
TRADITIONAL AND MODERN CANINE PSYCHOLOGY THEORIES

A BRIEF OVERVIEW

Academic essay for the Animal Care College, Canine Psychology module

By Laure-Anne Viselé-Jonkman (BSc, MSc) – Technical dog writer

March 2010

Contents

A BRIEF OVERVIEW	1
Contents.....	2
Introduction	4
Scope of this essay	4
Disclaimer	4
Traditional and modern: a diagnostic tool	4
Traditional perspective	5
The pack rules.....	5
Behaviour traditionally assigned to dominance.....	6
Initiating an interaction with a human (like nuzzling the owner for attention):.....	6
‘Winning’ the toy at the end of a tug-of-war game.....	6
Zig-zagging back to the owner when called, often stopping to sniff.....	7
Growling	7
Resting on furniture such as beds or couches, or any elevated place	7
Walking in front of a human, in particular entering thresholds like gates or doors .	7
Jumping up against people	7
Pulling on the leash	8
Eating before human handler.....	8
Not instantly and systematically obeying a ‘well-known’ command	8
Traditional objections to modern perspectives	8
Perception that gentle techniques rely on bribes	8
Integrity of the relationship: ‘He should just do it because I have asked’	9
Risk that the dog will be spoilt and ‘dominate’ the house	9
‘But I must be in charge, I must be the leader’	10
Modern perspective.....	10
The modern view on traditional rules.....	10
On the wolf pack.....	10
On dominance	11
On the dog-wolf comparison.....	12
On corporal punishment.....	13
The modern take on behaviour traditionally assigned to dominance	14
Initiating an interaction with a human (like nuzzling the owner for attention).....	14
‘Winning’ the toy at the end of a tug-of-war game.....	15
Zig-zagging back to the owner when called, often stopping for a sniff.....	15
Growling	15
Resting on furniture such as beds or couches, or any elevated places.....	15
Walking in front of a human, in particular entering thresholds like gates or doors	16
Jumping up against people.....	16
Pulling on the leash	16
Growling if a person approaches the dog’s food.....	16
Eating before human handler.....	17
Not instantly and systematically obeying a ‘well-known’ command	17
Traditional and modern management of non-compliance.....	17

The traditional solution	17
Repeating the command in an increasingly loud tone of voice	18
Coercion.....	18
Physical punishment.....	18
The modern solution	19
Question the dog's understanding	19
Generalisation.....	19
Distractions and stress factors.....	20
Physical comfort	21
Inadvertent learning and accidental rewards.....	21
Food for thought: discussion	22
Personal position.....	22
Gentle training and philosophy	22
On partisanship and controversy	23
On standards in the canine professions.....	24
Parting words: conclusion.....	24
Bibliography	25

Introduction

Scope of this essay

This essay gives an overview of the main tenets of the traditional versus and modern dog training principles.

It focuses on some of the acts most commonly interpreted to be related to dominance, and comparatively interprets them with the traditional and modern approaches.

A practical example of a frequent behaviour issue is presented, for which traditional and modern management methods are compared.

Disclaimer

The frequent use of quotation marks throughout this essay does not denote cynicism, stresses the use of the quoted expression as specific terminology.

For convenience's sake, I refer to dogs in the third person masculine ('he', rather than 'she'). This reflects no gender bias, but is more convenient than 'he/she', and more empathetic than 'it'. Thus unless otherwise specified, 'him' refers to dogs of both genders.

Traditional and modern: a diagnostic tool

In preparation for this essay, I dutifully trudged back through years of indexed notes on technical dog references. I came out struggling to crystallize the continuum of theories into two clearly clear-cut factions: traditional and modern. To help position a given dog training theory or method in this continuum, I suggest asking the following questions:

More traditional:

- Focuses on the wolf pack analogy and dominance to explain canine acts; and
- Makes integral use of aversives, physical coercion and punishment for training and behaviour modification.

More modern:

- Focuses mainly on rewards; and
- When interpreting a canine behaviour, stresses the perspective that dogs are a species in their own right (i.e. not interpreting its behaviour through human or alleged wolf traits).

For the purpose of this essay, theories were classified as 'modern' or 'traditional' following this method.

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 such as access to food or an elevated place;
- 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. Rank reduction methods also include the systematic withdrawal of some privileges thought to be related to dominance (such as totally forbidding access to furniture, or only providing food after human owners have eaten).

One of the most infamous techniques that is regrettably still seen as valid in the popular mindset is the alpha-rollover (Monks of New Skete, 1978), advising one to forcibly roll the dog on its back and to grab him by the throat. This handling technique was thought to be mimicking the alpha wolf rolling the subservient wolf onto its back to assert its dominance.

Less extreme, and widely socially accepted, are the methods of yanking the dog's lead or the use a choke collar, which continue to be widely promoted in traditional training schools. These methods are making use of force to coerce the dog into following one's will, thus, according to traditional trainers (Most, 1906, translated to English 1954), asserting the handler's dominance over the dog.

Behaviour traditionally assigned to dominance

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

The same behaviour is reviewed from a modern standpoint in [The modern take on acts traditionally assigned to dominance](#) section.

Initiating an interaction with a human (like nuzzling the owner for attention):

More traditional trainers would advise the handler to ignore the dog sternly, on the grounds that only the handler must decide when to initiate interaction.

'Winning' the toy at the end of a tug-of-war game

Some traditional trainers exhort the owner to always keep the contested toy after a game in a bid to avoid 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 (Sykes, 2004).

Zig-zagging back to the owner when called, often stopping to sniff

Scores of owners interpret this as direct defiance, so yell at the dog to come back, and then punish him when he has. This, overtime, seen from an operant conditioning perspective, will weaken the dog's recall response (as the consequence of coming is negative to the dog).

Growling

Growling is severely punished by most traditional dog trainers, who interpret it as a sign of dominance over the target of the growling. I frequently see well-meaning owners scream at their leashed dog after he growled at a boisterous and invasive (off-leash) dog.

This runs the clear risk of increasing the dog's aversion for oncoming dogs.

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 seen in traditional dog training circles as the dog claiming the high-ground position of your territory. Owners are advised to remove the dog at once for fear he will gradually assert his dominance over you.

Walking in front of a human, in particular entering thresholds like gates or doors

You are often advised that this is a sign of dominance and disrespect, and should be disallowed.

Jumping up against people

You are advised to push him back. Seen from an operant conditioning perspective, these manoeuvres are liable to reinforce the behaviour, as they give the dog the interaction and attention it is seeking at that moment.

Pulling on the leash

In traditional training schools, handlers are advised to yank the leash when the dog pulls. Aside from the real risk of tracheal damage, the dog may actually habituate to this stimulus, requiring you to use more and more force for the same response.

Eating before human hander

One is often advised to wait until the humans have eaten before serving the dog its meal. The logic behind this precaution is explained by traditional dog trainers by the need to clearly establish the dominance hierarchy in the dog's mind.

Not instantly and systematically obeying a 'well-known' command

This is explored in details in [Traditional and modern management of non-compliance](#).

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

actions, 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 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 spoiled and 'dominate' the house

Advocates of the traditional theories often express concern that the gentle methods produce spoiled 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) who are well-adapted to the life(style) of their owners.

'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 behaviour. 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 (targeted 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 (Schenkel, 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 (Mech, Alpha Status, Dominance, and Division of Labor in Wolf Packs, May 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. (Luigi & Ciucci, 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 (Mech, Alpha Status, Dominance, and Division of Labor in Wolf Packs , May 2000).

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

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 (Milani) 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.’

Casual observation attests to the fact that dominance is still an extremely pervasive concept when interpreting canine behaviour. One just needs to sample the opinions expressed by most professionals (and laymen) in response to a dog's fearful or excited display: a great majority of such witnesses would label the behaviour in relation to dominance (“He is a submissive dog”, or “He is a dominant dog”). It goes beyond the scope of the present essay to elaborate on the details of the dominance concept. One major point must be made, though: dominance hierarchies, if one must use this word,

are fluid in nature, and change over time, even in respect to the relationship of two individuals.

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 the broadly held view.

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 (Coppinger & Coppinger, 2001).

Figure 1: *Canis l. lupus*

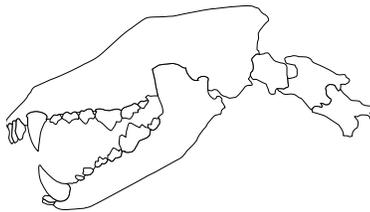


Figure 2: *Canis l. familiaris*

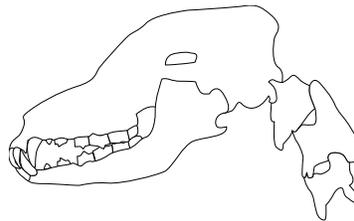


Figure credit: Archeo zoo (<http://www.archeozoo.org/en-article134.html>)

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 (Lindsay, 2000). Ray Coppinger (Coppinger & Coppinger, 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 (Hare & Tomasello, 2005);
- The dog has a smaller fight/flight distance than wolves in the presence of humans, even in dogs equally lacking previous exposure to humans (Coppinger & Coppinger, 2001);
- The dog shows a clear preference for human company over that of con-specifics (Frank & Frank, 1982).
- Wild dogs do not form long-lasting and permanent social associations with con-specifics, be it family packs or breeding pairs (Boitani & Ciucci, 1994); and
- Professional trainers approach dog and wolf training entirely differently (Mech, Alpha Status, Dominance, and Division of Labor in Wolf Packs , May 2000) and (Wilde, So you want to be a dog trainer, 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 (Thorndike, 1965).

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;
- 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.

The modern take on behaviour traditionally assigned to dominance

'Modern' trainers question the traditional tenet of assigning most behaviour to dominance, instead approaching the unwanted behaviour on a case-by-case basis, at times attempting to look at root cause, and at other times simply putting the end of the behaviour on cue.

Initiating an interaction with a human (like nuzzling the owner for attention)

Applying the principle of parsimony (adopting the simplest explanation), most modern dog trainers would interpret this behaviour as the dog wanting attention, without further elaboration about motives. Most modern dog trainers' response would be to

teach the dog to 'settle' for these moments when giving attention is just not convenient.

'Winning' the toy at the end of a tug-of-war game

While some modern trainers would advise the owner to make sure they win the game occasionally, I even question to what extent tug-of-war is in fact a power game, speculating instead that it could be a collaborative game of mimicking two dogs tearing a carcass.

Regardless of its exact competitive nature, modern training schools would teach the handler to put the start, intensity and end of the game on cue, rather than not disallowing it altogether.

Zig-zagging back to the owner when called, often stopping for a sniff

Many modern dog trainers are greatly influenced by the work of major canine body language self-appointed specialists, According to Turid Rugaas (Rugaad, 2006), the zigzag is a pacifying way of approaching another dog. Thus one would expect that the more one shouts at their dog to come back, the more indirect the return route would become, in increased attempts to appease its owner. Having casually experimented with it, I am inclined to abide by this particular theory.

Growling

The modern training perspective on growling is one of diagnosis, where getting to the root cause of the behaviour (e.g. resource guarding, fear, etc.) will enable a targeted protocol.

The widely held perspective on growling among modern dog trainers is that, despite being a very disconcerting sign, it provides an invaluable warning that the dog is one step closer to biting (growling was dubbed the 'amber light' by Nicole Wilde (Wilde, Getting a grip on aggression cases, 2008)). Most modern dog trainers would therefore advise the owner to refrain from chastising the dog for growling.

Resting on furniture such as beds or couches, or any elevated places

The modern training perspective on this topic is that it should be treated with regards to convenience, rather than to any conjecture to dominance.

If one is uncomfortable with the dog using resting on furniture, then the dog should abide by the house rule.

If the dog is only occasionally allowed on furniture, a modern trainer would typically put the climbing on and off behaviour on cue.

Walking in front of a human, in particular entering thresholds like gates or doors

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 typifies the modern trainers' attempts to follow the principle of parsimony in refraining from elaborating beyond the simplest explanation.

Jumping up against people

If one must compare Dog with Wolf, this behaviour is very similar to the wolf's (friendly) greeting ritual.

Despite its likely innocent origins, this behaviour can be unwelcome and one is advised to ignore the dog and only reward the dog with attention a few seconds after all four paws are on firmly the ground. Many modern trainers actually put this behaviour on cue (as it is occasionally nice to access the dog without having to bend down).

Pulling on the leash

From the modern training perspective, the act of pulling on the leash is a sign of enthusiasm, rather than dominance. Ian Dunbar's (Dunbar, 1998) game of 'red light/green light', whereby the handler stops moving when the dog pulls and resumes the walk when the leash is slack, is typically advised by modern trainers.

Growling if a person approaches the dog's food

This is symptomatic of resource guarding, rather than dominance. Indeed, if one must use wolves as a model, even younger (clearly subordinate) wolves guard their food against older (dominant) counterparts.

The modern protocol to resource guarding is one of counter-conditioning and de-sensitisation, whereby the originally aversive stimulus (approaching hand) gradually becomes irrelevant (it happens a lot and nothing bad happens), and even good (every time it happens, the dog gets a bigger treat).

Eating before human handler

It would seem that many wolf packs allow the young and the weak to eat before the presumably dominant pair, and, to my knowledge, there is yet to be a convincing study showing a solid correlation between eating sequence and rank.

In reality, many modern dog trainers still advise 'gesture feeding' (pretending to eat before the dog does), though.

Not instantly and systematically obeying a 'well-known' command

The modern approach to this is explored in details in the next section [Traditional and modern management of non-compliance](#)

Traditional and modern management of non-compliance

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. Many traditional trainers would assign the dog's failure to follow our rules as an attempt to challenge our dominance. 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 (McConnell, 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!** **SIIIIIT!**'.
- 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!** **SIIIIIT!**' 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 (Thorndike, 1965). 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

Regrettably, 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 the following paragraph: '

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 make it difficult to enjoy free-shaping sessions, as the dog may become nervous about offering a new behaviour.
- Another possible, and far more serious consequence, is that the dog could gradually become hand- or leash-shy, potentially causing a world of new behaviour problems.

At this stage, many traditionally educated dog owners will dispiritedly cry: 'Then what CAN I do'?. The following section ([The modern solution](#)) 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 specific behaviour is learned, is a success rate of eighty percent during at least five sessions in a row (Donaldson, 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 (Donaldson, 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

Acknowledging environmental challenges

As a new behaviour is put on cue (whereby the dog learns to perform the behaviour on command), 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 revert back to the previous training 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.

Aversive distractions: stress or fear

Some dogs will never be able to perform in certain conditions, like a crowded, chaotic training class. Feeling increased stress in situations where safety is uncertain (from a dog's perspective) is highly adaptive, and part of a normal dog's survival instincts.

Pleasant distraction: opportunity to scavenge

Similarly, a certain degree of opportunism (read, a tendency to scavenge) has been highly adaptive for dogs for generations, and is firmly part of the dog's blueprint. The presence of scavenging opportunities will drive most dogs to distraction.

A proofing programme

In relation to pleasant (e.g. opportunity to scavenge) and unpleasant (e.g. fear of nearby dogs) distractions, I advocate calibrating your expectations to your dog's sensitivities and abilities, and gradually building up the dog's ability to perform in these challenging environments, targeting one distraction at a time in your proofing programme.

A bomb-proof dog

We would all love Lassie or Rin-tin-tin in our midst, a dog who instantly understands when a stressful situation (e.g. many nervous strange dogs like in training class) is no cause for concern, but I beseech the reader to question the reality of such expectations.

Another distraction: the handler's emotional state

One important source of stress is the handler's motivational state. I have noticed that my dog performs slightly less promptly and consistently when I am stressed. 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 perhaps 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 also not eliminate the possibility of a physical ailment. Although this is rarely the reason for non-compliance, one is well advised to bear it in mind.

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.

Inadvertent learning and accidental rewards

Certain dog behaviours are interpreted as a direct challenge on the handler's status, when they were in fact repeatedly rewarded by the handler. This principle is called 'accidental reward'. A typical example is jumping up in excitement. Most handlers systematically respond by pushing the dog back. Perversely, this physical interaction is

perceived as a reward by many dogs, who enjoy most any physical interaction with their handler. In addressing an unwanted behaviour, one is advised to find any accidental rewards, or reinforcers.

‘Inadvertent learning’ refers to the dog developing a response to a stimulus that was not intended by the handler. In specific situations, this can lead the dog to adopt ill-adaptive behaviour. A very young pup who was frequently startled by children may develop a strong avoidance or aggressive response towards children. Similarly, a dog who was mistreated by a specific person may develop a strong aversion for a particular trait that that person had, like facial hair or glasses.

In this situation, many traditional dog trainers would overlook the possible reason behind the dog’s uncooperative or aggressive behaviour and interpret it as a challenge on the handler’s status. Such an unfortunate interpretation in dealing with inadvertent learning may in fact reinforce the undesired behaviour.

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 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 (Pryor, 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 behaviour. 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 Buddhism, 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, simply put, 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 potentially insufficiently qualified dog lover 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.

Modern theories consider such things as survival instinct, opportunism, inadvertent learning & accidental reward as well as your examples of inadequate training & the use of inappropriate training methods as some of the explanation for canine behaviour. These additional points were worth mentioning.

Bibliography

- Boitani, L., & Ciucci, P. (1994). Comparative social ecology of feral dogs and wolves. *Ethology Ecology & Evolution* , vol. 7, p. 49.
- Coppinger, R., & Coppinger, L. (2001). *Dogs, a new Understanding of Canine Origin, Behaviour and Evolution*. Crosskeys Select Ltd.
- Donaldson, J. (2005). *Culture Clash (the) – the Revolutionary new Way of Understanding the Relationship between Humans and Domestic Dogs*. James and Kenneth Publications.
- Dunbar, I. (1998). *How to teach a new dog old tricks*. James and Kenneth publishing.
- Frank, H., & Frank, M. G. (1982). On the effects of domestication on canine social development and behavior. *Applied Animal Ethology* , vol. 8, p. 507.
- Hare, B., & Tomasello, M. (2005). Human-like social skills in dogs? *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* , vol. 9, p. 439.
- Lindsay, S. (2000). *Applied Dog Behavior and Training – Adaptation and Learning – vol. I*. Blackwell Publishing.
- Luigi, B., & Ciucci, P. (1995). Comparative social ecology of feral dogs and wolves. *Ethology Ecology & Evolution* , vol. 7, p. 49.
- McConnell, P. B. (2002). *Other end of the leash (the)*. Ballantine.
- Mech, D. (May 2000). Alpha Status, Dominance, and Division of Labor in Wolf Packs . *Sustainable Society* ,
http://www.mnforsustain.org/wolf_mech_dominance_alpha_status.htm.
- Mech, D. (n.d.). fake.
- Milani, M. (n.d.). *Leadership vs. Dominance: Who Leads Your Human-Canine Pack?*
Retrieved Mar 2010, from MMilani.com Integrating animal health, behavior, and the human-animal bond: <http://www.mmilani.com/leadership-vs-dominance.html>
- Monks of New Skete. (1978). *How to be your dog's best friend*. Little, Brown.
- Most, K. (1906, translated to English 1954). *Training Dogs*. Dogwise.
- Pryor, K. (1999). *Don't shoot the dog – Art of teaching and training (the)*. Bantam Press.
- Rugaad, T. (2006). *On Talking Terms with Dogs: Calming Signals*. Dogwise Publishing.
- Schenkel, R. (1947). *Expression studies on wolves*. University of Basle. Basle:
<http://www.davemech.org/schenkel/ExpressionstudiesP.1-10.pdf>.
- Sykes, B. (2004). *Understanding and Handling Dog Aggression*. The Crowood Press Ltd.
- Thorndike, E. L. (1965). *Animal Intelligence Experimental Studies'*. New York: Hafner.
- Wilde, N. (2008). *Getting a grip on aggression cases*. Phantom Publishing.
- Wilde, N. (2001). *So you want to be a dog trainer*. Phantom Publishing.

