Time for a sharp exit for canine dominance theory?

Author : Michelle Smith

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Michelle Smith RVN, NCert (AnBeh), looks at the issues surrounding this controversial subject and reviews new behavioural theories

WHILE working as a veterinary nurse, I often hear “He’s a dominant dog” or “We have to show him where his place is” from clients and vets alike. Dominance seems to be a blanket diagnosis for most cases of aggression. To prove this, I compiled a survey and asked 20 clients, who owned breeds from collies to shih-tzus, what they thought could cause aggression towards an owner. All 20 clients gave “dominance” as their first answer. So where does this theory come from?

To gain an insight into how dogs think, behaviourists have historically looked towards the wolf (Fisher, 2002), and like to believe the dog is a pack animal and considers its owner as part of its pack (Eaton, 2008). The wolves studied were, however, captive wolves and had limited resources and space to avoid conflict, so was not a true reflection of wolf behaviour (Barber, 2011).

Many behaviourists and trainers recommend rank reduction programmes when things go wrong and the dog is labelled as dominant or pushy. The principles behind rank reduction programmes are to ensure the dog knows its position at the bottom of the pack. They usually don’t take into consideration the reason why the dog is showing unwanted behaviour, or the breed or lifestyle of the dog. It can cause depression when all the attention, treats and games are stopped, and often aggression can worsen (Eaton, 2008). They can, however, introduce consistency for the dog. For example, if one member is allowing the dog on the sofa while another member is not – when following the programme, the dog is not allowed on the sofa at all.

As part of the rank reduction programme, and in general advice, owners are advised to mimic the alpha wolf and reinforce their role as pack leader through activities such as denying their dog attention and their company. This will help reinforce the owner's high status (Appleby, 1997). Other advice, such as making sure your dog gives way to you at doorways, ensuring you eat before your dog and standing in your dog's bed, are ways of supposedly ensuring the owner maintains a high rank position. Also doing things such as using their hand like a mouth and pinning the dog down are encouraged. "This simulates a canine putdown," (Appleby, 1997). This is frequently demonstrated by TV's popular behaviourist Cesar Milan.

People have begun to question this method of training – does the dog view us as a pack and does it understand we are trying to assert our role as pack leader? It is now thought submissive wolves will voluntarily roll on to their backs at the approach of a dominant wolf. At no point is the submissive wolf physically forced into this position (Eaton, 2008).

A client who owned a very boisterous Weimaraner came in to the practice to have his dog euthanised. The reason given was that his dog had bitten his face when he attempted the so-called "alpha roll".

A dog is a dog

The traditional idea that because dogs descended from wolves and must, therefore, form packs, and look on us a part of that pack, is also being questioned. Barry Eaton questions this theory in his book *Dominance in Dogs.* He suggests dogs ultimately know they are dogs because, when they are in the nest, the behaviour of their siblings and mother is imprinted on them during this critical socialisation time. Because of this, a dog can only communicate with us like a dog, and it won't understand us trying to communicate our attempts at dominance (Eaton, 2008).

Dogs have also lost their ability to communicate effectively with their own species. This is because their face shape, tail shape and facial expressions (or lack of) have changed so much due to humans breeding for specific breed types (Eaton, 2008). I often watch my shih-tzu get very frustrated with my friend's young bull terrier, who ignores or doesn't recognise the shihtzu's attempts at telling him to leave him alone – but is this any wonder, with the fluffy face, curly tail and short snout? This often escalates into the shih-tzu snapping at the bull terrier and them having to be separated. With this lack of ability to communicate successfully, the domestic dog's ability to form a successful pack is doubtful.

Studies of feral dogs in the wild and in villages have shown they do not form packs. A pack of dogs is not needed to scavenge from the village dump – in fact it is to the dog's disadvantage to form a pack, and another dog is seen as competition for food. There is no need for a pack to help care for and rear pups, as the only need is the dump on which these dogs scavenge (Coppinger, 2001). These dogs live in groups, and can leave and rejoin the group as they wish. If a bitch is in oestrus, then any male can mate with her. Feral dogs do not need to hunt, as all their resources, such as

food, are readily available. (Eaton, 2008). As part of our family, all our dogs' resources are provided for, so why would they want to challenge their rank in the pack?

Anthropomorphism

The idea of a dog constantly assessing its situation within the family, then planning and plotting to challenge this position, is to anthropomorphise the dog. The definition of this in the Oxford English Dictionary is to "attribute human characteristics and behaviour to an animal". Many scientists believe dogs do not have "a sense of self", so are not capable of this (Appleby, undated).

The idea of a dog trying to challenge its rank in the pack can often lead to owners being advised to use harsh and punitive techniques, such as the rank reduction programme. While it can be helpful in some cases by providing consistency, as previously discussed, it can be psychologically damaging if used strictly – just suppressing the behaviour, not curing it (Eaton, 2008).

When preparing this article, I was initially certain that dogs cannot be "dominant" or "challenge" their status in their pack. I believe that dogs, in certain situations, can and will guard their resources, such as food and toys. From observing my dog, if another dog comes near his food bowl, he will guard it ferociously, but if the same dog goes near his favourite toy, he isn't bothered.

Fearful

When my dog started barking at people we saw while out on walks, I was advised he was asserting his dominance and protecting me. The dog trainer advised me to carry a bottle of water out on walks and, when he barked at people, I was to punish him by squirting water in his face. Without knowing any better, I followed the advice. The barking stopped for a while, but soon came back, and he started barking at dogs as well.

I sought the advice of a veterinary behaviourist, who established that my dog was actually scared of new people and the fear had been reinforced by using the punitive techniques I had been advised to use. I wonder how many dogs I see in practice that are labelled as dominant, or the owner describes as challenging, has actually learned this behaviour by the owner being overly heavy-handed in misguided attempts to establish his or her place as head of the pack.

If dogs have lost the way to communicate effectively with each other, and in feral situations don't form packs, why do we still insist they see our family as their pack? If a dog challenges an owner when he or she attempts to move the dog from the couch, would a simpler explanation be that the couch is more comfortable than the floor, and the owner is confusing and frustrating the dog by letting it sit on the sofa one minute, then demanding it gets off the next? Surely this makes more sense than dogs wanting to take over the world?

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