



Applying science
to pet behavior
and training



Explaining the Unexplainable

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Can all behaviors be explained in terms of their function? What happens when we encounter cases and say to ourselves “I don’t know why this animal is behaving this way”. We explore this problem in this series of articles.

1. How Do We Explain Behavior?

We’ve all had cases where we say to ourselves I have no clue why this animal is doing this. We can remember litterbox problems like this. The cat had multiple boxes, multiple locations, all kinds of litter, box was kept pristinely clean, clean bill of health from the veterinarian, no conflict in the house and yet the cat was still eliminating outside the box. Heck if we knew why (HIWKW)!

We’ve had fear and aggression cases that were not understandable as well. Dogs with sudden onset of fear of going outside, fear of completely harmless objects, or being fearful or walking on certain surfaces or being in certain locations. And always the aggression cases were the most concerning – dogs that were friendly with a person one second and the next were growling or snapping or them. Or were friendly during one encounter and aggressive the next. Heck if we knew why!

Working with these problems usually begins by formulating some sort of hypothesis about the “why”. Perhaps the cat has an undiagnosed medical problem, or a conditioned fear of the litterbox, still for unknown reasons. Maybe the dog was frightened by a noise when he was outside, or got a static shock when touching the carpet.

When we formulate a hypothesis, it’s best if we can test it in some way so we can either find support for it or refute it. Often our “testing” is actually the behavior modification plan we come up with. If the plan works, that’s evidence our ideas about the “why” were correct and we are addressing the relevant aspects of the “why”. If the plan doesn’t work, either it isn’t being implemented correctly OR it’s not the right plan, indicating our hypothesis about the “why” wasn’t correct and we need to rethink the problem.

In the following articles, we’ll give you a couple of examples of behavior cases that began with “Heck if I know why” and the results we had. In the last Biscuit we’ll make the case that some behaviors are not explainable - and why – and what that means for us, the pets, and our clients.

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2. Some Dogs Don't Understand Doors

Suzanne recently consulted about a dog that was lunging and threatening the husband in the family. Several incidents occurred when the husband came back into the house using the door from the house to the garage and when he re-entered the house through the sliding door to the backyard. At other times, the dog would willingly play with toys with the husband and seek him out for petting and attention. This dog had been kept in a large outdoor pen for three years by the previous owner. His physical needs were met – food, shelter, etc. - and he would get to play with other dogs this person had. But he was not allowed inside the house and apparently had minimal interaction with people although the owner did spend time with him when outside herself and when feeding him.

Because this dog had not been inside a house for three years, our hypothesis was that he did not understand how doors work. One second no one is there, the next, this solid object (a door) moves and a person appears. In other words, doors allow for the sudden appearance or re-appearance of a person that was completely unexpected from the dog's point of view. This event startled and frightened the dog and his default behavior was to lunge, growl, and snap. Thankfully, the dog had not bitten but the incidents were terrifying to the new owners.

We recommended a counter conditioning plan involving doors. If the dog's aggressive behavior related to doors decreases, then we will know our hypothesis was on track. We already know that some of this dog's episodes did not involve doors, so we know there are other as yet unknown "whys" to this dog's behavior. We may never completely understand all of them, and the best "why" we'll be able to come up with is perhaps the permanent social deficits this dog is left with from his three years spent in an outdoor pen. However, we've all known dogs with even poorer socialization experiences than this one, who did not develop aggression problems. So there are other factors in play. We'll talk about some of those in the last article in this series. Next time though we'll give you another example of an unexpected "why".

3. Fear of Going Outside

We recently saw a case of a German shepherd who had become increasingly fearful of going outside, to the point that he now refused to leave his driveway and would only go out in the backyard to relieve himself and come right back in. Several months prior to us seeing the dog, he had been startled during a walk by a passing car back firing. There were no additional fear inducing events the owner could identify. Why did this one incident in one location generalize to this dog's fear of going outside at all, or even leaving his driveway? Heck if we know! That would be an extreme case of generalization, and it's very possible there are other factors that caused this dog's fears to expand. Interestingly, the dog was reasonably calm if taken for a ride around the neighborhood in the golf cart (carts are street legal in this particular community). So, that was our starting point with this dog.

We also observed a case of generalization in a Doberman who had undergone snake avoidance training using a shock collar. We have no knowledge of the details of that training, but we observed the dog being extremely skittish when objects moved in the wind in our backyard. These included the wind

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chimes, branches of bushes, and a corner of rug. In addition the owner reported that the dog had “spooked”, jumped and tried to run away, dragging her along, after sniffing under a bush on a walk. From the dog’s behavior, she was convinced there was a snake under the bush and the dog was reacting as he’d been conditioned to. However, when she peered under the bush, no snake was to be found.

Unexpected associations can form from this kind of shock collar training, particularly if the training is not conducted appropriately and if what the dog is focusing on when the shock is delivered is not highly controlled. Our hypothesis was that the dog had not (or not only) made an association that “snakes hurt and should be avoided” but instead (or at least in addition to) had learned that “novel items that move quickly and unexpectedly hurt and should be avoided”. We were meeting this dog for a potential pet sitting, not for a behavior consultation so we did not pursue the topic with the owner at that time.

Looking for unexpected associations when trying to explain the “why” of fear related problems is often productive. We’ve had several cases over the years in which fear of going outside was precipitated by air conditioning compressors located immediately adjacent to the door to the backyard. These compressors would click on as the dog was going through the door, startling the dog and creating the fear of going outside. Because the eliciting stimulus/“trigger” was identified and discrete counter conditioning was fairly straight forward.

In the other cases we described in which the fear was more generalized, explaining the “why” was more problematic. In the next and last article of this series, we’ll talk about the behaviors that seem to be truly unexplainable.

4. Some Things Aren’t Explainable

Hearing this from two scientists may seem contradictory. After all, scientists believe that everything in the physical universe has an explanation, no matter how complex or difficult to study. But there are some things that are beyond our understanding at the present time because of our limitations of knowledge and/or methods. That means that there are some things (actually many, many things) about pet behavior that we don’t fully understand today.

As we described earlier, when a client presents us with a pet behavior problem we gather as much information as possible to help us identify the long-term and immediate triggers for and consequences of the behavior. From that information we can develop an hypothesis or hypotheses for the behavior. But sometimes our hypotheses don’t fit. Maybe we don’t have enough information about the proximal (immediate) triggers (nobody saw the bite the dog delivered to the young child), or about the prior history of the dog’s behavior, (perhaps we suspect the animal was very poorly socialized when young or has some unidentified medical condition). For many of these cases we will never know what went on prior to the behavior of concern. All of this makes it difficult to choose among possible hypotheses or even to generate a reasonable hypothesis.

Our point is that when we face a Heck If We Know (HIWK) situation, despite our best efforts to figure out what is going on, we don’t try to force the case into an explanation that doesn’t really fit. We admit

to ourselves and our client that we don't know what's really going on, and that there could be several potential explanations for what we are seeing.

Chatting with colleagues about the case often helps us clarify our thinking or can generate hypotheses we hadn't thought of, or confirms our opinion that it really is a HIWK situation. The take home message from this is that not all behaviors can be understood and therefore successfully modified. Both we and our clients can feel lots of guilt if a decision has to be made that the pet cannot stay in the home, or even has to be euthanized for safety reasons. Some animals are simply not normal in their brain chemistry or function and as we said, these conditions are not yet fully understood. Other animals may have been so damaged by traumatic events or terrible conditions that they simply cannot function without extreme fear or anxiety.

With these challenging, unexplainable cases, we must talk honestly with our clients about the unexplainable, and help them make the best decision they can.