalie's daughter also warned Natalie about Hugo's aggression to people, for he

had bitten someone and they did not consider it safe for him to be anywhere without supervision. Natalie responded similarly to the way she did to warning about Hugo's dog-aggression.

I just didn't have mental pictures of what it could be like. And as I say he wasn't aggressive towards us, towards humans during that incident in the dog park.

However, when it came to the first actual incident of Hugo's aggression towards people, Natalie's reaction was different from the way she reacted to the incident in the dog park, for a number of reasons: it happened in her house, it was a bite, and not only was the target a person but it was Natalie's elderly and very sick mother with whom she had a complicated relationship. The mother tried to pet Hugo while talking on the phone, got bitten on her finger and had to be taken to the hospital.

Natalie describes the bite as "almost one of these your whole life flashing before your eyes kinds of events," and expresses a very strong feeling of responsibility for the incident. She said that she understood why the bite happened, and told me, as if she were blaming herself, that she had failed to introduce her mother to Hugo that night, and she forgot Hugo was in the room where she took her mother to make a phone call. The fact that she was actively introducing people to her dog and was usually aware of where he was indicates that she was aware of the problem, but in a way that first incident was an eye opener. In contrast to her low level of preoccupation over Hugo's aggression towards dogs, she spent a few weeks after the incident with her mother wondering, "What do we do about this dog and making the household safe?"

Jennifer and David

For Jennifer, on the other hand, David's first bite, while a warning, was not an immediate cause for concern, most likely because he did not, to her knowledge, have any history of aggressive behavior. The first time the one year old mix breed aggressed towards a human was only a few weeks after he came to his new home. One morning, while Jennifer and her husband enjoyed coffee and donuts, her husband reached for a donut and David lunged at him, biting him hard enough to break the skin and leave a puncture from one tooth. "He was guarding the donuts. And we didn't realize that," Jennifer pointed out to me.

Their first reaction to the incident was that of shock: "We didn't know what we had done to cause him to do this," but Jennifer very quickly redirected her attention to her husband and decided to take care of him. At first they thought it was an isolated incident, but they did recognize that this was something they needed to watch out for. Unlike Natalie,

who knew Hugo might be exhibiting aggressive behavior, Jennifer did not know anything about David's behavioral history, and like Leanne, she never even considered aggression a possibility.

It never crossed my mind. Never ever. I mean, I had dogs since I was a kid, and we've been married for 30 years and we had a string of, we've never been without at least one dog, and often two. And just have never ever had a problem with any kind of aggression between, you know, dog aggression or human aggression. So this was just, we were on uncharted territory for us. ... And David, when we got him, and he was fluffy and cute and—So, it wasn't—I was having a hard time realizing that this cute, basically one year old dog, still very puppy-like, could have been aggressive. So, I mean, I was forgiving of him. I wasn't ... After the first incident ... I think I was more shocked than concerned, if I really think back on it.

Jennifer's thought process not only expresses the conflict between dog ideologies and the dog reality, after all cute fluffy puppies are not supposed to injure their owners, but also highlights the role previous dog experience can play in the construction of dog ideologies. Because none of Jennifer's previous dogs were aggressive, her dog ideology was grounded in experience and was that much stronger—not only did she believe family dogs are not aggressive, she knew it from experience. Therefore, she considered David's first bite as a possible isolated incident because the alternative, the “uncharted territory” of the actual aggression problem, was much more difficult to immediately comprehend. In contrast, I recall the first instance my second dog, Reeva, growled and snapped at me—I immediately knew that, unless I did something, she would probably do it again.

It is important to note that both Natalie's experience with Hugo and Jennifer's with David, seem somewhat atypical as their first experience of their dogs' aggression towards people was very abrupt—a straight-forward bite incident. Bites are probably never the first signs of aggression. From what Natalie told me, it is clear not only that Hugo had bitten before, but that he growled and snapped at people. David's history is unclear, but it is very likely that the donut incident was not his first time resource guarding. Like dog-directed aggression, human-directed aggression also develops gradually, as can be seen from Sam's experience with Lea.

Sam and Lea

After being sick for her first year of life, and trained by Sam's partner using methods Sam considered too harsh, such as tackling the dog to the floor, Lea started aggressing towards Sam. Sam thought it might have been because she would not tackle the dog and was therefore perceived as “the weaker link”. When I asked her about the time Lea started

exhibiting aggressive behavior, unlike Natalie and Jeniffer who single out a particular incident, Sam commented on the whole experience.

I couldn't believe it. I couldn't figure out what was that she kept, she kept targeting me. And because she's a wonderful friendly dog that she—I don't know. It was just a shock more than anything. I've had dogs all my life and I never had a dog be aggressive towards me.

Much like Oscar and Chewbacca who “started barking and growling” or “started snapping” at other dogs in a process that perhaps did not have a definite beginning, Lea “started targeting” Sam, indicating a similar development of the behavior that Sam clearly found shocking. Sam’s situation with Lea is actually fairly different from the rest because the primary target of the dog’s aggression was her owner and as such the behavior directly threatened that fundamental part of dog ownership, the dog-owner bond. Sam might have been shocked less by fact that her fluffy chow mix was aggressive, and more by the fact that she was the target of the aggression. Similarly to Jennifer, Sam seemed to have based her expectation of dogs on her previous experiences and she had never owned a dog aggressive towards *her*, and that breakdown of the dog-human bond was an explicit violation of her dog ideology.

Discussion

It is clear that owners can and do react differently to first witnessing their dog’s behavior. There seems to be a difference between more traumatic single incidents and a gradual development of behavior that might enable the owner to slowly get accustomed to it and maybe not perceive each particular instance as such a shock. There is also a difference between the experience of dog-directed and human-directed aggression, human-directed aggression being much more likely to be taken seriously. Finally, an owner’s reaction will also be different depending on whether the owner suspected the dog might be problematic or not. In the first case, an incident might prove what they already knew, although it can still be a shocking experience. In the second, owners might be more confused and might be more prone to dismiss the dog’s behavior because it is completely new and unexpected?. If they knew their dogs had a history of aggression, Eric, for example, might not have thought Oscar’s early displays were playful, and Jennifer would have maybe gotten concerned after the first biting incident.

What seems to be the common denominator in all of the stories is the process of trying to understand what had just happened, find some cause or explanation to it, and not fully accept it as a “big ugly problem with teeth.” Eric kept exposing Oscar to other dogs

and wondered whether he just did not know how to play. Leanne wondered whether Chewbacca was possibly abused and was concerned about his well-being. Natalie wondered whether Hugo really had a problem with other dogs. Jennifer thought David's bite was an isolated incident. Sam tells me she simply could not believe what was happening. And while a trainer I had talked to tells me many owners are actually in denial about their dog's behavior, it seems to me that they are in denial not about the behavior itself (all owners except for maybe Eric recognized their dogs' behavior as aggressive), but about the fact that the behavior represents a long-term problem. That disbelief, I believe, stems from the incompatibility of the notion of a family dog with the notion of an aggressive one, as well as from a sense that aggression is a betrayal of the dog-owner relationship.

One thing to point out here is that often, the 'first incidents' are not the first times a dog has tried to communicate a particular state of mind, but are the first times its behavior was noticed by its owners. A lot of early warning signs, unfortunately, go unnoticed, and that is the period when owners do not even know the behavior is there. According to the trainer I talked to, many dog owners are oblivious to dog body language and do not know how to read it properly. Guided by popular myths that tell us that dogs that growl are aggressive and dogs that wag their tails are friendly they make mistakes in interpreting their dog's body language and are often confused by more complex signals and often completely miss more subtle cues, which prevents them from responding to undesirable behavior until it has already progressed. Furthermore, by not recognizing fear or stress in their dogs, they might be taking it into situations it cannot handle which can in turn spark development of aggressive behavior.

Of course, the opposite can also happen, although probably much less frequently. Some owners might see their own or others' dogs as aggressive when they are not. While this is less problematic for dogs, it does show how simplistic dog ideologies can be when interpreting dog behavior. For example, another trainer told me of a phone-call she had received—the owners were very troubled and very worried because their dog kept jumping on them, biting them, pulling on the leash and growling. The dog turned out to be a puppy and all of its "problematic" behavior was, in fact, play behavior.

It is clear then that, not only does aggressive behavior develop gradually, but it takes time for owners to "catch up" with that development, to recognize that it is something that is occurring in the first place and to start trying to understand it. This might be the case especially if they have no personal experiences with dog aggression and are not good at recognizing it. However, even the inexperienced owners, after being exposed to it enough, start learning more about the ownership of this unexpected type of a dog and its behavior

and they realize that they have a problem.

“SO MY DOG HAS PROBLEMS ...”: COMING TO TERMS WITH THE DOG’S BEHAVIOR

Gradual realization of the problem

It was clear from Natalie and Hugo’s case that being aware that the dog might be, or is, exhibiting aggressive behavior is different from truly realizing it. While Natalie knew Hugo had bitten another person before she took him in, only after he bit her mother did she start actively thinking about his behavior. Few other owners I have interviewed went through a similar process. All of them knew, when they were adopting the dog, that the dog had exhibited some aggressive behavior, although they did not know the extent of it. None of them had previously owned aggressive dogs and therefore did not really know what to expect.

Rachel and Dallas

When Rachel adopted Dallas, she knew that “he had fear based aggression and ... that he was an aggressive dog.” She, however, believed that that was because his previous owners had not been “alpha” with him and that they let him rule over the household. She thought that taking control would be easy for her and that she would not have much of a problem with Dallas. Soon he started acting aggressively at Rachel’s office, and he started snapping at dogs in the dog-park. This is how Rachel describes it:

It was kind of like he was getting protective over me, and that when he started to growl and bark a lot more but, he protected the office, he protected the apartment, he protected me at the dog park, and he, and, it kind of, and that’s when I was like ‘This, he loves me, he listens to me, he sits, he stays, he lays down, he jumps up, he gets a treat, like, he does everything. But as soon as you want to socialize him...’ Like I couldn’t help him with it anymore.

In her first few months with Dallas, Rachel was struggling because she could not handle something she thought she could. A behavior she had attributed to the previous owner’s practices, Dallas’ aggression, not only did not disappear after she adopted him, but became a problem—he grew increasingly protective and within the first six months with Rachel had nipped two people, luckily without making any skin contact. Like Natalie after Hugo bit her mother, Rachel started wondering about what she is going to do with the dog to help him

and to keep others safe and she finally turned to a behaviorist.

Sharon and Rain

Sharon adopted Rain, her black labrador-border collie mix from the SPCA when Rain was about a year and a half old, and Sharon also knew she was aggressive—the previous owner had returned a month after adopting her because she had bitten another dog. Sharon and her husband decided to adopt her anyway because she was sweet and wonderful with people, and they thought they could just avoid dogs. While at first she did not aggress towards other dogs in the dog park, she soon started snapping at any dog that would approach her. The behavior worsened drastically after she was attacked by a neighbor's Pit Bull, and being outside with the dog became exponentially more stressful for Sharon and her husband. They quickly realized, similarly to Rachel, that owning an aggressive dog was more difficult than they thought it would be.

A memorable incident

While Sharon and Rachel were gradually realizing what ownership of an aggressive dog entails, some other owners I interviewed pointed to a particular incident that marked that moment of true comprehension of the issue at hand. Jennifer, for example, reflecting on the first few weeks with David, concludes that “I think it took until the second time (the rawhide bone incident). By the second time we knew like ‘Oh my god, we've got a problem.’” After that they started looking for a trainer and would observe David's behavior much more closely. Similarly, it was a particularly stressful incident that caused Leanne to re-evaluate Chewbacca's behavior. Chewbacca's fight with Leanne's in-law's Maltese that cost the smaller dog his eye, was Leanne's and Jake's “first real realization that ‘OK, he can't handle being around other dogs.’” After that, Chewbacca was allowed only to interact with the other dog in the house, Echo.

Eric and Oscar

Eric's experience with Oscar followed a similar pattern, and is reminiscent of Sharon's experience with Rain, for Oscar's behavior also seemingly worsened after being attacked by a dog, in his case, while at a day care. A few days after that attack, while at the same daycare, he attacked a small puppy.

Apparently he picked up this dog by the neck and kind of tossed him in the air and? really could've injured this dog. And then when they separated him—traditionally he had been very responsive to correction. But this time he didn't listen and went back

for the dog the second time and then dragged the dog several feet ... The owner was relating this to me, and I was like 'Oh my god, that is awful'. So that was pretty... I was really concerned and upset about that. Especially since he, you know, he actually broke skin on the owner's hand

After receiving the phone call about the attack, Eric felt disappointed, concerned and frustrated. The thought going through his head was "Oh, shoot, now what are we gonna do?" as he recognized some of the difficulties of owning an aggressive dog, such as not being able to take him to day-care or hire a dog-walker, who usually prefer to walk dogs in groups.

Acknowledging the problem to others

Eric also reflected on the process of how difficult it is to acknowledge the problem not only to himself but to others. He recalled a comment one of his friend's mother made about Oscar:

"Yeah, he's really mellow until he tears the face off another dog." And she was laughing, and I was like, "Yeah, you're right." She's like, "Yeah, it's just like kids, right, you speak of the positive things about somebody as opposed to admitting that there's a problem" and so... You know, it's tough to admit to other people that he's like a problematic dog.

It was not very clear how light or serious this exchange was supposed to be, but Eric definitely took the joke to heart. I wonder whether his friend's mother really understood what it meant to own a dog as unpredictably dog-aggressive as Oscar.

While it would seem crucial for others' safety to admit a dog's behavior issues, Sam's view on the matter shows why it might be difficult for an owner to do that. Sam started seeing Lea's behavior as problematic right away as her aggression was "very thoughtful, very premeditated," which is what really worried her. Still, she would not tell others about Lea's behavior:

I couldn't tell other people that my dog bites me, or, you know, I couldn't figure out what was going on and, and I didn't want also that Lea would get a bad reputation, and so ... I didn't want people to be negative towards her because I, I felt that there had to be a way to solve it.

It seems reasonable for owners to be worried about how their dogs, or even how they themselves, will be perceived by others. That is why Jennifer tried to frame her dog's behavior in less threatening terms:

Particularly when I meet strangers, I would call him reactive, and I would call him

"he doesn't like strangers" and fearful, and "sometimes he nips." I will use the word nip, because that word, "nip" has a totally different connotation than bite. And people get the message, without them, like, "Oh, your dog bites."

The reality, however, is that David does not nip, he bites. It is important to note that although Jennifer does not tell that about him to other people, she is highly aware of the seriousness of his behavior and knows exactly how many times David has bitten, but like Sam, she chooses not to disclose this information so people will not think worse of her dog.

Few other owners, in contrast, were very clear about the fact that their dog was aggressive, but they voiced dismay over the fact that other people do not get the message, even when warned without euphemisms. After being told about a dog's aggression towards other dogs, these individuals might respond, "But my dog is very friendly," or when warned about a dog's aggression towards people, some would say, "Oh, don't worry, I'm good with dogs." Interestingly, these responses are reminiscent of the thoughts Natalie, Rachel and Sharon had when they knew about their dogs' problems but had not actually seen or experienced them yet. This reinforces the notion that "you have to see it to believe it."

Discussion

The above examples show two patterns in owners' realizations that their dog is aggressive. In one, direct experience of aggressive behavior confirms previous knowledge about the dog's behavior. In the other, a particular incident convinces the owner that the behavior they had previously witnessed truly is a cause for concern. What both have in common is learning or realizing what it means to own, and live with, an aggressive dog, which will be a focus of Chapter 5, and the question "What are we going to do with the dog?" discussed in Chapter 6.

It is also important to note that "realization of the problem" is primarily a personal process and might not be explicitly shared with others, especially strangers. I do not believe, however, that dishonesty about the dog's behavior indicates denial, but it does show the owner's awareness of the stigma against aggressive dogs. In contrast, other people's refusal to heed warnings when owners give them does, in a way, shows denial, or simply unawareness of the reality of aggression in dogs, highlighting the presence of the dog ideology according to which dogs are not aggressive. Interestingly, the owners I interviewed seemed to have an awareness of this and they pointed out that, after being faced with their own dog's aggressive behavior, they approach other dogs more cautiously, especially if warned that they are aggressive.

“AND WHAT NOW?”: REALIZING THE BEHAVIOR CAN GET EVEN WORSE

In most of my interviews, the story did not stop at a point when the owners realized their dog was problematic and started managing them more. Unfortunately, there were still more incidents, and some really stood out as more frightening and stressful than the previous. For Rachel it was probably the first time Dallas nipped a person, right before she was to leave him in the care of her boyfriend’s sister as she went on a weekend trip. As they drove away in the car after the incident, she started crying in the car: "I can't do this, I can't leave him. ... Your sister can't handle him. ... I can't go on any trips anymore." For Sharon, the problematic incident happened after a training session during which she tried to teach Rain not to guard food around her baby son and she growled at him. The next day Rain actually snapped at Sharon’s son and for a few hours after the incident, Sharon felt very negative about the situation, thinking, “I'm getting rid of her. I can't have her do anything to hurt my son.”

Leanne and Chewbacca

In Leanne’s case, the incident in question was not worse than the previous ones, like Chewbacca’s attack on the family Maltese, but was stressful for another reason. They were in a together park when a puppy came up to Chewbacca and he just grabbed the puppy’s whole head in his mouth, but the puppy was not harmed. What Leanne found problematic about this incident was that even though she was being careful, it was not enough.

[His aggression] was so infrequent that I think even we would forget about it sometimes... ... [E]ven though he had taken the other's dog eye out, I just, I don't know, I just thought like "Maybe that was a weird fluke incident." And I was—I had let my guard down enough to, just let Chewbacca be there with the puppy right in his face long enough for him to attack it.

The fact that the behavior was not gone despite its low frequency, and that Chewbacca attacked when Leanne let her guard down for a bit made her realize she would never be able to let her guard down. Right after that incident they made the decision: “We cannot have him in positions where he is around other dogs, besides Echo. Ever.” Sadly, Leanne and Jake had to go through this process more than once, as they witnessed Chewbacca’s aggression towards Echo, and finally towards their nephew, each time having to make more difficult decisions.

Eric and Oscar

Eric told me a story about an incident that happened not long before I interviewed him. He had Oscar clipped onto his belt loop while Christine was giving him water on the street. They were running some errands. Suddenly, Oscar lunged towards a dog his owners had not even noticed, breaking off the belt loop and “smothering” the other dog. The other owner was screaming and punching Oscar while Eric jumped on Oscar to pull him off. Reflecting on the experience, Eric said

That was definitely much more emotional than the phone call [about the incident at the day-care.] ... [B]eing there when he went after this other dog ... I was like “Oh my god ...” First of all, he was really strong, to be able to break away like that. And the dog didn’t appear to be doing anything. ... It was super frustrating. I was like “Oh my god, he really could’ve hurt somebody. He could’ve hurt this guy. He could’ve really hurt this dog.” ... Literally he was right by our sides and just broke loose. That was scary. And we were like “Oh my god, OK, so now, now what do we do? What next?”

Like Leanne, Eric and Christine were surprised that Oscar could attack another dog even when they were really careful, especially after they had already spent a lot of time working with him on that issue. The dog fight also seemed more stressful than previous experiences Eric had had with Oscar, certainly more so than the secondhand recollection over the phone. Eric’s last question, “What next?” also indicates a strong feeling of helplessness in face of the dog’s behavior that he realizes is potentially really dangerous to others, something he is clearly worried about that.

Similar feelings are also apparent in Sam’s reflection on her experience with Lea and the time Lea had seriously bit her:

She seemed like a potential Cujo to me. She seemed like a ticking time bomb to me. And I— Especially after she bit me that one time. She bit me hard. I mean, there was blood and everything and I thought, you know, and it was with that—I had no warning. We were on a walk and she wanted to get to a cat and I pulled her back and she just sunk her teeth in my arm when she couldn’t get it again. I thought “This is... this dog, you know, at any moment could do anything.”

Even though Sam was already very cautious around Lea, this one particular incident, worse than any of the previous ones, took her caution and worry a step further and really made her dog-owning situation even more stressful and difficult.

Discussion

For some owners, unfortunately, realizing their dog has behavioral problems, getting

used to living with them or even starting to deal with their behavior, is not the end of the road. Even with management the dog can and often will continue exhibiting problematic behavior, often even escalating it due to an improper approach to the problem. Many owners will, for example, try to isolate their dogs from whatever triggers their aggressive behavior, which often leads to the intensification of the behavior the next time the dog is exposed to the stimuli, something that had probably happened with Chewbacca when his owners decided to isolate him from other dogs. In other cases, simply putting a dog in a novel situation too quickly, like Sharon's abrupt introduction of her son into her training sessions, will cause a more problematic behavior to emerge.

No matter the cause for escalated behavior, once owners face it they seem to experience it in similar ways. There seems to be a general feeling of helplessness, fear, or sense that the dog will not get better. In a way, the novel level of behavior can be likened to the first experiences of aggression altogether, although now the thoughts might change from "How can my dog be aggressive?" to "How can my dog be *this* aggressive?" In more frightening instances there is a strong sense of danger as the notion of "family dog" finally overlaps with that of the "dog predator," a dangerous dog, a Cujo. The dog is pushed further across the human-animal divide and that in turn can really threaten the owner's relationship with the dog. It was when owners were telling me these particular stories that some of them would express the most negative emotions towards their dog and when they told me about considering some of the most drastic solutions to their dog's behavior. This new-found sense of danger can also encourage people to take the behavior even more seriously. As I'll show in Chapter 6, after a particularly problematic incident, owners who have not constructively started dealing with the problem might start doing so. Those who have, might start considering other approaches.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have examined how the owners experience their dogs' aggressive behavior. I focused on particular shifts of thought owners might go through while owning an aggressive dog, mostly ignoring every-day experiences that I will look at more closely in Chapter 5. I therefore delineated three different realizations an owner may struggle with:

1. Realization that their family dog is exhibiting aggressive behavior
2. Realization of what owning an aggressive dog might entail (changes in lifestyle, stigma)

3. Realization that the dog's behavior can get worse

Depending on the dog's and the owner's situation those experiences will differ. Severity of aggression, the target of aggression and whether it was suspected as a problem or not will all make a difference. However, across the cases I looked at, there have been many commonalities. First experiences of aggression often were shocking, mostly because they were unexpected under the owner's dog ideologies, and many as they struggled with realization (1) tried to explain the behavior or think of it as a more isolated incident. As behavior progressed, the owners started facing the difficulties of owning an aggressive dog (see Chapter 5). For the owners who knew about their dog's behavior but thought they could handle it, realization (2) seemed really demoralizing. Finally, if the dog's behavior got worse, a new, more serious incident forced the owners to deal with realization (3) which was often tied to feelings of helplessness or hopelessness and a sense of danger from the dog that emphasized its 'wildness' and threatened the dog-owner relationship. While probably most frightening, this process can make people take the dog's behavior more seriously and is, as such, useful.

These findings fit with what other research found to be the case. As I pointed out in Chapter 2, Sullivan and Jones (2008) claim that owners are tolerant of significant degrees of aggressive behavior, and I believe now that that might be due to their denial of the problem. Takeuchi et al. (2001) show that in many cases there's a time difference between the onset of aggression and the time when the behavior really becomes serious. Still, even after it becomes serious, more time might pass before owners decided to seek help for their dog. While it is impossible to tell how any of the owners Takeuchi et al. looked at felt at the points in time mentioned, their findings show that dog owners do not become worried about their dogs' aggressive behavior even after it exhibits it the first time, but they wait for it to progress and then gradually become more concerned. This is very unfortunate because, as a few trainers I interviewed pointed out, it would be much easier for everyone involved if the owners started working with a professional right after (if not even before!) the dog starts exhibiting abnormal aggressive behavior.

CHAPTER 5

LIVING WITH AN AGGRESSIVE DOG

I was so scared of her hurting another dog, if we take her to a park or whatever. And I had so much anxiety about her accidentally hurting a kid because she was going after a dog, and so my anxiety was feeding into Rain and making it worse, and my husband was getting so frustrated and angry with her. That was making it worse, and we were fighting with each other about it and just got to the point where we were just like, "We can't fight over the dog anymore!" And I stopped walking her because I couldn't break up dog fights anymore.

Sharon, talking about her dog Rain

I pointed out in Chapter 4 that as owners experience their dogs' behavior they become increasingly aware of what ownership of an aggressive dog might entail and just how difficult it could be. This chapter will deal with aspects of owners' lives that change due to their dogs behavior, both as a direct result of the behavior or as a consequence of the owner's response to the behavior.

First, there are changes in daily life and habits with the dog. Walks become more stressful and rarer; simple tasks, like running to a coffee-shop for a cup of coffee becomes a dangerous mission; simple pleasures of dog ownership, like cuddling with the dog, become impossible to enjoy. Owners' social lives are also impacted. They become more reluctant to have people over or to go somewhere with the dog, and they might lose their 'dog-friends'—people with whom they would walk their dog. The dog's behavior will also raise tensions inside a house or within a family. Finally, the way owners think about their dog,

or about themselves as dog owners, might also change. While the owners I talked to all pointed out they still deeply care about their dogs, aggressive behavior can strain that relationship. Furthermore, the fact that the dog is problematic and that they cannot fix its behavior can make owners feel like they have failed as a dog owner.

“IT’S NOT FUN ANYMORE!”: CHANGES IN THE DAILY LIFE WITH THE DOG

The most salient and problematic aspect of aggressive dog ownership is the impact the dog’s behavior has on the day-to-day life of the owner. The changes follow a simple and understandable trend—as the dog starts exhibiting aggressive behavior, some activities become much more stressful, and many owners then try to avoid the situations in which their dog might act aggressively, which often leads to even more stress. This is yet another example of the conflict between owners’ dog ideologies and reality. Experiencing and getting used to these changes is what I have named in the previous chapter “realizing what it means to own an aggressive dog.”

Stress, Hyper-vigilance and Planning

If I were to sum up in one word the experience of owning an aggressive dog, based both on my interviews and my own experience, that word would be “stressful.” There is always the worry in the back of your mind that something might happen, the constant awareness of where your dog is, where other dogs or people are. For me those became so deeply ingrained that even though I have not lived full-time with my dogs for years, I am still subconsciously on a dog-lookout when outside. One of my biggest fears is receiving a phone-call from home hearing that my younger dog got over the fence and attacked someone. Most dog owners I have talked to told me similar stories.

Michelle’s experience with her dog Liam, a Pit Bull mix, really resonated with me. Liam, started developing dog-directed aggression issues a few months after he was adopted from a shelter. When describing how she felt during the time his behavior was at its worst, Michelle said:

It’s a 10 because I was paranoid all the time, I was on edge, I was worried. You know, “Where is my dog? What is he doing? Who can get to him? Whom can he get to?” If I wasn’t there watching him, I was thinking about him.

This obviously very stressful situation persisted for about two years during which Liam was

either with Michelle or was in her car. She would take him everywhere with her, to work, to the store, etc., to make sure nothing bad would happen and to slightly alleviate her level of anxiety by never leaving him in an environment where she could not control him.

Sam talked about a similar level of vigilance with Lea during her most problematic year:

I became very cautious around her. I noticed where she was a lot more often, because she was always rushing me... I thought that she was gonna pounce. ... I'd just see that dog watching me everywhere I went. I started getting nervous about—like Cujo or something in this house ... I was very cautious with her for a long time, I was afraid to ever take her out ... I would not easily approach her.

Unlike Michelle, who had to worry about how her dog would react to other people or dogs, Sam worried about how Lea would react when she was around. Sam's situation included fear of her own dog, which added to the anxiety and made it difficult for Sam ever to relax fully around her dog.

The increased awareness of the situations their dog is in often includes the owners' increased awareness of their own and their dog's environment, including other dogs, space, time of the day etc. Rachel, for example, knew that a certain dog, whom Dallas did not like, passed by her office every day between four and five, and she was always on the lookout around that time to try and prevent Dallas from growling and snapping. Other owners, as pointed out by a trainer I talked to, will altogether avoid certain areas where it is difficult to evade other dogs, or will go there only late at night. Still, some owners will prefer walking their dogs during the day as that makes it easier to see other dogs and respond to them in time. In Kate's case, however, this preference put a strain on her daily schedule as she had to make sure to get home in time to walk her dog-aggressive bull terrier Lily before nightfall. Finally, Jennifer also considered seasonal changes—she only took David to dog parks during the winter. While he is very friendly with other dogs, she is worried that he might nip another person as they try to interact with him. In winter, however, everyone is bundled up so even if he nips he would not do damage. Also, children do not come to the dog park in the winter, and she feels much more comfortable letting him run around without worrying about him potentially nipping a child.

Problematic Dog Walks

For owners of dogs who exhibit dog-directed aggression, dog walks seem to be problematic and stressful, as can be seen from the examples above of owner's strategies to avoid or ameliorate that stress by changing their walking schedules. Most dog-aggressive

dogs will lunge and bark or growl when they see some or any dogs, and might get into a dog fight if in close proximity with another dog, especially if one or both dogs are off leash. Such situations are frustrating and embarrassing, and they seem to be a problem especially in cities like San Francisco where the dog population is very high, and dogs seem to be appearing from around street corners and behind cars all the time. As I pointed this out to Eric, he enthusiastically agreed with me. Sharon, too, admitted to me that she stopped walking Rain because she did not want to continue breaking up dog fights. Leanne, who at the time of Chewbacca's incident with the puppy lived in a less densely (dog)populated area than San Francisco, similarly reflected on her realization that Chewbacca could not be with any other dogs besides Echo:

[That] made it really hard, 'cause we couldn't walk him. There's no guarantee that some other dog is not gonna be loose and come up to him. So that was challenging.

Rachel, on the other hand, gave a description of how problematic it was dealing with Dallas while she was still taking him to dog parks, again demonstrating the aforementioned vigilance and careful consideration of the environment:

If there was another dog in the dog park, I wouldn't take him in there until that dog left. I would make sure he was a bigger dog there. 'Cause he seems to like smaller dogs more. And if there was another dog there, then I would have to keep them separated, and I needed to make sure that he didn't go up to the fence, because he really liked going up to the fences and facing the dog through a fence. And that was a big problem, because I couldn't ... I would spend my time in the dog park running around to make sure that he wasn't going by the fence, the whole time, and that's when I was like, "This is getting to be a lot."

The situation Rachel described is interesting and also very revealing of many owners' experiences of aggressive dog ownership. Unlike Sharon and Leanne who talked to me about avoiding contact with other dogs, Rachel picked a time at which she did try to provide Dallas with that contact, but she was becoming increasingly careful and nervous about it until she just could not do it anymore.

The question at this point is not "Why did she stop going to dog park?," but "Why did she not stop going to dog parks sooner?" I believe this is mostly due to the dog ideology that says dogs should play with other dogs, and that owners should take their dogs to dog parks. This seems to be one of the essential parts of dog ownership even though more and more dog trainers are recognizing dog parks can have negative impacts on dogs and emphasize that not all dogs should be taken to dog parks (e.g. King, 2004; Frawley, n.d.)

Conflict between what owners believe they should provide their dog and what the

owner can provide them is then a secondary source of anxiety—the owner feels stressed when walking the dog but might in turn feel guilty about not taking the dog out enough. Eric told me that

sometimes if I feel like I haven't exercised him, given him the opportunity to run around, and stimulated him enough; that's definitely my responsibility. So if he's acting up because he's been pent up, it's hard—that's OK, that's partially my responsibility.

Furthermore, one of Eric's biggest concerns about Oscar's behavior was his inability to find a dog walker or a day-care that would take him. Rachel and Jennifer both told me they had a similar problem when trying to find a place to leave their dogs when traveling out of town—not just any dog-sitter or kennel would be willing to deal with an aggressive dog, and the owners might trust even fewer of them to do so well. That then restricts the owner's mobility as they are tied town more strongly to their home.

Problems Within the Home

In my interview with Jennifer she complained about the fact that her experience with human-aggressive David was very different from what most owners experience with dog-aggressive dogs. As the latter seems to be much more common, she found issue-related online groups and other sources of information to be inappropriate for her situation. When I asked her what she thinks is different between owning a human-aggressive versus a dog aggressive dog, she replied:

People, the ones that have dog-aggressive dogs, there may be multiple dogs within the family that are aggressing, but a lot of these people, they just ... Their home is their sanctuary, and nothing happens there and everything's happy in their home, and it's only when they take the dogs out that they have problems, and they walk their dog at night-time and they're especially worried about going outside. But if you have [a human] aggressive dog, your home isn't even the sanctuary. I mean, it's calmer here, you have way more control. But even that ... That's the big difference - you can never just relax.

While her answer aimed to differentiate experiences of two types of aggression, it actually very successfully showed the difference in experience based on the space in which the aggression is occurring. The reason why human-directed aggression might be more problematic is because it is much more difficult to remove the potential targets from the home. If a dog is aggressing at another dog in the household, however, the experience seems to be fairly similar. What differentiates dog and human directed aggression then is the likelihood of a potential target of aggression being in the owner's home and around the

aggressive dog. The higher the likelihood, the bigger the problem—the management becomes more difficult and “home” becomes much less of a safe and comfortable space.

Jennifer was, for example, very nervous about David biting someone when she has guests so “everyone in the house [had] rules.” One of the rules, beyond “do not pet the dog,” was that over-night guests were not allowed to come downstairs from the guest bedrooms during the night. For Sam, her dog’s aggression was even bigger of an issue because Lea was targeting her, and therefore all the interactions with the dog during her most problematic year were very stressful. And while most dog owners I have interviewed, like Jennifer or Michelle, pointed out that they were nervous when their dog was unsupervised, for Sam, being away from the Lea seemed to be the more relaxing environment because she was afraid of her and was cautious when approaching her. There was a lot of tension in her house, which was probably making Lea’s behavior even worse. But as Sam started working with Lea, “it immediately started creating this peace in the house.”

Aggression within a household can also be an issue if there are multiple dogs and conflict arises between them. In fact, study by Sherman et al. (1996) implies that owners seek help if their dog is aggressive towards their other dog(s) more often than if their dog is aggressive towards non-household dogs, indicating that the former is more problematic. This was confirmed by the experiences I gathered in my interviews. For Leanne and Jake, for example, Chewbacca’s aggression truly became a problem when he started attacking Echo, since at that point, “it was happening in [their] house and affecting [their] other dog.” Another owner I interviewed, Susan, a current owner of two rescued Pit Bulls, told me of her experience with two of her previous dogs, one of which started attacking the other as he was getting older. The other dog suffered multiple injuries, but she decided to keep both of them. In order to do so, she had to keep them completely separate until the aggressing dog died. Kate tells me a similar story about two dogs she previously owned, only in her case keeping the dogs was more difficult. Due to the lack of space in her home, the “victim” dog, Terra, practically lived in Kate’s bedroom until she decided to euthanize the aggressing dog, Chance. Talking about that decision, she said:

And once I did put him down, I felt really bad, but man, you could just feel the tension in the house had lifted. And I realized, “Oh my god, we’ve been living with this stress and tension, and my poor Terra was like a prisoner in the bedroom.” When she finally started coming out into the rest of the house, I was like, “I hadn’t realized Chance was running the whole house.”

Kate once more pointed to the difficulty of not being able to relax inside your own home,

but in addition to that, similarly to Leanne, she also clearly expressed concern for the other dog in the household. All the owners I interviewed who had issues with aggression between two or more of their dogs shared the same sentiment. All of those owners also considered their dogs to be family members, and some of them called them their “babies” or “children”. Everyday experiences of dog-directed aggression in multiple dog households might therefore be quite similar to experiences of human-directed aggression—not only does it similarly endanger a very important space—the home—and makes it difficult or even impossible for the owners to fully relax, but it is also, like human-directed aggression, a family member-directed aggression.

The Little Things

One thing that surprised me in my interviews is that when I asked some of the owners what they considered most problematic about owning their dog, they brought up very simple, small things. Eric, for example, would love to be able to go skateboarding with Oscar and be able to relax while doing so. One thing Jennifer loved doing with dogs, and she could not do with David, was simply sitting on the floor, petting the dog and enjoying some quiet time with him. For her, this time with the dog, the emotional and physical connection it develops, was the critical part of dog ownership.

Rachel had to deal with something even more trivial. What was really problematic to her was that she could not comfortably tie Dallas outside of a coffee shop and go inside to buy a cup of coffee. A simple thing turned into a complicated and stressful procedure:

I'd have to tie him outside' and I mean, going inside to get a coffee and looking outside making sure no one was petting him, and, when people want to go up to him and pet him I can just see him being scared and looking at them. And I'd have to run outside and tell them to stop petting him, go back and try to get in line at the coffee shop, again. And the worst part is that's he's [the size of a child], and he's not really been around children, and I don't know how he would react with children.

I believe that owners' inability to engage in these simple daily activities due to their dog's behavior is really frustrating exactly because those activities seem so basic and simple to them. As the owner is realizing their dog is aggressive, they probably cannot imagine, let alone predict, those particular disruptions of routines and the unfulfillment of simple expectations they had of living with their dog. Making these adjustments then, might in itself be difficult because the possibility of not being able to pet your dog or leave her outside of a coffee shop for a minute probably does not cross many owner's minds.

“YOU NEED TO KEEP YOUR DOG IN CHECK”: PUBLIC INCIDENTS, SOCIAL INTERACTIONS AND LIABILITY

Various authors have pointed out that pet dogs make their owners seem more likable and approachable and can work as social facilitators of owner’s contact with other people (Messent, 1983; Hunt, Hart & Gomulkiewicz, 1992; Rossbach & Wilson, 1992; McNicholas & Collis, 2000). This, however, is not true of all dogs. When faced with an owner whose dog is barking and growling, not many individuals will consider them approachable. Aggressive dogs will often work as facilitators of social avoidance, and sometimes even conflict. I have already discussed avoidance of other dogs or people, and I will look at how that avoidance impacts interpersonal social relationships below. First, however, I would like to look at the perception of and the reactions to aggressive behavior in dogs by the public.

When I asked another one of my interviewees, Carol, about whether she had had any negative experiences while in public with her dog-aggressive Jack Russell terrier Louie, she said:

This definitely happens a lot in New York. I feel like people have sort of judgmental dog owners there ... The one that comes to mind the most here in San Francisco—I was jogging with my dog, and he was behind me on the leash. And I didn’t realize that someone else was coming up behind me with their dog ahead of them. And he turned, just like latched onto the dog’s neck, and I pulled him off, and he didn’t hurt the other dog or anything, but the person was really pissed at me and was definitely, you know, like “You need to keep your dog in check!” and “What’s wrong with you?” And “Why would you let a dog like that run in public without a muzzle?”

Carol’s answer is interesting as it points to the existence of a category problematic for the owners of aggressive (or maybe misbehaved in general) dogs— the “judgmental dog-owners” who will engage in conflict like the one Carol describes. At least in Carol’s case, it seems that it is the other dog owners, not the general public, who are really critical of dogs’ behavior, which is in line with the results of my survey—owners of dogs rated various aggressive displays as much less acceptable than non-owners. (Appendix B). This might be because dog owners project their experiences as dog owners onto others and base their expectations of other dog owners and their dogs on those experiences. However, it is likely that they also feel like their dog is threatened by aggressive dogs and are being defensive.

Interestingly, while some people call for muzzles, others would seemingly prefer not to muzzle a dog. Michelle tells me of times when she would put a muzzle on her pit-bull mix Liam, following recommendations of a trainer. When Liam was approached by another dog during an outing he would start growling and barking. Michelle felt very embarrassed

because

I know everybody's already looking at him like "Who's that pit bull?" and now he has a muzzle on him so now they're thinking that "Oh, you know, this woman is totally out of control and she, you know, she has this aggressive dog and she's not a responsible, you know, person."

While what Michelle told me seems more like an interpretation of other's thoughts, rather than actual confrontation, it still demonstrates the negative attitudes others might have towards dogs. Furthermore, it shows the impact the (perceived) social disapproval might have on an individual owner's sense of self, something I will look at more closely later in this chapter. Michelle told me she felt the need both to excuse Liam's behavior and also to make up explanations for why she was dealing with the behavior the way she did, a phenomenon looked at in more detail by Sanders (1990). She also pointed out the issue I will be coming back to in Chapter 7, which is breed stereotyping, or even "breedism." Just her dog's appearance seemed to have made it more difficult to deal with his behavior due to people's assumptions about the dog's character.

Rachel told me of a few incidents in which Dallas tried to or did bite. Once he actually bit her while she was holding him back from lunging at another dog and tried to grab his snout. The bite resulted in a deep wound on her thumb that required stitches, but Rachel is certain Dallas had no idea he had even bit her. However, the owner of the other dog, Rachel said, "freaked out." On another occasion, Dallas snapped at a woman in her building and tore her pants. The woman was upset and had made Rachel give her \$40 for a new pair of pants. Rachel then just hurried away thinking "I don't want to get into a strife, I don't want this, a dog bite, like I can't. I don't want that right now". Luckily, the strife was avoided and so were any potential suits, but that is not always the case.

Although none of the owners I interviewed had had any legal troubles and had never had to deal with Animal Care & Control or the other states' equivalent, many do. Interestingly, according to Officer John Denny who leads the Vicious and Dangerous Dogs hearing in San Francisco, conflicts brought to the hearings often have little to do with dogs and much more to do with people. Most often, the reason for hearings is the fact that the complaining party and the dog owners cannot work out the issue on their own—the owner of the aggressive dog might refuse to acknowledge responsibility or pay for veterinary/medical bills. Sometimes, the victim, or the owner of the victim simply wants an apology or asks for the dog to be walked on a short leash. And even though resolution of conflicts in hearings might be that simple, the whole process, or even the threat of a hearing, is very stressful for owners because they are afraid of the outcome, including being forced to

put their dog down. In more serious cases, especially in the case of an attack on humans, the owners' main fear might stem from the possibility of a law suit and knowledge that they are liable for their dog's behavior.

Given accepted dog ideologies, and the potential danger they represent, it is clear that aggressive dogs, and by extension their owners, would be viewed negatively by the society. What I have been told by the owners I have interviewed supports this conclusion and also allows me to see how these cultural constructions of aggression in dogs impact the owners on an individual basis. Conflict, or simply the possibility of conflict, with other people due to their dog's behavior not only makes the owner more stressed and less confident, it also makes it more difficult for the owner to manage the dog's behavior effectively. Stigma against dogs with muzzles might make the owner more reluctant to muzzle the dog even though that could ultimately make it easier for them to relax more with the dog in public. In contrast, the ideological expectation that companion dogs are not-aggressive can give rise to situations described in Chapter 4 in which some people might ignore owners' warnings about their dog's behavior and therefore cause an incident. The time Dallas bit Rachel, for example, Rachel had explicitly asked the other owner to keep her dog away, but her warning was not heeded. I will discuss this potential danger of public dog ideologies in more detail in Chapter 7.

DOG VS. FRIENDS AND FAMILY: EFFECTS ON INTER-PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

While my subjects told me of only a few public incidents of aggression, many recalled various times their dog aggressed in familiar environments and around familiar people. This might not be fully representative of their complete experiences, but it does fit with other observations about dog aggression and ownership of aggressive dogs. A high percentage of reported bites, for example, seem to occur on the owner's property, within their circle of friends and family, and many more occur in those environments and do not get reported at all (Overall & Love, 2001). Dogs will also in general spend much more time in familiar environments, such as their home, and their owners might also be more relaxed and less careful at home or with friends than they would be with strangers. It is therefore not surprising that dogs' aggressive behavior is closely intertwined with their owners' personal lives. Even if the dog does not directly aggress at familiar people or dogs, its behavior can, and often will, have an affect on their owner's relationships with other people.

Decrease in Opportunities for Social Interactions

For many owners, changes in daily life mentioned earlier in the chapter also involve changes in their social lives. As they try to manage their dog's behavior and restrict their dog's interaction with others, they might also restrict their own social interactions or will enjoy them less. As Jennifer pointed out, she was a different person when David was in the room, hyper-vigilant and not as fun to be around because she had to attend to her dog and manage him. When she had friends over, they also had to be aware of the dog and follow the rules Jennifer set up to keep everyone safe. Her home was not a guest friendly zone.

Sharon, due to Rain's aggressive behavior, stopped inviting people over as much because Rain got very "hyper" when guests were around, and she and her husband would never consider having a party because the house is too small, and they do not have a place like a back yard to put her. Many of their friends also have dogs, so because of Rain, Sharon and her husband did not get invited to as many of their friends' events, such as barbecues in the park. And when they do get invited they will attend the event for a shorter time or might not go at all because they do not want to leave Rain on her own for too long.

Carol, the owner of the Jack Russell Terrier Louie, also sacrificed her social time for the sake of her dog. She told me of a particularly memorable incident:

One weekend I stayed at a friend's cabin, and I didn't know that another friend was bringing her two dogs, and my dog tried to attack her dogs. And I basically had to sequester him for the rest of the weekend, and I felt, even though he was the one that was attacking their dogs, I still felt bad leaving him alone. So then I spent time alone with my dog, and it was just like a huge mess. But, yeah, I mean, I guess, there's definitely a lot of social situations where I just, you know, had to leave early or wouldn't know if other owners were bringing their dogs, but I'm not going to. I felt bad.

The weekend at the friend's cabin that Carol spent alone with Louie is a good example of a conflict between wanting to spend time with friends and feeling responsible to one's dog. It is significant that the dog often seems to prevail as it exemplifies just how important dogs are to their owners.

Kate's situation with Lilly builds on this even more, because she had actually established many of her social relationships through her dogs. However, those started breaking down as Lilly became increasingly aggressive towards other dogs, and Kate had to stop going to a large local dog park where she had socialized with other dogs and owners.

My social circle with Lilly started getting smaller and smaller. I'm a very shy person, and I'm not really social unless it's around dogs. So I really felt socially deprived

when I had to start limiting our activities ... I got very isolated. Sometimes I would sit down, and I would cry about it, because I felt "all my fun time is no longer fun."

Kate's experience clearly demonstrates both the possible extent of the problem an aggressive dog poses to the owner's social life and the owner's sense of responsibility to just deal with the situation they are in—Kate never considered giving up on Lily and getting another, friendlier dog. It also shows that it is important to recognize that while dogs can certainly provide their owners with more opportunities for social contact (see Wells, 2004; Nicolas and Serge, 2008), they can then also be the cause of the loss of those same contacts.

Conflict in Close Relationships

Similar to the way dog aggression can create conflicts between strangers, or maybe passers-by, it can also fuel conflict among friends or family members. However, due to the proximity of the people in question, this type of conflict will be different and can also be caused by issues other than actual act of aggression, such as disagreement over how to handle the dog.

One of the most striking examples of this type of conflict was Michelle's argument with her roommate, which resulted in Michelle having to move out of their house in a matter of days and her not talking to her best friend for about two years. What happened was that about six months after Michelle adopted Liam, Liam and her roommate's dog started fighting, and tension was building up in the house. Michelle thought Liam was "right," her roommate thought her dog was "right." They started distancing the dogs, and so they were less accustomed to each other. Then, one day, Liam seemingly without provocation attacked the other dog in the house, and both dogs got bloodied and hurt. The roommate took her dog and went home, leaving Michelle and Liam in the house for a few days.

In those three days, I was really worried about her coming home 'cause I still had my dog there. She moved home for those three days with her dog. And then when she did come back, I just went into my room with my dog and kept them separate. And she wrote me a ton of e-mails and letters to express herself, how she was feeling and ... She basically expressed that she was, up until three months of having the dog—she liked him. But then after that she started seeing signs that he wasn't a good dog, and her feeling about my dog was that he was not a good dog, and her idea is that there's good dogs and there's bad dogs and I got stuck with a bad dog from the pound. And ... you know, it's too bad, but she thought that, you know, "You should really put your dog down."

Michelle was not able to find another place to stay, one of the reasons being the pit bull like

appearance of her dog, so she moved back in with her parents and despite really considering it, did not euthanize the dog. Her dog's behavior, however, did cause a huge disruption in her life and in her relationship with her best friend.

Carol told me a somewhat similar story, although in her case the level of aggression between the two dogs in the household was lower, but living away was not something she would consider because the other dog was her boyfriend's. Describing their relationship with each other's dogs she said:

I love his dog and he loves my dog, but there's definitely some tension, that's almost like how people are with like step-children and I'm like "Don't talk to my dog that way!" and he's like "Your dog hurt my dog," and we take it very personally. I'll be like "Well, she growled at him first!" and it becomes this thing where we both feel defensive and protective over our own dog. I would definitely say that my dog is obviously the one that causes more problems, but it's just sad because now you have to keep the dogs in the separate rooms.

Further aggravating the situation was the fact that Louie started barking when left alone in the room so he slept on the bed with Carol and her boyfriend while the other dog had to sleep outside, which the couple did not see as fair because "[Louie] is getting more attention and is being rewarded, and he's the bad one." Louie's behavior therefore did create tension in the house and strained the relationship between Carol and her boyfriend, much like Liam's behavior did in case of Michelle and her roommate. Unlike in Michelle's case, however, Carol and her boyfriend decided to keep both the dogs and their relationship and decided to work with a behaviorist in order to improve the situation in the household.

Rachel also had to deal with dog-fights within her family home when visiting her father who owned a dog Dallas just could not get along with, and if the two were in the same house they had to be separated by at least two doors. Rachel also felt that she could not stay overnight when visiting her father because Dallas could not stay there and that caused tension between the two. Furthermore, she also argued with her family about how to train the dogs. Her father worked with the same behaviorist as she did, and she kept trying to correct him in what she thought he was doing wrong. On the other hand, her sister had "the most perfect Labrador in the world" and might be what Carol called "a judgmental dog owner." After hearing Dallas had bitten Rachel that one time, her sister kept insisting that she should muzzle him when on walks or when somebody else was around. Rachel refused, because she did not believe that was a good way of training, and Dallas really disliked the muzzle. After that conversation she was not even able to bring up Dallas in conversations with her sister as she would refuse to talk about him. The argument over how to deal with her dog even extend into her own home—her boyfriend, an owner of a well-behaved golden

retriever, did not believe in behaviorists and they would argue over how to deal with Dallas. To make things worse, Dallas also acted very well when walked by Rachel's boyfriend, which left Rachel upset and mad because she could not even take her own dog to the dog park on her own.

Other owners I interviewed also told me about arguing or at least having disagreements with people close to them about how best to handle the dog. Eric and Christine, for example, had a complex system of treating the dog for various behaviors and would argue about what was the best way to do it. Oscar also seemed to be more responsive to Christine, which was difficult for Eric. And while the two of them at least agreed on the general approach to dog training, Sam and her partner had very opposite views on how to work with the dog. Sam's partner would tackle the dogs and shout at them, and that did not sit well with Sam as she preferred a more gentle approach. The way her partner treated the dogs kept making her nervous and uncomfortable. The difference in their attitudes, Sam thought, might have been what caused Lea to start aggressing more at Sam and less at her partner, which presented an additional difficulty for Sam. Out of the four dogs they had brought into the house, Lea was the one that Sam had picked and wanted to bond with the most.

Jennifer also received discomfoting advice on how to deal with David from some members of her family, especially after he bit Jennifer's brother one night when he absentmindedly petted him. Up until then, her family members knew Jennifer had problems with David, but they had not seen it firsthand. It was after that bite that they truly believed her, which is a sequence of events very much like the one I described in Chapter 4. After that realization settled in,

almost everybody wanted me to give the dog back, or put the dog down. They said that "You just can't keep this dog." And he was caught making me crazy, and they didn't like me because I became crazy, worrying about the dog.

Jennifer's friends and family noticed that having to deal with David was changing her, they felt the sacrifices she was making for him were too much, and they reacted to that. Jennifer took their opinions into consideration because she respected them and because she recognized that "they're looking out for what's best for [her], not what's best for the dog." For her, however, David did take priority.

Friends and Family as a Source of Support

It is important to note here that aggressive behavior in dogs does not necessarily

create conflict between friends and within families. Sometimes the opposite can be true, and people close to the owner can be supportive of the dog and the work being done with the dog. For Michelle, it was her parents who took both her and Liam in and were very understanding of his behavior. For Jennifer, it was her husband who sided with her and believed that they could and would work through and handle the problems they were facing. Her mother also liked David, and always had, so Jennifer was not in a “me against everybody” situation.

Leanne’s situation was probably most surprising of all. Chewbacca was in general a very sweet dog who “just wanted to lick your hand and sit in your lap and give you goggly eyes,” and most people only knew that side of him. But even those who had seen his aggressive side seemed very understanding. Leanne and Jake’s good friend knew about Chewbacca’s aggression issues but still agreed to take him in. And according to Leanne, if anybody in the world had a reason to hate Chewbacca, it would be Jake’s sister, because she was the owner of the Maltese Chewbacca attacked and also the mother of the child whom he bit. However, neither she nor Leanne’s in-laws blamed Chewbacca, or Leanne and Jake, for the Maltese incident, and they continued to invite him over to play with him. Even after Chewbacca had attacked Leanne’s nephew, and Leanne and Jake decided to put him down, the in-laws said that they did not feel that was necessary.

It is clear that dogs and their behavior affect their owner’s relationships with friends and family in a complex way. It is easy for aggressive behavior to lead to increased social isolation of the owner and increased tensions in their close relationships with others. However, that does not need to happen. Factors that might determine what the effects of the dog’s behavior will be are many, but my interviews did suggest some. If two individuals have conflicting ideas about the dog, such as Michelle and her roommate, or ideas about how to work with the dog, like Sam and her partner, that will easily fuel the conflict. Different experiences with the dog might also aggravate a conflict—Rachel’s sister and boyfriend both have well behaved dogs and probably could not fully understand what Rachel was going through. Also, if others feel threatened by the dog, or simply feel uncomfortable around it, as in the case of Jennifer and some of her family members, it is likely that those individuals will harbor negative feelings about the dog. On the other hand, if family and friends are able to interact with the dog in a positive setting, as did Leanne’s in-laws with Chewbacca, then the conflict might be lessened.

Conflict over the dog, whether with other people, or between what the owner wants and feels that the dog needs, is in itself interesting as it constructs the dog as a socially relevant actor and also underlines the strength of the owner-dog bond that seems to be what

ultimately drives the owners to make sacrifices in order to do the best they can for the dog.

GOOD DOG, BAD OWNERS: EFFECTS ON THE PERCEPTIONS OF THE DOG AND THE SELF

Throughout this chapter I have presented different challenges owners of aggressive dogs encounter in their lives with their dogs, highlighting the strength of the dog-human bond that drives the owners to deal with those challenges. Here, of course, I am looking only at a subset of owners who choose to make sacrifices for the dog, and I am well aware that not all owners would do the same. The number of dogs in shelters across the United States for various reasons, including aggression, speaks to that fact. However, even the strong bond featured in most of the stories I have collected does have weak points when it comes to dealing with aggressive behavior. In order to look at those, I will consider two spheres of thought influenced by these weak points: first, the way the owners feel about their individual dog and their relationship with it; and second, the way they feel about themselves as a dog owners.

The Individual Dog and the Relationship

As I already mentioned in my discussion of dog ideologies in Chapter 3, some dog owners are so “fed up” with their dogs due to their behavior that they cannot even look at them. This was not generally the case in my interviewees in which all but one owner, who had their dog for a very short time, loved and deeply cared about their dogs. None of them regretted getting the dog and in general they seemed to disassociate the behavior from the dog and their bond with it. However, various owners did point out times or moments when dealing with aggression became so difficult their attitudes towards their dogs would turn more negative.

Eric, for example, expressed a strong attachment to Oscar despite his aggressive behavior, recognizing his good qualities, but also admitted that there are moments when he might feel overwhelmed by the difficult situation:

I feel it would be selfish to say, “Let’s give him back and get a new dog, because he’s not as easy as I would like him to be.” But that might be just a thought that comes in a flash when I’m super frustrated. But, fundamentally, it’s like, “No, I don’t, I’m not gonna give up on him.” He’s a really good dog, he has a lot of really good traits, and he certainly has some issues that have to be worked on ... It’s like having a problem child, or like a special needs child, where you really have to provide that extra

attention. So it can just be tiresome.

Leanne, similarly, reflecting on her experience with Chewbacca, demonstrated dissatisfaction with how his behavior influenced the ownership and recognized him as an “abnormal” dog, while at the same time clearly acknowledging positive feelings towards him:

If I’m gonna have a dog, I want to be able to do stuff with it. I want to be able to take it to the park, and to take it when I go on walks, and I want to be able to have friends and family over and not worry about whether or not they’re gonna bring animals or children. ... as stupid as this probably sounds, like I just wanted to have a normal dog, you know. And I loved Chewbacca ... like the rest of the time, he was just an angel. He was well behaved, and he was just great.

In the end, however, inability to engage in particular activities with Chewbacca and a strong sense of liability when having him around, led Leanne and Jake to decide to give Chewbacca to a friend and sacrifice the bond with him.

Leanne and Eric's responses show clearly that the owners are very aware of the disruption their dog's behavior brings to their lives and are actively thinking about it. However, while maybe dissatisfied with the ownership, they are not necessarily dissatisfied with the dog. As Rachel put it “It's like having a child when you are really young—you might regret the situation, but you don't regret the child.” Furthermore, their reflections on their dogs' behavior also highlight factors that come into consideration about keeping an aggressive dog, such as the bond with the dog and the sense of responsibility for the dog, which I will further discuss in the next chapter.

Identity as a Dog Owner

Similarly to how, in some difficult moments, owners would start thinking more negatively about their dogs, some would also start thinking more negatively about themselves and their identity as a dog owner. In most cases, however, those negative feelings did not come from blaming themselves about the dog’s behavior, but rather originated in the feelings of inadequacy as a dog owner. The former was the case only in very specific situations in which the owners felt like their action or inaction had caused the dog to aggress towards someone or something . The latter seemed to be a more general reflection on the experience with the dog.

Jennifer compared her experience with David to a test:

It's been a struggle with this dog. And you feel like it's you—it not the dog that loses,

it's you, it's the owner. It's like, "Are you gonna pass a test? Are you a good enough owner to help him through this?"

She pointed out she did not want to feel like she was unable to handle her dog, and that was one of her motivations to try and tackle his behavioral problems. When she reflected on some incidents, she said, "I always feel like it's the failure of me, because I didn't manage him well enough," and in that process completely shifts all of the responsibility for her dog's behavior onto herself, which is a difficult burden to bear.

At the time when she was considering euthanizing her dog, Michelle similarly disliked the idea of feeling like she had failed her dog:

I really wanted to get to the bottom of that and instead of giving up on the dog and giving up on myself as a, you know, for my first dog, I thought that that would be really devastating because I would never be able to go back to the pound and pick out another dog. You know. If I had failed with the first one.

For Michelle, dealing with Liam really seemed to be a matter of personal identity, for she equated giving up on the dog with giving up on herself and recognized how devastating that path would be for her. In contrast, Leanne, who did make the decision to euthanize her dog, ended our interview saying, "We all felt like we failed Chewy."

These feelings of inadequacy, however, are definitely not limited to life or death situations. Carol, for example, when reflecting on the incident when another dog came up from behind while she was jogging with Louie, said:

I felt really ashamed 'cause again, there's this awful feeling where you're "Oh, I love my dog so much and I'm such a bad owner. I can't believe I have like this menace running around on the sidewalk." So it's just, it makes me feel really guilty.

Similarly, Michelle, when talking about how others might perceive her as an irresponsible owner of an aggressive, muzzled Pit Bull could likely be projecting her own thoughts onto others, implying that she sometimes feels like an irresponsible owner for having a dog she has to muzzle.

It is important to note, however, that while "failing a dog" can be a very negative experience, successfully managing its behavior can be a very positive one as it helps empower owners and give them a sense of success. I will discuss this in more detail in the next chapter.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I reviewed impacts that dogs' aggressive behavior has on their owners as I tried to describe the effect an aggressive dog had on their lives. Not surprisingly, many of these are quite negative. What is interesting however, is that they are very similar to the experiences of parents of problematic children, as indicated by Francis (2011). Like the parents she discusses, dog owners I interviewed found their situation to be troublesome; their daily routines had to change from what they envisioned they would be; the dog's behavior damaged their close personal relationships and threatened their public identities as responsible dog owners; and they experienced inner turmoil due to high levels of stress and negative emotions oriented sometimes towards the dog but often towards themselves.

One main difference between the two experiences that I found is that the home emerged as a very important and a problematic space in my analysis, but was not discussed by Francis (2011). The concept of home might get re-defined by the dog's behavior, and the space itself can also affect owner's experiences: larger spaces that enable owners to remove a dog from a potentially difficult situation can help relieve anxiety. This difference might be due to the fact that, unlike the trouble Francis (2011) focuses on, the behavior I am looking at endangered others. It might also draw a line between children and dogs, as it seems more acceptable to remove and isolate children than dogs. On the other hand, the general similarity between the experiences of troubled parents and dog-owners does seem to imply a child-like status of the dog, which is emphasized even further by owners' own comparison of their situation to parenting. Carol said she and her boyfriend are like people are with stepchildren, Sharon explains her commitment to Rain by likening her to a child, and both Eric and Jennifer explicitly describe their dogs as "problem children" or "children with special needs."

These parallels between the experiences of dog ownership and parenting highlight the very strong and special bond people can create with their pets. I believe this bond is crucial for making the decision to keep an aggressive dog, as it enables the owners to confront the challenges of owning the aggressive dog. Even when threatened by negative experiences, the bond can prevail as it seems that owners are able to disassociate it from their dogs' undesirable behaviors. Furthermore, if the behavior is properly managed, it can lead to the owner learning more about their dog and dog culture in general, modifying their dog ideology, and as such can actually have positive impacts. The dog-owner bond, and how it influences and is influenced by the decisions owners make about dealing with their dog's behavior, is what I will focus on in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 6

DEALING WITH THE AGGRESSIVE BEHAVIOR

[W]orking with [my behaviorist] was about more than just working with Lea. It was about getting my own life in order. I was not in a good place after [my partner and I] had split up ... It was the first hopeful type of news I'd heard in a long time, when she examined Lea and she just told me straight on [what I was dealing with] It's very clear now this is what Lea was about ... It was definitely worth it to me in terms of the time commitment. It gave me something positive to work for where I could see the change and I could feel the whole household kind of healing from this bad experience, and everyone, all the dogs, getting along better. Yeah, it was worth it. I've never doubted it, once I had that first appointment, that I should do it. I never doubted it.

Sam, talking about her dog Lea

Out of all the stories I have gathered in my interviews, Sam's is probably my favorite, for it is a truly inspiring success story. However, even in her case, the road to her "happy ending" ending was far from easy. In general when living with an aggressive dog becomes unmanageable, there are only a few paths one can take, all difficult in their own way. Many owners will decide to get rid of the problem. As I previously pointed out, tens of thousands of dogs are abandoned each year for reasons that include aggression. An unknown number of dogs is also euthanized due to aggression—either by owners or

shelters that will not try to adopt-out an aggressive dog. Other owners will decide to keep the dog and try to “fix” the problem, often not realizing how difficult that might actually be.

By looking at the decisions people make when their dog’s behavior simply cannot be ignored or tolerated anymore, I will be examining the strength of the dog-human bond and the sense of dog owner identity and responsibility—how they develop at different rates through dog ownership, how they encourage owners to work with their dogs as opposed to giving them up, and how they come in conflict when the dog really becomes dangerous. Also, by considering owners’ reflections on the process they are undergoing with their dog, I will be able to comment on their acquired awareness of the falsity of dog ideologies, as well as pinpoint some shared problems that I believe all owners of aggressive dogs should look out for when deciding to work with the dog on the behavior.

“I CAN’T DO THIS ANYMORE”: DECIDING TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT THE BEHAVIOR

As I pointed out in Chapter 4, as owners are experiencing their dog’s behavior, they start to accept that their dog has behavioral problems, and with time they learn about the extent of those problems. At some point they will make the third step and decide to deal with their dog’s behavior. According to Jeannine Berger, a veterinarian specializing in animal behavior, this might happen due to one of three factors. First, the behavior can grow increasingly bad, and a particular incident, or the owners’ inability to prevent the incident from happening, will often lead owners to realize that they cannot continue living with the behavior—they have to do something about it. Other times, something in the life of owners will change that will force them to seek some sort of a solution. Finally, owners will sometimes be prevented from helping their dogs by other occurrences in their lives, and a change in those will enable them to focus on the dog.

Jennifer, for example, started looking for dog trainers right after the second incident with David. Leanne decided to give Chewbacca to her friend after he started attacking her other dog Echo and made a decision to put him down after he bit her nephew. Rachel got to the point where she could not have Dallas with her at work because he was lunging at everyone passing by, but she also could not leave him at home because he would bark. Not knowing what else to do, she started looking for professional help. Eric started taking Oscar to dog-training classes after he witnessed firsthand Oscar’s behavior. While he only received a phone call about the incident that got Oscar kicked out of day care, some time later he

actually saw Oscar attack a small dog in a park, and then charge again even after being pulled away. Eric was stunned by this and felt that just trying to get him to socialize more was not solving the problem, and he too began looking for alternatives.

In contrast, what drove Carol and Sharon to look for help regarding their dogs was not the change in their dog's behavior, but a change in their lives. For ten years, Carol had adapted to Louie's aggression towards other dogs during walks. However, when she considered moving in with her boyfriend, who also had a dog, Louie's behavior became more of a problem because the two dogs could not get along and had to be kept in separate rooms, which in turn caused tension between Carol and her boyfriend. Because they wanted to move in together and keep both the dogs, Carol realized that she had to start actively dealing with Louie's aggression. The change in Sharon's life was not another dog but a baby—after she had given birth to her son, she decided that she had to make sure that it was safe for him to be around her dog, Rain, which was the main reason why she had called a behaviorist.

Finally, two of the owners I talked to had wanted to deal with their dog's aggression for a while but were able to do so only after some of their life circumstances changed. For example, Sam's partner was the one who took over training Lea, using methods Sam did not approve of, and Sam was not able to start dealing with Lea until she separated from her partner. Similarly, Natalie was not really able to dedicate herself to Hugo, the Cairn Terrier that previously belonged to her son-in-law, right after he bit her mother. Many other things were happening in her life: her mother was really sick and then passed away, her daughter was getting married, and the dog's relatively infrequent aggression was put aside. Natalie was able to dedicate to Hugo only when other aspects of her life quieted down.

It is clear that many factors, both internal and external to the dog-owner dyad, play a role in the owners' realization that they should do something about their dogs' behavior and that they're able to do so. Deciding to do something about the dog's behavior, however, is not the same as deciding what to do about it and is only the first step on the way toward resolution. One of the main choices the owners will have to make is whether to get rid of the problem by giving up the dog, or to keep the dog and try to get rid of the behavior. The latter is often a preferable choice—it is probably the best outcome for the dog and can be a rewarding experience for the owner. Most of the owners I talked to had decided to keep their dogs and modify their behavior and I will discuss this option in more detail later in the chapter. First, however, I will consider the factors that influence the owner's decision one way or the other and the options owners have if they decide not to keep the dog.

THINKING ABOUT GETTING RID OF THE DOG

Most dog owners I talked to I reached through dog trainers and behaviorists so I have heard only a few stories from owners who actually gave their dogs up or put them down. However, many owners have, at least at some point, considered getting rid of the dog. Three different alternatives to keeping the dog emerged from my interviews my interviews—first, giving the dog back after a short time to the shelter where it was obtained as soon as it exhibits aggressive behavior; second, after owning the dog for a while, giving it to another home; and third, making a decision to get the dog they have owned for a while euthanized. This list is not exhaustive, but presents three different options that differ in interesting ways.

Giving the Dog back to the Shelter

While many owners I talked to adopted their dogs after they had been returned to the shelter by someone else, in most cases surely due to aggression issues, I heard only one personal accounts from owners who homed a dog and then gave it back to the shelter. One had her dog for less than two months and felt like her dog-directed aggression was not something she could deal with. She gave the dog back to a non-kill shelter from where the dog was homed and rehabilitated. The other one, Kate, told me of a dog she brought home as a rescue from Animal Care and Control (AC&C). He got along with her other dog but had a behavioral problem with people—he would not let anyone leave and would attack them and bite them. After he bit two of her guests, she took him back to AC&C where they put him down. Apparently they did not know about the problem before.

The two cases differ greatly. While the first owner felt somebody else could handle the dog better and hoped she would get a better home, Kate took her dog back to AC&C knowing he would be euthanized. She had a very clear position when it came to dogs that aggressed towards people:

That dog needs to be put down ... There's just too much of a liability. [Some] dogs are just way too powerful to be aggressive to people ... Any large dog that's aggressive towards people, and when they're large like that and they're so aggressive towards dogs ... They need—that line needs to be stomped.

While Kate was comfortable with the idea of the dog she had adopted being euthanized, for many dog owners that was a very unfavorable option. It was also one of the main reasons why they decided not to return their dog to the shelter—they were very aware that even no-

kill shelters might put down overly aggressive dogs.

Giving a Dog to Another Home

Giving the dog directly to another family is quite different from giving the dog to a shelter—it enables the owner to know whose home the dog will be living in, and it allows for contact with the new owner and the dog. As such, it does not completely break the original dog-owner bond. This is the option that Leanne and her husband chose when Chewbacca started occasionally attacking Echo:

[A]fter the third or fourth time that it happened we decided that we needed to get rid of Chewbacca, so we gave him to a friend ... who is a very solitary person, so Chewbacca was just never around other animals or really, people ... The only reason we gave him to our friend is 'cause he was our very close friend, and we knew that we would be able to see him, and that he would be happy and even that was really hard ...

Unfortunately, this option is not always available as few individuals will willingly adopt a dog they know is problematic or that seems dangerous or difficult to manage. While both Rachel and Natalie willingly adopted their dogs from somebody they knew, they did so because they were confident that they could handle the dogs, . On the other hand Kate was unable to find someone who would take in her Pit bull Chance that was constantly attacking her other dog, likely because he was perceived as a greater risk than an aggressive Cairn terrier like Hugo or a light-bodied medium mixed-breed like Dallas

Euthanizing the Dog

Two owners I talked to had seriously considered euthanizing their dogs, and two others had actually made that decision. In all four cases, the dogs had been owned for a while and the owners thought about euthanasia as final resort, or at least the most reasonable or responsible, albeit very difficult, choice they could make in a given situation. Leanne had, for example, tried to help her situation with Chewbacca by giving him to a friend of hers, Dan, but due to unfortunate circumstances, Dan ended up having to move in with Leanne and Jack and he brought the dog back with him. Leanne was managing the new, very stressfull situation until Chewbacca bit her nephew. When talking about the decision to euthanize Chewbacca, in which she still had a say even though the dog was officially Dan's at that point, she said:

I felt very strongly that if we didn't put him down, there was a high risk that he would attack another person, especially if he were ever around another child. And I

felt like there was no way way we could guarantee that that would never happen. ... And I knew that there might be other options. I knew that we could potentially try and find him a home ... And Jake and I talked about it, and we both agreed that if we did that, if we decided to keep him and try to find him another place to live, we wouldn't be able to give him up. Because we all loved him so much and in particular because we weren't actually the owners at that point, Dan was. My feeling about it was that if we didn't put him down then, right then, when it happened, it wouldn't ever happen. And Dan wouldn't be able to give him away because to Dan, at that point, he was his best friend. And so ... In an ideal world, we would have spent as long as it took trying to find him a place where he could live out his happy dog life in isolation from all other small living creatures. But I, I realistically I don't think that would've been possible. And everybody agreed, nobody was happy about it. But we all agreed that the risk was just too high. I mean. And the thing is especially because Dan was the owner. If Chewbacca had attacked someone else, and Dan had gotten saddled with medical bills and a law suit and all of that. It could ... I mean that had the potential to destroy his life.

Kate similarly struggled with the decision to euthanize her bull terrier mix, Chance, whose behavior, like Chewbacca's, was getting worse over time. When he was about eight months old, he had gotten into a serious fight with Kate's other dog, Terra. After that she had to keep them separated and her living situation was getting increasingly stressful. She tried taking both of them to dog training classes and behaviorists but that did not help. Terra started living in Kate's bedroom. Then, when Chance was about a year and a half old he attacked Terra in front of Kate's guests, and Kate started looking for help once more and went to a trainer who tried to solve the problem using an electric collar, which made the problem worse.

After that, when we went out, he was constantly looking for trouble. I ended up having to put him down when he was about eighteen months. It was the hardest thing I ever had to do. I tried to re-home him, and people told me he was too big of a liability. I had to take him and have the vet put him down, and it just broke my heart. He was a perfectly healthy dog at that point ... Chance was like a freakshow, it really hurt me that I needed to put him down.

Luckily, not all considerations of euthanasia result with the death of the dog. Both Michelle and Sam, during a time of crisis over their dogs' behavior, were ready to euthanize their dog but had realized they had other, good options before they made the final decision. Sam had already scheduled an appointment to euthanize Lea when she met the behaviorist than helped her turn her life completely around. Similarly, Michelle was driving to the shelter to euthanize Liam when she decided that although she did not know how to deal with aggressive dogs and was in over her head, she could still learn and try to give him another chance, something at which she was, in the end, successful.

Factors Influencing the Decision Making Process

It is clear that decision of what to do with the dog is complex and not conclusive, since the dog's behavior and the owner's situation can change and the situation then has to be re-evaluated, as had, for example, happened with Kate and Leanne. It is therefore better to think about the decision of what to do with the dog as a long-term process of weighing different options with respect to both the negative and the positive aspects of ownership of the dog in question.

Arguments in favor of getting rid of the dog are many and clear to see. As I discussed in the previous chapter, dog aggression can severely disrupt many aspects of owners' lives. Furthermore it is also a dangerous behavior, which was for many owners a very important consideration. Owners of smaller or less aggressive dogs, like Natalie and Eric, never considered euthanizing their dogs or even giving them away because the behavior was not serious enough to justify such radical solutions. In contrast, Kate was very clear about the fact that she considers big, large dogs aggressive towards people simply too dangerous, and Leanne felt that keeping Chewbacca after he bit a child was just too much of a risk. Both owners recognized the difference between aggression directed at dogs and aggression directed at humans, the latter being the more problematic of the two. Similarly, Sharon pointed out that

If [Rain] would ever attack my son and physically hurt him, she'd be gone. There's no question. I mean, I love her to death and I don't ever want to see her out of our lives. but I have to draw the line somewhere.

The line Sharon talks about is the line at which the dog's behavior becomes, in the owner's opinion, too dangerous, too problematic, the line which dogs that are given up or euthanized seemingly cross. What is interesting about this line, however, is that some owners draw it in a way that shows a remarkably high tolerance of the dog's behavior. Jennifer is aware of that fact and reflects on it in a very rational manner:

Aggressive dogs have no place in society. I mean, really. And I have an aggressive dog. ...And that's why I was always not wanting to tell people about how many bites he really had. Because it is a reflection on the owner, I mean you're making this decision to keep the dog. I mean, I am preventing another good dog from having a good life with me, I'm putting resources towards this problematic dog when I could have donated that money to a shelter and helped fifty dogs, rather than one questionable dog. I mean, I play these things in my mind all the time. Am I doing the right thing? But he's like, as I say, my child, and I have to, I can't just abandon him.

Jennifer clearly voices the main argument against getting rid of an aggressive dog—you

cannot just abandon it. Unlike a simple possession that can be discarded, dogs are not as easily replaceable. This is the attitude I noticed in all the owners I talked to, and what stands behind it is the strong emotional bond with the dog and the sense of the responsibility for the dog.

As I pointed out in the previous chapter, many owners I interviewed, emphasized just how much they cared about their dogs despite their aggressive behavior, and this is clearly visible in their efforts to help their dogs and enable to bond to continue. Leanne had, for example, kept Chewbacca for as long as she could and had then entrusted him to somebody else only because she knew she could continue seeing him in his new home. Similarly, Carol was very determined to do everything she could in order to keep Rain. In contrast, the two owners, for example, who decided to return their dogs to the shelter due to their aggressive behavior had owned them for a very short period of time before making that decision. This is consistent with the results of a study on relinquishing dogs and cats to shelters, which showed that owners who relinquished dogs for behavior problems were most likely to have owned them for less than three months (Salman et.al., 2000). While this might simply mean that the dog's behavioral problems quickly become an issue for the owner, I believe it implies that owners who have owned their dog for a longer time have developed a stronger bond with the dog and are less like to give it up.

While the lack of a bond between the owner and the dog might mean the owner has less of an incentive to keep their dog, that does not mean that they do not have other reasons to do so. Michelle, for example, reflecting on her experience with Liam, said:

I knew my dog for six months. And there's a human-dog bond that happens. And I had had that bond with my previous dogs in my parents' house. I didn't have that bond with this dog, at that point. But, I didn't want to give up on the opportunity to have the bond with the dog. And even though I didn't have that bond with the dog I felt the responsibility about protecting the dog.

Michelle recognized that there is a potential for a bond even with her problematic dog so simply the idea of that bond encouraged her to keep Liam. Her words also describe a notion of ingrained responsibility to take care of the dog that I noticed in many dog owners I talked. This sense of responsibility stems from the expectations set up by ideologies about the good owner, one that will not abandon their dog, but is also related to the parental-like role owners construct for themselves that necessarily set a dog up as a vulnerable dependent. This makes the owners reluctant to give up the dog, even if they have not bonded with it yet because such a decision would be in direct conflict with their parental responsibility for the dog. Additionally, as I implied in Chapter 5, the sense of not wanting

to give up on the dog is also tied to not wanting to give up on oneself as an owner. As Jennifer put it, "To me, giving [David] back to the shelter, would've been a total admission of failure on my part to be able to handle an animal."

It is clear then that while ownership of an aggressive dog can be difficult and dangerous, there are many factors that encourage owners to keep their dogs. Depending on the owners, their circumstances, and the type and the severity of the dog's behavior, the positive and the negative pressures will lead the owner to make different decisions regarding their dog. On one hand, as I showed earlier in the chapter, until the behavior becomes problematic enough to the owners, they will not consider doing something about it. On the other hand, if it becomes too dangerous or too difficult to manage, relative to the levels of attachment to the dog, the owners will try to solve the problem by getting rid of the dog. It is in the middle ground, where the behavior is too problematic to ignore but not problematic enough to outweigh the bond and the owner's sense of responsibility, that the owners will decide to try and work on getting rid of the behavior.

"FIXING" THE PROBLEM

'Fixing' the problem by trying to modify the dog's behavior, while a good option for both the owner and the dog, is often a difficult option as well. Firstly, 'fixing' is a misnomer and that is a difficult realization for many dog owners. As Jennifer put it, "At the time, back then, I thought you can fix the dog. I thought you can fix him. I didn't realize this whole thing about management, which has come over time." Whatever work one does with the dog, it is not a cure, but rather, a treatment. Furthermore, it is a treatment that generally does not show results quickly and can be difficult to implement. No one can talk to dogs about their behavior or put some magical collar on them or beat the aggression out of them. One cannot explain to them that their life is not in danger when they see a stranger or another dog a hundred yards down the road and you cannot get them to calm down by promising them an amazing treat when they go home. Whatever is actually done once the dog starts exhibiting aggression might end up making it worse. What works for one dog might not work for another. And the sheer amount of available information does not make it easier to choose what to do, and the number of people with varying degrees of qualifications and different approaches do not make it easier to find help. 'Fixing' the problem is a process, one that can be rewarding but also frustrating, expensive and extremely time consuming.

Deciding How to 'Fix' the Problem

Taking into account the amount of information about dog training and dog aggression available to the owners, it would seem easy for the owners who have decided to deal with their dog's aggressive behavior to learn more about it and different techniques for 'fixing' dog aggression. A simple internet search will yield over 1,860,000 results for a search on 'dog aggression,' about 4,750,000 for 'dog aggression treatment' and about 10,200,000 results for 'dog aggression help'. A variety of online articles, videos and discussion groups are practically free resources available to most dog owners. I remember the time some six years ago when I spent hours in front of my screen looking through dozens of websites and forums, reading about different methods, approaches and experiences. However, if an owner does not have that much time, or a computer, to sift through the internet, these resources might not be that accessible. Leanne voiced her disappointment with online information:

I tried to look online and, a lot of the information that I found was not very helpful. A lot of what I found talking about aggressive dogs was talking about legal repercussions and basically telling owners that it's their responsibility to make sure their dog isn't in a situation where it can attack anyone, which I totally understand. But I didn't find anything other than "see a trained dog behavior therapist" that gave me any suggestions as to things we can do, besides keeping him out of those environments.

While this is sound advice, it is not very helpful if the owner is unable to afford a dog professional. This was a problem for Leanne who wondered if working with a behaviorist could have helped Chewbacca have a better and longer life. Unfortunately, working with an aggressive dog presents an economic investment beyond regular dog ownership. The price of group dog training classes is rarely less than \$100, while sessions with renowned behaviorists that might cost hundreds of dollars. Jennifer admits to spending around \$20,000 trying to help David.

For those who can afford professional help, however, that seems to be a preferred option, at least initially. Most first-time owners of aggressive dogs might know very little about training dogs, and even less about training aggressive dogs, so when faced with a very novel problem and exposed to either not enough, or too much information, turning to a professional for help seems a very logical, and also a responsible choice. It provides the owner with an opportunity to interact with someone who can assess their dog's behavior and offer personalized advice and support.

Relying on one trainer, however, also raises some issues. Much like a relationship between a doctor and a patient, the owner-dog trainer relationship features a power

imbalance based on the (perceived) superior knowledge and experience of the trainer, which can in some instances rob the owner of decision-making. As one of the dog trainers I interviewed describes it, if an owner refuses to comply with a change or a procedure described by the trainer, “it’s like, well do you wanna fix this aggression problem?” And while such an ultimatum could be crucial for helping the dog, it can also be damaging because, unfortunately, unlike doctors, dog trainers do not need any formal education or certification to practice. As I will discuss in the next section, inadequate trainers can put the dog owners into very problematic situations.

Some owners I talked to had realized this and had, like Rachel and Natalie, called multiple professionals and allowed themselves to choose one they thought best. Rachel, chose the behaviorist she is currently working with because she liked the way the behaviorist approached the situation, but also because “she was a little pricier which I thought would mean a lot more. And she claimed herself as a behaviorist, not as a trainer.” Natalie, similarity, tried to find someone who would not only be good with dogs, but who would also be good with people and could explain her things effectively. In contrast, Jennifer, made a much quicker and less thought-through decision:

We called a trainer, out of a phonebook, because we never had a dog trainer. We had dogs for thirty years, we never had a dog trainer ... I picked her out of the phonebook, it’s not like I even screened anybody else, I didn’t like call five places ... there were a number of different types of places that I could’ve called, but I just picked, you know, out of a phonebook. I thought that, OK, we’ll have this trainer come to the house. I signed up for 10 sessions or something like that, for a healthy amount of money.

Unfortunately, the trainer Jennifer called ended up aggravating the problem instead of helping it, as did the two trainers she went to afterwards. Finally, she went back to square one, started doing more research and then successfully began working with David on her own and regretted not doing that much earlier.

These few examples point to the importance of learning more about dogs, their behavior and training after realizing a dog is exhibiting inappropriate aggressive behavior, although ideally the owner should do so before acquiring a dog. While this is a logical step for someone who decided to work with their dog without professional help, it is also important for those who decide to hire a dog behavior expert because it enables them to make better and more informed choices. If the owner had never worked with dog trainers, they might not be aware of the array of methods that exists and the varying degrees of expertise dog trainers might have. The more they know, the better they will know what they want from a trainer and they will be more likely to avoid various bad experiences.

Bad Experiences

There are various bad experiences one can have with a trainer. From problems with scheduling and payments to simple differences in character, many things can make the relationship with a trainer difficult. Sometimes, however, more serious incidents occur, that either break apart that relationship or prevent it from forming in the first place and can create a situation dangerous for everyone involved—the dog, their owner, their environment and the trainer. These experiences are the most troublesome and most worrying because they can discourage the owner from trying to help their dog and might make that process more difficult.

The trainer Sam was working with was using an approach Sam did not like, and to which Lea responded to very badly:

I had a dog trainer who came with the same theory about dominating dogs, and she grabbed Lea and put a choke chain on her and dragged her outside and marched her down the street. I was following them and—there's a dog that barks at the end of the street. Lea turned to start barking back at the dog, and the woman sprayed aerosol in her face, so Lea turned around and bit her.

The trainer then called Sam on two different occasions complaining about Lea and the bite and told Sam she should euthanize her dog. As Lea is now doing much better, that was clearly not a necessary step to take. The approach this trainer took, however, shows a lack of appropriate experience and low sense of responsibility for her actions. And while that, to me, is evidence of a bad trainer, to less knowledgeable dog owner a similar incident might “prove” that their dog is bad dog. This might discourage them from trying to help the dog or cause them to make a decision they could regret, such as putting the dog down, something Sam was very close to doing.

Other owners, like Jennifer and Kate, told me even more worrying stories. The trainers they hired claimed to be able to “fix” their dogs, but instead made the behavior even worse. Jennifer described her experience with the second board and train she took David to:

They were going to train him, they said they had all sort of experience with aggressive dogs. And apparently they'd had a lot of experience with dog on dog aggression, and not with human aggression. ... But I sent him there, and he came out and was way worse. He was not the same dog, and it took a long time to, kind of ... I think they used really harsh methods with him. And I actually have some videotapes ... and I saw some of the stuff that they did, and it's like "Holy Jesus" I mean, they ... No wonder! To me it was torture. Had I had any idea that this was—and then the dog came out and he was screwed up. Totally screwed up, and I was like "Oh my

God, what have I done?"

Jennifer's story is very saddening and discouraging but offers a valuable lesson and a very important observation about the difference in experience trainers might have with different types of aggressions. Out of many aggressive dogs whose stories I know from different forums, books and personal experience, many are aggressive towards dogs and are very tolerant towards people. For example, at the stage of my work with Brix that involved a lot of physical punishment, to the point of abuse, the closest he came to aggressing towards me was one growl. Trainers used to working with such dogs, especially if they use confrontational methods, can be putting themselves in dangerous situations when working with dogs aggressive to humans.⁷ This might have happen in the case of the first trainer Sam worked with, who ended up being bitten by Lea. This highlight the importance of the dog professionals honesty when it comes their competence, both for the trainer and the client.

Good Experiences

While dog owners do occasionally have bad experiences with dog trainers, most of my interviewees did voice a variety of good experiences. Many have formed good relationships with the professionals they were working with and they found those valuable. Both Sharon and Sam pointed out that talking to their behaviorist was " kind of like therapy" and they appreciated that they had someone they could contact any time if they encountered a problematic situation. Rachel and Eric found it really helpful that the individuals they were working with could understand their situation and what they were going through. Eric likened the relationship with his trainer to a relationship with a doctor, pointing out that he wants to "share everything with her, good and bad, because that just kind of goes in her library about what Oscar is all about."

Working with a trainer was also a positive experience because it, in general, improved the dog's behavior and their owner's ability to manage it. The owners I talked to really appreciated all the techniques the professionals taught them how to use, and found the information they gave them very valuable in dealing with their dogs. Sam, for example, points out that the behavioral specialist veterinarian she was working with told her Lea was a chow-chow mix, which explained her character, and was helped her realize just how much

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Various trainers do recognize that working with different types of aggression might require different skills or might posit a different level of risk. Those trainers, like one of the Bay Area trainers I interviewed, will responsibly not take on cases they do not feel comfortable handling.

some of Lea's health problems could be affecting her behavior. This types of insights and knowledge that owners received during the training process, helped them to successfully modify the dog's behavior, drastically reducing the impacts of the aggression on their lives that I pointed out in Chapter 5. This improved both the owners' and the dogs' lives. At the time of our interviews, Sharon, for example, said she was noticeably more relaxed around Rain than she used to be. Michelle pointed out she felt like she could control Liam and was comfortable walking him. Sam felt completely comfortable around Lea, and Jennifer could touch David without him reacting. Even Rachel ho was in the middle of her work with Dallas, was noticing progress

It's relieved a lot of stress and ... I used to take him to the dog park, and he would snap at another dog, and I would be so upset I would cry. I would be like, "I can't believe I can't like take you anywhere," and it was heartbreaking. And it's so much better now. Granted, I can't take him to dog parks. But I can at least walk him. And I can have him greet a stranger on the street.

To others, these might seem like small accomplishments, but they are very meaningful to the owners and encourage them to continue working with their dogs and ensure them a better quality of life.

Finally, one of the aspects of working with a dog professionals owners appreciated the most was the fact that they felt they were learning a lot about dogs and their culture in general. Many considered being able to "read the dog," that is, interpret the dog's body language and behavior, to be a very valuable skill. Not only did it help them understand dogs better by bridging the "cultural" or "communicational" gap between dogs and humans, but it also made what might have seemed like unpredictable behavior more predictable. Jennifer, for example, pointed out that

[Being able to read him was helpful] because you could stop him, you could see if he was in a pre-aggressive state, if he was in an alert state, in a like "I'm gonna pounce" state, or if he was ... You know, what is gonna make him turn his head and bite. And, so it did help me. I think it just made me more relaxed that I had some control. Because I now I had some tools to understand what he was doing, while before I was just blind.

Much like the simple fact of owning an aggressive dog shook up owners' dog ideologies, working with a dog behavior professional changed them further. Sharon, for example, told me that

[The training] is helping me cause I'm a little bit calmer around her, and I realize I have to be. And if I'm not, it's only going to get worse, and that's not what I want. And so the dog behavior is dependent on my behavior, and so I've just gotta suck it up and get over it ... [The behaviorist] is not really training the dog, she's training us. We have to change our perspective of how our relationship is in order to get the relationship that we want. And so basically, she's training us to train the dog, but she's also helping better our relationship with the dog. She kind of uses the language of dog training to make it really accessible and understandable to humans 'Cause I feel like a lot of times humans perceive dogs differently, they believe dogs to be more like them. We don't like to remember that they're pack animals, that they have to have an alpha.

Sharon's reflections show a very clear change in her dog ideology from a more anthropomorphic view of dogs to one that tries to take account of their dog culture. She is not only aware of this shift but happy about. Understanding more about dogs, and how she should be relating to Rain is not only helping her manage Rain's aggression but is also improving their relationship.

Other owners had similar experiences. Eric's trainer told him that Oscar might simply not be a dogs' dog and that it was OK if he was not. This went against the ideological notion that dogs should always be friendly to others and therefore it made it easier for Eric to accept Oscar's potential limitations. Sam experienced a very similar shift in her work with Lea and the behaviorist, and she came to think about dog ownership differently:

It's like kids, you can't pick their personality, and she has her limitations, for sure, but she's a wonderful dog and I'm happy I have her. But it wasn't my little ideal image of this furry thing I have coffee with, and is friendly to everybody ... she's not gonna be that dog. And so I just stopped having those kind of expectations. And once I let go of that, actually I think, it deepened this kind of connection between her and I because I wasn't wanting her to be something she just was not.

In Sam's case, and also Sharon's, it might be possible to even say that their dogs' aggression issues ultimately allowed them to have a type of a relationship that might not have been possible if they had not been forced to work with their dogs and learn about them.

How Far Would Owners Go for Results?

While many dog owners I have talked to have been making good progress and are successfully, albeit sometimes very slowly, in dealing with their dogs' aggressive behavior, the fact is that that does not always happen. Even if the owner's overall experience with the

dog trainer is positive, and they are investing time and money trying to help their dog, sometimes the results just are not visible, or maybe the progress is just unsatisfactorily slow. In those situations, the owners might start reconsidering the training approach they are using with their dog and start thinking about other options they might have, some of which they had not felt comfortable with before.

Eric, for example, was quite disheartened after the incident in which Oscar tore the leash off of his belt loop and lunged at another dog. Since then, he started considering other tools that could help him control Oscar.

I was opposed to even considering the idea of a shock collar. I thought no way. There's no way I'd do that ... And I've heard about the choke collars and things like that. And before I was totally opposed, but now I'm open to the possibility that there may be a situation [in which] it's appropriate for us to use any of those methods, like. If we did ... I would hope that it would be a last resort kind of thing. I would want that extra factor of safety that even if he's not in my grasp, that I could stop him from causing injury to some other dog.

Eric pointed out that if it ever came to the point where he used some of the methods he considered less positive, he would do research and would find a trainer that really knew how to use them. He, however, felt uncomfortable talking to his trainer, who used only positive reinforcement methods, about the options he was considering, revealing that he did feel he should not be considering them. This makes sense as there is now a lot of stigma regarding the use of some "harsher" methods, something confirmed for me by many of my interviewees who were using electric or prong collars. They were met with public disapproval as people blamed the method for the dog's problem or look down on the owner. However, these owners found the tools they were using useful and felt comfortable using them, because they helped them solve a difficult problem. Some, owners, like Rachel, explicitly pointed out that

I would try everything, aside from beating him. I would try everything. I didn't want to rule out any method right away because I was like—what if that's the method that works?

In addition to "harsh" training methods, other ways of dealing with aggression some of the owners were not comfortable with were the use of medications and muzzles. While a few individuals I talked to had good experiences with "doggie prozac," others were very suspicious of it because they didn't know what it was doing to the dog, or they found it to change their dog's personality, highlighting their care for the dogs' well being. And while some owners regularly muzzled their dogs, which helped them relax when with them,

others felt that wearing a muzzle puts their dogs in an uncomfortable and defenseless position. In addition, they were upset with the very negative reactions of others people, especially dog owners, in response to the muzzle. This is worrying and it shows that the public is one of the things that discourages the use of a tool that can, if properly used, make the dog much safer to be around. It is important to note, however, that in many cases, even if owners were against a certain approach, they implied that they would consider it again if nothing else worked and it was their last, and best option.

The above examples show that owners can take a variety of approaches to dealing with their dog's aggression and might be willing to take some but not others. It also seems that if the dog's behavior worsens, owners might start considering using tools or methods they were previously uncomfortable or unacquainted with, especially when they weigh their discomfort with an approach against potential danger to others. While this might mean being willing to use what some individuals might deem "harsher" or less "dog friendly" methods, it can also be a push in the opposite direction. Jennifer, for example, after her experience with her last trainer had decided to try training David on her own using more of a reward-based approach. After failing to punish Brix for exhibiting aggression, I had similarly decided to try using clicker training I had, up until that point, considered to be a very stupid method of training dogs.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have tried to show the different avenues dog owners can take once it becomes clear they have to do something about the dog's behavior, or once their life situation enables them to do something about it. I acknowledged that many dogs might get given away or euthanized and showed how those can be very difficult decision as they bring into conflict the dog-owner bond and the fact that the dog is, in many ways, presenting a danger to its surroundings.

I focused, however, on owners who decided to work with their dogs and try to decrease the severity of the problem. If done properly and successfully, the training process stands in clear opposition to owners' experiences I have described in previous chapters. While first occurrences of aggression challenge owners' concepts of dogs and dog ownership, learning more about dogs and their communication enable dog owners to recognize their dog ideologies as ideologies and help them think about and relate to their dog in a much more realistic way. This can, as I mentioned in the end of the previous

chapter, help the owners get more out of their relationship with their dog than they would have if their dog had not been aggressive. Furthermore, as the dog starts aggressing less and owners learn about how to respond properly in situations in which the dog does aggress, they will feel less stressed, they will be able to engage in more activities with their dogs, and they will feel much better about themselves as dog owners. While an aggressive dog might never be "fixed," it can be successfully managed and the quality of life with the dog, and of the dog's life, drastically improved.

Unfortunately, not all dog training endeavors are successful. While some might simply not bring expected results, others might make the aggressive behavior worse. This is especially problematic when this involves a dog professional because the owner will trust, and pay, the dog professional to help them, and their failure to do so might discourage owners from trying to help the dog again. The lack of regulation among dog trainers in the United States does represent a big problem for the owners of aggressive dogs because it can endanger the lives of their dogs even when the owners have best of intentions and the dogs have good chances of rehabilitation.

CHAPTER 7

THE PROBLEMATIC CONSTRUCT OF THE “AGGRESSIVE DOG”

In Chapter 3 I discussed dog ideologies and argued that aggression is acceptable in family dogs only if used to protect. Otherwise, it is viewed as abnormal and dangerous. In Chapters 4-6 I then presented stories of various owners whose loved family dogs behave aggressively in a way that is not considered appropriate by their owners or the public in general. These stories, however, are not the ones that generally come to mind when aggressive dogs are mentioned. Rather, this label brings to mind a much different dog and a very different dog-ownership situation, such as a dangerous dog that has been seriously mistreated or was trained to be aggressive.

In this chapter, I will examine this image of an “aggressive dog” that stands in stark contrast to the one I presented in the previous chapters, looking at how and why it is created, how it fits within, or alongside, the dog ideologies I discussed in Chapter 3, what kind of expectations it sets up and finally why it can be problematic for (future) dog owners and dogs in general. To do this, I will first consider society’s vehement reactions to acts of dog aggression that do show a high degree of awareness that dogs are potentially dangerous. Then I will look at a stereotypical construction of an aggressive dog as a category into which people can place dogs they perceive as “abnormal.” From there I will go on to examine the beliefs people have about owners of aggressive dogs and about the strategies that should be used to deal with aggressive dogs. While in my discussion I will suggest ways in which these ideological constructions can be problematic, I do not

necessarily believe they can or should be changed, but I simply want to point out the need to be aware of these ideologies as such.

THE DOG-BITE EPIDEMIC

Despite the prevalent dog ideology of “no (inappropriate) aggression,” the fact is that many dogs act aggressively, many bite people and the society is aware of this. In 1994, for example, an estimated 1.8% of the US population was bitten by a dog (Sacks, Kresnow and Houston, 1996), an incidence which makes dog bite injuries a serious health issue (Hunthausen, 1997). A few of those injuries are very serious, sometimes even resulting in deaths, and they bring dog aggression into the media and public discourse. In a study of representations of animals in U.S. tabloids, dogs were found to be the most frequent perpetrator in the stories of the “vicious type” (Herzog and Galvin, 1992). There is frequent talk of a “dog bite epidemic,”⁸ framing dog aggression as a matter of public concern. A death caused by a dog is considered “a crime so heinous that the perpetrator, and others like it, must be destroyed” (Podberscek, 1994). Should we in fact be this worried about the harmfulness of dog aggression to humans?

The risk of injury people are exposed to when interacting with dogs is actually relatively low compared to other risks that people accept as a part of every-day life. Dog bite injuries, while numerous, often do not require any treatment at all (Bradley, 2005: 34), and when they do, they are on average less severe than any other class of common injury (Bradley, 2005: 47). The likelihood of being killed by a dog is also extremely low—one is more likely to die as a result of an accident involving bathtubs, coffee-table corners, Christmas trees, five-gallon water buckets, balloons and slippers (Bradley, 2005: 15). A child is many times more likely to be killed by a caregiver than by a dog (Bradley, 2005: 22), and while a person is somewhat less likely to be killed by a child under the age of thirteen than a dog, they are more than thirty times more likely to be killed by a child under the age of 18.⁹

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Bradley, however, shows that the frequently cited information, “from 1986-1994, there was a 37% increase in dog bites, even though the number of dogs went up just 2%.” (Falcon, 2001) is not a reasonable conclusion to make from available data.

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There are approximately 78.2 million dogs in the United States (APPA, 2012). There are around 50.7 million children aged 0-11 years, and 76.1 million children aged 0-17 in the United States (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 2011). Between 2005 and 2010 (inclusive) there were 182 dog attacks that resulted in death, 30.3 per year (DogsBite.org, 2012). In

They are also more likely to be killed or severely injured by an animal other than a dog that they might have much less exposure to, such as a horse (Bradley, 2005: 51). Taking into account these statistics, people's reaction to dog aggression is disproportionately strong and emotional, especially when the aggression is directed towards humans and results in physical harm.

It therefore seems safe to say then that Western society is not only aware of the potential for aggression in dogs, but hyper-aware. This anxiety is evident from the relative overreaction to incidents of dog aggression, which is partially to blame for the way dogs are regarded in Western society and the expectations we have of them, that is dog ideologies (Podberscek, 1994; O'Heare, 2007: 18). After all, an inappropriately—abnormally—aggressive dog seems to be breaking some ancient contract between people and their canine best friends and therefore should be a cause for concern. What becomes an issue then is reconciling the these aggressive dogs that make people nervous and the dog ideology that seemingly denies their existence. Like in other cases of things that do not fit into existent categories, a new, stigmatized one is created for the anomalies (Douglas, 1966:Chapter 2)—a different type of a dog is constructed, an Other that is not only allowed to, but is expected to behave aggressively, and it serves as scapegoat for most instances of dog aggression.

“ANOTHER SPECIES OF A DOG”

A prototypical aggressive dog is big, vicious looking, snarling, with bared teeth and a slobbery face, stiff tail, hackles up, eyes fixed on the target. It is a dog that actively seeks out or even enjoys conflict, or engages in conflict with an intent to cause harm, “like an aggressive human.”¹⁰ Its aggressive displays are unpredictable, unprovoked and “disproportionate to the threat it feels.” It is a mean, extremely reactive, malicious, evil, vicious, dominant animal, not safe to be around and untrustworthy. As one of the respondents to my survey (Appendix B) pointed out, “a dog that gets into fights seems like a whole different species from our pet.”

This type of a description constructs and demonizes the aggressive dog as a Cujo-like animal, Cujo being a rabid St. Bernard from a Stephen King's novel and its movie adaptation of the same name, which turns from a friendly pet into a ‘demon dog from hell’

the same time period, there were 66 homicides committed by children aged 0-12, 11 per year, and 5794 homicides committed by children aged 0-17, 967.7 per year (FBI.gov, n.d.)

¹⁰ This quote, and all other unattributed quotes in this section, come from the responses to my survey (see Appendix B)

that kills four people. While Cujo is certainly an extreme case, it has a contemporary and real equivalent—the guard dog breeds. Some of the survey respondents defined an aggressive dog as a naturally aggressive or violent breed that has been bred to be a guard dog and “shouldn’t be owned in [the] first place like tigers shouldn’t be owned.” It is a Rotweiler or a Pit Bull. Certain breeds of dogs, or dogs that look like they are of a certain breed are therefore defined as aggressive or potentially dangerous simply from their appearance. They are what partially characterizes the “abnormally aggressive dog” category.

This is not a new phenomenon—in the 19th century, the American public was worried about Bloodhounds, Mastiffs and Newfoundlands, which were the breeds predominantly responsible for severe and fatal attacks on humans. In the 20th century, problem dogs were German Shepherds, Dobermans, then Rotweillers, and especially Pit Bulls, which are the main “super-predators” today (Delise, 2007). What has changed through the time has not been the dogs, but people’s breed preference for negative functions such as guarding.

What has also changed in recent times is the media’s perspective on dog attacks. Only since the 1980’s have newspaper reports of serious and fatal dog attacks started focusing on the breed, as opposed to other aspects of attacks such as triggers and circumstances (Delise, 2007: 26). While this made stories more sensational, it resulted in two problems. First, stories lost some of the didactic power they used to have—for example by omitting or skewing information about circumstances, such as calling a resident dog a ‘family dog’,¹¹ a dog’s behavior is framed as unexpected, unpredictable and therefore shocking (Delise, 2007: 150), which sells newspapers but fails to warn people about risk factors for dog attack. Second, an increased focus on breed has negatively affected the reputations of certain breeds as token “aggressive dogs,” which leads to the “breedism” evident in other news reports, legislation (e.g. breed bans) and people’s general attitudes towards a breed.

Pit Bulls are a very good example of this. Their attacks are vastly over-reported—while a fatal attack by a mix-breed or a husky type dog might be reported in a few local newspaper, an attack by a Pit Bull might find its way into over a hundred US and international news stories, both on television and in print (Delise, 2007: 142-3). Not only that, but newspapers are also reporting on Pit Bulls “almost” attacking a human or attacking a cat, despite there being numerous other serious injuries they could have chosen to report

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As repeatedly pointed out by Delise (2007: 168), “Dogs maintained as resident dogs cannot be expected to exhibit the same level of sociability as dogs afforded the opportunity to interact with humans and their families on a daily basis and in positive and more humane functions”

on instead, some of them involving other breeds or “unexpected” perpetrators of crimes, such as parents against children (Delise, 2007:147). On top of that, in many news articles, the actual breed of the dog is misreported. According to Dogsbite.org (2012), which collects statistics from newspaper articles, Pit Bulls were responsible for 22 out of 33 fatal attacks on humans in 2010. The National Canine Research Council's 2010 report (NCRC, 2010), which is a product of independent investigation, reliably identified only 2 out of the 33 dogs as Pit Bulls.

This media bias clearly suggests an “abnormally aggressive category” at work here— if a dog seriously injures or kills a human, the act can easily be explained by the fact that the dog was a Pit Bull and therefore not a regular family dog that is expected to act unaggressively.¹² Beyond creating problems for dogs that may look like Pit Bulls, this “Pit Bull craze” also helps construct a very problematic aspect of US dog ideology. A line between a ‘normal’ dog that will not be aggressive, or will aggress only appropriately, and an “abnormally aggressive dog” gets drawn based on a dog’s appearance that is taken to have predictive value of the dog’s behavior, even though studies have shown a lack of correlation between inappropriate aggression and breed (Schalke et al., 2007). This accounts for the public perception that only certain breeds of dogs can be aggressive towards humans (and other animals) (Delise, 2007: 147), evidence of which I saw in my interviews. Leanne, for example, said outright that she was aware of the fact that aggressive dog existed, but she had always thought of them as back-yard Pit Bulls. As I pointed out in Chapter 4, many owners simply do not even consider aggression as a possibility when acquiring a dog. On the other hand, owners of Pit Bull-like dogs, like Michelle, were explicit about times when their dog’s appearance made it more difficult to address problems that emerged due to the dog’s behavior, or even created uncomfortable situations when their dog was not being aggressive at all.

ANOTHER CULPRIT—THE BAD OWNER

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I have to admit that I am simplifying things here. In the context of the media seeking to make their stories more sensational and various people arguing for and against breed-bans, the representation of Pit Bulls is a complex issue. There often seems to be a tendency to try and show that even family Pit Bulls are somehow abnormal and dangerous and should not be allowed, an argument that exploits and reinforces the categorization of Pit Bulls as the Other that some people still “unreasonably” treat as if it were just any other dog. For a great discussion of this, see Delise (2007).

While various people blame aggressive behavior on the breed, others find fault with the owner who is either bad for owning such a dog in the first place or incompetent for trying to deal with a dangerous dog. According to some responses in my survey, aggressive dogs are seen to be aggressive because they have been taught to be aggressive, have been mistreated, improperly or under-socialized, or improperly trained if trained at all. The aggressive behavior is therefore “not the fault of the dog, it’s the fault of the owners” who, even if they have not been neglecting or mistreating the dog or teaching it aggressive behavior, have probably chosen the wrong dog or did not neuter the dog, or are “[t]oo lazy to work or lack the sufficient knowledge to deal with breeds [that are] genetically more dominant.” Their dog does not obey them, and they are unable to control it and cannot stop its aggressive displays.

Like the aggressive dog, this type of an owner does not conform to the expectations of a dog ideology that sees the owner as necessarily responsible and in control of their dog, but also loving and caring. Many images of owners of aggressive dogs simply do not fit with the every-day dog owner. The most salient example are individuals who use their dogs for fighting and treat their dogs much like objects. Then there are the (predominantly young male) participants in urban hip-hop culture who seemingly care about their dogs but use them to intimidate and build their own identity, as depicted in a British documentary, “My Weapon is a Dog” (Haywood-Williams, 2009). In contrast, research done in Germany by Roll and Unshelm (1997) describes the prototypical owner of a dog aggressive towards other dogs as an emotionally distant, if not aggressive, professional in his thirties, interested in training his dog and using it for protection. He is not overly upset if his dog gets into a dog fight.

While portraying different types of owners, all of these stereotypes are similar in that they imply a causal relationship between the owner’s behavior/attitude and the dog’s behavior, constructing the owner of an aggressive dog as a bad or irresponsible dog owner, who, interestingly, often picks a large, “aggressive” breed for their dog. This dichotomy between good and bad owners in turn creates an expectation that a responsible dog owner will not have an aggressive dog, as those are owned only by irresponsible individuals.

Taking into consideration the profiles and the stories of the owners I interviewed, and the fact that there are many more owners out there seeking help for their dogs’ behavior, it seems clear that not all owners of aggressive dogs fit the above stereotypes. However, for most of them, the behavior of their dog is probably something very unexpected, in part because they view themselves as good and responsible owners and as such should not have a problematic dog. The construct of the “owner of an aggressive dog”

is therefore problematic in a way very similar to how the construct of an “aggressive dog” is problematic—it makes aggression seem like something that happens only to someone else’s dog. Furthermore, it captures neither the complexity of owning an aggressive dog nor the difficulty of making responsible decisions when taking care of the dog come to conflict with circumstances (an issue I discussed in Chapters 5 and 6). Owners of aggressive family dogs therefore really cannot know what to expect.

HOW AGGRESSION CAN OR SHOULD BE ADDRESSED

Apart from beliefs about which dogs are aggressive and who their owners are, people also have beliefs about what kind of place in society aggressive dogs can or should have. Some respondents to my survey believe that “[t]here’s no place for an aggressive dog unless you’re talking about a police dog” and that “[t]here’s nothing that can be done for such a dog” since aggressive dogs, as opposed to normal dogs, cannot be taught not to use violence. In contrast, others believe aggressive behavior can be modified with appropriate training and/or medication, but realize the behavior has to be managed for the rest of the dog’s life. This management might even include “[making] sure a dog doesn’t come in contact with other animals or people” by, for example, not taking the dog out in public with a muzzle or keeping it in household with children or other animals. This difference in people’s attitudes on the ability of aggressive dogs to participate in the society might depend on their definition of ‘aggressive dog’, but it also implies differences in people’s opinions on the acceptability of the risk of owning an aggressive dog. These differences can easily emerge in interpersonal conflicts over dogs’ behavior than can be very stressful for the owners.

A specific belief about dealing with aggression in dogs that is probably the most problematic is the one that constructs aggression as a problem that can be solved in a fairly short time, easily and permanently. I have definitely held this belief myself and have heard it expressed by many dog owners. Jennifer, for example, clearly stated that when she first hired a trainer, she thought David would be fine after 10 sessions. While in a few cases aggression might be solved quickly, for example if it is caused by a treatable medical condition, behavioral modification is generally a long and ongoing process. Unfortunately, it is also a process that is very invisible to the public, or even most dog owners, who are instead exposed to various stories of seemingly quick and easy “fixes.” Probably the foremost example of this are dog-focused TV shows like “The Dog Whisperer” or “It’s Me or

the Dog” that show problematic behaviors, including aggression, being eliminated or severely reduced in what is maybe 30 minutes of TV time, often representing not more than a dozen days of real time. Furthermore, various fictional stories also show resolution of aggression through little or no effort by the owner. Examples looked at by Rajcecki (2000) include instances of unwanted aggressive behavior which is not explicitly addressed, but stops being a problem with time. A book titled *One Good Dog* (Willson, 2010) tells a story of a Pit Bull mix that once used for fighting that does display some aggression towards other dogs, but with the help of a book and a few tips from a TV show, the dog is completely rehabilitated.

While these messages are good because they encourage owners to keep their dogs and try to help them, they are not realistically portraying what that help might entail, or what form it should take. Various other resources aimed specifically at owners of aggressive dogs do not necessarily offer better information. Hundreds of books, websites and other materials preach a wide variety of approaches, and while some stress that dealing with an aggressive dog can be a difficult and life-long commitment, others offer quick and easy solutions, many of which rely on punishment and as such can make the problem worse (Hiby et al., 2004; Herron et al., 2009). This can prompt owners like Sam’s partner, or sometimes even self-proclaimed trainers, to start dealing with the behavior without having the necessary knowledge to do so. This is problematic for the owner and the dog, if we keep in mind that a certified dog behavior specialist like Dr. Jeanine Berger, whom I have interviewed, explicitly states that

every aggressive dog should be seen by a veterinary specialist. [E]specially aggression cases I feel need to be seen by a veterinary specialist in order to rule out any medical reasons for the behavior problem ... Because there’s so much information out there, on the internet, which is just random and unspecific... And then some of the advice people are being given is just plain wrong so if you don’t have the skills and the knowledge to choose what’s right and wrong specifically for your dog this can lead to problems later in life.

Finally, if the general public, including owners of non-aggressive dogs perceive aggression as an easy thing to solve, their expectations of dogs owners will be higher and they will not have much understanding for owners trying to work with their dogs on improving their dog’s behavior. There is a lot of pressure on owners, once they recognize their dog has problems with aggression, to solve the behavior as quickly as possible. If they are unable to do so, it must mean either that they are a bad owner or that their dog is ‘abnormally aggressive’ and should be kept away from other people and dogs. A desire to achieve quick results can also rush, and therefore render ineffective, the often slow process

of “rehabilitating” the dog, and account for various negative experience with working with the dog I described in Chapter 6.

CONCLUSION

In Chapter 3 I showed that people’s beliefs about family dogs differ from reality. Then in Chapters 4 and 5 I argued that that the conflict between the two is especially problematic for owners of aggressive family dogs. In this chapter I presented what I believe are predominant beliefs about aggressive dogs and their owners held by a naïve public and indicated that they, too, fail to describe the situations in which the owners I interviewed found themselves.

Beliefs about aggressive dogs seem to be constructed as the antithesis of the family dog, a dangerous Other with their bad owners. This is ideologically necessary in order to explain the transgression of some dogs that do not behave in accordance with the main dog ideology of “no inappropriate aggression,” and also to alleviate the social anxiety about those transgressions—instead of being nervous about all dogs, the public can target only specific types of dogs. This strategy therefore, sets a very clear boundary between family dogs and aggressive dogs, and also responsible and irresponsible owners. This enables the (future) dog owners to, at the same time, be aware that there are such things as aggressive dogs and also expect their dog not to be aggressive because they consider themselves a good owner and they are not acquiring a stereotypically aggressive dog. As seen from the stories I presented in the last three chapters, this expectation is, unfortunately, false.

Another set of beliefs about dog aggression that I indicated as troublesome are beliefs about how to deal with aggressive dogs. The owners are supposed to either get rid of their dogs, keep them away from others or, if possible, make them conform to the regular ideology as quickly as possible by addressing their behavior through training, medication etc. While in themselves these seem like reasonable options, they do not leave any space for public displays of aggression, again confirming the ideology that aggression should not be seen, but also making it more difficult for owners to effectively deal with their dogs.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

In this thesis I presented and discussed the experiences of owners of aggressive family dogs in the contemporary U.S. and situated them within a broader socio-cultural context. This context is predominantly the one of positively oriented middle-class dog ideologies, which I discussed in Chapters 3 and 7. I showed how dogs are generally expected to fill the role of the best friend—obedient, unobtrusive and protective if necessary—and how their relationship with their owner is expected to be rewarding by nature. I also showed how aggressive dogs are constructed as a different kind of dog, and their owners as a specific type of an irresponsible owner, creating a ideological category that makes even worse the cases in which dogs harm others. This distinction between the “Walt Disney” family dog and the “Cujo” aggressive dog leaves no place for family dogs who exhibit inappropriate aggression and put their owners, who are confronted with a very unexpected reality of owning an aggressive dog, in a difficult position. As I told the stories of the owners I interviewed, I often drew on this conflict between ideology and reality to explain why ownership of an aggressive dog is problematic beyond simply having to deal with a threatening and difficult to manage behavior.

In my analysis, I indicated three main ways in which owning an aggressive dog can be problematic, and I dedicated one chapter to each. First, there are the owner’s experiences when directly faced with the aggressive behavior (Chapter 4). Often these experiences are shocking because the behavior is so unexpected. As the owners re-experience their dogs’ behavior, they come to terms with the realization that they have a problem and recognize the potential extent of the problem, which can be difficult and may require time. As dogs are

aggressing more and more, their behavior starts affecting their owners' lives more and more (Chapter 5). Owners' daily schedules change, especially when it comes to interactions with the dog, they experience an increase in stress levels, increase in negative interactions with others and also changes in the perception of the dog and the self. Finally, even though the owners might tolerate their dogs' behavior for long periods of time (Takeuchi et al., 2001; Sullivan & Jones, 2008), as the dog's behavior worsens, or other circumstances in the owners' lives change, the behavior can get impossible to tolerate. Owners might at that point try to remove the dog from their home by euthanizing it or giving it away. Conversely, they might try to modify the behavior, but here they must choose from a wide variety of approaches and trainers. Various factors come into play when making these very difficult decisions, such as the type and the extent of aggression, availability of various options, their cost, the owner's bond with the dog and their sense of responsibility towards the dog and towards others the dog might hurt. While in some cases it is difficult, or maybe even impossible to achieve, the ideal outcome for both the dog and the owners is when the owner decides to keep the dog and is successful at managing and modifying the dog's aggression.

In my analysis, a few themes stood out. They were either broad topics that emerged frequently or more specific points that were nonetheless very anthropologically interesting and important for the owner's experience as a whole. I discuss each themes in turn.

Difficulty of Owning an Aggressive Dog and Strength of the Dog-Human Bond

As predicted, I have found that owning an aggressive dog is more time-consuming, stressful and expensive than owning a dog without problematic behaviors. Their dogs' behavior impacted many aspects of the owners' lives and required many sacrifices. Still, all but one of my interviewees demonstrated very strong feelings for their dog and had gone to great lengths to try and help their dogs and secure them a better life, exemplifying just how strong a dog-human bond can be. This is further highlighted by the similarity of the impact of ownership of aggressive dog with the impact of troubled children on parents, as indicated by Francis (2011). The two experiences might only differ in degree. This is very significant because it shows that dog owners might not only think of their dogs as children or family members, as many authors have indicated, but that ownership of the dog is truly similar in kind to parenthood.

Dog Ideology - Dog Reality Conflict

In this thesis I have stressed the concept of dog ideologies in trying to explain why owning an aggressive dog is problematic beyond having to deal with the aggression. Often,

coming to terms with the behavior and its impacts involved changing one's dog ideology, and this required time and effort. After all, an aggressive dog behaves very differently from what is expected, and its behavior might easily prevent their owners from experiencing the type of dog ownership they envisioned. Many owners, however, pointed out that due to their experience, they had changed the way they thought about aggression in dogs and pointed out that aggression is something they would think about when choosing their next dog, or even when approaching other people's dogs.

These findings are important because they imply that dog ideologies might not only make ownership of aggressive dogs more problematic, but it might also be part of the cause of the problem. There is some indication that, in general, owners of aggressive dogs have never owned an aggressive dog before (Line & Voith, 1986; Jagoe & Serpell, 1996), and as I pointed out in Chapter 7, unawareness of aggression as a possibility might prevent owners acquiring a puppy from taking the steps necessary to decrease the possibility of the dog exhibiting "abnormal" aggression. Furthermore, it might also make it more difficult for the owners to respond to the behavior appropriately and timely once faced with it. .

Human-Directed vs. Dog Directed Aggression

A difference between ownership of a human-aggressive dog and a dog aggressive dog became fairly salient in my interviews. Dog directed aggression seems to be a bigger problem especially in areas where there are a lot of dogs, since it makes taking the dog out for walks very difficult. Dogs aggressive towards humans seem to exhibit that behavior in fewer situations, but the question of liability in case the dog bites is a big worry for the owner. The two also contrast in terms of space - many dog-aggressive dogs seem to be fine inside their homes, unless aggressing at another dog in the household. However, dogs aggressive towards humans will often have most of the close contacts with people inside the home, making the home a very stressful space. Aggression towards people also seems to concern people more (Appendix B) and has the potential to inflict the most damage on the dog-owner bond if directed at the owner. It is therefore more problematic for the dog as it seems that dogs aggressing towards people are more likely to be euthanized.

Influence on Owner's Social Relationships

Of all the different ways I saw aggressive dog behavior affecting owners' lives, the one I found most interesting was its impact on individuals' social lives, especially the conflicts it creates. Their dogs' aggression can cost owners their friends, or at least decrease their opportunities to interact with friends, it can initiate arguments with loved ones, and it can

make interactions with strangers tense enough for an official hearing to be necessary in order to solve the dispute. While some social isolation can result directly from the inability to control the dog's behavior in social situations, the conflicts themselves arise due to people, who might have different dog ideologies on how dogs should behave or how they should be trained, or disagreements about the particular dog in question.

What is very interesting about this issue is that it constructs the dog as a social actor that participates in, and affects, their owner's social relationships. This is especially highlighted in situations when owners choose to spend time with their dog instead of with their friends which implies an important social bond between dog and owner.

Impacts of Successful Training

Many owners I talked to engaged in training their dogs, although that is likely more indicative of my sample than of owners' tendencies more generally to try and modify their dog's behavior. While for some the training has not been successful, or not as successful as they hoped it would be, for many the process has been effective and a very rewarding experience. The decreased aggression and the increased ability to control and manage the dog has made ownership less stressful, "repairing" a lot of "damage" inflicted by the behavior on the owner's lives. In addition, the process of working with the dog also affected the owner's inner lives—giving them increased confidence, while also teaching them more about dog behavior and communication that helps them bridge the dog-human cultural gap. This made them feel better as dog owners and also brought their dog ideologies closer to dog realities, which made it easier to interact and be satisfied with, their dog.

The interactions between dogs and humans are clearly unique. The bond between the two can be very strong, both emotional and, in a way, social, and it can resist various disturbances, including aggressive behavior. Dog aggression, while definitely problematic, is in many cases not only a manageable issue, it is also, if properly employed, a very useful one. Not only can it encourage individual owners to try to better understand and communicate with their dog, allowing the improvement of their relationship, but it can also serve as a reminder to the society as a whole that dogs are, and always will be, dogs—animals with their own needs and culture who can, and sometimes do, fight and bite.

BROADER IMPLICATIONS FOR ANTHROPOLOGY AND OTHER SOCIAL SCIENCES

This thesis connects with broader question in the social sciences in various ways, some more specific than others. It also provides various insights into contemporary American culture.

On the one hand, my research builds on the study of human relationships with animals and describes the forms this relationship can take. In Chapter 2, I pointed to changing trends in the study of this relationship, and my findings confirm that continuation of this shift is very much needed. It seems that at least some individuals relate to their dogs in a way that is much closer to the way they relate to people than other animals, or let alone objects. Studies of families and social relationships can, I think, gain a lot by at least considering, if not including people's pets.

On the other hand, my focus on dog ideologies serves to highlight the problematic nature of ideologies that is certainly not restricted to the domain of dog ownerships. Beliefs we have about the workings of the world enable us to structure it as individuals and as participants in a particular culture. They are necessary and not necessarily always false. However, when they differ too much from the reality they seek to order, they can be problematic as they might cause us to have unrealistic expectations or make inappropriate decisions. Furthermore, conflicting ideologies can easily spark conflict between individuals, with little chance of quick resolution as it is not easy to become aware of a particular ideology, let alone actively influence it or change it.

Finally, there is an issue I only briefly discussed in Chapter 7—breedism. Although it did not emerge as a prominent issue in my research, I did encounter various discussions of it over and over again in my interviews and literature review. What is interesting about it is that it really speaks to the process of creating stigmatized cultural categories and bears a striking resemblance to the issue of racism. And while in dogs, due to their selective breeding, there is some relation between the natural instincts the dog is more likely to exhibit and breed, dogs' behaviors and personalities are frequently being judged not necessarily on their actual breed, but on their perceived breed. This is nearly always based on appearance, which often turns into a guessing game in case of mixed breed dogs. Furthermore, for some breeds, the "one-drop-rule" seems to apply—if it looks kind of like a Pit Bull, it is a Pit Bull and is therefore as aggressive and as dangerous as a Pit Bull (is thought to be).

Research Suggestions

As I was doing my research and analyzing my data, I repeatedly wished I could also research other topics, or at least wished someone else had done so. The prime example of this was my interest in dog ideologies. While I had this idea of what I think about dogs, and what other people think about dogs, I had no way of telling how many people think what. I therefore constructed a small survey (Appendix B) that I hoped would tell me a bit more about what people really think about dogs, which, while helpful, revealed only little. It would be interesting to find out more about how people with different exposure to dogs think about dogs in general and try to confirm the positive-oriented dog ideology as the predominant one in the contemporary America. I would also like to see whether different dog ideologies correlate to broader cultural differences or are more due to individual variation. Taking into account various orientations towards animals by their owner, and different reasons people have for acquisition of animals, it would also be valuable to look into how those orientations do, or do not, correlate with different expectations people might have of dogs. It would then also be useful to repeat the research similar to mine, but aiming to gather stories of different types of owners.

While my personal feeling is that aggression is a particularly problematic, unwanted behavior, this might be due to my personal bias—aggression is definitely the most problematic unwanted behavior for me. It would therefore be useful to look at how different issues, behavioral or otherwise, challenge the dog-owner bond and impact owners lives. For example, DiGiacomo et al. (1993) in their research on owners who surrendered their pets to shelters, indicate a variety of things that can go wrong in pet ownership: from various behavioral issues to pet health problems, from changes in living situations to family members' allergic reactions to the pet. Investigation of these might be able to show where and how people draw the lines, if they do, between the dog and the rest of their family. After all, abandoning a pet is much more acceptable than abandoning a child.

Finally, it would also be useful to look more into breedism. There is a study currently underway, conducted by Dr. Julie K. Levey with the support of the University of Florida's Shelter Medicine Program looking into peoples' ability to determine the predominant breed in a mixed breed dog. It would be interesting to couple this with investigation of peoples' expectations of how the pictured dog would behave. This could provide information about how the appearance of a particular aggressive family dog might be influencing the overall experience of owning it. I know, for example, that if both of my dogs were equally uncomfortable around people, I would be a lot more worried about people trying to pet the fluffy and cute Brix than the German shepherd looking Reeva.

SUGGESTIONS FOR OWNERS, TRAINERS AND FURTHER RESEARCH ABOUT AGGRESSION

My findings, while interesting, would not surprise many dog trainers or owners who have had similar experiences. The suggestions that emerge from these findings, are therefore not new or groundbreaking, but are, I believe, still important to state.

First, I want to emphasize the importance of owner education. Many individuals I interviewed told me they wished they had known before getting a dog what kind of problems they could expect. They also wished they had been more familiar with dog body language. I personally believe that taking a dog to a training/behavior class should be as expected of owners as taking their dog to a veterinarian. Owners would then be able to socialize their dogs in a controlled environment and learn skills that will improve their relationship with their dog. Hopefully, the trainer will catch any problems before they they fully develop and refer the owner to a specialist if necessary. In the case of dog aggression, I really believe prevention is the best strategy.

If behavior problems still occur, owners should at least consult with a veterinarian or other professional and go on from there. While “nipping it in the bud” seems like the obvious approach, many owners do not start actively dealing with the behavior right away. They might be in denial of the problem, embarrassed about it, or might even feel like they can or should deal with their dog’s behavior on their own. This allows the behavior to get worse, which makes the owners’ lives and later training more difficult.

When choosing a trainer, I think owners should take the time to make an informed decision and be aware of the fact that not all trainers have the same level or type of skill and experience, and some will be more suitable to deal with their dog than others. If they are dissatisfied with one trainer they should feel comfortable asking for a second opinion—sometimes the stressfulness of training sessions reflects more the trainer than either the owner or the dog.

My main suggestion, if not a plea, for dog professionals then is for them to refer the dog owner to someone else if they feel that they cannot take on a particular case—this would speak more to their responsibility than to their ability as a trainer. Furthermore, as ownership of aggressive dogs is stressful and confusing, I believe that the support a dog trainer or behaviorist can offer is also very useful, in addition to their main job of helping the owners deal with the behavior. A good dog professional will establish a relationship

with their client, help owners understand their dog's behavior, and also help them become aware of their dog ideologies and accept the fact that their dog might not fit them.

In addition to these, there are various other changes that could ideally happen to make ownership of aggressive dogs, or dogs in general, less problematic. More trainer regulation and education, and better visibility of institutions already out there (such as APDT—Association of Pet Dog Trainers, IACP—International Association of Canine Professionals, CCPDT—Certification Council of Professional Dog trainers¹³), which would hopefully make it easier for dog owners to find good trainers that would legally accept the risk of being injured in the course of their work and who could be held liable if their work causes injury to the dog or others. Shelters, while trying to adopt as many dogs as they can, should be honest about dogs' backgrounds and if possible help the owners find the resources necessary to accommodate those backgrounds. It would also be helpful if there were more realistic portrayals in the media of dog aggression and ownership of aggressive dogs in order to normalize the behavior and give dog owners a sense of what they could expect if their dog starts exhibiting abnormal aggressive behavior.

Finally, the smallest suggestion that I can make is probably the one that might be the easiest to implement and has a potential to make a big difference, and it has to do with muzzles. Various owners I talked to expressed negative attitudes towards muzzles: their dog did not like them, the dog kept trying to get them off?, they felt other people were judging them because their dog had a muzzle on. I believe this has to change: dog owners should know that there are ways to introduce the dog to wearing the muzzle so that the dog is comfortable wearing it, and the public should understand that a muzzled dog is less likely to inflict a bite than a non-muzzled dog. Then, the owner who might be nervous about their dog attacking and biting someone can comfortably muzzle their dog, which will prevent unwanted incidents, enable them to relax more when they are around others with their dog, which can in turn relax the dog and make handling it easier.

Research Suggestions

While writing this thesis, I was often frustrated by how little well established scientific knowledge about dog behavior and dog aggression is out there. While dog trainers construct various "dog cultures" by confidently making broad statements about what dogs supposedly naturally do, think, believe, want, need etc., due to a significant lack of dogs in a

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While I am providing these as an example, I am not necessarily personally endorsing the work, policies or structure of any of these organizations

“natural state” living away from humans, there is little to no research on dog behavior, and due to nature of the topic, no research on dogs’ thoughts or beliefs.

I would therefore really like to see more research on dog behavior, and also dog biology, especially as relates to dog aggression. Assessing the stressfulness of some training approaches over others for various behaviors would have important practical implications. Investigating potential causes for aggressive behavior, both ultimate and proximate, could give more exact and productive suggestions for prevention of aggression. For example, something that has recently been discussed a lot among dog trainers and professionals is stress. Various body postures, facial expressions and behaviors are seen as indicators of stress, and stress contributes to the development of many health and behavioral issues in dogs. Looking at factors increasing or decreasing the stress in dogs could be just one way in which science could help both trainers and owners of aggressive dogs deal with the problem more effectively.

APPENDIX A

THE INTERVIEW QUESTION LIST

The questions I aimed to ask in all of my interviews are as follows (apart from 1, 2 and 20, not necessarily in this order):

1. Can you tell me a bit about yourself? Personal Background: previous dog ownership, daily schedules, living situation, family structure etc.
2. Can you tell me a bit about your dog? Dog's Background: age, breed, sex, reproductive status, when was it acquired and from where etc.
3. Can you reflect on the first time(s) you noticed the dog's aggressive behavior? What was going through your head at that moment?
4. How do you feel your dog's behavior impacted your life?
5. How do those close to you feel about your dog?
6. Have you ever regretted getting your dog?
7. Have you had any memorable any memorable public incidents?
8. Have you had any legal problems?
9. Have you ever considered giving up or euthanizing your dog? If yes, can you tell me what was going through your head when you were thinking about it?
10. Have you, at any point look for information about dog aggression and dog behavior? Where?
11. How did you decide to deal with the behavior? How did you pick a trainer? (If applicable)
12. Can you reflect on the process of working with/training your the dog? (If applicable)
13. What do you find the most valuable in your interactions with the trainer? (If applicable)
14. What do you wish you knew/had access to at the time when your dog started exhibiting aggressive behavior?
15. Taking into account what you know know, would you do anything differently the next time you choose a dog?
16. Do you have any advice for other owners in your situation?
17. Has your dog's behavior changed the way you think about the dog or your relationship with the dog?
18. What does the term "aggressive dog" mean to you?
19. What do you consider your dog to be: just a dog, a pet, a family member, something else?
20. Anything else you want to say that we did not cover?

APPENDIX B

THE SURVEY

In December 2011 I conducted an online survey in order to get a sense of people's thoughts on different types of aggression and see how they might relate to their experience with (aggressive) dogs. As I was trying to collect information about immediate reactions to instances of aggression, I decided to keep the scenarios I asked people to look at very vague. That way my scenarios would not lead individuals toward any particular answer. They would approximate many real-life situations in which it is not know what was exactly happening when the dog aggressed, either because the bystanders did not see the aggressive display or were not overly observant.

The questions I asked on my survey are as follows (* indicates a required question):

General Questions

1. Which gender do you identify with? *

- Man
- Woman
- Other

2. You consider yourself to be: *

- rural
- suburban
- urban

3. Your age group: *

- 18-25
- 26-35
- 36-50
- 51-65
- 66 and older

4. You would describe your self as *

- working class
- lower middle class
- upper middle class
- upper class

5. Contact with dogs.* Think about how much contact you have or have had with

dogs in your daily life and pick the most applicable statement(s). Please check at least one. If you wish to elaborate on your choice, you can do so under the option "Other".

I don't own a dog and I only sometimes see them in public

I don't own a dog, but a neighbor had/has one

I don't own a dog, but someone I am acquainted with owns one

My family had a dog when I was a child

I have never owned a dog, but I would like to

I have owned one dog in my lifetime

I have owned more than one dog in my lifetime

I frequently interact with a variety of dogs (e.g. dog professional, shelter worker)

Other:

6. Reasons for acquiring a dog.* If you have a dog, pick the option that applies best to your most recent dog. If you don't own one, pick N/A.

N/A

personal companionship

gift for a child

received as a gift

work (hunting, herding etc.)

recreation (agility, SAR, hunting, herding)

protection (personal, property)

assistance dog

to show

to breed/make money

to save or rescue an animal

to keep away mice or other pests

Other:

7. I think of dogs as:*

annoyances, pests

useful animals that do work for humans

animals that should be taken care of

pets

family members

best friends

children

four legged humans in furry coats

Other:

8. Experience with owning a dog that has exhibited aggressive behavior.* Think about your experience with owning or knowing people who own(ed) a dog that has exhibited aggressive behavior and pick the most applicable statement(s). Please check at least one. If you wish to elaborate on your choice, you can do so under the option "Other".

I have never encountered a dog exhibiting aggressive behavior

I have encountered a dog exhibiting aggressive behavior, but nobody I know has owned/owns one

A neighbor has owned/owns a dog that has exhibited aggressive behavior

Someone I am acquainted with has owned/owns a dog that has exhibited

aggressive behavior

A close friend/family member has owned/owns a dog that has exhibited aggressive behavior

I have owned/own a dog that has exhibited aggressive behavior

I encounter dogs that have exhibited aggressive behavior in my professional or volunteer work

Other:

9. Has a dog ever acted aggressively towards you?* Think of any instances during which a dog has exhibited aggressive behavior, towards you and pick the most applicable statement(s). Please check at least one. If you wish to elaborate on your choice, you can do so under the option "Other". Note: "not serious" and "serious" refer to the nature of the incident. For example, "not serious" might constitute barking/growling and "serious" a bite for which you needed to seek medical attention.

A dog has never aggressed towards me

An unfamiliar dog has aggressed towards me - not serious

An unfamiliar dog has aggressed towards me- serious

A familiar dog has aggressed towards me - not serious

A familiar dog has aggressed towards me - serious

My own dog has aggressed towards me - not serious

My own dog has aggressed towards me - serious

Other:

10. Has a dog ever acted aggressively towards your dog? *Think of any instances during which a dog has exhibited aggressive behavior, towards your dog if you had/have one and pick the most applicable statement(s). Please check at least one. If you wish to elaborate on your choice, you can do so under the option "Other". Note: "not serious" and "serious" refer to the nature of the incident. For example, "not serious" might constitute barking/growling and "serious" a bite for which you needed to seek veterinary attention.

A dog has never aggressed towards my dog/ I have never had a dog

An unfamiliar dog has aggressed towards my dog - not serious

An unfamiliar dog has aggressed towards my dog - serious

A familiar dog has aggressed towards my dog - not serious

A familiar dog has aggressed towards my dog - serious

My own dog has aggressed towards my other dog - not serious

My own dog has aggressed towards my other dog - serious

Other:

Dog-Aggression Scenarios

In the following section, I will briefly describe a situation in which one or more dogs are acting aggressively and offer a list terms and expressions that could be used to characterize a dog:

Aggressive

Annoyed

Dog being a dog

Dominant

Mean

Playing

Protective

Reactive

Scared

Vicious

Other:

Please check all that apply and, if needed, use the section "Other" to offer a word or phrase yourself. Also rate the behavior on the scale 1-5, with 1 being completely inappropriate/unacceptable to you, and 5 being completely appropriate/acceptable¹⁴.

1. A dog is pulling on the leash, barking at passing people and dogs.
2. Two dogs get into a fight at a dog park. Neither of the dogs is hurt beyond a few scratches.
3. A dog is loose and unattended in a yard. It is running along the fence barking and jumping up as dogs, people, and bicycles are passing by.
4. A dog is chewing on a bone and starts growling as people approach it.
5. A young dog keeps trying to play with an older dog. Older dog starts growling and snapping at the younger dog. (Think about the older dog when answering.)
6. A child is petting a tethered dog and the dog bites the child.
7. A dog severely injures or kills another dog.
8. A dog in a yard bites a person that climbed in over the fence.
9. A dog severely injures or kills a human.
10. A dog is at a veterinarian's and bites the veterinarian during an examination

Open-ended questions

1. What does the term "aggressive dog" mean to you? In answering this question, you might want to think about what comes to your mind when you hear someone talking about an aggressive dog or when you might use the term to describe a dog.
2. Any other comments?

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

In my analysis of the 930 survey responses, I mostly focused on respondents' answer to the question "What does the term 'aggressive dog' mean to you?" and the general trends in attitudes toward dog aggression elicited by different scenarios. I received a range of responses from people whose experience with dogs ranged from disliking them to working

¹⁴ In the original survey, the multiple-choice list of labels and the acceptability scale were offered under each situation, but I provide it here in order to display the survey in a more condensed and coherent manner.

with them professionally. They focused on different aspects of aggressive behavior in their responses and also seemed to be describing a wide range of what they considered to be ‘an aggressive dog’: from a dog that barks too much and tugs on the leash to a dog that threatens everyone and everything around it. The survey therefore did not provide me with a unique notion people have of an “aggressive dog.” However, what did emerge from these various responses were different clusters of descriptions that show different categories of ideas people focus on when thinking about, or describing the ‘aggressive dog’. These categories are as follows

Behavior and appearance

One of the main strategies people used to describe an aggressive dog was describing their behavior, with some individuals explicitly focusing on the appearance, including the body language, of the dog. Behaviors most often referred to were barking, growling, biting, lashing out, charging, and fighting. Various individuals pointed out that the said behaviors are displayed in a harsh manner or aggressively and are violent and scary and not-playful. There was noticeable disagreement, however, on which behaviors are aggressive and which are not—nipping and barking, or biting without piercing the skin, for example, were explicitly pointed in a few responses as behavior that are not necessarily aggressive.

The appearance of an aggressive dog is cumulatively described as vicious looking, big, snarling, with bared teeth and slobbery face, ears back, stiff tail, tucked tail, eyes fixed on the target, hackles up. Some of these characteristics are not specific for a dog exhibiting aggression, such as slobbery face or raised hackles, and others, like ears pulled back and a tucked tail, are specific of a fearful response that can, but again does not have to lead to an aggressive display.

The aggressive intent

Many respondents, characterized an aggressive dog, maybe as opposed to a dog who is merely behaving aggressively, as a dog that actively seeks out or even enjoys conflict, or engages in conflict with an intent to cause harm. An aggressive dog is therefore one that seeks dominance and believes itself to be alpha, it picks fights and goes out of its way to show its strength and ferocity, it likes to bark, fight and bite and wants to fight every dog in sight. When it attacks, it seeks to maim, injure or kill, or does so without consideration for the amount of harm it might cause. Its intent behind aggressive behaviors, is malicious. These characterizations not only construct aggression as part of the dog’s character, but

they at least implicitly attribute to the dog the human characteristic of being aggressive on purpose. Two responses explicitly likened an aggressive dog to a human— one compared it with Mike Tyson, while another said that “aggressive dog is like an aggressive human, but a dog and not a human.”

Normal and abnormal aggression

Some respondents to the survey were very explicit about the fact that aggression in itself is a natural behavior dogs use to assert themselves, protect themselves or simply communicate their emotion. Those displays are sometimes alright. Also, it was pointed out by a variety of individuals that a dog that exhibits aggressive behavior in certain circumstances is not necessarily an aggressive. Many other respondents implicitly expressed that belief by focusing on abnormality of dog’s aggressive behavior as one of the main criteria that would label the dog as aggressive.

When academics discuss aggression in dogs, they also discuss “abnormal aggression” —“normal aggressive behavior that becomes excessive or uncontrolled and is then seen as undesirable and potentially dangerous by humans”. (Butcher et al. (2002). There are two basic criteria of ‘abnormality’ in this decision—the extent to which it differed from what is thought to be normal dog behavior, and the extent to which it’s considered appropriate according to human standards. The responses in the survey used both of those criteria when describing the ‘aggressive dog’.

Predictability, provocation and overreacting

Aggressive dog’s aggression displays were generally considered to be unpredictable, unprovoked or not proportionate to the provocation, showing that people, within their ideologies about dog behavior, have a concept of how ‘normal’ aggression in dogs should look. In some responses, the no-aggression expectation was clearly visible. They described aggressive dogs as not friendly towards all people, not affectionate all the time, not playful, or displaying any behavior that is not sweet or is beyond the regular barking and playing. All of those, in a way, restrict the appropriate behavior in dogs to a very small set of behavior, and set up very high expectations of dogs, denying them the right to express a wider variety of mental or emotional states such as disinterest, fear, shyness, nervousness etc. The fact that aggression in particular is not thought of as a possible element of a family dog’s behavioral repertoire was clearly expressed by one respondent who said that “ a dog that gets into fights seems like a whole different species from our pet.”

While individuals seemingly believing that any aggression is ‘abnormal’ were in a

clear minority, many others were still opinionated about just how aggression is displayed by an aggressive dogs, but there was sometimes significant disagreement between, and sometimes within those opinions. Some individuals, for example, pointed out that an aggressive dog is unpredictable, and attacks without prior aggression or warning such as growling or biting, i.e. does not follow a proper communication sequence. One respondent however said an an aggressive dogs is “snarling, [has] raised/exposed teeth, [gives] no warning before a bite.” This raises the question of the amount and type of warning that is expected from a dog, as well as people’s ability to notice early, subtle, warning signs that do not look overly threatening or aggressive such as standing very still or the “white eye”—gaze that enables one to see a larger than usual amount of the dog’s sclera.

Amount of perceived provocation that triggers the behavior also seems to be an important criteria in the description of an aggressive dog. Various people said that an aggressive dog is one aggressing without reasonable or clear provocation, that initiates injury when unprovoked or not fully provoked, that is reactive with minimal provocation, violent without a justifiable reason, attacking when not endangered or threatened in any way. On the other hand, some respondents believe provocation to be irrelevant and define aggression as “capability of causing harm when provoked” or “hostile behavior either provoked or unprovoked”.

It is clear that some of these judgements about justified cause for aggression have to do with what is considered appropriate on some cultural absolute scale (discussed in more detail in the next section). Other, however, seem to be based on explicit comparison between an aggressive dog and a ‘normal dog’. And aggressive dog, therefore, s, is barking, growling and jumping up more than other dogs, or is doing so excessively, reacts to a threatening situation in a more active/obvious way than other dogs, e.g. by not taking other available options when in a threatening situation, “exhibits violent and threatening behavior beyond what is accepted as dogs typical response” and “reacts in a manner that is inappropriate for a domesticated dog.” There is a strong sense that an aggressive dog, in comparison to non-aggressive dogs is overreacting to certain stimuli, either aggressing when other dogs wouldn’t, or aggressing too much by, e.g. exhibiting “physically damaging behavior disproportionate to the threat it feels” or reacting to “normal, benign or unpleasant situation with excess physical aggression or dramatic threatening behavior.”

Appropriateness

Responses focusing on appropriateness of the aggressive behavior are in many way similar to those considering provocation or comparing an aggressive dogs to non-aggressive

dog, but differ inasmuch as they generally at least mention, if not describe in more detail a specific scenario in the context of which they are considering the dog's behavior. Aggression is appropriate, for example, when a dog is defending itself, its owner or its territory, or any person or property in general, when it is scared or threatened and cannot run away, when a stranger is physically manipulating a dog or when a dog is simply being reactive, e.g. "reacting to a bike/jogger/running child, frustrated by the leash, warning someone to stay away". On the other hand, aggression is inappropriate if a dog is aggressing at familiar human, guests at home, strangers it has been calmly introduced to, people who try to pet it even when the owner consents to it, if it injures people and dogs in large open areas, such as parks, without being previously disturbed, or any people or animals while not on its property.

Some judgments of appropriateness seem to be heavily based on the perceived 'morality' of the behavior. Aggression towards kids, for example, seems to be especially inappropriate. One respondent even pointed out that "While the dog may have learned that it does not like being petted by children, dogs do seem to have a sense of whether a human is young or not and whether it understands the annoyance it may be causing," implying that dogs would really know better than to aggress towards children who are bothering them, again exemplifying an unrealistic expectation emerging from an ideology that constructs dogs as not only men's, but children's best friends that should be extremely patient with children. Similarly, dogs are also supposed to somehow know the difference between 'good' and 'bad' or at least their behavior is judged along those lines. A respondent clearly described this situation by saying that "[i]f the neighbor kid climbed into the yard and got bit, that would be a bad thing, but if someone was attempting to break in, the dog would be doing exactly the right thing."

The trends in rating behaviors as acceptable or not acceptable fit with these attitudes. As expected, very harmful acts of aggression, such as a dog killing another dog or a person were judged as very unacceptable. Situations such as an older dog growling at an annoying younger dog, or a dog biting a stranger climbing over the fence were rated as most acceptable, presumably because the reason why the dog aggressed is very clear. Interestingly, a tethered dog biting a child trying to pet it was rated as very inappropriate, confirming my observation that people feel there is something very wrong about dogs biting children.

Acceptability judgment in some cases varied considerably based on people's experience with dogs, especially aggressive ones. In general, individuals with more experience with dogs, especially professionals, rated aggressive behavior as a lot more

inappropriate/unacceptable than those with less experience. Even within the group of dog-owners, those who have owned aggressive dogs seem less tolerant of aggressive behavior. This might be because these individuals are more sensitive to aggressive behavior or know that it is possible to prevent it or modify it. The situation this effect is most visible in is when a dog chewing on a bone is growling as people approach it. A large portion of non-owners rated this behavior with a 4 or a 5, while the majority of dog professionals rated with a 1 or a 2. On the other hand, in the case of an older dog growling at an annoying younger dog, the opposite happened—while non-owners tended to rate the behavior more ambivalently, with grades 2-4, a large portion of experienced owners and dog professionals rated the behavior as completely acceptable. This suggests that individuals with more dog experience might have a better understanding of communicative and very low-risk potential of aggressive displays such as growling. My conclusions here, however, are very broad and based on a very basic survey. It would be very interesting, however, to research this in a lot more depth, potentially asking people to rate dog's behavior captured in video and potentially describe what they saw happening in the video. This could be very revealing of people's ability to read aggressive signals and of judgements they might be basing off of those readings.

Causes of aggression

In their description of an aggressive dog, many respondents included comments about potential causes of aggression, or at least factors contributing to aggressive behavior. Those were also used different causes to differentiate between normal and abnormal aggression, or dog. The two groups of causes discussed were basically those of nature and nurture.

Few people looked to the breed or the innate personality of the dog when giving their definition. Taking into account the breed, an 'aggressive dog' was defined as a Rotweiler or an (evil) Pit Bull, a breed that has been bred to be a guard dog, a naturally aggressive breed or a violent breed that "shouldn't be owned in [the] first place like tigers shouldn't be owned." As I will discuss in one of the later sections, there is a sense that some breeds of dogs are naturally more aggressive, or more prone to aggression, resulting in 'breedism'. Some responses took aggression not to be a breed-trait, but rather a personality trait of an individual dog. Various respondents said an 'aggressive dog' is dominant or has an "alpha" type personality. Two explicitly stated they view aggression as a stronger, deeper rooted temperamental/personality trait, as opposed to, for example, reactivity, and one pointed out that "an isolated act of aggression does not define a dog as aggressive in nature." Another said that they do not believe most dogs are innately aggressive, implying

that some are, explaining their stance with the belief that “[d]ogs have bred/domesticated to have a sort of theory of mind with humans, and thus probably react in similar ways as humans.” These considerations echo others I already presented—that domesticated, normal dogs should naturally have some sense of how to act appropriately around humans and that aggressive dogs in themselves like and seek out opportunities to be aggressive, as if that is a part of their temperament.

In contrast to relatively few people who talked about the innate character of aggressiveness, many respondents talked about possible the histories of aggressive dogs. According to them, an ‘aggressive dog’ has either been taught or trained to be aggressive or has been mistreated, neglected, improperly or under-socialized so it does not know what is appropriate in a situation (learning dog culture), improperly or not trained, has not learned the social norms of being a pet or is sick, stressed or afraid. Interestingly, while variety of respondents focused on mistreatment that caused the dogs to be aggressive, there’s also evidence of the opposite belief—that ‘aggressive dogs’ aren’t the dogs aggressive due to mistreatment. Finally, some responses blame the behavior directly on the owner—”it’s not the fault of the dog, it’s the fault of the owners” who probably chose the dog, are responsible for the said lack of training or socialization, have failed to address the dog’s issues, did not neuter the dog or are “[t]o lazy to work or lack the sufficient knowledge to deal with breeds [that are] genetically more dominant.”

Controllability

The role of the owner in description of an ‘aggressive dog’ also comes into play when it comes to the controllability of the dogs behavior, many responses implying a dog whose behavior can be controlled is not an ‘aggressive dog’. Although one does state that an ‘aggressive dog’ will growl until the owner corrects him, suggesting the behavior can be controlled, various other respondents point out that and aggressive dog “will not listen to commands when told to stop acting aggressing, continues aggressing even after being punished or scolded for it repeatedly, cannot be controlled or calmed, disregards human control, uncontrollable, has no ability or willingness to modify its dominant behavior, is difficult to manage, is uninfluenced by training and will not be distracted by treats/rewards. Few respondents explicitly draw a line between normal and aggressive dogs—one points out that “[a]ll dogs snap/growl/threaten, but an aggressive one doesn’t obey his owner,” one states that an aggressive dog is “[u]nable to have it’s aggressive behaviors modified through normal training and requires special training for aggressive behaviors,” and another one points out that “[n]ormal dogs may bite and show signs of aggression in certain

circumstances, but can be trained out of it, as opposed to ‘aggressive dogs’ who cannot be taught not to sue violence.

The criteria of controllability, I believe is mostly used as a determiner of the degree of aggressive behavior—more aggressive dogs will be more difficult to control. However, it is important to note it is also an outcome of the size of the dog, as smaller dogs can be physically controlled much more easily. The emphasis various survey responses put on control also suggest a strong social expectation of owners that they will keep their dog under control and (successfully) intervene if the dog starts aggressing, which can account for the way owners feel if their dog aggresses in public.

How aggressive dogs could or should be managed

A small group of individuals, in their responses talked about how aggressive dogs should be dealt with and what should their position in the society be. These responses form a category that is, in a way, a corollary to that of controllability, as they also elaborate on what the social pressures on owners of aggressive dogs might be. A response, for example, explicitly states that it is “[d]efinitely owner’s obligation to deal with [aggressive behavior] and make sure a dog doesn’t come in contact with other animals or people.” The ‘aggressive dog’, therefore, taken to public without a muzzle, or allowed to bark along the fence, should not be kept in households with children and may never gain be allowed to interact (or live in a home) with other animals or young children. While some respondents believe aggression can be modified with proper training, or medication, but has to be managed for the rest of the dog’s life, others state that “[t]here’s not place for an aggressive dog unless you’re talking about a police dog” and that “[t]here’s nothing that can be done for such a dog.” These differences in the perception of how the future of an ‘aggressive dog’ might look like could be based on different opinions on what people think an ‘aggressive dog’ is, e.g. a dog that can or cannot be trained out of the behavior/rehabilitated, but might also reflect different opinions on how possible it is or it is not to actually manage the aggressive behavior in dogs.

Negative attributes and labels

Another category of descriptives respondents use was that of a variety of other labels, nearly exclusively ones with negative connotations. An ‘aggressive dog’ was called a threat, a mean dog, vicious, a dominant animal, but not mean or vicious, potentially dangerous, not safe to be around, extremely reactive, or reactive in a vicious manner, intimidating, very territorial, constantly annoyed or scared, harmful, not submissive, abrasive, unable to relax, untrusting, cannot be trusted, unkind, rude, malicious, evil,

snappy, agitated, strong, mean-spirited, a “red-zone” dog, dog that has no “off switch” etc.

The general labeling trend that emerged from the “Aggression Scenarios” part of my surveys, is that less harmful behaviors were described more neutrally and were not considered aggressive, while more harmful behaviors are generally labeled aggressive and vicious, however this might also be due to the context.

A dog pulling on the leash and barking at people and other dogs, as well as a dog running along the fence and barking at passers-by were most often labeled as “dog being a dog” and “protective,” and “reactive.” Two dogs getting into a fight at a dog park, neither of them getting injured and an older dog growling at an annoying younger dog were most often labeled as “dog being a dog” and “dominant.” A dog chewing a bone and growling as people approach was most often labeled as “protective” and “dog being a dog.” In all five cases the labels “aggressive” and “vicious” were the ones used the least. This is very interesting as it conflicts with what I know to be the case from talking to various people: dogs fighting, dogs guarding resources and dogs barking and lunging while on leash are definitely referred to as aggressive by many.

The next stage of seriousness of aggressive behavior is a bite that actually inflicts damage. A dog that bites the veterinarian at the vet office is most often labeled “scared” and “reactive.” A dog biting a person climbing into its yard was most often labeled “protective” and “reactive.” These two contrast with the case of a tethered dog biting a child, which was labeled most often as “aggressive,” “reactive,” “mean,” “vicious” and “scared.” Maybe due to the scenario, but more likely due to the fact that the victim was a child, this dog was labeled much more negatively. In all three cases, the label used the least was “playing.”

Finally, there are the two situations in which the dog inflicts a lot of damage—severely injuring or killing a dog and severely injuring or killing a person. The dogs in the two situations received very similar labels, most common being “aggressive,” “vicious,” “dominant,” and “mean.” The label used the least was “playing.” The main difference between the two is that the dog attacking another dog was labeled as “dominant” and “mean” more often than the dog that attacked a human, while the dog attacking the human was slightly more often labeled as “reactive”. I am not sure, though, what that suggests.

Another trend that emerged from the responses is that of different degree of usage of certain labels based on experience with dogs. Use of labels “aggressive,” “mean” and “vicious” seems negatively correlated with the amount of experience, while the use of labels “annoyed,” “reactive” and “scared” is positively correlated with the amount of experience with dogs. Dog professionals in general tended to use labels ‘scared’ and ‘reactive’ a lot more often than other groups, and used “dog being dog” and “dominant” a lot less. Non-

owners also used “dominant” and “mean” a more often than other groups. This might suggest different levels or types of knowledge about aggression and dog behavior in general. Also, as these labels also seem to function as euphemisms or dysphemisms for “aggressive” that code for an attitude towards the behavior, the data also suggests that individuals with different amounts of experience with dogs do also have different attitudes towards dog aggression.

Aggression as a not-useful or useless label

Finally, various respondents, mostly those with more dog experienced (experienced owners or dog professionals) in the answers offered a critique of the term “aggressive dog”. Many pointed out that the term is vague, misused, overused and carries an unnecessary negative connotation. Some respondents actually pointed out that they would never even use the term. Many also stressed the importance of context and expressed their desire to know more information about behavior of the dog, such as its body language, of the victim and of the owner. Various individuals additionally voiced their frustration about the situations presented in the survey because they were themselves extremely briefly described and offered basically no information on what was actually happening. This shows that aggressive behavior is definitely a complex issue and is not considered solely by its end result.

To conclude, “aggressive dog” is obviously a complex label that brings to mind a specific type of a dog, although the type of the dog can easily differ from person to person. For many people, it seems that ‘an aggressive dog’ is more than a dog displaying aggressive behavior—it is a dog displaying abnormal aggressive behavior. Factors that make aggression abnormal seem to rely on human judgement of how appropriate the behavior and whether it is executed the way it should (with warning) and at a right level (not overreacting). They also take into account potential causes of behavior and the owners control over the animal.

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