Supplement for Dog Behavior for Law Enforcement Training Program

DOG BEHAVIOR FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT

FACILITATED BY
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Bios

Eleasha Gall
Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Los Angeles’ (spcaLA) Director of Animal Behavior and Training, Eleasha Gall, CPDT-KA, began her training career in South New Jersey in the mid-1980s volunteering for the Ocean City Humane Society. After moving to Northern New Jersey, Eleasha volunteered with numerous groups and fostered over 150 dogs and cats. In training and caring for litters of foster puppies, she realized how early learning impacts a dog for the rest of his life.

In 1998, Eleasha started a pet sitting and private training service. She switched from traditional training to positive reinforcement becoming what is referred to as a “crossover” trainer. Then in 2003, Eleasha opened Sit. Stay. Play! Dog Training and Day Care in Union, NJ, Union County’s first dog training and day care facility. In addition to daycare and training classes, Sit. Stay. Play! also offered massage sessions and REIKI. Many of Eleasha’s clients earned their Canine Good Citizen Award and became therapy dogs, including Eleasha’s dog, Gunner, a rescued Rottweiler, who worked with autistic children.

Eleasha moved to Pennsylvania where her focus shifted to animals in rescue groups and shelters, and she began working with Bucks County SPCA. In 2011 Eleasha was chosen as 1 of 4 trainers in the country to participate in the Train to Adopt Program by Sue Sternberg and Petfinder. Through Train to Adopt, she saw how simple, quick training methods positively impacted shelter dogs in the long term. It was then she dedicated herself to the pursuit of animal training in the shelter world.

In 2012, Eleasha began her career with spcaLA, where she positively impacts the lives of hundreds of shelter animals every day, and offers training classes to the public as well as private training. She has become an integral part of the staff, charting rehabilitative paths for shelter animals as well as animals held in protective custody by spcaLA.

Cesar Perea, Lieutenant
spcaLA Director of Animal Protection Services, Lt. Cesar Perea began his law enforcement career at the San Diego County Sheriff’s Department as a Deputy. Upon graduation in 1994 from the 19th Corrections Academy at the San Diego Regional Public Safety Training Institute at Miramar College, he was assigned to George Bailey Detention Facility.

Perea joined the San Diego Police Department the following year, completing the 32nd Regional Police Academy at the San Diego Regional Public Safety Training Institute at Miramar College in 1995. As an officer, his patrol assignments included Northeastern Division, Northern Division and Central Division.

While at Northeastern Division, he began work as the Migrant Liaison Officer patrolling the migrant community that was abundant due to the agriculture existing in the North County of San Diego. This sensitive assignment demonstrated Perea’s ability to gain and maintain trust with workers — most of whom were undocumented and in the United States illegally — while at the same time effectively balancing the needs of the residential communities surrounding the farming fields and migrant camps.

Perea eventually expanded the Migrant Liaison Unit to two divisions and was integral in the formation of an alliance between community groups and outreach organizations, which
succeeded in mitigating crimes perpetrated against migrant workers. While assigned to the unit he earned top accolades, and was awarded two Commanding Officer’s Citations — one for his involvement in a high-profile hate crime investigation in which five elderly migrant workers were brutality beaten by teenage boys, and another for planning and coordinating a large-scale, mutual-aid operation to combat human trafficking for the purpose of prostitution. Perea was also instrumental in creating and conducting a course curriculum to teach police recruits sensitivity when dealing with issues relating to migrant workers.

Concurrent with his assignments at the San Diego Police Department he was part of Operation Lengua, which provided support to Department of Homeland Security Agents interrogating suspected narcotics smugglers who were arrested at United States/Mexico ports of entry. He was also involved with the International Police Training Program (IPTP), which fostered law enforcement training with police agencies from other countries. He earned a Commanding Officer’s Citation for his role with IPTP.

Other specialized assignments with the San Diego Police Department included: the La Jolla Bike Team, which patrolled Downtown La Jolla and the surrounding beaches; and C Squad, which patrolled Downtown San Diego’s historic and popular Gas Lamp District.

A 10-year veteran in 2005, Perea made the decision to transition from the police department into the private sector in order to pursue and achieve a lifelong dream of owning and operating a working equine boarding facility. In that capacity, he managed all aspects of ranch operations. His love for horses and his entrepreneurial spirit proved fruitful as he grew the business tremendously and eventually sold his shares for a significant profit.

In 2008, with a strong desire to return to law enforcement and continue working with and for animals, Perea joined the San Diego Humane Society & SPCA as its Investigations Lieutenant. Concurrent with his 100% conviction rate in the prosecution of offenders, and his hands-on involvement in a variety of animal rescues, Perea also taught at the Humane Academy, and supervised the Investigations Department and Animal Rescue Reserves.

Recruited in 2010 to return to ranch management, he was contracted to oversee a 3,500-acre equestrian and organic cattle operation. Such a complex endeavor was challenging in that he was tasked both with improving the housing areas of the horses as well as implementing livestock fencing that ensured the health and welfare of all of the animals.

From that successful assignment, Perea has returned full-time to law enforcement with his current assignment as Director of the Animal Protection Services Department for spcaLA. In that leadership position he continues the venerable organization’s 137-year history of preventing cruelty to animals by overseeing its animal cruelty investigations, notable of which is the 2012 “Ewing Guard Dog” case in which the defendant was found guilty in 2013 of four felony counts of animal cruelty. Perea has been successful in fostering relationships with other law enforcement and animal welfare agencies, has developed a landmark Dog Behavior for Law Enforcement course to better prepare police officers in the field for encounters with family pets, and has provided training at the annual Animal Care Conference, the Advanced Humane Academy at the San Diego Humane Society & SPCA, and the American Humane Association. Perea also oversees spcaLA’s, Animal Cruelty Investigations, Disaster Animal Response Team, Border Puppy Task Force, LAX Animal Importation investigations, and more.
Course Introduction

Dog Behavior for Law Enforcement is a course designed for officers to properly evaluate dog behavior and modify their own actions and appearance for more favorable outcomes with regard to officer safety, the safety of the public, and the well-being of the family pet involved.
Sued for Shooting a Dog

The stakes can be very high when grieving dog owners seek redress against officers and agencies.

By David Griffith  |  November 4, 2014

There was a time in this country that when a law enforcement officer killed a hostile pet dog, the owner of that dog would seek no further compensation than just the value of the dog. Dogs were nothing more than property.

Legally pet dogs are still property, and if you kill one in the line of duty, your action is a seizure of that property.

But to some dog owners, their canine companions are much more than property. They are family members, friends, and in some people’s minds, children. Where once dog owners were called “masters,” they are now known by some dog lovers as “parents.”

When you kill a dog owner’s pet during a police operation, even if your actions are reasonable, you can expect that grieving person to lash out at you, your agency, and anyone else involved.

Often the “aggrieved” dog owner’s anger will manifest in the form of legal action. Many agencies try to head off such litigation by trying to reach a settlement with the dog owner.

But sometimes the owner’s anger cannot be defused with just a monetary settlement. In one recent case, the agency and the dog owner failed to reach agreement because the dog owner insisted that the involved officer be terminated. When your agency and a dog owner can’t reach agreement, then you may receive some court papers.

If you are sued in state court for shooting a dog, it’s likely the case will be filed under a tort called “trespass to chattels.” This tort means the plaintiff is claiming that you damaged his or her personal movable property—as opposed to real estate.

If you are sued in federal court for shooting a dog, it’s likely the case will be filed as an unreasonable Fourth Amendment seizure and a violation of the dog owner’s civil rights.

Qualified Immunity

For reasons that we’ll discuss in a moment, most attorneys who take the cases of dog owners suing officers for shooting their pets will file their cases in federal court, claiming an unconstitutional seizure of the plaintiff’s property and a violation of the plaintiff’s Fourth Amendment rights.

Attorneys say the first move they attempt in a civil rights lawsuit against a police officer is to argue for qualified immunity. Arguing for qualified immunity is one possible way to seek the case’s dismissal with a summary judgment for the defense.

Government officials, including police officers, can receive qualified immunity against a claim they violated someone’s civil rights for discretionary job actions—even if those actions are unlawful—if there is no clearly established case law on the subject.

The issue of clearly established case law is complicated, but it essentially means your attorney will...
argue to the judge that the U.S. Court of Appeals in your geographic circuit has not established binding precedent. At this writing, six of the 11 U.S. Courts of Appeal have set a binding precedent that when officers shoot pet dogs they are executing a seizure of the owners’ property under the Fourth Amendment. Which means qualified immunity may not be available to you in the majority of federal court districts. Legal experts expect the other circuits to follow suit in the near future.

**Going to Court**

If your counsel cannot get the case tossed on qualified immunity, you and your agency may once again try to settle or you may have to go to court.

Going to court on a dog shooting case is going to be very unpleasant. The plaintiff’s attorney will make his or her client—the dog’s owner—look like a sympathetic victim and make you look like the worst person on Earth for shooting a “sweet pet doggie.” About 50% of Americans have dogs in their home, most others have a fondness for dogs, so there will be dog lovers on the jury.

Your best defense, regardless of jury sentiment, will be that you had a legal right to be on the property, and the shooting was reasonable. That means a reasonable law enforcement officer with the same training, in the same situation, given the totality of the circumstances, would have feared bodily injury or death from the dog’s hostile behavior and could have reasonably decided to do what you did and use deadly force against the dog.

Attorney Scott MacLatchie of the Charlotte office of Womble Carlyle Sandridge & Rice, LLP defends law enforcement agencies and officers in civil lawsuits and has worked on dog shooting cases. He says, “If the underlying entry (to the person’s real property) is legal, then the corresponding seizure, as long as that was reasonable, will be upheld.”

Having a constitutionally valid reason to be on the dog owner’s property and then a reasonable fear of death and bodily injury from the dog’s behavior is a best-case scenario for an officer sued for shooting a pet. Take away either of those elements, and the case gets a little more difficult for the defense.

“If an officer is shooting a dog on a homeowner’s property, they better have a lawful basis to be on that property,” says police defense attorney and law enforcement trainer Laura Scarry of Chicago-based DeAno & Scarry LLC. “If they don’t have a reasonable basis to be on that property and then they end up shooting a dog on that property, that’s not a good situation.”

Attorneys will also tell you that much of the outcome of your case will hinge on how well you documented and articulated your reasons for shooting.

“I’ve been teaching police officers if there is a shooting of a dog, they can’t just say in the report: ‘Officer feared for life and shot dog,’” says Scarry. “You have to detail what happened. Put in the report that the dog was growling, it was barking aggressively, hair on its back was standing up, it jumped over a five-foot fence to attack. You have to put that stuff in your reports.”

Liza Franklin, Dep. Corporate Counsel for the City of Chicago says any case of officer use of deadly force, even against an animal, must be treated as a serious incident scene. “I need you to document it as clearly as you can,” she says in “Police & Dog Encounters,” a series of law enforcement training videos produced by Safe Humane Chicago and the National Canine Research Council, and distributed by the Department of Justice Community Oriented Policing Services office.

“‘I can’t (defend you) without reports and photographs from the scene,’” says Franklin. “The family will probably take its own photos. So what I need is context. I need to be able to tell how far away the dog was from you when you made the decision to shoot. So I need some indication of where your shell casings are in relation to the dog’s body.”

Thorough reporting is critical for your defense in court, but be careful about what you say in your report. Be aware that “vicious” is in many states a specific legal term with a legal definition.
Describing a dog as “vicious” when it doesn’t meet the legal definition is a problem. Better terms to use are “hostile” and “aggressive.” But don’t leave it at just that. Describe what made you believe the dog was hostile or aggressive. Finally, be very careful about assigning a breed name to the dog. Dog experts have a hard time assigning breed to your average American “Heinz 57” mixed-breed mutt. Just because you think it looks like an American pit bull terrier doesn’t mean it is one.

**Losing and Paying**

Officers and agencies do lose dog shooting lawsuits. Here’s what to expect if the jury finds for the plaintiff.

Settlements in the $50,000 range are not unusual and six-figure compensatory awards are not unheard of. In addition, attorneys representing prevailing plaintiffs in civil rights lawsuits against law enforcement officers and other government officials receive the cost of their representation from the losing defendant. These fees are set by the judge, and it is not unusual for the legal fees to exceed the value of the judgment. This is one reason why so many attorneys are willing to represent plaintiffs on contingency in federal civil rights lawsuits against law enforcement officers.

Both compensatory damages and legal fees are usually covered by the agency’s insurance. So an individual officer will probably not have to pay these costs.

Of course, that doesn’t mean your agency can’t discipline you. Losing a lawsuit over shooting a dog may severely damage your career progress or even end it.

**Watch What You Say**

Your biggest fear in a dog shooting lawsuit is punitive damages. While compensatory damages are likely to be covered by your employer, punitive damages are probably coming out of your pocket.

A jury can award the plaintiff punitive damages in a dog shooting case if it finds you acted with malice. In the case of killing someone’s pet, malice could mean indifference for the person’s feelings about the animal, recklessness on your part, or having a predisposed attitude about the animal that can be proven in court.

The bottom line is that officers should maintain professionalism at the scene of a dog shooting and watch what they say before, during, and after the incident. Remember just about everything you say or do is being recorded, and you don’t want some stupid joke to cost you your house, your pension, and possibly your badge.

Franklin says she has represented officers who damaged themselves severely at dog shooting scenes by running their mouths. “Some officers got hit with punitive damages after they shot a dog. We feel [the shooting was legitimate]. But they were cavalier about it in front of the family.” She cautions: “Be mindful of what you say.”

**Agency Response**

Los Angeles-based police defense attorney Mildred “Missy” O’Linn believes law enforcement agencies could defuse some community anger over dog shootings and perhaps avoid some lawsuits if they would show more compassion toward the owner of the pet that was shot and toward the animal itself.

It’s not unusual for dogs to survive shootings by officers and perhaps more would have a chance to survive if they received immediate veterinary care. O’Linn believes agencies should be prepared to respond to the situation.

“It would be wonderful if we took the dog that’s been wounded to medical care without delay,” O’Linn says. She recommends that agencies have an account with a local veterinary hospital, just in case a dog shooting should occur. “I think that would go a long way toward improving community response to these incidents. We need to handle these incidents with compassion, respect, and some type of assistance, if that’s appropriate.”

Of course the first question any law enforcement administrator would ask about such a policy is
would providing such care for the wounded dog be admitting liability. O’Linn, a partner at Manning & Kass, Ellrod, Ramirez, Trester LLP, says that’s not the primary concern when a dog shot by a police officer is suffering.

“You can let the public know through your PIOs that your actions are not about who is right or who is wrong. You are trying to respond with compassion to the needs of an animal that was injured during the course of an event in which we were involved. If anybody asks about admitting wrong, you can say, ‘Our attorneys will deal with other issues down the line,’” she says.

**More Lawsuits Coming**

Experts and attorneys contacted for this special report on police encounters with pet dogs say they can’t confirm that the frequency of dog shooting lawsuits is increasing. But anecdotally, it certainly appears that way.

And noted dog trainer and author Brian Kilcommons believes the flood of such cases has yet to crest. “The law schools are now teaching animal law and animal rights law. So there will soon be a whole new wave of attorneys who are locked and loaded on this issue,” he says.
Can Police Stop Killing Dogs?

Battered by lawsuits and angry public opinion, some agencies are searching for a way to stop shooting pets. Humane organizations, dog behaviorists, and police trainers say officer education is the answer.

By David Griffith | October 29, 2014

The weekend after Thanksgiving 2012 Gary Branson went out of town so he had his cousin in the Denver suburb of Commerce City, Colo., watch his four-year-old mixed breed pooch named Chloe.

Somehow that Saturday afternoon, Chloe got loose while the cousin was away and started roaming around the area, enjoying a rare burst of freedom. A cross-street neighbor noticed the unfamiliar medium-sized dog, with the big head, and the short-haired coat, and called 911 to say a “vicious pit bull” was “running at large.”

Commerce City police officers Robert Price and Edgar Castillo, and animal control officer Arica Bores responded to the complaint. About half an hour later, they had cornered Chloe back into the garage, and she wasn’t happy about it.

How the dog behaved during this confrontation is in dispute. But what is known is that Officer Price used a TASER to stun Chloe, knocking her down. She got back up and he tried to stun her again. But Chloe was not onboard with another TASER ride, so she ran toward the people and the door.

Animal control officer Bores looped a catch pole rope around Chloe’s neck just as she broke out of the garage. Then as Bores fought to control the dog, Price drew his duty pistol and shot Chloe dead.

Repercussions from Price’s shots are still echoing in Colorado. The last few minutes of the Chloe shooting were videoed by the son of the neighbor who had called in the complaint about the roaming “vicious dog.” And that video was posted online and went viral.

Dog lovers and animal rights activists were outraged. There were “Justice for Chloe” protests in front of the Commerce City PD headquarters.

Prosecutors charged Officer Price with felony animal cruelty. Charges that didn’t stick. He was acquitted at trial.

But that wasn’t the end of Price’s legal problems. A lawsuit was filed last fall by Chloe’s owner against Commerce City, Officer Price, Officer Castillo, and animal control officer Bores.

Nor were the effects of the Chloe incident confined to local courts. The incident attracted so much political attention that Colorado now has a new law requiring that law enforcement officers be trained in how to handle dog encounters. How that law will be implemented remains to be seen. One Colorado police chief contacted for this article said his agency has not received any training guidelines.

An Epidemic

While the Chloe incident is one of the best-known cases of police officers shooting and killing a companion canine, it is not an anomaly.

No one keeps records on how many privately owned dogs are shot and killed each year by

American law enforcement officers so there are no hard figures. But a perusal of the Web and social media will tell you it’s a lot.

Laurel Matthews, a supervisory program specialist with the Department of Justice’s Community Oriented Policing Services (DOJ COPS) office, says it’s an awful lot. She calls fatal police vs. dogs encounters an “epidemic” and estimates that 25 to 30 pet dogs are killed each day by law enforcement officers.

That’s an alarming statistic. But it’s impossible to prove.

It is, however, a solid fact that the attention to these incidents is increasing. As with other police encounters involving civilians and what the public perceives as bad outcomes, many dog shooting incidents are captured on video and posted on the Internet, Facebooked, and tweeted. The people whose dogs are killed in such incidents also seem more likely to lodge complaints, contact the media, and even sue than they did in the past. Some officers have even been fired for shooting dogs.

**A PR Nightmare**

It is often repeated in law enforcement circles that shooting a dog brings more heat down on an agency than an officer-involved shooting of a human. Whether that’s true depends on the justification for shooting the human. But many, many Americans have dogs and love dogs, so they don’t take kindly to the idea of officers committing what some activists call “puppycide.”

And what makes pet owners most angry is that dogs are often killed by officers during encounters that the public considers to be routine such as false burglar alarms at houses, following up on reports, and calls about nuisance barking. One pet dog was shot by an officer while he delivered a death notification to the dog’s owner.

Los Angeles-based attorney and former law enforcement officer Mildred K. “Missy” O’Linn, who defends officers and agencies in civil suits, says agencies need to be aware of how explosive community response to a dog shooting can be. “The public cares about these kinds of incidents on a magnitude that is sometimes lost on the law enforcement community,” she says.

O’Linn adds that before agencies dismiss dog shootings as no big concern, they should consider the example of the Hawthorne (Calif.) Police Department. Officers from the southeast Los Angeles County agency shot and killed a pet Rottweiler on a public street in front of the owner this summer. And the agency has experienced a lot of grief because of it. “The City of Hawthorne had its network server shut down by Anonymous,” O’Linn says.

Salt Lake City is also experiencing the pain of a lethal dog shooting by police.

In June, Officer Brett Olsen of the Salt Lake City Police Department shot and killed a 110-pound Weimaraner named Geist while searching for a missing 3-year-old child in a residential neighborhood. The dog was behind a fence and Olsen wanted to search the yard for the child.

Olsen had been told that the child would not respond to calls, so he did not speak when opening the gate. He was then surprised by Geist and killed the dog. Salt Lake City’s Civilian Review Board cleared Olsen of any wrongdoing and noted that he had been involved in the search for another child years earlier and that child’s murdered body had been found eight days later in a neighbor’s basement.

Despite such extenuating circumstances and the exigency of the child search—even though the missing child was found safe at home—the Salt Lake City PD has endured a firestorm since the incident. Hundreds of people have protested the shooting and the lack of disciplinary action against Olsen, and the agency has received hundreds of e-mails and phone calls demanding the officer be fired. Geist’s owner has refused any settlement that does not include the officer’s termination and has threatened litigation.

**The Fourth Amendment**

Legal specialists won’t say that the number of lawsuits against agencies over dog shootings is on
the rise. But they will admit there is anecdotal evidence of that being the case.

“In the past I was certain there was no way that anybody would be able to succeed in a civil rights case involving a constitutional violation as a result of shooting a dog because dogs don’t have constitutional rights,” says Laura Scarry, a Chicago-based attorney who represents law enforcement officers and agencies and trains officers in lawsuit prevention. “In the last 10 to 20 years, plaintiffs’ attorneys have been suing officers and agencies on the grounds that killing a dog is a Fourth Amendment seizure.”

And they have plenty of appellate court ammunition to do so, according to Charlotte-based attorney Scott Maclatchie, who represents law enforcement agencies and officers in civil suits. “Six (out of 11) federal circuit courts of appeal have ruled that the killing of a pet does represent a Fourth Amendment seizure,” he says.

The floodgates on lawsuits over police shooting dogs opened in 1998. That’s when 90 officers from multiple California agencies executed a search warrant on a San Jose Hells Angels clubhouse and several homes of the outlaw motorcycle gang’s members. During entry into those homes, the officers involved shot and killed a Rottweiler and two Bullmastiffs. The officers were searching for a videotape that could be used as evidence in a murder prosecution. They didn’t find it.

The dog owners sued. The Ninth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals let the suit go forward. And then in 2005 after the U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear an appeal of the Ninth Circuit decision, Santa Clara County settled for $990,000 and the City of San Jose settled for $800,000. The cities of Santa Clara and Gilroy had already paid total damages of about $50,000.

Of course not every lawsuit stemming from a dog shooting by officers nets nearly 2 million bucks for the plaintiffs like the Hells Angels settlements. But six-figure damages are not unheard of, and even nominal payoffs to the plaintiff can balloon when the defendant officers and agencies have to pay attorney fees for the winners. It should also be noted that some officers have been slapped with punitive damages in dog shooting suits. And punitive damages are usually paid by the officers personally, unlike compensatory damages, which are often covered by the agency’s insurance.

Training Materials

Social media and community outrage and growing fears of litigation are just some of the reasons that law enforcement agencies, use-of-force experts, and animal protection organizations are working to find solutions to the officer vs. dog problem. Many think part of the solution is better officer training.

That’s why three years ago DOJ COPS published a training booklet that is available free to law enforcement agencies titled “The Problem of Dog-Related Incidents and Encounters.” And last year Safe Humane Chicago and the National Canine Research Council produced four approximately 10-minute-long training videos titled “Police & Dog Encounters” that are now available on YouTube and distributed by DOJ COPS. The four videos cover assessing a dog’s body language, tactical options for dealing with dogs, and the potential legal ramifications of shooting dogs.
Negotiating with a Dog

The body language section of the “Police & Dog Encounters” videos is designed to teach officers how to quickly size up the potential threat presented by dogs. And dog behaviorists and police trainers say you can’t just eyeball a dog, decide that it looks like a pit bull or Rottweiler, and decide it’s dangerous.

In the body language section of the “Police & Dog Encounters” videos, dog trainer and author Brian Kilcommons works with four Chicago PD officers on how to approach dogs that are not very happy about having strangers in their territory. “Dogs don’t lie,” Kilcommons says on the video. “They tell you what they are thinking.” That may be true, but you have to know how to interpret what the dog is saying.

Often what dogs are saying to police officers is, “Where did you come from?” “I don’t want you here.” “You scare me.”

Kilcommons and other dog behavior experts contacted for this article say the first thing an officer about to enter a property should check for is signs of a dog on that property. These include “Beware of Dog” signs, worn running paths next to the fence, dog leads, dog toys, food dishes, and water bowls.

If officers see these things and they are not trying to stealth their way onto the property and into the dwelling, experts say it’s time to make some noise. “You don’t want to surprise an animal. A startled dog will turn around and come after you,” says Jim Osorio, a former officer who has trained thousands of officers through his Texas-based company Canine Encounters Law Enforcement Training.

Kilcommons says officers have to remember they are entering the dog’s territory and the dog’s job is to defend that territory. “It’s the officer’s body language that sets most dogs off,” he explains. “Police are taught to take control, be assertive, and stand there and be ready. And the more you push like that, the more you stare at the dog, the worse it gets.”

ASPCA dog behavior expert Dr. Randall Lockwood says officers dealing with a dog in a non-exigent circumstance should consider the situation like a hostage negotiation. “What the dog wants is for you to go away. What you want to do is stay, do what you need to do, and then leave. You and the dog need to reach agreement on the terms by which that will take place,” he explains.

Canine behavior experts advise officers to avoid eye contact and assume a bladed and relaxed stance when approaching a dog for the first time. “Turn sideways,” says Kilcommons, who has trained more than 40,000 dogs. “When you confront a dog head-on and look him in the eye, it’s a challenge. You are basically telling that dog that you want to fight. Some dogs will react and bark and go into a state of anxiety when they see that. Others will accept your challenge and think, ‘Fighting sounds like a good idea. Here I come.’”

Deterrence Tools

Police trainers and dog experts say that only in the most extreme circumstances should drawing your duty pistol be your first reaction to a hostile dog.

“You have to do some critical thinking,” says retired officer and use-of-force expert Dr. Ron Martinelli, who has testified in dog shooting lawsuits, both for and against officers. “You have to ask yourself, ‘Is there any other way of getting around this? Can I get around this dog or remove this dog from the picture without shooting it?’ And if the dog is presenting a clear threat, you have to ask what you can do rather than shoot it to accomplish your mission. Can you bring in animal control? Can you ask the dog’s owner to lock it up? Can you use OC? Can you use a TASE?”

Some experts say one of the first things an officer should try...
with an unfriendly dog is to throw a stick or ball. Pets will often chase it. Another option is dog treats. And Lockwood says officers can at least try saying, “Sit,” in a firm, but friendly voice. “Most pet dogs at least know that command, and sometimes when they hear it, they will just stop and kind of look at you,” he explains.

Kilcommons recommends that before using weapons, officers should try to shield themselves from charging dogs with objects like garbage cans, chairs, and even clipboards. He says another option is to pull the baton not to strike the dog but to deflect a bite. “Dogs bite the first things they come in contact with,” he explains.

Some officers have had success using fire extinguishers as deterrence weapons against dogs. Lockwood, who trains police officers through an ASPCA Northeast program, says the fire extinguisher is an almost perfect dog repellent. “It’s very noisy and very cold. It tastes bad. But it doesn’t do any damage to the dog,” he says. “I’ve talked to many, many officers who have used fire extinguishers, and I have never heard of a case where they didn’t work.”

Kilcommons argues that fire extinguishers, while effective, can be unwieldy. He prefers boat horns. “There are very few dogs that can stand up to a boat horn,” he explains. “Use the big boy, the one they can hear for three miles,” he adds.

**Patrol Tools**

Fire extinguishers and boat horns are not on the belts of patrol officers, but OC canisters and TASERS are.

The Baltimore Police Department conducted a study of OC effectiveness on dogs. OC was sprayed at hostile dogs from a distance of three to eight feet during 20 incidents, and it was effective nearly 100% of the time. “Halt, the pepper spray carried by letter carriers, is only one-tenth the strength of police OC, and Halt works,” says Lockwood.

Still, many officers believe OC to be useless against a hostile canine. Some say they were taught and are still being taught this myth by police trainers. It’s actually tear gas that is ineffective on dogs.

Martinelli warns, however, that dogs react to OC differently than humans. “There’s no pain on the skin because of their fur,” he explains. “Animals with fur get over pepper spray in a couple of minutes, and then they come looking for the guy that sprayed them.”

TASERS are a powerful less-lethal weapon for use on both humans and animals, but shooting a dog with a TASER is very different from tasing a human. The dog is smaller and has a horizontal body mass. So use-of-force trainers say officers should cant their TASERS “gangsta style” parallel to the ground in order to stun a dog. Also, because of the size of the dog, TASER shots should not be attempted at a range of more than 10 feet.

Dep. Dustin Nelson of the San Diego County Sheriff’s Department, who oversees dog encounter training for his station, believes shooting dogs with TASERS may not be a very sound use of force. “The purpose of tasing somebody is to restrain them. What are you going to do when you tase a dog, handcuff him?”

**No Other Option**

Unfortunately, all the training in the world will not end all shootings of dogs by police officers. There are times when there is no other option and all but the most radical animal activists realize this is the case.

Kilcommons says that like some humans, “some dogs just are not wired right.”

And former officer now attorney O’Linn raises tactical concerns that would prevent an officer from choosing a less-lethal, take-it-slow approach during a hostile dog encounter. She uses a foot pursuit scenario as an example. “Officers have to be concerned about the tactical disadvantage they could be placed at if, as they are dealing with the dog, the bad guy takes advantage and tries to hurt them or someone else,” she explains.
Matthews stresses that DOJ COPS is in no way advocating that officers compromise their personal safety to save dogs. “We just want to give officers options so they don’t have to resort to the immediate use of deadly force,” she says.

Other dog advocates agree that while they don’t want officers to shoot dogs without reason, they understand that sometimes it’s necessary.

Cynthia Bathurst is the founder of Safe Human Chicago and a noted animal advocate. She was one of the driving forces behind the production of the “Police & Dog Encounters” videos.

In 2010 Bathurst helped train more than 6,000 officers of the Chicago Police Department on police vs. dog encounters, participating in roll call briefings for all three shifts. She says one night after the training two tactical officers came back into the station an hour later looking distressed and told her they had to tell her something.

“I feel so guilty,” one of them told Bathurst. “We were chasing this guy and somebody told us there were no dogs in the yard that the guy had just run into. So I jumped over the fence, and two big dogs, teeth bared, came running at me. I tried to get back over the fence before they reached me, but I couldn’t. I had to shoot and kill one of the dogs and the other ran away.”

Bathurst says she looked that officer in the eye and said, “Good for you. You did the right thing. I’m not going to second-guess something like that. You kept your partner and yourself safe, and that’s what you are supposed to do.”

NOTES:
Canine Dominance: Is the Concept of the Alpha Dog Valid?

Current research challenges the idea of the alpha dog.

Published on July 20, 2010 by Stanley Coren, Ph.D., F.R.S.C. in Canine Corner

It seems like every discussion of dog obedience and dog behavioural problems eventually turns to the issue of dominance. Dog owners are told that they must be “the leader of the pack” and the “alpha dog in your own home.” One reason why this issue has become so salient again has to do with the current popularity of Cesar Millan, who calls himself “The Dog Whisperer,” and has popularized the use of forceful methods to exert dominance over unruly dogs.

Millan’s methods are controversial among most trained dog behaviourists and researchers. To begin with, his use of the title “dog whisperer” seems odd, since it is an adaptation from the term “horse whisperer” that was first used to describe people like Willis J. Powell and Monty Roberts. They were called whisperers because they abandoned the use of force which was the common way of dealing with difficult and aggressive horses and substituted much gentler and supportive methods.

Millan’s techniques have caused professionals, such as Jean Donaldson, director of the SPCA Academy for Dog Trainers in San Francisco, to comment that: “A profession that has been making steady gains in its professionalism, technical sophistication and humane standards has been greatly set back. ... To co-opt a word like ‘whispering’ for arcane, violent and technically unsound practice is unconscionable.” She was sufficiently upset so that, with the collaboration of Ian Dunbar, who is a well respected dog behaviourist and has a degree in veterinary medicine as well as a PhD in psychology, they produced a DVD titled Fighting Dominance in a Dog Whispering World, which specifically attacks the methods used by Millan in his popular TV show.

However, rather than addressing the issue of Cesar Millan and his manner of training, there is a more fundamental issue that should be looked at, namely, is the concept of canine dominance—specifically the idea of the alpha dog who is leader of the pack—valid?

The original description of the basic difference between dominance and submission in dogs comes from Konrad Lorenz in his book, “King Solomon’s Ring,” (1949). Lorenz, who was a Nobel Prize winning ethologist and animal behaviorist, based this idea on observations of his own dogs. If one dog appeared to be more aggressive and powerful (dominant) the other dog would acknowledge this by giving ground or rolling on its back (submission). Lorenz felt that humans also had dominance relationships with dogs, since if he struck or threatened one of his dogs they acted similarly submissively toward him.

The thinking of scientists usually reflects the culture and the beliefs of the historical era and the place that they live in. Lorenz was born in Austria in 1903. His thinking about dogs was doubtless influenced by the dog training procedures common at that time, most of which had been developed by the German military for teaching service dogs. The methods used to train dogs reflected the attitudes of the military at the time and were based upon strict discipline supported by force if necessary. Certain tools that were developed for training reflect this attitude, such as a leash that was braided and made rigid at the loop end so that it could be turned around and used as a whip if the dog failed to obey.

Colonel Konrad Most summarized that Germanic philosophy of training when he wrote, “In the absence of compulsion neither human educationnor canine training is feasible. Even the most soft hearted dog-owner cannot get on terms with his idolized favorite without some form of compulsion.” In other words, one should use force to establish dominance and then use that dominance to control the animal’s behavior.

The first research on wolf behaviors seemed to support the idea of a rigid, military-like canine social hierarchy, usually supported by physical confrontations which ultimately established a leader—the “alpha wolf”—who maintains his leadership through force and intimidation. Unfortunately, later research would show that this is an artificial and erroneous view of canine social organization.

David L. Mech, who is now a Senior Research Scientist for the U.S. Department of the Interior, was one of the first people to study wolf behavior in the wild. In his 1970 book, he was influenced by earlier ideas, including those of Lorenz, and referred to the pack leader as the “alpha wolf.” Looking back 40 years later he has come to doubt the usefulness of this concept. He now maintains that the label is wrong because it implies that the wolves fought to determine dominance.

In actuality, when they mature, wolves leave their original pack to mate and produce offspring which then become the rest of their new pack. Dominance arises simply in the same way that parents naturally control the behavior of their offspring in humans, at least while they are living with the family. As in human families, the parents loosely set the rules, and the kids sort things out among themselves. Because of this state of affairs, rather than using the label “alpha” Mech prefers to refer to the “breeding” male or female in the pack or simply the mother or father wolf. The idea of the alpha only seems to be valid in artificial packs, where unrelated individuals are put together, as in captivity, or where may be multiple breeding pairs. In such “unnatural” social groupings, animals will contest for leadership and an alpha wolf will emerge.

Of course wolves are not dogs, so let’s look at a recent (2010) piece of research by Roberto Bonanni of the University of Parma and his associates. They looked at free-ranging packs of dogs in Italy and found that leadership was a very fluid thing. For example, in one pack, which had 27 members, there were 6 dogs that habitually took turns leading the pack, but at least half of the adult dogs were leaders, at least some of the time. The dogs that were usually found leading the pack tended to be the older, more experienced dogs, but not necessarily the most dominant. The pack seems to allow leadership to dogs, who at particular times seem to be most likely to contribute to the welfare of the pack through knowledge that can access the resources they require.

The reason that all of this is important is that it tells us, (regardless of concerns about the amount of force used in training) that Cesar Millan’s technique, and that of many other trainers who use a military-like concept of canine social hierarchy as the basis of dog training and problem solving, is based on a false premise. It is a holdover from German military service dog training at the turn of the last century, and generalization from outdated wolf research based on artificial packs of captive wolves.

Perhaps it is time to revise our dog training and obedience concepts to something along the ideas proposed by advocates of Positive Training. In that view, controlling the dog’s behavior is more a matter of controlling the things that a dog needs and wants, such as food and social interaction, rather than applying force to achieve what the science suggests is an unnatural dominance over the dog. If you manage and dispense important resources, the dog will respond to you out of self interest. So this approach to behavior modification has the same effect as forcefully imposed dominance in controlling the dog’s behavior. However, instead of dominance based on physical power and threats it is more similar to establishing status. One can agree to respond to controls imposed by someone of higher status, but this is done, not out of fear, but out of respect and in anticipation of the rewards that one can expect by doing so.
New Study Finds Popular “Alpha Dog” Training Techniques Can Cause More Harm than Good

By Sophia Yin, DVM, MS March 9, 2009

“The client, an elderly couple, had a 6-year-old male, neutered Rhodesian Ridgeback that was aggressive to dogs” describes Dr. Jennie Jamtgaard, an applied animal behavior consultant and behavior instructor at Colorado State University College of Veterinary Medicine. “They had watched Dog Whisperer with Cesar Millan and seen Millan place aggressive dogs in with his group of dogs and then hold them down on their sides or back if they were aggressive. So they brought their dog to the dog park and basically flooded him [immersed him in the aggression-inducing situation].”

Not surprisingly, they didn’t get far. “The female owner was trying to make the dog lie down while she stood on the leash, while all the dogs came up to hover and sniff. Her dog growled, then another dog growled back, and her dog (who probably weighed the same as she did) started to lunge and she couldn’t stop it. Then she was bitten while breaking up the fight that ensued. She could not have done an alpha roll if she had wanted to, though she did lament her obvious lack of being in the ‘pack leader’ role.”

In this case, the bite was an accident. But it’s not always so.

Jamtgaard describes another case, an Australian Cattledog mix with severe aggression (lunging, growling, barking) directed at other dogs whenever they came into view, even hundreds of feet away:

“The dog was fine with people and had never been aggressive to people before this bite. The owners were Millan-watchers, and dealt with the dog in a completely punishment-based way. They thought this was what they were supposed to do, but felt uncomfortable and frustrated. They repeatedly tried to physically subdue the dog whenever it was aggressive, a technique they had done for months. They admitted to knowing things weren’t improving, but didn’t have other ideas. Finally, at PetSmart, the dog growled and lunged, and when the female owner—5 months pregnant at the time—tried to force the dog down, she was bitten on the arm. The bite was tooth depth punctures. That was when they called me.”

Bite Incidences Come as No Surprise

Unfortunately, these bite incidences are not surprising. According to a new veterinary study published in The Journal of Applied Animal Behavior (2009), if you’re aggressive to your dog, your dog will be aggressive, too.

Says Meghan Herron, DVM, lead author of the study, “Nationwide, the number-one reason why dog owners take their dog to a veterinary behaviorist is to manage aggressive behavior. Our study demonstrated that many confrontational training methods, whether staring down dogs, striking them, or intimidating them with physical manipulation, do little to correct improper behavior and can elicit aggressive responses.”

Indeed, the use of such confrontational training techniques can provoke fear in the dog and lead to defensively aggressive behavior toward the person administering the aversive action.

For the study, Herron, Frances S. Shofer and Ilana R. Reisner, veterinarians with the Department...
of Clinical Studies at University of Pennsylvania, School of Veterinary Medicine, produced a 30-
item survey for dog owners who made behavioral service appointments at Penn Vet. In the
questionnaire, dog owners were asked how they had previously treated aggressive behavior,
whether there was a positive, negative or neutral effect on the dogs’ behavior, and whether
aggressive responses resulted from the method they used. Owners were also asked where they
learned of the training technique they employed. 140 surveys were completed.

Some Techniques Triggered Aggression

The highest frequency of aggression occurred in response to aversive (or punishing) interventions,
even when the intervention was indirect:

• Hitting or kicking the dog (41% of owners reported aggression)
• Growling at the dog (41%)
• Forcing the dog to release an item from its mouth (38%)
• “Alpha roll” (forcing the dog onto its back and holding it down) (31%)
• “Dominance down” (forcing the dog onto its side) (29%)
• Grabbing the jowls or scruff (26%)
• Staring the dog down (staring at the dog until it looks away) (30%)
• Spraying the dog with water pistol or spray bottle (20%)
• Yelling “no” (15%)
• Forced exposure (forcibly exposing the dog to a stimulus – such as tile floors, noise or people –
  that frightens the dog) (12%)

In contrast, non-aversive methods resulted in much lower frequency of aggressive responses:

• Training the dog to sit for everything it wants (only 2% of owners reported aggression)
• Rewarding the dog for eye contact (2%)
• Food exchange for an item in its mouth instead of forcing the item out (6%)
• Rewarding the dog for “watch me” (0%)

Who Uses Punishment-Based Techniques?

“This study highlights the risk of dominance-based training, which has been made popular by
television programs, books, and other punishment-based training advocates,” says Herron.

For instance, Dog Whisperer with Cesar Millan – the popular National Geographic Channel television
series – routinely demonstrates alpha rolls, dominance downs and forced exposure, and has
depicted Millan restraining dogs or performing physical corrections in order to take valued
possessions away from them.

And like their previous bestselling books, Divine Canine by the Monks of New Skete focuses on
correcting bad behaviors using choke chain and pinch collar corrections rather than proven non-
aversive techniques.

These sources attribute undesirable or aggressive behavior in dogs to the dogs striving to gain
social dominance or to a lack of dominance displayed by the owner. Advocates of this theory
therefore suggest owners establish an “alpha” or pack-leader role.

But veterinary behaviorists, Ph.D. behaviorists and the American Veterinary Society of Animal
Behavior (AVSAB) – through its position statement on The Use of Dominance Theory in Animal
Behavior Modification – attribute undesirable behaviors to inadvertent rewarding of undesirable
behaviors and lack of consistent rewarding of desirable behaviors.

Herron stresses, “Studies on canine aggression in the last decade have shown that canine
aggression and other behavior problems are not a result of dominant behavior or the lack of the
owner’s ‘alpha’ status, but rather a result of fear (self-defense) or underlying anxiety problems.
Aversive techniques can elicit an aggressive response in dogs because they can increase the fear
and arousal in the dog, especially in those that are already defensive.”
Owners Often Fail to See the Connection

Herron points out that, interestingly, not all owners reporting an aggressive response to a particular aversive technique felt that the training method had a negative effect on their dog’s behavior. For instance, while 43% of owners who hit or kicked their dog reported aggression directed toward them as a result, only 35% of owners felt that the technique had a negative effect.

Herron explains that one reason owners may have difficulty making the connection is that aversive techniques may temporarily inhibit reactive or undesirable behaviors – so that it appears the behavior has improved – but it's not a long-term fix. In addition, owners may not have recognized non-aggressive fearful responses to the correction and may have felt the technique was indeed helpful in the particular context. However, increasing the dog’s fear can also increase defensive aggression in the same or other situations.

What Methods Can Be Used Instead?

These results highlight the importance of using positive reinforcement and other non-aversive methods when working with dogs, especially dogs with a history of aggression. Indeed, such non-aversive methods, which focus on rewarding desirable behaviors and changing the dog’s emotional state, work well for aggressive dogs. (See video links below for examples of positive reinforcement.)

So what about the Australian Cattledog and Rhodesian Ridgeback we met at the beginning of this post?

Says Jamtgaard about her cases, “The Australian Cattledog improved dramatically at our consultation, being calm during situations the owners had never witnessed before, such as the neighbor dogs barking at her only a few feet away. I think seeing what just a few minutes of work could accomplish by changing approach gave them the hope that it could work.

Within 4-6 weeks they began to be able to go on normal walks with her, with dogs at normal distances. I continued following up by phone with the owners every few days at first, then weekly for the first 3 months. They felt so good that they could treat her differently (more kindly). The owner now competes with her dog in weight-pulling contests and can be in close contact with other dogs they meet during contests and on the street, whereas before, the dog was reactive from over a hundred feet.

This calm behavior has continued well beyond the first months of training. Jamtgaard states, “I saw the owner 2 years after the consult, with toddler in tow, and things were continuing to go well.”

“The elderly couple with the Rhodesian Ridgeback also achieved their goals in that 6-8 week range, structured similarly to the above as far as consults,” says Jamtgaard. “They were able to walk their dog safely and have him remain calm when they encounter other dogs. The dog can sit while they talk to the other dog owners. They do walk him on a Gentle Leader, but that helps with the safety issue of his size relative to their weight, should a situation happen. At last communication, approximately 6 months after our initial consult, things had continued to go well.”
Dogs Follow the Friendliest, Not the Alpha (Op-Ed)

Brian Hare and Vanessa Woods, Duke University  |  October 15, 2013 08:40pm ET

Brian Hare is an associate professor and Vanessa Woods is a research scientist in evolutionary anthropology at Duke University. They founded Dognition, a Web-based service that helps people find the genius in their dogs. This post was adapted from their New York Times’ best-seller “The Genius of Dogs,” which comes out in paperback Oct. 29. They contributed this article to LiveScience’s Expert Voices: Op-Ed & Insights.

Never let your dog walk first through a doorway. Don’t let your dog win tug-of-war. To establish yourself as the pack leader, flip your dog on its stomach and hold it by the throat.

This is some of the advice from the so-called “top” dog-training school, where the philosophy is that owners should establish a dominant relationship over their dogs to ensure that their canines are obedient.

This philosophy originates from the idea that wolf packs have strict dominance hierarchies where the wolves compete for dominance, but are held in check by the alpha male and female. Since dogs evolved from wolves, that dog school encourages you to act like the alpha wolf.

The problem from a scientific perspective with the “dog in wolf’s clothing” approach is that it assumes that the social system of dogs is the same as for wolves. However, domestication changed the social system of dogs. If people want to see how dogs behave without human interference, the best model is actually feral dogs.

Feral dogs are dogs who have been domesticated but have returned to a wilder existence. These include dogs that live completely independently from humans, like dingoes, and stray dogs that survive by scavenging human garbage. Many populations of feral dogs have not been intentionally bred by humans for generations, and are a great model of how dogs would behave without humans.

In wolves, with the exception of unusually large packs, a single breeding pair is dominant to everyone else. This pair uses their dominance to suppress the breeding of other pack members. Dominant female wolves are aggressive all year round, and use unprovoked attacks to prevent other females from mating. Male wolves become most aggressive during the mating season. Younger and subordinate pack members are usually the offspring of the breeding pair from previous years. Juveniles are forced to stay with their parents because meeting another wolf pack before they become fully grown is dangerous.

Feral dogs have a different system. While some feral dog groups have a dominance hierarchy that predicts priority to food and mates, this hierarchy is not as strict as in wolves. There is no dominant pair that leads the group. Instead, the leader of a feral dog pack is the dog that has the most affiliative relationships. When the pack decides where to go, they do not follow the most dominant dog — instead, they follow the dog with the most friends.

And yet, the top-dog approach is still prevalent in the training world. In one of the few experiments testing that theory, researchers assessed how long it took a group of golden retrievers to obey commands both before and after either winning 20 games of tug-of-war or losing 20 games of tug-of-war. Some members of the top dog school suggest that you should not let your dog win a tug-of-war match, because your dog will think they are dominant to you.

Regardless of whether the dogs won or lost the tug-of-war match, they did not show an increase or decrease in dominance toward their human partners.
Dogs are not wolves. It is time people started treated them as a unique species with a mind and social system very different from their ancestors.
De-Bunking the “Alpha Dog” Theory

Why every mention of “alpha dogs” or “dominant” dogs is dangerous to all dogs.

By Pat Miller, CBCC-KA, CPDT-KA, CDBC

The alpha myth is everywhere. Google “alpha dog” on the Internet and you get more than 85 million hits. Really. While not all the sites are about dominating your dog, there are literally millions of resources out there – websites, books, blogs, television shows, veterinarians, trainers and behavior professionals – instructing you to use force and intimidation to overpower your dog into submission. They say that you, the human, must be the alpha. They’re all wrong. Every single one of them.

The erroneous approach to canine social behavior known as dominance theory (two million-plus Google hits) is based on a study of captive zoo wolves conducted in the 1930s and 1940s by Swiss animal behaviorist Rudolph Schenkel, in which the scientist concluded that wolves in a pack fight to gain dominance, and the winner is the alpha wolf.

Bad Extrapolation

Schenkel’s observations of captive wolf behavior were erroneously extrapolated to wild wolf behavior, and then to domestic dogs. It was postulated that wolves were in constant competition for higher rank in the hierarchy, and only the aggressive actions of the alpha male and female held the contenders in check. Other behaviorists following Schenkel’s lead also studied captive wolves and confirmed his findings: groups of unrelated wolves brought together in artificial captive environments do, indeed, engage in often-violent and bloody social struggles.

The problem is, that’s not normal wolf behavior. As David Mech stated in the introduction to his study of wild wolves (Mech, 2000), “Attempting to apply information about the behavior of assemblages of unrelated captive wolves to the familial structure of natural packs has resulted in considerable confusion. Such an approach is analogous to trying to draw inferences about human family dynamics by studying humans in refugee camps. The concept of the alpha wolf as a ‘top dog’ ruling a group of similar-aged compatriots (Schenkel 1947; Rabb et al. 1967; Fox 1971a; Zimen 1975, 1982; Lockwood 1979; van Hooff et al. 1987) is particularly misleading.”

What we know now, thanks to Mech and others, is that in the wild, a wolf pack is a family, consisting of a mated pair and their offspring of the past one to three years. Occasionally two or three families may group together. As the offspring mature they disperse from the pack; the only long-term members of the group are the breeding pair. By contrast, in captivity unrelated wolves are forced to live together for many years, creating tension between mature adults that doesn’t happen in a natural, wild pack.

Enough About Wolves

But that’s all about wolves anyway, not dogs. How did it happen that dog owners and trainers started thinking all that information (and misinformation) about wolf behavior had anything to do with dogs and dog behavior? The logic went something like, “Dogs are descended from wolves. Wolves live in hierarchical packs in which the aggressive alpha male rules over everyone else. Therefore, humans need to dominate their pet dogs to get them to behave.”

Perhaps the most popular advocate of this inaccurate concept, Cesar Millan, is only the latest in a long line of dominance-based trainers who advocate forceful techniques such as the alpha roll. Much of this style of training has roots in the military – which explains the emphasis on punishment.

As far back as 1906, Colonel Konrad Most was using heavy-handed techniques to train dogs in the German army, then police and service dogs. He was joined by William Koehler after the end of World War II.

Koehler also initially trained dogs for the military prior to his civilian dog-training career, and his writings advocated techniques that included hanging and helicoptering a dog into submission (into unconsciousness, if necessary). For example, to stop a dog from digging, Koehler suggested filling the hole with water and submerging the dog’s head in the water-filled hole until he was nearly drowned.

Fast-forward several years to 1978 and the emergence of the Monks of New Skete as the new model for dog training, asserting a philosophy that “understanding is the key to communication, compassion, and communion” with your dog. Sounds great, yes? The Monks were considered cutting edge at the time – but contrary to their benevolent image, they were in fact responsible for the widespread popularization of the “Alpha-Wolf Roll-Over” (now shortened to the alpha roll). Reviewing the early observations of captive wolves, the Monks concluded that the alpha roll is a useful tool for demonstrating one’s authority over a dog. Unfortunately, this is a complete and utter misinterpretation of the submissive roll-over that is voluntarily offered by less assertive dogs, not forcibly commanded by stronger ones.

The Monks also advocated the frequent use of other physical punishments such as the scruff shake (grab both sides of the dog’s face and shake, lifting the dog off the ground) and cuffing under the dog’s chin with an open hand several times, hard enough to cause the dog to yelp.

While professing that “training dogs is about building a relationship that is based on respect and love and understanding,” even their most recent book, Divine Canine: The Monks’ Way to a Happy, Obedient Dog (2007), is still heavy on outdated, erroneous dominance theory. Immediately following their suggestion that “a kindly, gentle look tells the dog she is loved and accepted,” they say “But it is just as vital to communicate a stern reaction to bad behavior. A piercing, sustained stare into a dog’s eyes tells her who’s in charge; it establishes the proper hierarchy of dominance between person and pet.” (It’s also a great way to unwittingly elicit a strong aggressive response if you choose the wrong dog as the subject for your piercing, sustained stare.)

Despite the strong emergence of positive reinforcement-based training in the last 20 years, the Monks don’t seem to have grasped that the “respect” part needs to go both ways for a truly compassionate communion with your dog. Perhaps one of these days . . .

**Birth of Modern Training Era**

Just when it seemed that dog training had completely stagnated in turn-of-the-century military-style dominance-theory training, marine mammal trainer Karen Pryor wrote her seminal book, Don’t Shoot the Dog. Published in 1985, this small, unassuming volume was intended as a self-help book for human behavior. The author never dreamed that her modest book, paired with a small plastic box that made a clicking sound, would launch a massive paradigm shift in the world of dog training and behavior. But it did.

Forward progress was slow until 1993, when veterinary behaviorist Dr. Ian Dunbar founded the Association of Pet Dog Trainers. Dunbar’s vision of a forum for trainer education and networking has developed into an organization that now boasts nearly 6,000 members worldwide. While membership in the APDT is not restricted to positive reinforcement-based trainers, included in its guiding principles is this statement:

“We promote the use of reward-based training methods, thereby minimizing the use of aversive techniques.”

The establishment of this forum facilitated the rapid spread of information in the dog training world, enhanced by the creation of an online discussion list where members could compare notes and offer support for a scientific and dog-friendly approach to training.

Things were starting to look quite rosy for our dogs. The positive market literally mushroomed with books and videos from dozens of quality training and behavior professionals, including Jean Donaldson, Dr. Patricia McConnell, Dr. Karen Overall, Suzanne Hetts, and others. With advances
in positive training and an increasingly educated dog training profession embracing the science of behavior and learning and passing good information on to their clients, pain-causing, abusive methods such as the alpha roll, scruff shake, hanging, drowning, and cuffing appeared to be headed the way of the passenger pigeon.

A Step Backward

Then, in the fall of 2004, the National Geographic Channel launched its soon-to-be wildly popular show, The Dog Whisperer. Dominance theory was back in vogue, with a vengeance. Today, everything from housetraining mistakes to jumping up to counter surfing to all forms of aggression is likely to be attributed to “dominance” by followers of the alpha-resurgence.

“But,” some will argue, “look at all the dogs who have been successfully trained throughout the past century using the dominance model. Those trainers can’t be all wrong.”

In fact, harsh force-based methods (in technical parlance, “positive punishment”) are a piece of operant conditioning, and as the decades have proven, those methods can work. They are especially good at shutting down behaviors – convincing a dog that it’s not safe to do anything unless instructed to do something. And yes, that works with some dogs. With others, not so much.

My own personal, unscientific theory is that dog personalities lie on a continuum from very soft to very tough. Harsh, old-fashioned dominance-theory methods can effectively suppress behaviors without obvious fallout (although there is always behavioral fallout) with dogs nearest the center of the personality continuum – those who are resilient enough to withstand the punishment, but not so tough and assertive that they fight back. Under dominance theory, when a dog fights back, you must fight back harder until he submits, in order to assert yourself as the pack leader, or alpha.

Problem is, sometimes they don’t submit, and the level of violence escalates. Or they submit for the moment, but may erupt aggressively again the next time a human does something violent and inappropriate to them. Under dominance-theory training, those dogs are often deemed incorrigible, not suitable for the work they’re being trained for nor safe as a family companion, and sentenced to death. Had they never been treated inappropriately, many might have been perfectly fine.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, a very “soft” dog can be easily psychologically damaged by one enthusiastic inappropriate assertion of rank by a heavy-handed dominance trainer. This dog quickly shuts down – fearful and mistrusting of the humans in his world who are unpredictably and unfairly violent.

Most crossover trainers (those who used to train with old-fashioned methods and now are proud to promote positive reinforcement-based training) will tell you they successfully trained lots of dogs the old way. They loved their dogs and their dogs loved them.

I’m a crossover trainer and I know that’s true. I also would dearly love to be able to go back and redo all of that training, to be able to have an even better relationship with those dogs, to give them a less stressful life – one filled with even more joy than the one we shared together.

We’re Not Dogs – And They Know It

Finally, the very presumption that our dogs would even consider we humans to be members of their canine pack is simply ludicrous. They know how impossibly inept we are, for the most part, at reading and understanding the subtleties of canine body language. We are equally inept, if not even more so, at trying to mimic those subtleties. Any attempts on our part to somehow insert ourselves into their social structure and communicate meaningfully with them in this manner are simply doomed to failure. It’s about time we gave up trying to be dogs in a dog pack and accepted that we are humans co-existing with another species – and that we’re most successful doing so when we co-exist peacefully.

The fact is, successful social groups work because of voluntary deference, not because of aggressively enforced dominance. The whole point of social body language rituals is to avoid conflict and confrontation, not to cause it. Watch any group of dogs interacting. Time and time again you’ll see dogs deferring to each other. It’s not even always the same dog deferring:
Dog B: Hey, I’d really like to go first. Dog A: “By all means, be my guest.” Dog B passes down the narrow hallway.

Dog A: “I’d really like to have that bone.” Dog B: “Oh sure – I didn’t feel like chewing right now anyway.” Dog A gets the bone.

Social hierarchies do exist in groups of domesticated dogs and in many other species, including humans, and hierarchy can be fluid. As described above, one dog may be more assertive in one encounter, and more deferent in the next, depending on what’s at stake, and how strongly each dog feels about the outcome. There are a myriad of subtleties about how those hierarchies work, and how the members of a social group communicate – in any species.

Today, educated trainers are aware that canine-human interactions are not driven by social rank, but rather by reinforcement. Behaviors that are reinforced repeat and strengthen. If your dog repeats an inappropriate behavior such as counter surfing or getting on the sofa, it’s not because he’s trying to take over the world; it’s just because he’s been reinforced by finding food on the counter, or by being comfortable on the sofa. He’s a scavenger and an opportunist, and the goods are there for the taking. Figure out how to prevent him from being reinforced for the behaviors you don’t want, and reinforce him liberally for the ones you do, and you’re well on your way to having the relationship of mutual love, respect, communication, and communion that we all want to have with our dogs.

Pat Miller, CBCC-KA, CPDT-KA, CDBC, is WDJ’s Training Editor. Author of numerous books on positive dog training, she lives in Fairplay, Maryland, site of her Peaceable Paws training center, where she offers dog training classes and courses for trainers.

NOTES:
If You’re Aggressive, Your Dog Will Be Too, Says Veterinary Study

DATE: February 18, 2009

SOURCE: University of Pennsylvania

SUMMARY: In a new, year-long survey of dog owners who use confrontational or aversive methods to train aggressive pets, veterinary researchers have found that most of these animals will continue to be aggressive unless training techniques are modified.

In a new, year-long University of Pennsylvania survey of dog owners who use confrontational or aversive methods to train aggressive pets, veterinary researchers have found that most of these animals will continue to be aggressive unless training techniques are modified.

The study, published in the current issue of Applied Animal Behavior Science, also showed that using non-aversive or neutral training methods such as additional exercise or rewards elicited very few aggressive responses.

“Nationwide, the No. 1 reason why dog owners take their pet to a veterinary behaviorist is to manage aggressive behavior,” Meghan E. Herron, lead author of the study, said. “Our study demonstrated that many confrontational training methods, whether staring down dogs, striking them or intimidating them with physical manipulation does little to correct improper behavior and can elicit aggressive responses.”

The team from the School of Veterinary Medicine at Penn suggest that primary-care veterinarians advise owners of the risks associated with such training methods and provide guidance and resources for safe management of behavior problems. Herron, Frances S. Shofer and Ilana R. Reisner, veterinarians with the Department of Clinical Studies at Penn Vet, produced a 30-item survey for dog owners who made behavioral service appointments at Penn Vet. In the questionnaire, dog owners were asked how they had previously treated aggressive behavior, whether there was a positive, negative or neutral effect on the dogs’ behavior and whether

aggressive responses resulted from the method they used. Owners were also asked where they learned of the training technique they employed.

Of the 140 surveys completed, the most frequently listed recommendation sources were “self” and “trainers.” Several confrontational methods such as “hit or kick dog for undesirable behavior” (43 percent), “growl at dog” (41 percent), “physically force the release of an item from a dog’s mouth” (39 percent), “alpha roll” physically -- rolling the dog onto its back and holding it (31 percent), “stare at or stare down” (30 percent), “dominance down” — physically forcing the dog down onto its side (29 percent) and “grab dog by jowls and shake” (26 percent) elicited an aggressive response from at least 25 percent of the dogs on which they were attempted. In addition, dogs brought to the hospital for aggressive behavior towards familiar people were more likely to respond aggressively to some confrontational techniques than dogs brought in for other behavioral reasons.

“This study highlights the risk of dominance-based training, which has been made popular by TV, books and punishment-based training advocates,” Herron said. “These techniques are fear-eliciting and may lead to owner-directed aggression.”

Prior to seeking the counsel of a veterinary behaviorist, many dog owners attempt behavior-modification techniques suggested by a variety of sources. Recommendations often include the aversive-training techniques listed in the survey, all of which may provoke fearful or defensively aggressive behavior. Their common use may have grown from the idea that canine aggression is rooted in the need for social dominance or to a lack of dominance displayed by the owner. Advocates of this theory therefore suggest owners establish an “alpha” or pack-leader role.

The purpose of the Penn Vet study was to assess the behavioral effects and safety risks of techniques used historically by owners of dogs with behavior problems.

NOTES:
Position Statement on the Use of Dominance Theory in Behavior Modification of Animals

AVSAB is concerned with the recent re-emergence of dominance theory and forcing dogs and other animals into submission as a means of preventing and correcting behavior problems. For decades, some traditional animal training has relied on dominance theory and has assumed that animals misbehave primarily because they are striving for higher rank. This idea often leads trainers to believe that force or coercion must be used to modify these undesirable behaviors.

In the last several decades, our understanding of dominance theory and of the behavior of domesticated animals and their wild counterparts has grown considerably, leading to updated views. To understand how and whether to apply dominance theory to behavior in animals, it’s imperative that one first has a basic understanding of the principles.

Definition of Dominance

Dominance is defined as a relationship between individual animals that is established by force/aggression and submission, to determine who has priority access to multiple resources such as food, preferred resting spots, and mates (Bernstein 1981; Drews 1993). A dominance-submissive relationship does not exist until one individual consistently submits or defers. In such relationships, priority access exists primarily when the more dominant individual is present to guard the resource. For instance, in a herd comprised of several bulls and many cows, the subordinate males avoid trying to mate when the dominant bull is near or they defer when the dominant bull approaches (Yin 2009). However, they will mate with females when the dominant bull is far away, separated by a barrier, or out of visual sight. By mating in this manner, subordinate bulls are not challenging the dominant bull’s rank; rather, they are using an alternate strategy for gaining access to mates.

In our relationship with our pets, priority access to resources is not the major concern. The majority of behaviors owners want to modify, such as excessive vocalization, unruly greetings, and failure to come when called, are not related to valued resources and may not even involve aggression. Rather, these behaviors occur because they have been inadvertently rewarded and because alternate appropriate behaviors have not been trained instead. Consequently, what owners really want is not to gain dominance, but to obtain the ability to influence their pets to perform behaviors willingly—which is one accepted definition of leadership (Knowles and Saxberg 1970; Yin 2009).

Applying Dominance Theory to Human-Animal Interactions Can Pose Problems

Even in the relatively few cases where aggression is related to rank, applying animal social theory and mimicking how animals would respond can pose a problem. First, it can cause one to use punishment, which may suppress aggression without addressing the underlying cause. Because fear and anxiety are common causes of aggression and other behavior problems, including those that mimic resource guarding, the use of punishment can directly exacerbate the problem by increasing the animal’s fear or anxiety (AVSAB 2007).

Second, it fails to recognize that with wild animals, dominance-submissive relationships are reinforced through warning postures and ritualistic dominance and submissive displays. If the relationship is stable, then the submissive animal defers automatically to the dominant individual. If the relationship is less stable, the dominant individual has a more aggressive personality, or the dominant individual is less confident about its ability to maintain a higher rank, continued aggressive displays occur (Yin 2007, Yin 2009).

Key Points

• Despite the fact that advances in behavior research have modified our understanding of social hierarchies in wolves, many animal trainers continue to base their training methods on outdated perceptions of dominance theory. (Refer to Myths About Dominance and Wolf Behavior as It Relates to Dogs)

• Dominance is defined as a relationship between individual animals that is established by force/aggression and submission, to determine who has priority access to multiple resources such as food, preferred resting spots, and mates (Bernstein 1981; Drews 1993). Most undesirable behaviors in our pets are not related to priority access to resources; rather, they are due to accidental rewarding of the undesirable behavior.

• The AVSAB recommends that veterinarians not refer clients to trainers or behavior consultants who coach and advocate dominance hierarchy theory and the subsequent confrontational training that follows from it.

• Instead, the AVSAB emphasizes that animal training, behavior prevention strategies, and behavior modification programs should follow the scientifically based guidelines of positive reinforcement, operant conditioning, classical conditioning, desensitization, and counter conditioning.

• The AVSAB recommends that veterinarians identify and refer clients only to trainers and behavior consultants who understand the principles of learning theory and who focus on reinforcing desirable behaviors and removing the reinforcement for undesirable behaviors.
The AVSAB emphasizes that the standard of care for veterinarians specializing in behavior is that dominance theory should not be used as a general guide for behavior modification. Instead, the AVSAB emphasizes that behavior modification and training should focus on reinforcing desirable behaviors, avoiding the reinforcement of undesirable behaviors, and striving to address the underlying emotional state and motivations, including medical and genetic factors, that are driving the undesirable behavior.

How Leadership Differs from Dominance

The AVSAB clarifies that dominance and leadership are not synonymous. In the human-related fields of business management and sociology, where leadership is studied extensively, leadership is defined broadly by some as “the process of influencing activities of an individual or group to achieve a certain objective in a given situation” (Dubrin 1990, in Barker 1997). Despite this definition, which includes influence through coercion, scholars in these fields recommend against the use of coercion and force to attempt to gain leadership (Benowitz 2001). Coercion and force generate passive resistance, tend to require continual pressure and direction from the leader, and are usually not good tactics for getting the best performance from a team (Benowitz 2001). Additionally, those managers who rule through coercive power (the ability to punish) “most often generate resistance which may lead workers to deliberately avoid carrying out instructions or to disobey orders” (Benowitz 2001).

Similarly with pets, leadership should be attained by more positive means—by rewarding appropriate behaviors and using desired resources as reinforcers for these behaviors. Leadership is established when a pet owner can consistently set clear limits for behavior and effectively communicate the rules by immediately rewarding the correct behaviors and preventing access to or removing the rewards for undesirable behaviors before these undesirable behaviors are reinforced. Owners must avoid reinforcing undesirable behaviors and only reinforce the desirable behaviors frequently enough and consistently enough for the good behaviors to become a habit (Yin 2007).

Finally, AVSAB points out that while aggression between both domesticated and wild animals can be related to the desire to attain higher rank and thus priority access to resources, there are many other causes. These are discussed in detail in multiple veterinary behavior textbooks (please see www.avsabonline.org for helpful articles). Consequently, dominance should not be automatically presumed to be the cause of such conflicts, especially when the conflict occurs within a human household. Instead, a thorough medical and behavioral assessment should be conducted on all animals involved in the conflict to determine the true cause or causes of the aggression.

Conclusion

The AVSAB emphasizes that the use of scientifically sound learning principles that apply to all species is the accepted means of training and modifying behavior in pets and is the key to our understanding of how pets learn and how to communicate with our pets.

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**Myths About Dominance and Wolf Behavior as It Relates to Dogs**

**MY DOG GREET ME BY JUMPING UP, STEALS FOOD BEHIND MY BACK, TRIES TO CLIMB INTO MY LAP TO BE PETTED, AND OFTEN IGNORES ME WHEN I CALL HIM TO COME. ARE THESE SIGNS OF DOMINANCE?**

No. In animal social systems, dominance is defined as a relationship between two or more individuals that is established by force, aggression, and submission in order to gain priority access to resources (Bernstein 1981; Drews 1993). Most unruly behaviors in dogs occur not out of the desire to gain higher rank, but simply because the undesirable behaviors have been rewarded. For instance, dogs jump on people and climb into their laps because when they do so, they get attention. Similarly, dogs fail to come when called if they are being rewarded by the objects or activities that are distracting them. Even stealing food when humans are not watching is not a play for higher rank. In the wild, lower-ranking animals steal resources when higher-ranking animals are not around to guard the resources. This is an alternate strategy for obtaining the resources they want. Those who are rewarded by success are more likely to continue stealing in this manner.

Because dogs are related to wolves, we should use wolves as a model for understanding dogs. While we can get ideas of the types of behaviors to study in dogs based on what we know about wolves, the best model for understanding domestic dogs is domestic dogs. Dogs have diverged significantly from wolves in the last 15,000 years. Ancestral wolves evolved as hunters and now generally live in packs consisting most often of family members (Mech 2000). Pack members cooperate to hunt and to take care of offspring. In a given year, generally only the alpha male and alpha female mate, so that the resources of the entire pack can be focused on their one litter. Dogs, on the other hand, evolved as scavengers rather than hunters (Copping and Copping 2002). Those who were the least fearful, compared to their human-shy counterparts, were best able to survive off the trash and waste of humans and reproduce in this environment. Currently, free-roaming dogs live in small groups rather than cohesive packs, and in some cases spend much of their time alone (MacDonald and Carr 1995). They do not generally cooperate to hunt or to raise their offspring, and virtually all males and females have the opportunity to mate (Boitani et al. 1995). Marked differences in social systems, such as those just described, inevitably lead to notable differences in social behavior.

**I hear that if you think a dog is dominant, you should roll him on his back in an “alpha roll” and growl in his face because that’s what an alpha wolf would do... In a pack of wolves, higher-ranking wolves do not roll lower-ranking wolves on their backs. Rather, lower-ranking wolves show their subordinate status by offering to roll on their backs. This submissive roll is a sign of deference, similar to when someone greets the queen or the pope by kneeling. Consequently, a more appropriate term for the posture would be a submissive roll (Yin 2009).**

**Even if wolves don’t roll subordinates on their back, it seems to work in some cases. Should I try it anyway if my dog is aggressive?**

The most common cause of aggression in dogs is fear. Pinning a dog down when he is scared will not address the root of his fear. Furthermore it can heighten the aggression (AVSAB 2007). In fact, a recent study of dogs (Herron et al. 2008) found that confrontational techniques such as hitting or kicking the dog for undesirable behavior, growling at the dog, performing an “alpha roll,” staring the dog down, and enforcing a “dominance down” frequently elicited an aggressive response from the dog. The aggression may also be redirected toward inanimate objects, or other animals or people besides the owner. Even non-physical punishment, such as a harsh verbal reprimand or shaking a finger at a dog, can elicit defensive aggression if the dog feels threatened by it.

**I have heard that to be the boss or leader, you have to go through doors first: walk ahead of the dog like wolves do. In a wolf pack, the highest ranking wolves only lead the hunt a fraction of the time (Peterson et al. 2002). Furthermore, when they are hunting, they do not keep a tight linear formation based on their rank.**

**Since the alpha goes first, should you eat before your dog?**

Higher-ranking wolves don’t necessarily have priority access to food. Once a wolf has possession of food, he may not give it up to another wolf regardless of his rank. When food is not yet in possession of either wolf, ritualized aggression (snarling, lunging) may still occur, with the higher-ranking wolves usually winning.

**Feeding dogs treats will cause them to become dominant.** Even among wild animals, sharing of food does not relate to dominance. Adult wolves frequently regurgitate food for puppies. Males of other species frequently court females by bringing food to them. Giving a dog a treat when he jumps up or barks at you can result in unruly behavior. However this does not teach him that he is higher ranked or has priority access to resources. If you would like to teach him to wait...
politely for a treat you can wait until he sits or lies down patiently and then give him a treat.

Will growling or trying to bite a dog or making a claw with your fingers mimic what a wolf does when he growls at or bites a subordinate? There are no studies on this. However, as an experiment, you might ask a friend who has been bitten by a dog whether poking him with your fingers bent in claw formation has an effect that’s similar to when he was bitten, or whether your growling or biting seems similarly ferocious. In general, we shouldn’t assume that our actions mimic those of a dog or a wolf. Rather, we should evaluate each of our interactions with our pets and observe their response to determine how the pet perceived it.

REFERENCES


The word *alpha* applied to wolves has had a long history. For many years books and articles about wolves have mentioned the alpha male and alpha female or the alpha pair. In much popular writing the term is still in use today. However, keen observers may have noticed that during the past few years the trend has begun to wane. For example, 19 prominent wolf biologists from both...
Europe and North America never mentioned the term *alpha* in a long article on breeding pairs of wolves. The article, titled “The Effects of Breeder Loss on Wolves,” was published in a 2008 issue of the *Journal of Wildlife Management*. In the 448-page, 2003 book *Wolves: Behavior, Ecology, and Conservation*, edited by Luigi Boitani and myself and written by 23 authors, *alpha* is mentioned in only six places and then only to explain why the term is outdated. What gives?

This change in terminology reflects an important shift in our thinking about wolf social behavior. Rather than viewing a wolf pack as a group of animals organized with a “top dog” that fought its way to the top, or a male-female pair of such aggressive wolves, science has come to understand that most wolf packs are merely family groups formed exactly the same way as human families are formed. That is, maturing male and female wolves from different packs disperse, travel around until they find each other and an area vacant of other wolves but with adequate prey, court, mate, and produce their own litter of pups.

Sometimes this process involves merely a maturing male courting a maturing female in a neighboring pack and then the pair settling down in a territory next to one of the original packs. In more saturated populations, this may mean wolves moving many miles to the very edge of wolf range and finding mates there that have similarly dispersed. This is the process that helps a growing wolf population expand its range. A good example is the ever-increasing wolf population in Wisconsin. There, not only is the main population in the northern part of the state continuing to fill the north with more and more pack territories, but wolves have managed to form a separate population in the central part of the state through this dispersal and proliferation of packs. Currently about 18 packs live in central Wisconsin.

But now back to the family. As the original, new pairing wolves raise their pups, they feed and care for them just like any other animals care for their young. As the pups grow and develop, their parents naturally guide their activities, and the pups naturally follow. During fall when the pups begin to accompany their parents away from the den or rendezvous site and circulate nomadically around the territory, the pups follow the adults and learn their way around. The parents then automatically fall into the leadership role in the pack as they guide the pups throughout their territory. This leadership role, however, does not involve anyone fighting to the top of the group, because just like in a human family, the youngsters naturally follow their parents’ lead.

Certainly as the pups further develop, they begin to gain some independence, and individuals might temporarily stray from the group, exploring this and that along the
packs. However, the parents continue to guide the group as they hunt prey, scent-mark the territory, fend off scavengers from their kills, or protect the group from neighboring wolf packs that they might encounter. As the pups continue to develop and reach 1 year of age, their parents produce a second litter of pups, which become the younger siblings of the first litter. Again the parents continue to guide and lead the new litter along with the older litter and remain the pack's leaders. The yearlings naturally dominate the new pups just as older brothers and sisters in a human family might guide the younger siblings, but still there is no general battle to try to gain pack leadership; that just naturally stays with the original parents. Some of the older siblings will disperse between the ages of 1 and 2 in some populations, and in others they may remain with the pack through about 3 years of age. However, eventually almost all of them will disperse, try to find mates, and start their own packs. Given this natural history of wolf packs, there is no more reason to refer to the parent wolves as alphas than there would be to refer to the parents of a human family as the "alpha" pair. Thus we now refer to these animals as the male breeder and female breeder and as the breeding pair or simply the parents.

So how did science get so far off track for so long and refer to the parent wolves as alphas? The answer is an interesting story that nicely illustrates how science progresses. Several decades ago, before there were many studies of wolves under natural conditions, scientists interested in animal social behavior thought the wolf pack was a random assemblage of wolves that came together as winter approached in order to better hunt their large prey. Thus to study wolves in the only way they knew how, these folks gathered individual wolves from various zoos and placed them together in their own captive colony. When one puts a random group of any species together artificially, these animals will naturally compete with each other and eventually form a type of dominance hierarchy. This is like the classical pecking order originally described in chickens. In such cases, it is appropriate to refer to the top-ranking individuals as alphas, implying that they competed and fought to gain their position. And so too it was with wolves when placed together artificially. Thus, the main behaviorist who studied wolves in captivity, Rudolph Schenkel, published a famous monograph describing how wolves interact with each other in such a group, asserting then that there is a top-ranking male and a top-ranking female in packs and referring to them as the alphas. This classical monograph was the main piece of literature on wolf social behavior available when

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This book was a synthesis of available wolf information at the time, so I included much reference to Schenkel’s study. The book was timely because no other synthesis about the wolf had been written since 1944, so *The Wolf* sold well. It was originally published in 1970 and republished in paperback in 1981 and is still in print. Over 120,000 copies are now in circulation. Most other general wolf books have relied considerably on *The Wolf* for information, thus spreading the misinformation about alpha wolves far and wide.

Finally in the late 1990s, after I had lived with a wild wolf pack on Ellesmere Island near the North Pole for many summers witnessing firsthand the interactions among parent wolves and their offspring, I decided to correct this misinformation. By then, however, both the lay public and most biologists had fully adopted the alpha concept and terminology. It seemed no one could speak about a wolf pack without mentioning the alphas. Many people would ask me what made an alpha wolf an alpha and what kind of fighting and competition did it take to gain that position. Thus, in 1999 I published the article “Alpha Status, Dominance, and Division of Labor in Wolf Packs” in the *Canadian Journal of Zoology* formally correcting the misinformation in the scientific literature. I followed that up in 2000 with the article “Leadership in Wolf, *Canis lupus*, Packs” in the *Canadian Field Naturalist*, further elaborating on the role of the parent wolves in the pack’s social order.

However, it has been said that it generally takes about 20 years for new science to fully seep down to general acceptance, including even new medical breakthroughs. Such seems to be proving true with the alpha-wolf concept. Several of my wolf biologist colleagues have accepted the update, but others suddenly correct themselves in the middle of their conversations with me; still others seem totally oblivious to the whole issue. It is heartening indeed to see newly published papers such as the one I cited above in the introduction to this article that have adopted the proper terminology.

The issue is not merely one of semantics or political correctness. It is one of biological correctness such that the term we use for breeding wolves accurately captures the biological and social role of the animals rather than perpetuate a faulty view.

One place where this issue becomes particularly confusing is Yellowstone National Park, where great numbers of the public spend much time observing wolves right along with wolf biologists and naturalists. Because the Yellowstone wolf population was newly restored and enjoys a great surplus of prey (6,000 to 12,000 elk, 4,000 bison,

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and hundreds of deer, pronghorn, bighorn sheep, moose and other prey), the pack structure of its population is more complex than in most wolf populations. There, young wolves disperse at a later age, when 2 to 3 years old instead of 1 to 2, thus making packs larger and containing more mature individuals than most packs do elsewhere. In these packs where both the mother and some of her daughters mature, all sometimes get bred during the same year, the daughters usually by outside males.

When more than one female breeds in a pack, the females may become more competitive, so it is probably appropriate to refer to the original matriarch as the alpha female and to her daughters as “betas.” The Yellowstone observers commonly use this phraseology, but too often it becomes loosely applied to all the breeding wolves, even in packs where there are only single breeders. While it is not incorrect to use alpha when applied to packs of multiple breeders, it would be possible and even desirable to use less loaded terminology. For example, the top-ranking female could be called the dominant female or the matriarch, and her breeding daughters, the subordinates. Or individually if the females actually show a dominance order, the second- and third-ranking individuals could be called simply that. This approach would further reform wolf terminology and add to both science’s and the public’s more accurate perception of the wolf.

Hopefully it will take fewer than 20 years for the media and the public to fully adopt the correct terminology and thus to once and for all end the outmoded view of the wolf pack as an aggressive assortment of wolves consistently competing with each other to take over the pack.

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The issue is not merely one of semantics or political correctness. It is one of biological correctness such that the term we use for breeding wolves accurately captures the biological and social role of the animals.
The Top Ten Dog Behavior Myths

By Jean Donaldson | October 30, 2008

There are a lot of myths about dog behavior so I whittled it down to ones that were pervasive and that made myth criteria, which are: a) There is no (zero) scientific evidence supporting the contention; b) There is scientific evidence against the contention and/or scientific evidence supporting alternatives.

1) Dogs are naturally pack animals with a clear social order.

This one busts coming out of the gate as free-ranging dogs (pariahs, semi-feral populations, dingoes, etc.) don't form packs. As someone who spent years solemnly repeating that dogs were pack animals, it was sobering to find out that dogs form loose, amorphous, transitory associations with other dogs.

2) If you let dogs exit doorways ahead of you, you’re letting them be dominant.

There is not only no evidence for this, there is no evidence that the behavior of going through a doorway has any social significance whatsoever. In order to lend this idea any plausibility, it would need to be ruled out that rapid doorway exit is not simply a function of their motivation to get to whatever is on the other side combined with their higher ambulation speed.

3) In multi-dog households, “support the hierarchy” by giving presumed dominant animals patting, treats, etc., first, before giving the same attention to presumed subordinate animals.

There is no evidence that this has any impact on inter-dog relations, or any type of aggression. In fact, if one dog were roughing up another, the laws governing Pavlovian conditioning would dictate an opposite tack: Teach aggressive dogs that other dogs receiving scarce resources predicts that they are about to receive some. If so practiced, the tough dog develops a happy emotional response to other dogs getting stuff – a helpful piece of training, indeed. No valuable conditioning effects are achieved by giving the presumed higher-ranking dog goodies first.

4) Dogs have an innate desire to please. This concept has never been operationally defined, let alone tested.

A vast preponderance of evidence, however, suggests that dogs, like all properly functioning animals, are motivated by food, water, sex, and like many animals, by play and access to bonded relationships, especially after an absence. They're also, like all animals, motivated by fear and pain, and these are the inevitable tools of those who eschew the use of food, play, etc., however much they cloak their coercion and collar-tightening in desire to please rhetoric.

5) Rewards are bribes and thus compromise relationships.

Related to 4), the idea that behavior should just, in the words of Susan Friedman, Ph.D., “flow like a fountain” without need of consequences, is opposed by more than 60 years of unequivocal evidence that behavior is, again to quote Friedman, “a tool to produce consequences.” Another problem is that bribes are given before behavior, and rewards are given after. And, a mountain of evidence from decades of research in pure and applied settings has demonstrated over and over that positive reinforcement – i.e., rewards – make relationships better, never worse.

6) **If you pat your dog when he’s afraid, you’re rewarding the fear.**

Fear is an emotional state – a reaction to the presence or anticipation of something highly aversive. It is not an attempt at manipulation. If terrorists enter a bank and order everybody down on the floor, the people will exhibit fearful behavior. If I then give a bank customer on the floor a compliment, 20 bucks or chocolates, is this going to make them more afraid of terrorists next time? It’s stunningly narcissistic to imagine that a dog’s fearful behavior is somehow directed at us (along with his enthusiastic door-dashing).

7) **Punish dogs for growling or else they’ll become aggressive.**

Ian Dunbar calls this “removing the ticker from the time bomb.” Dogs growl because something upsetting them is too close. If you punish them for informing us of this, they are still upset but now not letting us know, thus allowing scary things to get closer and possibly end up bitten. Much better to make the dog comfortable around what he’s growling at so he’s not motivated to make it go away.

8) **Playing tug makes dogs aggressive.**

There is no evidence that this is so. The only study ever done, by Borchelt and Goodloe, found no correlation between playing tug and the incidence of aggression directed at either family members or strangers. Tug is, in fact, a cooperative behavior directed at simulated prey: the toy.

9) **If you give dogs chew toys, they’ll learn to chew everything.**

This is a Pandora’s Box type of argument that, once again, has zero evidence to support it. Dogs are excellent discriminators and readily learn with minimal training to distinguish their toys from forbidden items. The argument is also logically flawed as chewing is a ‘hydraulic’ behavior that waxes and wanes, depending on satiation/deprivation, as does drinking, eating and sex. Dogs without chew objects are like zoo animals in barren cages. Unless there is good compensation with other enrichment activities, there is a welfare issue here.

10) **You can’t modify “genetic” behavior.**

All behavior – and I mean all – is a product of a complex interplay between genes and the environment. And while some behaviors require less learning than others, or no learning at all, their modifiability varies as much as does the modifiability of behaviors that are primarily learned.

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This entry was posted in Blogs To Help You Train Your Dog and tagged dog training myths, jean donaldson, myth busting on November 5, 2010 by DogSmith.
WHEN WE NEED A HUMAN: MOTIVATIONAL DETERMINANTS OF ANTHROPOMORPHISM

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We propose that the tendency to anthropomorphize nonhuman agents is determined primarily by three factors (Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007), two of which we test here: sociality motivation and effectance motivation. This theory makes unique predictions about dispositional, situational, cultural, and developmental variability in anthropomorphism, and we test two predictions about dispositional and situational influences stemming from both of these motivations. In particular, we test whether those who are dispositionally lonely (sociality motivation) are more likely to anthropomorphize well-known pets (Study 1), and whether those who have a stable need for control (effectance motivation) are more likely to anthropomorphize apparently unpredictable animals (Study 2). Both studies are consistent with our predictions. We suggest that this theory of anthropomorphism can help to explain when people are likely to attribute humanlike traits to nonhuman agents, and provides insight into the inverse process of dehumanization in which people fail to attribute human characteristics to other humans.

Aristotle suggested that the only critical ingredient in the recipe for supreme happiness was other people, and social psychologists more than 2,000 years younger have provided empirical justification for this claim (Diener & Seligman, 2002). People need other humans in daily life for reasons ranging from the practical to the existential.
potential, and we suggest here that this need is so strong that people sometimes create humans out of non–humans through a process of anthropomorphism. In particular, we suggest that such inferential reproduction can be used to satisfy two basic needs that other humans (or the concept of humans) can satisfy in everyday life—the need for social connection (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and the need to experience competence (i.e., control and understanding of the environment; White, 1959). We derive these claims from a more general theory of anthropomorphism (Epley, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2007), and spend the remainder of this article testing two predictions derived from this theory and explaining why psychologists should care about anthropomorphism.

WHAT ANTHROPOMORPHISM IS (NOT)

Perceiving humanlike characteristics in either real or imagined nonhuman agents is the essence of anthropomorphism. These humanlike characteristics may include physical appearance (such as a religious agent believed to look humanlike; Guthrie, 1993), emotional states perceived to be uniquely human (e.g. Leyens et al., 2003), or inner mental states and motivations (Gray, Gray, & Wegner, 2007). Real or imagined nonhuman agents can be anything that acts—or is believed to act—with apparent independence, including nonhuman animals, natural forces, religious agents, technological gadgets, or mechanical devices. Such anthropomorphic representations are important determinants of how a person behaves towards these agents (as with nonhuman animals, for instance), or how a person may behave in light of these agents (such as with guidance that people seek from anthropomorphized religious agents).

Knowing what anthropomorphism includes requires only one minute spent alone with a dictionary (readers are encouraged to take that minute now). More important for psychologists, however, is what it does not include, and it does not include at least four things. First, anthropomorphism does not include behavioral descriptions of observable actions. Announcing that the snarling dog chewing on one’s ankle is aggressive is a description of an observable action, and even the most ardent Skinnerian would accept that there is no anthropomorphism in that statement. Anthropomorphism requires going beyond what is directly observable to make inferences about unobservable humanlike characteristics (such as stating that the dog is vindictive; see also Semin & Fiedler, 1988).

Second, anthropomorphism does not merely entail animism. Piaget (1929) noted, for instance, that children tend to see living agents almost wherever they look. But animate life is not a uniquely human property. Although anthropomorphism entails treating an agent as living, the former is not reducible to the latter.

Third, anthropomorphism does not include any requirement of reasoned or reflective endorsement of an inference. Like any belief or attitude, the strength of anthropomorphic inferences will vary from one domain or context to another (variability that our theory is designed to predict). Religious believers frequently speak of God’s will; cat owners describe their pets as conceited, and computer users verbally scold and curse their technology when it fails to “cooperate” with them (a practice reported by 79% and 73%, respectively, of PC users; Luczak, Roetting, & Schmidt, 2003). These examples describe behavior consistent with anthropomorphism, but not all people in these instances will, upon conscious reflection, report that the agent in question truly possesses humanlike characteristics. Strong forms of
anthropomorphism (such as many religious beliefs) entail behaving towards an agent as if it possessed humanlike traits along with conscious endorsement that the agent actually possesses those traits, whereas weak forms (such as cursing one’s computer) may only contain the weaker as-if component. This variability in strength is the same kind of variability that occurs in the strength of any attitude (Petty & Krosnick, 1995). A theory of anthropomorphism does not need to accept one form or reject another, but it does need to explain both strong and weak forms equally well.

Finally, anthropomorphism is not necessarily inaccurate. Everyday discourse, scientific debates, and scholarly treatments of anthropomorphism have equated anthropomorphism with an overgeneralized error (e.g., Guthrie, 1993), and therefore hinge on whether anthropomorphism actually represents a mistaken representation of a nonhuman agent. But considering an inference anthropomorphic only when it is clearly a mistake is itself a mistake. Readers are encouraged to return to their dictionaries for another minute and note that accuracy appears nowhere in the definition of anthropomorphism. People conceive of gods, gadgets, and an entire gaggle of nonhuman animals in humanlike terms. Although interesting, whether such inferences are accurate is orthogonal to a psychological understanding of the conditions under which people are likely to make an anthropomorphic inference. A psychological theory of anthropomorphism should predict variability in the tendency to perceive humanlike traits in nonhuman agents, and can leave questions of accuracy for others to answer.

MOTIVATIONAL DETERMINANTS OF ANTHROPOMORPHISM

Due to the incessant focus on accuracy, much research on anthropomorphism has actually overlooked a psychological explanation for the very phenomena in its midst. Although anthropomorphism is arguably widespread (Guthrie, 1993; Hume, 1757/1956), even the most casual observer of the human condition will notice that it is far from invariant. Some people anthropomorphize more than others (Chin, Sims, DaPra, & Ballion, 2006), some situations induce anthropomorphism more than others (Epley, Akalis, Waytz, & Cacioppo, 2008), children tend to anthropomorphize more than adults (Carey, 1985), and some cultures are notorious for their anthropomorphic religions and worldviews (Asquith, 1986). We provide here a brief overview of a theory of anthropomorphism focusing on three critical determinants designed to predict variability across the four major categories of operational influence in daily life—dispositional, situational, developmental, and cultural (see Epley et al., 2007 for a more detailed description). We derive this theory largely from work in social cognition investigating how people think about other people.

Anthropomorphism represents just one of many examples of induction whereby people reason about an unknown stimulus based on a better-known representation of a related stimulus (Rips, 1975), in this case reasoning about a nonhuman agent based on representations of the self or humans. The basic operations underlying inductive inference are the acquisition of knowledge, the activation or elicitation of knowledge, and the application of activated knowledge at the time of judgment (Higgins, 1996). The application process includes attempts to correct, adjust, or integrate less accessible information into a more automatically activated default representation—a correction process that is often insufficient leaving final judgments
biased in the direction of the initially activated representation (for examples see Epley & Gilovich, 2006; Gilbert, 2002). Seeing humanlike attributes in nonhuman agents is therefore likely to be determined by the relative accessibility and applicability of anthropomorphic representations compared to nonanthropomorphic representations, and the likelihood of correcting an anthropomorphic representation once it is activated. How people perceive nonhuman agents therefore utilizes the same mechanisms involved when people think about other people (see also Kwan, Gosling, & John, 2008, this issue).

As part of a larger theory of anthropomorphism (Epley et al., 2007), we suggest that two motivational factors are important determinants of anthropomorphism, namely sociality and effectance motivation. Sociality motivation is the fundamental need for social connection with other humans. When lacking social connection with other humans, people may compensate by creating humans out of nonhuman agents through anthropomorphism—increasing belief in anthropomorphized religious agents (e.g., God), or perceiving nonhumans to be more humanlike (e.g., pets). Those who are momentarily or chronically lonely should thus anthropomorphize more than those who are connected. We test this hypothesis in Study 1.

Other humans not only provide a sense of social connection, but the richly detailed and readily accessible concept of “human” (or the self) can also serve as a useful source of explanatory power for understanding, controlling, and predicting another agent’s behavior. The concept of human or one’s own egocentric experience is therefore likely to serve as a useful knowledge structure when reasoning about nonhuman agents (in the same way that egocentrism is useful heuristic for reasoning about other people; Dawes & Mulford, 1996). Use of this heuristic, however, should be moderated by one’s motivation to understand, control, and interact competently in one’s environment. Such effectance motivation (White, 1959) is strengthened by variables that increase the incentives for competence, such as a desire for control or predictability, the possibility of future interactions, or strategic interactions. Anthropomorphism can satisfy effectance motivation by providing a sense of understanding and control of a nonhuman agent, and should therefore increase as effectance motivation increases. Those who are particularly fond of feeling in control of one’s environment, for instance, should be especially likely to anthropomorphize in times of uncertainty. We test this hypothesis in Study 2.

These two motivational factors make unique predictions about how specific dispositional, situational, developmental, and cultural variables will influence anthropomorphism. We believe these motivations are among the primary determinants of anthropomorphism (and other important motivations may exist, see Norenzayan, Hanson, & Cady, 2008, this issue), and certainly do not expect all instances of motivated reasoning (e.g., motivated self-enhancement) to influence anthropomorphism. Our goal here is not to articulate all specific predictions (see Epley et al., 2007, for such articulation), but rather to test directly a subset of them—namely dispositional and situational predictions regarding sociality and effectance motivation. Our theory of anthropomorphism is derived from work in social cognition, and many of our predictions need to be tested directly. The experiments here provide two such tests.
STUDY 1—SOCIALITY MOTIVATION

Most readers will be well familiar with the stereotype of the introvert who becomes just a bit too enamored with her cat (those in the minority may visit www.crazycatladies.org). Being disconnected from other people is not only unpleasant and uncomfortable (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), but it is unhealthy as well (Cacioppo et al., 2002; House, Landis, & Umberson, 1988). Thankfully for one’s well being, people are relatively clever in their ability to gain a sense of social connection even in the complete absence of actual human agents. Television characters, photographs, and religious figures all appear to be effective surrogates for actual human connection (Gardner, Pickett, & Knowles, 2005). Our hypotheses here, however, go beyond predicting that chronic social isolation or disconnection will increase attraction or liking for nonhuman agents, and predict that such a chronic need for social connection will alter the humanlike characteristics that people attribute to these agents. In particular, we suggest that when people are chronically isolated they make up humans by anthropomorphizing nonhuman agents—creating a sense of social support through a kind of inferential reproduction. We tested this hypothesis in Study 1 by asking people to evaluate familiar pets on anthropomorphic traits related to social connection, anthropomorphic traits unrelated to social connection, and non–anthropomorphic traits. We predicted that dispositional loneliness would increase the likelihood of anthropomorphizing one’s pet on traits related to social connection.

METHOD

Participants
One hundred sixty–six Harvard University undergraduates completed this experiment in exchange for a chance to win $50. Participants were recruited via e–mail for a study investigating how people think about their pets and directed to an online website where they completed all of the following measures. All participants were current (or for 2% of cases, past) pet owners. The vast majority (96%) reported that they were not currently living with the pet under consideration.

Procedure
All participants completed the 20–item UCLA loneliness scale (Russell, 1996), consisting of items such as “I lack companionship,” “There is no one I can turn to,” and “I feel alone.” One group of participants did so before, and the other group after, completing the pet–rating items. On the critical pet–rating items, participants were instructed to consider a series of 14 traits and asked to rank order them, from 1 being most descriptive of their pets to 14 being the least descriptive. These included three anthropomorphic traits related to providing social connection (thoughtful, considerate, and sympathetic), four anthropomorphic traits unrelated to providing social connection (embarrassable, creative, devious, and jealous), and seven non–anthropomorphic traits that were simply behavioral descriptions (aggressive, agile, active, energetic, fearful, lethargic, and muscular). We classified traits based on existing research that identifies metacognition as a critical distinguishing feature between traits seen as humanlike versus those shared by other living agents.
RESULTS

No effort was made to restrict variability in the pets participants considered, and this sample included 99 dogs (of roughly half as many breeds), 48 cats (also of reportedly different breeds), and 19 “others” (11 fish, 2 lizards, 2 parrots, 1 chicken, and 3 unspecified). Including pet type (dog, cat, “other”) did not reduce the significance level of any of the following results, and is not discussed further.

To analyze these results, participants’ responses to the loneliness scale were first reverse-scored where appropriate to obtain an overall measure of social disconnection. We next calculated the average rank given to the three anthropomorphic traits related to social connection ($\alpha = .73$), to the four anthropomorphic traits unrelated to social connection ($\alpha = .09$), and to the seven behavioral descriptors (after reverse coding “lethargic,” $\alpha = .57$). The $\alpha$ levels of these last two measures are unacceptably low (due to being selected as unrelated or irrelevant to social connection), so we analyzed both the composite rankings (for conceptual reasons) as well as the individual rankings themselves in the following analyses.

As predicted, participants who felt more chronically disconnected provided higher rankings of the supportive anthropomorphic traits than participants who felt more socially connected, $r (164) = -.18, p = .02$. A similar correlation did not emerge on the nonsupportive anthropomorphic traits, $r (164) = .07, p = .37$, nor among the behavioral traits, $r (165) = .03, p = .70$. None of the individual items for either the nonsupportive anthropomorphic traits or the behavioral traits approached significance themselves after correcting for multiple comparisons (all $p_s > .2$).

We interpret these results as consistent with our prediction that participants who were chronically lonely would create agents of social support by anthropomorphizing their pets. That these correlational patterns emerged among only the anthropomorphic items related to social connection suggests that participants may be creating agents to satisfy their need for social connection. Of course, such correlational results cannot attest to this causal connection, but we report similar results elsewhere in which manipulating a person’s sense of social connection increases their tendency to again anthropomorphize their pets on traits related to social connection (Epley et al., 2008). This convergent validity suggests that anthropomorphism may serve a social connection function by creating humanlike agents out of nonhumans.

One interesting possibility not addressed by this experiment is that people who are chronically isolated or rejected from other people may prefer social connection through nonhuman agents, such as religious agents or pets. People who are ostracized by another person, for instance, tend to avoid or aggress toward that person (Buckley, Winkel, & Leary, 2004; Twenge & Campbell, 2003) and seek connection from other people (Maner, Dewall, Baumeister, & Schaller, 2007). A person who is chronically isolated or disconnected from people may withdraw from attempts to connect with other humans in general, and may instead seek connection with nonhuman agents through a process of anthropomorphism. Study 1 did not compare evaluations of the mental states or traits of other humans with nonhuman pets, and it is at least possible that experiments that do so may reveal an interesting asymmetry.
STUDY 2—EFFECTANCE MOTIVATION

People anthropomorphize to satisfy sociality needs, but turning a nonhuman agent into a human through a process of anthropomorphism can also fulfill a basic need for understanding, control, and predictability. Charles Darwin (1872/2002) argued, for instance, that anthropomorphism was essential to progress in understanding other animals. So too did Hebb (1946) who noted the utter lack of coherence that emerged when scientists studying with him at the Yerkes laboratory tried to avoid using anthropomorphic descriptions of nonhuman primates. “Whatever the anthropomorphic terminology may seem to imply about conscious states in chimpanzee,” Hebb wrote, “it provides an intelligible and practical guide to behavior” (p. 48).

Humans are generally motivated to feel competent through resolving uncertainty, increasing predictability, and gaining a sense of control or efficacy over their environment (White, 1959). Anthropomorphism may satisfy this “effectance motivation” by providing a detailed knowledge structure that can be used to understand a novel nonhuman agent. To the extent that people use the concept of self or human to better understand a nonhuman agent, anthropomorphism should increase when effectance motivation is high, and decrease when effectance motivation is low. Incentives to understand an agent’s behavior—such as being involved in strategic interaction with another agent (Berger & Douglas, 1981; Berscheid, Graziano, Monson, & Dermer, 1976), interacting with an apparently unpredictable agent (Barrett & Johnson, 2003), or having a high “need for control” (Burger & Cooper, 1979)—should increase effectance motivation and anthropomorphism, as well.

We investigated this prediction in Study 2 by asking participants to watch a short and mundane video clip of two dogs interacting with each other. One of these dogs appeared less predictable than the other (one was small, quick, and seemingly unpredictable, whereas the other was large, slow, and relatively predictable), and we expected this lack of predictability would induce more anthropomorphic inferences about the less predictable dog. In addition, we expected that those who were chronically high in effectance motivation—namely those high in Desire for Control (Burger & Cooper, 1979)—would tend to anthropomorphize more than those low in chronic effectance motivation. It is also theoretically possible that Desire for Control could interact with the predictability manipulation rather than just producing an independent main effect, and we did not have a clear a priori prediction about which particular pattern would emerge.

We conducted a pilot study to ensure that the two dogs shown on the video varied in their apparent predictability and controllability. Participants in this study (N = 54) watched the video two separate times, being instructed to pay attention to the smaller dog during the first viewing and the larger dog during the second viewing. When finished, participants rated how predictable each dog would be in a future interaction on a scale ranging from 1 (not at all predictable) to 7 (completely predictable), and how easy each dog would be to control on a scale ranging from 1 (easy) to 7 (difficult). As predicted, the smaller dog was rated as less predictable than the larger dog, $M_s = 3.07$ vs. $5.43$, respectively, paired $t(53) = 8.98, p < .0001$, and also as more difficult to control, $M_s = 4.57$ vs. 3.54, respectively, paired $t(53) = 3.13, p < .004$. 
PROCEDURE

Visitors to the Decision Research Lab at the University of Chicago (N = 132) participated in exchange for $5. Participants were told they would be taking part in a study on “attribution and interaction” and completed all parts of the study on MediaLab computer software. Participants first completed the 20–item Desirability of Control measure (Burger & Cooper, 1979) that asked participants to evaluate items such as, “I prefer a job where I have a lot of control over what I do and when I do it” on scales ranging from 1 (The statement does not apply to me at all) to 7 (The statement always applies to me). Responses from these twenty items (reverse scored where appropriate) were summed to calculate participants’ desire for control score (α = .81). The resulting distribution was platykurtic, so we conducted a median split on these totals in order to categorize participants as high in desire for control (high–DC, n = 65) or low in desire for control (low–DC, n = 67), and to easily submit these results to an ANOVA analysis.

Participants next viewed the video clip used in the pilot study. Participants watched this video twice following the same procedure as in the pilot study. When finished watching the video, approximately one–third of participants simply continued to the critical dependent measures, whereas the remaining participants were asked to imagine that, after the experiment, one of the dogs (approximately one-third told the large dog, and the remaining told the small dog) would be brought into the lab so that they could interact with the dog and attempt to teach it a trick. This variable did not influence the results in any meaningful way and is therefore not discussed further.

Participants were then asked to evaluate both dogs on three items related to anthropomorphism: the extent to which each dog was aware of its emotions, has a conscious will, and has a “personality,” on scales ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much). Finally, participants were asked to rate the dog on its similarity to other life forms on a scale ranging from 1 (bacteria) to 11 (human).

RESULTS

The four anthropomorphism ratings were highly intercorrelated (α = .78 and .80 for the small dog and large dog, respectively) and were therefore standardized and collapsed into a single composite for all of the following analyses.

A 2 (dog: unpredictable vs. predictable) × 2 (desire for control: high vs. low) ANOVA on the composite anthropomorphism measure revealed a predicted main effect for dog, such that participants rated the unpredictable dog (M = .12) higher on the composite than the predictable dog (M = –.12), F (1, 130) = 11.50, p = .001. A main effect of desire for control also emerged such that high–DC participants rated both dogs higher on the anthropomorphism composite (M = .15) than did low–DC participants (M = –.14), F (1, 130) = 6.45, p = .01. Interestingly, these main effects were qualified by a dog × desire for control interaction, F (1, 130) = 3.84, p = .052. The difference in evaluations of the predictable versus unpredictable dog was especially large among high–DC people, F (1, 130) = 14.10, p < .0001, and high–DC individuals anthropomorphized the unpredictable dog more than low–DC individuals, F (1, 130) = 11.78, p = .001 (see Figure 1). Neither of the other simple effects were significant (both ps > .3).
These results are consistent with our predictions about how effectance motivation may influence anthropomorphism, and provided a test of both dispositional and situational influences on anthropomorphism. An interaction emerged here between Desire for Control and the apparent predictability of the stimulus, suggesting that the dispositional tendency to seek understanding and control is facilitated by a stimulus that enables anthropomorphism. As with Study 1, of course, dispositional measures cannot isolate the cause of this effect, and experimental manipulations of effectance motivation are needed to clearly isolate its causal influence. We therefore find these results to be encouraging evidence of the role of effectance motivation as a determinant of anthropomorphism, and are currently conducting studies that experimentally manipulate effectance to provide convergent support for this notion (Waytz, Cacioppo, & Epley, 2008).

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Human beings have been thinking about nonhuman agents for every bit as long as they have been thinking about other humans, and yet scientific understanding of the latter vastly outstrips understanding of the former. This may appear perfectly acceptable. Whether people believe their pets are thoughtful, their PCs vindictive, or speak of their plants as “wanting” sunlight hardly seems the kind of intellectual puzzle that would spark a stampede of psychologists to search for explanations. Whether people recognize these humanlike traits in other people, however, is the stuff of love and war. A journal like Social Cognition should therefore be filled with experiments investigating people’s thoughts about other people, and so it has been for every issue before this one.
But readers who share this assessment should think more carefully about why studying anthropomorphism is worth one’s time before dismissing it completely, and we think it is well worth our time for at least four reasons. First, it’s not clear that understanding how people think about relatively trivial agents such as pets or their computers is actually all that trivial. Nonhuman agents, from dogs to gods, serve as a source of social connection, and the link between connection to these nonhuman agents and one’s health and well-being is well documented (Serpell, 1991, 2003). Computer scientists charged with enabling computer users to learn from their products have begun utilizing anthropomorphism by creating interfaces that look and act humanlike. Such interfaces appear to facilitate learning compared to less humanlike interfaces (Moreale & Watt, 2004). And marketers utilize anthropomorphism to peddle products ranging from movies to motor parts (Aggarwal & McGill, 2007; Guthrie, 1993). Understanding how people think about even relatively mundane nonhuman agents can have wide-ranging—and potentially very important—implications (for some examples see Chartrand, Fitzsimmons, Fitzsimons, 2008, this issue, Gardner & Knowles, 2008, this issue, and Kiesler, Powers, Fussell, & Torrey, 2008, this issue).

Second, it is important to remember that the agents prone to anthropomorphism also includes religious agents that the vast majority of the world’s population uses—or purports to use—as a moral compass. Thinking that one’s dog is jealous is one thing, but thinking that one’s god is jealous is quite another (see Morewedge & Clear, 2008, this issue). And yet the psychological processes that lead to these inferences should be identical in both cases. Indeed, we report elsewhere that experimentally induced feelings of loneliness not only increase anthropomorphism for one’s pets (in an experiment similar to Study 1), but also increase belief in religious agents such as God and Angels as well (Epley et al., 2008). Xenophenes (6th century B.C.) was the first person to use the term anthropomorphism, and did so when noting the similarity in appearance between gods and their human followers. Understanding how this anthropomorphic process works with religious agents has advanced surprisingly little since that time. In a world long populated by explicit and powerful religious fundamentalism, such understanding seems long overdue.

Third, seeing a nonhuman agent as humanlike not only entails the attribution of humanlike characteristics, but it also carries the consequence of moral agency. Consciousness, intention, desire, and regret are all the very sorts of humanlike emotions that turn nonhuman agents into moral agents. It is no accident that environmentalists refer to “mother earth,” for instance, and that appeals for animal rights often hinge on the reality of animal suffering. Anthropomorphizing at least some nonhuman agents creates an agent that deserves concern for its own well-being. Such agents are not just represented as humanlike, but are also more likely to be treated as humanlike.

Finally, understanding anthropomorphism should provide precious insight into the inverse process of dehumanization, whereby people fail to attribute humanlike characteristics to other humans and think of them as nonhuman agents (see Boccato, Capozza, Falvo, & Durante, 2008, this issue and Haslam, Kashima, Loughnan, Shi, & Suitner, 2008, this issue). The theory we have sketched here, and describe in greater detail elsewhere (Epley et al., 2007), can also be used to make predictions about when people will dehumanize other people and when they will not. For instance, feeling socially isolated increases the search for sources of social connection and increases anthropomorphism. Applied to dehumanization, feeling a
tight social connection to other humans should satisfy one’s sociality motivation and therefore predict greater dehumanization among those who are highly connected. It is well-known that having a well-defined and highly connected ingroup facilitated dehumanization of an out-group (e.g., Leyens et al., 2003), and we have found in one recent experiment that those asked to think about of a close friend dehumanized outgroup members more than those asked to think about a distant acquaintance (Waytz, Epley, & Cacioppo, 2007). So too, we predict, should effectance motivation influence dehumanization. When incentives for understanding are reduced (no anticipated future interaction, highly predictable behavior, etc.), dehumanization should increase. Understanding anthropomorphism does more than increase understanding of how people think about nonhuman agents. It increases understanding of when people see humans in the environment and when they do not, both for better and for worse.

For these reasons we think an understanding of how people think about nonhuman agents in general, and an understanding of anthropomorphism in particular, is both long overdue and of central importance to psychologists interested in social cognition. We have outlined here two motivational determinants that can predict and explain when people are likely to attribute humanlike characteristics to nonhuman agents, and have provided two experiments that test predictions about motivational determinants of this anthropomorphic process. We believe that the long tradition of research in social cognition has already provided many of the pieces needed to solve this intellectual puzzle of anthropomorphism. What is needed now is some focused attention, systematic thought, and well-reasoned assembly.

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I get it. Like you, I have known (and loved) dogs who have massacred pillows, invaded cabinets and made abstract art with toilet paper. I’ve felt confusion, disbelief, maybe even anger. And then, out of the corner of my eye, I spy the culprit with a downtrodden face, tail thumping on the ground. He knows he’s guilty.

The only problem is, it’s not what it seems. We’re duped. By ourselves.

Here’s why: A dog owner often assumes that the dog, let’s call him Moose, has misbehaved despite knowing the rules of the house. And Moose’s post-screw up behavior, in which he “fesses up” with those big, sad eyes, only confirms that he knows he did something wrong.

We can all describe the infamous Guilty Look. When I asked owners to describe their dogs’ guilty looks, their answers were similar: dogs look away and avert their gaze; some approach, low and slow; others freeze; others move away. Some roll onto their back and for many, the ears go back and the tail can’t stop thumping. And if you look closely, many will lift a paw.

But a body of growing research suggest that when it comes to the infamous guilty look, we seem to be missing the mark. And sadly, your dog’s “guilt” is likely obscuring the real reasons behind his “bad” behavior.

Let’s first examine the evidence. According to owners, dogs crack under the pressure of being confronted. That certainly appears to be the story behind Denver, the queen of the YouTube Guilty Dogs (whose signature video has over 30 million views):

In multi-dog households, owners often interrogate each dog until, as Denver the “guilty dog’s” owner explains, “one of them cracks under pressure.” In other instances, interrogation is futile because the dog is caught red-handed.

Barnard College Associate Professor (and author of “Inside of a Dog”) Alexandra Horowitz, investigated the guilty look with the help of a clever experiment. Owners instructed their dog not to eat a treat, and then left the room. Dogs then either ate the treat or were prevented from doing so. When the owners returned, the researchers sometimes tricked them by telling them that the dog ate the treat when he had not.

The result? If owners scolded them, dogs looked guilty regardless of whether they ate the treat or not. The results were clear: the guilty look was not associated with what dogs did, but with what the owner did.

While it’s tempting to think your dog acts like a human child would, dog behavior is better framed in an ethological context -- what it means for dogs in dog terms. In the mid-1900s, many ethologists investigated canine social behavior, particularly the “cohesive displays” -- often submissive behavior -- which are common in social animals (ourselves included) who benefit from keeping the group together. Some cohesive displays include rolling onto the back, raising a paw or looking away. Sound familiar? These displays not only overlap with our now-familiar owner descriptions of the guilty look, but also with behaviors associated with fear and stress.

One of the classically misunderstood “guilty” behaviors -- the “guilty grin,” made famous by Denver (and Baileys and Buffy) -- actually describes what ethologists call a submissive grin. As the ASCPA behavior team explains, submissive grins are “almost always accompanied by an overall submissive body posture, such as a lowered head, yelping or whining, and squinty eyes.” Instead of indicating...
admission of “guilt,” these “appeasement” displays come out during stress or fear-inducing interactions. Dogs see you are upset and are trying to appease you.

“Fine," I often hear next at dinner parties. “Then why is my dog already hiding under the bed when I come home and before I see that the bathroom is destroyed?” Others say they can tell the dog did something wrong just because the dog’s greeting was “off.” Or, as Dr. Patricia McConnell, PhD, Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist says, “People think their dog ‘knows’ she shouldn't potty in the house because she greets them at the door looking ‘guilty,’ with her head and tail down, her eyes all squinty and submissive.”

If you see this in your dog, I hear you. It’s very possible your dog’s behavior looks suspicious, and that it means something. But it probably doesn’t mean what you think it does. In 1977, Peter Vollmer, a veterinarian in Wisconsin, had a client who complained that his dog, Nicki, shredded paper in his absence. To investigate, Vollmer recommended that next time, the owner shred the paper himself before leaving the house. When the owner returned, the dog looked “guilty” even though she did nothing wrong.

Why did Nicki look guilty if she hadn’t shredded the paper? “Evidence + Owner = Trouble” summarizes Frans de Waal, in the acclaimed book “Good Natured: The Origins of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other Animals.” Meaning, dogs are responding to those things in the environment or situations which they have previously been scolded. They’re fearful or upset, and our concept of guilt is not part of the equation.

Submissive behavior has an additional component in the social world of dogs. Dogs offer submission actively, without prompting, and often to members of their group who are not acting in a specifically confrontational way. So your dog might look guilty before you find that half-eaten shoe because what she knows is that when you see things chewed up, you get unhappy.

Ultimately, this suggests that in multi-dog households, the dog looking exceedingly guilty didn’t necessarily do the “bad behavior.” That dog just might be a peacemaker. So think twice before assuming “guilty” Denver, with her tail thumps and guilty grin, is the culprit, as carefree Masey lies calmly nearby. For all we know, Masey might just be the cat-treat eating sociopath.

In any event, the behaviors underlying the guilty look don’t reliably indicate disobedience. Along with members of the Family Dog Project, a preeminent research group in Budapest, I conducted a study to investigate the guilty look. In our experiment, owners enforced a social rule that food on a table was for humans and not dogs. Dogs were then left alone with the food. Some dogs scarfed it down, others didn’t.

When the owners returned to the room, we observed how dogs greeted them, noting any “guilty” looking behaviors. We found no difference in the greetings between dogs that ate the food and dogs that did not. Nor were owners able to tell whether their dogs had eaten the food in their absence. The takeaway message is that dogs display the “guilty look” to owners for tons of different reasons, and its presentation does not signify knowledge of a misdeed.

None of this is meant to suggest that dogs do or don’t feel guilt. Studies to date haven’t investigated this question. Instead, what we can say is that our inferences about guilt based on behavior are unsubstantiated.

And misattributing guilt to dogs could be damaging. Wrongly saying Moose’s “feeling guilty” could obscure a deeper truth: Moose doesn’t understand the rules you think you’ve put in place -- and by incorrectly believing you have a bad dog that’s willfully disobedient, you’re not doing your relationship, or shoe collection, any favors. While domestication primes dogs for living with us, along with it doesn’t (unfortunately) come some genetic moral code that eating new shoes is wrong but that other good smelling thing you brought home -- a dog toy -- can be torn to pieces.
Another problem with attributing guilt is that it obscures real issues behind “bad” dog behavior. Why did your dog tear up all the toilet paper rolls? Why is that pillow now exposing its 700+ pieces of fluff? When you get angry or forgive your “guilty” dog for demolishing your house, you ignore deeper concerns that, if addressed, could reduce or eliminate those behavior problems. Was the dog bored? Scared? Anxious? Did something change in your routine that confused them? Sadly, scolding dogs after the fact most often doesn’t decrease future detrimental behavior. If anything, the “guilty look” could just become more exaggerated over time as your confused companion develops an anxious cycle of destruction and appeasement.

Maybe it is easier for people to see guilt than it is for them to come to grips with other motivators of behavior like boredom, fear, anxiety, or a dog who just doesn’t get it. The story of the guilty look might be a more comfortable narrative to tell ourselves, but often, our narratives are myths. But that’s a people issue. I study dogs.

NOTES:
The alpha myth is everywhere. Google “alpha, dog” on the Internet and you get more than 85 million hits. Really. While not all the sites are about dominating your dog, there are literally millions of resources out there – websites, books, blogs, television shows, veterinarians, trainers and behavior professionals – instructing you to use force and intimidation to overpower your dog into submission. They say that you, the human, must be the alpha. They’re all wrong. Every single one of them.

A History of Dominance Theory

The erroneous approach to canine social behavior known as dominance theory (two million-plus Google hits) is based on a study of captive zoo wolves conducted in the 1930’s and 1940’s by Swiss animal behaviorist Rudolph Schenkel, in which the scientist concluded that wolves in a pack fight to gain dominance, and the winner is the alpha wolf. Schenkel’s observations of captive wolf behavior were erroneously extrapolated to wild wolf behavior, and then to domestic dogs. It was postulated that wolves were in constant competition for higher rank in the hierarchy, and only the aggressive actions of the alpha male and female held the contenders in check. Other behaviorists following Schenkel’s lead also studied captive wolves and confirmed his findings: groups of unrelated wolves brought together in artificial captive environments do, indeed, engage in often-violent and bloody social struggles.

The problem is, that’s not normal wolf behavior. As David Mech stated in the introduction to his study of wild wolves (Mech, 2000), “Attempting to apply information about the behavior of assemblages of unrelated captive wolves to the familial structure of natural packs has resulted in considerable confusion. Such an approach is analogous to trying to draw inferences about human family dynamics by studying humans in refugee camps. The concept of the alpha wolf as a “top dog” ruling a group of similar-aged compatriots (Schenkel 1947; Rabb et al. 1967; Fox 1971a; Zimen 1975, 1982; Lockwood 1979; van Hooff et al. 1987) is particularly misleading.”

What we know now, thanks to Mech and others, is that in the wild, a wolf pack is a family, consisting of a mated pair and their offspring of the past one to three years. Occasionally two or three families may group together. As the offspring mature they disperse from the pack; the only long-term members of the group are the breeding pair. By contract, in captivity unrelated wolves are forced to live together for many years, creating tension between mature adults that doesn’t happen in a natural wild pack.

But that’s all about wolves anyway, not dogs. How did it happen that dog owners and trainers started thinking all that information (and misinformation) about wolf behavior had anything to do with dogs and dog behavior? According to an article in the July 30, 2010 issue of Time, somewhere along the line the logic went something like this: “Dogs are descended from wolves. Wolves live in hierarchical packs in which the aggressive alpha male rules over everyone else. Therefore, humans need to dominate their pet dogs to get them to behave.”

Cesar Millan, the current darling of the dominance crowd, is only the latest in a long line of dominance-based trainers who advocate forceful techniques such as the alpha roll. Much of this style of training has roots in the military – which explains the emphasis on punishment. As far back as 1906, Colonel Konrad Most was using heavy-handed techniques to train dogs in the German army, then police and service dogs. He was joined by William Koehler after the end of World War
II. Koehler also initially trained dogs for the military prior to his civilian dog-training career, and his writings advocated techniques that including hanging and helicoptering a dog into submission (into unconsciousness, if necessary). To stop a dog from digging, he suggested filling the hole with water and submerging the dog's head in the water-filled hole until he was nearly drowned.

Fast-forward several years to 1978 and the emergence of the Monks of New Skete as the new model for dog training, asserting a philosophy that “understanding is the key to communication, compassion, and communion” with your dog. The Monks were considered cutting edge at the time, and were in fact responsible for the widespread popularization of the “Alpha-Wolf Roll-Over” (now shortened to the alpha roll), in a complete and utter misinterpretation of the submissive roll-over that is voluntarily offered by the less assertive dog, not forcibly commanded by the stronger one. They also advocated the frequent use of other physical punishments such as the scruff shake (grab both sides of the dog's face and shake, lifting the dog off the ground) and cuffing under the dog’s chin with an open hand several times, hard enough to cause the dog to yelp.

Even their most recent book, Divine Canine; the Monks’ Way to a Happy, Obedient Dog (2007), while professing that “training dogs is about building a relationship that is based on respect and love and understanding” is still heavy on outdated, erroneous dominance theory. Immediately following their suggestion that “a kindly, gentle look tells the dog she is loved and accepted,” they say “But it is just as vital to communicate a stern reaction to bad behavior. A piercing, sustained stare into a dog's eyes tells her who's in charge; it establishes the proper hierarchy of dominance between person and pet.” (Author's note: It can also elicit a strong aggressive response if you choose the wrong dog as the subject for your piercing, sustained stare.)

Despite the strong emergence of positive reinforcement-based training in the last 20 years, the Monks don't seem to have grasped that the “respect” part needs to go both ways for a truly compassionate communion with your dog. Perhaps one of these days...

Enter the Clicker

Just when it seemed that dog training had completely stagnated in turn-of-the-century military-style dominance-theory training, marine mammal trainer Karen Pryor wrote her seminal book, Don't Shoot the Dog. Published in 1985, this small, unassuming volume was intended as a self-help book for human behavior, the author never dreaming that her modest book, paired with a small plastic box that made a clicking sound, would launch a massive paradigm shift in the world of dog training and behavior. But it did.

Forward progress was slow until 1993, when veterinary behaviorist Dr. Ian Dunbar founded the Association of Pet Dog Trainers. Dunbar's vision of a forum for trainer education and networking has developed into an organization that now boasts nearly 6,000 members worldwide. While membership in the APDT is not restricted to positive reinforcement-based trainers, included in its guiding principles is this statement: “We promote the use of reward-based training methods, thereby minimizing the use of aversive techniques.” The establishment of this forum facilitated the rapid spread of information in the dog training world, enhanced by the creation of an online discussion list where members could compare notes and offer support for a scientific and dog-friendly approach to training.

Things were starting to look quite rosy for our dogs. The positive market literally mushroomed with books and videos from dozens of quality training and behavior professionals, including Jean Donaldson, Dr. Patricia McConnell, Dr. Karen Overall, Suzanne Hetts, and others. With advances in positive training and an increasingly educated dog training profession embracing the science of behavior and learning and passing good information on to their clients, pain-causing, abusive methods such as the alpha roll, scruff shake, hanging, drowning and cuffing appeared to be headed the way of the passenger pigeon.

Then, in the fall of 2004, the National Geographic Channel launched its soon-to-be-wildly-popular show, The Dog Whisperer, over the protests of several degreed behavior professionals to whom they had sent a review clip months earlier. Nat Geo was clearly informed in advance of that first airing that the star of the show, Cesar Millan, was using methods that were outdated, unscientific, and potentially dangerous. “Don’t do it,” the experts warned. The show aired anyway. Dominance theory was back in vogue, with a vengeance. Today, everything from housetraining mistakes to jumping up
to counter surfing to all forms of aggression is likely to be attributed to “dominance” by followers of the alpha-resurgence.

**Why Not Alpha**

“But,” some will argue, “look at all the dogs who have been successfully trained throughout the past century using the dominance model. Those trainers can’t be all wrong.”

In fact, harsh force-based methods are a piece of operant conditioning (positive punishment), and as the decades have proven, those methods can work. They are especially good at shutting down behaviors – convincing a dog that it’s not safe to do anything unless instructed to do something. And yes, that works with some dogs. With others, not so much.

My own personal, unscientific theory is that dog personalities lie on a continuum from very soft to very tough. Harsh, old-fashioned dominance-theory methods can effectively suppress behaviors without obvious fallout (although there is always behavioral fallout) with dogs nearest the center of the personality continuum – those who are resilient enough to withstand the punishment, but not so tough and assertive that they fight back. Under dominance theory, when a dog fights back, you must fight back harder until he submits, in order to assert yourself as the pack leader, or alpha. Problem is, sometimes they don’t submit, and the level of violence escalates. Or they submit for the moment, but may erupt aggressively again the next time a human does something violent and inappropriate to them. Under dominance-theory training, those dogs are often deemed incorrigible, not suitable for the work they’re being trained for nor safe as a family companion, and sentenced to death. Many of them, had they never been treated so inappropriately in the first place, might have been perfectly fine.

At the opposite end of the spectrum, a very soft dog can easily be psychologically damaged by one enthusiastic inappropriate assertion of rank by the heavy-handed dominance trainer. This dog quickly shuts down; fearful and mistrusting of the humans in his world who are unpredictably and unfairly violent.

Most crossover trainers (those who originally trained using old-fashioned methods and now are proud to promote positive reinforcement-based training) will tell you they successfully trained lots of dogs the old way. They loved their dogs and their dogs loved them. I’m a crossover trainer, and I know that’s true. I also know that I would dearly love to be able to go back and redo all of that training, to be able to have an even better relationship with those dogs; to give them a less stressful life, and one filled with even more joy than the one we shared together. Where’s a DeLorean and a flux capacitor when you need one?

Finally, the very presumption that our dogs would even consider we humans to be members of their canine pack is simply ludicrous. They know how impossibly inept we are, for the most part, at reading and understanding the subtleties of canine body language. We are equally inept, if not even more so, at trying to mimic those subtleties. Any attempts on our part to somehow insert ourselves into their social structure and communicate meaningfully with them in this manner are simply doomed to failure. It’s about time we gave up trying to be dogs in a dog pack and accepted that we are humans co-existing with another species – and that we’re most successful doing so when we co-exist peacefully.

The fact is, successful social groups work because of voluntary deference, not because of aggressively enforced dominance. The whole point of social body language rituals is to avoid conflict and confrontation, not to cause it. Watch any group of dogs interacting. Time and time again you’ll see dogs deferring to each other. It’s not even always the same dog deferring:

**Dog B:** Hey, I’d really like to go first. **Dog A:** “By all means, be my guest.” **Dog B** passes down the narrow hallway.

**Dog A:** “I’d really like to have that bone.” **Dog B:** “Oh sure – I didn’t feel like chewing right now anyway.” **Dog A** gets the bone.

What we know now is that yes, social hierarchies do exist in groups of domesticated dogs, and in many other species, including humans. We also know that hierarchy can be fluid. As described above, one dog may be more assertive in one encounter, and more deferent in the next, depending...
on what’s at stake, and how strongly each dog feels about the outcome. There are a myriad of subtleties about how those hierarchies work, and how the members of a social group communicate—in any species.

We also know that canine-human interactions are not driven by social rank, but rather by reinforcement. Behaviors that are reinforced repeat and strengthen. If your dog is doing an inappropriate behavior such as counter surfing or getting on the sofa, it’s not because he’s trying to take over the world—it’s just because he’s reinforced by finding food on the counter, or by being comfortable on the sofa. He’s a scavenger and an opportunist, and the goods are there for the taking. Figure out how to prevent him from being reinforced for the behaviors you don’t want, and reinforce him liberally for the ones you do, and you’re well on your way to having the relationship of mutual love, respect, communication and communion that we all want to have with our dogs.

SIDEBAR: COMMENTS AND RESOURCES ON “ALPHA” DOMINANCE THEORY

There is a growing body of information available to anyone who wants to learn more about why dominance theory is so outdated and incorrect. Here are ten resources to get you started:

1. The American Society of Veterinary Animal Behaviorists Position Statement on Dominance (excerpt): “The AVSAB recommends that veterinarians not refer clients to trainers or behavior consultants who coach and advocate dominance hierarchy theory and the subsequent confrontational training that follows from it.” (http://www.avsabonline.org/avsabonline/images/stories/Position_Statements/dominance%20statement.pdf)

2. The Association of Pet Dog Trainers Position Statement on Dominance (excerpt): “The APDT’s position is that physical or psychological intimidation hinders effective training and damages the relationship between humans and dogs. Dogs thrive in an environment that provides them with clear structure and communication regarding appropriate behaviors, and one in which their need for mental and physical stimulation is addressed. The APDT advocates training dogs with an emphasis on rewarding desired behaviors and discouraging undesirable behaviors using clear and consistent instructions and avoiding psychological and physical intimidation. Techniques that create a confrontational relationship between dogs and humans are outdated.” http://www.apdt.com/about/ps/dominance.aspx

3. Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist Kathy Sdao (article excerpt): “But even if dogs did form linear packs, there’s no evidence to suggest that they perceive humans as part of their species-specific ranking. In general, humans lack the capability to even recognize, let alone replicate, the elegant subtleties of canine body language. So it’s hard to imagine that dogs could perceive us as pack members at all.” http://www.kathysdao.com/articles/Forget_About_Being_Alpha_in_Your_Pack.html

4. Dr. Patricia McConnell, PhD – ethologist (article excerpt): “People who argue that ethology supports “getting dominance over your dog” are not only focused on an issue more relevant 50 years ago than today, they are misrepresenting the findings of early researchers on social hierarchy. Social hierarchies are complicated things that allow animals to live together and resolve conflicts without having to use force every time a conflict comes up.” http://www.4pawsu.com/pmdominance.htm

5. Dr. Meghan Herron, DVM (article excerpt): “Our study demonstrated that many confrontational training methods, whether staring down dogs, striking them, or intimidating them with physical manipulation such as alpha rolls [holding dogs on their back], do little to correct improper behavior and can elicit aggressive responses.” http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0168159108003717

6. Dr. Sophia Yin, DVM (blog excerpt): “Experts say dominance-based dog-training techniques made popular by TV can contribute to bites.” http://drsophiayin.com/blog/entry/experts_say_dominance-based_dog_training_techniques_made_popular_by_television

7. Study –University of Bristol (article excerpt): “Far from being helpful, the academics say, training approaches aimed at “dominance reduction” vary from being worthless in treatment to being actually dangerous and likely to make behaviours worse.” University of Bristol (2009, May 21).


“The dominance panacea is so out of proportion that entire schools of training are based on the premise that if you can just exert adequate dominance over the dog, everything else will fall into place. Not only does it mean that incredible amounts of abuse are going to be perpetrated against any given dog, probably exacerbating problems like unreliable recalls and biting, but the real issues, like well-executed conditioning and the provision of an adequate environment, are going to go unaddressed, resulting in a still-untrained dog, perpetuating the pointless dominance program.”


“...the alpha wolf is not the dictator of a pack, but a benevolent leader, and domestic dogs are not dictatorial and are unlikely to try to raise their status to rule over other dogs in a pack environment.”

“I believe it’s time to open our minds and consider the concept of pack rules as a thing of the past and recognize that dogs are not constantly trying to dominate their owners.”


“...while the notion of social dominance holds potential for value in a social psychology and ethology context, it is an insidious idea with regards to explaining and changing behavior between companion dogs or dogs and people... it should be abandoned completely in that context in favor of a more efficient, effective and scientifically defensible behavioral approach.”

From an APDT interview with James O’Heare:

“The most significant problem with viewing dog-human relationships in the context of social dominance is that it implies and promotes an adversarial relationship between the two. It sets up a win-lose scenario, that actually ends up in a lose-lose scenario (as most win-lose scenarios do). It is incompatible with cooperation by its very nature, cooperation being something you need to promote an effective bond and training environment.”

WHAT YOU CAN DO

1. Educate yourself about the fallacies of dominance theory so you’re not taken in by those who might try to convince you to forcibly coerce your dog into submission.

2. Share your information with dog-owning friends so they, too, can avoid inflicting inappropriate and dangerous training techniques on their canine companions.


POTENTIALLY HARMFUL