

*Studies now suggest that personality in non-human animals can be measured and evaluated, just as in humans.*



# Personality Plus

**DO DOGS HAVE IT?**

By Julie Hecht, MSc

**A**LL DOGS ARE THE SAME. REALLY. Look at an evolutionary tree and you'll find all domestic dogs, clustered together in one spot. But that can't be the entire story. When asked, Rachel Licker of Lawrenceville, N.J., describes Piper, her "Basset Hound on stilts," as incredibly goofy, communicative, playful and quick to overwhelm. According to Mary de Vachon of Nice, France, Ria, her Sheltie, is gentle and loving, content and confident, extremely shy, and above all else, a mademoiselle.

While all dogs might fit in the same spot on the tree of life, each has his or her own unique personality. Just as one person might greet you with a cautious wave or a coy smile, another will come barreling into your life doling out hugs and kisses. Dogs are the same, in that each is different.

## WHAT IS PERSONALITY?

While the name Pavlov usually brings to mind bells and salivating dogs, early in his studies Pavlov and his students noticed that dogs differed from one another. Some tended to be nervous and sensitive, some were active and lively, and some were quiet and steady. Like Rachel and Mary reflecting on Piper and Ria, Pavlov and his team were describing dogs' personalities. The concept of personality can be used to convey that individuals differ in how they perceive and interact with the world around them.

Additionally, the word describes an individual's usual pattern of behavior, characteristics that are relatively stable over time and across situations. Say a snowman with stick arms that wave in the wind appears on the front lawn after a snowstorm. Some dogs would walk by as though Frosty had always been there. Others might play-bow and dance joyfully in front of their new friend, while a few are sure to freeze, tuck and retreat.

If those same dogs then confront other novel situations—balloons in a tree, a parade, clowns jumping out of a car, you name it—those who perceived Frosty as no bother would probably continue to be indifferent, while those who equated Frosty with Satan would also be likely to associate other odd events with the underworld. Although it does not imply that an individual will respond the same exact way every time (dogs are not robots, after all), the term “personality” denotes an individual's *usual* perceptions or interactions.

Thinking about personality gets tricky very quickly because there is no universal definition. Some fields distinguish between personality and temperament, while others use the terms interchangeably. As Samuel Gosling, PhD, a personality and social psychologist at the University of Texas, Austin, explains, “Temperament is the basic, biologically inherited tendencies of an individual, and personality is the result of the interaction between temperament and the environment.” That distinction is common in human

psychology but is not always made in animal fields. But, as Gosling adds, “since adult animals are a combination of biologically inherited tendencies as well as individual experiences, it seems to me misleading to call that temperament. In humans, we would call that personality, so why not in other animals?”

Making a distinction between temperament and personality could enable researchers to explore whether certain traits are more stable over time than others. For example, a recent analysis surveying a number of studies found that in puppies, aggression and submissiveness were most consistent, while responsiveness to training, sociability and fearfulness were least consistent.

Understanding the relationship between early-life temperaments and later-in-life personalities could be paramount for real-world issues, such as selecting dogs for work or companionship. For working dogs, Gosling and his team advise the U.S. Department of Homeland Security on how to measure personality-trait consistency in order to improve the selection and training of working detector dogs.

Back home, you might think you have a handle on who your puppy Wizzer is, but what you're seeing might or might not relate to Wizzer's adult personality. (So even if Wizzer starts out apprehensive about the vacuum cleaner, there's hope for improvement, and you can help him.)

At the same time, many shy away from using the term when it comes to non-human animals, sometimes because they're uneasy about the “A” word: anthropomorphism. To avoid linking dogs and personhood so explicitly, scientists use alternative descriptors such as “behavioral types,” “behavioral syndromes” and “coping styles.” Regardless of the word employed, when the definitions are compared, they tend to describe the same basic phenomenon: consistent, individual differences in behavioral tendencies over time and across situations.

Much of the initial pushback against

the term “personality” has dissipated because studies now suggest that personality in non-human animals can be measured and evaluated, just as in humans. (Relatively speaking, this field is in its infancy, and techniques and methodologies continue to evolve, so stay tuned.)

## HOW IS PERSONALITY EVALUATED?

While human personality is often assessed by questionnaires, dogs are less adept with that format, tending to provide insufficient responses (mostly, slobber and paw prints). But their inability to hold a pen does not exclude them from questionnaire-based per-



sonality assessments; humans complete questionnaires on dogs' behalf. The method is reliable because independent observers—in this case, dog owners and other humans who know the dog—generally concur in their descriptions of a dog's personality. This type of consistency is a hallmark of human personality research and lends credibility to the approach. And, even better, similar ratings provided by observers *over time* further substantiate the utility of particular questionnaires.

Questionnaires, however, are not bulletproof. Gosling notes that questionnaires “don't rule out the possibility that ratings are based on some stereotype, say a physical stereotype, like ‘bigger animals are more aggressive.’ You could still get those biases.” Dogs' physical appearances are emotion points for humans and make them susceptible to attributions and judgments that might have no bearing on the personality of individuals. For example,

the Papillon breed standard specifies that these small dogs are to be “happy, alert and friendly,” and their physical appearance easily promotes this perception of an overall perkiness. But on an individual basis, just like other dogs, Papillons can be shy (or downright neurotic).

Even taking into account the risk of stereotyping, questionnaires provide meaningful information about canine personality. When comparing questionnaire ratings with separate behavior-observation assessments, a strong link has been found. So if a dog is judged on a questionnaire to be highly timid, independent observers will generally

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also describe the dog's behavior in terms consistent with shyness.

Since people are rarely shy about discussing their dogs, collecting data via questionnaires can be incredibly fruitful. The Canine Behavioral Assessment and Research Questionnaire (C-BARQ), developed by James Serpell, PhD, and researchers at the University of Pennsylvania, is a widely used assessment of dog behavioral characteristics (available for public use at [vetapps.vet.upenn.edu/cbarq](http://vetapps.vet.upenn.edu/cbarq)). The 101 questions gather insights into dogs by asking owners to use a five-point scale to describe how their dog would likely react in a variety of different situations, such as anxiety or fear in heavy traffic or when examined by a veterinarian; excited when the doorbell rings or when visitors arrive; and of course, likely to chase cats if given the opportunity.

A recent study of former breeding dogs from commercial breeding operations—commonly referred to as

“puppy mills”—relied on the C-BARQ to evaluate the dispositions of these dogs once they're out in the world. Overall, they were found to be more fearful and nervous than typical pet dogs, particularly regarding strangers and stairs, and many were sensitive about being touched. Despite having lived for years in their adoptive households, many of these dogs still displayed persistent fear and anxiety, which is exactly the type of long-term rather than short-term tendencies that investigations of personality aim to reveal.

But do we really need questionnaires when a dog's actual behavior is right in front of us? Of course, it's easy to watch

a dog and write down how he or she reacts to various stimuli, but that's not necessarily enough. While it is plausible to observe dog behavior in myriad situations by simply waiting for different scenarios—such as flashing lights and loud sirens—to present themselves, test batteries, which are designed to investigate whether various stimuli and situations elicit particular responses, are more common. For example, the Dog Mentality Assessment (DMA) is a behavior test originating in Sweden that requires dogs to respond to, among other things, novel people, furry objects, loud noises, the potential for play and people dressed up like ghosts (yep, ghosts).

The researchers boiled down dogs' behavioral responses into five personality dimensions: sociability, playfulness, chase-proneness, aggressiveness, and curiosity/fearfulness. Comparing the results from the DMA test battery with the C-BARQ assessment showed broad agreement between the two.

You can think of these personality dimensions as the canine equivalent of the classic human “Big Five” personality models: extroversion (sociable and outgoing), agreeableness (trustworthy and straightforward), neuroticism (anxious, irritable and shy), openness (curious, imaginative and excitable) and conscientiousness (efficient, thorough and not lazy). Research groups continue to flesh out the various personality dimensions found in dogs; recently, the Anthrozoology Research Group in Australia generated a slightly different list of attributes, one that included extroversion, neuroticism, motivation, training focus and amicability.

As you might imagine, it's not easy to summarize and sort all of a dog's behaviors into a small number of buckets, so there is much left to learn in this area. One hot topic that warrants more research is the possible relationships between different traits. For example, are individuals who are more bold also more sociable and playful with strangers? Or is it more challenging to find links between traits? While boldness and aggression correlate in some species, researchers have not found that to be true for dogs. Dogs who were bolder were not necessarily more aggressive. The possibilities for this area of research are virtually endless.

## WHO WILL MY DOG BE?

At any given moment, chances are that a Beagle's nose will be pressed to the ground while an Afghan Hound will be striking a pose on the couch. But personality encompasses both genetically selected attributes as well as



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individual life experiences. For that reason, there is no one-to-one relationship between personality characteristics and breed; personalities can vary within a particular breed based on the experiences of individual dogs. In fact, in the recent book, *Dog Sense: How the New Science of Dog Behavior Can Make You a Better Friend to Your Pet*, anthrozoologist John Bradshaw comments that even in Scott and Fuller's seminal research on dog behavior and genetics, "breed turned out to be less relevant to personality than had been expected at the outset." The bottom line is that breed characteristics are certainly relevant to who a dog is, but they are not the be-all and end-all when it comes to personality.

The short answer to "Who will my dog be?" is "Wait and see." Current research finds that puppy tests have low predictive value for later-in-life behavior. On the other hand, personalities examined in older dogs do display more stability over time. Krista Macpherson, a PhD candidate at the University of Western Ontario who studies cognitive abilities in domestic dogs, reminds us that at the time of testing, puppies have had minimal interaction with the outside world, apart from their conspecifics. "At eight weeks, they are not that developed cognitively, and there are a lot of experiences yet to be had," she observes. Researchers at the Clever Dog Lab (part of Austria's University of Vienna) are currently investigating whether early temperament tests are predictive of behavioral tendencies in an older dog. By testing dogs at a range of ages, they will be able to explore the predictive value of early-life temperament tests.

At the end of the day, Jules Winnfield, the gangster from *Pulp Fiction*, gets it right: "A dog's got personality, and personality goes a long way." Rachel Licker, who lives with Piper, reminds us exactly *why* personality is so important. "I hope people really enjoy their dogs being more than just amicable, and give their dogs more leeway to be multi-dimensional beings. I think they might enjoy their dogs more, and I think it would create more space for the dog and owner to be happy together." **B**

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