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Hal Herzog Ph.D., Animals and Us

The “Cute Dog Effect” On Sex, Money, and Justice

The hidden sexual, economic, and legal impact of cute dogs.

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Dogs are fun to play with, and owning one may (or may not) provide health advantages to their owners. (See this Psych Today post on the mixed effects pets can have on human happiness and health.) But research by two French social psychologists demonstrates that, for better or for worse, cute dogs can unconsciously influence human sexual and economic decisions. And there are legal implications to their findings.

Cute Dogs Make Men Sexier

Antoine, a handsome young Frenchman in his early twenties, approaches an attractive young woman on the street. A cute energetic black and white dog named Gwendu is with him. "Hello," he says to the woman. "My name's Antoine. I just want to say that I think you're really pretty. I have to go to work this afternoon, but I was wondering if you would give me your phone number? I'll phone you later and we can have a drink together someplace." She hesitates for a second, looks at him and then his dog. "*Oui*," she says and pulls a pen from her purse.

The truth is that Antoine is actually a confederate in an experiment designed by Serge Ciccotti and Nicolas Guéguen of the Université de Bretagne-Sud. (As described by Psych Today blogger Gaad Saad, Guéguen is known for discovering female hitchhikers with large breasts are more likely to get picked up by male drivers). Now he is studying whether dogs make men sexier. Over several weeks, Antoine chatted up 240 randomly selected young women. On half of these approaches, he was alone and on the other half he was accompanied by Gwendu.

Did the cute dog increase Antoine's sexual charisma? *Mais oui*. While about ten percent of the women gave him their phone numbers when he was by himself, nearly thirty percent of them fell for Antoine's line when he was accompanied by *le chien*. Poof....the cute dog instantly tripled Antoine's sex appeal.

Cute Dogs Increase the Income of Beggars

The cost of bringing a dog into your life is a whopping \$8,000 over the animal's lifetime. There are, however, ways that your dog can help you recoup these expense - particularly in these tough economic times.

Last summer, I spotted a beggar sitting on a Paris street corner near the Left Bank's famous bookstore, Shakespeare and Company. He seemed to be attracting an unusual amount of attention from passersby, even though he was dirty, disheveled, unshaven, and sweating profusely because he was wearing a heavy coat in the middle of July. I was surprised by the

number of people who were tossing spare change his way - until I saw the dogs, two adorable sleepy mongrels lying placidly in his lap. They were money magnets. And I gave him a couple of Euros myself.

Ciccotti and Guéguen tested the hypothesis that people (at least French people) are more likely to give money to needy strangers if they are accompanied by a cute dog. The study was similar to the "Antoine" experiment. This time, a confederate approached 160 randomly selected adults and said *en français*, "Sorry Sir (or Madam), but would you have some money so that I can catch the bus, please?" On half of these approaches, the faux beggar was alone and half of the time, he was accompanied by a dog (again, Gwendu). The results were clear. When panhandling alone, 11% of the strangers gave him money. But when he was with Gwendu, his hit rate jumped to 35%. Further, the people who acceded to his request gave, on average, 20% more money when he was with the dog.

Based on these results, all Parisian beggars should get a dog. By my calculations, if a beggar *sans* dog were to bring in 100 Euros during an eight hour shift, sitting next to cute puppy would increase his income by an additional 260 Euros a day. *Mon Dieu!*

Do Cute Dogs Sway Juries?

I suppose that the ability of a cute dog to enhance the sex appeal of men on the make and boost the income of Parisian beggars can be seen as pluses. But the impact of attractive dogs on the decisions of juries is more problematic. Take, for example, Rosie, the first judicially approved "courtroom dog" in New York state. A beautiful golden retriever, she is a trained psychiatric service dog. In the courtroom, her job is to provide psychological support for stressed-out individuals on the witness stand.

Rosie was recently called upon to reduce anxiety in a teenage girl as she testified that her father had raped and impregnated her. Rosie was in the courtroom because Judge Stephen Greller ruled that the presence of the dog would reduce the trauma to the victim caused by having to confront the defendant face-to-face. During the victim's testimony, Rosie sat quietly at the girl's feet, occasionally looking up and gently nosing her.

The presence of service dogs in criminal trials is the logical extension of the use of dogs as stress reducers in psychotherapy, a practice that dates back to the 1960s. Similarly, psychiatric service dogs are now being used as adjuncts in pre-trial forensic interviews with children, particularly in cases involving sexual abuse.

The problem is that presence of an adorable dog like Rosie could unconsciously influence the jury - just like Gwendu increased the Antoine's sexual charms and a pair of dogs motivated me to donate a pocketful of spare change to a beggar. The comments of a Seattle prosecutor who advocates the use of courtroom dogs suggest this is indeed the case. She told the New York Times, "Sometimes a dog means the difference between a conviction and an acquittal."

Rosie may have proved her right. In the Dutchess County rape case, the jury voted guilty, and the defendant was given 25 years to life. His attorneys, of course, cried "Foul!" They claimed

that the sight of a beautiful golden retriever next to the primary witness unfairly prejudiced the jury against their client. The case is now under appeal.

You Make the Call

It's one thing for men to use cute dogs to woo attractive women and for beggars to use dogs to increase their income, but it's another thing to use dogs to sway a jury. Juries are supposed to make their decisions based on a rational assessment of the strength and weakness of the *evidence* against the accused. I would argue that a cute dog can unfairly tip the scales of justice. If a witness is accompanied by a cute dog, should, for example, the accused have the right to, say, cradle a kitten during the trial?

Now you make the call: If you were a judge, would you allow cute dogs on the witness stand?