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Why nobody will ever agree about dominance in dogs

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ABSTRACT

The concept of dominance in the training of domestic dogs is debated by both scientists and dog trainers but is not an observable truth that can be evidenced by further study. The same observed interactions between animals may be interpreted as dominance within a hierarchy or as an outcome of learning theory, depending on the theoretical perspective taken by the observer. The term ‘dominance’ as used in everyday language may also be applied to the dog-human relationship without the need for interactions to be driven by an implicit hierarchy. Debates around the validity of dominance in dogs should instead focus on the promotion of welfare-friendly training methods that must be used by all.

Keywords: Dominance; Dogs; Canine; Training
In this Point-Counterpoint article I will discuss my thoughts surrounding my conclusion; that despite lots of debate, nobody will ever agree about the issue of dominance in dogs. There are two aspects to my argument: one concerning the construction of dominance hierarchies by scientists as a tool for explaining animal behaviour; and the other the use of the word by everyday dog owners.

Regarding the first point, there has been lots of recent debate over whether or not dominance exists in domestic dogs and the related wolf (Bauer and Smuts 2007; Bradshaw, Blackwell et al. 2009; McGreevy, Starling et al. 2012; Akos, Beck et al. 2014; Cafazzo, Bonanni et al. 2014; Schilder, Vinke et al. 2014). The use of ideas such as occupying positions of inherent dominance and submission within a social group is a remnant of our historical socio-biological view of animals as not capable of reasoned complex thought. Instead we believed they must acting on simplistic instincts in order to maximise their evolutionary success using strategies such as safely submitting to those of higher rank (Wilson 1975). However our views on the cognitive ability of animals, including domestic dogs, have developed. At the same time, increased complexity has been observed in group animal behaviour, where simple linear dominance hierarchies sometimes cannot be found or used to explain observed behaviour (Strum 1982). There are two natural reactions to this: some use this evidence to question the validity of dominance hierarchies in general or in particular species eg. Bradshaw, Blackwell et al. (2009); whereas others develop increasingly complex theories of dominance signals to explain the discrepancies (see summary in Schilder, Vinke et al. 2014).

It is assumed that these inconsistencies can be solved by more debate, more data, better methodologies and becoming ‘better’ scientists by removing ourselves from our ideologies, perhaps including how we personally own (and train) dogs. But what if the discrepancies are real and our frame of reference wrong? This question was raised to me when during my training in social science
research methods, I came across a paper (Strum and Latour 1987) discussing and questioning what
we believe about the social behaviour of baboons in light of increasingly complex explanations being
required to explain dominance relations or the absence of clear hierarchies. Sound familiar? I simply
replaced the word ‘baboon’ with ‘dog’. The most striking part is this is not a new revelation; the
paper was published when I was six years old.

The paper’s discussion surrounding baboons questions the usefulness of the idea of dominance in
animals given evidence for complex skills and self-awareness:

“...skills involve negotiating, testing, assessing and manipulating ... A male baboon,
motivated by his genes to maximize his reproductive success, cannot simply rely on his size,
strength or dominance rank to get him what he wants. Even if dominance was sufficient, we
are still left with the question: how do baboons know who is dominant or not? Is dominance
a fact or an artefact? If it is an artefact, whose artefact is it - is it the observer's, who is
searching for a society into which he can put the baboons? (Even in the classic dominance
study, the investigator had to intervene by pairing males in contests over food, in order to
"discover" the dominance hierarchy.) Or is it a universal problem, one that both observer
and baboon have to solve?” (Strum and Latour 1987).

The paper suggests that rather than animals being constrained within a dominance hierarchy to be
discovered by observing scientists, this overarching structure is a PRODUCT of the interactions that
occur between animals. The idea that interactions are key to creating the hierarchy is probably not
that much of a revelation to anyone; of course those that believe in dominance hierarchies would
also agree that the interactions between animals are fundamental to it. However, here the hierarchy
is presented more as OUR concept, a by-product of the simple fact of us observing them, rather than
fundamental to the structure of their social system and decisions they make. Taking this concept
further suggests that the hierarchy may not mean as much to them as to us as observers. Individuals can be merely doing their own thing and a hierarchy is observed:

“baboons would not be seen as being in a group. Instead they would be seen as striving to define the society and the groups in which they exist, the structure and the boundaries. They would not be seen as being in a hierarchy, rather they would be ordering their social world by their very activity. In such a view, shifting or stable hierarchies might develop not as one of the principles of an overarching society into which baboons must fit, but as the provisional outcome of their search for some basis of predictable interactions. Rather than entering an alliance system, baboons performing society would be testing the availability and solidity of alliances without knowing for certain, in advance, which relationships will hold and which will break. In short, performative baboons are social players actively negotiating and renegotiating what their society is and what it will be” (Strum and Latour 1987).

Even as experienced scientists, it is possible to be looking at the same data from different perspectives and seeing a different ‘truth’. Although the traditional ‘positivistic’ view equates that there is only one objective, observable truth, a social science approach allows that there is not a single view or truth, and that a range of views can be valid in different ways (Alderson 1998). So some persons look at a group of dogs from ‘above’ or ‘top down’ and see a form of dominance hierarchy that can explain the way the dogs are behaving, whereas others look from ‘below’ or ‘bottom up’ and see a group of individuals following the principles of learning theory, simply guided by reinforcement and avoidance, without the need to consider a driving system of dominance and submission. To each they are both valid explanations explainable by the data observed, depending on whether your philosophy is aligned to the ‘macro’ or ‘micro’ level. The addition of more data is not going to swing the argument either way.
However, this brings us to a slightly different question; is there really a need to view animals in the light of dominance in order to explain why they do what they do (and more importantly in the case of dogs, what we can do about it)? I think this is the point Bradshaw is trying to make when beginning to question the status quo regarding dogs (Bradshaw, Blackwell et al. 2009). For example, we could observe a group of people interacting and draw a dominance hierarchy (as discussed by (Schilder, Vinke et al. 2014)), but how much does it really tell us about human psychology and decision making, including the motivations for aggressive or fearful behaviour? For sure some people (and dogs) may have ‘stronger’ and ‘pushier’ personalities than others, but that does not mean that every choice is motivated by a desire to get one over on (or defer to) somebody else. Nor does it mean that a bossy child or dog needs to be treated with authority to change their behaviour.

This brings me neatly to my second point. Like many other dog behaviourists and trainers, whenever I see an aggressive animal, an element of fear can be traced back somewhere in the behavioural history, even if the aggression now looks extremely confident. Furthermore, the majority of labelled ‘dominant’ dogs I have been referred to treat for a behaviour problem have been aggressive to their owner or another household member. A quick internet search of the meaning of the word ‘dominance’ brings up terms such as: rule; control; authority; power; ascendancy. A dog that tries to bite its owner may do so for various reasons, my personal diagnosis is likely fear of losing something important to them, or fear of pain/punishment. However, the aggressive act means the dog is in breach of the terms of the word dominance as the owner expects to apply it to their relationship with their dog. Namely, if you are in control of your dog, it should not be trying to bite you.

Thus, when used in the context of the dog-human relationship, dominance is a valid word a person may choose when describing a behavioural issue. And dare I say it, simply by the fact that my own dogs (mostly) do as they are asked instead of defying or challenging my authority, I am in layman’s terms dominant over them. However, again this is a word used to describe the outcome of our
interactions, not the input of how we got there; in my case by teaching them that it is worthwhile doing as I ask. Referring back to our baboons, each day, through our interactions, my dogs and human family are negotiating and renegotiating how the society that is our household will be constructed.

In conclusion, the idea of dominance in dogs is not a problem to be solved but a question of individual interpretation and philosophy. The same is true with respect to other species; think of the so-called dominant horse, parrot, rabbit or iguana. Until this is recognised the debates will continue without any resolution. This may seem harmless, was it not for a concerning consequence; some interpret that because a dominance hierarchy can be seen when we observe a group of dogs, therefore a dog with a behaviour problem must be trying to assert their authority over another in terms of dominance. Even the scientists debating dominance in dogs agree that this has welfare implications in terms of harsh and aversive training methods often chosen to fix it (Bradshaw, Blackwell et al. 2009; Schilder, Vinke et al. 2014). Therefore perhaps our energy should move away from debating whether dominance in dogs, or other species, exists (which we shall never solve), to what training methods we can all promote for use?

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References


