Abstracts

1 MAN MEETS WOLF: ETHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES

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What might be the ancestral roots of behaviors that predisposed canines to adapt so well to the living conditions of modern human families? This central question has been explored in diverse ways since the early writings of the classical ethologists and still remains an enigma that stimulates healthy debate. Since Konrad Lorenz published “Man Meets Dog” in the 1960s, substantial additional information has been published on the ecology, behavior, and physiology of wolves. In light of the additional knowledge, ethologists are now in a better position to refine testable hypotheses and identify remaining information gaps. Ethological perspectives address the logic of natural selection by examining the cause, development, evolution, and function of behaviors (Packard, 2003). These 4 basic questions, clarified by Niko Tinbergen, provided a conceptual framework for this review. This review of the peer-reviewed literature integrates insights from personal observations of wolf behavior under conditions ranging from captivity to montane habitat in Yellowstone and arctic tundra on Ellesmere Island. An inductive approach addressed the implications of selection favoring large body size and delayed maturation. The comparative method was used to contrast behavioral tendencies of canine species that vary in body size. Three developmental phases of juvenile wolf behavior occur predictably within a social context where individuals learn the contingencies of interaction with family members and their environment (Packard et al., 1992): (a) milk-dependent (from birth to 5 weeks), (b) transitional (6-9 weeks), and (c) milk-independent (after 10-12 weeks). The working hypothesis that needs to be examined in future research is that the behavioral adaptations of the ancestors of modern canines were shaped by fluctuating environmental conditions. The resulting ability to learn within the social context of an extended family contrasts with the existing instinctive behavioral traits that persist despite artificial selection of domestic canines. Both the flexible and the fixed aspects of canine behaviors may have served as pre-adaptations favoring domestication.

Key words: weaning; suckling; lactation; regurgitation; parent–offspring conflict

References


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