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Follow-up surveys of people who have adopted dogs and cats from an Australian shelter

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ABSTRACT

Unwanted pets are a major concern in Australia and many other countries, with shelters under pressure to accommodate them. This study assessed the degree of satisfaction among individuals whom had adopted a cat or a dog from the Animal Welfare League South Australia (AWL). The survey also assessed the adopted animals' health, behaviour and interactions with children and other pets residing in the household. A cross-sectional survey was completed by contacting individuals who had adopted an animal by telephone, with questions relating to satisfaction with the adopted pet. Descriptive analyses, ordinal and logistic regression, chi squared, Mann-Whitney U and Kruskal-Wallis tests were conducted to determine variables related to adoption satisfaction. A total of 107 canine surveys and 168 feline surveys were included in the study. Undesirable behaviours were present in 53.3% of the dogs and 14.3% of the cats. Dogs with a behaviour problem after adoption spent significantly less time in the shelter versus dogs without a behaviour problem (18.6 ± 9.6 days versus 26.4 ± 19.2 days, respectively, $p = 0.017$) Using a score out of 5, owners were very satisfied overall with their adopted cat ($M = 4.9$, $SD = 0.3$) or dog ($M = 4.8$, $SD = 0.5$), despite the presence of undesirable behaviours. These findings suggest adopters have realistic expectations of their newly adopted pet, although further research is needed to investigate the factors influencing adopter satisfaction. Assessing levels of adoption satisfaction is central to anticipating the outcome of prospective adoptions.

1. Introduction

Relinquishments of dogs and cats to shelters is a world-wide problem (Patronek et al., 1996; Diesel et al., 2008). In 2014–2015 the Australian RSPCA shelter network received 133,495 animals (RSPCA, 2015), a number that excludes facilities outside of the RSPCA network. Owner related health and personal reasons have been cited during pet relinquishments, such as allergies, conflicts with children or other pets, and not having enough time to care for the pet (Scarlett et al., 1999). Relinquishments have also been associated with a lack of knowledge or unrealistic expectations of both the effort required to care for an animal and normal animal behaviour (Patronek et al., 1996; Scarlett et al., 1999; New et al., 2000; Diesel et al., 2008). Animal characteristics also contribute to their relinquishment, including behavioural issues such as destructive behaviours, aggression and inappropriate toileting (Scarlett et al., 1999; Salman et al., 2000).

Even in well-managed and caring shelters, cats and dogs can be exposed to high levels of noise and other stimulation (Hennessy et al., 2001) potentially excerbating undesirable behaviours (Hennessy et al., 1997; Hennessy et al., 2001; McCobb et al., 2005). Other research suggests dogs that spent long periods of time in shelters became calmer and spent less time barking and more time resting, implying a period of familiarisation post-admission (Wells and Hepper, 1992; Wells et al., 2002). The circumstances of the animal's admission may also affect their chances of being re-homed. Owner surrendered cats experience increased levels of behavioural stress compared to strays and this may affect their adoption outcome (Dybdall et al., 2007). Stray dogs with previously low contact with humans are still able to form new attachments despite unknown levels of socialisation (Gacsi et al., 2001). Unfortunately, not all of these animals remain successfully adopted, with return rates reported as low as 8% in Australia and as high as 50% in the Netherlands (Marston et al., 2005). Returns can be saddening and frustrating to both the shelter staff and the individual returning the animal (Shore, 2005). Additionally, the animal can enter into a vicious cycle whereby undesirable behaviours may be precipitated by the changes from a new home and then back to a shelter.

Therein lies the question of why some pets are returned after being adopted despite the best efforts of shelter staff and welfare agencies. Similar to initial relinquishments, reasons given when returning an adopted animal mainly include behavioural problems; with a study in

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Table 1
Descriptions of primary personality profiles assigned to dogs and the required adopter requirements.

Personality profile	Family description	Dog description
Low maintenance	Basic skills and can work with an easy-going dog.	Polite and well-trained.
Medium maintenance	Intermediate skills, good training skills and can read canine body language well.	Dogs and puppies with normal training needed.
High maintenance	Advanced skills; able to work with exuberant and timid dogs.	Has more significant needs regarding fear, manners and reactivity. Will need more time and special training to adjust.

Italy finding 39% of adopted dogs were returned due to behavioural issues (Mondelli et al., 2004). Other reasons were those that can be difficult to screen for prior to adoption, including allergies, not being good with the resident children and/or conflicts with pre-existing pets (Mondelli et al., 2004; Shore, 2005). A mismatch between owner expectation and normal animal behaviour may affect levels of adoption satisfaction, particularly when normal interactions between adopted resident pets or hyperactivity are perceived as problematic by the owner (Salman et al., 2000; Marston et al., 2005). All of these issues can contribute to the strain placed on the human-animal relationship when adopting a new pet into the family, yet little research has been conducted investigating the levels of satisfaction post-adoption.

Understanding aspects of an adoption that influence prospective adopters' satisfaction is pivotal to improving the outcome of relinquished or stray cats and dogs. The objectives of this study were to explore the characteristics of dogs and cats adopted from an Australian animal shelter (Animal Welfare League South Australia) and to investigate whether factors such as resident children, other pets, and admission reason were associated with overall adopter satisfaction. An additional objective was to explore whether the presence of undesirable behaviours (and accompanying behavioural satisfaction score) was associated with the number of days the animal had spent in the shelter or the presence of a resident pet.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Study participants

A cross-sectional study was conducted involving individuals who had adopted a cat or a dog from the Animal Welfare League in Wingfield, South Australia, Australia. Participants were selected based on a list generated using the shelter's database Sheltermate™ of individuals adopting a cat or a dog at least one week earlier (range 5–75 days post-adoption). Participants were contacted by telephone, and if there was no adult eighteen years or older available at the time of the call or the participants did not understand English, these participants were excluded. Approval for the study was obtained from the University of Adelaide Human Research Ethics Committee (project number: H-2015-150).

Nine volunteers conducted the interviews. Telephone calls were made between 0900 and 1600 on weekdays from June 25th 2015 to August 19th 2016. When multiple numbers for the individual were provided, the mobile number was dialled first and if the person could not be contacted on the first attempt, the home number was dialled. The person who was listed as being the primary adopter of the animal was asked if they wanted to participate in the survey, and if they were unavailable, the person's partner/spouse or adult children were permitted to participate in the survey. If no-one was available to answer the call, a message was left explaining the purpose of the call and a number was provided that the adopter could call back if they wished to participate in the survey.

2.2. Information collected about the adopted dog or cat

Before each individual was contacted, the background information of the animal was perused. This information included: whether or not the animal had been a stray or an owner surrender (and reasons for surrender), and the animal's behavioural and health assessments. This was done to provide context to the volunteer callers and enable better engagement with the adopter if any known concerns were brought up during the survey. There were four main categories of animals: dogs, puppies, cats and kittens. These responses were entered into the Sheltermate™ database on the same day as the phone call.

2.3. Dog personality profiles

Prior to adoption, all dogs admitted into the AWL are assigned two personality profiles as part of the temperament testing by the dog behaviourist. These were adapted from the ASPCA Canine-ality assessment (ASPCA® Pro, 2017). The primary personality profile is to assist in matching suitable dogs to prospective owners, as well as allowing potential owners to appreciate the level of training the dog may need after adoption. Dogs are assigned low, medium or high primary personality profiles (Table 1). In addition, dogs are assigned at least one colour for their secondary personality profile as part of their temperament test (Table 2). Cats are not assigned personality profiles.

2.4. Survey questionnaire

The survey questions were designed by the AWL and modified by the study authors. The survey consisted of 22 questions in total. There were four questions regarding the animal's health which assessed the adopter's satisfaction with the health of their pet, the presence or absence of health issues, and if present, the nature of the presenting health issues. The levels of satisfaction were rated using three five-level Likert scales, with one being very dissatisfied, and five being very satisfied. Levels of satisfaction were asked in relation to health, behaviour, and overall satisfaction. There were thirteen questions regarding the animal's behaviour which assessed the adopter's satisfaction with the behaviour of their pet, the presence or absence of behavioural issues (e.g.

Table 2
Descriptions of colour (secondary) personality profiles assigned to dogs.

Colour profile	Dog description
Black	I may find living with certain other animals difficult. Please ask the Dog Adoption Team for more details.
Blue	I can be quite adventurous so will need to have good secure fencing to keep me in.
Brown	Ask our team about some specialised training techniques that may bring out the best in me.
Pink	To keep my coat looking lovely and free of mats I will need regular grooming.
White	I have some special needs and I may be more suited to a home without young children. Please ask the Dog Adoption Team for details.
Yellow	To find out more about my veterinary history please talk to the Dog Adoption Team.

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