

Your Secret Feline Decoder Ring: Feline Behavior Assessments



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Agenda

- Components of a shelter behavior program
- Cats vs. dogs
- Definition of behavior assessments
- Use of behavior assessments
- Goals of behavior assessments
- Challenges with using behavior assessments
- Available feline behavior assessment tools
- Performing feline behavior assessments
- Conclusions

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Components of a Shelter Behavior Program

- Surrender prevention¹
- Behavior assessment
- Welfare in the shelter
- Bringing out the best
- Adoption
- Post-adoption support



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Cats vs. Dogs

- Numerous studies regarding behavior assessments for dogs have been conducted^{2,3,4,5}



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Cats vs. Dogs

Dogs have owners, cats have staff.
 - Unknown

Dogs believe every stranger is a friend they haven't met yet. Cats wait for a proper invitation.
 - Vicki Brown

Dogs come when they're called. Cats take a message and get back to you.
 - Mary Bly

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Cats vs. Dogs

- Differences

Characteristic	Cats	Dogs
Social structure	Independence with social relationships	Deference within a pack
Communication	Facial expressions, body postures, smell, and vocalization	Facial expressions, body postures, and body contact
Attachment	Territory	Pack

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Cats vs. Dogs

- Behavior assessments for dogs cannot be applied to cats



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Definition of Behavior Assessments

- Definition = A tool that attempts to identify attributes which characterize an individual animal's conduct at a point in time



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Definition of Behavior Assessments Additional Definitions⁶

- Temperament = Emotional Responses
- Character = Environment + Experiences
- Personality = Temperament + Character



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Definition of Behavior Assessments Temperament

- Temperament = Emotional Responses
 - Natural or innate responses to the environment
 - Based on genetics and experiences during early development



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Definition of Behavior Assessments Character

- Character = Environment + Experiences
 - Learning history that is influenced by changing environment



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Definition of Behavior Assessments Personality

- Personality = Temperament + Character
 - Overall way of responding to the environment
 - Characteristics that make us unique



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Use of Behavior Assessments

- An ancillary tool
 - Added to information from other resources
 - Owner relinquishment/surrender questionnaires⁷
 - Staff and volunteer experiences
- Not a pass/fail test of adoptability
- Ongoing “mini-assessments” (i.e., behavior rounds)

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Goal of Behavior Assessments

- Identify needs of the individual cat
- Input for shelter pathway planning
- Ultimate goal ⇨ Match pet with best possible home



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Goals of Behavior Assessments

Individual Cat

- Gather baseline information
 - Starts with first surrender contact with caregiver
 - Similar to a physical exam, but for behavior
- What’s needed to bring out the best
- Start of providing for the cat’s welfare



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Goals of Behavior Assessments

Pathway Planning

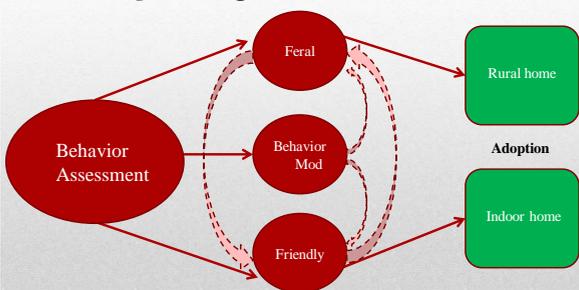


- Decision making for the shelter population
- Individual determines path ⇔ Decision making
- Helps answer the question, "Does the shelter have the resources to save this cat?"
- Important in identifying live-saving alternatives

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Goals of Behavior Assessments

Pathway Planning



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Goals of Behavior Assessments

Ultimate Goal ⇔ Match Pet with Best Home



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Challenges with using Behavior Assessments

- Need for standardization
- Improving reliability
- Validation of results
- Need for additional studies with cats



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Challenges Need for Standardization

- Good assessment ⇒ Only variable is the animal being assessed
 - Difficult to do
- Assessment is performed, recorded, and reported in the same manner
- Reduces evaluation variability

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Challenges Improving Reliability

- Training
 - Behavior assessment handbook
 - Defines the evaluation
 - Provides definitions for behaviors
 - Criteria for outcome decisions
 - Cat body language



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Challenges Improving Reliability



- Periodic evaluator reviews
- Evaluators work in teams
- Assessments performed in a designated room
- Remove yourself if biased

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Challenges Validation of Results

- Are we really measuring what we think we are measuring?
- Ultimately:
 - Identifying needs of the individual cat?
 - Providing input for Pathway Planning?
 - Matching the cat to best possible home?
 - Predicting behavior in the new home?
 - Protecting the public from harm?
- Studies that validate feline behavior assessments are limited
 - Commonly cited study was done in 2003⁸

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Challenges Need for Additional Studies with Cats



- Need for additional studies to validate feline behavior assessments
- Necessary for accuracy and reliability

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Feline Behavior Assessment Tools



- What shelters are using:
 1. Nationally available programs
 2. No formal program (observations and experience)
 3. Shelter designed program (in-house)

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Tools Nationally Available Programs

- American Humane Association
- ASPCA Meet Your Match Feline-ality™
- BCSPCA CatSense™
- Cornell University College of Veterinary Medicine
- Pet Behavior Solutions Core Behavior Assessment for Cats

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Tools Feline-ality™



- Research-based
- Assessment of cat's behavior matched with adopter lifestyle and preferences
- Pairs distinct cat characteristics with adopter

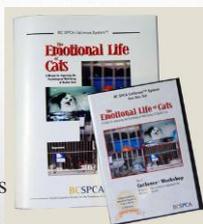
<http://www.aspc.org/adoption/meet-your-match/feline-ality-101.aspx>

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Tools

CatSense™

- Research-based
- Daily welfare assessment
- Matching animals and adopters
- Guide for ensuring good welfare
- Hide, Perch & Go box™



<http://www.sPCA.bc.ca/welfare/professional-resources/catsense/catsense.html>

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Tools

Shelter Designed (In-house) Programs

- Animal Care & Control of NYC Behavior Designation
- Animal Humane Society Feline Evaluation for Adoption (FEFA)
- Animal Rescue League of Boston
- Dane County Friends of Ferals
- Oshkosh Area Humane Society Catitude Assessment

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Performing Feline Behavior Assessments

- Who?
- When?
- Where?
- How is it done?
- How is it used?



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Performing Who?



- Ideally, all cats in the shelter
- At a minimum:
 - Special needs cats (medical and/or behavioral)
 - Cats going to foster care

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Performing When?



- Stress may decrease the longer a cat is in a shelter
 - But may increase, too...
- No clear-cut time
 - There is a need for more research in this area
- Many perform assessments at or after 3 days

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Performing Where?



- Start at cage side
- Remove cat from cage
 - Using carrier, transfer to a larger, calmer, and quieter living space
 - Helpful in improving behavior

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Performing Where?

- Ideally, done in an area:
 - Free of noise, traffic, and other distractions
 - Separated from ALL other animals
 - No hiding places (other than carrier)
 - Smaller room (approximately 10' x 10')
 - If not available, exercise pen in larger room

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Performing How is it Done?

- Initial behavior assessment
- Staff and volunteer observations
- Behavior rounds (“mini-assessments”)
- Use of behavior experts in the area

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Performing How is it Done? Initial Behavior Assessment

- If surrendered, start with review of relinquishment/surrender form
- Use a point system to reduce bias



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Performing

How is it Done? Initial Behavior Assessment

- Stress and anxiety
 - Consider the influence of this on behavior
 - May result in increased OR decreased fear and/or aggression
 - Common causes:
 - NOISE!
 - Confined (small) living conditions
 - Proximity to other animals
 - Exposure to unfamiliar people
 - Change in schedule
 - Separation from family
 - Lack of exercise
 - Lack of relaxation/sleep

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Performing

How is it Done? Initial Behavior Assessment

- Stress and anxiety
 - Common signs:
 - Hiding
 - Hyper-alert
 - Freezing
 - Crouching
 - Calculated movement
 - Increased or decrease movement
 - Eyes wide open with dilated pupils or shut tight
 - Lack of grooming
 - "Airplane ears"
 - Tail tucked
 - Anorexia
 - Excessive vocalization

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Performing

How is it Done? Initial Behavior Assessment

- Performing the evaluation
 - Starts at the cat's cage



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Performing

How is it Done? Initial Behavior Assessment

- Performing the evaluation
 - Introduction to novel room
 - Note time it takes the cat to exit the carrier
 - Allow the cat to explore the room for 5 minutes, noting behavior

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Performing

How is it Done? Initial Behavior Assessment

- Performing the evaluation
 - After introduction to novel room, note response to:
 - Calling
 - Closed then open hand
 - Stroking
 - Play
 - Hugging
 - Sensitivity (e.g., holding paw, grasping tail, etc.)



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Performing

How is it Done? Staff and Volunteer Observations

- Includes the day-to-day observations and experiences of staff and volunteers
 - Should be trained about feline body language and behavioral observation
- Update behavior record

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Performing

How is it Done? Behavior Rounds

- Done after initial behavior assessment
- Ideally, performed three times/week
- “Mini-Assessments” ⇒ Walk through shelter to briefly assess each cat
 - Medical intervention needed?
 - Behavioral intervention needed?
 - Foster care needed?
 - Review and update behavior record
- Adjunct to the daily medical rounds

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Performing

How is it Done? Use of Behavior Experts

- Use when needed
- Can help shelters:
 - Manage individual animals
 - Provide continuing education
- Resource:
 - American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior (AVSAB)
 - Website: <http://www.avsonline.org/avsonline/>

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Performing

How is it Used?

- Categorization
 - Needs of individual cat
 - Fast track to adoption
 - Behavior modification program
 - Type of home
 - Decision making about shelter population
 - Matching cat with adopter



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Conclusions

- Behavior assessments helpful with achieving our ultimate goal ⇒ Match pet with best home
- Starts with organizational leadership
 - Establish a vision
 - Allocated appropriate resources
 - Develop support
- We have to start somewhere

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