

The Struggle for Dominance: Fact or Fiction? A Bird's Eye View

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In the field of psychology, an important distinction is made between *behaviors* and *constructs*. In this context, a behavior describes *what* a bird is doing and is defined as something that can be observed and measured. We can see and count the number of times a bird flies off a perch, and we can hear and clock how long a bird screams. Alternatively, a construct is an idea or theory about the mental processes inside an individual that explains *why* or *how* they behave as they do. As such, a construct cannot be observed or measured directly. These explanatory theories are “constructed,” that is, inferred from the outward behaviors we can observe and measure with our senses. You can't touch or measure a bird's dominance, per se, but you can measure how often he bites you when you try to get him off the top of his cage. Height dominance, cage dominance, food dominance, and flock dominance are all examples of many commonly discussed constructs assumed to explain companion parrot behavior.

Admittedly, specialized lingo like “constructs” can be a major turnoff, but sometimes these concepts are so clarifying that it's worth the effort to ponder them. The distinction between behaviors and constructs is part of a larger framework for understanding behavior that is relevant to those of us living with companion parrots. Of course, our goal is always the same: To better interpret why our birds behave the way they do and identify what can be done to decrease the problems they encounter living with us.

Can't Live With `Em or Without `Em

Constructs are useful. When we observe what appears to be a related set or class of behaviors, it is both efficient and compelling to synthesize them according to some unifying process. For example, it is much more succinct to say that a bird is exhibiting “nesting

behaviors” than it is to describe each of the behaviors that comprise this construct. It could take hours to describe the specific individual behaviors of Irene Pepperberg's amazing bird Alex, when what we really want to convey is that this bird is very “intelligent.” Birds are loving, fearful, athletic, zany, all constructs that allow us to convey important information to one another with single words.

But for all their apparent usefulness, constructs present serious obstacles to the pursuit of understanding behavior (human and parrot alike). The first problem is with the very choice of a label that, like a picture, can convey a thousand words— and emotions. Labels evoke powerful impressions about the value of what they describe. These impressions predispose us – no, prejudice us – to interpret behavior in very positive or negative ways. For example, some people describe cockatoo behavior as deliciously cuddly, while others describe the same behavior as overly needy. Are greys cold or independent? Are these good or bad things? Should we try to change or accept them?

The second problem with thinking in terms of constructs rather than observable behaviors is verifiability. Since they describe intangible mental processes that are neither directly observable nor quantifiable it's hard to know, for any given construct, if we are dealing with an explanatory truth or an explanatory fiction. For example, when a bird bites you from the top of his cage, is he exhibiting height dominance, fear, or simple annoyance at being removed or interrupted? How can you tell? As you can see, it is a huge and precarious leap of logic, not science, to jump from observable behaviors to interpreted constructs and there is no surefire way to control the accuracy of the landing.

Finally, the third problem with constructs is that they are tightly bound by our own genetic, cultural, and personal perspective: The Human Perspective. For most of us, thinking outside the proverbial “box” to truly understand a child, spouse, or friend is tough enough. Thinking outside ones own taxonomic class, from *Homo sapiens* to *Aves*, is an extraordinary challenge. Trying to increase our understanding of birds by drawing constructs from the well of human experience is fraught with problems. On the one hand, parrots need all the humanity we can muster in order to thrive in our homes. On the other hand, our uniquely human perspective too often leads us to respond and intervene in inappropriate or even harmful ways. For example, it is not uncommon for new parrot owners to punish their bird for biting when he was merely leading with his beak.

Origins of the Dominance Theory

Within the companion parrot community, it is a commonly held belief that our birds behave from an inherent need to dominate their human flock, that is, to be king of the tree. Many people have described pet parrots as control freaks with authority complexes that are looking for our submissive reactions in order to win the struggle for dominance. It is the glib repetition of this idea, not research, which has given it status as the most proffered explanation for our birds’ noncompliant behaviors.

Strangely, this interpretation of the dominance construct persists in spite of the lack of corroborating evidence from ornithologists, field biologists and wild bird behaviorists who are studying wild parrots. Apparently, in their natural habitat there are no alpha parrots or straight-line hierarchies. Contention between parrots appears to be relatively uncommon and brief with unpredictable outcomes that change with the wind. Life in the wild is simply not as neat as we in the companion world would have it. It is also worth noting that, just like the rest of us, biologists must discipline themselves to resist the allure of going beyond observable behaviors into the realm of explanatory fictions. The history of science is strewn with such errors of interpretation in all fields of study.

It seems that the main basis of the dominance construct applied to companion parrots is the projection of our own domineering behavior. We are, after all, proficient controllers, and the dominance construct is a strikingly human interpretation of what our birds are thinking when they simply decline to step up. It is not without a certain logic; it has a certain utility, but does it lead to the best practices with our companion birds?

Clearly, simple logic and utility is not enough. To advance our understanding of our birds we will need to bring on board the multidisciplinary knowledge of many different fields of study. This was not easily accomplished in the past. However, such a strategy is more possible now than ever before.

So What?

Given that constructs are merely theories about what underlies behavior, it is reasonable to wonder what all this fuss is about. However, the way in which we respond to our birds is strongly influenced by our assumptions about what makes them tick. Interpreting our birds’ noncompliant behavior as a struggle for dominance leads us to naturally respond by picking up the gauntlet, clamping down and meeting the challenge with counter-dominance. How would our responses differ if we interpreted our birds’ refusal to our requests as fear or bird-appropriate self-centeredness or annoyance at our frequent imposition? Misunderstanding what motivates behavior results in missed teaching opportunities and decreases the likelihood that we will respond with appropriate, effective or humane interventions. Perhaps this point can be made clearer with this silly story from our own more familiar human turf:

We know some poor parents whose 3-year old daughter refused to brush her teeth. Every night, when told it was time to go to bed, she ran up the ladder and hid in the farthest corner of the top bunk bed. One night, when her mother stretched up to grab her, the girl bit her! Well, that was the final straw. The parents could not reward such a challenge or show submission to this willful child who had apparently assumed

that her height advantage on the top bunk bed made her the dominant person in the house! So, they took back control assertively and busted her to a futon in the basement. She would never be higher than her parents again. The girl still refuses to brush her teeth but she bites less often now ...

Consider this: When you want to move your bird from his play top to his cage, are you trying to dominate him or do you simply have a different location for him in mind? How is this different than your bird's intention when he declines the offer?

The Point

The point of this article is not to suggest that parrots should be allowed to bite, scream, flee from our hands, or interact with only one person in the family. To be a successful companion, a bird should exhibit none of these behaviors, most of time. Neither is the point to suggest that dominant behavior is completely absent in our captive parrots. At issue here is how best to achieve a repertoire of good companion behavior with our pet birds.

Over the years, there have been many recommended strategies to decrease assumed dominance in pet parrots. For example, to control height dominance, lower your bird's perches to no higher than eye level of the shortest person in the house; to break cage dominance, don't pull your finger away when your bird is biting it; and, to nip flock dominance in the bud, never hold your bird higher than your heart. All of these strategies may have an effect on a bird's behavior but they are neither necessary nor desirable for the long run. More importantly, they do not represent best practices, regardless of what motivates our birds.

Counting both the authors' pet flocks combined, we own nine pet parrots ranging in age from 1 to 13 years old. Represented in these two flocks are Congo and Timneh greys, *Psittacus erithacus erithacus* and *P.e. timenh*, a Severe Macaw, *Ara severa*, an Alexandrine Parakeet, *Psittacula eupatria*, an Umbrella Cockatoo, *Cacatura alba*, a Budgie,

Melopsittacus undaulatus, and a lovebird, *Agopornis*. None of them refuse to come down off their cage tops and all of them can be nuzzled and kissed on tiptoe by all family members including two children. We continue to work with some of the younger birds to better express their dissatisfaction with their voices and not their beaks, and we continue to expand their confidence to interact pleasantly with all friends and strangers. None of this was accomplished overnight; all of this was accomplished in the complete absence of domination and force.

Insights and Strategies

The act and art of great teaching is largely the result of great observation and communication skills. With every interaction, both you and your bird are communicating to one another your personal wants, needs and boundaries. The goal is to use this communication to get the desired behavior by controlling the teaching sequences, not the bird. Consider changing your attitude from demanding compliance to being "blown away" by their willingness to cooperate! Don't lose the feeling of awe that brought you to parrot ownership in the first place.

To devise specific strategies, focus on specific behaviors more than constructs. Insights about the inner workings of our parrots' minds are a luxury, not a necessity, for successful teaching. Analyze the antecedents, that is, the events that occur right before your bird misbehaves and consider how they might be changed to facilitate cooperation. Carefully consider the consequences that follow each specific behavior and arrange them to reward the desired actions not the undesirable ones.

Let's follow one example. Many of us have been frustrated by our bird's refusal to step onto our hands from high perches or cage tops. We expect that a bird should comply because from our point of view there is nothing to fear and nothing to avoid. As with our friends' daughter aloft on the top bunk, there are lots of good reasons why your bird should come down but apparently he doesn't think so. Ask yourself, what is the goal: getting him off his cage at any

cost or being the person he *wants* to come to? Depending on your goal, you will devise different strategies. Of course, we suggest that the goal should always be to avoid force, and facilitate and reward cooperation.

One mistake bird owners frequently make is asking for too much too soon. Don't lose sight of the fact that stepping up when you "reeeeally" don't want to is asking a lot of anyone. Arrange a teaching environment such that your bird is given frequent opportunities to practice complying with your request. Reward each and every act of cooperation. Ask him to step up often just to say "Hello good bird!" and set him down again to continue whatever he was doing. In this way he will look forward to stepping onto your hand as it signals attention without a cost. If the immediate consequence for stepping up is always being returned to his cage, your bird will be less willing to step up in the future. This is a way to inadvertently punish your bird for complying. When you do need to put your bird in his cage, allow sufficient time in your schedule to first reward him with a minute or two of attention or a treat for stepping onto your hand.

Program success by facilitating good behavior, that is, pave the way for cooperation. For example, make sure that you make requests at reasonable times, not while he's deeply

engaged in playing or eating. Ensure that being inside his cage is a desirable place to be by providing adequate space, toys and sufficient out of cage time. With thoughtful attention to these antecedents and positive consequences your bird will soon choose to be on your hand, and stepping up at your request will become a habit. This is the time to expect your bird to step up from cage tops and high perches, even though he may have other things in mind.

Conclusion

We may never know what mental processes underlie our parrots' observable behaviors. From the human perspective, any resistance is easily misinterpreted as a struggle for dominance. Depending on our understanding about what motivates birds to behave in particular ways, one naturally chooses some strategies and ignores others. We believe that the quest for dominance is rarely an accurate description of what motivates a companion parrot's negative behavior. Regardless, the intervention strategies typically associated with this interpretation are themselves so domineering as to be senselessly damaging to the relationship you wish to have with your bird. Too often, the processes thought to underlie behavior are solely in the eye of the beholder. When this is the case, we move farther away from facilitating our parrots' companionability when we should be moving closer to a bird's eye view.

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