

Dogs as Judges of Character
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Mary, a client of ours, recently told us that her dog, Lucy, who is aggressive to strangers, is a “good judge of character”. It seems that Lucy threatens people that act suspiciously or that Mary feels uneasy about. Is Lucy a good judge of human character? Can dogs tell good people from bad people? If so, how do they do it?

We could get into all kinds of arguments about what defines good and bad people and what we mean by character. We’ll side-step those philosophical questions and state that no matter how you define it, there is no evidence that dogs can discriminate people of good or bad character. These are things defined by human culture and religion and not things that are automatically known by dogs. If dogs really were good judges of character, why would they live with really bad people? Even Adolph Hitler had a loyal dog.

It is likely that what Mary is seeing in Lucy is not a character judgment but rather a discrimination based on the person’s behavior and/or Mary’s behavior. Some dogs become threatening to people who act in an unusual manner or when people do things that the dog considers a threat. Sometimes dogs seem to take their cues from their owners and become threatening when the owner acts frightened or threatening. For example, a person that comes to the door and seems nervous, talks in loud, gruff tones and moves in quick and erratic ways would seem unusual to most people and most dogs. This sort of behavior would probably threaten the dog as well as the person and may lead the dog to become threatening in turn. If the owner becomes frightened or threatening to the person at the door, the dog may respond by becoming threatening to the person as well.

The cues to which dogs respond don’t have to be overt. Some dogs can respond to very subtle changes in human behavior. So even if the owner doesn’t know why the person makes them uncomfortable, the dog may be responding to very subtle threats and unusual behavior. It appears that what the dog is responding to is not something inherent in the person’s character but rather to the unusual or threatening behavior that is directly observable by the dog.

Dogs don’t always make the right choices when threatening people that act in unusual ways. We have seen several cases where dogs attacked innocent people who just happened to have movement disorders such as cerebral palsy. The dogs seemed to be responding to the unusual movements of these people. The fact that dogs don’t always make the right choices of whom to attack and whom not to attack is a good reason to teach dogs to be friendly to everyone. If you teach or encourage your dog to be suspicious or threatening to strangers, she may make a mistake and attack an innocent person.