

The Macho Myth

The social structure of domestic dogs is often described in terms of a linear dominance hierarchy, in which the top dog, or 'alpha animal', is dominant over all lower ranking animals, the second ranking dog is subordinate to the top dog but dominant over all others, and so on down to the lowest dog on the totem pole. Also, it is popularly believed:

1. Rank is established and maintained by physical strength and dominance.
2. The more dominant (i.e., higher ranking) dogs are more aggressive.
3. The most dominant dog is the most aggressive. Hence, dogs which frequently threaten, growl, fight and bite are often assumed to be 'alpha' animals.

The majority of the above assumptions are quite awry. Not only do they betray a theoretically simplistic view of a most sophisticated social structure but also, such notions tend to be counterproductive, inhumane and dangerous when cavalierly extrapolated to dog training, or the treatment of behavior problems.

Social Rank and Aggressiveness

It is generally assumed that high rank is correlated with aggressive behavior. In reality, a growly, macho top dog is a rare find. Top dogs rarely growl - they seldom need to! The true top dog is usually a cool customer, which is secure and confident of its privileged position and has no need to fluster and bluster to bolster up its rank. In the words of psychologist Dr. Linda Carlson, "If you've got it, there's no need to flaunt it." A true top dog is more likely to share a toy, a bone, or a sleeping place, than fight over one. On the other hand, bottom-ranking dogs rarely growl either. The prime directive of a low ranking individual is to maintain a low profile. Barking, growling and snarling only draw unwanted attention and if it came to a fight, the underdog would most certainly lose.

A top dog has little need to threaten and an underdog would be crazy to. Without a doubt excessive growling and repeated fighting is indicative of underlying insecurity and uncertainty about social rank vis a vis other dogs. Within a social group, protracted, blustery displays of aggression are the hallmark of the middle-order of the hierarchy. Middle-ranking dogs, threaten more and fight more frequently than higher- or lower-ranking individuals. With the advent of a litter on the social scene, it is not uncommon for a previously wimpy-wormy underdog to become ultra-macho with the puppies. Whilst maintaining its lowest of low profiles with other adults, the ex-underdog may wield its newfound power with exaggerated swagger: relentlessly hassling the developing puppies and adolescents (especially the males) by staring, stalking, dogging (following), barking and growling. Once an underdog assumes responsibility as a rearguard, the other adult males seldom bother with the (soon to be adult) youngsters and often the social atmosphere in the pack becomes more relaxed.

Subordinance Hierarchy

When the framework of a successful hierarchy is viewed in a developmental context, it becomes apparent that 'subordinance hierarchy' is a more descriptive term for canine social structure. This premise was first suggested by English primatologist Dr. Thelma Rowell. Maintenance of an existing hierarchy depends on the underlings respect of the position of higher-ranking individuals. The status quo is maintained because, lower-ranking individuals seldom challenge authority and so only occasionally, is there need to enforce higher rank with a display of physical, or more likely, psychological dominance.

Development of Hierarchies

Growing up around larger pups, adolescents and adult dogs, puppies simply can not compete on the social scene in view of their smaller size and inferior physical and psychological strength. Thus, puppies learn their station in life well before they become sufficiently large and strong to be a threat to the established order. Most adult dogs are quite lenient with young pups until they approach adolescence, whereupon adults (males especially) relentlessly pursue, stand-over and growl at the adolescents (males especially). Even so, harassment by adult dogs is largely psychological, rather than physical. It would be a perversely under-socialized adult dog, which physically beats up young puppies.

Nonetheless, during this crucial stage in hierarchical development, young pup and adolescents are extremely intimidated by the incessant harassment and consequently, they learn to respond with exaggerated appeasement gestures to assuage the torment from their elders. Moreover, puppies and adolescents quickly learn that bother from older dogs may be largely prevented by taking the initiative and demonstrating active appeasement before they are harassed. The pups' preemptive apology characteristically comprises: a low slung, wiggly approach with ears back, submissive grin and tail and hindquarters all a wag. The youngster may paw the brisket and lick the muzzle of the older dog. (The infantile pawing and muzzle-licking food-soliciting behaviors of puppyhood now acquire new meaning and are retained as neotenic appeasement gestures in adolescence and adulthood.) In addition, the underdog may rollover and lift a leg to expose its inguinal region. And some may submissively urinate. (Adult dogs may determine the age of a puppy or adolescent from the smell of the youngster's urine.)

From this stage on, to maintain harmony on the social scene, higher ranking dogs need only chastise those individuals which do not voluntarily show deference and respect in their presence. And even this is usually done with nothing more than a cold, penetrating stare.

Maintenance of Hierarchies

Fighting and physical dominance very rarely come into play during the maintenance of hierarchies. On the contrary, the major function of hierarchical structure is to lessen the amount of fighting. Once established, the hierarchy provides many of the answers before the problems crop up. For example, when there are two dogs but only one bone, the ownership of the bone is predecided and therefore, there is nothing to fight about.

Potential problems are similarly pre-settled in established human hierarchies. For example, in a large corporate hierarchy, the problem of a single parking place and two cars - the CEO's Rolls and the Assistant Sales Manager's Ford Escort proves no more of a dilemma than when the CEO was Sales Manager and drove a Jaguar and the ASM was a secretary in the typing pool and drove a beaten-up VW. I mean, who, in their right mind, would park in the boss's parking place. No one ever does, hence no problem.

It is similar with dogs. Misunderstandings about the relationship between rank, dominance and aggression tend to exacerbate fighting problems, which are largely the product of asocialization and the mixing of socially-unprepared adult dogs. In addition, erroneous notions of canine social behavior tend to foster macho owners, who allow and/or encourage their dogs to snarl and growl, thinking they have a real baaaad dog! This sort of person - usually an adolescent (13-59 year-old) male, wearing a single black glove and owning a male dog of one of only half a dozen breeds that I will not bother to mention - can be a bit of a 'pain in the class'. However, it is sometimes possible to get this wally to wise-up with a compliment/insult like: "What a wonderful dog! What a shame he's so growly. Well, perhaps we can build up his confidence and turn him into a top dog. Because top dogs don't growl you know, they don't need to." I never cease to be amazed at how many potential jerks are, in fact, incognito responsible owners once wised-up in this manner.

Unfortunately, the real danger of the alpha-concept of physical dominance lies in its questionable extrapolation to dog training and husbandry. Instead of being educational, many so-called 'training' methods are just downright adversarial if not abusive; the dog is often viewed as our enemy, rather than as our best friend. Many playful, greeting and fearful gestures are misinterpreted as being aggressive, providing the unthinking owner with a convenient excuse to abuse the dog under the guise of 'training'.

For example, snapping, pilo-erection, growling and lip-curling are often misconstrued as signs of dominance, whereas they are, in fact, more usually signs of fear - most probably the direct product of a person pounding on the poor dog. Similarly, owners are advised that urine marking, mounting people, stealing food, jumping-up and prolonged eye contact are all signs of dominance, for which the dog should be punished. Some ill-advised, big blue meanies are confusing issues and trying to take the fun out of dog ownership. In my book:

- A dog which marks indoors, needs to be housetrained.
- A dog which mounts people, a) needs to be instructed to desist and b) requires social introduction to another suitably inclined furry quadruped.
- A dog which steals food, a) is in desperate need of an owner who remembers to put food away and b) requires rapid introduction to my favorite booby-trap.
- A dog which jumps-up, needs simply to be taught to sit when greeting people.
- A dog which is tricky about eye contact should be taught a) that human eye-contact is no threat, b) to look away, or look at its paws on command, and c) to lovingly gaze in the eyes of its understanding owner.

Certainly, we need to control dogs - but mental control is what is required, not physical domination. Even though an ill-experienced, middle-ranking dog 'handler' might be able to

jerk, hang, roll-over, and/or beat a dog into submission, what is the point of winning the battle and losing the war? What possible advantage is there in converting a 'dominant' dog into a fearful one? Both are equally as worthless as companions or working dogs. Furthermore, most physical corrections are well beyond the physical and mental capabilities of all but a few dog owners. And so, why advise novice owners to enter into a physical contest that they are bound to lose? In fact, why abuse the dog at all, when it is possible to achieve the same end using brain instead of brawn? Why try to wade the Atlantic, when one could take the Concorde?

We must prescribe training methods which are effective and lie within the capabilities of the average dog owner, including women, children and the elderly. If we have learned anything at all from studying dog behavior, ... owners must establish control in a developmental context, whilst the dog is still a puppy. Rather than browbeating the dog into submission, it is far easier to convince the dog to join the team, so that it enjoys life living with us, rather than fighting against us.

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