

When & When Not to Manage Aggression



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Things to remember

- Our animals are still “under the influence” of evolution:
 - They have evolutionary history that transcends current circumstances
 - Despite our efforts, our environments and management exert selective pressure
 - Not all stimuli that lead to behavioral evolution in the wild are absent in captivity
 - E.g. animals are fed based on nutritional needs and not always to “wants”; the presence of food also triggers evolutionarily-derived drives to obtain it and defend it from others
 - E.g. a male may not have to compete for access to mates, but may still be aggressive to keepers or young males in the group to protect or monopolize the mates he has.
 - E.g. dominance hierarchies still exist despite less competition
- Thus, certain behaviors (in this case aggression) are the ways animals “know” (through experience or evolution) how to get what they want

Aggression is a form of communication too

- Aggression communicates/is used to
 - establish dominance
 - maintain hierarchies
 - form alliances
 - teach or reprimand younger individuals
 - play
 - E.g. A younger male chimp who leads a troop may exhibit inappropriate levels or forms of aggression if he hasn't had sufficient opportunities to observe and learn about aggression from previous or older males whom we prevented from exhibiting normal levels of aggression –setting up a negative cycle
- Are we portraying our own dislike of aggression onto species for whom it still holds value? If we deter or stop these 'undesirable' behaviours we are removing an entire method of communication which can affect their welfare
- There are certain situations where aggression is more likely and may need to be managed but is still needed, such as during an introduction process. But again if we stop these behaviours during these key interactions we may be cutting short their communications, resulting in the animals being unable to resolve conflict and establish meaningful relationships. We may also just be “prolonging the pain”.

The roles of dominance & motivation

- Dominance hierarchies evolved to REDUCE the frequency & severity of aggression, but they must be maintained/reinforced
 - The learned relationships amongst individuals are reinforced this way
 - This occasional “discipline” is necessary AND evolution drives individuals to periodically “challenge” the hierarchy to improve their rank
- Aggressive behavior is common in bachelor groups but is usually somewhat less intense than “the real thing”
 - Because the motivation is different: the goal is more to learn than to obtain mates at the moment
 - Usually if the “loser” can remove themselves from the area upon defeat, things quiet down
 - But this could be constrained by space or location of resources – think about whether your set up is useful for diffusing aggression aside from just whether or not you can separate animals.
- So there is transient aggressive behavior that could lower welfare that helps the animal to a) avoid more harmful outcomes, b) achieve goals later on with less trouble
 - The “correct performance” of species-typical social behaviors is important to avoid trouble – sometimes called “competence-building agency”
 - Sometimes we must take a long view

Motivation: does it make aggression ok?

- Animals are willing to compromise their own welfare to achieve their goals – animal motivation should make it tricky (*or at least more thought provoking for you*) to decide whether to manage aggression or not and to what extent
 - These goals may in fact be behavioral needs
 - The need to ‘win’
 - It may be best to let animals do what they know how to do rather than to continually adjust the environment to try and prevent these behaviors
 - Some argue that the central question in welfare is: does the animal have what it wants?
 - Doesn't mean you have to let the aggression go unmanaged, you can ameliorate the situation while letting the animal(s) pursue their goals

Taking a long view and considering “balance”

- A decision to avoid some ephemeral negative experiences at one life stage (e.g., a few weeks to months of occasional threats or aggression from the herd bull) may set an animal up for a cascade of chronic negative experiences later and result in a net negative quality of life.
- Weigh the frequency/duration/severity of ephemeral negative events against all the positive experiences that you can provide during that animal’s lifetime
 - You can do a lot to make sure even the most subordinate animal has an overall positive balance of life experiences without worrying about occasional aggression
 - When the balance gets to neutral or negative, perhaps a more permanent intervention is called for.
- While all animals should have an overall positive welfare state/balance, it’s ok for it to vary on how positive it is from individual to individual – it is still a life worth living

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Questions?

If a question pops up after the webinar, email me:

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