

TYPE: Oral presentation

PROGRAMME THEME: Qualitative Research/Companion Animal Welfare

TITLE: “Don’t bring me a dog...I’ll just keep it”: Understanding unplanned dog acquisitions

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INTRODUCTION: Understanding the range of factors that result in people becoming dog owners is key to developing messaging around responsible acquisition and providing appropriate support for prospective owners to optimise dog welfare. This qualitative study investigated factors that influence pet dog acquisition.

METHODOLOGY: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 136 sets of dog owners at 23 Dogs Trust community events in areas of the UK with a known high proportion of the population of low socioeconomic status. Interviews focused on the motivations and influences that impacted how people acquired their dogs. Transcribed interviews and notes were coded in NVivo (v.12) using inductive thematic analysis.

MAIN FINDINGS: Across our participants, two types of acquisition were reported that each accounted for around half of our interviewees’ experiences: planned and unplanned. Whilst planned acquisitions involved an intentional, active search for a dog, unplanned acquisitions occurred following an unexpected and unsought opportunity to acquire a dog. The circumstances of unplanned acquisitions varied but frequently involved significant life events (e.g. illness, death or changes in housing) affecting family or friends. Key motivations for deciding to take the dog included the new owner’s relationship with the dog, the influence of other household members, and a desire to rescue the dog. Many reported making the decision to acquire the dog without hesitation, and thus many new owners did not conduct any pre-acquisition research about dog ownership.

PRINCIPLE CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FIELD: This study found that many dog owners attending Dogs Trust community events had not intended to acquire their dog. This finding presents a valuable insight for designers of educational campaigns about responsible acquisition and ownership, as there is minimal opportunity to deliver messaging with these unexpected acquisitions. Additionally, these findings may guide future research, to develop more accurate understandings of the acquisition process.