

Triangles & Family Assessment in Animal Behavior Consulting

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*"The self of the blind man includes the ground he is walking on."
- Salvador Minuchin, M.D.*

Do you ever notice what happens when tensions begin to rise between you and another person? Perhaps you launch into a discussion with a friend, expecting that you and she will have the same perspective, but discover that you have less in common than you realized. Your friend looks uncomfortable, and you sense that she is not responding favorably to your ideas. Casting about, you hit upon a way to salvage the situation! *Triangulation*. That is, you are able to restore equilibrium, to calm things down, by referring to a third person whose ideas are even less appealing. The two of you reunite against that third person, who has the misfortune of not being present to create his own exculpatory triangle.

Triangulation can serve more constructive purposes than satisfying the togetherness needs of a duo at the expense of a third party. In well-functioning families, members negotiate issues through triangulation but succeed in shifting alignments flexibly, depending on the issue. For example, a wife may feel that a dog's place is indoors, as a loved member of the family, while the husband was raised to believe that dogs should be relegated to the yard. The wife wins support from a child, and together they assert that it is "cruel" to leave a dog out of doors. The problem is resolved when the husband relents. He even grows to enjoy having a dog in the house.

Now the child hopes to press "togetherness" and "compassionate care of animals" a step further by sharing his bedroom with the dog. The mother, who is the primary housekeeper, worries about dirt. However, the father has grown fond of the dog and now remembers how, as a child, he used to sneak his outdoor dog inside and under the covers of his bed on cold nights. The child knows this and, so armed, turns to the father for support. He wins his father over, and the mother relents.

In this family, the triangles are *flexible*. The husband and wife are, we will posit, more often the team with the stronger voice, but the son is able to join with his father or mother at opportune times, to further a “good cause.”

A *dysfunctional pattern* is at work when an alliance becomes *fixed, dominant, and inflexible*. Some such *stable coalitions* are consistently in alliance with another member of the household typically on the outside. Another form of stable coalition is the *detouring coalition*, characterized by its intent to defuse stress between its members by designating another party as the source of their problem and assuming an attacking or solicitous attitude toward that person. It may work, and reinforcement is all the coalition (often a couple) needs to continue using that third party as a scapegoat.

The concept of the *triangle* and the process of *triangulation* are central to the application of family systems theory to animal behavior consulting. As described in the examples above, triangulation refers to the tendency of two-person systems to draw in a third person -- or an animal -- when tension develops between the two. Sometimes one of the original pair will seek to join that third party against the other; or the third party may find it necessary, for whatever reason, to cooperate first with one and then the other of the opposing parties.

That “third” might be an animal who will be stressed by the competing expectations of the relationship system. But just as often the “third” is the person of the animal behavior consultant who is brought in to resolve relationship problems between the couple owning the animal. Equally, the conflict or potential for conflict may exist between animal owners and their veterinarian, groomer, or rescue organization, or a relative or neighbor, and the animal behavior consultant is called in to help people who have an agenda other than simply helping the animal.

Do you ever wonder why some families do not follow through with your carefully constructed training plans? Perhaps the family does not have the time or energy, or is confused; or your plan may be off-target. In your search for explanations, however, do not overlook the possibility that a family’s failure to comply may be motivated by relationship needs.



Typical Triangles.

Perhaps the most familiar triangles are those that fit cultural norms. For example, the wife may be appropriately concerned for a dog, while the husband is more distant and harder to engage. The animal behavior consultant might conclude that the wife cares for the dog and the husband does not. But it may be that the wife is the “carrier” of the couple’s concern for their dog. That is, perhaps the husband wishes to dote on the dog but was raised to believe that “real men don’t fuss over dogs.” So the wife expresses caring on his behalf.

In another arrangement, a couple may discover that they can avoid their own conflict over issues having nothing to do with an animal, by rallying in a united front of mutual concern for their animal. As long as they are focused on the animal’s “issues”, there is peace between them. If the animal’s problems are resolved what is the couple left with but unresolved interpersonal issues? If they lack coping skills, they may be motivated to undermine the animal’s progress rather than work through couple issues. Triangulation can of course be more benign. Couple’s frequently squabble over a pet’s or child’s behavior problems, then unite to respond productively as allies.

Another scenario involves parents at war. They are able to let go of their conflict when they unite to blame, or scapegoat, the family pet. This a common occurrence, with the spouses swapping stories about the misbehaviors of the “bad” pet and their unsuccessful effort to rehabilitate her. Owners drawing together at the expense of their dog may find dominance theory most attractive, because it offers a rationale for using muscle to “put the dog in her place.”

I worked with a family with a Houdini cat, who ran off at opportune times. The family joined together routinely to chase after him ... and when he finally allowed himself to be caught, they punished him severely. In this way, the family guaranteed that the problem would continue, and that the searches would be long and challenging. You may find yourself wondering why, when punishment is so ineffective, so many families use it. But sometimes the family needs the problem more than the solution.

We also often encounter owners who are kind but amazingly inept at fixing problems with their animal. If they remain incompetent in spite of our best efforts as highly skilled behavior consultants and trainers, we might suspect triangulation. Again, the need for an animal with problems can outweigh the need for problem resolution.

Suppose a child has brought home a bad report card. The family dog is not allowed on the furniture. The child, knowing that a parent is due home, invites the dog to find a comfy spot for himself on the couch. When the father arrives, the dog is “caught,” and the father focuses on the dog’s misbehavior. In scolding the dog, he “forgets” to discuss with his son the drop in grades. In this scenario, the father does not enjoy confrontations with his son, so both parties collude to divert attention from the real issue of the child’s performance in school. The dog’s motivation is simpler: she enjoys sleeping on furniture because it is soft

Pets living with singles owners are not immune to triangulation. A third party does not have to be present to impact on the emotional processes between a dyad. For example, a young woman in her twenties is living alone. She adopts a puppy for companionship. Her parents might call often to criticize her handling of the puppy. The young woman might “feed” her parents information about a “naughty” puppy that confirms their view that the daughter could not get by without their advice. Thus, the daughter keeps her parents engaged. Or, the daughter might reject all advice from her parents and do everything in opposition to them. She ends up rejecting even useful advice. If the behavior consultant rolls in with similar advice without establishing leadership, she will reject that too.



Coalition. A spouse may form a *coalition* with an animal, against or to the exclusion of her significant other. It is a familiar scene: the wife (usually) is tightly bonded with a dog, and the dog becomes intent on “protecting” her, his precious resource, from the husband. The excluded party, the husband, supports this pattern by keeping his distance.

Who caused this problem? Chances are the dog has inherent tendencies to guard, but the problem is perpetuated and escalates because his response meets the emotional needs of his owners. Typically, the husband may grumble that the dog is coming between him

and his wife, but unconsciously he may feel relieved that the dog is meeting her needs and thus sparing him fuller responsibility for maintaining intimacy in the marriage. The downside for the man is that he also has unmet needs, but when the dog runs interference both spouses are protected against intimacy.

An owner might form a coalition with the dog against outsiders. I know of a dog who will not let anyone near his elderly owner – but they are a “good-enough” team because the woman does not care much for socializing. She is afraid of people. Does the dog sense his owner’s vulnerability and fearfulness, himself feel afraid, and take matters into his own “paws”? I also know a number of dog owners with phobias -- irrational fears -- whose dogs have also developed inappropriate fearfulness. These dogs might well exhibit better behavior in a home with a strong leader who makes the dog feel safe and protected. A strong, skillful leader would ask the dog to defer to her better judgment about strangers, and would communicate that humans are not a threat.

In another arrangement, the triangulated member assumes the role of go-between for family members, thus balancing loyalties and regulating tension and intimacy. As a behavior consultant, how often do you feel called upon to serve as go-between for a couple, helping them to regulate tensions by deferring first to one, then to the other? For example, perhaps a husband is intent on showing you that the wife is inept, the evidence being that their dog is not housetrained. The husband does not mention that he habitually ignores signs that the dog needs to eliminate – in other words, he is not giving either the dog or his wife the support she needs. You are supposed to fix the problem, but without the husband’s support.

Families triangulate according to the level of tension in the system, and as a measure of how much tension they can tolerate. In sum, when you assess animals living in relationships with humans, consider family dynamics and stay alert for triangulation. Triangles can facilitate problem-solving -- but more often than not, there is mischief in the air.

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