Breed Stereotype & Effects of Handler Appearance on Perceptions of Pit Bulls

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Introduction

Previous research has indicated that dog breed stereotypes exist (Wright, Smith, Daniel & Adkins, 2007; Bennett & Mornement, 2009; Twining, Arluke & Patronek, 2000) and that the appearance of a human handler alongside a dog can affect perceptions of the dog's temperament (Walsh, McBride, Bishop & Leyvraz, 2007). The present study aimed to determine whether a negative stereotype about pit bull-type dogs existed by examining participants' perceptions about traits such as approachability, aggressiveness, intelligence, friendliness, trainability, and adoptability; and whether handler appearance affected those perceptions when a rough adult male, elderly woman and male child is presented alongside a pit bull-type dog.

What is a pit bull?

A loosely defined group of dogs such as the American Pit Bull Terriers, American Staffordshire Terriers, and Pit Bull-type dogs with similar identifiable characteristics such as body shape, muscle tone, short hair and head size.

Hypothesis

We predicted that the pit bull will have an overall unfavorable rating among the breeds presented, and that the appearance of the child and elderly woman will improve perceptions while the appearance of the rough adult male will negatively impact them.

Participants

228 respondents, with 76 males, 148 females and 4 non-reporting, with an age range of 16-61 (mean age = 22) from psychology classes at Foothill College and online community forum Reddit.

Methods

A Labrador Retriever (LR), pit bull-type dog and Border Collie (BC) and five human handlers were photographed.

Participants viewed a photograph of the LR, pit bull and BC, a woman in a wheelchair with the LR and an athletic man with the BC. Participants were randomly presented with the rough adult male with the pit bull, elderly woman with pit bull or male child with pit bull.

Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with statements about the dog's approachability, intelligence, aggressiveness, friendliness, trainability and adoptability. Statements were rated on a 6-point Likert scale that ranged from strongly disagree to strongly agree with no neutral response.

Results

When examining perceptions of the LR, pit bull and BC, one-way ANOVA with a Bonferroni correction demonstrated highly significant breed differences in all traits.

Paired-samples t-tests were conducted comparing the pit bull with no handler and the pit bull with the rough adult male, the pit bull with the elderly woman and the pit bull with the male child. The presence of the elderly woman significantly improved perceived approachability, friendliness, intelligence, and adoptability and reduced perceived aggressiveness. Perceived aggressiveness yielded a reduction of $t(74) = 4.54$, $p<.001$, $r^2 = .24$ while adoptability showed an increase of $t(74) = -4.71$, $p<.001$, $r^2 = .23$.

The appearance of the child alongside the pit bull significantly improved perceptions about the dog's intelligence, friendliness and adoptability while reducing perceived difficulty to train and aggressiveness. Perceived aggressiveness decreased with a result of $t(74) = 5.10$, $p<.001$, $r^2 = .26$ and perceived friendliness had an increase of $t(74) = -4.055$, $p<.001$, $r^2 = .18$. The rough male's presence decreased perceived friendliness of the dog but increased the dog's intelligence.

Mean Ratings of Behavioral Traits by Breed

Significant Rating Differences of Behavioral Traits in Pit Bull Conditions

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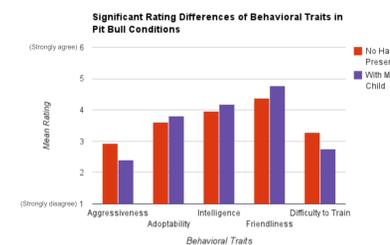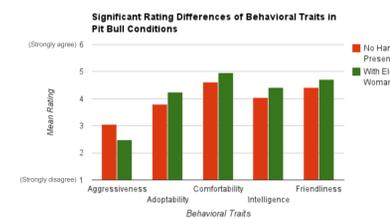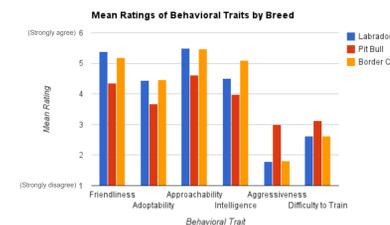
Discussion

Participants clearly possessed a negative stereotype of pit bulls. This is consistent with research illustrating that people are more greatly influenced by negative versus positive information (Ito, Larsen, Smith & Cacioppo, 1998) as well as Wright et al.'s (2007) findings on the effects of negative images on perceptions of dogs of that breed.

The elderly woman and male child activated positive handler stereotypes, motivating participants to perceive the pit bull-type dog as friendlier, more adoptable, more approachable and less aggressive while the rough male reinforced the dog's negative stereotype. These results suggest that a handler can serve as a primer for perceptions about the dog's characteristics (Bargh, Chen & Burrows, 1996).

These findings could be useful for the animal welfare community. Positive perceptions about pit bull-type dogs' friendliness, approachability, intelligence and adoptability can be increased and perceived level of aggressiveness decreased by including a positively stereotyped person in photographs with these dogs. These improved perceptions could contribute to the success of educational efforts about pit bulls and increase the public's interest in adopting them.