The Selection and Assessment of Potential Therapy Animal Candidates

Animal Welfare and Ethical Considerations in Animal Assisted Interventions

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Introduction

As Animal Assisted Interventions (AAI) continue to be recognized as a viable treatment option for a range of clinical presentations, there is a growing need for highly qualified animals to serve humans in multiple and varied capacities. Regardless of the species, or the particular role, animals are increasingly being "drafted" for roles in human health services.

With the use of appropriate assessment instruments, that have the sensitivity to assess the traits that are relevant to the demands of a particular job, we are better able to provide high quality clinical services to human clients, while respecting our animal partners in the process.

Need in Mental Health Field

Many of the currently available selection procedures in AAI assess behavioral repertoires and learned skills, rather than underlying temperament or character traits. How well these methods actually help assess "goodness of fit" between a particular animal and a particular client or service role, continue to be an area of interest for practitioners and researchers alike.

Figure 1. First Standards Published by Delta Society, 1996

The first "Standards of Practice" published in 1996 by the Delta Society, suggested four broad criteria when selecting therapy animals. These criteria were intended to provide a framework to guide the development of selection procedures (Fredrickson, et. al, 2010). Prior to this, early efforts for animal selection focused almost exclusively on risk management for humans.

If we are to truly consider animal welfare in AAI, we must look beyond trained skills (controllability, reliability, predictability) and consider an animal's baseline "suitability" for work in AAI.

Multi-Dimensional Assessment

The Clothier Animal Response Assessment Tool (CARAT™) is a multi-dimensional assessment tool developed by Suzanne Clothier that has been used for evaluating guide dogs, service dogs, and other working dogs. CARAT is one tool that can be used to assess an animal's baseline suitability in the field of AAI. CARAT allows us to evaluate an individual animal with a fine tuned analysis, considering multiple traits of that individual and how those traits interact.

Temperament Traits

CARAT has five primary temperament indexes, each of which include three to four individual traits. There are three additional complex traits that are scored independently.

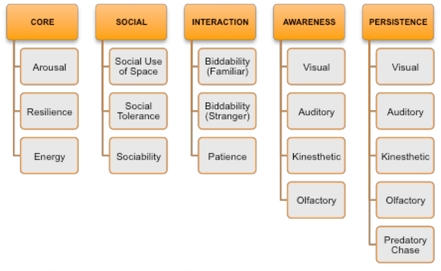

Figure 2. CARAT Temperament Traits

Psychometric Properties

CARAT is not a pass/fail test; rather it assists in creating a profile of traits. CARAT traits are scored on a bidirectional scale, where the mid-point of zero represents highly functional behavior.

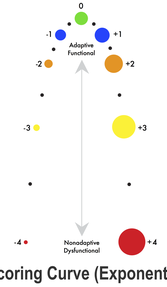

Figure 3. Bidirectional Scoring Curve (Exponential Scale)

The CARAT scoring scale is an exponential scale, not a strictly linear scale. The shift from zero to +/-1 is more moderate than the shift from two to +/-3 and from three to +/-4. The shift from adaptive behavior to dysfunctional behavior is precipitous, not gradual. Each possible score for every trait is operationally defined and based on observable behaviors.

Use of CARAT in AAI

CARAT allows for assessment of "goodness of fit" with a particular job, therapeutic milieu or clinical population. For example, a dog that scores a +2 on Sociability (defined as a dog that approaches readily without invitation or eye contact from person being approached) may make an appropriate therapy dog, but would be less desirable as a guide dog.

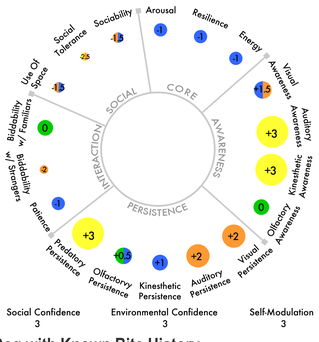

Figure 5. Pet Dog with Known Bite History

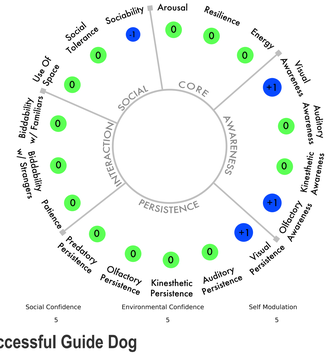

Figure 6. Successful Guide Dog

Figure 5. Illustrates a dog that would not be suitable for AAI due to notable social intolerance (defensively aggressive) and touch and noise sensitivities. Figure 6. Illustrates a dog who is tolerant, balanced, has normal sensory processing and could make a suitable therapy dog.

Ethical Considerations in AAI

Ethical decision-making in AAI requires that we consider the needs of both our human clients and animal partners. The questions below (Figure 6) offer a framework for clinicians to consider when using data driven decision-making in assessing suitability for therapy animal candidates.

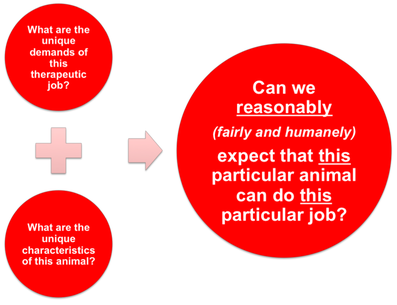

Figure 4. Ethical Framework for Selecting Therapy Animals

Conclusions

CARAT is one tool can be used to guide ethical decision making in the selection and assessment of animal partners in AAI. Further exploration of CARAT's utility in AAI is warranted.

References

Fredrickson-MacNamara, M., & Butler, K. (2010). Animal Selection Procedures in Animal Assisted Interaction Programs. In A. Fine (Ed.), Handbook on Animal-Assisted Therapy: Theoretical Foundations and Guidelines for Practice (3rd Edition ed., pp. 111-134).

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