

Society & Animals Journal of Human-Animal Studies

Volume 8, Number 1, 2000

Managing the Stigma of Outlaw Breeds: A Case Study of Pit Bull Owners

Hillary Twining, Arnold Arluke, 1 and Gary Patronek

Tufts Center for Animals and Public Policy

Ethnographic interviews were conducted with 28 pit bull “owners” to explore the sociological experience of having a dog with a negative image. Results indicate that the vast majority of respondents felt that these dogs were stigmatized because of their breed. Respondents made this conclusion because friends, family, and strangers were apprehensive in the presence of their dogs and because they made accusations about the breed’s viciousness and lack of predictability. In the face of this stigma, respondents resorted to using a variety of interactional strategies to lessen the impact of this perception or prevent it from occurring. These strategies included passing their dogs as breeds other than pit bulls, denying that their behavior is biologically determined, debunking adverse media coverage, using humor, emphasizing counter_stereotypical behavior, avoiding stereotypical equipment or accessories, taking preventive measures, or becoming breed ambassadors.

For the first half of this century, pit bulls enjoyed a positive image in America. During World War I, these dogs stood for American courage and were featured in a series of patriotic wartime posters. In the 1930s, a popular show called *The Little Rascals*, as well as the *Our Gang* comedy series, featured a pit bull. And from 1890 to 1948, pit bulls were very popular dogs to own because they were seen as “a good_natured watchdog and family pet” (Jessup, 1995, p. 43).

However, the image of pit bulls has suffered in recent years. The popular media commonly portrays pit bulls as demonic animals - unpredictable and savage in their behavior toward humans. For example, the headline of an article in *U.S. News and World Report* (1987) proclaimed that pit bulls were “The Most Dangerous in America.” The article’s author claimed that “America’s baddest dog” was in a separate category from shepherds, Dobermans, and Rottweilers because they cannot “chomp through a chain_link fence” like pit bulls. Cities passed ordinances that restricted or banned pit bulls, and the media kept the hysteria going by reporting every pit bull attack while minimizing those of other breeds.

The result is that pit bulls have come to be seen as an abomination or disturbance in the natural order - an unacceptable threat to the perceived security and stability of the entire community and a violation of the almost sacred image of the dog as an amiable cultural hero (Serpell, 1995). In other words, they have become an outlaw or deviant breed. Feeding this negative portrayal of pit bulls have been depictions of their “owners” that threaten mainstream America. Media reports of attacks by these dogs were invariably accompanied by value_laden descriptions of their owners as people whom “average citizens” might find dangerous. According to Hearne (1991), these reports often described pit bull owners as white thugs or poor urban blacks and Latinos who kept their dogs in dope dens and fed them raw meat to make them as mean as possible.

This negative image has implications for people who have pit bulls as companion animals. On the one hand, some people might be drawn to this breed in the hope of exploiting and perpetuating its vicious reputation. Such owners seek to use these dogs as status symbols of power and aggression and to reap the secondary benefit of an intimidating persona. On the other hand, some people might see qualities in this breed that run contrary to its negative image and want to establish “traditional” human_dog relationships with their pit bulls. Nevertheless, they “inherit,” and presumably have to contend with, adverse public perceptions of their pets. Sociologically, this adverse perception can be considered a breed stigma where the animal itself has a “spoiled” or tainted identity and where owners may experience a courtesy stigma as a consequence of their association with, and ownership of, pit bulls (Sigelman, Howell, Cornell, Cutright, and Dewey, 1991).

According to Goffman (1963), humans experience stigma when they possess certain physical or mental traits that result in various negative consequences such as social exclusion, anxiety, alienation, loss of self_esteem, discrimination, and social disenfranchisement. In the face of social disapproval or even fear, stigmatized individuals seek to manage or respond to these adverse perceptions by relying on interpersonal strategies that minimize, neutralize, or evade their stigma - as, for example, do epileptics (Schneider & Conrad, 1980) and animal researchers (Arluke, 1991).

Individuals undertake these steps to manage their stigma as a part of the dramaturgy of everyday life whereby people seek to present a certain image of themselves, especially in terms of the small, unremarkable interactions that comprise a substantial part of routine social behavior. According to Turner (1998), "...individuals deliberately 'give' and inadvertently 'give off' signs that provide others with information about how to respond" (p. 394). Although some information that people communicate is inadvertent, much of it is deliberate and carefully orchestrated. Given the degree to which our social reality hinges on people's unspoken agreement to uphold common expectations about public conduct, the failure to do so results in a sense of uneasiness. In this regard, people not only maintain and promote social interactions through their presentation of self but also seek to repair damaged or disrupted relationships.

Dramaturgical sociologists have noted that impression management can involve a "team" of actors who collaborate to create particular perceptions of themselves (Goffman, 1959), and a handful of recent studies suggest that team presentations of self can extend across species lines, such that humans who are responsible for particular animals may seek to control or influence how other people perceive their animals and them (e.g., Cantwell, 1992). For instance, Sanders (1990) notes that companion animals and their owners often function as teams in public settings when owners re-establish social equilibrium by accounting for their dogs' actions after they misbehave. Although Sanders' "excusing tactics" refer to specific incidents of canine disobedience, they also are relevant to the ways that pit bull owners respond to their anticipation of negative perceptions of their dogs. Pit bull owners may seek to manage impressions of their dogs if they discover that their dogs, or the breed as a whole, are viewed in an unfavorable light and if they care about this negative image.

Method

Ethnographic interviews were conducted with pit bull owners to explore how they experience and manage breed stigma. Names of pit bull owners were obtained from two shelters in large eastern Massachusetts cities. The forty most recent pit bull adopters from each shelter were sent a letter describing this study. Of this group, a total of 28 owners were interviewed. Except for one pilot interview, all participants had adopted a pit bull within the past year and a half. They lived in cities and suburbs throughout the central and northeast part of the state as well as in southern New Hampshire. The vast majority of respondents were Caucasian, between the ages of 20 and 50. Both blue and white collar professions were represented, although the former were more common than the latter. The types of households ranged from single adults to couples and families.

The interviews were semi-structured and usually lasted about 45 minutes. The questions focused on participants' previous experience with pit bulls, their decision to adopt this kind of dog, reactions from strangers, family, and friends, and the way in which this breed's stigma affected dog ownership. On the whole, the vast majority of respondents appeared to be comfortable and forthcoming during the interviews.

Results

Results indicate that the nature of this stigma usually revolved around accusations of the breed's viciousness and lack of predictability. Although a few owners spoke with nonchalance about the breed's negative public reputation, the majority of respondents expressed concern and frustration about this stigma. In the face of such stigma, respondents used one or more excusing or accounting tactics. These strategies included passing their dogs as breeds other than pit bulls, denying that their behavior is biologically determined, debunking adverse media coverage, using humor, emphasizing counter-stereotypical behavior, avoiding stereotypical equipment or accessories, taking preventive measures, or becoming breed ambassadors.

Breed Stigma

According to many respondents, when they and their pit bulls encountered strangers, direct allegations of viciousness were rare. More common, they claimed, was a sense that strangers were fearful or apprehensive. Most respondents, for example, could recall situations in which people on the street tried to avoid their dogs, either by walking around them or by crossing the street. One owner who lives just outside Boston in a city with a prominent pit bull population said,

In the morning when I walk [my dog], sometimes I cross paths...and as I'm coming out [there is] this lady walking her little - I don't know what it is; it's a Schnauzer or Lhasa Apso or something. I could be in my driveway and she's already trying to avoid the dog.

For another respondent, this avoidance was expressed more directly. Recounting a situation in which a delivery man refused to come to the house, he said,

My dogs were out in the front yard and the guy would not come near the house. He parked up the street, called me from the cell phone. [He said], "You have two dogs in your yard, two pit bulls; I'm not coming in there."

This desire to avoid pit bulls altogether was occasionally expressed by family members as well. Several respondents had relatives who did not want to visit them because of their dogs. For one owner, it took positive reports about his pit bull from siblings before his stepmother would consider a visit. In another case, the respondent's father agreed to visit but did not want to stay in his house with the dog.

He was supposed to come visit and stay with us, and he wouldn't stay with us because [our dog] was a pit bull. Not because he's afraid of dogs, because he has a dog, but basically just because she was a pit bull, he was dead against it. The presence of children often heightened people's caution around pit bulls. One owner, although familiar with occasional avoidance from strangers, was struck by the dramatic reaction of two parents as she and her leashed pit bull walked by their children on a busy road:

I saw these people; they were walking on Route 9 and I was coming up by the pond there. The two adults were next to the pond side of the sidewalk and their children [were] half on the road, half on the sidewalk...They're letting their kids practically play in traffic - they see me coming with the dog and they immediately push their children to the side of the road sheltering them from the dog.

For this respondent, the parents' reaction to her pit bull seemed ironic in light of the comparative risk of letting their children walk so close to a busy road.

Concern for children frequently prompted people to voice more specific fears about pit bulls. One owner's relative related a story in which a friend's daughter was bitten on the face by the family's pit bull when she accidentally stepped on the dog. For a young couple with a newborn, concern about their pit bull from friends and family had been fairly low_key ("Is the dog going to be okay?"), but for another respondent, the reaction was much more pronounced: "When [my daughter] was first born, everyone said, 'You've got to be careful. That dog is going to eat her; he's going to kill her; he's going to bite her.'"

Although concerns about safety around pit bulls were most pronounced with children, adults often harbored the same fears. Several respondents were self-employed contractors or salespeople who spent most of the day in their trucks traveling between clients, and they often brought their pit bulls with them. One of these respondents related the following story:

One of my customers didn't know that I had my dog who...would sleep down on the floor [of my truck]. And this guy got in to move my truck in front of his garage and...slammed the door shut, and [my dog] sprung up off the floor, leapt onto the seat, and prepared to give him a big, old kiss. And [the customer] urinated! The guy was so scared that he messed himself.

Although the element of surprise certainly contributed to this man's reaction, it is possible that the dog's breed was also a factor in his split_second reaction.

Some owners described situations in which people approached them and asked if their pit bulls were friendly. Although this type of inquiry indicated an acknowledgment that there are good pit bulls, it nonetheless communicated expectations about the way in which most pit bulls behave. When one respondent told a woman who was petting his dog that the dog was a pit bull, she quickly began to retreat. He pointed out that his dog was still the same friendly animal she had just seen, and the woman acknowledged his point but made it clear that his pit bull was an exception to the rule. She commented, "I'm really glad I got to meet a pit bull because I hadn't ever met one, and it's a great learning experience for me that there is at least one nice one out there."

Other questions and comments challenged respondents' sense of trust in their pit bulls. One owner's neighbor said, "Do you really trust that dog? Aren't you worried that she's going to attack someone?" Questions about a dog's trustworthiness could be particularly vexing for respondents because such comments seemed to presume that the

speaker had a more complete knowledge of the dog than did the owner. Referring to several co_workers, another woman said,

They're just like, "Oh my God, why would you get a dog like that?" Like you're asking for trouble. And then I'd say, "It's all in the way we bring this dog up." And they're like, "Oh no, that dog will turn on you." I hate to hear that. I'm like, "Don't tell me this! I've had [my dog] for how many years? She could never turn on us"!

The suggestion that stereotypes could be more accurate than extensive personal experience left owners such as this one frustrated and upset.

For some people, the pit bull's tough reputation precluded the possibility that this type of dog could assume the more benign role of canine companion. Pit bulls have been described as weapons; as Hearne (1991) pointed out, they are often portrayed as guard dogs for illegal activity. When one young woman identified the breed of dog that she had adopted, her mother asked, "Why did you think you needed a dog for protection"? Although her mother didn't claim that pit bulls are vicious or bad, her question turned on the assumption that they serve a particular purpose: to protect their owners.

In the experience of some respondents, negative assumptions about their dogs were unspecified, but the tone of people's remarks left no doubt as to their opinion of the breed. When a respondent who teaches at a local college told his colleagues that his family had adopted a pit bull, one of them exclaimed, "Oh my God, you didn't!" Stigma was also indirectly expressed in terms of the suggestion of more appropriate breeds. Another colleague chided him, saying, "Couldn't you have been a little smarter and gotten a Cocker spaniel or a Labrador retriever?" There was a sense among some of these owners of an unofficial canon of appropriate family dogs, such as spaniels or retrievers, among others. In adopting a pit bull, they were stepping outside this tradition and confounding other people's expectations.

Law enforcement regulations and practices also appeared to stigmatize pit bulls, according to respondents. Many were troubled by the implications of animal control laws and ordinances that singled out pit bulls. Massachusetts cities such as Haverhill and Salem have muzzle laws that apply to pit bulls and other "dangerous breeds." Springfield has outlawed pit bulls altogether. Lynn passed a similar ban in the late 1980s, but later it was challenged and overturned.

Some respondents, especially those who live in areas with a high concentration of pit bulls, were sensitive to prejudicial treatment this breed seems to receive from police and animal control officers. One owner who currently lives in Lynn was told by a friend, "...pit bulls in Lynn have a wicked reputation and whenever there's a problem with a pit bull, the cops will shoot them right on the spot." The implication of this comment was that police officers in this city consider pit bulls too dangerous to be evaluated on a case_by_case basis. The small group of owners whose dogs had been reprimanded by a police officer or animal control official often attributed the response to bias or discrimination. One man had been told that he could not walk his mother's pit bull in public while the dog was in heat. According to this respondent, "I was like, 'What kind of law is that? I've never heard of it.' I think the dog officer was just having a problem because [my mother's dog] was a pit bull."

In sum, breed stigma was manifested in a variety of ways both subtle and direct. Many respondents found that people simply avoided their pit bulls, but a large number of owners also described more pronounced reactions, especially when children were present. According to respondents' experience, the pit bull stereotype had several components to it; pit bulls were expected to be vicious and untrustworthy, unpredictable, and particularly dangerous around children. Although most references to breed stigma revolved around informal interactions with other people, some respondents described this stigma in terms of larger social institutions such as animal control and law enforcement departments.

Managing the Stigma

Respondents use "passing" tactics. Passing Individuals from stigmatized, disenfranchised groups sometimes attempt to hide their identity and to represent themselves as authentic members of the dominant culture. Respondents also used passing as a tactic to fit in with mainstream culture and avoid proper identification, although it was their dogs and not they whose identities were masked; in order to deflect the stigma of pit bulls, respondents presented their dogs as unproblematic and acceptable pets.

Two conditions make it possible to pass their dogs as not pit bulls. First, much of the public is unaware that the terms “pit bull” and “American Staffordshire Terrier” often function as synonyms. In 1935, the American Kennel Club (AKC) agreed to register these dogs but chose to call them Staffordshire Terriers to avoid association with dog fighting. To confuse the issue further, the name Staffordshire Terrier was changed to American Staffordshire Terrier in 1972 when the AKC began recognizing the Staffordshire Bull Terrier from England. Shelters also have contributed to breed confusion in their efforts to promote pit bull adoption. Fearing that negative associations may discourage people from adopting such dogs, Humane societies have become creative marketers; the San Francisco Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, for example, has gone so far as to refer to them as St. Francis Terriers. Although less radical in their approach, the shelters involved in this study make it a point to call their pit bulls American Staffordshire Terriers, and the cage cards display this AKC breed name.

Beneath the confusion about this dual American Staffordshire Terrier/pit bull identity is a larger and more basic issue: the public’s frequent inability to identify the breed correctly. Although pit bulls have continued to attract headlines and media coverage, a surprising number of respondents indicated that they regularly encounter people who do not recognize pit bulls at all. Several respondents surmised that this lack of recognition is due partly to the assumption that pit bulls are very large dogs. The other factor that, according to some respondents, contributed to this lack of breed recognition was the expectation that pit bulls, by definition, behave aggressively. As one respondent illustrated,

We brought a pit bull and a Rottweiler down to Martha’s Vineyard on the ferry and we had them on_lease, and everybody came up to the pit bull and was petting her and whatnot and [saying], “What a sweet dog.” And then they’re like, “What kind of dog is it?” They had no idea.. Once they found out it was a pit bull, they kind of shied away. Confusion surrounding the multiple names used to refer to pit bulls, as well as the inconsistency with which they were accurately identified, offered respondents an opportunity to present their dogs in a better light simply by the way in which they referred to their breed. Many owners attempted to manage breed stigma by studiously avoiding the term pit bull and replacing it with a more neutral and respectable name such as American Staffordshire Terrier. By using this term, respondents passed their pit bull as a more idealized version of the breed. According to one man, “I always say ‘Staffordshire Terrier;’ - always; I never say ‘pit bull.’ I guess maybe subconsciously I know it kind of conjures up bad feelings about the breed.” Another owner expressed similar concerns about using the name pit bull to refer to her dog; she said, “...I’m afraid that people will get the wrong idea and the wrong impression of [my dog]. Because he’s nothing [to be afraid of]. He’s such a wimp! He’s so easygoing and laid_back.”

Other respondents chose to distance their pit bulls even further from the breed’s intimidating public persona by emphasizing their unknown or mixed heritage as shelter dogs. The notion of passing functioned more directly in this context insofar as owners avoided all references to the breed. Several owners referred to their dogs as a “mixed breed,” a “mutt,” or a “pound dog.” One respondent found that people often identified her dog incorrectly and she chose not to correct their misconception. She remarked,

Most people think [my dog] is a Boxer. She’s got, like, big cheeks [and] she doesn’t have that tight pit bull face at all...So most people just think she’s a Boxer mix and ask me what she is, and I’ll say, “Oh yeah, she’s a Boxer mix.”

Use of the term pit bull was sometimes situational and depended on people’s initial reaction to an owner’s dog. For example, some respondents deliberately avoided the term when other people showed signs of fear around their dogs. One woman said, “I have said to people that [my dog] is a pit bull, but only to people that I know aren’t afraid of them...” Another respondent described a tier of related breed names that he used, depending on the degree of apprehension that he encountered:

A lot of it depends on the people you meet...If I see people [who are] very timid with dogs, a lot of times I’ll tell them [my dog] is an American Bulldog, because he does look a lot like the picture of an American Bulldog...Sometimes we’ll just say - if they’re really afraid of dogs - we’ll say, “Oh, he’s a Boxer mix.”

These respondents focused on moderating people’s reactions to their dogs by choosing the most appropriate name for each audience. Through this approach, passing remained fluid and context_driven. In addition to providing respondents with greater control over the presentation of their dogs, passing allowed them to orchestrate positive encounters. Many owners managed breed stigma by allowing their dogs to make a good first impression before telling others that they

were pit bulls. This approach was effective because it offered people positive, firsthand experience with pit bulls, which directly counteracted the expectations they might have had otherwise. Passing in this context was achieved through delayed breed identification, as opposed to an indefinite concealment of the dog's breed.

Don't blame the dog. A second strategy for neutralizing breed stigma was for respondents to prevent their own pit bulls, as well as the breed itself, from being blamed for bad behavior. This was accomplished in several ways: they emphasized the role of environment and training as determinants of behavior; they pointed out similarities between pit bull behavior and that found in other breeds; they noted that these dogs were unaware of their own strength; and they insisted that their dogs were unlike other, more stereotypical pit bulls.

Environment was often expressed in terms of owners' attitudes toward, and treatment of, their dogs, with particular emphasis placed on the importance of respect. One respondent explained,

It's like children [and] how you bring them up. If you bring them up with no respect, bring them up with no discipline, then they're going to respond that way...It's the same way [when] you bring your animal up.

Another respondent stated,

...if you treat [your dogs] well, they'll treat you well. If you abuse them, they're not going to have any respect for you, not going to have any love for you. So what do you expect? The dog will turn on you.

Many of these owners compared dogs to people in terms of their response to poor treatment, noting in one case, for example: "If you abuse a kid, if you abuse a wife, if you abuse an animal, they're going to react." Another respondent remarked

I mean, it's like people; if you get some kid that has been beaten all his life, he's going to go out and be aggressive towards people. And that's how it is with [my dog] and with pits [in general].

These comments conveyed the belief that behavior does not occur in a vacuum; rather, pit bulls, like any other animal (including humans), are shaped by, and react to, their environment.

Training was also emphasized, particularly in terms of its contribution to aggressive behavior. One respondent remarked, "I think almost any breed can be trained to be bad_aggressive." Another respondent, describing a group of pit bull owners he had seen in a nearby city, said, "They wanted a pit bull, they wanted this little, vicious dog that just barks at people. You know, they foster that and they want that. I think that's why the dog ends up being that way."

Several respondents underscored this emphasis on training by noting that pit bulls exhibit a particularly strong desire to please their owners. This malleability makes training a particularly potent tool when pit bulls fall into the wrong hands. One respondent remarked,

I think with pit bulls, they'll turn out exactly the way you want them [to]. If you want them to be tough and vicious and intimidating, they will do that for you...If you want a nice all_around dog - very athletic, smart, all that - you can get that [too].

The assertion that pit bulls' behavior is determined largely by their owners and their environment plays an important role in defusing breed stigma because these dogs are often perceived as naturally vicious. Although respondents acknowledged the unusual strength of these dogs, they denied any malicious intent on their part and maintained that owners could choose to channel these physical capabilities in positive or negative directions. The few respondents who witnessed aggressive and unwanted behavior in their dogs targeted inbreeding as the problem; dogs "born bad" were considered anomalies that had resulted from poor breeding, either accidental or deliberate.

In addition, many respondents deflected blame by comparing pit bull behavior to that of other dogs and thereby normalizing it. For example, an owner noted that one of his pit bulls could become possessive of her food around his other dog but said, "...any dog is like that." According to another respondent,

My brother_in_law was telling my sister all the reasons why not to [get a pit bull] - you know, the horror stories. Yeah, they happen, but...any dog could be that way if you train him and treat him that way.

One owner recalled that his dog had been "nippy" when he adopted it as a seven_month_old; when asked if this behavior had subsided, the respondent said, "Oh yeah, he stopped. He doesn't do that any more. That was just puppy [behavior]." By emphasizing that the potential for certain behavior exists in all dogs, these owners sought to demystify

pit bulls. Respondents used this excusing tactic to discredit breed-specific criticisms and to promote the idea that, at a fundamental level, a dog is a dog, regardless of breed.

As another twist on the theme, don't blame the dog, some respondents focused on their dogs' lack of awareness about their own strength. This common refrain was voiced by one woman who owns two pit bulls: "They don't know their own strength really." Echoing this observation, another owner said, "[My dog] doesn't really know her strength, I think. That's what I worry about, because she is really strong." When owners described interactions between children and their pit bulls, many of them expressed the concern that their dogs could easily knock a child over. For most respondents, the issue was not that their dogs would behave aggressively with children but that their dogs would unintentionally hurt or frighten a child because of the breed's strength and excitability. A mother of two older children offered this advice: "I don't think I would recommend this kind of dog to anyone with young, young children because [my pit bull] is very forceful. It's not that he's aggressive towards them, but just in play...he's strong."

Several respondents managed breed stigma by pointing out that their pit bull was not like other more stereotypical pit bulls. For example, one respondent said,

[My friend] was like, "Well, I just don't like pit bulls. I don't like Rottweilers or pit bulls." I felt upset that she said that right in front of me with my dog. I could see if she said, "Well, other pit bulls..."

Another woman described a situation in which she was sitting in a doctor's office while her boyfriend waited outside with their pit bull; when another patient came into the office and made a disparaging remark about her dog, this owner responded in the following manner: "I said, 'Listen lady, there's nothing wrong with that dog.' She said, 'I've been attacked by one.' I said, 'Well, you weren't attacked by my dog.'"

In sum, respondents not only emphasized the role of environment and training but also deflected blame from their dogs in several ways: they sought to normalize pit bull behavior, they focused on their dogs' lack of awareness about their own strength, and they rejected breed stereotypes by insisting on specificity. Each of these approaches to managing breed stigma had a similar goal: namely, to tell others "don't blame the dog."

Many respondents debunk media coverage. As a group, respondents had a complicated and somewhat ambivalent reaction to pit bull-related media coverage, and many of them took an active role in debunking press coverage and media reports. This approach to managing breed stigma included four general criticisms: selective reporting, sensationalism, a lack of objectivity, and a failure to provide context.

Many owners, especially those who had been on the receiving end of aggressive behavior from other breeds, felt that pit bulls were unfairly over-represented in the media reports. A young businessman who owned two pit bulls said, "It annoys me that only pit bulls are shown. I mean, there are a lot of other dogs that attack. When I was young, I was attacked by a collie, you know, a Lassie dog. You never hear about those stories but...you always tend to hear the worst about pit bulls."

Echoing these sentiments, another owner remarked,

When you see an article in the newspaper and all it says is "pit bull," the dog's [automatically] a killer. If a Cocker spaniel attacked a kid, you wouldn't even hear about it. You never see any bad press about...these "killer dogs."

These respondents complained that journalists were more interested in reporting dog attacks and bites if they involved pit bulls. There was also frequent cynicism about articles and television reports that focused on the lurid details of pit bull attacks. One woman quipped, "What do they say? 'If it bleeds, it leads.'" When asked about the breed of dog that was mentioned in a particular newspaper article, another owner said, "I think it was a pit bull; that's what the paper said. Of course, because that's what sells." Owners argued that media coverage was fueled by a desire to sell papers or to attract television viewers and that reporters were simply giving people what they wanted to hear.

A related criticism concerned the objectivity of media coverage. One respondent had owned an American Staffordshire Terrier who bit another dog, prompting the dog's owner to go to a newspaper with the story. Recalling the coverage, this respondent said,

...the paper called me and I just kind of said, "No comment," and hung up. And then they put that in there, [to] try and make me look bad; you know, "He's not concerned and just said no comment."...They made it [sound] like if [my dog]

was a pit bull, she would have killed [the other dog]. Even the animal control officer had a quote: “If she had been a real pit bull, she would have never let go and killed him.”

As this experience illustrates, many respondents felt that people in the media had already made up their minds about this breed and that they reported pit bull-related incidents accordingly.

Many respondents pointed out that aggressive behavior was often taken out of context by the media and that important questions about the dog’s background and upbringing had not been asked. According to one young woman, “If I read an article about [a pit bull incident], I would ask, ‘How was this dog raised? Who was its owner? What kind of life did it have before this owner?’” Most respondents emphasized that aggressive behavior does not occur in a vacuum - that it is triggered by specific events that are often overlooked or unacknowledged by the media.

It was common for owners to disagree with the tone or content of this breed’s media coverage. Given the degree of negative attention pit bulls receive in newspapers and on television, owners frequently managed breed stigma by debunking these media reports and calling for a more critical interpretation.

Respondents use humor to reaffirm their perceptions. Many respondents noticed a sharp discrepancy between the demeanor of their own pit bulls and the reputation of the breed as a whole; this contrast occasionally prompted jokes and humor. Although such a response did not involve an active rebuttal of the breed’s reputation, it allowed owners to reaffirm their own perception of pit bulls. Like any breed of dog, pit bulls have many dimensions to their personalities, and the occasions for this humor allowed respondents the opportunity to refute the one-sidedness of breed stereotypes.

This humor often revolved around contrast and contradiction; although the popular image of pit bulls points to vicious, aggressive dogs, many owners had encountered the opposite behavior. For example, humor often resulted from the observation of a dog’s affability and playfulness in light of the expectation that pit bulls are tough, intimidating dogs. One respondent joked with her husband about their two pit bulls’ night-time routine in front of the television, a routine where it was clear that they were “family dogs” and not guard dogs or uncontrollable animals. She remarked,

[One of our dogs] will come up and plop down next to you and put his head on you...[Our other dog] is the same way. They just want to cuddle up to you and be next to you.

She added, “We kind of laugh about it, [about] the stereotype. I mean, we don’t like it, but I kind of try and make a joke of it, like ‘Killer pit bull? Yeah, right!’” Another respondent joked about the way her pit bull greeted people: “...if people come into the house, she gets all excited and she does this cute little bunny hop and we think, ‘Oh, look at the vicious pit bull!’”

Other things could underscore the juxtaposition between a dog’s personality and appearance, thereby providing an opportunity for humor. For instance, humor could be prompted by the dog’s occasional habits. When asked if he ever jokes about the breed’s reputation, one owner responded, “Yeah, especially when [my dog] does silly things, like when she’s just snoring away when she’s sleeping and we’re like, ‘Oh, look at the aggressive pit bull!’”

In addition to comical poses and behavior, accessories could serve this purpose. Studded collars are often used to emphasize the tough image of pit bulls, but one respondent remembers laughing at the incongruity of such a collar on her brother’s dog. This pit bull had been nicknamed “Pathetic Petey” by the family and according to the respondent, “...if it rained, he would lie in my brother’s office and moan the whole time.” She added, “Petey was the most docile dog that there possibly was.” When the family saw the studded collar, “...we would laugh and say, ‘That is so Petey, right?!’” Sometimes Petey would be adorned with goggles and sunglasses, and the respondent remarked, “The dog was a riot.” Such accessories underscored the contrast between this family’s pit bull and the breed image while allowing them to poke fun at the reputation. These respondents’ humor, whether prompted by the presence or absence of particular personality traits and behaviors, emphasized contrast and contradiction. Such humor allowed owners to counteract breed stigma, if only among themselves, and to emphasize the limited scope of breed stereotypes.

Looks aren’t everything. Although some respondents were quick to acknowledge various physical characteristics of the breed which tend to exacerbate pit bull stereotypes, many owners emphasized their pit bulls’ personalities over their appearance. In other words, this fifth stigma-managing strategy sought to demonstrate that there is more to these dogs than meets the eye.

In comparison to smaller breeds or dogs that have long coats and soft mouths, pit bulls look built for power. One woman noted, "...their mouth in proportion to the rest of their head is bigger. And they just have a very clean, sleek look about them, as opposed to a Golden [retriever]." Another owner commented, "[Pit bulls] are real brawny, muscular; [they have a] wide, broad chest. They've got a big jaw...They just look mean." Respondents such as these spoke candidly about the implications of their dogs' strength. According to one owner, "[Pit bulls] have physical capabilities that are different from toy poodles." Another owner, noting that his pit bull chews through medium-sized logs from the woodpile, stated this point more bluntly, saying of his dog, "She does have the equipment to cause problems."

As a way of counterbalancing the effect of this breed's appearance and physical power, many respondents alluded to images and stories of their pit bulls' affection, which directly contradicted their intimidating reputation. Owners frequently focused on displays of affection as well as the breed's sensitivity and attunement to people. One owner described the introduction between her pit bull and a wary friend who was concerned about the dog because she had young children:

...She came over here and sat down...and [my dog] got up on the couch and started kissing her and everything. And she's like, "Oh my God; well, I guess this is okay - the dog is just going to kiss my kids to death!"

Another owner, focusing on the contrast between his dog's physical strength and her docile personality, explained, "[My pit bull] is a strong, powerful dog but, you know, she'd lick you to death."

Respondents also described specific incidents that highlighted their dogs' sensitivity, especially toward people considered weak and vulnerable such as the disabled, the elderly, and the very young. For example, the wheelchair-bound mother of a respondent's girlfriend had been very skeptical about the couple's pit bull adoption. According to this respondent,

I brought the dog in and he lay on the floor and [my girlfriend's] sister patted him and everything else. So finally [my girlfriend's mother] said, "Why don't you bring him over here." So I brought him over so that he could, you know, sniff her and lick her and she could pat him. Well, he gradually crawled up ever so gently and lay prone, kind of half on her and half next to her, and licked her face, and from then on she was won over.

In this encounter, the respondent's pit bull was not only well-mannered and friendly but also seemed to display an instinctive sense about how to modify his behavior to fit the situation. Such stories emphasized the idea that appearances can be deceiving.

For many of these respondents, their pit bulls were walking contradictions: powerful yet gentle, rambunctious yet restrained. In contrast to dog owners who must contend with the ramifications of having small, adorable breeds with short fuses, these respondents faced the challenge of owning a breed that appears threatening but loves people. These pit bull owners attempted to manage breed stigma by arguing that behavior, not appearance, expressed the truth about their dogs, and their stories underscored the contention that "looks aren't everything."

Respondents alter physical presentation. A sixth stigma-managing strategy was for respondents to alter the physical presentation of their pit bulls to avoid any appearance that might communicate the mean or aggressive image widely subscribed to in popular culture. This approach is contrary to the tough, intimidating image of pit bulls emphasized by various accessories such as spiked leather collars and heavy harnesses. As one respondent observed, pit bulls wearing this type of equipment resemble "gladiator dogs."

Many respondents were particularly critical of young teenage pit bull owners who used such accessories and equipment on their own pit bulls. As one owner said,

We went to the beach...this weekend and every dog we saw was a pit. Every dog. And all of them had those collars with the spikes on them, and a lot of [the people there] were younger teenage guys....You can tell that these owners have [their dogs] just to show off, just to say, "Oh, I have a pit," and God only knows what else they do to them.

These respondents, in turn, were careful about the choices they made in presenting their own dogs. Referring to large, studded collars, one man said,

I've stayed away from that, somewhat on purpose, because I didn't want to recreate the bad image that they have. When [my dog] was a puppy, a real small puppy, there was a collar that had the small, spherical studs [or] beads on it. Now that

she's bigger, she'll just wear a plain collar.

Referring to this type of collar, one respondent said, "I bought [my dog] one and I returned it; it made him look too mean. I bought him one, I had it for a day, and I brought it back."

Concerns about breed presentation frequently crystallized around particular training devices and equipment. For an owner who had to treat her pit bull for kennel cough, the use of a harness was a necessity because she didn't want to irritate her dog's throat further with pressure from a collar. However, this respondent noticed how the harness affected reaction to her dog and she was quick to return to a plain collar after treatment. Some owners were concerned about the image projected by pinch or prong collars and modified their usage accordingly. One respondent explained,

We took [our dog] to training and [the instructor] suggested it because he pulled hard at first.... At first we were like, "We're not using those collars," because, you know, [they] looked so scary.

This couple eventually decided to use the pinch collar with their pit bull, but only as long as it took to train him not to pull on the leash. Respondents also did not like to use muzzles on their pit bulls because they reinforced fear of them. One respondent lived in a city that required pit bulls to be muzzled in public. He said,

I think it's going to scare them even more, seeing that the dog has to wear a muzzle. They're going to think the dog is vicious, mean, [that the dog] bites. [My dog] will lay down [and show you] these sad eyes until you take it off. Because the city's muzzle law compromised this respondent's ability to control breed presentation, he limited the time of his dog's public exposure by walking the dog only at night.

Although none of the respondents deliberately added accessories to soften their dog's image, several recalled situations in which they had unknowingly created that effect. One owner, for instance, said,

...I bought [my dog] a coat for the wintertime because I would walk her outside and she'd be shaking. So I got her a little fleece coat, and the reactions I get when she's wearing her coat are very different from the reactions that I got before I got the coat...I would see people and they would kind of shy away and [then] they'd be like, "Oh, she has her coat on today! Oh, look at her in her little coat; doesn't she look nice." She was definitely less intimidating with her coat on. I should maybe think about getting her a summer coat!

Although this respondent did not buy the coat in order to change her pit bull's appearance, its effect was noticeable. She, like the respondents above, were acutely aware of how certain physical accessories could easily reinforce an image of pit bulls that they wanted to avoid.

Respondents use preventive measures. A seventh strategy used by some respondents entailed managing breed stigma by modifying their dogs' behaviors or physical capabilities. By training their pit bulls to avoid questionable behavior, however innocent, many respondents sought to anticipate and defuse people's concern. Alluding to their Rottweilers, Gillespie, Leffler, and Lerner (1996) wrote, "...we faced a definitional problem of how to reconceive them as non-threatening, even friendly and pleasant - safe for the people our dogs might frighten" (p. 176). The pit bull owners in this study faced a similar challenge, and the preventive measures they undertook included a variety of approaches such as refusing to play particular games, discouraging "mouthiness," training their dogs not to jump up on people, and implementing certain protocols around children. These preventive measures offered owners an effective method for ensuring that people did not misinterpret their pit bulls' behavior, given the vicious reputation attributed to these dogs.

Although studies of pit bull anatomy have found no evidence of a "locking jaw," this breed does have a very strong jaw and can grip with considerable tenacity. Several respondents had a policy of not playing tug_of_war with their dogs because they did not want to develop this jaw strength. According to one owner,

My friends think it's great when they get [my dog] locked onto the rope and they're tugging with him and stuff. I really haven't done that with him. I really don't want him to know that [sort of game].

Avoidance of this kind of play indicated a recognition of the breed's physical capability and a desire not to develop it further.

Another preventive measure was to discourage mouthiness. Many dogs, especially those who are young and untrained, exhibit this type of behavior and owners may regard it as a harmless, if somewhat annoying, tendency. Some respondents, on the other hand, expressed concern about such behavior and consistently frowned upon it because this

sort of behavior could be dangerous and prone to misinterpretation. An owner said of her two pit bulls: “I don’t allow them to mouth [people]. I mean, sometimes they’ll do it when they get excited about something, but we discourage that big time.”

Like many dogs, pit bulls are often inclined to jump up on people when they greet them, but their muscularity and potentially intimidating appearance can easily make such introductions go awry. Most respondents were highly aware of the apprehension that already exists in the minds of people who encounter their dogs, and many expressed a desire to train their dogs away from this tendency to jump. The issue of this breed’s jumping ability, especially when combined with an overenthusiastic greeting, was a concern for the following owner:

[My pit bull] is definitely a really hyper dog. She gets really frantic around other dogs and kids; she just gets kind of worked up into a frenzy. She never does anything aggressive towards them but sometimes she’ll jump up on them. We’ve been working on with her to sort of calm down a little bit around other animals and people.

Concern about the strength of these dogs was especially prevalent when children were present, and most respondents were very attentive to the possibility that their dogs could knock a child over accidentally. In response to this heightened concern, some respondents took special care to present their dogs in a mild, unthreatening manner when they were around children. For several owners, this meant having their pit bulls sit before they were allowed to interact with children, especially if the children were unfamiliar. One young woman explained what she does if kids want to pet her dog: “I get him sitting and then I’m like, ‘This is what you do,’ trying to teach these kids not to go right at [the dog] with their hands.” In addition to presenting her pit bull in a positive manner, this owner used her dog to educate children about safe behavior around animals in general:

[Kids ask], “Does he bite”? And my answer is, “He has teeth.” And they’re like, “I don’t get it,” and I’m like, “Listen, if he wants to bite, he’ll bite.” I’m like, “He’s never bitten anybody. I don’t know if he’ll bite somebody, but with an animal whom you don’t know, just use caution.”

In this situation, education also served as a preventive measure; by teaching children appropriate behavior around dogs, respondents such as this woman anticipated future interactions between children and their pit bulls and attempted to ensure a positive outcome. Another respondent felt compelled to remove her pit bull from social gatherings if children were involved. She trusted her dog to be well behaved around children, but she also felt responsible for the concern that was expressed by parents and other adults. Although this respondent trusted her dog, there was a sense that special scrutiny would be given to behavior and that no situation was foolproof. By separating her dog from young visitors, she removed any cause for concern.

Respondents undertook a variety of preventive measures ranging from modified play and an intolerance of mouthiness and jumping to carefully planned interactions between pit bulls and children in order to manage breed stigma. This approach distinguished itself from most other strategies in that it was based on the anticipation of breed related stigma in future encounters. These preventive measures were not excusing tactics so much as they were precautionary tactics. Undertaken by respondents in the absence of direct accusations about their pit bulls, such preventive measures allowed owners to respond proactively and with a sense of agency to breed stigma.

Respondents use advocacy and ambassadorship. One of the most public and visible ways in which respondents managed breed stigma was to become an advocate or ambassador for pit bulls. These owners defined their responsibility in terms of the breed as a whole, and they sought to present these dogs - often through the example of their own pit bulls - as friendly, well behaved pets. This approach involved rebutting stereotypes and misconceptions as well as promoting the breed’s winning qualities. Owners often encouraged their pit bulls to act as their own ambassadors by showcasing the dogs’ friendly, outgoing personalities. In addition, some respondents filled the role of advocate/ambassador by serving as models of responsible dog ownership.

A major facet of advocacy and ambassadorship was to rebut negative comments and promote the breed. Some advocates made strong, proactive rebuttals. In one case, an owner described his reaction to family members who brought up breed stereotypes as follows:

...there’s some [people] in our family that have said, “Oh, their brain will swell up and they’ll bite you!” And I [have] said, “Go read something before you come out with that stuff to me! Don’t sit there and give me some rumors that...”

their jaws lock. They don't lock; they don't ratchet shut. Don't tell me this stuff. Go read facts before you bother me with this." And that normally shuts them up.

Other respondents took a more low_key approach, such as an owner who explained, I don't get into shouting matches. Everybody has their beliefs....I'll just say "You know, maybe you should look into it a little bit more," or, "I know quite a few pits that are really good; [my dog] happens to be one of them."

For this respondent, her personal experience with pit bulls provided a solid basis for suggesting that others reevaluate their opinions of the breed, but she was more circumspect in her defense.

Advocacy and ambassadorship also entailed promoting the breed and emphasizing its best traits. For example, one woman said, "I always defend them....I always say, 'No, [my pit bull] is a great dog.' You know, I definitely play up his assets." One of the goals which lay behind promotion of the breed was a desire to educate others, often through descriptions of personal experience with pit bulls. According to one respondent,

...I'll try and educate people, as to at least my experiences with pit bulls....I give them the instances of how great they are with kids and, you know, I've had pictures with my other pit bull laying on top of three children and just getting his tummy rubbed. I'll tell them all the positive stuff....If you bring these dogs up in a loving environment, I think they're fantastic and I don't hesitate to tell people that.

Given the reputation that pit bulls have for endangering children, this approach offered direct evidence to the contrary, and this type of promotional effort gained credibility through its reliance on first_hand experience.

In building support for this breed, many respondents felt that the dogs themselves were the best ambassadors. One woman stated, "In the right hands, [pit bulls] are the best ambassadors for the breed." Referring to his stepmother's reluctance to visit because of his pit bull, another respondent noted, "I'd give her two minutes with the dog and she'd be won over just like everybody else." A third owner expressed a similar degree of confidence in her dog's ability to overcome people's preconceived ideas about the breed: "If [people] say something [negative] about the dog, I tell them - if I have my dog with me - I basically say, 'My dog speaks for herself.'"

The personalities of these pit bulls made a particularly notable impact by subverting public expectations about the breed. In contrast to the popular image of pit bulls as fierce, predatory dogs, one owner said, "[My dog] will run up and greet just about anybody. He's pretty happy. He's got his tail going all the time." Another respondent noted that her pit bull puts her tail between her legs and rolls over on her back when she encounters other dogs. This submissiveness and docility fly in the face of breed stereotypes; according to the respondent, "She breaks every stereotype." The degree to which this type of behavior could overcome public fears was illustrated by an owner who remarked, "People will cross the street in order to see [my dog]...If she wants you to come over, she looks at you like, 'I'll kiss you; come on, come on!' She invites [the attention]." This respondent surmised, only half jokingly, that her dog had "some kind of magnetic charm."

Finally, several respondents served as advocates for pit bulls by acting as role models. For one of these owners, being a role model meant having a well_behaved and obedient dog. After adopting his dog, the respondent had taken her to puppy kindergarten, followed by a course in basic obedience. He planned to continue her training with a class in advanced basic obedience and eventually to certify her as a "Canine Good Citizen." One woman said:

You've got to work harder. You are being scrutinized and watched every minute of the day. You had better carry poop bags when you are out for a walk, because you'll be crucified for that one thing and that one thing alone...You just have to work harder, you're more visible...

Advocacy and ambassadorship, then, served as the final way for respondents to manage pit bull stigma. They did so by rebutting negative comments about the breed and by actively promoting pit bulls, often through the charismatic personalities of their own dogs. As an extension of this advocacy, several owners assumed the responsibility of serving as role models, either individually or in partnership with their dogs.

Discussion

Although pet ownership is often cast as benign and unstressful, many pit_bull owners we studied experienced some

aspects of their animal relationship as stigmatizing and relied on a number of interactional strategies to lessen the impact of this stigma or prevent it from occurring. The vast majority of respondents relied on one or more of the following strategies with their dogs: passing them as a breed other than pit bull, denying that their behavior is biologically predetermined, debunking adverse media coverage, using humor, emphasizing counter-stereotypical behavior, avoiding stereotypical equipment or accessories, taking preventive measures, or becoming breed ambassadors.

From the respondents' point of view, these strategies developed as an essential part of the relationships they had with their dogs and the people around them. At least with outlaw breeds like pit bulls, the human-dog relationship is sociologically more complicated and interesting than previously thought. Prior research on the nature and management of stigma has been anthropocentric, focusing only on how humans experience and cope with blemishes in their individual or group identities. Our work suggests that nonhuman animals also can be stigmatized, although they will not have a conscious awareness of this perception. However, as part of a human-animal team, their owners can experience the taintedness that is commensurate with stigmatization and resort to various techniques to mitigate, prevent, or improve such adverse perceptions. Apparently, the dramaturgical nature of symbolic interaction extends across the species divide.

Although the vast majority of our respondents used various stigma-reducing strategies, a few did not, choosing to relinquish their pit bulls and exit the role of dog owner. Two of the 28 respondents returned their pit bulls to the shelter, and a third considered it and was still undecided. In two cases, negative experiences with their dogs added credibility to the poor reputation; for the third, negative comments from others led her to question what the dog would become. The level of disapproval, often reinforced by bad behavior of the dog, made it particularly difficult to manage breed-related stigma. The two respondents who returned their dogs expressed frustration that the adoption process had not focused more specifically on breed-related issues. One left the shelter without realizing she had adopted a pit bull since she did not associate the name American Staffordshire Terrier with pit bull. In the other case, family reaction was pronounced. For the respondent who kept her dog: In the two months since adoption, the dog had attacked several other dogs, and these incidents raised questions about the uncertainty of the dog's disposition. Even though the dog had not attacked people, this experience led the adopter to question when that line would be crossed.

Lastly, our findings are important because breed-related stigma is likely to affect the success of companion animal ownership. Shelters naturally seek to avoid adoptions that lead to unsuccessful relationships. Understanding breed stigma and the various ways that owners manage it can be useful for shelters or other adoption agencies working to place pit bull dogs. Adopters and new owners can be counseled to help them cope with problems that may arise with pit bulls. Potential adopters can be engaged in a meaningful discussion about the ways in which breed stigma can affect the experience of dog ownership, in the hope that such a discussion will better prepare them as pit bull owners.

References

- Arluke, A. (1991). Going into the closet with science: Information control among animal experimenters. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 20, 306-330.
- Cantwell, M. (1992). The racing greyhound as a team presentation. Paper presented at the American Sociological Association, Miami, FL.
- Gillespie, D. Leffler, A., & Lerner, E. (1996). Safe in unsafe places: Leisure, passionate avocations, and the problematizing of everyday public life. *Society and Animals*, 4, 169-188.
- Goffman, E. (1959). *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.
- Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Hearne, V. (1991). *Bandit: Dossier of a dangerous dog*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Jessup, D. (1995). *The working pit bull*. Neptune City, NJ: TFH Publications, Inc.
- Sanders, C. R. (1990). Excusing tactics: Social responses to the public misbehavior of companion animals. *Anthrozoös*, 4, 82-90.
- Schneider, J. & Conrad, P. (1980). In the closet with illness: Epilepsy, stigma potential and information control. *Social Problems*, 28, 32-44.
- Serpell, J. (1995). *The domestic dog: Its evolution, behaviour, and interactions with people*. UK: Cambridge University

Press.

Sigelman, C., Howell, J., Cornell, D., Cutright, J., & Dewey, J. (1991). Courtesy stigma: The social implication of associating with a gay person. *Journal of Psychology*, 13, 45_56.

"The Most Dangerous in America." (1987). *U.S. News and World Report*.

Turner, J. H. (1998). *The structure of sociological theory*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Note

1 Correspondence should be sent to Arnold Arluke, Department of Sociology, Northeastern University, 360 Huntington Avenue, Boston, MA 02115.