Fellowship of Animal Behaviour Clinicians

Can a cat be 'Dominant'?

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Dominance is a term that describes a position of power or advantage over others. An individual who is victorious in a conflict situation and/or achieves prime access to a resource may be described as dominant. But the term can only be applied to an individual regarding the immediate outcome of a conflict or competitive situation. Dominance or 'being dominant' cannot be used to describe an animal's temperament or behaviour. An animal may be aggressive, or even a persecutor of others, but this alone does not make him or her dominant.

However, a dominance hierarchy can develop within a group or between a pair of animals when a dominance/subordinate relationship becomes stabilised or is maintained, either by aggressive and/or deferential interactions or by using specific signalling. For some group-living species this can be part of their normal social structure.

But does such a social structure exist when cats live together? Without doubt, when cats are forced to share important resources competition between them is almost inevitable, sometimes resulting in more confident and assertive individuals gaining greater access to resources (Cole and Shafer. 1966). But whether this can be regarded as evidence of a dominance hierarchy is debatable.

The domestic cat's primary ancestor the African Wildcat (*Felis Silvestris Lybica)* is a primarily solitary and highly territorial animal, so it seems highly unlikely that dominance hierarchy is a part of the domestic cat's ancestral social structure. But the domestic cat has evolved to be more social than its ancestor and is able to live alongside other cats and can even develop close social bonds. However, unlike other social species who work together to procure food for 'the group' cats remain self-reliant, solitary hunters with each individual hunting or otherwise procuring food only for him or herself. In other words, cats do not share and therefore they have no need for a dominance hierarchy and the signalling repertoire necessary to avoid conflict over shared food resources. In fact, deferential signalling, which is necessary to maintain a dominance hierarchy is very limited in the cat and aggressive or competitive encounters are more likely to be avoided or deflected with defensive rather than submissive signalling (Bradshaw *et al,* 2012).

It is therefore highly unlikely that dominance hierarchies are a part of the domestic cat's normal social structure.

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