

Dominance in domestic dogs—useful construct or bad habit?



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Available online 12 May 2009.

Abstract

The term “dominance” is widely used in the academic and popular literature on the behavior of domestic dogs, especially in the context of aggression. Although dominance is correctly a property of relationships, it has been erroneously used to describe a supposed trait of individual dogs, even though there is little evidence that such a trait exists. When used correctly to describe a relationship between 2 individuals, it tends to be misapplied as a motivation for social interactions, rather than simply a quality of that relationship. Hence, it is commonly suggested that a desire ‘to be dominant’ actually drives behavior, especially aggression, in the domestic dog. By contrast, many recent studies of wolf packs have questioned whether there is any direct correspondence between dominance within a relationship and agonistic behavior, and in contrast to wolves, hierarchical social structures have little relationship with reproductive behavior in feral dog packs. Nor do the exchanges of aggressive and submissive behavior in feral dogs, originally published by S. K. Pal and coworkers, fit the pattern predicted from wolf behavior, especially the submissive behavior observed between members of different packs. In the present study of a freely interacting group of neutered male domestic dogs, pairwise relationships were evident, but no overall hierarchy could be detected. Since there seems to be little empirical basis

for wolf-type dominance hierarchies in dogs, the authors have examined alternative constructs. Parker's Resource Holding Potential (RHP) appears to be less useful when applied to domestic dogs than to other species, although it has the advantage of incorporating the concept of subjective resource value (V) as a factor influencing whether or not conflicts are escalated. The authors propose that associative learning, combined with V, can provide more parsimonious explanations for agonistic behavior in dogs than can the traditional concept of dominance.

Key words: domestic dog; wolf; dominance; aggression; resource holding potential

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