

The effectiveness and welfare implications of current dog training methods

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Introduction

Although historically, dog training methods primarily involved punishment and negative reinforcement, the focus in recent years has shifted towards an increasing application of reward-based strategies (Hiby et al., 2004). Positive reinforcement is currently employed with enormous success in training dogs in activities as diverse as guidance of the visually impaired (Ray Joyce, 2004, pers comm.), police operations (Roger Mayer, 2004, pers comm) and termite detection (Brooks et al., 2003). Surprisingly, little research has been conducted into the efficacy of assorted techniques practiced by everyday dog owners. Similarly, the welfare issues associated with such techniques is yet to be comprehensively investigated.

Discussion

In one recent study, Hiby et al. (2004) constructed a survey examining these issues. The survey focused on the various methods employed by the dog-owning community, their efficacy and their impact on the behaviour and welfare of the respective dogs. The welfare focus was not on the immediate pain or distress caused by applying aversive stimuli, but rather on longer term consequences of inadequate standards of welfare indicated by the expression of problematic behaviours, which often reflect a state of chronic anxiety and may lead to relinquishment or euthanasia (Serpell, 1996). Respondents were asked to outline their training methods for seven common tasks, rate their dog's obedience at each and indicate whether their dog had ever shown any of sixteen common problematic behaviours.

While reward-based methods were significantly more successful for training certain tasks, for no task was punishment-based training most effective. Furthermore, dogs trained using only reward-based methods were reported significantly more obedient than those trained by other means, identifying reward-based methods to be the most effective overall training method. Another noteworthy finding was the positive correlation between punishment-based techniques and problematic behaviours, suggesting that punishment may result in the dog experiencing anxiety or conflict, later expressed as a problematic behaviour. This relationship was particularly evident in the occurrence of separation-related behaviours. Although the subjective nature of surveys can potentially bias results, the association of reward-based behaviour with higher levels of obedience and fewer problematic behaviours compellingly advocate it as a more effective, welfare-conscious alternative to punishment for the average dog owner.

Perhaps for these reasons of welfare and efficacy, positive reinforcement was the chosen method for a cynopraxic training program assessed by Sonntag (2003). More a philosophy on human-canine relationships than a training technique, cynopraxis further promotes canine welfare. According to Lindsay (2000), there are no training goals or objectives for cynopraxists beyond the attainment of interactive harmony between human and dog. While behaviour adjustment may be necessary for the dog to harmoniously share a domestic environment with humans, behavioural control for the sake of domination or objectives harmful to the dog or degrading to the human-dog bond contradict cynopraxic philosophy.

The difficulty in defining cynopraxic training is differentiating between improving human-dog harmony and utilitarianism. For example, it could be argued that training dogs for police operations places a utilitarian purpose above canine safety and the human-dog relationship and thus violates cynopraxic ideals. However, it could equally be argued that police dogs enjoy their work, evident by their body language, and that it promotes the bond between dog and handler (Roger Mayer, 2004, pers comm).

Sonntag (2003) investigated the effect of a cynopraxic training program on the human-dog relationship. Her program involved operant conditioning through positive reinforcement coupled with owner education in aspects of human-canine interactions. Participants were presented with questionnaires regarding their motivation to train their dogs and the extent to which the dog's behaviour and the dog-owner relationship, including owner expectations and their ability to cope with the dog, had changed since enrolling in the course.

The responses identified basic obedience and a desire to build a better relationship with their dogs as the most popular reasons for enrolment. While the latter is fundamentally cynopraxic, training simply for obedience is not. By the conclusion of the program, most clients reported an improvement in obedience and all clients believed they had improved relationships with their dogs. Furthermore, they felt that their expectations of the dogs were now more realistic and the dogs fitted better into the household. Thus, the two motivations for enrolment most commonly identified in the survey of clients were successfully met suggesting that the apparently conflicting ideals of utility and cynopraxis are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Programs such as this represent an advancement in canine training welfare since any program genuinely aiming to train under cynopraxic values must prioritise canine welfare.

The strength of any human-canine bond is dynamically linked to the dog's behaviour (Serpell, 1996). Effective human-canine communication in training results in better behaviour, strengthening this bond, thus furthering the aims of cynopraxis. To further investigate dog cognition of human instruction, McKinley and Young (2003) compared the efficacy of a 'model-rival' training method to operant conditioning. They demonstrated that dogs could learn to identify an object by watching humans talk about it in an animated way, with frequent use of its name, while passing it between themselves. Dogs trained by this method selected the object in a retrieval task with equal success to when trained using operant conditioning. The researchers inferred that, since the object constituted an intrinsic reward, this method showed an understanding of the object's name rather than it simply equalling food and, thus, provided a better means of communication with the dog.

It could be argued, however, that this 'model-rival' technique is nothing more than a variation of operant conditioning. Through exaggerated interest in an object, the trainers inadvertently increased its extrinsic value, being that whoever possesses the object becomes the centre of attention. Social animals, such as dogs, that thrive on the attention of their social leaders, may not learn the object's name but rather associate the object with social status, in the same way that a dog learning by conventional operant conditioning associates it with food.

Conclusion

The above studies indicate that a deeper understanding of canine cognition could lead to better application of already effective positive reinforcement training methods which, used in conjunction with cynopraxic philosophy, would uphold ideals of canine welfare and enrich the human-canine bond.

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