

The View from All Fours: A Look at an Animal-Assisted Activity Program from the Animals' Perspective

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ABSTRACT In recent decades, animal-assisted therapy (AAT) and animal-assisted activity (AAA) programs have gained in popularity. A growing literature documents the benefits of AAT/AAA for humans. The prevalent perspective for AAT/AAA research is “what can non-human animals do for us?” with no apparent consideration to what such programs may do for, or to, the animals involved. Ample research reveals that animals are minded actors with the capacity to feel complex emotions. Consequently, AAT/AAA programs should benefit the animals as well as the humans involved. Based on interviews with human volunteers in an animal shelter’s AAA program and participant observation in the same program, this paper investigates the animals’ experience in AAA. Specifically, this study discusses the use of shelter animals as “volunteer therapists” and concludes that AAT/AAA programs raise numerous concerns for the animals involved. These findings indicate the need for more attention to the experience of animals in AAT/AAA programs.

Keywords: animal-assisted activities, animal-assisted therapy, animal welfare, shelter animals



There is a long history of human reliance upon non-human animals¹ for therapeutic benefits. While perhaps existing in varying degrees since the domestication of dogs and cats, the systematic use of animals for therapeutic purposes dates back to at least the early middle ages (Cantanzaro 2003a). Contemporarily, animal-assisted therapy (AAT) and animal-assisted activities (AAA), of various types and with differing goals, exist in prisons, juvenile homes, hospices, retirement homes, treatment centers, homeless shelters, schools, and hospitals. “Animal-assisted therapy” (AAT) programs technically refer to programs with a stated goal of therapy, for example, a stroke patient brushes a dog or a child with cerebral palsy rides a horse in order to help improve motor skills. In such cases, health or human service professionals use animals as part of their job. “Animal-assisted activities” (AAA) often refer to programs where animals simply “visit” with a population (i.e., the elderly) with no stated “therapeutic” goals per se (besides that of companionship).² In AAT and

AAA programs, animals visit or work with hearing- and sight-impaired children and adults, and those with varying mental, psychological, and physical disabilities. AAT/AAA programs take a variety of forms, but usually fall within four major categories, based on the role of the animal. Some specially trained animals live with an individual on a full-time basis; other animals are temporary companions, visiting facilities alongside human volunteers; others are “mascot” animals, residing most of the time in therapeutic settings; and others are considered “part of the living environment,” an approach that is seen in some residential centers or working farms (Cantanzaro 2003b). A range of animals, in addition to dogs, are used in AAT/AAA programs, including cats, rabbits, mice, gerbils, ferrets, horses, dolphins, birds, pot bellied pigs, farm animals (i.e., llamas, goats, cows), and monkeys.

Existing AAT/AAA Research

Accompanying, and perhaps in part fueling, the relative abundance of AAT/AAA programs is a growing literature attesting to the benefits such programs have for humans. Veterinarians, psychologists, and other pet-therapy enthusiasts have gathered testimonials and witnessed first hand the effectiveness of AAT/AAA programs for humans (see, for example, Graham 2000; Becker 2002; Crawford and Pomerinke 2003). Such accounts argue that animals can help humans in a variety of ways, including but not limited to helping patients recover in hospitals, providing support and companionship for those facing emotional difficulties, encouraging the physically disabled to perform tasks that strengthen speech and motor skills, encouraging children to read, calming Alzheimer’s or other distressed patients, and raising the spirits of the terminally ill.

Many academic and medical studies attest to the benefits of interacting with companion animals; one review of literature between 1996 and 2001 found 84 journal articles focusing on the benefits of interacting with companion animals, including human–animal interaction found in AAT/AAA programs (Barker et al. 2003). Interacting with animals (“companion” and otherwise) is said to have a range of physical effects such as lowering blood pressure (Beck and Katcher 1983); aiding in the development of motor skills like coordination, balance and posture (McCowan 1984); a variety of psychosocial effects like decreasing feelings of loneliness, despair, isolation and fear (Muschel 1984), and decreasing symptoms of depression (Jessen, Cardiello and Baun 1996). Animals act as “facilitators” (see Messent 1983) of human social interaction, increasing the levels of communication among residents, staff, and the human AAT/AAA volunteers (Granger and Carter 1991; Bernstein, Friedmann and Malaspina 2000). Additionally, the use of various animal programs in correctional facilities has resulted in decreased incidents of aggression and problem behaviors, decreased levels of depression, and has positively impacted inmate self-esteem (Haynes 1991; Moneymaker and Strimple 1991; Walsh and Mertin 1994; Strimple 2003).³

Not all studies of AAT/AAA yield positive results. Some research points to potential problems or negative effects of AAT programs for human recipients. For example, the benefits of pet visitation programs may depend on the personality type of those being visited (Colby and Sherman 2002). Other studies indicate animal visits or pet ownership has no effect on elderly residents and there is evidence of AAT/AAA causing decreased morale and health in some populations (Lago, Knight and Connell 1983; Ory and Goldberg 1983; Miller and Lago 1990; Stallones et al. 1990). Wilson and Barker (2003) point to the potential problems in the methodology of existing research that claims therapeutic effectiveness in human–animal interactions. Additionally, Beck and Katcher (1984) find little evidence that companion animals provide *long-term* therapeutic benefits for human health and well-being.

With so much research done on AAT/AAA programs, what is missing is a thorough discussion of the effects programs of this nature have on the animal “volunteers” themselves.⁴ The prevalent perspective on AAT/AAA is “what can animals do for us?” with little or no consideration to what the program may be doing for, or to, the animals. Any focus on the animals has largely been limited to what the animals need in order to succeed in AAT/AAA. For example, animals should be bathed, spayed/neutered, current on vaccinations, housebroken, obedient, and have a calm temperament. Some work on AAT/AAA mentions the possible problems animals may cause for humans, for

example, the potential for the transmission of zoonoses (Walter-Toews 1993), resident allergies (Beck 2000), concern about fleas (Brickel 1979), fear of or dislike of animals (Fine 2000b), negative consequences associated with the death or illness of an animal on the human (Fine 2000b), and physical injuries (i.e., scratches and bites) (Arkow 1987b). However, very few researchers have focused on the possible ill effects AAT/AAA programs have on the animals themselves. Iannuzzi and Rowan (1991) provide a notable exception with their study of the ethical issues raised by AAT/AAA. They point to the following concerns for the animals: limited access to water, high temperatures in nursing homes, high expectations for the length of time animals should visit, and the overall stress such work can create for animals. Serpell, Coppinger and Fine (2000) point to the high potential for inhumane or inappropriate training methods used on therapy or service animals. They also argue that many therapy and service animals are placed in positions in which they cannot avoid or escape unpleasant social intrusions that may have an adverse effect on their physical and mental well-being. Crutches, walkers and wheelchairs also pose a risk to any animal who may be “underfoot,” and therefore care needs to be given to keep animals safe from accidents and aggressive client behavior (Granger and Kogan 2000). With the potential for so many problems, it appears necessary for researchers to consider the effects, both positive and negative, of AAT/AAA for the animals involved.

Some animal rights activists argue that keeping animals as companions, let alone using them as aides in human therapy, is a form of animal exploitation. Such a position would likely find the use of animals (as property) to aid in human well-being problematic. Whether one agrees with this argument or not, at the very least it seems reasonable to expect that those involved in AAT/AAA programs should be (or would want to be) concerned about animal welfare and the humane treatment of therapy animals. Thus, it would be fruitful to research the potential physical harm animals can suffer from participating in AAT/AAA programs (i.e., dehydration and fatigue). Furthermore, recent sociological work affirms that animals are minded actors with distinct selves and the ability to feel and display a range of emotions (Arluke and Sanders 1996; Alger and Alger 1997, 1999, 2003; Sanders 1999; Irvine 2004). These findings raise concerns about the potential emotional and mental harm to the animals involved in AAT/AAA (i.e., stress, fear and discomfort) and whether the animals enjoy participating. Ideally, AAT/AAA programs should benefit the animals as well as the humans involved.

Research Objectives and Methods

My interest in this research came from my experience volunteering in an AAA program affiliated with a humane society that I will refer to as “The Shelter.”⁵ The Shelter’s program sponsors animal visitation through a variety of local institutions, including nursing homes, hospices, retirement homes, and juvenile homes.⁶ The stated goals of The Shelter’s pet-therapy program are to “provide therapy and to promote the human/animal bond” and to “provide a ‘feel good’ service to the community in which our animals get exercise and exposure while benefiting participating institutions.” To reach these goals, volunteers can bring either animals from The Shelter or their own companion animals to their assigned location. The human volunteers attend a two-hour training session sponsored by The Shelter, and the companion animals must pass a temperament and obedience test⁷ to participate in the program. In contrast, shelter animals do not have to pass a specific temperament test (other than the behavioral evaluation that deems them “adoptable”) or have any specific training. The Shelter considers those who bring shelter animals as partaking in a “pet therapy” program and those who bring companion animals as part of an “animal-assisted therapy” program. The difference in labels indicates that companion animals have passed an evaluation and can enter more “high risk” locations. However, both “animal-assisted therapy” and “pet therapy” are technically misnomers because the dogs and cats in either category are used for visitation.

Once a week, I would bring a shelter animal (usually a dog) to a nursing and retirement home. After doing this a few times, I wondered what this experience was like for the animals themselves. Further research indicated that not only are there relatively few discussions of animal welfare

concerns in existing AAT/AAA research, but that the use of shelter animals (rather than companion animals) in AAT/AAA is fairly rare, or at least rarely discussed. My research objective was to get a sense of what the animals experience while participating in an AAA program.

This paper draws on interviews with ten human volunteers who, along with shelter animals (instead of their own companion animals), participated in The Shelter's AAA program. Additionally, I include my own experiences as an AAA volunteer that I gathered over the expanse of about a year. The nine women and one man I interviewed were all white and middle-class. The youngest respondents (ages 12 and 15) participated in the program with their mothers (the mothers chose not to be interviewed), two of the respondents were college aged, and the remaining respondents ranged in ages from 25 to 68 years. The semi-structured interviews (see Appendix 1 for interview schedule) took anywhere from one hour to three hours to complete and were completed in mutually convenient locations away from the shelter.

Volunteers typically chose dogs for their visits, but occasionally brought cats or rabbits. Most volunteers visited elderly populations (in nursing homes, hospices, Alzheimer's units, assisted and independent senior living, and low-income housing). Most visited their location(s) every other week, spending about 30 to 45 minutes on site. The number of people seen in one visit ranged from one to 80, with most volunteers visiting about ten to twenty. The majority of respondents had one to two years of experience in the program.

It is important to recognize the potential problems inherent in interviewing the volunteers in this program. On one hand, the volunteers are likely to have interest in the dogs, in addition to having first hand experience in witnessing the behavior and response of the dogs while "on location." On the other hand, these very factors might make the respondents over interpret or misconstrue what dogs do, feel, and think.⁸ Additionally, the respondents vary in their knowledge of reading and interpreting dog behavior.

Measuring Animal Response

Because we lack a shared language, assessing an animal's "true" feelings can pose a difficult, but not impossible, task. Although a dog cannot vocalize her discontent or glee in terms humans can understand, her body language sends fairly clear and comprehensible messages (Sanders 1999; Bekoff 2002). Animals speak in body postures; for example, a dog who raises her hackles is likely displaying fear, and a cat who twitches her tail is likely displaying irritation. Through experience and perhaps intuition, many humans can grasp the meaning of some common dog and cat postures. For example, many interpret the wagging tail of a dog or the purring of a cat as indicators of happiness, and for the most part those are correct interpretations. Fewer people understand the more subtle body posturing that animals display. For instance, a dog's wagging tail may mean different things depending on the speed of the wag, and whether the full tail or just the tip is wagging. Dogs also use a range of what The Shelter and renowned dog trainer Turid Rugaas refers to as "calming signals" that they use to diffuse stressful situations.⁹ For example, a dog may lick her nose, sniff the ground, yawn, turn away, or stare in response to a stressful situation¹⁰ (Rugaas 1997). Familiarity with the likely meanings behind animal postures and behavior allows humans to understand and communicate with them.

The volunteers in The Shelter's AAA program all received handouts and a cursory explanation of dog and cat body postures. I asked the volunteers to discuss the responses they saw animals exhibit during AAA. The meaning behind calming signals was not emphasized much in the training, and thus respondents had a range of familiarity with calming signals (some very familiar, some not familiar at all). Despite this range of knowledge, respondents' intuition and experience with cats and dogs did allow them to feel fairly confident in their assessment of the animals' reactions. In other words, while some people may not have been familiar with dog calming signals *per se*, they felt they could still speak to the dogs' experience (based on their interpretation or "sense" of the animals' reaction). Thus, respondents engaged in a fairly common practice that Arluke and Sanders (1996) refer

to as “speaking for” the animals’ subjectivity. Faced with a lack of shared language, humans often feel compelled to “give voice” to what they believe to be the point of view or thoughts of the dog or cat. In this respect, the volunteers felt they could interpret, and speak for, what the dogs experienced and desired.

Any attempt to describe what animals are feeling in the absence of “hard” evidence is likely to be charged with anthropomorphism. In the sense that one uses human language to describe the feelings and emotions of animals, one is certainly anthropomorphic. This, however, is the consequence of using human language; we cannot avoid anthropomorphizing (Irvine 2004).¹¹ In the attempt to understand if a dog feels upset or happy, fearful or relaxed, I am not arguing for sentimental projections. Instead, I argue for the use of a critical anthropomorphism that grounds statements in what is known about the animal, either as individuals or representatives of the species (see Shapiro 1990, 1997; Burghardt 1998; Bekoff 2002).

Results

Selecting Candidates

The volunteers who use shelter animals for AAA are responsible for picking out an appropriate animal at the shelter. Shelter animals do not undergo specific AAA temperament or obedience tests; thus, most adoptable animals are candidates. To find a suitable candidate, volunteers must use their best judgment. They observe the animals’ behavior. Some ask shelter staff for recommendations, and additionally, they read the paperwork attached to each dog and cat kennel, which outlines what is known about the animal. The paperwork includes medical notes, the results of The Shelter’s behavioral evaluations, and as many details about the animal as possible (including a questionnaire filled out by the previous guardian, if the animal was relinquished instead of stray). Very few volunteers choose cats or rabbits for AAA; clearly, dogs were the more popular choice, perhaps due to the volunteers’ familiarity with dogs or because they believed dogs made the best “volunteer therapists.” Respondents also considered the age of the animal; they considered older animals better AAA candidates because of their typically more “mellow” dispositions. Other sought-after characteristics varied. One respondent mentioned that she specifically looks for food-motivated dogs and waits until she feels the right “energy” from the animal. A mother/daughter duo looks for smaller dogs because they are easier to handle. One volunteer avoids dogs who are “yippy.” Yet another looks for cats who like to sit on laps. In other words, there is no established understanding of what makes a “good” shelter AAA candidate. Sometimes volunteers made successful guesses and the animal worked well for AAA, and sometimes volunteers found their decisions to be way off the mark. Brian¹² explains the difficulty in selecting the right shelter dog for AAA:

It is so hard to tell, the dog wants out to begin with and it almost seems like you are being conned, ‘I’m the sweetest little dog in the world, please let me out, please please please please,’ and as soon as you...put the leash on (and) you open the door and they are running all of the place and you call the dog’s name and they never respond...I think that you just never can tell, you do the best you can.

In the end, choosing the “best” animal for AAA is a combination of basing one’s decision on as much information as one can gather about the animal and also a bit of sheer luck. Even if a dog or cat seemed “calm enough” at The Shelter, their behavior could change in the car or at the residence. Consequently there is a bit of a gamble involved.

Many times the human volunteers began to get a sense of the temperament and energy level of the dog or cat immediately after leaving the shelter. Not all shelter animals have had much previous experience, or much *positive* experience, with automobiles. Therefore, getting in to the car or carrier and riding in the car is a troublesome experience for some, but not all, of the visiting animals. Dogs and cats can and do associate certain experiences (like riding in the car), or certain people (like the vet), with negative or positive reactions and feelings.¹³ Moreover, if a handler finds that the

animal, especially a dog, is afraid of the car it actually provides a good opportunity to engage in some training. By using positive reinforcement, and perhaps treats, the volunteer can coax the dog into the car, and thus begin to help the dog overcome their fear. Many volunteers used such reinforcement to get dogs into the car, but few had the time, patience, or knowledge to engage in much training. Some volunteers mentioned picking the fearful dog up and placing him or her in the backseat. From the standpoint of using AAA as a way to also socialize shelter animals, this method may not be helpful in the long run.

The Visitation Site

The behavior and reaction of dogs and cats at the residences or treatment centers varied widely, depending on the animal. While few volunteers brought cats, those who had experience bringing them seemed to indicate that many, if not most, cats found the experience, or aspects of the experience, especially stressful. For example, cats who had little positive experience with carriers often yowled while riding in them, and many cats also seem to find new locations nerve-racking. For the most part, respondents who did bring cats tried to find calm, lap-loving cats. Gloria tried to find more active cats because they seemed more willing to leave their cage. As she explains, “we had to try to find ones that you could tell wanted to play because some didn’t and we would try to get them out (of their cage) and they wouldn’t want to.” Occasionally, volunteers chose a cat who worked well for AAA, who would spend time on a client’s lap, or play with a toy and not indicate fearfulness. Other times, it did not go as well. For example, I once brought a cat to a nursing home. She yowled during the entire trip there and instantaneously produced a covering of dandruff. She immediately tried to hide when I let her out at the nursing home. Clearly, this cat did not enjoy any part of the experience. It is possible that this sort of reaction is somewhat expected in cats, and thus most volunteers brought dogs instead.

Respondents who brought dogs to various institutions indicated that most of them were at least curious with their new surroundings and engaged in a lot of sniffing and “investigating.” Some dogs solicited attention. Others had trepidation of wheelchairs and walkers. Some dogs lay down; others roamed. A few respondents recognized calming signals in some of the dogs, like yawning and panting. All in all, while Gloria summed up the reactions of the shelter dogs as all “really excited (and) really hyper,” the responses the dogs had to the environment, and the people in it, seem to range widely. Most of the volunteers had an implicit understanding of what they thought made a “good” visitation dog. The “best” AAA dogs were those who were “well-mannered,” who did not jump on people or pull on their leash, and who were interested in the residents and solicited their attention. In explaining what a “good” AAA dog displays, Jenny said that, “they just went right up to people...that’s what makes it fun, when the dog kind of does all the work, and you don’t have to drag the dog just to go into a room or something.” Thus, for a dog to be especially “good” in relation to AAA, the dog must be a relatively well-behaved and willing participant. The “good” dogs usually made the experience go more smoothly for all involved, they made the handling easier for the human volunteer, some of the dogs seemed to enjoy the attention, and often clients responded better to the “well mannered” dogs.

Not all dogs displayed praiseworthy behavior during AAA. Other dogs either were simply less “well mannered” and/or they found the experience frightening or stressful. While Samantha said that most of the dogs were “good” and that most loved the people they were visiting, some dogs had a different reaction:

There were a couple of dogs that were there that I took, fortunately few and far between, that didn’t want to be there at all, (they) were so distracted. They didn’t want to even be touched, they wanted to go to the door, they wanted to lay down, they wanted to eat, they wanted to do anything but not be around the people.

Some respondents mentioned having to cut the visitation short because of a specific animal’s behavior. While respondents did not seem to do this often, some skipped doing their usual visit

if the dog seemed anxious, hot, or distracted. Claudia once made such a decision after getting the dog into her car but before arriving at the nursing home. While driving, she decided that the dog was too stressed for visitation. She turned the car around and brought the dog back to The Shelter.

Sometimes a dog's behavior or reaction was questionable at best, but it did not necessarily provoke the respondents to feel the need to bring the dog back immediately. For example, Claudia brought a dog who ended up exceedingly frightened of elevators, and another who was frightened of stairs. I once brought a dog who was terrified of the nursing home's sliding glass doors. Both Samantha and Olivia had experiences of dogs getting free from their leashes and running away (fortunately, both were subsequently caught). Dogs also sometimes panted (which is indicative of heat, thirst, and/or stress), pulled toward the door to leave, paced, sniffed the ground obsessively (indicative of curiosity and/or stress), and acted disinterested or distracted. However, many dogs also wagged their tails, "checked in" with their handlers, solicited attention, and were otherwise well-mannered and "good" AAA dogs. Additionally, there were no reported incidences of dogs snapping or biting any client or handler. The behaviors and responses of the dogs varied, and sometimes a dog who enjoyed part of the experience (i.e., the car) did not necessarily enjoy others (i.e., being around wheelchairs). Instead, the dogs' responses illustrate that not all dogs have the appropriate temperament or training for such programs. The "antsy" or "anxious" AAA dog may, in a different situation, make for a very calm and "well-mannered" dog. To be sure, fear behaviors open an opportunity for the handler to engage in some training and positive socialization. However, respondents often lacked the time and skills to do so.

Dogs may also react in a certain way because their behavioral signs are misinterpreted by the handlers. For example, early in the interview, Jenny comments that sometimes dogs are anxious and have difficulty focusing. Later in the interview she explains that, "We don't give them water or anything during the visit in case, you know, we don't want them to have an accident in the hall." Given that dehydrated dogs are likely to display anxiety, offering these anxious dogs water may have helped calm them. Claudia mentioned that she sometimes thinks the dog she brings can pick up on her stress, if she is stressed a particular day, and consequently the dogs also feel stressed or anxious themselves. Thus, the human handlers can and do play a large role in the dog's experience.

Resident Reactions

As discussed earlier, ample research indicates that animal visitation programs have positive effects on the residents of various institutions. This is not to say, however, that everyone enjoys a visit by an animal. Mostly, the reactions are positive; people typically enjoy petting the animals, reminiscing about pets they had over their lifetime, and using the animals as a catalyst for conversations with the human volunteer. However, sometimes the reactions toward the animals are not positive, and could even be dangerous. For instance, Claudia recalled when a staff member jumped in front of a dog to scare it (and it worked!). Perhaps the most troubling of all experiences is the one Brian had with a small dog:

I had a dog in my arms, and I brought it closer to this one person who I thought seemed to want to see the dog, and that person just swatted the dog in the nose! And the dog just reeled back a little, looked at me, looked at the person, looked at me like "what the hell?"

Obviously, the experience of being hit by a human is not good for any dog, but arguably it is even more problematic for a shelter dog. First, the dog may have responded aggressively (thankfully it did not), and second, that kind of experience may harm the dog's chances of ultimately being adopted. A dog who could possibly have a history of experiencing animal abuse, or who fears humans in general, clearly is done a further disservice by situations such as these.

Respondent Reactions

When asked directly, respondents had more difficulty listing specific drawbacks of the program for shelter animals than they did listing benefits. However, through the course of the interviews, many would bring up examples of things that would *seem to be* drawbacks for the animal—like evidence of stress or fear—and yet not mention those same things when asked directly to list potential costs. This may indicate that respondents do not find fear or stress in the animal necessarily problematic, that they believe such instances of stress or fear are too few to mention, or that they feel the need to “defend” the program (or at least not speak negatively about it). Additionally, it is difficult to think of the animals’ behaviors and reactions retrospectively. If a volunteer was not aware of the meaning behind certain calming signals, he or she is unlikely to have paid much attention to them if they were indeed displayed. Thus, for example, when people remember dogs sniffing the ground, they may have interpreted this behavior simply as “exploring.” The sniffing certainly may have indicated exploring and curiosity, it may also have been a calming signal employed by a nervous dog. Consequently, not being familiar with behavioral cues makes interpreting the animals’ reactions difficult.

Discussion

In the early 1970s, Phil Arkow from the Humane Society of the Pikes Peak Region in Colorado pioneered the involvement of shelter animals in AAA programs. His “Pet-Mobile” program brought shelter kittens and puppies to nursing homes. A “small but influential” number of humane societies across the nation followed suit by organizing their own AAA programs using shelter animals (Arkow 1987b). However, within the course of about two decades, the use of shelter animals (puppies/kittens and adults alike) in AAA programs became more controversial. Fredrickson and Howie (2000) and Hines (2003) argue that by the 1990s, all major humane associations and veterinary organizations in the United States recommended against using shelter animals in AAA programs. The Humane Society of the United States began to question the use of shelter animals for AAA for a variety of reasons, including for example, that AAA programs take time and resources away from shelter’s larger missions (i.e., preventing animal cruelty and adopting out homeless animals); the programs keep animals out of the shelter when they may have otherwise been adopted; the animals return to the shelter often exhausted from the visits; and there is often very little information known about the past behavior and health history of the animal (Beck 2000). Currently, while many shelters nationwide continue to sponsor AAA programs, it is unknown how many of these programs use shelter animals as opposed to volunteers’ companion animals. The use of shelter animals today either has become relatively rare, or has received no attention in the literature.¹⁴

It is easy to see why there are mixed feelings about the use of shelter animals in AAA programs. On the one hand, AAA provides shelter animals the potential benefits of socialization and exercise. Additionally, the shelter benefits from increased positive exposure in the community. On the other hand, numerous problems can arise in AAA, some of which may have a negative impact on the animal and his or her chances of adoption. The relative lack of information about the animals’ pasts is the most pressing concern. With no knowledge of a dog’s behavioral history, one does not know if they are afraid of wheelchairs or elevators. Thus, forcing a dog or cat into a situation that may cause them considerable fear not only harms the animal, but may also put other people in danger if the animal responds to fear with aggression. Thus, bringing animals into institutions for AAA, whether they are companion or shelter animals, raises concerns about liability. Companion animals can receive specialized AAA testing, training, and certification, and therefore they become much less risky, legally speaking, than a shelter animal with no specialized training or certification.

It seems understood that any client or handler who severely abuses a therapy or visitation animal will not only mentally and/or physically harm the animal and destroy the animals’ ability to help others, but also threaten the animal’s chances of being adopted. The case of the resident who hit the visiting dog is a prime example of such straightforward animal cruelty. An animal who learns to fear humans is simply not as likely to be adopted. Although research indicates visiting with animals

is a positive experience for institutionalized populations, not all people like or will respond appropriately to animal visits. Keeping the welfare of animals in mind, there is indeed reason to be cautious about the people who are visited. Handlers should avoid people who can and do express their dislike for animals, and animals may be in harm's way if they are exposed to people who cannot voice their dislike or fear. Furthermore, certain populations may be inappropriate for animal visitation, or at the very least, warrant extra caution. For example, one of the respondents worked with a "troubled" teenager who, at age ten, had killed a dog after the dog bit him. The goal of AAA for him was to learn to like and trust animals. The program's objective for this teen is obviously a worthy one, but situations like these call for extraordinary vigilance on the part of the handler and perhaps the presence of a mental health professional.

Perhaps not as obvious as outright abuse is the risk posed to animals in AAA (or AAT) inadvertently. For example, if an animal who fears wheelchairs and walkers is pulled toward them (instead of learning to be comfortable with them) the handler could create anxiety in the animal and thereby reinforce the fear. Another example, seen several times in this study, is the handlers' failure to provide the dogs water due to concerns about the dog urinating in the facility. While not intentionally malicious, the handlers are in effect dehydrating the dogs and creating an unhealthy experience for them. The handlers' lack of knowledge about calming signals and other stress reactions could result in their failure to read, or their misreading of, the behavioral cues the animals display. In AAA, the potential for handler mistreatment, mishandling, and ignorance exists, regardless of how well intentioned the human may be. Without proper knowledge about animal behavior, handlers may not know when to take an animal from a situation. Without proper knowledge, handlers may reinforce fear or stress reactions, which could consequently make the dog or cat more difficult to adopt and/or could increase the chances of the animal's eventual euthanasia. Additionally, the experience of stress can have detrimental effects on animals' health and well-being. Stress can suppress reproductive functions, impair immune functions, and have other ill effects (Carlstead and Shepherdson 2000).¹⁵

Many respondents in this study argued, consistent with AAT/AAA literature, that shelter animals benefit from participating in AAA because they have increased exposure to people. Not only do animals in the shelter receive little human interaction, but many come from situations in which they had little or no *positive* interaction. Thus, as many of the respondents to this study mentioned, AAA may allow for a socialization opportunity. Many respondents also point to the benefit of providing the shelter animal with an opportunity to stretch his or her legs, to get out of the shelter, and have a change of scenery. While exercise is important for an animal's well-being, the need for a "change of scenery" may not be imperative and may actually be stressful. There are, however, ample benefits gleaned by shelter animals in situations involving *positive* human interaction. Shelter animals can learn to trust and like humans, in addition to being exposed to new and interesting environments. Despite these potential benefits, it seems important to weigh the potential costs (i.e., fear and stress) and benefits (i.e., socialization).

AAA programs that use shelter animals can rely on research to make the program safer and more successful for the animals involved. For example, Hennessy et al. (1997) found higher levels of plasma cortisol concentration, which could indicate stress, in dogs during the first three days in a shelter. Therefore, it seems advisable to choose an animal for AAA after their initial three days at the shelter, thereby not adding more strain to the initial high stress period. Gasci et al. (2001) found that dogs in shelters have a "remarkable need for social contact with humans, which can lead to a relatively rapid formation of attachment to a potential attachment figure." Even three short handling encounters between a shelter dog and a human may evoke attachment behavior in the dog. AAA handlers could theoretically reduce the dog's overall stress if they have some history, even if brief, of interaction.

One of the most important aspects to implement in an AAA program that uses shelter animals is a thorough and comprehensive education for, and perhaps screening of, the human volunteers. The handlers must know how to recognize and respond to the signs of stress, discomfort, and fear. Animals who are noticeably nervous about any aspect of the AAA experience (including meeting

with residents, driving in the car, riding on elevators, etc.) should be removed from the situation. In cases of stress or fear, the handler should use appropriate methods of relaxing the animal and know when, and how, to use the situation for positive reinforcement training. It does, however, seem foolhardy to expect that a handler will be able to train an animal not to exhibit fear or stress in just one visitation excursion. Additionally, handlers must recognize, and respond to, any health need that the animal may express (like the need for water or rest).

Therapy programs that use shelter animals would benefit from implementing a temperament/behavioral test (or series of tests) for the AAA candidates. Each animal responds to environmentally induced stress differently, because responses to stress vary based on the individual histories of the animal (Wolfe 2000). Thus, it makes sense to test each animal individually instead of making assumptions based on age or breed. While there are problems with the reliability of such tests, they provide a better indication of the animal's potential reaction to stress than does an "educated" guess based on limited paperwork and kennel behavior. In fact, one temperament test alone may not be sufficient. As Dunbar (1987) astutely argues, "a temperament test only reflects the relative good and bad qualities of individual animals on the day that they were tested." Thus, a series of temperament tests would fare better as an appropriate indicator. Additionally, it is important to know whether the animal in question responds well to commands so that the handler can comfortably control the animal during AAA. Shelter dogs run the gambit in their knowledge of obedience. When a handler embarks on AAA with a shelter dog in tow, it is largely unclear when and if the animal will understand and obey commands. The inability for dogs to understand certain commands is inconvenient, but it can also be dangerous for the animal and humans involved. For example, if the dog accidentally gets off the leash and does not understand the command to "come" (as happened to some respondents in this study), the dog is in serious danger of harming herself. Accordingly, the lack of relationship between a dog (or cat) and a human handler poses risks. With no shared history or mutual understanding between them, neither knows what to expect of the other. The very lack of a relationship or bond between handler and dog could result in a stressful or anxious experience for the animal (and perhaps the human, as well). Clearly, running such tests on shelter animals would strain a shelter's already limited resources. If such testing is not possible, or if thorough training of the human handlers is likewise not affordable, the program may not be worth the risk.

Conclusion

This study is not without its limitations. Asking human volunteers to describe and observe animal behavior opens up the possibility of subjectivity and bias. However, the study is firmly situated in a growing body of sociological literature that seeks to investigate and understand the ways in which humans interpret animal behavior (Arluke and Sanders 1996; Alger and Alger 1997, 1999, 2003; Sanders 1999; Irvine 2004). Additionally, this paper makes a significant contribution to existing research on AAA by examining the role of the animals in such programs. This research indicates that AAA programs provide benefits (i.e., potential for increased socialization) and pose risks (i.e., potential for client mistreatment) for the shelter animals involved. The lack of knowledge of shelter animal temperament and obedience also poses some risks. Additionally, the lack of relationship and history between the animal and the handler may result in the inability of the handler to read the animal's behavioral cues. And, having no experience with visiting the facilities and lacking a shared history with the handlers, the animals may feel stressed, fearful or anxious. While there is a possibility that the AAA experience for shelter animals can increase their socialization skills and provide an opportunity to work on "good" behavior, there is also the chance that the experience could reinforce negative or fearful behavior that could hurt their chances of being successfully adopted. Overall, shelter animals may not benefit from their participation in AAA to the same extent that is possible for companion animals to benefit. Weighing the potential positives against the potential negatives, arguably the concern about the use of shelter animals for AAA is justified. Future research into all animals' experiences in AAT/AAA programs is essential for animal welfare and the future of AAT/AAA programs.

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Notes

1. For the sake of simplicity, I will henceforth refer to non-human animals as “animals” and human animals as “humans.”
2. In addition to “Animal-Assisted Therapy” and “Animal-Assisted Activities” the following terms are also sometimes used: “animal-facilitated activity,” “animal-facilitated therapy,” “pet-facilitated therapy,” “pet-facilitated activity,” “pet therapy,” “pets as therapy,” and “pet visitation.” While some of the phrases refer to basically the same thing, other terms are indicative of differing program goals. See The Delta Society’s website (www.deltasociety.org) for additional information about the differences between AAT and AAA programs.
3. For additional discussions of various studies describing the health benefits AAT/AAA programs and interacting with companion animals have for humans, see Arkow (1987a, 2004) and Fine (2000a).
4. Similarly, very few studies have considered the human volunteers that accompany the pets. Some exceptions to this include Savishinsky (1985, 1986) and Granger and Carter (1991).
5. This particular program is for the most part referred to as “Pet Therapy” by The Shelter. This use of this label is a bit misleading, as it is mostly a visitation program with the hopes of having therapeutic effects. The animals are not used to aid in reaching specific therapeutic goals with the help of health professionals.
6. This paper is part of a larger research project in which I compared the experience of shelter animals with the experience of companion animals in The Shelter’s visitation program.
7. Specifically, dogs undergo the nationally recognized “Canine Good Citizen Test,” with a couple of additional evaluation exercises added on by The Shelter. Cats undergo a temperament test developed by The Shelter. The Shelter has not evaluated any other animal besides dogs and one cat for this AAA program.
8. My gratitude to an anonymous reviewer for bringing this point to my attention.
9. Stress is a loaded word, and there does not seem to be one agreed-upon definition between animal behaviorists (Broom and Johnson 1993). Stress includes both mental and physical strain. Though it is not the purpose of this paper, it is possible to measure the physiological components of stress on animals (i.e., changes in heart rate, adrenal or hormonal responses). Odendaal and Meintjes (1999) used physiological measures to determine the effectiveness of AAT. Perhaps more studies on AAT/AAA could incorporate physiological measures in the future.
10. “Calming signals” may have some similarity to “cutoff behavior” displayed by wolves (Fox 1971). A wolf who displays passive submission to an aggressor may effectively cutoff an attack. Likewise, a dog who engages in calming signals may be attempting to stop or diffuse a certain stressful situation.
11. I realize I am touching on a contentious issue here, as many animal behaviorists do believe it is possible to describe animal behavior without being anthropomorphic. The debate whether anthropomorphism is unavoidable and potentially beneficial (Bekoff 2002) or something that should be resisted, however difficult, (i.e., Kennedy 1992) does not fall within the scope of this particular study.
12. I have changed all names to protect confidentiality.
13. See Irvine (2004) for further discussion on an animal’s capacity for memory and continuity (self-history).
14. I came across at least one study that referenced the use of shelter animals (see Bernstein, Friedmann and Malaspina 2000).
15. See Carlstead and Shepherdson (2000) for a more thorough discussion of stress and animals.

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Appendix 1. The interview schedule.

1. How long have you been an AAA volunteer at The Shelter?
2. Have you volunteered in an AAA program elsewhere, and if so, for how long?
3. What location(s) do you bring animals to? What type of establishment is it?
4. How often do you visit the establishment? How long do you stay each visit?
5. Explain the atmosphere and protocol for the establishment(s) you visit. For example, do you bring the animal room to room or is there one main visiting room?
6. Do you bring shelter animals or your own companion animals?
7. What animals from the shelter have you brought with you on AAA trips? Do you have a primary species you have experience or preference bringing? Why?
8. Are you familiar with calming signals? Explain what you know about calming signals.
9. Explain your process of picking out the animal at the shelter. Are there certain characteristics you are looking for?
10. Describe what you have seen the animals display when you pick them out at the shelter and prepare them for the car trip.
11. Describe what you have seen the animals display when you take them in the car to drive to your visitation location.
12. Describe what you have seen the animals display while they are at the visitation location. How do they approach and react to residents? How do they react to you?
13. Describe what you have seen the animals display while you take them out of the residence and drive them back to the shelter.
14. Describe what you have seen the animals display when you return them to their holding pens at the shelter.
15. Do you feel as though the animals form any type of bond with you, the volunteer? Do they “check in” with you or otherwise attempt to please you?
16. Do you feel as though the animals form any type of bond or connect with the residents?
17. What are some potential benefits of the visitation experience to the animals themselves?
18. What are some potential costs of the visitation experience to the animals themselves?
19. Overall, in your opinion, do you think the animals enjoy the visitation experience? Why or why not?
20. To whom do you believe the benefits of the program are strongest – the resident, the animal, or the human volunteer? Why?
21. Are there benefits or costs to bringing an animal from home along for visitation instead of a shelter animal? Are there benefits or costs to bringing an animal from the shelter along for visitation instead of a companion animal?
22. Please describe any memorable experiences you have had in the program.