
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.’

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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.

This manoeuvre, administered from one wolf to another, is essentially a death threat, and has been received with violent fear by many a dog over the years that it was advocated as a valid disciplinary measure, causing numerous bites to human handlers. Despite the fact that this manoeuvre has since frequently been recanted by one of the book's co-authors (Job Michael Evans), and that subsequent editions of the book actively discourage its use, it has seemingly irreversibly trickled down to the general public and remains advised by some traditional training schools to this day. 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.

Behaviours traditionally assigned to dominance

From the traditionalist perspective, countless behaviours are considered to be 'coup' attempts of various degrees by your dog. Owners are often encouraged to respond to these behaviours with disciplinary actions ranging, in my opinion, from futile to downright abusive. Here are but some examples of the many canine behaviours traditionally considered to be related to dominance, and the traditional responses to them:

- Initiating an interaction with a human (like nuzzling the owner for attention): You are advised to ignore the dog sternly, on the grounds that only you must decide when there shall be interaction.
- 'Winning' the toy at the end of a tug-of-war game: You are warned to always keep the contested toy after a tug-of-war game to avoid it reinforcing the dog's feeling of dominance over you. Some authors also advise not to play that game at all, for fear it will rouse dormant aggressive tendencies (Ref 15: Sykes, Barbara – 2001/2004).
- Zig-zagging back to the owner when called, often stopping to sniff: Scores of owners interpret this as defiance, and so yell at the dog to come back, and then punish him when

he has. This, seen from an operant conditioning perspective, produces exactly the contrary: a dog with a weak recall.

- Growling: Growling is traditionally severely punished, regardless of the reason behind it. I not too infrequently see well-meaning owners scream at their (on-leash) dog after he growled at a boisterous and invasive (off-leash) dog. This is counterproductive as it risks sensitising the dog to future dog-dog encounters while on-leash. Another example of the counter-productivity of punishing a growling dog is fear-aggression, which will only be reinforced by forceful punishment.
- Resting on furniture such as beds or couches, or any elevated place: This is frequently seen as the dog claiming the high-ground position of your territory, and you are advised to remove him at once for fear he will see himself as dominant over you.
- Walking in front of a human, in particular entering thresholds like gates or doors before you: You are often advised that this is a sign of disrespect and should be disallowed.
- Jumping up against people: You are advised to (some say gently) knee him in the chest bone or push him back with your hands. These manoeuvres are actually liable to reinforce the behaviour, as they give the dog the interaction and attention it is seeking at that moment.
- Pulling on the leash: You are often advised to yank the dog's leash every time the dog pulls. Aside from the risk of tracheal damage, this may actually habituate the dog to this stimulus, requiring you to use more and more force with time.
- Eating before a human eats: One is often advised to wait until the humans have eaten before serving the dog its meal, to clearly establish the dominance hierarchy in the dog's mind.
- Not instantly and systematically obeying a 'well-known' command: (explored in details in *The traditional solution* section)

These same behaviours are reviewed from a modern standpoint in the

The modern take on behaviours traditionally assigned to dominance section.

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 true reinforcer, it would need to be given immediately after each work unit). More fundamentally, I feel that one cannot in the same breath use anthropomorphic comparison, and yet reject anthropomorphism as retrograde when used by traditionalists.

A small point perhaps, but I prefer to meet the bribe objection with the following 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. One is subsequently advised to only occasionally use food rewards (i.e. an intermittent ratio) to prevent the extinction of the taught behaviour.

'He should just do it because I have asked'

I have often heard the following despondent remark 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 reminiscent of a dictatorial demand, but it also lacks realism. When facing this situation, I have often asked this one question: 'How's that working out for you?'. 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 will produce spoilt dogs, 'dominating' the household and pretty much doing as they please. To such objections, I point out that 'gentle' does not mean permissive. The promoters of modern techniques harangue their audience about the need for clear boundaries and discipline as often and as loud as the most traditional of trainers. The goal of the gentle training techniques is, first and foremost, to produce 'canine good citizens' (first coined by Ian Dunbar, if memory serves).

I personally see each dog as an ambassador to the owner's training techniques (and to dog in general). I frequently take my own to the office, restaurant, crowded beach, etc., and he is a model citizen in those situations despite the fact that he was only been trained with gentle methods while under my care. I find that the countless examples of gently-trained yet well-behaved dogs are the best answer to this concern.

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

And so you should, in my view. Being a leader (or, as I see it, a carer) to a pet, is not about the use of force: it is about keeping your charges safe and, to the best of your abilities, flourishing. As a human, I know better than my dog what is appropriate in society, so it is my job to direct him towards the right behaviours. I rarely, however, expect instant results or systematically coerce the dog if he does not comply. Instead, I try to understand the reason behind the disappointing performance, and correct it with the appropriate tool at my disposal (counter-conditioning, more training, etc.).

Modern perspective

Modern views distinguish themselves in their departure from the traditional views. I shall therefore cover the modern perspective on traditional views, rather than cover the entire modern training principles, most of which overlap with the traditional view (importance of consistency, timing and sequence, etc.).

The modern view on traditional rules

On the wolf pack

The 'pack rules' are mainly based on post-war observations of captive gray wolves by Rudolf Schenkel (Ref 14: Schenkel, Rudolf – 1947). One of the main findings to transpire from his

study was the repeated rank-related fighting between the wolves. Many of Schenkel's observations were later invalidated (even by himself) through the observation of wolves in the wild. Among others, subsequent studies allowed the following corrections to Schenkel's original work:

- Most wolf 'packs' are a nuclear family unit composed of the breeding pair, this season's pups, and sometimes their yearlings. The parents (note: not the 'alpha' pair) are in charge of such groups and rank disputes are rare in light of such 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 cooperative grouping in times of duress (Ref 1: Boitani, Luigi and Ciucci, Paolo – 1995).

It has since been speculated that the intense and frequent competitive fights observed by Schenkel were a result of 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. 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 behaviour in wolves (Ref 9: Mech, David – 2000).

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, rather than the intrinsic attribute of an individual wolf. 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 have heard someone, sometimes a professional, referring to a dog as being 'dominant' (and I have to gather all my will-power not to roll my eyes in exasperation), testifies to how pervasively the pack rules have impregnated the popular mindset.

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. Depending on whom you talk to, dogs are not even always considered to be the same species as the gray wolf, sometimes referred to as *C. l. familiaris* and sometimes *C. familiaris*). Even if dogs were a mere sub-species of the gray wolf, one cannot argue against the fact that the dog has been domesticated, and the wolf has not. Domestication implies a range of physical and behavioural changes. To use but two of the many salient differences with a definite influence on behaviour, one could look at dentition and brain size.

The dog's dentition reflects a fundamental life-style difference between dogs and wolves: their diet. The dog's molar teeth are adapted for grinding, rather than shearing, for dogs have evolved into opportunistic scavengers, and can no longer be considered specialized predators like the gray wolf (Ref 2: Coppinger, Ray and Lorna - 2001).

Figure 1: *Canis l. lupus*

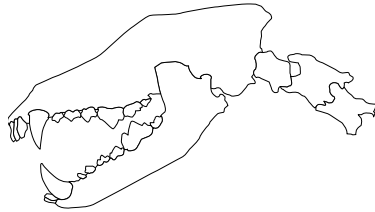


Figure 2: *Canis l. familiaris*

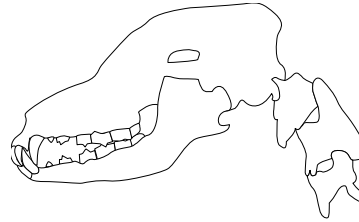


Figure credit: Archeo zoo (<http://www.archeozoo.org/en-article134.html>)

Another fundamental physical difference between dog and wolf is brain size. In dogs, the brain to body (mass) ratio is invariably smaller than in wolves (Ref 7: Lindsay, Steven R. – 2000). Ray Coppinger (Ref 2: Coppinger, Ray and Lorna - 2001) speculates that is related to differences in diet (scavenger vs. predator) and life-style (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.

Behavioural differences are also observed, to strengthen the case for distinct treatment of the two species. Below are some examples of behavioural differences between dog and wolf:

- 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 human activity, even if the individual dog equally lacked previous close exposure to humans (Ref 2: Coppinger, Ray and Lorna - 2001);
- The dog shows a clear ¹preference for human company over that of con-specifics (Ref 5: Frank, Harry and Frank, Marthy Gialdini – 1982 in Ref 7: Lindsay, Steven R. – 2000);
- The dog, even in wild conditions, is clearly disinclined to form long-lasting social associations, be it family packs or breeding pairs (Ref 1: Boitani, Luigi and Ciucci, Paolo – 1995); and
- There are countless reports of how different, and difficult, it is to train a wolf in comparison to a dog (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.

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.

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:

- Damage to the trust the dog-owner bond;
- Potential for worsening the condition of 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 on punishment delivery;
- 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 keep escalating the aversive intensity of punishment.

Morality

As the person in charge in my dog-human relationship, I try not to abuse my position of power, and I enjoy watching the bond between my dog and I grow closer as a result.

I am not alone in finding the use of force on dogs uncomfortable, and ultimately 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). Reflecting 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 today.

The modern take on behaviours traditionally assigned to dominance

'Modern' trainers question or deny whether the traditionally 'dominant behaviours' are related to dominance at all. This is how these behaviours are now approached by most modern trainers:

- Initiating an interaction with a human (like nuzzling the owner for attention): The dog wants attention, no less, no more. One can always teach him to 'settle' for these moments when giving attention is just not convenient.
- 'Winning' the toy at the end of a tug-of-war game: Some modern trainers would advise the owner to make sure they win the game occasionally. I personally even question to what extent the tug-of-war is in fact a power game, speculating instead that it is the mimicry of two dogs collaboratively (albeit excitedly) tearing a carcass. Regardless of its exact competitive nature, modern trainers would encourage you to put the start, intensity and end of the game on cue, not disallowing it altogether.

- Zig-zagging back to the owner when called, often stopping for a sniff: According to Turid Rugaas (Ref 13: Rugaas, Turid - 2006), this is a non-confrontational way of approaching another dog. Thus the more one shouts at their dog to come back, the more the animal would seem to procrastinate, in its misunderstood attempts to appease its owner. Having casually experimented with it, I am inclined to abide by this theory.
- Growling: The modern take on growling is one of diagnosis: one should get to the bottom of why the dog is growling (e.g. resource guarding, fear, etc.) and manage the issue accordingly. Although a deeply disconcerting sign, a growl gives an invaluable warning that the dog is one step closer to biting (growling was dubbed the 'amber light' by Nicole Wilde - Ref 18: Wilde, Nicole – 2008). You are therefore advised by modern trainers to keep that admittedly unwelcome signal in the dog's range of communication. One should be careful to not reinforce growling, though, thus the ideal immediate response is a careful balance between not backing off (reinforcing if that is what the dog wanted) before the dog has stopped growling for at least couple of seconds, and not putting yourself at risk (a cornered dog can be more prone to aggression).
- Resting on furniture such as beds or couches, or any elevated places: The modern take on this is that if, for whatever reason (such as a spouse who inexplicably dislikes dog hair on his clothes), one does not want the dog resting on furniture, then it can, and should, by all means be disallowed. The sticking point is that this behaviour should not be disallowed because of a conjectured link to dominance, but for convenience reasons. One may wish to only occasionally allow the dog to climb on furniture (e.g. when the above-mentioned spouse is away ...), in which case it makes perfect sense to teach the dog to climb up – and more importantly down - when prompted. It is a different situation altogether if the dog growls when asked to jump down from the furniture. This is symptomatic of resource guarding (note: not dominance testing), and must be treated as such.
- Walking in front of a human, in particular entering thresholds like gates or doors before a human: Once at a seminar about dog training, the presenter was making this very point (dog walking in front does not equate dominant behaviour) and someone asked 'OK, we but what DOES it mean?'. To which the presenter wittily answered: "It means that your dog is walking in front of you." That answer gets it right on the mark, in my opinion, in that it questions the need to seek deeper, sinister, dominance-related meaning behind every behaviour. Isn't it time we relaxed and enjoyed our dogs?
- Jumping up against people: This behaviour is very similar to the wolf's greeting ritual to a returning individual, and I have not yet found more than anecdotal references linking it to dominance. If one wants to discourage it (muddy paws + white trousers = not always a great combination), one is advised to ignore the behaviour (I personally add a stiff look-way, with my arms tightly folded), and at least a few seconds after all four paws are on firmly the floor, start doling out the attention. Because I often enjoy this behaviour – saves me from bending down - I have put it on cue.
- Pulling on the leash: This is a clear sign of keenness, impatience and enthusiasm, rather than dominance. Ian Dunbar's (Ref 4: Dunbar, Ian – 1998) game of 'red light/green light' (owner stops moving when the dog pulls and owner resumes the walk when the leash is slack) works wonder to correct this in a gentle way.
- Growling approaching the dog's food: This is symptomatic of resource guarding, not dominance. If one must use wolves as a model, even younger (subordinate) wolves guard their food against older (dominant) counterparts.

- Eating before a human eats: In nature, the lead wolves often first give food to their young (i.e. subordinates), then tuck in themselves. I have not yet read a convincing study suggesting a hard and fast correlation between eating sequence and dominance position. Thus the modern perspective on this point is to feed your dog in whatever sequence is most convenient to the human family.
- Not instantly and systematically obeying a 'well-known' command: The modern approach to this is explored in details in the next section (The modern solution).

Traditional and modern management of a specific behaviour problem

Imagine that 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 skill, but, to your dismay, he no longer sits on cue in his training class. What do you do?

The traditional solution

It seems alien to some of us that the dog does not automatically understand the English language or our value system, he must therefore, do it on purpose out of jealousy, revenge, stubbornness, or whatever human motive one cares to assign to the behaviour. Thus emboldened by our certainty about his defiance, we would traditionally approach the behaviour with the following methods:

Repeating the command in an increasingly loud tone of voice

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

- Should our dog sit after the repeated 'sit. Sit! SIT! **SIT! SIIIIIIIT!**': We are now raising the bar for the cue required for him to sit in the future. If we regularly repeat the cue on non-compliance, the required cue is gradually shifting from a brief, soft 'sit' to an exhausting 'sit. Sit! SIT! **SIT! SIIIIIIIT!**'.
- Should the shouting not work: we are on our way to teaching the dog cue irrelevance. By repeatedly shouting a command to no avail, we are teaching the dog that: 'sit. Sit! SIT! **SIT! SIIIIIIIT!**' means nothing at all and should be treated as (irritating) background noise.

Coercion

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

More fundamentally, as coercing a dog into position inhibits the process of trial-and-error which is so essential to solid learning (Ref 16: Thorndike, Edward L. – 1911/1965 in Ref 7: Lindsay, Steven R. – 2000), I question whether it actually delays that 'light switch' moment of operant conditioning. Allow me to illustrate scenario 1 (positive reinforcement): 'Ahaaaa! Boss says 'Sit', I tried this (sitting) and this (treat or praise) happens!'. Scenario 2 (negative punishment) would go like this: 'uh ouch. He says 'Sit', and something unpleasant happened. I passively leant into the pressure (sitting) and the unpleasantness stopped.' In my opinion, scenario 1 is a lot more effective than scenario two: it allows the dog to take an active part in the learning process.

Aside from effectiveness, there is no question that pressing on a dog's back is aversive. 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

Some owners will physically punish the dog, hitting him on his flank, flicking the bridge of his nose, or even lightly hitting his lower back with the leash (as I have recently witnessed in the dog park). This approach can have the consequences set down in '

On corporal punishment'.

A point of less importance, but a shame nonetheless, is that frequent punishment can also make it difficult to enjoy free-shaping sessions with your dog, as it will be very nervous about offering new behaviours. Your dog may also create a hand-shy, or even leash-shy, dog, causing potential new behaviour problems.

At this stage, many traditionally educated dog owners will dispiritedly cry: 'Then what CAN I do?' The following section shows just this: 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 established a behaviour is, is a success rate of eighty percent at least five sessions times in a row (Ref 3: Donaldson, Jean - 2005). Should he not meet that standard, 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 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 difficult (i.e. distracting or stressful) environments. I always expect some regression when practising for the first time in a more challenging environment. I use the 80% success test to judge whether the dog has graduated at the present level. If not, I teach him that same behaviour in the stressful environment as if the behaviour was new, until I reach 80% success in that new environment.

Some dogs will never be able to perform in certain conditions, like a crowded, rowdy training class, while the training class environment seems to make no difference to others. 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 is that a realistic expectation?

Physical comfort

The reason for poor performance could be physical discomfort. This could be due to the weather (getting a dog to sit on cold, wet asphalt on a rainy day is less easy than on a dry day), a tangle in his lead or harness, or even a physical ailment.

If comfort is the issue, I question the need to have the dog execute the command. 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, maybe even reverting to luring the dog into position until I am confident he has made the link.

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 naturally inclined to be gentle to animals, I am not entirely comfortable with the more disciplinarian approach. I am also inclined to take a scientific approach to dog training, thus reject pack theory-based approaches on the basis of their vastly illegitimate grounds.

Gentle training and your human life

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.

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. Anyone who has had kids can testify: the baby must sleep on its belly, then five years later babies must sleep on their back, only to hear some years after that that infants must sleep on their belly again. 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 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 my claim as thoroughly and honestly as possible. It slows me

down, but gives me confidence to calmly state facts when faced with the usual dominance-based arguments.

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 know better than to start it at this stage, you live and learn), I try to tactfully explain my point, rather than ridicule my interlocutor and his traditional dog trainer.

I am also trying to remember to approach the subject with flexibility and modesty (once again, not always with great success) as, you never know what next scientific discovery will turn the current trends around again. 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 find it next to impossible to calmly keep my 'no judgement' efforts when I see a dog being abused in the name of the 'pack theory' (violent yanking, unfair yelling, etc.). I have found myself in many unpleasant situations giving my most unwelcome opinion. I am yet to find how to crack that nut.

On standards in the canine professions

The 'gentle' message would be more effectively spread were the canine professions subject to clear-cut 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.

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