BEHAVIOR TESTING SHELTER DOGS – Document 1
The reality of where we are now

What is a behavior test?

A behavior test in not a temperament test. It is not a personality test. It is not behavioral phenotyping in the sense that biologists and geneticists use the term. A behavior test, as the term is used in relation to shelter dogs, is a brief attempt to estimate how a dog reacts to common human variables and behavior it will likely meet in daily life. The most common ones include how the dog reacts to approach to its kennel; once leashed how it reacts to the handler, including close contact; to removal of food and a toy; to sudden approach by a second person; to the sudden entrance of another dog into the testing room; to a sudden loud noise; and to the presentation of a doll that looks like a toddler.

These tests are supposed to be a form of risk assessment on the one hand, and a way to better match a dog to an adopter on the other. There are two main hypotheses that underlie this testing: 1) that the responses will be stable and will be the same in other situations; and 2) that the test will uncover both aggression and fear problems, at least with relation to whatever stimuli are used in the test.

What does / doesn't it test?

The test shows the dog's reaction to the presented stimuli at that moment and in those surroundings. Sometimes a test does reveal things like fear of men or aggression around food. Sometimes it doesn't. When a behavior test quickly pinpoints a specific problem, that's useful, but in general, the predictive value of these behavior tests is low.

There is much that these tests don't tell us. Scientists acknowledge that the tests do NOT detect territorial aggression, predatory aggression, owner-directed aggression, dog-aggression, nuisance barking, escape behavior, or how a dog will react to direct physical contact or restraint once it's rehomed.

In addition, all of the tests are based on the premise that behavior is stable – the friendly dog will always be friendly – and that dogs will warn with elevating threat signals before biting or attacking. In fact, none of the tests can – or ever will – detect impulsive aggression (IA), which is by definition the tendency to commit a sudden, unpredictable, explosive attack, out of all proportion to any stimulus or threat to the dog, not preceded by any warning signals, and often occurring in a dog that is otherwise friendly and obedient. This is a trait that is known to be strongly heritable and to be present in only a handful of dog breeds and types. The best indicator of high risk that IA will be present is 'breed' or type of dog, regardless of how such a dog does on a behavior test.

What does the public believe about the tests?

The public, and as it turns out the press and many a judge, seem to believe that the tests are scientific and that a behavior test guarantees that a dog will be safe to have in a home. Some of the public believes that the behavior tests condemn too many dogs, and that aggression isn't a

reason to fail a dog, never mind public safety. There is a growing segment of the public that feels the whole business of behavior testing is pretty much a scam, serving other interests than public safety and the well-being of the dogs.

What is the reality of the tests?

Some behavior tests were developed at universities. In fact, developing behavior tests for dogs has become a rather lucrative industry – there are quite a few university-developed tests, all of them competing for a share of the market. The truth about all of these tests, as reported in their own scientific literature, but mostly hidden from the public behind pay walls, is as follows:

1) There is complete lack of standardization of both content and methodology. This means that you can't compare the results or reliability of any one test with the results or reliability of any other test.
2) Most of these tests have low reliability, with a few achieving moderate reliability on some (not all) of the things they try to measure. None have high reliability.
3) None of the tests have been credibly validated.
4) The predictive validity of all of these tests is admittedly weak.
5) There is no test that takes breed-specific risks into account.
6) They must all be done by trained testers, not by random shelter workers, dog trainers, or staff.

In other words, all of these university-designed tests are in the try-out phase, none of them a finished or trustworthy product yet.

But in fact, most shelters don't use these university behavior tests at all. Some shelters use tests designed by someone working in the dog rescue / dog welfare world – such as the SAFER test designed by Emily Weiss for the ASPCA, one of the many 'humane' societies that have no obligation, legal or otherwise, to care about public safety. Even more shelters make up their own test, picking and choosing elements they've seen at a seminar or on YouTube. Other shelters have a resident dog trainer, who thinks up his or her own test. Some leave testing to a volunteer who has watched some television trainers, mucked out a few kennels, and declared herself a behavior expert.

There is nothing wrong with any of this, as long as the public is not misled to believe that any of the tests are somehow 'scientific' or that they have relevance to public safety.

Problems with the tests

We already mentioned the lack of standardization, the many things a test doesn't detect, and their low predictive value. But there are more problems.

No shelter is protecting against **tester bias**, which makes the results of any test they use invalid, whether it was developed by an academic or by a supervisor's favorite unschooled volunteer. This bias has several origins. Sometimes the tester is emotionally involved with a particular type or 'breed' of dog, but is allowed to test those dogs anyway. There is often also ego

involvement with a dog – eg, a shelter trainer's wish to show that she can get a doubtful dog to pass a re-test, thus proving what a great trainer she is. She will ignore the fact that a test is not meant to show how a dog behaves with its professional trainer in a controlled environment, but with an inexperienced adopter – and children! – in a less controlled home environment. Expectations of typical or normal canine behavior may influence interpretation and reporting of results. This is particularly dangerous when a tester has been led to believe that extreme aggression is normal in the domestic dog. (It is not.) In the present climate, testers know that live release rates trump all, so many may be inclined to pass dogs that really should fail a test. In many shelters, tester bias is intentionally introduced – staff know that anyone who fails too many dogs or protests an unfair and dangerous 'pass' is risking their job.

All of the tests **exclude the variable 'breed' or type of dog**. They all ignore the vast amount of data about what is going on in the field and what population genetics tell us about breed-specific behavior. By doing this, the tests explicitly avoid consideration of statistically predictable risks and behaviors. While it may be justifiable to expose the public to the risk that a pointer will point, it seems difficult to justify ignoring the serious breed-specific aggression problems field data are showing (eg, IA in the 'bully' types), as well as other known breed-specific traits such as over-arousal (eg, the Malinois) or deafness (eg, the Dalmatian and other all-white dogs).

Another problem is **abuse of the tests**. In many shelters, the tests are not really used to explore a dog's reactions, but to artificially justify a high live release rate. They're also abused to protect against liability when the tested dog later mauls or kills. The shelter that performed a manipulated test can later say, "But the dog passed our test, so it must be the adopter's fault that something went wrong." This isn't testing, but politics – a high live release rate protected, but without the shelter having to bear consequences for making this political choice.

Which brings us back to **low predictive value**. In 2006, one study showed that 40.9% of non-specified dogs that passed a shelter test showed aggression of some kind after adoption. Since 2007, an alarming number of tested shelter dogs have gone on not to growl or air-snap, but to actually maul or kill once they were rehomed. Of the killers, 90% were pit bull types or mixes and 8% Rottweilers. Refusal to include breed-specific risks in shelter 'behavior testing' is clearly strongly diminishing any test's already poor predictive value.

That there are serious problems with shelter behavior testing is demonstrated most of all by the fact that **many dogs, again most of them pit bull types and mixes, and 'molosser' types, have passed these behavior tests not before, but even *after* killing many animals where they live, *after* executing rampage attacks, and *after killing a human being*.** If anything is proof that 'behavior testing' has gone in a wrong direction, then this is it.

A final problem is that these behavior tests don't test adopters. Despite the cries of 'disasters are due to irresponsible owners', shelters know perfectly well that adopters rarely obey instructions they are sent home with (eg, no children, no dog parks) or show concern about public safety. This is true regardless of what type of dog an adopter chooses, but various forensic journals have shown that this is particularly true of people who choose known aggressive dog types. Again live release rates rule – if a shelter can get a dog out the door, particularly one of the pit bull types shelters are flooded with, they don't much care who is holding the other end of the leash.

What the so-called 'scientific community' is up to

The scientific community is not interested in public safety and has no obligation to be. The academics who are developing 'behavior tests' are interested in launching a marketable product and extending the list of publications on their CVs. A review of the literature – much of it hidden from public scrutiny behind a pay wall – shows that they are still mostly arguing via 'peer-review' about methodology, terminology, and whether the factors they identify really exist. All agree that as yet no valid or predictive test has been produced – but this doesn't stop the developer of any test from advertising and marketing it to the general public.

Then there are the actual scientific failures. All of the test developers pretend that the domestic dog is one big amorphous mass, upon which Darwin's laws have had no influence. They claim that centuries of intensive human selection has not produced populations with highly specialized behavior, at any rate not in the case of the pit bull and war dog (ie, mastiff / molosser) types. None of them include accurate data on the breeds and types of dogs they used in developing a test, nor on which ones failed and why those failed, nor which ones behaved differently after passing and being adopted. This means they are all developing tests that exclude one of the most crucial variables in doing risk assessment: 'breed' and type of dog.

Both academics and shelters insist on classing simple dog bites together with sustained mauling, maiming, disfiguring and fatal attacks. This too is an issue that needs to be addressed, since risk assessment – and real science – demands that variables be honestly and adequately defined. In fact, we know that 98% of the people killed by tested, rehomed shelter dogs have been killed by pit bull types, their mixes, and 'breeds' derived from or closely related to pit bulls (ie, most of the molosser / mastiff types). Excluding this data from studies and test development is like publishing hundreds of studies about lung cancer, but refusing to consider and report data on smokers vs. non-smokers – even though you know that 90% of lung cancers occur in smokers.

Furthermore, the tests are generally developed using a nondescript cross-section of the dog population, while we know that in most large shelters 70 – 90% of the dogs are pit bull types and mixes. The few tests developed specifically for present-day shelter dogs have all been developed by people employed by or deeply involved in the pit bull advocacy movement. These tests, funded by the 'humane' industry (and sometimes by pit bull breed clubs), are inevitably aimed at serving live release rates rather than at finding problems in the dogs.

Summarizing: The academic 'dogology' community is behaving here just as other academics did in service of the tobacco industry a few decades ago.

What does real science say?

As Jane Goodall demonstrated half a century ago, real science has to include field observations and data. When we do this, we come to the only possible scientific conclusions. The first is that 'breed' and type of dog is the best predictor of whether a dog will commit a sudden, sustained, maiming or fatal attack on other animals and on humans. In the past three years, pit bull and molosser / mastiff types have been responsible for close to 90% of these attacks. In shelter dogs, these two dog types account for 98% of all fatal attacks by tested then rehomed dogs. This means that not the tests, but again the type of dog is the best predictor that placing a dog will present a serious threat to public safety.

If the scientific community wants to remain credible, it needs to start doing and publishing studies that look specifically at which dogs – with honest, non-manipulated data on 'breed' and type – have passed shelter tests then gone on to maim and kill, aimed at finding out what these dogs have in common and why tests are failing to detect the risk. The studies need to be accessible to the general public, not hidden behind pay walls that limit scrutiny to the small circuit that is funded by and involved in the 'humane' movement. If the shelter community wants to remain credible – and protected from liability – it will have to take such studies into consideration and accept the realities as it decides how to evaluate the risks any shelter dog presents.

In the meantime, and contrary to what 'dogology' academics now tell us, science does not mean you have to know what exact mechanism is behind lung cancer (or typical pit bull aggression), nor be able to predict exactly which smoker will get cancer (or which pit bull type dog will attack) before you're allowed to take measures to protect public health and safety against the known risk. It's scientifically perfectly justifiable to put safety measures in place based only on field data.

Summarizing

The academic community admits it still doesn't know what 'behavior tests' really measure. They specifically exclude several crucial variables that would give their tests value as risk assessment. They refuse to use field data in developing and assessing validity of their tests. The samples used in developing tests are often biased, as is the outcome the tests aim at achieving. Test developers are not obligated to consider public safety. If the funder wants live release to be the main concern, then the tests are developed to accommodate this wish.

Shelters play their own role in 'behavior testing', often designing their own tests so as to elevate live release rates. They select testers with the same goal in mind, often firing testers and staff who don't comply. Shelters may report behavior tests in their files, but they don't tell which test was used, what the training or qualifications of the testers are, or even require any real training or qualification beyond popularity on the work floor. 'Animal behaviorist' is not a protected title. Shelters allow any staff that has tested a dog to use this title, and that is legally okay.

Shelter testing can be useful in assessing risk and matching dogs to adopters, but it is not a scientific activity. At the moment, it is being used to serve other goals than to assess real risk so as to protect public safety and the well-being of shelter dogs. Only the inclusion of all known risk factors, of field data and of longitudinal observations of any individual dog will help remedy this situation.

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