

Another Point of View.

Scientists believe that man and dog have shared a campfire for about forty thousand years. It's a romantic picture for those of us who look on our dogs as part of the family – a man and his dog side by side sharing the warmth of a crackling fire.

How it happened we really don't know for sure, but those that spend their life studying such things believe that the dog's road to the campfire was a long one to travel. The coincidence of evidence of the first stable human settlements also cropping up around the forty thousand year mark can't be overlooked, with many believing it to be key which opened the door to the friendship we share with our dogs today. When human beings live in a group and stay in the one place it is inevitable that piles of waste begin to develop. As far as an animal that makes a living from hunting and scavenging is concerned, this would be an utter gold mine, a lot of gain for very little output. Of course, the animals that took advantage of this gold mine would also have had to have the confidence to deal with the fact that human beings were close by, so slowly but surely, evolution begins to create two from one. The more nervous animals continued to hunt and scavenge as their predecessors had for thousands of years and stayed wolves, while those with the confidence changed their lifestyles by focusing more on scavenging and became dogs.

As their lifestyle changed, so did their physiology and behaviour to suit and slowly but surely wolf became dog. Today we still spend a lot of time looking back to wolves for clues as to why our dogs behave the way they do. Different body postures, communication signals, the need to live in a stable group are all ghostly remains of their ancestry. Trouble can arise though, when this is the only place we look to find the reason our dogs behave in certain ways– trouble for us and even more so for our dogs.

All behaviour is a result of nature and nurture. The genetic information an individual has embedded deep within its brain will only ever give us part of the answer as to why it is behaving in a certain way. Many, many more pieces to the puzzle come from looking at the personal history and the immediate environment of the individual animal in question. Looking at our dog's behaviour from the point of view of learning theory not only adds greatly to our understanding of what is controlling their behaviour, it also gives us exact rules that we can follow to change almost any behaviour our dogs throw at us in a positive, non confrontational way.

A scientist called B.F. Skinner made operant conditioning famous back in the 1940's with the help of hundreds of rats and pigeons. Operant conditioning is the type of learning we utilise every week at training when we provide rewards for desired behaviour. Thing is, operant conditioning doesn't stop with sit, drop and come – in fact 99% of your behaviour, my behaviour, our dogs' behaviour, your

kids', cat's, husband's and fish's behaviour can all be easily explained through the laws of operant conditioning. All good dog trainers have trained themselves to see behaviour through these laws to give them all the power they need to change almost any behaviour their dogs (or their kids!) throw at them.

The basic laws of operant conditioning are simple to learn and remember. The cornerstone law is that **reinforcement strengthens behaviour**. Reinforcers are anything your dog likes or the absence of anything your dog doesn't like. The dog will link these reinforcers to their behaviour as long as the reinforcer occurs immediately after their behaviour.

If a behaviour doesn't bring the dog something it wants or needs, it won't bother doing it. The dog climbs up and sleeps on the lounge cause it is much more comfy than the floor. That's reinforcement. The dog doesn't climb up on the lounge when you are around because even though the lounge is comfier than the floor, it would rather avoid the yelling it gets from you when it does climb up there. That's reinforcement too. Reinforcement goes way, way beyond food.

When hit with the question "Why does my dog"? A good trainer goes straight to their knowledge of the laws of learning and observes the behaviour to find out what reinforcers are controlling the behaviour in question, not to the evolutionary history of the dog. You would probably find many fine trainers discussing such an interesting topic over a beer, but they wouldn't waste their time there when seeking what, right here, right now, is controlling that dog's behaviour.

Looking at your dog's behaviour from this different point of view is incredibly empowering. Explaining behaviours with labels like dominance, stubbornness or any other label you can come up with will always limit your understanding of your dog's behaviour and your ability to control it. Take the issue of dominance for instance. Everyday dogs are labelled as dominant or alpha wannabes because of a huge variety of different behaviours they may display. All too often this label brings along with it anger, frustration, guilt and confusion for the owner. The answer some trainers will give is to explain this behaviour from the point of view of the dog as an ancestor of the wolf and advise the owner to focus on increasing their status in the eyes of the dog by any number of means - throw chains, alpha rolls, hanging the dog or simply removing privileges.

Fact is, that to my knowledge no one has yet worked out how to talk to dogs. For this reason, our guess at the internal state of the dog, that which we believe is driving the 'dominant' behaviour may or may not be correct. If we are honest we have to admit that even the most educated dog trainer is guessing. The laws of learning on the other hand are observable and measurable. We can always be 100% confident that if a behaviour is there to observe, there will be a reinforcer somewhere controlling it. We can work to identify this behaviour and control it, thus controlling the behaviour or we can introduce something more reinforcing

into the environment to change the dog's focus and control the behaviour that way.

Am I saying that social status in dogs doesn't exist? Not at all, as a social species dogs need a way to relate to each other in different contexts. But as the first (and often only) reason some people will give to explain away a dog's behaviour it falls pretty flat. Learning theory provides dog trainers and owners with a sound, empowering point of view through which to view their dog's behaviour. Taking a step back and looking at the context, behaviour and consequence in a non emotional way can provide all the information you need to change your dog's behaviour in the most powerful way possible.

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