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## From Deviant Symbol to Cultural Icon? Understanding Pit Bull Stigma

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FROM DEVIANT SYMBOL TO CULTURAL ICON? UNDERSTANDING PIT BULL

STIGMA

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## ABSTRACT

This research draws from twelve months of ethnographic data using Las Vegas as a case study to understand how pit bull owners experience and negotiate stigma in various social settings. The human-dog relationship, long rooted in utility, transformed in the modern era as animals were promoted from worker to companion. The world's first dog register, The American Kennel Club, created breed standards and encouraged selective breeding, which influenced the idea of certain dogs being more physically "dangerous" than others. Though the pit bull is not the first dog "breed" to be the object of discrimination, it is the first dog group to become subjected to restrictive legislation beginning in the 1980s. Using participant observation, casual conversations, and semi-structured interviews, I seek to expand our understanding pit bull stigma's complexity, highlighting the roots of pit bull stigma, how pit bull stigma is expressed and experienced, and how it may be changing. Specifically, I confirm previous research which suggests pit bulls and their owners continue to experience stigma and the owners use various contextual strategies to negotiate it. I also discuss broader implications about human ridicule and animal welfare that flow from breed-specific stigma, policies, and legislation.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In 2018, 39 countries, 43 U.S. states, and 900 U.S. cities had some form of breed specific legislation, laws that include restrictions of “pit bull type dogs,” from muzzling and micro-chipping to complete bans and euthanasia (American Veterinary Medical Association Editors 2018; BanPitBulls.org Editors 2018; DogsBite.org Editors 2018). Legislating dog breeds began in the 1980s when the U.S. media reported skyrocketing numbers of pit bull bites, mauling’s, and fatalities (Delise 2002; Delise 2007; DogsBite.org 2018; Marmer 1984). Between 1980 and 1984, Hollywood, Florida, Tijeras, New Mexico, and Cincinnati, Ohio became the first American cities to enact breed specific legislation (BSL), in an effort to address pit bull attacks (Delise 2007; Marmer 1984). As BSL continued to spread around the country and the world, proponents and opponents became locked in contentious international debate about the genetic disposition of pit bulls toward aggression that continues today.

The growth of breed specific legislation alongside increasing pit bull advocacy raises questions about the extent of breed bias in American consciousness. By breed bias, I mean the assumption that a particular dog breed possesses innate characteristics to harm humans or other animals and the consequent label of “dangerous dog.” Though breed discrimination began the 1800s with the Bloodhound and has since evolved to other breeds, the “pit bull,” though not an official breed, is the first dog group to be legislated against (Delise 2002; Delise 2007; Marmer 1984).

Though pit bulls have been stigmatized off and on for over a century, recent trends suggest this may be changing with a new generation of owners. Television shows on Animal Planet, which emphasize responsible pet ownership like “Pit Bulls and Parolees,” “Pit Boss,”

“It’s Me or the Dog,” and “The Dog Whisperer,” have all portrayed pit bulls in a positive light, while educating viewers on proper dog training, and promoting an alternative view to the pit bull’s stigmatized image. Increased awareness of a breed bias cycle has contributed to this recent change in attitude toward pit bulls.

A review of dog attack news article dating back to 1864 suggests all breed biases develop cyclically, and as a breed’s popularity grows, more owners take on dogs that are unprepared to care for and/or train (Delise (2002 and 2007)). As a result, the biased breed is implicated in increasing numbers of attacks, leading to high abandonment rates at the pounds. The cycle ends when the breed is labeled a “dangerous dog,” before starting over with a new breed. Though popular breeds like the German Shephard, Chow Chow, Doberman Pinscher, and more have all experienced the breed bias cycle, the pit bull’s label as a “dangerous dog” has been drawn out longer than all previous breeds (Delise 2002; Delise 2007).

Research on pet ownership covers five major categories: (1) the socio-historic and economic aspects of domestication and pet keeping (Beck & Katcher 1996; Feldman 1979; Fogle 1981; Hirschman 1994; Savishinsky 1986; Serpell 1996; Working Party Council for Science and Society 1988), (2) the physical benefits of pet ownership (Baun, Bergstrom, Langston, & Thomas 1984; Friedmann 2013; Friedman, Katcher, Lynch, & Thomas 1980; Fritz, Farver, Kass, & Hart 1995; Jennings 1990; Katcher 1981) (3) the psychological benefits of pet ownership (Beck & Katcher 1996; Collis & McNicholas 1998; Katz 1997; Kidd & Kidds 1980; Lasher 1996; McNicholas & Collis 1995; Messent 1983; Weiss 1974), (4) cases against pet ownership (Cameron et al. 1966; Cameron, Conrad, Kirkpatrick, & Bateen 1972; Patroneck 1999; Worth

and Beck 1981), and (5) gender and pets (Beck et.al. 1996; Cameron et al. 1972; Flynn 2000; Gage & Holcomb 1991; Margolies 1999; Melson 2001; Peek, Bell, & Dunham 1996; Richards & Krannich 1991; Zilney 2007). There is also research on animal rights (Wrenn 2015), and symbolic interactionists address the concept of self and the effects of pet ownership on human identity (Arluke & Sanders 1996; Fox 1981; Irvine 2004; Moorehead 2016; Sanders 1999). I draw from this inter-disciplinary literature to help frame and understand the dynamics of social stigma as applied to the pit bull and, ultimately, to contribute to research on the intersection of breed specific legislation, pit bull ownership, and stigma negotiation.

A “stigma” is a discrediting attribute and deviant label requiring negotiation to avoid social ridicule (Goffman 1963). With dog ownership, the label is attached to the owner and their dogs as a team, which requires meaningful discussion on the mental and social challenges of owning a pit bull (Twining et al. 2000). I use interviews, participatory observation, and documentary data to understand what attracts pit bull owners to the breed and how they perceive, manage, and negotiate stigma in their daily lives. Specifically, I address the following questions:

- 1) Do pit bull owners experience stigma?
- 2) If so, what strategies do pit bull owners use to negotiate their stigma in different activities?
- 3) What circumstances explain pit bull ownership?
- 4) What is the range of pit bull ownership activity experiences in public space?

I employ Goffman’s (1963) stigma concept to understand pit bull ownership because owners share ideologies and engage in common practices that contrast with the institutional demands around them which insist pit bulls are genetically “dangerous.” Owning a pit bull represents some rejection of the contemporary idea that pit bulls are an inherently dangerous

breed, especially in the case of owners with young children. I draw from research on the study of pet ownership and stigma to explain contemporary pit bull ownership. In the next section, I discuss the evolution of the human- pit bull relationship from Roman times in to the 1980s, and the cycle of breed bias is explored to frame and understand the origins of breed specific legislation. The concept of stigma is then explored in more detail before outlining the methodology for this project.

### *Literature Review*

Scholars debate about when and why humans incorporated dogs into social life. Many studies center arguments around the domestication of animals 12,000 years ago (Beck and Katcher 1996; Feldman 1979; Fogle 1981; Savishinsky 1986; Serpell 1986; Kalof 2007; Working Party Council for Science and Society 1998). Others argue fossil evidence dates back 14,000 years, while mitochondrial DNA studies date back 100,000 years (Clutton-Brock 1999; Vila, Maldonado, & Wayne 1999). Regardless of the time line, it is certain that for millennia, humans have domesticated dogs for practical tasks they excelled in, such as guarding, tracking, hunting, and/or farming based on their physical characteristics and disposition (Clutton-Brock 1999; Delise 2002; Delise 2007; Herzog 2006; Vila, Maldonado, & Wayne 1999). Contemporary society revolutionized the role of dogs from animal to companion.

Debate also exists over the start of dog breed distinctions, though the world's first and largest dog register, the American Kennel Club (AKC), emerged on September 17, 1884 when they officialized the Blood Hound, Airedale Terrier, and Boston Terrier breeds (AmericanKennelClub.org Editors 2018a; Clutton-Brock 1999; Delise 2002; Delise 2007;

Herzog 2006). The purpose of dog registers is to provide written and agreed upon documented standards for all breeds within each of seven groups, including the Toy, Hound, Working, Terrier, Hunting, Non-Sporting, and Herding groups (AmericanKennelClub.org Editors 2018a). After WWII, Americans began attaining “purebred” dogs in record amounts as a status symbol of the “all-American family” (Herzog 2006). In 1946, the AKC had 106 breeds registered, which climbed to 136 in 1991, to 150 in 2003, and more than 400 by 2007 (Herzog 2006; Hirschman 1994; Hunter & Brisbin 2007; Parker, Kim, Sutter, Carlson, Lorentzen, Malek, Johnson, DeFrance, Ostrander, & Kruglyak, 2004). Total dogs registered in 1956 was five million, and by 1981 this rose to twenty-five million (AmericanKennelClub.org Editors 2018c).

“Pit bulls” have a unique history with dog registers throughout the transition from utility to companion dog. The term “pit bull” insolation is not a specific breed in any register, though other common names include the American Pit Bull Terrier, American Staffordshire Terrier, and the Staffordshire Bull Terrier (American Dog Breeders Association Editors. 2018; AmericanKennelClub.org Editors 2018b; United Kennel Club Editors, 2018). The following section explores the pit bull’s pathway into contemporary life.

### *Pit Bull as Breed*

Originating from Bulldogs as Roman and Egyptian dogs of war, ancient “pit bulls,” known as Bulldogs at the time, were large and resembled a Mastiff (Lockwood & Rindy 1987; Stahlkuppe 2000). Bull dogs were bred to protect their family and livestock, herd livestock, and protect ranchers from lethal charging cattle (Delise 2002; Delise 2007; Stahlkuppe 2000). Though the Collie and Shepard also defended ranchers against aggressive cattle the Bulldog was

quicker, their bravery and willingness to die for their owners interpreted as an act in service to humanity (Delise 2002; Delise 2007; Stahlkuppe 2000).

Bulldogs were popular in late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century for their reputation as “all purpose” dogs (Delise 2007:p63). Like “hound,” bulldog was a generic name for the type of dog and included the American Pit Bull Terrier and Bull Terrier (Delise 2007:p63). Bull dogs were also used for their speed and agility to perform police work and provide entertainment to all socio-economic classes through gambling, dog fights, and bull baiting which was thought to tenderize meat before it was slaughtered (Delise 2007; Lockwood & Rindy 1987; Stahlkuppe 2000). When bull baiting was outlawed, underground dog fighting took its place, and a smaller dog was created, resulting in the “pit bull” we know today (Lockwood & Rindy 1987; Stahlkuppe 2000).

The bull dog revolutionized industrial era dog fighting in the age of rising capitalism (Lockwood & Rindy 1987; Nibert 2013; Stahlkuppe 2000). The move from rural to urban areas changed the image of the bull dog, especially when they began roaming the streets in large numbers (Delise 2007). Though most owners did not use their dogs for fighting a small minority continued to do so, and this negative image was enough to attract deviant owners, largely increase the number of attacks from 1900 to 1909 (Delise 2007). Despite this, the long history of contributions to humanity buffered the dog from most negative publicity (Delise 2007).

The United Kennel Club (UKC) which formed in 1898, and the American Dog Breeders Association formed in 1909, were the first breed registers to recognize pit bulls, classifying them as American Staffordshire Terrier and Staffordshire Bull Terrier (American Dog Breeders Association Editors. 2018; George 2004; United Kennel Club Editors. 2018). Their official

registration popularized them, and they later appeared on 1930s television shows including “The Little Rascals” and “Our Gang,” became the dog of choice for presidents Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, and were owned by Fred Astaire and Helen Keller (Coren 2002; Delise 2002; George 2004; Twining et. al. 2000, p2).

In 1935, the AKC began recognizing “Staffordshire Terriers” which was changed in 1972 as the “American Staffordshire Terrier” (AST) (Lockwood & Rindy 1987). The AKC currently registers the American Staffordshire Bull Terrier, and the American Staffordshire Terrier, while the UKC currently registers the American Pit Bull Terrier, and the Staffordshire Bull Terrier (American Kennel Club Editors 2018b; United Kennel Club Editors 2018). Following inclusion into the dog registers, the pit bull enjoyed over four decades of human companionship, until the breeds stigmatized image resurfaced later in the century.

### *The Breed Bias Cycle*

The pit bull’s reputation has resurrected an old argument of a breed bias cycle that has historically altered the “dangerous breed” label about every decade (Delise 2007). “Breed bias,” or prejudice and discrimination against a certain “breed” was first documented against the Bloodhound in the late 1800s, when they began assisting law enforcement by tracking escaped convicts and slaves (Delise 2002; Delise 2007). This influenced stage productions of Uncle Tom’s Cabin (aka “Tom Shows”) which portrayed the breed (and African Americans) in a negative light (Delise 2002; Delise 2007). Bloodhound discrimination was short lived, later followed by the Newfoundland, Northern sled dog-types, and Mastiffs from the late 19<sup>th</sup>-early



20<sup>th</sup> century, all of which were increasingly used as guard dogs in the new urban-industrial environment (Delise 2002; Delise 2007).

From the 1800s into the mid-1930s, the “dangerous dog” label belonged to the Collie, St. Bernard, Airedale Terrier, Boston Terrier, Bulldog, and other “savagely” non-specified breeds (Delise 2002; Delise 2007). Delise (2002 and 2007) notes that the size of the Boston Terrier and its large reputation for bites at the time suggests the importance of intent when a dog attacks, as well as the possibility of extreme aggression in small to medium dogs.

The rise of cinema in the early 1900s influenced popular culture trends, which began using and portraying dogs in various stereotypical images for entertainment (Delise 2007). Though one study argues that a cultural mixture rather than a single media portrayal produces breed bias, other studies believe media portrayals act as catalysts for further negative cultural depictions (Ghirlanda, Acerbi, Herzog, & Serpell 2013). The German Shepherd, known as a “Shepherd dog” from 1887-1919, was popularized in 1954 through media perceptions of Rin Tin Tin (Delise 2002; Delise 2007), while in 1955, “Lady and the Tramp” increased the popularity of the Cocker Spaniel (George 2004).

In the early 1970’s, a series of films portrayed Doberman Pinchers as “blood thirsty,” (George 2004, p1) while prior to WWII there was no mention of them in the media. Doberman’s were an easy choice for the entertainment industry because they were used by Nazi’s, which solidified violent images into people’s heads that were not easily removed (Delise 2002; Delise 2007). A popular myth was that the Doberman head was too small for its brain, and the pressure would make their brains “explode” from madness (Delise 2002: Delise 2007 p84).

Assumptions about anatomy and temperament were used by reporters to enhance the effect of news stories involving dog attacks, changing the focus from the context of the attack, to the breed (Delise 2002; Delise 2007). Critics argue the construction of breed images is about projection of the human ego, and the perversions of the human-canine bond (Delise 2002; Delise 2007). By projecting the dark side of human nature onto the dogs, humanity avoids responsibility for their behavior.

The pit bull entered the breed bias cycle in the early 1980s (Delise 2007; DogsBite.org Editors 2017). During that time, there was an increasing distrust of law enforcement in America, while pit bulls and other aggressive dogs became popular amongst gangs, drug dealers, and dog fighters (Delise 2002; Delise 2007). Media publicity surrounding these groups was a catalyst for the introduction of breed specific legislation, the first of its kind which began with the pit bull. Though legislation was designed to prevent further violent incidents, it also worked to attract owners who take pride in being associated with and perpetuating the breed's stigma. Predictably, pit bull attacks began to increase.

### *Bites and Fatalities*

Pit bulls were attributed to over half of the surge of dog bites and fatalities in the early 1980s (Delise 2002; Delise 2007; DogsBite.org Editors 2017). Fatalities have remained constant over time and are rare, usually between 25 and 35 incidents per year (Bradley 2005; DogsBite.org Editors 2017; Gershman, Sacks, & Wright 1994). The nature of fatality incidents increases their statistical accuracy more so than bite statistics.

Dogs bite for various reasons, but some characteristics make dogs more prone to biting including its sex, early socialization experience, heredity, level of obedience training, reproductive status, quality of ownership, and behavior of the victim (Gershman, et al. 1994). A growling dog indicates a warning which is designed to prevent bites, while a dog which does not growl before biting is considered more dangerous (Bradley 2005).

Current dog bite statistics suggest pit bulls consistently contribute to over half of all dog bites in the U.S. every year (DogsBite.org Editors 2017). Critics argue these statistics are unreliable because of the high likelihood of breed misidentification, and cross-sectional studies of dog bites show different and incomparable results (Bradley 2005). Historical analysis shows prior to the 1980s the state of dog bites and attacks were about owners controlling dogs. But by 1980, the focus became the breed while giving little attention to human influence (Delise 2002; Delise 2007).

### *Pit Bull as Victim*

The 1980s also introduced gangster rap culture, characteristic of the hustler lifestyle of quick money, drugs, prostitution, hypermasculinity, and underground dog fighting (Bastian 2019; Evans, Gauthier, and Forsyth 1998; Kalof 2014). Pit Bulls are a popular choice for deviant subcultures that operate underground dog fighting rings. Humane Societies reported cases of “pit bulls being left starved and chained for days while wearing barbed-wire collars and being burned with acid” (George 2004 p2). Dog fighting is a major influence to the development of pit bull stigma.

Historically, pit bull owners have been stereotyped as young, male, suffering from social isolation, anxiety, low self-esteem, discrimination, and social disenfranchisement (Delise 2002; Hearne 1991; Cohen and Richardson 2002). Researchers suggest young men become attracted to dog fighting to mentally dissociate from the ghetto, quick and easy income, and personal relation to the breed and its endeavors (Burrows et al. 2005; Cohen et al. 2002). NFL trends even suggest that some players define their masculinity through Pit Bull ownership because of the “muscle dog” appeal and of being challenged without limits (Roberts 2007).

Several cases have surfaced linked to the NFL that portray pit bulls in a negative light, such as Steelers linebacker Joey Porter whose escaped Pit Bull and Mastiff mauled a miniature horse in 2007 (Roberts 2007). Complaints about Bears defense tackle Tank Johnson’s three caged Pit Bulls revealed a hidden stash of firearms on his property by authorities (Roberts 2007). Hip hop artist and part owner of the Nets Jay Z is known for portraying a Pit Bull in his violent music videos (Roberts 2007).

Most notoriously, in April 2007, a drug raid of one home of Falcons quarterback Michael Vick uncovered a fully functioning dog fighting facility (Roberts 2007). Animal fighting experts believe dog fighting is glamorized through gangster rap culture and that “some athletes are taking it with them to the NFL,” while scholars believe gangster culture was already prevalent and the pit bull mirrored their tenacity and outlaw image (Delise 2002; Delise 2007: Roberts 2007 p1). They believe the pit bull is just another breed caught up in the breed bias cycle.

### *Breed Specific Legislation*

Breed specific bans began in the early 1980s and began to receive widespread media attention in the mid-1980s (Marmer 1984; Delise 2007). Their purpose varies by jurisdiction, ranging from placing restrictions on current ownership and breeding practices, to humanely phasing out the breed in others (DogsBite.org Editors 2017). The first breed ban was enacted in Hollywood, Florida in 1980, and required registration of pit bulls along with proof of liability insurance. However, in 1982 the ban was declared unconstitutional and voided (Marmer 1984). In 1984, the village of Tijeras, New Mexico enacted a complete pit bull ban, instructing its officers to kill on sight, and in 1984, Cincinnati, Ohio created vicious dog regulation (Others say 1983, Delise 2002) (Marmer 1984). Also, in 1984 the village of Walbridge, Ohio also banned pit bull ownership (Marmer 1984).

Opponents of breed specific legislation argue that breed exploitation is historically rooted and has been perpetuated by the media for decades for capital gain (Cohen et al. 2002; Delise 2002; Delise 2007; Stahlkuppe 2000). They argue the media became more profit centered and pressured to sell stories in the 1980s, which encouraged a more vivid construction of pit bulls as dangerous dogs than previous breeds to draw in readers (Cohen et al. 2002; Delise 2002; Delise 2007; Schaivone 2016). Furthermore, critics argue reporters often publicize inaccurate stories of the worst cases of bite incidents, while using “pit bull” to sell quick stories, whether or not the dog is actually a pit bull (Cohen et al. 2002; Schaivone 2016). The history of the pit bull as a ruthless fighting dog that is ruled by genetics lives on in the modern psyche, attaching a stigmatized label to all variations of the dog and their owners (Twining et al. 2000).

## *Stigma*

A stigma is an attribute that discredits all other aspects about a person, giving them a deviant label (Goffman 1963). Put another way, “stigma lies at the intersection of cultural differentiation, identity formation through social interaction, and social inequality” (Goffman 1959; Pescosolido & Martin 2015:93). When one carries a stigma, they must manage the averse perceptions of others to avoid conflict or other harms (Goffman 1959; Goffman 1963; Sanders 1999). Traditional stigma literature studied mental illness and HIV, while 21<sup>st</sup> century literature included ideas of prejudice and discrimination (Mak, Mo, Cheung, Woo, Cheung, & Lee 2006; Pescosolido et al. 2015; Phelan, Link, & Dovidio 2008; Roeloffs, Sherbourne, Unützer, Fink, Tang, & Wells 2003; Yee Chan & Reidpath, 2003).

Current research seeks to understand the complexity of how stigma is experienced, what the standard roots are, possibilities for social change, and practical implications (Pescosolido 2015). My research seeks to expand existing literature by highlighting the subtleties, complexities, and the contextual nature of stigma experienced by pit bull owners.

## *Basic Concepts*

Though still a complex area of study, stigma is no longer considered a singular attribute, but contains basic concepts, characteristics, variants, and dimensions which intersect. The most basic concepts are “stigma,” the mark that warrants social negotiation, “stigmatization,” and stigma negotiation processes (Goffman 1959; Link and Phelan 2001; Pescosolido 2015). These foundational concepts are dependent on four general processes; (1) labeling of differences, (2) stereotyping to associate a difference with negative attributes, (3) prejudice to endorse the

stereotype, followed by (4) discrimination and status loss (Goffman 1959; Pescosolido et al. 2015). These foundational concepts and processes are dependent on context, are enacted through social relations, and are shaped, and reshaped by the specific contexts in which they occur (Goffman 1959; Pescosolido et al. 2015).

The foundational concepts of stigma are all applicable to this research, since pit bull owners experience a stigmatized label, are stereotyped as different, experience prejudice, discrimination, and status loss as a result. The results of this study reveal how these foundational concepts vary in different contexts owners and their dogs engage in including walking and driving in public places, on the owner's property, and the dog park. Building on these foundational concepts, are various stigma characteristics.

#### *Characteristics*

For this research, pit bulls act as a “fixed physical mark” of stigma that is not directly changeable (Goffman 1959; Pescosolido et al. 2015). The mark is “visible” which makes it easily “discreditable,” and also stigmatizes the owner's character for choosing the dog (Goffman 1959; Pescosolido et al. 2015; Twining et al. 2000). The owner is considered morally weak and loses social status in many contexts from owning a pit bull (Twining et al. 2000). In addition to foundational concepts and characteristics, there are variants of stigma.

#### *Variants*

Stigma research suggests there are two variants of social stigma called “experiential” and “action” stigma (Pescosolido et al. 2015). Experiential stigma characterizes how the mark is experienced, while action stigma characterizes who gives and receives it (Pescosolido et al.

2015). Both experiential and action stigma have five sub-variants with them (Pescosolido et al. 2015). For this study, all sub-variants of experiential stigma are applicable including; perceived, endorsed, anticipated, received, and enacted stigma (Pescosolido et al. 2015). Sub-variants of action stigma applicable to this study include; self, public, provider-based, and structural (Pescosolido et al. 2015). Pit bull “accepters,” people who associate with pit bull owners but do not own one, do not experience courtesy action stigma.

When stigma is perceived, there is an agreement the label is devalued whether the person with the mark believes in it or not (Pescosolido et al. 2015). Endorsed stigma is when there is expressed agreement with the stereotype and is the most common variant (Pescosolido et al. 2015). Anticipated stigma is the expectation by the person with the mark that others will devalue them, while received stigma is whether or not one personally experiences the devaluation (Pescosolido et al. 2015). Enacted stigma is the treatment behavior of stigmatizers (Pescosolido et al. 2015).

Self-stigma is the internalized acceptance of the label, while courtesy stigma is experienced by someone who does not have the mark but associates with someone who does (not found in this study) (Pescosolido et al. 2015). Public stigma is the endorsement of the label by general population (i.e. mental illness) (Pescosolido et al. 2015). The most recent variants of action stigma are provider-based, when occupational groups designed to treat the stigma (health care workers (HIV)) stigmatize their patients, and structural or institutionalized stigma, when policies intentionally or unintentionally restrict opportunities (Pescosolido et al. 2015).



### *Dimensions*

In addition to basic concepts, characteristics, and variants, contemporary stigma research also explores a variety of dimensions including intolerance, exclusion, fear, and mistrust (Pescosolido et al. 2015). Specifically, these dimensions include social distance, traditional prejudice, exclusionary sentiments, negative affect, treatment carryover, disclosure carryover, and perceptions of dangerousness (Pescosolido et al. 2015). For this study, applicable stigma dimensions include social distance, the avoidance of those with stigma, and perceptions of dangerousness, the fear that stigmatized people will engage in harmful behavior toward themselves or others.

Together, the concepts, characteristics, variants, and dimensions create a “stigma complex,” a theoretical tool which utilizes a systems approach while infusing micro, meso, and macro insights to qualitatively understand the experience of social stigma (Pescosolido et al. 2015). At its core, the stigma complex solidifies Goffman’s understanding of stigma as embedded in social relationships while acknowledging the influence of individual affect and motivation in various contexts, how the context shapes normative expectations, and the likelihood of attaching stigmatized labels (Pescosolido, Martin, Lang, & Olafsdottir 2008). Put another way, the “stigma complex” illustrates how stigma is embedded in and shaped by social structures (i.e. the individual, community, and media) forming a dynamic system of interconnections and feed-back loops (Pescosolido et al. 2015:101).

According to Twining et al. (2000), pit bull stigma attaches not only to the dog but also to the owner because humans and their dogs are a team. Pit bull owners must use negotiation

strategies to minimize the effects of their stigma to shape impressions and responding to slights about their character and style. Though the common perception of pit bull owners suggests an extrinsic motivation to choose a pit bull, such as for status and attack dogs, other studies suggest this is an oversimplification, and the motivations for choosing any breed will align along a continuum of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Maher et. al. 2011). Though many owners today work to train their pit bulls well to show a positive example and avoid negative attention, many still face conflict in social settings when interacting with other “non-stigmatized” people.

Twining et al. (2000) conducted a study of pit bull owners at an animal shelter to understand the strategies they use to negotiate their stigma. These strategies include; passing their dogs as other breeds, denying biological determination, debunking averse media coverage, humor, emphasizing counter-stereotypical behavior, avoiding stereotypical equipment or accessories, taking preventative measures, or becoming breed ambassadors (Twining et al. 2000). Twining et al. (2000) concludes by stressing the importance of meaningful discussion on how stigma can affect the experience of pit bull ownership prior to adoption, to better prepare owners and prevent them from returning their pit bulls to the shelter (Twining et al. 2000).

This ethnography extends Twining et al’s. (2000) almost two-decade old observations conceptually and empirically by understanding how pit bull owners manage and negotiate their stigma in their everyday experiences. I address the following questions:

- 1) Do pit bull owners experience stigma?
- 2) If so, what strategies do pit bull owners use to negotiate their stigma in different activities?
- 3) What circumstances explain pit bull ownership?
- 4) What is the range of pit bull ownership activity experiences in public space?

## CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I explain the methodology I used to understand and explain how pit bull owners experience and negotiate stigma. I describe the ethnographic approach and highlight its appropriateness for studying the ground-level experiences of a culture-sharing group. I then describe the field, data collection procedures, primary places for observations, pit bull informants, data analysis procedures, and interpretive style.

### *The Ethnographic Approach*

The ethnographic approach to social science research is a method to understand and explain the cultural patterns of a group. Using inductive analytical reasoning, ethnographers engage in participant observation within a group to record specific observations about their ground-level social relations and form broad insights about them as a culture (Lofland et al. 2006). While participating in the group's culture, the ethnographer records, organizes, analyzes, and interprets the cultural patterns they observe.

The ethnographic approach involves two stages: (1) understanding the group through fieldwork study; and (2) explaining the group through a written detailed record (Lofland et al. 2006). The ethnographer begins the first stage by entering the field, a space or setting shared by members of a culture-sharing group. While in the field, the ethnographer engages in participant observation, temporarily participating in and observing the ground-level social relations among the culture-sharing group of people.

While in the field, the ethnographer develops detailed field notes to document their experiences, casual conversations, and descriptions of ground-level social relations from the group member's standpoint (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 2010). Casual conversations develop

naturally over the course of social interactions, and sometimes lead to recorded, semi-structured interviews that involve the use of an interview guide containing a list of questions to direct conversations with informants (Lofland et al. 2006).

During the second stage, the ethnographer accumulates a detailed written record of all the field data, including experiences, observations, conversations, and interviews (Lofland et al. 2006). The ethnographer then organizes, analyzes, and interprets the field data. Organizing field data requires the analytic process of sorting, coding, and categorizing the information and “rendering it meaningful from the vantage point of one or more frameworks or sets of ideas” (Lofland et al. 2006:200). The ethnographer also memos or writes down ideas about the sorting and coding processes, to help make connections between categories. The ethnographer further analyzes these categories, identifying interpretive patterns and general themes, and developing typologies, taxonomies, diagrams, or charts to produce generalizations or theories about the culture-sharing group (Lofland et al. 2006).

### *The Field*

Using a naturalistic approach to social science (Lofland et al. 2006), my background as a veterinary assistant and status as a dog-owning graduate student at UNLV influenced my decision to conduct this ethnography in Las Vegas. My data sites included the four largest and most well-known dog parks around the city; Sunset Dog Park, Dog Fancier’s Park, Craig Ranch Park, and Desert Breeze Park. In addition to their size and popularity, these parks were chosen because they are located in different parts of the city which are generally segregated by race and class.

### *Sunset Dog Park*

Sunset Dog Park is part of Sunset Park, which spans several blocks. This park is surrounded by working and middle-class communities and is utilized by people of all ages and races. It lies next to a very busy street, is close to the airport, and next to a set of train tracks. Several times a day, a train passes on the tracks. The loud noise scares and confuses some dogs but excites others who run along the fence and bark as it goes by. Before the train arrives, a loud warning sign is set off on the busy street where barricades are lowered to stop traffic and allow the train to pass.

Sunset Dog Park is adjacent to several baseball diamonds that are often used in the evenings and weekends. The dog park and baseball diamonds both share a large parking lot. Sometimes dog owners will walk their dogs on leashes around the diamonds and surrounding grassy fields as opposed to bringing them inside the dog park. Bathrooms lie in between the baseball diamond and the fenced off yards in a brick building.

Sunset Dog Park has three fenced-in yards where dogs roam off leash. The western yard is the smallest, the eastern yard is the largest, and the middle yard is medium sized. Each yard has two gates with a holding area in between them that adds a layer of safety in case a dog decides to take off. Often, dog owners will bring their dogs through the first gate and remove the leash before opening the second gate into the dog park. Two of the three yards are used at a time while the third is rested to allow the grass to replenish. All yards are rotated at the beginning of the month to help keep the grass in good condition. Yards are separated by size for the safety of the dogs, though signs on the front of the gate all indicate “all ADA service dogs welcome.” One

yard is used for large dogs 35 pounds or more, and the other is used for small dogs under 35 pounds.

Within the fenced off parks are trees, three-foot high brick fences in several corners and along the sides, several concrete benches, and a covered area with more benches. Each yard has a water spigot, along with water dishes and waste collection materials with the words “small dog park” and “big dog park” written on them in black permanent marker. When the yards are rotated, this equipment is too.

Some owners play fetch, wrestle, or play with their dogs, while others sit along the fences or benches to watch their dogs play. Some owners talk to each other while others stay to themselves and some ignore their dogs while playing with their phones. Other owners walk the perimeter of the park to get exercise simultaneously with their dogs. Most often, their dog will follow them.

### *Dog Fancier’s Park*

Dog Fancier’s Park is in east Las Vegas and is connected to Horseman’s Park by a dirt road. Some dog owners make use of both parks in one visit to observe equestrian events. Both parks are adjacent to Wetlands Park, where various routes of the Las Vegas Wash meet to collect and funnel water runoff into Lake Mead. Although working-class and ethnic minorities surround these parks, people from other sides of town will travel to this park.

Dog Fancier’s Park spans twelve acres, has multi-level dirt parking, and has five fenced in yards for dogs to run off leash. Three of the yards are the same size, one is much smaller, and the other much larger complete with a running track. The lower level parking lies on the north

east side and has a dirt ramp that connects to a larger dirt parking lot on a second level into Horseman's Park. The upper level dirt parking lot is large enough for several hundred RV's, large trucks, and horse trailers to be parked. Though patrons of Horseman's Park use the upper lot more often, Dog Fancier's Park patrons will use it occasionally.

The entirety of Dog Fancier's Park is fenced in and has walkways to reach different gated areas. While the north-west side of the park houses the small dog park (dogs under 35 pounds), the other four yards are often used by owners of various sized dogs due to the distance they are capable of putting between each other. The small dog park is the only park that does not share a fence with another yard and is the smallest park of the five.

Each park has several benches though only one of the four has a covered area. A second covered area lies within the gated walkways of the park as opposed to inside a yard. You can open a gate in one yard to get inside an adjacent yard, or you can walk along the outer path to go directly to the yard of your choice. Tall trees are scattered throughout the park which add shade. The benches are made of metal and covered in rubber for comfort. They are also movable if someone wants to adjust the shade or congregate in a corner. Dog waste bag dispensers are scattered throughout the park as well as two water spigots.

The park has a bathroom that lies close to the intersection of Dog Fancier's and Horseman's Park. Often while visiting this park, I would find alcoholic beverage containers left in the bathrooms, as well as knives, cell phones charging, and even a mattress. The bathroom facility is surrounded by a concrete walking path. On the wall of the bathroom, a black graffiti tag said, "lil criminals gangsters," in a curvy bubble font that suggested a female artist.

On the west side there is a carving that states, “no pitt bulls,” and “gangs are for losers.” On later visits, the beverage containers, weapons, cell phones, and mattresses was removed, and attempts were made to cover the graffiti. Though the concrete carving remained and suggested an interesting history, considering the mis-spelled “pitt” in pit bull, the affiliation of gangs with pit bulls, and the age of the concrete surrounding the bathroom.

### *Craig Ranch Park*

Craig Ranch Park is in North- Las Vegas and is surrounded by lower to middle class ethnically diverse communities. It is a large park located off a busy street and is approximately 170 acres. A former golf course, this park has a 65,000 square-foot skate park, four civic plazas, a dog park, two baseball fields, tennis, volleyball and basketball courts, community gardens, and eight ramadas. It also has ponds, concrete walking trails, and standard restrooms. There are various parking lots and one is located near the dog park on the north end.

Like the other parks, there are fenced in yards for dogs to be off leash, are designated by weight, and have waste collection bag dispensers. All yards are the same size. There are two gates to get into the yards just like Sunset Park. Unlike the other parks, it does not have water dishes and the spigots are located outside of the gated yard. There are large trees of various species scattered throughout the fenced yards, and the terrain is more dirt than grass. The ground was uneven and has various dips and elevations.

When speaking to people at Sunset and Dog Fancier’s park, they often spoke negatively about Craig Ranch Park and described it as run down, with broken glass in the parking lots, poor



maintenance, and upkeep. When I first visited this park, the gate was broken (See Figure 3), and dogs frequently got into scuffles with each other.

### *Desert Breeze Park*

Desert Breeze Park is in west-Las Vegas and is surrounded by a middle to upper class community of a younger age and diverse ethnicities. It spans several city blocks and is the newest of the three parks. In addition to three fenced in dog yards with double-gated entrances, it contains several baseball diamonds, a skate park, soccer fields, roller hockey rink, and picnic areas.

The dog park is closest to the baseball diamond and skate park, and someone yelling “heads up” is a common occurrence while visiting this dog park. The parks are the same size and have a hill in them with multiple gates to get in and out of them. The gate near the top of the hill opens to individual staircases, all which lead up to the same picnic area which over sees the dog yards and the city of Las Vegas.

### *Data Collection*

For this dissertation, I refer to the fieldwork data I collected through Las Vegas dog parks, email, and social media through two major phases between 2017 and 2018. I rely on a year’s worth of qualitative data collected to understand and explain the experience of stigma by pit bull owners and professionals. I used the following ethnographic data collection techniques: (1) participant observation, (2) field notes, (3) casual conversations, (4) semi-structured interviews, and (5) photography.

Participant observation promoted a greater understanding of pit bull owner practices and activities, as well as the relationships between their words and actions (Lofland et al. 2006), all of which were documented in field notes. Casual conversations helped understand common ideology, while semi-structured interviews helped with a more in-depth understanding of ideas, beliefs, values, and motivations. I used photography to document occurrences and help validate claims.

In stage one, I engaged in participant observation and casual conversation with pit bull owners and professionals for twelve months. I took detailed field notes compiled them into a word document. After five months, I moved from making specific observations about pit bull owners and professionals to generalizations and theoretical connections about their experiences. I then returned to the field while using these generalizations and connections to sharpen my focus and formulate my semi-structured interview.

### *Places of Observation*

Dog parks are a popular option for city-dwelling dog owners because they provide a place to bring their dogs for needed exercise and socialization. The parks are free to patronize, provide health benefits, and opportunities to form a sense of community among dog lovers. Dog parks were the primary place for observing important pit bull owning practices and ideologies. These dog parks were the primary places where I formed relationships with pit bull owners which provided the opportunity to engage in snowball sampling.

In addition to dog parks, I relied on social media and direct emailing to get at pit bull owners, breeders, and professionals who do not patron dog parks. This population is “anti-dog

park” due to a distrust of strangers and dogs being off leash together in public. While my observations were primarily at dog parks, social media and direct emailing supplied informants for my interviews. In addition to Las Vegas, these informants resided in California, Oregon, Texas, and Georgia. Other observation sites included a dog boarding facility where I volunteered to walk pit bulls in needs of homes once per week, and a K-9 aquatic rehabilitation center where I observed pit bulls engage in physical therapy to help them heal from broken bones and remedy anxiety.

### *Informants*

For this dissertation, I draw from twenty semi-structured interviews with pit bull owners, breeders, trainers, and other professionals. Owners of pit bull mixes and foster owners were also included. Interviews lasted between thirty minutes and two hours and were conducted in person and over the phone. In person interviews were conducted in the person’s home or place of business such as their training facility. In some cases, the training facility was their home. I used an interview guide with open-ended questions, which guided my interviews as well as casual conversations with pit bull owners and professionals. Each informant who agreed to be interviewed was provided a brief description about the research purpose and a copy of the consent form.

Appendix C lists the pit bull owners and professionals I interviewed for this dissertation and their characteristics such as race, gender, age, and ownership status. I also included the date, time of the interview, and interview format such as over the phone or in person. The twenty pit bull owners and professionals I interviewed were all English-speaking Americans. Fourteen

identified as White, one as Mexican, one as Black, one as White and Portuguese, one as Puerto Rican, one as White, Mexican, and Native American, and one as Black and White. Thirteen identified as female, six male, and one as queer. The youngest was twenty-eight, and the oldest was sixty-six. The majority of informants were in their forties. Four were rookie owners, two were foster owners, and two were non-owners who worked with pit bulls professionally. One was a dog trainer and the other an aquatic k-9 rehabilitator. Eleven were serial owners, and of these eleven four were professional trainers, and four were breeders.

### *Data Analysis and Interpretation*

I employed inductive reasoning techniques to understand and explain the field data I collected through participant-observation, casual conversations, and interviews with pit bulls owners and professionals. This analytic approach allowed me to move from making specific observations about pit bull owners and professionals, to generalizations or theories about pit bull ownership and working with them professionally. I relied on the inductive process of sorting and coding my field data to then develop central categories and identifying patterns between them to produce general themes about pit bull owners and professionals.

I classified the first five months I spent in the field as my first phase of coding. Following this time in the field, I coded my field notes into “nodes” in NVivo to clarify, organize, and group similarities, differences, frequencies, sequences, correspondences, and causations I was seeing. This first phase formed twenty-four themes and they included;

- 1). Emotional Support/Emotions
- 2) Safe Zones
- 3) Age and Race
- 4) Gender

- 5) Stigma
- 6) Interest in me/my dog
- 7) Argues dog behavior is owner responsibility
- 8) Pit bull attainment
- 9) Number of pit bulls owned
- 10) Educated of dog behavior
- 11) School yard characters
- 12) Addicts/dying people
- 13) Pack mentality
- 14) American Bully Association
- 15) Pit bull mix behavior
- 16) Pit Bull Resiliency
- 17) Go to several parks
- 18). Pit bulls as/with kids
- 19) Training tactics
- 20) Contradictions
- 21) Policing each other's behavior
- 22) Noise pollution
- 23) Owner Demeanor
- 24) Ear Cropping

Using these twenty-four themes, I went back into the field to gather more data. While there I focused my observations and casual conversations around these themes to make them more informed and specific. After two more months, I focused my twenty-four themes down to seven which included;

- 1) Demographics
- 2) Stigma
- 3) Social Interaction/Behavior
- 4) Individual owner characteristics
- 5) Owner-pit bull dynamics
- 6) Pit Bull Dynamics
- 7) Self-Reflexivity

These seven themes were used to frame the analytic chapters. I write about them using an interpretive style to walk my reader through the experiences of pit bull ownership, training, and

rehabilitating. To describe my experiences and observations, I used a realist approach which refers to “an author-proclaimed description and explanation of observed cultural practices” (Van Maanen 1988:45). I provide vivid descriptions, narratives, and direct quotes from casual conversations and semi-structured interviews.

This dissertation and research developed inherently from a “Western” perspective which historically cannot dismiss nationality, race, class, gender, sexuality, age, and culture-based differences and biases in understanding and explaining the diverse experiences of pit bull owners and professionals with diverse backgrounds. My ideas about pit bulls and pit bull ownership were influenced by my background, embodied experience, and demographics as a white, cis-female, graduate student, from Las Vegas. My previous employment within several Las Vegas animal hospitals will color the way I interpret and experience the data. My demographics relate to being an ethnographer and a dog owner with these traits, which will induce different embodied experiences than someone who is a research informant and has a different background and embodied experience. I will convey my research findings by relying on my theoretical knowledge base and sociological understanding of ethnography.

## CHAPTER 3: STIGMATIZING PIT BULLS

### *Stigma Definition and Introduction*

This chapter addresses the following research questions: (1) Do pit bull owners experience stigma? (2) If so, what strategies do pit bull owners use to negotiate their stigma in different activities? A “stigma” is a discrediting attribute and deviant label requiring negotiation to avoid social ridicule (Goffman 1963). According to Pescosolido et al. (2015:93), “stigma lies at the intersection of cultural differentiation, identity formation through social interaction, and social inequality.” With dog ownership, both the owner and their dog are labeled as a team by others (Twining et al. 2000). Pit bull owners must negotiate a variety of situations to minimize the effects of their stigma by shaping impressions and responding to slights about their character and style.

My observations align closely with Twining et al. (2002), who suggests that pit bull owners carry a stigma associated with their dog(s), and employ various strategies to minimize or embrace it. The owners I interviewed believe the stigma others give to them originates from a range of narratives about pit bulls, dog fighting, and their dog’s presumed inherently aggressive nature. But only a very few believed that pit bulls possess genetic pre-dispositions to natural aggressiveness they cannot control. Most owners attributed dog behavior to owner characteristics such as properly socializing their pit bulls.

### *Owner Definitions of Stigma*

Owners who referenced dog fighting narratives commonly described pit bulls as “attack dogs” when characterizing stigma. Specifically, pit bulls will, “attack people, their family, other dogs, and your kids.” They believe in addition to having the genetics to be natural fighters,

owners will socialize and encourage them into this behavior. Several stated the perception that pit bulls are “bred to fight,” and “are killers” who do not discriminate against their targets. The essence of the dog-fighting argument is that pit bulls are “murderers at the end of a leash.”

One woman expressed disagreement with the dog fighting narrative and states, “past stories of dog fighting is what built this mean and dangerous idea of them. The people too. They capitalized on that image and get pit bulls to scare people away and protect themselves. It’s not just pits, but a lot of different large dogs.” Another believes, “the general perception is that most people feed off of social media. People don’t know all the facts.” A third claims, “dog’s bite, it’s in their nature. As dog owners we need to be aware of these possibilities. I get defensive because they’re my babies.”

Owners who referenced genetic predisposition narratives commonly described pit bulls as being naturally “aggressive” and “mean” to characterize stigma. Owners spoke of “inherent ferocity,” said they are “scary,” “dangerous,” “untrainable,” and are “super strong and have locking jaws.” One trainer described them as, “man mauling monsters who bite your children and eat your neighbors.” Another said people believe, “pit bulls are some kind of super dog that is so different from every other type of dog.”

A trainer who disagreed with the genetic predisposition narrative states, “most people who adopt them now are families and single people. The perception of most people is what they hear on the news. When people tell me they’re mean I say why? Have you met my dog?” A breeder described a positive news article that featured her pit bull. She states, “The first line of the article, I’ll never forget was, “If you think all pit bulls are man mauling monsters you haven’t



met Pebbles yet.” They took photos of her rolling around in the yard and it was a huge benefit for breed at that point in time.”

At the root of dog fighting and genetic predisposition narratives is the belief that pit bulls are unpredictable. Owners described this as, “you can’t trust them,” “they have an untriggered switch,” “they turn on their owners for no reason,” “will just snap,” and are “waiting to become unhinged like a ticking time bomb.” A trainer states, “I do see people who are 100% against or afraid of them but the majority are just a little bit leery and don’t know what to think. I think people for most part only think the first step but have never met a pit bull. They just “know” they are scary and kill people, but they don’t think of the next step.”

Several owners disagreed that pit bulls are unpredictable while defending their dogs. One woman says, “The news makes it seem like people are scared of them and there’s a stigma, but everywhere I go people wanna pet him. I post pictures of him online and people comment how cute he is. When I younger it was a lot of drug dealers and gang bangers who had them but now everyone does.” She held back tears as she told me, “now people like you are trying to change it.”

Another owner argued their loyalty are what dog fighters and other aggressive owners take advantage of in pit bulls. He states, “at the root of this (stigma) is mistaking loyalty for aggression. They (the public) think they are inherently unpredictable, but really they are inherently predictable. Their loyalty and what they are willing to do for their owners is very predictable.” He believes the inherent loyalty in pit bulls is what maladaptive owners exploit to socialize them into fighting dogs.

### *Stigma Contradictions*

For some owners, stigma was a complicated construct, and did not appear mindfully connected to it. Some seemed to shut it out and/or became defensive. In these cases, the definitions and experiences of stigma did not initially appear as a priority to them, but after they put thought into it (possibly for the first time) their conscious awareness of it seemed to rise to the surface. For some, processing their experience of stigma appeared therapeutic as I watched them think about how to express their perspective as well as the perspective of the stigmatizer to understand why stigmatization happens.

Often, these owners contradicted themselves when they described experiencing, understanding, and caring about stigma. On one hand, some appeared inattentive when they initially stated they did not experience stigma, but shortly after told a story of experiencing it. Others appeared unconcerned when they said they did not care if they experienced stigma or were attracted to it for protection, but then emphasized a desire to prove people wrong by having an obedient pit bull as a role model. One owner initially states he was “attracted to them as a guard dog to keep enemies away from my tight knit family.” He later explained how he wanted to train his pit bull to “set an example” that pit bulls are good dogs.

Some owners seemed to believe in the justification of stigma when they blamed it on inbreeding. They argued breeders are responsible for poor bloodlines that cause genetic aggression. Others suggested the possibility of stigma justification but believe like all dogs, pit bulls need proper socialization from responsible owners to redirect aggressive impulses. Occasionally, owners contradicted themselves by combining these two explanations. They

initially stated many pit bulls are the product of inbreeding (genetic aggression) but followed this up with the importance of training and socializing them. This suggests socialization can alter “bad genetics.” Others denied that pit bulls are innately dangerous but deflected to other breeds, like the Chihuahua or German Shepherd, claiming that these breeds “really are” (innately dangerous), implying the genetic argument applies to some breeds but not pit bulls.

One owner claimed she does not believe in the stigma, but then seemed to glorify it. She first claimed she “never believed in stigma” and that she’s “a dog lover, I just love dogs.” She follows this by telling a story of her pit bull killing a cat while proudly calling it a “real pit bull.” She claims, “he’s a cat killer, he don’t look like a cat killer.” Another woman who initially stated she disagreed with the stigma told the story of a suspicious looking teenager in her neighborhood who did not belong, and “looked like a tweaker.” She responded by taking her pit bull out while “pretending he was mean” and “tricked the kid into thinking he was after him.” The teenager took off running and never returned to the neighborhood.

#### *Owner Stigma Conversion*

In other cases, pit bull owners once believed in the stigma, but changed their mind after having positive experiences and eventually adopting their own pit bull. I refer to this change in attitude as “stigma conversion.” When a pit bull was portrayed in a non-stereotypical way, such as interacting gently with children, being obedient, playful, licking, or as a puppy, some owners experienced stigma conversion.

In one case of stigma conversion, an owner went to the pound for a dog and was given the choice between a pit bull or a Chihuahua (a common scenario given that many pounds

receive large numbers of these breeds). He was a large man and did not want a smaller dog because he feared “stepping on them.” After being acquainted with a pit bull in the socialization room, he realized the dog was friendly, and decided to give it a chance. He’s had his pit bull for several years now and believes they should be treated individually. He says his biggest misconception was about their unpredictable aggression and changed his mind when he observed his pit bull “protecting a litter of kittens he found.”

A mother said she feared pit bulls after being bitten by a German Shepherd as a child but changed her mind after being exposed to her daughter’s pit bull over several years without incident. She now owns her own pit bull and explains that the dog “helped me over-come my fear” of dog bites after she “fell into the being-afraid-of-pit-bull-trap.” She believes the media hypes up the true nature of pit bulls and that if more people spent time with them, they would not stigmatize them.

Other examples of stigma conversion were with professional trainers who publicly displayed the non-stereotypical side of pit bulls. One trainer posts weekly videos on social media to show the public how well the dogs are doing in their training classes and to help get them adopted. He states, “I think public perception has changed a lot since we’re doing the videos because they (the dogs) are happy and kissing me, crawling onto my lap.” People say, “I’ve never seen a pit bull do that before.” Another trainer set his five pit bulls up in a wooden “kissing booth” and said he got “a quarter million likes on Facebook after doing that.” While in the booth, his dogs were happy and obedient, which provided the public the opportunity to see the non-

stereotypical side of pit bulls. In both of these examples, the trainers claimed that several people seeking to adopt a dog became comfortable with choosing a pit bull.

### *Family and Friend Stigma Conversion*

Another variation of stigma conversion is when pit bull owners change the opinions of others such as friends and family members. Those they “convert” do not become pit bull owners themselves but come to accept the breed they once feared. Often, the owner’s mother was who experienced stigma conversion though in many of these cases, mothers only accepted their pit bull, not all of them.

One woman described how her eighty-year-old mother plays cards at her home on Friday nights with her friends. Initially, they were all afraid to come inside because of her pit bull’s bark, but when she told him to lie down and showed them how obedient he was, they were open to trusting him. After getting to know her pit bull, her mom and her friends now bring treats when they come to play cards and “have all fallen in love with him.”

Another woman told the story her mom “flipping out” when she got a pit bull because she had small children and would constantly reference media reports about people getting mauled. After some time and exposure, her mom came around to her pit bull but the owner states, “to this day, she will still make reference every time there is a story having to do with them even though she adores our dog. She loves him and buys him Christmas presents, but still thinks other pit bulls are evil. She thinks I got lucky.”

A breeder described her mother stigmatizing her for choosing to breed pit bulls over other breeds. She argued, “why in God’s name would you get one of those horrible animals?” Within

time this breeder's daughter also began breeding pit bulls which eventually desensitized her mother. She says, "she is okay with them now and even babysits sometimes."

### *Experiencing and Responding to Stigma*

The owners I interviewed experienced various stigma forms, some that were concise and others that were dynamic. These forms include; pit bull stigma, multiple stigma, no pit bull stigma, and within breed stigma. Owners used various strategies to negotiate these forms some of which confirmed and expanded on previous research. These included; (1) passing their dogs as other breeds, (2) denying biological determinism, (3) debunking adverse media coverage, (4) using humor, (5) emphasizing counter-stereotypical behavior, (6) avoiding stereotypical equipment and accessories, (7) taking preventative measures, or (8) becoming breed ambassadors (Twining et al. 2002). I found three additional forms, which I term: rationalizing, withdrawing, and registering pit bulls as emotional support dogs. The rest of this chapter explores these forms of stigma, the strategies used to negotiate them, and illustrates their contextual influences.

### *Pit Bull Stigma*

Owners experience "pit bull stigma" when they feel social ridicule for owning a pit bull. This social ridicule flows from both informal interactions with others, and formal rules about the dog type. Informal pit bull stigma is socially deviant and sanctioned by those who view pit bulls as norm breakers. Formal pit bull stigma is reflected in various codified laws and regulations, such as breed bans and ownership restrictions. Most owners reported experiencing informal pit bull stigma in various public contexts, as well as by their neighbors and family members.

Though formal pit bull stigma was less common, it was a major influence on where respondents could live and travel.

### *Pit Bull Stigma and Interaction*

Several owners reported experiencing informal pit bull stigma when walking their dog around their neighborhood and coming into contact with other people. Often, people would cross the street in fear to avoid the pit bull and if they had a small dog or child, they would pick them up. Other times a stranger would approach their dog and start petting it not knowing it was a pit bull. Once the owner revealed the breed, the stranger reacted with fear. One woman said, "I've literally had people petting my dog and ask what it is. When I say pit bull, they yank their arm away as if it was bitten off." Another described a woman with a Yorkie once approached her pit bull puppy. When she discovered it was a pit bull, she also reacted with fear and stated, "Oh my god you rescued a killer, why would you do that?"

Other times the dog is in a fenced yard, and neighbors will only say hello to each other from a distance. A woman explained when her new neighbors were moving in her pit bull barked at them, she saw them react with fear. She states, "That's our fault, we weren't training him. He's nice he can just be loud. We told the neighbor, if you feed him once he's your best friend, but they did not seem interested. We bring him over to my brother's house all the time. He has dogs, and he interacts with them just fine." Along with being fearful of pit bulls, stigmatizers display a lack of trust towards them.

Another woman told the story of how one of her two pit bulls bit someone and ever since she has treated them differently with more caution. She believes, "It's about the circumstances,

dogs in general can bite. A neighbor kid came running into our backyard to play with my son and the dog instinctively went to stop him.” She spoke quickly with anxiety when she told me this story and referred the offending pit bull as “the scary one of the two.”

Though dogs can initiate social interaction, pit bulls can encourage anti-social behavior. A couple explained how they used to invite a neighbor inside but because one of their pit bulls was a bit “skittish” they would put him in a room during the visit. “The neighbor essentially used this as validation and said, “they are mean dogs, I hate pit bulls.”” The couple responded by saying, “I’m sorry you feel that way, if you do, you probably don’t want to come to our house.”

Another couple explained when they go through the drive through and their dog sticks his head out too fast, the workers will quickly retreat from the window and close the door. Though drive through workers might have a similar reaction to any large dog that approached them with speed, these owners attributed this behavior to the fact their dog was a pit bull. This could be because they have been stigmatized in other contexts for having a pit bull and assume that is always the reason. Several owners explained that PetSmart would not allow them to board their dogs because they were pit bulls but emphasized the company does this for several breeds including wolf hybrids and Miniature Bull Terriers.

Most owners experience pit bull stigma, disagreed with it, and in some cases deflected it. After sharing their negative experiences, they often followed up with a positive story about their pit bull to exemplify a lack of aggression. Sharing with a stranger their experience of social ridicule appeared to invoke a bond with the owner and their pit bull in front of me. Often, I



watched them console their dogs after talking about their unjust treatment, the same way a parent would console a child who experienced bullying.

Many owners cope with stigma by discrediting it and turning the experience into a bonding opportunity. For some, discussing their experiences of stigma was something they seemed mindful of, as the words and actions needed to cope came easily for them. For others, they spoke more slowly in their descriptions and appeared to be working through these emotions for the first time. Sometimes stigma was more complex than just being present but was amplified by the owner's and dog's characteristics.

### *Multiple Stigma*

Research on multiple stigma suggests that marginalized groups such as racial and gender minorities experience each of Goffman's dimensions to stigma including the body, character, and tribe (Henkel et al. 2008). If an individual possesses one signifier of a stigmatized identity (i.e. race or gender), this can automatically result in another signifier due to cultural biases, thus compounding the experience of stigma (HassanpourDehkordi, Mohammadi, & NikbakhatNasrabadi 2016; Henkel, Brown & Kalichman 2008; Treloar et al. 2016). When pit bull owners were racial and gender minorities, their descriptions of experiencing stigma were expressed more quickly and definitively than those in dominant groups. This may be because broader cultural narratives attribute pit bull stigma (i.e. fighting dogs, genetic aggression, and unpredictability) predominantly to minority groups. I refer to these as owner layers.

### *Owner Layers*

Examples of discredited owner demographics which compounded stigma included racial and sexual minorities, while discreditable demographics included ex-felons, mental, and psychological disturbances such as PTSD, anxiety, depression, and panic attacks. While discredited attributes were straight forward, discreditable attributes were more complex.

### *Race*

When racial minorities were asked if they are “treated differently for owning a pit bull” by the public, friends, or family, they most often responded with an emphasized “yes” using a deep breath, accentuated tone, and an occasional eye roll. They gave the impression that differential treatment for owning a pit bull happens very often.<sup>1</sup> One owner described going to a county flea market where someone “made a racist comment about the dog.” The owner felt,

Since I was a Hispanic black guy, he (the stigmatizer) was trying to make a perception of all black male guys raise pit bulls to fight. He was an elderly white guy and I just ignored him. What made it bad was we were both (military) veterans. It seemed to me he was the type of guy where things were still segregated from his time, and he was trying to label the pit as a bad dog.

When whites were asked if they are “treated differently for owning a pit bull” by the public, friends, or family, their answers varied from giving a similarly accentuated “yes” as the racial minorities, to a less emphasized “yes,” a plain “no”, to a complete confusion for why I

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<sup>1</sup> It may be that all pit bull owners are similarly stigmatized by others, but some owners who are already marginalized due to factors such as their race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation, are more sensitive to stigma. Consequently, they may be more likely to report others' negative reactions as being related to pit bull stigma and other stigmatized social attributes.

asked the question. Although most white owners experience stigma for owning a pit bull, some did not. As one older white male explained,

People were mostly stigmatized back then (the 1980s) for who you are and what you look like. Different ethnic groups, way you dress, people stereotype people. We aren't seeing the dangerous thug dog owner but the mentality of some people is that they have to have flashy cars and clothes. Others will look at them with the dog and think they are trouble.

Though this owner claimed pit bull stigma is less common today, he believes it originated because of the way ethnic groups portrayed themselves. This history may be why racial minorities today experience stigma more intensely and frequently than whites.

### *Gender*

Men would occasionally report not wanting to be seen with a smaller dog for fear of being stigmatized so instead they chose a pit bull, opting to be stigmatized for an aggressive dog instead a generally perceived docile smaller dog. Women were more likely to report their dog was registered as an emotional support or service dog, though some men did too. One man had PTSD and was on the autism spectrum, so he needed two service dogs, one to address each concern. A transgender man who was recovering from drug addiction said he was more “scared of himself” than other people because he feared he wouldn't know what to do if his dog got into a scuffle. He said he specifically feared other people would think his pit bull had “lock jaw.”

### *Dog Layers*

In addition to owner layers, some pit bulls had their own layers that amplified stigma such as poor socialization, being intact (i.e. not spayed/neutered), and being mixed breed. Some

owners had recently adopted their pit bull from the shelter and had not yet invested in obedience training. In some of these cases, owners claimed their pit bulls were former fighting dogs. Intact pit bulls often have tense energy, more excitement, and increasingly mount other dogs which can result in scuffles.

If a dog was not properly socialized, were from a shelter, and/or were former fighting dogs, they tended not to listen to their owner's commands while in public. They would pull while on a leash, bark incessantly, have heckles along their backs, and were quick to get in scuffles with nearby dogs. Dogs who were intact elicited these same responses, presumably because of heightened hormones. Intact male dogs were more evident than females, and people tended to respond to them by keeping their distance and instructing their dogs to stay away from them. Intact female pit bulls tend to swell in their back end indicating they were not spayed, and public suspicions were validated if the dog displayed high energy, aggression, and/or a lack of obedience. In some instances, owners had a male and female pit bull who were both intact, and likely bred them.

#### *Mixed Pit Bulls*

Pit bulls mixed with other breeds appeared to invoke different intensities of stigma. If a pit bull had feminine features such as a short stature, small head, jaws, and body, with a smooth bone and muscle structure, owners described how people were willing to be near it at dog parks or out on walks. People would not always cross the street and/or pick up their child or small dog to avoid it. At the dog park, many people appeared comfortable being near their dogs.

If a pit bull had masculine features, such as a tall stature, cropped ears, thick bones, protruding muscles, large heads, jaws, and shoulders, and a slim muscular waste, owners reported people crossing the street and picking up children/small dogs on walks. At dog parks, owners of masculine looking pit bulls reported more people avoiding them and were quickly blamed for scuffles with other dogs.

Sometimes, a dog is mixed with similar looking breeds such as an American Bulldog or English Bulldog, and these owner's will be stigmatized for owning a "pit bull." One such owner was an emergency veterinarian and states, "sometimes people mistake my dog for a pit mix, I can't blame them because she is a mix. She might be pit, might be boxer, we don't really know. But overall, I don't like people stereotyping my dog because of one bad incident."

Other times, differences in appearance come down to color when experiencing mixed stigma, such as the case with black pit bulls. One man told the story of adopting his pit bull from the pound because he thought no one would want him after cowering in the corner and "being black". He said most black animals are less likely to be adopted, including cats. He's not sure if this is because of "stereotypes or racism," and he "doesn't care," he "just knows it's there." His claims support research that lighter color pets are more preferable for adoption than darker colored pets (Posage, Bartlett, & Thomas 1998).

Racial and sexual minorities experience multiple stigma because their layered status is visible and discredited (Goffman 1963). Owners with discreditable layers (Goffman 1963) such as ex-felons and people with mental and psychological issues did not experience multiple stigma unless they verbalized their layered status, or it was revealed once they put the emotional support

or service dog vest on their pit bulls. If the owner had an invisible disability, they reported getting glares from the public for having an emotional support or service dog. This supports research that suggests the public discriminates against service dog handlers who they believe exploit the opportunity to take their dog into public places (Mills 2017). Owners with visible disabilities were not observed in this study.

Pit bull mixes all experience stigma but with different intensities. Though feminine looking pit bulls produce less knee jerk reactions to stigma than masculine looking pit bulls, owners with more feminine pit bulls still reported they experienced stigma. In a few rare cases, owners insisted they did not experience stigma.

#### *No Pit Bull Stigma*

A very small number of owners reported not experiencing pit bull stigma. Most owners acknowledged pit bull stigma exists but stated they do not put thought into it because they have had good experiences. One woman became irritated when I asked if people treat her differently, quickly saying, “no,” lowering her eyebrows, and turning her body to face away from me. In these rare cases, I refer to this as “no pit bull stigma.”

One owner who reported not experiencing stigma explained that he was transitioning back into society after several years of backpacking with his pit bull. His detachment from society may have buffered his experience of pit bull stigma compared to if he had been more socially integrated. He stated that he, “hates that people fight them,” and has a desire to, “help extinguish this.”

While walking from the parking lot into the dog park, a man had an unleashed pit bull running excitedly toward the gate. When I asked what his experience was like owning a pit bull and if people treated him differently, he quickly replied “pit bulls are fine so there’s no issue.” I further asked, “if a stranger is unaware his dog is friendly, does that make a difference?” He quickly stated “no” and changed the subject, asking what my name was and which dog was mine, appearing uninterested.

At a different park, I observed a man circling the dog run while working diligently to train his pit bull. He did not pay much attention to other dog park patrons. I approached him by asking, “Is your dog a pit bull?” When he confirmed, I asked him what he thought about pit bulls being stigmatized. He stated he, “does not experience stigma,” but believes pit bulls have “lock jaw,” which is why the public stigmatizes them.

One woman referenced multiple stigma while explaining to me she does not herself experience it. She believes that because of her demographics she, “doesn’t get judged for having a pit bull.” She states, “people take into account I am in my thirties, have a home, job, kids, and I’m white. I’m not a single Mexican guy in an apartment. We live in a racially dictated world and it’s upsetting. I’m also a woman, maybe if it was just my husband, people would wonder about it.” She believes that because she does not possess extra stigmatized layers such as race and gender, she is considered a more acceptable pit bull owner to mainstream society. This perception is likely from the cultural biases about race that are heavily rooted in pit bull stigma.

When asked about their experiences with pit bull stigma, these owners appeared confused and some were annoyed by the question. They were detached from the conversation which could

be because I was a stranger or because they were not interested in validating the stigma. Owners who do not give stigma the time of day could be coping with it by taking away its power and not acknowledging it. They create an “out of sight, out of mind” mentality which could be because they really believe it does not exist, or because they disagree with and do not prioritize it in their daily lives. These rare cases were all white respondents, which could suggest their privilege allows them to do this.

### *Within Breed Stigma*

Though most pit bull owners and professionals view stigma as something to distance themselves from, others used it as a tool to reprimand owners who they believe are less responsible. I call this “within breed stigma.” Pit bull owners and professionals who stigmatize each other do so because they believe responsible ownership is the only way to eradicate the stigma. Common reasons for it include disagreement with how others interacted with and disciplined their pit bull. Specifically, owners referenced the stereotypical pit bull owners of the past as well as breeders who they attribute responsibility to their dog’s current behavior problems. In one case, an owner stigmatized the use of pit bulls as emotional support dogs.

### *Past Owners*

Commonly, owners and professionals I interviewed referred to a past time when they believed pit bull owners were “thugs” and “gangbangers.” One woman who worked with pit bulls professionally as an aquatic rehabilitator states, “I think back in the day someone decided I can make this dog look mean because he’s so loyal. I can turn it into protection and make them look tough with a spiked collar. Gangs and street kids trying to be macho like a thug.”



A professional trainer believes, “people make pit bulls look all stocky with steroids and choke collars with spikes on them. The big collar makes them look mean and it’s how they present themselves. They have a bandana on their heads, look like a gangbanger. I see these people in lower head communities (i.e. low SES communities) and on social media. When they do dog shows they don’t even look healthy. They stigmatize themselves because they want a dog that looks beefy and they breed for other people who want them to look like that.”

In one case, an owner stigmatized those who previously owned his current pit bull, and believed they were at fault for their poor behavior and/or appearance. He described his pit bull’s ear cropping as a “meth job” because they were noticeably messy and uneven. He suspected, “they (the previous owner) probably just used an X-ACTO knife.”

### *Breeders*

Breeding practices were another reason pit bull owners engaged in within breed stigma. A veterinarian believes “backyard breeding” is hurting the breed’s health by promoting “hip dysplasia, or blood disorders.” She clarified that the dog’s health was being compromised, not their behavior. This distinction between genetic and behavioral health suffering from breeding practices was primarily seen in pit bull professionals than in every day pit bull owners.

One woman stigmatized the color of the pit bull and claimed this dictated their level of aggression. She says,

Certain breeds are worse because of how they were bred. Blue nose are more aggressive which is why a lot of them are used in fighting. They (blue nose pit bulls) are bred for that so I stay away. Red nose are more sweet and docile.

I did not hear this claim from other respondents, nor was I able to find data that supported this idea.

### *Fake Emotional Support Dogs*

Another pit bull owner worked with wounded veterans and displayed within breed stigma when she expressed her discontent over the abundance of “fake emotional support pit bulls.” She states, “people are doing it just to take it on planes and it’s bogus. It’s really bad for people who really need it, but a lot of people are just doing it to cut corners.” When I asked her if she believed this helped pit bulls in general since they are able to stay with their owners she clarified and said, “yeah it does, I agree with that. It helps and hurts them. Owners get to keep them, but legitimate cases (of emotional support needs) are suffering because of it. It’s hard.” Several other owners agreed with her stance, and often referred to all breeds of emotional support dogs, not just pit bulls.

### *Stigma Negotiation Strategies*

Whether an owner experiences within breed, multiple, pit bull, or no pit bull stigma, they all have strategies to negotiate social interactions. The type of stigma shapes their strategic choices, which I will now highlight. Twining (2002) identifies eight strategies pit bull owners use to negotiate stigma: (1) passing their dogs as other breeds, (2) denying biological determinism, (3) debunking adverse media coverage, (4) using humor, (5) emphasizing counter-stereotypical behavior, (6) avoiding stereotypical equipment and accessories, (7) taking preventative measures, or (8) becoming breed ambassadors. I confirm these findings, and offer

three additional strategies; rationalizing, withdrawing, and registering pit bulls as emotional support dogs. Below, I describe all eleven strategies in more detail.

### *Passing Their Dogs as Other Breeds*

Public confusion over what constitutes a “pit bull” is something some owners use to their advantage. Pitbull’s stereotypical stigmatized image is that they are large and inherently aggressive dogs when, in fact, they are typically short, stocky, and have various temperaments. One way that pit bull owners negotiate stigma is to pass their dogs off as other breeds, at least until they establish a positive relationship (Twining et al. 2000). This strategy is an initial defense against stigma from strangers. Owners try to read situations to understand and anticipate how individual people will react and decide how to present themselves and their dog (Twining et al. 2000).

Some owners offer a different name for their dog that conveys a pedigree that does not bring the connotations that “pit bull” typically brings. As one owner states, “I prefer to call them American Bull Terriers because when pit gets thrown in there, people act differently and are more standoffish. I’ve passed them off as a Weimaraner before while traveling at an RV park because of their (silver-grey) color.” Other owners simply call their pit bulls “mixed breed” or “mutts” to get into apartments, rental homes, and to avoid liability insurance.

Prior research suggests shelter workers will label pit bulls as other breeds such as Staffordshire Terrier or Boxer in an effort to ease adoption (Hoffman, Harrison, Wolff, and Westgarth 2001; Twining et al. 2002). Many owners in this study reported adopting their dog from the shelter and although it resembled a pit bull, were told by shelter workers they

“Labradors” and “Boxers.” These more “acceptable” pedigrees have been shown to successfully increase adoption rates.

### *Denying Biological Determinism*

Passing pit bulls off as other breeds is an indirect approach to negotiating stigma by avoiding conflict and keeping interactions smooth and peaceful. Other owners take a more direct approach when they face stigma and actively deny their pit bulls are inherently aggressive. For instance, some admit their dog is a pit bull while insisting the interplay between the environment and level of obedience training mediates any aggressiveness (Twining et al. 2000). They believe dogs react in the same way people do if they are abused or grow up well adjusted. Since pit bulls show a strong desire to please their owners, they explain how this trait can be exploited and/or not given a proper outlet in the hands of an ignorant or maladaptive owner (Twining et al. 2000). Other times, owners insisted the dog is not aware of how strong they are and can inadvertently cause harm to small children, which some believe is due to inbreeding (Twining et al. 2000).

In other cases, the dog’s aggressive behavior is normalized by comparing it to other dogs who instinctually do the same thing, such as food possession and nipping at new dogs (Twining et al. 2000). Owners of mixed pit bulls who experienced multiple stigma commonly denied biological determinism. As one owner explained, “I never believed in the stigma, it doesn’t matter what kind of dog it is just take care of it.” Another told the story of how she could not stay in her apartment because her dog was a pit bull. In response, she sternly insisted her dog is a “pit bull MIX,” (with boxer) while widening her eyes and tensing her body in frustration.

Owners reported that most people who stigmatize pit bulls were not open to considering arguments on nurture and socialization. Their preference was to remain adhered to the nature argument that supports genetic aggression. Though in one case, a respondent was successful in changing her neighbor's negative perception of her pit bull when she explained she was teaching her children of color to discriminate based on appearance.

Many respondents reported those who stigmatize them bring up stories they hear on the media about pit bulls being naturally dangerous to support their claims. In response, these owners challenge the media because they believe it is motivated to sell stories. Their strategy is to debunk adverse media coverage to educate and change public perception of the pit bull.

#### *Debunking Adverse Media Coverage*

Debunking the media is about educating the public, exposing selective reporting, and sensationalizing dog breeds while ignoring the context of dog attacks (Twining et al. 2000:p15-16). Owners who employ this strategy believe reporters seek to validate popular opinion by selectively covering pit bull attacks and writing in emotionally provocative tones to sell stories and attract viewers (Twining et. el. 2000). Media critics argue for a more critical interpretation to fully understand what happened but also to prevent future attacks (Bradly 2005; Cohen & Richardson. 2002; Delise 2007; Hunter & Brisbin 2007; Schaivone, A. L. 2016).

A young woman expressed annoyance over media reports and insisted, "it has nothing to do with the breed it's how you treat them. Some dogs are just more temperamental, just like people you know?" "I've seen Chihuahuas snap at kids, it's just the owners." An older man believed the breed is "on the edge, you can make them aggressive if you want to but like any dog

you can redirect it.” Another states, “people are put off (by pit bulls) because of the media, what they see and hear they are capable of. That they’re supposedly vicious.”

Several older respondents debunked media coverage from earlier decades beginning with the 1970s. A woman told the story of two 1970s pit bull attacks in Las Vegas that lead to an anti-pit bull campaign. The first victim was a mail woman who was attacked, and the news reported that the owner “sent her pit bull out after her.” The second incident was when a pit bull that came into someone’s house who left their front door open and bit him. They were “well televised events that created public fear” that this woman admitted she felt and believed at the time. Years later, she realized there were constantly pit bull stories on the news but eventually realized lots of dogs are capable of this. She doesn’t trust everything the media says anymore and now has her own pit bull. When someone brings up negative media reports, she tells this story while letting her well- trained pit bull speak for itself. She states, “the news makes it seem like people are scared of them and there’s a stigma, but everywhere I go people wanna pet him. I post pictures of him online and people comment on how cute he is.”

An owner who breeds pit bulls referenced the infamous 1987 Sports Illustrated cover with a teeth-baring pit bull and headline that said, “Beware of this dog.” She explained how her mom became afraid of pit bulls when, “Sports Illustrated came out with one on the cover,” and says she tried to educate her otherwise when she made the decision to breed them.

Another woman referenced Judge Judy a popular court show that debuted in 1996. She claims, “the news and Judge Judy will call them pit bulls instead of just calling them a dog. If it’s a Husky or a German Shepherd they just call it a dog, but if it’s a pit bull they will call it that and

sensationalize the term.” Her description echoes the work of Karen Delise (2007) who did a content analysis of 150 years of dog attack articles in her book titled, “The Pit Bull Placebo.” In this study, she concluded that early news articles on dog attacks as far back as the 1800s reported how and why an incident happened. After many decades, the focus of the article descriptions gradually began to shift from reporting the circumstances of an attack, to the specific breed that did it. The change coincided with the trends of the 1970s, 80s, and 90s that respondents in this study referred to.

Some owners debunk media coverage by breaking down stories, portrayals, and stating facts about the breed. They take negative remarks to heart and make it their responsibility to educate people. Other owners take a less serious approach to stigma and simply laugh at it. In these cases, owners used light humor or actively mocked those who stigmatized them, as I discuss below.

### *Using Humor*

Pit bull owners who use humor to negotiate stigma joke about the “vicious nature” of what they see as their “obviously” docile dog (Twining et al. 2000). The stark contrast of their pit bull’s behavior against these claims are what prompts the use of jokes such as pit bull that is meek or playful. Some owners used humor as a direct response to experiencing stigma, while for others it was a more casual comment in conversation.

In prior research, owners had timid pit bulls they would put spiked collars, goggles, or sunglasses on to joke about the stigma (Twining et al. 2000). In this study, only one owner used humor as a strategy to negotiate stigma. He told the story of walking his pit bull down on the

Freemont Street Experience and a woman had little dog on leash. As a professional dog trainer, he prefaced his story with “the tinder for starting any shit at any dog park are little dogs, they’re not hard to train, and people let little dogs get away with murder.” As he continued, he explained, “this woman picks up her small dog and makes obvious why (because he was walking toward her with a pit bull). She was about 10 feet away from me, so I picked Bandit up and ran the opposite way, making her look like idiot. People were laughing.” In this way, this owner sought to negotiate stigma by directly mocking the stigmatizer and deflect the negativity from his pit bull to her.

#### *Emphasizing Counter-Stereotypical Behavior*

Another strategy pit bull owners used to negotiate stigma was to use visible signifiers to illustrate the media’s false claims. Some pit bull owners tell stories and show photos of their dog that contradicted the stigma such as their sensitivity and attunement to people (Twining et al. 2000: p18). They acknowledge the dog’s powerful nature alongside their docile personality, or cite incidents with vulnerable populations like the disabled, elderly, or very young in which their dogs were sensitive, well-mannered, and instinctive about how to modify their behavior in these situations (Twining et al. 2000:p19).

One owner reported how a stranger began petting their dog without issue, but once they told them the dog was a pit bull the woman suddenly pulled her hand away. The owner told them “it’s the same dog you were petting,” but this was not enough to convince her all was fine. A young mother told me how she would instruct her pit bull to “go watch the baby” on command



and he would go sit by them. She thinks they have a bad rap because they “look scary.” “If I chase my dog with a piece of paper, he will cower and hide.”

A breeder said, “If you think pit bulls are all man-mauling monsters you haven’t met Pebbles yet,” while mentioning photos she had of her pit bull rolling around in the yard. A trainer discussed weekly videos he posts of pit bulls who need homes on social media and says, “many look happy, fun, and playful. They’re kissing me and relaxing in my arms. A lot of people have never seen this.”

Owners who emphasize counter-stereotypical behavior typically model ideal dog manners when making their points such as calmness and obedience, traits desired in all dogs regardless of breed. While some owners use the dog’s behavior to exemplify why the stigma is unwarranted toward their pit bull, others use or avoid certain accessories as an alternative. The choice of how to model a pit bull’s desirable behavior comes down to context and owner preference.

#### *Avoiding Stereotypical Equipment and Accessories*

Stereotypical accessories that support pit bull stigma include large spiked collars, choke collars, pinch collars, muzzles, and heavy chains. Prior research shows that some owners actively avoid using these accessories in an effort to prevent stigma though in some cases, owners temporarily use pinch collars for training purposes (Twining et al. 2000). Additionally, owners avoid muzzles since they reinforce fear, though if a jurisdiction has legislation that requires muzzles, some owners limit their public exposure by walking them at night (Twining et al. 2000).

This research found that some owners prefer a simple harness over a choke collar because they believe it is “better for the dog” and its image. One man said his female pit bull will just, “choke herself out,” and believes the collar is not good for his dog. Another echoed, “choke collars don’t work, she (her pit bull) would just pull through.” Several owners stated a preference for the no pull harness because it makes the dog look less mean and is more effective for training.

In addition to avoiding stereotypical equipment and accessories, several owners in this study purposely dressed their female pit bulls in pink harnesses and collars to suggest their dog is “less aggressive.” One owner bought a matching pink tag, and another said she did not choose the color on purpose. I asked one of these owners if people are afraid of her dog, and she said “yeah that’s why I got pink on her I never take her out without her pink. The pink means girl and less aggressive.” Though owners did not indicate if the “pink strategy” was successful, judging by this owner’s insistence that she does not “take her out without her pink” suggests it has an effect.

While previous research suggests pit bull owners avoid stereotypical accessories that encourage stigma, my data suggests that in addition to avoiding, some owners promote pink accessories they believe counter-act stigma by suggesting their female dog is gentle. Avoiding stereo-typical accessories can help buffer stigma, other strategies seek to actively prevent it by focusing on the dog’s behavior.

### *Taking Preventative Measures*

Preventative measures are behaviors to avoid stigma and include training their dogs not to jump on people and having protocols around children (Twining et al. 2000:p21). Owners in this study also spayed and neutered, did not crop ears, actively socialized their pit bulls, and educated themselves on dog instincts. Some owners with at home businesses like a daycare or an Airbnb inform potential customers of their pit bull before they arrived at their home. Others chose not to go to dog parks because “they don’t trust dogs that much” and think bringing a pit bull around a bunch of dogs and people she does not know is not a good idea.

In many cases, owners take preventative measures when they notice behaviors in their pit bull that can become amplified and/or misinterpreted such as games involving “mouthiness” (tug of war, play biting limbs) (Twining et al. 2000:p21). “Mouthiness” is seen in younger dogs which some owners think is as “cute,” though others insist mouthiness is “not safe behavior for any large dog.”

Another behavior that can be misinterpreted is jumping. An owner told the story about his roommate who used to tap his chest and tell the dog “up,” encouraging him to jump on him with his front paws. The owner told him “not to do that. Imagine if we are in public and he comes up and does that to someone who doesn’t like dogs, especially a pit bull.” Of course, many owners train their dogs to avoid jumping on friends and strangers, but the pit bull owners that I spoke to are especially cautious about this because they know what damaging perceptions it can set off based on the stigma so many people ascribe to them and their dog.

To avoid instances of the dog not recognizing its own strength, some owners put their pit bulls in other rooms in the presence of children and some adults as a preventative measure. Sometimes, owners will keep their dog on a leash, instruct them to sit, and educate the children of how to pet the dog in a non-intimidating way as opposed to going right at the dog with their hands (Twining et al. 2000:p23). Other times, owners have anxious pit bulls and put them in other rooms for the dog's benefit. One of these owners says, "Bentley is scared so when we have a lot of people come over, I would rather put him in the bedroom so it's not a traumatizing experience."

Some owners used negative stories of family members with pit bulls as an example of what not to do with their own dog. One owner told a story of his best friend's uncle getting bit on the arm. His friend reached over his uncle to grab the remote and the dog latched onto him. He states his friend "was a big guy and put the dog up against the wall still attached to his arm and choked him out until he passed out. He had deep punctures as a result which were two millimeters away from an artery. He was told would have bled out before the ambulance got there." He further stated, "it's all in how you raise them, I think my friends' uncle had it trained to where no one could come near him, so the pit bull thought he was trying to attack him."

Owners who take preventative measures want an obedient dog. They are aware of what pit bulls are physically capable of and how they are perceived, so they focus their efforts on intense socialization and obedience. Those who can afford to will enroll their dogs in obedience classes while others will do it informally with advice from the internet. Those who spend time training their dogs said they felt a stronger bond with their dog throughout the experience. They

believe the trust they built enhances the effect of the training. Others take training to an advanced level, and upon mastering obedience, become breed ambassadors.

### *Becoming Breed Ambassadors*

Prior research shows the most public and visible strategy pit bull owners use to manage stigma is becoming a breed ambassador (Twining et al. 2000:p24). These owners seek to model responsible dog ownership by accentuating their pit bull's friendliness, outgoing personalities, and obedience. They experience within breed and pit bull stigma. Some ambassadors are strong and adamant about these and vocalize their disagreement with the stigma, while others take more low-key approaches while acknowledging people are going to have their opinions despite their efforts (Twining et al. 2000;p24). Some ambassadors promote pit bulls when an opportunity presents itself, while others become certified professionals who train and rehabilitate them.

One owner who was about to become a father said he wanted to "write a children's book on how to be a good pit bull owner" that would educate children on dog instincts and behavior. Another owner says aspiring pit bull owners should "think about the discipline, simple stuff, like any other dog love them and they will love you." "My dog is my best friend, my brother, at times he can be an asshole, but it's all about the discipline."

One woman volunteered for an anti-dog fighting and animal cruelty campaign because she "had an interest in pit bulls." Within time, she advanced to a manager, and then became the State Representative for this non-profit organization. A couple I interviewed founded a non-profit organization which provides enrichment training to shelter and rescue dogs (most of which are pit bulls) to help them correct problem behaviors and help them get adopted.

An older woman volunteers at an animal shelter to promote pit bull adoptions and is also a volunteer dog walker for a non-profit organization. This organization promotes “enrichment training,” which is when volunteers come to train the shelter dogs to increase their chances for adoption. A younger woman I interviewed manages the boarding facility for these pit bulls are held in. A breeder supports weight-pulling competitions as an alternative to dog fighting to demonstrate the dog’s strength and abilities.

In a unique case, one owner had his own radio show and followed the entire Michael Vick case as it happened before finally adopting one of the dogs. He said it was like his listeners “followed him through a pregnancy.” Many of them provided him supplies such as food and a car so he could make the trip across several states to pick up the dog.

Breed ambassadors put a lot of effort into negotiating stigma by setting their dog up for success. Some take a more active and passionate approach such as becoming a certified dog trainer, while others take a step back and let the dog speak for itself through obedience. While these strategies were all confirmed from previous research, additional strategies were also found.

#### *Rationalizing, Withdrawal, and Registering*

Pit bull owners in this study used three additional strategies to negotiate stigma that previous research has not identified. These include rationalizing, withdrawing, and registering pit bulls as emotional support animals. I describe these strategies below.

#### *Rationalizing*

Rationalizers break down stigma into components to understand why it is happening while confirming its inaccuracy. They often have an internal dialogue but will also share with

those around them why they believe stigma is occurring. Their goal is not so much to educate those who stigmatize them, but to make sense of why they are doing it for their own peace of mind.

Some rationalizers will tell themselves the stigmatizer is “older,” “grew up in a different time,” has a “good ole boy mentality,” or believe, “it will take more than me and my dog to change their minds.” Other times a rationalizer will blame the other owner’s or other dog’s behavior for how their own pit bull reacts. One explains, “sometimes it’s not just the dog, but the person has bad body language. They’re not communicating well or giving good energy to the dog.” Another told the story of a “little dog going after a pit bull and he just finally had enough and was like dude get away from me, enough already. This happens a lot. Small dog owners don’t take the training or socialization too seriously because the damage won’t be as bad.”

One woman believes, “we live in a society that gets offended easily. Although we are incredibly educated about many things, we don’t want to educate ourselves anymore on this (pit bulls). We don’t want to take the time to get to know something new. Not just with pits, with people who drive trucks not understanding people who like to drive a Prius. Vegans don’t want to understand people who eat meat and vice versa. We want to polarize ourselves.” Another owner also used food in her explanation and says, “I’ve had conversations with people who don’t like pit bulls because they have had bad experiences with them.” I understand, I’ve had bad experiences with a restaurant, and I don’t like the restaurant anymore.”

Some rationalizers believe pit bull stigma is about human instincts toward any large animal that is muscular, has big jaws, and shows any kind of aggression. One owner recalled his

female pit bull mix made a little 3-year-old girl cry while approaching her at the dog park. There were other dogs around her, and he believed “her reaction was purely visual, possibly on an instinctive level. The dog was also at her level physically but then again there were other big dogs around.” As he continued to process the event, he believed the dog’s “muscular stance might make her feel something.”

Other rationalizers will reflect on the breed’s reputation and believe the reason they are experiencing stigma is because of things like back-alley breeders, irresponsible owners, and/or dog fighting. Sometimes they will observe other pit bull owners being stigmatized and state their belief that they got their pit “from the shelter,” the “relationship is still building,” and the “trust isn’t there.”

For other rationalizers, the stigma attracted them to the dog for protection. One transgender owner stated they are, “used to being judged,” and embraces the stigma as part of their identity. Their family chose a pit bull because they do not want outsiders invading their space. A mother and daughter duo who live alone stated that despite not believing in the stigma, they amplify it at their home so that people feel their space is “protected by a vicious dog.”

Rationalizers take in their surroundings to understand why they are experiencing stigma to negotiate it. Most understand they will not change the opinion of others, but they comfort themselves by looking at the bigger picture. Some will outwardly engage their stigmatizers and share their thoughts, though in most cases they keep to themselves and with those who share their view. In other cases, the owner shuts down and quickly removes themselves from the situation to neutralize it without exchanging a word.



## *Withdrawal*

Owners who withdraw negotiate stigma by isolating from other people and/or shutting down emotionally. I primarily observed this strategy at the dog park. Unlike rationalization which involves an active desire to understand why the stigma is happening, withdrawal is a passive approach that seeks to avoid conflict. One states, “I just laugh and ignore them when they’re like that. If we’re at a park and I just met you, I won’t continue to hang out with you if you’re gonna discriminate against my girls, I will just walk away. When it comes to my girl it’s not worth it if they are that ignorant.” Another explained that, “In the past I have said I don’t understand why you believe that way. I’d ask a few questions and sometimes you can educate them, but other times they are so ignorant there is no changing their mind.”

Many owners who withdraw will sulk. Some will open up slightly before shutting down while others are not approachable. One owner, after breaking her pit bull up from a scuffle with a smaller dog, sadly stated in passing that, “everyone freaks when they see it’s a pit bull,” while sinking her head, and walking off into an open space away from other patrons. Another owner whose pit bull instigated a scuffle bolted out of the park despite efforts from other patrons to assure him they understood the dynamics. Others mention how they no longer leash walk their dogs around their neighborhoods because of reactions by neighbors, such as crossing the street to avoid them while giving fearful and sometimes angry looks.

One woman was a regular at the park and had a unique pit bull with little hair. She was not open to talk to me at first but when her dog started playing with mine it helped us break the ice. If a stranger shows trust towards a pit bull, the owner tends to let their guard down. In this

case, when I revealed my researcher status the woman became slightly more trusting. In the short time I spoke with her, she told me she had severe medical issues that were similar to her dog's skin problems. When her friends arrived, they quickly cut our conversation short.

Withdrawal centers around avoiding conflict and uncertainty. Unlike rationalizing, owners who withdraw take an indirect approach. Both withdrawal and rationalizing strategies respond to informal stigma owners experience from others in public. The final strategy I discuss below happens in response to formal stigma expressed through breed controls such as apartment bans, insurance increases, and traveling restrictions. In response, some owners opt to register their pit bull as emotional support dogs. Some owners who do this have legitimate emotional needs, while others covertly aim to protect and keep their pit bulls.

#### *Registering as Emotional Support Dogs*

Emotional support dogs were a common in this study, and owners had different understandings of them. Some defined emotional support dogs as a service dog, while others said they are not. Legally, these are two very different designations. Some also brought up therapy dogs and used all three terms interchangeably. I interviewed the founder of a service and therapy dogs training program who explained the differences. She said she, “used to certify emotional support dogs, but it’s become so muddy the past few years we don’t do it anymore.”

According to the trainer, a service dog requires two years of training and has a “70% failure rate.” This means most dogs never attain this status because they are either too timid or too energetic. There are no restrictions on where a service dog can travel in public. Though she

did not specify how dog temperament is tested, research suggests this process has become more scientific and accurate since it began (Serpell & Hsu 2001; Taylor & Mills 2006).

A therapy dog requires approximately six months of training and is trained specifically to go into certain public places such as hospitals and retirement homes to provide therapy. The facilities that allow them are required to have insurance for the service. Therapy dogs are not permitted in other public places like the grocery store or the library.

An emotional support dog does not require training and can be certified within a day. The purpose of an emotional support dog is to provide comfort its owner. Because of their lack of training, emotional support dogs are not permitted in public places like restaurants, stores, and hotels. A doctor's note is the only requirement to attain an emotional support dog. As one owner explained, "My mom gets stressed out sometimes and says the dogs help, so her doctor signed off on it."

Some owners certified their pit bull as emotional support dogs because they had a medical reason for it, while others did so to explicitly protect them from various breed specific laws. One man I spoke with did it for both reasons. He had two pit bulls and explained, "I have diabetes and my wife has depression and anxiety, so both our pit bulls are registered. The papers also help when we travel (against breed specific legislation) because we stay in RV parks. Colorado has a ban."

Many owners I interviewed live in apartments, condos, or rented a house. One owner who lived in an apartment told me, "they are companion dogs so they can't charge you for [dog]"

rent.” I clarified and asked, “is a companion dog like a service or emotional support dog?” He responded, “yes, they are all the same thing.”

Several homeowners were aware of emotional support access, but said it was unnecessary. A woman had a mentally retarded son who is 25, has a seizure disorder and is on the autism spectrum. She says it’s “like having a giant two-year-old.” Though her pit bull supports her emotionally while she cares for her son, she has no desire or need to register it as an emotional support dog. Another owner who lived with his girlfriend said he was “aware of it, but don’t really have a need for it.” A mom says her pit bulls “are not emotional support dogs but they should be because my husband and I have very stressful jobs.” A breeder and military veteran said he was “interested because he had PTSD but I never pushed the issue.”

Other owners said their pit bulls were “emotional support dogs to me” but did not have official certification. Many of these owners also lived in their own homes. They told stories of enduring health complications their dogs helped them through such as back surgeries, cancer treatments, chronic skin conditions, and drug addiction recovery. In one case, a woman wanted to get her dog officially registered because she was lonely after she recently euthanized her other dog. A man with terminal cancer said his pit bull helps him endure his physical pain.

One owner was strongly against emotional support dogs and expressed within breed stigma. She believes, “people just want to take their pets indoors. They’re doing it just to take it on planes and it’s bogus. It’s really bad for people who need it, and these people are doing it just to cut corners.” She acknowledged emotional support status helps pit bulls remain with their owners but believes this strategy still exploits legitimate service dogs.

One owner admitted he initially went to certify his pit bull as an emotional support dog to bypass legislation and take him in public, but during the process realized he qualifies for it because he is, “pretty fucked up.” Another believes pit bulls do not make good service dogs because “they are not intelligent and too submissive.”

### *Conclusion*

Pit bull owners experience and negotiate stigma in a variety of ways which are influenced by individual owners and the context they find themselves in. I suggest four types of stigma an owner can experience including; pit bull stigma, multiple stigma, no pit bull stigma, and within breed stigma. Prior research also found eight common strategies pit bull owners use to negotiate. I also observed each of these stigma negotiation strategies including; passing pit bulls off as other breeds, denying biological determinism, debunking adverse media coverage, using humor, emphasizing counter-stereotypical behavior, avoiding stereotypical accessories, taking preventative measure, or becoming breed ambassadors (Twining et. al. 2000). I found three additional negotiation strategies including; rationalizing, withdrawing, and registering pit bulls as emotional support animals. Owners can express any or all strategies depending on context and preference.

## CHAPTER 4: OWNERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS

This chapter addresses circumstances that explain pit bull ownership. For millennia, humans have domesticated dogs to guard, track, hunt, and/or farm based on their physicality and temperament (Clutton-Brock 1999; Delise 2002; Delise 2007; Franklin 1999; Herzog 2006; Vila, Maldonado, & Wayne 1999). The Enlightenment and Industrial eras revolutionized the role of dogs in human life when they evolved from rural worker, to urban companion (Franklin 1999; Thomas 1983). These trends occurred over several hundred years and heightened with the rise of the world's first dog register in 1884, The American Kennel Club (AKC), which created standards for specific dog breeds (AmericanKennelClub.org Editors 2018c).

The post-industrial era further changed the human-dog relationship as marital, family, neighborhood, and community structures were being radically transformed (Franklin 1999; Serpell 1996). In 1967, those who preferred dogs over people were considered social outcasts, incapable of relating with others (Franklin 1999; Serpell 1996). By the 1990s, this attitude changed as people realized animals offered companionship to remedy loneliness, comforted the sick, replaced deceased partners, and became surrogate children, friends, siblings, and other loved ones (Franklin 1999:84). Today, a close relationship with animals is considered healthy (Franklin 1999).

Though early philosophers and sociologists argued animals react by instinct, lack an independent personality, and are “dumb machines” (Descartes 1646-1649/1976; Mead 1907), today's dogs have been elevated to anthropomorphized commodities, friends, children, and “fur babies” with an authentic “core self” (Greenebaum 2004; Irvine 2004; Sanders 1990; Sanders

1993). Owners are now “parents” who together with their dogs engage in impression management to shape community, family, friendships, and personal identity (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988; Belk, 1996; Belk, 1988; Cain, 1985; Gillespie, Leffler, & Lerner, 2002; Greenebaum 2004; Goffman 1959; Hirschman, 1994; Sanders, 1999; Veevers, 1985). Pit bull owners reflect these socio-historical changes.

Like all pet enthusiasts, pit bull owners vary in appearance, personality, level of education, social status, and motivation behind their choice of pet. Some diligently train their pit bulls by attending obedience classes, and/or watching YouTube and Animal Planet videos using either “human centric” or “dog-centric” methods (Greenebaum 2004). Choice of training method corresponds with how the owner has constructed the status of themselves and the dog such as “owner/masters” or “guardian” (Sanders 1993; Sanders 1999; Greenebaum 2004; Irvine 2004).

“Traditional dominance-based” training or the “Koehler Method” is a “human-centric” approach to dog training that places the dog in a subordinate position and owners in superior position as “master” (Greenebaum 2004; Koehler 1962). As attitudes toward the human-animal relationship evolved in post-industrialism, a newer “reward-based” and “dog-centric” approach emerged, viewing owners as “guardians” and “companions” that seek balance between human and dog desires and needs (Franklin 1999; Greenebaum 2004; Pryor 2002; Serpell 1996).

Many pit bull owners have had dogs and/or pit bulls all their lives, while others have not. Some are single “parents” who are solely responsible for the dog, while others share co-ownership. I have identified three main types of pit bull owners; rookies, serial owners, and family owners.

### *Rookie Owners*

Though most owners in this study have owned dogs before, I call owners of their first pit bull “rookie owners” (AKA “rookies”). Most rookies are young, and some grew up with their current pit bull, while others acquired their pit bull more recently. Older rookies were generally more confident and knowledgeable of dog instincts than younger rookies such as being territorial and chasing. Many rookie owners were white and told stories of encouraging older family members to attain a pit bull.

One young rookie owner said she was, “ready for a dog” and chose a pit bull, “after watching Pit Bulls and Parolees.” She was inspired by watching abused pit bulls get a second chance at life and impressed by their resilience. The show taught her that former fighting pit bulls can learn to trust humans again and become regular pets.

An older rookie identified her daughter as her instigator for adopting her pit bull “My daughter begged me for a pit bull for a Christmas present for months, so I gave in and we adopted one.” Another just took an opportunity that presented itself as she was “ready for a puppy” at the same time his friend’s pit bull was having a litter. Others seem not to have specifically sought out a pit bull, but just “ended up” with one when they adopted it from a shelter, rescued it from an abusive owner, or found it on the street.

### *Serial Owners*

I call owners of two or more pit bulls consecutively “serial owners.” Serial owners express more security in their breed choice than rookies because of their experiences with pit bulls. Prior research on family status and dog ownership suggests some dynamics increase their



attachment to their pets including, but not limited to, never being married, divorced, widowed, and empty nesters (Albert et al. 1988; Blouin 2012). Several older serial owners supported this pattern when they reported their pit bulls are like their “second stage of kids” since their human kids are grown. Indeed, some owners had one pit bull for a few years then acquired another to remedy “only child syndrome.”

In contrast to rookie owners, most serial owners in my sample were racial minorities and encouraged younger family members to attain a pit bull. Most serial owners also “grew up with pit bulls” and/or large dogs so choosing one they say “came natural” to them. Many adopted their pit bulls, while some bought their first one and adopted and/or bred the rest. Some had to euthanize a previous pit bull, so they acquired another one as a replacement.

#### *Family Owners*

Some owners said their pit bull was owned by multiple people, a pattern that I call “family ownership.” These owners were unique, made up of a mixture of rookie and serial owners including couples, or parents with children. Some family owners claimed the dog was owned by a group, while others said the dog was their parent’s and they were “dog-sitting.” There were more rookie family owners than serial, and the dog had often been given as a gift.

One rookie bought his pit bull puppy on Craigslist the day before Christmas for his kids and they named it together. Another bought his pit bull for his girlfriend as a birthday present. He says they, “co-own it, but it’s definitely her pup.” A couple had a foster owner bring a pit bull to their house and they decided to adopt him. A serial family owner said his parents “adopt when they can,” while a father-daughter described their pit bull as belonging to the daughter. The

daughter described how her dad “spoils” the dog like a grandchild, to which the father replied with a prideful voice, “she’s a baby, like a one-year old human, she can get happy, pretty, feminine, and her ears will go back.”

Despite their differences, most rookie, serial, and family owners said they were attracted to pit bulls because of their “loyalty.” Some elaborated on pit bull temperament to support why they chose one while others commented on their physicality and/or mental acuity. In other cases, the owner’s own attraction to the dog influenced their decision to acquire a pit bull. The remainder of this chapter explores how different owners became attracted to pit bulls and the various ways they acquired one.

#### *Attraction to Pit Bulls*

People choose their dogs for various reasons including age, size, color, and breed (Weiss, Miller, Mohan-Gibbons, Vela 2012). Physical appearance is one of the top reasons why people choose their dogs, and research suggests people tend to prefer small dogs and dogs with lighter coats (Brown, W. P., Davidson, J. P., & Zuefle 2013; Deleeuw 2008; Lepper, Kass, and Hart 2002). People also prefer puppies, purebreds, and dogs who are healthy, playful, and have good energy (Weiss et al. 2012).

Two broad themes capture why my respondents choose pit bulls; (1) the dog’s traits and (2) the owner’s own disposition. Specific dog traits included; physicality, mental capacity, and temperament, while specific owner traits included a desire to save dogs and that they are “dog people” who grew up with dogs and want them around. Most owners reported a combination of

these traits attracted them to pit bulls, though dog traits of physicality and temperament were most common. This section explores these concepts in more detail.

### *Dog Traits*

Many owners said their main attraction was to how pit bulls look, their intelligence, gentle nature, and loyalty. I broadly characterize these traits as physicality, mental acuity, and temperament. Physicality involves visual appearance and stamina, while mental acuity describes astuteness and ease of trainability. Temperament characterizes pit bull behavior with people and other animals.

### *Physicality*

Owners talked about being attracted to several physical traits they associate with pit bulls, including their strength, tenacity, protective nature, size, short hair, large heads, stocky body, broad shoulders, and big smiles. Rookie owners often talked first about their attraction to their dog's smile and "colors," while serial owners most typically highlighted their attraction to their strong, stocky, and muscular "build" and their potential for "protection." Most rookies and serial owners were clearly not attracted to dogs with cropped ears, feeling that such artificial grooming changed their natural look.

Both rookie and serial owners expressed affection for pit bull's squared off heads and faces, size and build, happy visage, short hair, and easy disposition. As one rookie described, "their faces are adorable, they always have big block heads and it's adorable because they have big smiles. They're really playful and I like the different colors they come in, I think they're pretty." Another said, "I like their physical features and body style, how they're built. They have

broad shoulders, a stocky little body, and happy faces. I always thought they were adorable.” A third explained, “I got a pit bull because my sister-in-law has six of them and they don’t shed so she likes them. I’m not put off by their bad reputation because my sister recommended them.” Another believes, “in general they’re just a good all-around family dog, they’re not huge or super small, are incredibly loyal, and have short coats which are great for grooming.”

A breeder and serial owner said he was attracted to the dog’s “build and style,” which inspired him to begin his own bloodline. He states,

I loved the dog but when I stood next to it, it was so small. It wasn’t something I liked. So I began breeding my own pit bulls to give them the same look but on a different frame. I liked the look, not the tininess, they are very muscular and toned, but it’s deceiving when you’re next to one. It’s like where did the dog go?

This breeder “grew up with pit bulls” during the 1980s when the stigma originated. His claim of not liking the “tininess of the dog,” is significant because it suggests the stigma originated when pit bulls were been “15 to 16 inches tall and roughly 45 pounds.” In other words, the assumption has been that pit bulls are large dogs when in reality, they did not start off that way. This breeder states he now breeds his pit bulls between, “21 to 22 inches tall and between 90 to 130 pounds,” and calls them “XL pit bulls.” This current size (of his blood line) is the standard that pit bulls of the past have been judged. This larger size confirms stigma narratives today and are assumed to have been present when the stigma began.

### *Gender Distinctions*

Women and men identify with their dogs differently from one another. Prior research shows that women tend to identify with their dogs as a caregiver especially if they have their own children (Ramirez 2006). Additionally, they are most often attracted to a dog's personality and ground their relationship with pets in intimacy (Ramirez 2006). This study was not able to confirm these findings but did suggest that several women were attracted to pit bulls for protection. This finding could be because this study focused specifically on pit bulls, not dogs in general.

One woman says, "the stigma attracted me to them as a guard dog." A mother claimed, "I did not work to debunk myths in this environment because it was my home and I did not want intruders. Their deep throaty barks create a lot of protection for our home and they are protective of our children. People are less likely to break in." Another woman had a small dog and was getting harassing phone calls at her house while her husband was working swing shift. She said, "it was unnerving, I wanted a larger dog."

Prior research on men and pet ownership suggests that men tend to identify as friends, exercise partners, and "coaches" for their dogs, rather than a caregiver (Ramirez 2006). They are most often attracted to appearance, and having a dog is considered a masculine display based on the common phrase "man's best friend" (Ramirez 2006). Though I was not able to confirm these findings in this study, I did find that some men were attracted to pit bulls because they did not want a smaller dog. Like with women, the difference in findings may be attributed to studying one particular dog breed.

In several cases, these men went to the pound and it was “either a pit bull or a Chihuahua.” One man grew up in the 1980s said he was attracted to pit bulls as the “dog of the era,” and described them as “tough.” “It was the beginning of the hip hop era and I grew up on the east coast where that started. I was a young boy and it was a cool thing to be, it was the dog of that culture.”

### *Ear Cropping*

Veterinary professionals consider ear cropping a “medically unnecessary surgery” designed to alter the appearance by amputating half of a dog’s ear that tends to fold over so that they stand at attention (Henderson & Horne 1993; Mills, von Keyserlingk, & Niel 2016; Rosser 2004). This procedure has been done to prevent ear damage and infection during hunting or fighting, though critics argue there is no evidence to support this

Nearly all owners disagreed with ear cropping, including breeders who said they had the procedure done to meet breed requirements. Owners preferred intact ears because it is “cute,” “soft,” and “natural.” One owner who bought his pit bull from a friend and breeder said, “I don’t like cropping, a lot of breeders do that as puppies. My buddies didn’t clip any of them.” Most owners who had pit bulls with cropped ears said they adopted the dog that way and “wished they still had them.”

Owners opposed ear cropping because they are “unnatural,” the procedure is “mean,” and there’s “no reason to do it.” A breeder described how she cropped her dog’s ears as an obligation to her breed register. She says, “we had ours done, but hated doing it, it’s so painful for them.” A serial owner said, “my pit bull is uncropped because my wife didn’t want the mean look.”

In essence, pit bull owners believe cropped ears amplify stigma because it makes them look mean and supports the argument for genetic aggression. Though one owner, who has been breeding since the 1980s, stated she was required to crop their ears to meet breed standards, a review of current standards of the AKC, and UKC for all “pit bull” breeds (American Pit Bull Terrier, American Staffordshire Terrier, etc.) stated their ears can be “natural or cropped” or do not specifically state they must be cropped (AmericanKennelClub.org Editors 2019a; AmericanKennelClub.org Editors 2019b; United Kennel Club Editors 2019a; United Kennel Club Editors. 2019b). This change in standard may be from efforts by breed registers to help change the aggressive image of pit bulls and/or because a new generation of owners have emerged with a perception that contradicts the stigma.

#### *Mental Acuity*

While some owners reported their attraction to the look of the pit bull as their motivation for attaining one, others reported their dog’s intelligence. Cognition research shows that dogs are capable of understanding human social cues such as pointing and facial expressions, can solve means-end tasks, understand hundreds of words, as well as physical properties of objects (i.e. one solid object cannot pass through another) (Gácsi, Miklósi, Varga, Topál, & Csányi 2004; Howell, Toukhsati, Conduit, & Bennett 2013; Kaminski, Call, Fischer 2004; Miklósi & Soproni 2006; Pattison, Miller, Rayburn-Reeves, & Zentall 2010; Pongrácz, Miklósi, Kubinyi, Gurobi, Topál, & Csányi 2001; Range, Hentrup, & Virányi, 2011). Since prior research did not focus on a particular breed, I was unable to locate cognition research specific to pit bulls.

I was able to find general information on pit bull cognition on the AKC and UKC websites. The AKC describes the Staffordshire Bull Terrier as “clever,” and the American Staffordshire Terrier as “smart” (AmericanKennelClub.org Editors 2019c; AmericanKennelClub.org Editors 2019d). The United Kennel Club describes both the American Pit Bull Terrier and the Staffordshire Bull Terrier as having a, “high level of intelligence” (United Kennel Club Editors. 2019a; United Kennel Club Editors. 2019b).

Mental acuity was the least common dog trait owners said attracted them to pit bulls, and it was mentioned more by serial owners, breeders, and trainers especially, than rookies. Most owners characterized pit bulls as being “easily trainable” as sign of high intelligence, and the most common word used to describe their intelligence was “smart.” It was common for owners to initially report a physical attraction to pit bulls but said they learned of their intelligence after interacting with them.

One rookie owner said, “I think they are beautiful and resilient, sweet, and smart.” Another states, “they are intelligent and trained to be police and service dogs, they can be trained to be a family pet.” A serial owner echoes this with, “they’re very intelligent dogs, you just have to know how to work with them.”

One breeder began with pit bulls but was dissatisfied with them, so he created a new breed. He states, “I was inspired by the look of a pit bull but wanted a different temperament. Pit bulls are more intelligent though, they require more mental stimulation.” Another breeder said he began breeding pit bulls because he felt they are smart enough to “train them and get them



rehabilitate veterans with PTSD.” A third says, “they are a misunderstood breed, they’re more obedient and disciplined than anything.”

Like many dog owners, a dog’s ability to communicate with humans and follow their commands is how their intelligence is measured. An obedient, trainable, and disciplined dog is equated to a smart dog, while one that does not follow human commands is not. This measure of intelligence may be criticized by some for being anthropocentric but is a cornerstone to a successful human-dog relationship, especially to trainers. As one trainer puts it, “I help train the dogs and their owners.”

When taken together, more owners were primarily attracted to the aesthetic appeal of pit bulls and upon interacting with them learned of their intelligence. In other cases, owners who researched the breed before attaining one had an awareness of the dog’s intellect. They typically reported using the internet to research their desired breed through less formal sites and blogs but also more official sites like the AKC and UKC. The purpose of researching the dog’s intellect was the same for learning about their affect. Owner’s wanted to assure they were getting a dog that would fit their lifestyle.

### *Temperament*

Though literature on dog temperament spans across many disciplines, including anthrozoology, psychology, and social policy studies, this field began with Ian Pavlov who was the first to study basic types of canine temperament (Jones and Gosling 2005: Pavlov 1906). Many studies used purebred puppies who were potential guide and police dogs as well as shelter puppies to try and match the right dog to the right owner (Jones and Gosling 2005). This narrow

focus was criticized over the years by psychologists and veterinarians as well as the design methods to test these premises, resulting in a more systematic approach to enhance reliability and validity (De Palma, Viggiano, Barillari, Palme, Dufour, Fantini, & Natoli 2005; Serpell & Hsu 2001; Taylor & Mills 2006). More recent studies have expanded to study genetics and opinions of multiple owners in the same household (Jakuba, Polcová, Fedáková, Kottferová, Mareková, Fejsáková, & Ondrašovič 2013; Serpell & Duffy 2014).

Though prior research does not specify pit bull temperament, I was able to find general information on the AKC and UKC websites. The AKC describes the Staffordshire Bull Terrier as “brave and tenacious,” and the American Staffordshire Terrier as “confident and good natured” (AmericanKennelClub.org Editors 2019c; AmericanKennelClub.org Editors 2019d). The United Kennel Club describes the American Pit Bull Terrier as having a, “willingness to work,” and the Staffordshire Bull Terrier as having, “indomitable courage, high tenacity, affection, quietness, and trustworthy stability” (United Kennel Club Editors. 2019a; United Kennel Club Editors. 2019b).

The most common word my informants used to describe pit bull temperament was “loyal.” Other common words and phrases were, “resilient, lazy, snuggly, big babies, meatballs, playful, and sweet.” A serial owner explains, “pit bulls are very emotional dogs, it doesn’t matter what you want them to do, love a child, kill another dog, they just want you to be happy.”

Another observed that, “most are eager to please their owners, and don’t like them being upset.” One owner exclaimed that, “pit bulls are ridiculously lovable, I’ve never had more kisses

from a dog who wants to sit on your lap more than a pit bull, they're big love bugs." Another owner agreed, characterizing them as "big puppies that just wanna cuddle and sit on your lap."

Several others talked specifically about their attraction to pit bulls' gentle nature toward adults and children. All parents emphasized the protective nature of their pit bull around their young children claiming, "they won't let anyone or another dog near them." One woman with a small child and a toddler said she got her pit bull at the same time her toddler was born, and they are the same age. When I asked if she had any fear over her kids being around pit bulls, and she responded, "no, he's a good boy, he's very gentle and timid." She says she can tell her pit bull to "go watch the baby," and "go get your kids," insisting the dog will do this on command.

Another mom says her pit bull is, "gentle and loyal with our kids, she lets them lay on her and pull her ears." I also talked with older children walking their dog who explained how their pit bulls are very good with their younger siblings. As one parent-owner summed up, "Pit bulls are loyal. I've grown up with a lot of different dogs and they just have a love about them."

The lack of current scholarly literature specific to pit bull temperament could be the result of a lack of interest or assumption that pit bulls are "aggressive" due to common stigma narratives. At most, studies describe pit bull capability as "all-purpose dogs" meant to perform everything from bull baiting to babysitting (Delise 2002; Delise 2007; Stahlkuppe 2000). In this study, owners described pit bull traits on the softer end of the spectrum (snuggly, big babies, love bugs) while the AKC and UKC covered the entire range (brave, tenacious, affectionate). The dominant trait used to describe pit bull temperament may be the result of the person who owns it.

### *Owner Traits*

Historically, pit bull owners have tended to be young, male, socially isolated, suffer from anxiety and low self-esteem, and involved in drug and gangs in some way (Burrows & Fielding 2005; Hearne 1991; Cohen and Richardson 2002; Delise 2002; Twining et al. 2000). Some studies suggest people acquire pit bulls because it enhances their status and provides an outlet to project subconscious aggression (Maher & Pierpoint 2011; Miloski 2007) but others disagree.

Personality studies found that people who prefer “aggressive” type dogs are less agreeable and highly neurotic, so their preferences for these dogs is more about personality than status (Egan and MacKenzie 2012; Miklósi, Turcsán, & Kubinyi 2014). While prior research on pit bull ownership supports the ideas rooted in the stigma, this study suggests a new generation of owners has emerged. Many are older (both serial and rookie owners), there are more women, come off as confident in their choice to own a pit bull.

Some owners in this study chose pit bulls because they wanted to save the dog from adversity, while others grew up with pit bulls and did not put much thought into the choice. Saving a pit bull was about “making a difference” in their stigmatized reputation while growing up with a pit bull made choosing one a normal course of action. The following sections explore these traits in more detail.

### *Saviors*

Saviors are motivated to own pit bulls either because of the stigma or because they felt the dog was in need in some other way. They express a sense of responsibility toward them and believed they had both an emotional and physical capacity to take on a pit bull. Many saviors are

bothered by how many pit bulls are euthanized at shelters every day, so they choose to adopt them or volunteer to help them by fostering or training them for others.

One savior who volunteers at a shelter says, “I think pit bulls are the kind of dog that needs somebody. People aren’t afraid of Pugs and Chihuahuas, but afraid of pit bulls, so I figured I’m not afraid of them, I should work with them.” She elaborated, saying “everyone loves an underdog story, and I like to be needed. This type of dog needs me.” Another volunteer who adopted her pit bull states, “We (she and her husband) had the patience and love to give them and we wanted to make a difference by giving the underdog a chance.”

Another savior described how she, “wanted to stand up for the underdog. He (her pit bull) was very insecure and didn’t have self-confidence. He was cowering in the corner at the shelter and I wanted to help a dog like that.” Another savior spoke about her sister who found an emaciated pit bull roaming the streets and described it as “the most amazing creature I’ve ever met” when she watched it resiliently return to health and show love and affection. After meeting her sister’s dog and seeing the media “pick on pit bulls,” she decided to adopt one herself.

A serial owner who grew up with a pit bull in the 1980s recalled watching the media portrayed them in a negative light but knew he had a “great dog.” He claims, “that’s when I realized the media is bullshit, if it bleeds it leads. They’re just here to sell stories and pit bulls make a great story. That’s when I knew this is the dog for me.” He has owned 19 pit bulls since then.

Another serial owner and professional trainer tells his clients about his first pit bull “Petey” that he regrettably euthanized out of ignorance. He told the story of misinterpreting his

pit bull's jealous nipping and "snapping" at his other dog as a lost cause, so he surrendered him to the pound. "I didn't introduce them correctly, there was no training or crating. A little tweaking and there could have been harmony. Especially for pits, they learn fast, are loyal, and killing each other for their masters. I surrendered Petey knowing what was gonna happen to him. I think about it and get really sad. I tell people and my clients, "the Petey story," don't do what I did."

Another savior I interviewed adopted a pit bull from the infamous Michael Vick case of 2007, when authorities broke up an elaborate dog-fighting ring, "Bad Newz Kennels," in his Surry County, Virginia home. Of the 66 dogs rescued, 55 of them were pit bulls (USA Today Editors 2007; Pickens 2013; Roberts 2007). He says, "I was horrified by the case, and asked a representative from Best Friends Animal Society if any of these dogs were going to be up for adoption." After a year of rehabilitation, background checks, and in-home simulations, this savior owner and others were able to take these pit bulls, nicknamed "Vicktory Dogs" home with them.

A 2015 documentary film titled, "The Champions" featured these "Vicktory Owners" to display how well the dogs were doing in their new environments. As this savior owner told me his story, he followed up by talking about his support group, who followed him through the waiting period and adopting requirements, providing him with material needs to see the process through. He says, "It was like they followed me through a pregnancy, everyone wanted to be a part of it."

Many saviors are motivated by pit bull stigma to “step up to the plate” and do what they believe other dog owners cannot, adopt a dog in need that may make the experience of dog ownership more challenging. They seek to “fix” the stigma by being the best dog owner they can be and let their healthy relationship with their pit bull speak for itself when in the public eye. Other saviors become pit bull owners because they found one in need, which may be from the vast amount of pit bulls who are abandoned for not meeting the standards of breeders and/or dog fighters. This would speak to the “breed bias cycle” which is currently characterized by an abundance of homeless pit bulls (Delise 2002; Delise 2007).

### *Grew Up With*

Research suggests that childhood experiences shape adult relationships to animals and many people who grew up with pets acquired them as adults (Blouin 2008 and 2012; Serpell 1981). Those who grew up with dogs have also been shown to be more social than those who did not grow up with pets and are less likely to have pet-related allergies (Nagasawa & Ohta 2010; Perzanowski, Rönmark, Platts-Mills, & Lundbäck, 2002). Owners who grew up with pit bulls or large dogs all their lives sought their pit bulls based on familiarity. Most of these owners said their parents had pit bulls and a few even said their grandparents did as well. In one case, an owner had an uncle who had a pit bull and recalled how amazing she thought he was when she was little.

Many owners who grew up with pit bulls are in their 30s or older and say, “choosing a pit bull was normal for me, my family has always liked dogs.” One woman explained, “I had my first pit bull when I was younger, she was a family pit. My first time owning one was eight years

ago, he turned eight yesterday. I got my second pit about four years ago.” Another man said, “I’ve always owned pit bulls. My family has owned dogs since before I was born. We’ve owned every breed known to man.” One owner said he had pit bulls in his house “ever since the eighties” and described his childhood pit bull being blamed for an attack on a mail woman. He adamantly argued it never happened but despite this, his dog was quarantined by animal control. He claimed he knew the media was “full of shit,” when he saw a reporter take a photo of his dog “angled up from the ground, making him look bigger” while he was in his cage to attach to his news story.

Another owner had a pit bull during the 1980s and admitted that he was attracted to the “tough guy appeal” that was pervasive then. But, he emphasized, “I never had a desire to fight my pit bull, only to enjoy him as a regular pet. I was a young boy, and it (being a pit bull owner) was a cool thing to be in that cultural era. I grew up with different dogs and they (pit bulls) just have a lot to love about them.”

Although not all respondents who grew up with dogs are serial pit bull owners, those who grow up in general around dogs tend to lean less toward saving and take a more reserved stance. Those who lived through prior stigmas and since the beginning of the 1980s pit bull stigma tend to be less reactive and defensive when discussing this topic, which points toward differences in owner affect.

### *Acquiring a Pit Bull*

People adopt and buy dogs for various reasons, though the most popular is physical appearance (Brown et al. 2013; Weiss et al. 2012), along with temperament, size, breed, color,



health, whether they are purebred, and whether they are spayed or neutered (Bir, Widmar, & Croney 2017; Lepper, Kass, & Hart 2002; Posage & Bartlett 1998; Protopopova & Wynne 2014; Svoboda & Hoffman 2015; Weiss et al. 2012). Adoption is the most common acquisition method, though women and people with higher socioeconomic status prefer this more than men and those from a lower socioeconomic status (Bir, Widmar, & Croney 2017). People who choose to adopt talk about wanting to help the dogs, while those who chose to buy from a breeder choose not to adopt because the pound does not have pure bred or does not have the kind of dog they are looking for (Bir, Widmar, & Croney 2017; Maddalena, Zeidman, & Campbell 2012).

In this study, pit bull owners first attained their dogs through one of five methods: (1) adopting them from the shelter or pet events, (2) finding and rescuing them, (3) the dog found them, (4) they bought it from a breeder or bred their own, or (5) the dog was given to them by a friend, family member, or someone they worked with such as a co-worker or employee.

Some serial owners attained their pit bulls through multiple means such as buying one and adopting or rescuing the others. Most owners have one or two pit bulls at a time, though breeders will typically have more. The most reported was 15 at once by a breeder most of which were puppies. Breeders reported buying their first pit bull and breeding the rest to their own standards. The following sections explore in more detail the various ways pit bull owners came to adopt their dogs.

### *Adoption and Fostering*

Prior research shows a typology of people who adopt their pets: the planners, the impartial, and the smitten (Irvine 2004). Planners have a specific idea of what they want in size,

breed, sex, temperament and age while impartial prioritize a “good match” based on personality (Irvine 2004:92). The smittens are impartial, and chose animals based on an “elusive” and “irresistible pull” to a particular dog (Irvine 2004:92). Another study found that appearance, personality, and how the dog behaves with the potential owner are the top reason people chose their dogs when adopting (Weiss, Miller, Mohana-Gibbons, and Vela 2012). Adopters value information on animals by staff members more than cage cards especially about health and behavior (Weiss, Miller, Mohana-Gibbons, and Vela 2012).

Dog pounds are typically overflowing with pit bulls and Chihuahuas, so it was common for owners in this study to report adopt pit bulls from animal shelters. Many owners who adopted from shelters said they were told the dog was a Boxer and/or Labrador mix. This supports previous research that says shelters workers often lie about breed to help them get adopted (Hoffman et al. 2001). Some owners entered the pound without expectation while others viewed the shelter’s website for photos and bios of the dogs to have a sense for what to expect upon arrival. Others said the “breed was insignificant.”

Relatedly, other owners adopted their pit bulls at charity pet events, such as “Barktoberfest,” “Hearts Alive,” and “Petapalooza.” During some of these events, owners reported their dog was given to them for free because so many pit bulls need homes, and shelters are running out of space. Rescue event organizers also have websites and social media accounts which they use to help expose the dogs through photos and videos and increase adoption rates. If media visibility does not help, volunteers will walk the dogs around public places such as shopping centers to maximize their exposure and chances of getting adopted.

The dog's age is also a factor in adoption decisions. As one owner who adopted an adult dog explained, "everyone wants a puppy, they're the most adoptable. There are so many (adult dogs) in the shelters and rescues that are overlooked." An owner who adopted a puppy admitted, "we were being selfish, and they (puppies) go fast (at the pound) so we adopted one." The bottom line, however, is that the stigma pit bulls carry means that far too many of them at any age remain without homes.

This animal shelter overflow also encourages people to become foster pit bull owners to help alleviate the crowding. For this project, I classify those who foster pit bulls as owners, because they have similar experiences as standard owners, since their foster status is not visually obvious. Fostering involves temporarily adopting a dog while a permanent home is being sought. Fostering not only alleviates over-crowding in animal shelters but provides the dog a home environment to enhance their well-being, freeing them from life in a cage. In some cases, foster dogs have medical needs which require consistent care, making foster owners with veterinary knowledge in high demand.

In one case, a trainer who has owned 19 pit bulls throughout his life said, "most of my dogs are (what he calls) foster fails. I adopted them to train and adopt out but ended up keeping them because they were such great dogs. I used to tell my clients never adopt from the pound, you don't know what you're gonna get, but I realized shelter dogs are the best dogs, they live longer, and there's no bottle-neck gene pool that magnifies the genetic inheritance of hip dysplasia. They are so loyal they know you saved them from death." In this case, this owner sought to foster dogs, train them, and help find them homes. But many times, as he indicates,

they were “foster fails,” meaning his intention was to foster them but ended up adopting them himself after he realized “what great dogs they were.”

Adopting from the shelter or a charity event was the most common route to pit bull ownership. Potential owners visit the shelter with the intent on adopting, though at pet events this is one of several reasons to attend such to network or engage in past time. In these cases, some owners will use “adopt” and “rescue” to describe the same situation. In other instances, owners found their pit bull unexpectedly, and made the decision to rescue them from a harmful situation.

#### *Found and Rescued*

Owners who found their pit bulls said they were roaming the street, abandoned in hotels, houses, and apartments, or hiding under debris. Others said they “rescued” their pit bull from a previous owner who was abusing it or was going to take it to the pound, or a breeder who was going to euthanize it for not meeting breed standards. A back packer and found his pit bull near some train tracks. He says he chose the dog “based on availability, not breed.”

Several owners who found their pit bulls suspected they were former bait dogs because they had heavy scaring on and around the dog’s face and body. The dogs were guarded, fearful, would cry often, avoid eye contact, and were emaciated. One owner was walking his two dogs in the desert when his pit bull began whining and scratching at a piece of wood partly covering a ditch. When he went to investigate, he found another pit bull hiding under it, covered in open bite wounds, scars, and suffering from emaciation. He believes that were it not for his pit bull, he would have never found her. Eventually his pit bull helped the frightened dog trust that it was okay to come out of the ditch and he decided to keep her and nurse her back to health.

Others found their pit bulls scavenging and running around a trailer park, parking lots, or rummaging through garbage cans in back alleys. One owner was driving in her SUV with her two young children through an alley and saw a malnourished pit bull on the side of the road scavenging for food. She said, “I don’t know what made me stop cause that’s not like me, but I rolled down the window and whistled at him. He didn’t seem skittish, like his ears perked up and he was happy to see me, like I was an old friend. He came over to the car passenger seat and I was not scared at all. I got out, he let me pet him, and then followed me to the rear of the car where I let him in. He crawled past the kids and licked them, came to the front seat, and went to sleep.”

Owners who rescued their pit bulls off the street all reported how thankful the dog appeared from being rescued and how adamantly they protect them both in their homes and in public. Though most people who found their pit bulls on the street describe the experience as rescuing the dog, other owners describe it as the dog finding them.

#### *Pit Bull Found Them*

A few owners described getting their pit bulls when the dog “found them” and “came out of nowhere.” One young owner was longboarding on the streets in California with two of his friends when a pit bull began chasing him. He said he was scared at first because the dog was large and he thought he was going to bite him, but when he looked back, his tail was wagging. While in route, one of his friends went right, the other went left, and the owner kept going straight on his board. The dog chose to follow him as he continued down the street. Before he got a chance to “kick it in the face,” the owner stated the dog pounced on him and began licking his

face with excitement. He and his friends posted signs to try and find to owner to no avail, and he said, “that was five years ago, the rest was history.”

Other owners claim the dog “found them” when they went to the pound. They described the experience of entering the pound and being faced with so many friendly pit bulls attempting to engage them through their cages. After socializing with several dogs in a separate room, most of them pit bulls, these owners deduced that they adopted a pit bulls because it “found them.”

Several foster owners also described this scenario. Owners who reported their dog found them were rare in comparison to other attainment methods. These experiences could be interpreted as the owner finding the dog, but the owners told their stories to emphasize the sense that the dog played an active role in approaching and showing affection to them. Many felt there was some sort of larger force at play, like they were destined to be chosen by the dog.

#### *Bought and/or Bred Their Own*

Another common method was buying the dog from a breeder and/or breeding their own. Many Las Vegas pit bull owners that I talked with who bought their dog from a breeder said their dogs came from outside Nevada. Most came from California, though one bought his from Hawaii. Many owners who bought locally found their breeders on Craigslist or from someone they knew like a family, friend, or co-worked. Prices ranged from \$100 to \$2500, though some were given away as “free to good home.” Some owners prefer to buy from breeders because if you adopt you “don’t know where they came from.”

A veterinarian I spoke with prefers rescues over pure bred dogs because they “live longer and are less likely to have health conditions.” However, other owners report being overcharged

and being left with a dog with deformities and genetic conditions. As one owner recalled, she bought her first pit bull for \$1,000 from a breeder she met through a friend because “they were going to put her down for being the sickly runt of the litter.”

The breeders I interviewed bought their first pit bull and bred the rest. One said, “I had a female, bred her, and took first pick male of the litter.” Each claimed breeding was a hobby they do a few times a year while working fulltime elsewhere. They breed because they love pit bulls, and believe breeders motivated by money are irresponsible. Some described the difference as “backyard” vs. “front yard” breeding.

Breeders who breed pit bulls in the “front yard” have registered pedigrees and healthy bloodlines with either the American Kennel Club (AKC), the American Dog Breeders Association (ADBA), or the United Kennel Club (UKC). One breeder said her puppies were “dual registered with the UKC and ADBA.” Commonly, front yard breeders have homes for puppies before they are weaned or even born which they say they’ve confirmed as healthy and safe. Front yard breeders do not sell puppies to people they know nothing about.

Breeders who breed pit bulls in the “backyard” do not have registered pedigrees or established bloodlines and sell to whoever wants to buy without regard for their ability to support and care for the dog. These breeders find search for buyers through Craigslist, in parking lots, or in front of stores. The front yard breeders I interviewed argue the backyard breeders create an abundance of pit bulls and often have difficulty finding homes for them or people willing to pay their asking price. Consequently, they will sell to available strangers, but if they puppy get too

old and depreciates in value, they let them loose, abandon them, abuse them, and in some instances kill them.

Of the four breeders I interviewed, one of them fit the criteria of a “backyard breeder” according to the others because he sold his puppies in front of stores, they were not registered, and they did not have an established bloodline. He said he bought his first pit bull puppy from a friend because he, “saw how loyal and trainable they were so I decided to get one.” He’s been breeding for four years, and said he bred Rottweilers before he bred pit bulls.

Those who consider breeding pit bulls report different names for different lines the breed, such as The American Pit Bull Terrier, Bull Terrier, and Staffordshire Bull Terriers. Registered breeders often begin after showing their dogs in professional dog shows. One man said, “I was an owner in life, then I showed, then I owned my own blood line, then I created my own breed.” Breeders who continue to breed pit bulls report leaning toward weight pulling and athletic enhancement as opposed to fighting to demonstrate the prowess and abilities of the breed.

Weight pulling is an organized and sanctioned sport similar to tractor pulling and was created in 1984 to “promote the working heritage of all dogs” (International Weight Pull Association Editors 2019). The goal is for the dog to be harnessed to a sled of wheeled cart and to pull it on their own (International Weight Pull Association Editors 2019). The organization is complete with an elected Board of Directors and hold weight pulling events all over North America (International Weight Pull Association Editors 2019).

Breeding and buying pit bulls is a controversial subject for some, mostly because of the large amount of pit bulls overcrowding the shelters. Breeders report engaging in the practice for



the “love of the breed” and being around them. They take pride in their work and having a hand in the continuation of the breed’s bloodline. One breeder says,

I regulate my stuff because I’m not in for money, I’m in it for the love of the breed.

Before I sell them, I have in depth conversations with my buyers. I need to know if they are a family, a single person, and how many people live in the home. I won’t sell to apartments or condos because they need a yard. Some have told me they gave me more information than any other breeder they’ve ever had.

Though breeders will sell the majority of their puppies, several owners informed me their breeder gave their away because they got too old or had substandard health to represent their bloodline. One breeder attested to this and said, “ The price changes depending on the person. Sometimes I will give them to friends or give them a discount.”

### *Gifts*

Owners often sometimes received their pit bulls as Christmas or birthday gifts, or in some cases, someone’s co-worker or employee had an “accidental” litter of puppies and needed to find them homes. Often these puppies are free because there are so many of them and time is limited before they started aging, depreciating in value, and become less desirable.

In one instance, a middle-aged parent received a pit bull from their adult children as a Christmas gift. One owner says his daughter propped a puppy on his lap and replied, “how can you say no to that?” He brings his dog, named “Bella,” to the park every weekend to socialize and exercise her, insisting she is good with people and other dogs because of the time he has spent there. Bella was the first dog that injured me out in the field, when I bent down to the

ground to greet her as she ran into me like a linebacker, striking me in the jaw and bruising it with her excitement, reminding me that they are very strong and powerful dogs.

In another case, a daughter bugged her dad for a pit bull for more than a year, stating she didn't "want anything for her birthday, Christmas, or firework on the Fourth of July." Her dad eventually bought one from the secretary he works with for \$100. Though he bought the dog, he described it as a gift for his daughter that would serve to cover other gifts usually exchanged on certain holidays. A mother said her daughter "found the mom and gave me one of the puppies." Another owner found a pit bull being given away on Craigslist and said the original owner told her people were "fighting with it." She didn't trust them and ended up gifting the dog to her.

Giving pit bulls as gifts was a less common method for owners to acquire their dogs compared to other means. Pit bulls were gifted out after being bought in some cases and out of need to find homes in others. Though owners I spoke to chose to keep their gifted pit bull, it is common for dogs to be given as gifts to people who are unprepared for the level of commitment they require, resulting in giving them up to the shelter, and contributing to the over flowing population.

### *Conclusion*

This chapter explained the circumstances that underlie pit bull ownership. Owner experiences vary in terms of how they relate to and train their dogs, what attracted them to their pit bull(s), and how they acquired their pit bull. Many owners were attracted to the look of the pit bull such as its short coat, floppy "cute" ears, large heads and bodies, and big smiles. Some were drawn to their intelligence and temperament because they are "smart," "easy to train," "loyal,"

and “sweet.” Both serial and rookie owners reported an attraction to the physicality and temperament of pit bulls.

Others (mostly serial owners) have owned pit bulls all their lives so they chose one based more on familiarity as opposed to specific dog traits. Other serial and rookie owners specifically sought out a pit bull because of their stigmatized status to “give the underdog a chance.” Their mission is to show the world the “true nature” of pit bulls in that they are just like any other dog.

The most common method by which owner acquired their pit bull was adopting from shelters or pet events followed by finding them on the street or abandoned somewhere. Those who found their dog all reported their emaciated state and took pride in the process of nursing them back to health. Their dogs showed evidence of emotional scars based on hesitation to trust new people, but all were friendly and willing to try especially if their owners encouraged them. Owners took pride in their rehabilitative efforts and emphasized how common the possibility is for former fighting and abused dogs to recover from their trauma. When an owner reported the dog found them, they interpreted the dog playing an active role in insinuating themselves into their lives and demonstrating desirable qualities.

Breeders and those who bought puppies from them both expressed a love for pit bulls and being around them. They enjoy and express pride in their efforts to further the bloodline of various pit bull breeds. Some have altered and established bloodlines in an attempt to make a taller pit bull, to create the new breeds, and/or to calm the temperament and decrease the level of required mental and physical stimulation. Breeders differ based on their level of involvement with breed registers which act as legitimizing agents. Breeders who have homes early for the

puppies are considered more responsible and legitimate than those who sell their puppies in front of stores or in parking lots. Sometimes litters are accidental, in which cases the puppies are often given away quickly for little to no money.

Pit bulls given as gifts in this sample all remained in their homes, and owners reported their attachment to and desire to keep the dog. Though this is not always the case, as shelter workers and adoption agencies report dogs being dropped off or returned due to a lack of understanding the commitment required of dog ownership. Often, pit bulls given as gifts live with family owners, suggesting the person who gifted the dog did so to also partake in the enjoyment of companionship.

Though people come into pit bull ownership from all walks of life and today's owners are more diverse than they were decades ago, their experience of stigma persists. Serial owners seem less reactive and defensive to stigma than rookie owners which may be from having more experience. Depending on the situation, both serial and rookie owners negotiate stigma by denying biological determinism, debunking adverse media coverage, emphasizing counter-stereotypical behavior, and avoiding stereotypical equipment and accessories.

Serial owners more often negotiate stigma by using humor, taking preventative measures, becoming breed ambassadors, rationalizing, and registering pit bulls as emotional support dogs. Sometimes they will lie about the breed, but this strategy was less common. The choice to use these negotiation strategies may be because of their level of experience in dealing with stigma.

In some cases, serial owners suspect they will not change a stigmatizer's mind, so they choose to joke about or rationalize it. They may have increased awareness of when to anticipate

stigma, so they take preventative measures. Or, after the experience they've gained as pit bull owners over time, they become motivated to become breed ambassadors. In the case of registering pit bulls as emotional support dogs, this could reflect the latest creative efforts of serial owners to negotiate stigma but more importantly, to keep their dog when they move and/or travel.

Rookies more often negotiate stigma by passing their dogs as other breeds and withdrawing. Sometimes they will take preventative measures and become breed ambassadors, but these strategies were less common. The choice to use these negotiation strategies may be due to their inexperience in dealing with pit bull stigma. Choosing to pass their dogs off as other breeds could be a quick means to diffuse stigma when no other coping skill is in their immediate awareness. Other rookies withdraw and seem to give up when they are stigmatized. This could also be from their inexperience of handling conflict surrounding what they perceive as a normal family pet.

Owner preferences will influence the type of activities they do with their pit bulls. Some prefer to keep their dog out of public eye which may in itself be a negotiation strategy to stigma. Others chose to take their dog out into public spaces such as the neighborhood, pet stores, drive throughs, and dog parks. Some owners take their pit bulls to dog parks because they live in apartments and condos and have no other means to provide them with sufficient exercise, while others do so to socialize them. Whatever the motivation, bringing a pit bull from the private into the public sphere creates myriad possibilities to experience and negotiate stigma.

## CHAPTER 5: NEGOTIATING STIGMA IN PUBLIC SPACE: THE DOG PARK

Drawing on participant observation at four Las Vegas dog parks, in this chapter I address the range of pit bull ownership activity experiences in public space. Pit bull owners commonly visit dog parks, which legally allow dogs to run free off their leashes. While formal dog park rules exist, such as remaining with your dog at all times, cleaning up after your dog, and having proof of your dog's licensing and immunization records, most "rules" develop informally and are enforced through subtle social control mechanisms, such as ridicule and distancing. At times, however, more obvious social controls emerge to shape dog park interactions.

The dog park is a public place where pit bull stigma and stigma negotiation play out daily. I performed extensive observations to understand pit bull stigma negotiation, attitudes, and actions from both pit bull owners' and non-pit bull owners' points of view. Below, I describe the history of dog parks in modern society, support for and opposition to them, and general processes that take place within the off-leash areas. I follow this with an exploration of how pit bulls and stigma play out within the dog parks and identify various social roles that dog owners take while in them. I conclude by explore the possibility of what I call, "safe zones," places of refuge within dog parks where pit bulls and their owners are protected from stigma.

### *Dog Parks*

When the Animal Rights Movement in the 1970s changed the view of dogs from animals to companions, the Dog Park Movement followed suit in 1979 to address the social and behavioral needs of city dwelling dogs (Gomez 2013; Harnik & Bridges 2018; Urbanik & Morgan 2013). Population density within cities increased the demand by dog owners who pushed

for dog parks through grassroots initiatives (Gomez 2013; Harnik & Bridges 2018). The Ohlone Dog Park in Berkeley, California is considered the first “official” dog park in the United States in 1979 (Allen 2007; Brittain 2007; Gomez 2013; Harnik & Bridges 2018). This was followed by a “boom” in dog park development throughout the 1990s and by the 2000s, dog parks were incorporated into city park master plans (Gómez, Baur, & Malega, 2018; Lee, Shepley, and Huang 2009; Nowlin 2006). Today, there is estimated to be over 2,200 in the United States (Urbanik and Morgan 2013).

### *Dog Park Opposition*

The rise of dog parks has not been without controversy. Though interdisciplinary social scientists have studied how dog parks enhance social, psychological, physical, and community benefits for both humans and their dogs (Gomez 2013; Gomez, et al. 2018), other scholars criticize them for being a threat to human health through infection and canine aggression (Gomez 2013; Rahim, Barrios, McKee, McLaws, & Kosatsky, 2018). Sociological literature is limited to identity and role management at dog parks (Jackson 2012).

Since their inception in 1979, opponents argue over public safety and nuisance, suggesting off-leash dog parks might enhance the well-being of some, but deter others from using the broader park the dog park is placed within (Holmberg 2013; Instone, & Sweeney 2014; Matisoff & Noonan 2012; Rahim et al., 2018; Rock, Degeling, Graham, Toohey, Rault, & McCormack 2016; Walsh, 2011). Specifically, opponents cite failure to remove dog waste, which can lead to slips, falls, and transmission of zoonotic agents as arguments against dog parks (Atenstaedt & Jones 2011; Derges, Lynch, Clow, & Petticrew 2012; Rahim et al., 2018; Wilson

2014). Other critics are concerned over dogs carrying a variety of pathogens capable of being transmitted to humans such as E. coli, Salmonella, and Ringworm (Ahmed, Price, & Graham 2015; Atenstaedt & Jones 2011; Day 2016; Procter, Pearl, Finley, Leonard, Janecko, Reid-Smith, Weese, Peregrine, & Sargeant 2014; Rahim et al., 2018; Traversa, di Regalbono, Di Cesare, La Torre, & Drake 2014). And due to limited control of one's dog off leash, they are also concerned over canine aggression and dog bites (Rahim et al., 2018; Walsh, 2011).

Several of my respondents were opposed to dog parks because they did not trust the people and dogs there. As one says:

I don't go to dog parks. I did once or twice but I won't go any more. I took my dog one time and there were a lot of irresponsible owners. One time a gentlemen had his dogs off leash but they weren't in the fenced in yard. I don't wanna put my dogs in a situation where something could happen, because no matter how you look at it, always the pit bull's fault.

Another echoes this and says;

I feel like, there's always a chance something might happen at a dog park. There's always an irresponsible person, they'll personify a stereotypical pit bull owner who's aggressive. I just never wanna see my dog on TV. They'll tell it like two dogs got into a fight and a pit bull killed the other dog. They always blame it on them, there's never two sides.

Though literature on dog park critics do not specify if they are dog owners or not, I found that some pit bull owners are opposed to dog parks. Their reason for opposition is about



protecting their dog from harm as opposed to protecting themselves and other people from harm. Their ultimate goal is avoiding pit bull stigma.

### *Dog Park Processes and Characteristics*

Like a business, dog parks have “regulars,” owners and dogs who visit on a daily basis or several times a week, as well as less frequent visitors. Some days are calm, quiet, and the dogs play with each other while the owners converse. Other days are tense, as dogs frequently fight with each other and owners argue over whose dog started the fight. A typical day lies somewhere in between, mostly calm, with an occasional tense moment.

Scuffles are common on any day and usually last only a few seconds, though sometimes they will last longer. Longer scuffles are more concerning since the dogs typically escalate their aggression throughout the incident. In a typical few second scuffle, dogs will bark at each other more often than bite each other, and this is usually over dominance, unwanted mounting behavior, or getting too close to another dog’s toy, water, or owner. Some dogs have unique triggers such as large dogs, small dogs, or intact dogs. If a pit bull is involved, they are usually blamed. Many pit bull owners negotiate stigma in these incidents by denying biological determinism.

The dog parks that I visited differed by architecture, number of fenced in yards, and location. Some parks stand alone, surrounded by homes, apartments, and retail spaces. Most share a space within or next to a larger public park. Most fenced in yards are specified by weight which dogs can enter and each has posted rules on the entrance along with equipment for waste management such as bags, shovels, and trash cans. The smallest dog park that I observed is a

fenced yard for dogs under 35 pounds, while the big dog parks allow dogs over 35 pounds. If an owner has multiple dogs of different sizes, they must use the big dog park if at least one of their dogs is over 35 pounds. Most pit bulls I observed were in a big dog park unless they were puppies.

### *Dog Parks, Pit bulls, and Stigma*

Pit bulls carry their stigma into dog park. When they enter the park, some people do not react, while others become tense and fearful. Sometimes fearful people will recognize others lack of reaction and slowly relax themselves. And, in some cases, people who have had little contact with pit bulls approach the owner in a very common way to ask, “Is he friendly?” before holding their hand out to allow the dog to sniff them.

When I asked pit bull owners how they felt about their dogs interacting with strangers, they had mixed perceptions. One states, “some people are put off by pit bulls, and some are in the know. You can sense it, they will say, “Can I pet your dog?” Others won’t do this and will just withdraw.” While people have many reasons for being wary toward dogs, the pit bull owners I spoke with attributed others’ worries to their own stigma toward pit bulls.

Most people who visited dog parks I observed lived very close by, though a few “dropped in” when a park was on their route for that day. Some people travel longer distances to a park they prefer such as to meet friends, go where there are fewer people, or if they prefer the park’s architecture. Sometimes owners will visit one park but will leave for a different park if they feel uncomfortable from overcrowding with too many dogs, they do not like the owners, or there are frequent scuffles.

Many owners bring their dogs to the park to tire them out and get them to “run.” Like people, some dogs will bond with each other better than others. When two dogs begin playing, their owners often share mutual appreciation, knowing they accomplished their dog’s exercise goal. “A tired dog is a good dog,” many will say. Sometimes, dogs will play too rough which upsets some owners. Other times, owners appreciate rough play because it tires their dog out faster and they feel “it’s just how dogs play.”

Like most dogs, pit bulls are excited when they arrive at the park and will bark, pull their owners on the leash towards the entrance, and sometimes howl. Many people at dog parks understand this as natural dog behavior but some visibly tense up, not knowing what an excited dog, especially a pit bull, will do. Many seem to read their excitement as aggression. If a pit bull is a regular and people are familiar with it, most people have no reaction other than observing.

If the pit bull is new and unfamiliar to the owners, they are likely to stigmatize it. In one instance, an older man came into the park with a very excited and vocal pit bull that was jumping and doing flips. Though he kept his dog on a leash, people around them were afraid and kept backing up from the dog while keeping a locked eye on it. After five minutes, the dog was still excited, so the man decided to leave the park. It was clear to me that his exit was, in part, in response to the subtle cues indicating discomfort from other owners.

In another instance, a black man experienced mixed-stigma when his stocky pit bull stood on top of my dog and they began snarling at each other. With one hand, he tensely lifted his dog up by the harness to pull her off my dog. Despite my assurance to him that “it’s okay,” he looked around fearfully and promptly left the park. Though I personally did not display an issue, others

around me gave him looks of shock and fear. He seemed quite aware of others' ridicule and withdrew to mitigate the tension.

When owners have the same breed of dog, they commonly converse about their experiences. Often, pit bull owners will flock together at dog parks but sometimes, owners of other breeds will converse with them. After participating in and observing different dog parks for twelve months, I noticed patrons resemble different social roles based on their ownership styles and personalities. For this chapter, I describe dog park patrons as “dog yard” characters. Most of these characters own pit bulls, which I call Aggressors, Professionals, Loners, and Teachers. I call characters who do not own pit bulls Policers, Accepters, and Bystanders.

#### *Dog Yard Characters: Pit Bull Owners*

Throughout my observations, I witnessed pit bull stigma, mixed stigma based on owner and/or dog layers, and within breed stigma. I found some owners to be closed off and anticipate discrimination from others at the park, while others showed little concern. When I spoke with owners about their experience with stigma, they often lowered their head, avoided eye contact with me, and verbally hesitated as they reflected on their experiences. They would also contract their lips to one side of their mouth while telling me their stories of being stigmatized.

While observing owners from a distance, I noticed that most of them displayed non-verbal defensiveness around other people they were not acquainted with by holding their breath, tensing their bodies, and looking back and forth at their dog and the person. In some cases, I would observe owners displaying this insecure body language, and then leave the park in 20 minutes or less. I suspect this was from their level of discomfort based on the way they felt at the

dog park (i.e. being judged by other patrons, anticipating stigma). While approaching one owner to converse with her about her pit bull, she said, “I couldn’t tell if you were on my side or not.” She may have anticipated a negative reaction from me based on her dog being a pit bull and is used to people either being accepting of this choice or ridiculing her for it.

Though most dog parks have fenced in yards for dogs by their weight, pit bulls are still a source of tension in “big dog parks.” Some pit bull owners are open to people approaching their dogs, but say they treat them as individuals. One explains, “people are getting better and not judging them as much, my mom was always afraid of them and now will babysit them.” Another states “some people at the park are more willing to let their dogs approach (their pit bull) while in other arenas they shy away.” These different personalities make up different “characters” which I identified in the dog yard.

### *Aggressors*

Aggressors are pit bull owners who come off as rude, arrogant, stuck up, self-centered, impatient, insecure, and dominant. They often use the Koehler method of training their dogs (i.e. dominance-based and human-centered) and will accessorize their pit bulls with choke collars, spike collars, and thick leather collars (Koehler 1962). If someone has an issue with an Aggressor’s pit bull, such as after a scuffle, they will react with anger, raise their voices, and in some cases get violent with other owners by hitting, pushing, and/or pulling weapons on them. Some of their pit bulls show insecurity and will cower under benches, tuck their tails between their legs, avoid eye contact, and run away from their owners. Other Aggressors have energetic

and antagonistic pit bulls who play rough, bark, snarl, and get into frequent scuffles with other dogs.

Aggressors who do not spay or neuter their pit bulls, amplify stigma and tension. One states, “it doesn’t matter if you neuter him, they say ‘it’ll stop.’ No it doesn’t, he still wants to dominate.” While this owner’s pit bull ran around the park trying to mount other dogs, other owners reacted ruefully towards the owner and worked to guide their dog away from the pit bull while frowning and rolling their eyes in annoyance. One later said to me, “if he would calm down, his dog would listen to and trust him more. They won’t take direction if you just scream at them, they just tune you out.” Another woman said, “some men have a hard time with it (neutering their pit bulls) and they really need to get over it. It’s not good for the dog and it causes problems at the park.”

A group of Aggressors sat in a corner of the park and spoke loudly about politics. One was a younger man who sat next to an older man on a bench. The younger claims, “we need to be able to call people fags again, cause it makes people stop whatever it is they’re doing.” The older aggressor nodded his head while pulling out his phone to show a picture of a transwoman. The younger chimed, “yeah, you can’t call them fags or you’re a bigot, there’s no more masculinity.” While watching this interaction, I noticed this aggressor’s pit bull go from playful to increasingly scared, cowering under the table they were sitting on, and began nipping and barking at other dogs who came near. When the Aggressor’s girlfriend attempted to comfort her, the dog nipped at her too.

Other pit bull owners and in particular Teachers (owners who seek to educate about pit bull behavior) might interpret this owner's aggression as the catalyst to his dog's fear and subsequent nipping. Likely, Teachers would engage in within breed stigma because believe the owner's aggressive demeanor is provoking insecurity in the dog, causing her to cower and hide. When a dog feels cornered with nowhere to go, they will nip and become aggressive as a means of defense. This perspective would intersect with how the media reports dog attacks.

Critics of dog attack reports have argued the focus has shifted from understanding the circumstances of the attack, to the breed of dog and its behavior while ignoring the full context (Delise 2007). Although this pit bull appeared to be lashing out in fear and insecurity, someone with less dog behavior knowledge may not connect the owner's aggression as the cause of the dog's nipping. Instead, they might engage in pit bull stigma by quickly ridiculing the dog for being a pit bull while ignoring its owner's influence. Those who criticize media reports of pit bull attacks would use this Aggressor's example as the "real reason" for dog aggression.

Most Aggressors I met were male, but one was female. While talking to a group of dog owners of various breeds, the conversation turned to ear cropping. She loudly stated, "I don't like ear cutting" and compared it to "declawing cats." Her body became tense and her attitude condescending as she further stated, "would you do that to someone you love?" As she said this, her face displayed anger and discontent, and despite the conversation moving to a different topic, kept the look of scorn and lowered eyebrows on her face for the rest of the encounter.

Aggressors are evident at the dog park when a previously calm and relaxed atmosphere is interrupted by the introduction of tension, gritting teeth, yelling, short breaths, and stomping feet

to get their point across. They tend to stand out from other characters due to their dramatic behavior and resemble the stereotypical pit bull owner. Instead of minimizing stigma, Aggressors tend to enhance it.

Aggressor pit bulls often appear as status symbols for their owners that signifying a tough and hard demeanor. Some Aggressors do not neuter their pit bulls which can exacerbate the aggressive energy they bring into the dog park and make training difficult. This can result in Aggressors using the Koehler method when trying to get their pit bull under control (Koehler 1962). Aggressors tend to embrace stereotypical accessories such as choke, spike, and thick leather collars instead of avoiding them. As a result, they contribute to pit bull stigma instead of debunking stereotypical myths.

Aggressors are often indirect targets of within breed stigma from other dog owners. The choice to stigmatize an Aggressor from a distance, such as to me and/or other dog owners nearby, suggests these owners do not feel approaching/correcting an Aggressor will have a positive impact. This could be interpreted as a form of withdrawal since the owner engaging in within breed stigma is not coming forward to the dog's defense but could also be interpreted as rationalization over why they believe the Aggressor's dog behaves in an aggressive way. Other owners tend to primarily focus on the pit bull, feel sorry for it, and feel helpless to intervene in something that they believe encourages the stigma of all pit bulls.

### *Professionals*

Other characters stand out more for their appearance than their behavior. I call these characters "Professionals." Professionals are pit bull owners who come to the dog park nicely



dressed in slacks, button shirts, skirts, and/or heels. This is generally unusual since most people come to the dog park in their pajamas or clothes they intend to get dirty, especially if they have a large dog.

Some professionals wear cologne or perfume, jewelry, watches, and will occasionally match their dog's accessories in color, shape, or size such as collars, leashes, or harnesses. Some wear color coordinated sportswear and flashy sunglasses. Most are friendly but appear motivated to be at the dog park strictly to get their dog exercise as opposed to socialize. Some exhibit "dog manners," such as wiping their dog's drool with a cloth they brought.

Other professionals do not dress up themselves but will dress up their dog. They dress their pit bulls in elegant leather collars, sparkling glitter and gem collars, flower collars, and other colorful accessories like sweaters, scarfs, and shoes. One woman dressed her pit bull in a camouflage jacket because he was losing his hair, though she herself did not wear fancy clothes. Another put a fancy red jacket on their pit bull because it was "cold outside."

A man dressed himself up but not his pit bull puppy, and wore an expensive named brand long sleeved top, sweat pants, and matching shoes and baseball cap of the same color, black with neon orange. Another woman dressed herself and her dogs up and wore a vibrant blue tank top with large sunglasses. She came into the park with her pit bull and "Yorkie sister," both of which were wearing blue harnesses which matched her tank top.

Many accessories that professionals put on their pit bulls work to counter act and negotiate stigma. Since these accessories are not stereotypical for pit bulls, they tend to force others to pause when they see the dog as they attempt to frame what they are seeing and, often,

react with less concern and worry about whether or not the dog will express aggression toward them.

### *Loners*

Other owners share the desire to exercise their pit bulls but prefer to blend in with the crowd as best they can. I call these characters, “loners.” These introverted pit bull owners keep to themselves, isolated in the park, and inattentive to others unless they are approached. They are short in their responses and often shy.

The loners I observed carried a variety of deviant attributes, such as dreadlocks, tattoos, and piercings. Some were backpackers, recovering drug addicts, suffered from anxiety attacks and PTSD, and terminally ill cancer patients. Several appeared stoned with glossy red eyes that weren't open all the way and/or worked in the local marijuana industry.

Many loners are hesitant to engage in social interaction but tend to open up if someone asked them about their dog. They try to get out of conversations quickly, though, many seemed appreciative of being interviewed and talking about their dogs as evidenced by a smile, handshake, introspective answers, and waves goodbye. Some are more open to conversing, and after talking to them, I suspected they were lonely people.

One loner, an older woman in her 60s, looked down a lot with a sorrowful tone while she told me her adult daughter had given her a pit bull and the dog helps with her loneliness now that her daughter is “too busy with her own kid.” She expressed some within-breed stigma when she stated that she still fears pit bulls, but not her own. Toward the end of our conversation, she

focused her attention on her pit bull and began petting her, which seemed to ease her anxiety as she smiled at it.

Some loners were hesitant when asked if their pit bull was an emotional support dog and would also bow their head and lose eye contact. A loner who was initially reluctant to talk to me but opened up after he saw how well our dogs played together told me he was a recovering drug addict at the park on a “health kick.” He had just gotten out of rehab sixty days prior. He says his pit bull is helping him, “save his own life.” His pit bull resembled a life line and loving companion which was helping him reintegrate into society. This would support prior research which suggests dog parks enhance social, psychological, physical, and community benefits for humans and their dogs (Gomez 2013; Gomez et al. 2018).

Loners seemed to anticipate stigma pit bull stigma, so they prefer to avoid social contact. They enjoy the company of their dog and stick to situations they are familiar with such as playing fetch with their dogs or going to a certain corner of the park. They show little desire to engage others to convert their stigma and are the most to negotiate it through withdrawing to less active parts of the park. This is in contrast to characters I call, “Teachers,” who prefer to engage others about the “true nature” of pit bulls, and use strategies like taking preventative measures, emphasizing counter-stereotypical behavior, and becoming breed ambassadors to change people’s minds about pit bulls.

### *Teachers*

Teachers have a variety of personalities though all seek to educate themselves and the public about the “true” nature of pit bulls. Some are supportive of other owners as they learn

about pit bull ownership, while others are cocky and engage in within-breed stigma by ridiculing and labeling other owners as irresponsible. They negotiate stigma by taking preventative measures and emphasizing counter-stereotypical behavior by having well trained dogs and are more confident about their ability to control their pit bull's behavior than aggressors and loners.

Some teachers are parents, formally educated animal professionals such as trainers, veterinarians, and veterinary technicians, and informally educated animal professionals like shelter workers and self-taught trainers. Many have done research before acquiring a pit bull to assure this breed fits their lifestyle. Some seek additional education throughout their ownership such as various formal training classes, reviewing the latest research, and watching informal educational YouTube videos. One even told me that after all his research and experiences, he wanted to write a children's book about responsible pit bull ownership to explain to the world how to think about the breed and how to responsibly own one.

Teachers were the most common group to rationalize stigma by using analogies to describe pit bull potential and nature such as "weapons," "tools," and "children." They break down pit bull stigma into components and educate on how they can be connected. For example, one teacher states, "pit bulls can be a weapon if used in the wrong context, the same way a boxer's hands are registered weapons. If they use them for violence outside of the ring, they can be arrested." A second believes, "pit bulls are like a hammer, you can build a house with it, or hit someone over the head with it." A third echoes, "pit bulls are just like children, they need proper socialization and it all starts in the home."

These examples illustrate how some Teachers acknowledge that pit bulls can be used for harm and need appropriate training to prevent stigma. If pit bulls (and all dogs for that matter) are not sufficiently trained and socialized, they will misbehave, and risk misdirecting their natural aggression potential. If a pit bull has an owner that does not properly meet these needs, appears ignorant, and irresponsible (like an Aggressor) many Teachers will engage in within-breed stigma. If the owners appears to be a rookie, is trying to redirect the behavior but is unsuccessful, many Teachers will volunteer to help and provide advice.

A common situation where Teachers provide helpful advice is when a rookie keeps their pit bull on a leash while in the dog park, which is considered a misguided effort to keep their dog under control. Teachers will explain how being on a leash around so many other dogs will make their pit bull feel at a disadvantage and can exacerbate aggressive behavior more than help correct it. In this case, Teachers, which are often serial owners, become teammates with rookies with the common goal of emphasizing counter-stereotypical behavior with a well-behaved pit bull to negotiate pit bull stigma.

Many teachers train their pit bulls using encouragement-based (i.e. dog-centered) training and redirecting undesired behavior with positive reinforcement activities (Serpell 1986). For example, if a dog is playing too rough, barking excessively, or engaging their chasing or chewing instinct inappropriately, teachers redirect the behavior with something positive like a squeak toy or other designated chewing item. They use a calm voice and praise their dog for doing the right thing to build their dog's confidence as they learn. In addition to correcting their dog for doing something wrong, they will also praise them when they do something right.

Commonly, teachers will bring their pit bull puppies to the dog park to socialize them after they get their initial shots, so they are protected from rabies, kennel cough, parvo virus, and other contagious diseases. One Teacher was at the park with his girlfriend and told a story of a friend who was holding a small dog, and his brother's pit bull "went for it," lunging at and killing the smaller dog while biting his friend in the process. This teacher engaged in within-breed stigma while he explained his belief that the blame belonged to his brother because he was the pit bull's owner. To this day he says he doesn't trust his brother's dog because "he is not sociable," meaning the dog was not socialized to be around other people and dogs which increased its aggression and influenced the attack.

His girlfriend chimed in and said, "that's why we're taking him (his pit bull puppy) out early, right after all his shots. We're teaching him "off," with a "no-pull harness." During their visit, the couple constantly asked those around them if they were okay with how their puppy plays while stating, "he just barks he doesn't bite, he's very playful."

These teachers learned from a violent experience the importance of training and socialization before becoming dog owners themselves. To prevent stigma, they employed preventative measures like early socialization, teaching their pit bull not to jump on people and to understand the "off" command when he does jump up. The choice of a no-pull harness is considered a "dog centric" approach to training, as it balances the needs of the owner and the dog as opposed to dominating the dog through the lesson (Franklin 1999; Greenebaum 2004; Pryor 2002; Serpell 1996). Unlike choke and spike collars which are argued to cause pain and choking,

no-pull harnesses tighten around the abdomen when the dog pulls, resulting in non-violent discomfort as a way to modify unwanted behavior.

Some teachers are arrogant about their own ownership style and critique other pit bull owners for what they perceive as irresponsibility for not properly training or having control over their dogs. They will boast their own knowledge at the less experienced owner's expense. One teacher engaged in within breed stigma as they spoke generally about other owners who they believed lack knowledge in handling a "large dog," especially one with "this reputation." They think if you attain a pit bull, you must be aware of their stigma and be prepared to handle it properly, in this case through preventative measures. Doing so will help the reputation of all pit bulls and their owners. If a new owner lacks knowledge on dog behavior and/or does not actively seek it out, some teachers interpret this as being irresponsible and voluntarily perpetuating pit bull stigma.

Teachers emphasize rule following, noting the fine printed signs on the gates of the dog park entrance, and argue that truly "responsible owners" would read that before entering. "When you own a powerful breed like a pit bull you need to be responsible by reading the fine print at the dog park before you enter." Another added, "if people come here, they need to follow the rules, if they can't follow them, they need to leave. Aggressive dogs shouldn't be here." A third echoed with, you just "don't bring bad behaved dogs to dog park."

Conversely, teachers will praise and support other owners who they judged as being competent. One teacher explained that "some are better at bringing them to the park to work through issues and will correct them in the moment." Others occupy a middle ground and report

an understanding for insufficient socialization and training, especially if the owner recently attained the dog and they are in the early stages of forming their bond, but do not condone it.

Many teachers expect new owners to either be open to taking direction from experienced owners, and/or be actively working through their dog's particular issues. One teacher observed a woman and her child with a pit bull that got into a scuffle. He suspected, "the owner may have gotten her dog from a shelter," as a way to explain "why they were being aggressive." When the pair came closer to him, he encouraged her by instructing that "your bond is still forming, don't lose patience. It'll come." In this case, the teacher was supportive and understanding. He could see that the less experienced owner had well intentions but knew some dog behaviors can only improve with time and after trust has developed.

Teachers come off as thoughtful, reflective, and take a mentor role in the dog park. They praise accountability and honesty while ridiculing what they see as laziness and irresponsibility among dog owners. They have a strong understanding of what is considered natural dog behavior, and most often advised me to talk to trainers to get the best information. Most believe training needs to "start early," though were not opposed to rescuing a pit bull from adversity. They took the most active role out of all pit bull characters to negotiating stigma.

#### *Dog Yard Characters: Non-Pit Bull Owners*

Dog yard characters do not own pit bulls display a spectrum of acceptance to pit bulls being at the dog park. Some will target them when an opportunity presents itself to "prove" the accuracy of their stigma perceptions, while others treat them as any other dog. I call the former,



“Policers” and the latter “Accepters.” Another group I term “Bystanders” act as backdrop characters. They do not interact with pit bulls or many other dogs or people at dog parks.

### *Policers*

Policers are non-pit bull owners who monitor and sometimes attempt to control the behavior of other people and their dogs through verbal and sometimes physical ridicule. Very often policers blame both pit bulls and other dogs in general for starting scuffles with their own dogs. When doing so, they tend to make stereotypical comments which characterize pit bull stigma, especially emphasizing their innate dangerousness and aggression. As several policers said to me about pit bulls, “those dogs are dangerous,” and “of course it’s a pit bull, that’s what they do.”

In rare cases, male Policers will engage in physical behavior to break up scuffling dogs and/or make their points. Though Aggressors and Policers are known to get violent, Policers are more likely to respond to violence than initiate it. Though I did not observe Policers get physical at the dog park, I was informed about it through other dog park patrons. Specifically, I was told some Policers will throw water on, kick, or hit dogs to break up their scuffles. One respondent, who spends a minimum of four hours every day at the dog park with his pit bull, informed me told me he’s had a knife and a gun pulled on him from several male Policers who blamed his dog for scuffles.

Policers also monitor how people treat their dogs while at the park such as if they coddle them too much and condone poor manners or if they feel an owner is being inattentive and not properly managing their dog’s waste. Generally, Policers are emotional, cause scenes, and are

about being right over considering other perspectives. Their goal is to win arguments when they arise.

One Policier engaged in pit bull stigma when she brought her own puppy to the park. When an excited pit bull entered the park, she continually picked up her puppy and moved it to the other end of the park whenever it wandered toward the pit bull. In the process she commented about “not bringing aggressive dogs here,” giving the pit bull owner a tense and scorned look. The owner remained sitting on a bench as she observed the Policier and chose not to respond to or validate their behavior. She appeared confident that her pit bull would not cause harm to the Policier’s puppy and continued supervising her dog park visit in silence.

Highlighting recent “dog park news” is common among Policiers, especially when something dramatic happens like a dog being killed, owner arguments, or if Animal Control was called. These gossip sessions provide Policiers opportunities to express and reinforce pit bull stigma. Commonly, the news is about pit bulls or other large dogs attacking smaller dogs. In one case, an English Bull Dog killed a Chihuahua, but when Policiers told the story, they described the dog as a pit bull.

One Policier told other dog park patrons the story of a pit bull attack on a smaller dog that happened the previous day. He claimed, “the owner was a kid who ran off instead of sticking around and being responsible. He tried to walk down the street, and I told him to ‘either bring it (his pit bull) back and wait for the cops in the parking lot or I’m gonna drag your ass here.’” The kid returned and the man said Animal Control “only gave him a teeny ticket and he’s allowed to

come back. All Animal Control said was, “now on record he’s killed, next time, maybe we can ban them. Humans would never get that chance.”

In this particular case, the Policier enacted pit bull stigma, but also pointed to what he believed is a broader conspiracy by animal professionals and pit bull supporters who allow pit bulls to continue to cause harm. Many opponents of pit bulls cite claims that more can be done to “stop” pit bulls but for various reasons, people and institutions are ignoring the problem of pit bull bites, maulings, and fatalities (BanPitBulls.org Editors 2018; DogsBite.org Editors 2018). They believe less people and dogs would be harmed if pit bulls were better legislated and use incidents of dog attacks and lenient sanctions to support their arguments.

Most Policiers are dog park regulars who seek to maintain an established order at the dog park. When someone new comes in, Policiers commonly try to avoid them and stick to their own clique. Many of them are older and lived through the rise of pit bull stigma and bred specific legislation. Their amount of exposure into this cultural frame is more deeply rooted than with younger Policiers. Though they often stigmatize pit bulls, they do not limit their policing to them.

### *Accepters*

Accepters who are a stark contrast from policiers. They do not own pit bulls but recognize them as just another dog. Accepters own other dog breeds but do not discriminate against pit bulls. They tend to be calm, confident around pit bulls and their owners, and like Teachers, understand typical dog behaviors. They also believe the media creates pit bull stigma by exaggerating stories. Most often, Accepters own big dogs and congregate with pit bulls and their

owners in the dog parks' big dog section. Their frequent and ongoing interactions with pit bulls and their owners likely mollifies any trepidation they might carry due to pit bull stigma.

Some Accepters employ stigma contradictions when they use the word "pit bull" to describe aggression, but then follow up by stating they "have no issue with the breed." This suggests that although they disagree with pit bull stigma, they still carry it with them as an adjective to describe aggression, referencing the assumption pit bulls are genetically aggressive. Others report seeing things for "what they are" and do not like what they perceive as "bullshit" in how the media portrays the breed. In some cases, a pit bull may upset their dog, and the pit bull owner will show signs of stress and apologize. But Accepters tend to assure the owner that they are not worried about their dog's safety and understanding the pit bull is just doing what dogs naturally do. As several Accepters said, "it's a dog, this is a dog park."

Accepters seem to develop as someone who grew up with dogs and feel comfortable with natural dog behaviors such as barking and aggressive playfulness. They tend to trust their own experiences rather than the popular stigma about pit bulls. That said, they don't completely escape the stigma. At times they will even express it, then deny it in the same breath. Their struggle with pit bull stigma suggests how powerful it persists in the minds of those who try to keep their negative assumptions at bay. In many cases, these positive reactions began with someone close to them they trusted, such as a family member, who had a pit bull. Since they trusted the family member, this helped them develop more trust in the dog breed as a whole.

### *Bystanders*

Bystanders are dog park patrons who unlike the Acceptor and Policier do not have an active involvement with pit bulls. Some stay to themselves but are not as closed off as Loners, while others are part of a “clique.” Cliques are groups of regulars who prefer to stay within their own social circle than engage with others and meet new people. They keep socialization with outsiders to a minimum though will usually pet a dog that comes near them.

Often, members of Bystander cliques have been coming to the dog park for many years. With Las Vegas being a transient city, these cliques may be a core group of individuals who have remained in the area, have become accustomed to people coming and going, and therefore choose to stick to their own groups. They are typically close in age, often the same race, and have a mixture of dog breeds. They form both in the big dog park, as well as the little dog park.

### *Safe Zones*

Dog parks mix all types of dog owners and characters. The ratio of characters can dictate the tone for the day such as calm and peaceful, often with Professionals, Loners, Teachers, Accepters, and Bystanders, or tense and rigid with Aggressives and Policers. For different reasons, “safe zones” will emerge where pit bulls, owners, and accepters will flock together.

Safe zones are spaces of refuge from stigma within fenced off yard at dog parks where two or more pit bull owners congregate. Sometimes pit bull owners will gather off in a corner, while other times owners stand near each other in a huddle nearer the dog park’s center. Sometimes owners form safe zones after a scuffle to buffer and deflect pit bull stigma, while

other times they form simply because owners find common ground in owning the same type of dog.

Safe zones protect pit bulls and their owners from stigma by Policers, though they are not protected from Teachers who like to enter the zone to offer their knowledge whether or not they are explicitly invited. In either case, safe zones are places where pit bulls and their owners are accepted for who they are. They often trade advice on best practices for ownership and sometimes share stories about dealing with pit bull stigma and others' Policing efforts.

Though pit bulls are the dominant breed in a safe zone, Accepters are welcomed in them. Since Accepters are not easily distinguishable from Policers by looks alone, sometimes there is initial reluctance by pit bull owners for an Acceptor to enter the safe zone. When the Acceptor enters and greets a pit bull without showing fear or potential for stigma, pit bull owners relax as they realize the Acceptor appreciates their pet as just another dog.

When a safe zone forms after a scuffle, it typically includes rookie owners, serial owners, and Teachers. In many of these cases, a rookie owner is involved in the scuffle and sometimes has difficulty getting their pit bull under control. Often, serial owners take the Teacher role and engage in rationalization to console the rookie owner by explaining how they can navigate and help avoid these incidents. For example, they will educate rookie owners about the newness of their relationship with their pit bulls and how the bond is still forming. They talk about the importance of trust and patience so the dog will look to them for guidance on how to handle scuffles instead of trying to handle it on its own by becoming aggressive. The supportive advice

seems to help the rookie owners' confidence, as evidenced by holding their heads up, smiling, laughing, and engaging their pit bulls.

Pit bull owners and Accepters often end these mentoring sessions by stressing that “dogs are dogs no matter the breed.” They often explain away pit bull stigma as reflection that “people are ignorant and watch too much TV,” and that “other breeds have been stigmatized in the past.” In some cases, other owners praise the rookie for their willingness and dedication to give their pit bull a chance at life. The encouragement seems to reaffirm that their choice to adopt a pit bull was worth it.

### *Conclusion*

Since its inception in 1979, The Dog Park Movement has provided a public space that enhances social, psychological, and physical benefits for both humans and their dogs (Gomez 2013; Rahim et al. 2018). Some dog owners regularly visit the dog park while other do so less often. Depending on the makeup of people on any given day, the dog park will be relaxed and calm, or tense with frequent scuffles. Occasional scuffles are common and short, even on a calm day and most do not involve pit bulls.

That said pit bulls carry stigma with them into dog parks. Like most dogs, pit bulls are excited when they arrive at the park and will bark, pull their owners towards the entrance while on the leash, and sometimes howl. Many people understand this as natural dog behavior while others become tense, not knowing what an excited dog will do and/or read their excitement as aggression. Many non-pit bull-owning patrons express pit bull stigma though some experience stigma conversion after they have encountered a pit bull and their owner. Pit bull owners tend to

experience pit bull stigma, mixed stigma based on owner and/or dog layers, and within breed stigma.

Different personalities at the dog park resemble different “characters,” some of which own pit bulls while others do not. Characters who own pit bulls are Aggressors, Professionals, Loners, and Teachers. Characters who do not own pit bulls are Policers, Accepters, and Bystanders. While Aggressors and Policers are both dominant, the decision to own a pit bull differentiates these two roles. Aggressors approach pit bull ownership from a “tough” angle, while Policers approach the idea of owning a pit bull as an opportunity to “be tough.” Both tend to instigate disagreements, and their dogs are often aggressive.

Professionals are friendly pit bull owners just like the Acceptor. They will strike up a conversation with you before you do to them, sometimes dress “up” for the context they are in and carry a generally relaxed demeanor. Accepters have more of a luxury to remain relaxed at the dog park while Professionals are still stigmatized for owning a pit bull.

Loners can be friendly but typically have difficulty initiating conversation. If you ask a Loner about their dog, most of them will gladly tell you about them, though often keep their conversations short. Despite their social isolation at the dog park, Loners have the same level of love and appreciation for their pit bulls as everyone else.

Teachers are also friendly, love to talk out their pit bull, and the “breed” in general. Unlike the Aggressor who will display esoteric knowledge of certain subjects, Teachers are more diverse in what they know and share about pit bulls, the world, and the different activities they engage in. Teachers are about sharing their knowledge so that others and the pit bull breed in



general can benefit from it and decrease the stigma, while Aggressors take a competitive approach to knowledge sharing and are about who is the better owner. Though some Teachers are the “know-it-all” type that engages in within breed stigma, they still possess a wider range of knowledge sharing than the Aggressor.

All dog parks have Bystanders, who take an inactive role toward pit bulls. If they were active, they would be classified as Accepters. Bystanders add variety to the spectrum of dog park characters and may choose this role for various reasons such as trust, time constraints, or interest level. They are the least involved with pit bulls and do not seek to engage them, though most will not turn a dog down who comes to greet them in.

Safe zones help protect pit bulls and their owners from stigma. They often form after a scuffle as a place of refuge and support, though sometimes they will form based on opportunity. While in them, owners often exchange information and build education about pit bull ownership. Safe zones help with confidence for rookie pit bull owners who are still adjusting to stigma and provide a place to share expertise for serial owners. Safe zones can include Aggressors, Professionals, Loners, Teachers, and Accepters but not Policers or Bystanders. Often, they form because of Policers. To the general public, safe zones provide a place to view counter-stereotypical behavior of pit bulls since they often play in harmony while their owners converse. They provide the opportunity to display the pit bull being “just another dog.”

## CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I discuss how contemporary pit bull owners experience and negotiate social stigma. In the early 1980s, pit bulls became the first dog group subjected to breed specific legislation, laws that involve dog controls ranging from muzzling and micro-chipping to complete bans and euthanasia (American Veterinary Medical Association Editors 2018; BanPitBulls.org Editors 2018; DogsBite.org Editors 2018). These controls flow from and exacerbate stigma that both the dogs and their owners carry and negotiate across many social contexts (Twining et al. 2000).

In 2018, 39 countries, 43 U.S. states, and 900 U.S. cities had some form of breed specific legislation (American Veterinary Medical Association Editors 2018; BanPitBulls.org Editors 2018; DogsBite.org Editors 2018). Twenty-first century pit bull ownership still bears the scars of the 1980s, when media started linking pit bulls with gangs, drugs, and violence. Later attempts to change the image of the pit bull, such as Animal Planet television shows like “Pit Bulls and Parolees,” “Pit Boss,” “It’s Me or the Dog,” and “The Dog Whisperer,” calls into question the possibility that attitudes towards pit bulls are changing.

I employed Goffman’s (1963) theory of stigma to explore how Las Vegas pit bull owners experience stigma associated with their canine pet. A “stigma” is a discrediting attribute and deviant label requiring negotiation to avoid social ridicule (Goffman 1963). Pit bull stigma attaches to both dogs and owners because they constitute a team in others’ eyes. Consequently, owners must use strategies to negotiate their stigma, shape impressions, and respond to slights about their character and style. Some existing literature on social stigma describes pit bulls and

their owners as ridiculed, ostracized, and disgraced across many settings, and highlights some strategies they use to negotiate it in social settings (Twining et al. 2000).

My work seeks to expand our understanding of pit bull stigma's complexity. I focus on the roots of pit bull stigma, how it is expressed and experienced, and how it may be changing (Pescosolido 2015). My research expands existing stigma literature by employing ethnography to highlight the subtleties, complexities, and the contextual nature of stigma experienced by pit bull owners. Additionally, I drew from research on pet ownership to provide a broader understanding of the relationships between stigma and pet ownership.

#### *Dogs, Owners, and Classification*

For millennia, humans have domesticated dogs for practical tasks they excelled in, such as guarding, tracking, hunting, and/or farming based on their physical characteristics and disposition (Clutton-Brock 1999; Delise 2002; Delise 2007; Herzog 2006; Vila, Maldonado, & Wayne 1999). Contemporary society revolutionized the role of dogs from animal to companion, which was concretized with the creation of the world's first dog register, the American Kennel Club in 1884 (AmericanKennelClub.org Editors 2018a).

The purpose of dog registers is to provide written and agreed upon documented standards for all breeds within each of 7 groups, including the Toy, Hound, Working, Terrier, Hunting, Non-Sporting, and Herding groups (AmericanKennelClub.org Editors 2018a). In 1946, the AKC had 106 breeds registered, which climbed to 136 in 1991, to 150 in 2003, and more than 400 by 2007 (Herzog 2006; Hirschman 1994; Hunter & Brisbin 2007; Parker, Kim, Sutter, Carlson, Lorentzen, Malek, Johnson, DeFrance, Ostrander, & Kruglyak, 2004). Total dogs registered in

1956 was five million, and by 1981 this rose to twenty-five million (AmericanKennelClub.org Editors 2018c).

Pit bulls originated from Bulldogs in Roman times and were “all-purpose dogs,” bred to protect their family and livestock, herd livestock, and protect ranchers from lethal charging cattle (Lockwood & Rindy 1987; Delise 2002; Delise 2007:p63; Stahlkuppe 2000). In the industrial era, they performed police work, were used for bull baiting, and dog fighting (Delise 2007; Lockwood & Rindy 1987; Stahlkuppe 2000). When bull baiting was outlawed, underground dog fighting took its place, and a smaller dog was created, resulting in the “pit bull” we know today (Lockwood & Rindy 1987; Stahlkuppe 2000).

Their prior involvement in bull baiting and dog fighting made it difficult to officially recognize them as a breed in any dog register, but eventually they were classified into several different dog groups. The term “pit bull” is not a specific breed but is a dog group, encompassing the American Pit Bull Terrier, American Staffordshire Terrier, and the Staffordshire Bull Terrier (American Dog Breeders Association Editors. 2018; AmericanKennelClub.org Editors 2018b; United Kennel Club Editors, 2018). Once recognized, “pit bulls” remained out of the spotlight of breed discrimination while popular culture focused on other breeds (Delise 2002; Delise 2007). By the 1980s, this all changed.

#### *Attacks, Stigma, and Breed Specific Legislation*

The 1980s introduced the hustler lifestyle of quick money, drugs, prostitution, hypermasculinity, and underground dog fighting with pit bulls as the dog of choice (Bastian 2019; Evans, Gauthier, and Forsyth 1998; Kalof 2014). Around the same time, a surge of dog

bites and fatalities surfaced in the media, more than half of which were attributed to pit bulls (Delise 2002; Delise 2007; Dogsbite.org 2017). Pit bull stigma spread quickly, and the breed became the first to be legislated against (Delise 2002; Delise 2007; Dogsbite.org 2017).

Prior research has identified a “breed bias cycle,” in which a deviant breed rises to a popular status as feared and stigmatized. Scholars suggest that the particular breed that evokes bias shifts about every ten years starting with the Bloodhound in the late 1800s (Delise 2002; Delise 2007). Since then, other breeds have entered and exited the cycle including the Newfoundland, Northern sled dog-types, and Mastiffs from the late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century, to the Collie, St. Bernard, Airedale Terrier, Boston Terrier, Bulldog, and other “savage” non-specified breeds from the 1800s into the mid-1930s (Delise 2002; Delise 2007). From there it evolved to the German Shepard, Cocker Spaniel, and Doberman Pincher between the 1950s and 1970s (Delise 2002; Delise 2007; George 2004). By the 1980s, the focus was on pit bulls (Delise 2002; Delise 2007).

Historically, pit bull owners have been stereotyped as young, male, suffering from social isolation, anxiety, low self-esteem, discrimination, and social disenfranchisement (Delise 2002; Hearne 1991; Cohen and Richardson 2002). Researchers suggest young men become attracted to dog fighting to mentally dissociate or distract themselves from the hardships of the ghetto, quick and easy income, and personal relation to the breed and its endeavors (Burrows et al. 2005; Cohen et al. 2002). Roberts argues that some NFL players define their masculinity through Pit Bull ownership because of the “muscle dog “appeal and of being challenged without limits until the whistle blows, which they feel resembles the dynamics of American football (Roberts 2007).

Indeed, several cases have surfaced linked to the NFL that portray pit bulls in a negative light, but none are as infamous as the Michael Vick case. A drug raid on his home in April 2007 uncovered an elaborate dog-fighting ring (Roberts 2007). Of the 66 dogs rescued, 55 of them were pit bulls (USA Today Editors 2007; Pickens 2013; Roberts 2007). The Michael Vick case encouraged the public to look at pit bulls as victims as opposed to perpetrators and raises questions about whether or not pit bull stigma may be changing.

### *What I Found*

The growth of breed specific legislation alongside increasing pit bull advocacy raises questions about the extent of breed bias in American consciousness. Though pit bulls have been stigmatized off and on for more than a century, recent trends suggest this is diminishing with a new generation of owners. This research sought to explore this issue using Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma as a framework to understand how pit bull owners experience stigma.

My observations align closely with Twining et al. (2002), who suggests that pit bull owners carry a stigma associated with their dog(s) and employ various strategies to minimize or embrace it. The owners I interviewed believe the stigma others place on them originates from a range of popular narratives about pit bulls, dog fighting, and their dog's presumed inherently aggressive nature. Only a very few believed that pit bulls possess genetic pre-dispositions to natural aggressiveness they cannot control. Most owners attributed dog behavior to owner characteristics such as properly socializing their pit bulls.

### *Contradictions and Conversion of Stigma*

For some owners, stigma was a complicated construct, and they did not appear mindfully connected to it. They seemed to shut it out and/or became defensive when confronted with the idea. In these cases, the definitions and experiences of stigma did not initially appear as a priority to them, but after they put thought into it (possibly for the first time) their conscious awareness of it seemed to rise to the surface. For some, processing their experience of stigma appeared therapeutic as I watched them think about how to express their perspective as well as the perspective of the stigmatizer to understand why stigmatization happens.

Some pit bull owners once believed in the stigma but changed their mind after having positive experiences and eventually adopting their own pit bull. I refer to this change in attitude as “stigma conversion.” When a pit bull was portrayed in a non-stereotypical way, such as interacting gently with children, being obedient, playful, licking, or as a puppy, some owners experienced stigma conversion. Another variation of stigma conversion I identified occurs when pit bull owners change the opinions of others such as friends and family members. Those they “convert” do not become pit bull owners themselves but come to be more accepting toward the breed they once feared.

The owners I interviewed experienced various stigma forms. Some forms simply contained the basic stigma concepts, the “mark” that warrants “stigmatization,” and others that were multi-dimensional, containing additional characteristics and dimensions (Goffman 1959; Link and Phelan 2001; Pescolido 2015). These forms include; pit bull stigma, multiple stigma, no pit bull stigma, and within breed stigma.

Owners used various strategies to negotiate these forms some of which confirmed and expanded on previous research. These included; (1) passing their dogs as other breeds, (2) denying biological determinism, (3) debunking adverse media coverage, (4) using humor, (5) emphasizing counter-stereotypical behavior, (6) avoiding stereotypical equipment and accessories, (7) taking preventative measures, or (8) becoming breed ambassadors (Twining et al. 2002). I found three additional forms, which I term: rationalizing, withdrawing, and registering pit bulls as emotional support dogs.

These new forms flow in part from my methodological differences with Twining et al. (2000) and from a particular historical moment. Rationalization and withdrawing were identified as stigma negotiation strategies because my field expanded beyond new owners who recently adopted pit bulls from a shelter (Twining et al. 2000), to dog parks and serial owners. This allowed me to observe owners in a different setting as well as gather in depth knowledge of more experienced pit bull owners. Registering pit bulls as emotional support dogs reflect the increased prevalence of emotional support dog breeds and other animal types over the past decade.

### *Understanding Owners*

Though early philosophers and sociologists argued animals react by instinct, lack an independent personality, and are “dumb machines” (Descartes 1646-1649/1976; Mead 1907), today’s dogs have been elevated to anthropomorphized commodities, friends, children, and “fur babies” with an authentic “core self” (Greenebaum 2004; Irvine 2004; Sanders 1990; Sanders 1993). Owners are now “parents” who together with their dogs engage in impression management to shape community, family, friendships, and personal identity (Albert & Bulcroft,



1988; Belk, 1996; Belk, 1988; Cain, 1985; Gillespie, Leffler, & Lerner, 2002; Greenebaum 2004; Goffman 1959; Hirschman, 1994; Sanders, 1999; Veevers, 1985). Pit bull owners reflect these socio-historical changes.

Like all pet enthusiasts, pit bull owners vary in appearance, personality, level of education, social status, and motivation behind their choice of pet. Some diligently train their pit bulls by attending obedience classes, and/or watching YouTube and Animal Planet videos using either “human centric” or “dog-centric” methods (Greenebaum 2004). Choice of training method corresponds with how the owner has constructed the status of themselves and the dog such as “owner/masters” or “guardian” (Sanders 1993; Sanders 1999; Greenebaum 2004; Irvine 2004).

Many pit bull owners have had dogs and/or pit bulls all their lives, while others have not. Some are single “parents” who are solely responsible for the dog, while others share co-ownership. I identified three main types of pit bull owners; rookies, serial owners, and family owners.

Though most owners in this study have owned dogs before, I call owners of their first pit bull “rookie owners” (AKA “rookies”). Most rookies are young, and some grew up with their current pit bull, while others acquired their pit bull more recently. Older rookies were generally more confident and knowledgeable of dog instincts than younger rookies such as being territorial and chasing. I call owners of two or more pit bulls consecutively “serial owners.” Serial owners express more security in their breed choice than rookies because of their experiences as pit bull owners. Most serial owners also “grew up with pit bulls” and/or large dogs so choosing one they say “came natural” to them. Some owners said their pit bull was owned by multiple people, a

pattern that I call “family ownership.” These owners were unique, made up of a mixture of rookie and serial owners including couples, or parents with children. Some family owners claimed the dog was owned by a group, while others said the dog was their parent’s and they were “dog-sitting.”

People choose their dogs for various reasons including age, size, color, and breed (Weiss, Miller, Mohan-Gibbons, Vela 2012). Physical appearance is one of the top reasons why people choose dogs, and research suggests people tend to prefer small dogs and dogs with lighter coats (Brown, W. P., Davidson, J. P., & Zuefle 2013; Deleeuw 2008; Lepper, Kass, and Hart 2002). People also prefer puppies, purebreds, and dogs that are healthy, playful, and have good energy (Weiss et al. 2012). Some owners in my study chose pit bulls because they wanted to save the dog from adversity, while others grew up with pit bulls and did not put much thought into their choice. Saving a pit bull was about “making a difference” in their stigmatized reputation while growing up with a pit bull invoked familiarity.

Owners described attaining their pit bulls through one of five methods: (1) adopting from the shelter or pet events, (2) finding and rescuing them, (3) the dog found them, (4) they bought from a breeder and/or bred their own, or (5) the dog was given to them by a friend, family member, co-worker, or employee. Some serial owners attained their pit bulls through multiple means such as buying one and adopting or rescuing the others. Most owners have one or two pit bulls at a time, though breeders will typically have more. The most common forms of attainment were adoption from shelters and pet events and finding pit bulls on the street.

### *Negotiating Stigma in a Public Place*

The Animal Rights Movement in the 1970s preceded The Dog Park Movement in 1979 with the goal of addressing the social and behavioral needs of city dwelling dogs (Gomez 2013; Harnik & Bridges 2018; Urbanik & Morgan 2013). Following the construction of the nation's first dog park, the Ohlone Dog Park in Berkeley, California, a dog park development "boom" occurred throughout the 1990s and by the 2000s, dog parks were incorporated into city park master plans (Allen 2007; Brittain 2007; Gomez 2013; Gómez, et al. 2018; Harnik & Bridges 2018; Lee, et al. 2009; Nowlin 2006). Today, there is estimated to be over 2,200 in the United States (Urbanik and Morgan 2013).

Dog parks are public spaces frequented by dogs and their owners from all walks of life. The parks have "regulars," owners and dogs who visit on a daily basis or several times a week, as well as less frequent visitors. Most patrons live nearby, though some will travel based on their personal preferences.

Pit bulls carry their stigma into dog parks. When they entered the parks I observed, some people did not react, while others become tense and fearful. Sometimes fearful people will recognize others' lack of reaction and slowly relax themselves. Like most dogs, pit bulls are excited when they arrive at the park and will bark, pull their owners on the leash towards the entrance, and sometimes howl. Many people at dog parks understand this as natural dog behavior but some visibly tense up, not knowing what an excited dog, especially a pit bull, will do. Many seem to read their excitement as aggression. If a pit bull is a regular and people are familiar with it, most people have no reaction other than observing. If the pit bull is new and unfamiliar to the

owners, they are likely to stigmatize it. Scuffles are common and if a pit bull is involved, non-pit bull owners usually blame the pit bull owners.

I describe dog park patrons as “dog yard” characters. Most of these characters own pit bulls, which I call Aggressors, Professionals, Loners, and Teachers. I refer to characters who do not own pit bulls as Policers, Accepters, and Bystanders. I witnessed each of them engage in pit bull stigma, mixed stigma based on owner and/or dog layers, and within breed stigma, as well as employ various negotiation strategies.

Aggressors are pit bull owners who come off as rude, arrogant, stuck up, self-centered, impatient, insecure, and dominant. They often exhibit dominance-based and human-centered training efforts and accessorize their pit bulls with choke collars, spike collars, and thick leather collars (Koehler 1962). Some of their pit bulls show insecurity and will cower under benches, tuck their tails between their legs, avoid eye contact, and run away from their owners. Other Aggressors have energetic and antagonistic pit bulls who play rough, bark, snarl, and get into frequent scuffles with other dogs. Though other pit bull-owning characters seek to avoid and prevent stigma, Aggressors tend to perpetuate it.

Professionals are pit bull owners who come to the dog park nicely dressed in slacks, button shirts, skirts, and/or heels. This is generally unusual since most people come to the dog park in their pajamas or clothes they intend to get dirty, especially if they have a large dog. Some professionals wear cologne or perfume, jewelry, watches, and will occasionally match their dog’s accessories in color, shape, or size such as collars, leashes, or harnesses. Though prior research suggests some pit bull owners negotiate stigma by avoiding stereotypical accessories

(Twining et al. 2000), professionals dress their pit bulls in non- stereotypical accessories, which leads others to pause when they see the dog as they attempt to frame what they are seeing and decide how to react. They often react with less concern and worry about whether or not the pit bull will express aggression toward them.

Loners are introverted pit bull owners who keep to themselves, are isolated in the park, and inattentive to others unless they are approached. They are short in their responses and often shy. Some are more open to conversing, and after talking to them, I suspected they were lonely people. Loners seemed to anticipate stigma so they prefer to avoid social contact with other dogs and owners. They enjoy the company of their dog and stick to situations they are familiar with such as playing fetch with their dogs or going to a certain corner of the park. They show little desire to engage others to convert their stigma and mostly to negotiate it by withdrawing to less active parts of the park.

Teachers have a variety of personalities though all seek to educate themselves and the public about the “true” nature of pit bulls. Some are supportive of other owners as they learn about pit bull ownership, while others are cocky and engage in within-breed stigma by ridiculing and labeling other owners as irresponsible. They negotiate stigma by taking preventative measures and emphasizing counter-stereotypical behavior by having well trained dogs and are more confident about their ability to control their pit bull’s behavior than aggressors and loners. Teachers will engage in within-breed stigma if they feel an owner is negligent in training their pit bull because they believe this contributes to pit bull stigma. Many teachers are serial owners. If

an owner appears to have good intentions and is possibly a rookie, some teachers will provide them with guidance and support as they work to train their pit bulls.

#### *Dog Yard Characters: Non-Pit Bull Owners*

Dog yard characters who do not own pit bulls display a spectrum of acceptance to pit bulls being at the dog park. Some target them when an opportunity presents itself to “prove” the accuracy of their stigma perceptions, while others treat them as any other dog. I call the former, “Policers” and the latter “Accepters.” “Bystanders” act as backdrop characters who do not interact with pit bulls or many other dogs or people at dog parks.

Policers monitor, and sometimes attempt to control, the behavior of other people and their dogs through verbal and sometimes physical ridicule. Very often, Policers blame both pit bulls and other dogs in general for starting scuffles with their own dogs. When doing so, they tend to make stereotypical comments that characterize pit bull stigma, especially emphasizing their innate dangerousness and aggression.

Many Policers are dog park regulars who seek an established order at the dog park. When someone new comes in, Policers commonly try to avoid them and stick to their own clique, until opportunities emerge for them to vocalize the “rules of the park.” Many of them are older and lived through the rise of pit bull stigma and breed specific legislation. Their amount of exposure into this cultural frame is more deeply rooted than with younger Policers. Though they often stigmatize pit bulls, they do not limit their policing to them.

Accepters are a stark contrast from policers. They do not own pit bulls but act as if they recognize them as just another dog. Accepters own other dog breeds but do not openly

discriminate against pit bulls. They tend to be calm, confident around pit bulls and their owners, and like Teachers, understand typical dog behaviors. They also believe the media creates pit bull stigma by exaggerating stories. Most often, Accepters own big dogs and congregate with pit bulls and their owners in the dog parks' big dog section. Their frequent and ongoing interactions with pit bulls and their owners likely mollifies any trepidation they might carry due to pit bull stigma.

Accepters seem to develop as someone who grew up with dogs and feel comfortable with natural dog behaviors such as barking and aggressive playfulness. They tend to trust their own experiences rather than the popular stigma about pit bulls. Some Accepters employ stigma contradictions when they use the word "pit bull" to describe aggression, but then follow up by stating they "have no issue with the breed." This suggests that although they disagree with pit bull stigma, they still carry it with them as an adjective to describe aggression, referencing the assumption pit bulls are genetically aggressive.

Bystanders are dog park patrons who unlike the Acceptor and Policer do not have an active involvement with pit bulls. Some stay to themselves but are not as closed off as Loners, while others are part of a "clique." Cliques are groups of regulars who prefer to stay within their own social circle than engage with others and meet new people. They keep socialization with outsiders to a minimum though will usually pet a dog that comes near them. Often, members of Bystander cliques have been coming to the dog park for many years. Given Las Vegas' high rate of resident transience these cliques may have become accustomed to people coming and going, and therefore choose to stick to their own groups. They are typically close in age, often the same

race, and have a mixture of dog breeds. They form both in the big dog park, as well as the small dog park.

### *Safe Zones*

Safe zones are informal socially constructed spaces of refuge from stigma within fenced off yard at dog parks where two or more pit bull owners congregate. Sometimes pit bull owners will gather off in a corner, while other times owners stand near each other in a huddle nearer the dog park's center. Sometimes owners form safe zones after a scuffle to buffer and deflect pit bull stigma, while other times they form simply because owners find common ground in owning the same type of dog.

These safe zones protect pit bulls and their owners from stigma by Policers, though they are not protected from Teachers who like to enter the zone to offer their knowledge whether or not they are explicitly invited. In either case, safe zones are places where pit bulls and their owners are accepted for who they are. They often trade advice on best practices for ownership and sometimes share stories about dealing with pit bull stigma and others' Policing efforts.

Pit bull owners and Accepters often end these mentoring sessions by stressing that "dogs are dogs no matter the breed." They often explain away pit bull stigma as reflection that "people are ignorant and watch too much TV," and that "other breeds have been stigmatized in the past." In some cases, other owners praise the rookie for their willingness and dedication to give their pit bull a chance at life. The encouragement seems to reaffirm that their choice to adopt a pit bull was worth it.



### *Research Question Answers, Importance, and Refinement*

The pit bull's reputation as the first dog group to be legislated combined with being the "dog in question" in the breed bias cycle longer than any other breed influenced my decision to study this social problem. By conducting this ethnography, I sought to understand the ground level experiences of pit bull owners who face informal stigma while out in public, and formal stigma through BSL which in some cases, effects the owner's ability to keep their dog.

Since prior research on pit bull stigma dates back to 2000, I first sought to confirm these claims by asking; Do pit bull owners experience stigma? And, if so, what strategies do pit bull owners use to negotiate their stigma in different activities? According to Twining et al. (2000), pit bull owners experience stigma and will employ eight different strategies to negotiate it. These strategies include; (1) passing their dogs as other breeds, (2) denying biological determinism, (3) debunking adverse media coverage, (4) using humor, (5) emphasizing counter-stereotypical behavior, (6) avoiding stereotypical equipment and accessories, (7) taking preventative measures, or (8) becoming breed ambassadors (Twining et al. 2000).

### *Confirmation and Extension of Prior Research*

My research confirmed and extended Twining et al's. (2000) almost two-decade old observations that the majority of owners experience stigma and use eight different strategies to negotiate it. Pit bull stigma is still quite prevalent and shapes how pit bull owners navigate their social worlds. My respondents believed the stigma originated from a range of narratives about pit bulls, dog fighting, and their presumed (but unproven) inherent aggressive nature. Most attributed dog behavior to owner characteristics.

Some owners were inconsistent with their reports of experiencing stigma and would first say they do not experience it but then state their desire to “prove people wrong.” Several experienced what I call “stigma conversion,” meaning they once stigmatized pit bulls but changed their minds and acquired one. In other cases, owners changed their friends and family’s opinions about pit bulls.

I extended Twining’s (2000) observations by identifying three additional strategies pit bull owners use to negotiate stigma including; (1) rationalizing, (2) withdrawing, and (3) registering as an emotional support dog. Rationalizers break down stigma into components to understand why it is happening while confirming its inaccuracy. They often have an internal dialogue for their own peace of mind. Owners who withdraw will isolate and/or shut down emotionally. Unlike rationalization, which involves an active desire to understand why the stigma is happening, withdrawing is a passive approach that seeks to avoid conflict. Several owners registered their pit bull as emotional support dogs to keep their pet when they moved and/or traveled.

I also identified four variations of stigma owners experience, which include: pit bull stigma, multiple stigma, no pit bull stigma, and within-breed stigma. “Pit bull stigma” occurs when respondents experience social ridicule for owning a pit bull at least once and exists both informally and formally. Informal pit bull stigma is socially deviant and sanctioned by those who view pit bull as norm breakers. Formal pit bull stigma involves legal ramifications such as breed bans and restrictions enacted by law. Most owners reported experiencing informal pit bull stigma in various public contexts, as well as by their neighbors and family members. Though formal pit

bull stigma was less common, it was a major influence on where respondents could live and travel.

### *Multiple Stigma*

“Multiple stigma” classifies the presence of more than one stigmatized attribute in a pit bull and/or their owner. While most owners experienced stigma, when I asked if people, “treated differently for owning a pit bull,” those from minority groups most often responded with an emphasized “yes” using a deep breath, accentuated tone, and an occasional eye roll. They gave the impression that differential treatment for owning a pit bull happens very often.

When I asked whites were asked if they are “treated differently for owning a pit bull” by the public, friends, or family, their answers varied from giving a similarly accentuated “yes” as the racial minorities, to a less emphasized “yes,” a plain “no”, to a complete confusion for why I asked the question. The common reaction from racial minorities supports previous research which suggests having a stigmatized identity (i.e. race) creates additional layers to stigma (HassanpourDehkordi, Mohammadi, & NikbakhatNasrabadi 2016; Henkel, Brown & Kalichman 2008).

In addition to owner layers, pit bulls also had layers that amplified their stigma such as shelter pit bulls, former fighting or bait dogs, and/or pit bulls who were not well socialized. If a pit bull had feminine features such as a short stature, small head, jaws, and body, with a smooth bone and muscle structure, owners described how people were willing to be near it at dog parks or out on walks. People would not always cross the street and/or pick up their child or small dog to avoid it. At the dog park, most people appeared comfortable being near their dogs.

If a pit bull had masculine features, such as a tall stature, cropped ears, thick bones, protruding muscles, large heads, jaws, and shoulders, and a slim muscular waste, owners reported people crossing the street and picking up children/small dogs on walks. At dog parks, owners of masculine looking pit bulls reported more people avoiding them and were quickly blamed for scuffles with other dogs.

### *No Pit Bull Stigma*

A very small number of owners reported not experiencing pit bull stigma. Most of these respondents were white and all of them were encountered at the dog park. Some of these owners acknowledged pit bull stigma exists but stated they do not put thought into it because they have had good experiences. One woman became irritated with me when I asked if people treat her differently, quickly saying no, lowering her eyebrows and turning her body to face away from me.

No pit bull stigma cases are rare but do exist. When asked about their experiences with pit bull stigma, these owners appeared confused and some seemed annoyed by the question. They were detached from the conversation which could be because I was a stranger or because they were not interested in validating the stigma. Owners who do not give stigma the time of day could be coping with it by taking away its power and not acknowledging it.

### *Within Breed Stigma*

Pit bull owners who stigmatize each other do so because they believe responsible ownership is the only way to eradicate the dog's stigma. I call this "within breed stigma." Common reasons for within breed stigma seemed to revolve around disagreement with how

other owners interacted with and disciplined their pit bull. Often, within breed stigma was harsh and unsupportive.

Commonly, owners I interviewed would stigmatize imagined pit bull owners of the past, which they described as “thugs” and “gangbangers.” One woman who did not own a pit bull but worked with them professionally as an aquatic rehabilitator states, “I think back in the day someone decided I can make this dog look mean because he’s so loyal. I can turn it into protection and make them look tough with a spiked collar. Gangs and street kids trying to be macho like a thug.”

#### *Why People Choose Pit Bulls*

In addition to confirming and refining Twining et al’s (2000) claims, I wanted to understand why and how people chose to own the most stigmatized dog “breed” in the world. Specifically, I wanted to know why if owning a pit bull means having to deal with public slights, pressure, and conflict, why do people take on the responsibility of pit bull ownership. Broadly speaking I asked: What circumstances explain pit bull ownership?

I identified two broad themes that capture why people choose pit bulls; (1) dog traits and (2) owner traits. Specific dog traits included; physicality, mental acuity, and temperament, while specific owner traits included; the desire to save and grew up with dogs. Most owners reported a combination of these traits attracted them to pit bulls, though dog traits of physicality and temperament were most common. Many owners said they were attracted to how pit bulls look, their intelligence, gentle nature, and loyalty.

### *Adoption and Fostering*

Dog pounds are typically overflowing with pit bulls and Chihuahuas, so it was common for owners in this study to report adopt pit bulls from animal shelters. Many owners who adopted from shelters said they were told the dog was a Boxer and/or Labrador mix. This supports previous research that says shelters workers often lie about breed to help them get adopted (Hoffman et al. 2001). Some owners entered the pound without expectation while others viewed the shelter's website for photos and bios of the dogs to have a sense for what to expect upon arrival. Others said the "breed was insignificant." Relatedly, other owners adopted their pit bulls at charity pet events, such as "Barktoberfest," "Hearts Alive," and "Petapalooza."

Owners who found their pit bulls said they were roaming the street, abandoned in hotels, houses, and apartments, or hiding under debris. Others said they "rescued" their pit bull from a previous owner who was abusing it or was going to take it to the pound, or a breeder who was going to euthanize it for not meeting breed standards. Several owners who found their pit bulls suspected they were former bait dogs because they had heavy scarring on and around the dog's face and body.

A few owners described getting their pit bulls when the dog "found them" and "came out of nowhere." Other owners claim the dog "found them" when they went to the pound. They described the experience of entering the pound and being faced with so many friendly pit bulls attempting to engage them through their cages. After socializing with several dogs in a separate room, most of them pit bulls, these owners deduced that they adopted a pit bulls because it

“found them.” Several foster owners also described this scenario. Owners who reported their dog found them were rare in comparison to other attainment methods.

Another common method involved buying the dog from a breeder and/or breeding their own. Many Las Vegas pit bull owners that I talked with who bought their dog from a breeder said their dogs came from outside Nevada. Most came from California, though one bought his from Hawaii. Many owners who bought locally found their breeders on Craigslist or from someone they knew like a family, friend, or co-worked. Prices ranged from \$100 to \$2500, though some were given away as “free to good home.” Some owners prefer to buy from breeders because if you adopt you “don’t know where they came from.”

Owners often sometimes received their pit bulls as Christmas or birthday gifts, or in some cases, someone’s co-worker or employee had an “accidental” litter of puppies and needed to find them homes. Often these puppies are free because there are so many of them and time is limited before they started aging, depreciating in value, and become less desirable.

#### *What People Do with Their Pit Bulls*

Once I identified what attracts people to pit bull ownership and the various ways they come to attain them, I wanted to explore more about what people do with them. Specifically, I wanted to know what pit bull ownership looks like in a public space and in a world that stigmatize them. To do this, I engaged in participant observation at four Las Vegas dog parks for twelve months to answer: What is the range of pit bull ownership activity experiences in public space?

I found that when pit bulls and their owners visit the dog park, they carry their stigma with them. If a pit bull is excited upon arrival, they are vulnerable to being misinterpreted as aggressive by some dog park patrons. These patrons resemble different social roles and characters, which I described above, some of which own pit bulls, and others who do not. Together with their dogs, they create unique social dynamics within the dog park.

In one sense, pit bull owners are like any other dog park owner. They come to the dog park to exercise their pet, have them socialize with other dogs, and sometimes to socialize themselves with other owners. Some gravitate to pit bull specific owner groups, while other stay to themselves. However, the still prevalent stigma that surrounds pit bulls is what sets these owners apart.

No other dog appeared to get the type of stares and concern when they entered the parks. Owners do a range of things to mitigate concerns, from acknowledging others' worries and talking about their dog's gentle nature to accessorizing their dogs in ways that may ease fearful assumptions about them. There is no doubt that pit bull stigma is active today. However, there are some indications that it may also be changing.

#### *Thoughts on Pit-Bull Stigma Today*

Pit Bull stigma was concretized in American culture during the early 1980s with the rise of gangster rap culture and surge in dog bites (Delise 2002; Delise 2007; Dogsbite.org Editors 2017). Over half of attacks were attributed to pit bulls, resulting in them becoming the first dog group to endure breed specific legislation (BSL), laws that include restrictions of "pit bull type dogs," from muzzling and micro-chipping to complete bans and euthanasia (American



Veterinary Medical Association Editors 2018; BanPitBulls.org Editors 2018; DogsBite.org Editors 2018).

BSL has since spread across the country and around the world. By 2018, 39 countries, 43 U.S. states, and 900 U.S. cities had some form of it (American Veterinary Medical Association Editors 2018; BanPitBulls.org Editors 2018; DogsBite.org Editors 2018). Pit bull stigma has been exacerbated by BSL, largely spread through media coverage extending moral panics around pit bull bites, maulings, and fatalities, which drive constituent political pressure to ban or control the breed (Delise 2002; Delise 2007; DogsBite.org Editors 2018).

Although pit bull owners still experience and anticipate stigma nearly four decades later, this research suggests pit bull stigma is in a state of transition. An increasing number of pit bull owners are either embracing stigma, deflecting it, educating others to try and change it, and/or getting defensive and protective of their pit bulls in the face of it. In essence, they are fighting back, and although they are still managing stigma, the various reports of BSL being overturned throughout the world suggests they might be slowly shifting perceptions (Madhani 2014; National Canine Research Council Editors 2019; Pritchard 2019; Simpson, 2018; Zhu 2018).

International studies from Spain, Italy, Great Britain, The Netherlands, Canada, and the United States show that banning pit bulls is not decreasing the number of dog bites, maulings, and fatalities and that these problems flow from much more than a specific breed with innate aggressiveness; a perception that doesn't square with biological facts (Canine Research Council Editors 2019). Instead, these countries have opted for policy that treats dogs as individuals when they offend (Canine Research Council Editors 2019). BSL opponents have long proposed this

approach, and now that sufficient research has been produced on its lack of effectiveness, new policies are replacing BSL.

Today's pit bull owners come from all walks of life and are a stark contrast to the stereotypical owner of the early 1980s when pit bull stigma and BSL began. Many of them report older generations stigmatizing them, which may be due to cultural and generational shifts in perceptions. There is far more public support to for pit bull breeds from major organizations like breed registers, Animal Planet, Sports Illustrated magazine, and animal welfare workers who are combating pit bull stigma.

#### *Policies Shaping People's Lives*

In Las Vegas, pit bull owners who live in apartments, condos, or rental homes often face breed restrictions and/or renter's insurance which can complicate their ability to keep their pit bulls. Homeowners often face additional coverage on their homeowner's insurance for having a pit bull which can make or break their ability to keep their pit bull. If an owner has a full-time job or other obligation that requires a large amount of their time to be spent away from home, they face breed restrictions in "doggie daycare" facilities such as Petsmart. These circumstances can not only inconvenience pit bull owners and prevent them from keeping their pet, they also prevent the rescuing of pit bulls from over-crowded shelters.

Breed specific legislation also exists on a national and global level. Just like Las Vegas owners, BSL laws affect the lives of pit bull owners in various ways such as limiting where they can travel, where they can move, whether or not they take a job, or can force them to split up

their families so that one member can take a job and the others remain in a different state that does not ban pit bulls. A famous example of this is with Blue Jays baseball player Mark Buehrle.

In 2012, Buehrle signed a contract to play with the Miami Marlins, but since Miami-Dade County prohibits pit bulls, he moved to neighboring Broward County and made a 30 minute commute each way to the park he played at so he could keep his pit bull “Slater” (Crasnick 2013). When he was sent to play in Toronto later in the year, he was again faced with a province-wide pit bull ban within Ontario, so he decided his best option was to leave his wife and children 800 miles away in St. Louis so they did not have to give up his pit bull (Crasnick 2013). His wife supported his decision.

#### *Pound Overflow: A Humanitarian & Animal Welfare Problem*

According to this research, an animal welfare crisis exists with the majority of Las Vegas shelter dogs being pit bulls. Many of these shelters are vastly over-crowded and according to my respondents, lead to an estimated 14 dogs per day being euthanized in each pound. Most of these dogs are pit bulls.

According to the ASPCA, although companion animal euthanasia decreased by 18.5% from 2011 to 2015, pit bull type dogs are still at a higher risk due to “widespread misconceptions and prejudices about the breed” (ASPCA Editors 2017). When the organization realized larger cities have more animals in their shelters and have higher euthanasia rates, they founded the ASPCA Animal Relocation Program in 2016, which transports dogs from densely populated areas to less populated areas (ASPCA Editors 2017). They believe this has contributed to the 18.5% drop in euthanasia rates (ASPCA Editors 2017).

Pit bull advocacy groups focus their attention on pit bull euthanasia specifically and estimate that pit bulls and pit bull mixes average 33% of shelter intakes in small cities, and between 40% and 65% in larger cities (Save-A-Bull Rescue Editors 2015). They suggest 75% of shelters euthanized pit bulls immediately upon arrival, which would correspond with my respondent's claims (Save-A-Bull Rescue Editors 2015). They further estimate that 1 million pit bulls are euthanized per year which averages to 2,800 per day (Save-A-Bull Rescue Editors 2015). The number is even higher in larger cities, though they were proud to emphasize that free sterilization clinics for pit bulls have been so successful, they have extended this program indefinitely (Save-A-Bull Rescue Editors 2015).

The large amount of breeding contributes to the animal welfare crisis. Some people breed pit bulls because they are passionate about the continuation of the breed, though if their puppies do not meet breed standards, pit bulls become vulnerable to abandonment. In other cases, breeders give pit bulls away at a discounted price or for free. However, all breeding contributes to the pound over flow, because it prevents potential owners from adopting a shelter pit bull if they are getting them from breeders.

Some breeders pit bull for the purpose of fighting and if they do not meet their standards, they risk being abandoned on the streets and/or being used as bait dogs. As I mentioned above, many owners in this study reported finding their pit bulls on the street and suspecting they were former bait dogs due to scarring and timid demeanors. Several reasons why pit bulls would not meet the standards for dog fighting would be they are not aggressive enough, are the runt of the litter and/or are too small.

In addition to shelters being overcrowded with pit bulls, shelter workers have reported lying about pit bull breeds in desperate means to get them adopted (Hoffman et al. 2001). This suggests stigma prevents people from getting pit bulls because they think they are genetically dangerous, and/or think owning one will bring them too much stress from the social world.

### *Human Ridicule Problem*

Those who choose to adopt pit bulls often do so because they want to “make a difference.” Many of them know how many pit bulls are killed each day in pounds so they purposely seek them out. Others will rescue them off the street or from a breeder to prevent them from ending up in a shelter on the assumption they will be killed. Despite these efforts to help alleviate an animal welfare crisis, most pit bull owners are stigmatized for their choice. They are not viewed as someone who has dedicated their life to saving an animal in need, but instead that something is wrong with them. If they are attracted to pit bulls, they must be damaged in some way.

Owners react to public ridicule differently, as we have seen throughout this research. Some will avoid it, and others embrace it. Some will seek to register their pit bulls as an emotional support dog in order to protect them from BSL. In doing so, they are willing to admit to the world, “maybe there is something wrong with me. And maybe I don’t care if you know or think less of me because of it.”

The struggle for pit bull legitimacy lives on through the efforts of people like those in this study. The general public, victims of pit bull attacks, and their families will remain an oppositional part of this discourse for the foreseeable future. Only time will tell if the breed bias

cycle (Delise 2002) will move on from pit bulls to another breed, or if more knowledge about dogs' characteristics in general, and pit bulls specifically will help us move on from these breed bias cycles and toward a more humanitarian approach to dog ownership and social treatment.

## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW TEMPLATE

**Name:**

**Date:**

**Time:**

- 1). Describe how you initially came into contact with pit bulls.
- 2) What attracts you to pit bulls?
- 3). How many pit bulls do/have you owned and where did you get them?
- 4). What do you think people's general perceptions are about pit bulls and pit bull owners?
  - Prompts: what are some assumptions people make?
- 5) What sorts or activities do you do with your pit bull? Do people treat you differently during \_\_\_\_\_ activities? How do you respond?
  - Prompts: drive-throughs, pet stores, hardware stores, walks, etc.
- 6). Have you heard of pit bulls being stigmatized? If so, what does the stigma mean to you?
  - Prompts: who do you feel the stigma from specifically?
- 7) Does the public, friends, neighbors, and/or family stigmatize you for owning a pit bull? If so how do you respond?
  - Prompts: exemplar stories
- 8) Are there some people who stigmatize you for owning a pit bull that you understand or accept? Why or why not?
  - Prompts: exemplar stories
- 9) Have you seen other owners being stigmatized? If so, why do you think this happens?
  - Prompts: exemplar stories
- 10). Is your pit bull an emotional support or service dog? If so, why?
- 11). Do you think aspiring owners of dogs over 40 pounds should be required to complete a training program and/or earn some kind of certification in dog behavior?
- 12). Do you mind if I ask a few demographic questions?
  - Prompts: What is your race, gender, age, occupation
- 13) Do you have any questions for me?

## APPENDIX B: COPY OF INFORMED CONSENT



### INFORMED CONSENT Department of Sociology

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**TITLE OF STUDY: The Stigmatization of Sin City Bully Culture: Pit Bull Pariahs?**  
**INVESTIGATOR(S): Genevieve Minter and Andrew L. Spivak**  
For questions or concerns about the study, you may contact **Andrew L. Spivak at 702-895-3322 or Genevieve Minter at 702-542-3043 or via email at [minterg2@unlv.nevada.edu](mailto:minterg2@unlv.nevada.edu).**

For questions regarding the rights of research subjects, any complaints or comments regarding the manner in which the study is being conducted, contact **the UNLV Office of Research Integrity – Human Subjects at 702-895-2794, toll free at 877-895-2794 or via email at [IRB@unlv.edu](mailto:IRB@unlv.edu).**

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#### **Purpose of the Study**

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to investigate to understand the motivations and cultural practices among pit bull owners. We are interested in how norms associated with pit bulls may be changing in the U.S.

#### **Participants**

You are being asked to participate in the study because you have been identified as having experiences with pit bull ownership. Your involvement is strictly voluntary.

#### **Procedures**

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to do the following: take part in an interview lasting between 30 and 120 minutes.

#### **Benefits of Participation**

There may not be direct benefits to you as a participant in this study. However, we hope to learn about pit bull norms in the U.S. and how they may be changing.

#### **Risks of Participation**

There are risks involved in all research studies. This study may include only minimal risks. You may become uncomfortable answering some questions. Your participation is strictly voluntary and you may refuse to answer any or all questions asked.

#### **Cost /Compensation**

There is no financial cost to you to participate in this study. The study will take no more than 120 minutes of your time for which you will not be compensated.



**Confidentiality**

All information gathered in this study will be kept as confidential as possible. No reference will be made in written or oral materials that could link you to this study. If interviewing through Facebook Messenger, know that this is not an entirely secure way of transmitting data. All records will be stored in a locked facility at UNLV for three years after completion of the study. After this storage time, the information gathered will be destroyed. The use of pseudonyms will be used for any informant who chooses to keep their identity confidential.

**Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may refuse to participate in this study or in any part of this study. You may withdraw at any time without prejudice to your relations with UNLV. You are encouraged to ask questions about this study at the beginning or any time during the research study.

**Participant Consent:**

I have read the above information and agree to participate in this study. I have been able to ask questions about the research study. I am at least 18 years of age. A copy of this form has been given to me.

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Participant Name (Please Print)

**Audio Recording:**

I agree to be audio recorded for the purpose of this research study.

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Participant Name (Please Print)

### APPENDIX C: INFORMANT CHARACTERISTICS

<b>Name</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Race</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Interview Type</b>
Candess	Serial Owner	White	Female	33	Phone
Tino	Trainer-Serial Owner	Mexican	Male	Late 40s	Phone
Amir	Breeder- Serial Owner	Black	Male	40	Phone
Richard	Rookie Owner	White	Male	47	In-person
Ryan	Breeder- Serial Owner	Mixed	Male	40	Phone
Diana	Serial Owner	Puerto Rican	Female	34	Phone
Whitney	Rookie Owner	White	Female	31	In-person
Kim	Rookie Owner	White	Female	61	In-person
Dave	Breeder- Serial Owner	White	Male	Late 40s	Phone
Melissa	Trainer-Serial Owner	White	Female	47	Phone
Michael	Trainer-Serial Owner	White	Male	49	Phone
Jennifer	Rookie Owner	Mixed	Female	35	Phone
Erika	Trainer-non-owner	White	Female	28	Phone
Chris	Foster	White	Queer	30	In-person
Amy	Foster	White	Female	42	Phone
Cindy	Breeder- Serial Owner	White	Female	53	Phone
Kathy	Aquatic Rehabilitator	White	Female	47	Phone
Ann C	Serial Owner	Mixed	Female	66	Phone
Jesica	Serial Owner	Mixed	Female	43	Phone
Michell	Trainer	White	Female	40s	In-person

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## CURRICULUM VITAE

**GENEVIEVE D. MINTER**  
**G.MINTER@YAHOO.COM**

### EDUCATION

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- 2019 Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.), Sociology, University of Nevada Las Vegas  
Committee: Dr. Andrew L. Spivak (Chair), Dr. Robert Futrell (Co-Chair), Dr. David Dickens, Dr. William Sousa
- 2015 Master of Arts (M.A.), Sociology, University of Nevada Las Vegas  
Committee: Dr. Simon Gottschalk (Chair), Dr. Robert Futrell, Dr. David Dickens, Dr. David Copeland
- 2010 Bachelor of Arts (B.A.), Psychology (major) and Sociology (minor), University of Nevada Las Vegas
- 2008 Associate of Arts (A.A.), Psychology, College of Southern Nevada

### AREAS OF INTEREST

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Crime and Deviance  
Environmental Sociology

Ecopsychology  
Qualitative Methods

### COURSES TAUGHT

*Principles of Sociology*  
*Crime and Criminal Behavior*  
*Ethics and Social Responsibility*

### COURSES ASSISTED

*Globalization, Economic, Political, and Cultural Perspectives*  
*Marriage and the Family*  
*World Population Problems*  
*Crime and Criminal Behavior*  
*Penology and Social Control*

### TEACHING TRAINING

- 2018 Completed SOC 710: Teaching Practicum
- 2013 Completed SOC 709: Learning to Teach Sociology
- 2013 UNLV Graduate College New GA Teacher Training Workshop

### GUEST LECTURES

- 2014 Guest Lecturer at the College of Southern Nevada for SOC 240: Research Methods

## APPOINTMENTS

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2018 to present Sociology Instructor at the University of Nevada Las Vegas  
2017 to 2018 Graduate Teaching Assistant, University of Nevada Las Vegas  
2015 to present Sociology Instructor at the College of Southern Nevada  
2014 Graduate Teaching Assistant, University of Nevada Las Vegas

## RESEARCH EXPERIENCE

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2015 Graduate Research Assistant for the Department of Criminal Justice, University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Funded by: Center for Crime and Justice Policy.  
Dr. William Sousa

2011 to 2014 Graduate Research Assistant for the Department of Sociology, University of Nevada, Las Vegas. The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (CSEC)  
Funded by: Center for Court Innovation, New York, NY. Dr. Andrew L. Spivak

## MANUSCRIPTS IN PROGRESS

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Minter, Genevieve D. 2019. "Awakening Ecological Consciousness: Toward an Ecopsychology for Young Children." Intend to submit to *Environmental Education Research*.

Minter, Genevieve D. and Spivak, Andrew L. 2019. "Bullying the Bully Breeds? Pit Bulls, Mass Media, and Breed Specific Legislation." Intend to submit to *Society & Animals*.

## INVITED ARTICLES

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Stevens, Jennifer, **Minter**, Genevieve, and Futrell, Robert. 2018. "Environment and Sustainability in Nevada: Leading Indicators and Quality of Life in the Silver State" *UNLV Center for Democratic Culture*. Located at: <http://cdclv.unlv.edu/mission/index2.html>

Minter, Genevieve D., and Mark Bird. "Top Ten Myths about Desalination." *Water Conditioning & Purification International Magazine*, November, 2014. Located at: [http://www.greatbasinwater.net/doc/1114\\_minter\\_bird.pdf](http://www.greatbasinwater.net/doc/1114_minter_bird.pdf)

## PUBLIC MEDIA IMPACT

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Minter, Genevieve D., and Mark Bird. "Top Ten Myths about Desalination." *Water Conditioning & Purification International Magazine*, November, 2014. Referenced by John Smith, "Desalination dawdling could leave Southern Nevada high and dry." *Las Vegas Review Journal*, June 13, 2015. Located at: <https://www.reviewjournal.com/local/local-nevada/desalination-dawdling-could-leave-southern-nevada-high-and-dry/>

## PRESENTATIONS

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- Minter, Genevieve D. 2018. "Stigmatizing Sin City Bully Culture: Pit Bull Pariahs?" Presented in event 2112: *Section on Animals and Society Refereed Roundtable Session, Table 2: Animals and Identities*, at the American Sociological Association 113<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on August 12, 2018.
- Minter, Genevieve D. 2018. "The Emotional Support Loophole: Pit Bulls and Breed Specific Legislation." Presented in session 149: *CRITICAL DIALOGUE: Limits of Existing, Socio-Legal Approaches to Regulating Disability* at the Society for the Study of Social Problems 68<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on August 12, 2018.
- Minter, Genevieve D. 2017. "Bullying the Bully Breeds? Pit Bulls, Moral Panic, and Breed Specific Legislation." Presented in session 120: *Narratives of Fear in Popular Culture*, at the Society for the Study of Social Problems 67<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting in Montreal, Canada on August 11, 2017.
- Minter, Genevieve D. 2016. "Global, National, and Local Desalination Trends." Presented at the Green Desalination Ideas for a Water-Secure Nevada 1<sup>st</sup> Annual Meeting in Las Vegas, Nevada on April 23, 2016.
- Minter, Genevieve D. 2016. "Healthcare Disparities After a Fatal Dog Bite." Presented at the Pacific Sociological Association 87<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting in Oakland, California on March 31, 2016.
- Minter, Genevieve D. 2015. "Framing Breed Specific Legislation." Presented in Session 118: *Legislative and Political Party Activism*, at the Pacific Sociological Association 86<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting in Long Beach, CA on April 2, 2015.
- Minter, Genevieve D. 2015. "Awakening Ecological Consciousness: Toward an Ecopsychology for Young Children." Presented in Session 155: *Environmental Justice, Consciousness, and Lifestyle*, Pacific Sociological Association 86<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting. Long Beach, CA on April 2, 2015.
- Minter, Genevieve D. 2014. "Ecopsychology, Environmental Values, and Place Attachment; A Content Analysis of Preschool Curricula." Presented in Session D-2: *Environmental Studies*, American Association of Behavioral and Social Sciences 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting. Las Vegas, NV.
- Minter, Genevieve D. 2013. "The Social Construction of Western Masculinity and Emotionality". Presented in Session F-1: *Psychotherapy and Counseling*, American Association of Behavioral and Social Sciences 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting. Las Vegas, NV.

Minter, Genevieve D. 2013. "The Joker, "Media Super Villain": Does America Need Psychotherapy"? Presented in Session D-1: *Psychotherapy and Counseling*, American Association of Behavioral and Social Sciences 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting. Las Vegas, NV.

Minter, Genevieve D. and Andrew L. Spivak. 2011. "Is the American Pit Bull Terrier a Social Problem? Aggression, Deviant Subculture, and Dog Ownership." Presented by G.D. Minter in Session 77: *Non-human/Human species and Inequalities*, Society for the Study of Social Problems 60<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting. Las Vegas, NV.

#### **ACADEMIC HONORS, AWARDS, AND SCHOLARSHIPS**

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2018	Society for the Study of Social Problems Mentor Program Mentee
2018	Society for the Study of Social Problems travel grant; \$92
2017	Society for the Study of Social Problems Mentor Program Mentee
2017	Society for the Study of Social Problems travel grant; \$200
2017	University of Nevada Las Vegas Graduate Writing Bootcamp Scholar
2003	Nevada Millennium Scholarship recipient; \$10,000

#### **PROFESSIONAL AND COMMUNITY SERVICE**

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2018	Graduate and Professional Student Association Summer Council Representative at the University of Nevada Las Vegas
2018	Volunteer dog walker for Pawtastic Friends Enrichment Training Scholars
2017	9 <sup>th</sup> Semi-Annual National Clean Energy Summit Volunteer, October 13, 2017
2017	UNLV Fall Semester Graduate College Fair, Sociology Ph.D. Booth
2016	Journal Manuscript Peer Reviewer: <i>Environmental Education Research</i> (1).
2015	Journal Manuscript Peer Reviewer: <i>Environmental Education Research</i> (2).
2015	Alpha Kappa Delta information table, at the 86 <sup>th</sup> Annual Pacific Sociological Association Meeting in Long Beach, California
2012 to 2015	Qualified Mental Health Assistant at Elements of Motivation Behavioral Treatment Agency, Las Vegas, NV
2010	UNLV Alpha Kappa Delta Treasurer
2010	UNLV Fall Semester Student Involvement Fair Alpha Kappa Delta Booth
2010	UNLV Spring Semester Student Involvement Fair Sociology Booth

2009 to 2010 Applied Behavioral Analysis Interventionist at The Lovaas Center, Las Vegas,  
NV

2004 to 2006 Veterinary Technician at Spencer Springs Animal Hospital, Las Vegas, NV

**PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS**

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American Sociological Association

Society for the Study of Social Problems

Alpha Kappa Delta International Sociology Honor Society