

Returning a Recently Adopted Companion Animal: Adopters' Reasons for and Reactions to the Failed Adoption Experience

Elsie R. Shore

*Department of Psychology
Wichita State University*

The return of a recently adopted companion animal places the nonhuman animal in jeopardy and may be painful and frustrating to the humans involved. However, if returners learn from the failed adoption experience, future adoptions may be more satisfactory for all concerned. In this study, 78 people who had adopted and returned dogs or cats to an animal shelter in a U.S. Midwestern city were interviewed regarding their reasons for return, reactions to the experience, and plans for future adoptions. Although some returners adjusted their pet ownership plans in potentially beneficial ways, most reacted by counseling greater forethought and planning before adopting. The last, although sound advice, had little to do with reasons for return, which primarily were problems that arose postadoption: pet behavior such as not getting along with other pets or children. Changing expectations about the development of new pet–family relationships and the provision of postadoption services might help adopters tolerate the adjustment period and handle problems without resorting to returning the animal.

The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS, 2004a) estimated that between 6 million and 8 million cats and dogs enter U.S. animal shelters each year. The relinquishment of previously owned, nonhuman animals is frustrating to animal shelter personnel, dangerous for the animals (Olson & Moulton, 1993), and often painful for the relinquisher. DiGiacomo, Arluke, and Patronek (1998) conducted in-depth interviews with 38 individuals or families who had relinquished a companion animal. They found that the action came after a period of tolerating

pet behavior objectionable to the caregivers and was accompanied by considerable pain. Shore, Petersen and Douglas (2003) conducted telephone interviews with 98 individuals who had relinquished a pet, citing moving as the reason for relinquishment. Many of the relinquishers were in situations in which there appeared to be little choice but to give up the pet, and many expressed deep sadness over their action.

The return of a recently adopted animal may be different from the relinquishment of a pet who had been in the household for a longer period of time. Having had little time together, the bond between human and nonhuman animal may not have developed or may have developed only weakly. On the other hand, following relatively closely after the usually exciting and joyful experience of adoption, the act of bringing back the animal may be accompanied by disappointment and a sense of failure. Nonetheless, given the prevalence of U.S. households with at least one companion animal (HSUS, 2004b), it seems likely that people who have given up a pet will, at some time in the future, obtain another. If people who have adopted and returned an animal have learned from the experience, they subsequently may make more informed choices, resulting in adoptions that are more durable. The goal of this study was to examine the circumstances leading to the return of a recently adopted companion animal and returners' reactions to their experience—emphasizing changed perceptions of the role of companion animals in their lives and the types of animals who might be compatible with their needs.

METHOD

This study was done with the cooperation of a humane society in a Midwestern U.S. city. The private, not-for-profit agency, governed by a board of directors and supported by donations and fees, serves a 1,000 square mile area with an estimated 2004 population of 463,802 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2005). The area also is served by an animal control agency with its own open-admissions shelter. The humane society receives owned or stray animals brought in by private individuals but does not pick up animals. Adult dogs are evaluated, primarily for various forms of aggression, prior to being made available for adoption. Those determined to be appropriate for adoption are evaluated further and, on the basis of the level of attention and owner expertise they require, assigned to categories. Individuals seeking to adopt dogs complete a questionnaire assessing the characteristics they desire in a dog. Adoption counselors share the results and recommend that individuals choose a dog who matches their needs. Puppies and cats are assessed in a more limited fashion. Adoption counselors encourage adopters to call if they have questions or problems and to return to the shelter any animal they decide not to keep; the contract signed at the time of adoption also states that any animal the person no longer wants is to be returned to the shelter.

Shelters define *returns*—animals adopted from the agency and then brought back to the same agency—in different ways; the humane society in this study defines *returns* as animals brought back within 2 years of adoption. All others are handled as *relinquishments*. The agency gave the author access both to the form completed when a companion animal is returned and to its computerized adoption records. Returners' names and telephone numbers were obtained from these sources. A university-based Institutional Research Board approved the study protocol.

The target sample of 100 was obtained in 9 weeks (February 17, 2004 to April 22, 2004). All returners were contacted by telephone, with up to 10 attempts being made to reach the household. Twelve returners could not be reached. Another 9 refused to participate, and 1 person started, but did not finish, the interview, yielding a completion rate of 78% for the entire sample and 88.6% for those who could be reached.

The author conducted all the interviews and identified herself as a university researcher “looking at how dogs and cats, puppies and kittens come back to animal shelters after they’ve been adopted.” Those who agreed to participate were asked primarily open-ended questions about the animal’s stay in the home, reason for return, thoughts about the experience, and future adoption plans. Demographic data also were collected. The interviewer tried to record the person’s own words in response to the open-ended questions. Some of the questions were analyzed for themes by a team composed of the author, a graduate student, and three undergraduate psychology students instructed in these procedures. Data obtained from shelter records include all 100 cases; other data come from the 78 telephone interviews.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The majority of the 78 interviewees were female, White, in their 20s or 30s, and employed (see Table 1). Reported annual household income was relatively evenly distributed over the seven categories presented. Almost all respondents lived in homes they owned (74.4%); the rest lived in rented homes (11.5%), apartments (10.3%), or mobile homes (3.8%). More than 85% had had pets before the one being returned; a similar number (84.8%) reported that this was the first time they had returned an adopted animal.

Almost all the 100 animals returned during the study period were canines (54 adults, 28 puppies less than 6 months old); 16 cats and 2 kittens completed the sample. The breakdown by sex (56 male, 43 female, 1 unavailable) was not statistically significant. All animals had been neutered before adoption. Their mean age was 16.28 months ($SD = 17.20$, range: 2 months to 6 years); 51% were less than 1 year of age. Sixty of the 82 canines were mixed breeds, with Labrador Retriever and German Shepherd being the most common breed designations. With one exception, the cats were domestic short hair (9), medium hair (5), or long hair (3).

TABLE 1
Demographic Data

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Gender		
Female	51	65.4
Male	27	34.6
Race/ethnicity		
White	73	93.6
Native American	1	1.3
Other	4	5.1
Age group		
Under 20	2	2.6
20 to 29	22	28.2
30 to 39	23	29.5
40 to 49	14	17.9
50 to 59	10	12.8
60 to 69	4	5.1
70 and more	3	3.8
Annual household income		
Less than \$20,000	8	10.3
Between \$20,000 and 30,000	13	16.7
Between \$30,000 and 40,000	18	23.1
Between \$40,000 and 50,000	9	11.5
Between \$50,000 and 60,000	7	9.0
Between \$60,000 and 75,000	9	11.5
Over \$75,000	10	12.8
Employment status		
Employed	56	71.8
Unemployed	22	28.2

Fifty-four of the 100 returns occurred in the first 2 weeks postadoption (see Table 2), a finding similar to that of Mondelli et al. (2004) for returns of dogs to an Italian shelter. Some adopters cited the agency's policy of refunding most of the adoption fee if the return occurs in 2 weeks as a factor in their decision regarding the pet. (The agency since has changed its refund policy.) Half of the interviewees reported that the problem leading to return occurred immediately after the pet was brought home (see Table 3). This also may have been related to the time between adoption and return.

Only 4 returners (three interviewees) adopted another pet during the same visit in which they returned the animal adopted earlier. When asked whether they planned to adopt another pet in the future, 31 respondents (44.3%) said yes, 29 (41.4%) said no, and 9 (12.9%) were not sure. The low proportion of respondents planning to adopt again, especially in a sample largely composed of people who had had pets from childhood, suggests that the failed adoption experience may

have suppressed the desire to add a new pet to their household. Part of this hesitance may have been a result of the pain of returning the pet. When asked to rate, on a scale of 1 to 10, the difficulty involved in returning the pet, 43 respondents (56.6%) chose 10 (*very difficult*). Furthermore, a number of respondents expressed sadness when discussing the return with the interviewer, including one woman who had been crying about the event just before her telephone rang.

Reactions to the Failed Adoption

Two questions were used to elicit comments concerning how the failed adoption might have affected the participant’s understanding of his or her needs regarding pet ownership. The first was “Do you think the experience of returning an animal you had adopted has changed the way you look at pets, or the kinds of animals you might adopt in the future?” Those responding affirmatively were then asked “In what way have you changed your views?” The second question was “Would you have any advice for people getting ready to get a pet, so they wouldn’t have to go through the experience of adopting and then returning the animal?”

TABLE 2
Time Between Adoption and Return

<i>Time Span</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
0 to 7 days	34	34.0
8 to 14 days	20	20.0
15 to 21 days	1	1.0
22 to 28 days	1	1.0
5 weeks to 2 months	5	5.0
61 days to 6 months	15	15.0
176 days to 1 year	17	17.0
Longer than 1 year	7	7.0

TABLE 3
Responses to Question: “How Long Had You Had the [Dog/Cat/Puppy/Kitten] Before the Problem(s) Developed?”

<i>Response</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
First 24 hr (including “right away”)	39	50.6
First week (2 to 7 days)	13	16.9
8 days to 1 month	7	9.1
> 1 month to 3 months	4	5.2
> 3 months to 6 months	5	6.5
> 6 months to 1 year	7	9.1
Longer than 1 year	2	2.6

The first question elicited more responses that were nonproductive (I don't know"); responses to the second question tended to be longer and more elaborate. A number of the themes were present in responses to both questions. A few, such as statements that the person would get a different type of pet or that the person will not own a pet in the future, were present in responses to the first question but not to the second.

The major theme that emerged was that of devoting more time, thought, and planning both to considering adoption and to the process of adopting (see Table 4). Almost all comments in this area focused on thinking carefully, before adoption, about the addition of a pet to one's life ("You really need to evaluate your lifestyle"). Others emphasized the importance of doing research on animal behavior or on particular breeds ("Would definitely search into the behavior of different kinds of dogs before adopting"). Another focus was on spending more time in the shelter, including asking more questions of shelter staff ("Find out everything you can find out about the animal") and taking staff advice seriously, including paying attention to the results of behavioral evaluations ("When it says 'hyper,' believe the tag!"). Respondents also advised taking more time to get to know the animal ("Try to spend more time with it than I did"). This last comment, however, was from an experienced pet owner who had spent an hour in the shelter with the dog she adopted, whom she later found to be difficult and destructive. A man who before adopting had spent 30 min with the dog offered similar advice.

The second most frequently occurring response reflected a recognition that it is difficult to predict how an adoption will turn out. Some interviewees simply stated that adoption is "just a chance you take." Others pointed out that an animal's behavior may change from the shelter to the home environment or that a few minutes in the shelter is not enough time to be able to predict whether the match will work out. Some respondents began to give advice or provide things they might have done differently but then realized that their proposed changes probably would not have made any difference. One woman, who had adopted a cat who turned out to be extremely shy, offered "I guess, make sure you read over the little card that tells the personality. But we did that." A man whose adult son developed an allergy to the dog after the dog had been in their home for 10 months also tried to give some advice:

Make sure the dog likes all its members, get close to the dog, smell it, make sure you're not allergic. But then I saw that that's what most people do at the shelter. So there was nothing we could have predicted. No, no advice.

With perhaps one exception ("You're taking a gamble when you go to a shelter"), respondents in this category expressed no negative feelings toward the

TABLE 4
 Changed Views of Adoption, Advice to Others: Some Participant Comments

Theme: Devote time and thought to the decision and to the process of picking a pet

- “Really think about it really hard before you adopt.
- “Take a real hard look at your situation—How much time you have to spend, especially with a puppy.”
- “I would think about my decision a little more, instead of saying ‘Let’s get a dog’ and getting one.”
- “Will be way more cautious.”
- “Think it clearly through. Look at the whole big picture, not just the immediate cuteness of the pup.”
- “Think about it long and hard. Do your research first on the kind of dog it is. If you can’t find information—find it!”
- “More education on choosing a pet for your circumstances. The Humane Society does a great job [but] there’s even more the owner should know.”
- “We’d ask quite a few more questions and think it through a lot more.”
- “When it says ‘hyper,’ believe the tag!”
- “Make sure you’re compatible with the dog. A dog lasts a long time ... if you don’t like the dog you’ll still have it for another ten plus years.”
- “Maybe spend a little bit more time playing with the animal so you get a better idea of its temperament.”

Theme: Just a chance you take

- “I think it’s hard to tell what’s going to happen.”
- “Just one of those things. It’s a chance you take.”
- “So hard to tell how it’s really going to fit into your life.”
- “You’re just kind of taking your chances. An investment that may or may not work out—emotionally too.”
- “In a few minutes in the shelter you can’t tell whether there are going to be problems when you get home. No guarantee.”
- “Would want to know something about the animal, but hard to know at [the shelter].”
- “Should have brought her [daughter who turned out to be allergic] with me, but I don’t know if that would have helped. Sometimes it just happens.”

Theme: Change in type of animal adopted in the future

- “I would definitely get a smaller dog.”
- “I want a dog that is a puppy—easier to train.”
- “Look for an older dog - somewhat trained. Hard to start with a puppy.”
- “Will be more choosy in the breed, more docile.”
- “Maybe a dog other than a cat—easier to read in the shelter.”
- “I think I’m done.”

Miscellaneous responses

- “Probably wouldn’t go to the Humane Society ... not that it’s their fault”
 - “Rather than just counting on the kid, the family members have to be prepared to play with the pet.”
 - “It [returning] was hard on the puppy too.”
 - “A dog needs a lot of human contact.”
-

shelter or its staff; instead, their statements showed an acceptance of the uncertainty involved in adding a companion animal to the family.

A number of respondents made statements regarding changes they would make the next time they adopt a pet. The most common changes were in the animal's size and age. All six respondents who cited size said they would get smaller dogs. Changes in age were split, with three respondents saying they would get a puppy next time; two saying they would get an older dog; and a woman—who had adopted a 6-month-old, mixed-breed dog—saying she would get either a pup or a mature dog but “not in-between.” Four respondents stated that they would not adopt again.

The question that arises is whether the proposed changes make sense. Some clearly did, as in the case of the following:

- The woman who had adopted a Brittany mix only to discover that her landlord required pets to be under 20 lbs (9.07 kg; “As long as I live here, will look at smaller animals”).
- The man whose child was allergic to the pet (“Won’t adopt”).
- The older couple who realized that a smaller and older pet probably would be easier for them to handle than the 10-month-old Labrador mix they had adopted.
- The woman with five cats who brought a 7-month-old German Shepherd into the family and now planned to adopt a kitten (“I will never again get a dog”).

In more cases, however, the respondents appeared to be making misattributions or overgeneralizing from the failed adoption. An experienced dog owner returned a 6-month-old Border Collie mix with multiple-behavior problems, including destructiveness (“literally cost us thousands”), stubbornness, and extreme fear of people. Despite “wondering if [the dog] was brain damaged,” the woman focused on the age of the dog, stating that in the future she would adopt either a very young dog or a mature dog who had been with a family for a long time. The adopter of a 1-year-old Corgi mix whose food aggression resulted in injuries to the adopter and her other dog stated that she would be more careful about breed and seek a more docile and smaller dog. Others who reported aggression as the reason for return also said they would get either smaller or younger animals. The remaining responses to the original questions covered a range of topics, including the following:

- Statements about adopting from animal shelters: “I don’t mind going to the Humane Society because you get a lot of things.”
- Expressions of pain at having to return the pet (“Too heartbreaking”).
- Comments about bringing pets into homes with children (“Don’t get one just because your kid is hollering for one”).
- Responses that did not address the question.

Relation of Advice to Reasons for Return

Advising others or planning oneself to think more carefully about pet adoption in the future is, of course, a good idea. Similarly, it is realistic to recognize that one cannot guarantee that an adoption will work out. However, as in the case of the changes respondents proposed to make the next time they adopt, the question is whether the advice follows from the circumstances of the present failed adoption.

Early in the telephone interview, respondents were asked "Could you tell me what led you to return the [dog/cat/puppy/kitten] to the shelter?" Follow-up questions were used as needed, and the reasons were categorized (see Table 5). With the exception of moving, the reasons for return were quite similar to those reported in other studies (Miller, Staats, Partlo, & Rada, 1996; Salman et al., 1998; Scarlett, Salman, New, & Kass, 1999). Pet behaviors, including elimination problems, escaping, destructive behavior, separation anxiety, aggression, hyperactivity, and timidity, combine to account for more than one third of the reasons for return. Salman et al. (2000) found that the presence of other pets in the household increased risk of relinquishment. In the present study, problems between the new pet and other pets was the second, most commonly cited reason, tying with pets' not being good with children. Almost all the latter involved infants or young children and canine behavior that was viewed as too boisterous (sometimes, aggressive); in a number of cases, the children became too frightened to play with the pet. In two cases, the opposite occurred: The children's behavior frightened a new cat.

TABLE 5
Reasons for Return

<i>Reason</i>	<i>N^a</i>
Didn't get along with other pets, including aggression	11
Not good w/children; other child-related issues	11
Other pet behavior problems	9
Human allergies, human illness	8
Elimination problems	8
Other illness in the animal	7
Escaping	7
Other	7
Parvo virus	6
Destructive behaviors	6
Size issues (too big, yard/house too small)	6
Not enough time	5
Separation anxiety	4
Animal to human aggression	3
Moving	3

^aTotal greater than number of cases because of multiple reasons given by some respondents.

During the study period, the shelter experienced an outbreak of parvo virus, and six puppies adopted before symptoms had appeared were subsequently returned. The “other” category included the following: A pit bull was returned because the adopter’s homeowner’s insurance company threatened to discontinue coverage, a dog was returned when the adopter’s friend offered her a dog for free, and a dog was returned when the couple divorced. All cases involving allergies were among people who had not known before adoption that they or family members were allergic to animals.

It seems, therefore, that the majority of the problems that resulted in these failed adoptions were not ones that increased forethought or additional time spent in the shelter could have prevented. Some, such as young children becoming fearful of active dogs or cats hiding when introduced to a new home, might have been anticipated and indeed may have been raised by shelter staff at the time of adoption. Almost all difficulties, however, could only have emerged postadoption. Thus, respondents who stated that adoption is an uncertain business may have presented the most reasonable conceptualization of their situation. This is not to say that the return could not have been prevented; postadoption services such as follow-up phone calls, behavior help lines, and behavioral counseling might have helped many of these adopters keep their new pets.

CONCLUSIONS

Research using qualitative methods gives voice to the people being studied. As in other studies of people relinquishing companion animals to shelters (DiGiacomo et al., 1998; Shore et al., 2003), returners’ descriptions of what happened when the pet went to a new home, their attempts to make the adoption work, and their pain and sadness when it did not increase our understanding of the complexity of the human–nonhuman animal bond. The sample is a limited one, being composed of individuals returning adopted dogs and cats to one shelter in the Midwestern United States. Other studies might provide additional insights into the experience of adopting and returning, and future research also might compare the experience of returners to those of people who keep their new pets as well as to those who give up their pets but do not return them to the original shelter.

The focus of this study was to see whether the experience of adopting and returning a pet produces learning or other reactions that might lead to longer lasting future adoptions. This was the case for some respondents. Those who discovered that they or family members are allergic to animals, and those who realized that their preferences, current living situation, and stage of life require a different type of animal, expressed clear intentions to change their pet-acquisition behavior. These cases, however, were in the minority. The more general advice to think

more carefully and spend more time in the adoption process, although sound, did not appear related to the more frequently occurring causes of return.

This advice might, in part, have been a function of the interview situation. Having been asked how the experience changed them and what advice they would give others, the participants may have felt obligated to come up with a response. Alternatively, respondents may have recalled the adoption and interpreted their excitement as haste and lack of prudence.

A number of studies have suggested that owner expectations are critical to the success of an adoption. Patronek, Glickman, Beck, McCabe, and Ecker (1996b) and Patronek, Glickman, Beck, McCabe, and Ecker (1996a) found that expectations regarding the amount of care needed were related to relinquishment of dogs and that having specific expectations about the pet's role in the household were related to relinquishment of cats. Kidd, Kidd, and George (1992, p. 560) reported that pet behaviors were interpreted differently by retainers and rejecters of pets ("She'll outgrow it" vs. "So we got rid of it"). Similarly, it may be that the returners in this study did not conceptualize adoption as the beginning of a relationship that will take time to stabilize and/or as something that can be improved. Thus, problems that arose as both pet and owner tried to adjust to their new situation were attributed to poor preadoption decision making.

Replacing the expectation of "happily ever after" with an understanding that "marriages take work" could reduce returns by changing adopter expectations. Such a change also might increase adopters' willingness to seek assistance during this adjustment period. The provision of new-owner training classes and other services that keep adopters in contact with the shelter may assist in these processes, ultimately raising the proportion of adoptions that last.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank the Kansas Humane Society for its assistance and continuing support of research on animal shelter and welfare issues. I also thank Deanna Douglas and Michelle Riley for their contributions to the project, and the anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions.

REFERENCES

- DiGiacomo, N., Arluke, A., & Patronek, G. (1998). Surrendering pets to shelters: The relinquisher's perspective. *Anthrozoös, 11*, 41–51.
- Humane Society of the United States. (2004a). *HSUS pet overpopulation estimates*. Retrieved August 6, 2005, from http://www.hsus.org/pets/issues_affecting_our_pets/pet_overpopulation_and_ownership_statistics

- Humane Society of the United States. (2004b). *U.S. pet ownership statistics*. Retrieved August 6, 2005, from http://www.hsus.org/pets/issues_affecting_our_pets/pet_overpopulation_and_ownership_statistics
- Kidd, A. H., Kidd, R. M., & George, C. C. (1992). Successful and unsuccessful pet adoptions. *Psychological Reports, 70*, 547–561.
- Miller, D. D., Staats, S. R., Partlo, C., & Rada, K. (1996). Factors associated with the decision to surrender a pet to an animal shelter. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association, 209*, 738–742.
- Mondelli, F., Previde, E. P., Verga, M., Levi, D., Magistrelli, S., & Valsecchi, P. (2004). The bond that never developed: Adoption and relinquishment of dogs in a rescue shelter. *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science, 7*, 253–266.
- Olson, P. N., & Moulton, C. (1993). Pet (dog and cat) overpopulation in the United States. *Journal of Reproductive Fertility, 47*(Suppl.), 433–438.
- Patronek, G. J., Glickman, L. T., Beck, A. M., McCabe, G. P., & Ecker, C. (1996a). Risk factors for relinquishment of cats to an animal shelter. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association, 209*, 582–588.
- Patronek, G. J., Glickman, L. T., Beck, A. M., McCabe, G. P., & Ecker, C. (1996b). Risk factors for relinquishment of dogs to an animal shelter. *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association, 209*, 572–581.
- Salman, M. D., Hutchinson, J., Ruch-Gallie, R., Kogan, L., New, J. C., Kass, P. H., & Scarlett, J. M. (2000). Behavioral reasons for relinquishment of dogs and cats to 12 shelters. *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science, 3*, 93–106.
- Salman, M. D., New, J. G., Scarlett, J. M., Kass, P. H., Ruch-Gallie, R., & Hetts, S. (1998). Human and animal factors related to the relinquishment of dogs and cats in 12 selected animal shelters in the United States. *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science, 1*, 207–226.
- Scarlett, J. M., Salman, M. D., New, J. G., & Kass, P. H. (1999). Reasons for relinquishment of companion animals in U.S. animal shelters: Selected health and personal issues. *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science, 2*, 41–57.
- Shore, E. R., Petersen, C. L., & Douglas, D. K. (2003). Moving as a reason for pet relinquishment: A closer look. *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science, 6*, 39–52.
- U.S. Bureau of the Census. (2005). *Population finder*. Retrieved June 11, 2005, from http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/SAFFPopulation?_sse=on&_lang=en&_state=04000US20&_cityTown=Sedgwick%20County&_county=Sedgwick%20County&_zip=