

Aggressive dog breeds: Document nr. 3

Backward reasoning, crooked logic, sudden denial – i.e. strange human pathologies

For hundreds of years, dog breeders have proudly trumpeted the heritability of the distinguishing traits of their particular breeds. They still do. Breeders are often – rightly – so convinced of the heritability of desired traits that they give money-back guarantees to the buyers of puppies. Until recently, many did the same for the buyers of dogs bred for fighting and aggressive guarding purposes (and also still do, where the goal is dog fighting). Many web sites proudly recited a breed's history, including an explanation of how heightened aggression was achieved in the breed. The sites often included proud statements about the dogs' deadliness, warnings about keeping them from other dogs and children, or proud warnings that the dogs would not accept strangers – all aimed at an audience that was not seeking a house pet, but a working dog bred specifically for the task of maiming and killing. However, as these breeds became more and more popular as house pets, and as fatal attacks on humans began to be a serious social problem, people began to be less honest. This document includes examples of some of the rather strange human behavior that has ensued.

Sudden denial of abnormality

Biologists, behavioral scientists, educated dog trainers, all widely acknowledge that one of the distinguishing traits of the domestic dog as a species is its capacity to solve conflicts with purely ritual aggression. This is an established fact. It is also an established fact that a normal domestic dog will cease all the ritual aggression at the sight of a certain signal from the other dog. In other words, purely ritual aggression is the standard of normal behavior in dogs when they are solving conflicts (Donaldson 1996, Semyonova 2003). Normally speaking, a dog will do all it can to avoid a real aggressive encounter even when it is frightened (*ibid*). All parties acknowledge that a normal dog will signal its intent to lash out, making every effort to give the other a chance to avoid a confrontation. This low level of aggression and the ability to extend the ritual usage of it to include other species is, in fact, the entire basis for the dog's evolution into a separate species (Coppinger and Coppinger 2001, Semyonova 2003). According to most biologists, including Nobel Prize winner Konrad Lorenz, the whole function of what they call the "dominance hierarchy" among dogs is to keep the peace and avoid damaging aggressive encounters. Fights are extremely rare among normal dogs. In twenty years of taping groups of dogs interacting freely at the University of Utrecht, Faculty of Veterinary Medicine, Dr. Matthijs Schilder was not able to tape so much as a single fight (personal communication, February 2, 2006). In fourteen years of observing normal household dogs behave freely off-leash in cities and parks, this author witnessed only seven ritual conflicts between ordinary dogs intense enough that a layman would call them fights. Five of these did not result in injuries to any of the dogs. Two of them resulted in small puncture wounds on the face, a result of dogs batting each other with their fangs while holding their mouths open (Semyonova 2003).

Then the aggressive breeds. For decennia "dogmen" (i.e., lovers of the blood sport of dogfighting) have acknowledged that their dogs were different, praising the special aggression of the dogs they use for their dog fights. These dogs have "a unique capacity to fight to the death, whereas most other dogs retreat once they have exhausted themselves." (Gibson 2005, p 2). Coppinger and Coppinger acknowledge experience with terriers who showed no submissive behaviors (2001, p. 216) and so-called AmStaffs who continued to attack despite the other dog's submissive signals (*ibid*, p. 217), remarking upon this as abnormal behavior. Many (scientific) sources comment on the fact that these dogs attack without any warning signals or any contextual cues that would lead one to anticipate aggression at all, let alone an unbridled attack. (E.g., "A [bull mastiff] of my own breeding who I rescued, attacked a potential new owner as I interviewed her. A shock to me since

he had been in my back yard for six weeks with no problems. I never could figure out what set him off. ... A male rescued from another breeder, after several years of successful acclimatization at a friend's home, suddenly attacked the woman new owner *as she fed* him [italics mine, AS] – two bites on one arm and tore up her face. Who knows what set him off?" www.home.att.net/~dubc/de/TempermentSurvey.htm, accessed in May 1999, now removed from the internet). Kenneth Phillips rightly makes the distinction between dog bites to humans that cause various degrees of damage and all-out attacks intended to seriously maim or kill the object (www.dogbitelaw.com).

What it comes down to is the widely acknowledged fact that reticence about using aggression, as well as signalling in advance in order to avoid a confrontation where possible, are probably THE distinguishing characteristic of the domestic dog as a species. It has also always been an acknowledged fact that the breeds that have undergone artificial selection for human aggressive purposes do not share this normal canine characteristic.

Until recently. Because we now meet a surprising phenomenon when yet another pit bull/Presa/AmBull/etc. attack has reached the news, or when anyone so much as implies that maybe we should do something about these particular breeds. Suddenly everyone tries to assert that these all-out attacks are within the spectrum of normal domestic canine behavior. The pit bull/Presa/etc. is “just overly dominant” – and everyone forgets that “dominance” as described by biologists is a purely ritual behavior, which serves specifically to *avoid* serious conflict. The fans of aggressive breeds cite statistics in which other breeds are at the top in bite incidents, hoping no one will notice that they are comparing controlled bites to all-out attacks intended to kill. (Not to deny the seriousness of a normal dog bite, but it just IS an entirely different phenomenon, and differently motivated.) In Europe, many people cited a case of two Dachshunds that had killed a baby in its crib. In fact, the owner of the Dachshunds had taught them to sleep in the crib before the baby came. When they suddenly encountered a foreign object (the newborn baby) on their usual sleeping spot, they had tried to shove it aside to make space for themselves by making digging movements with their front paws. There was not a single tooth mark on the child because the dogs had not used their teeth. Nevertheless, the fans of the aggressive breeds cited this case to demonstrate that dogs who do maim or kill children and do this with their teeth are behaving no differently than cutey-pie Dachshunds. Killing as normal behavior, since apparently Dachshunds do it, too.

When the golden retriever, the cocker spaniel or some other breed suddenly shows up with attack behavior, everyone is shocked and acknowledges that this is abnormal and astonishing behavior in a dog. When the aggressive breeds kill, everyone forgets what they said about the golden that killed yesterday and starts to point out that a deadly attack is normal canine behavior, searching for a history or for environmental stimuli that will explain the attack. Here, they confuse breed expectations with expectations about normal canine behavior in general. We don't expect a golden retriever to attack. We do, in fact, expect an aggressive breed to attack. However, the two sets of expectations end up confused. Because it is normal in many breeds to attack, maim or kill, people's expectations are met when this happens. Because it was what they expected, they experience the behavior as normal. Then – in cases where they are not knowingly distorting the facts – we can guess that they emotionally extend this feeling of “normal” to canine behavior in general. They end up losing sight of the fact that the behavior is abnormal in *canis familiaris* as a species, confusing their breed-expectations with expectations about all dogs. This psychological phenomenon is illustrated by contrasting the response to an attack by a golden retriever. We didn't expect it, it is therefore – due to our expectations – not experienced as normal, nor do we immediately feel that the behavior is normal in all dogs.

Perhaps the most tragic bending of what is normal in dogs is the unfair use of John Fisher's words, “all dogs bite” (Fisher 1998). Fisher made this comment for love of dogs and before the canine homicide epidemic began, in the hope of explaining ritual bites to dog owners so these bites could

be prevented. He was anxious to have people understand that most bites are motivated by some kind of anxiety and not intended to kill or maim. His words are now taken out of context and bent to indicate that the deadly attacks fall within the spectrum of normal canine behavior, since “all dogs bite”.

So this is pathological reasoning number 1: the false assertion that killer aggression is within the spectrum of normal canine behavior. It is not. The dog’s entire evolution is based on the loss of the killing bite as a normal behavior.

Sudden denial of heritability

There is a huge economic traffic in dogs, which traffic is solely based on the fact that all kinds of breed-specific behavior is genetically determined and heritable. No kennel club will deny the inherited glories of whichever breed you want to buy. Again, breeders are often – rightly – so convinced of the heritability of desired traits that they give money-back guarantees to people who buy their puppies. No one will deny that the breed-specific behaviors of the border collie, the pointer, the husky, and many other breeds is genetically determined – nor that many of these breeds are not fit to be household pets because of their genetic heritage! Everyone acknowledges that you won’t win a sheep trial with a border collie unless you train her, but they also acknowledge that the untrained border collie will still exhibit all the genetically determined stances and behaviors that belong to the breed (e.g., giving eye, the stalk stance, nipping at the heels of children or chasing cars).

Until recently, the same applied when buying or talking about dogs bred for fighting and aggressive guarding purposes. Dogfighters still acknowledge being highly picky about their dogs’ pedigrees (Gibson 2005). After a lengthy (and very elegant) explanation of the biological phenomena called physical and behavioral conformation, the Coppingers cite the case of a fighting dog. “Famous pit bull Whitney Ford showed one of these special motor patterns. As he entered the ring, he would bump the other dog like a sumo wrestler, with his chest. He has a ‘chest bump’ behavior. He knocked the other dog down, then he’d go after him. Other dog owners liked to breed to Whitney Ford because his offspring had the same move.” (Coppinger and Coppinger 2001, p. 216). The example is intended to illustrate how even very specific behaviors can be genetically determined. Meanwhile, the physical and physiological anchoring of this kind of abnormal aggression in the canine brain – no matter the breed – has been pinpointed, and with that its heritability is definitively established (Peremans 2002, Van den Berg 2006). The kennel clubs fully acknowledged that this aggression was a genetically determined fault when it appeared in the golden retriever, the cocker spaniel and the Berner Senne hund (see also Van den Berg 2006). They rushed to advertise that they were instituting new breeding programs intended to breed aggression back out of the dogs, clear in their statements that a few bad genes had simply crept into otherwise good breeds.

So everyone freely admits that breed traits, including abnormal aggression, are inherited, right? Wrong. They are willing to acknowledge good traits as genetic all the time, and bad ones as genetic when they are an anomaly in a breed. The same kennel clubs, biologists, behavioral scientists, and just about everyone else, suddenly assert that abnormal aggression is the one breed-specific behavior that is NOT inherited – if, and only if, you encounter it in a breed that has been intensely selected to exhibit abnormal aggression for many generations. The point breeders make is that abnormal aggression is definitely inherited if the dog is a golden retriever, cocker spaniel, etc. – it’s just not hereditary if the dog is a pit bull (or Presa/Dogue de Bordeaux/ etc.). In the pit bull (but not in the golden retriever) the problem is deficient socialization, owner inexperience, environmental stimuli, heaven knows what, but in any case not genes.

The kennel clubs also have another area where they want both hereditary and not-hereditary to be true at the same time. They claim that the AmStaff is an entirely different dog than the pit bull, utterly non-aggressive toward humans, *because the two have been bred separately for a couple of decades*. Thus, we are to believe that genetic selection not only can, but already has (in thirty short years) gotten the aggression out. Yet at the same time, the same people continue to assert that the behavior is not genetic in the pit bull. Excuse me? If it's not genetic, why all the trumpeting about AmStaffs having separate genes?

One of the most surprising (and, to me, shameful) examples of sudden and contradictory denial is to be found in Coppinger and Coppinger 2001. The authors give a lengthy and clear explanation of how much breed-specific behavior is genetically determined in dog breeds. They state (besides the comments about fighting dogs mentioned above):

“If a dog is bred for exaggerated behavioral conformation and is expected to display it in a working environment, it is hard to imagine that the household environment is going to provide the proper stimulation for such displays. ... This results in dogs that have motor displays not only inappropriate in the household environment, but that also can turn into compulsive disorders. A highly bred working dog raised in a nonworking household environment will still show the working behaviors it has been selected to display, but it will display them abnormally. Worse, it will display those behaviors in bizarre and obnoxious ways.” (p. 242)

“Certain breeds make bad pets no matter what you do. We should recognize this and not try to make pets out of them.” (p. 325, citing further the example of a border collie they owned),

The authors go on (pp. 322-323) to state that the only time they were ever afraid of the stray dogs they studied was at a dump in Tijuana, Mexico, where there were many dumped pit bulls and rottweilers. “These immigrants *of high breeding* [italics mine, AS]” had a different demeanor than the ordinary dump strays, and “to tell the truth I was a little afraid of them.” These dogs snarled at and sometimes pursued the authors at the dump, unlike the normal strays. “This is very different behavior from that of the standard village dog...” (p. 232, *passim*)

Then, amazingly – given the entire content of the book – s/he goes on to say, “By the way, I do not mean to imply that the aggression has anything to do with pit bull or rottweiler breeding...” I almost fell off my chair.

This is illustrative of the phenomenon “sudden denial.” There are large economic interests at stake, be it the sale of dogs, be it keeping your spot in the (kennel-club funded and very lucrative) lecture circuit, and apparently people are willing to resort to the strangest of sudden twists in order to protect these economic interests. Another possible motive may be the fact that people who speak the truth are often terrorized by owners of aggressive bred dogs. This fact-bending is pathological behavior in the sense that otherwise intelligent, often highly educated people, suddenly deny all they said two pages ago, demanding that two mutually contradictory statements be considered true at the same time. This is a phenomenon that probably warrants further study, as it would be most interesting to find out how much the behavior is motivated by greed and how much by fear.

Pathological reasoning number 2: sudden denial of the heritability of the behavior, often together with an assertion that the behavior is, in fact, heritable. In fact, the behavior is hereditary, period.

I'm defending the pit bull (etc.) out of love for dogs; those who want to ban these breeds are guilty of a dog-holocaust – i.e., denial of the importance of other dog deaths

This is a stance taken by many animal shelters, humane societies and owners of aggressive breeds. It doesn't take much examination to show that these are not dog-loving people in a larger sense. To clarify this fact, we have to move away from attacks on humans and look at what these dogs are doing to other dogs.

In the past six years, I have personally witnessed the killing of eleven dogs by pit bulls (in which category I include the so-called AmStaff) in dog parks, and have seen uncountable maiming but – due to human intervention – non-deadly attacks. In some of these cases, the household dog approached or was approached by the pit bull and started using normal greeting signals. The result was a – for the first dog – totally unexpected, all-out attack intended to kill. In other cases, the pit bull suddenly charged up to the first dog and attacked, without even stopping to inspect (for example) the gender of the attacked dog. Many attacks took place from behind, without the first dog even seeing the pit bull, let alone using any kind of signals at all, let alone provocative signals. In the past three years, I have started to see similar dog-dog attacks executed by Dogues de Bordeaux, American bull dogs, and Presa Canarias, as these breeds have replaced the banned pit bull in Europe. My own male dogs have been attacked by pit bulls multiple times, and once by a 10-month-old female Fila Brasileiro. Dog-dog attacks and killings are much more common than attacks on humans. The Chief of Surgery at Utrecht University's Faculty of Veterinary Medicine recently commented that the wounds these aggressive dogs inflict on other *dogs* are becoming a huge and serious problem. In fact, there is a slaughter of ordinary, non-aggressive household dogs going on out here on the streets. If you want to talk about “a holocaust”, I think we should start with this one.

A normal dog does *not* expect to have to fight for its life, and it is not equipped to do so, neither by its anatomy nor by its life experience. The universe of a normal dog is based on the assumption that all conflicts will be solved by ritual signals. It is – if you love dogs – unbearable to see the fear and surprise in the eyes of the dog that is attacked by an aggressive breed. There is panic, attempts to turn to avoid bites, attempts to flee. The attacked dog screams in dismay, in pain, trying to signal the aggressive dog to stop attacking and (probably) calling for help. If you love dogs, you cannot see this even once and continue to defend the right to breed for aggression in dogs.

Love of dogs? I have never once seen the owner of an aggressive breed come to the assistance of the attacked dog. In literally all of the many attacks I have witnessed, the owner stood by watching. In a few cases, I had the impression the owner was frightened of his own dog, but in most these owners just seemed interested to watch what their dogs did to the victim of the attack. That is, as long as they are convinced it is the other dog who will be hurt. I once saw the owner of a husky pick up his husky in an attempt to interrupt an attack by a pit bull. The owners of the pit bull stood by watching calmly as the pit bull went on attacking the husky, who was now hanging helplessly in the air. In the end, the husky's owner dropped his own dog and picked the pit bull up by its hind legs. The husky was so upset by this time that she grabbed the pit bull's lip and didn't let go. Only then did the owners of the pit bull come into action, picking up a piece of driftwood and starting to beat the husky viciously with it. At that point, I managed to grab the husky's collar, and the whole thing stopped. The owners of the pit bull were furious because their dog had a bleeding lip. How dare this man touch their dog? They were completely unconcerned about the fact that the husky was seriously injured, bleeding profusely and unable to walk on one of her front legs. They warned the owner of the husky that they were going to find out who he was and where he lived and punish him extensively for his sin. In another attack, the female owner of the pit bull stood there screaming, “don't call the police!” as she watched the attack without offering assistance, worried only that her own dog – who had already killed two other dogs – would be confiscated this time and destroyed. I have, myself, repeatedly (probably unwisely) intervened because I do love dogs (not only my own), only to face raging verbal aggression from the owner of the aggressive dog, “how dare you touch my dog!” In one case, I was stalked for months by the owner of an English

Staffordshire terrier whose dog I hadn't hurt, just stopped from killing my own dog. I don't quite see the connection between a love of dogs and the objection to interfering with the killing of one...

The comments we see in the press affirm this lack of love for dogs. People respond to reports of a killed dog with the ritual opening, "my deepest regrets for your maimed/dead dog..." Then they immediately add "BUT..." and proceed to explain why the attacking dog is, in fact, to be pitied more, and why the attacking dog is, in fact, the victim. In fact, all the poor aggressive dogs are victims, because people won't let their ordinary dogs play with the pit bull in the park, they give them dirty looks on the street or flee by quickly turning the corner, the poor, poor pit bull (Presa/Dogue/AmBull/etc.)...and because people report the poor things to the police when they kill another dog. What it comes down to is that these people (and humane societies) feel that the lives of countless ordinary dogs are less important than the life of the aggressive dog. If saving his life means he will maim and/or murder many other dogs during his natural life, well, so be it. Love of dogs??????

The real "holocaust" (to use their own terms) is the one going on among dogs not bred for aggression. This is a serious problem for those of us who love dogs, even if the law does not recognize the seriousness of dog-dog murders. Besides the deaths and horrible injuries, and the mental trauma (which a surviving dog never recovers from), there are other adverse effects on the lives of ordinary dogs, ones who have not yet been attacked. Their living space is becoming more and more limited as increasing numbers of dogs of aggressive breeds come to dog parks. People with ordinary dogs have to avoid these parks in order not to endanger their dogs' lives, thus decreasing their dog's opportunities to be off leash and play with other dogs. This is an important decrease in the quality of an ordinary dog's life. It also has adverse effects on the maintenance of socialization in the normal dog, since social skills and confidence do need to be exercised to be kept. Many places in Europe where dogs have always been welcome are now closed to dogs (e.g., bars, restaurants, department stores, small shops, schools, playgrounds, malls, entire shopping streets, parks not specifically designated for dogs). Because the law does not allow only (as yet) legal aggressive breeds to be prohibited from public places, all dogs are shut out. In private establishments, the owner knows s/he knows s/he will be terrorized if s/he shuts out only certain breeds, so all dogs are excluded. The presentation of unbridled aggression and the killing of children and other dogs as "normal canine behavior" has also led to a huge negative turn in the general public opinion about and tolerance of dogs in general. Ten or fifteen years ago a parent did not immediately think of maiming and death if one of my dogs passed his/her child in a park, or even if my dog rushed up to the child. Now this is the first thing they think of, reacting first with fear and panic, then with anger as they work off the adrenaline shot. People are starting to fear and even hate dogs in general. If you love dogs, you can't ignore what the "right" to breed specifically for aggression is doing to the lives of ordinary dogs in our societies.

Breeding for aggression is also raising a problem for the future of the dog as a species. Natural selection took thousands of years to produce a species that is extremely reticent in the use of aggression, and which is able to transfer this reticence to its social bonds and interactions with many other species. This is the foundation of the species' biological success. As we insist on our "right" to apply artificial selection to undo what natural selection did, and as the aggressive breeds grow in popularity and mix their genes with the general canine population, a threat is arising for the species as such. Mixing these genes widely and unpredictably into the general canine population will eventually mean the end of the domestic dog as a safe companion for humans – and this will mean the dog's demise as a species altogether.

This brings us, finally, to the question of the dog as a consumer item. The insistence on owning a particular breed (even if it's a golden retriever) is strictly a consumer preference. The dog is not bought for his dogginess, but to satisfy consumer needs – be it a cutesy-girly image or a macho-

frightening one. You won't love him unless he has such extremely short legs that he can only waddle, or that cute nose through which he can hardly breathe, or – yup – a body and brain that are built to kill. Consumer preferences are ego-related. Losing your utter freedom of consumer choice feels cruel to yourself, that's all. Let's not kid ourselves that defence of consumer freedom is the same as love of dogs.

Perhaps the oddest thing here is that so many humane societies fell for this one. Normally, humane societies lobby the kennel clubs to stop breeding for the many extremes in body and behavior that are such a handicap to the dogs born with them. Despite the fact that the European bans on the pit bull were instituted humanely, aimed not at immediate eradication but at eventual extinction of the breed (without killing a single dog), humane societies suddenly dropped their anti-extremes stance and fought for the "right" to continue breeding for abnormal aggression. They were willing to ignore not only the many canine maimings and deaths these dogs inflict, but also the miserable lives most of these dogs lead themselves. "You can't blame a dog for its owner's actions," they shouted, ignoring the fact that no one wanted to kill the dogs. Besides the many canine deaths, the humane societies also ignored the fact that the extinction policy would protect future generations of aggressive dogs from living 23 hours a day in a bench, from being viciously maltreated by their owners, from being maimed themselves in illegal dog fights, and from being left hung by the neck on trees in parks, suffering a slow death as punishment for losing a fight. We can only guess at what other motives behind this strange stance were, because it certainly isn't the love of dogs nor even the protection of the aggressive dogs themselves.

In a nutshell. If you love dogs, you will object to purposely breeding them with abnormalities of any kind. You will object to continued breeding that leads to thousands of violent dog deaths each year. You will think the lives of ordinary dogs are important, and that multiple dog-lives are too high a price to pay – or even risk paying – for preserving the life of an aggressive-bred dog. You will want to protect the aggressive-bred dogs from leading miserable and violence-ridden lives, by the gentle measure of preventing their birth. You will be concerned about preserving the domestic dog as a species, just as Nature made him, and you will put this concern above your own (and others') strictly consumer preferences.

This is pathological reasoning number 3: I fight to keep the aggressive breeds because I love dogs so much. Breed preferences are purely a question of consumer freedom, a freedom that, in fact, has disastrous consequences for dogs.

I am the ultimate dog expert because I have an aggressive breed dog

Lots of people believe they are a dog expert just because they own a dog who sits when they say so and who has never bitten them. This belief is not a problem with an ordinary dog, as long as both the dog and the owner are reasonably happy. A subset of this group is people who believe they are a dog expert because they grew up with their parents' dogs (who sat when told to and never bit). They repeat their parents' practices and believe this constitutes expertise, since it's worked for two generations now (their own dog sits when told and doesn't bite). There is also no harm in this, as long as human and dog are happy. Then there are the trainers at the various dog clubs, who are somewhat like the people who grew up with their parents' dogs. These trainers learn their beliefs at a dog club, and since all the dogs sit when told and don't bite, they consider themselves to be experts. This is not a problem when their methods are not cruel, but it is a little more dangerous than the previous two groups. As Askew (1996, p. 59) puts it:

"If there is one major difference between today's academically qualified veterinarian, psychologist, or biologist practitioners it is the following: while academically qualified practitioners know that

true competence can only be achieved by a combination of extensive counseling experience with a comprehensive knowledge of the interdisciplinary scientific literature, dog trainers are confident that they have learned everything they need to know about how to solve dog behavior problems in their obedience schools. . . .The time is past when the insights and simplistic, often dogmatic views of such individuals can play a useful role in the further development of the field [of animal behavioral therapy].”

Indeed, all of the above groups basically adhere to simplistic ideas and dogmas, but dog trainers have invested much more in their dogmas. So much so that an important part of their self-image and the whole of their public image depend on not having their dogmas challenged. As academically educated experts have taken an increasingly prominent role in this now lucrative field (training dogs and solving behavior problems in dogs), self-appointed experts and dog-club appointed experts seem to be feeling the need to defend their expertise.

One of the ways they try to do this is by choosing to own aggressive breeds. The attitude is: any ol’ body can get a Labrador to sit or live with some wimpy mutt without getting bit – but look at ME, I live with these dangerous dogs everyone else is so scared of, and they sit when I say so, and they don’t dare bite me, so I must be the biggest expert of all (even if this is the first and only dog I’ve ever had). The next step is to claim that they are the only ones who know anything about the aggressive breeds, disqualifying literally everyone – from biologist to behavioral scientist to geneticist – who does not actually own such a dog. These are the people who will tell you the pit bull/Presa/AmBull/etc. is not an aggressive breed, and the definitive proof they offer for this the fact that their own dog(s) hasn’t attacked them (yet). Finally, there’s a group that still feels insecure despite owning such a dog, so they go do attack training with the dog. Not only do they interact with these dogs daily, but they also beat them, shock them, work the dogs into defensive rages – and since the dogs haven’t bitten them yet, or since they have survived one or more attacks, well, they must truly be the ultimate dog experts. These people will often tell long stories about how they torture the dogs they work with, as if torturing an animal with all the odds stacked against the animal and with all kinds of restraining measures in place to prevent it from defending itself or retaliating proves some kind of “expertise”. Completely ignorant of the enormous literature on punishment and behavior, they claim you don’t know anything about dogs until you’ve tortured one, and that you don’t know anything about aggressive dogs until you’ve tortured lots of these, too.

So people who work with these dogs either never knew what dogs really are, or else they lose sight of this due to the narrow world they shut themselves up in (Semyonova, book in preparation for publication in 2007). They often use truly weird and highly cruel methods in dealing with their dogs. They have a distorted view of dogs and often of the rest of the world. They don’t understand that the moment you think you know all there is to know is the moment when true ignorance begins. They are anything but experts on dogs.

This is pathological reasoning number 4: The pissing contest. Unfortunately, being able to piss further than someone else does not in any way bestow expertise on the pisser.

Buy the most aggressive breed you can find, with the specific intention of intimidating people, then object when people are, indeed, intimidated

People who buy highly bred dogs buy them because they are looking for the specific characteristics the breed (or mix of breeds) has. People who buy the aggressive breeds buy them *because* they are aggressive and scary. Some of these people basically want to prove something to their surroundings. Besides the group mentioned in the previous section, there are adolescent male

humans. Both young men and the police openly remark that the aggressive dog is a means of achieving status and power within the adolescent peer group – a status symbol, part of the various macho images touted in the video clips shown on (for example) MTV, as much a part of the image as the Nikes and the baggy skater's pants. (See also Burrows and Fielding 2005.) Others really want a killer – be it because they take part in illegal dogfighting, be it because they are so insecure that this is the only way they can compensate enough. As the Los Angeles Times noted (February 1, 2001):

“[There is] a new generation of fighting dogs being bred for size and ferocity in a canine arms race that is yielding animals more than twice the size of the pit bull. ... Today, it seems, pit bulls are not enough. ‘Now there’s the thought of trying to come up with a stronger, meaner dog,’ said Teri Austin, president of the Amanda Foundation, which rescues dogs from Los Angeles animal shelters. ‘This is where mastiffs come in, a more efficient killing machine. ... The problem with the [Presa] is that these guys are so powerful and when they’re crossed with something like a pit bull, you don’t know what you’re going to get.’”

The same phenomenon has taken place in Europe, where the legal AmStaff that first replaced the pit bull is now being pushed out by the larger aggressive (mixed) breeds.

So people know what they are buying when they buy an aggressive dog, and they buy it for a reason. They want a dog that will enhance a scary macho image; sometimes they want a dog that really will maim and kill others (other dogs, humans). They go out onto the street with their dog, and then the most strange thing happens – when people react by indeed expressing fear of the dog, they get furious!

I have heard hundreds of stories of people being pursued, cursed at, even physically assaulted because they tried to avoid an aggressive dog. You see someone with one of these dogs in the distance and cross the street with your own dog to avoid having to pass them on a narrow sidewalk. The owner of the aggressive dog sees this, which releases a stream of insulted curses as he follows you across the street, determined to force his dog on you – just to prove to you that you are stupid to be scared. I have been pursued this way many a time, only to have the furious owner stop in dumbfounded amazement when his dog indeed began to try to attack mine, upon which the two of them do an about face and disappear as quick as the owner's legs will carry him. In a dog park, one of them shows up with the intent to release his aggressive dog into the group, wanting everyone to let his pit bull/Presa/etc. play with their dogs. When other dog owners immediately call their dogs and leave, you can learn many a new curse word, the owner of the pit bull/etc. highly insulted that everyone is shunning his dog. You see one of these dogs in the distance on a path in the woods. You turn down another path to avoid a meeting. The owner sees this, starts shouting indignant curses at you, shouting that you are stupid to be afraid – and, again, pursues you to force a confrontation with his dog. Now there are no witnesses, so the pursuit continues even when his dog begins to attack yours. The only way I have found to avert this (in the absence of witnesses who might come to my aid as his “harmless” dog continues its interaction with my own) is to pull a can of pepper spray out of my pocket. Upon which the owner grabs his dog and keeps both himself and the dog at a safe distance as he curses me out. And again the incident I cited above, when I prevented an English Staffordshire terrier from killing my border collie by lifting the Stafford's hind legs into the air. My dogs immediately moved off a bit and just stood there, the Stafford was not harmed. Nevertheless, the owner physically assaulted me for stopping his dog from killing mine. As he hit me with the one hand, he held onto his dog's collar with the other hand – not to protect my dogs, but to protect his own dog from me, since he'd already seen I could get his dog under control. This was (thank heavens) on the public street. It took four police officers to restrain this man as he continued to shout that I had no right to shun his dog and that he was going to kill me for doing so.

You see the same thing in the newspapers when there has been yet another vicious attack. The owners of aggressive dogs send in huge streams of letters to the editors, many of which say “I get so tired of the way people react to my dog, crossing the street to avoid us, shunning us in parks, these scaredy-pants really need to learn something about dogs...” Often the tone betrays the fact that the owner is enjoying displaying his greater courage and expertise under the guise of “oh poor me,” but just as often the tone is one of sincere insult. I believe that what happens in the second case is as follows. These people buy an aggressive dog because, for whatever reason, they like the idea of scaring others. It seems like it’ll be lots of fun. But as time goes on and they have to *live* with the fact of people being scared, shunning them on the streets and in parks, they decide it’s not so much fun after all. But instead of living with the consequences of the choice they made as grownups should, they start to demand that their surroundings excuse them from those consequences – like a whining child, “this is no fun anymore!!!” – and start to demand that they be treated as if they’d bought a poodle. They often do this even after their dog has killed other dogs.

Which brings us to a subset of this pathological reasoning: blame the victim. In order to maintain their fantasy (and force you to cooperate), they claim endlessly and in all cases that the maimed or killed dog (or child) was at fault. The victim deserved to be maimed or die because s/he was too assertive, because s/he smelled funny (the maimed child who must’ve smelled sick), because s/he somehow must’ve provoked the attack. No matter what, it is not because the attacking dog is aggressive, and there is still no reason to be afraid of this dog. After all, it will only kill you or your dog if you deserve it. All you have to do is make sure you (or your child or your dog) don’t deserve it. And of course, one of the ways you deserve it is by being afraid of the aggressive-bred dog.

Pathological reasoning number 5: Buy the most aggressive, scary dog you can find, then be highly insulted when people are, indeed, afraid of it.

[Banning aggressive breeds is cruel to these breeds; we’re talking about a dog holocaust here](#)

The point was made above that there is already a dog “holocaust” going on – among ordinary household dogs. As far as a “holocaust” among aggressive breeds, the fact is that whenever a ban is instituted as a humane extinction policy, there is nothing cruel about it. Let’s examine the reasons people think a muzzle-leash-extinction policy is cruel to the aggressive dog.

Muzzling. Many people assert that it’s cruel to muzzle a dog. Yet the same people have no objection to the widespread use of the Gentle Leader as a humane training tool. And the same people get a lot less sentimental when their own dog turns out to be a compulsive poop-eater. Then the muzzle is suddenly just fine, aside from the worry that people will think their dog is aggressive. But this is a worry about their own public image, not about the dog’s welfare, and most people get over it as their dog breathes (literally) shit-breath on them daily. Many people are mistakenly afraid that their muzzled dog won’t be able to defend itself in a “fight”.

In fact, any competent trainer will tell you that dogs easily get used to wearing a muzzle. They can still do everything they normally do in a park or the woods – read the daily gossip mags (smell who’s been here today), play with other dogs, take a swim. The only thing they can’t do is fetch the ball or bite. Fetching a ball is something a dog can do in a place where no other dogs are present. After all, if he’s fetching the ball, he’s not playing with other dogs anyway. As for biting, well, normal dogs don’t want to bite, so they won’t mind not being able to. Normal dogs also don’t need their teeth to defend themselves, because they don’t really use their teeth in conflicts anyway. Even if attacked by one of the aggressive breeds, normal dogs still don’t use their teeth in defence because this defence is useless (and dogs know this). They try to flee, and a muzzle does not interfere with this. Muzzling a dog does not cause dog suffering. It does cause owner suffering –

the owners of aggressive breeds suffer horribly at the idea that people will no longer be so intimidated by their muzzled dogs.

Life on a leash. Many people shout that making a dog spend every minute of his life outside the house on a short leash is a cruel measure. It's true, adding a short-leash provision to an extinction policy would mean the pit bull (etcetera) doesn't get to run free in the park and stretch his legs. However, a large majority of the dogs who live with us never get to do this anyway. Lots of dog owners never get to a dog park. Lots of dogs never see the outdoors except for their fenced yard. There is no huge outcry about this, even though most of these dogs would never maim or kill anyone if they did get out to a park. Many cities have leash laws for all dogs, requiring leashing in all public places except in designating dog parks. In fact, this is a humane measure because the largest cause of death of unleashed dogs is the automobile. And the dog parks? If a dog must, for whatever reason, miss his run in the park, a conscientious dog owner can compensate this in many ways so that the dog doesn't suffer a loss in the quality of his life. And sorry, but you can't compare the "suffering" of the always-leashed dog with the suffering of the dog who is attacked with the often successful intent to maim and kill.

There are various reasons the owners of aggressive breeds object to the idea of life on a leash. Many actually enjoy seeing the fights that occur when they let their dogs loose in dog parks. Others enjoy seeing how frightened people get when their aggressive breed approaches humans or other dogs. Yet others just don't like the idea of anyone telling them what to do. They just hate following rules in general. Often it's just laziness or impatience. It takes effort and patience to teach a dog to walk on a leash. The lazy person objects to having to wait while the dog sniffs something. S/he objects to the tiny effort it takes to leash the dog for the walk from the front door to the car. Again, it is only the dog's owner who suffers – losing his/her weapon and having to put a little effort into life with the dog.

Sterilization. Objections to not allowing the aggressive breeds to breed any further are all human projections – in so far as they are not merely consumer-freedom protests. Unlike human males, male dogs do not know they have testicles. And – although testosterone does influence some of their behavior – their social identity is not dependent on possession of those testicles. A castrated dog is just as happy as, and in some ways often happier than, a non-castrated dog. The operation is a minor one, involving practically no physical pain or suffering. The dog recovers within a day or two, and goes his happy way without noticing anything has changed. He doesn't miss having sex. Most dogs never have sex anyway. Those who do are dependent on certain very specific stimuli to even have the thought, and as soon as the stimuli are gone, they forget sex exists as an activity. Female dogs do not know they can have puppies until the puppies are actually there. They are often shocked and taken aback (sometimes even traumatized) by the whole process of mating, hindered in their lives as the pregnancy progresses, and extremely frightened and baffled at parturition. A female dog who doesn't have (anymore) puppies doesn't walk around feeling like some tragedy has struck her. Unlike humans, a dog's social status and sense of self is – in her own eyes and among conspecifics – not dependent on being a mother. Being a mother only lasts a few weeks anyway. We quickly take the pups away from her because we have been taught that seven to eight weeks is the best time to place a pup in a new home. And the puppies who never get born? They don't know they weren't born, it's as simple as that.

The claims that an extinction policy is cruel *to the dog* is not valid. Some people are projecting, but for most, the real problem with extinction is (yet again) purely a problem of having their toys taken away from them.

Eradication. No one has suggested killing all existing aggressive dogs. If we keep them harmless for the duration of their natural lives until extinction is a fact, there is no need to do any killing.

However, for the sake of challenging all false sentimentality, a last point has to be made here. Dogs do not have any abstract conception of life and death. Unless there is some signal of danger to themselves, they won't react to the killing of another animal in their presence. They react to a corpse laid among them – even if it's a dead dog, and even if they knew the other dog well – with no other emotion than passing curiosity (with the exception of the breeds that are likely to attack the corpse). When faced visibly and concretely with maiming or death (for example, a pit bull attacking him), a dog is certainly full of fear and will try to preserve his physical integrity and his life. But even if we were to actively eradicate the aggressive breeds, we wouldn't do this by having other dogs tear them apart alive. We would take the pit bull (etc.) to a vet, who would give it a lethal injection in the gentlest possible way. The pit bull (etc.) would feel exactly what it felt the last time it was at the vet's for an operation – nothing like what the dog it killed yesterday felt as he was torn apart alive. Furthermore, dogs do not imagine the rest of their lives. When we gently kill a dog, he is not losing a future life he imagined and looked forward to. The dog lives his life up until the moment he loses consciousness, then everything stops. Period, just like a human who dies during an operation, you didn't go in thinking of death, and you don't know that you never woke up. The dog remains unconscious both of his own death and of his lost future. While we may mourn the loss of a future we were able to imagine, but we shouldn't kid ourselves that a dog can do the same.

The only argument against eradicating the aggressive breeds is human consciousness of taking the rest of their lives away from them. However, even this is not a very credible argument. First of all, we continue to do nothing about the millions of ordinary dogs killed at shelters each year, so suddenly mourning the killing of selected breeds as a tragedy is not very convincing. Secondly, and here the humane societies should be most ashamed of themselves, opposition to eradicating the aggressive breeds can't be in the name of saving dogs' lives, because these dogs do too much dog-dog killing for that argument to be valid. Finally, dogs do not know about life and death except in the moment. The fact that *we* feel bad about what *we* know we took away from the aggressive dog is, perhaps, just punishment for the fact that we created these dogs in the first place.

Dogs are not little humans. They don't care about having balls or children and can lead their lives perfectly well leashed and muzzled. Being killed after you're born is a totally different thing than never having been born at all, and – though no one is talking about killing dogs – even being killed (by lethal injection) is a totally different thing to a dog than to a human (though being attacked by an aggressive dog is not). This argument is all about human projection, and not at all about what is best for dogs.

This is pathological reasoning number 6: the idea that an extinction policy for the aggressive breeds would be cruel to the dogs. It would not be. In fact, extinction of all the aggressive breeds would be the most humane thing, both for the aggressive dogs themselves and for their victims, as well as for the dog as a species. A policy of banning any breed that shows up with this genetic abnormality in more than, say, 5% of the dogs would send a clear message to the kennel clubs not to switch and start selecting new breeds for this trait. It would make them take quick measures in dogs like the golden retriever, the German shepherd, the husky, the moment aggression begins to appear as anything more than an extremely rare anomaly in such a breed. It would discourage illegal breeders from taking a new breed and running with it, knowing that will only lead to loss of their investment as the breed shows up in the statistics too often. It might even send a message to the kennel clubs that breeding for unhealthy extremes of any kind might be a poor investment for the future.

Breed bans don't work

Breed bans do work, *as long as they are enforced*. When the pit bull was originally banned in

Europe and the ban strictly enforced, fatal injuries to humans (and dogs) immediately returned to being rarities. The police thought the problem was solved and turned their attention to other things. As time progressed, the so-called AmStaff began to replace the pit bull among those who wanted aggressive dogs (and wanted to maintain their rapper-skater fashion images). Many of these dogs were, in fact, illegal (having no pedigree), but the police weren't bothering about it anymore. As the numbers of these dogs began to increase again, so did the number of maimings and fatal incidents that reached the news (involving both humans and other dogs). People whose dog had been attacked were sometimes terrorized to the point where they had to move out of the neighborhood. This resulted in pressure on the police to start enforcing the law again, until the point was reached where (to take the example of a city in The Netherlands) the police again cracked down and started confiscating banned dogs. The maiming and fatal incidents involving humans in that city again immediately dropped to almost zero, and now involved only legal pit bull-type dogs (i.e., the AmStaff and the Staffordshire bull terrier). Harassment on the street and in parks (see pathology number 5 above) also stopped. It was suddenly possible to walk on the street or in a park with your dog without being followed, cursed at or assaulted by the owner of a pit bull-type dog. When pursued in a place where there were no witnesses, pulling out a cell phone and starting to call 911 was enough to make the owner and his aggressive dog quickly melt off into the woods.

People who own these dogs are motivated only to protect themselves and their dogs. Experience shows that they will protect others from their dogs, *as long as they have to fear that their own dog is the one that will end up dead.*

Sometimes bans fail because they are not extensive enough. Some European countries have banned all aggressive breeds, and in Germany any dog larger than thirty pounds has to be muzzled at all times when outside the home. These bans have been effective in radically reducing incidents with these dogs. In The Netherlands, only the pit bull was banned. The ban has proved effective when it is enforced. However, the people who opposed banning pit bulls are proving right to be about one of the points they made, and are turning out to know their own kind but all too well: in The Netherlands these people are starting to avoid the enforced pit bull ban by buying other, often larger, aggressive breeds. The Presa Canaria, the Dogo Argentino, the American Bull dog (which falls under the pit bull ban), the Dogue de Bordeaux, the Boerbull are all increasing in numbers on the Dutch streets. And, as was to be expected, the first incidents have already occurred with these breeds.

This does not prove that a ban doesn't work, quite the contrary. What this proves is that an enforced ban does work. After all, the incidents involving banned dogs drops, every time again, radically. The very fact that the banned dogs are later completely replaced in the statistics by dogs that are not banned is the clearest demonstration one could ask for that the ban worked.

“Banning the pit bull won't work” is a statement that is false on one level, true on another. The pit bull ban works everywhere it is enforced because people (and dogs) stop getting killed by pit bulls. If your goal is to stop death by pit bull attacks from occurring, then the statement is false – the ban does work. However, banning the pit bull doesn't stop people from getting killed in attacks by other aggressive breeds. So if your goal is to stop people (and dogs) getting killed by dog attacks at all, “banning the pit bull won't work” is a true statement. People just go buy other aggressive breeds.

The jump in logic to the statement “breed bans don't work” is a result of confusing these two different goals. It has been strange to see even people like Lockwood make this jump (1987, 1994), since scientists are trained in the logical and coherent development of hypotheses and proofs. What we should be writing is, “banning one aggressive breed will stop deaths by that breed, and it will do this effectively; however, it does not stop deaths by other aggressive breeds.”

Pathological reasoning number 7: breed bans don't work because people just get other aggressive breeds. This is like saying, "Diets don't work because if you switch from a pound of chocolate a day to a pound of hard candy, you still get fat." What you need to do is get rid of everything with sugar in it.

A final note: The problem of police forces and armed forces that feel they need aggressive dogs to assist them in their work is beyond the scope of this paper. This is a different problem involving different theoretical and sociological points – though it is a problem I feel the humane societies should be addressing. However, even if one were to concede to these professional forces, it is not difficult to think of ways to keep both possession of these dogs and the spread of their genes limited to the government services involved.

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