

For the “dog days” of summer, a column about dogs and their social life. Last year, a certain Helen Wilson, claiming to hold a “doctorate in feminist studies” submitted a paper titled “Human reactions to rape culture and queer performativity at urban dog parks in Portland, Oregon” to the *Journal of Feminist Geography*. Turned out there was no evidence for Wilson’s PhD claim. But her accreditation shouldn’t have been the issue. Why would any credible academic journal accept a paper hypothesizing, “Dog parks are microcosms where hegemonic masculinist norms governing queering behaviour and compulsory heterosexuality can be observed in a cross-species environment”? The statement is of course utter BS. Because, see, they are not humans, they are dogs. Turned out there was no evidence for Wilson’s PhD claim (—image—)

(—image—)

That an allegedly educated human being can sit in a dog park (for 1,000 hours by Wilson’s account), observing canine interaction, and process it strictly through the lens of feminist dogma illuminates what the humanities are churning out: minds that are completely untethered from science (not to mention common sense), lacking the merest smidgin of critical thinking skills. Pity. If Wilson had actually spent her time observing the dogs interacting without prejudice and a foregone conclusion in mind, she might have gotten an inkling of the fascinating canine code of behaviour that was on display. In her 2009 book, *The 100 Silliest Things People Say About Dogs*, dog behaviourist Alexandra Semyonova brought both academic research and 14 years of fieldwork to the task of explaining canine behaviour to humans. Semyonova debunks common myths I always suspected were nonsense: such as that dogs are a kind of tame wolf, that they are pack animals, that owners must demonstrate “alpha dog” behaviour or their dogs will not respect them, and other mantras people believe, even when consistent evidence fails to materialize. (—image—)

Dogs go for a romp at a Calgary dog park in an undated photo.

West Campus Development Trust

Most relevant with regard to Wilson’s foolish takeaway from her dog-park “research” is Semyonova’s explanation of the rules that govern dogs when they meet in common recreational space. While many dog behaviourists study dogs in controlled experiments, Semyonova’s knowledge was gleaned from 14 years of daily excursions to dog parks with her own and clients’ dogs, where she simply observed, neutrally, as a proper scholar should, what unfolds when neighbourhood dogs, both familiar and strange, occupy the same limited terrain. Semyonova describes what happens as a “self-organizing system” (SOS), in which the moving parts — the dogs in this case — arrive at equilibrium “like a bunch of atoms in a bell jar.” The goal is to spread the available energy around evenly without collision — i.e. serious fighting in the dogs’ case — until the system achieves stability. The goal is to spread the available energy around evenly without collision i.e. serious fighting (—image—)

(—image—)

A human SOS, somewhat analogous to a dog park, Semyonova says, can be observed at cocktail parties, where everyone instinctively follows unwritten rules of conduct. Each individual strives for the feeling of well-being that comes with a drink in hand, a comfortable sitting or standing zone and a conversational partner. But that situation never remains static. One partner gets bored, or a drink must be replenished, or an unexpected friend arrives. Everyone is shifting their attention or movements at slightly different moments, and so the energy is diffused; everyone is constantly stimulated, and everyone feels included. Nobody is so gauche at a cocktail party as to destabilize the equilibrium by pushing someone off the chair she fancies. Nobody asks the host embarrassing questions about his troubled marriage. We don’t consciously think we are following rules, but we follow them voluntarily, because we are socialized to do so through practice and observation of what others do. If someone breaks the rules — gets drunk and punches a rival in the nose, say — everyone is upset and the party grinds to a halt. So that must not happen. (—image—)

Dogs and their owner enjoy a hike at Thetis Lake Park in Langford, B.C., on Nov. 16, 2017.

Chad Hipolito/CP

Semyonova says that every time more than two dogs share physical space, they immediately constitute a SOS seeking its equilibrium. They all work toward maximal well-being in safety, with no recourse to authority. Strange dogs exchange signals that neither intends to deploy their “weapons,” and they exchange other signals through body language to indicate comfort levels as interaction continues. Once boundaries are established, play becomes relaxed. There are three immutable rules normal dogs obey, Semyonova says: i) we will not use aggression in social interactions, but will limit ourselves to signals and avoid damaging each other; ii) we will respect each other’s personal zone and not enter it without permission; and iii) we will be considerate of each other’s personal preferences once we have learned them. If you want to understand dog behaviour, gender studies won’t help you. But this gem of a book will. It’s the best dog book I have ever read — and I’ve read a lot of them. • Email: kaybarb@gmail.com | Twitter: [BarbaraRKay](#) Barbara Kay: It’s time to bring some order, and safety, back to our classrooms Barbara Kay: For the first time, Israel is the world’s most Jewish country — this is a game-changer Barbara Kay: One woman’s journey from social-justice warrior to free-speech champion