

# BREAKING BAD DOG-SCIENCE

## Sara Muncke Rescue Dog advisor to the PETbc

Reviews Dr John Bradshaw's Questionable  
Science on Dominance in dogs and in relation  
to dogs in rescue centres

## Pet Education Training & Behaviour Council

Britain's leader in training  
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A Specialist Teacher for  
Autism in Children

**Sara** is a UK authority in dog  
behaviour and has specifically  
designed new modern methods in dog  
behaviour to help keep dogs in their  
current homes.

Sara particularly enjoys working with  
and training dogs with severe  
behavioural problems and  
rehabilitating and re homing dogs and  
working with the new owners over a pe-  
riod of time to ensure successful  
permanent homes.

Sara is also a qualified teacher and has  
spent many years teaching children with  
additional needs including Downs  
Syndrome, Autism and Dyslexia.

Her wide range of teaching and  
communication skills has proved a great  
asset for her canine behavioural and  
training work and the teaching of new  
owners.



**Sara Muncke B.Ed (Hons)**  
MCFBA. MGoDT (MT)



**Education and Rescue Welfare  
Consultant**

Sara has over 30 years experience in animal rescue work  
and the  
management and care of dogs. For the past 20 years  
Sara has been the manager of an independent canine  
welfare home.

Over her career Sara has assessed over 20,000 dogs on  
behalf of Chilterns Dog Rescue Society. Dog rescue, dog  
training and behaviour are not words that most  
people would normally expect to see in the same  
sentence.

However, Sara ensures that the staff at her  
organisation are aware that behaviour and training go  
hand in hand, in order to achieve a happy outcome for  
the dogs in their care.

**Sara is a Member of the Canine and Feline Behaviour  
Association the GODT, she is Pet Education Training &  
Behaviour Council Rescue Dog advisor and council  
member.**

*"An acceptance of the construct of dominance  
should never be regarded as synonymous with  
Punishment."*

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## Response to J Bradshaw's Research: Dominance in domestic dogs

Prof. Bradshaw's research and interpretation of observable behaviours between dogs and the perceived significance of this research to dog owners and dog trainers and behaviourists attracted my interest because I have lived with dogs all my life.

As the project was undertaken with a group of dogs at a rescue organisation, this research intrigued me further because I have worked and trained with rescue dogs for thirty five years. I had anticipated that Prof. Bradshaw's study and analysis of canine behaviour might reflect my own understanding, shaped by work with the thousands of dogs I have overseen in rescue and perhaps enhance my care of the dogs at the rescue centre I have managed for twenty years. I also expected that he would allow professionals to examine his work and perhaps reproduce it for scientific analysis but he has not produced the data required despite being asked over two years ago. This makes

his results most  
questionable.

"Once you have generated a hypothesis, the process  
of hypothesis testing becomes important"

I hoped that other aspects  
of this study would support

the vital work undertaken by behavioural practitioners such as myself to improve canine behaviours causing conflict, abandonment and in the worst scenarios, potentially euthanasia. However, this was not the case; in fact the reverse appears to be true.

Reading Prof. Bradshaw's research, a marked dichotomy in thinking and practice was immediately apparent between the conclusions drawn by Prof. Bradshaw and his team and the opinions of many leading canine professionals. I therefore looked in detail at the study and the inferences drawn from the observed canine interactions to establish where the main sources of contention lay and base my comments on my own practical experience of multiple dog ownership, rescue centre employment and behavioural training expertise for dogs with all levels of canine behavioural issues.

Having considered the structure of the study, I feel the context of the research is hugely significant to the observations made and the conclusions drawn from these. Life at a



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rescue centre revolves around the intake, care and rehoming of dogs that, for various reasons, find themselves in need of a fresh start in life. The day-to-day care of the dogs including feeding, cleaning and veterinary attention forms one aspect of the management of the dogs, the other essential component of rescue work is having a sound understanding of the psychological state of every dog within that organisation. For any given dog this will be determined by a number of different factors, each capable of being of greater or lesser intensity and of having more or less impact on other aspects of the dogs mental state and behaviour.

Among these I would list the breed/breed-type, age, temperament and background of the dog including any efforts made by the ex-owner relating to socialisation, exercise, training and/ or rehabilitation. Some dogs are brought to the rescue centre by responsible owners who have made every effort to care for their pet well and who are able to give a full and frank account of their strengths and weaknesses; the rehoming may just be prompted by a change in personal circumstances.



Other dogs will arrive with owners who have not provided satisfactory living conditions for their dog, have not met some or any of their needs and who are not well placed to communicate relevant background details. The largest proportion of dogs may be admitted as strays or from dog pounds and it is therefore not possible to access any prior details about them.



Regardless of the history of any dog, it is the duty of designated rescue centre staff to assess each dog as an individual, to put a structure in place to meet its particular needs and advance it towards a successful rehoming. As previously indicated, there is often not much background information on which to base such assessments and what is available should be tested to check its veracity.

The most effective rescue centres therefore rely heavily on the experience and expertise of their staff to assess dogs in a range of formal and informal situations - in kennels, on walks, with volunteers, at play, during structured training opportunities and in behavioural training sessions designed to test for and/or improve certain canine behaviours. Assessments not only help to ensure the right care for each dog but also to meet the legal responsibilities associated with rescue and rehoming. Rescue work by its very nature is a risky business because you are dealing with so many unknowns and so many different contexts. Failure to recognise, minimise and manage risk will inevitably result in staff, the public and dogs being placed in unacceptable and potentially dangerous circumstances which could easily create major legal ramifications.

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Rescue centre staff become very adept at assessing the dogs and understanding the strengths and limitations and it is this knowledge and experience I have applied to all aspects of the Bradshaw study.

Experimental design is crucial as, without proper consideration, the outcome of the experiment can be predetermined by that very design. Given this, I would suggest that the design of the experiment leaves it open to criticism on a number of levels.

The number of dogs in need of rescue far exceeds the volume of space available. While it is important that, wherever possible, dogs move on to appropriate new homes at the earliest opportunity, there is always likely to be a residue of long stay dogs that will be more difficult to place.

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These may be elderly dogs, dogs with medical conditions, health issues, challenging behaviours or of certain breeds. Different

strategies are applied at different centres with many adopting a non-destruct policy and keeping some dogs indefinitely, often funded through sponsorship schemes. While willing to participate in the study, it would seem reasonable to question whether the sample of dogs selected for the survey was entirely random. It is unclear whether the nineteen dogs in the study represented all the dogs at the centre at that time or only a proportion of those being cared for. If the latter is the case, some pre-study selection must have been made from the available total.

For the reasons previously outlined, centre staff would have got to know their dogs over the extended time they had been in kennels and formed various opinions about them. No responsible rescue centre would want to jeopardise the welfare of their dogs and therefore some assessment of risk would surely have been made, with decisions taken accordingly. In other words, the choice of dogs could have been made on the basis that, in the opinion of those who knew them best, they did not pose an overt risk to each other. Any aggressive dogs with perceived dominance issues would not have been released to prevent fighting so this does not constitute a representative group and this would have distorted the results of the survey.



It is also significant that the group of dogs selected was described as 'semi-permanent'; twelve out of nineteen had been at the centre for more than five years and some of the rest for at least six months. The high proportion of long stay dogs is, I feel, pertinent to the outcomes recorded. In these statistics alone, it can be deduced that more than 50% of the dogs were adult, if not mature or possibly even elderly which has implications for the overall conclusions of the survey. Not only is the age of the dogs significant, the gender of the dogs is also relevant. Nineteen neutered male dogs is totally unrepresentative of a natural canine grouping which naturally tends to centre around dominant bitches, their puppies and to include adult dogs of different ages, all un-neutered. Castration diminishes male

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tendencies and a significant reduction in male hormones within the social group will affect behaviour to some degree, which is one of the reasons neutering is promoted by rescue organisations. That is not to say competitive and aggressive behaviours are exclusive to un-neutered dogs, but in this survey of only neutered males, testosterone levels had been artificially reduced, natural sexual tensions created by male/female interactions removed and the extremely powerful influence exerted by many mature bitches within a group structure was not considered. Sexual rivalries were not a contributory factor to the outcomes of the survey nor were innate protective maternal behaviours since there were no bitches or puppies.

As the study group were semi-permanent, it is possible these dogs were familiar with each other to some extent already as many rescue centres like to give dogs opportunities to socialise and play together. Until staff are satisfied with the interactions between pairs or groups of dogs, these socialisation sessions will be closely supervised but may be increasingly less so as staff gain confidence in that particular mix of dogs. If the study group had had previous contact with each other, then it would be safe to suggest any minor disputes would have been resolved. This may be achieved through the balancing nature of the pack and/or else the attendant staff who should have corrected dogs for untoward behaviour towards each other unless, in my opinion, they

were remiss in their management of the dogs. In other words, these long term dogs had already sorted out their rank naturally or had received conditional training to stop any dominance displays so they could be managed during their stay at the rescue centre and be considered for rehoming.



With the reputation of the rescue centre to consider and the welfare of the dogs of paramount concern, I would suggest it would have been unwise to include any dogs with a

history of high dominance or aggression towards fellow dogs and, if this was the case, again this would make it an unrepresentative reflection of canine status issues.

If, as I indicate, some or all of the dogs had met before or had been pre-selected in some manner, it is also possible they were familiar with the paddock in which they were released. One third of an acre is a relatively small space, especially for so many dogs, but, if after the initial excitement of entry, they did not use the whole space, it may be that they were accustomed to this environment.

The only unfamiliar elements may have been the observers themselves who were trying to be as neutral as possible so as not to influence the dogs' behaviour, they would quickly cease to be of any interest or threat to the dogs. The reaction one would

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anticipate would be for the majority of dogs to just congregate near the observers to see if they did anything interesting, threatening or curious. Without further stimulus from them the dogs would quickly move to a quiet, calm, if watchful, position – the result of the classic 'ignore' approach in many respects.

Creating selective social groups of dogs is something that is undertaken at my rescue centre every day. The choice of which dogs to mix is of critical importance to ensure that the best results are achieved and that the experience contributes to the positive development of every dog involved. This may be with pairs of dogs, or small groups up to about eight dogs simultaneously. Balanced 'stooge' dogs are used to accustom less socially adept dogs to new skills and the overall composition of the group is considered and fine tuned at every stage. Bradshaw's classification of three groups of dogs - 'hermits' (dogs that opt out and avoid contact with other dogs), 'outsiders' (dogs showing one or no dominant relationships) and 'insiders' (dogs with significant dominant relationships and no subordinate relationships) is a pattern that I recognise from my own work. The 'hermits' are often submissive dogs with little or no experience of canine interaction, they have never learned the social cues of the dog world and therefore elect to dis-engage with the rest of the group. In the course of their development some of these dogs may go on to demonstrate nervously aggressive tendencies, especially if their behavioural training is rushed. A few at the opposite end of the spectrum may watch and wait and then identify a moment to launch what might appear to the uninitiated to be a completely unprovoked attack on another dog or a person.

I have witnessed this highly dominant behaviour with a few dogs including German Shepherds, Golden Retrievers, an Akita, a Boxer and some Terriers but it is a relatively rare event and dogs falling into this category would have undoubtedly made their presence felt within the six month time frame of the shortest stay dogs in the survey.

Given the proper support, the majority of submissive 'hermits' will learn to integrate and to give and receive canine signals appropriately and take up other positions within the canine hierarchy. 'Outsiders', as evidenced by David's scores, are dogs with innate or conditioned submissive behaviours that rarely seek to dominate other dogs. Numbers of such dogs will mix and match quite readily provided they all recognise a dominant dog within the group to which they defer (possibly Bradshaw's eighth dog or its interactive partner) and/or are under the influence of a handler capable of controlling the group. It is to be expected that the 'insiders' demonstrate almost all the apparently competitive interactions, regularly and subtly testing their status against other naturally dominant dogs and from time to time reminding the rest of the group of their rank.



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Bradshaw states that, 'Overall, the pattern of individual relationships can possibly be interpreted in terms of the Insider dogs. These were competitive between themselves but... no overall structure had emerged.'

In fact the observations which enabled Bradshaw to attribute the dogs to different groups strongly infers that these dogs had already made significant steps towards recognising and accepting their status within the group. If the dogs were reasonably familiar with each other and/or of a balanced nature; there would be little requirement for individual dogs to display overt postures of dominance or submission than those noted by the observers and discussed above. No extreme behaviour from the dogs was noted because the circumstances of their situation and the study did not



require it from them; the big battles may already have been won and lost or just not necessary. Communication between all dogs would nevertheless be ongoing and, above and beyond the recorded 'confident behaviours' of which Bradshaw highlights as 'growl, inhibited bite, stand over, mount, stare at, chase, bark at' and the 'submissive behaviours' including 'crouch, avoid, displacement lick/yawn, run away', a raft of other body language would also be taking place between the various dyads and the group as a whole. The presence and energy of certain dogs can be the most subtle communication between the pack members, easy to miss or misinterpret by observers with a check list, and yet immensely powerful and controlling.

After commenting on the dynamics of the 'insiders' and interactions of the minority of 'hermits' and the majority of 'outsiders', Bradshaw concludes that, 'In essence, relationships appeared to operate at the dyad level, without any overriding structure'. To draw this conclusion from the observations made of the interactions between various dyads seems to take no account of the much deeper and more complex relationships groups of dogs achieve and to ignore the evidence that even within this unrepresentative sample, some hierarchical relationships clearly existed.

While it is true that, in many respects, these dogs in rescue were in a very alien situation, after six months or five years, this would none the less be a fairly predictable environment for them. I hesitate to say the dogs were institutionalised, but the stresses and uncertainties of life on the street, in a home (often turbulent and chaotic from a dog's perspective) or in a wild pack, simply would not exist. Hierarchical disputes, or inter pack dominance issues, are often triggered by a particular stimulus or conflict point; for dogs this can be food, personal space, toys, entering and exiting doorways,

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the initial excitement of a walk etc. Rescue centre staff work to teach dogs how to cope better with such triggers and, just as importantly, to advise adopters on the management of dogs to reduce the risk of conflict points at home.

It would appear the dogs in the study had the minimum of trigger points to concern them. They were not hungry; rescue dogs are generally well fed in their kennel at least once every day, there was no competition for food resources, no particular drive to hunt or scavenge and, as semi –permanent dogs, a certainty that the next meal was not far away. No games were played that would stimulate competitive play which sometimes spills over into aggression and there were no recorded items within the compound that might elicit a possessive response. The enclosure itself was unchallenging and even familiar. It appears the rescue centre had excelled in providing a safe, comfortable, secure, bland, and non-competitive environment for these dogs where they could relax and gently interact with the minimum effort but an unrealistic representation of the ancestral social groupings from which dogs have evolved.

The focus of Prof. Bradshaw's study then turns from an analysis of the observations made of the dogs to a discussion of the nature of dominance with reference to various alternative models of interaction highlighting the significance of contextual and physiological factors present when two dogs first encounter. From this Bradshaw concludes that 'When dogs are able to express their social and sexual behaviour with minimal interference from man, there is no evidence they adopt a wolf-type social structure... Neutering appears to disrupt sociality further still, to the point where hierarchies may no longer be discernible.' Having dismissed the traditional wolf-based analogy as outmoded, together with the contribution made by the presumption of canine hierarchy to the understanding, management and training of dogs, Bradshaw concludes, 'It is therefore doubtful whether the concept of 'dominance' can make any useful contribution to explaining dog – dog aggression and is therefore even less likely to be applicable to aggression directed at humans'.

Arguing against the use of the term 'dominance' in dog behaviour in a theoretical forum is largely a question of semantics and academic debate. The danger of this for canine professionals working with real dogs with real teeth is that Bradshaw's views do not add anything to the day to day work they undertake. The term 'dominant' can be substituted for words like assertive, confident, pushy, boisterous, challenging, even dangerous in some cases, when describing canine behaviours to people and other dogs.

The language may affect how handlers, owners and trainers may regard an individual dog but the terminology in no way changes how the dog behaves and the amount of damage it can potentially inflict.

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In his study, Bradshaw draws earlier research to support his view that 'dominance' should be used to describe the quality of a relationship between two dogs and is affected by factors including physiological state, social circumstance and specific learning opportunities.' The authors would argue, therefore, that the use of the expression 'dominant' dog is meaningless.' The majority of behavioural trainers do

recognise that social interactions between dogs and between dogs and people are affected by context and adjust their training and support to take this into account.

I believe that many have come into contact with dogs that have inherently dominant characteristics. The outcome of prior experiences may reinforce or diminish an individual dog's explicit behaviours. However, even where the appropriate socialisation, training and management does take place, I believe the underlying natural propensity to be dominant remains. To give two examples, my colleague and I hand reared a litter of eleven Terrier X puppies after they were rejected by their mother after being born by emergency caesarean section.

Right from the beginning, Cleo, one of four female puppies, demonstrated behaviours which could be categorised as dominant - despite being the smallest in size, she was more lively, more active and was described by the staff as 'generally more full-on.' She would always seek a central place in the bundle of puppies, climbing on top of the others to reach the place she wanted to be and pushing the others out of the way to get there. By the time the puppies were being weaned, she was always to be found in the food bowl with her legs spread wide to claim as much food as possible and sometimes growling to ward off her siblings. Cleo was very carefully rehomed with an experienced owner who took her to socialisation and training classes at the earliest opportunity as well as offering her an active country lifestyle. Cleo has continued to be challenging to the point where she came back to us for further behavioural training to help her owner cope with her difficult and demanding behaviour.

A second litter of five crossbred puppies was brought up in the Rescue Centre office under the constant scrutiny of rescue centre staff. One female puppy, Harper, stood out from the beginning. She was born first and showed the same range of behaviours as Cleo. This litter had the benefit of a caring mother and Harper was generally to be found in prime position between her front legs where she received the maximum attention. Like Cleo, Harper was naturally assertive and a suitable adopter had to be selected for her. Ongoing training has helped to address issues such as extreme mouthing and attention seeking but Harper continues to be a dog that constantly tests all the social and physical boundaries in her life.

The reason I cite these particular cases is because they were litters of puppies that were extremely well-known to rescue centre staff. The development and behaviour of the individual puppies in each litter was closely monitored from birth and continues post homing. The presence of a caring mother or not provided an interesting contrast but did

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not seem to make a material difference to the intrinsic dominance of particular puppies which still continues.

Fortunately the quality of homes to which Cleo and Harper were adopted has ensured that while these two dogs are challenging, their needs are understood and met. The implementation of an Intelligent Leadership programme has secured an appropriate position for the dogs within their homes and no aggression issues have surfaced as might otherwise have been the case.

In his book entitled 'In Defence of Dogs' Bradshaw then extends his theory to encompass aspects of practical dog training and makes particular reference to rescue dogs said to be 'problematic... psychologically troubled' and that require a rescue process that is managed carefully if it is not to tip an already fragile personality further towards instability'.

*"The implementation of an Intelligent Leadership programme has secured an appropriate position for the dogs within their homes and no aggression issues have surfaced "*

A carefully managed rescue process is what all good rescue organisations strive to achieve; the provision of a safe, secure, comfortable environment that recognises the widely differing physiological and psychological needs of the variety of dogs for which it will have to cater. Part of this provision is the effective training which I believe is critical to the future success of dogs in their new homes.

A range of training options is required to meet the broad spectrum of needs of the dogs of different ages, types and backgrounds. 'Dominance' is not always synonymous with aggression and the behaviour of dominant dogs can be ameliorated through a variety of measures including the consistent application of appropriate behavioural training.

An understanding of rank and the application of appropriate measures to make a dog safer and more desirable should not be equated to a philosophy of punishment and abuse in the interests of dog training; this is simply not the case and would be the antithesis of the aims of any dog rescue centre or professional dog trainer.

While flawed in many aspects of its design, the important debate Bradshaw has opened has, if anything, united other canine professionals in the view that an awareness of the dog's wolf



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antecedents is relevant in the everyday care and training of both companion and working dogs.

An acceptance of the construct of dominance should never be regarded as synonymous with punishment based training. To suggest this is to denigrate the work of some of the most experienced and effective dog trainers in this country who can offer dogs of all backgrounds and temperaments the possibility of a happy, successful and safe life in a home and as part of a wider community.

**Sara Muncke B.Ed(Hons) MCFBA. MGoDT (MT)**

*Sara has assessed over 20.000 dogs and over a 30 year period personally.*

