

The Evidence Is Overwhelming – Or Is It?

A Review of Dog Training Tools and Methods Research

Analysis

¹ Ziv G. The effects of using aversive training methods in dogs—A review. *J Vet Behav Clin Appl Res.* 2017;19:50-60.

Is the study Correlational Research or Causal Research?

Correlational Research – As the research title states, this is “A review.”

Which sub-type of study best describes the research?

This appears to be a hybrid of meta-analysis (helps researchers compile the quantitative data available from previous studies) and systematic review (examines all the literature related to a specific research question in a standardized way).

Are there any potential problems with the study?

Yes. Although phrases such as “appears that,” “appears to be the case,” and “suggest” are used, recommendations are made even though causation cannot be demonstrated through this type of study. These are opinions rather than a conclusion based on Causal Research.

Conclusion Statement Examples:

- 1) *“Despite the methodological concerns, it appears that aversive training methods have undesirable unintended outcomes and that using them puts dogs’ welfare at risk.”*
- 2) *“In addition, there is no evidence to suggest that aversive training methods are more effective than reward-based training methods.” At least 3 studies in this review suggest that the opposite might be true in both pets and working dogs (Blackwell et al., 2012; Haverbeke et al., 2008; Hiby et al., 2004).*

Blackwell et al., 2012 (Correlation Research)

Methods: *“A standard questionnaire was developed to investigate the types of training technique used and the prevalence of undesired behaviours in a population of dog owners in the UK.”*

Haverbeke et al., 2008 (Correlation Research)

Abstract: *“The authors cannot prove that the welfare of these dogs had been hampered, but there is an indication that it was under threat.”*

Abstract: *“Handlers punished more and rewarded less at the second evaluation than at the first one. This suggests that handlers modified their usual behaviour at the first evaluation in view to present themselves in a positive light.”*

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From a dog trainer perspective, this could also indicate that the first evaluation was the learning phase for the dogs (more positive reinforcement) and in the second evaluation, the handler had an expectation of reliability to commands.

2.2 Standardized evaluation: *“Every evaluation was done twice, with 20 days in-between, to assess the reliability of our observation methods. No training has been realized between these evaluations.”*

Based on the lack of training for 20 days, there would not be an expectation of improved performance (effectiveness). To the contrary, you would expect the performance to be equal at best, but more likely decreased with no training between evaluations.

2. Methods, 2.1 Subjects: *“The studied group consisted of 33 DH teams of the Belgian Defence. Dogs were selected as representative of the Military canine population regarding sex (26 males, 7 females), breed (27 Belgian shepherds, 6 German shepherds) and housing conditions (18 living in a military kennel, 15 living at the handler’s home). The animals had at least belonged to the army 3 months before the study and were used as operational working dogs for maximum 3 years (1.26 +/- 0.14 years). The dogs were between 1 and 5 years old (3.06 +/- 0.21 years). According to this sample constitution, effect of sex, breed and duty time have not been tested. The only factors that have been analysed are age and the housing conditions. Because of the difficulty in documenting the origin of many dogs acquired by the Belgian Defence, no attempt was made to distinguish dogs on basis of their provenance. All the dogs were subjected to a clinical examination and were declared in good health and ready to take part in this study. The average time handlers were operational was 7.92 +/- 1.00 years. In this study, all handlers were men.”*

There is no mention as to the level of training each dog had received prior to the evaluations. These three factors, length of time with the army, time as operational working dog, and age, could individually or in any combination have an impact on the results.

4. Discussion: *“Secondly to encourage the dog to release the sleeve (=“real” sleeve) more rapidly, it is recommended to present another object (frequently another sleeve (=“decoy” sleeve) or toy) next to the dog’s head so that the dog would release the “real” sleeve to bite the “decoy” sleeve. The dog’s motivation for releasing the first sleeve being that he is allowed to bite again (“decoy” sleeve).”*

There is no reference or evidence provided indicate that this suggestion would be effective for Military Working Dogs. Since the dog is in a high state of arousal with a grip already on the “real” sleeve, would a “decoy” sleeve be of higher value?

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Hiby et al., 2004 (Correlation Research)

Abstract: *“We distributed a questionnaire to 364 dog owners in order to examine the relative effectiveness of different training methods and their effects upon a pet dog's behaviour.”*

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