

## Response to Comments

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The reviewers of “A Fresh Look at the Wolf-Pack Theory of Companion-Animal Dog Social Behavior” (van Kerkhove, 2004/*this issue*) raise issues worthy of further consideration and investigation. Mertens (2004/*this issue*) and Wright (2004/*this issue*) refer to the role of domestication and breed differences. These excellent observations are not inconsistent with the suggestion that a behavior-analytic approach to dog aggression has much to offer. Dogs’ genetic makeup and overall physiology interact with their personal history to determine their behavior. The difficulty of course is that, at present, little can be done about an individual dog’s genetic makeup, whereas contingencies in the dog’s environment are open to direct manipulation. This fact does not deny any role for genes and past history; it simply is a matter of pragmatics: We can control environmental contingencies, but we cannot control the role of genes and past history.

A theme running through all the reviews is that of caregiver competence in implementing clinical interventions. Mertens (2004/*this issue*) and King (2004/*this issue*) found owner compliance to be one of the biggest challenges to the success of behavioral interventions. This is an enormously important point. An otherwise effective behavior change program that is too hard for the average owner to implement is doomed to fail. The extent to which advice to clients must be dispensed in small increments and monitored closely deserves empirical investigation.

Mertens (2004/*this issue*) makes another important point in noting that specific contexts—proximity to coveted resources and arousal or excitement level—often precipitate fights. The importance of antecedent events is part and parcel of the behavior-analytic perspective I advocated in my essay. Identification of the antecedent events that trigger fighting often can provide simple solutions: elimination of the known triggers.

Each of the reviewers expresses the view that the “unimodal” approach discussed in the article is too limited. I would argue that there is nothing unimodal about the general behavior-analytic perspective advocated. It is simply an empirical question awaiting objective investigation as to whether something beyond the behavior-analytic perspective is necessary for success. Clearly, Wright (2004/*this issue*) and King (2004/*this issue*) think that it is, sharing the opinion that conditioning methods in conjunction with other techniques—such as owner support of the dominant dog’s status—are more effective than conditioning methods alone.

Mertens (2004/*this issue*) has reservations on the matter, noting that owners find supporting the dominant dog hard to do, and suggests, “A resulting lack of compliance may be part of the reason that this approach leads to marked improvement or resolution in only 56% to 74% of the cases” (p. 290). Wright (2004/*this issue*) seems to think that combining the two approaches educates owners about the concept of different social roles and role-appropriate behaviors and that somehow this improves the overall success of the intervention program. It is unclear, however, exactly how adding the endorsement and enforcement of the dominance relationship affects what the owners—or their dogs—do and how it differs objectively from using only conditioning procedures. King (2004/*this issue*) does not precisely describe why she is uncomfortable with the behavior modification protocol alone but does state that owner compliance in carrying out systematic desensitization and counterconditioning routines is poor. Thus, the issues of owner compliance, knowledge, understanding, and skill come up again—this time as a factor impeding a scientific judgment on the relative merits of prescribed intervention strategies.

When it comes to intervening effectively on interdog aggression in the family home, both clinicians and clients clearly still have much to learn. The intent of my original essay was simply to suggest that there may be more—or perhaps less—to the wolf-pack model of dog social behavior as it has been conventionally described and that we should, therefore, be wary of becoming complacent about it. I believe the reviewers have helped me make that point, and I thank them for their thoughtful comments.

## REFERENCES

- King, T. (2004/*this issue*). Comment on van Kerkhove’s commentary. *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*, 7, 293–294.
- Mertens, P. (2004/*this issue*). Comment on van Kerkhove’s commentary. *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*, 7, 287–291.
- van Kerkhove, W. (2004/*this issue*). A fresh look at the wolf-pack theory of companion-animal dog social behavior. *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*, 7, 279–285.
- Wright, J. (2004/*this issue*). Comment on van Kerkhove’s commentary. *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*, 7, 295–298.