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Choosing Your Words

How Our Discourse About Behavior Affects Our Practice

Marisa Scully, CPDT-KA

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When speaking to clients about their dogs' behavior, I am very aware of the language I use to describe exactly what the dog is doing and why. The explanations and descriptors we use when discussing behavior greatly affect the way it is understood and perceived, which directly affects the way in which it is responded to and addressed. My goal when discussing a behavior is to begin by identifying the underlying causes for that behavior, instead of getting distracted by the desire for immediate results that many people are desperate for by the time they are meeting with a trainer. I find that if my explanation is clear, concise, and logical, it enables people to find some patience and understanding with which to work towards our training/behavior modification plan. Not only does the language and explanation help the owners trust the trainer and commit to the training plan, it also moves our field forward as far as discourse and the ever-evolving conversation about the behavior of domestic dogs.

When I began studying dog behavior and learning theory, the term "dominance" was still frequently being used as an explanation and cause for certain behaviors. As the field moves forward, we as trainers are focusing

more on evidence-based information about the science of behavior as it is informed by psychology, physiology, biology, etc. Because of the involvement of science and research, previous dog training theories that incorporated guessing and assumption are being replaced by methods and philosophies that correlate with factual, testable information. I find that so many of my clients' dogs display problematic behaviors previously deemed "dominant," and often the beginning of my relationship with clients is a discussion that involves reorienting their view of behaviors they thought they understood. I believe that many behaviors previously deemed "dominant" are actually quite common in dogs who exhibit high levels of stress, fear, and anxiety, and so often a starting point is helping people understand how to recognize when a dog is stressed, fearful, or anxious and what is actually happening in the body and brain during these kinds of responses.

I often start by mentioning the autonomic nervous system and the fact that it is responsible for many behavioral/physiological responses, such as fight and flight (specifically the sympathetic nervous system). Because most people are familiar with the concept of fight versus flight, this allows us to find a common ground from which to begin.

I mention that numerous other extremely basic survival needs are carried out by the parasympathetic nervous system, for example “rest, digest, feed, and breed” and that the autonomic nervous system functions mostly unconsciously/involuntarily.

Many of the behaviors people believe domestic dogs are making decisions about are actually far more biologically complex, and a brief discussion about cognition, the cerebellum, the amygdala, the limbic system, and the endocrine system — depending on how in-depth our own knowledge is and the capacity we believe our clients have to absorb the information — helps to initiate intelligent discussion and conversation. This kind of communication does not have to be overly formal; I often make jokes and use examples that help to soften the tone and bring familiarity to the topic. But it does establish a rapport where phrases like “he thinks he’s the boss” no longer have a place.

Building on fight and flight, since again it is often a starting point people are familiar with, I introduce some behavioral examples and variants:

Flight: Moving away, avoiding, hiding, averting eyes

Fight: Moving towards, posturing, barking, growling, lunging, muzzle punching, frontal alignment

Freeze: Decrease in physical behavior, becoming still or stoic, pancaking, shutting down

Fidget/fool around: Increase in physical activity, sniffing, scratching/grooming, mouthing, licking, zoomies, body language associated with play, chewing, marking (not to be confused with loss of control of bladder/bowels)

Fawn: Appeasement behaviors, exposure of belly, licking, behaviors associated with play, extremely dramatic wiggling or wagging

Of course, all of these behaviors have to be read in context, and can mean different things from different dogs in different settings. I always explain to people that a specific dog can display very different behavioral responses

depending on things like proximity, environment, history, or hormone levels, just to name a few factors. Furthermore, a behavioral response in one dog does not always mean the same as it does in another dog, and the tendencies and predisposing factors in each dog play a large role as well.

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Below are some common examples of behaviors that are frequently perceived as status/rank-seeking or “dominant,” and the explanations I give to clients to help them view the behaviors more accurately.

Jumpy/mouthy: This is physically active, arousal-based behavior that involves direct contact. This can happen with social dogs who are interested in interacting, or in anxious dogs who are uncomfortable about interacting and therefore are fidgety and over-aroused.

Pushy/demanding (i.e., barking for food or moving towards an intended location despite discouragement from owner): Often “inappropriate” ways to gain access to desired resources are just a matter of a dog following instincts rather than being trained to offer more desirable behavior — for example, a dog who jumps up and tries to grab food or barks at someone who is eating. In other instances I find that this can refer to a frantic and desperate attempt at acquiring a resource even if the dog has previously been trained. I often see dogs who are anxious about resources “forget their manners” as their bodies’ signals to acquire the resource overpower the cognitive learning history.

Marking: This refers to both home soiling and repeated and seemingly compulsive urination or defecation in an appropriate location. This can be due to incomplete house-training but is also a very natural biological impulse. Leaving olfactory information in an environment serves many purposes for animals, and even though they may not need to fulfill those functions in every day domestic life, the instincts and physiological impulses still exist. I often find that anxious or stressed dogs tend to mark more frequently and often in response to a stressor. I categorize this as a fidgety behavior.

Humping: This behavior can relate to intent to breed, even in altered dogs. It is also a common response to arousal and also a form of fidgeting.

Posturing: This refers to tensing of muscles and holding the body in a way that makes the animal look larger, often paired with piloerection. This falls along the lines of a modified fight response.

Staring/fixating/not averting eyes: This can be anything from a hard stare to a soft glance that the dog will maintain for a long period of time. Many people teach and reinforce eye contact, and it can be a form of connection and communication. A dog is also often looking at something in order to gather information for any reason, be it positive interest or fear.

High resting places: Animals who seek resting spaces high up off the ground do so for many reasons. I have seen this happen in homes with hardwood floors where the only soft surfaces to rest on are human furniture that is up off the ground. I have also seen animals use high spaces to avoid things in the environment they find unpleasant. Dogs might use height as a way to find a good location for scanning the environment, which is another information-gathering behavior.

Pulling on leash: This can, of course, be due to a lack of training, but I also find it common in dogs who are hypervigilant and anxious about the environment, or those who are frantic, over-aroused or desperate to get to a particular location.

Walking through doors or thresholds, into and out of locations first: Often desperation to get through a threshold is a display of a frantic and anxious need to gather information or resources.

Resource guarding: Controlling and maintaining access to resources is often perceived as a dog needing to be in control. Acquiring and maintaining resources is also necessary for survival. Even though a domestic dog is being fed and therefore will not die if he shares his rawhide bone, that does not mean his instincts to remain in possession of an item, or anxiety about potentially losing access to items, will suddenly turn off.

In reflecting on where dog training was 10 years ago when I began and where it is currently, I am excited about the progress and movement I have witnessed. I also have to consider when joining the conversation that someday

in the future I will look back on my own writing and cringe in disbelief at where the understanding of animal behavior was or how elementary my own take on it was. I think that in airing out and speaking openly about our understanding and beliefs, we can all work to explore and grow as a field, and as advocates for the human-animal bond. In the big picture, all living creatures are working to move towards things that make us feel safe, comfortable, and happy, and move away from things that make us feel threatened, compromised, or bad. The cognition and behavior that play a role in how and why we move comprise a complicated and intricate system that we are all working to understand. Here's to gathering

information in order to further understand and actualize ideal circumstances for ourselves and the animals we cherish.

Resources and Additional Reading

K9 Paws for Thought: <http://k9pawsforthought.blogspot.com/2010/04/five-fs-flight-fight-freeze-faint.html>

Tellington Touch:
<http://www.tellingtontouch.com/Print/5fs.htm>

The Good Men Project:
<http://goodmenproject.com/featured-content/the-good-life-hyperarousal-beyond-fight-or-flight/>

Marisa Scully, CPDT-KA, has a small dog training business in Philadelphia called Philly Dog Training. She began training professionally in 2007 and has continued to expand her knowledge and expertise through experience and education, and close relationships with other professionals in her field. She runs the dog training portion of a non-profit organization called Hand2Paw (www.hand2paw.org) that connects homeless youth and shelter animals in a mutually beneficial way. Marisa lives in Philadelphia with her three rescue dogs: a Yorkie/Jack Russell Terrier named Super, and two Pit Bulls, Pun and Muffin. Marisa can be reached at www.phillydogtraining.com.