

SHORT COMMUNICATIONS

DO PEOPLE LOOK LIKE THEIR DOGS?

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ABSTRACT

One tenant of folk psychology is that people tend to select or form a preference for pet dogs that have a similar appearance to themselves. A sample of 261 women judged the desirability of four breeds of dogs. Two breeds had lopped ears (English Springer Spaniel, Beagle) and two had pricked ears (Siberian Husky, Basenji). Long hairstyles in women produce a facial framing effect similar to lop ears while short or pulled back hairstyles produce a facial configuration more similar to prick-eared dogs. Consistent with this interpretation, women with long hair tended to prefer the lop-eared dogs while women with the short hairstyles preferred the prick-eared dogs, consistent with the folk belief. These results are interpreted in light of social psychological principles, namely the effects of familiarity and mere exposure on affect and interpersonal attraction.

INTRODUCTION

One of the enduring maxims of folk psychology is that people and their pet dogs tend to look the same (Coren 1998). This belief is widely held and has led to a variety of comic interpretations in films, on television and in advertisements. While this issue may appear to be frivolous, there are actually some empirically established reasons why it might be true, at least in a weaker form — namely that people tend to form a preference for dogs that look similar to themselves, and this preference may, in turn, affect their choice of a particular breed of dog, to some extent.

The data that gives this idea a bit of credibility comes from two sources. The first is the extensive literature on interpersonal attraction which suggests that, in choosing a mate or a partner, while everyone may be attracted to physical beauty, most people follow a matching strategy by selecting partners who are at about the same level of physical attractiveness as themselves (Berscheid and Walster 1978; Feingold 1988). For example, clients of a professional dating service were more likely to begin and continue dating when they were similar in physical attractiveness (Folkes 1982). If this carried over to selection of a canine companion, this would suggest that people who are generally consid-

ered handsome or beautiful would tend to select dogs that are also considered to be fairly comely, while the converse would hold for people who are fairly unattractive.

A much more specific mechanism that might cause people to select dogs that have some physical similarity to themselves has to do with a mechanism known as the Mere Exposure Effect. Basically, this means that people like familiar objects more than things that they have not seen before. It doesn't seem to matter what that item is; thus when people hear a word, see a person, look at a painting, hear a piece of music, or encounter anything else a number of times they develop a more positive attitude toward it (Zajonc 1968; Bornstein 1989). For example, Moreland and Beach (1992) had students rate photographs of confederates who had attended a large lecture class but never actually interacted with any of the class members. They found that the more classes a woman attended the more attractive and pleasant she was perceived to be as a function of mere exposure to her.

To link this discussion back to our selection of dogs, we are frequently exposed to the sight of our own face in mirrors and other reflecting surfaces. The mere exposure effect predicts that we should develop a fondness for our facial characteristics. Thus when Mita, Dermer and Knight (1977) had students evaluate photographs of themselves they tended to prefer images that were left-right reversed, as their face would appear in a mirror, while friends and lovers preferred the true image, which is the perspective that they are more familiar with. By extension then, we might expect people to find

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dogs whose faces had characteristics that were similar to their own to be more appealing.

While it is difficult to find an appropriate metric to compare a dog's face to that of a human, there is one characteristic which is easily scored and might have some predictive ability. If you look at Figure 1, it is clear that a dog with long, lop ears (1A) has its face framed in a manner that is similar to the framing effect caused by long hair in a woman (1B). A dog with pricked ears (1C) however, is somewhat more similar to a woman whose hair is shorter or pulled back, exposing the ears and giving a cleaner, unframed lower face (1D). This could lead to the prediction that women who habitually wear their hair longer and over their ears might prefer lopped ear dogs while women with shorter hair and exposed ears might prefer prick-eared dogs simply due to the mere exposure effect.

METHOD

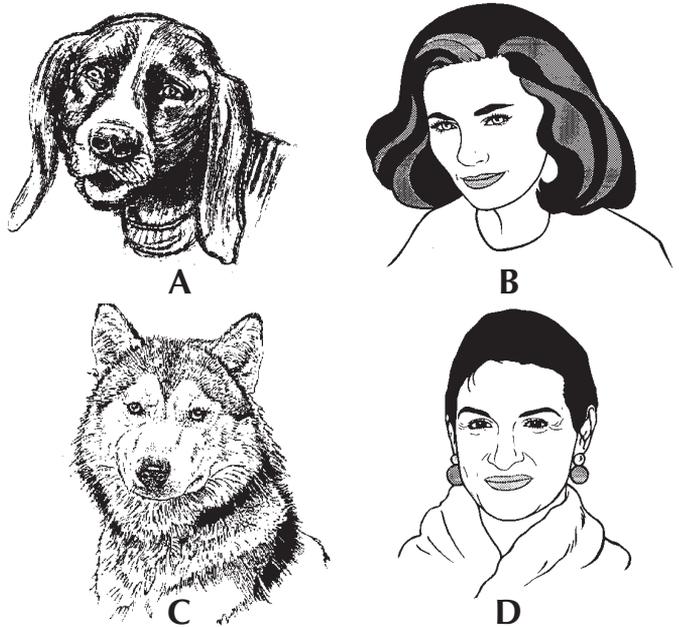
Subjects

Testing involved a sample of 261 women students enrolled at the University of British Columbia. The sample was limited to women simply because there is a wide variability in women's hairstyles, while in this region the vast majority of men wear fairly close cropped hair. The mean age of the sample was 18.6 years. All were enrolled in the psychology department's student subject pool and were naive as to the purpose of the experiment.

Stimuli and Procedure

The test stimuli consisted of portraits of four different dog breeds—simply the head of each dog looking toward the camera. The breeds were an English Springer Spaniel, Beagle, Siberian Husky and a Basenji. Each stimulus was projected on a screen for approximately one minute, during which the subjects were required to rate each dog on four dimensions: how much they liked the look of the dog, how friendly they thought it was, how loyal they thought it might be, and how intelligent it appeared to be, using a 9-point scale. Following this, the women were asked some general questions about themselves and their lifestyle. As part of this assessment, they were asked to

FIGURE 1:



Dogs dog with lop ears (A) have their faces framed in a manner that is similar to the framing caused by long hair in a woman (B). Dogs with pricked ears (1C) have an appearance that is more similar to a woman whose hair is shorter or pulled back, exposing the upright tips of the ears with an unframed lower face (1D).

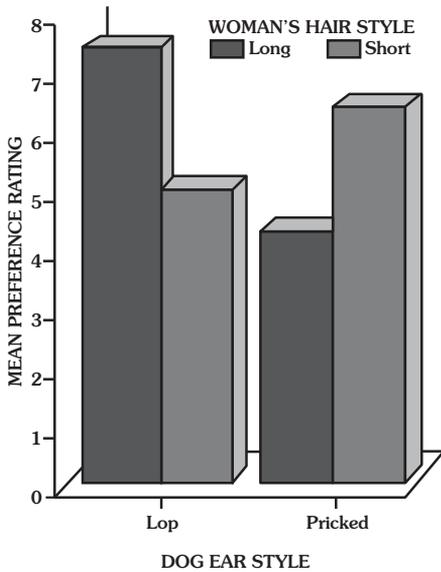
look at a series of 12 schematic sketches of women's hairstyles and to indicate which one was closest to the way that they most commonly wore their hair over the past three years.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For the purpose of analysis, detailed differences in hair style were ignored, and women were divided into two groups: one with longer hairstyles, that covered the ears (e.g. Figure 1B), and the other with shorter hair or longer hair that was pulled back, so that the woman's ears were visible (e.g. Figure 1D).

A simple mean of the four ratings gives a global estimate of the desirability of each dog and the mean of the responses for the Springer Spaniel and the Beagle give a rating for lop-eared dogs, while the mean of the Siberian Husky and Basenji scores give the approval rating for prick-eared dogs. As can be seen in Figure 2, there is a small but significant preference overall for lop-eared dogs over prick eared dogs (6.15 vs. 5.09, $F_{[1,259]}=344.67, p<0.001$). Most importantly for the hypothesis here was the fact that women with longer hair tended to prefer the lop-eared Springer Spaniel and the

FIGURE 2:



The mean ratings of the four judgements of dog preference show that women with longer hair tend to prefer lop-eared dogs while women with shorter or pulled back hair tend to prefer dogs with pricked ears.

Beagle, rating these breeds higher on the dimensions of likeable, friendly, loyal and intelligent. Women with shorter hair and visible ears tended to rate the Siberian Husky and the Basenji more highly on these same dimensions (hair style by ear shape interaction, $F_{[1,259]}=227.22, p<0.001$).

This pattern of results is consistent with familiarity effects on liking, given that the longer hair on a woman forms a framing effect around her face, which is much the same as the framing effect caused by the longer, lop ears of the spaniel or Beagle as opposed to shorter hair, which provides unframed lines to the sides of the woman's face and allows her to see her own ears. Please note that because of the nature of these data, we must confine our conclusions to dog preference, rather than to dog ownership. Since all of the test subjects were university students, the breed of their family dogs was generally the result of selection by their parents, rather than by the tested individuals.

To further consider the hypothesis that people prefer dogs that look like themselves, we ought to be able to find other appearance dimensions that can be scored in a relatively unambiguous manner which could be also used to confirm this notion. Somatype might be such a dimension, with relatively slim people perhaps

preferring relatively slim dog breeds, or with tall people preferring taller dogs. More difficult to score, but still interesting dimensions that could be explored might be facial shape and nasal prominence. Somatype variables do have a theoretical advantage over hairstyle, since they are not easily subject to voluntary control. Given the fact that one can easily change their hairstyle it is possible to argue that the direction of the observed correlation runs, not from mere exposure to one's hairstyle to a preference in dogs, but rather from a generalized preference for the kind of facial framing effect associated with long hair or lop ears. While not invalidating the conclusion that people look like their dogs, this form of reasoning would suggest that a person's initial preferences may result in their creation of a particular look or style for themselves, and also in their preference of dog breeds which have that preferred appearance.

Obviously, we are not talking about a universal effect on preference. There were a number of women with short hair that preferred the long-eared dogs and vice-versa. Coren (1998) has pointed out that a person's preference for a particular breed of dog may depend upon a number of factors, including the image that the individual wishes to convey, the purpose that the dog is intended to fulfil and the personality characteristics of the individual making the selection. However, the size of the effect associating one aspect of the general portrait of the individual with the global appearance of the dog is large enough in this study to be statistically reliable. Taking this result at face value (no pun intended), this might suggest that we have some preference for dogs that have a general likeness that is somewhat reminiscent of the appearance of our own faces. This could provide some confirmation of the folk psychological belief that we look like our dogs to some degree.

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