

The Truth about Humans: The Decision to Adopt Dogs & Cats

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Abstract

Millions of dogs and cats are adopted from animal shelters every year, however, little is known about why specific animals are adopted. This study examines the qualitative comments given by adopters of cats and dogs for selecting specific animals. Differences between the species and insights into human/animal interactions are discussed.

Problem

Every year millions of animals are adopted from animal shelters (American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, 2015; New et al., 2004), however, little is known about why specific animals are adopted. Understanding the rationales adopters provide gives insights into better marketing for animal shelters, as well as an understanding of human/ animal interaction.

Purpose

The current study analyzes the qualitative comments given by prospective adopters of cats and dogs in a northwestern US no-kill shelter over a 5 month period. Of interest are the differences in rationales given for selecting specific animals between the species.

Relevant Literature

Approximately 1 million dogs and 2 million cats are adopted from animal shelters each year (American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, 2015; New et al., 2004), meaning that about 23% of all owned dogs and 25% of owned cats were selected from shelters (American Pet Products Manufacturers Association). While there have been several studies investigating the change in the human-animal bond when an animal is relinquished to a shelter (e.g., Salman et al., 1998, Scarlett et al., 1998) there has been little research as to why a particular animal is initially selected in a shelter.

The animal's temperament or personality may be influential to animal selection. Podbersek and Blackshaw (1998) surveyed cat owners in Brisbane, Australia. When asked why they initially selected their cat, the most commonly cited reasons were "personality" and "appearance."

Relevant Literature, Cont.

Similarly, in a survey conducted in Belfast, Ireland, "temperament" was listed as the most important characteristic when selecting a dog from a shelter (Wells & Hepper, 1992). In a small study of cat selection from an animal shelter, adopters indicated a preference for cats they perceived as friendly, playful, happy, relaxed, and not sad or fearful (Gourkow & Fraser, 2006).

A study in five major US cities (Weiss et al., 2012) found that appearance of the animal, social behavior with adopter, and personality were the top reasons for adoption across species and age groups. However, few studies have examined differences in rural shelters, nor considered the insights the comments provide into human/animal interactions. The present study examines these issues.

Research Questions

1. What reasons do potential adopters provide for their choice of animal?
2. How do the reasons differ by species?
3. What insights do the comments provide about human/ animal interaction?

Procedures

Five months of 2013 pet admission data from the Heart of the Valley Animal Shelter in Bozeman MT were analyzed. Prior approval was obtained for the access and analysis of the secondary data from Walden University's IRB. A total of 741 animals were processed during this 5 month period (386 dogs and 355 cats).

A total of 414 (55.8% of total) animals were adopted during this period: 171 dogs and 243 cats. Others were returned to owner (24.7%), euthanized due to unadoptability (e.g., aggression, medical issues; 14.7%), transferred (.3%), or unknown disposition (2.2%).

New owners provided written short answers to the question "Why did you choose this pet?" A total of 142 (84.5%) of dog adopters and 162 (67%) of cat adopters completed this question.

Data Analysis

The responses were coded and resulted in 12 themes for dogs and 10 themes for cats, if multiple comments were provided the first was used for classification. The top 4 themes for each species are discussed.

Findings

Dogs

Companionship: 29 (20.4%) mentioned wanting the dog for companionship. Some example comments include: "I want a new friend," "I have always wanted a dog as a companion," "Companionship, possible service dog."

Dog Personality: 22 (15.5%) mentioned aspects of the dog's personality as being the reason it was chosen. "Nice temperament." "Good with kids, good companion, protection." "She's sweet and mature."

Physical Characteristics: 20 (14.1%) chose the dog because of physical characteristics that appealed to them. "Small, perfect for us and our house." "She is beautiful, friendly, trainable." "Size, look in her eyes."

Breed Related. 19 (13.3%) made comments about choosing the dog because of its breed. Some comments: "(I previously) owned breed and had to put him down last year. Love breed." "Had 3 previous border collies, very good personality." "I love huskies."

Cats

Affectionate: 48 (29.6%) mentioned the loving aspects of the cat. "Very affectionate." "Affectionate & playful." "Very loving."

Cat personality: 18 (11.1%) indicated that they chose the cat because of its personality. "Is cute and friendly." "He's super sweet & jumped in my lap, playful." "Has a personality." "Be social & laid back." "Gentle, sweet, good with kids."

Companionship: 8 (4.9%) people mentioned wanting the cat as a companion. Some example comments: "Looking for new indoor companion." "Looking for companion to keep me company." "Is my companion & family member."

Something about family: 7 (4.3%) mentioned family aspects. "Seems very family friendly." "To add to our family." "Is part of the family."

Limitations

These data are from a rural no kill shelter in a northwestern state over a 5 month period between January and May 2013, other time periods and shelters may result in different findings. There is the likelihood of social desirability in the responses: Saying what they believe the shelter may wish to hear.

Conclusions

Human adopters have decidedly different views of their reasons for selecting a dog or cat. Dogs are described as "companions" or "friends," these are terms reflecting a mutual reciprocity. Interestingly, the comments do not describe the animal, instead it is describing the human's need for interacting with the animal.

Cats are primarily described as "affectionate" and "loving;" these are receptive words, indicative of expectations of the animal giving to the human. Interestingly, the terms "affectionate" and "loving" were never seen in the dog data, suggesting distinct differences attributed to the species. Adopters are providing a need they want met: humans appear to want cats to take of them, they want the perception of love and a focus on the human. This may be a link to the reasons for cats' surrenders: cats are actually independent (Bradshaw, 2013). An innate behavior for cats is to rub up against humans, leaving their scent; this behavior appears to be interpreted by humans as loving behavior and is sought in adopters.

Aspects of personality was mentioned for both species. This suggests that the way the animal interacts with potential adopters is a key element. The physical variations available with dogs is evidenced in the frequent mention of breed characteristics and physical attributes such as size, beauty, etc.

Social Change Implications

The information from the study can be used by animal shelters to understand the adoption trends and to assist adopters in clarifying the behaviors they want in an animal: this may lead to a decrease in returned animals.

Shelters may be able to target needs of the adopter: emphasizing companionship in dogs and affection in cats. Training animals to behave in ways valued by human adopters may also increase adoption rates, e.g., cats jumping into laps and appearing affectionate.