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The Place of the Dog in the Family: A Comparative Case Study of Dog Adoption

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Abstract

This paper explores how perspectives on the appropriate place of the dog in the family shape the practice and experience of dog adoption. This research is based on a comparative case study of a traditional shelter and an independent animal rescue organization. The data were collected through participant observation and interviews with directors and volunteers at these organizations, and with people who adopted dogs through shelter or independent animal rescue organizations. The independent rescue organizations tended to use "dog-centric" discourse to describe the relationship between the dog and its prospective family, while the traditional animal shelter and some adoptive families used "human-centric" discourse. These perspectives were tied to the adoption practices of the organizations and individuals' experiences while adopting a dog.

The implications of these findings for the practice of dog adoption are discussed, and suggestions for shelters and animal rescue organizations are presented.

Keywords

companion animal adoption, animal rescue organizations, family, discourse, ethnography

Introduction

While city or county-run shelters and humane societies are still the foundation of animal rescue in the United States, numerous independent animal rescue organizations have been created over the past decade. These organizations rely on web postings to advertise dogs and adoption events to the public, use the internet to process adoption applications, coordinate volunteer activities, raise funds, and arrange the care of stray and abandoned dogs in a network of volunteers' foster homes rather than in traditional shelters. In this paper, I use a comparative case study approach to explore the beliefs these different types of organizations have about the appropriate place of the dog in the human family. This paper will demonstrate that there are two general perspectives on the appropriate place of the dog in the family, a dog-centric perspective and a human-centric perspective. Further, the organizations differ in which perspective is held by most of its personnel, including directors, staff, and/or volunteers. These perspectives are also linked to how the organizations approach the work of screening potential adopters of dogs as well as the experiences of people who have adopted dogs from both types of organizations.

The Relationship between Companion Animals and Humans

A variety of perspectives on the appropriate relationship between animals and humans are articulated in recent research. The guidelines for care of the Association of Shelter Veterinarians focuses on the needs of the animal as an animal: “Freedom from thirst, hunger, and malnutrition; freedom from discomfort; freedom from pain, injury, and disease; freedom to express normal behavior; and freedom from fear and distress” (Nolen, 2011, p. 130). However, others hold a human-centered perspective on animals. Greenebaum (2007) notes that:

> The social construction of animals creates distinctions and boundaries among the functions of animals. Some animals are used for food, sport and/or experimentation, while others are treasured as sacred objects and pets....Some pets are valued as status symbols or an extension of the self (Belk, 1988), like a fashion accessory (i.e. Paris Hilton’s Tinkerbell). Many pets are valued as special members of the family, including being treated as surrogate friends and children ... while other pets are treated as objects that are disposable. (Greenebaum, 2007, p. 35).

Several recent studies have noted the tendency to consider the animal as a friend or a genuine member of the family rather than a pet or a possession (Arluke & Sanders, 1996; Atwood-Harvey, 2005; Hickrod & Schmitt, 1982; Irvine, 2003a; Planchon, Templer, Stokes, & Keller, 2002; Sanders, 1999, 2003; Serpell & Paul, 1994; Veevers, 1985). Others found that companion animals may be treated as if they were children (Beck & Katcher, 1983, 2003; Greenebaum, 2004, 2007; Parry, 2005; Sanders, 1999; Serpell, 1986, 2003). Tannen’s (2004) study shows that how family members talk about their dogs reflects and constructs their identity as a family. Some

couples refer to themselves as their dog's "Mommy" or "Daddy" (Tannen, 2004; see also Greenebaum, 2004) or use baby talk with their companion animals (Roberts, 2004). Bilger (2003, cited in Tannen, 2004) reports that "sixty-three percent of pet owners say 'I love you' to their pets every day," indicating not only a degree of anthropomorphism but also showing that some people are treating their companion animals as they would treat a family member (p. 48).

The language used to describe the animal and his/her relationship with others can be consequential for the life that animal will lead (Arluke & Sanders, 1996; Frank-Carlisle & Frank, 2006; Crist, 1999). Irvine (2002, 2004c) argues that animals will be treated better if defined as companion animals rather than pets:

> Whereas a pet must please and entertain a human "master," a companion animal has a guardian or caretaker who acknowledges the animal as one whose ways of being in the world are radically different but still worthy of respect. (Irvine, 2004c, p. 28)

How people treat the animals in their care is also tied to whether the human believes that the animal has a "self" (Irvine, 2004c; 2004b; see also Sanders, 1999). Irvine (2003a) notes that "the practice of naming an animal suggests both the presence of animals' selves and the cultural acknowledgement of their individuality" (p. 16; see also Irvine, 2004c; Phillips, 1994). Taylor (2010) found that workers in a nonprofit no-kill shelter believed in the "personhood" of the animals and that they should be treated as permanent members of the families who adopted them.

While in general, treating the animal as more of an equal member of the household rather than a pet or a possession may lead to better living conditions for the animal, "humanizing" the

relationship is not always beneficial. For example, animal hoarders typically feel a strong connection with their animals, often think of and talk about them as their children, and name them and treat them as individuals; however, their hoarding behaviors also cause the animals great suffering (Arluke, 2006; Arluke & Killeen, 2009). In a study of veterinarians, Sanders (1994) found that "clients who are seen as emotionally over-involved with their animals" are perceived as troublesome (p. 160). The perfect client is one who can balance the needs of the human with that of the nonhuman animal. Sanders (1999) notes that while family membership can provide many benefits to companion animals, there are also risks and dangers in many human families that can result in oppressive or abusive living situations for animals. Veevers (1985) notes that humanization of companion animals can be taken to an extreme in American culture—and not necessarily to the benefit of the animal, citing as examples beauty parlors, limousine rides, and stylish clothes specifically marketed for dogs.

The beliefs of volunteers or shelter workers about the appropriate place of the dog in the family are not necessarily related to successful adoptions and good lives for the adopted animals. Weiss and Gramann (2009) found that adopting a cat for free as opposed to paying an adoption fee does not affect the level of attachment to the cat or level of care provided to the cat after the adoption. Shore, Douglas, and Riley (2005) showed that level of attachment to a companion animal is not correlated to the quality of care provided. Instead, quality of care relates to guardian characteristics such as gender, education, previous experience with cats, and social attachments with humans (Adamelli, Marinelli, Normando, & Bono, 2005).

Previous research on companion animal adoption reflects these tensions between the best interest of the animal and the best interest of the human. Balcom and Arluke (2001) found that the adoption process is becoming more "open," with shelters deliberately trying to be more

flexible in terms of who they allow to adopt in order to maximize placement opportunities for their nonhuman animals. The open adoption policy replaced an earlier, more restrictive approach in which the shelter tried to screen out adopters who would not adhere to their policies (e.g., by planning to declaw cats or to use dogs as guard dogs). Staff members now had to educate the potential adopter and help them "make a good match" with an appropriate companion animal rather than excluding people out of hand (Balcom & Arluke, 2001, p. 138).

Arluke (2006) illustrates some potential risks of open adoption policies. A shelter worker describes situations in which the no-kill shelter, in its efforts to place every dog, ends up placing dogs with behavior problems (even dogs that had bitten shelter workers) in families not qualified to handle them (p. 131). This creates risks for the family and hence the dog, who could be relinquished. While not all shelters with open adoption policies are no-kill shelters, Arluke's example serves to illustrate how the desire to maintain a no-kill approach could lead to more risk-taking in adoption decisions.

There is great variability in how animals are treated in our society, with some of the differences tied to beliefs about the role of the dog in the human family (e.g., as guard dogs or as companion animals) (Arluke, 2006). Animals are also sometimes viewed in terms of how they benefit the children in the family (Sanders, 1999, p. 10; Veevers, 1985). Irvine (2003b) found that there is often a divergence between shelters' thinking about the place of the animal in the family and that of people seeking to relinquish animals. The shelter she studied believes that the animal should be a "commitment for life" (Irvine, 2002; see also Frommer & Arluke, 1999; Taylor, 2010), while the relinquisher perceives the animal as a "problem" they want out of their homes (Taylor, 2010; Greenebaum, 2007, p. 46).

This prior research illustrates a variety of perspectives on how people doing animal rescue work perceive their relationship with companion animals and the appropriate place of the nonhuman animal in the family. What has not yet been examined is how these perspectives differ depending on the nature of the organization, and how these perspectives shape the process of dog adoption and the experience of people adopting dogs. This case study will begin to fill these gaps by comparing a city's traditional shelter with a locally run independent animal rescue organization.

Materials and Methods

This paper is based on an ethnographic study of animal rescue organizations conducted in a Midwestern city in 2005 and 2006. The primary sites for participant observation (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were two organizations: MidCity Shelter, a traditional county-affiliated shelter that typically had about 150 dogs available for adoption, and HelpDogs, an independent nonprofit that typically had between 20 and 30 dogs available for adoption.

Participant Observation Data

While working as a volunteer for MidCity Shelter over a two-year period, I walked and groomed dogs, assisted visitors in the adoption process, and helped out at mobile adoption events. I served as a volunteer for HelpDogs over the course of a two-year period, volunteering at 15 mobile adoption events and fostering dogs in my home. My volunteer roles in both of these organizations provided multiple opportunities to observe and interact with staff and other volunteers, as well as with prospective adopters. For example, when a potential shelter adopter

wanted to visit with a particular dog, they would ask me to take the dog out of the kennel for them, and I would answer their questions while they played with and interacted with the dog. Conversations with other volunteers might occur while assisting with photographing the dogs for their web postings or while walking dogs.

Interview Data

In addition to the participant observation data, 17 semi-structured interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2005) were conducted. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed, and were analyzed by searching each transcript for the themes and issues of concern, and comparing the responses produced by individuals based on their role (e.g., leader, staff member, volunteer, adopters) and organization (e.g., shelter or independent rescue organization).

Interviews were conducted with the director and the two other management-level personnel at MidCity Shelter. These three individuals were chosen to be interviewed because they were the highest ranking staff members at the shelter. At HelpDogs, interviews were conducted with two directors who were chosen to be interviewed because of their key roles in founding and running the organization. In addition, interviews were conducted with five active volunteers who fostered dogs, attended mobile adoption events, and interacted with and helped screen potential adopters. Interviews were also conducted with two of the key leaders at a smaller independent animal rescue organization serving only one breed of dogs ("breed-specific"), which typically had fewer than 10 dogs available for adoption. These individuals were chosen as research subjects because of their central roles in the running of the organization. A convenience sample of five people who had adopted dogs from an independent rescue organization and/or a traditional shelter were also interviewed. The goal in selecting these

individuals was to sample a range of experiences and perspectives (e.g., whether they had children in the home or were interested only in a specific breed of dog).

Additional Sources of Data

In addition to the participant observation and interview data, I reviewed numerous shelter and rescue organization websites and internet postings of dogs available for adoption. The use of these three different modes of data collection provided "triangulation," which increases the confidence in the results of the study (Webb, Campbell, Schwartz, & Sechrest, 1981). All names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

Results

MidCity Shelter's Perspective on Dog Adoption

MidCity Shelter is a county-affiliated semi-public agency, and is required to follow state statutes and to provide equal access to animals to all segments of society. Its adoption policies and practices are therefore relatively open compared to the independent animal rescues, which are free to make their own rules and set their own standards. While staff and volunteers at both the MidCity Shelter and HelpDogs use the rhetoric of adoption and want the dogs to be treated well, their views on how the dog should fit into the family differ.

After a potential adopter visits MidCity Shelter and finds a dog they are interested in, a staff member asks the potential adopter to fill out an adoption form. They try to determine whether the person can afford to support the dog financially. They ask whether the person has had a dog before, and if so, they ask the name of their veterinarian. Not being able to name a

veterinarian raises a “red flag,” which alerts the clerk to probe more deeply. They also ask where the dog will live. Those who say the dog will live outside are subjected to more scrutiny.

Mr. Smith, the director of MidCity Shelter, states that while he does not approve of chaining dogs in yards, state statutes allow it. Shelter staff can educate potential adopters on alternatives and convey that they do not recommend that method of confinement, but they cannot reject an application on those grounds. This policy, as we will see below, differs from HelpDogs’ policy. Mr. Smith states:

> I don’t like chained dogs....Now if the animal is well cared for, and given an opportunity to come in, and the chain is a temporary restraint, it is possible that the animal would be okay....You can advise, you can educate, you can do the best you can, but there are going to be people, as long as it’s permissible statutorily, [who] are going to put that dog out on a chain. So the object is to get them to do it as close to the right way as possible.

In addition, MidCity Shelter does not discriminate against potential adopters who plan to leave the dog alone at home during the day. Mr. Smith argues that there is nothing wrong with crating an animal when you leave your home. His own dogs are kept crated in his basement while he is at work. He explains that “separation, if handled in the right way, is not a problem.”

MidCity Shelter is open to low income families adopting dogs. Robert, the assistant director of MidCity Shelter, explains this position:

> Low income people love their animals as much as anyone else does. I think you'll find the people who neglect the animal, you see that across all socioeconomic [levels]....I don't think the socioeconomic level is an indicator necessarily of how the animals is going to be cared for in the house.

Mr. Martin, a former director of volunteers for MidCity Shelter, believes that people in difficult or financially challenged circumstances may need a companion animal more than those in stable circumstances, thus showing that the needs of the human are at least equal to and may take priority over the needs of the dog:

> Why discriminate against people, at times in their life, when they need an animal the most? If you are homeless, or in a renting situation, in a transient stage, why discriminate against them, because that's the time they need that animal.

Another factor that no doubt affects the perspective and actions of MidCity Shelter's directors and staff is that they routinely had a large surplus of dogs available for adoption. Although they did euthanize animals for space and other reasons, their practice was to do everything possible to minimize the use of euthanasia. For example, at times four or five dogs would be housed together in one cage of about six by eight feet. Although less than ideal in terms of living conditions, this decision was preferable to euthanizing adoptable dogs. They also kept adoptable dogs for as long as possible (in some cases, for several months) rather than euthanizing them after a specific cutoff period. The fact that overcrowding existed and euthanasia was sometimes required is another factor contributing to the relative openness of adoption in this organization.

MidCity Shelter exhibits a perspective on the dog's needs that approaches the dog more as a nonhuman animal rather than a proto-human. Mr. Martin argues that animals can be well cared for without treating them as surrogate children, and that it is actually better for the dog and the family if the dog is treated as a nonhuman animal rather than a human. If treating the dog as a human fosters bad behavior on the part of the dog, and rewards dominant behavior, the dog may be more likely to be relinquished by his/her guardians. Mr. Martin articulates this position:

> Many people have gone too far in humanization process and they treat their animal as human, and don't give it boundaries and rules and hold them accountable as they should ... I mean they're dogs ... [letting the dog sleep in the bed]....That's absolutely the worst thing that can be done, because it fosters dominance ... [the humanization of dogs] hasn't necessarily done the dogs any justice, in terms of keeping them in their homes, and actually improving the quality of life that they have.

While MidCity Shelter wants dog adoptions to be permanent placements, they recognize that often they are not. Mr. Smith, Director of MidCity Shelter, notes that he wants families to try to place the dog in an alternate home themselves if they can't keep the animal. The main concern with relinquishment is that the dog not be returned to the shelter, rather than a concern for emotional stresses on the dog if he/she loses one family and has to connect with another:

> Well, first of all, we would like to keep the dog in the same home, if that's at all possible. And the way to do that is if someone mentions a baby, to be prepared

> with all the instructional material possible ... to give to the individual when they come in and tell you what their problem is. The key is convincing them what you're telling them does and will work, but, if they don't want to do that, you can offer them two alternatives....One is, place the animal yourself. Try your best: you have friends, you have family, you have acquaintances in the neighborhood who may have seen your dog, know your dog, or know your cat. Try it with them. We take animals in as a last resort, basically. We cannot guarantee that it will be placed.

MidCity Shelter has a human-centric approach to the place of the dog in the home. This approach is characterized by a desire for the dog to have his/her needs met—paramount among these is the need for a home—but the needs of the dog are not anthropomorphized. It is assumed that the proper way to treat a dog may not be the same as the proper way to treat a person. For example, MidCity Shelter did not name dogs—they were given numbers, which were put on their cages and their collars. This institution's use of a human-centric perspective is at least partly due to their obligation to run the organization in line with local laws and regulations (e.g., in terms of allowing adoptive families to chain dogs outside). These legal requirements contribute to an institutional philosophy in which the needs of the families adopting the dogs are given precedence over the needs of the animals.

Perspectives on Adoption at HelpDogs Independent Rescue

The HelpDogs independent animal rescue organization was started by a small group of friends who shared an interest in animal rescue. As a private nonprofit organization, they were not

subject to the rules and regulations governing the adoption of animals at MidCity Shelter. They used this latitude to provide what they considered a higher level of care: fostering dogs in volunteers' homes instead of in a shelter; providing more veterinary care, training, socialization, and grooming to improve dogs' adoptability; and thoroughly screening potential adopters. These organizational factors and policies are tied to members' beliefs about the place of the dog in the family. Mary, one of the founders and directors of HelpDogs, articulates her perspective on the ideal place of the dog in the adoptive family:

> The most important thing is for them to be treated as a member of the family. We want the people to love them like they would love a child ... care for them and worry about them, and take precautions with them, and take them places, and not just stick them in the backyard. You know, take them on some kinds of vacations. I mean that's my ideal home. Every dog needs something different. You know, some dogs really need families with children, they just thrive on that, and it's really good for them. And other dogs need a more quiet environment. But I think just being loved as a member of the family.

Notice how the focus is on the dogs and what is good for them, rather than on what is good or bad for the family. For example, the presence or absence of children is talked about in terms of how beneficial, or not, it might be for a particular dog, rather than in terms of the risks or benefits to the children.

The goal for HelpDogs is to find a home for the dog in which they are not just treated as part of the family, but as equal to the human members of the family. For some volunteers at

HelpDogs, the role of the dog in the family was the same as the role of a child. Along with this idea of family goes the assumption of permanence. In the excerpt below, HelpDogs volunteer Karen explains that, when she selects an adoptive family for a dog, she considers the ability of the family to care for the dog for the extent of his/her life:

> We're not adopting out a dog to a family that in three years is going to be bringing the dog back....You can see about why is he going to get a dog, for their thirteen-year-old son. In four more years the boy's going to be out of the house. What's going to happen to the dog in four years?

Lani (a director and co-founder of HelpDogs) assumes that the dog is a family member and should be treated as such, and that there is almost no excuse for relinquishing a dog. While some circumstances are valid, such as suffering a serious illness, developing allergies, or moving into a nursing home, Lani says that she's tired of hearing from people who want to get rid of their dogs:

> [We] have decided in most cases we're not going to continue to accept animals from people who, for some stupid reason or another, they don't want them in their lives, because we feel like we're just motivating poor behavior. You know, they think it's no big deal, and it is a big deal. We want them to feel it, we want them to feel a sense of responsibility, or shame.

While both MidCity Shelter and HelpDogs share the goal of finding permanent homes for their dogs, the methods they use to achieve this goal differ. Because MidCity Shelter is limited by

statutes in the degree to which it can screen or reject potential adopters, it relies primarily on educating potential adopters about the expenses, challenges, and labor involved in caring for dogs in order to address any issues that might lead to relinquished animals. HelpDogs, on the other hand, does not see education as its primary mission. They achieve their goal of finding permanent homes for their dogs by careful screening of potential adopters. They attempt to screen out less desirable families and only place their dogs with good families who will provide permanent homes. Their concept of what is a good home differs substantially from that of MidCity Shelter.

HelpDogs requires that the dog must sleep inside the house. They would reject the application of a potential adopter who planned to keep the dog in the basement, or outside on a chain. While volunteering at a HelpDogs adoption event, I watched the foster mother of a Dachshund tell a potential adopter that she would only give the dog to someone who would let the dog sleep on the bed with her. Although not all HelpDogs volunteers took this extreme stance, all those observed or interviewed agreed that the dog must sleep in the house and could not sleep in the basement. This example illustrates the marked difference in the degree and type of screening that gets done at HelpDogs as compared to MidCity Shelter.

While the adoption process at many independent rescue organizations begins with an online application, rescue representatives typically meet potential adopters in person before placing a dog with them. Some rescues have an extensive pre-screening process involving multiple interviews as well as home visits. Mary, the director of HelpDogs, describes her process of investigating the family:

> First of all, you ask them who makes up the family, in terms of small children, older people, I like to know the activities of the family and ... we like to know how where the dog's going to sleep, where they're going to be when no one's home, where they're going to be when someone is home, do children visit....We want to know if they've ever given up an animal before, and if they did why they did and how they did. That tells you a whole lot about somebody. I mean, some groups are very harsh on this, if you've ever given up a dog, you can't adopt one from us. We're not like that. We want to know the situation and what happened. We want to know that you made an attempt, if it didn't work with your family, you tried to find another home, you didn't take it to a kill shelter.

During the adoption events, foster parents engage in casual conversation with potential adopters to elicit information about the potential adopter's qualifications for adoption. At one HelpDogs mobile adoption event I observed a young woman who was thinking of adopting a large breed puppy. The woman said that she had grown up with Great Danes. Later on, when she put in an adoption application, and the volunteers in charge were deciding whether to let her adopt the puppy, I detected a lack of enthusiasm for her application. I then shared the information she had given me about having grown up with Great Danes, and this seemed to influence the volunteers to allow the adoption. The woman's great interest in adopting a large dog did not sway the volunteers, but when informed that she had experience living with and raising large dogs, their opinion changed. The best interest of the dog was given priority over the needs and desires of the human.

HelpDogs' perspective on the place of the nonhuman animal in the family also affects how they treat the dogs they foster and how they treat their own families in relation to their dogs—the dog-centric approach isn't just a philosophy, it guides actions and decisions. In the excerpt below from Lani, one of the leaders of HelpDogs, she describes how her love for a problematic dog ("Dobbs") leads her to take him home even though she has five dogs of her own and a husband who doesn't want any more dogs in the house. This excerpt also illustrates how the needs of the dog are seen by some at HelpDogs as more important than the needs of the family.

> I can deal with almost any animal, and I've got five at home, and I don't mind. I would take more than one animal, I can deal with it. My husband can't. Every time I bring a new one home it's a problem, you know. So that's something I knew I was going to have to deal with, but I was willing to deal with it in order to save Dobbs. And he did, he came home and he just blew up, "What is that? Why are you bringing more dogs home?" This is, you know, this is who I am. This is what I do.

Karen, a HelpDogs volunteer and foster mother, puts the needs of dogs ahead of the needs of potential adopters and of her own family members:

> No one's ever going to take a dog from me at [the supermarket] if they came to get groceries. They're going to have to wait and think about it....I would go to [the supermarket] and come home with a dog. Dogs are—I'm weird. I got divorced

> because of that. I'm willing to, (laughs) I choose dogs over marriage! But other people, I mean, you can't just get a dog at [the supermarket] when you're there to pick up milk, because it looks cute. You're not prepared for the dog, and the other members of your family don't have any decision or say-so.

HelpDogs volunteers are looking for high-quality homes where their dogs cannot just survive, but "flourish." Many of these volunteers are seeking affluent adopters for the dogs they foster. An excerpt from the interview with Mary, Director and Co-Founder of HelpDogs, illustrates the importance of social class in their adoption process: "That's one of the things we think about, when we're setting up mobile adoptions: we like affluent areas." At a HelpDogs adoption event, one volunteer commented to another about a woman who was interested in one of the dogs: "She's on Social Security." She would not allow this woman to adopt a dog, because she believed that someone on Social Security could not afford to keep a dog. At another adoption event, one volunteer said to another that they had rejected an online application that was submitted because of the address. The volunteer said that she was familiar with that neighborhood and did not think that anyone who lived there could afford to keep a dog.

While for both HelpDogs and MidCity Shelter, the goal is to find a permanent home for their dogs where the nonhuman animal's needs will be met, there are differences in beliefs about how dogs should be treated and what they deserve. HelpDogs has adoption screening procedures that are much more rigorous than those of MidCity Shelter, and that privilege the perceived needs of the dog over the adoptive family while, to a great extent, anthropomorphizing the needs of the dog. For HelpDogs, the best interests of the dog are the central focus in selecting a family

for that animal; the status of the dog is on a par with the human members of the family. The perspectives of these two types of organizations affects the experiences of people adopting dogs.

The Perspective of People Adopting Dogs

People adopting dogs from independent animal rescue organizations were often surprised by how demanding the screening and adoption process was compared to the process at traditional shelters such as MidCity Shelter. Julienne faced several challenges during the process of adopting a dog from an independent animal rescue organization:

> And so there were a couple of dogs we were interested in before we got our dog, that were at like these ... prisoners train them....They would never let me have a dog. They always said their dogs couldn't live with kids. I thought they were neurotic. Who knows, maybe their dogs couldn't. It's just funny, the extremes, because you can go to [MidCity Shelter] and walk out with a dog. And these people were screening us!

Julienne then found a dog online at another independent rescue organization, and submitted an application. The rescue demanded that the president of the rescue, the fosterer of the dog, and Julienne's entire family be present at the pre-adoption interview. This created problems with scheduling, which delayed their adoption process. After placing the dog with her family on a probationary basis, the rescue tried to take the dog back for a week to get her spayed. Julienne successfully persuaded them to let her keep the dog and get her spayed herself. However, Julienne was angry with the organization, because their actions led to her children becoming

afraid that they would lose the dog after becoming attached to her. While Julienne clearly wants her dog to be a member of the family (at one point, she said she wanted the dog to be like a sibling to her children), her thinking is human-centric. She is primarily concerned with protecting her family's interests, and the emotional needs of her children.

For some independent rescue organizations, the adoption process includes extensive interviews as well as a home visit prior to approval for adoption—or sometimes, even prior to meeting the dog. Daren describes his experiences adopting a dog he found online at an independent breed-specific rescue organization:

> They grilled [us]. Beyond the normal background stuff, what do you do for a living, do you own a house? They had covered most of that in email. They followed up the initial round of interviews with a home visit, and they actually sent another person out to make sure our house was cool, we had a fenced in yard, our neighborhood was safe....She said we don't want to see a lot of junk in the yard, we don't want to see car parts the dog might cut themselves on, we want to make sure the house isn't cluttered with stuff and the dog would be comfortable. So sort of a basic standard of housing, but also make sure it's just a good place for a dog.

For some families the dog-centric language of the independent animal rescues is compatible with their own perspective, because they view their dogs as surrogate children. For example, Daren describes his experiences interacting with the animal rescue organization he adopted a dog from ("Sandy" is his former dog):

> They were interested that we don't have kids and we don't plan to have kids, so they thought that "Wow your dog really is your surrogate child." And we took Sandy everywhere, [on] vacation with us. And when we didn't take her, we didn't kennel her, we left her with either my mom or Ann's parents. But they did ask a lot about how are your routines. Are you gone a lot at night? How often do you travel? When you travel do you take the dog with you?

Julienne explained how initially she wanted a dog who would be like a sibling to her children, but as she interacted with the animal rescue organization and became frustrated with the extent of anthropomorphism in the adoption process, she moved closer to a belief that she wanted a family "pet" rather than an additional "child." She becomes aware of how she differentiates in her mind between dogs and children:

> There has to be a limit, the dog is a dog and she is not one of my children. In some ways it may be a reaction to dealing with these adoption people and all of their excessive screening and use of parenting and adoption language, made me more like "It's a dog!" We will take good care of her, but she is a dog....Yes, but she is part of the family, the dog, she sleeps with Elaine [Julienne's daughter]. Yeah, it's funny, I mean I say all that but she gets treated very well. Very very well, as I told you at the grocery store, she's now eating human food. I mean good grief!

Julienne describes how initially she and her husband resisted the efforts of the foster mother to get her to let the dog sleep with them, but then describes how the dog Roxie earns the right to sleep on her daughter Elaine's pillow—by filling a need for the child:

> They didn't like that we weren't going to let her up on all the furniture. And that was like a weird conflict when they were coming over, because the woman kept saying to me, "she loves to sit on your lap, she sleeps with me every night." ... I knew that she [the foster mother] didn't like [that], and I said to her at one point during the whole process, that the dog would not be sleeping with me and my husband… Now she's all the way to sleeping on Elaine's other pillow ... Elaine likes that because then she sleeps right next to Elaine and she pets her when she's falling asleep.

Maritza, who has rescued and adopted several stray dogs, describes a shift from a human-centric to a dog-centric perspective on the place of the dog in the family, as her children grew up and moved out of the home:

> I think the fact that we don't have children in the home anymore probably elevated the animals quite a bit in their status....When my children were babies, we got a dog. Certainly we cared for it, it was a member of the family in a way, but I don't think it had the status the dogs do now. It sort of takes the place of children in some sense.

She now emphasizes the emotional bond between dogs and humans as an essential part of their place in the family:

> Well, I think love is really important... I don't think that's more important than having their basic physical needs met, but I don't think that a dog that only has its physical needs met really has a home. Both are critical.

Those who adopted dogs held a wide range of perspectives on the dog's place in the family. In this excerpt, Daren contrasts his friends' treatment of their dogs as pets, with his treatment of his dog as a family member:

> We have friends who treat their dogs like dogs, I mean treat their dogs like pets, and along with that they tend to be dogs who've gone through a lot of obedience training, who almost are like machines, do this do that command, stay out of our way. Whereas our dogs, they sleep in bed with us, they're on the couch, they are a complete part of our lives, and we even joke sometimes, like they don't understand how much they control how much we do. There are road trips we don't go on on short notice because we can't get anyone to watch them.

Julienne contrasts her family's treatment of their dog as a member of the family with her husband's family's treatment of their dog as a companion animal:

> Mark, my husband, didn't, he grew up with pets who were tied up in the backyard in the morning, brought in, no one pet them, no one loved it. Our dogs were trained to hide in a luggage bag in case the hotel wouldn't allow pets. I mean these dogs were part of our lives ... we loved them, they did things with us, we read books to them, they were part of our play....So I felt very much that I wanted a dog that would be a part of our family and the kids will play with.

In sum, the perspectives of those who have adopted dogs from shelters or independent animal organizations varies, with some adopters closer to the human-centric than the dog-centric perspective. Some adopters fall between the two perspectives, wanting the dog to be a member of the family, but not necessarily buying into the more dog-centric perspective of some independent rescue organizations, while for others the dog is a full-fledged member of the family.

Discussion

This comparative case study has shown how beliefs about the dog's place in the family affect both organizations' adoption procedures and policies, expectations for the type of home the dog should go to, and the experience of potential adopters. While both MidCity Shelter and HelpDogs believed that dogs' basic needs for safety, comfort, and care should be met, HelpDogs anthropomorphized dogs' needs and gave them priority over the needs and desires of potential adopters. This dog-centric perspective treats the dog as a family member rather than a pet or a possession, and assumes that the relationship between the family and the dog will be a permanent one. The emotional bond between the adopter and the dog is seen as central to their relationship.

HelpDog's perspective on the place of the nonhuman animal in the family also affects how they treat the dogs under their care and how they treat the adopters—the dog-centric approach isn't just a philosophy, it guides actions and decisions.

MidCity Shelter, on the other hand, held a human-centric perspective, in which the needs of the potential adopter are given priority and the needs of the dog are not anthropomorphized. For the human-centric perspective, the existence of an emotional bond between the family member and the dog is an aspiration rather than a requirement. The needs of the dog are perceived as different from the needs of the family members, and the best interest of the family is the primary focus in decision making about the dog. While on the surface these findings contradict those of Taylor (2010), whose shelter workers seem to be firmly on the dog-centric side of the spectrum, the shelter she examined is an independent non-profit no-kill shelter rather than a county-affiliated shelter. It was thus not subject to the institutional and legal constraints that MidCity shelter operated under, and did not have the pressure of having to euthanize adoptable dogs.

Some of those who had adopted dogs were closer to the dog-centric perspective, while others held a human-centric perspective that was very similar to the one held by MidCity Shelter. For those who adopted dogs from independent animal rescue organizations, the dog-centric screening process was experienced as excessive.

The assumption of HelpDogs seems to be that treating a dog like a member of the family is necessarily better than treating him/her as an animal companion, while the priority of MidCity Shelter is simply to place dogs in families that will provide them with good care. Fudge (2007) describes the dilemma of anthropomorphism—if we humanize nonhuman animals, we are more likely to try to help them, but anthropomorphism also denies the essential nature of the animal,

often to his/her detriment (see also Arluke & Sanders, 1996). Research reviewed previously (e.g., Weiss & Gramann, 2009; Shore et al., 2005; Adamelli et al., 2005) suggests that using a dog-centric approach to the placement of dogs in families may not be necessary in order to find homes that meet the dog's needs. In addition, the high level of selectivity of HelpDog's adoption procedures and standards may unnecessarily eliminate good adoptive families from consideration. For example, as MidCity Shelter's experience has shown, families across the social class spectrum can provide a high level of care for their animals. Neglect or abuse of animals is a problem that transcends class boundaries.

Leaders of both shelters and independent animal rescue organizations should examine their organizations' perspectives on the dog's place in the family. Staff and volunteers can be sensitized to the risks and benefits of the dog-centric and human-centric perspectives, and trained to objectively evaluate the merits of potential homes for adoptable dogs without unduly anthropomorphizing the perceived needs of the animal. The independent animal rescue organizations in particular should be alert to the risks of over-vigilant screening, which may not take into account the wide range of mutually beneficial relationships families may have with their dogs.

Conclusion

While this comparative case study served to identify the human-centric and dog-centric perspectives and to show how they can affect the practice of placing dogs for adoption and the experience of those adopting dogs, additional research on a larger data set should be done to further specify these relationships and determine the level of generalizability of these findings. Further research should be done on a wider range of types of organizations, on whether the

success of adoptions varies by dog-centric and human-centric adopters, the extent to which perspectives vary depending on the breed of dog, and the extent to which diversity of perspective among members of an organization may cause stress in the organization.

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