

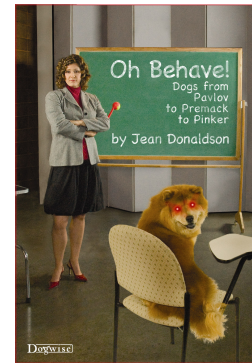
An excerpt from

Oh Behave! Dogs from Pavlov to Premack to Pinker

By Jean Donaldson

Dogwise Publishing. 800-776-2665, www.dogwise.com

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Observation vs. Interpretation

Dear Jean,

Sydney is an eight month old American Cocker. He loves jumping on the bed and walking on my husband and me in the morning. He never jumps on the bed when we're not in it. My class instructor says he thinks he is establishing his dominance and that we should disallow it, crate him overnight and show more leadership. My husband says he's pretending to be hunting for birds. I used to think he was just having fun but I now wonder if Sydney has realized that this is a good way to get our attention. What is he thinking?

I don't know. I can't know. I, you, your husband, your trainer, and the top fifty dog gurus on the planet cannot know what Sydney is thinking. This is not a dodge. In fact, not only is it not a dodge, it's a concession that is made far too seldom in dog behavior circles.

What Sydney is doing—"jumping on the bed when people are in it and walking on the people"—is an observation. We can all witness it, quantify it (how many steps, for how long, at what time of day etc.) and agree that that is what he is doing. In contrast to observations are interpretations, which are attempted explanations about *why* he is doing what he is doing. Interpretations are stabs at the dog's internal events—emotions and thoughts that mediate behavior. These internal events cannot be observed, even with access to brain scanning technology, which can only record correlates (like blood flow in specific regions) to other observable events like behavior or a person's stated thoughts. In the domestic dog behavior community, there is a veritable cottage industry in interpreting what dogs do. The part that concerns me is the way many of these guesses are passed off as fact or strongly supported theory.

No one can "observe" that a dog is establishing dominance or pretending to hunt for birds, thinking a particular thought or even that the dog is thinking at all (including in pictures). These are all interpretations. One *can* observe that a dog

is jumping on a bed and walking around under certain circumstances. One can observe facial expressions, vocalizations and differences in the environment that make him more or less likely to do it or stop doing it. One can then generate hypotheses about why he does it. Interpretations are kind of like hypotheses that never undergo testing the way formal hypotheses do.

Interpretations are useful insofar as they help us "chunk" observations into useful constructs—rather than saying "the dog put his front legs parallel to the ground, opened his mouth on the horizontal axis by two and one half inches past baseline, held his tail at ten degrees past vertical and moved it at a frequency of six cycles per second and an amplitude of..." we say "the dog is soliciting play." This is an interpretation, in this case one that is well supported by replicable observation of what happens next when virtually all dogs do this behavior.

This chunking in turn helps us to understand behavior in a deeper, more meaningful way. The danger with interpretations of hidden events—especially of the "one dog did this once" variety—is that they are notoriously difficult to falsify. No one can prove you wrong. The philosopher Bertrand Russell once mused that there was a small china teapot in perfect elliptical orbit around the sun. No one can prove him wrong so it might very well be there. The question then becomes, "is it likely?" The maxim in science is "big claims need big evidence."

There is some merit to sticking to observations as much as possible and avoiding the temptation to invent interpretations, however intuitive they might feel. This tendency to stick to observations for pragmatic purposes is known as behaviorism. Behaviorism put forward the idea of a black box—the animal's internal machinations—and that understanding of these inner workings were not necessary in order to conceptualize and, ultimately, control behavior. It's not true that

behaviorists deny there is anything going on in the black box of the animal's brain. It's that they don't think it's necessary or particularly relevant when it comes to modifying behavior. Behaviorism has fallen wildly out of favor in psychology, but is extremely useful in one particular domain of relevance to us doggie people: animal training.

Opinions, not surprisingly, differ when it comes to interpreting dog behavior. One fantastic example is dogs that growl, snarl or snap when approached while eating or chewing a bone. An interpreter from the behaviorism school would say "the dog growled when the approacher came within five feet and from the dog's right." Another interpreter would say "the dog is displaying his dominance." The latter would likely lay out a plan to lower the dog's presumed status in the family hierarchy, whereas the behaviorist would lay out a modification strategy to stop the dog growling when he's approached with a bone.

Another example comes from the animal sheltering world. The prevailing culture is one of ascribing character traits rather than describing what dogs do while in the shelter or during an intake test. The very terms used to describe tests that shelters use belie their bias for or against behaviorism. For instance, being of the behaviorist ilk, at the San Francisco SPCA we conduct "Behavior Evaluations," which are quantified tests of what dogs do when, for example, approached while eating, handled on various parts of their body or when meeting another dog. Many other shelters conduct "Temperament Tests," which may use similar scenarios but frame testee responses more in terms of set, unyielding traits the dog has rather than something the dog did. Dogs are "dominant," "submissive," "pushy," etc. rather than *doing* X, Y or Z.

Supporters of the fixed temperament construct feel they have uncovered a dog's immutable essence with the right test, whereas behaviorists are more inclined to think that "this is what the dog did in this circumstance on this day." They will then measure whether this is predictive of behavior in the adopter's home. Behaviorists are also more likely to then ask, "do you want more or less of this behavior" and proceed to change it. Fixed temperament aficionados might feel that a dog who performs well on a temperament test after training or behavior modification has (presumably dangerously) had his true nature masked whereas a

behaviorist would, on the same basis, question the value of the "temperament" construct in this context.

Regardless of who is right, there is no denying that humans are drawn to the idea of "temperament." Humans got in line twice for doses of what psychologists call "theory of mind"—the ability to imagine the internal events of someone else, and we seem to project madly and gleefully across species lines. Discussions about temperament, for instance, are far from unique to dogs. Hamster people don't just describe what hamsters do, they refer to different hamster temperaments, as do hobbyists who are into gerbils, hedgehogs, snakes, salamanders, box turtles, guppies, goldfish, and iguanas ("iguanas that are switched from small cages to free-roaming demonstrate an improvement in temperament"). Even tarantula owners describe their charges as "secretive," "cautious," "methodical," "peaceful," and "spunky" rather than observing and quantifying tarantula behavior. Box turtles are described as "full of personality." Goldfish, too, have "loads of personality" and one even, according to the owner "discovered that bubbles are fun".

Interpreting behavior, quite aside from its usefulness, is so reinforcing to people it is unlikely to diminish any time soon. There are, however, small signs of increasing circumspection about the guesses dog people make about dog behavior, which is no doubt very reinforcing to behaviorists. The bottom line is for all of us to know the difference between observations and interpretations and to be up front about labeling interpretations as such when we make them.

Author **Jean Donaldson** has over 30 years experience in dog behavior and training. As the Founder and Director of the **San Francisco SPCA Academy for Dog Trainers**, Jean leads a new generation of dog trainers to better understanding of the research and science of canine behavior. Jean's award-winning book, *The Culture Clash*, is a pivotal book in the dog trainer's library. She is also featured in *Fighting Dominance in a Dog Whispering World* DVD, *Perfect Paws in 5 Days* DVD, and *Predation in Family Dogs* DVD. Jean lives in the San Francisco area with her Chow, Buffy. Visit www.jeandonaldson.com to keep up to date with Jean and her work.