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Ethics for Behavior Analysts Working With Non-Human Animals

Terri Bright

Behavior analysts are typically trained to assess and intervene with their subjects to lessen unwanted behavior, often through the process of experimentation. Since the Behavior Analysis Certification Board requires behavioral subjects to be *human* animals, those BACB certificants inspired to practice their craft with *animals* have typically not been exposed to the needed level of supervision, mentorship or study of non-human animals. Guidelines may be extracted from the Behavior Analysis Certification Board Guidelines (2020), however.

The 5th edition of the BACB Code of Ethics (4) states:

"Behavior analysts ensure their competence by:

- *Remaining within the profession's scope of practice*
- *Remaining current and increasing their knowledge of best practices and advances in ABA and participating in professional development activities*
- *Remaining knowledgeable and current about interventions (including pseudoscience) that may exist in their practice areas and pose a risk of harm to clients*
- *Being aware of, working within, and continually evaluating the boundaries of their competence*
- *Working to continually increase their knowledge and skills related to cultural responsiveness and service delivery to diverse groups."*

Thus, the erstwhile animal behavior analyst should avail themselves of these sources of knowledge before they pursue experimentation and training of non-human species:

- venues of science;
- professional organizations;
- best practices;
- terminology;
- sources of valid and current data knowledge, both general and species-specific.

Venues of Science:

Ethology: the science of how different species of animals evolved and their typical stages of development, including how the environment during these stages shapes behavior throughout their lives. For example, dogs and cats rolling on their backs appear similar, however, the function of these behaviors are different.

Veterinary Science: What are the health needs for the species you are studying, and are they presently being met?

Professional Organizations:

The behavior analyst may obtain a wealth of information from the following organizations, including practitioner lists, recommended ethics, and training information:

Animal Behavior Society: https://www.animalbehaviorsociety.org/web/index.php
International Society for Applied Ethology: https://www.applied-ethology.org/
Association for Pet Dog Trainers: www.apdt.org
International Association of Applied Animal Behavior Consultants: www.iaabc.org
American Association of Feline Practitioners: www.catvets.com
Association of Zoos and Aquariums: www.aza.org
American Kennel Club: www.akc.org

Best Practices:

The BACB Code of Ethics, 5th edition also states:

"2.15 Minimizing Risk of Behavior-Change Interventions Behavior analysts select, design, and implement behavior-change interventions (including the selection and use of consequences) with a focus on minimizing risk of harm to the client and stakeholders. *They recommend and implement restrictive or punishment-based procedures only after demonstrating that desired results have not been obtained using less intrusive means, or when it is determined by an existing intervention team that the risk of harm to the client outweighs the risk associated with the behavior-change intervention*. When recommending and implementing restrictive or punishment-based procedures, behavior analysts comply with any required review processes (e.g., a human rights review committee). Behavior analysts must continually evaluate and document the effectiveness of restrictive or punishment-based procedures and modify or discontinue the behavior-change intervention in a timely manner if it is ineffective."

As stated in the JABAAT "Instructions for Authors," the guidelines for research should be followed as stated herein: https://olaw.nih.gov/sites/default/files/Guiding_Principles_2012.pdf Note "... there is a moral imperative to prevent or minimize stress, distress, discomfort, and pain in animals, consistent with sound scientific or veterinary medical practice."

Van Houten, et al. (1988) laid out a comprehensive path to follow in "The Right to Effective Behavioral Treatment." Though the recommendations are made for humans, the guidelines therein are easily extrapolated for animals and should be required reading for animal trainers.

Perhaps more accessible for animal trainers is to investigate the history of and to adopt existing principles and acronyms that recommend ethical treatment of animals:

1. "Five Freedoms:" Originating as the "Bramble Report," these recommendations were formalized in 1979 after being created following a United Kingdom survey of the welfare of farm animals. (https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20121007104210/http://www.fawc.org.uk/pdf/fivefreedoms1979.pdf) They have been frequently referred to for all forms of animal welfare, and continue to be re-examined in light of science and animal welfare (Ohl & van Der Staay, 2012); Mellor (2016) has reimagined the Five Freedoms to better represent contemporary animal welfare needs, introducing "Five Provisions/Welfare Aims" as a way to provide *for* animal welfare rather than simply advocate *against* poor treatment.
2. "Least Intrusive/Humane Hierarchy:" Friedman (2010) extrapolates Carter and Wheeler's (2005) recommendations for using the "least intrusive" intervention, of treatment for humans that are more effective than more punitive methods, and introduces the "Humane Hierarchy," created in 1999 by Alberto and Troutman, illustrated herein: https://www.behaviorworks.org/files/articles/APDT%20What's%20Wrong%20with%20this%20Picture%20-%20Dogs.pdf The behavior analyst/trainer will recognize the importance of ruling out medical causes for behavior and preventing problem behavior with antecedent manipulation. They will recognize and should be fluent in using positive reinforcement, as well as different types of differential reinforcement, and these should be the default interventions. The Hierarchy at Level 5 contains extinction, negative reinforcement, and negative punishment, and though these may be necessary at times, the trainer should seek guidance from an experienced applied animal behavior analyst before pursuing these types of interventions. Note that a behaviorist need not move sequentially down the hierarchy. For example, an animal that is so fearful in its environment such that it will not interact with any reinforcing stimuli should, if possible, be allowed to escape to an environment where positive reinforcement can have an effect; that may be the least intrusive start in training. For an animal that will eat, though, one can imagine that prompting a horse to enter a trailer with hay is less intrusive than threatening it with a rope or a stick. We would add to the Hierarchy the recommendation that the function of the problem behavior should be discerned if possible to aid in training design. However, the use of positive punishment – Level 6 , is "rarely necessary…when one has the requisite knowledge of behavior change and teaching skills."

3. "L.I.M.A." (least intrusive, minimally aversive). This phrase (Lindsay, 2001) exhorts the trainer to do simply what the phrase suggests: make their best efforts such that training is not unpleasant for the animal. For example, one could pattern a functional analysis on Iwata's precursor research, rather than girding up for the probable bite one might elicit in an FA exploring aggression (Fritz, et al. 2013);

4. “L.I.F.E.” (least inhibitive, functionally effective). (Fernandez, 2023.) In this articleernandez draws from many sources and recommends adoption of a new acronym to “promote optimal welfare for the animals under our care and in our lives.”

By becoming familiar with Van Houten and the above mainstays of ethical animal treatment, the behavior analyst can find their way to the most ethical way to assess and treat a behavioral issue. Resources are also available for those who cannot make a decision: they can write to this Journal editor for a reference or correspond with the AABAI Applied Animal Behavior Special Interest Group.

Terminology Matters:

As a behavior analyst, you are familiar with the concept that behavior can be shaped through the use of language. For this reason, it is imperative you learn the language of applied animal behavior, and be able to discriminate between proper terminology and popular colloquial terms that could be misleading or even harmful.

Be mindful that pseudoscience exists in every profession, and do not repeat terms you do not thoroughly understand. Ethological terms such as “alpha” or “dominance” are bandied about by many, but in a roomful of people, be they trainers or clients, each person may mean something different when they use such a word.

Animal Shelters are a common source of pet adoption for families, and there are some unfortunate terms for their practices. Learning the terms and descriptions for various types of Shelters will help you to guide clients more professionally and with greater respect for those who staff the institutions.

For example, referring to an “open-admission” shelter as “high kill” severely denigrates the work of those who must take in every animal, regardless of its age, health, or behavior. https://www.humanesociety.org/sites/default/files/docs/all-shelters-are-not-alike.pdf

Preferred terms are “open-admission,” meaning a facility that is required to take in any animal regardless of its health or behavior. This could be a town or city “pound,” with a directive from the City/Town Code. It could be a shelter that has made the difficult decision that they will take in every animal that comes their way and do their best to serve that animal’s needs; if these needs cannot be met or changed, euthanasia might be a difficult but necessary choice. “Limited” admission refers to a shelter that only takes in animals they know they can rehome. Using these terms correctly will go a long way toward the public’s understanding of the world of homeless animals. A good source for information on shelters in the United States is https://www.shelteranimalscount.org/

You should be setting an example for others with your language. As with human subjects, avoid mentalistic interpretations of animal behavior, e.g. "The cat knew it was mealtime when it heard the can opener." You can simplify your explanations for clients without abandoning our science.

Data Sources/Journals:

Journals for your supportive data could include, among others:

1. The Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science;
2. The Journal of Applied Animal Behavior;
3. The Journal of Veterinary Behavior;
4. The Journal of the Veterinary Medical Association;
5. Animal Behaviour;
6. Journal of Experimental Animal Behavior;
7. Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis;
8. Behavior Analysis in Practice;
9. Animals.

Checklist:

- **Before You Start Your Experiment:**

  An Institutional Animal Care and Use Committee (IACUC) exists at institutions where live vertebrate animals are used in research, and they must review your experiment and approve it prior to your beginning it. What other permissions should you seek if no such committee exists and you are not working with pets? Are you familiar with the species-typical behavior you will be studying, along with the correct terminology that describes it? Is the animal in good health, how recently was this determined and by whom? Will its physical needs be met during your time together, e.g. for food and/or water, elimination, breaks? Can you recognize the precursors to and actual emotional and physical responses to your likely interactions with the animal? Do you have an experienced mentor who will guide you in your experimental design and give you feedback throughout the process? What are any safety concerns? Is the equipment you will be using appropriate, per your mentor's and any organizational recommendations or requirements? If restraint is used, is it humane? Is the safety of the subject, the humans and any other animals planned for?

- **During Your Experiment:**

  Are the data you are collecting representative of the behavior you are studying? Do you recognize when that is <u>not</u> the case? (For example, if you are collecting frequency of barking in a dog with separation-related anxiety, do you count the dog's barks at the mail carrier, or is that not separation-related?) Are the animal's husbandry needs being met during your experiment? Do you have plans for when and if you should stop your experiment for any reason?

- **After Your Experiment:**
  Is your subject in good physical and emotional condition? Is it secured in a safe place where it can recover from any stressors from your training?

- **Your Write-Up:**

  As above, avoid mentalistic language, and describe all behavior appropriately per species. This could include descriptions of the sounds the animal is making. If you are not sure how to describe a sound, look it up in a Journal or ask a mentor. Don't just resort to the words you know, e.g. "screaming." The same is true of movements of the animal. Be clear, precise and descriptive.

Congratulate yourself for being interested in reverse-translating behavior analysis for animals; your following these guidelines will pave the way for others to follow in your footsteps in the years to come.

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