Why and how should we assess pet rabbit personality?

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Why and how should we assess pet rabbit personality?
Clare Frances Ellis, Wanda McCormick, Ambrose Tinario

Summary
There is a great deal of discussion around the use of the term personality in animal studies, with terms such as temperament and behavioural syndromes being used synonymously, in error. The term personality is used within this study to describe individual differences that can be measured behaviourally and vary between individuals but remain stable across situations and over time for individuals. A case is presented to highlight the need for further research regarding personality in pet rabbits (Figure 1) and then a selection of methods used for pet animal assessment are reviewed (Table 1). Finally, methodology is suggested for use with pet rabbits (Figure 2), specifically a bottom-up approach, and discussion on these methods is most welcome.

Table 1: Review of a selection of methods used to measure personality in pets, with some examples of tools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method of personality assessment</th>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
<th>Example tools / studies and species used for</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subjective trait descriptions</td>
<td>Person familiar with animal rates animals for specified adjectives.</td>
<td>Non-invasive.</td>
<td>Cat owner ratings (Lee et al., 2007), Owner ratings for hens (17 adjectives resulted in four components for 119 chickens) (PCA = 62.7% of variance).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjective rating scales</td>
<td>Person familiar with animal rates animals for specified adjectives.</td>
<td>Non-invasive, Quick in comparison to behavioral observations.</td>
<td>Dog Personality Questionnaire (Ward et al., 2013), Can cover a range of contexts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour coding (rating)</td>
<td>Behaviour coding (rating) is a subjective measure.</td>
<td>Scores based on memories.</td>
<td>Dog-ADHD rating scale (Favet et al., 2007).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reinforcement</td>
<td>Reinforcement is a method of shaping behaviour.</td>
<td>Influenced by rater relationship with subject.</td>
<td>Dog Mental Assessment (Siegford et al., 2003).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social cognitive</td>
<td>Social cognitive is an approach to understanding animal cognition.</td>
<td>Some stimuli may not have been encountered.</td>
<td>Snake Fear Questionnaire (Lee et al., 2007).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges matching</td>
<td>Challenges matching is a method of assessing animal social cognition.</td>
<td>Standardisation of methods.</td>
<td>Human-animal interactions are better suited to human setting during a three day period.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges matching social</td>
<td>Challenges matching social is a method of assessing animal social cognition.</td>
<td>Behavioural observation methods may be preferable to animal behaviour and ethology scientists, these are not always validated.</td>
<td>Social cognitive analysis and the ability to predict adopted cats (Quick in shelter setting).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Suggested reasons for a need to explore individual differences in pet rabbits.

Figure 2: Proposed methods for pet rabbit personality studies.

How could we assess personality in pet rabbits?
Considering the reasons for exploring rabbit personality (Figure 1), an objective approach is considered to be most appropriate. Specifically utilising bottom-up trait methodology in the first instance, attempting to identify personality traits that may exist in pet rabbits.

This will enable the exploration of potential personality traits in rabbits in a way that may encourage a deeper consideration for the species and individual animals uniqueness, how they function, and when they interact, bottom-up assessments are advocated (Uher, 2008).

Discussion
Many tools developed thus far for pet animal species have sought to explore the presence of specific personality traits. They have generally been developed as tools to predict the animal’s future behavior in terms of our human interactions with them. There is a need to explore personality in pets, specifically rabbits, more broadly so that the personalities that exist as a result natural selection pressures, and the domestication process as a by-product of selection for morphological / physiological traits, can be accounted for.

Such studies may be beneficial in terms of exploring animal personality as a tool to enhance welfare of captive animals.