SIMPLE FOOD PREFERENCE ASSESSMENTS FOR COMPANION DOGS

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Food is commonly programmed as part of behavior modification or maintenance for dogs; however, some foods function as more effective behavioral reinforcers than others (Vicars et al., 2014). Foundational studies indicate that higher-preferred stimuli typically function as more effective reinforcers (Fisher et al., 1992; Pace et al., 1985; Piazza et al., 1996; Vicars et al., 2014), and therefore identification of an individual's food preferences can maximize protocol effectiveness. Empirical identification of preferences can be achieved using a preference assessment protocol. As a result, preference assessments are commonly used in human behavior protocols to identify the participant's preferences and program the results as putative reinforcers. However, formal preference assessments are not often used by dog owners or professionals, potentially due to protocol complexity or because owners believe they can accurately guess their dog's preferences. The purpose of this study was to develop and test a simple, owner-implemented paired stimulus preference assessment for companion dogs. Outcomes were validated by testing high- and low-preferred items in a progressive ratio or fixed ratio schedule. Eleven owners and 15 dogs enrolled virtually in the study, of which nine owners and 11 dogs submitted their full dataset and video recordings. Results indicate that the protocol successfully identified food preference rankings, which were often in contrast to owner speculations. Further, owners were able to implement the protocol with high levels of integrity (99.8% average) and indicated the protocol had high social validity. These data indicate that the paired stimulus preference assessment can be utilized by dog owners and professionals. As a result, canine behavior modification protocols, such as those targeting cooperative care or fear, anxiety, or stress during veterinary visits, can be made more effective by identifying and programming the utilization of high-preference foods.

References

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