

MOVING BEYOND THE DOMINANCE MYTH: TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF TRAINING AS PARTNERSHIP

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OVERVIEW

Dog trainers have commonly accepted a model of training based on a supposed emulation of the behaviors of wolves, particularly Alpha wolves. Central to this model is the notion of “dominance”. This model is conceptually flawed in that it rests on some serious misconceptions about wolf behavior as well as serious misconceptions about the interactions between dogs and humans. As a separate species from dogs, humans cannot emulate intraspecific behaviors and expect those behaviors to be interpreted other than as aggression. A more accurate and ultimately more productive training model is to approach training from the point of view of symbiosis: interspecific cooperation based on some form of mutual benefit.

BACKGROUND: THE ROOTS OF TRADITIONAL TRAINING

Dog training has long been characterized by a tendency toward the use of force and compulsion. For example, Most explains the basis of training this way:

“What is the actual object of training? It is that the dog shall only do what we find convenient or useful, and refrain from doing what is inconvenient or harmful to us. This requirement cannot be completely reconciled with what is acceptable by, or of advantage to, the dog. ***

***It is only when a dog learns that the adoption or abandonment, disagreeable in themselves, of certain action will be to his own advantage that training can be proceeded with on a sound basis. Such is the object of compulsion.” (Most, pp. 24-25)

This view did not change substantially from 1910 when Most first published his book through the 1960s when Koehler wrote his basic training guide. Koehler expressed his philosophy this way:

“Magazines have dignified the prattle of ‘dog psychologists’ who would rob the dog of a birthright that he has in common with all of God’s creatures: the right to the consequences of his own action.

“There will always be more emphasis and clarity to be had in the contrast between punishment and reward than from the technique of ‘only good’ and if they obey, ‘still more good.’ And there is more meaning and awareness of life that knows the consequences of both favorable and unfavorable action. So let’s not deprive the dog of his privilege of experiencing the consequences of right and wrong, or, more definitely, punishment as well as praise.” (Koehler, p. 21)

Their differences notwithstanding (Most, for example, rejected an anthropomorphic view of dogs while Koehler, as evidenced by the above quote, tended toward an anthropomorphic view) Koehler and Most both assumed that humans in some way had the right to compel dogs to act in certain ways acceptable to humans. For Most the basis of this is clear: he was one of the first people to train dogs for military and police work. Koehler's books were written for the more general public pet-owning population. The implicit assumption in Koehler's work is clear but unstated: dogs live in human society and must follow human rules, and humans must use compulsion to get dogs to do follow those rules.

But there was more than that. There was a further view that the use of compulsion in training elevated the dog. This extension of Koehler's implicit anthropomorphism took full flight in Vicki Hearne, who presents as one of Koehler's leading acolytes. Hearne argues that:

“Koehler holds, against the skepticism that in the last two centuries has become largely synonymous with philosophy, that getting absolute obedience from a dog – and he means absolute – confers nobility, character and dignity on the dog” (Hearne, p. 41).

Yet neither Koehler's straightforward, hard-boiled program nor Hearne's pedagogical flights of fancy gave any meaningful answer to the underlying question: what in fact gives humans the right to inflict training methods on dogs that can only be described as unremittingly harsh and physically punishing? Far from conferring “nobility, character and dignity on the dog” the methods in fact give the dog no room at all to be anything but an absolutely subservient being under constant pain of punishment.

DOMINANCE: THE ETHOLOGICAL SHEEP IN WOLVES' CLOTHING

Enter the Monks of New Skete. The Monks' work was considered quite progressive. For purposes of this discussion however, the Monks were the first modern trainers to articulate a clear theoretical basis for the use of compulsion in training. Their model was the wolf pack (at least, the wolf pack as they understood it). They wrote “To learn about dogs, learn about wolves.” And they wrote:

“. . . “[W]olf and dog have striking similarities. Both are innately pack-oriented and prefer not to be isolated for long periods of time. . . . Both are responsive to leadership from an ‘Alpha-figure’ to whom they look for order and directives.” (Monks at 12)

The Monks assert the theory that

“[s]ince we have deprived the dog, through domestication, of its normal pack life, the dog has adopted us as its new pack. *A dog perceives the people it lives with as fellow-members of a pack.* Once a dog understands this, he can understand training methods that, while including the dog in the pack, lower the dog in the pecking order.” (Monks at 13, emphasis added)

This is the underlying rationale for what has come to be known as “dominance” theory: Dogs see themselves as living in a pack with humans, therefore humans have to emulate pack behavior and, specifically, assume the Alpha position within the pack. Ironically, although the direct analogy to

wolves was new, the notion of dogs and humans forming a pack in which humans must reign supreme was not. Most articulated the same theory in 1910. He wrote:

“In a pack of young dogs fierce fights take place to decide how they are to rank within the pack. And in a pack composed of men and dogs, canine competition for importance in the eyes of the trainer is keen. . . . As in a pack of dogs, the order of hierarchy in a man and dog combination can only be established by physical force, that is by an actual struggle, in which the man is instantly victorious. Such a result can only be brought about by convincing the dog of the absolute physical superiority of the man. Otherwise the dog will lead and the man follow. If a dog shows the slightest sign of rebellion against his trainer or leader, the physical superiority of the man as leader of the pack must be given instant expression in the most unmistakable manner.” (Most at 35, *emphasis added*)

Based on the notion that dogs and humans form a unitary pack in which humans must rule, “dominance” becomes the central issue in the relationship between human and canine. This “dominance paradigm” may be said to underlie all approaches to training rooted in the use of force to compel obedience. Disobedience is not merely a failure to perform a behavior when called upon to do so, but incipient rebellion against the Alpha. As Most put it:

“Should a dog rebel against his trainer, instant resort to severe compulsion is essential. . . . For, each time the dog finds that he is not instantly mastered, the canine competitive instinct will increase and his submissive instinct will weaken. One of the objects of training, however, is to inculcate the reverse condition.” (Most, 35-36)

There are several fallacies in this paradigm although there is a kernel of truth within it. The kernel of truth is that dogs must live appropriately within human society, both in the home and in the world at large, and that humans are responsible for teaching dogs how to do so through training. But there is no need for a theory of “dominance” to explain the need for this training. And seeing the purpose of training as achieving “dominance” sets up an approach to training that all too easily becomes unduly harsh and punishing. As noted, punitive methods are justified by the logic of the “pack” approach.

DOMINANCE AS A PRODUCT OF INTRASPECIFIC AGGRESSION

It is important to understand what “dominance” represents in the natural order. Lindsay explains that dominance is a product of a certain type of aggression occurring within members of the same species (or, intraspecific aggression). He writes:

“In general intraspecific aggression provides a countervailing and distance-increasing function over place and social attachment processes but without breaking down affiliative contact altogether. As such, ritualized intraspecific aggression imposes social order (e.g., the formation of a dominance hierarchy) and territorial limits on the interaction between individuals belonging to the same species.” (Lindsay, p. 167)

Lindsay distinguishes intraspecific from interspecific aggression, pointing out that

“Interspecific aggression refers to aggressive behavior directed against another species and includes both offensive and defensive elements. Although intraspecific aggression is most often associated with competition between closely socialized animals belonging to the same species, interspecific aggression is most frequently associated with self-protective goals, as, for example, occur when a prey animal defends itself against the attack of a predator. The dog’s relationship with humans is complex in this regard, with both competitive and self-protective aggression being exhibited under different situations.” (Ibid.)

We can understand the fallacies of the dominance paradigm if we first understand that “dominance” is really a set of behaviors that can be identified and therefore can be modified. And in almost all cases this set of behaviors exists within a larger range of social behaviors available to and exhibited by the dog within the context of social relationships within which the dog functions.¹

Seen from this perspective, the first major fallacy in the “dominance paradigm” is to regard the dog-inclusive family as a canine “pack”. The second major fallacy is to classify a given dog as “dominant”. Related to this is the third major fallacy, seeing “dominance” as though it were a psychological disorder or condition rather than a set of behaviors exhibited by the dog in response to the situation in which he lives.

FALLACY ONE: THAT THE DOG-INCLUSIVE FAMILY IS TRULY A “PACK”

Dogs and humans are alien to each other and our societies have different rules and mores. If our household were in fact a canine pack then we should have to expect to live by dogs’ rules, and that is clearly impossible. Dogs must live by human rules, which means that dogs have to surrender their ordinary modes of interaction insofar as they are interacting with humans and not other dogs.

This fact alone tells us that our relationship with our dogs is not intraspecific but interspecific. The same actions which if directed by one member of a given species against another member of that species would lead to some settling of hierarchy and order take on a far different quality when directed by a member of one species against a member of another species. As Lindsay suggests, our acts of physical “discipline” are in fact a form of interspecific aggression.

While acknowledging that a group of dogs remaining together for any length of time can form a stable hierarchy, Dunbar tells us that:

¹ We should also recognize that nobody really knows what is meant by the word “dominant”. “Dominance” has become a catch phrase to cover a wide range of behaviors and so-called “attitudes”, many of which can be best explained or understood without any reference to “dominance”. We have much the same problem with terms such as “aggression” and “submission”. The problem is exemplified by the evolution of phrases such as “submissive aggression” that almost defies explanation.

“To say that the hierarchy is the sole basis of dog social behavior would be incorrect. The notion of hierarchies has been much overplayed. For the most part, dogs seem to live in relative harmony with each member of the group, each generally going about its business with an apparent disinterest in the affairs of others.” (Dunbar, p. 85)

At most the “pack” concept is of some limited metaphorical value. It does not even necessarily accurately express the range of behaviors within a given association of wolves (Coppinger, pp. 66-67). It cannot be a basis for understanding the interaction between humans and dogs, much less for establishing a training approach.

FALLACY TWO: CLASSIFYING A GIVEN DOG AS “DOMINANT”.

This kind of classification is a human tendency but it ignores the realities of canine identity and interaction. Dogs are social and interactive animals and are very responsive to their circumstances. Dunbar tells us that:

“The traditional notion of interaction between dogs is one of a dyadic dominant/subordinate relationship. This is to say that when two dogs encounter each other, one dominates the other. This is a useful framework for an initial analysis, but again it is far too simple and rigid to fully explain a complex situation.” (Dunbar, 88)

Any given dog may be dominant or compliant at any given time depending on the situation. The apparently “subordinate” dog may in fact control many interactions (Dunbar, 88-89). It is true that some dogs have more assertive personalities than others, but for training purposes it does not help to classify such a dog as “dominant”. The dog with the strongest (i.e., most “dominant”) personality may also be the most compliant with training as well as the most willing worker.

FALLACY THREE: THAT “DOMINANCE” IS A PATHOLOGY RATHER THAN A BEHAVIOR OR SET OF BEHAVIORS WHICH CAN BE IDENTIFIED AND THEREFORE MODIFIED

“Dominance” is considered a problem trait and becomes the prism through which we view a given dog, much the same as if we were to say of a human that he is “a borderline personality” or “manic depressive”. If “dominance” is some sort of underlying pathology, then how can the trainer deal with it? We cannot put the dog on the couch. All we can do is suppress the dog’s dominant tendencies (assuming for the sake of discussion that this is really possible), and this leads ineluctably to physical punishment.

In this vein it should not be surprising that the Monks devote 5 pages of their book to praise (Monks, pp. 36-40) and 11 pages to physical discipline (Monks, pp. 40-50), giving thorough instruction on the mechanics of striking the dog under the chin, the “shakedown” (scruff shake) and the Alpha Wolf Roll-Over. Ironically, as Lindsay notes, this sort of action is likely to be perceived by the dog as physical threats, triggering even stronger aggressive reactions (Lindsay at 168).

But assuming that a given dog has not become sociopathic, what may be termed “dominance” is in fact behavior, that is, a set of things that the dog does. We can identify these behaviors. They may include such things as growling, or shoving into another’s space, or object-guarding. Once the behavior is identified, the trainer can modify those behaviors. The trainer can shape incompatible behaviors and otherwise set up a framework to subject the undesirable behaviors to extinction.

ALTERNATIVES TO TRAINING BASED ON “DOMINANCE”

There is an alternative to the “dominance” paradigm. This alternative rests on several perceptions, some of which are at least implicit in what has been set out above.

DOGS ARE NOT HUMANS

First, humans are not dogs and dogs are not humans. We cannot interact with dogs as though we were dogs. Our interactions are interspecific, and in our interactions we must respect the realities that distinguish humans and dogs.

Dogs are social and interactive creatures. Dogs are much better at lubricating their interactions with other dogs than humans are at lubricating interactions with other humans. It is the human lack of sensitivity to social signals that underlies much of our misunderstanding of what canine social behavior is about. For example, if two dogs meet one another and one averts its eyes, this is “good manners” – a canine calming signal that will help avoid any clash between the dogs. If two humans meet one another and one averts his eyes, this suggests shiftiness or a lack of openness. If a human meets a dog and the dog turns its head, the human may try to get the dog to look him right in the eyes. To the human, this is friendly. To the dog, it is antagonistic.

We will interact best if we focus on behavior and not “attitude”.

Second, we will do best if we understand that what concerns us is the behavior that the dog produces at any given time. There may be some value in trying to determine the source of that behavior, but such analysis is often speculative and therefore may not be of much use in figuring out how to modify the behavior in question. For example, one may diagnose a certain type of behavior as “predatory”, but having done so we have not necessarily clarified our options (although the fact that a given dog consistently manifests predatory behavior may affect our assessment of whether the dog can continue to live in a given family environment).

THE MODEL FOR INTERSPECIFIC INTERACTION IS SYMBIOSIS NOT DOMINANCE

Webster’s New World Dictionary defines “symbiosis” as “the intimate living together of two kinds of organisms, especially if such association is of mutual advantage.” Although in some ways inexact, this describes a more appropriate paradigm for the relationship between dogs and humans. There is mutual practical advantage in the relationship between dogs and humans. Dogs have their survival needs met; humans can get useful work from dogs. This useful work may consist of actual productive

labor (e.g., herding or guarding livestock, hunting, or search and rescue) or it may consist simply of the general psychological and emotional benefits dogs can confer on humans simply by their presence.

Our training should be based on that mutual benefit. Good training effects a “training bargain” in which the human says to the dog “you give me what I want, and I’ll give you what you want.” The dog, in turn, learns to “say” the same thing to the human. This creates a mutually beneficial partnership in which “dominance” is essentially irrelevant.

Operant conditioning embodies this symbiotic or “partnership” approach. Positive reinforcement is the means for giving the dog what the dog wants, which in turn makes clear to the dog what the human wants by way of behavior. “Dominance” is not an issue. As an operant trainer it is essentially irrelevant to me whether the dog thinks he is “driving” me by using his actions to cause me to click. In fact, in many ways I am perfectly happy that the dog should think so, because that dog has become strongly engaged in the training “game” that we play.

This approach is not only beneficial to the professional or competitive trainer but to the average pet owner as well. In this writer’s experience, most pet owners do not want to be in conflict with their dogs and resist harsh training methods. Koehler viewed such people with contempt (see, e.g.: Koehler, pp. 18-19). But in fact it is possible to achieve everything that a trainer wants to achieve, regardless of the type of training involved, through operant conditioning and positive reinforcement. It is not necessary to “dominate” the dog: it is essential to enlist the dog in a cooperative working relationship.

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