

BEYOND CESAR MILLAN (/)

Forget About Being Alpha in Your Pack by Kathy Sdao, MA, CAAB

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In their recent book “Made to Stick,” Chip and Dan Heath detail the characteristics that make an idea or explanation “sticky.” According to their analysis, stories that are simple, unexpected, and concrete capture our imagination and get lodged in our brains. Many urban myths, they point out, are ideal examples of this phenomenon.

One perfect example of a “sticky” story is the ever-popular notion that dogs are essentially domesticated wolves who view their human companions as members of their hierarchical pack. This story is simple (pack structure is presumably a clear-cut ranking of alpha, beta and omega animals), unexpected (imagine having the descendent of a wild wolf right in our living rooms!), and concrete (who hasn’t seen TV footage of a wolf pack chasing down a moose or elk?). So sticky is this canine urban myth, in fact, that it refuses to die, despite the series of inaccuracies at its core.

Unfortunately, both dogs and their owners suffer the consequences of this fable, for it is from this story that we get the popular but unfounded training decree that humans must be “alpha” in their mixed-species pack.

Allow me to set the record straight. Here are just a few of the inaccuracies embedded in the “dog as domesticated wolf” story.

Myth 1: Wild wolves form hierarchical packs in which individuals vie for dominance.

Not always. And maybe not even very often. It turns out this common assumption about the social dynamics of wolves is based on studies of captive animals whose group structure was non-natural (i.e., the wolves came from various locations and lineages). After a broad review of the scientific literature and thirteen summers spent observing free-living wolves on an island in the Northwest Territories in Canada, wolf ethologist L. David Mech concluded that social interactions among wolf-pack members are nearly identical to those among members of any other group of related individuals. In essence, the typical wolf pack is a family in which parents guide activities of younger members. Vying for dominance in the pack hierarchy is not a priority. Care-taking and teaching of younger pack members by adults is.

Myth 2: Dogs, close relatives of wolves, must also form packs in which individuals vie for dominance.

It is true that there is virtually no difference in the genetic material of dogs and wolves, or of dogs and coyotes or jackals, for that matter. But, from an ecological perspective, dogs and wolves are indeed distinct species because they are adapted to different niches. That is, they earn their livings in different ways. Wolves kill large prey, while dogs live in partnership with humans.

Recent research regarding the evolution of dogs indicates that this partnership did not occur as a result of our human ancestors’ attempts to tame wild wolves to be guard animals or hunting companions. It appears much more likely that dogs evolved from a wolf-like ancestor not through artificial selection by humans but from a process of natural selection filling a new ecological niche. That niche was the town dump, which first appeared approximately 15,000 years ago, at the end of the last Ice Age. This is when humans began creating permanent villages. Wolves found a new food source: they could forage on the waste products in the refuse piles. The individual wolves who were able to continue eating even when humans approached were at a reproductive advantage. In other words, the less skittish wolves, the “tamer” ones who didn’t flee at the first indication of a nearby human, ate more. Over many generations, this produced the behavioral quality that most distinguishes dogs from wolves: dogs will approach rather than avoid humans.

This version of dog evolution, starring the proto-dog as a scavenger of human waste at village dump sites (think “large rat”), is surely less sexy than proto-dog as noble wolf tamed by clever ancient humans. But it’s essential for our modern view of dog-training because scavenging “village dogs” don’t have a pack structure at all. They don’t hunt cooperatively. Other dogs are competitors, not helpers, in finding edible garbage. And so they live alone or in groups of two or three.

Myth 3: Dogs incorporate humans into their view of pack hierarchies.

Despite data to the contrary, many people still believe dogs form linear hierarchies of alpha (dominant) and omega (submissive) individuals. Many trainers have capitalized on this belief system by arguing that you can solve behavior problems in your dog only when you have established yourself as Alpha dog among the pack of creatures in your home (people and dogs). And so many folks waste time complying with irrelevant rules (e.g., “always eat your meals before your dogs eat theirs”) when they instead could be using that time and effort to conduct simple effective training (e.g., rewarding desired behaviors). Often they also use physical force, such as shaking the dog by the scruff of the neck, pinning him on his back, or grabbing his muzzle – all because they’ve heard these are methods alpha-ranked wolves use to discipline subordinates.

But even if dogs did form linear packs, there’s no evidence to suggest that they perceive humans as part of their species-specific ranking. In general, humans lack the capability to even recognize, let alone replicate, the elegant subtleties of canine body language. So it’s hard to imagine that dogs could perceive us as pack members at all.

Maybe we need a new sticky story. Dogs are lovable scavengers. Their evolution has made them dependent on humans to provide food. This concept of humans as feeders, rather than as “leaders of the pack” forms the foundation for a logical, reward-based approach to dog-training. And since even wolves organize themselves into family units, we can aspire not to be dominant pack leaders, but good “parents” instead, that is, excellent care-takers

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and teachers of our dependent dogs.

[If you're interested in learning more, check out this fascinating book: Dogs: A New Understanding of Canine Origin, Behavior, and Evolution, 2001, by Ray & Lorna Coppinger, University of Chicago Press]

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Name: Kathy Sdao ACAAB

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Thanks for the very useful site.

Kathy

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