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Psych 7

I've had five dogs throughout my life, and four of them have been mutts. My first dog, a Golden Retriever named Astro, was purchased from what my parents assure me was a 'reputable' breeder. Of the others, two were adopted from shelters, one rehomed from a stranger on the internet, and one taken off the hands of my parent's friends. Both of the two shelter dogs had issues with aggression, and the two rehomed—while friendly—proved to be a nightmare to train. Astro, by contrast, was a calm, friendly, and intelligent presence with the least amount of issues out of all the dogs that came after him, but of course he was. He was, after all, a purebred.

I love dogs, but this is not exactly an uncommon trait in American society. However, unlike mine, society's appreciation does not seem to extend to all dogs equally, as evidenced by the American Kennel Club's 2016 ranking of the most popular dog breeds. While the lovable Labrador Retrievers rank #1, scruffy Welsh Terriers don't even make it in the top 100 (AKC). Even among my own friends I've noticed a selective love, some of them dotting over the beautiful Siberian Huskies while deeming Chihuahuas 'rat dogs', or cooing over pictures of Cocker Spaniels while remaining completely indifferent to my own assemblage of indefinable canines. In fact, it's almost like the category of 'mixed-breed' is a breed of its own, and it makes up the absolute last ranking. After all, according to the AKC, purebreds are bred to be genetically healthier, more physically fit, and even to have more appealing temperaments (AKC). Mutts are the dogs you find wandering the streets or filling up every spot in the shelter; they're not the sort you actually want to take into your home.

Well, at least for some people. After bonding with four of them, it's impossible for me not to be an avid proponent of the infamous 'mixed-breed'. They may not be as prestigious as purebreds, nor as attractive, nor as likely to get you those hundreds of Instagram likes, but I loved my mutts every bit as much as I loved my purebred. In fact, though I certainly adored Astro, I would never get another purebred from a breeder again. Why? Because in doing so I might unwittingly support a

common misconception that I'd much rather help dispel. The myth perpetrated by the AKC that purebred dogs are genetically, physically, and behaviorally superior to mutts is not only wrong but objectively harmful in that it reinforces society's rampant manipulation and commercialization of living, feeling beings.

What many people don't know—and what I didn't, either—is that the distinction between mixed and purebred dogs is not something that's inherent in canines as a species. In fact, purebreds themselves are actually the direct result of genetic manipulation through selective breeding, designed by humans to foster the traits we consider the most useful and attractive in our pups. This form of canine eugenics emerged as little more than a fad for the 19th-century Victorian elite, with the title of 'purebred' tagged arbitrarily onto dogs that shared certain desirable traits (Murphy). Unlike most other short-lived fads, however, this one never died out. Even today, the first thing someone asks when I tell them I have dogs is, "What breed are they?" and I have no doubt that the way I answer immediately invokes a silent, even subconscious, judgement. Breeds tend to go in and out of fashion, and while the AKC may claim this the result of the supposed 'superiority' of these most popular breeds, science suggests otherwise. In examining the relationship between breed popularity and the average behavior, health, and longevity of these breeds, one study found a negative correlation between popularity and trainability, along with a positive correlation between popularity and separation problems, inherited disorders, fear of other dogs, and aggression towards their owner (Ghirlanda). Clearly, society's obsession with purebred dogs has seldom to do with what's actually good for the dogs—physical health—and almost as little to do with what's good for the owners—a positive temperament. Rather, it can be assumed that a lot of a breed's popularity has to do with their unique physical qualities. This isn't dangerous in and of itself, but can, unfortunately, have very negative consequences when taken to the extreme. Just like humans have unrealistic standards of beauty, so do dogs, and the results are just as disastrous. It all comes down to the genes.

There seems to exist this idea that purebred dogs are somehow genetically superior to mixed-breeds, and it's not exactly hard to see why. Even the name—*purebred*—seems to denote some sort of royal blood, and society's obsession with mating purebreds only with others of the same species is reminiscent of a practice quite common in 15th century Europe: the intermarriage of cousins or even siblings in the same royal family in an attempt to preserve the 'purity' of the blood. As most are aware, this had the unfortunate effect of causing severe mental and physical disabilities, genetic disorders, and even infertility in later generations, ultimately leading to the extinction of a number of great European dynasties (Alvarez). Of course, skeptics might call this a false comparison, because—hey—it's not like all purebred dogs are cousins!

Well, unfortunately, they sort of are. One study, which analyzed the pedigrees of ten popular dog breeds, found that nine of the ten breeds qualified as 'extremely inbred' and all but three had lost 90% of their genetic variability in approximately six generations. (Calboli). Why does this matter? Tellingly, studies have demonstrated that mixed-breed dogs are less likely to suffer from inherited genetic diseases than purebreds, and generally live longer (Turscan), which can likely be attributed to their huge advantage in genetic variability. One study even documented that, among purebreds, there's a startling median of 32.5 inherited disorders per breed, with 25% of breeds suffering from 45 or more disorders (Ghirlanda). If this weren't bad enough, there's proof that the very 'desirable' traits that purebreds are interbred for can actually have extremely negative effects on the dog's overall health. For instance, dogs bred for loose, wrinkled skin—like the Chinese Shar-Pei—are often especially susceptible to skin infections like atopic dermatitis, which leads to painful and persistent itching. Additionally, dogs like Great Danes are so large their hearts can't support their bodies, Pugs' noses are so squashed they can barely breathe, up to a third of King Charles Spaniels have skulls too small for their brains, and Bulldogs have such large heads and small hips that they can only give birth by cesarean section (Porter). All of these physical deformities lead not just to the dogs' severe discomfort but also medical conditions that can threaten their lives, as is the case of the Bull Dog,

which on average lives no more than six years (Porter). My mixed-breeds managed to live more than twelve. Despite all of this information, many so-called ‘reputable’ breeders refuse to believe that “deformed joints, extremely short muzzles, or [other traits] cause any suffering in their dogs. And even breeders who do acknowledge these problems often regard the genetic barriers between different breeds as more or less sacred” (Jeppsson). After all, a purebred dog is a moneymaker, and while some select mixes—such as Labradoodles, Cocakpoos, and Puggles—may rise and fall in popular demand, nothing compares to the public’s timeless love for the classic, purebred, ‘family dog,’ like the Golden Retriever. Even if 60% of them will die from cancer before they reach the age of eight (Trowbridge). Unfortunately, Astro was one of them.

A common excuse people use in their purchasing of purebred dogs actually recalls another facet of this common dog myth: that purebreds are inherently better behaved than their mixed-breed cousins, largely because breeders select mating partners based on what most people consider positive canine traits. This claim, actually, has some truth behind it, as indicated by one study in which owners of mixed-breeds rated their dogs as less calm, less sociable towards other dogs, and with more problematic behavior, though they did demonstrate higher trainability (Turcsan). On the surface, this study seems to prove the theory of purebred superiority, and perhaps even justifies the public’s obsession with purebreds over mutts, but in reality it’s not so simple. For instance, these traits were not assessed by impartial professionals but the owners themselves. Because owners of purebreds tend to have invested much more money in their dogs—sometimes under the assumption that purebreds are superior, and thus valuing their dog’s pedigree as a status symbol—the study itself suggested they may have a tendency to overrate their dogs (Turcsan). Additionally, of all the owners rating their dogs, twelve out of twenty demographic factors differed between those who owned purebreds and those who owned mutts, including the fact that owners of mixed-breed dogs are less educated, younger, have less experience with dogs, and also provide their dogs with less training (Turcsan). All of these factors are likely to result in a dog with more behavioral issues, as their

owners are less equipped to provide them with the structure and authority they need to develop proper obedience.

Even after controlling for the distribution of the demographic factors, however, mixed-breeds were still found to be both less calm and more prone towards problematic behavior than purebreds. If purebreds really are so genetically malformed, how do we account for this? Well, it may have something to do with that fact that mixed-breeds are so overrepresented in shelters, accounting for approximately 80% of a shelter's population (Turcsan). Because of this, the mixed-breed dogs in this study were considerably older than the purebreds and oftentimes spent their impressionable puppy years in a much more stressful, less nurturing environment. Another study found that, in the first three days of being placed in a shelter, dogs had almost three times the amount of the stress-related adrenal hormone cortisol in their blood than dogs sampled in their owner's homes. Because these stressors can sensitize the neurochemical systems, later exposures to milder version of the trauma—in this case, the trauma being social separation—can evoke severe responses, such as separation anxiety in dogs (Tuber). Being that more mixed-breeds are shelter dogs, and shelter dogs are more likely to have separation anxiety—which is associated with more prevalent barking and destruction—it makes sense that mixed-breeds are more likely to have problematic behaviors, but this has more to do with their backgrounds than what sort of dogs they are. This can be seen in another study where—after mathematically factoring out the effects of their differing backgrounds—purebred and mixed-breed dogs did not score any differently in any of the three personality assessments they were given, which tested for extraversion, motivation, training focus, amicability, neuroticism, aggression, and eagerness to please. However, when the mathematic adjustments were not made, dogs adopted from shelters were rated lower in extraversion and eagerness to please than those acquired by other means (Ottenheimer-Carrier).

It's clear that just because purebred dogs are more popular doesn't mean that they're physically or genetically superior. In fact, if one takes overall health into account, evidence suggests

that the opposite is true. The same goes for behavior, but only if one discounts the fact that mixed-breed dogs are much more likely to have spent long stretches of time in shelters. Even among my own mutts I've noticed a definite correlation between the time they spent in shelters and the behavioral issues they displayed. Astro, for instance, never spent a day in a shelter, and was practically the perfect dog. Many might see the research indicating the relationship between time spent in shelters and poor behavior and decide that, instead of avoiding mixed-breed dogs, they should avoid shelter dogs. However, because very few breeders will sell any but the most popular mixed-breeds, this is essentially the same thing. According to recent data, 1.2 million dogs are euthanized in shelters each year (Henn), due largely to a lack of space, resources, and potential adopters. When people pay thousands of dollars to purchase an 'undamaged' purebred instead of adopting one of the hundreds of thousands of dogs waiting in a shelter—as my parents did when they purchased Astro—they are unwittingly contributing to a system that treats dogs as commodities rather than the living, feeling beings they are. As the current owner of two amazing mutts, this makes me angrier than anything. Because of breeding, unwanted mixed-breeds remain in the stressful shelter system even longer, generating behavioral issues that make them even more difficult to adopt out. Were everybody to adopt dogs instead of purchasing them, not only would dogs spend less time in shelters—lessening these supposed behavioral issues—but there would be less dogs in the shelters overall, which would do the same by creating a less stressful environment and allowing caretakers to contribute more individual attention to each dog. Therefore, mixed-breeds—because of their tendency towards shelter backgrounds—might very well have poorer behavior than their purebred counterparts, but this is largely the result of human actions, and can therefore also be fixed by them. The first step in doing so is to dispel the myth that purebred dogs are any better than mixed-breed dogs and to raise public awareness as to the negative effects that inbreeding in order to preserve these arbitrary breeds can have. The next step is to adopt a mutt. After all, the best kind of dog is a healthy dog, no matter what it looks like.

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