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Dogs as co-therapists for individuals with Autism spectrum disorder: 50 years after a first Psychiatrist's insight

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More than 50 years ago, the Psychiatrist Boris Levinson gave birth, quite by accident, to the concept of dogs as 'co-therapists'. In a paper that turned out to be at the basis of Animal-Assisted Interventions (AAI), he described the unexpected benefits that the presence of his dog brought to his counseling sessions with children and youth, and provided numerous examples of ways in which a positive interaction with animals could enhance therapy. By stressing the need to empirically evaluate his model and highlighting a number of research questions that would be fruitful to explore at that point, he opened the way for the emergence of a multi-disciplinary field of research known as Anthrozoology, or Human-Animal Interaction (HAI). This field encompasses the relationships between people and animals, the emotional and cognitive mechanisms underlying them, and the ways in which they may affect human physical and psychological health and well-being, namely in clinical populations. Within these, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) has been suggested, by markedly varied studies, as a target population that may specially benefit from positive interactions with animals, and particularly, dogs. To date, however, there is no comprehensive overview integrating data of relevance to the field of ASD from both 'laboratory' studies (i.e. studies focusing on particular aspects of the dog-human interaction) and 'clinical' investigations (i.e., research evaluating dog-assisted interventions for ASD), nor any discussion on the need to evaluate the application of laboratory findings to targeted therapeutic protocols. The purpose of the information presented in this poster is to fill this gap in the literature while, simultaneously, calling for attention on how far we still are today, within the particular field of ASD, from a proper analysis of the questions first brought to light by Levinson himself more than half a century ago.

Biography

Mariely Lima has a degree in Speech Therapy (Superior School of Health Technology of Porto, 2001) and a PhD in Biomedical Sciences (Institute of Biomedical Sciences Abel Salazar of the O'Porto University, 2012). She is an invited Professor at the Superior School of Education Paula Frassinetti, where she lectures, since 2004, in Post-graduated and Master courses and supervises academic research. More recently (2013), she has been invited to lecture also at the Higher School of Health Sciences of the Aveiro University.

She is a founding member of ANIMAS (2002), a Portuguese association, that implements dog-assisted interventions and educates assistance dogs, being the only in Portugal that is accredited by the Assistance Dogs International. She has been responsible for planning and implementing a number of dog-assisted activities and therapy programs for children with different diagnoses, namely autism spectrum disorders and profound intellectual and multiple disabilities. She has been responsible for training courses aiming at certifying dog-handler teams in Portugal.

She has attended different conferences as an invited speaker and she has published a number of scientific papers, in the fields of communication, sensory stimulation and dog-assisted interventions, in peer reviewed journals with impact factor.

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