Dominance as rated by owners corresponds to ethologically valid markers of dominance in dogs

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Dominance is well defined in ethology, debated in psychology, and is often unclear among the dog owning public and in the press. However, to date, no study has examined how owners perceive dominance in dogs, and what different behaviours and personality types are used to describe dominant and subordinate individuals. A questionnaire study was launched to investigate the external validity of owner-derived estimates of dominance in dog dyads sharing the same household (N = 1151). According to the owners, dogs rated as dominant (87%) have priority access to resources (resting place, food, and rewards), undertake certain tasks (defend and lead the group, bark more), display dominance (win fights, lick the other's mouth less, and mark over the other's urine), share certain personality traits (smarter, more aggressive and impulsive), and are older than their partner dog (all p < 0.0001). An age related hypothesis has been suggested to explain dominance in dogs; but we found that dog age did not explain the occurrence of dominance related behaviours over the owners' estimate of dominance status. Results suggest that owner-derived reports of dominance ranks of dogs living in multi-dog households correspond to ethologically valid behavioural markers of dominance. Size and physical condition were unrelated to the perceived dominance. Surprisingly, in mixed-sex dyads, females were more frequently rated as dominant than males, which might correspond to a higher proportion of neutered females in this subgroup. For future studies that wish to allocate dominance status using owner report, we offer a novel survey.

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2 **dogs**

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13   **Abstract**
14   Dominance is well defined in ethology, debated in psychology, and is often unclear among the dog
15   owning public and in the press. However, to date, no study has examined how owners perceive
16   dominance in dogs, and what different behaviours and personality types are used to describe
17   dominant and subordinate individuals. A questionnaire study was launched to investigate the
18   external validity of owner-derived estimates of dominance in dog dyads sharing the same
19   household (N = 1151). According to the owners, dogs rated as dominant (87%) have priority access
20   to resources (resting place, food, and rewards), undertake certain tasks (defend and lead the group,
21   bark more), display dominance (win fights, lick the other's mouth less, and mark over the other's
22   urine), share certain personality traits (smarter, more aggressive and impulsive), and are older than
23   their partner dog (all p < 0.0001). An age-related hypothesis has been suggested to explain
24   dominance in dogs, but we found that dog age did not explain the occurrence of dominance-related
25   behaviours over the owners' estimate of dominance status. Results suggest that owner-derived
26   reports of dominance ranks of dogs living in multi-dog households correspond to ethologically
27   valid behavioural markers of dominance. Size and physical condition were unrelated to the
28   perceived dominance. Surprisingly, in mixed-sex dyads, females were more frequently rated as
29   dominant than males, which might correspond to a higher proportion of neutered females in this
30   subgroup. For future studies that wish to allocate dominance status using owner report, we offer a
31   novel survey.

32

33   **Introduction**
34   The term dominant is often used by dog owners to describe dogs, however, there may be little
35   agreement regarding its meaning, as dominance is defined differently in ethology, psychology, and
36   among the public. In ethology, dominance describes long-term dominant-subordinate social
37   relationships within a dyad or group (Clutton-Brock et al., 1979; Drews, 1993). Dominant
38   individuals usually have priority access to key resources such as food and reproductive partners,
39   due to the consistent winning of agonistic interactions or deference, during which one individual
40   consistently gives way to another (Lorenz, 1966; Smith & Price, 1973). However, in psychology,
41   dominance is often referred to as a personality trait (Gosling & John, 1999) and describes the
42   disposition of an individual to assert control in dealing with others. Finally, the word "dominance"
43   is defined as having control, authority, and power or influence over others (Westgarth, 2016), and
44   the general public may use this word to describe individuals who are more powerful, successful,
45   or important than others. When we consider these three definitions, it is not surprising it is unclear
46   what dog owners mean when they use the term 'dominance' in reference to their dogs.
47   In the next paragraphs we summarize the current knowledge about dominance in dogs and then
48   we examine how scientific findings are related to the perception of dominance in the dog owning
49   public. Although dominance hierarchies have previously been described in free-ranging dogs
50   (Bonanni et al., 2010; Cafazzo et al., 2010; Bonanni & Cafazzo, 2014), in dogs living in packs in
51   enclosures (Range, Ritter & Viranyi, 2015; Van Der Borg et al., 2015; Dale et al., 2017), and in
52   neutered pet dogs at a dog day care centre (Trisko & Smuts, 2015; Trisko, Smuts & Sandel, 2016),

53 the existence and validity of linear dominance hierarchies in these animals is highly debated both
54 by the public and some researchers, mainly because agonistic interactions are rare and contextual
55 (Schilder, Vinke & van der Borg, 2014). Data on kennelled dogs suggest that dominance is based
56 on submission (signalled mostly by body tail wag and low posture) rather than on aggression (Van
57 Der Borg et al., 2015). Therefore, it has been suggested that domestication has altered the social
58 behaviour of dogs compared to wolves, and submissive behaviour is used to defuse conflicts
59 (Bradshaw, Blackwell & Casey, 2009).

60 In addition, as van Kerkhove (2004) notes, although dominance hierarchies in dogs are often
61 described through access to resources (or "competitive ability", (de Waal, 1989)), not all
62 individuals are equally motivated (or physically able) to obtain them. Therefore the subjective
63 resource value, in combination with associative learning (Bradshaw, Blackwell & Casey, 2009,
64 2016) and personality (McGreevy et al., 2012) can explain interactions between dogs more simply
65 than dominance theory. Moreover, if researchers do not assume the existence of a dominance
66 hierarchy, they seldom identify one, thus a more dynamic approach is needed in order to
67 understand social organizations (Overall, 2016).

68 However, when a hierarchy was detected in a dog group, several parameters have been shown to
69 covary with dominance status, such as age, sex, and personality. Older dogs were found to be more
70 often dominant than young individuals (Mech, 1999; Peterson et al., 2002; Bonanni et al., 2010,
71 2017; Cafazzo et al., 2010; Trisko & Smuts, 2015). Therefore Bradshaw et al. (Bradshaw,
72 Blackwell & Casey, 2016) suggested that a simple rule of thumb could help to explain formal
73 dominance in dogs: "in order to be allowed to stay in the group, perform affiliative behaviour
74 towards all the members of the group older than you are". However, in a group of domestic dogs,
75 van der Borg and colleagues (2015) did not find correlations of rank with age, and it remains
76 unexplored whether the age related hypothesis is a better predictor of formal dominance than
77 dominance displays.

78 Concerning sex as a potential confounding factor of dominance, conflicts between dogs living in
79 the same household are more common between dogs of the same sex, and female-female pairs are
80 most often affected (Sherman et al., 1996; Wrubel et al., 2011). Mixed-sex dyads are more likely
81 to affiliate and less likely to show unidirectional displays of submissiveness and aggression than
82 same-sex pairs (Trisko & Smuts, 2015). In wolves, separate male and female age-graded
83 dominance hierarchies have been observed in captive packs (Packard, 2003). Overall, male wolves
84 were found to be more often dominant and/or leaders of the pack (Clark, 1971; Haber, 1977; Mech,
85 1999). In one study on free-ranging dogs, a sex age graded hierarchy was found, such that males
86 dominate females in each age class, and adults dominate over subadults, and subadults over
87 juveniles (Cafazzo et al., 2010). However, sex had no clear effect on dominance in a family pack
88 of captive arctic wolves, although sex-separated linear hierarchies showed a stronger linearity than
89 female-male hierarchies (Cafazzo, Lazzaroni & Marshall-Pescini, 2016).

90 Personality traits might also associate with dominance status. For example, aggression towards
91 people and controllability was linked to dominance rank and leadership in pet dogs according to
92 Ákos et al. (2014). Since some dog owners describe dogs that often show dominant behaviour

towards other dogs as having a "dominant personality", studies linking personality traits to dominance status would be especially useful to help clarify the correct terminology to the public. Dog owners confusion regarding the term dominance can be partly explained by the fact that based on a literature review on canine personality, researchers have identified a broad dimension labelled as 'Submissiveness', and defined it as the opposite of dominance (Fratkin et al., 2013). According to the authors, "Dominance can be judged by observing which dogs bully others, and which guard food areas and feed first. Submission can also be reflected by such behaviours as urination upon greeting people". Thus, even in the scientific literature some authors define dominance as a personality trait, and there is an ongoing debate in human, primate, and dog personality research on how to interpret certain traits. However, according to the majority of ethologists dominance is not a personality trait (Schilder, Vinke & van der Borg, 2014). While personality is largely independent of context and is stable over time (Jones & Gosling, 2005) dominance status depends on the interacting partners.

The popular media has also played a role in influencing owners' attitudes, by often describing dominant dogs as those with behavioural problems or a tendency towards aggression. A dog is often referred to as dominant when it "misbehaves", e.g. jumps up on or shows aggression towards the owner. The belief that such behaviours may signify that the dog is attempting to control the owners' behaviour, is based on erroneous models of wolf pack organisation, and has often been used to justify the use of abusive training techniques (Bradshaw, Blackwell & Casey, 2016). However, negative reinforcement and positive punishment training techniques can cause increased stress, fear and mistrust, and are associated with increased aggression towards other dogs in the household (Casey et al., 2013), and towards human family members (Casey et al., 2014). Positive punishment has obvious abusive connotations too, according to these studies.

Previously, several studies have attempted to determine the dominance rank of dogs living in multi-dog households by utilising owner questionnaires (Pongrácz et al., 2008; Pongrácz, Bánhegyi & Miklósi, 2012; Ákos et al., 2014). Pongrácz et al. (2008) used a four item questionnaire to measure dogs' dominance status in dyads, and related them to differences in social learning in response to a human or dog demonstrator. Dogs were identified as dominant if they displayed at least three behaviours out of four (barked more/longer, licked the other dog's mouth less, ate first, and won fights). Dominant dogs were less likely to learn from observing other dogs, and more likely to copy a human demonstrator. They also performed better than subordinates in a problem solving task, but only when observing a human demonstrator (Pongrácz, Bánhegyi & Miklósi, 2012). Subordinate dogs showed better learning in the dog demonstrator condition. Results from both studies suggest that social rank affects performance in social learning situations, as dominant dogs tend to follow humans while subordinate dogs follow other dogs. Thus, owner questionnaires could be a valid method to determine the dominance rank of individuals within dog dyads, similarly to other dog behaviour studies, particularly as the quality of data produced by citizen scientists has proved to be satisfactory (Hecht & Spicer Rice, 2015).

To understand how the dog-owning public use the word "dominance", we evaluated what attributes they associated with dominance using a questionnaire study. We have to note here, that,

133 as Westgarth suggests (2016), it is possible that a dominance hierarchy is not fundamental to the
134 structure of the dogs' social system, but is rather the by-product of human observation. According
135 to this view, dominance is simply the question of individual interpretation, and this is another
136 reason to investigate how the public interprets "dominance" in dogs. In this study, we surveyed
137 people that owned multiple dogs. We investigated the relationship between the dogs' ranks,
138 behaviour, and demography. We were interested in finding out whether dogs that the owners have
139 classified as "dominant" display certain behaviours more or less often than their subordinate
140 partner. We also tested the age related hypothesis suggested by Bradshaw et al. (Bradshaw,
141 Blackwell & Casey, 2016) by determining which factor best explained behavioural and
142 demographic differences between the dyads, owner reported hierarchical status or age status.
143

144 **Materials and Methods**
145

146 *Ethical statement*
147 The procedures applied complied with national and EU legislation and institutional guidelines
148 (ethical approval: Government Office for Pest County PE/EA/2019-5/2017). Participants were
149 informed about the identity of the researchers, the aim, procedure, and expected time commitment
150 of filling out the survey. Owners filled out the survey anonymously; therefore, we did not collect
151 personal data. Participants could at any point decline to participate (Supplemental Information S1).
152

153 *Subjects*
154 Between 25th June and 13th August 2017, 1156 owners of at least two dogs filled in a
155 questionnaire in Hungarian, which was advertised in a social media Dog Ethology group. We
156 identified the dogs using their given names, to ensure that no duplicate entries were included in
157 the analysis. After data cleaning and deleting of duplicate entries, 1151 responses remained, which
158 detailed owners' responses for unique individual pairs of dogs. Owners indicated the sex and
159 reproductive status of each dog in the dyad, after allocating them to either Dog A or Dog B (based
160 on their own choice). We have no information on how owners chose which dogs to compare if
161 they had more than two dogs. Twenty three percent of the dyads consisted of males only, 28%
162 females only, and 49% were both sexes. The percentages of neutered individuals were 45% in
163 males and 62% in females.
164

165 *Procedure*
166 The questionnaire consisted of 21 items (Table 1). In the case of items 1-19, owners indicated
167 which of the two dogs best fitted the description: Dog A, or Dog B. Owners could also select
168 "Similar" if both dogs fitted the description, or "N/A". When the owners marked "N/A" we
169 assumed that they could not answer the question as the dog/dogs did not display that behaviour, or
170 that situation did not occur (e.g. the dogs never fight with each other or they do not go for walks
171 together), or owners were unsure/did not fully understand the question, or the answer was not
172 known to them (e.g. they could not assess which of the dogs was in better physical condition). We

173 chose the behaviours based on previous studies (Pongrácz et al., 2008; Pongrácz, Bánhegyi &
174 Miklósi, 2012), and included markers of agonistic (i.e. winner of fights) and formal dominance
175 (i.e. licking the mouth of the partner, usually during greeting ceremonies (signalling the acceptance
176 of lower social status) Bonanni et al., 2010), as well as resource-holding potential (obtains more
177 food, (Vervaecke, de Vries & van Elsacker, 2000), better resting places, etc.). In addition, we
178 included other factors, which have previously been proposed to be relevant when measuring
179 leadership and dominance, such as age, sex, size, physical condition, leadership and specific
180 behavioural characteristics, including intelligence, obedience, aggressiveness and impulsiveness
181 (Drews, 1993; Conradt & Roper, 2003, 2005; Cafazzo et al., 2010). Items 2-4 and 6 were the same
182 as those used in (Pongrácz et al., 2008). In the case of items 20 and 21, the owner could also
183 indicate "both" or "neither" dogs (Table 1).
184
185 INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE
186
187 *Statistical Analysis*
188 Analyses were performed in SPSS 22.0 and R 3.3.2. Descriptive statistics were calculated for the
189 sample and summarised in the results section. Note that we did not have the opportunity to use
190 dominance rating (dominant vs subordinate) as a response variable in a model directly, due to the
191 design of the questionnaire, which collected information for dyads (resulting in one line of data
192 per dyad), and not individual dogs. Therefore individual binomial analyses were the best way to
193 answer our question, "Do dogs which the owners classify as "dominant" show certain behaviours
194 more or less often than their subordinate partner?" and to deal with missing values.
195
196 Binomial tests using Dominance Status on the full sample
197 To investigate the owners' responses for each item (1 to 21), we calculated the percentage
198 allocation of the dogs to each possible category: "Differ" (the dogs in a particular dyad differed in
199 that behaviour/characteristic), "Similar" (the dogs' behaviour was similar) and "N/A" (the owner
200 was not able to determine if the dogs differed).
201 In order to answer the question "do dogs that the owners classify as "dominant" show certain
202 behaviours more or less often than their subordinate partner", we used binomial tests to compare
203 the distribution of observations between the dogs for each of the replies to items 2 to 21. We
204 included only the dogs that were allocated a "dominant" or a "subordinate" status, based on the
205 response of the owner to item 1 ("Which of your dogs is the boss/dominant). We did not consider
206 dyads where owners indicated that their dogs were "Similar" in dominance status, or where they
207 marked "N/A" (N=148). (Sample sizes are indicated in Figure 1 for each item). We lowered the p
208 level to 0.0023 from 0.05 as suggested by a Bonferroni correction for the 22 comparisons.
209
210 Binomial tests using Age Status on the full sample and comparison with Dominance Status
211 We tested the age related hypothesis suggested by Bradshaw et al. (2016), by using the response
212 of the owner to Age (item 19, "Which of your dogs is older?"), to assess differences between dogs

213 allocated an "older" or "younger" status (dogs which were "Similar" in age, or that were marked
214 "N/A", N=72, were excluded). Next, we used two-sample tests for equality of proportions with
215 continuity correction in order to determine which factor (Dominance status or Age status) best
216 explained the behavioural and demographic differences between the dogs. This test is used to
217 compare two observed independent proportions. The test statistics analysed by this procedure
218 assume that the difference between the two proportions is zero under the null hypothesis.
219
220 Binomial tests on the mixed-sex and same-sex dyads
221 In order to examine any effect of the dyad composition on dominance status allocation, we created
222 subsets of data including mixed sex dyads (N=491), and same-sex dyads (N=512), and ran
223 additional binomial tests to inspect possible associations for items 2 – 21. We again adjusted for
224 multiple comparison using Bonferroni correction and lowered the significance level to 0.0025.
225
226 Correlation of the items
227 We used the binary behavioural categories: "which of your dogs' expresses the behaviour more",
228 the dominant = 1 or the subordinate = 0, of the 18 different items: bark, lick mouth, eat first,
229 reward, fight, play ball, greet owner, walk first, resting place, overmark, defend group, smarter,
230 obedient, aggressive, impulsive, size, physical condition, and age, and correlated them using a
231 Pearson Correlation. For this analysis we only used dyads where we had no missing information
232 (N=215). Results are displayed and discussed in the Supplemental Information.
233
234 Differences in the number of dominance related behaviours expressed in dominants and
235 subordinates
236 We created a "dominance score" by summing all the items that were significantly associated with
237 a "dominant" status for each dog in every dyad. Then we created a "difference score" by
238 subtracting the subordinates' dominance score from the "dominants" for each dyad. The difference
239 score was then used as the response variable in a general linear model to identify the key variables
240 associated with the difference score. All possible interactions between dominant sex (male or
241 female), subordinate sex (male or female), dominant neuter status (intact or neutered), subordinate
242 neuter status (intact or neutered) and dominant age (older or younger) were entered into the model.
243 We also included the main effect of the order the dogs were entered into the questionnaire (Dog A
244 first or second). We included only the dyads where an asymmetry in dominance was detected by
245 the owner (N= 931). For more details, please see Supplemental Information.
246
247 **Results**
248 *Descriptive statistics*
249 Eighty-seven percent of owners indicated that their dogs differed in social status, 10% perceived
250 them as similar, and 3% marked the question as "N/A" (Fig. 1). Some items were unreliable for
251 differentiating between the dogs. For example, 30.1 - 35.1% of the dyads were reported to be
252 similar in greeting the owner, smartness, and physical condition. Other items were relatively

253 difficult for the owners to assess; 16.2 - 24.3% of owners did not specify a particular dog for the
254 items lick mouth, fight, overmark, and aggressive, Fig. 1).

255
256 INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE.

257
258 *Binomial tests using Dominance Status on the full sample*
259 We tested which items (from items 2-21) were associated with the perceived dominance rank (item
260 1). Eleven different dog-dog or dog-owner oriented behaviours, five behavioural/personality traits
261 and five demographic factors were examined. The binomial tests revealed that dogs rated as
262 dominant usually (1) have priority access to certain resources such as food, rewards, resting places;
263 (2) are perceived as undertaking specific tasks, such as "guard" the house through barking more,
264 walk in the front during walks (i.e. "leading" the group), defend the group in case of perceived
265 danger; (3) display dominance: win more fights, mark over the other's urination, and more
266 frequently accept that the other dogs lick their mouth; (4) have characteristic personality traits: are
267 smarter, more aggressive and impulsive; and (5) are older than subordinates according to the
268 owners. Physical condition, obedience, sequence of greeting the owner and retrieving balls were
269 unrelated to perceived dominance (z=>|5.03|, p < 0.0001; see Fig 2 and Table 2 for an overview
270 of the results).

271
272 INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE.

273
274 *Binomial tests using Age Status on the full sample and comparison with Dominance Status*
275 When we tested the age related hypothesis suggested by Bradshaw et al. (2016) we found that
276 twelve items were associated with Age status. Six in the same direction as the "dominance" status
277 (bark, lick mouth, fight, resting place, defend group, and smart), and one in the opposite direction,
278 owners found older dogs to be less impulsive, but "dominant" dogs more impulsive. Age but not
279 dominance was associated with five items. Older dogs bark more, play with the ball less, greet the
280 owner less, are in worse physical condition, are larger, and are less often intact than their younger
281 partner dog, according to the owners (p < 0.001). Dominance status was more strongly linked with
282 11 items in comparison to age status (for statistical details see Table 2).

283
284 INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE.

285
286 *Binomial tests on the mixed-sex dyad sample*
287 In mixed-sex pairs where a dominant was indicated (N = 491), 51% of males and 67% of females
288 were neutered. Females were more often reported as dominant over males (57% females, binomial
289 test z = 3.25, p < 0.001). If we compare dominant females with dominant males in order to help
290 determine what factors might explain why more females are dominant than males: results indicate
291 that 56% of dominant females were older than their partner, in comparison to 66% of dominant
292 males. Thus, older age do not explain the prevalence of dominant females. When a female was

293 rated as the dominant individual, she was more often neutered than when the male was the
294 "dominant" (female neutered 72%, male neutered 51%). "Dominant" males more often (90%)
295 marked over their female partners (while 20% of "dominant" females marked over "submissive"
296 male partners), defended the group in case of perceived danger, and they were often larger in size
297 than the female "subordinate". Refer to Table 3, 4, and the Supplemental Information for more
298 information.
299
300 INSERT TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE.
301
302 INSERT TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE.
303
304 *Binomial tests on the same-sex dyad sample*
305 In same-sex pairs (N = 512, 48.5% neutered) there was no significant difference between the
306 number of neutered and intact "dominant" animals (z = 1.86, p = 0.063). "Dominant" individuals
307 were again more often older than "subordinates" (N = 319 dyads, 67% older, binomial test z =
308 7.38 p < 0.001).
309 The items that best described owner reported dominant individuals in the full sample remained
310 significant in the same-sex pairs subsample, apart from the item impulsive, which did not differ
311 between subjects rated as dominant and subordinate. Owners reported that 73% of "dominant"
312 females and 64% of "dominant" males marked over their "submissive" same-sex partners. More
313 results can be found in Table 2.
314
315 *Difference in the number of dominance related behaviours expressed in dominants and*
316 *subordinates*
317 The dyad that showed the greatest relationship difference (difference score) between the
318 "dominant" and "subordinate" individual (and therefore the clearest status difference) was in a
319 mixed sex dyad when an intact male was considered as dominant over an intact female. For more
320 results see the Supplemental Information.
321
322 **Discussion**
323 Our aim was to understand how owners interpret dominance in dog dyads living in their
324 households and to determine whether our psychometric tool measures dominance as defined in
325 ethology. We found that the majority (87%) of owners labelled one of their two dogs as dominant.
326 Perceived dominance status was characterised by fighting ability, submission, competitive ability,
327 subjective resource value, personality, specific roles, and older age. Only thirteen percent of
328 owners were unable to determine a clear rank order between their dogs. This may be because: (1)
329 the dogs have a non-interactive relationship (the partners co-exist without social interactions, i.e.
330 they avoid each other), or an 'egalitarian' relationship (the partners affiliate regularly, e.g. play
331 with each other, without agonistic behaviour or exhibiting dominance, Trisko, Smuts & Sandel,
332 2016); (2) the dogs may not have lived together long enough to form a clear rank order; (3) the

333 owner might actively work against the dogs displaying dominance behaviour (e.g. chasing away
334 the dominant dog from the better resting place, not allowing the dominant to feed first, preventing
335 fights, and favouring the loser dog, etc.); (4) the owner does not accept/understand the concept of
336 dominance; and finally, (5) the survey design encourages that the owner makes a selection.
337 We found that the results from the questionnaire show external validity. Items associated with the
338 perceived dominance corresponded to behavioural markers of dominance identified by Pongrácz
339 et al. (2008), such as fighting, barking, eating first and receiving mouth licking, and markers related
340 to priority of access to resources such as food, rewards and resting places (Schjelderup-Ebbe,
341 1922). However, items that examined control over a ball and the owner (greeting) did not differ
342 between "dominant" and "subordinate" dogs, which suggests that the subjective resource value
343 (van Kerkhove, 2004; Bradshaw, Blackwell & Casey, 2009) has probably a greater effect than the
344 perceived rank. Owners also indicated that dogs higher in status overmark lower ranking dogs,
345 similarly to the findings of Lisberg & Snowdon (2011). In the current study "dominants" marked
346 over same-sexed dogs more often than different-sexed dogs, suggesting higher intra- than inter-
347 sexual competition. Dominance was also associated with items theoretically concerning
348 behaviours viewed by humans as responsibilities, such as defending and leading the group.
349 Similarly, Ákos et al. (2014) found that during off-leash walks, dogs rated as dominant by the
350 owners are more often followed by their group-mates that were rated as submissive. Finally, our
351 results confirmed that some personality traits (aggression, impulsivity, and smartness) are
352 associated with reported dominance, as was suggested by Ákos et al. (2014), who found that
353 aggression towards people and controllability was linked to dominance rank and leadership in pet
354 dogs.
355 According to the literature, dominance ranks are influenced by several confounding factors, such
356 as age and sex. As predicted, older individuals were more often allocated a higher status by owners
357 in the full sample, and in both mixed and same-sex pairs. However, in contrast to the age related
358 hypothesis, which suggests that age better explains the social structure in dog groups (Bradshaw,
359 Blackwell & Casey, 2016), we found that dominance status, as perceived by the owner, was more
360 strongly associated to 11 of the items than age status. Thus, dog age did not explain the occurrence
361 of dominance related behaviours over and above the owners' estimate of dominance status. Sex
362 was also linked to dominance; in mixed-sex dog dyads, females were perceived by owners as
363 dominant more often than males, even though in 59% of the dyads they were smaller in size than
364 their male partner. This could be related to the fact that dominant females were more often neutered
365 than dominant males. Previous studies have determined that hormonal activity influences inter-
366 dog aggression (Sherman et al., 1996) and aggression has been found to be more frequent in
367 neutered females compared to intact females and neutered males (Wright & Nesselrote, 1987).
368 Our study has several limitations: (1) We did not measure the dominant behaviour of the dogs,
369 only the dominance perceived by the owner. Therefore, we have no information about convergent
370 validity, whether the ratings of dominance and behaviour reflect actual rates of behaviour. (2) Only
371 relationships between single dyads were examined. Previous work has determined that individuals
372 can and do establish different types of relationships including "friendships", when paired with

373   different individuals, and these relationships can also change over time, suggesting high social
374   complexity in dogs (Trisko, Smuts & Sandel, 2016). Future studies should examine how
375   individuals' relationships differ within multi-dog households. (3) We also did not include items on
376   affiliative behaviour in the questionnaire, so it was not possible to classify the dominance
377   relationships further into formal (affiliation and dominance) and egalitarian (affiliated with no
378   dominance) types (Trisko, Smuts & Sandel, 2016). (4) We were not able to examine breed
379   differences in dominance relationships. Dog breeds and breed groups differ greatly in morphology
380   and typical behaviour (Turcsán, Kubinyi & Miklósi, 2011; McGreevy et al., 2012; Starling et al.,
381   2013), therefore the types of relationships between dogs may also be highly dependent on the breed
382   composition of the group (van der Borg, Schilder & Vinke, 2012). (5) Due to time constraints, we
383   applied single item statements to describe personality traits. (6) We investigated the interpretation
384   of dominance only in Hungary, although there could be significant cultural differences (Wan et
385   al., 2009). (7) We asked owners to compare two dogs to each other, which was difficult for some
386   owners as reflected in a large amount of missing values in the dataset. Future studies should aim
387   to collect data for subordinate and dominant dogs separately using for instance Likert scales, which
388   would allow the use of statistical modelling. (8) Finally, future studies should also investigate
389   inter-observer reliability, thus multiple people should rate the dogs in order to reduce the chance
390   that the answers are reflective of one individual's views and biases.
391   Whether dominance as perceived by owners is just a by-product of human observation remains to
392   be answered. However, if we assume that our questionnaire measured actual dominance
393   relationships within the dyads, our results show that the age, sex and neuter status of the dyad
394   influences the relationship between the subjects,which has broader implications for the
395   management of dogs within households. Since humans are ultimately responsible for choosing the
396   social partners (human and conspecific) of their dogs, they have a duty to try to ensure that social
397   relationships are as amicable as possible, in order to keep chronic stress levels, and therefore
398   welfare at an acceptable level. For example, in mixed sex dyads, neutered females were often seen
399   as dominant, and showed behaviours that might increase conflict (reflected in the reduced
400   difference score), regardless of age or body size. Competition in the dyad could be reduced, and
401   any possible increase in dominance motivation in females (caused by neutering) would be avoided,
402   if females could be kept intact and the male neutered if necessary (to prevent breeding). Previous
403   research has indicated that a sex/age graded hierarchy is present in dogs (Cafazzo et al., 2010),
404   and as such, owners could reinforce the position of older individuals in the hierarchy in order to
405   reduce competition in the household. Additionally, to prevent conflicts, owners should try to avoid
406   keeping multiple dogs of the same sex and age. Finally, future studies are necessary to determine
407   how owners perceive their own relationships with their dogs. For example, whether owners have
408   different types of relationships with the dogs within their household, and how this might influence
409   the intraspecific relationships between their dogs; a topic which is currently hotly debated. For
410   instance, one study has determined that dogs form similar relationships with both humans and
411   dogs, and that the quality of the bond varies more with the individual partner than between dog vs.
412   human partners; indicating that relationships cannot be entirely attributed to an individual's
413   personality (Cimarelli et al., 2019).

414

Conclusion

416 Owner estimates of dominance rank corresponded to previously established behavioural markers
417 of dominance displays, which supports that dominance relationships are robust and well-
418 perceivable components of companion dog behaviour and owner-derived reports about dominance
419 ranks have external validity (in pre-schoolers see Hawley, 2002 for similar results). However, the
420 results lack convergent validity, because no simultaneous measure of behaviours were taken, and
421 the data represents only one culture.

422 We conclude that owners of multiple dogs interpret dominance based on specific behaviours,
423 obtaining resources and certain personality traits. We suggest that future studies that wish to
424 allocate dominance status using owner reports should include the following seven items: which
425 dog starts to bark first, eat first, obtains the reward, walks at the front, acquires the better resting
426 place, defends the group, and is more aggressive. Asking which dog wins fights or which dog licks
427 the mouth of the other might also be useful, as both were highly predictive of owner perceived
428 social status if they did occur, in approximately 70% of cases.

429

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435

Data Accessibility

437 The datasets supporting this article have been uploaded as part of the Supplemental Information
438 (S2).

439

Supplemental Information

441 Supplemental Information S1 reports analyses regarding the correlation of the items, differences
442 in the number of dominance related behaviours expressed in dominants and subordinates,
443 difference score models, and R codes.

444

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579

Questionnaire items.

Owners were asked to fill out the questionnaire for two of their dogs ('A' and 'B') and indicate which dog corresponds better to the description. They could also select "Similar" if both dogs fitted the description or "N/A" if the question did not apply to the dog dyad. Items marked by * were adopted from Pongrácz et al. (2008) .

Item number	Short form	Questions
1	status	Which of the dogs is the "boss" (has a dominant status) to the best of your knowledge?
2*	bark	When a stranger comes to the house, which dog starts to bark first (or if they start to bark together, which dog barks more or longer)?
3*	lick mouth	Which dog licks the other dog's mouth more often?
4*	eat first	If the dogs get food at the same time and at the same spot, which dog starts to eat first or eats the other dog's food?
5	reward	If they got a special reward (e.g. a marrowbone), which dog obtains it?
6*	fight	If the dogs start to fight, which dog wins more frequently?
7	play ball	If you play with a ball with both dogs, which one retrieves it more frequently?
8	greet owner	When you enter your home, which dog greets you first?
9	walk first	Which dog goes in the front during walks?
10	resting place	Which dog acquires the better resting place?
11	overmark	Which dog marks over the other's urination?
12	defend group	If the dog's group is perceived as being under attack, which dog is in the front?
13	smart	Which dog is smarter?
14	obedient	Which dog is more obedient?
15	aggressive	Which dog is more aggressive?
16	impulsive	Which dog is more impulsive?
17	size	Which dog is heavier?
18	physical condition	Which dog is in a better physical condition?
19	age	Which dog is older?
20	sex	Which dog is male?
21	neutered	Which dog is neutered?

Results of the binomial tests using A) the owners' allocation of the dogs to "dominant" or "subordinate" status (item 1) and B) "older" or "younger" status (item 19) as the predicted variables and the 21 items.

Bold type indicates that status was associated with the characteristic after Bonferroni correction (for the Binomial tests all p values are ≤ 0.0022). Two-proportion z-tests were used to determine whether the proportion of "dominant" and "older" dogs were equal for each item. C) Two-sample tests for equality of proportions with continuity correction in order to determine which factor (Dominance status or Age status) best explained the behavioural and demographic differences between the dogs. P Cond= Physical condition, Prop = Proportion, Prop Diff = Proportion difference, and 95% CI=95% Confidence intervals.

Item	A. Dominance Status					B. Age Status					Prop. diff	C. 2-sample test for equality of proportions			
	Count	Total	Prop	Z	P	Count	Total	Prop	Z	P		X2	P	95% CI	
Bark	547	884	0.619	7.03	<0.0001	512	920	0.557	3.40	<0.0001	0.062	6.953	0.008	0.016	0.109
Lick mouth	259	737	0.351	-8.03	<0.0001	218	779	0.280	-12.25	<0.0001	0.071	8.669	0.003	0.024	0.120
Eat first	473	717	0.660	8.51	<0.0001	400	746	0.536	1.94	0.0261	0.124	22.662	**<0.0001**	0.072	0.175
Reward	497	684	0.727	11.81	<0.0001	386	714	0.541	2.13	0.0164	0.186	51.141	**<0.0001**	0.135	0.237
Fight	606	700	0.866	19.31	<0.0001	443	703	0.630	6.86	<0.0001	0.236	101.920	**<0.0001**	0.190	0.281
Play ball	404	793	0.509	0.50	0.7150	349	835	0.418	-4.71	<0.0001	0.091	13.330	**<0.0001**	0.042	0.141
Greet owner	352	644	0.547	2.32	0.0100	295	674	0.438	-3.20	<0.0001	0.109	15.194	**<0.0001**	0.054	0.164
Walk first	532	795	0.669	9.50	<0.0001	430	824	0.522	1.22	0.1114	0.147	35.819	**<0.0001**	0.099	0.196
Resting place	517	716	0.722	11.85	<0.0001	425	754	0.564	3.46	<0.0001	0.158	39.352	**<0.0001**	0.109	0.208
Pee	400	669	0.598	5.03	<0.0001	372	697	0.534	1.74	0.0407	0.064	5.465	0.019	0.010	0.118
Defend group	527	739	0.713	11.55	<0.0001	437	760	0.575	4.10	<0.0001	0.138	30.545	**<0.0001**	0.089	0.187
Smart	433	665	0.651	7.76	<0.0001	410	692	0.592	4.83	<0.0001	0.059	4.710	0.030	0.651	0.593
Obedient	415	838	0.495	-0.24	0.6221	477	879	0.543	2.50	0.0063	-0.048	3.679	0.055	-0.096	0.001
Aggressive	524	762	0.688	10.32	<0.0001	392	780	0.503	0.11	0.4572	0.185	53.997	**<0.0001**	0.136	0.235
Impulsive	512	908	0.564	3.82	<0.0001	313	952	0.329	-10.53	<0.0001	0.235	103.120	**<0.0001**	0.190	0.280
Size: heavier	497	929	0.535	2.10	0.0178	575	999	0.567	5.43	<0.0001	-0.032	3.051	0.081	-0.086	0.005
P Cond: Better	353	687	0.514	0.69	0.2461	209	734	0.285	-11.63	<0.0001	0.229	76.941	**<0.0001**	0.175	0.280

Age: Older	615	931	0.661	9.77	**<0.0001**										
Sex: Male	427	927	0.461	-2.36	0.0090	503	990	0.508	0.48	0.3168	-0.047	4.128	0.042	-0.093	-0.002
Sex: Female	576	1078	0.534	2.22	0.0131	556	1128	0.493	-0.45	0.6936	0.041	3.621	0.057	-0.001	0.080
Neutered	580	1073	0.541	2.63	0.0043	613	1133	0.541	2.73	0.0031	0	0.000	1.000	-0.043	0.042
Intact	423	933	0.453	-2.82	0.0024	446	985	0.453	-2.93	**0.0017**	0	0.000	1.000	-0.045	0.046

Results of the binomial tests using the owners' allocation of the dogs to "dominant" or "subordinate" status (Item 1) as the predicted variable and the 20 items in A) mixed-sex and B) same-sex dyads.

Bold type indicates that status was associated with the characteristic after Bonferroni correction (for the Binomial tests all p values are ≤ 0.0022). Two-proportion z-tests were used to determine whether the proportion of "dominant" dogs in mixed-sex and same-sex groups were equal for each item. C) We compared the "dominants" proportion of each item of each group using a z score calculation with Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons. Dominant individuals in same-sex dyads mark over subordinate urinations more often than dominants from mixed-sex dyads (same-sex 69% and mixed-sex 51%). Dominant individuals were more often neutered in mixed-sex dyads in comparison to same-sex dyads (mixed-sex 63%, same-sex 53%). P Cond= Physical condition, Prop = Proportion and Prop Diff = Proportion Difference.

Item	A. Mixed-sex Dyad					B. Same-sex Dyad					C. Proportion comparison		
	Count	Total	Prop	Z	P	Count	Total	Prop	Z	P	Prop. Diff	Z	P
Bark	268	424	0.63	5.39	<0.0001*	279	460	0.61	4.52	<0.0001	0.03	0.7815	0.4354
Lick mouth	227	356	0.64	5.14	<0.0001*	251	381	0.66	6.15	<0.0001	-0.02	-0.6011	0.5485
Eat first	214	348	0.61	4.23	<0.0001*	259	369	0.70	7.70	<0.0001	-0.09	-2.456	0.0139
Reward	234	329	0.71	7.61	<0.0001*	263	355	0.74	9.02	<0.0001	-0.03	-0.8678	0.3843
Fight	289	338	0.86	13.00	<0.0001*	317	362	0.88	14.24	<0.0001	-0.02	-0.8011	0.4237
Play ball	192	383	0.50	0.00	0.5000	212	410	0.52	0.64	0.2605	-0.02	-0.4438	0.6599
Greet owner	182	314	0.58	2.77	0.0028	170	330	0.52	0.50	0.3102	0.06	1.6426	0.1010
Walk first	253	375	0.67	6.71	<0.0001*	279	420	0.66	6.68	<0.0001	0.01	0.3105	0.7566
Resting place	246	340	0.72	8.19	<0.0001*	271	376	0.72	8.51	<0.0001	0.00	0.0831	0.9362
Overmark	177	346	0.51	0.38	0.6857	223	323	0.69	6.79	<0.0001	-0.18	-4.7143	<0.0001
Defend group	255	362	0.70	7.73	<0.0001*	272	377	0.72	8.55	<0.0001	-0.02	-0.5127	0.6101
Smart	205	321	0.64	4.91	<0.0001*	228	344	0.66	5.98	<0.0001	-0.02	-0.6532	0.5157
Obedient	202	404	0.50	0.00	0.5198	213	434	0.49	-0.34	0.6671	0.01	0.2666	0.7872
Aggressive	240	359	0.67	6.33	<0.0001*	284	403	0.70	8.17	<0.0001	-0.04	-1.076	0.2801
Impulsive	252	435	0.58	3.26	0.0005*	260	473	0.55	2.12	0.0172	0.03	0.8994	0.3681
Size: Heavier	234	450	0.52	0.80	0.2115	263	479	0.55	2.10	0.0177	-0.03	-0.6973	0.4839
P Cond: Better	168	325	0.52	0.55	0.7471	185	362	0.51	0.37	0.6819	0.01	0.1538	0.8808
Age: Older	296	455	0.65	6.38	<0.0001*	319	476	0.67	7.38	<0.0001	-0.02	-0.6319	0.5287
Neutered	310	491	0.63	1.97	0.0488	270	512	0.53	1.86	0.0629	0.10	3.3347	0.0009
Sex: Female	282	491	0.57	3.25	0.0006*	294	512	0.57	3.31	0.0004	0.00	0.0038	1.0000

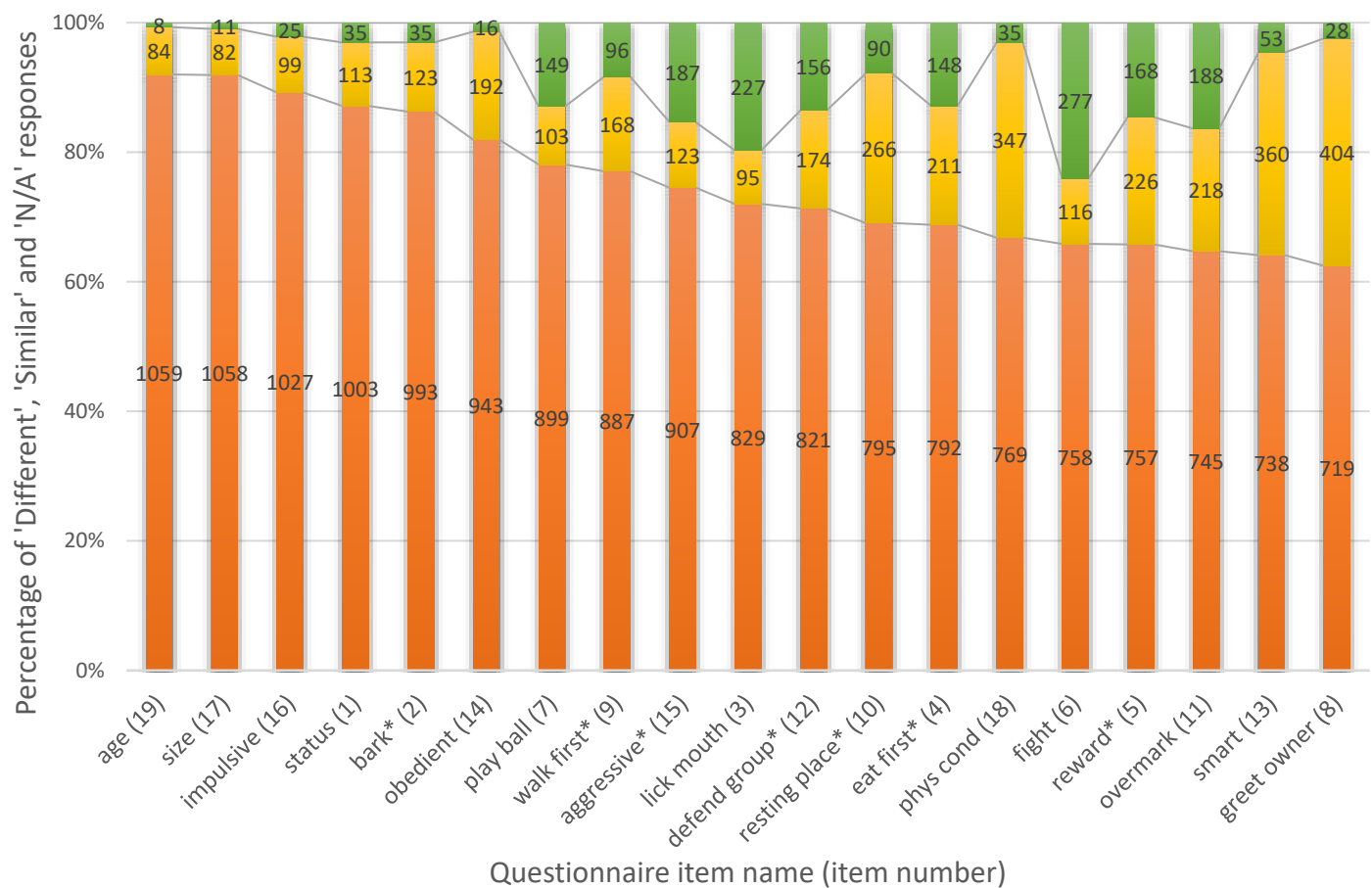
3

Comparison of male and female "dominants" in mixed-sex dyads.

In order to determine whether there were differences between the dominant males and females in each item measured, we compared the dominants proportion of each group (dominant male and dominant female in mixed-sex group) using a z score calculation. Results are displayed for mixed-sex dyads by the sex of the dominant. Bold type indicates that social status was associated with the characteristic after Bonferroni correction (for the Binomial tests all p values are ≤ 0.0026). Prop= Proportion and Prop Diff = Proportion difference.

Item	Dominant female			Dominant male			Prop Diff	Proportion comparison	
	Count	Total	Prop	Count	Total	Prop		Z	P
Bark	162	248	0.65	106	176	0.60	0.05	1.07	0.2846
Lick mouth	125	201	0.62	102	155	0.66	-0.04	-0.70	0.4839
Eat first	128	201	0.64	86	147	0.59	0.05	0.98	0.3271
Reward	137	187	0.73	97	142	0.68	0.05	0.98	0.3271
Fight	177	205	0.86	112	133	0.84	0.02	0.54	0.5892
Play ball	111	220	0.50	81	163	0.50	0.01	0.15	0.8808
Greet owner	96	175	0.55	86	139	0.62	-0.07	-1.25	0.2113
Walk first	137	222	0.62	116	153	0.76	-0.14	-2.87	0.0041
Resting place	154	197	0.78	92	143	0.64	0.14	2.82	0.0048
Overmark	39	193	0.20	138	153	0.90	-0.70	-12.93	**<0.0001**
Defend group	127	212	0.60	128	150	0.85	-0.25	-5.22	**<0.0001**
Smart	118	183	0.64	87	138	0.63	0.01	0.27	0.7872
Obedient	114	228	0.50	88	176	0.50	0.00	0	1.0000
Aggressive	126	206	0.61	114	153	0.75	-0.13	-2.66	0.0078
Impulsive	158	255	0.62	94	180	0.52	0.10	2.03	0.0424
Size: heavier	106	257	0.41	128	193	0.66	-0.25	-5.27	**<0.0001**
Physical Condition	89	184	0.48	79	141	0.56	-0.08	-1.37	0.1707
Age: Older	159	258	0.62	137	197	0.70	-0.08	-1.75	0.0801
Neutered	203	282	0.72	107	210	0.51	0.21	4.78	**<0.0001**

Differences between characteristics in dog dyads.

Colours: orange: dogs in a dyad differ in the characteristic, yellow: dogs are similar, green: N/A. Sample sizes are indicated on the columns, item numbers are in brackets. Seven items, highlighted by *, are suggested for future work based on both their significant link with dominance status (independently from the sex of the dogs) and their occurrence (% of 'Similar' responses were lower than 24.7 and % of 'N/A' responses were lower than 16.1, see Descriptive statistics).

Percentages with which each characteristic was associated with "dominant" status.

* indicates that "dominant" status was associated with the item after Bonferroni correction (for the Binomial tests all p values are ≤ 0.0022). Item numbers are in brackets. See Table 2 for more statistical results.