
TRADITIONAL AND MODERN CANINE PSYCHOLOGY THEORIES

A BRIEF OVERVIEW

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Assignment description

‘Write an essay outlining the traditional ‘rules’ and explain the modern views. Identify a typical situation, which may develop in training or in the dog’s behaviour, and indicate whether you would tackle this with traditional or modern theories, stating the reasons for your choice.’

Contents

A BRIEF OVERVIEW	1
Introduction	3
Disclaimer	3
Scope of this essay	3
Traditional and modern: two camps indeed?	3
Traditional perspective	4
The pack rules.....	4
Traditional objections to modern perspectives	5
Perception that gentle techniques rely on bribes	5
Integrity of the relationship: ‘He should just do it because I have asked’	6
Risk that the dog will be spoilt and ‘dominate’ the house	6
‘But I must be in charge, I must be the leader’	6
Modern perspective.....	7
The modern view on traditional rules	7
On the wolf pack.....	7
On dominance	8
On the dog-wolf comparison.....	8
On corporal punishment.....	10
Traditional and modern management of a specific behaviour problem	11
The traditional solution	11
Repeating the command in an increasingly loud tone of voice	12
Coercion.....	12
Physical punishment	13
The modern solution	13
Question the dog’s understanding	13
Generalisation.....	13
Distractions and stress factors.....	14
Physical comfort	14
Food for thought: discussion	15
Personal position.....	15
Gentle training and philosophy	15
On partisanship and controversy	15
On standards in the canine professions	16
Parting words: conclusion.....	16
References	17

Introduction

Disclaimer

You will not that I make frequent use of quotation marks throughout this essay. This is not intended to denote cynicism, but to stress the importance of the terminology used.

For convenience's sake, I mainly refer to a dog as 'he', rather than 'she'. This reflects no gender preference. It is simply more convenient than 'he/she', and more empathetic than 'it'. Thus unless otherwise specified, 'him' refers to dogs of both genders.

Scope of this essay

This essay gives an overview of the main traditional and modern dog training and behaviour principles. It also focuses on some of the behaviours most commonly interpreted to be related to dominance, and comparatively interprets them with the traditional and modern approaches. Finally, a practical example of a frequent behaviour issue is presented, for which traditional and modern management methods are compared.

Traditional and modern: two camps indeed?

After reading the assignment description, I dutifully trudged back through years of indexed notes on my reading about dogs. I came out struggling to crystallize the myriad theories and techniques into two clearly clear-cut factions, i.e. traditional (aka 'natural' or 'pack-based') and modern (aka 'gentle', 'reward-based', or 'positive'). Although one always hears of modern and traditional perspectives in dog training, it has been challenging to find commonly one standard definition of what distinguishes them. My personal classification method is to ask the following questions about a given theory or method:

Traditional:

- Focuses on the wolf pack analogy and dominance; and
- Makes integral use of aversives, physical coercion and punishment.

Modern:

- Focuses mainly on rewards; and
- Promotes the treatment of dogs as a species in its own right (i.e. not interpreting its behaviour through human or alleged wolf traits).

I used these definitions to classify the principles reviewed in this essay.

Traditional perspective

The pack rules

Followers of the 'natural method' perspective, interpret much of a dog's behaviour through the 'pack theory', whereby:

(On wolves)

- (Gray) wolves (*Canis lupus lupus*) are invariably, wholly and permanently pack animals;
- The wolf pack is a linear, 'pecking-order'-like hierarchy, with the alpha male (or breeding pair) on top and a rigid structure of followers and leaders below. Higher up individuals have more privileges;
- Each wolf can legitimately be characterised as dominant or submissive. The dominance value of an individual is an intrinsic quality in him, regardless of the wolf's history interactions with other individual wolves;
- Dominant wolves frequently use violent means to assert and maintain their rank; and
- Subservient wolves frequently seek opportunities to gain rank over established 'dominant' wolves through in-pack fighting, tension and rivalry.

(On dogs)

- Domestic dogs (*Canis lupus familiaris*) are essentially (gray) wolves, therefore their behaviour should be interpreted strictly using the pack model;
- Domestic dogs see their human family as a pack; and
- Many domestic dogs are constantly seeking to increase their rank in the family, to 'dominate' us.

These assumptions have led to a generation of dog trainers advising pre-emptive and reactive 'rank-reduction' programmes greatly involving the use of physical force, coercion and punishment. One of the most infamous techniques that is regrettably still in the popular mindset as a valid handling is the alpha-rollover (Ref 11: Monks of New Skete (the) - 1978), advising one to forcibly roll the dog on its back and to grab him by the throat. Less extreme, and arguably more socially acceptable, are the acts of yanking the dog's lead or using a choke collar, which continue to be widely promoted in traditional training schools.

Traditional objections to modern perspectives

Detractors of the modern training methods have several fundamental objections to reward-based techniques. I answer these frequent concerns below:

Perception that gentle techniques rely on bribes

The common modern answer to this concern is to compare food reward with human wages. This never struck me as a water-tight analogy. The two processes (food reward and human salary) are entirely different, in my opinion: one concerns the mechanics of operant conditioning and the other, arguably not (strictly speaking, for the salary to be a potent reinforcer, it would need to be given immediately after each work unit. Besides, most humans do not do their job well so that they get paid, the motivations lie more in the area of personal pride and a needed sense of achievement). But my more fundamental objection to this analogy is that it is blatant anthropomorphism: a dog is not a human.

I prefer to meet the bribe objectors with the more fact-based arguments:

1. In lure-based training, the 'lure' is used only to position the animal in the desired position in the first attempts to put the behaviour on cue, and is quickly faded out.
2. With the possible exception of the recall, the (food-based) 'reward' is quickly replaced by verbal praise once the behaviour is solidly anchored. For most on-cue behaviours, one is subsequently advised to only occasionally use food rewards (i.e. an intermittent ratio) to prevent the extinction of the taught behaviour.

Integrity of the relationship: 'He should just do it because I have asked'

I have often heard the following despondent remark from fellow dog handlers at training class after poor performance to a cue: 'He should just do it because I have asked', regardless of the difficulties at play at the time (e.g. anxiety, comfort, or lack of solid previous training). In my view, not only is this statement a little dictatorial, but it also lacks realism.

It lacks realism in that demanding and coercing have long been proven to not be optimal training methods in the motivational state of a coerced dog is not optimally conducive to keen and durable learning.

When facing this dejected reaction, I can only ask one question: 'How's that working out for you?'. 'That' being the unilateral and often unsuccessful demand that the dog should simply obey. This tends to get me a smile and an interlocutor ready to hear a little more.

Risk that the dog will be spoilt and 'dominate' the house

Advocates of the traditional theories often express concern that the gentle methods produce spoilt dogs, 'dominating' the household and doing as they please. My current dog was brought up exclusively with gentle methods, and he is the perfect gentleman where most dogs are more of a handful (I take him to the office, the restaurant, crowded beaches, etc.). My previous dog's behaviour, who was also brought up with gentle methods, was also receiving a lot of compliments. The dogs I had before that were trained on a more mixed approach and I got less satisfactory results. Of course, this is anecdotal and rather subjective.

To meet such objections with a more fact-based answer, I point out that 'gentle' does not mean permissive. The promoters of modern techniques talk of the need for clear boundaries and discipline every bit as insistently as their traditional counterparts. The goal of the gentle training techniques is, first and foremost, to produce 'canine good citizens' (term coined by Ian Dunbar, if memory serves).

'But I must be in charge. I must be the leader'

And so one should, in my view. Being a leader (or, as I see it, a parent, a carer), is not about the use of force: it is about keeping your charges safe, polite, and, to the best of your abilities, flourishing. I know better than my dog what is appropriate in human

society, so it is absolutely my job to steer him towards appropriate behaviours. I rarely, however, expect instant results or coerce the dog if he does not immediately comply. Instead, I try to understand the reason, and correct it with the appropriate tool at my disposal (targetted counter-conditioning, more generalised training of a concept, etc.).

Modern perspective

I mainly define modern views in their contrast with the traditional views. I shall therefore cover the modern perspective on traditional views, rather than cover all precepts of modern training principles (most of which overlap with the traditional view in the importance of consistency, timing and sequence, etc.).

The modern view on traditional rules

On the wolf pack

The 'pack rules' are mainly based on a 1947 study on captive gray wolves (Ref 14: Schenkel, Rudolf – 1947). One of the main findings to transpire from his study was the frequent occurrence of rank-related fighting. Many of Schenkel's observations were later invalidated through observation of wolves in the wild, allowing the following corrections to Schenkel's findings:

- Most wolf 'packs' are in fact a nuclear family unit composed of the breeding pair, this season's pups, and occasionally last year's yearlings. The parents (note: not the 'alpha' pair) are in charge of such groups and rank disputes are rare, as this is a stable, socio-biologically sound structure.
- Not all wolves live in groups, and most wolves do not live in groups all year round (Ref 9: Mech, David – 2000). The forming of a pack appears to be a response to environmental pressures, with more grouping in times of duress, where it pays to cooperate for baby-sitting, hunting, scavenging, etc. (Ref 1: Boitani, Luigi and Ciucci, Paolo – 1995).

It has been speculated that the frequent competitive fights observed by Schenkel resulted from the fact that the wolves under observation had been collected from disparate origins and did not form the usual family unit, resulting in much rank uncertainty and group instability. This was compounded by the fact that they were

living in close quarters and had plenty of food, conditions averse to the environmental factors known to favour packing in wolves (Ref 9: Mech, David – 2000).

To conclude briefly, one has to take training principles based on the wolf pack analogy with a pinch of salt, given how outdated the wolf pack theory is in scientific terms.

On dominance

Dominance in wolves is much more fluid than the rigid pecking order pictured in the popular mindset. Dominance is the attribute of a relationship between two individuals, and is continually influenced by the outcome of each encounter between them. Myrna Milani (Ref 10: Milani, Myrna - undated) illustrates the concept very clearly: *‘Two dogs, Salt and Pepper, meet each other for the first time. They sniff each other out and... Salt ... puts his front paws on Pepper's shoulders, but Pepper refuses to go down and a fight ensues. Finally, Salt pins Pepper to the ground. Which dog is the leader?’*

Although we can say that Salt is the more dominant dog, we can't say anything about his leadership skills until the two dogs meet again. If when they do, Salt only needs to look at Pepper and Pepper immediately displays subordinate body language, then Salt can claim the leadership title. However, if Pepper doesn't back down and the two dogs fight again, and even if Salt wins that and every other fight, Salt hasn't proven his leadership.’

The number of times I still hear someone, often professionals, expediently referring to an excited or scared dog as being ‘dominant’, testifies to how pervasively the concept of dominance has impregnated the popular mindset.

The concept of dominance still has a place in modern canine behaviour interpretation, but it concerns a small portion of specific cases, such as dominance aggression or submission urinating, and not the whole spectrum of dog behaviour as is still perceived by most people.

On the dog-wolf comparison

In my opinion, a dog should not be expected to behave like a (gray) wolf (*Canis lupus lupus*, or *Canis lupus*) for one simple reason: it isn't one. In contrast, the dog is in turn referred to as *Canis familiaris* or *Canis lupus familiaris*. Regardless of the precise zoological classification, one cannot argue against the fact that the dog has been domesticated, and the wolf has not. Domestication implies a range of important

physical and behavioural changes. To use but two of the many salient differences: let's approach dentition and brain size.

The dog's dentition reflects a fundamental dietary difference between dogs and wolves: the dog's molar teeth are adapted for grinding, rather than shearing, reflecting the fact that dogs are opportunistic scavengers, and no longer specialized predators (Ref 2: Coppinger, Ray and Lorna - 2001).

Figure 1: *Canis l. lupus*

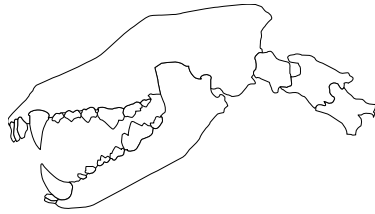


Figure 2: *Canis l. familiaris*

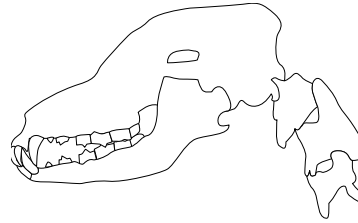


Figure credit: Archeo zoo (<http://www.archeozoo.org/en-article134.html>)

Another fundamental physical difference between dog and wolf is brain size. In dogs, the brain to body (mass) ratio is significantly smaller than in wolves (Ref 7: Lindsay, Steven R. – 2000). Ray Coppinger (Ref 2: Coppinger, Ray and Lorna - 2001) speculates that is, again, related to dietary differences (scavenger vs. predator), but also in social tendencies (solitary vs. [seasonal] group cooperation). Regardless of the definite reason for this difference in brain mass, one must concede that it supports treating the behaviour of the wolf and the dog as that of different species.

To further strengthen the case for treating wolves and dogs differently, the following behavioural differences are often observed between the two species:

- The dog shows a superior ability to read human cues (Ref 6: Hare, Brian and Tomasello, Michael);
- The dog has a smaller fight/flight distance than wolves in the presence of humans, even in dogs equally lacking previous exposure to humans (Ref 2: Coppinger, Ray and Lorna - 2001);

- The dog shows a clear ¹preference for human company over that of conspecifics (Ref 5: Frank, Harry and Frank, Marthy Gialdini – 1982 in Ref 7: Lindsay, Steven R. – 2000);
- Wild dogs do not form long-lasting and permanent social associations with conspecifics, be it family packs or breeding pairs (Ref 1: Boitani, Luigi and Ciucci, Paolo – 1995); and
- Professional trainers approach dog and wolf training entirely differently (Ref 9: Mech, David – 2000, Ref 17: Wilde, Nicole – 2001).

In my view, all these arguments convincingly disqualify dog training techniques fundamentally based on how wolves (are claimed to) behave.

On corporal punishment

Most modern training schools keep away from corporal punishment. Beyond my personal aversion for physical punishment, I question its necessity, effectiveness and morality, in line with most modern approaches.

Necessity and effectiveness

To advocates of corporal punishments, who often exclaim 'But it works!', I say the following: it does work, but in the short-term, for middle-of-the-road dogs (not too anxious, not too aggressive), and it carries many risks. The most influential animal learning theorists, such as Skinner and Thorndike, also favoured reward-based techniques over punishment (Ref 16: Thorndike, Edward L. – 1911/1965 in Ref 7: Lindsay, Steven R. – 2000).

Below are some of the better-documented disadvantages of using punishment in training:

- Potential weakening of dog-owner trust;
- Potential worsening of condition for stress-related aggressive or fearful dogs;
- Requirement for very precise timing and intensity, with the risk of reinforcing the undesirable behaviour with each small error of judgement in delivering punishment;

¹ I am aware that this is in contradiction to '*...over the many generations of living with us - although his preference would be to live with his own kind.*' in the ICC Unit 1 Coursework presentation, but it has been experimentally proven.

- If regularly administered in conjunction with the situation which makes the dog 'misbehave', punishment risks making the dog associate the aversive with the stressful situation, thus compounding its stressful potential; and
- Risk of habituation: if regularly administered, the dog may become increasingly unresponsive to punishment, causing the need to frequently escalate the aversive intensity of punishment.

Morality

As the person in charge in my dog-human relationship, I find it shows more moral integrity to avoid abusing my position of power, and I enjoy watching the bond between my dog and I grow as a result.

I am not alone in finding the use of aversive force on dogs morally questionable: in our increasingly liberal world, enormous steps have been made in dealing with previously mistreated groups (e.g. the disabled, women, children, animals). In line with this cultural shift, most dog owners today are reluctant to use force on the animal in their care, and are more at ease with the many gentle methods that are at their disposal.

Traditional and modern management of a specific behaviour problem

Imagine the following situation: you have dutifully taught your dog to sit at home. It is now time to go to your weekly training class and you want to show off his new trick. To your dismay, he no longer sits on cue in his training class. What do you do?

The traditional solution

It seems very intuitive to many of us that our dog understands the English language and our value system, and that he must therefore, not obey or eat our 2,000 dollar shoes on purpose: out of jealousy, spite, revenge, stubbornness, or whatever motive one cares to assign to the behaviour. Thus emboldened by our certainty about the defiant motivation behind the misbehaviour, we would traditionally approach it with the following methods:

Repeating the command in an increasingly loud tone of voice

This is understandable behaviour on our part: that is how primates communicate insistence (Ref 8: McConnell, Patricia B. – 2002). What it achieves, however, is another story:

- Should the dog sit after the Nth repetition, and should we keep repeating the cue in future instances, we are working our way towards changing the cue the dog required for sitting from a brief, soft 'sit' to an exhausting, loud 'sit. Sit! SIT! **SIT!** **SIIIIIIT!**'.
- Should the repetition keep failing, and should we keep using the method in future instances, we could be teaching our dog that 'sit. Sit! SIT! **SIT!** **SIIIIIIT!**' means nothing at all and should be treated as background noise (following the principle of learned irrelevance).

Coercion

The next response to non-compliance to a sit command is often to physically press down on his lower back to physically force him into a sit. I am uncomfortable in that treatment for a number of reasons. Firstly, and admittedly a very subjective point, it does not convey an awful lot of respect for the dog.

More fundamentally, though, coercing a dog does not make use of the process of trial-and-error which is so essential in the early stages of teaching a new behaviour (Ref 16: Thorndike, Edward L. – 1911/1965 in Ref 7: Lindsay, Steven R. – 2000). I surmise that physical coercion actually delays that 'light switch' moment of operant conditioning, when the dog understands which one of the behaviour he offered was successful in getting a positive outcome.

Thirdly, observation of the dog's body language attests that pressing on a dog's back is an aversive handling for most dogs. It makes most dogs uncomfortable as can clearly be seen in their body language: subtle crouching, lip-licking, yawning, etc. So I ask: if there are less aversive methods in your panoply, why not do your relationship with your dog a favour and use those?

Physical punishment

Regretably, I still witness many owners physically punishing a non-complying dog using the following methods: hitting him on his flank, flicking the bridge of his nose, or even hitting his lower back with the leash. The shortcomings of physical aversives are set down in: '

On corporal punishment'.

Allow me to delve on two specific possible consequences of using physical punishment in addition to the dedicated paragraph above: Frequent punishment can also make it difficult to enjoy free-shaping sessions, as the dog may become nervous about offering new behaviours. Another specific possible, and far more serious consequence, is that you could potentially create hand- or leash-shy dog, causing a world of potential new behaviour problems.

At this stage, many traditionally educated dog owners will dispiritedly cry: 'Then what CAN I do?'. The following section suggests how to deal with non-compliance using a modern approach.

The modern solution

Question the dog's understanding

When faced with poor on-cue performance, I start by questioning how well my dog understood the cue in the first place. A measurable rule of thumb for assessing how well a behaviour is learned, is a success rate of eighty percent during at least five sessions in a row (Ref 3: Donaldson, Jean - 2005). Should he not meet that standard at a higher level of difficulty (e.g. in a distracting environment like the training class), I go back one step in training difficulty (e.g. going back to luring the dog into position) until the dog reliably performs at that level.

Generalisation

Dogs can be appalling generalisers (Ref 3: Donaldson, Jean - 2005) when compared to humans. Thus understanding the 'sit' cue in your living room is another matter than in your neighbour's garden, or at the park, or indeed at training class.

Whenever I teach my dog a new behaviour, I gradually increase the number of situations in which I teach him the cue. I find that he tends to generalise across the board after two or three different locations.

Distractions and stress factors

As a new (on-cue) behaviour is taught, it must **gradually** be introduced in increasingly challenging (i.e. distracting or stressful) environments. I always expect some regression when practising for the first time in a more challenging environment. If the dog is finding the behaviour difficult in the new environment, I regress my teaching method back to the previous step (e.g. reverting to the temporary use of lures, despite the fact that the dog could reliably perform on-cue only in the 'easy', previous environment). I use the rule of 80% success in my regression phase in the new environment before I consider him a graduate, and ready to learn the behaviour without the aid of a lure.

Some dogs will never be able to perform in certain conditions, like a crowded, rowdy training class. I advocate calibrating your expectations to your dog's sensitivities and abilities. We would all love Lassie or Rin-tin-tin in our living room, but one must question how realistic that expectation is.

One important source of stress is your own motivational state. I have noticed that my dog is slightly less performant when I am stressed or nervous. At times, I am also too intensely focused on his compliance, staring at him expectantly, with all my muscles tensed up and holding my breath. That is a recipe for failure with nervous dogs like mine, who will revert to inhibition and offer no behaviour at all, or a displacement behaviour like sniffing the ground, until the pressure is lifted.

Physical comfort

The reason for poor performance could be physical discomfort. Its most benign and obvious reason could be the weather (getting a dog to sit on cold, wet asphalt on a rainy day is less easy than on a dry day), or a tangle in his lead or harness. One should not eliminate the possibility of a physical ailment, although in my experience, this is the minority of cases and the reasons for non-compliance are often a lot less concerning.

If comfort is the issue, I question the need to have the dog execute the command in the current conditions. Should the behaviour be of vital importance (e.g. for safety reasons), I should train the already-taught behaviour in the physically uncomfortable

environment (e.g. sitting on a cold floor) with the same compliance expectations I would of a new behaviour, going back to regression if necessary, as explained above.

Food for thought: discussion

Personal position

If I had to firmly position myself in a training school of thought, I would be in the modern corner. Given that I am extremely inclined to be empathise with animals, I am not entirely comfortable with the more disciplinarian approach.

Regardless of my philosophical stance, I also support fact-based, well-researched approaches, thus I mainly reject dogmatic pack theory-based approaches on the basis of these grounds.

Gentle training and philosophy

Like Karen Pryor (Ref 12: Pryor, Karen – 1999), I am applying some training precepts to my human interactions. One of the most important life lessons I try to take from the modern approach is 'Do not take it personally', 'it' being lack of compliance, poor performance or annoying behaviours. It makes your relationships – to dogs and humans alike - a lot less stressful and more effective.

The modern approach has also taught me that, when faced with an apparent road block, I should relax, find an alternative route, break it down or go back a step instead of frustratingly ploughing on. Modern dog training and bhuddism, that would be a nice essay!

Another valuable life lesson I try to export from dog training to everyday life is to forego the temptation for quick, shaky results in favour of solid foundations.

On partisanship and controversy

I am wary of entrenching myself too radically in one philosophy, as scientific discoveries and cultural shifts have the nasty habit of turning around on themselves every few years. So I try to rein myself in before I allow myself to embark upon yet another of my passionate bashing sessions on the latest telegenic trainer. I try to remember to approach the subject with flexibility and modesty as, you never know what next

scientific discovery will be. Will we evolve towards a strictly specialized breed-per-breed approach? Will we revert to a more disciplinarian approach when more ground-breaking facts are discovered?

I also try (not always successfully), to avoid spreading self-reinforcing and loosely fact-based beliefs just because they fit with my philosophy. This precaution makes me go through excessive pains to research as thoroughly and honestly as possible. It slows me down, but gives me confidence to calmly state facts when faced with die hard fans of the dominance-based theory.

Having had the same ineffective and frustrating discussion again and again, I am endeavouring to heed my grand-mother's advice: 'You won't catch flies with vinegar, but with honey, honey'. So when I get caught up on the old dominance discussion again, I try to tactfully explain my point once, rather than belittle my interlocutor or keep insisting.

Having said all of the above, I keep finding it next to impossible to calmly keep my 'no judgement' 'no intervention' approach when I see a dog being abused in the name of the 'dominance; or the 'pack theory' (violent yanking, unfair yelling, etc.). Thus I have found myself in many unpleasant situations, as I just had to give my most unwelcome opinion. I am yet to find an approach that is less stressful and more effective, but I cannot just stand back and watch abuse in the name of training.

On standards in the canine professions

The 'gentle' message would be more effectively spread were the canine professions subject to well-defined, central and universal academic and professional standards. Nowadays, any well-meaning but ill-informed dog lover, myself included, can set up shop as a canine professional and continue to spread sometimes self-reinforcing antiquated opinions to their clientele. With what little influence I possess, I am using all the PR tools in my panoply to inch closer and closer to that vision.

Parting words: conclusion

Here's hoping you enjoyed reading this essay on a subject I am deeply passionate about. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to get on my soapbox, and order my thoughts on this can of worms that is the comparison of modern versus traditional training approaches.

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