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## “Dominance Theory” and Animal Behaviour

### • What is “Dominance Theory”

- Dominance is the act of using aggressive behaviour towards another individual of the same species in order to secure first access to scarce resources (such as mates, food, sleeping areas etc.). A stable dominant relationship is established when one individual (the submissive one) consistently allows the other individual (the dominant one) access to these resources. This type of behaviour is seen in animals that form strict hierarchies such as cows, chickens, elephant seals and many others.
- “Dominance Theory” can be generalized as the idea that much of the behaviour problems seen in dogs relates to humans not expressing their own dominant status towards their dogs. Thus, the solution is to assert your dominance (through such techniques as alpha rolls, punishment, eating first etc.) and become the “alpha” or “leader of the pack.”

### • Do Dogs Show Dominant Hierarchies?

- Dominance theory can be very popular among breeders, trainers and dog owners (due in large parts to TV shows like Cesar Milan’s ‘Dog Whisperer’) especially with regards to larger breeds but it is not one supported by scientific evidence in either wolves or dogs.
- Initial studies on captive wolf populations led the idea that wolf packs were made up of unrelated animals that maintained a hierarchy through displays of aggression or submission. Later research would show that wolf packs in more natural settings are family units with the “alpha” male and female being the parents and the rest of the pack being their offspring. Wolf biologists no longer even use the term “alpha” in their research.
- Research on free-roaming dogs showed that they do not even form packs but instead short-lived social groups. These groups do not cooperate with each other (like a wolf pack/family unit does) but instead socialize and stick together until they are drawn away by something else. Because they do not have strict hierarchy, they do not show the same kind of dominance seen in hierarchal species (like bulls and chickens). Instead, dominance is fluid and depends on a variety of factors in the situation. Therefore, a dog is not “dominant”, rather they can act dominant towards certain individuals under certain conditions. Changing the situation’s factors can change whether the animal will be act dominant or submissive.

- E.g. Dog A may move Dog B out of the way in order to access the food bowls with Dog B submitting to this. However, Dog B may push Dog A out of a bed he likes with Dog A submitting to this.
- Note that there is very little aggression being showed in this example and that it is more about one dog valuing a resource that the other dog does not care as much about

## • **How Does Dominance Relate to Aggression?**

- Dominance is commonly used to describe both the posture of the aggressive animal as well as the cause behind the aggression itself. However, dominance is rarely the cause of aggression. Far more often the cause relates to fear, medical issues, territorial displays or other causes.
- When all other causes of aggression have been ruled out, only then is dominance considered as a possible cause and only in cases of aggression towards other dogs (not aggression towards people). It is rarely diagnosed by trained, behaviour specialists.

## • **Is My Dog Trying To Dominate Me?**

- Dominance occurs between two individuals of the same species so by definition, your dog cannot dominate you
- Unruly behaviours such as jumping up on furniture/people, ignoring commands, pulling on the leash, poor manners during food preparation, and pushing past you through an open door are not examples of your dog “trying to dominate you.” Rather, they are often due to factors like inconsistent training, accidentally rewarding the behaviour, or attention seeking behaviour.
- Aggression directed towards you is also not an attempt by your dog to dominate you. Instead, these cases are examples of fear-based aggression, resource guarding or other sources of aggression (see the aggression handout)

## • **Conclusion**

- Dominance is generally not a factor in dog behaviour problems and treating these problems as if it were dominance-related is often ineffective or even makes the problem worse. An accurate understanding of the animal’s cause’s for behaviour and their underlying emotional state is critical for successful treatment of behaviour problems. Dominance generally only masks the true issue at the core of the behaviour problem and rarely factors into a successful treatment plan. If you are seeing a well-informed professional to address your dog’s behaviour problems, the concept of dominance should come up rarely if at all.