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Dumbed down by dominance, Part 1

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Exploring our misconceptions and myths about human-pet relationships

The issue: Most canine behavioral problems either involve normal behaviors that people don't like or understand or anxiety-related concerns that comprise true behavioral diagnoses. The foundation for treating any canine behavioral concern relies on:

- Understanding "normal"
- Identifying and mitigating risk
- Communicating well with the dog
- Reading the dog's signals
- Meeting the dog's needs.



And yet, the main advice that too many veterinarians and trainers still give to clients completely ignores this foundation and instead appears focused only on the human's needs:

- "You must dominate the dog!"
- "You must exert control and show the dog who is boss!"
- "You must be alpha to the dog!"
- "You must ensure that the dog submits to you!"

Is this anthropocentric focus really necessary, and does it truly reflect our history with dogs?

The answer to both of these questions: absolutely not. The entire concept of dominance as applied to pet dogs is almost always based on a profound misunderstanding of the shared history of dogs and humans.

The unique relationship between dogs and humans

Dogs have a relationship with humans unlike that of any other domestic animal. Dogs have been selected over time for true collaborative work with humans, and such selection has historically resulted in dog breeds and the attendant breed groupings.

The molecular data support that dogs separated from wolves from as recently as 15,000 years ago to as long as 135,000 years ago. Molecular and anthropological data support that dogs of different morphologies that were likely engaged in different tasks have lived together with humans for at least 15,000 years. Stand-alone anthropological

evidence supports that dogs have lived intimately with humans for at least 30,000 years. For at least the past 2,000 years, there have been well-defined breed groups, composed of dogs of different shapes and sizes that engaged in related tasks.

Much of the physical variation in dog breeds is a consequence of overt selection for specific suites of behaviors that have a co-varying physical aspect. For example, coat type may depend on the type of behavior desired—field trial or working and show English springer spaniels look like completely different breeds, and only one of them can readily scramble through brambles.

Our unique relationship with dogs may be due to convergent evolution of canid and human social systems that was the result of like groups meeting and recognizing the power of collaborative efforts, followed by secondarily derived, homologous changes in brain function that have allowed modern humans and dogs to truly rely on each other.

Behavioral patterns shared by dogs and humans

Both humans and canids:

- Live in extended family groups
- Provide extensive parental care
- Share care of young with both related and unrelated group members
- Give birth to altricial (completely dependent, immature) young that require large amounts of early care and sustained amounts of later social interaction
- Nurse for an extended period before weaning to semisolid food (dogs do this by regurgitation; humans use baby food, but the concept is the same)
- Have extensive vocal and nonvocal communication
- Have a sexual maturity that precedes social maturity.

Among the characteristics of social behavior that dogs share with humans is that their social systems are based in deference. Additionally, associated signaling is often redundant, and most signaling or affirmation of signaling is nonvocal rather than vocal.

Recent data indicate that dogs are also comparable with humans with regard to the complex social cognition involved in understanding long-distance signals that indicate where food is hidden. Dogs are further able to communicate this information to other dogs. Dogs appear to have the ability to "fast map"—to make deductions about object class, name and action without having learned them—and to communicate this ability to humans. Like humans, dogs suffer from what we recognize as maladaptive anxiety—that which interferes with normal functioning.

Finally, when examining the rates of gene expression mutations in regional brain tissue, the only species studied to date that has comparable rates with those found in humans is the domestic dog. Such data, when taken together, suggest that humans and dogs have been working partners and companions in profound ways.

The misinterpretation and limitations of the behavioral and ethological literature

An accurate understanding of normal dog behavior is at odds with the idea that dogs struggle for dominance.

- Dominance is a traditional ethological concept that pertains to an individual's ability—generally under controlled conditions—to maintain or regulate access to some resource. It is a description of the regularities of winning or losing staged contests over those resources. It is not to be confused with status and, in fact, does not need to confer priority of access to resources.
- In situations in which the concept of dominance has been used with regard to status, it is important to realize that it is not defined as aggression on the part of the "dominant" animal but rather as the withdrawal of the "subordinate."
- The behavior of the relatively lower status individuals, not the relatively higher ranking one, is what determines the relative hierarchical rank.
- Rank itself is contextually relative. Truly high-ranking animals are tolerant of lower-ranking ones.
- Dominance displays infrequently lead to actual combat. Instead, combat ensues when these displays are not effective.

- If there is no assumption of a dominance-based system, one is seldom identified. When free-ranging baboon interactions were classified by behavioral types (e.g., friendly, approach–retreat) and then analyzed according to specific behaviors of the participants, no dominance system was noted.

Misinterpretation of pathological behaviors and how they arose

The misuse and misperception of the concept of dominance with respect to pet animals has seriously confused any understanding of the behavioral diagnosis that was formerly called *dominance aggression* (now more often called *impulse control aggression* or *conflict aggression*). There are three conceptual areas where harm has been done.

1. Dominance has been equated to social status or order in a rigid hierarchy, which was thought to develop through contests in young pups that would predict later social relationships as adults. Sequential possession of a bone was used as an assay for dominance in puppies. In truth, puppies are far more fluid in their relationships, which are changing as their brains continue to mature. The rank hierarchy experimentally achieved was a function of the experimental design, not of the behaviors. The design used would impose a rank hierarchy, whether or not one existed.
2. Because of the forceful way in which this rigid rank hierarchy was assumed to develop, humans were encouraged to be at the top of the hierarchy and told to be dominant to their dogs. Our historic and evolutionary relationship with dogs is one of cooperative and collaborative work. A hierarchical relationship like that formerly recommended would not have allowed dogs to work with humans in the ways that they have because humans would have had to make all of the work decisions. In addition, social systems based on deferential behaviors and on gaining accurate information can look exactly like these top-down systems if they are not carefully observed. Deference and compliance in contextually appropriate situations remove the need for control, whether or not someone thinks they are present and successful.
3. Finally, dogs exhibiting this diagnosis, which is based in pathological anxiety and not in use of inadequate force, were to be treated by physically and behaviorally dominating them. The single most devastating advice ever given to people with dogs is that they should dominate their dogs and show the problem dogs "who is boss." Under this rubric, untold numbers of humans have been bitten by dogs they have betrayed, terrified and given no choice. And for dogs that have an anxiety disorder that involves information processing and accurate risk assessment, the behaviors used to dominate a dog (e.g., hitting, hanging, subjecting the dog to dominance downs, alpha rolls and other punitive, coercive techniques) convince that troubled, needy, pathological dog that the human is indeed a threat, resulting in the dog's condition worsening.

It's clearly past time to change our thinking.

In part two of this two-part series, I'll reveal how we can manage misconceptions, improve interactions with dogs and stop being dumbed down by dominance.

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