

The Trouble With Drives
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It has become fashionable in dog training circles in the last few years to talk about different drives and how they motivate dogs. There are prey drives, pack drives and even learning drives. Trainers use these terms to explain differences between dogs in certain kinds of behavior such as saying that good retrievers have high prey drive. Some have used drives to explain the existence of behavior problems such as dogs with dominance aggression having high prey drive combined with a high pack drive. Drives have also been used to predict behavior. If a dog is thought to have a low prey drive for example, he may not be a good candidate for scent detection work with a government agency. Sometimes people talk about differences in drives to explain the behavior of dogs at different times. So a dog that barks at the mail delivery person one day but not the next could have a low territory drive on the day he didn't bark.

There are several problems with drive theory. As a way of explaining and predicting behavior, drives are not very useful and psychologists and animal behaviorists stopped using them to explain behavior about 40 years ago. Psychologists developed the idea of drive to explain how behavior was energized and how it changed from time to time. So the "sex drive", somewhere in the animal, provided energy for sexual behavior, and differences in the drive explained why the dog was interested in sex sometimes but not others. The theory of drives fell out of favor with psychologists and animal behaviorists for two major reasons. First, the body doesn't store and release energy to serve specific behaviors. It may seem to us that our bodies store energy for different tasks but careful study of physiology doesn't support this idea. The second reason that drives are no longer used is that they tend to oversimplify our understanding of behavior. The control of behavior is complex and simple centers that control each behavior haven't been found.

Some dog trainers use drive this way, but others talk about drives as if they were some unchanging characteristics that dogs were born with. So when a dog is said to have a low prey drive and will not be a very good hunter, this is how the term is used. Using drives to refer to behavioral traits in dogs has its problems as well. There is no scientific evidence that dogs have traits like prey drives, pack drives, or defensive drives. The studies of dog temperament that have been done have not identified such simple and all-inclusive traits. The definitions of such traits have been vague and imprecise, something that is not tolerated in science. For example, what does it mean to say that a dog has high prey drive? Perhaps he is very interested in chasing rabbits or fetching balls. Does this also mean that he will kill and eat cats if he can catch them? What about infant children? For the trait of prey drive to have any scientific meaning it would need to be behaviorally defined in a very precise way.

The use of drive traits to explain behavior often falls short and explains nothing. If we say that dogs that chase rabbits have a high prey drive, then any dog that has a high prey drive will chase rabbits. This is circular reasoning and explains nothing. It simply is

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a description of what some dogs do. We would be better off simply describing the behavior and not talking about drives at all.

Drive traits are often used to make predictions about the later behavior of dogs. Some puppy tests and adult temperament tests are used to identify certain drive traits and then to predict the abilities and future performance of the dogs. None of these tests has ever been shown to identify these traits and to predict future behavior. In fact, at least two studies have found that puppy tests do not predict later behavior of adult dogs.

It may seem helpful to us to talk about our dogs as having drives, but we should realize that drives tend to over-simplify things and that they don't really help us to understand why our animals do what they do.