

Sacred Heart University

The Unethical Practices Behind Dog Breeding

Sarah Maybruck

Honors Capstone HN-300-A

Professor Thomson & Professor Trudeau

25 October 2020

The practice of dog breeding has been around for over 15,000 years. What first started as a simple interaction between man and wolf has led to around 400 dog breeds that exist today. While these dog breeds are beloved by many around the globe, that does not come without some questions as to whether or not the practice of breeding these animals is ethical. While purebred dogs are an attractive option to some people, purchasing dogs from a breeder is not the best choice when there are thousands of dogs in shelters. The continual breeding of dogs is unethical, as the overcrowding conditions, poor treatment, and toxic environment, creates dogs that are prone to both physical and mental health problems that can last for the dogs' lifetime.

TREATMENT CONCERNS IN DOG BREEDING

Canine commercial breeding establishments (CBEs) are unethical as they provide inadequate care for their dogs in order to cut costs and boost their profit margins. These canine commercial breeding establishments are known as puppy mills. Puppy mills are essentially puppy producing factories. In order to produce puppies at a low cost, puppy mill owners cut corners by cramming dogs together, not taking them to the vet, and feeding them poor quality food. The cages that the dogs are kept in are often cramped, poorly made, and are filthy. The dogs are traumatized as a result of these conditions and the lack of socialization often leads to anxious behaviors, such as pacing. *People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA)* states that “investigators have observed dogs circling frantically in their small cages and pacing ceaselessly back and forth, oblivious to anything around them—their only way of coping with despair” (PETA). The conditions that these dogs are forced to live in leads to a numerous amount of health problems such as crusty oozing eyes, ear infections, mange, and abscessed feet from the wire flooring of the cages. These dogs are often housed outside with little to no protection from the elements and little to no veterinary care when problems arise. “Puppy-mill kennels can consist of anything from small cages made of wood and wire mesh to tractor-trailer cabs or simply chains attached to

trees, where mother dogs and puppies spend every day outdoors in the same small patch of dirt in all types of weather” (PETA). Canine commercial breeding establishments cut their costs by housing their dogs in cheap, poorly constructed cages outside, and refusing to provide their dogs with adequate veterinary care. By unethically decreasing the amount of care they give their dogs, the breeders are increasing their profit margins.

Breeders do not look out for the dogs’ overall wellbeing, but only for their wallets. These breeding facilities take part in the practice of overbreeding. Overbreeding is the practice of breeding a dog too many times and or too often. While unethical, overbreeding is done by some breeders because the more puppies that they can produce from one dog the greater their profits. This is not healthy for the female as she does not have enough time to recover and producing too many litters is a strain on her body. After the female dogs can no longer be bred, she is often sold or killed as the breeder no longer has any use for the dog. Not only are the parent dogs not cared for, but the puppies are not cared for as well. *The Humane Society of the United States* indicates that puppies that come from these mills are often sick as a result of malnourishment, exposure to the elements, and lack of veterinary care. “Since puppy mills breed dogs for quantity, not quality, genetic defects are rampant. These can include physical problems that require costly veterinary treatment as well as personality disorders that often frustrate guardians into abandoning their dogs” (PETA). Puppy mills are designed to make the most money possible and to do this they overbreed their dogs and cut costs by not providing the dogs with the care that they need. These mills are breeding dogs that have problems that largely lead their owner to abandon them, thus contributing to the overpopulation of dogs in the United States. The treatment of these dogs is unethical as they are treated as puppy making machines, and they are treated as such. The breeders are collecting a paycheck while the animals are the ones who pay the price by not receiving the adequate care, shelter, and socialization that they need. It is not uncommon that

people refer to their pets as their children, however, they do not realize that their pets often come from these breeding situations where dogs are treated like objects and not living animals.

MENTAL HEALTH CONCERNS IN DOG BREEDING

Breeding dogs has led to adverse effects on the dogs' mental health. When it comes to breeding, some dog breeds are prone to dog-oriented fear, separation-related anxiety, and touch-sensitivity. A study published in 2016 by Zapata, Serpell, and Alvarez, indicates that smaller dog breeds are prone to increased-fear aggression. "These behaviors are associated with breeds of small to medium size... As owner personality does not necessarily predispose to owner-directed aggression, it is thus an apparent dog trait" (Zapata, Isain, et al. 14). Continuously breeding dogs with these traits are leading to increased levels of anxiety and aggression. In some cases, certain breeds have been bred to be more aggressive. It is not ethical to continually breed dogs that are prone to fear and aggression, thus creating dogs who suffer their whole lives with these issues. If dogs are to continually be bred, they need to be bred to help the dog, for example, to have less aggression as it is not healthy for the dog to be fearful, aggressive, or anxious. In a second study, published in *Proceedings of the Royal Society B*, a scientific journal published by the *Royal Society*, upon investigation into 14,000 dogs from 101 breeds it was found that there are differences in behavior that are heritable in certain breeds. "Interestingly, the traits with the highest heritability were trainability, stranger-directed aggression, chasing and attachment and attention seeking, which is consistent with the hypothesis that these behaviors have been important targets of selection during the cultivation of modern breeds." (MacLeant, et al. 4). These traits were deemed desirable traits by humans when dogs first started to become bred as companions. While some of these traits are good, most selective breeding has caused dog breeds to be prone to mental illnesses. An article in *The Office of International Epizootics (OIE)*, states "if selection causes an animal to be more likely to perceive aversive brain signals (for example,

through a predisposition to a condition that causes pain), or results in brain changes causing an increased sensitivity to incoming noxious signals, that selection would have a negative effect on welfare” (Sonntag, et al. 216). Continuously breeding dogs with these traits is resulting in creating offspring that have mental health problems. Purposely continuing to produce dogs that have these mental health problems is not ethical as the dogs are suffering from the effects of breeding rather than gaining.

Canine commercial breeding establishments (CBEs) and their unethical treatment and lack of care they provide to their animals leads to adverse mental health effects on the dogs for years after they leave the breeding facilities. Dogs who were placed in homes after living at breeding facilities have increased levels of nervous behavior when compared to dogs who did not come from breeding facilities. A study published in the *Applied Animal Behaviour Science* shows that “with respect to behaviour, CBE dogs displayed significantly higher rates of fear (both social and nonsocial; ordinal, house-soiling, and compulsive staring..., chasing small animals, excitability, and energy” (McMillan, et al. 91). There are several factors in these breeding facilities that lead to permanent effects on the dogs’ mental health. One of the main problems that leads to lifelong mental health problems for dogs is the lack of socialization during the early developmental stages of their lives. “The sensitive period for socialization occurs during the first 4 months of life, and, with rare exceptions, CBE breeding dogs are themselves conceived, born, and raised in CBEs, and live in CBEs throughout their sensitive periods” (91). In this crucial part of their lives, the dogs are stuck in small cages and do not get to learn what the world is like outside of those cages. When these puppies are adopted this lack of socialization turns into fear, anxiety, and aggression as they can become afraid of objects, other animals, and even people as they are not used to being around them. This is known as ‘kennel-dog syndrome.’ “[Puppies] that are socially isolated from 3 days to 20 weeks of age are disturbed for life and

have impaired learning ability” (92). The lack of socialization and medical care leads to lifelong problems for not only the dogs that are used for breeding but the puppies that are produced as well. The living conditions at these canine commercial breeding establishments are so traumatic that the mother dog’s stress and anxiety has a negative impact on the mental health and wellbeing of her puppies. “Offspring of pregnant animals exposed to various stressors have been documented with neurohormonal dysfunction and dysregulation of the HPA axis; abnormal... impaired ability to cope with stress; exaggerated distress responses to aversive events; impaired learning; abnormal social behaviour; increased emotionality and fear-related behaviour and fearful behaviours...” (92). The way in which these dogs are treated is leading to lifelong mental health effects on the dogs. They are not treated nearly as well as they deserve considering most dog owners feel that their dogs are their family members. It is also unethical because most of these puppies are advertised to be the best of their breed, while most are leaving the breeding facilities physically and mentally ill. CBEs are not ethical, as their conditions and treatment of their animals are leading to adverse mental health effects on not just the dogs who are used for breeding, but their puppies as well.

PHYSICAL HEALTH CONCERNS IN DOG BREEDING

Along with breeding’s negative effect on dogs’ mental health, continuous genetic modifications over the years have led to an increase in the number of physical health problems in dogs. There are several breeds of dogs that are considered prone to certain health problems. In a study that was created to discover breed predispositions to disease, it was found that “the diseases to which specific breeds are predisposed can be divided into two main groups: those that have arisen accidentally or incidentally through the process of inbreeding to derive defined breeds and those that have deliberately been introduced through selection for extreme phenotypes as ‘desirable’ traits” (Gough, Alex, et al. 9) The practice of breeding is to create an animal, in this case, a dog,

that obtains a trait that is considered desirable to the human breeders. As the desired traits appeared present in the offspring, inbreeding then often occurs in order to keep the desired trait present in that breed of dog. An article in *The Office of International Epizootics (OIE)*, state that “selective breeding in purebred animals has resulted in the loss of genetic diversity, accumulation of detrimental genes and exaggeration of anatomical features associated with physical health risks” (Sonntag, et al. 215). If breeding is to continue it is only ethical if healthier dogs are produced. To do so genetic variation must be increased, thus inbreeding needs to be replaced by crossbreeding, breeding two or more different breeds together. Crossbreeds are often considered healthier than their interbreed counterparts, as they are more genetically diverse. The continual breeding and manipulation of these animals' genes to create these breeds is unethical, as the animals are not gaining from these traits but are in fact suffering the consequences of human interference in biology.

Breeders are more concerned about the quality of their dog's appearance than the overall health of the dog. Breeders' goals are to produce dogs who possess traits that are as close to the desired physical attributes that are recognized by organizations such as kennel clubs. In order to produce such desired qualities, these dogs are predisposed genetically to a wide variety of illnesses and physical problems. In a study published in *The Veterinary Journal* in 2009, it states that of the top 50 breeds in the United Kingdom, a total of 396 inherited disorders were detected (Asher, et al.). Among those identified were musculoskeletal, integument, nervous-sensory, cardiovascular, urogenital, respiratory, gastrointestinal, immune, and endocrine disorders. The amount of predisposed disorders increases with the number of registrations of that particular breed (Asher, et al.). As breeders continue to breed more of the same breeds of dogs, the dogs become more likely to have disorders. No matter what the phenotypical trait of the dog is, there are critical characteristics that lead the dogs to have predispositions to various disorders. Dog

breeds who are taller have more cardiovascular, gastrointestinal, integument, and musculoskeletal disorders, along with hip and elbow dysplasia (Asher, et al.). This is largely because of their large body size and rapid growth rate. Lighter breeds have more respiratory, urogenital disorders, and endocrine disorders, and shorter breeds have more nervous-sensory, respiratory and urogenital disorders, along with odontoid process dysplasia, shoulder dysplasia, and patellar luxation (Asher, et al.). Smaller dogs that are members of the Toy and Utility groups at dog shows are candidates for Patellar luxation, which can cause lameness. Dog breeds that have brachycephalic, short skulls, are more susceptible to respiratory problems as the nature of their skull does not support for proper respiration, resulting in problems such as dyspnea, including stenotic nares, an elongated soft palate, and hypoplastic trachea (Asher, et al.). These dogs should be bred to reduce these medical problems, rather than breeding them to have these problematic phenotypes that lead them to be unable to breathe properly. The reduced size of the cranial cavity of some dogs such as the Cavalier King Charles spaniel leads to “potentially severe neurological conditions of cranioschisis, hydrocephalus and syringomyelia. The condition is assumed to be painful, as well as causing brain damage, and long-term success of treatment is limited.” (406) There are some key characteristics that distinguish one breed from the rest. Often these characteristics are direct causes for medical issues that the dog must endure throughout its life. In the case of breeds with curly tails, like Pugs and Basenjis, there are spinal issues such as hemivertebrae and spina bifida that come as a result of the tail’s curly nature (Asher, et al.). The Rhodesian ridgeback is known for the ridge of hair on its back. The breed’s namesake however is linked to dermoid sinus, a skin defect caused by the separation of the skin and the nervous system. According to breed standards that are produced by groups such as the American Kennel Club, some traits are considered desirable, while others are considered undesirable. In Dalmatians their light coloring often results in the dogs being deaf. “Although Dalmatians with

patches are less likely to suffer from deafness (Henley and Wood, 2003), the breed standard states that ‘patches are unacceptable’ (409). Instead of breeding for desirable physical traits, if dogs are continually to be bred it is only ethical that breeders look for the traits that are less prone to health problems and then breed dogs to have healthy qualities. “Health and behavioural concerns were reported at significantly higher rates among owners of former CBE breeding dogs than for matched controls, with 23.5% of CBE ex-breeding dog owners reporting health problems compared to 16.6% of matched pet owners” (McMillan, et al. 89). Breeders are not concerned with producing dogs that possess characteristics that make them prone to health problems. Breeders are looking to breed puppies that have the traits that they need to be considered “quality.” In order for the puppies to be considered “quality”, they have to follow the guidelines set by groups like the *American Kennel Club*. The higher the “quality” the more money can be made off that dog. The goal of the breeder is not focused on the health and wellness of the dogs, but the dogs’ monetary value.

ETHICS IN ADOPTING SHELTER DOGS

It is unethical for breeders to continue to breed dogs while dogs who are in need of loving homes are euthanized daily. People continue to go to breeders to purchase a new, purebred puppy, while “approximately 6.5 million companion animals enter U.S. animal shelters nationwide every year. Of those, approximately 3.3 million are dogs and 3.2 million are cats” (ASPCA). Due to a large overpopulation problem of dogs and cats in the United States, many of these sweet animals are put to sleep. Unfortunately, the *American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals* declares “each year, approximately 1.5 million shelter animals are euthanized (670,000 dogs and 860,000 cats)” (ASPCA). Rather than continuing the breeding process by funding breeders with purchasing their dogs, people need to turn their focus to saving dogs who are waiting for their homes in these shelters.

It is unethical for breeders to continue to breed dogs while there are hundreds of thousands of dogs sitting in cages at animal shelters that are euthanized each year. While animal shelters are established to create safe places for animals to await their new homes, they are not pleasant places for these animals. These animals are often suffering in conditions that are not suitable which causes them to become anxious and depressed that can lead them to contract diseases. Shelters are high-stress environments for these animals. Animals' stress levels increase in environments that are new and uncertain. In an article published by Pesavento and Murphy in the *Veterinary Pathology Journal*, due to the number of animals that are usually housed in these facilities "small or inappropriately constructed housing may be suboptimal for typical animal behaviors such as normal postures, playing, elimination, and hiding" (Pesavento 480). This environment, while not ideal for the animals is what shelters are forced to deal with as a result of the large overpopulation of cats and dogs in the United States.

Breeders continue to contribute to the overpopulation of dogs in the United States; so rather than purchasing a pure-bred dog, people need to adopt an animal that is in need. The conditions in these shelters can lead not just to mental health problems, but physical health problems as well. As the animals' stress and anxiety levels increase, so does their susceptibility to contract diseases. Doctor of Veterinary Medicine, Brenda Griffin argues that "acute stress can reduce appetite, cause upset stomachs and exacerbate existing medical conditions including heart disease, hormone imbalances, urinary tract disease and allergies. Chronic stress compromises the immune system, lowering resistance to infection" (Griffin). Animals circulate throughout the shelter, bringing in new diseases, parasites, and illnesses. This collection of problems along with the increased levels of stress that the animals are already in, create a perfect environment for health problems to flourish. Pesavento and Murphy address that "numerous studies have linked the presence of stress to the induction of immunodeficiency and resulting vulnerability to various

infectious diseases. Studies in multiple species indicate that chronic stress has a deleterious effect on both cell-mediated and humoral immunity” (Pesavento 480). When an animal enters a shelter, the new atmosphere is shocking to their system, and as a result stress and diseases are often occurrences. While shelters are not conducive environments for promoting physically and mentally healthy animals, they are in place to attempt to save these animals and give them another chance at a wonderful life. The ASPCA declares that the *American Pet Products Association* “...reports that 34% of dogs are purchased from breeders, while 23% of dogs and 31% of cats are obtained from an animal shelter or humane society” (ASPCA). As people continue to purchase animals from breeders the overpopulation problem in animal shelters increases. Most shelter dogs are not purebred and thus are more genetically diverse. These cross-bred dogs are often much healthier and can live longer than their purebred counterparts. Rather than contributing to the problem and continuing to purchase purebred dogs, people need to look to their local shelters to save a life that is truly in need.

ETHICAL AND WELFARE CONCERNS IN DOG BREEDING

Breeders are not providing their dogs with the welfare they are entitled to. Animal welfare is protecting the health and wellbeing of animals. *American Veterinary Medical Association* indicates that in order to protect an animal's welfare its physical and mental needs need to be provided. Dog breeders are tampering with the dog's genetic makeup by producing dogs with new phenotypic and behavioral traits. The genetic manipulation of these dogs' traits is affecting their overall wellbeing and integrity. Environmental ethics specialists and doctors of philosophy Bovenkerk and Nijland argue that “integrity has been described by as ‘the wholeness and intactness of the animal and its species-specific balance, as well as the capacity to sustain itself in an environment suitable to the species’” (Bovenkerk, B., et al. 395). The integrity of the vast majority of dogs has been diminished as they can no longer survive in the wild. Dogs have been

bred to have traits that would make them unable to survive without human interaction. For example, the small nature of the Chihuahua might make humans want it because it is deemed “cute” however its integrity is no longer apparent as a Chihuahua could not survive in the wild as its small, frail nature would make it a prime target for predators. If we are to breed a dog to help it live longer, be stronger, or resist disease, that would not affect the integrity of the dog, however, most selective breeding is focused on creating a dog with the desired phenotypic traits. It is unethical to strip the integrity of a dog and its ability to survive in the wild by creating a more aesthetically pleasing dog for human consumption. An article published in the *BBC* indicates that “genetic engineering and selective breeding appear to violate animal rights, because they involve manipulating animals for human ends as if the animals were nothing more than human property, rather than treating the animals as being of value in themselves” (BBC). Breeders are violating the animals’ rights because they treat them as objects rather than living breathing animals. They use the animals for their own personal gain, rather than helping the animals.

Breeders continue to neglect the welfare of their dogs by unethically breeding for the desired phenotypic traits which leads to an increased risk for mental and physical problems. Bovenkerk and Nijland argue that “...instrumentalisation can mean that animals are treated as if they are things. This objection focuses on the attitude of the person who tampers with the animal and thereby views the animal as an object. This form of instrumentalisation is also called objectification and harbours the risk that society will start viewing animals as if they were objects, which in turn could lead to a denial of the animals’ own interests and own nature” (Bovenkerk, B., et al. 397). Breeders instrumentalize their dogs because they treat them like objects. To them, profit is the main concern, not the wellbeing of the animals. Many people consider their dogs as part of their families and many are beloved as such, however, the way in

which they are bred is similar to that of designing the perfect item. The dogs are not looked at as animals, but an object that is bred to have the desired traits so that they are softer, smaller, and fluffier. They are bred merely for the human's desire to own a particular looking animal. Writer and philosopher, Bernard Rollin, suggests "that a suitable rule to regulate genetic engineering would be this: 'Genetically engineered animals should be no worse off than the parent stock would be if they were not so engineered.' This principle can easily be adapted to cover selective breeding" (BBC). Dogs breeds are worse off because now they are more prone to physical and mental health problems. If breeding dogs is to continue, it is only ethical if breeders should work toward creating healthier dogs instead of creating the perfect looking dog that matches the desired description of that particular breed.

Breeders also need to provide their dogs with their rights. These dogs need to not be treated as objects but as living, breathing animals with emotions and needs. The Farm Animal Welfare Council (1992) created the Five Freedoms-approach "which states that an animal has good welfare when it is free from hunger and thirst, from discomfort, from pain, injury or disease, free to express normal behavior, and free from fear and distress" (Bovenkerk, B., et al. 394). The conditions that dogs are forced to live in when they are in these commercial breeding facilities are going against the dogs' welfare. In most breeding facilities dogs are hungry, thirsty, in pain, uncomfortable, and are not free to express their natural behaviors. Another ethical concern is the overall manipulation of the genes of an animal. Selective breeding is the simplest form of bioengineering, which is the human manipulation of genes. Bovenkerk and Nijland argue that "the point here is not that something is done that would never happen in nature, but rather that interfering itself is deemed unnatural, because it is carried out by humans. The reference point for naturalness then seems to be the 'untouched' animal, as it would appear in nature, as the end result of the process of evolution" (398). The ethical concern behind human

interference in genetic manipulation is that it is not up to humans to create new species. Dog breeding is unethical as it interferes with nature by creating dog breeds that we find desirable. If breeders are to continue to breed dogs it would only be ethical that they do so while maintaining the health and welfare of the dogs.

The practice of breeding dogs is unethical in several areas. The continual breeding for desired physical traits has led to dire health consequences for the dogs. If breeding must continue, dogs should be bred to have healthier qualities, not qualities that lead them to possible suffering throughout their lives. The conditions that these dogs are bred in is also unethical. The breeders' main concern is for their profit margin and not for the care of the dogs. The poor living conditions, along with little to no medical care, and socialization lead to lifelong mental health effects on the dogs. If breeders cared for their dogs, they would treat them better and work on breeding healthier dogs. In order to stop the unethical practices of breeding, people who are looking for a dog need to turn to adopting from shelters, where thousands of dogs are in need of loving homes, rather than contributing to the problem.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor. Denise Lovett for her advice and feedback on this paper. I would also like to thank my peers Anna Martinelli and Kiersten Keating for their input.

Works Cited

- “Animal Welfare: What Is It?” *American Veterinary Medical Association*, American Veterinary Medical Association, www.avma.org/resources/animal-health-welfare/animal-welfare-what-it.
- Asher, Lucy, et al. “Inherited Defects in Pedigree Dogs. Part 1: Disorders Related to Breed Standards.” *The Veterinary Journal*, vol. 182, no. 3, Jan. 2009, pp. 402–411. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1016/j.tvjl.2009.08.033.
- ASPCA. “Pet Statistics.” *ASPCA*, ASPCA, www.aspc.org/animal-homelessness/shelter-intake-and-surrender/pet-statistics.
- BBC. “Biotechnology.” *BBC*, BBC, 2014, www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/animals/using/biotechnology_1.shtml.
- Bovenkerk, B., & Nijland, H. J. (2017). The Pedigree Dog Breeding Debate in Ethics and Practice: Beyond Welfare Arguments. *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics*, 30, 387-412. doi:https://doi.org/10.1007/s10806-017-9673-8
- Gough, Alex, et al. “Breed Predispositions to Disease in Dogs and Cats.” Germany, Wiley, 2011.
- Griffin, Brenda. “Emotional Rescue.” *Animal Sheltering*, Humane Society of the United States,

Oct. 2015, www.animalsheltering.org/magazine/articles/emotional-rescue.

MacLeant, Evan L, et al. “Highly Heritable and Functionally Relevant Breed Differences in Dog Behaviour.” *Proceedings of the Royal Society B, Biological Science*, vol. 286, no. 1912, 2019. *Royal Society*, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1098/rspb.2019.0716>.

McMillan, Franklin D., et al. “Mental Health of Dogs Formerly Used as ‘Breeding Stock’ in Commercial Breeding Establishments.” *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, vol. 135, no. 1-2, Nov. 2011, pp. 86–94. *Science Direct*, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.applanim.2011.09.006>.

Pesavento, P. A., and B. G. Murphy. “Common and Emerging Infectious Diseases in the Animal Shelter.” *Veterinary Pathology*, vol. 51, no. 2, 21 Nov. 2013, pp. 478–491. *Sage Journals*, doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/0300985813511129>.

PETA. “Puppy Mills.” *People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals*, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, www.peta.org/issues/animal-companion-issues/pet-trade/puppy-Mills/.

Sonntag, Q., and K. L. Overall. “Key Determinants of Dog and Cat Welfare: Behaviour, Breeding and Household Lifestyle.” *Revue Scientifique et Technique (International Office of Epizootics)*, vol. 33, no. 1, Apr. 2014, pp. 213–220. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=mnh&AN=25000794&site=eds-live&scope=site.

Zapata, Isain, et al. “Genetic Mapping of Canine Fear and Aggression.” *BMC Genomics*, vol. 17, Aug. 2016, p. 572. *EBSCOhost*, doi:10.1186/s12864-016-2936-3.