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Dognition.com Digs Up Distinctions in How Pure and Mixed Breed Dogs Think

Preliminary Data Reveals Memory and Communication Variances Between the Purebreds, Mixed Breeds

Durham, N.C. (May 17, 2013) – Rumors abound regarding dog intelligence, but to date science has had little to say about the differences, if any, within and across canine breeds.

Today, Dognition, the science-based service that enhances and enriches relationships between dogs and their owners, is revealing early findings that point toward important differences in canine intelligence. Preliminary data from Dognition's citizen scientists indicates that purebred dogs rely more on communicative gestures from humans, whereas mixed breeds focus more heavily on memory. The data samples more than 500 dogs that have gone through the Dognition Assessment.

"It shows that while all dogs are good at reading human social cues, purebreds appear to rely on social cues more often," says Brian Hare, chief scientific officer at Dognition and an associate professor of evolutionary anthropology at Duke University. "Mixed breeds, on the other hand, appear more flexible—relying on their memory more than human gestures."

Many have hypothesized about differences between purebreds and mixed breeds, but until Dognition this has not been scientifically validated. This is possible because of the unique value that Dognition delivers to all of the dogs and owners who participate in the service. Each Dognition owner not only receives an extensive cognitive profile of his or her own dog—detailing their everyday strategies in memory, reasoning, communication, empathy and cunning—but researchers can study the anonymous data from these assessments to answer key questions about canine cognitive approaches and trends.

To evaluate the strategies each dog uses, Dognition's scientists developed memory and communication games based on 15 years of canine cognitive research. In select Dognition games purebreds and mixed breeds relied on different strategies. Relative to each other purebreds were more likely to rely on their owner's gestures, while mixed breeds were more likely to use their memory. This was observed during pointing games, memory games, and games that pitted memory versus pointing.

One explanation for this is that historically, many purebreds were raised for specific jobs that depended on reading human gestures. For example Labradors were originally bred to be hunting dogs and German Shepherds were originally bred to herd and guard sheep.

“The ability of dogs to understand our gestures to find a lost ball or toy is something we often take for granted, but this skill is remarkable,” said Laurie Santos, associate professor of psychology at Yale University and a member of Dognition’s Scientific Advisory Board. Even our closest relatives, the great apes, cannot read our gestures as well as dogs can, which is one of the main reasons their relationship with us has become so extraordinary.”

Santos hopes that as the database grows, Dognition will be able to pinpoint different skills of individual dogs further—perhaps even to the breed level.

“Thanks to citizen science and dog owners around the world helping collect this data by evaluating their own dogs, we are able to discover new traits in man’s best friend,” said Dr. Hare. “We look forward to new findings as more people use Dognition to understand their dog’s particular genius.”

About Dognition

Dognition helps enrich the relationships between dogs and people. Through science-based games curious owners gain fresh perspective on their dog's personality and their way of seeing the world. Along the way, these everyday “citizen scientists” contribute to new findings about what makes all dogs special, while enjoying activities tailored to their dog’s individual outlook. Dognition helps owners celebrate what is extraordinary about their dogs, while contributing to the greater good of all dogs. For more information, visit Dognition.com.

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