

Social–Psychological Dynamics in Dog Training: The Power of Authority and Social Role Designation and its Possible Effects on Dog Training

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Introduction

The role of the professional dog trainer is to instruct guardians on how to change their companion dog's behavior and to do so in ways that promote a healthy relationship between dog and guardian, certainly avoiding abusive treatment of dogs. However, some professional dog trainers advise clients to use abusive methods, and many guardians accept these recommendations, even though their natural inclination would normally be to avoid using abusive punitive techniques on their companion dogs. In this article, I will review some classic research on why people often tend to obediently accept methods they would otherwise reject and explore some human cognitive processes that contribute to this tendency. I will also offer advice to professional dog trainers on how to empower clients to take personal responsibility for the way they interact with their companion dogs, elaborating on a win/win principle. Specifically, I consider the willingness of dog trainers to follow the instructions of dog training instructors, even when following those instructions could potentially harm their dogs. Dog training instructors have the power of authority over their students, and with this power comes an awesome responsibility to give clear advice that can be followed safely.

Humans who live with pet dogs want them to be obedient. An obedience-trained dog is a matter of pride, and people compliment each other on well-mannered pets. The message to the dog is consistent: if you follow rules, you will usually be able to avoid aversives and maybe even have your behavior reinforced.

However, there is a dark side to obedience called “destructive obedience.” Destructive obedience involves one person obeying the demands of another that result in harm to an individual, a group or society. The world has seen destructive obedience in action many times, including the holocaust of Jews in Nazi Germany, during which six million people were killed by people who were “following orders.” Recently a pet dog guardian hired a pet trainer, and according to media reports, ended up assisting in the killing of her dog. The guardian was following the instructions of the trainer who allegedly stated that the dog needed an exorcism. This story demonstrates how powerful obedience to authority can be.

Social role designation is “a cluster of socially defined expectations that individuals in a given situation are expected to fulfill” (Allison, 2006). For example, when trainers or guardians label dogs as “dominant,” this label establishes a social structure between dog and guardian of dominant versus subordinate. A power struggle for “dominance” can ensue, which can damage the guardian–dog relationship (O’Heare, 2007).

A number of experimental studies have examined the nature of destructive obedience and social role designation. This paper summarizes some of the key studies and examines their relevance to dog training.

Experimental Studies of Human Obedience

In the 1960s and 1970s, a social psychologist, Stanley Milgram (Milgram, 1974), conducted a series of 18 experiments attempting to understand destructive obedience. The

experiments asked whether humans would inflict pain on other humans if they were ordered to by an authority figure. Psychiatrists predicted that Milgram's study would find that only a very small percentage of subjects would comply with the orders (Sheridan and King, 1972). Although Milgram's experiments would be considered unethical today for a number of reasons, they provided valuable information about the willingness of people to follow instructions that resulted in harm to other people.

The subjects in Milgram's initial experiments were told that they were participating in a study designed to examine the effects of punishment on learning. The subjects were given the role of teachers who were attempting to help another person (the learner or "victim") learn word pairs. If the learner got the word pair correct, the experiment continued to the next word pair question. However, if the learner got the answer wrong, the subject was instructed to administer an electric shock to the learner. With each error, the subject was required to increase the level of shock administered. (In fact, the learners were actors who did not actually receive shocks but reacted with apparent distress each time they were "shocked.") In the original study, the victim of the shocks was located in a separate room and the subject was able to hear but not see him. In later studies (Milgram, 1974), Milgram moved the victim closer to the subject to examine how visual and even physical contact would influence the results.

During the original experiment, an authority figure introduced to the subject as the "experimenter" used statements such as "the experiment requires you continue" if a subject objected to shocking the victim. It was the obedience to these statements that Milgram was researching.

The findings of this study were surprising and disturbing. In Milgram's first experiment, 26 out of 40 subjects (roughly two thirds) obeyed the orders of the experimenter to the end, punishing the victim to the most potent level of shock available when told that the experiment required it (Milgram, 1974). When Milgram

brought the victim and the subject into closer proximity, the percentage of obedient subjects shocking the victim decreased until, when the subject and the victim were touching, the percentage of obedient subjects dropped to 30% (Milgram, 1974).

Milgram was curious about what caused subjects to be obedient or disobedient. He personally interviewed some subjects immediately after the study, and mailed questionnaires to others, disclosing the true nature of the experiment to both groups. The obedient subjects assigned responsibility for the shocks to the experimenter (Milgram, 1974). When instructed to administer shocks, subjects abdicated personal responsibility. Furthermore, they wanted to please the experimenter. Disobedient subjects referred to religion or value systems when refusing to shock the learner.

In 1972, Sheridan and King replicated Milgram's study of obedience to authority using an authentic victim (Sheridan & King, 1972). The experimental question was whether using an authentic victim would influence the percentages of obedient and disobedient subjects. A puppy was selected to be the authentic victim and to receive shocks. The puppy was visible to subjects and would yelp and jump when shocked, yet 100% of the female subjects and 54% of male subjects were fully obedient. Clearly, this result demonstrates the power of authority and, especially, the strong desire of females to be obedient to authority figures.

In his book *Obedience to Authority: Current Perspectives on the Milgram Paradigm*, editor Thomas Blass (2000) discusses how the National Transportation Safety Board indirectly suggests, in a review of airplane accidents (in the United States), that destructive obedience causes up to 25% of all plane crashes. In Blass's book, Eugen Tarnow is quoted explaining that voice recorders recovered after plane crashes established that co-pilots noticing errors by the pilot failed to speak up or were bullied into silence by the pilot, resulting in the crash of the plane.

Relevance of Studies of Human Obedience to Dog Training

The concept of destructive obedience is relevant to dog training because dogs routinely suffer physically, psychologically and emotionally when guardians follow the directions of instructors who advise the use of aversive techniques.

For example, obedience of pet dog guardians to their instructors can lead to dogs being hung (generally by a choke chain) with their feet off the ground, locked in crates and only released when “working,” shocked using an electronic collar, “alpha rolled” (when a person forcibly rolls a dog onto its back and holds the dog in that position), and scruff shaken (when a person grabs a dog by both sides of the face and shakes the dog). When pet dog guardians follow instructions to use these practices, they can cause physical and psychological damage to their dogs. Obedience can even kill; many dogs have been killed because obedient owners complied when an instructor labeled the dog “dominant” and recommended euthanasia.

In some class environments, instructors do not permit any challenges to their authority from other instructors or from pet dog guardians. They may have prepared replies to discourage objections from their students and they may select for obedience in their staff by firing, or not employing, staff who do not follow instructions precisely.

Milgram’s findings that “obedient” subjects wanted to please the experimenter are interesting because it is likely that many people who train their dogs wish to please their instructor. Such people may even be prepared to follow an instructor’s directions that could result in harm to their dog.

Milgram’s studies showed that proximity of the subject to the victim seemed to make it harder for the subject to shock the victim. In dog training, proximity to the “victim” (dog) may be less of a buffer against destructive obedience than in studies with human victims because dogs are a different species. In his book *The Inner*

Ape, De Waal (2005) explains that there may be some cross-species barriers when analyzing facial expressions of different species.

Experimental Studies of Social Role Designation

In 1971, social psychologist Philip Zimbardo designed the Stanford Prison experiment. The study was never completed, but it gave humans profound insight into their own behavior. College students who replied to a newspaper advertisement were randomly assigned to be prisoners or guards. In this case, the authority was the role assigned to the students by Zimbardo, and all of the prison guards were obedient to their roles.

The local police agreed to “arrest” the prisoner students in an attempt to make the experiment more realistic. Prisoners were required to wear smocks with numbers sewn on them and nylon stockings over their heads to create the appearance of a shaved head. The guards operated on 8-hour shifts and were empowered to create their own rules.

Most prison guards became abusive toward their prisoners. Within one day, the guards’ behaviors had shifted to “dominating, powerful and coercive” (Blass, 2000). Day by day, the guards steadily increased their coercion and aggressive practices, which humiliated and dehumanized the prisoners. Zimbardo wrote, “within 36 hours after being arrested, the first prisoner had to be released because of extreme stress reactions of crying, screaming, cursing and irrational actions that seemed pathological.” He went on to say, “a fifth prisoner was released after he broke out in a full body rash following the rejection of his appeal for a parole by our mock parole board” (Blass, 2000). Only 6 days into the experiment, Zimbardo ended the study. He explained, “we had to do so because too many normal young men were behaving pathologically as powerless prisoners or as sadistic, all-powerful guards” (Blass, 2000). Zimbardo noted that much time and effort had gone into the selection process, which chose only the “most normal, healthy and well-adjusted college students.”

While some guards did not choose to treat prisoners in sadistic ways, none of the “good” guards ever refused an order by a sadistic guard, nor did they “intervene to stop or prevent despicable behavior by another guard” (Blass, 2000).

Relevance of Social Role Designation to Dog Training

The Stanford Prison experiment provides further evidence that obedience to people in positions of authority can have unfortunate consequences. It also showed that complete empowerment of one human over another can lead to abuse. Although the subjects were “normal, healthy and well-adjusted” people, they were capable of abusive behavior when put in a position of authority. Dogs are expected to be both obedient and completely subordinate to human will. This may make dogs particularly vulnerable to abuse by humans.

The Stanford Prison Experiment also demonstrated how social role designation can have extremely destructive consequences. Social dominance theory (also known as “pack theory”), which places dogs and guardians in “dominant” and “subordinate” roles, is frequently misused, and guardians are told that they must behave in a way that is dominant in relation to the dog. By assigning the guardian the role of being dominant, dog trainers may be setting dogs up for abuse. Dominance implies power, and the Stanford Prison Experiment and other prisoner abuses have shown a tendency of people to become abusive when empowered over another being (Zimbardo, 2004). James O’Heare (2003), in his book *Dominance Theory in Dogs*, says that, as a result of dominance theory being introduced into the dog training world, “People started using dominance theory to justify dominating their dogs and relationships were hopelessly ruined and many dogs killed because they were labelled dominant. They were dominant because they walked through doors first or pulled on leash. It created a combative, adversarial and confrontational relationship between humans and companion dogs.”

Human Cognitive Processes that May Contribute to Forceful Training

Deindividuation and Dehumanization

Conditions that lead to the use of aggression, according to Zimbardo (1999), are deindividuation and dehumanization. People deindividuate other humans by placing them in groups that they themselves do not belong to, frequently put them in uniforms (for example, as in prisons), and at times will disguise them. According to Zimbardo, “taken together, these actions will deindividuate them and also reduce the [cognitive] information processing.” This means that by modifying a person’s appearance (deindividuating), the people in positions of power are less likely to cognitively process whether the disempowered individuals are being treated kindly or respectfully.

Dogs are not humans, but it seems logically possible that by disallowing individual differences, by categorizing a dog as an “animal” as if humans are not animals, humans are capable of the same process of deindividuation with dogs as has been seen in history and experiments with other humans. Speciesism can make abuse seem more acceptable. When people refer to dogs as “just a dog” or when dog emotions or feelings are ignored, deindividuation and (for lack of a better term) dehumanization are in operation. This mental baseline sets the stage for inhumane training.

Since dehumanization is at work when humans aggress toward other humans, it seems probable that a dehumanization dynamic is occurring when people choose to train dogs with physical violence. Albert Bandura and his colleagues (1975) conducted a study in which the researchers examined the minimal conditions necessary to create dehumanization in people. Focusing on the manipulation of perceptions of one group of college students towards another, the researchers instructed one group to teach the other group by collectively shocking them when they made mistakes. The shock box had 10

levels of intensity that could be delivered for errors in any one of the 10 trials. Bandura et al. deceived one group of students regarding the other group by allowing the teaching group to overhear the assistant say one of three phrases to the experimenter. The first, which was neutral, was “the subjects from the other school are here.” The second, which was humanizing, was “the subjects from the other school are here, they seem nice.” The third phrase, which was dehumanizing, was “the subjects from the other school are here, they seem like animals.” The teaching group never saw the learning group and never had any direct contact with them, so this was the only information they had about the other group.

The results of this study showed that the students who heard the third (dehumanizing) phrase increased the intensity of the shock after each subsequent trial. They were able to justify higher levels of shock by attributing blame to the victim; since the subjects were “like animals,” it became more personally acceptable for them to administer the shocks. The elevated shock intensity was statistically relevant over the neutral control group. The humanizing label was found to reduce aggression significantly below the level of the neutral control.

Assuming that there is a parallel between human-to-human aggression and human-to-dog aggression, it could be postulated that the dynamic of dehumanization may be, in part, responsible for forceful dog training.

Moral Justification

Moral justification—the act of cognitively justifying the use of violence against another being—may also come into play in dog training. How many times have trainers heard that the use of shock or other means of aversive stimulation is justified on the basis of saving the dog’s life? Bandura (1999) says, “people do not ordinarily engage in harmful conduct until they have justified to themselves the morality of their actions. In this process of moral justification, detrimental conduct is made personally and socially acceptable by portraying it as serving socially worthy and moral purposes.”

Minimizing and Ignoring

Bandura (1999) describes minimizing, ignoring and misconstruing consequences as detrimental effects that can contribute to victimization. Minimizing refers to the aggressor diminishing any sort of stress, pain or suffering that the aggressive actions are creating. A shock becomes “stimulation” or a shock collar becomes an “e-collar,” terms that attempt to minimize the painful effects that the dog actually experiences. People use deceptive rhetorical devices such as these to minimize the moral content of their actions.

Ignoring is another dynamic that enables trainers to use force. By simply ignoring the signs of stress and focusing on other desired things, such as the suppression of the unwanted behavior, the trainer can choose not to pay attention to yelps of pain. This ignoring creates a cognitive bias that allows people to attend to data that supports their own preconceptions and avoid data that refutes it.

Ideas for Hope

Critical Thinking and Personal Responsibility

People abdicate responsibility for their actions as a means of protecting themselves emotionally from guilt. By abdicating responsibility, they place distance between themselves and the pain they caused another person or animal (Bandura, 1999; Bandura et al., 1975). This is a potentially dangerous dynamic that may cause harm to dogs.

Critical thinking and personal responsibility are the keys to empowering guardians and trainers to think independently, rather than obediently following what is recommended or popular. Guardians and trainers should also take responsibility for their actions, promote the concept of taking responsibility and encourage critical thinking.

Win/Win Scenarios

One way to prevent abuse is to advocate win/win training. Win/win training presents a theory of behavior change that empowers both the dog and the trainer. The goal of all interactions is that both the dog and the trainer win (Steinker, 2006). Contrary to what some trainers and guardians believe, dog training is not a zero-sum game in which someone must lose for someone else to win. In most interactions between humans and dogs, it is possible to find behavioral solutions that enable both the dog and the human to attain what they desire. This is a win/win situation.

Encouraging humans to find the win/win solution to human–dog interactions can be a key component of preventing abuse. By focusing on finding the win/win scenario, the issue of dominance and its potential abuse is reduced.

Self-awareness and Awareness of the Dog's Wellbeing

Self-awareness enables dog trainers to know when a technique they have just used may have had a cathartic effect because it is negatively reinforced. O’Heare (2007) describes how this can establish a cycle of countercontrol; that is, “some irritating behavior resulting in an aversive intervention is negatively reinforced, which stimulates countercontrol measures in the dog, which is also negatively reinforced, which begins a cycle of countercontrol measures and negative reinforcement.”

Self-awareness also prevents a trainer from blaming the dog for training or handling errors. If trainers are aware of the dog and are able to read the dog’s body language and facial expressions, they can evaluate whether the training technique is causing stress and are then in a position to modify the training process to minimize or eliminate stress.

Education

In his 1999 article, “Transforming people into perpetrators of evil,” Philip Zimbardo

discusses peer pressure as a compelling factor in aggressive acts committed by some people. Zimbardo goes on to say that “perpetrators never see their acts as evil deeds.” This statement seems to imply that some dog training clients may opt to use aggression or pain in modifying their dog’s behavior, never recognizing their acts as abusive. It seems that it is imperative to educate clients that positive reinforcement methods are available and that these methods are equally or more effective (O’Heare, 2004, 2007). Most clients would then probably choose the nonaggressive and painless option of dog training. Education also can give people insight into reading signs of stress in dogs; they are then able to choose training methods that minimize stress rather than trigger it (Steinker, 2006).

Education also seems a likely option to inoculate humans against using deindividuation and dehumanization. Bandura (1999) explains that “psychological theorizing and research tends to emphasize how easy it is to bring the worst out in people through dehumanization and other self-exonerative means.... What is rarely noted is the equally striking evidence that most people refuse to behave cruelly, even under unrelenting authoritarian commands, if the situation is personalized by having them inflict pain by direct personal action rather than remotely and if they see the suffering they cause” (Bandura et al., 1975; Milgram, 1974). Bandura refers to this as the power of humanization. As professional trainers, we frequently discourage the use of humanization. Yet it seems to me that what we ought to be doing is encouraging humanization but discouraging projection. Projection is the psychological process by which we attribute our own emotions to that of another being. When a guardian informs us that a dog deliberately urinated in his shoe, this is likely to be a projection and possibly destructive to the dog behavior change process. But when a guardian recognizes that their dog is an individual being with thoughts and feelings, this seems to me to be constructive humanization that should be encouraged, and that will safeguard against abuse and violent dog training techniques.

Once again, education can serve to enlighten trainers and guardians and avoid the use of aversives with dogs. Gaining an awareness of psychological dynamics that can create moral justification also seems a potentially successful means of guarding against violence in dog training. Being aware of these dynamics makes them less likely to occur. Understanding that they are common methods used by people to justify violence against other people, and assuming one's principled values are nonviolent in nature, one can then use this awareness to break the pattern and assume new, more dog-friendly behaviors.

Furthermore, an understanding of the principles of behavior and the power of positive reinforcement can encourage more dog-friendly choices. Murray Sidman, author of *Coercion and Its Fallout*, puts it this way, "Just as the givers of shocks become shocks themselves, the givers of positive reinforcers become positive reinforcers themselves." Sidman (2000) coined the term "fallout." Fallout refers to the secondary detrimental effects of aversive or coercive stimulation. One component of fallout is social disruption and problematic respondent conditioning. For example, if jumping up is followed with a knee to the chest, the dog will associate the unpleasant experience with the agent administering it, which will cause disruptive effects on the relationship, potentially including aggressive countercontrol behaviors. In other words, if you use aversives as part of the learning process, then you yourself will become aversive to the student, whether that student be a human or dog. Likewise if you use positive reinforcement, this is also associated with you, via classical conditioning, and you become positively reinforcing to the learner.

As shown by the Stanford Prison Experiment, recommending that a guardian be dominant over a dog sets the stage for the use of aversives, which creates fallout.

Conclusion

Both the Milgram studies and the Stanford Prison Experiment show us a potential dark side of being human with regard to methods used in dog training. Professional dog trainers are in a position of authority with clients, and the research reviewed here indicates that this is a significant responsibility. As dog trainers and authority figures, we must adhere to a strict code of ethics to prevent dogs from being trained using pain and stress in contrast to fun and play. Many clients will be willing to obediently coerce their dogs if told to do so by an authority figure when they would normally be inclined not to do so. People often seek to please authority figures (positive reinforcement), avoid embarrassment (negative reinforcement) involved in refusing to follow the dog trainer's recommendations, and carry out various self-deceptive cognitive processes that promote destructive obedience. It is vital for professional dog trainers to empower guardians to use their judgment, take personal responsibility for what they do to their dog and avoid common cognitive pitfalls that can lead to abusive treatment of dogs. Clients need to be armed with powerful and effective positive-reinforcement-based methods and the courage to use them in accordance with a win/win principle of dog training. This will serve clients well throughout the life of their relationship with their dog and future dogs.

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