

The reliability of a survey for cat owners/caregivers regarding their cat's socialization to humans

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Animal shelters and rescue groups accept cats with unknown backgrounds and have to determine if the cat is unsocialized to humans or if the cat is socialized but too frightened to show normal behavior. Adoptability and euthanasia decisions often depend upon how well-socialized the cat appears to be. However, no validated methods of determining socialization status exist. A survey (CS) was designed for cat owners, fosterers and caregivers to report cats' behavior towards people in their normal environments. Respondents rated cats' behavioral propensities in various situations from 0 (never) to 10 (always). An overall socialization score (OSS) was calculated as the median of these ratings. Two sanctuaries with long term resident cats were studied. Two caregivers independently completed the CS for each cat (inter-rater reliability) and repeated it one month later for the same cat (test-retest reliability). At one sanctuary 2 staff caregivers rated 31 cats each. At the other sanctuary 36 staff and volunteer caregivers with 48 unique pairings rated 54 cats (inter-rater) and 48 cats (test-retest). Spearman correlation coefficients and 95% confidence intervals were calculated for each question and the OSS. Inter-rater and test-retest agreement was higher at the first sanctuary (0.71-0.98) than the other (0.21-0.85). Inter-rater correlations were <0.5 for questions about cat's reaction to a new place, reaction to caregiver approaching while cat eats, cat's activity level and cat staying near caregiver. Test-retest correlations were <0.5 for questions about reaction to caregiver approaching while cat eats and cat's response to an unfamiliar person arriving. The OSS had high inter-rater and test-retest correlations at both sanctuaries (0.81-0.99). The CS shows promise as a reliable instrument to assess cats' socialization to humans.