Validating the behavioural assessments of canines at the RSPCA Shelter in Fairfield, Queensland

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Abstract

The RSPCA in Fairfield, Queensland, behaviourally assesses all dogs over the age of four months before they are considered for rehoming. This is done in order to ascertain whether the dogs are suitable for rehoming, as well as to determine the temperament of the dogs in order to ensure that it is rehomed in the most appropriate way. A dog is considered behaviourally unsuitable for rehoming if it is overtly aggressive or extremely anxious. The Fairfield shelter has been performing such behavioural assessments since 1995 and the assessment has changed and continues to change as new methodologies become available. This research is the first of its kind conducted to validate the behavioural assessments of canines at the Fairfield RSPCA.

Introduction

The assessment incorporates eleven components and employs a point scoring system. The components pertain to responses to general handling, restraint, food, other dogs, being left alone and noise and movement. A numerical value is assigned to each of the responses according to the desirability of the response behaviour displayed by the dog. The least desirable response behaviour warrants the highest score and the most desirable behaviour is assigned the lowest score, with a progressive numerical scale in between.

There are three possible outcomes from the behavioural assessment. The dog may either 'pass' the assessment, having neither exhibited any aggressive or extremely anxious behaviours and having scored below a certain score; the dog may 'fail' the assessment, having either exhibited aggressive or extremely anxious behaviours or scored above a certain score; or the dog may have scored within a small margin between what is considered a low and a high score and will subsequently be placed on a 'behaviour intervention program' and be re-assessed at a later date. When a dog 'fails' the assessment it is euthanased and when it 'passes' the assessment it is considered for rehoming.

The behavioural assessments of 236 dogs were observed at the Fairfield shelter. Variable factors such as the duration of the assessment; number of people present; amount of faeces and urine deposited by other dogs and the dog being assessed; distractions; origin of the dog and any discernible health conditions, were noted. It was found that the duration of the assessment varied positively with the likelihood of a dog passing the assessment. This was to be expected given that dogs whose assessment continues have not displayed any undesirable behaviours which warrant the assessment to be terminated before completion. It was also found that the presence of urine from dogs other than the dog being assessed showed a marginal positive correlation for the likelihood that a dog would pass the assessment. The presence of faeces by dogs other than the dog being assessed also showed to have a positive correlation with the likelihood that the dog would pass the assessment. The reason for this may be that olfactory stimulation from excreta help dogs to be relaxed and reassured by the presence of other dogs.

Thirty nine of the dogs which passed the behavioural assessment and were rehomed were visited in their new homes and the behavioural assessment re-administered. All except two components of the behavioural assessment were replicated in this manner and owners were asked to assess their dogs' responses to other dogs and to being left alone. The 'backstroking' and 'head patting' and 'physical tolerance' components did not show any correlation between the first assessment administered at the shelter and the second assessment administered in the home after adoption. This suggests that these components are not good indicators of a dog's response to such stimuli after adoption in its new home, and it is possible that behavioural responses to these components depend largely on the mood of the dog at the time of the assessment. Similarly the 'safe hug' component also showed no correlation between the first and second assessments, indicating that is has no predictive value for future behaviour.

The 'muzzle tolerance' test comprises a stimulus that has traditionally been used to assess the assertiveness of young pups. This test showed a strong correlation between first and second assessments which suggests that it is a good indicator for future behaviour. The 'restraint' test follows this prototype, as this stimulus has also traditionally been used by behaviourists to assess pups and adult dogs. This test was shown indicate a good predictive value also.

The 'food guarding' and 'response to noise and movement' and 'play and toy excitement' tests also showed a strong predictive value for future behaviour. These tests all share one similar attribute: they do not appear to rely solely on the mood of the dog in response to its circumstance, but rely on behaviour which has been classically conditioned or is innate and instinctual.

The 'left alone' test did not show to have any predictive value for future behaviour while the 'response to other dogs' did. These results were based on the responses provided by the new owners of the dogs as neither of these two tests could be assessed in the home.

Each dog scored, on average, 3.2 points less in the second assessment, with scores deviating by as much as 31 points overall, out of a possible score of between zero and approximately 130. The statistical analysis indicates that there is some correlation between the overall scores of the first and second assessments, however the standard deviation of just over 12 points suggests that most dogs scored much greater difference than 3.2 points between the first assessment and second assessments.

Owners were asked to complete a questionnaire to ascertain the typical behaviour of their adopted dogs. All new owners reported that they were either satisfied or very satisfied with their adopted dogs. All owners reported that they had bonded well or very well with their new dog and that the dog fit in with the routine of the household. One dog had been aggressive to a human and ten dogs had been aggressive to other pets in the household. Only six dogs had been to obedience training after adoption. Many owners reported that they had observed behavioural problems but none were considering rehoming the dog.

The findings of this study raise questions about the validity of the inclusion of certain components in the behavioural assessment. Some components have no predictive value, while others have a strong predictive value and should remain a part of the behavioural assessment. It can be speculated that the components which have no predictive value are largely dependent on the mood of the dog at the time of assessment, based on a number of inconsistent variables, some of which appear to have an impact on the dog's likelihood of passing the assessment. Conversely, the components which have shown to have a high predictive value can be argued to be the result of classical conditioning and instinctual and innate responses, on which inconsistent variables are less likely to have an impact.

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Angelika grew up on a farm in Denmark and came to Australia in 1992. She began a Bachelor of Arts degree at the Australian National University in 1998 and completed it in the warmer climates of Queensland at the University of Queensland in 2002. She recently completed her Masters degree in Animal Science and Management at UQ's recently established Centre for Animal Welfare and Ethics, under the supervision of Professor Clive Phillips and Dr Andrew Tribe.

Angelika volunteers at the Queensland Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries' Animal Welfare Unit, and is a member of WSPA and Animal Liberation Qld, and a registered companion animal foster carer. She would like to travel and complete a PhD in Canada. She currently shares her home in Brisbane with her two big dogs, Oskar and Bea, and her cat, Shaddock, and would like to extend her menagerie to include just about every animal she can think of!