Feline behavior problems in Brazil: a review of 155 referral cases

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ABSTRACT

BACKGROUND: Geographical variations in feline behavior problems exist. The occurrence of feline behavior problems in different regions are therefore important to prepare professionals for the emerging needs of cat owners.

METHODS: One-hundred and fifty-five feline behavior cases that were referred to a veterinary behaviorist in São Paulo (Brazil) during the period 2008-2014 are described.

RESULTS: Inter-cat aggression was the main behavioral complaint reported (31%), followed by housesoiling (26.4%). Unlike other international studies inter-cat aggression was more frequently seen than inappropriate elimination. Oral repetitive behaviors, including problems such as psychogenic alopecia and pica, were also a prevalent problem (i.e. 16.8% of the cases). Human directed aggression accounted for 13.5% of the cases, taking fourth place in the list of the most common feline behavioral problems. Female and male cats were equally likely to be presented (51% and 49% of cases, respectively).

CONCLUSIONS: This study highlights potentially geographic or temporal variation in the behavioral problems that need to be recognized by veterinary behaviorists, in order to meet the emerging needs of owners.

Key-words: behavioral problems, cat, Brazil
Unlike dogs, reports concerning the prevalence of feline behavior problems are much less common, perhaps because they typically make up a smaller proportion of the caseload of veterinary behavior professionals. For example, in their review of canine cases seen over a 10-year period, Bamberger and Houpt (1) report on 1644 cases, while their similar review of cat cases contains only 736 cases (2). Brazil has the second largest population of pet cats worldwide (there are approximately 22.1 million cats and 52.2 million dogs with 17.7% of Brazilian households having at least one cat - IBGE (3)), but feline behavioral medicine is a very recent form of veterinary practice and little is known about cat behavioral problems in this country.

From the standpoint of the cats, even though they may seem to be quite well adapted to everyday life in modern Brazil with increasingly more Brazilians acquiring cats every year, they appear to face behavior and welfare challenges, including the frequent manifestation of signs of emotional distress (4,5). Souza-Dantas et al (6) found that 91% of the general veterinary practitioners operating in these Brazilian university veterinary hospitals had encountered cat owners with behavioral complaints (6). Inappropriate urination in the form of either urine spraying or latrine behaviour (34.8%) and excessive scratching (28.3%) were the most common complaints. A similar result was found by Fatjó et al (7) in their survey of general clinics in Spain. However, as seen in Spain (7,8) the prevalence of cases seen may differ between general practitioners and veterinary behavior professionals in Brazil. Cases seen by behavior experts probably reflect those that practitioners find most challenging and/or have greatest impact on the owner’s family and immediate associates, thereby causing them to seek specialized help.

The present study aimed to identify the reasons behind the referral of cats to a veterinary behaviorist in Brazil as well as the characteristics of these
cats. As such it represents a point sample in an increasingly important geographic region of the world in relation to cat management.

155 cases of feline behavior, referred to a veterinarian behaviorist (DR, under the supervision of DSM and ARJ) in the city of São Paulo (Brazil) during a 6-year period (2008 to 2014) are described. Behavioral consultations were usually held in the residence of the cat owners and data relating to the cat’s sex, age, breed, reproductive status (i.e. intact or neutered) and main behavioral complaint leading to referral as reported by the owners were recorded. Secondary behavioral complaints from the case were not considered in the calculation of the prevalence of behavioral problems. In the case of inter-cat aggression, the data from all cats involved were considered. Owners provided their permission for use of the data.

Of the 155 feline behavioral cases, 145 provided complete data on gender, breed, age and sexual status relating to a total of 217 cats (49.3% males and 50.7% females). The ten remaining cases (all inter-cat aggression) were not analyzed beyond the behavioral complaint given their missing files.

The age of cats presenting varied from 3 months to 19 years, with an average of 4.8 years (median 4 years). 14.8% were purebred pedigree cats (i.e. 12 were Persian, 6 Siamese, 4 Ragdoll, 5 Maine Coon, 2 Bengal, 2 Birman and 1 Savannah) while 85.2% were mixed-bred cats. 95% of the cats were neutered.

Feline aggression was the most commonly reported behavioral complaint, representing 44.5% of the cases (69/155). These included inter-cat aggression (48/155, 31%) and aggression towards people (21/155, 13.5%) in a roughly 2:1 ratio. The second most common problem (41/155, 26.5%) was housesoiling (latrining: 29/155, 18.7%, spraying: 10/155, 6.5%, maddening: 2/155, 1.3%), followed by (13/155, 8.4%) repetitive non-medical self-licking (psychogenic alopecia) and (13/155, 8.4%) ingestion of non-food items (pica). (see Table 1).
Other behavioral problems represented 12.2% of the cases (19/155): 2 cases of inappropriate sexual behavior, 4 cases of destruction of furniture by biting and/or scratching, 4 cases of fear/phobia, 1 case of chronic psychogenic vomiting, 3 cases of excessive vocalization, 3 cases of problematic cat interaction with resident dogs, 1 case in which the owner sought guidance for preparing the cat to move and adapt to a new house and 1 case of uncontrolled behavior/over-activity. (see Table 1)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behavioral Complaint</th>
<th>% of cases</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>FELINE AGGRESSION</strong> (N=69 cases)</td>
<td>44.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inter-cat aggression</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human directed aggression</td>
<td>13.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>HOUSESOILING</strong> (n=41 cases)</td>
<td>26.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latrining</td>
<td>18.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spraying</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middening</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1: Description of feline behavioral complaints from 155 referral cases.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>REPETITIVE BEHAVIOR (n=26 cases)</th>
<th>16.8%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-licking</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PICA</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>OTHER (n=19 cases)</th>
<th>12.2%</th>
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This is the first report of the most common feline behavioral cases seen by a veterinary behaviorist in Brazil and, as such, it may reflect the aspects of feline behavior that has the greatest impact on humans because it drives them to search for specialized help.

Consistent with the previous professional feline caseloads described in international surveys (2,8,9,10), inter-cat aggression and inappropriate elimination were the two most frequently encountered problems; but only in the caseload of Amat et al (8), did inter-cat aggression exceed inappropriate elimination. By contrast, Fatjó et al (7) identified problems, such as scratching and excessive vocalization to be more common than inter-cat aggression, as did Souza-Dantas et al (6) in Brazil. However, these latter two surveys were based on the cases seen in general clinics rather than by behavioral professionals. It is worth noting that inappropriate elimination is the most commonly seen problem in Fatjo et al (7) and Souza-Dantas et al (6) and a common issue for referral practice too, suggesting that this is very much a problem which all vets should be able to manage.
There was an unusual, high prevalence of oral repetitive behaviors reported in the current caseload, represented by cases of pica (i.e. ingestion of non-food items) and excessive licking accompanied by alopecia, representing 16.8% of the cases. This contrasts with the findings of studies conducted in countries like USA, Canada, UK and Spain (2,8,9,10), but it is in line with the result found by the case study in Australia (10).

Human directed aggression was fourth on the list of the common feline complaints in the present study. Although not on the top of the list, which is in agreement with other surveys (2,8,9,10), the significance of the problem should not be underestimated. Ramos & Mills (4) found that human directed aggression is a much more common problem than the case prevalence indicates (i.e. approximately 50% prevalence) suggesting Brazilian cat owners may act with resignation in relation to their cats attacking them.

Fears and phobias, inappropriate sexual behavior, destructive behavior, excessive vocalization, conflicts with dogs and psychogenic vomiting (diagnose based on a complete medical work-up) were less commonly seen. Along with a single case considered to be “preventive” (guidance on how to change residence with a cat), they amounted to 12% (19/155) of cases. It is possible that all of these represent less troubling problems for pet owners, or simply problems for which advice is sought elsewhere by owners.

In conclusion, this study reinforces the difference in the type of cases seen by behavior professionals versus general practitioner and between countries. It cannot be excluded, however, possible ownership changes over time that could explain at least in part differences comparing the less recent caseloads with the one presented here. It is clear that there is a need for training in feline behavior related issues for general veterinary practitioners, but this training should focus on the need in the given country and not be
biased by the different prevalence of cases seen by professionals who may be providing this training.

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REFERENCES


