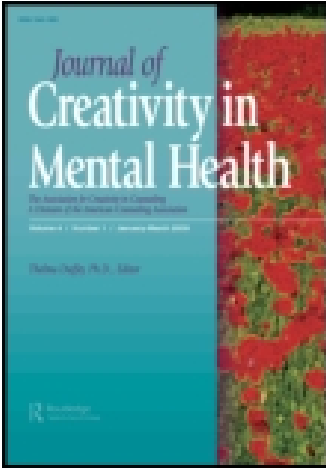


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Animal-Assisted Therapy and Rogers' Core Components Among Middle School Students Receiving Counseling Services: A Descriptive Study

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Animal-Assisted Therapy and Rogers' Core Components Among Middle School Students Receiving Counseling Services: A Descriptive Study

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Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is an effective counseling method, yet the reasons for this effectiveness are not well understood. It has been theorized but not empirically verified that AAT participants view therapy animals as possessing Carl Rogers's core counselor characteristics (Friesen, 2010; Parish-Plass, 2008). This study examined the degree to which 312 middle school students in Grades 4 through 8 rated an AAT dog on Rogers's core counselor characteristics using the Barrett-Lennard Relationship Inventory (1962). The findings show that the AAT dog was rated highly on the 3 Rogerian traits level of regard, empathy, and congruence.

KEYWORDS *animal-assisted therapy, school counseling, Rogerian traits, creativity in counseling*

Animal-assisted therapy (AAT) is the use of animals as therapeutic mediators in the counseling relationship (Jasperson, 2010; O'Callaghan & Chandler, 2011). William Tuke provided one of the first documented cases of AAT when in 1792, he employed farm animals to "enhance the humanity of the emotionally ill" at his retreat in York, England (Beck & Katcher, 1996, p. 132).

This article was based on the doctoral dissertation research conducted by the first author and directed by the second author. The remaining authors served as the balance of the dissertation committee and assisted equally in the production of this article.

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More recently, Levinson (1997) found by accident the therapeutic benefits of AAT for children in 1969 when he brought his dog, *Jingles*, to his psychotherapy office. Although a variety of animals are used for AAT, including cats, birds, horses, fish, rabbits, and other small animals, dogs are used most frequently (Dimitrijevic, 2009). This article presents a review of the literature regarding AAT's effectiveness in general, and as applied to school-aged children in particular, and tests the hypothesis that school-aged AAT recipients ascribe the Rogerian traits of congruence, empathy, and unconditional positive regard to the animal.

The research investigating the social, emotional, psychological, and educational benefits of AAT is supportive of its use, particularly among children. For example, Reichert (1998) reported that sexually abused children demonstrated increased socialization, self-esteem, and problem-solving skills following AAT. Kogan, Granger, Fitchett, Helmer, and Young (1999) found that children treated with AAT demonstrated increased eye contact and social skills, decreased negative comments, decreased distractibility, and a greater ability to pay attention. Marr and colleagues (2000) concluded that AAT clients improved their socialization more with other clients, smiled more, and appeared to take pleasure in their activities. Other research findings revealed a decrease in children's social isolation when a dog was present in the school setting (Kotschal & Ortbauer, 2003).

Additional research into AAT efficacy has yielded positive outcomes with respect to emotional benefits (Kogan et al., 1999). Serpell (2000) reported that 70% of AAT participants spoke about and disclosed their innermost thoughts when an animal was involved in the counseling process compared with traditional forms of counseling. Hanselman (2001) concluded that AAT "increased feelings of happiness, security, and self-worth, and reduced feelings of loneliness, isolation, and stress" (p. 177) among a group of adolescents in an anger management group. Folse, Minder, Aycock, and Santana's (1994) work with children receiving AAT showed that the children demonstrated improved mood and reduced levels of depression. AAT dogs introduced into classroom settings are associated with decreased behavioral management problems (Hergovich, Monshi, Semmler, & Zieglmayer, 2002). Further, Anderson and Olson (2006) found that children's emotionally stability, attitudes, and behavioral compliance improved following the introduction of AAT.

Two meta-analyses (Nimer & Lundahl, 2007; Souter & Miller, 2007) revealed that AATs produced moderate effect sizes in improvements among children, adolescents, and adults regarding recovery from medical difficulties, behavioral problems, and emotional well-being. Dimitrijevic (2009) provided a comprehensive literature review of AAT's psychological benefits. This review provided evidence that AATs in general, and dogs in particular, were associated with enhanced communication with family members and improved quality of life. Additional benefits included reduced anxiety,

fear, and depression. Dimitrijevic concluded that the animal assumes the role of a cotherapist because “children . . . accomplish a significant level of intimacy with them (animals)” (p. 239). Finally, Limond, Bradshaw, and Cormack (1997) as well as Martin and Farnum (2002) investigated AAT’s academic benefits. These authors concluded that children had more interactions with adults and focused greater attention and were more compliant with adult requests when a dog was present.

SCHOOL COUNSELING AND ANIMAL-ASSISTED THERAPY

The benefits associated with AAT have attracted the attention of professional school counselors who use AAT in therapeutic and nontherapeutic settings (Friesen, 2010). When providing individual/group counseling to students, counselors incorporate AAT dogs by making them available for comfort and companionship. For example, students can pet an AAT dog and talk or hug the dog. Counselors also use AAT dogs to teach character traits such as: honesty, tolerance, kindness, respect, responsibility, and leadership through teaching, reading, and modeling behaviors (Friesen, 2010). Counselors’ use of AAT dogs in nontherapeutic settings varies; for example, counselors assign students to read to and/or to accompany and greet students as they get on and off the bus. Students will also see AAT dogs throughout the day in the hallways as the students change classes.

THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT AAT’S EFFECTIVENESS

Although AAT can be an effective addition to counseling in academic settings (Berget, Ekeberg, & Braastad, 2008), the reasons for this effectiveness are not clearly understood. Kruger and Serpell (2010) observed that the literature lacks an accepted and empirically supported theoretical explanation for why AAT is effective. Kruger and Serpell believe that the components responsible for AAT’s effectiveness are features consistent with Rogers’s approach to counseling. That is, animals demonstrate the three qualities that Rogers (1957, 1980) believed to be necessary and sufficient to effect personal change: congruence, empathy, and unconditional positive regard (Friesen, 2010; Halm, 2008; Parish-Plass, 2008; Rogers, 1957, 1980). Congruence, viewed from Rogers’s perspective, means that the counselor is being genuine and honest with the client. Empathy is the counselor’s ability to feel what the client is feeling (Rogers, 1980). Unconditional positive regard is the counselor’s acceptance of and respect for the client (Rogers, 1961). The data supporting Rogers’s core conditions as fundamentally necessary for effective counseling are well established (e.g., Kirschenbaum, 2009). This Rogerian hypothesis is consistent with the views held by those who

practice AAT. O'Callaghan and Chandler (2011) surveyed 31 persons who were associated with one of three professional AAT groups to determine the types of AAT-specific techniques utilized in their work. The results revealed that AAT practitioners used 18 techniques in their work. These authors concluded that a "prominent AAT intention is to enhance therapeutic rapport through the client-therapy animal relationship" (p. 100). Others posit that the client-animal relationship is a powerful promoter of the therapeutic alliance through the building of rapport and trust and through creating a sense of a safe environment (Chandler, Portrie-Bethke, Barrio Minton, Fernando, & O'Callaghan, 2010). Animals can be useful by "being congruent, authentic, genuine, caring, accepting, warm, and empathic" (Chandler et al., 2010, p. 358). Similarly, animals are thought to naturally connect with clients and thereby foster a safe and warm therapeutic environment (Nimer & Lundahl, 2007). Kruger and Serpell (p. 41) called for empirical investigations to explore "... the potential value of animals as non-judgemental [*sic*] confidantes and sources of unconditional positive regard." To date, the empirical literature is silent regarding these hypothesized constructs (Geist, 2011).

The purpose of this study is to test the hypothesis that counseling recipients of AAT perceive that Rogers's core conditions are present within the clients' construct of the animal. Specifically, we examined the degree to which middle school students in Grades 4 through 8 rate an AAT dog on Rogers's core counselor characteristics (congruence, empathy, and unconditional positive regard) as operationally defined by the Barrett-Lennard Relationship Inventory (BLRI; Barrett-Lennard, 1962). Our hypothesis was that the students would rate the dog positively on the BLRI, thus indicating that they attributed Rogers's traits to the animal.

METHOD

Participant Characteristics

A convenience sample was selected because of the school's history of integrating an AAT dog into its daily practices. All students enrolled at the school, approximately 900 fourth through eighth graders, were invited to participate. Parental/guardian permission to participate was obtained for 312 students, 133 (42.6%) of whom were boys. The students' average age was 11.65 years ($SD = 1.25$, range = 9–15). Table 1 provides the students' demographic data.

The Therapy Dog and Counseling Office

These counselors were members of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) and followed ASCA's National Model (2004). The

TABLE 1 Descriptive Information for Student Participants

Variable	<i>N</i>	Percent
Grade		
Fourth	52	16.7
Fifth	96	30.8
Sixth	86	27.6
Seventh	52	16.7
Eighth	24	7.7
Age		
9 years	7	2.2
10 years	46	14.7
11 years	94	30.1
12 years	82	26.3
13 years	45	14.4
14 years	25	8.0
15 years	2	0.6
None	15	3.5
Ethnicity		
EA	254	81.4
AA	2	0.6
Hisp	14	4.5
NA	13	4.2
Bi	20	6.4
AsAm	2	0.6
ME	6	1.9
None	1	0.3

Note. EA = European American; AA = African American; Hisp = Hispanic; NA = Native American; Bi = Biracial; AsAm = Asian American; ME = Middle Eastern; None = no data reported.

counselors presented lessons on study skills to help enhance effective learning. This was done through class lessons, through small-group lessons for students needing extra reinforcement, and on an individual basis, as needed. Career opportunities and employment readiness skills were embedded in most activities. The counselors taught cooperation, problem solving, and respect for each other's similarities and differences.

The AAT dog for this study was a female golden retriever who assisted the school's two licensed school counselors. She received her training and certification from Assistance Dogs of America, Incorporated (ADAI). ADAI conducts evaluations, formal training, team training, certification, and follow-up with each dog selected for their program. As part of her training and evaluation, this dog was assessed for temperament, obedience, personality, and public socialization. She received a veterinarian examination to ensure that she had a clean bill of health including all her required vaccinations, and she successfully passed a yearly administration of the Assistance Dog International Public Access Test.

The school counselors care for the AAT dog and bring her to school where students have access to her throughout the day. The AAT dog was

used by the counselors in both therapeutic and nontherapeutic settings. When providing individual/group counseling to students, the counselors incorporated the AAT dog by making her available for comfort and companionship. Students could pet her, talk to her, and hug her. The two counselors also used the AAT dog for classroom instructions and interventions to teach important character traits such as: honesty, tolerance, kindness, respect, responsibility, and leadership through teaching, reading, and modeling behaviors.

Materials and Procedure

This study was approved by the sponsoring university's institutional review board and was conducted in accordance to the American Counseling Association's *Code of Ethics* (2005).

Participant recruitment was conducted by the first author, who entered classrooms to explain the nature of the study and discuss the need for parental consent and student assent. Interested students were provided with an envelope that contained the consent/assent letters with instructions to return the letter by a requested date. The envelope also contained a description of the study with a request for written permission. These were sent home with each student. No study materials were presented to students without first securing parental consent and student assent. The study materials were administered during student downtime (e.g., first 15 min/last 15 min of school, or study hall).

DEMOGRAPHIC DATA FORM

A demographic data form, created to describe the sample, asked each participant to provide standard data points including age, sex, ethnicity, and grade level. The demographic data form asked participants to indicate whether or not they have seen the school counselor or have been in a school counselor's group for academic, emotional, or social skills development purposes.

THE BARRETT-LENNARD RELATIONSHIP INVENTORY

The BLRI (Barrett-Lennard, 1962) was created to assess Carl Rogers's core conditions of treatment and to measure these constructs within interpersonal relationships. The BLRI is intended to measure the conditions necessary and sufficient to effect therapeutic growth: empathy, congruence, and level of regard (Rogers, 1957). The BLRI has been utilized in more than 500 research studies for more than 45 years (Simmons, Roberge, Kendrick, & Richards, 1995). Permission to use the BLRI was provided by Dr. Godfrey Barrett-Lennard (personal communication, May 13, 2008).

The BLRI is a 40-item scale (Schacht, Howe, & Berman, 1988). This version is shortened from the original 64-item inventory. The BLRI has four 10-item subscales: Level of Regard, Empathy, Unconditionality, and Congruence. Each item is written such that the respondent answers with a particular person—or in this case, an AAT dog—in mind. Possible responses are: “No, I strongly feel that it is not true” (−3 points); “No, I feel it is not true” (−2 points); “No, I feel that it is probably untrue, or more untrue than true” (−1 point); “Yes, I feel that it is probably true, or more true than untrue” (+1 point); “Yes, I feel it is true” (+2 points); “Yes, I strongly feel that it is true” (+3 points). The total range of points for each scale is −30 to +30. The higher the scale score, the more the rated individual is judged by the respondent to possess Rogers’s traits.

Several authors (e.g., Cramer, 2009; Ganley, 1989; Gurman, 1977; Khandaker, Vereecken, & Nijs, 2002; Lake, Miles, & Earle, 1973; Wampler & Powell, 1982) have concluded that the BLRI has considerable data to support its validity for measuring the strength of relationships. Test–retest reliability for the Empathy subscale is .89 (Gurman, 1977). Spearman-Brown split-half internal consistency correlations for the Empathy subscale range from .82 to .93 (Gurman, 1977). Eggeman, Moxley, and Schumm (1985) reported Cronbach’s alpha reliability estimates ranging from .83 to .92 for the Empathy scale, .76 to .96 for the Regard scale, and from .77 to .96 for the Congruence scale.

Although the entire BLRI-40 was administered and scores for each of the four scales were calculated, this project was concerned only with the following scales: Level of Regard, Empathy, and Congruence. The data analyzed in this study produced Cronbach’s alpha estimates of .81 (Level of Regard), .79 (Empathy), and .79 (Congruence).

Data Analysis

This project was exploratory and conducted without a comparison group against which to compare the findings using parametric methods (O’Callaghan & Chandler, 2011). Consequently, the data reported here are descriptive in nature. Before proceeding with the data analysis, all variables were screened for possible code and statistical assumption violations, as well as for missing values and outliers, with the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences Frequencies, Explore, and Plot Missing Value Analysis. The 312 fourth through eighth graders were screened for missing values on three continuous variables (level of regard, empathy, and congruence). Three cases were missing for level of regard, six cases were missing for empathy, and four cases were missing for congruence. Fourteen univariate outliers (nine for level of regard, two for empathy, and three for congruence) were detected and removed. We expected that positive scale scores

would be evidence that the students attributed Rogers's traits to the AAT dog. Conversely, BLRI scale scores of 0 or lower would indicate that the AAT dog was attributed with negative amounts of or none of the Rogerian traits.

RESULTS

Eighty participants (25.63%) reported that they saw the school counselor and the AAT dog individually or in a group for academic reasons, 79 (25.3%) for emotional reasons, and 305 (97.8%) for social skills. The means and standard deviations of scores attributed to the dog's empathy, congruence, and level of regard are found in [Table 2](#).

To better understand the meaning of these mean scores, we produced a mean score per item per scale by dividing the sum of each scale's items by the number of responses to that item. For example, students who saw the counselor for academic reasons rated the AAT dog's level of regard as 21.47. Dividing the mean score for the level of regard by the total number of items (10) results in a per-item average response of 2.15. Based on the BLRI's item response options, 2.15 is slightly greater than a response of "Yes, I feel it is true." Students seeking counseling for each of the three reasons (academic, emotional, and social skills) rated each of the three Rogerian traits (level of regard, empathy, and congruence) no lower than "probably true." Regardless of the reason for seeking counseling, all students rated the dog's level of regard as "It is true." These positive ratings indicate that students seeking counseling judged the dog to have possessed those core traits theorized as necessary to develop a therapeutic relationship and facilitate change in the context of that therapeutic relationship (Barrett-Lennard, 1962).

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to test the hypothesis that recipients of AAT perceive that Rogers's core conditions are present within the animal. Specifically, we examined the degree to which middle school students in Grades 4 through 8 rate an AAT dog on Rogers's core counselor

TABLE 2 Means and Standard Deviations of Rogerian Traits Ascribed to the AAT Dog

	<i>n</i>	Level of Regard <i>M (SD)</i>	Empathy <i>M (SD)</i>	Congruence <i>M (SD)</i>
Academic	80	21.47 (6.14)	14.04 (10.22)	17.49 (9.7)
Emotional	79	20.85 (7.12)	12.5 (9.37)	15.95 (10.25)
Social Skills	305	21.38 (6.06)	13.79 (8.98)	17.33 (9.43)

characteristics as assessed by the BLRI (Barrett-Lennard, 1962). Heretofore, the mechanisms responsible for effectively incorporating animals into the counseling relationship have been theorized but not empirically investigated. Likely catalysts included those traits that Rogers (1989) posited to be necessary and sufficient for change—namely, positive regard, empathy, and congruence. This study is the first to provide evidence that an AAT dog is perceived by students to demonstrate Rogers's necessary and sufficient traits across three school counseling situations: educational counseling, emotional counseling, and social skills counseling.

These findings are important because AAT is quickly becoming an area of interest for many helping professionals (Banks & Banks, 2002; Edwards & Beck, 2002; Fick, 1993; Fine, 2006; Richeson, 2003). Counselors currently using AAT are looking for researchers to bring AAT into the mainstream of counseling practice.

Many community agencies and schools have expressed interest in investing time, energy, and money to enlist the support of an AAT dog in their setting. Consequently, empirical evidence to help determine the impact AAT dogs have could inform decision makers as they consider this component of counseling services.

These results, descriptive in nature, provide initial support for the conventional wisdom (O'Callaghan & Chandler, 2011) and academic perspective (Kruger & Serpell, 2010) that AAT dogs bring to the counseling session Rogers's core components of positive regard, empathy, and congruence. This may help school counselors to: (a) create conditions for the development of a professional relationship necessary to foster positive social, emotional, and educational counseling outcomes; (b) build rapport, an important precursor to change in individual and group counseling sessions (Kotrschal & Ortbauer, 2003); (c) elicit among students positive responses to requests from counselors (Martin & Farnum, 2002); (d) deliver classroom lessons and interventions (Anderson & Olson, 2006); (e) teach guidance lessons on responsibility and empathy (Anderson & Olson, 2006); and (f) lower stress for students in situations such as teacher conferences and individualized education program and 504 meetings by offering the calming effect of the animal's presence.

LIMITATIONS

The use of the survey data-gathering technique in this study prevented the researchers from making inferences about causality among variables. Further, there may have been a selection bias in this study. The study group only included those students who were given permission by a legal guardian to participate. It is impossible to know whether the students whose parents refused to provide consent to participate differed in some meaningful way

from those children who did participate. Consequently, it is unknown how these nonparticipants' missing data might have changed, if at all, the results of this study. The AAT dog involved in this study worked in the school for 3 years and was well-known and liked by all students in the building, not just those who received school counseling services. There is no way to determine if the results of this study would generalize to schools of differing age groups or schools where an AAT animal was more recently introduced. This research utilized an instrument (the BLRI) that was intended for human use. Although the BLRI was designed to measure respondents' views of their relationships, it was standardized for use with humans, not animals. These results are only valid to the extent that the BLRI can validly measure non-human relationships. Although the imbued qualities of the dog are clearly in evidence, our study did not examine the degree to which, if any, the presence of the dog facilitates change in the therapeutic relationship with the counselor. Finally, this population is predominantly rural and of European American ethnicity. All of these factors limit the generalizability of the study's results to similarly constituted samples and settings.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future researchers are encouraged to design a study in which an AAT dog is introduced to a new school and where only students receiving school counseling services have access to the animal. In this way, the effect of having the dog known by so many students who are not receiving school counseling services could be controlled and true group differences could be analyzed between those who were receiving school counseling services and those who were not. Additionally, counselors and researchers could randomly assign students with similar presenting issues to one of two counseling conditions: with the school counselor and the dog and with the school counselor only. In this way, researchers and counselors could investigate between-group differences among students receiving services.

Future researchers are encouraged to consider alternative methods of inquiry. This line of research may benefit from the use of a mixed-methods approach wherein quantitative and qualitative methods are brought to bear. Although many persons in the AAT field are looking for quantitative research to support AAT, many of the benefits of the richness of student responses are lost without the inclusion of the qualitative piece. Finally, this line of research would benefit from investigations into determining the degree to which, if any, the presence of an AAT dog facilitates changes in the therapeutic relationship between school counseling clients and school counselors. For example, does rapport between a client and a dog transfer to rapport between the client and counselor? And if so, does rapport between the client and the dog facilitate change faster or to a greater degree than rapport that is

established absent of a dog's presence? The investigation of these and other applied questions would advance the AAT field.

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