Canine behavior problems in Brazil: a review of 180 referral cases

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ABSTRACT

Background: Behavioral caseloads may vary due to cultural differences, and so it is important to know how these differ with geography.

Methods: One hundred and eighty dog cases referred to a veterinary behaviorist in São Paulo (Brazil) during the period of 2008 – 2014 are described.

Results: Aggression against people was the most common behavioral complaint (22.2% of the cases), followed by apparent fears and phobias (13.3%). Forms of aggression against other dogs (12.2%) and repetitive behaviors (11.1%) were third and fourth most frequent, respectively. Female and male patients were equally reported (47.6% and 52.4%, respectively). These results differ slightly from the findings of other international studies, in which aggression was the main behavioral complaint with fears and phobias less common.

Conclusion: Regional demographic reviews of the caseloads of veterinary behavior specialists help the profession recognize the problems of most concern to pet owners in a given area and thus local priorities, as well as opening up the potential to generate new hypotheses relating to the reasons for regional differences.

Even though Brazil has the second largest population of owned dogs in the world (i.e. 52 million dogs) (1), canine veterinary behavior is a very recent specialty in the country and studies of the prevalence of behavioral problems of domestic dogs are limited. Such data would reveal those areas for which there is most demand for a service and perhaps shed light on the behavioral issues with greatest impact on human carers, since these are the cases for which they are willing to seek specific professional help. A better understanding of regional prevalence, not only allows us to make comparisons with other demographics which can help to identify potential knowledge and training priorities for the profession, but also potentially gives insight into cultural factors that affect the development or presentation of problem behaviors.

180 cases of dog behavior problems referred to a veterinary 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 dog owners and data relating to the dog'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 complaints meaning other minor behavior problems mentioned by the owners during consultation were not considered in the calculation of the prevalence of behavioral problems since we focused on the complaints leading owners to seek help from a veterinary behaviorist. In cases of aggression between resident dogs, the data of all dogs involved were considered.

Of the 180 canine behavior cases described in terms of the main behavior issue, 176 are also considered according to gender, breed, age and reproductive status for a total of 187 dogs (52.4% males and 47.6% females).

The four remaining cases (i.e. aggression towards familiar dogs cases) were not analyzed because their records were incomplete.

The age of the dogs varied between 4 months and 14 years, with a mean of 4.3 years (median=3 years). 64.2% of the dogs were purebred (German Shepherd, Dachshund, Poodle, Lhasa Apso, Shih Tzu, and English Bulldog were the most common breeds) whereas 35.8% were crossbreeds. 76.5% of the dogs were neutered (63.3% of the males and 91% of the females).

Canine aggression was the most common complaint, representing 62/180 (34.4%) of the cases. These cases included aggression towards people (40 cases, 22.2% - ranked first by frequency) and aggression towards dogs (22 cases, 12.2%- ranked third by frequency). The second most frequent problem was reports of specific fears and phobias, which accounted for 24/180 cases (13.3%) (e.g. fear of specific objects or surfaces, fear of going outside, etc.) with the majority of them (n=13) being dogs with apparent fear/phobia of noises (fireworks and/or thunderstorms). There were 20 cases (11.1%) involving repetitive behaviors (16 involving repetitive self-licking, 1 flank suckling, 1 chasing shadows, 1 case of ingestion of non-food items (i.e. pica) and 1 circling behavior accompanied by tail chasing and biting).

Training problems were the fifth most frequent primary complaint occurring in 16/180 cases (8.9%). These included 13 cases of specific uncontrolled behavior (jumping on people, stealing objects) and 3 cases of restless dogs with several uncontrolled behaviors, whose owners reported them as hyperactive, with excessive levels of energy and/or agitation. Inappropriate elimination (n=14 cases, 7.8%), problems related to being separated from the owner (n=13 cases, 7.2%), excessive barking (n=10 cases, 5.5%) and coprophagy (n=7 cases, 3.9%) were the least frequent behavioral reasons for visits. Other behavior problems made up the

remaining 14 cases (7.8%) These were: 6 puppy consultations, 2 consultations requesting a dog temperament test, 3 cases involving age related decline in behavior (e.g. cognitive dysfunction), 1 consultation for guidance on living with a dog that has become visually impaired, 1 case involving problems in adapting a dog to a "day care" service and one case of depressed behavior in a recently adopted dog.

The present survey is the first report of the most common canine behavioral problems from the perspective of a veterinary behaviorist in Brazil. The finding of aggression towards people and fears and phobias being the most frequently complaints is in partial agreement with other previously published international caseloads (2,3,4,5). In all studies, including the current one, aggression towards people is the most common problem encountered by specialists.

However, we found a different relative prevalence in relation to the second most commonly reported problem, which in Brazil related to what appeared to be a specific fear or phobia. By contrast, in the survey by Denenberg et al (3) anxiety was the second most common primary problem or secondary complaint (21% and 22%, respectively); for Bamberger & Houpt (2) anxiety-related problems was the second most reported issue, particularly separation anxiety; with problems related to fears and phobias being much less prevalent.

The city of São Paulo, in which the cases occurred, is very crowded and noisy, with fireworks used regularly throughout the year, in different situations and at different times of the day. The high prevalence of problems related to fears and phobias in the present study leads us to believe that, at least in part, this environment may be affecting dogs: sensitizing and dishabituating them to the noise and not habituating them to it, perhaps because of the intensity of many firework displays. This environment might

129   also result in increased owner awareness of the problem. Early socialization

130   and training programs seem to be uncommon in Brazil, and perhaps owners

131   are only seeking assistance for their dogs´ training/behavior when problems

132   have already developed. Thus, environmental conditions together with

133   owner attitudes in big Brazilian cities, such as São Paulo, may help to explain

134   why noise fear and phobias are so common. It is worth mentioning that in an

135   Australian caseload (3) fears and phobias were also very frequent, thus it

136   would be worth exploring the environmental similarities between São Paulo

137   and Sydney, from which the Australian caseload was derived.

138   Separation-related problems were less prevalent in the present

139   caseload. This is not consistent with some other international surveys (2,3)

140   but in agreement with others (5). However, in the only related survey of its

141   kind in Brazil, Soares, Pereira and Paixão (6) reported separation anxiety

142   signs in 55.9% of 93 Brazilian owned dogs living in Rio de Janeiro. Either

143   there are marked differences between these cities, or, more likely, many

144   cases are either passing unnoticed or not receiving the specialist care that

145   occurs in other countries.

146   Aggression towards other dogs accounted for 12.2% of cases, which

147   is broadly in line with other surveys (2,3,4,5), but a slightly lower prevalence

148   in the present caseload. This may be due to several reasons: it might be that

149   in Brazil inter-dog aggression is still seen by many as a training problem

150   leading owners to seek the help of dog trainers rather than behavior

151   specialists, or that these dogs are simply kept separated, abandoned or

152   recommended for euthanasia without first seeking a specialist for help.

153   Indeed, in the national survey by Soares *et al* (7) with Brazilian veterinary

154   clinicians, canine aggression was reported to be the most frequent behavioral

155   cause of abandonment or euthanasia (7).

The significant presentation of repetitive behaviors is somewhat at odds with studies conducted in other countries such as the USA, Canada, UK and Australia (2,3,5). In all of these surveys, problems related to repetitive behavior did not occupy a prominent position on the list of behavioral complaints. One of the reasons for this remarkably high number of cases is perhaps the tendency for many owners to live in a small indoor environment in a city like São Paulo city, and/or very long periods of solitude. This is an area in need of further research.

Training issues accounted for 8.9% of the cases. Lack of socialization and training programs for puppies in Brazil is likely to contribute to this problem, with the result that owners end up more frequently looking for specialized help for issues associated with poor behavioral development and training. However, trainers rather than veterinary behaviorists may be the first professionals from whom they seek help, as veterinary behavioral medicine is not yet a well-established discipline in Brazil. More studies at a national level are needed in order to elucidate this matter further.

Problems related to aging (e.g. cognitive dysfunction), adaptation to "day care" and depressed behavior were less commonly seen. Along with 6 preventive consultations for puppies, 2 requests for temperament testing and one consultation for guidance regarding living with a dog who had become visually impaired. These amounted to 7.8% of the cases seen. It may be that these cases represent less worrying issues for owners, or that they are complaints for which the solution may be found from other sources such as a primary care veterinarian.

It is important to consider that the aforementioned international caseloads (2,3,4,5) may differ between them and from this study in terms of behavior classification (e.g. descriptive versus motivational-emotional based diagnoses). It would be necessary to standardise behaviour classification in

order for more accurate comparisons between caseloads to be made, but currently there is no agreed taxonomy for veterinary behaviour diagnosis. Our classification was based on owner presenting complaints, but others have been based on professional diagnosis (5). Whilst owner complaint shows what owners are worried about, diagnosis shows what is professionally believed to be happening; both are of value.

Important regional differences compared to the rest of the world are reported here, but these deserve replication with the caseloads of other specialists in Brazil especially considering how large and racially mixed the country is. A culture with greater use of fireworks throughout the year as well as the modern lifestyle of city animals which may frustrate and restrict them may result in a unique profile of behavior complaints, increasing the risk of problems such as noise fear and repetitive behaviors. São Paulo is the largest and the most heterogeneous city in Brazil with thousands of migrants and an estimated population of 12 million habitants (8).We hope further Brazilian behavior caseloads are therefore published which will help us answer the question to what extend the results here are representative of the country.

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