

**LITERATURE REVIEW AND MANUAL: ANIMAL-ASSISTED THERAPY**

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## Dedication

This paper and manual are dedicated to Jaymie and Laura and their playfulness and love for animals; to my parents who have given me the gift of believing in myself; to my wonderful husband who supports and encourages me (and all of my many projects); and to all of the animals in my life, past and present. I would like to specifically mention Maureen Howard and Lila Pulos, two very wise friends who have supported and guided me in this exceptional journey. And, a special thank you to Dr. Jacqueline Pei, my mentor, facilitator, supervisor, and supporter.

## Abstract

In this paper research of animals in therapy is reviewed and then used to inform a manual on the topic. A history of the field, a discussion of terminology, and a summary of therapies utilizing animals prefaces the review. Key research in animal therapy is reviewed, followed by contemplation of animal therapy in counselling, including therapeutic techniques, populations who may benefit from animals in counselling, and a discussion of benefits, challenges and ethical considerations. Welfare of animals in counselling is explored, followed by a synopsis, possible future directions in research and a conclusion. The manual designed for counsellors draws from this review and the writer's experience to provide thoughtful and practical information for the practitioner interested in Animal Assisted Therapy.

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## Introduction

One fourteen-year-old female had real difficulty expressing her needs. She also has [*sic*] family issues of abandonment. She displayed a lot of extreme behaviors like self-harm, distractions and withdrawal to avoid discussion and confrontation. She was difficult to communicate with. When introduced to animal assisted therapy, she initiated a lot of appropriate physical interaction. She connected with the animal on a deep level. Her verbal communication improved greatly. Her deep connection with the dog enabled her to communicate with me (Mathews, as cited in Aanderson, 2008, p. 123).

Integrating animals into the field of counselling has both benefits and challenges, and to ensure it is the right fit for a client a counsellor must ask, “What do I need to know to make an educated decision to further pursue AAT in counselling?” As Chandler (2005), McIntosh (2002), Parshall (2003) and others have stated, the clinician should be well-versed in all aspects of integrating animals into therapy to ensure they are minimizing harm to both the client and the animal, and to recognize how to best utilize the approach to benefit the client.

Until recently, the literature focused on Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) has tended to reflect upon the positive aspects of the broad field (Beck & Katcher, 1996, 2003), without clearly addressing the inherent challenges and ethical considerations of involving an animal in counselling. This paper will offer a comprehensive overview of the literature regarding animals in therapy with particular emphasis on the involvement of animals in counselling settings. A review of the history of animals in therapy is followed by a discussion of terminology in the field. Next, a general overview of therapies utilizing

animals is offered to provide a framework for the rest of the paper. Key research in the area of animal therapy is then reviewed, followed by specific consideration of animal therapy in counselling, including therapeutic techniques, populations who may benefit from animals in counselling, and a discussion of potential benefits, challenges and ethical considerations. The welfare and rights of animals in AAT is explored, followed by methodology for the literature review. A synopsis, possible future directions in research and a conclusion will close the paper. A manual based on the information derived from this review is offered as an Appendix.

### History of Animals in Therapy

A well-written chronological account of the history of AAT is offered by Chandler (2005), Fine (2000) and others. To afford the reader basic information on AAT, important markers of history and research are highlighted in this section.

Historical accounts of animals contributing to the wellbeing of people date back to the 1600s, including John Locke's discussion of the use of small animals to help cultivate empathy and responsibility in children (Fine, 2000). While anecdotal accounts noting the benefits of the human-animal bond to promote well-being have exponentially outweighed academic research, information from front-line practitioners have increasingly inspired the practice of integrating animals into therapy (Taylor, 2001).

Many other accounts beyond Locke's descriptions are recorded in the literature. In 1792, for example, a Quaker retreat in England described using farm animals to treat mental health patients (Baun & McCabe, 2000) in an effort to reduce the need for isolation and restraints. Baun and McCabe explained documentation over the next 100 years revealed mental health institutions, such as Bethel, a treatment centre for patients

with epilepsy, included pet animals in their work with patients. However with the emergence of psychotropic drugs on the medical scene the involvement of animals disappeared from the literature (Urichuk & Anderson, 2003) until the 1940s, when James Bossard (as cited in Fine, 2000) noted the positive physical and emotional effects of owning a dog. At that time, Fine explained the U.S. military began using animals in their work with veterans at a convalescent hospital in 1942. In the 1960s, Boris Levinson coined the term *pet therapist* to refer to his dog, Jingles, who participated in his therapeutic work (Levinson, 1964). This term marked the emergence of interest by researchers and practitioners in the psychological effects of human and animal interaction, and highlighted the critical shift to regard animals as a partner in therapy rather than a tool to be exploited (Zamir, 2006).

Alan Beck, director of the Center for Applied Ethology and Human-Interaction at the Veterinarian Centre at Purdue University, and Aaron Katcher, a psychiatrist and instructor at the University of Pennsylvania, have also greatly contributed to the development of public and professional understanding of the human-animal bond. In 1983, Beck and Katcher suggested animals could promote physical and mental health, offer companionship and even provide therapy; the second edition of their book in 1996 included research to help support their contention that human-animal relationships are not only necessary but can easily be integrated into psychological work with people (Beck & Katcher, 1996).

Significant growth in the field was evident in the 1990s, providing a strong foundation for AAT. As recognition and interest has unfolded, the description of how

animals are included in therapy with people has proven to be broad and sometimes unclear, leaving both professionals and the public confused by the terminology.

### Lay Terms in Animal Therapy

The terms in Animal therapy vary tremendously and are often used interchangeably in literature and on websites. Although recent literature is attempting to employ terms in a more consistent manner (Chandler, 2005), it is prudent for the professional to go beyond the terminology and understand the way in which an animal is integrated into practice. This section will familiarize the reader with the most frequently used terms in AAT, including: *therapy*, *animal-assisted activities (AAA)*, *animal-assisted therapy (AAT)*, *pet therapy*, and *animal-assisted therapy - counselling (AAT-C)*.

### *Therapy*

Within the field of psychology, the term therapy is clearly defined by the American Psychological Association as follows:

a process involving a special kind of relationship between a person who asks for help with a psychological problem and a person trained to provide that help....To help individuals thwart overcoming obstacles to their personal growth, wherever these may be encountered, and toward achieving optimum development of their personal resources (Patterson, 1980).

While this definition is specific to psychology, the use of the term therapy in the AAT literature is applied to a much broader description of activities, including interventions without goals. The following is a description of how AAA and AAT are considered different.

### *AAA versus AAT*

The Delta Society (1996) is a non-profit society established to promote the involvement of animals in an effort to improve the wellbeing of those requiring psychological assistance. Two broad categories of animal therapy are described by the Delta Society: animal-assisted activities (AAA), and animal-assisted therapy (AAT).

#### *The Definition of AAA*

AAA is defined by the Delta Society as the integration of animals into activities to facilitate motivation, education and recreation, encouraging casual interaction without following a specific set of criteria or goals. AAA could include volunteers and their pets visiting a nursing home to encourage positive socialization and interaction amongst residents. While considered therapeutic in nature, there are no set goals, and no planning or evaluation is required.

#### *The Definition of AAT*

On the other hand, the Delta Society described AAT as intentional and therapeutic, whereby the animal's role is integral in assisting with mental health, speech, occupational therapy or physical therapy goals, and augments cognitive, physical, social and/or emotional well-being. Their criteria for AAT included the following: the animal must meet specific criteria that fit the therapeutic goals; the animal is considered a necessary part of the treatment; therapy is directed by a qualified professional or practitioner; therapeutic intentions include physical, social, emotional, or cognitive gains; therapy can occur in group or individual sessions; and, all treatment must be documented and evaluated.

### *Pet Therapy*

Another term often used in the literature to describe the work by organizations that conduct visitations with animals is *pet therapy*. The Pet Access League Society (2008) is a well-respected Calgary based non-profit organization offering enhanced quality of life utilizing animals. Through their *Pet Visitation Therapy Program*, The Pet Access League Society (PALS), volunteers and their animals visit facilities such as nursing homes, correctional centres and day homes. Therefore, based on Delta Society definitions, the pet therapy conducted by PALS would fall under the category of AAA because visits are non-directive and delivered by volunteers; animals are not involved in an intentional way to help clients reach specific therapeutic goals.

The CHIMO Project (Urichuk & Anderson, 2003) is an Alberta based non-profit organization dedicated to developing, planning and implementing AAT. Urichuk and Anderson helped to further clarify that pet therapy could be considered both pet visitation and AAA, and while they are therapeutic in nature, only AAT is intentional and goal-directed. The Pet Therapy Society of Northern Alberta (2008) is another example of an Alberta organization that offers a wide range of community programs and education to the community, including pet visitation, animal-assisted activities, pet bereavement support groups, and support and training for establishing pet programs.

### *AAT in Counselling*

As described, distinguishing between AAA, AAT and AAT in the context of counselling can be problematic. Chandler (2005) clarified this issue by coining her own phrase for AAT in counselling as *AAT-C* to illustrate the difference in working with animals to specifically improve the psychological well-being of a client, versus all other

types of therapies and activities. Chandler defined AAT-C as “the incorporation of pets as therapeutic agents into the counselling process” (p. 2) and described two methods of delivery within AAT-C.

First, the counsellor may incorporate their own pet who has undergone training to become a therapy animal, or second, they could utilize an animal handler who has a certified therapy animal working under the supervision of the counsellor to carry out certain interventions. She explained AAT-C can occur in a variety of environments, including schools, private office settings, on acreages, and so forth, and responses to intervention are recorded.

A third scenario, as described by Aanderson (2008), may include the client’s pet in the sessions if the counsellor feels competent in handling the animal and if the animal is motivated and comfortable. If it is not possible to physically include the animal, then inclusion of the pet could be achieved through methods such as storytelling, puppetry, stuffed animals, scrapbooking, metaphorical language, or photography (Chandler, 2005; see also Reichart, 1998).

#### *AAT as an Entity*

Aanderson (2008) stated AAT in psychotherapy “is not a modality in and of itself. It is the use of strategies to achieve goals that can help maximize client strength by enhancing traditional therapies” (p. 14). Therefore, until research clearly demonstrates AAT can stand alone it is recommended by researchers (Beck & Katcher, 2003; see also Chandler, 2005; Fine, 2000), AAT should act as an adjunct to other therapeutic modalities. It also makes sense that the counsellor should feel competent enough in their area of therapeutic expertise and methodology to be able to thoughtfully integrate animals

into their practice. To support education of counsellors, selected institutions are now providing accredited courses and programs in AAT. Green Chimneys (Mallon, Ross & Ross, 2000), a highly regarded non profit organization located on a former dairy farm in New York State, has long been devoted to therapeutically working with at-risk youth. They offer psychology internships to develop psychotherapeutic skills, preparing interns to become competent clinicians utilizing AAT in their practice. The University of Arizona, through Prescott College, now offers a Masters in Counselling program in Equine-Assisted Mental Health (2008), known as EAMH. Students qualify for certification as a psychotherapist or in counselling psychology in EAMH. Several other Canadian colleges and universities are beginning to offer accredited courses in AAT, such as Lakeland College in Alberta (A. Slugoski, personal communication, September 12, 2008).

#### An Overview of Therapeutic Approaches Involving Animals

This section will offer the reader a general overview of the most common types of animal therapies, including possible advantages and challenges, to provide the framework for the following in depth section featuring key research. Therapists from varied practices, organizations focused on the health and welfare of humans, and animal advocates such as veterinarians and animal welfare organizations, have recently begun to work together to examine the ethical implications of both AAA and AAT, and to set guidelines and structures to ensure best practice. The type of animal, the context in which the animal is expected to function, and the intent of the integration are just some of what the issues being addressed. Friedmann (2000) indicated a client's response to an animal

depends on their past and present experiences, and should also be a consideration when reflecting upon appropriate interventions. An overview of therapies involving animals is offered.

### *Therapy with Horses*

The term *Hippotherapy* refers to an organized and structured approach which emerged in the 1960s to integrate horses into physical rehabilitation therapy (Chandler, 2005). On their website, The American Hippotherapy Association Incorporated (2008), known as AHA, described the therapy as a method of utilizing horse movement to compliment physical, occupational and speech-language therapy sessions, with therapy not limited to one type of practitioner. For instance, a child with a physical disability may practice gross motor coordination skills by learning to balance in a saddle, or may develop expressive language skills through commands and verbal interaction with the horse and therapist. The North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (2008), or NARHA, is another organization focused on the use of horses in the physical rehabilitation of people living with disabilities.

Taylor (2001) described Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy, referred to as EFP, as a more current approach utilizing horses in therapy. Taylor specified that EFP is derived from AAT and can only be conducted by an accredited mental health professional specifically trained in utilizing horses as part of their counselling intervention. Chandler (2005) deduced that horses selected for therapy should be “well trained, calm, and friendly toward people and other horses. A therapy horse must not startle easily to noises or unfamiliar objects” (p. 31). However, some therapists intentionally select horses who have challenges (A. Slugoski, personal communication, September 20, 2008). As an

example, Slugoski described Dreamcatcher Ranch in Androssan, Alberta, a home to horses and other rescue animals who work with at-risk children and youth. On this ranch, a horse named Rain lost half of her ear from frostbite at her previous home, and now experiences significant problems. For instance, when first entering a herd, her physical disability inadvertently conveys a threatening pose and often evokes a negative reaction from other horses. Slugoski explained some youth relate to Rain; for instance, they may also have trouble fitting in with a peer group, have a physical disability, or have trouble communicating their feelings.

There are a number of strengths and challenges to involving horses in therapy. For instance, the novelty of the horse can incite interest and involvement for many clients who may otherwise lack motivation to participate in therapy (Chandler, 2005). Chandler also suggested the size and power of a horse can promote self-confidence when clients learn appropriate interaction, and the fact horses can be ridden may assist the counsellor with creating novel and interesting tasks. However, Chandler also pointed out horses require a large space and ongoing manure clean-up. As well, the potential for serious injury may outweigh the benefits. The Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (2008), commonly known as EAGALA, offers direction, education, and professional standards when including horses in psychotherapy.

#### *Therapy with Farm Animals*

As with EFP, the involvement of farm animals can be both beneficial and challenging. Chandler (2005) and Mallon (1994) suggested all types of farm animals can be included in therapy as long as the handler is competent and the animal is safe to be around. Chandler suggested the level of training is dependant on the species and

involvement of the animal. Green Chimneys offers a residential treatment centre for youth-at-risk, and Bittersweet Farms offers a therapeutic setting for autistic adults (Granger & Kogan, 2000). As Mallon et al. (2000) explained, the diversity of a farm experience offers much stimulation, and provides the basis for creative and varied interventions, such as providing the client with opportunities to practice nurturing activities, organizational skills, perspective-taking and problem solving. The variety of animals allows the counsellor and client to choose the co-counsellor, or offer change of animal, if necessary. Concrete and meaningful daily activities may help to develop the client's sense of confidence and competence, as well as their skills. Granger and Kogan also pointed out the animals work in their home environment, reducing the stress for the animal. Chandler suggested disadvantages could include location, transportation of clients, potential for serious injury, and a need for more people, such as an animal handler, be involved and on-site.

#### *Therapy with Dolphins*

Dolphin-assisted therapy, known as DAT, has become a popular therapeutic approach to work with cognitively and physically challenged individuals (Brensing, Linke, Busch, Matthes, & Eke van der Woude, 2005). Advantages and challenges are evident in DAT. Brensing et al. explained dolphins are included in therapy to assist with skill development in areas such as communication, fine and gross motor skills, and sensory integration. Granger and Kogan (2000) noted the advantage to working with dolphins is their intelligence and the "stress-reducing capabilities of water" (p. 218). The authors noted previous studies, such as those conducted by Nathanson in 1993 and 1996, revealed DAT as a cost-effective approach because it often demonstrated client success in

achieving their treatment goals in a shorter period of time compared to more traditional therapies.

However, holding a non-domesticated mammal captive to serve people is often controversial. Those against this form of therapy often point to the limitations in the research, the often exorbitant expense incurred by clients and family members, and the general welfare of the animals in captivity (Beck & Katcher, 1996). For instance, researchers such as Marino and Lilienfeld's (2007) research review of DAT over the last decade revealed inherent methodological flaws in the studies that have consistently resulted in unreliable outcomes. They purported no conclusive evidence has yet to suggest DAT can stand alone as a legitimate therapy.

#### *Therapy with Dogs*

Well before psychologists and counsellors, a broad range of therapists integrated dogs into their work to help improve client skills and abilities. As Fine (2000) explained, human-dog partnerships traditionally provided a service for clients with disabilities, such as dogs assisting people with visual impairments or working with autistic children. Treatment interventions included providing safety and offering independence to the client. Dogs are now one of the primary animals involved in AAT and psychotherapy (Beck & Katcher, 2003); examples of specific interventions are provided in following sections. As with other animals, integrating dogs avail certain benefits and challenges. Turner (2000) commented, a "dog's social life is organized around dominance-subordinance relationships" (p. 453), affecting the type of relationship it may also expect from humans.

Strategies and interventions available because of this relationship can be quite different from involving another species, such as a cat (Turner, 2000). Dogs are expected to obey commands and offer clients what is often referred to as “unconditional acceptance” (Chandler, 2005, p. 28) in the literature, and so consideration of the dog’s temperament and sociability, trainability, predictability, and ability to handle stressful situations is paramount (Urichuk & Anderson, 2003). Chandler also suggested matching a dog’s temperament and activity level to the client is important, along with provision for exercise, grooming, feeding and a place to defecate.

To address animal welfare issues, organizations such as Delta Society (1996) developed resources, education and training for volunteers with dogs who wished to pursue AAA in their community. The Davis Medical Centre in California developed the program *Pets Helping Us Recover* (PHUR) from which guidelines were developed around animal selection, training techniques, and grooming requirements (Hart, 2000).

#### *Therapy with Cats*

Cats are another species sometimes integrated into psychotherapy, although much of the literature emphasized cats in AAA rather than AAT. Turner (2000) suggested, “cat sociality assuming socialization toward humans in the first place is based on “give and take”, mutuality/reciprocity, and respect for their independent nature” (p. 453), in contrast to human-horse or human-dog relationships. Chandler (2005) listed the following attributes for felines in therapy: quietness and calmness; level of comfort with being touched; and motivation to be around people. She also noted playful cats offer lighthearted moments which can act as an ‘icebreaker’.

Unlike horses or dolphins, and with little client effort, cats can offer friendship by sitting in a client's lap. Disadvantages, as described by Chandler (2005) included: a cat's tendency towards introversion; a possible need for more built-in breaks for the animal; less trainability than some other commonly used animals, posing possible problematic behaviours; a need for constant access to a litter box; and a high incidence of human allergies to cats.

### *Therapy with Small Animals*

Small animals, such as gerbils, hamsters, guinea pigs, rabbits and even fish are utilized in psychotherapy. Referred to as *pocket pets* by Flom (2005), she noted these smaller animals often provide options in facilities with animal restrictions, such as a hospital, classroom, or office setting. Most of the literature addressing pocket pets is under the guise of AAA or pet therapy as these animals are often confined, can live in the facility, and can become part of the environment with relative ease (Hart, 2000). Flom pointed out schools have recently imposed restrictions on various animals, such as reptiles, because of the fear of Salmonella, or on larger animals, such as dogs, because of injury risks. Flom also noted an animal in a school setting must fit the client's therapeutic needs, as well as somehow fit into the curricula. Pocket pets may be appropriate in facilities where clients would like to hold the animals, or could possibly feel intimidated by larger ones. The shorter life span of these animals, ranging from 2 to 5 years, can be problematic, as can their tendency to be more fragile and their susceptibility to injuries and stress-related problems (Chandler, 2005). Little information was found in the literature regarding guidelines for integrating pocket pets into psychotherapy.

## Key Research

Qualitative case-studies and informal articles written by practitioners working with animals have reflected perceptions of the positive effects within the large field of AAT (Beck & Katcher, 2003), reporting successes with a wide range of maladies, including dementia, depression, motivation, self-esteem, behavioural issues, and various psychiatric ailments (Chandler, 2005). As Taylor (2001) and others have noted, this subjective approach to documentation is problematic in a society requiring efficacy and accountability and a clear measurement of change. They indicated thorough and proper research is not only required to examine current practice, and to legitimize the integration of animals, it is particularly critical as a foundation for safe and ethical standards. Urichuk and Anderson (2003) stated the Delta Society founded the International Association of Human Animal Interaction Organization (IAHAIO) focused on “promoting research, education, and information-sharing about human-animal interactions and the unique role that animals [*sic*] play in human well-being and quality of life” (p. 1-12). A discussion of research of AAT in the medical and psychotherapeutic communities is followed by challenges to researching AAT.

### *Research from the Medical Community*

The medical community laid the foundation for much of the research in AAT. Academic research of the implications of owning and working with an animal during therapy emerged in the early 1980s revealing encouraging information, such as healthier cardiovascular function in elderly patients who owned pets and decreased minor health problems when people adopted a pet (Serpell, 1991). In the mid 1980s, the National Institute of Health (NIH) reported an increased one-year survival after a coronary attack

(Beck & Katcher, 2003). Anderson, Reid, and Jennings (1992) reported pet ownership improved physical problems such as blood pressure and cholesterol. Patronek and Glickman, as cited in Friedmann (2000), highlighted the psychosocial benefits of owning animals assisted with recovery from cardiovascular disease.

In 1997, Batson, McCabe, Baun, and Wilson (as cited in Beck, 2000) studied the health benefits of integrating animals into therapy with patients afflicted with Alzheimer's disease. Positive improvements in blood pressure occurred following a participant's positive interaction with a dog. As well, Odendaal (2000) discovered positive changes in neurochemicals, such as cortisol and dopamine related directly to positive interactions with a dog. Edwards and Beck (2002) even studied the presence of fish tanks on improving patient eating habits. Observable and measurable benefits of physiological health on a client's state of mental health noted by medical practitioners and other therapists attracted the interest of the psychotherapeutic community, resulting in research specific to the psychological benefits of involving animals in psychotherapy.

#### *Research from the Psychotherapeutic Community*

As mentioned, much of the research expounding the psychological benefits of integrating animals into therapeutic practice has been significantly less than reliable or rigorous (Chandler, 2005). While mainly qualitative and anecdotal in nature, mental health practitioners began to informally record outcomes when involving animals in their work. As Prothmann, Bienert and Ettrich (2006) noted, AAT in psychotherapy has only recently been offered in research based institutions such as universities; case studies, exploratory studies, and other qualitative research of children have generally occurred more informally in peripheral settings such as regional hospitals or private practice.

While not rigorous by research standards, the anecdotal information provided the beginnings of research in psychotherapy. The following are examples of research conducted in AAT.

#### *AAT and Sexual Abuse*

Reichart (1994, 1998) utilized case study designs to examine the effect of animals as an adjunct to individual and group therapy for girls who experienced sexual abuse. While Reichart accounted for faults within each study, such as small sample sizes, tentative evidence suggested the animals were helpful as the girls worked through their individual traumas, and the information provided a springboard for future research.

#### *AAT and Anger Management*

More recently, Lange, Cox, Bernert and Jenkins (2007) conducted an exploratory study investigating the effect of including dogs in anger management therapy with five adolescents between the ages of 13 and 16 years. The children involved a dog named Tucker in activities in sessions by teaching him tricks and taking him for walks. When therapy was completed, 3 of the 5 adolescents were interviewed together. Sample size and the limited interview compromised the rigour of the study; as such, the authors indicated qualitative themes could not be identified. Lange et al. (2007) noted Tucker appeared to generate a calming effect in difficult moments, and his presence provided humour in an otherwise serious situation. As well, they observed that Tucker facilitated rapport building between the therapist and clients, and the children reported they were motivated to stay engaged and involved in the therapeutic work.

*AAT and Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder*

Katcher and Wilkins' (2000) study is an example of a more recent research design attempting to adhere to stricter guidelines. They created a crossover experimental design to capture the value of including animals in educational settings, specifically with severely challenged children diagnosed with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD). Over a 6-month period, 55 children participated in the Companionable Zoo Method (CZM), also devised by Katcher and Wilkins. The participants, all with severe challenges including AD/HD, Conduct Disorder (CD), and developmental disorders, ranged in age from 7 to 16 years old. The children were treated via structured education in their special education settings, the focus being the environment and care of animals in natural environments. The study compared the efficacy of CZM versus an Outward Bound (OB) program as both were felt to be novel and motivating. Participants were randomly assigned to the two programs, and to help minimize the effect of a small sample group, the demographics of the groups were similar. Outcomes of behavioural change were considered both in the therapeutic setting as well as other contexts outside of both programs. The children were free to visit their animals outside of the controlled setting. The Achenbach Teacher Report Form and the Piers Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale were utilized. Outcomes from this study indicated the inclusion of animals was beneficial; response to the CZM was greater than to the OB model. It was noted that success was context specific, that is, while the children's positive behaviours carried over to other structured settings, such as the classroom, behaviours remained the same in less-structured settings.

### *AAT and Diagnosis*

Prothmann et al. (2005) conducted an interesting study to explore whether animal play could assist psychiatry with the diagnosis of a variety of disorders in children and adolescents, including eating disorders, anxiety and autism. Forty children between the ages of 6 and 19 years participated. Interactions with dogs were digitally recorded and analyzed using software specially designed to statistically interpret the child-dog interactions. Researchers found the presence of a dog encouraged spontaneous non-verbal interactions which were clear and easy to code. Results indicated “almost three quarters of all patients could be assigned to the correct diagnostic groups” (p. 57). The authors noted distinct interactions with the animals within each population from which therapeutic goals could be derived. For instance, they surmised that a child with an eating disorder would benefit from therapy targeting “uncomfortable and rigid postures” (p. 57) observed when the child interacted with the dog. The authors acknowledged the study did not take into account gender differences in response to the dogs, or the fact the dogs varied from session to session.

### *AAT and Communication*

Beck and Katcher (1996) suggested animals “act as a bridge by which therapists can reach patients who are withdrawn, uncooperative, and uncommunicative” (p. 129). Many studies have resulted from observations such as these. One such study (Martin & Farnum, 2002) investigated the potential of dogs acting as therapeutic aides for children with pervasive developmental disorders (PDD) to increase communication. The study was described by the authors as a “within-participants repeated-measures design, with all participants experiencing all three experimental conditions (i.e., the children served as

their own control)” (p. 660). A limited selection of 10 participants, diagnosed within the autistic spectrum, ranging in age from 3 to 13 participated in 45 therapy sessions. The developmental age of each participant was determined prior to therapy using The Psychoeducational Profile – Revised (PEP-R), devised by Schopler, Reicher and Renner in 1990. Three 15-minute sessions were videotaped each week to determine behavioural and verbal interactions. In rotating sessions, each child was exposed to a ball, a stuffed dog and a variety of live dogs, all of which had similar temperaments, but different physical characteristics. Therapists followed a pre-determined protocol based on the PEP-R results. Software coding was used and interrater reliability was established.

Martin and Farnum determined there were no clear trends related to the developmental age of the children, and acknowledged gender differences in response to the dogs could not be established as there were only two female subjects in the study. As well, the small sample size compromised the author’s ability to generalize results when compared to the greater population. However, they determined there was a definite difference in the children’s response to the live dog, including more laughing, increased eye contact, communication with the dog, and a desire to connect through feeding the animal dog treats. Martin and Farnum also noted the children remained on-topic for longer periods of time while engaged with the dog, and were generally more compliant with therapist requests. Interestingly, the authors also observed increased hand flapping, less eye contact with the therapist, and less physical contact with the dog than with the other stimuli. This study reflects previous research findings that animals can encourage the growth of desired communication skills, and provides a solid foundation from which further research can grow.

### *AAT and Mental Health*

As Beck and Katcher (2003) noted, “studies of moderate or long duration and especially multi-centered studies using comparable protocols” (p. 85) are needed to help study the value of AAT. The CHIMO Project, named after the Dennis Anderson’s dog, conducted a structured research project spanning 27 months (Urichuk & Anderson, 2003), funded by the Health Innovation Fund. Researchers examined the benefits and pitfalls of AAT when working with youth diagnosed with mental health concerns, the objective being to “enhance and improve the well being of individuals with mental health concerns through animal-assisted therapy” (p. 3) to help meet client goals. The researchers employed a “case-non-equivalent control group repeated measures design” (p. 14) in both private and residential treatment settings, utilized standardized instruments to gather pre-post data on the level of depression and/or anxiety of the clients involved in the study, and gathered anecdotal and self-reports from clients and counsellors through questionnaires. The results indicated counsellors and clients participating in the study felt the use of animals in therapy was beneficial. In particular, Urichuk and Anderson attested “youth with mental health challenges receive great benefit from animal-assisted therapy” (p. 38).

### *AAT and Counselling*

A number of researchers have attempted to research the specific outcomes of involving animals in counselling. For instance, Prothmann et al. (2006) conducted a pretest-posttest research design to study the state of mind of children interacting with animals during counselling. They used the Basler Befindlichkeits Skala (BBS), a measure of a person’s *state of mind*, described in the measure as vitality, intra-emotional balance,

social extroversion and alertness. The researchers concluded those children involved with the dog during therapy demonstrated increases in all areas identified by the measure. They noted limitations in their study, but concluded the difference in response was significant enough to tentatively suggest the inclusion of a dog helped to achieve therapeutic goals. Prothmann and colleagues concluded, “animals alter the atmosphere in the run up to the actual therapeutic treatment in such a manner that the development of a therapeutic relationship could be catalyzed and deepened” (p. 275).

### *Challenges when Researching AAT*

As revealed in the studies cited above, researching AAT can be challenging for a variety of reasons. Beck and Katcher (2003) listed contributing problems to include inconsistent methodology and rationale for the use of animals in therapy, as well as varying belief systems about the value of animals in therapy, the wide array of definitions of AAT, an inconsistency amongst professionals and practitioners around the implementation of AAT in their practice, and varying degrees of the level of intentionality in how animals were involved.

Other problems which can arise may be finding participants, as well as the length of the study (Fine, 2000). Chandler (2005) also pointed out the complexity of constructing a research design that can properly accommodate the variables when participants are both humans and animals, and suggested a combination of qualitative and quantitative data must be gathered to fully measure the outcome. As Chandler reported, “it is a responsibility for all AAT practitioners to strive to document clinical successes of their AAT program” (p. 24) by collaborating with those who work in research to ensure the study is conducted properly and thoroughly.

Mr. Terry Wilton is an Alberta psychologist actively practicing equine therapy on an acreage setting with individuals and groups. He also includes his dog in office sessions with individual clients. Wilton suggested quantitative measurement cannot stand alone in AAT as standardized measures may not fully describe the experience of a client (T. Wilton, personal communication, October 2, 2008). Reflecting on his professional experience, he has observed working with an animal often disrupts the way in which the client views the world, but the time it takes for the client to process and integrate that shift can dramatically vary, occurring immediately, or at a much later date. Depending on when the measure is administered or on what information the measure tries to gain, he suggested the client's shift of perspective may not be accurately captured. Wilton also noted the client's language may be more reflective of growth than what is measured on a standardized scale or inventory. The International Association of Human Animal Interaction Organization, known as IAHAIO, and other organizations encourage rigorous evaluation of AAT programs to help provide evidence to funding bodies, professionals, and the public, that AAT is a worthwhile, viable and effective method to integrate into psychotherapy.

Another problematic area when demonstrating AAT's value is researcher bias. It is important for researchers to conduct cross comparisons with the intent to query whether AAT is useful (Beck & Katcher, 2003). For instance, Lutwack-Bloom, Wijewickrama, and Smith (2005) investigated the effects of pets versus people on the moods of elderly nursing home residents. While there was noticeable elevation in mood, as described by the measures used in the study, both with and without pets, there was no significant statistical difference to indicate pets were necessary to increase mood.

## Integration of Animals into Therapeutic Practice

As previously described, research has illustrated AAT's potential for facilitating growth towards therapeutic goals when combined with more traditional approaches. This section describes possible ways to integrate animals into common therapeutic approaches. Populations who may benefit from AAT in counselling are considered, and the potential benefits, challenges and ethical considerations are reviewed.

### *Common Counselling Approaches and AAT*

As previously mentioned, AAT is considered by researchers to be an adjunct to more traditional psychotherapies. The following examples are offered to illustrate the possibilities of integrating animals into common therapeutic approaches such as cognitive therapy, family therapy, and person-centred play therapy.

#### *Cognitive Therapy*

AAT can be successfully blended with cognitive therapy. An animal could assist the counsellor to address a client's maladaptive beliefs and assumptions through cognitive techniques such as *guided discovery*, *cognitive rehearsal*, or *modeling*, as described by Beck and Weishaar (2000). The client and counsellor could collaboratively develop behavioural experiments to involve animals. Consider the client who believes she cannot be assertive. A behavioural task may be as simple as calling across the field for the animals to come in, or placing her in charge of directing the animal to accomplish a task. The counsellor could question client to encourage mindfulness of her actions and experience to help expose cognitive distortions. Cognitive rehearsal could be facilitated by exposing the client to a situation involving an animal which mimics a difficult situation she has encountered in the past, such as feeling unsuccessful when she

attempted to be assertive. Rehearsal of a more effective approach to being assertive could then lead the client to experience success and encourage further reflection. A more elaborate behavioural experiment could include working collaboratively with an animal to conquer an obstacle course. Role-playing exercises could be built around the exercise to allow the counsellor to model effective reactions to situations. Ultimately, it is hoped the meaningful, active and concrete experiences will facilitate new skill development and promote a more realistic perspective of self.

### *Family Therapy*

Family therapy, described by Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2000), also easily dovetails with AAT. McIntosh (2002) offered examples of exploring the underlying rules in family utilizing collaborative interaction when working with a horse to challenge the *redundancy principle*, the “restricted range of options for dealing with one another” (p. 387). Activities designed to draw attention to existing dynamics encourage the family to acknowledge current behaviours and interrelationships, and reflect on healthier interactions. Consider the family who resorts to scapegoating behaviours. One scenario may be asking that family work together to maneuver a horse or animal from point A to point B without talking to each other or to the animal. Eliminating the ability to chastise or blame through language automatically forces change. Ample information about the family dynamics would be forthcoming. This type of concrete and emotionally-laden activity offers a platform for discussion and reflection for the family and counsellor. From their experiences, new tasks may be created to extend their knowledge, practice new skills, make connections and associations to their daily life interactions, and to actively work towards a healthier dynamic.

### *Person-Centred Play Therapy*

Raskin and Rogers (2000) described this approach as a method for encouraging self-direction and self-actualization through the expression of latent emotions. Axline (as cited in Raskin & Rogers, 2000) was a pioneer in the field of person-centred play therapy, with the intent to encourage children to “experience the exhilaration of being themselves” (p. 157), making AAT a natural fit with play therapy. Chethik (2000) reasoned the experience of playing provides a natural vehicle for expressing thoughts and feelings, and suggested the counsellor watch for emerging themes during play to help the child make meaning of his play. Chethik explained the combination of nondirective play and structured exercises requires modifications in the environment to reduce risk for both the client and animal. Chandler (2005) suggested a number of considerations for office settings to protect the animal such as: removing small toys that are a choking hazard; eliminating sharp objects or heavy tools; using non-toxic objects; utilizing a large cushion with a removable cover to lie on so bonding can occur; and creating stories or songs with animal puppets to express positive experiences. Setting limits prior to the session is helpful so the child knows what is acceptable. Within the context of play, the counsellor can model appropriate behaviour and language as well, including petting the animal nicely, and using positive and encouraging comments to both the client and co-counsellor such as, “I sure like the way you are looking at each other!”

### *Populations who may benefit from AAT in Counselling*

Beck and Katcher (2003) offered the psychological constructs of *biophilia theory* and *social support theory* to help explain why animals may be so important while supporting human well-being. Biophilia theory, conceptualized by Erich Fromm in the

early 1940s, is described by Beck and Katcher as the human tendency to be inherently drawn to nature. As such, the positive physiological response which occurs in the presence of animals automatically draws and sustains a person's attention; people are innately interested and motivated to be in the presence of an animal. In turn, they described social support theory as a person's circle of support which includes the companionship of an animal. Pets can help to expand that support system. While more research is required to help determine what makes the human-animal bond so powerful, researchers in the literature have begun to identify characteristics of clients who seem to benefit from AAT.

Individuals seeking counselling services may genuinely wish to make change, but struggle to achieve their goals through more traditional talk-based therapies (Sarafino, 2006). These clients may experience more success if afforded the opportunity to actively practice new ideas via an external catalyst, such as art, drama, or with an animal co-counsellor. Mruk and Hartzell (2003) suggested the client must be as invested in change as the counsellor, and to do this, the therapeutic approach must fit their learning style (Sarafino, 2006).

There are many reasons some clients feel less successful with talk-based therapies. The experience of a debilitating trauma may evoke emotions so overwhelming that verbal discussion of the problem or issue is not possible (Fine, 2000). Less developed higher level thinking and reasoning skills may prevent or significantly interfere with a person's ability to process and synthesize abstract concepts presented verbally (Broderick & Blewitt, 2006). Learning disabilities in the language domain could make it challenging for an otherwise cognitively able person to benefit from verbal interaction (Beers,

Goldstein, & Katz, 1994), and social communication challenges may hinder awareness and understanding of social and emotional experiences discussed on a purely verbal level (Attwood, 1997). Verbal discussion of the interrelationship of thoughts, feeling, and behaviours may not be sufficient to assist the client to make sense of the connections (Chandler, 2005).

Individuals with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) are an example of a population who could benefit from AAT. Toutain and Lejuene (2008) explained these children may have complex challenges, including: delayed physical or intellectual development; weak visual skills; slow development of speech or motor skills; a lesser ability to pay attention; underdeveloped sensory motor integration; problems with transitions; unpredictable mood; trouble understanding or forecasting consequences; or problems with social interaction. For example, Anderson (2008) suggested teaching a child with FASD positive dog training techniques could help the child understand the importance of clear communication, further the development of empathy, practice perspective-taking, experience delayed gratification, and illustrate the connection between behaviours and consequences in a non-threatening manner.

Clients with a terminal illness may also benefit from therapy involving animals. Gorczyca, Fine and Spain (2000) referred to the *ecosystem model* developed by Bronfenbrenner in 1973 to illustrate children and adults with Autoimmune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) may more easily find solace and a positive and compassionate relationship with an animal than with another human in their time of need because of how the stigma of AIDS may affect relationships. As well, they cited Carmack in 1991, who determined animal companionship can reduce feelings of stress and thereby improve the

client's immune system. In addition, Gorczyca et al. (2000) determined an animal can increase the person's sense of worth and value if they are asked to participate in its care.

### *Potential Benefits of AAT in Counselling*

The benefits of involving an animal in psychotherapy abound in the literature. Mainly the focus is on how the well-being of the client is affected, although there were several articles attending to the beneficial aspects of AAT for the counsellor and even the animal (Chandler, 2005; see also Fine, 2000; Parshall, 2003). The following are themes identified in the literature.

#### *Environment*

The atmosphere of therapy is altered by the presence of an animal (Chandler, 2005) no matter where the session takes place. Myra Ducharme, a clinical social worker who has practiced llama-assisted therapy for many years, determined a client's interaction with their animals reveals how they handle the real world, and creates a chance for the client and therapist to identify and practice different strategies for dealing with various situations (M. Ducharme, personal communication, April 2001).

#### *Icebreaker*

Consider the introduction scenario described by Mathews (2008) where the young woman, although attending counselling for a serious concern, found herself comfortably sharing a positive interaction with the animal. This allowed the client and counsellor a chance to open communication and assisted with future discussions. In 1992, Hunt, Hart and Gomulkiewicz (as cited in Beck & Katcher, 2003) first described animals as *social lubricants*, explaining they can serve as a catalyst for neutral discussion and safe interaction.

### *Stress Reduction*

Prothmann et al. (2006) reflected on the results of their study of the affect of dogs on children with depression, noting the youth “may feel transported into an atmosphere that is characterized by warmth, acceptance and empathy” (p. 275), all of which are considered the foundation for a strong therapeutic relationship. Chandler (2005) offered the example of dogs working with inmates who were mandated to counseling. By interacting with the dog first, the clients became more relaxed and open to discussion with the counsellor. An interesting example of this was revealed in a study conducted by Marr et al. (2000) in which sixty-nine men and women with a mean age of 41.5 years met for one hour each day of the week for 4 weeks. Each participant had been diagnosed with a mental illness in addition to drug or alcohol abuse. Half of the patients were in a control group, the remaining participants met in the presence of a variety of small animals including dogs, rabbits, guinea pigs, and ferrets. All but one of the participants chose the option of interacting with the animals during their sessions.

Based on the Social Behavior Scale given to both groups, Marr and his colleagues found the participants interacting with the animals were more inclined to smile and demonstrate pleasure, and were more sociable and relaxed with other participants. Some researchers also suggested more sensitive issues can be rendered less incendiary when an animal is involved (Chandler, 2005). For instance, Parshall (2003) noted the dog helped her to dispel a child’s anxiety, and increased the child’s sense of comfort and safety through petting and cuddling.

### *Social Development*

The very nature of interacting with another being can provide fodder for personal reflection and the potential for heightened understanding of how one's behaviours may affect another's conduct. In this writer's informal study with children and animals, abundant opportunities were available to promote self-awareness and self-regulation of behaviours. For instance, the children discovered that speaking in quieter tones, while moving slowly and paying attention to the animal's response was more likely to motivate the animal to remain engaged.

Chandler (2005) stated AAT can be more meaningful and concrete than words, can provide substantial examples for more abstract concepts, and learning can be less threatening when practiced with an animal rather than with peers. Parshall (2003) wrote positively of her experience as a novice counsellor working with a dog that she described as possessing the characteristics of unconditional positive regard and warmth. Collis & McNicholas (1998) also suggested symptoms of stress, depression or anxiety related to social disconnect may be addressed through interaction with animals.

As previously mentioned, perspective-taking can also be facilitated with animals and provide a neutral ground for discussion. Chandler (2005) and Anderson (2008) explained many opportunities present themselves to problem-solve and work through emotions elicited from interactions with the animal or counsellor; the counsellor can model thoughtfulness and consideration for another perspective when attempting to figure out why the animal would not comply.

### *Multisensory Experience*

A multisensory aspect is also available when an animal is involved; potentially increasing the client's level of attention and understanding of the relevance of a task (Chandler, 2005). The animal can also assist the counsellor to maintain the attention and interest of the client who is active or struggles with focus or concentration (Katcher & Wilkins, 2000).

As mentioned earlier, multisensory tasks can be built into AAT, such as photographing or videotaping the animals; scrapbooking, story writing and journaling are appropriate for clients more fluent in language skills. The use of metaphors and symbolism can be very effective as well. Kopp (as cited in Fine, 2005) explained, "Metaphors are similar to mirrors in their ability to reflect inner images within people" (p. 195). McIntosh (2002) offered the example of a parent and child concretely exploring the metaphor of feeling 'reined in' through horse work. As orchestrated by the counsellor, the family can discover the animal is more compliant and responsive with a looser rein or leash. When held tight, the animal may fight to gain control, or will become passive and stubborn, much like a child on a tight rein. The experience of learning to become assertive instead of aggressive while establishing clear behavioural expectations can help the client become aware of how his behaviour affects the animal's responses. Fine offered other metaphors useful in AAT, such as "feeling chained or leashed, smothered, or being in a cocoon" (p. 196).

Clients with less-developed verbal skills can experience a sense of success when interacting with an animal. Individuals with lowered self-esteem and confidence can experience success even when uncomfortable talking; asking a dog to sit, or offering food

to an animal provides positive interaction without the need for language. Small tasks such as these can present an opening for more conversation, or a vehicle for interaction (Chandler, 2005). Leimer (1997) explained unwritten rules in our communication system can make it difficult for some individuals when they are not fluent in those rules, and Leimer explained animals are often clearer because they communicate in a direct manner, both verbally and non-verbally. As Beck and Katcher (1996) pointed out, “animals do not use words, and patients can safely approach them when they cannot approach people” (p. 127). Mallon (1994) summarized this concept as follows:

Traditional forms of therapy, which rely on talking and trusting, sometimes fail children who are mistrustful of adults. The cow on the farm may in fact be the best therapist a child can have while in treatment. The cow, and other farm animals can become a companion for the child, one in whom he or she can confide all of his or her misgivings, heartaches, and pains. The cow and other farm animals can serve as the catalytic agent that brings the child and the therapist together (p. 470).

Finally, animals can provide an entity onto which the client may project or identify (Reichert, 1998). The author offered the example of storytelling from the animal’s point of view as a means for the client to raise metaphorical, or even factual, details of a topic otherwise difficult to talk about, such as abuse. These situations are only some examples of ways a client can practice certain skills in a “deeper and more meaningful way” (Chandler, 2005, p. 8) because emotions and cognition are actively engaged.

### *A Catalyst for Emotion*

Fine (2000) discussed AAT as a “catalyst for emotion” (p. 184) and specifically illustrated the importance of laughter and joy as emotions sometimes challenging to tap in counselling. As Beck and Katcher (1996) pointed out, “The difficult art in therapy is achieving a mutual feeling of intimacy without touching” (p. 92).

### *Potential Challenges and Ethical Considerations in AAT*

Mallon et al. (2000) explained “the widespread ardor about the almost universal efficacy of animal-assisted programs has for many years all but obscured any serious questioning of its possible risks” (p. 122). To offer the reader a fuller understanding of the possible complexities and obstacles of AAT in counselling, a realistic foundation to promote thoughtfulness and discuss solutions will be presented.

### *Physical Risk*

No matter how well trained, an animal is never completely predictable. Something as simple as a cat scratching a child, or a dog knocking the client over during playtime (Chandler, 2005) can jeopardize the therapeutic relationship. Serious injuries could occur in any environment, such as a client or counsellor breaking an ankle in a gopher hole, or a client tripping over an animal in an office. Obvious potential for liability issues are plentiful and therefore risk management is a key feature when working with animals.

This also applies to clients when their own pets are involved. This writer can provide an example by describing a situation where a client wanted to include her pet ferret, Sam, in her therapy sessions. While his presence theoretically fit her goals, it became apparent Sam was not happy with the experience. It was difficult to read Sam’s

stress levels. Sam detracted, rather than contributed, to the session, and so this writer problem-solved with the client to determine alternative ways to include Sam, such as videotaping his interactions with her other animals at home to give us concrete examples with which to work. Chandler (2005) dedicated an entire chapter to this topic.

Mallon et al. (2000) have written extensively about protocols developed by Green Chimneys Children's Services. The authors presented methods and suggestions to minimize risk, and afford insight and ideas regarding liability and insurance coverage. Depending on the facility and the way in which the animal is involved, animals must pass an evaluation by qualified professional to be involved in AAT, although qualifications vary depending on the animal and circumstance (Delta Society, 1996).

#### *Strategy Appropriateness*

AAT offers an excellent vehicle for metaphors and analogies, and ample opportunity for the client a chance to practice skills (Aanderson, 2008; see also Chandler, 2005). However, Aanderson (2008) explained although one child with FASD can benefit from AAT, another child with the same diagnosis may be challenged. For instance, she observed the client whose FASD resulted in cognitive difficulties to struggle to process and implement complex strategies requiring generalization of behaviour, to understand metaphors requiring higher level thinking skills, or with experiences lacking immediate consequences and feedback. Further, the presence of an animal could be too stimulating for a client who struggles with sensory issues, ultimately detracting from the therapeutic process. In other words, a counsellor must be careful not to make assumptions of how a client may respond to an animal merely based on his diagnosis.

*Cultural Diversity and AAT*

The client's worldview (Arthur & Collins, 2005) reflects and affects their interaction with, and understanding of, animals and influence how they regard an animal as co-therapist. Taylor (2001) noted that domesticated animals depend on people and therefore can be at the mercy of the intention of the "owner" of the animal. When animals are owned for the purpose of indulging the owner, the value of the animal is determined by the needs of the owner. This attitude negates the intrinsic worth of the animal as a living being (p. 5).

Friedmann (2000) accounted for a client's physical and emotional response to a particular species of animal as being based on "previous direct and indirect experiences with as well as their beliefs, desires, and fears about specific species" (p. 55). It is therefore possible counsellor and client worldview could differ enough that an animal's presence could hinder, rather than facilitate, rapport building, or the safety or mental well-being of the animal may be compromised. For instance, the counsellor's worldview shapes their professional decisions and actions, including the veracity that animals are considered meaningful in a therapeutic situation. Pederson (1995) explained the counsellor's problem of "covert unintentional racism" (p. 197) when she has not examined her underlying assumptions. In the case of AAT, the counsellor and client may not share similar values and belief systems towards animals. Several potential scenarios are offered. First, if a client habitually controls an animal at home with force, he may regard the counsellor as weak or even incompetent if the counsellor uses a gentler approach. While this could be a valuable therapeutic opportunity, it could detract from focusing on therapeutic goals, potentially fracturing the therapeutic relationship.

The role of animals in the client's life outside the therapy session is another cultural consideration (Beck & Katcher, 2003). If a client belongs to a club that raises an animal to be sold or slaughtered, or if she is a hunter, she may regard animals differently than those who only keep animals as pets. Next, Friedmann (2000) indicated medical research has suggested there is variability in gender response to animals, suggesting the "importance of sex and other demographic variables in determining or moderating the effects of animals" (p. 55). Finally, a client's place of origin may affect their regard towards animals. Chandler (2005) offered the following examples: Koreans may find large dogs intimidating because they are often used as aggressive guard animals in their culture, and some Latino communities regard animals as community pets who wander freely, with few restrictions, and are looked after by everyone.

Ethnic diversity with regard to attitudes towards animals requires more research. A study by Curtiss, Holley, and Wolf (2006) explored ethnic diversity and the animal-human bond by comparing different ethnic groups and their attitudes towards companion animals and ownership practices. As social workers, the authors wished to determine the importance of considering the family animal to achieve a "more inclusive ecological approach to work with clients" (p. 266). They suggested it may behoove the counsellor to explore the role of a companion animal in families experiencing domestic abuse as the attitude and behaviour of a family member towards the animal may be reflective of his attitude towards others in the family. As well, they suggested consideration of whether AAT is appropriate with a client who has a history of animal abuse should be determined in each case.

### *Health*

Whether in an office, or outdoor setting, sanitation and the potential for disease must be addressed. Animal inoculations and parasite control, among other things, must be current (Delta Society, 1996) and clients must also be screened for potential allergies or sensitivities (Chandler, 2005). As well, animals can pass on zoonotic diseases, disease passed between humans and animals (Mallon et al., 2000). Gorczyca et al. (2000) recommended working with dogs and cats older than 9 months as puppies and kittens are more likely to pass on certain parasites to humans. Gorczyca and colleagues listed other diseases, such as acquiring ringworm from cats, or salmonella from cats, birds and horses. They noted it is somewhat rare for the transmission of diseases to occur, however consideration of the client's immune system is critical and a client at higher risk will require more precautionary measures than someone with a strong immune system. In all cases, if the animals are well-cared for and the client is not exposed to feces or a contaminated environment, the risk should be low.

The United States Department of Agriculture (2008), known as USDA, emphasized cross-species infection can also occur within a farm or between farms, such as the Avian Influenza Virus between chickens and dogs. The department also emphasized viruses can be carried from one farm to another, a consideration when a rural client from a farm or ranch may be involved in therapy on a different farm.

### *Distractions*

Environmental distractions, combined with the predictability of the client's behaviour, can present challenges to the counsellor, particularly in an outdoor setting (Urichuk & Anderson, 2003). As previously mentioned, the combination of a handler

and therapist may be beneficial depending on the setting and the nature of the client's problems. The counsellor cannot expect a client to manage an animal, or to be able to predict an animal's behaviour, or monitor levels of stress; this is the counsellor, or handler's sole responsibility. Vigilance is imperative. This is not to say the client should not be encouraged to learn to read the animal's nonverbals, as this fosters respect for the animal and obviously contributes to the safety of the session.

A second consideration is the client's ability to tolerate distraction. If the animal's presence incites inappropriate behaviours that are not conducive to the therapeutic realm, or if they interfere with the process of therapy, the counsellor may have to consider alternative methods to assist the client.

Chandler (2005) suggested it wise to consider an animal will expose the client to normal bodily functions such as eating, defecation, urination, and exposure of sexual organs. Experiences with such natural activities can generate therapeutic opportunities outside of traditional therapy, as long as the client is comfortable with observing these events, and the disadvantages do not outweigh the benefits.

### *Suitability of Animal*

Although a client may want to work with animals, the animal must be suited to the client. For instance, Mallon's (1994) study of racially mixed children in a residence for behavioural, emotional and academic challenges revealed the younger children favored holding and cuddling rabbits, while the pre-teenagers preferred horse riding.

If the client is uncomfortable with the animal, or is not interested in the species, it may detract from the experience, thereby interfering with the intention of the work.

Fredrickson and Howie (2000) described this as an animal's ability to "inspire

confidence” (p. 106), explaining the client’s experience should not incite unreasonable fear or anxiety. Beck and Katcher (2003) suggested interaction with an animal may be beneficial and healthy for some individuals, while others may experience “decreased health or morale” (p. 83). Consequently, the counsellor must gauge the response of the client to the co-therapist and be flexible enough to change the therapeutic approach.

Furthermore, the animal must be intentionally involved, that is, participation should meaningfully contribute to the client attaining a goal (Aanderson, 2008; see also Chandler, 2005; Fine, 2000). To do this, the animal must feel safe, confident, and be at least reasonably engaged in the process. As well, the animal must be trained within the capacity they are expected to function; a dog is more likely to be expected to follow commands, to provide unconditional love and to tolerate a certain level of activity from the client than a fish in a fish tank (Chandler, 2005).

While much of the literature emphasizes high levels of animal training, such as the Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (2008) method for equine-assisted therapy and Delta Society guidelines for training a dog, not all counselling practitioners in AAT agree with this philosophy. As previously mentioned, Dreamcatcher ranch in Adrossan, Alberta, is an example of a facility that intentionally chooses animals with challenging behaviours, such as a dog whose brain injury has resulted in severe obsessive compulsive-like behaviours, and a turkey with considerable boundary issues (A. Slugoski, personal communication, September 12, 2008). Slugoski explained they work with animals with challenges because their struggles may mirror client problems, offering non-contrived opportunities to observe and deal with undesirable outcomes, provide opportunities for problem-solving, offer occasions to practice reading

nonverbals, rouse self-reflection, and incite discussions around natural consequences. Slugoski emphasized the animals' behaviours are predictable to the staff, and therefore the clients should not be at risk.

As dogs are frequently included in counselling, it is worth noting the type of breed and size of dog can be an important consideration. For instance, Hart (2000) pointed out golden retrievers, as a breed, are less inclined to be protective than German shepherds. Hart also indicated the elderly reported feeling safer around smaller breeds because they were afraid of being knocked over by a larger, more rambunctious dog. Chandler (2005), Anderson (2008), Fredrickson and Howie (2000) and others have devised methods to assist the counsellor in selecting an appropriate animal for a particular therapeutic instance.

More research is required beyond the type, temperament, and trainability of an animal and AAT, including the differences in involving carnivorous versus non-carnivorous species. Fredrickson and Howie (2000) noted non-carnivorous animals eat more frequently and therefore may be more beneficial if the focus is on encouraging or developing nurturing skills; this also means the animal may eliminate on a more frequent basis, posing a rather different challenge.

### *Loss and Grief*

Loss and grief can be of concern if something happens to the animal during the therapeutic process (Fine, 2000). Consider this scenario: what if, in the middle of a therapeutic program, an animal made it clear it did not want to work with the client? Or, the animal fell ill or died unexpectedly? What if the client was attending counselling because of a recent loss? A skilled counsellor could work to find ways to turn the

situation into an opportunity, but it is also possible the experience could induce trauma.

Terminating is often exigent both for the client and counsellor (Chandler, 2005). Conflicting results are evident in the literature regarding whether clients involved with AAT can experience long-term, positive affects beyond the actual therapeutic experience. For instance, Katcher and Wilkins (2000) found short-term results were evident, but long-term outcomes were not marked, in the patients they studied, hypothesizing the absence of the animal when therapy was terminated negatively affected long-term outcomes. This writer's experience has highlighted termination is often intellectual for the client and they are rarely prepared for strong therapeutic relationships to end. When managed well, the termination experience can be an excellent vehicle for dealing with difficult topics such as closure in relationships, saying good-bye, and loss and grief issues, but if mismanaged the situation could be disastrous. Chandler (2005) and others attempted to address this significant problem in their writing.

### *Intentionality*

While it is a collaborative experience, counsellors often must help clients consider ways to safely and purposefully achieve their goals when involving an animal. Urichuk and Anderson (2003) offered appropriate and meaningful integration of animals into a therapeutic situation through case studies and explicit activities. They overviewed client goals such as: rapport building, bonding, empathy building, increasing a sense of control and empowerment, addressing grief and loss, and increasing self-control. A treatment goal suggested by Urichuk and Anderson was to “decrease learned helplessness behaviours [and] increase [a] sense of control over self and environment” (p. 2-62). They indicated this could be done by teaching the client how to direct the

animal, and then collaboratively problem-solve when confronted with an obstacle to promote self-monitoring, mindfulness, and to empower the client and encourage generalization to daily life situations, amongst other things.

#### *Documentation and Evaluation*

A major concern with the literature is the lack of thoughtfulness or structure when determining methods for integrating animals to achieve therapeutic goals. A number of methods are available to practitioners. Chandler (2005) described Cameron and turtle-song's (2002) SOAP plan, as follows: observation of the client's subjective presentation is first recorded, followed by objective observation and facts of the client by the counsellor. From this, the counsellor assesses and creates a conceptualization of what the client will require, providing the foundation for the plan. The termination report then draws from this collective information to provide recommendations.

Urichuk and Anderson (2003) and Aanderson (2008) also offered methods for evaluation by capturing the client and therapists' perspective, and assessing the overall evaluation of the program itself. Performance indicators listed by Aanderson were: determining most effective activities, length of time clients are seen, and the number of clients over time who achieved therapeutic goals. By utilizing a variety of approaches, such as regularly employing standardized tests, surveys or questionnaires to capture change, direct observation and documentation of each therapy session, and the accumulation of therapy notes, counsellors may derive meaningful outcome measures. Urichuk and Anderson explained that "unless the presence of the animal in the therapy session is controlled for, it is not possible to make unequivocal claims about an animal's impact in therapy" (p 4-3).

## Welfare and Rights of Animals in AAT

While this topic could be included in the previous section, it is critical enough to warrant separate discussion. As Hatch (2007) stated, “recent sociological work affirms that animals are minded actors with distinct selves and the ability to feel and display a range of emotions....ideally, AAT/AAA should benefit the animals as well as the humans involved” (p. 39).

Gathering of testimonials and first-hand descriptions of the benefits for professionals and clients who interact with animals are abundant in the literature, fueling the movement of AAT. However, less research has been conducted to determine how participation in AAT affects the animal’s well-being (Hatch, 2007). Animals involved in any interaction with humans are dependant on them for their basic needs, and exploitation could inadvertently occur. Serpell, Coppinger and Fine (2000) explained the human-animal bond becomes morally besought when “there is a conflict of interests between the two: where the human use either causes pain, fear, or harm to an animal, or it in some way thwarts or prevents the animal from satisfying its own needs and goals” (p. 415).

The Delta Society is one of several organizations that have attempted to set rules and design for AAT. However, it is important to remember empirical evidence informing the standards has not been available, and therefore one must consistently and intelligently revisit those standards with an underlying regard for the animal’s well-being (Serpell et al., 2000).

The Human-Animal Bond Association of Canada (2008), or HABAC, was founded in 1987 to act as an umbrella organization for all groups in Canada involving animals in their practice, the goal being to improve the well-being of their clients. The

association actively collaborates with the Delta Society, the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (2008) and the Canadian Federation of Humane Societies (2008) to promote increased awareness and policies through research and networking. To better understand this topic, a brief discussion of the difference between *welfare* and *rights* of animals will be offered, followed by an overview of current research, and a reflection of some of the larger issues applicable to AAT.

### *Definitions of Welfare and Rights*

The Animal Welfare Foundation of Canada (2008), the Canadian Federation of Humane Societies, and the Animal Welfare Council (2008) are three examples of organizations focused on the protection and welfare of animals. They promote research, policy making, education, and networking amongst agencies with similar philosophies regarding animal welfare. On their website, the Animal Welfare Council referred to the American Veterinary Medical Association definition of animal welfare as the “human responsibility that encompasses all aspects of animal well-being, including proper housing, management, disease prevention and treatment, responsible care, humane handling, and, when necessary, humane euthanasia” (para. 2). The council explained they advocate the possibility for humans to interact with animals in all capacities in a responsible way by ensuring adequate management and care of the animal in each situation. Council participants include rodeos, circuses, animal health organizations, entertainment and recreation.

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (2008), known as PeTA, is one of the most well-known animal-rights organizations in the world. They differentiated the concept of welfare from rights as follows:

Animal welfare theories accept that animals have interests but allow those interests to be traded away as long as the human benefits are thought to justify the sacrifice, while animal rights theories say that animals, like humans, have interests that cannot be sacrificed or traded away to benefit others. However, the animal rights movement does not hold that rights are absolute—an animal's rights, just like those of humans, must be limited and can certainly conflict. Supporters of the animal rights movement believe that animals are not ours to use for food, clothing, entertainment, or experimentation, while supporters of the animal welfare movement believe that animals can be used for those purposes as long as “humane” guidelines are followed (para. 3).

Consider this example. A counsellor may not eat red meat, wear clothes made from animals, or support products tested on animals. But, in the eyes of a true animal-activist, the counsellor would still not meet PeTA's philosophical criteria if they integrate animals into therapy work with humans. Therefore, when considering AAT as an adjunct to therapy, a counsellor must determine if AAT fits with their value and belief system regarding animal rights and welfare. As Hatch (2007) stated so eloquently; “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” (p. 39).

#### *Research on the Welfare of Animals in AAA and AAT*

Current research has begun to examine the physical and mental effect of AAA and AAT on the animals. While research is burgeoning, the very fact animal welfare is being studied is heartening. Iannuzzi and Rowan (1991) were one of the first researchers

to survey those involved with animal programs throughout the United States in an effort to clarify the level of exploitation or abuse in animal assisted programs. Iannuzzi and Rowan discovered most programs were aware of and careful to protect their animals. However, they also uncovered significant concerns, including neglect and abuse, sometimes resulting in death of an animal in a therapeutic setting. Following Iannuzzi and Rowan's efforts, until the late 1990s, there was a dearth of literature regarding animal welfare. Serpell et al. (2000) pointed out behaviour modification and teaching of "non-natural skills" (p. 419) to animals is evident in most instances of AAT, thereby infringing on the animal's natural state of being.

To offer examples of the varying type of research regarding animal welfare, three recent studies are discussed: a study of dolphin response when interacting with humans; physiological stress response of companion dogs when working; and an attempt through interviewing human volunteers to capture the perception of shelter dogs involved in an AAA program.

#### *Dolphin Study*

Brensing et al. (2005) conducted a study on the impact of different groups of swimmers on dolphins in unstructured swim-with-the dolphin programs. A program in the United States was compared to a program in Israel, where both programs had dolphins contained in fenced pens in the open sea. The former program catered to both children and adults with mental and physical disabilities, while the latter catered only to adults. The dolphins were untrained in both programs and not used to being touched by humans: all interactions were initiated by dolphins. Observations were made the same time every day for 30 minutes, totaling 83 sessions, divided fairly equally between

control, tourist swims, and therapy sessions. With special recording equipment, the researchers applied a three-dimensional coordinate system to analyze dolphin movements and frequency of breathing.

The researchers found the dolphins involved only with adults presented as more relaxed and interested in interacting as compared to the dolphins involved with children, who demonstrated signs of stress and avoidant behaviours. While the difference in subspecies of bottlenose dolphins between the groups was not accounted for in this study, the researchers felt this was not likely a major variable as wild bottlenose dolphins have been repeatedly observed to be attracted to humans.

Interestingly, Brensing and colleagues concluded the housing and handling of the dolphins was likely more of a factor in dolphins experiencing stress than the difference in sub-species or even the type or size of human population to which they were exposed. The dolphins interacting only with adults lived in a much larger pen, which was divided into three areas so the dolphins had refuge without humans to retreat to when they desired a break from the activity. As well, they could leave their enclosure to an adjoining one further into the open sea, offering them even more space and freedom. Furthermore, there were less people at any given time with the adult population, there was a familiar trainer present at all times, and the dolphins could retreat when desired.

#### *Companion Dog Study*

Haubenhofner and Kirchengast (2006) investigated physiological arousal for companion dogs when working with their owners. They measured the levels of cortisol in the dogs' saliva samples, as this has been found useful in measuring human physiological response to stress in humans (Preville, Zarit, Susman, Boulenger, &

Lehoux, 2008). Haubenhofner and Kirchengast sampled eighteen dogs of varying breeds between 3 and 9 years of age with their humans in a non-laboratory setting. The four neutered female dogs and one male neutered dog were considered healthy. The dogs and humans had previously received the same training by a nonprofit animal therapy training organization in Austria. A self-questionnaire established a baseline in addition to saliva samples gathered by the animal's handlers at three points in the study: (a) 3 control days during a time when the dog was not involved in therapeutic work, (b) before and after each therapeutic session over the course of three months, and again followed by (c) 3 control days during a time when the dog was not involved in therapeutic work. Variables such as the small sampling size and heterogeneity of the animals were taken into consideration when interpreting data.

Haubenhofner and Kirchengast's study revealed the dogs produced considerably elevated levels of cortisol while working within the therapeutic situation. The researchers noted intense and shorter sessions produced more cortisol, while longer sessions, containing breaks, revealed comparatively lower levels, although still higher than the control. Interestingly, the researchers found cortisol levels were generally found to be higher if sampled after 2:00 p.m., a phenomenon they could not explain from the data obtained in their study. Finally, although cortisol levels were clearly elevated when the dog was working in a therapeutic situation, the authors could not conclusively state the increase was harmful for the dog in the long-term, and suggested further research was required to determine whether the work of service dogs negatively affects their health.

*Shelter Dog Study*

In another study, Hatch (2007) conducted semi-structured interviews with ten human volunteers working with shelter animals in an AAA visitation program. Nine women and one man ranging in age from 12 to 65 years participated in individual semi-structured interviews; Hatch offered her perspective, as she also participated in the program. For each visitation the volunteers chose different animals, the intent being to expose them to presumed positive benefits of socializing with humans outside the confines of the shelter. Limitations when interviewing the volunteers were evident in her study, including the volunteers' ability and experience in understanding an animal's behaviour, resulting in the attempt to interpret subjective and biased opinions. Nevertheless, her results encouraged reflection and consideration of the animal's experience. Hatch indicated observable positives for some of the animals which included apparent enjoyment of increased socialization, stimulation and contact with people. However, she found the volunteer's lack of history with an animal sometimes affected the quality of interaction between the animal and the volunteer as the human could not always interpret the animal's behaviour, and the animals sometimes exhibited conduct that was fearful or apprehensive because handler, situation, and client were all unfamiliar. Hatch expressed concern that this could inadvertently reinforce negative behaviours, such as being fearful in new situations, ultimately affecting the animal's potential for adoption.

### *Issues of Animal Welfare in AAT*

The Centre for the Human-Animal Bond at The Purdue University of Veterinary Medicine (2008) offers a variety of undergraduate certificate programs dedicated to promoting the rights and welfare of animals utilized in helping professions. One example is an undergraduate program studying issues of animal welfare as it applies to societal concerns. As described on their website, the care and use of animals from a social, ethical, biological and economical perspective is explored to promote improvement of animal handling, to encourage the development and implementation of policies related to animal welfare, and to advance research. While reading this next section, it is hoped the reader will reflect on their circumstances and abilities when considering AAT.

#### *Basic Needs*

It can be assumed an animal feels more secure when his basic needs are met. Basic needs are defined by the Animal Welfare Act (2008) as follows: a proper diet and water; a suitable place to live; an opportunity to be housed, or apart from, other animals; an opportunity to express normal behaviours; and protection and treatment of illness and injury. The Canadian Federation of Humane Societies (2008), or CFHS, described basic needs as attending to both the physical and mental well-being of an animal. In their discussion of policies where animals are used in a classroom as an educational tool to improve the well-being of the students, a responsible adult must be available to oversee the welfare and husbandry of the animal; this should include holidays and weekends. Responsibilities comprise an environment which must suit the animal; interaction between the animal and students must be controlled and supervised; the animal must have the opportunity to rest; knowledge that the breeding of animals is not appropriate; and the

animal's well-being must be attended to no matter where they are housed.

When placed in novel situations and environments with unfamiliar people, such as a hospital, an animal becomes completely dependant on their handler to ensure their needs are attended to. Regardless of how caring a counsellor may be, unintentional neglect can occur if the counsellor is distracted or consumed by the client's needs. Chandler (2005) offered the example of an animal in a warm environment without water. This situation can inadvertently lead to dehydration, exhaustion and undue stress for the animal. Coppinger, Coppinger, and Skillings (1998) spoke of lack of experience and improper handling of dogs, including inappropriate corrections, poor commands, and lack of rest as a primary cause for the animal to become confused and even act out. And, Hatch (2007) emphasized experience in understanding a particular animal's nonverbal indicators of stress is also critical.

This writer can offer an example to further highlight the importance of the experience just mentioned. When working with an alpaca, clients may believe the animal is showing affection when he leans against them, and they are enjoying the feel of his soft fibre. In actual fact, the alpaca is conveying distress. If the handler is ignoring, or is unaware of, the discomfort the animal is trying to communicate, unexpected and potentially undesirable behaviours from both client and animal may become the focus of the session. Broom and Johnson's red flags indicating stress levels cited in Serpell et al. (2000) are also useful to consider, including "high frequencies of displacement activities, stereotypes [*sic*], or self-mutilation" (p. 417). Aanderson (2008) listed other causes of stress to include invasion of the animal's space, strange behaviours exhibited towards the animal such as flapping arms or unfamiliar smells.

### *Environment*

There are considerations associated with the environment in which the animal is working, including noise level, excessive feeding by clients, level of risk for injury, adaptability of the animal to the setting, and the type of training the animal must endure to fit into the environment (Chandler, 2005). As revealed in the dolphin study (Brensing et al., 2005), the environment can be as important as the actual handling when considering animal welfare. Aanderson (2008) offered several considerations, such as choosing the size of animal to fit the space, providing an exercise area, and creating a place for the animal to safely retreat when feeling stressed or uncomfortable. This is particularly important for animals involved in crisis situations (Chandler, 2005) where the level of chaos and the state of the environment may be difficult to control.

### *Length of Work Day*

Consideration must be given to the length of time the animal is expected to work. An animal belonging to a therapist may stay in the office all day, some co-counsellors may travel extensively if they are a part of a mobile operation, or animals on a ranch may be able to come and go at their leisure. No matter the situation, without appropriate breaks an animal that is expected to interact with clients all day may become exhausted and stressed. Depending on the animal, Aanderson (2008) suggested a work session should last no more than one-hour at a time, with sizeable downtime away from working which includes exercise, play and rest.

## Method

The focus of this final project was to create a manual to inform counsellors of Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT). The target reading audience is counsellors interested in considering the introduction of an animal into their practice to augment their therapeutic work. Two steps were involved: a comprehensive review of current literature was completed to support the theoretical foundations of the topics covered in the manual, and the development of the manual as the final product. Through critical reflection and discussion of pertinent themes and key issues drawn from the literature, the writer provides the reader with thoughtful and practical information and ideas pertinent to support a practitioner in better understanding AAT, to determine whether they wish to more deeply pursue information and education regarding AAT, and to reflect whether integrating animals as co-counsellors may be a useful and reasonable adjunct to their professional practice.

Chapter themes run parallel to the accompanying paper to include: background and history of AAT; key themes emerging from the literature; benefits, challenges and ethical implications; meaningful application and integration of animals into more traditional approaches; and, animal welfare. Possible future directions based on questions generated by this writer are also presented. The manual provides direction and references to current information available on pertinent websites.

This writer examined the literature employing a search strategy based on Mertens' (1998) strategy in addition to reviewing references. The University of Calgary library services was the primary source used to access books and articles. Academic Search Premier, Academic Search Complete, PsychInfo, Wilson OmniFile: Full Text Mega

Edition, and the Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection databases were mainly used. Examples of key words and phrases included animal-assisted therapy, therapy and animals, animals as therapists, animals as adjunct to therapy, counsellors and animals, augmenting counselling and techniques, animal assisted activities, equine therapy, dolphin therapy, animal and school, children and animals, and disability and animals.

To make the manual a practical resource, this writer drew from her own experiences in various settings over the last two decades as a teacher, educational consultant, and more recently as behavioural coach and counselling practicum student. Client scenarios with challenges and unexpected outcomes are offered.

As a professional working directly with children and youth, this writer felt it worthwhile to seek to find ways to operationalize AAT in a useful and meaningful way. I sought advice and input from counsellors and other professionals currently working with animals in their therapeutic practice, such as registered psychologist Terry Wilton, or with those individuals researching the effectiveness of AAT, such as the staff from the CHIMO project.

### Synopsis and Future Directions

As illustrated in this paper animals as an adjunct to counselling can be beneficial, challenging, and not without ethical considerations. This writer engaged in the exploration of AAT as a response to her ongoing endeavor to seek ways to involve animals in her work with clients. The reflection and discussion within the manual is based both on her previous experience with integrating animals into her teaching and educational consultant practice, and more recently into practicum experiences within her counselling program. Conducting this literature review generated practical questions and

considerations regarding the state of literature available in the field of AAT, and provided the springboard for the manual. The relative infancy in the area of research of AAT in counselling is apparent; medical research has adhered more to standards considered acceptable in the field of research, but with a focus on physiological benefits. Fortunately practitioners in counselling and related fields of mental health are now beginning to conduct AAT research in AAT. Volker (1995) indicated a lucid explanation of research goals, combined with suitable instruments for documenting and measuring data, sufficient sample sizes, and controlled conditions, constitutes respectable research design. As described in the Key Research section, a larger portion of AAT research until the last few years had generally limited population samples and sampling biases, less than rigorous procedures, and conclusions reflecting the bias of the researchers, who drew conclusions from the biased position of someone who already regards AAT as a worthwhile adjunct. An example of this bias was revealed by Marino and Lilienfeld's (2007) review of research of dolphin-assisted therapy in which they concluded procedural flaws in the studies resulted in erroneous outcomes leaning to the observable benefits of involving dolphins in therapy. This is not to say the work was worthless; rather it provided a springboard for further research.

In earlier, qualitative research, many of the researchers noted the limitation of length of study and the lack of generalizability of outcome results. However, the outcomes were often positive and supported the involvement of an animal, and certainly presented as intriguing and attractive to a novice counsellor like myself until I critically analyzed the limitations. The problem with this type of reporting is practitioners searching for ways to engage and motivate clients may not go as deeply into the studies

and draw incorrect conclusions. It seemed much of the problem historically stemmed from a lack of collaboration or communication between practitioners reporting their observations and professionals familiar with sound methodological research procedures. Research pioneers in AAT such as Alan Beck, Samuel Ross and Gary Mallon are succeeding in their efforts to improve the state of research by conducting more rigorous studies combining qualitative and quantitative methodology.

As well, the articles this writer reviewed by these authors presented a more neutral position in which they queried whether AAT is a viable and useful adjunct, and if so, what must be done to fully capitalize on an animal co-counsellor. The timeline for many of the older studies seemed quite short and therefore did not necessarily capture whether longer-term benefits could be gained from AAT; admittedly this is not an easy task in any area of research but certainly worth the effort. The CHIMO project is an exemplar of a more successful and recent research study undertaken with the intent to examine longitudinal results of the benefits and pitfalls of AAT when working with youth diagnosed with mental health concerns, with the ultimate goal to gather meaningful qualitative and quantitative data to assist front-line practitioners in determining ways to meet client goals. As well, the researchers went beyond one setting and included both clients and counsellors as participants from which they gathered perspective. Including client perspective and not just observation of client reaction was an important balance in the study to offset the bias from counsellor interpretation of client response to the animal; the client was able to present their thoughts and emotions directly as well.

This more recent move towards conscientious research is heartening, and suggests continued improvement in the field. Of course, the pervasive tension between acquiring

funding and conducting research is a systemic problem. Research funding and involvement from institutions, such as universities, hospitals and colleges, are particularly vital in research, such as the involvement of Purdue University, Prescott College and the Glenrose Hospital in Edmonton. Efforts made by Beck, the CHIMO project, and others have certainly helped to make significant strides for further involvement and support from academia. However, when larger funding bodies become involved, imposed criteria can create dissention and challenges for the researchers, particularly individuals or smaller agencies with nominal manpower. A personal experience with a funding organization created frustration around imposed timelines, as the effort to develop a logic model, gather copious quantitative data, and engage in extensive report writing was daunting for our small, not-for-profit agency. These restrictions can potentially discourage more formalized research. Practitioners in the field actively employing AAT as an adjunct to their therapy for years reiterate this apprehension and caution an over-focus on measurable gains and accountability could inadvertently cancel the burgeoning efforts of those in the field who see both benefits and challenges and recognize change must be measured in various ways and at various times (T. Wilton, personal communication, October 2, 2008). With these thoughts in mind, this writer offers possible suggestions for future research all of which are clustered around key themes generated from the literature.

#### *Approaches to Research*

To earn reimbursement from companies managing medical care, multicentered therapeutic trials and comparisons with other kinds of alternative therapies, such as dance, music, and psychodrama, are required. It seems longitudinal mixed

methodological research designs would be most useful, with accommodation for variables introduced by involvement of humans with animals. Cross comparison studies would provide valuable information from which possible, larger extrapolations may be achieved. Specifically, a cross comparison study with pre and post measure, and with formal instruments to gauge change at different points during the study, could help to achieve ongoing monitoring required by many funders, and generate useful data.

As previously mentioned, a balance of qualitative and quantitative information is optimal as together they are more likely to capture the client's experience within the timeframe of the counselling experience, and beyond. Narrative, anecdotal data is necessary. This writer's work in the area of action-based research with at-risk youth has afforded me this perspective as clients required ample time to process their experiences, and sometimes only later were able to clearly reflect on change. To capture client change with standardized instruments is not always possible, particularly if that information is being measured too soon. Wilton offered an interesting suggestion that closer inspection of a client's narrative—"a semantic analysis of client stories"—would be useful and assist with capturing change that is sometimes difficult to measure (T. Wilson, personal communication, October 2, 2008).

#### *Considerations for Research*

This writer has reaped the benefits of working on a multi-disciplinary team for many years; the benefit of varying professional perspectives when working with a client experiencing complex issues can be invaluable. An interdisciplinary and multi-centred approach to research, including a combination of animal professionals, mental health practitioners, animal advocate organizations and researchers, would offer varying

perspectives and goals for research. Information from this collaboration would cultivate the database of information, publications, resources, and ethical guidelines accessible to various animal professionals. This collaboration and cooperation could also encourage further discussion and potential partnerships and alliances. For instance, this writer has been approached by local veterinarians interested in co-developing an action-research project investigating ways to dovetail AAT with certain clients of veterinarians who are experiencing loss and grief over a pet. Alliances such as these benefit both professionals and clients and help to grow the field of AAT.

#### *Physiological Change during Human-Animal Contact*

Beck and Katcher (2003) made the connection between physiological response and its effect on mental wellness. Guided by the theories of biophilia and social support, research from a biopsychosocial perspective could further define the interrelationship between positive physiological change and improved psychological and social well-being. Comparisons between various therapeutic modalities, with and without animals, could help assess levels of change in physiology related to the presence of an animal. For instance, a study might query the physiological response of children with depression when engaged in cognitive therapy with AAT versus cognitive therapy on its own, or compare the physiological response of children engaged in cognitive therapy and AAT versus another interactive therapy, to shed light on characteristics of effective therapy and whether AAT is better suited to certain theoretical approaches. Likewise, the extent to which physical contact affects rapport and client change may assist with determining whether an animal co-counsellor will assist particular clients with their goals. As well, if positive physiological response elicited by the presence of an animal during therapy is an

important factor, results may guide exploration of ways to encourage longer lasting effects of therapy after termination. Research configured to query whether animals are beneficial in therapy, rather than constructing research to demonstrate their effectiveness, would help define AAT as a legitimate adjunct as well as reveal the realistic aspects of involving an animal in therapy.

#### *Therapeutic Relationship*

Horvath and Symonds (1991) suggested a positive and strong therapeutic relationship may be more important than the therapeutic approach. This writer has experienced accelerated rapport-building with clients when an animal was involved. It would be worthwhile to practitioners if research investigate the degree to which AAT as an adjunct to therapy facilitates rapport building, and whether the therapeutic modality in combination with AAT has bearing on the process, success, or speed of rapport building. Furthermore, the significance of animals in rapport building in therapy could be compared between populations involved in AAT versus those in therapy without animals.

#### *Client and Counsellor Worldview*

This writer discovered the importance of understanding cultural differences when involving animals. Research regarding the attributes of animals most likely to positively impact the health and well-being of people of different cultural backgrounds and histories would be useful. As Beck and Katcher (2003) explained, without this kind of knowledge we may formulate generalizations leading to false assumptions or unrealistic expectations. Zamir (2006) and Hatch (2007) explained human regard for animals varies tremendously, and belief systems influence the way an animal is treated and the duties they are expected to perform. Research of the effect of belief systems on therapy

involving animals would be invaluable for counsellors to help dispel assumptions or generalizations regarding expected client response to animals, and facilitate identification of client populations or counsellors amenable to AAT. Comparison group categories could include: differences in age, gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status; comparisons of pet owners, livestock owners, and those who have little interaction with animals; comparisons of the response of clients with various disabilities; or, power differential in human-animal relationships between those individuals who regard animals as a product or tool, versus those who do not.

The exploration of the importance of the choice of animals and how they may affect certain populations would be useful. As well, the level of an animal's interest or ability to engage in human-animal interaction is of importance. Research into desirable breed attributes for AAT within a species could also help to provide guidelines for choosing a co-counsellor.

#### *Animal Involvement*

Research investigating if or how much the choice of animal influences the therapeutic experience would help guide future practice. The level of involvement of an animal in therapy would also be worth consideration. This writer has offered clients a chance to choose their co-counsellor. One client involved his dog, empowering and motivating him to participate in creating tasks and homework to practice skills. He was excited to practice perspective-taking and communication for his family via his work with the dog. In another instance, this writer modified the involvement of a client's ferret because of his reluctance to participate; instead we successfully involved him through photography and journal-writing to help my client reach her therapeutic goals.

Another interesting consideration is whether continued involvement of the same animal from session-to-session makes a difference in therapy. Such research could focus on topics such as the importance of animal consistency and rapport building between therapy participants, including client and counsellor, or differences in the response of clients within defined populations between the provision of consistent versus inconsistent co-counsellors. This could reveal possibilities for therapists who may have access to a variety of animals but may not own their own pet. This may also address some of the concerns regarding animal welfare: is it necessary to always use the same animal, or can animals be rotated in if a particular co-counsellor requires a break from the counselling sessions?

#### *Counsellor Competency*

Cormier and Nurius (2003) explained counsellor competency is based on training, self-awareness of strengths and limitations, personal and professional ethics, and how attitudes of self influence the counsellor's work with clients. As well, the counsellor's ability to navigate, embrace and utilize unanticipated situations is essential (T. Wilton, personal communication, October 3, 2008). Wilton offered creative and lateral thinking is necessary to capitalize on the copious opportunities presented when working with an animal. I have found it prudent to imagine possible scenarios and outcomes prior to a session to help me more 'spontaneously' respond to interesting and unexpected situations resulting from the animal's involvement. The interrelationship of a counsellor's worldview and the nature of involving an animal is a critical consideration for those considering AAT. This writer's brief attempt to integrate a ferret into counselling revealed the importance of not only feeling competent in the chosen theory, but also

being aware of her personal discomfort with not fully understanding the behaviour of an unfamiliar animal as co-counsellor, and her worldview that the safety and welfare of the animal is of equal importance to that of her client, and therefore it was inappropriate to continue involving the unhappy animal even though the client wanted to try.

Sarah Sholte at the University of Victoria is conducting a survey of counsellors utilizing AAT (S. Scholte, personal communication, August, 2008) which, according to Sholte, is the first of its kind in Canada, designed to capture information regarding characteristics of practitioners attracted to utilizing AAT. The survey is bilingual and targets individuals who work with a variety of animals, including horses, a subpopulation not been previously captured in surveys. This type of research is vital as it will help to reveal practical information related to practitioners and their perceptions of AAT, more clearly define necessary training, and provide grounding for policies and guidelines in AAT. Other potential topics for investigation include: level of awareness and understanding of animal welfare; current level of training in their therapeutic modalities and in the field of AAT; methods used to involve animals in treatment; methods for assessment and evaluation of client progress and perceived effectiveness of AAT; level of interest or willingness to access training in AAT, including methods for integrating AAT into their current therapeutic approach; and perspectives of what is required to improve competency within the field of AAT.

#### *Animal Health and Welfare*

Beck (2000) cautioned that the recent swell of practitioners involving animals in their practice could lead to challenges in the field regarding animal welfare. This writer can offer the example of an alpaca working as a co-counsellor for approximately one

year. His genuine curiosity and willingness to participate made him amenable to counselling. However, after experiencing a particularly loud child, he consistently demonstrated avoidant behaviour and was obviously no longer enjoying the experience. His stress response led us to offer him peaceful retirement from his role, and to reflect on what may have prevented this scenario. Topics for research in this area could include: determining the importance of environment for an animal; implications of training and competency of counsellor/handler with the animal on the success of therapy; guidelines for optimal length of work time in a day for a co-counsellor; factors that guide when an animal should be retired from therapy; importance of developmental stage of an animal when determining appropriateness; how animals with past traumas or physical disabilities compare in hardiness within therapy with animals without significant issues; and whether the setting of therapy is a factor.

### Conclusion

The involvement of animals in counselling has great potential as well as challenges, all of which must be considered by a counsellor contemplating AAT as an adjunct to therapy. Future research of AAT will hopefully contribute to better understanding of the scope of animal involvement in therapy as well as guide policy and decision-making in the field. As the field grows and more practitioners become interested in AAT, concrete and meaningful information is needed to guide practitioners when operationalizing AAT. As a novice counsellor, this writer has developed a manual for practitioners based on personal experiences, professional practice and current research, including questions generated from her experiences and discussion of current research and publications of practice, in order to provide practitioners a chance to reflect on the

implications of integration of animals in their practice. The manual also provides direction and references to current information available on pertinent websites. After reading the manual, clinicians will hopefully be better equipped to determine whether AAT is a viable adjunct to their practice. Moreover, as clinicians gain a greater understanding of this important area of practice, their increased application of integrating animals into professional practice will hopefully encourage involvement and interest in fostering further research and refinement in the area. In short, this review and its accompanying manual are meant to contribute to increased application and enhancement of the field of AAT.

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## Appendix

Pawnderings for Psychotherapeutic Professionals and Animal Assisted Therapy in

Counselling: A Manual for Counsellors



I think we sometimes overlook what is right in front of us, thinking ahead to the future and missing the splendor of the world. Animals can help insist we stay in the moment, experience emotion more intensely than we might otherwise allow, and challenge our thinking. I believe we have a great deal to discover about ourselves and our world; animals have a great deal to teach us if we slow down for a moment and pay attention. This manual is dedicated to Jaymie and Laura and their playfulness and love for animals; to my parents who have given me the gift of believing in myself; to my amazing husband who supports and encourages me and all my projects, and to all of the animals I have fostered or owned in my life, past and present. Thank you to Sarah Scholte, Amanda Slugoski, and Terry Wilton for taking the time to speak with me and share their insights of Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) in counselling. I would like to specifically mention Maureen Howard and Lila Pulos, two very wise women who have supported and guided me in this exceptional journey. And, thank you to Dr. Jacqueline Pei, my mentor, facilitator, supervisor, and supporter.



I accidentally stumbled upon the concept of animals being involved in the quest to improve the well-being of people during a vacation to Germany in 1987. I encountered a small farm where several people were cleaning stalls and caring for the animals. An older gentleman milking a cow explained the farm was a private retreat for people recovering from a range of mental health issues. Each day was filled with chores and interactions with animals, followed by sessions with their assigned counsellor. He described the retreat as ‘a break from the world’, and explained the animals, picked for their gentle qualities, were like therapists. This was the first time I had heard of an animal referred to as a ‘therapist’. He explained the experience of caring for the animals encouraged clients to move beyond their own realities and perhaps become more open to change. It was then I began my research into AAT. As a young classroom teacher, I began introducing animals mainly as a teaching tool for curriculum purposes. I discovered the presence of animals in my classroom often encouraged a sense of safety and comfort, and offered me a way to teach empathy and responsibility and to develop close rapport with my students.

Later as a clinician on a multi-disciplinary team, I brought Georgie, my quirky little pug/border terrier cross into assessment sessions when an animal-loving child was afraid, worried, fearful, or when I needed assistance with developing rapport and reducing the child's anxiety about the situation. Georgie mostly sat in the corner and received snacks or hugs during a break. That positive experience with such a domesticated animal led me to the discovery of other kinds of animals such as alpacas and llamas. Seven years ago I volunteered on an alpaca ranch, and discovered their delightful qualities. Easy to handle, gentle, intensely curious, trainable, and extremely verbal, their interest in people made them ideal for working with children with complex challenges. A talented psychologist, Maureen Howard, teamed with me to work with children identified with severe behavioural challenges. We wrote of our work dovetailing cognitive therapy and AAT with the children and their families. I have participated in training with an Alberta-based certified equine therapist, worked with individuals with animal behaviour expertise, and regularly consulted with therapists integrating AAT within their practice. I have learned to thoughtfully involve the animal and ensure an animal will contribute to the client's goals. This guide offers a realistic ponder of what you can expect if you integrate an animal co-counsellor, and anecdotal notes interspersed from this writer, a novice counsellor, to offer a concrete foundation from which to think...my thoughts are depicted in grey font and by the symbol ☼

## CHAPTER 1: THE BEGINNINGS

### WHY SHOULD I EVEN 'PAW'NDER ANIMAL-ASSISTED THERAPY?

"The animal's eyes have the power to speak a great language."

Martin Buber (para 4, "ThinkExist", 2006)



☀️The leaves quietly rustled on a fresh, fall day as I watched my client pick alfalfa for Marco, a young and lively alpaca who is full of beans. Marco's lips were already pursed in anticipation of the tasty treat. She giggled and then laughed out loud as Marco contentedly munched his way through the grass while staring at her with his huge, brown eyes. She crawled under the fence and slowly walked with him across the field to fill the trough, one of the jobs she chose to complete prior to our sessions. Marco excitedly pawed at the ground with his gangly legs, happily splashing his feet in the mud and squeezing his eyes shut as he shoved his face into the spray of water. It was wonderful to watch; this was the first time Marco felt comfortable enough to allow this type of interplay. My client, diagnosed within the autistic spectrum, came to me because she wanted to improve her communication skills, which included understanding and reading nonverbal cues. Her ability to respond to Marco's non-verbal communication was beginning to pay off for both of them – she was beginning to know when to back off and when to play. They enjoyed each other for a few more minutes, and then she quietly walked towards me with a huge grin on her face. It was a great start to the session.

**This partly fictional account (to protect my client) illustrates the power of involving animals in therapy. As Chandler (2005), a guru in the field of Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) and psychotherapy suggested, counsellors need to be well-versed in all aspects of integrating animals into therapy to ensure they are minimizing harm to both the client and the animal.**

**Until recently, the literature has tended to reflect mainly on the positive aspects of the broad field of AAT (Beck & Katcher, 1996, 2003), without clearly addressing questions regarding the possible challenges or ethical considerations of involving animals in therapy. This manual will attempt to answer all of your questions. However, before we launch into the benefits and challenges, the term AAT must first be defined.**

## CHAPTER 2: DEFINITIONS AND DISCUSSION

### BEFORE I 'CAT'APULT FORWARD, WHAT EXACTLY IS AAT?

"There has never been a cat who couldn't calm me down by walking slowly past my chair."

Rod McKuen (para 18, "PetsinUtah", n.d.)



**Within the field of psychology, the term therapy is clearly defined by the American Psychological Association as follows:**

a process involving a special kind of relationship between a person who asks for help with a psychological problem and a person trained to provide that help....To help individuals thwart overcoming obstacles to their personal growth, wherever these may be encountered, and toward achieving optimum development of their personal resources (Patterson, 1980).

**While this definition is specific to psychology, the use of the term therapy in the AAT literature applies to a much broader description of activities, including interventions conducted without specific therapeutic goals. As a result, it is important sort out the varying terminology.**

### **AAA versus AAT**

**The Delta Society (1996) is a non-profit society established to promote the involvement of animals in an effort to improve the wellbeing of those requiring psychological assistance.**

**Two broad categories of animal therapy are described by the Delta Society: animal-assisted activities (AAA), and animal-assisted therapy (AAT).**

#### **The Definition of AAA**

**AAA is defined by the Delta Society as the integration of animals into activities that facilitate motivation, education and recreation. The activities encourage casual interaction without following a specific set of criteria or goals. AAA could include volunteers and their pets visiting a nursing home to encourage positive socialization and interaction amongst residents. While considered therapeutic in nature, there are no set goals, and no planning or evaluation is required.**

#### **The Definition of AAT**

**The Delta Society described AAT as intentional and therapeutic, whereby the animal's role is integral in assisting with mental health, speech, occupational therapy or physical therapy goals, and augments cognitive, physical, social and/or emotional well-being. Their criteria for AAT included the following:**

- The animal must meet specific criteria that fit the therapeutic goals.**
- The animal is considered a necessary part of the treatment.**
- Therapy is directed by a qualified professional or practitioner.**
- Therapeutic intentions include physical, social, emotional, or cognitive gains.**

- Therapy can occur in group or individual sessions.
- All treatment must be documented and evaluated.

## **Pet Therapy**

**Another term often used in the literature to describe the work by organizations that conduct visitations with animals is pet therapy. The Pet Access League Society (PALS) is a well-respected Calgary based non-profit organization offering enhanced quality of life utilizing animals. Through their Pet Visitation Therapy Program (PVTP), PALS volunteers and their animals visit facilities such as nursing homes, correctional centres and day homes. Therefore, based on Delta Society definitions, the pet therapy conducted by PALS would fall under the category of AAA because visits are non-directive and delivered by volunteers; animals are not involved in an intentional way to help clients reach specific therapeutic goals.**

**The CHIMO Project (Urichuk & Anderson, 2003) is an Alberta based non-profit organization dedicated to developing, planning and implementing AAT. Urichuk and Anderson helped to further clarify that pet therapy could be considered both pet visitation and AAA, and while they are therapeutic in nature, only AAT is intentional and goal-directed.**

The Pet Therapy Society of Northern Alberta (PeTS) is another example of an Alberta organization that offers a wide range of community programs and education to the community, including pet visitation, animal-assisted activities, pet bereavement support groups, and support and training for establishing pet programs. As you can see, distinguishing between AAA, AAT and AAT in the context of counselling can be problematic. Chandler (2005) attempted to address this issue by coining her own phrase for AAT in counselling.

### **AAT in Counselling**

Professionals in the area of mental health, such as psychologists, psychiatrists, nurses and counsellors are more recently becoming involved in utilizing AAT (Anderson, 2008). Chandler (2005) coined the term AAT-C, or Animal assisted therapy in counselling as “the incorporation of pets as therapeutic agents into the counselling process” (p. 2). There are different ways of including animals:

- The counsellor and her/his pet work together with the client
- The counsellor, and a handler and their animal work together with the counsellor overseeing the way in which the animal is therapeutically involved.
- The client’s pet is involved if the counsellor feels competent in handling the animal and if the animal is motivated and comfortable.

- **Methods such as storytelling, puppetry, stuffed animals, scrapbooking, metaphorical language, or photography are also within the realm of AAT.**

### **AAT as an Entity**

**Aanderson (2008) stated AAT in psychotherapy “is not a modality in and of itself. It is the use of strategies to achieve goals that can help maximize client strength by enhancing traditional therapies” (p. 14). Therefore, until research clearly demonstrates AAT can stand alone, researchers (Beck & Katcher, 2003; see also Chandler, 2005; see also Fine, 2000) recommend AAT should act as an adjunct to other therapeutic modalities.**

**To support education of counsellors, selected institutions are now providing accredited courses and programs in AAT. Green Chimneys (Mallon, Ross & Ross, 2000), a highly regarded non profit organization located on a former dairy farm in New York State, has long been devoted to therapeutically working with at-risk youth. They offer psychology internships to develop psychotherapeutic skills, preparing interns to become competent clinicians utilizing AAT in their practice. The University of Arizona, through Prescott College, now offers a Masters in Counselling program in Equine-Assisted Mental Health (EAMH).**

**Students qualify for certification as a psychotherapist or in counselling psychology in EAMH. Several other colleges and universities, such as Lakeland College in Alberta (A. Slugoski, personal communication, September 12, 2008), are also beginning to offer accredited courses in AAT.**

## **CHAPTER 3: A REVIEW OF ANIMALS IN THERAPY**

### **HAS THERAPY GONE TO THE DOGS, OR HAMSTERS OR...?**

"Animals are such agreeable friends - they ask no questions, they pass no criticisms."

George Elliot (para 2, "PetsinUtah, n.d.)



Therapists from varied practices, organizations focused on the health and welfare of humans, and animal advocates such as veterinarians and animal welfare organizations, have recently begun to work together to examine the ethical implications of both AAA and AAT, and to set guidelines and structures to ensure best practice. The type of animal, the context in which the animal is expected to function, and the intent of the integration are just some of what the issues being addressed. Friedmann (2000) indicated a client's response to an animal depends on their past and present experiences, and should also be a consideration when reflecting upon appropriate interventions.

### Types of Therapies with Animals

To help set the stage for the next chapter focusing on key research in AAT, a general overview of some common types of therapies involving animals is offered for your contemplation and consideration.

#### Therapy with Horses

The term **Hippotherapy** refers to an organized and structured approach which emerged in the 1960s to integrate horses into physical rehabilitation therapy (Chandler, 2005).

The American Hippotherapy Association Incorporated (AHA) described the therapy as a method of utilizing horse movement to compliment physical, occupational and speech-language therapy sessions, with therapy not limited to one type of practitioner. AHA has produced articles describing the positive effects of therapy with horses (Taylor, 2001). The North American Riding for the Handicapped Association (NARHA) is another example of an organization focused on the use of horses in the physical rehabilitation of people living with disabilities.

Taylor (2001) described Equine-Facilitated Psychotherapy (EFP) as a more recent approach utilizing horses in therapy. Taylor specified that EFP is derived from AAT and can only be conducted by an accredited mental health professional specifically trained in utilizing horses as part of their counselling intervention. Chandler (2005) deduced that horses selected for therapy should be “well trained, calm, and friendly toward people and other horses. A therapy horse must not startle easily to noises or unfamiliar objects” (p. 31). However, some therapists intentionally select horses who have challenges (A. Slugoski, personal communication, September 20, 2008).

As an example, Slugoski described Dreamcatcher Ranch in Androssan, Alberta, a home to horses and other rescue animals who work with at-risk children and youth.

On this ranch, a horse named Rain lost half of her ear from frostbite at her previous home, and now experiences significant problems. For instance, when first entering a herd, her physical disability inadvertently conveys a threatening pose and often evokes a negative reaction from other horses. Slugoski explained some youth relate to Rain; for instance, they may also have trouble fitting in with a peer group, have a physical disability, or have trouble communicating their feelings.

As Chandler (2005) pointed out, the novelty of horses may promote interest and involvement for many clients who may otherwise lack motivation to participate in therapy. Chandler declared the size and power of a horse can promote self-confidence when clients learn appropriate interaction, and the fact horses can be ridden may assist the counsellor with creating novel and interesting tasks. However, she also pointed out horses require a large space and ongoing manure clean-up. As well, the potential for serious injury may outweigh the benefits. The Equine Assisted Growth and Learning Association (EAGALA) offers direction, education, and professional standards when including horses in psychotherapy.

### Therapy with Farm Animals

As with EFP, the involvement of farm animals can be both beneficial and challenging to integrate into therapy. Animals could include cows, pigs, goats, sheep, chickens...you name it! Chandler (2005) and Mallon (1994) suggested all types of animals can be included in therapy as long as the handler is competent and the animal is safe to be around. Chandler suggested the level of training is dependant on the species and involvement of the animal. Green Chimneys offers a residential treatment centre for youth-at-risk and Bittersweet Farms offers a therapeutic setting for autistic adults (Granger & Kogan, 2000).

As Mallon et al. (2000) explained, the diversity of a farm experience offers much stimulation, and provides the basis for creative and varied interventions. The variety of animals allows the counsellor and client to choose the co-counsellor, or offer change of animal, if necessary. Concrete and meaningful daily activities may help to develop the client's sense of confidence and competence, as well as their skills. Granger and Kogan (2000) also pointed out the animals work in their home environment, reducing the stress for the animal. Chandler (2005) suggested disadvantages could include location, transportation of clients, potential for serious injury, and a need for more people, such as an animal handler, be involved and on-site.

## Therapy with Dolphins

Dolphin-assisted therapy (DAT) has become a popular therapeutic approach to work with cognitively and physically challenged individuals (Brensing, Linke, Busch, Matthes, & Eke van der Woude, 2005). Brensing and colleagues explained dolphins are included in therapy to assist with skill development in areas like communication, fine and gross motor skills, and sensory integration. Granger and Kogan (2000) noted working with dolphins offers clients the opportunity to work with intelligent mammals in the “stress-reducing capabilities of water” (p. 218). The authors noted previous studies, such as those conducted by Nathanson in 1993 and 1996, revealed DAT as a cost-effective approach because it often demonstrated client improvement in a shorter period of time compared to more traditional therapies.

However, holding a non-domesticated mammal captive to serve people is often controversial. Those against this form of therapy often point to the limitations in the research, the often exorbitant expense incurred by clients and family members, and the general welfare of the animals in captivity (Beck & Katcher, 1996). For instance, researchers such as Marino and Lilienfeld’s (2007) research review of DAT over the last decade revealed inherent methodological flaws resulting in unreliable outcomes.

## Therapy with Dogs

Well before psychologists and counsellors, a broad range of therapists integrated dogs into their work to help improve client skills and abilities. As Fine (2000) explained, human-dog partnerships traditionally provided a service for clients with disabilities, such as dogs assisting people with visual impairments or working with autistic children. Dogs are now one of the primary animals involved in AAT and psychotherapy (Beck & Katcher, 2003) and as such, offer certain benefits and challenges. Turner (2000) commented, a “dog’s social life is organized around dominance-subordinance relationships” (p. 453), affecting the type of relationship it may also expect from humans.

Strategies and interventions available because of this relationship can be quite different from involving another species, such as a cat (Turner, 2000). Dogs are expected to obey commands and offer clients what is often referred to as “unconditional acceptance” (Chandler, 2005, p. 28) in the literature, and so consideration of the dog’s temperament and sociability, trainability, predictability, and ability to handle stressful situations is paramount (Urichuk & Anderson, 2003). Chandler also suggested matching a dog’s temperament and activity level to the client is important, along with provision for exercise, grooming, feeding and a place to defecate.

To address animal welfare issues, organizations such as Delta Society (1996) developed resources, education and training for volunteers with dogs who wished to pursue AAA in their community.

The Davis Medical Centre in California developed the program *Pets Helping Us Recover* (PHUR) from which guidelines were developed around animal selection, training techniques, and grooming requirements (Hart, 2000).

### Therapy with Cats

Cats are another species sometimes integrated into psychotherapy, although much of the literature emphasized cats in AAA rather than AAT. Turner (2000) suggested, “cat sociality assuming socialization toward humans in the first place is based on “give and take”, mutuality/reciprocity, and respect for their independent nature” (p. 453), in contrast to human-horse or human-dog relationships. Chandler (2005) listed the following attributes for felines in therapy: quietness and calmness; level of comfort with being touched; and motivation to be around people. She also noted playful cats offer lighthearted moments which can act as an ‘icebreaker’.

Unlike horses or dolphins, and with little client effort, cats can offer friendship by sitting in a client’s lap.

Disadvantages, as described by Chandler (2005) included: a cat's tendency towards introversion; a need for more built-in breaks for the animal; less trainable than other commonly used animals, posing possible problematic behaviours; a need for constant access to a litter box; and a high incidence of human allergies to cats.

### Therapy with Small Animals

Small animals, such as gerbils, hamsters, guinea pigs, rabbits and even fish are utilized in psychotherapy. Referred to as **pocket pets** by Flom (2005), she noted these smaller animals often provide options in facilities with animal restrictions, such as a hospital, classroom, or office setting. Don't you get a kick out of the name? When I first heard the term, I envisioned counsellors running around schools with hamsters peeking out of their shirt pockets! Most of the literature addressing pocket pets is under the guise of AAA or pet therapy as these animals are often confined, can live in the facility, and can become part of the environment with relative ease (Hart, 2000). Flom (2005) pointed out schools have recently imposed restrictions on various animals, such as reptiles, because of the fear of Salmonella, or on larger animals, such as dogs, because of injury risks. Flom also noted an animal in a school setting must fit the client's therapeutic needs, as well as somehow fit into the curricula. Pocket pets may be appropriate in facilities where clients would like to hold the animals, or could possibly feel intimidated by larger ones.

**The shorter life span of these animals, ranging from 2 to 5 years, can be problematic, as can their tendency to be more fragile, and their susceptibility to injuries and stress-related problems (Chandler, 2005). Little information was found in the literature regarding guidelines for integrating pocket pets into psychotherapy.**

## CHAPTER 4: KEY RESEARCH

### WHY IS AAT SO 'PUP'ULAR?

**“A dog wags its tail with its heart.”**

**Martin Buxbaum (para 1, “ThinkExist”, 2006**



### **Qualitative case-studies and informal articles**

written by practitioners working with animals have reflected perceptions of the positive effects within the large field of AAT (Beck & Katcher, 2003), reporting successes with a wide range of maladies, including dementia, depression, motivation, self-esteem, behavioural issues, and various psychiatric ailments (Chandler, 2005). As many researchers have noted, this subjective approach to documentation can be problematic in a society where funders and the public require efficacy, accountability and a clear measurement of change. They indicated thorough and proper research is not only required to examine current practice, and to legitimize the integration of animals, it is particularly critical as a foundation for safe and ethical standards. Urichuk and Anderson (2003) stated the Delta Society founded the International Association of Human Animal Interaction Organization (IAHAIO) focused on “promoting research, education, and information-sharing about human-animal interactions and the unique role that animals play in human well-being and quality of life” (p. 1-12). In this section, general challenges when researching AAT are discussed, followed by research studies conducted by the medical and psychotherapeutic communities. I hope to familiarize you with key research and the problems and limitations of the studies you may encounter in your readings.

## **Challenges when Researching AAT**

**As Chandler (2005) reported, “it is a responsibility for all AAT practitioners to strive to document clinical successes of their AAT program” (p. 24) by collaborating with those who work in research to ensure the study is conducted properly and thoroughly. However, researching AAT can be challenging for a variety of reasons.**

**The following are examples of problems presented by Beck and Katcher (2003), Chandler (2005) and Fine (2000):**

- Inconsistent methodology and rationale for the use of animals in therapy.**
- Varying belief systems about the value of animals in therapy.**
- The wide array of definitions of AAT, and inconsistency around the implementation of AAT in their practice.**
- The varying degrees of the level of intentionality in how animals were involved.**
- Recruiting participants.**
- Length of the study.**
- Constructing a research design to accommodate the variables when participants are both humans and animals.**
- Researcher bias.**
- Developing appropriate measures of change for AAT.**

IAHAIO and other organizations encourage rigorous evaluation of AAT programs to help provide evidence to funding bodies, professionals, and the public, that AAT is a worthwhile, viable and effective method to integrate into psychotherapy. It is important for researchers to conduct cross comparisons with the intent to query whether AAT is useful (Beck & Katcher, 2003). For instance, Lutwack-Bloom, Wijewickrama, and Smith (2005) investigated the effects of pets versus people on the moods of elderly nursing home residents. While there was noticeable elevation in mood, as described by the measures used in the study, both with and without pets, there was no significant statistical difference to indicate pets were necessary to increase mood.

Terry Wilton is an Alberta psychologist actively practicing equine therapy on an acreage setting with individuals and groups. He also includes his dog in office sessions with individual clients. Wilton brought an interesting perspective to the question of research; he suggested quantitative measurement cannot stand alone in AAT as standardized measures may not fully describe the experience of a client (T. Wilton, personal communication, October 2, 2008). Reflecting on his professional experience, he has observed working with an animal often disrupts the way in which the client views the world, but the time it takes for the client to process and integrate that shift may vary dramatically, occurring immediately or at a much later date.

Depending on when the measure is administered or on what information the measure tries to gain, he suggested the client's shift of perspective may not be accurately captured. Wilton also noted the client's language may be more reflective of growth than what is measured on a standardized scale or inventory.

### Research from the Medical Community

Academic research of the implications of owning and working with an animal during therapy emerged in the early 1980s revealing encouraging information, such as healthier cardiovascular function in elderly patients who owned pets and decreased minor health problems when people adopted a pet (Serpell, 1991). In the mid 1980s, the National Institute of Health (NIH) reported an increased one-year survival after a coronary attack (Beck & Katcher, 2003). Anderson, Reid, and Jennings (1992) reported pet ownership improved physical problems such as blood pressure and cholesterol. Patronek and Glickman, as cited in Friedmann (2000), highlighted the psychosocial benefits of owning animals assisted with recovery from cardiovascular disease.

In 1997, Batson, McCabe, Baun, and Wilson (as cited in Beck, 2000) studied the health benefits of integrating animals into therapy with patients afflicted with Alzheimer's disease. Positive improvements in blood pressure occurred following a participant's positive interaction with a dog.

As well, Odendaal (2000) discovered positive changes in neurochemicals, such as cortisol and dopamine related directly to positive interactions with a dog. Edwards and Beck (2002) even studied the presence of fish tanks on improving patient eating habits.

### **Research from the Psychotherapeutic Community**

As mentioned, much of the research expounding the psychological benefits of integrating animals into therapeutic practice has been significantly less than reliable or rigorous (Chandler, 2005), not surprising since AAT as a form of psychotherapy is relatively new and the inherent challenges as seen above. Chandler noted the recognition of the potential of AAT in psychotherapy generally emerged from other practitioners' observations, such as occupational therapists, as they observed the animals often facilitated rapport with the therapist and improved the patient's motivation to participate. This motivation often sped up achievement of therapeutic goals.

From this, practitioners in the field of mental health began to involve animals in their work with clients, and soon researchers began to qualitatively investigate the effect of animals in counselling situations, such as individual and group work with children who have experienced sexual abuse or are challenged with anger management issues.

Prothmann, Bienert and Ettrich (2006) explained AAT in psychotherapy has only recently been offered in research based institutions such as universities, and as such, case studies, exploratory studies, and other qualitative research of children has been in more peripheral settings such as regional hospitals or private practice. The following are some examples of past and current studies.

#### **AAT and Sexual Abuse**

Reichart (1994, 1998) utilized case study designs to examine the effect of animals as an adjunct to individual and group therapy for girls who experienced sexual abuse. While Reichart accounted for faults within each study, such as small sample sizes, tentative evidence suggested the animals were helpful as the girls worked through their individual traumas, and the information provided a springboard for future research.

#### **AAT and Anger Management**

More recently, Lange, Cox, Bernert and Jenkins (2007) conducted an exploratory study investigating the effect of including dogs in anger management therapy with five adolescents between the ages of 13 and 16 years. The children involved a dog named Tucker in activities in sessions by teaching him tricks and taking him for walks. When therapy was completed, 3 of the 5 adolescents were interviewed together. Sample size and the limited interview compromised the rigour of the study; as such, the authors indicated qualitative themes could not be identified.

However, the results reflected positive outcomes of earlier research. For instance, Lange et al. (2007) noted Tucker generated a calming effect in difficult moments, and provided humour in otherwise serious situations. As well, Tucker facilitated rapport building between the therapist and clients, and the children reported they were motivated to stay engaged and involved in the therapeutic work. The following are examples of recent studies attempting a more rigorous research design.

#### **AAT and Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder**

Katcher and Wilkins' (2000) study is an example of a more recent research design attempting to adhere to stricter guidelines. They created a crossover experimental design to capture the value of including animals in educational settings, specifically with severally challenged children diagnosed with Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (AD/HD). Over a 6-month period, 55 children participated in the Companionable Zoo Method (CZM), also devised by Katcher and Wilkins. The participants, all with severe challenges including AD/HD, Conduct Disorder (CD), and developmental disorders, ranged in age from 7 to 16 years old. The children were treated via structured education in their special education settings, the focus being the environment and care of animals in natural environments. The study compared the efficacy of CZM versus an Outward Bound (OB) program as both were felt to be novel and motivating.

Participants were randomly assigned to the two programs, and to help minimize the effect of a small sample group, the demographics of the groups were similar. Outcomes of behavioural change were considered both in the therapeutic setting as well as other contexts outside of both programs.

The children were free to visit their animals outside of the controlled setting. The Achenbach Teacher Report Form and the Piers Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale were utilized. Outcomes from this study indicated the inclusion of animals was beneficial; response to the CZM was greater than to the OB model. It was noted that success was context specific, that is, while the children's positive behaviours carried over to other structured settings, such as the classroom, behaviours remained the same in less-structured settings.

#### AAT and Diagnoses

Prothmann et al. (2005) conducted an interesting study to explore whether animal play could assist psychiatry with the diagnosis of a variety of disorders in children and adolescents, including eating disorders, anxiety and autism. Forty children between the ages of 6 and 19 years participated.

Interactions with dogs were digitally recorded and analyzed using software specially designed to statistically interpret the child-dog interactions.

Researchers found the presence of a dog encouraged spontaneous non-verbal interactions which were clear and easy to code. Results indicated “almost three quarters of all patients could be assigned to the correct diagnostic groups” (p. 57).

The authors noted distinct interactions with the animals within each population from which therapeutic goals could be derived. For instance, they surmised that a child with an eating disorder would benefit from therapy targeting “uncomfortable and rigid postures” (p. 57) observed when the child interacted with the dog. The authors acknowledged the study did not take into account gender differences in response to the dogs, or the fact the dogs varied from session to session.

#### **AAT and Communication**

Beck and Katcher (1996) suggested animals “act as a bridge by which therapists can reach patients who are withdrawn, uncooperative, and uncommunicative” (p. 129). Many studies have resulted from observations such as these. One such study (Martin & Farnum, 2002) investigated the potential of dogs acting as therapeutic aides for children with pervasive developmental disorders (PDD) to increase communication.

The study was described by the authors as a “within-participants repeated-measures design, with all participants experiencing all three experimental conditions (i.e., the children served as their own control)” (p. 660). A limited selection of ten participants, diagnosed within the autistic spectrum, ranging in age from 3 to 13 participated in 45 therapy sessions. The developmental age of each participant was determined prior to therapy using The Psychoeducational Profile – Revised (PEP-R), devised by Schopler, Reicher and Renner in 1990. Three 15-minute sessions were videotaped each week to determine behavioural and verbal interactions. In rotating sessions, each child was exposed to a ball, a stuffed dog and a variety of live dogs, all of which had similar temperaments, but different physical characteristics. Therapists followed a pre-determined protocol based on the PEP-R results. Software coding was used and interrater reliability was established.

Martin and Farnum determined there were no clear trends related to the developmental age of the children, and explained gender differences in response to the dogs could not be established as there were only two female subjects in the study. As well, the small sample size compromised the author’s ability to generalize results when compared to the greater population.

However, they determined there was a definite difference in the children's response to the live dog, including more laughing, increased eye contact, communication with the dog, and a desire to connect through feeding the animal dog treats.

Martin and Farnum also noted the children remained on-topic for longer periods of time while engaged with the dog, and were generally more compliant with therapist requests. Interestingly, the authors also observed increased hand flapping, less eye contact with the therapist, and less physical contact with the dog than with the other stimuli. This research provides a solid foundation from which further research can grow.

#### **AAT and Mental Health**

As Beck and Katcher (2003) noted, "studies of moderate or long duration and especially multi-centered studies using comparable protocols" (p. 85) are needed to help study the value of AAT. The CHIMO Project, named after Dennis Anderson's beloved dog, conducted a structured research project spanning 27 months (Urichuk & Anderson, 2003) in Edmonton, Alberta that was funded by the Health Innovation Fund. Researchers examined the benefits and pitfalls of AAT when working with youth diagnosed with mental health concerns, the objective being to "enhance and improve the well being of individuals with mental health concerns through animal-assisted therapy" (p. 3) to help meet client goals.

The researchers employed a “case-non-equivalent control group repeated measures design” (p. 14) in both private and residential treatment settings, utilized standardized instruments to gather pre-post data on the level of depression and/or anxiety of the clients involved in the study, and gathered anecdotal and self-reports from clients and counsellors through questionnaires.

The results indicated counsellors and clients participating in the study felt the use of animals in therapy was beneficial. In particular, Urichuk and Anderson attested “youth with mental health challenges receive great benefit from animal-assisted therapy” (p. 38).

## CHAPTER 5: COUNSELLING AND AAT

### STILL 'HOOF'ERING ABOUT WHETHER AAT IS FOR YOU?

“The great pleasure of a dog is that you may make a fool of yourself with him and not only will he not scold you, but he will make a fool of himself too.”

Samuel Butler (para 1, “ThinkExist, 2006)



As seen in the vignette of the young girl, AAT in counselling can strengthen rapport, increase communication, and facilitate growth when dovetailed with more traditional approaches to therapy. A number of researchers have attempted to research the effects of involving animals in counselling. For instance, Prothmann et al. (2006) conducted a pretest-posttest research design to study the state of mind of children involved in animal-assisted therapy. They used the Basler Befindlichkeits Skala (BBS), a measure of a person's state of mind, described in the measure as vitality, intra-emotional balance, social extroversion and alertness. The researchers concluded those children involved with the dog during therapy demonstrated increases in all areas identified by the measure. They noted limitations in their study, but concluded the difference in response was significant enough to tentatively suggest the inclusion of a dog helped to achieve therapeutic goals. Prothmann and colleagues concluded "animals alter the atmosphere in the run up to the actual therapeutic treatment in such a manner that the development of a therapeutic relationship could be catalyzed and deepened" (p. 275).

The following chapter describes possible ways to integrate animals into common therapeutic approaches. Populations who may benefit from AAT in counselling are considered, and the potential benefits, challenges and ethical considerations are reviewed. Personal reflections drawn from my journals over the last few years are also offered to help provide a foundation for the concepts.

### **Common Counselling Approaches and AAT**

As previously mentioned, AAT is currently considered by researchers to be an adjunct to more traditional psychotherapies. The following examples illustrate the possibilities of integrating animals into common therapeutic approaches such as cognitive therapy, family therapy, and person-centred play therapy.

#### **Cognitive Therapy**

AAT can be successfully blended with cognitive therapy. An animal could assist the counsellor to address a client's maladaptive beliefs and assumptions through cognitive techniques such as guided discovery, cognitive rehearsal, and modeling (Beck and Weishaar, 2000). The client and counsellor could collaboratively develop behavioural experiments to involve animals. Consider the client who believes she cannot be assertive.

**A behavioural task may be as simple as calling across the field for the animals to come in, or placing her in charge of directing the animal to accomplish a task. The counsellor could question client to encourage mindfulness of her actions and experience to help expose cognitive distortions. Cognitive rehearsal could be facilitated by exposing the client to a situation involving an animal which mimics a difficult situation she has encountered in the past, such as feeling unsuccessful when she attempted to be assertive. Rehearsal of a more effective approach to being assertive could then lead the client to experience success and encourage further reflection. A more elaborate behavioural experiment could include working collaboratively with an animal to conquer an obstacle course. Role-playing exercises could be built around the exercise to allow the counsellor to model effective reactions to situations. Ultimately, it is hoped the meaningful, active and concrete experiences will facilitate new skill development and promote a more realistic perspective of self.**

**☀I integrated camelids into my practicum with rural women diagnosed with depression. The women attended understanding that AAT, cognitive therapy and Cultural-Relational Theory (Jordan & Hartling, 2002) would guide our work.**

Goals included exploration of relationships through observation of the herd and of the client with the animals; discussion/experimentation of barriers and solutions; active work towards connecting the thinking, feeling and behavioural domains by engaging in challenging tasks with the animals and counsellor; and the development of assertiveness and self-confidence by asking the client to problem-solve and respond to situations involving interaction with the animal. Meditation, increased awareness of the benefits of breathing, and relaxation strategies were also the focus during exercises and observations of the animals as well as surrounding environmental factors.

### Family Therapy

Family therapy, described by Goldenberg and Goldenberg (2000), also easily dovetails with AAT. McIntosh (2002) offered examples of exploring the underlying rules in family utilizing collaborative interaction when working with a horse to challenge the redundancy principle; “the restricted range of options for dealing with one another” (p. 387). Activities designed to draw attention to existing dynamics encourage the family to acknowledge current behaviours and interrelationships, and reflect on healthier interactions. McIntosh (2002) offered the following: consider the family who resorts to scapegoating behaviours. One scenario may be asking that family work together to maneuver a horse or animal from point A to point B without talking to each other or to the animal.

**Eliminating the ability to chastise or blame through language automatically forces change. Ample information about the family dynamics would be forthcoming. This type of concrete and emotionally-laden activity offers a platform for discussion and reflection for the family and counsellor.**

**From their experiences, new tasks may be created to extend their knowledge, practice new skills, make connections and associations to their daily life interactions, and to actively work towards a healthier dynamic.**

☀️ **My colleague Maureen and I created a plan to include camelids with each client based on their therapeutic goals. With families, Maureen generally worked with the parent or caregiver, and I worked with the child and animal to reinforce therapeutic goals. I mostly worked on my own with the adults. Of course, the work frequently changed and fluctuated depending on the child, adult and/or animal's response – so many surprises and rich opportunities were offered to me that allowed for spontaneous learning experiences. With families, Maureen and I brought the family together to observe, interact and reflect on their respective experiences in the sessions, and assigned tasks to families such as parents photographing their child experiencing success with the animal, making puppets together or felting with fibre, or role playing how to solve problems while working with the animals. The women tended more to individual interactions, and wanting to 'just be' with the animals and to reflect on their experiences.**

The camelids as co-therapists offered ways for us to make the experiences and strategies more concrete and tangible, gave parents an opportunity to step back and reflect on their child's behaviours and successes, and provided opportunity for practice and reinforcement of developing skills for all clients in a safe and non-judgmental environment.

### **Person-Centred Play Therapy**

**Raskin and Rogers (2000) described this approach as a method for encouraging self-direction and self-actualization through the expression of latent emotions. Axline (as cited in Raskin & Rogers, 2000) was a pioneer in the field of person-centred play therapy, with the intent to encourage children to “experience the exhilaration of being themselves” (p. 157), making AAT a natural fit with play therapy. Chethik (2000) reasoned the experience of playing provides a natural vehicle for expressing thoughts and feelings, and suggested the counsellor watch for emerging themes during play to help the child make meaning of his play. Chethik explained the combination of nondirective play and structured exercises requires modifications in the environment to reduce risk for both the client and animal.**

**Chandler (2005) suggested a number of considerations for office settings to protect the animal such as: removing small toys that are a choking hazard; eliminating sharp objects or heavy tools; using non-toxic objects; utilizing a large cushion with a removable cover to lie on so bonding can occur; and creating stories or songs with animal puppets to express positive experiences. Setting limits prior to the session is helpful so the child knows what is acceptable. Within the context of play, the counsellor can model appropriate behaviour and language as well, including petting the animal nicely, and using positive and encouraging comments to both the client and co-counsellor such as, “I sure like the way you are looking at each other!”**

### **Populations Who May Benefit From AAT**

**Beck and Katcher (2003) offered the psychological constructs of biophilia theory and social support theory to help explain why animals may be so important while supporting in the assistance of human well-being.**

**Biophilia theory, conceptualized by Erich Fromm in the early 1940s, is described by Beck and Katcher as the human tendency to be inherently drawn to nature. As such, the positive physiological response which occurs in the presence of animals automatically draws and sustains a person’s attention; people are innately interested and motivated to be in the presence of an animal.**

In turn, they described social support theory as a person's circle of support which includes the companionship of an animal. Pets can help to expand that support system. While more research is required to help determine what makes the human-animal bond so powerful, researchers in the literature have begun to identify characteristics of clients who seem to benefit from AAT:

- Individuals seeking counselling services may genuinely wish to make change, but struggle to achieve their goals through more traditional talk-based therapies (Sarafino, 2006).
- These clients may experience more success if afforded the opportunity to actively practice new ideas via an external catalyst such as art, drama or an animal co-counsellor. Mruk and Hartzell (2003) suggested the client must be as invested in change as the counsellor, and to do this, the therapeutic approach must fit their learning style (Sarafino, 2006).

There are many reasons some clients may feel less successful with talk-based therapies:

- The experience of a debilitating trauma may evoke emotions so overwhelming that verbal discussion of the problem or issue is not possible (Fine, 2000).

- **Less developed higher level thinking and reasoning skills may prevent or significantly interfere with a person's ability to process and synthesize abstract concepts presented verbally (Broderick & Blewitt, 2006).**
- **Learning disabilities in the language domain could make it challenging for an otherwise cognitively able person to benefit from verbal interaction (Beers, Goldstein, & Katz, 1994), and social communication challenges may hinder awareness and understanding of social and emotional experiences discussed on a purely verbal level (Attwood, 1997).**
- **Verbal discussion of the interrelationship of thoughts, feeling, and behaviours may not be sufficient to assist the client to make sense of the connections (Chandler, 2005).**

**Individuals with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) are an example of a population who could benefit from AAT. Toutain and Lejuene (2008) explained these children may have complex challenges, including: delayed physical or intellectual development; weak visual skills; slow development of speech or motor skills; a lesser ability to pay attention; underdeveloped sensory motor integration; problems with transitions; unpredictable mood; trouble understanding or forecasting consequences; or problems with social interaction.**

For example, Anderson (2008) suggested teaching a child with FASD positive dog training techniques could help the child understand the importance of clear communication, further the development of empathy, practice perspective-taking, experience delayed gratification, and illustrate the connection between behaviours and consequences in a non-threatening manner.

Clients with a terminal illness also benefit from AAT. Gorczyca, Fine and Spain (2000) referred to the ecosystem model developed by Bronfenbrenner in 1973 to illustrate individuals with Autoimmune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) may find solace and positive and compassionate relationships with an animal more than with a human because of pre-supposed stigmas.

They cited Carmack in 1991 who found animal companionship lowered stress and improved immunity. Gorczyca et al. (2000) suggested an animal increased the person's sense of worth and value when asked to participate in its care.

## CHAPTER 6: IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS

**'COW'NTING ON LEARNING MORE? HERE ARE SOME  
BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES.**

“Teaching a child not to step on a caterpillar is as valuable to the child as it is to the caterpillar.”

Bradley Millar (para 1, “ThinkExist”, 2006)



Now that you are gaining a better understanding of AAT, it is also worth considering both the benefits and possible challenges. This chapter will help you more clearly define how you might integrate AAT into your work. Thoughts from my journals are included.

## Potential Benefits

### Environment and Distraction

☀️ I can't believe how well the ladies are responding to the setting and the animals. The fresh air, lawn chairs in the paddock, and mountain view definitely enhances our work with the animals.

**The atmosphere of therapy is altered by the presence of an animal (Chandler, 2005) no matter where the session takes place. Myra Ducharme, a clinical social worker who has practiced llama-assisted therapy for many years, determined a client's interaction with their animals reveals how they handle the real world, and creates a chance for the client and therapist to identify and practice different strategies for dealing with various situations (M. Ducharme, personal communication, April 2001).**

### Icebreaker

☀️ It is really amazing how easy rapport was established with each client; the clients were so excited to be around animals and just talking about and observing the animals was a great icebreaker.

**Consider the following scenario described by Mathews (2008) where the young woman, although attending counselling for a serious concern, found herself comfortably sharing a positive interaction with the animal which contributed to her growth in therapy.**

One fourteen-year-old female had real difficulty expressing her needs. She also has family issues of abandonment. She displayed a lot of extreme behaviors like self-harm, distractions and withdrawal to avoid discussion and confrontation. She was difficult to communicate with. When introduced to animal assisted therapy, she initiated a lot of appropriate physical interaction. She connected with the animal on a deep level. Her verbal communication improved greatly. Her deep connection with the dog enabled her to communicate with me

(Mathews, as cited in Aanderson, 2008, p. 123).

**This experience allowed the client and counsellor a chance to open communication and assisted with future discussions. In 1992, Hunt, Hart and Gomulkiewicz first described animals as social lubricants (as cited in Beck & Katcher, 2003), explaining they can serve as a catalyst for neutral discussion and safe interaction.**

### **Stress Reduction**

☀It is a good thing to pay attention to client behaviour. I've figured out, for some, it is better to let them to spend time with the animals before we try and have a session; it calms them down, gives them a chance to collect themselves. Interestingly, some just want to get down to talking, enjoy the company of the animals, and make connections between what they see with their own lives and relationships.

**Prothmann et al. (2006) reflected on the results of their study of the affect of dogs on children with depression, noting the youth “may feel transported into an atmosphere that is characterized by warmth, acceptance and empathy” (p. 275), all of which are considered the foundation for a strong therapeutic relationship. Chandler (2005) offered the example of dogs working with inmates who were mandated to counselling. By interacting with the dog first, the clients became more relaxed and open to discussion with the counsellor.**

An interesting example of this was revealed in a study conducted by Marr et al. (2000) in which sixty-nine men and women with a mean age of 41.5 years met for one hour each day of the week for 4 weeks. Each participant had been diagnosed with a mental illness in addition to drug or alcohol abuse. Half of the patients were in a control group, the remaining participants met in the presence of a variety of small animals including dogs, rabbits, guinea pigs, and ferrets. All but one of the participants chose the option of interacting with the animals during their sessions. Based on the Social Behavior Scale given to both groups, Marr and his colleagues found the participants interacting with the animals were more inclined to smile and demonstrate pleasure, and were more sociable and relaxed with other participants. Some researchers also suggested more sensitive issues can be rendered less incendiary when an animal is involved (Chandler, 2005). For instance, Parshall (2003) noted the dog helped her to dispel a child's anxiety, and increased the child's sense of comfort and safety through petting and cuddling.

### Social Development

☀️ I wonder how my client is going to do today – one of her goals is to work on perspective-taking and thinking about how nonverbal cues can convey important information about how a person, or animal, is feeling. I'm curious to see what happens when she tries to halter Spatz [alpaca].

**The very nature of interacting with another being can encourage personal reflection and the potential for heightened understanding of how one's behaviours may affect another's conduct.**

**In my informal study with children and animals, opportunities were available to promote self-awareness and self-regulation of behaviours. For instance, the children discovered that speaking in quieter tones, while moving slowly and paying attention to the animal's response was more likely to motivate the animal to remain engaged.**

☀️ **Clients sometimes felt frustrated because their alpaca would become less compliant, usually because something was wrong in the environment, or because the client was being too rough. Many opportunities arose to stop and consider why the alpaca was misbehaving and what the alpaca may be thinking or feeling in that moment. Some clients were compelled to react because they felt they were losing control of the situation and so the experience served many purposes, including slowing the client down, thinking about the underlying cause of the problem, considering another's perspective and so forth. Clients often spontaneously related to the animal, reflecting a personal feeling of being trapped in a situation when they were uncomfortable. This is obviously an opportunity for reflection on personal relationships as well.**

**Chandler (2005) stated AAT can be more meaningful and concrete than words, can provide substantial examples for more abstract concepts, and learning can be less threatening when practiced with an animal rather than with peers. Parshall (2003) wrote positively of her experience as a novice counsellor working with a dog that she described as possessing the characteristics of unconditional positive regard and warmth. Collis & McNicholas (1998) also suggested symptoms of stress, depression or anxiety related to social disconnect may be addressed through interaction with animals.**

**As previously mentioned, perspective-taking can also be facilitated with animals and provide a neutral ground for discussion. Chandler (2005) and Aanderson (2008) explained many opportunities present themselves to problem-solve and work through emotions elicited from interactions with the animal or counsellor; the counsellor can model thoughtfulness and consideration for another perspective when attempting to figure out why the animal would not comply.**

### **Multisensory Experiences**

**☀It is interesting to practice mindfulness around empathy, perspective-taking and communication as my clients seem significantly more motivated when they work with an animal rather than role-play with a person.**

**A multisensory aspect is also available when an animal is involved, potentially increasing the client's level of attention and understanding of the relevance of a task (Chandler, 2005).**

**The animal can also assist the counsellor to maintain the attention and interest of the client who is active or struggles with focus or concentration (Katcher & Wilkins, 2000). As mentioned earlier, multisensory tasks can be built into AAT, such as photographing or videotaping the animals. Scrapbooking, story writing and journaling were appropriate for those clients more fluent in language skills. The use of metaphors and symbolism can be very effective as well. Kopp (as cited in Fine, 2000) explained, "Metaphors are similar to mirrors in their ability to reflect inner images within people" (p. 195). McIntosh (2002) offered the example of a parent and child concretely exploring the metaphor of feeling "reined in" through horse work. As orchestrated by the counsellor, the family can discover the animal is more compliant and responsive with a looser rein or leash. When held tight, the animal may fight to gain control, or will become passive and stubborn, much like a child on a tight rein. The experience of learning to become assertive instead of aggressive while establishing clear behavioural expectations can help the client become aware of how his behaviour affects the animal's responses. Fine offered other metaphors useful in AAT, such as "feeling chained or leashed, smothered, or being in a cocoon" (p. 196).**

☀️ A simple example may be a child reacting negatively to an over-controlling parent by feeling 'reined in'. The parent and child can apply this metaphor in a concrete way through their work with an alpaca. As orchestrated by the counsellor, the family can discover the alpaca is better behaved, and feels more in control, with a looser rein. When held tight, the alpaca will fight to gain control, or will become passive and stubborn, much like a child on a tight rein. The experience of learning to give over control to the alpaca, while at the same time establishing clear behavioural expectations, is priceless; his behaviour will inevitably reflect the calmness and confidence learned when becoming aware of expectations & limitations.

**Clients with less-developed verbal skills can experience a sense of success when interacting with an animal. Individuals with lowered self-esteem and confidence can experience success even when uncomfortable talking; asking a dog to sit, or offering food to an animal provides positive interaction without the need for language. Small tasks such as these can present an opening for more conversation, or a vehicle for interaction (Chandler, 2005). Leimer (1997) explained unwritten rules in our communication system can make it difficult for some individuals when they are not fluent in those rules; animals are often clearer because they communicate in a direct manner, both verbally and non-verbally.**

**As Beck and Katcher (1996) pointed out, “animals do not use words, and patients can safely approach them when they cannot approach people” (p. 127). Mallon (1994) summarized this concept as follows:**

**Traditional forms of therapy, which rely on talking and trusting, sometimes fail children who are mistrustful of adults. The cow on the farm may in fact be the best therapist a child can have while in treatment. The cow, and other farm animals can become a companion for the child, one in whom he or she can confide all of his or her misgivings, heartaches, and pains. The cow and other farm animals can serve as the catalytic agent that brings the child and the therapist together (p. 470).**

**Finally, animals can provide an entity onto which the client may project or identify (Reichert, 1998). The author offered the example of storytelling from the animal’s point of view as a means for the client to raise metaphorical, or even factual, details of a topic otherwise difficult to talk about, such as abuse. These situations are only some examples of ways a client can practice certain skills in a “deeper and more meaningful way” (Chandler, 2005, p. 8) because emotions and cognition are actively engaged.**

### **A Catalyst for Emotion**

☀️ I cannot believe the difference between the first session and the third session. I brought in Georgie [dog] and my client's face absolutely lit up! She smiled, laughed and hugged Georgie...what a change...after that, she was willing to talk when she had Georgie on her lap (no small feat considering her weight!) - NOW we might get somewhere.

**Fine (2000) discussed AAT as a “catalyst for emotion” (p. 184) and specifically illustrated the importance of laughter and joy as emotions sometimes challenging to tap in counselling. As Beck and Katcher (1996) pointed out, “The difficult art in therapy is achieving a mutual feeling of intimacy without touching” (p. 92).**

### **Potential Challenges and Ethical Considerations of AAT**

**Mallon et al. (2000) explained “the widespread ardor about the almost universal efficacy of animal-assisted programs has for many years all but obscured any serious questioning of its possible risks” (p. 122). To offer the reader a fuller understanding of the possible complexities and obstacles of AAT in counselling, thoughts from my first journal are offered when I first considered working outdoors with clients.**

## Physical Risk

☀️ An outdoor office will entail more physical work and attention to safety than in the office with the client's pet. Someone else will have to be on-site, and I will need to devise a method to call for help if needed. How will I respond to inappropriate behaviours of a client around the animals? How will I collaborate with the client in deciding how to purposely integrate the animals into our work?

**No matter how well trained, an animal is never completely predictable. Something as simple as a cat scratching a child, or a dog knocking the client over during playtime (Chandler, 2005) can jeopardize the therapeutic relationship. Serious injuries could occur in any environment, such as a client or counsellor breaking an ankle in a gopher hole, or a client tripping over an animal in an office. Obvious potential for liability issues are plentiful and therefore risk management is a key feature when working with animals.**

☀️ A client of mine wanted to include her ferret – I'll call him Sam. While his presence fit our goals, Sam was unhappy with the experience. It was difficult to read Sam's stress levels, and would suddenly want to run away. Not only was Sam's welfare being compromised, it was hard to focus on the session. We decided to videotape him at home – he was impulsive and often got himself into trouble, something my client related to.

Watching and talking worked well, was a lot of fun, and effectively met my client's goals.

**Mallon et al. (2000) have written extensively about protocols developed by Green Chimneys Children's Services. The authors presented methods and suggestions to minimize risk, and afford insight and ideas regarding liability and insurance coverage. Depending on the facility and the way in which the animal is involved, animals must pass an evaluation by qualified professional to be involved in AAT, although qualifications vary depending on the animal and circumstance (Delta Society, 1996).**

### Strategy Appropriateness

☀️ I cannot believe how much the animals help with making the work meaningful for the clients! Who knew my one client would begin to compare Lucky's [llama] behaviour to her husband! The insights are amazing, and she is making the connections herself...I couldn't have orchestrated this if I tried!

**AAT offers an excellent vehicle for metaphors and analogies, and ample opportunity for the client a chance to practice skills (Aanderson, 2008; see also Chandler, 2005). However, Aanderson (2008) explained although one child with FASD can benefit from AAT, another child with the same diagnosis may be challenged.**

**For instance, she observed the client whose FASD resulted in cognitive difficulties to struggle to process and implement complex strategies requiring generalization of behaviour, to understand metaphors requiring higher level thinking skills, or with experiences lacking immediate consequences and feedback. Further, the presence of an animal could be too stimulating for a client who struggles with sensory issues, ultimately detracting from the therapeutic process. In other words, a counsellor must be careful not to make assumptions of how a client may respond to an animal merely based on his diagnosis.**

### **Cultural Diversity**

☀**So, she's [client] a hunter...I wonder how she is going to regard working with an animal?**

**The client's worldview (Arthur & Collins, 2005) reflects and affects their interaction with, and understanding of, animals and influence how they regard an animal as co-therapist. Taylor (2001) noted:**

**domesticated animals depend on people and therefore can be at the mercy of the intention of the "owner" of the animal. When animals are owned for the purpose of indulging the owner, the value of the animal is determined by the needs of the owner. This attitude negates the intrinsic worth of the animal as a living being" (p. 5).**

**Friedmann (2000) accounted for a client's physical and emotional response to a particular species of animal as being based on "previous direct and indirect experiences with as well as their beliefs, desires, and fears about specific species" (p. 55). It is therefore possible counsellor and client worldview could differ enough that an animal's presence could hinder, rather than facilitate, rapport building, or the safety or mental well-being of the animal may be compromised. For instance, the counsellor's worldview shapes their professional decisions and actions, including the veracity that animals are considered meaningful in a therapeutic situation. Pederson (1995) explained the counsellor's problem of "covert unintentional racism" (p. 197) when she has not examined her underlying assumptions. In the case of AAT, the counsellor and client may not share similar values and belief systems towards animals. Several potential situations are offered:**

- If a client habitually controls an animal at home with force, he may regard the counsellor as weak or even incompetent if the counsellor uses a gentler approach. While this could be a valuable therapeutic opportunity, it could also detract from focusing on the client's therapeutic goals, potentially fracturing the therapeutic relationship.**
- The role of animals in a client's life outside of therapy is of consideration (Beck & Katcher, 2003). If a client does not own a pet and is a hunter, she may regard animals differently than those who only keep animals as pets.**

- **Friedmann (2000) indicated medical research has suggested there is variability in gender response to animals, suggesting the “importance of sex and other demographic variables in determining or moderating the effects of animals” (p. 55).**
- **A client’s place of origin may affect their regard towards animals. Chandler (2005) offered the following examples: Koreans may find large dogs intimidating because they are often used as aggressive guard animals in their culture, and some Latino communities regard animals as community pets who wander freely, with few restrictions, and are looked after by everyone.**

**Ethnic diversity with regard to attitudes towards animals requires more research. A study by Curtiss, Holley, and Wolf (2006) explored ethnic diversity and the animal-human bond by comparing different ethnic groups and their attitudes towards companion animals and ownership practices. As social workers, the authors wished to determine the importance of considering the family animal to achieve a “more inclusive ecological approach to work with clients” (p. 266). They suggested it may behoove the counsellor to explore the role of a companion animal in families experiencing domestic abuse as the attitude and behaviour of a family member towards the animal may be reflective of his attitude towards others in the family. Consideration whether AAT may be appropriate with a client who has a history of animal abuse is imperative.**

## Health

☀️ She has allergies and yet she wants to work with the camelids? Wow. She says she just wants to take Benadryl and endure the sniffing and itchiness...apparently it isn't severe enough to make her ill or put her in hospital. But, I wonder how much will this detract from our work? She seems to be certain about this...I guess we'll give it a shot and see what happens – after all, she IS the client and one of her goals is to feel more in control and empowered...

**Whether in an office or outdoor setting, sanitation and the potential for disease must be addressed. Animal inoculations and parasite control, among other things, must be current (Delta Society, 1996) and clients must also be screened for potential allergies or sensitivities (Chandler, 2005). As well, animals can pass on zoonotic diseases, disease passed between humans and animals (Mallon et al., 2000). Gorczyca et al. (2000) recommended working with dogs and cats older than 9 months as puppies and kittens are more likely to pass on certain parasites to humans. Gorczyca and colleagues listed other diseases, such as acquiring ringworm from cats, or salmonella from cats, birds and horses, as possible problems. They noted it is somewhat rare for the transmission of diseases to occur, however consideration of the client's immune system is critical and a client at higher risk will require more precautionary measures than someone with a strong immune system.**

**In all cases, if the animals are well-cared for and the client is not exposed to feces or a contaminated environment, the risk should be low. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) emphasized cross-species infection can also occur within a farm or between farms, such as the Avian Influenza Virus between chickens and dogs. The USDA emphasized viruses can be carried from farm to farm, worth consideration in a rural situation.**

### **Distractions**

☀️ **I will have to attend to the client and not become distracted and make sure I don't become distracted. Organization will be paramount. What if the animals are distracting, or even detract from the process? What if a client becomes bored with the process? And the animals will participate if comfortable, but they will be very clear if they don't want to and make noises, throw back their ears, hum loudly, and if they become bored, they will leave.**

**Environmental distractions, combined with the predictability of the client's behaviour, can present challenges to the counsellor, particularly in an outdoor setting (Urichuk & Anderson, 2003). As previously mentioned, the combination of a handler and therapist may be beneficial depending on the setting and the nature of the client's problems.**

The counsellor cannot expect a client to manage an animal, or to be able to predict an animal's behaviour, or monitor levels of stress; this is the counsellor, or handler's sole responsibility. Vigilance is imperative. This is not to say the client should not be encouraged to learn to read the animal's nonverbal cues, as this fosters respect for the animal and obviously contributes to the safety of the session. A second consideration is the client's ability to tolerate distraction. If the animal's presence incites inappropriate behaviours that are not conducive to the therapeutic realm, or if they interfere with the process of therapy, the counsellor may have to consider alternative methods to assist the client.

Chandler (2005) suggested it wise to consider an animal will expose the client to normal bodily functions such as eating, defecation, urination, and exposure of sexual organs. Experiences with such natural activities can generate therapeutic opportunities outside of traditional therapy, as long as the client is comfortable with observing these events, and the disadvantages do not outweigh the benefits.

### Animal Choice

☀️ Once they [women] get to know the alpacas, maybe they won't like them and I have to rethink how to work with them...or, IF we work with them...

Although a client may want to work with animals, the animal must be suited to the client. For instance, Mallon's (1994) study of racially mixed children in a residence for behavioural, emotional and academic challenges revealed the younger children favored holding and cuddling rabbits, while the pre-teenagers preferred horse riding.

If the client is uncomfortable with the animal, or is not interested in the species, it may detract from the experience, thereby interfering with the intention of the work. Fredrickson and Howie (2000) described this as an animal's ability to "inspire confidence" (p. 106), explaining the client's experience should not incite unreasonable fear or anxiety. Beck and Katcher (2003) suggested interaction with an animal may be beneficial and healthy for some individuals, while others may experience "decreased health or morale" (p. 83). Consequently, the counsellor must gauge the response of the client to the co-therapist and be flexible enough to change the therapeutic approach.

Furthermore, the animal must be intentionally involved, that is, participation should meaningfully contribute to the client attaining a goal (Aanderson, 2008; see also Chandler, 2005; Fine, 2000). To do this, the animal must feel safe, confident, and be at least reasonably engaged in the process.

As well, the animal must be trained within the capacity they are expected to function; a dog is more likely to be expected to follow commands, to provide unconditional love and to tolerate a certain level of activity from the client than some other animals (Chandler, 2005). While much of the literature emphasizes high levels of animal training, such as the EAGALA method for equine-assisted therapy and Delta Society guidelines for training a dog, not all counselling practitioners in AAT agree with this philosophy. As previously mentioned, Dreamcatcher ranch in Adrossan, Alberta, intentionally chooses animals with challenging behaviours, such as a turkey with considerable boundary issues (A. Slugoski, personal communication, September 12, 2008). Let me tell you a short story.



What a crazy turkey! He walked up to me, boldly and confidently, no worries in the world, and he tried to get as close as he could. Everywhere I walked, Bob walked. If I ran, Bob ran. At first it was fun. But then, when I tried to pet the dog, Bob got in the way and puffed himself up as big as possible, pecking at the dog to get him to back away. He started to remind me of a kid I knew in school who was always in my face and wanted all of my attention ALL of the time.

When I tried to play with other kids, he would always get in the way and even push the other kids, exclaiming, “She’s MY friend!” Bob was annoying; Bob had boundary issues. Bob didn’t read social situations well...Bob was not good at perspective-taking. Bob was definitely a turkey, literally and figuratively! At one point, a donkey started to stalk Bob – obviously Bob had ticked her off at some point. And eventually, Bob had to be removed and put into his home with the chickens because he wouldn’t respond to “Back off Bob; boundaries Bob” the way he normally did – yup, Bob got a time-out. Yes, it was all about Bob...

**Slugoski explained they work with animals with challenges because their struggles may mirror client problems, offering non-contrived opportunities to observe and deal with undesirable outcomes, provide opportunities for problem-solving, offer occasions to practice reading nonverbal cues, rouse self-reflection, and incite discussions around natural consequences. Bob certainly offered this opportunity! Slugoski emphasized the animals’ behaviours are predictable to the staff, and therefore the clients should not be at risk.**

**As dogs are frequently included in counselling, it is worth noting the type of breed and size of dog can be an important consideration. For instance, Hart (2000) pointed out golden retrievers, as a breed, are less inclined to be protective than German shepherds.**

**Hart also indicated the elderly reported feeling safer around smaller breeds because they were afraid of being knocked over by a larger, more rambunctious dog. Chandler (2005), Anderson (2008), Fredrickson and Howie (2000) and others have devised methods to assist the counsellor in selecting an appropriate animal for a particular therapeutic instance.**

**More research is required beyond the type, temperament, and trainability of an animal and AAT, including the differences in involving carnivorous versus non-carnivorous species. Fredrickson and Howie (2000) noted non-carnivorous animals eat more frequently and therefore may be more beneficial if the focus is on encouraging or developing nurturing skills; this also means the animal may eliminate on a more frequent basis, posing a rather different challenge.**

☀ I need to think more about how to respond if, and when, the animal does not want to interact with the client, or it turns the animal is not a good fit for the client? Animals must always be safe and I never force them to participate, but I've already seen some clients who don't like a situation where the animal is allowed to stop participating. In one case I even saw the child chose an alpaca that promptly made it clear he didn't want anything to do with the boy because of his loud voice and activity level.

## Loss and Grief

**Loss and grief can be of concern if something happens to the animal during the therapeutic process (Fine, 2000).**

**Consider this scenario: what if, in the middle of a therapeutic program, an animal made it clear he did not want to work with the client? Or, the animal fell ill or died unexpectedly? What if the client was attending counselling because of a recent loss? A skilled counsellor must contemplate these potential situations and consequences of involving an animal.**

☀️**The concept of termination is often intellectual for the client; they are rarely prepared for strong therapeutic relationships to end. The termination experience can be a great way to deal with tough topics such as closure in relationships, and loss and grief issues.**

**Terminating is also often exigent both for the client and counsellor (Chandler, 2005). Conflicting results are evident in the literature regarding whether clients involved with AAT can experience long-term, positive affects beyond the actual therapeutic experience. For instance, Katcher and Wilkins (2000) found short-term results were evident, but long-term outcomes were not marked in the patients they studied, hypothesizing the absence of the animal when therapy was terminated negatively affected long-term outcomes.**

## Intentionality

☀️ Everyone is excited now that they've met the boys [alpacas], and although I tried to get them [clients] to think about ways to include them to help them meet their goals, I'm realizing I need to bring forward more ideas...the children automatically knew what they wanted – to lead, to halter, to learn to groom; the women, on the other hand, seem stymied!

**While it is a collaborative experience, counsellors often must help clients consider ways to safely and purposefully achieve their goals when involving an animal. Urichuk and Anderson (2003) offered appropriate and meaningful integration of animals into a therapeutic situation through case studies and explicit activities. They overviewed client goals such as: rapport building, bonding, empathy building, addressing grief and loss, and increasing self-control.**

**A treatment goal suggested by Urichuk and Anderson was to “decrease learned helplessness behaviours [and] increase [a] sense of control over self and environment” (p. 2-62). They suggested teaching the client how to direct the animal, and then collaboratively problem-solving when confronted with an obstacle helped to promote self-monitoring, mindfulness, and empowered the client. Check it out; it is an extraordinary resource.**

☀️ Leading an alpaca through the field on a halter was often a challenge for my clients because they felt they were making the animal participate.

Assertiveness versus aggressiveness regarding proper handling preceded the activity. The client observed the behaviour of the alpaca when the lead was loose versus tight, and when the handler clearly conveyed expectations verbally and with body language and positioning. Examples of goals were: clarity in communication, overcoming anxiety, problem-solving and testing solutions and responding to nonverbal cues.

#### Documentation and Evaluation

☀️ How will I evaluate the effectiveness of my work with the clients and whether or not the animals are helping them achieve their therapeutic goals?

**Some researchers expressed concern with the lack of structure used to determine when and how to integrate animals in therapy. Chandler (2005) offered one way, as described Cameron and turtle-song's (2002) SOAP plan: (a) observe/record the client's subjective presentation; (b) objectively observe/gather facts about the client; (c) assess and conceptualize what the client will require to provide the foundation for the plan; and (d) create a termination report that draws from this collective information to provide recommendations.**

**Urichuk and Anderson (2003) and Aanderson (2008) also offered methods for evaluation by capturing the client and therapists' perspective, and assessing the overall evaluation of the program itself. Performance indicators listed by Aanderson were:**

- **Determining most effective activities.**
- **Length of time clients are seen.**
- **Number of clients over time who achieve therapeutic goals.**

**By utilizing a variety of approaches, such as regularly employing standardized tests, surveys or questionnaires to capture change, direct observation and documentation of each therapy session, and the accumulation of therapy notes, counsellors may derive meaningful outcome measures. Urichuk and Anderson explained, “unless the presence of the animal in the therapy session is controlled for, it is not possible to make unequivocal claims about an animal’s impact in therapy” (p 4-3).**

## CHAPTER 7: ANIMAL WELFARE AND RIGHTS

### 'MEW'SINGS ON OUR RESPONSIBILITIES AS COUNSELLORS TO OUR ANIMALS

"The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated."

Mahatma Gandhi (para1, "PetsinUtah", n.d.)



While this topic could be included in the previous chapter, I felt it was critical enough to warrant separate discussion. As Hatch (2007) stated, “recent sociological work affirms that animals are minded actors with distinct selves and the ability to feel and display a range of emotions....ideally, AAT/AAA should benefit the animals as well as the humans involved” (p. 39).

**Gathering of testimonials and first-hand descriptions of the benefits for professionals and clients who interact with animals are abundant in the literature, fueling the movement of AAT. However, less research has been conducted to determine how participation in AAT affects the animal’s well-being (Hatch, 2007). As someone thinking about AAT, you will have to care for both your animal AND your client’s well being! Animals involved in any interaction with humans are dependant on them for their basic needs, and exploitation could inadvertently occur. Serpell, Coppinger and Fine (2000) explained the human-animal bond becomes morally besought when “there is a conflict of interests between the two: where the human use either causes pain, fear, or harm to an animal, or it in some way thwarts or prevents the animal from satisfying its own needs and goals” (p. 415).**

The Delta Society is one of several organizations that have attempted to set rules and design for AAT. However, it is important to remember empirical evidence informing the standards has not been available, and therefore one must consistently and intelligently revisit those standards with an underlying regard for the animal's well-being (Serpell et al., 2000).

The Human-Animal Bond Association of Canada (HABAC, 2008) was founded in 1987 to act as an umbrella organization for all groups in Canada involving animals in their practice, the goal being to improve the well-being of their clients. HABAC actively collaborates with the Delta Society, the Canadian Veterinary Medical Association (CVMA, 2008), and the Canadian Federation of Humane Societies (CFHS, 2008) to promote increased awareness and policies through research and networking.

To better understand this topic, a brief discussion of the difference between welfare and rights of animals is offered, followed by an overview of current research, and a reflection of some of the larger issues applicable to AAT.

### **Welfare and Rights**

The Animal Welfare Foundation of Canada (AWFC, 2008), the CFHS, and the Animal Welfare Council (AWC, 2008) are three examples of organizations focused on the protection and welfare of animals.

**They promote research, policy making, education, and networking amongst agencies with similar philosophies regarding animal welfare. On their website, the AWC referred to the American Veterinary Medical Association definition of animal welfare as the “human responsibility that encompasses all aspects of animal well-being, including proper housing, management, disease prevention and treatment, responsible care, humane handling, and, when necessary, humane euthanasia” (para. 2). For instance, AWC explained they, as well as the organizations they work with, advocate the possibility for humans to interact with animals in all capacities in a responsible way by ensuring adequate management and care of the animal in each situation. AWC participants listed on their website included rodeos, circuses, animal health organizations, entertainment and recreation (2008). People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PeTA, 2008), one of the most well-known animal-rights organizations in the world, differentiated the concept of welfare from rights this way:**

**Animal welfare theories accept that animals have interests but allow those interests to be traded away as long as the human benefits are thought to justify the sacrifice, while animal rights theories say that animals, like humans, have interests that cannot be sacrificed or traded away to benefit others. However, the animal rights movement does not hold that rights are absolute—an animal’s rights, just like those of humans, must be limited and can certainly conflict.**

Supporters of the animal rights movement believe that animals are not ours to use for food, clothing, entertainment, or experimentation, while supporters of the animal welfare movement believe that animals can be used for those purposes as long as “humane” guidelines are followed (para.3).

☀️ Consider this example: I do not eat red meat, wear clothes made from animals, or support products tested on animals. But, in the eyes of a true animal-activist, I would still not meet PeTA’s philosophical criteria because of my belief in integrating animals into therapy to benefit humans.

**As Hatch (2007) stated; “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” (p. 39). Where you stand on this issue will help you determine if integrating animals into counselling truly fits your worldview.**

### **Research on Welfare and Rights of Animals in Therapy**

**Current research has begun to examine the physical and mental effect of AAA and AAT on the animals. While research is burgeoning, the very fact animal welfare is being studied is heartening.**

**Iannuzzi and Rowan (1991) were one of the first researchers to survey those involved with animal programs throughout the United States in an effort to clarify the level of exploitation or abuse in animal assisted programs. Iannuzzi and Rowan discovered most programs were aware of and careful to protect their animals. However, they also uncovered significant concerns, including neglect and abuse, sometimes resulting in death of an animal in a therapeutic setting.**

**Following Iannuzzi and Rowan's efforts, until the late 1990s, there was a dearth of literature regarding animal welfare. Serpell et al. (2000) pointed out behaviour modification and teaching of "non-natural skills" (p. 419) to animals is evident in most instances of AAT, thereby infringing on the animal's natural state of being. To offer examples of the varying type of research regarding animal welfare, three recent studies are discussed: a study of dolphin response when interacting with humans; physiological stress response of companion dogs when working; and an attempt through interviewing human volunteers to capture the perception of shelter dogs involved in an AAA program.**

### **Dolphin Study**

**Brensing et al. (2005) studied the impact of different groups of swimmers on dolphins in unstructured swim-with-the dolphin programs. A program in the United States was compared to a program in Israel, where both programs had dolphins contained in fenced pens in the open sea. The former program catered to both children and adults with mental and physical disabilities, while the latter catered only to adults. The dolphins were untrained and not used to being touched by humans: all interactions were initiated by dolphins. Observations were made the same time every day for 30 minutes, totaling 83 sessions, divided fairly equally between control, tourist swims, and therapy sessions. Researchers applied a three-dimensional coordinate system to analyze dolphin movements and frequency of breathing.**

**The researchers found the dolphins involved only with adults presented as more relaxed and interested in interacting as compared to the dolphins involved with children, who demonstrated signs of stress and avoidant behaviours. While the difference in subspecies of bottlenose dolphins between the groups was not accounted for in this study, the researchers felt this was not likely a major variable as wild bottlenose dolphins have been repeatedly observed to be attracted to humans.**

Interestingly, Brensing and colleagues concluded the housing and handling of the dolphins was likely more of a factor in dolphins experiencing stress than the difference in sub-species or even the type or size of human population to which they were exposed. The dolphins interacting only with adults lived in a much larger pen, which was divided into three areas so the dolphins had refuge without humans to retreat to when they desired a break from the activity. As well, they could leave their enclosure to an adjoining one further into the open sea, offering them even more space and freedom. Furthermore, there were less people at any given time with the adult population, there was a familiar trainer present at all times, and the dolphins could retreat when desired.

#### **Companion Dog Study**

Haubenhofer and Kirchengast (2006) investigated physiological arousal for companion dogs when working with their owners. They measured the levels of cortisol in the dogs' saliva samples, as this has been found useful in measuring human physiological response to stress in humans (Preville, Zarit, Susman, Boulenger, & Lehoux, 2008). Haubenhofer and Kirchengast sampled eighteen dogs of varying breeds between 3 and 9 years of age with their humans in a non-laboratory setting. The 4 neutered female dogs and 1 male neutered dog were considered healthy. The dogs and humans had previously received the same training by a nonprofit animal therapy training organization in Austria. A self-questionnaire established a

baseline in addition to saliva samples gathered by the animal's handlers at three points in the study: (a) 3 control days during a time when the dog was not involved in therapeutic work, (b) before and after each therapeutic session over the course of three months, and again followed by (c) 3 control days during a time when the dog was not involved in therapeutic work. Variables such as the small sampling size and heterogeneity of the animals were taken into consideration when interpreting data.

Haubehofer and Kirchengast's study revealed the dogs produced considerably elevated levels of cortisol while working within the therapeutic situation. The researchers noted intense and shorter sessions produced more cortisol, while longer sessions, containing breaks, revealed comparatively lower levels, although still higher than the control. Interestingly, the researchers found cortisol levels were generally found to be higher if sampled after 2:00 p.m., a phenomenon they could not explain from the data obtained in their study. Finally, although cortisol levels were clearly elevated when the dog was working in a therapeutic situation, the authors could not conclusively state the increase was harmful for the dog in the long-term, and suggested further research was required to determine whether the work of service dogs negatively affects their health.

### **Shelter Dog Study**

**In another study, Hatch (2007) conducted semi-structured interviews with ten human volunteers working with shelter animals in an AAA visitation program. Nine women and one man ranging in age from 12 to 65 years participated in individual semi-structured interviews; Hatch offered her perspective, as she also participated in the program. For each visitation the volunteers chose different animals, the intent being to expose them to presumed positive benefits of socializing with humans outside the confines of the shelter.**

**Limitations when interviewing the volunteers were evident, including the volunteers' ability and experience in understanding an animal's behaviour, resulting in the attempt to interpret subjective and biased opinions.**

**Nevertheless, her results encouraged reflection and consideration of the animal's experience. Hatch indicated observable positives for some of the animals including enjoyment of socialization, stimulation and contact with people. The volunteer's lack of history with an animal sometimes affected the quality of interaction between the animal and the volunteer as the human incorrectly interpreted the animal's behaviour, and the animal's were fearful or apprehensive because of the unfamiliar situation. Hatch expressed concern that this could inadvertently reinforce negative behaviours and even affect the animal's potential for adoption.**

## **Issues of Animal Welfare in AAT**

**The Centre for the Human-Animal Bond at The Purdue University of Veterinary Medicine (2008) offers undergraduate certificate programs for promoting rights and welfare of animals in helping professions. The care and use of animals from a social, ethical, biological and economical perspective is explained as follows:**

- **Promote improvement of animal handling.**
- **Encourage the development and implementation of policies related to animal welfare.**
- **Advance research.**

## **Basic Needs**

**It can be assumed an animal feels more secure when his basic needs are met. Basic needs are defined by the Animal Welfare Act (2008) as follows:**

- **A proper diet and water.**
- **A suitable place to live.**
- **An opportunity to be housed, or apart from, other animals.**
- **An opportunity to express normal behaviours.**
- **Protection and treatment of illness and injury.**

**The Canadian Federation of Humane Societies (CFHS) described basic needs as attending to both the physical and mental well-being of an animal. In their discussion of policies where animals are used in a classroom as an educational tool to improve the well-being of the students, the CHFS advocates a responsible adult must be available to oversee the welfare and husbandry of the animal; this should include holidays and weekends.**

**Responsibilities comprise an environment in which:**

- **It must suit the animal.**
- **Interaction between the animal and students must be controlled and supervised.**
- **The animal must have the opportunity to rest.**
- **Knowledge that the breeding of animals is not appropriate.**
- **Animal well-being must be addressed regardless of housing.**

**When placed in novel situations and environments with unfamiliar people, such as a hospital, an animal becomes completely dependant on their handler to ensure their needs are addressed. Regardless of how caring a counsellor may be, unintentional neglect can occur if the counsellor is distracted or consumed by the client's needs. Chandler (2005) offered the example of an animal in a warm environment without water. This situation can inadvertently lead to dehydration, exhaustion and undue stress for the animal.**

**Coppinger, Coppinger, and Skillings (1998) spoke of lack of experience and improper handling of dogs, including inappropriate corrections, poor commands, and lack of rest as a primary cause for the animal to become confused and even act out. And, Hatch (2007) emphasized experience in understanding a particular animal's nonverbal indicators of stress is also critical.**

☀I can offer an example to further highlight the importance of the experience just mentioned. When working with an alpaca, clients may believe the animal is showing affection when he leans against them, and they are enjoying the feel of his soft fibre. In actual fact, the alpaca is conveying distress. If the handler is ignoring, or is unaware of, the discomfort the animal is trying to communicate, unexpected and potentially undesirable behaviours from both client and animal may become the focus of the session.

**Broom and Johnson's red flags indicating stress levels cited in Serpell et al. (2000) are also useful to consider, including "high frequencies of displacement activities, stereotypies, or self-mutilation" (p. 417).**

**Aanderson (2008) listed other causes of stress to include invasion of the animal's space, and strange behaviours like unusual movement or smell.**

## Environment

There are considerations associated with the environment including:

- Noise level.
- Excessive feeding by clients.
- Level of risk for injury.
- Adaptability of the animal to the setting.
- Type of training the animal must endure to fit into the environment.

(Chandler, 2005)

As revealed in the dolphin study (Brensing et al., 2005), the environment can be as important as the actual handling when considering animal welfare. Anderson (2008) offered:

- Choosing the size of animal to fit the space.
- Providing an exercise area.
- Creating a place for the animal to safely retreat when feeling stressed or uncomfortable.

This is particularly important for animals involved in crisis situations (Chandler, 2005) where the level of chaos and the state of the environment may be difficult to control.

### **Length of Day**

**Consideration must be given to the length of time the animal is expected to work. An animal belonging to a therapist may stay in the office all day, other animals may have to travel intensively between sessions if they are a part of a mobile team, while other animals on a ranch may come and go as they please. No matter the situation, without appropriate breaks an animal that is expected to interact with clients all day may become exhausted and stressed. Depending on the animal, Anderson (2008) suggested a work session should last no more than one-hour at a time, with sizeable breaks, including exercise, play and rest.**

## CHAPTER 8: FUTURE DIRECTIONS

### SO, WHERE IS THE FIELD OF AAT GOING YOU ASK?

“Life is life - whether in a cat, or dog or man. There is no difference there between a cat or a man. The idea of difference is a human conception for man's own advantage.”

Sri Aurobindo (para 1, “ThinkExist, 2006



As this paper has illustrated, animals as an adjunct to psychotherapy can be beneficial, challenging, and not without ethical considerations. AAT in psychotherapy is a young field and requires interested professionals to become engaged in vigilantly controlled research designs, in training and education and in policy making. Organizations, such as the Delta Society, which practitioners rely upon for guidance, base their work on current research. As a professional in the counselling field, you may be interested in not only understanding and operationalizing AAT, you may one day even want to participate in research. Everything you do in your work could potentially contribute to increased understanding of involving animals as co-counsellors. This chapter considers research design and possible research questions.

### Approaches to Research

**Animals as an adjunct to counselling can be beneficial, challenging, and not without ethical considerations. I engaged in the exploration of AAT as a response to my ongoing endeavor to seek ways to involve animals in my work with clients. The relative infancy in the area of research of AAT in counselling is apparent; medical research has adhered more to standards considered acceptable in the field of research, but with a focus on physiological benefits. Fortunately current practitioners in counselling and related fields of mental health are conducting research.**

**Volker (1995) indicated a lucid explanation of research goals, combined with suitable instruments for documenting and measuring data, sufficient sample sizes, and controlled conditions, constitutes respectable research design. As described in the Key Research section, a larger portion of AAT research until the last few years had generally limited population samples and sampling biases, less than rigorous procedures, and conclusions reflecting the bias of the researchers, who drew conclusions from the biased position of someone who already regards AAT as a worthwhile adjunct. An example of this bias was revealed by Marino and Lilienfeld's (2007) review of research of dolphin-assisted therapy in which they concluded procedural flaws in the studies resulted in erroneous outcomes leaning to the observable benefits of involving dolphins in therapy. This is not to say the work was worthless; not at all! Rather, it provided a springboard for what is happening now. Thank goodness for the pioneers.**

**The other problem with much of the qualitative research conducted by those outside the medical community, at least in the area of AAT, has been a focus on observable short-term responses by clients. While many noted limitations in their studies to include the lack of generalizability, the results could not be recognized as necessarily reliable or valid, although certainly intriguing and attractive to practitioners searching for ways to engage and motivate clients.**

**Much of the problem historically stemmed from an apparent lack of collaboration between practitioners who may be reporting their observations and professionals familiar with methodological research procedures. Research pioneers in AAT such as Alan Beck, Samuel Ross and Gary Mallon are succeeding in their efforts to improve the state of research by conducting more rigorous studies combining qualitative and quantitative methodology. As well, the articles I reviewed by these authors presented a more neutral position in which they queried whether AAT is a viable and useful adjunct, and if so, what must be done to fully capitalize on an animal co-counsellor.**

**The timeline for many of the older studies seemed quite short and therefore did not necessarily capture whether longer-term benefits could be gained from AAT; admittedly this is not an easy task in any area of research but certainly worth the effort. The CHIMO project is an exemplar of a successful and recent research study undertaken with the intent to examine longitudinal results of the benefits and pitfalls of AAT when working with youth diagnosed with mental health concerns with the ultimate goal to gather meaningful qualitative and quantitative data to assist front-line practitioners in determining ways to meet client goals. As well, the researchers went beyond one setting, and included both clients and counsellors as participants from which they gathered perspective.**

**Including client perspective and not just observation of client reaction was an important balance in the study to off-set bias of counsellor interpretation of client response to the animal; the client was able to present their thoughts and emotions as well.**

**This more recent move towards conscientious research is heartening, and suggests continued improvement in the field. Research funding and involvement from institutions, such as universities, hospitals and colleges, are particularly vital in research, such as the involvement of Purdue University, Prescott College and the Glenrose Hospital in Edmonton. Efforts made by Beck, the CHIMO project, and others help to make significant strides for further involvement and support from academia. Of course, as with any research, the concern of developing research to meet the standards of funders, which may require shorter time-lines, increased quantitative procedures which may or may not capture relevant information, is worth noting. In my conversations with practitioners in the field actively employing AAT as an adjunct to their therapy for years, they reiterated this apprehension and caution an over-focus on measurable gains and accountability could inadvertently cancel the burgeoning efforts of those in the field who see both benefits and challenges and recognize change must be measured in various ways and at various times (T. Wilton, personal communication, October 2, 2008).**

**These preliminary thoughts lay the groundwork for further reflection and concrete suggestions for future research, clustered around key themes generated from the literature.**

**If AAT is to progress beyond its current state and earn reimbursement from the companies managing medical care there needs to be multicentered therapeutic trials and comparisons with other kinds of alternative therapies, including horticulture, nature study, dance, music, and psychodrama, to name a few (Beck & Katcher, 2003, p. 88).**

**A number of researchers, including Taylor (2001), Fine (2000) and others, suggested longitudinal, mixed methodological research designs with accommodation for variables introduced by involvement of humans with animals. As noted by Beck and Katcher (2003), cross comparison studies would provide valuable information from which possible, larger extrapolations may be achieved. A cross comparison study with pre and post measure, and with formal instruments to gauge change at different points during the study, could be useful. As Wilton noted, closer inspection of a client's narrative; "a semantic analysis of client stories" would also be revealing (T. Wilson, personal communication, October 2, 2008).**

Finally, an interdisciplinary and multi-centred approach to include a combination of animal professionals, mental health practitioners and animal advocate organizations, would also help to develop best practice in research.

### Considerations for Research

The Latham Foundation (2008), an organization promoting humane education of the human-animal bond, and the Delta Society provide websites offering information, publications, resources, ethical guidelines when working with animals, and literature reviews on AAT. However, as mentioned before, much of the research has lacked scientific rigour or adequate sample sizes, and focused mostly on appealing outcomes without regard for practicality and ethical considerations (Beck & Katcher, 2003; see also Souter & Miller, 2007).

This limited information could potentially leave a novice counsellor with the impression AAT is easily integrated or implemented. Potential for harm to the client or animal is very possible if not done carefully and with intentionality (Haubenhofner & Kirchengast, 2006). Mallon (1994) proposed research should be configured to query whether animals are beneficial in therapy, rather than constructing research to demonstrate their effectiveness. The following section is a compilation of considerations for research in AAT.

### **Physiological Change during Human-Animal Contact**

**Beck and Katcher (2003) noted the psychological construct of biophilia assumes humans are biologically driven to seek out contact with nature, including animals.**

**Research outcomes have concluded that positive physiological response elicited during human-animal contact, such as decreased blood pressure, can be linked to improved mental wellness (Beck & Katcher, 2003; see also Friedmann, 2000; Odendaal, 2000). Guided by the theories of biophilia and social support, research from a biopsychosocial perspective could utilize available medical equipment to assess physiological change to further define the interrelationship between positive physiological change and improved psychological and social well-being in the field of AAT.**

**With this in mind, research could include:**

- **Comparing various therapeutic modalities, with and without animals, regarding the level of change in physiology related to the presence of an animal. For instance, a study might query physiological response of children with depression when engaged in cognitive therapy with AAT, versus cognitive therapy on its own.**

- **Analyzing the physiological response of children engaged in cognitive therapy and AAT, for instance, versus another interactive therapy such as art therapy, could help to shed light on the underlying reasons for what makes therapy most effective. The role of positive physiological response, and whether AAT is best suited with certain types of therapies is worth researching.**
- **Investigating the importance of physical touch in eliciting physiological response in AAT; specifically, whether this is an important variable when determining client needs and the animal choice.**

**Beck and Katcher (2003) noted that with AAT there is little reliable evidence pointing to positive long-term outcomes from therapy. If positive physiological response elicited by the presence of an animal during therapy is a factor in successful therapy, results may guide further research in exploring methods for encouraging longer lasting effects of therapy after termination.**

### **Therapeutic Relationship**

**Horvath and Symonds (1991), amongst others, suggested a positive and strong therapeutic relationship may be more important than the therapeutic approach.**

**Mathews (2008), Aanderson (2008), Chandler (2005) explained animals can help to facilitate open communication and a strong working alliance.**

**Martin and Farnum (2002) concluded clients with autism were more compliant and involved during therapy with an animal present.**

**With this in mind, researchers could investigate areas such as:**

- **The degree to which AAT as an adjunct to therapy facilitates rapport building.**
- **Whether the therapeutic modality in combination with AAT has bearing on the process, success, or speed of rapport building.**
- **Comparing the significance of animals in rapport building in therapy between populations involved in AAT versus those in other therapy; an example of a population could be young Caucasian males mandated to therapy to deal with law enforcement issues.**

#### **Client and Animal Connection**

**It is also important to understand the attributes of a pet that are most likely to positively impact the health and well-being of people of different cultural backgrounds and histories. Without this knowledge, we may make generalizations that lead to false assumptions and expectations, and therefore possible failure in AAT (Beck & Katcher, 2003).**

Larger animals, such as dogs and horses, are commonly used in AAT, yet some research suggested smaller animals, even fish, can be very effective in improving the mental health of clients (Katcher, Friedmann, Beck & Lynch, 1983).

With this in mind, consider:

- An Investigation of whether animal choice influences the therapeutic experience may help guide future practice.
- An exploration of whether particular characteristics of people, rather than their diagnosis, are better suited to certain species would be useful.
- Research of desirable breed attributes for AAT within a species to help inform counsellors of considerations when choosing a co-counsellor, or when developing intervention for client therapeutic goals.
- An exploration of differences between client attitude and response to therapy when the client can choose their co-therapist, versus working with a designated animal.

Martin and Farnum's (2002) study of the effect of dogs with autistic children revealed their clients seemed most attracted and responded most positively, to the live dog over the ball or stuffed animal.

However, Beck and Katcher (2003) suggested the symbolism of animals should not be dismissed in AAT. The level of animal involvement necessary to facilitate therapeutic success in meeting client goals requires further investigation within specified populations.

A client may thoroughly enjoy animals but problems such as allergies or fear of a species prevent direct contact. With this in mind, it may be valuable to explore:

- Outcomes derived from direct versus indirect animal interaction, such as a client teaching a dog a trick, versus a metaphorical discussion while observing a dog playing independently.
- Animal characteristics helpful in assisting certain client populations; for instance, animals who are interested and engaged in human-animal interaction, such as a dog, versus animals who appear less connected, such as a fish or snake, may elicit different responses depending the client's needs and problem, or may better suit a client's personality.
- Whether an individual with anxiety regarding a particular animal (e.g., a dog) could still benefit from interaction with a different animal (e.g. hamster).

**Prothmann et al. (2005) changed dogs from session to session in their study of AAT in diagnosis, in contrast to Lange et al.'s (2007) approach involving one dog over a period of time with an adolescent anger management group.**

**Research exploring the effect of animal consistency could focus on topics such as:**

- The importance of animal consistency and rapport building between therapy participants, including client and counsellor.**
- The differences in response of clients within defined populations between the provision of consistent versus inconsistent animal co-counsellors.**

#### **Client and Counsellor Cultural Worldview**

**The perception of an animal's role is shaped by the client's cultural worldview, as described by Arthur and Collins (2005). The counsellor's view of animals will also affect how the animal is integrated into therapy. As described by Zamir (2006) and Hatch (2007), human regard for animals varies tremendously, and belief systems influence how an animal is treated and involved. Friedmann (2000) suggested variables such as socioeconomic status, single living, and the person's capacity to take part in routine activities may contribute to how much health benefit the person may derive from human-animal interaction.**

**With this in mind, research to dispel assumptions or generalizations regarding expected client response to animals, and to help determine client populations or counsellors who may be amenable to AAT would be helpful.**

**Comparison group categories could include:**

- **Differences in age, gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status.**
- **Pet owners, livestock owners, and those who have little interaction with animals.**
- **Response of clients with various disabilities.**
- **Power differential in human-animal relationships between those individuals who regard animals as a product or tool, versus those who do not.**

### **Counsellor Competency**

**Cormier and Nurius (2003) explained counsellor competency is based on training, self-awareness of strengths and limitations, personal and professional ethics, and how attitudes of self influence the counsellor's work with clients. Pederson (1995) referred to unintentional racism as an area that can be problematic if the counsellor has not examined how her worldview has shaped her assumptions, values and belief systems.**

**In the case of AAT, counsellors must be proficient in working towards an understanding of self in relation to their belief systems regarding animal welfare, their field of expertise, theoretical orientation and choice(s) of therapeutic modality, and striving for competence within the field of AAT to protect themselves, the client and the animal.**

**As well, the counsellor's ability to navigate and be comfortable with unanticipated situations that may arise in AAT is imperative (T. Wilton, personal communication, October 3, 2008). Wilton suggested creative and lateral thinking is essential to capitalize on the copious opportunities often presented when working with an animal.**

**A survey conducted by Sarah Sholte, a university student from the University of Victoria, is currently underway (S. Scholte, personal communication, August, 2008). According to Sholte, the survey is the first of its kind in Canada, designed to capture information regarding practitioners conducting AAT and their perceptions of the field. She explained the survey is bilingual, and targets individuals including a variety of animals, including horses, a subpopulation that had not been previously captured in surveys.**

**Clear and practical information describing the benefits and challenges of AAT, and a quick resource for more extensive and helpful resources in AAT would be beneficial to any counsellor wishing to weigh the risks and benefits of AAT. For instance, the CHIMO project recently published a detailed manual offering methods and considerations for creating and implementing an AAT program for clients diagnosed with Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) and Developmental Disabilities (Anderson, 2008).**

**With this in mind, research could assist with understanding what constitutes competency in AAT to help more clearly define what training is needed, and to guide policies and guidelines for practitioners in the field of AAT. Areas of research could include:**

- Capturing the level of awareness and understanding amongst practitioners of animal welfare.**
- Determining current level of training of counsellors in their therapeutic modalities and in the field of AAT.**
- Gathering information on how counsellors are involving animals in treatment.**
- Determining methods counsellors employ to assess and evaluate progress and effectiveness of AAT.**

- Exploring counsellors' interest or willingness to access training in AAT, including methods for integrating AAT into their current therapeutic approach.
- Determining belief systems regarding competency within the field of AAT.

### **Animal Health and Welfare**

**As Beck (2000) commented, the recent increase of practitioners involving animals in their practice significantly increases the possibility for safety problems. Research must inform practitioners of the potential impact of therapy on the health of their co-counsellors to help reduce the potential for harm.**

**Research on varying animal response, both observable and physiological in different contexts of therapy would be beneficial, including:**

- **The effect of working in unfamiliar versus familiar settings.**
- **The implications on the success of AAT with regard to the level of training and competency of the counsellor/handler with their co-counsellor.**
- **Optimal length of a workday for a therapy animal.**
- **What factors may help to determine when an animal should be retired from therapy.**

- **Whether a particular developmental stage of the animal included in AAT makes a difference.**
- **How animals with past traumas or physical disabilities compare in hardiness within therapy with animals without significant issues.**
- **Whether the setting of therapy is a factor.**
- **Important considerations when integrating smaller animals into therapy.**

## **Conclusion**

**So here we are at the end of this manual and I wonder, “What did you think about? Does AAT make sense for you? Do you have more questions? Do you feel you have a better idea of AAT than before? I know when I first looking into the literature I found it challenging; terminology was used interchangeably, much of the writing was dedicated to the benefits but not of the challenges, and it was hard to grasp whether AAT would be a good fit for my work with children. This manual was my effort to share pertinent information with you to help establish a balanced perspective of AAT and what a co-counsellor could potentially add to your current practice.**

**Obviously there is more literature available than what is offered in this manual; specific interventions offered by Chandler (2005), Aanderson (2008), Fine (2000) and others are well worth the read.**

**As this field grows, future research of AAT will hopefully contribute to better understanding of the scope of animal involvement in therapy, guide policy and decision making in the field, and provide ideas for operationalizing AAT.**

**I hope by presenting questions I asked when I first started contemplating AAT, and by providing concrete and meaningful examples from front-line practitioners, you are better equipped to sort out whether AAT makes sense for you.**

**Moreover, as you gain greater understanding of this important area of practice, your use of AAT may help to foster increased research and refinement in the area. If you decide to integrate AAT into your practice, have fun, pay attention to the challenges, consider contributing to research, and treat your co-counsellor well! May your future counselling bring you and your clients much success!**

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## Gurrreat Websites to Check Out



**American Hippotherapy Association Inc.**  
[www.americanhippotherapyassociation.org](http://www.americanhippotherapyassociation.org)

**Animal Welfare Council**  
[www.animalwelfarecouncil.com](http://www.animalwelfarecouncil.com)

**Animal Welfare Act**  
[www.aphis.usda.gov/ca](http://www.aphis.usda.gov/ca)

**The Animal Welfare Foundation of Canada**  
[www.awfc.ca](http://www.awfc.ca)

**Anthrozoos Journal Publication – a multidisciplinary journal of the interactions of people and animals**  
<http://www.isaz.net/anthrozoos.html>

**The Canadian Federation of Humane Societies**  
<http://cfhs.ca>

**Canadian Veterinary Medical Association**  
<http://canadianveterinarians.net>

**Centre for the Human-Animal Bond**  
[www.vet.purdue.edu](http://www.vet.purdue.edu)

**Centre for the Interaction of Animals and Society**  
<http://www2.vet.upenn.edu/research/centers/cias/>

**The Chimo Project in Edmonton, Alberta**  
[www.chimoproject.com](http://www.chimoproject.com)