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Stanley Coren PhD., DSc, FRSC
Canine Corner

Canine Dominance: Is the Concept of the Alpha Dog Valid?

Current research challenges the idea of the alpha dog.

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It seems like every discussion of dog obedience and dog behavioural problems eventually turns to the issue of dominance. Dog owners are told that they must be "the leader of the pack" and the "alpha dog in your own home." One reason why this issue has become so salient again has to do with the current popularity of Cesar Millan, who calls himself "The Dog Whisperer," and has popularized the use of forceful methods to exert dominance over unruly dogs.

Millan's methods are controversial among most trained dog behaviourists and researchers. To begin with, his use of the title "dog whisperer" seems odd, since it is an adaptation from the term "horse whisperer" that was first used to describe people like Willis J. Powell and Monty Roberts. They were called whisperers because they abandoned the use of force which was the common way of dealing with difficult and aggressive horses and substituted much gentler and supportive methods.

Millan's techniques have caused professionals, such as Jean Donaldson, director of the SPCA Academy for Dog Trainers in San Francisco, to comment that: "A profession that has been making steady gains in its professionalism, technical sophistication and humane standards has been greatly set back. ... To co-opt a word like 'whispering' for arcane, violent and technically unsound practice is unconscionable." She was sufficiently upset so that, with the collaboration of Ian Dunbar, who is a well respected dog behaviourist and has a degree in veterinary medicine as well as a PhD in psychology, they produced a DVD titled *Fighting Dominance in a Dog Whispering World*, which specifically attacks the methods used by Millan in his popular TV show.

However, rather than addressing the issue of Cesar Millan and his manner of training, there is a more fundamental issue that should be looked at, namely, is the concept of canine dominance--specifically the idea of the alpha dog who is leader of the pack--valid?



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dogs. The methods used to train dogs reflected the attitudes of the military at the time and were based upon strict discipline supported by force if necessary. Certain tools that were developed for training reflect this attitude, such as a leash that was braided and made rigid at the loop end so that it could be turned around and used as a whip if the dog failed to obey.

The original description of the basic difference between dominance and submission in dogs comes from Konrad Lorenz in his book, *"King Solomon's Ring,"* (1949). Lorenz, who was a Nobel Prize winning ethologist and animal behaviorist, based this idea on observations of his own dogs. If one dog appeared to be more aggressive and powerful (dominant) the other dog would acknowledge this by giving ground or rolling on its back (submission). Lorenz felt that humans also had dominance relationships with dogs, since if he struck or threatened one of his dogs they acted similarly submissively toward him.

The thinking of scientists usually reflects the culture and the beliefs of the historical era and the place that they live in. Lorenz was born in Austria in 1903. His thinking about dogs was doubtless influenced by the dog training procedures common at that time, most of which had been developed by the German military for teaching service

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Colonel Konrad Most summarized that Germanic philosophy of training when he wrote, "In the absence of compulsion neither human education nor canine training is feasible. Even the most soft hearted dog-owner cannot get on terms with his idolized favorite without some form of compulsion." In other words, one should use force to establish dominance and then use that dominance to control the animal's behavior.

The first research on wolf behaviors seemed to support the idea of a rigid, military-like canine social hierarchy, usually supported by physical confrontations which ultimately established a leader--the "alpha wolf"--who maintains his leadership through force and intimidation. Unfortunately, later research would show that this is an artificial and erroneous view of canine social organization.

David L. Mech, who is now a Senior Research Scientist for the U.S. Department of the Interior, was one of the first people to study wolf behavior in the wild. In his 1970 book, he was influenced by earlier ideas, including those of Lorenz, and referred to the pack leader as the "alpha wolf." Looking back 40 years later he has come to doubt the usefulness of this concept. He now maintains that the label is wrong because it implies that the wolves fought to determine dominance.

In actuality, when they mature, wolves leave their original pack to mate and produce offspring which then become the rest of their new pack. Dominance arises simply in the same way that parents naturally control the behavior of their offspring in humans, at least while they are living with the family. As in human families, the parents loosely set the rules, and the kids sort things out among themselves. Because of this state of affairs, rather than using the label "alpha" Mech prefers to refer to the "breeding" male or female in the pack or simply the mother or father wolf. The idea of the alpha only seems to be valid in artificial packs, where unrelated individuals are put together, as in captivity, or where may be multiple breeding pairs. In such "unnatural" social groupings, animals will contest for leadership and an alpha wolf will emerge.

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Of course wolves are not dogs, so let's look at a recent (2010) piece of research by Roberto Bonanni of the University of Parma and his associates. They looked at free-ranging packs of dogs in Italy and found that leadership was a very fluid thing. For example, in one pack, which had 27 members, there were 6 dogs that habitually took turns leading the pack, but at least half of the adult dogs were leaders, at least some of the time. The dogs that were usually found leading the pack tended to be the older, more experienced dogs, but not necessarily the most dominant. The pack seems to allow leadership to dogs, who at particular times seem to be most likely to contribute to the welfare of the pack through knowledge that can access the resources they require.

The reason that all of this is important is that it tells us, (regardless of concerns about the amount of force used in training) that Cesar Millan's technique, and that of many other trainers who use a military-like concept of canine social hierarchy as the basis of dog training and problem solving, is based on a false premise. It is a holdover from German military service dog training at the turn of the last century, and generalization from outdated wolf research based on artificial packs of captive wolves.

Perhaps it is time to revise our dog training and obedience concepts to something along the ideas proposed by advocates of Positive Training. In that view, controlling the dog's behavior is more a matter of controlling the things that a dog needs and wants, such as food and social interaction, rather than applying force to achieve what the science suggests is an unnatural dominance over the dog. If you manage and dispense important resources, the dog will respond to you out of self interest. So this approach to behavior modification has the same effect as forcefully imposed dominance in controlling the dog's behavior. However, instead of dominance based on physical power and threats it is more similar to establishing status. One can agree to respond to controls imposed by someone of higher status, but this is done, not out of fear, but out of respect and in anticipation of the rewards that one can expect by doing so.

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Stanley Coren is the author of many books including: [The Modern Dog, Why Do Dogs Have Wet Noses? The Pawprints of History, How Dogs Think, How To Speak Dog, Why We Love the Dogs We Do, What Do Dogs Know? The Intelligence of Dogs, Why Does My Dog Act That Way? Understanding Dogs for Dummies, Sleep Thieves, The Left-hander Syndrome](#)

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About the Author



[Stanley Coren, Ph.D., FRSC.](#) is a professor of psychology at the University of British Columbia.

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