

## **What's Wrong with Dominance Theory & Aversives, Two Common Problems in Working with Dogs**

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Questions posed by Sherry Antonishen of [www.smartdogtraining.ca](http://www.smartdogtraining.ca) for a Nature of Things documentary project.

**Question: What, in your opinion, is the biggest problem with using dominance model for training dogs?**

Answer: The most significant problem with viewing dog-human relationships in the context of social dominance is that it implies and promotes an adversarial relationship between the two. It sets up a win-lose scenario, that actually ends up in a lose-lose scenario (as most win-lose scenarios do). It is incompatible with cooperation by its very nature, cooperation being something you need to promote an effective bond and training environment.

A consequence of this is that you simply fail to effectively carry out your training. Whether you are simply trying to install some new behaviors like sit or down or you are trying to resolve a problem behavior, rather than identifying the behavior and setting up the contingencies to make that behavior more or less likely (depending on your goal) you are distracting yourself with this notion of dominance. Behavior is driven by reinforcers. If we want to be effective and efficient in our training goals, then it would be more effective and efficient to simply identify reinforcers for behaviors and then control those.

Most applications of social dominance are self-perpetuating and unfalsifiable too. It seems most everything (including simple fear and avoidance or escape behaviors motivated by that fear) serve to "prove" social dominance. If the dog shuts down (usually through disempowerment and helplessness, the consequence of being psychologically beat down—dominated) then the theory is supposedly proved true and if the dog does not, then it supposedly means that you just did not dominate the dog enough. This sets up what I have called a "cycle of reciprocal countercontrol," (O'Heare & Santos, 2007) in which, each party works to control the unpleasant experiences (as we all do naturally) and it only serves to worsen the situation.

**Question: Your book [Dominance Theory and Dogs <http://www.dogpsych.com>] gives people great reasons to question the dominance model in dogs. What argument might the average dog owner really stop and listen to?**

Answer: It may seem fancy and intuitive but in practice it destroys relationships. How can you really like someone that you are training yourself to see as a threat, as someone that is out to challenge your "authority" and gain "status" at your expense. If you see a relationship, any relationship, as one in which ones must lose for the other to win then you are going down a path that is simply no fun and will deteriorate that relationship. There is absolutely no need for this. It may take a bit more learning and it may not be as great a "story" but if you simply learn to see behaviors as driven by the basic principles of learning then you will go a lot further to establishing a cooperative relationship with your friend, a close bond too. Learn about how consequences maintain behaviors and how you can simply manipulate consequences to change behaviors and you will be in a much more productive state of mind.

**Question: Why are people so invested in describing their dogs as dominant?**

Answer: I think it is intuitive for humans. We, as a species, are very concerned with who is winning and who is over or under who. Social dominance makes an intriguing narrative and humans are very story oriented beings. It has drama. It is also a lot easier for some to understand than the simple principles of learning but I think that is just because many people just don't take the interest in familiarizing themselves with the "boring" principles of learning. Their (and their dog's) loss though, because that is exactly what controls behavior. People like to feel and look like they know what they are talking about too and feel more impressive with social dominance. It is a thing of legend and has that 'call of the wild' feel. Some people like to fantasize about the behavior of wild animals and are attracted to projecting that onto their pet dog. They have seen some old wolf footage (usually contrived by film makers rather than truly "natural" behavior). But, as Jean Donaldson once wrote, social dominance is just more sexy and I could not put it any better.

**Question: Can we train dogs to a high degree of reliability without the use of aversives? If yes, how is that achieved? If no, then which aversives are best used and why?**

Answer: Absolutely. [First, note that understanding dog behavior in light of social dominance does not have to necessarily involve using aversive stimulation.] Aversive stimulation tends to suppress behaviors and not just the discrete behaviors you are attempting to punish but also all behaviors. Using aversive stimulation is fraught with insidious consequences and these can only interfere with training. Remember, 'aversive' refers to stimulation that you act to escape and/or avoid. That means it is unpleasant. Just think about your own experience. Do you think people making things unpleasant for you really promotes an environment in which you work to your highest potential? It may indeed reduce a particular behavior but there will be other effects won't there? We know in the work world that managing by fear is not the best way to get the best out of your

employees and the same goes for dogs. If you realize that reinforcers (pleasant things) drive behaviors, and you control those (as opposed to unpleasant things, which we simply learn to work around) then you are on the right track. If you want a behavior, make it worth their while, and if you want someone to like you, make interacting with you pleasant, not unpleasant. If you don't like a behavior, make some other behavior in its place more worth their while, while making the problem behavior less effective. Aversives result in aggression, emotionality, disempowerment and other difficult to predict problems. This cannot influence your training positively.

Since I raised the “management” analogy as a means to encourage empathy and understanding, I also recommend that you avoid simply replacing the word dominance with “leadership” or other similar terms because these all imply the same over-under, win-lose relationship and they are all unnecessary. Just focus on training the dog. We encourage and discourage specific behaviors in people we deal with (equals or even bosses) every day. This is not necessarily dominance or leadership. Want a behavior? Make it worth their while. If you don't like a behavior, make a different behavior pay off better and make that behavior less likely. There is no need to invoke notions of dominance or leadership or terms that mean the same thing but are intended to avoid the dominance connotation. Many people feel that we really need this notion. I don't see why. Just train the dog.

**Question: Is coercion and conflict at the heart of controlling a social pack of animals such as dogs?**

Answer: First we should point out that dogs are not "packing" animals (see O'Heare, 2003). They simply do not meet the criteria. Even when we look just at dogs that are living away from direct human influence we still find that they do not pack. They may gather around a food source like a dump but the association is loose, and, does not meet the criteria for "pack." But obviously they are social. What's the best way to control a group of dogs? Train them! Solid verbal control can help you manage group interactions, but you can also train dogs to behave in specific ways with each other. Some dogs simply have not had experience learning how to communicate with other dogs and have frequent misunderstandings. Some have learned that they can get what they want most easily with aggressive behaviors. In most cases of multi-dog households, my recommendation is to train each dog separately, then together, and then address specific issues. Good verbal control is imperative. Then, if one does not tolerate some other behavior from the other dog, you arrange it so that that previously intolerable behavior is actually a ‘good thing.’ Make an unpleasant thing pleasant and you change the behavior these things motivate. Do you need to coerce them? Well, sometimes you need to micromanage the situation and use tools like leashes and I guess that is a kind of coercion, but if you want someone to tolerate and like someone else, you certainly don't start associating unpleasantness to their interactions. If you got punished every time you interacted with someone you did not like very much, are you really going to like them more? Most likely you will try to figure out ways to avoid them to begin with and you might even learn to put on a happy face (but that is deceptive because you are just pretending). No, what you want to do is change the contingencies involved. You want their interactions to be a pleasant

experience and make tolerance really pay off for them and that principle is what will ultimately work most effectively if maintaining their relationship. When dogs do not get along, it is really still just behaviors and as such, the best way to change them is simply to change the motivation and the consequences and intentionally using unpleasantness is counterproductive.

**Question: What is at the heart of controlling a pet dog's behaviour?**

Answer: Change the environment to change the behavior. Adjust the motivation and the consequences. Whether something is seen as pleasant or unpleasant determines whether the animal will want to approach and access something or escape / avoid that thing. If something is unpleasant, this elicits fear and behaviors that allow the dog to escape or avoid it will be highly reinforcing. If something is pleasant, this will elicit pleasure and behaviors that allow the dog to approach and access it will be highly reinforcing. So, if the dog is afraid of something (and you can tell by how they act to escape or avoid it in some way) then change that. Gradually introduce it and pair it with highly pleasurable things until the dog comes to see the previously feared thing as predicting "pleasant things for dogs." Now, instead of escape and avoidance behaviors or other distress related behaviors, you have pleasure related behaviors. And consequences drive these behaviors too. If you want a particular behavior, make it worth their while and you'll see more of it. If you don't like a particular behavior, think about what behavior you would prefer and make that other behavior pay off big time instead. It is a bit more involved than this but basically, that's it. You should be able to see how much more simple this strategy is, how directly applicable it is, as opposed to trying to turn the notion of social dominance into actions you might take to change a dog's behavior.

**References Cited:**

- O'Heare, J. (2003). *Dominance Theory and Dogs*. Ottawa: Dogpsych Publishing.  
O'Heare, J., & Santos, A. (2007). Explaining and Changing People's Use of Aversive Stimulation in Companion Animal Training. *Journal of Applied Companion Animal Behavior*, 1(1), 15-21.

Further reading:

If you are interested in a thorough explanation of social dominance, see:

- O'Heare, J. (2007). Social Dominance: Useful Construct or Quagmire? *Journal of Applied Companion Animal Behavior*, 1(1), 56-83.  
<http://www.iiacab.com/journal.html>