

# Beyond the “Dominance” Paradigm

By Patricia B. McConnell, PhD

It happened in Scotland, where I attended a conference on animal welfare in the 1990s. My host had escorted me into a crowded room at cocktail hour, and then tapped a spoon against her glass to get the group's attention. “Everyone,” she said, as the crowd turned and looked toward us expectantly. “Everyone, please meet Dr. Patricia McConnell from the States. She's an ethologist.” At the word “ethologist,” a collective “ooooh” floated toward me from the crowd. I might even have heard some “ahhhhhhs”! It wasn't me who got the reaction, it was my profession. Everyone seemed to know what ethology was, and most importantly, was eager to talk about it. In short order, I was surrounded by individuals enthusiastically discussing animal behavior, everything from the mating rituals of ruffed lemurs to the antics of the Labrador Retriever in their living room.

I think of that evening in Scotland when I am introduced as an ethologist here at home in the US. More often than not, the word is changed into “ecologist,” as if somehow we had collectively developed a kind of a lisp, and had really meant ecologist all along. “Ethology” isn't a term that's widely familiar in this country, and I wouldn't mind that so much if this lack of awareness hadn't led to the mis-use of the term as it relates to dog training.

This most often happens when people with no academic background cite ethology as a justification for “getting dominance over your dog” as a way of solving all behavioral problems. To the collective amazement of many of us in the behavior and training field, methods emphasizing this perspective have recently cropped up again in this country. Does your dog not come when called? Does he urinate on the carpet? Well, then, we're told, that's because you haven't established a clear pack hierarchy.

Ah, my. Now, don't get me wrong. I'm on record as arguing that dogs, as animals dependent upon us for their very food and water, need us to be benevolent leaders (as do children). Neither do I agree with those who argue that there's no such thing as a social hierarchy in dogs—surely there's a reason dogs greet one another with tails up or tails down, for example. However, that doesn't mean dominance has anything to do with coming when called or peeing on the rug. There's no logic in explaining away every behavioral issue as being related to dominance or submission, just as it would be illogical to excuse one's own bad habits using the concept of social status. Good luck with explaining that you ate three pieces of mocha fudge cake because you're confused about your place in society.

Advocates of the “getting dominance over your dog as the answer to everything” perspective often support their argument by citing scientific evidence—especially data from ethologists—that dogs are pack animals. As such, they argue, dogs don't need love from us, they just need to know their place. Sigh. About the only thing that's true about this argument is that dogs are indeed highly social animals. And it's true that we learned that from ethologists.

Ethology is the study of behavior, with an emphasis on an animal's behavior in its natural environment. The current use of the word began in Europe in the 1930s, when Konrad Lorenz, Karl von Frisch and Niko Tinbergen began the work that would eventually win them a Nobel prize in 1973 for their studies on behavior. These European scientists were especially interested in observing animals in the wild, as opposed to the then-pervasive American practice of studying animals' behavior in captivity. Eventually, this type of fieldwork led to David Mech's vast body of research into wolf behavior, and to Jane Goodall's forays into Africa to observe chimpanzees in the wild.

One of the many aspects of behavior that interested these early ethologists was social organization, and much of their initial work attempted to understand how animals related to one another and how they organized their social relationships. It is true that, in the '40s and '50s especially, ethologists were fascinated by issues related to social hierarchy and status. It was also during those same decades, 50 or 60 years ago, that much was written about dominance (male dominance in particular), as well as about the function and evolution of aggression. That doesn't mean these issues are the only ones ethologists are interested in, it just means that back then, matters related to status and hierarchy got a lot of attention.

At the same time that ethologists were discovering social hierarchies in a multitude of species, American animal behaviorists were dispensing food treats and using electric shocks on mice, rats and monkeys to understand the learning process in animals. Along the way, things were done to animals that most of us would rather not think about. The reason that educated behaviorists and trainers are convinced that positive reinforcements (like tasty snacks) are more effective in dog training than “positive punishment” (like electric shocks) is because thousands and thousands of animals were experimented on in ways that would never be allowed today.

Although I wish I could go back in time and prevent some of the suffering that was caused by these experiments, it is true that much good has come from them. Just as modern-day ethologists build on the early work of Lorenz and Tinbergen, learning theorists and psychologists have profited greatly (as have dog trainers) from the early work of American behaviorists like Watson and Skinner. However, it doesn't mean that today's psychologists advocate using electric shock on your dog any more than ethologists advocate using force to achieve “dominance over your dog.”

People who argue that ethology supports “getting dominance over your dog” are not only focused on an issue more relevant 50 years ago than today, they are misrepresenting the findings of early researchers on social hierarchy. Social hierarchies are complicated things that allow animals to live together and resolve conflicts without having to use force every time a conflict comes up. Social status is but one of many factors that influence an animal's behavior, and it only relates to an animal's behavior in specific circumstances. It's relevant, I would argue, when dogs are greeting one another, when they are in potential conflict over who gets the bone or who goes out the door first, but it's irrelevant when a dog is deciding to come (or not) when called. High status wolves don't bark out a COME command to subordinates, and they don't punish young pups for “disobedience” if they don't do a perfect recall when asked. Status just isn't relevant in most social interactions. Further, studies on a raft of social species have made it abundantly clear that relationships between individuals are based as much on individual personality and learning as they are on social status.

Thus, using “dominance” as a foundation of a training program ignores all that ethologists have discovered about the nuances of communication and social interaction, and all that psychologists have come to understand about the learning process. Ethology is no more about “getting dominance over your dog” than psychology is about using electric shock to influence behavior. Both scientific perspectives provide us with a rich and textured foundation that informs academic and dog-lover alike. From understanding subtle visual signals that tell us when our dogs are anxious to knowing when to reinforce our dog's behavior and when to withhold a food treat, ethology and psychology can work hand-in-hand to help us improve our relationships with our dogs. Neither advocate using force or physical punishment as the primary method of training dogs.

The next time someone tries to seduce you with bad science by saying that “ethology justifies using force to control your dog,” don't hesitate to challenge them. Science is on your side—put Lorenz and Skinner in your pocket and use what we've learned in both ethology and psychology to enhance, not diminish, the relationship between you and your dog.