

Book Review:  
“The Practice of Animal-Assisted Psychotherapy: An innovative  
modality for facilitating mental wellness”

Lynn J. Piper (2014) E Street Lane Publications LLC

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This sixteen chapter book details the experiences of the author whose primary therapeutic practice incorporates dogs in a clinical setting with children, adolescents, adults, and families. It is an introductory book written in a relaxed and accessible style with a number of case examples and several chapters of vignettes that illustrate the main ideas presented within the work. The main title is a bit misleading in that the focus is exclusively on canine assisted therapies and there is no mention of other forms of animal assisted therapy (such as equine assisted therapy). The author does provide an overview of the field and a wealth of illustrations of the incorporation of canines into therapeutic settings.

In chapter one, the author begins with her journey into AAT (canine) assisted therapy and training, education, and supervision with Cynthia Chandler - a noted expert in this emerging field. This information and perspective is critical for those interested in exploring AAT as a possible therapy modality as it illustrates the importance of formal training and supervision. There are a number of misconceptions and misperceptions about AAT both among the lay public as well as those in the mental health fields. AAT is *not* a separate profession but rather one in which the therapist, a licensed mental health professional, incorporates AAT as a *treatment modality* into the theoretical orientation they already use. In chapter three (p.32) she also mentions this but could more

clearly define AAT as a *modality* here that becomes incorporated into an individual therapist's orientation. She revisits this important point in chapter seven, when she discusses the serious concerns of therapists who bring their pets into their therapy sessions (without appropriate training or supervision); however, she could emphasize this even more strongly in the first chapter and then throughout the work. Dog ownership does not qualify a therapist as competent to do AAT. It is clear that the author has much expertise in dog training and preparation in her AAT practice and this parallels the current calls in the field for species-specific *ethological* competence. This could also be more emphatically stated including in later chapters on choosing a therapy dog and training.

In chapter two, the author details the distinctions between service dogs, medical dogs, mental health service dogs, and dogs that provide AAT. It may have been useful to also define and describe the differences between pets, companion animals, and working dogs as well and the implications of and differences between the relationships people might have with their pets as distinct from those they might have with an animal in a therapeutic context. Often the literature on the benefits of AAT (including a few cited in the book) draws on studies of pet ownership and clearly these are very different contexts. Chapter three is an overview of the modern history of AAT beginning in the late eighteenth century and

this included some lesser-known examples. The author could have made this section even more sophisticated and richer by drawing on the wealth of literature on the long history of the human-canine bond and relationships including dogs as “healers” in the ancient world.

In chapter three she presents eighteen techniques that are used in therapy settings and it would be even more helpful for readers if the therapeutic goal or context for each was presented alongside this as well. Chapter four also contains illustrations of what happens in a session; however, conducting a more sophisticated content analysis of the later case vignettes would really help the interested reader understand the context. It is a common challenge for practitioners to translate the subtlety and complexity of their techniques to those outside the session and the profession.

The chapters on risks and risk management contained important points but these could have been condensed and written more concisely into a single chapter. This reviewer most appreciated the detailed chapter on ethics which is often overlooked in a Western scientific culture that frequently asks, “what can animals do for us?” rather than, “what can we do for animals?” This is an important chapter and the author describes her retiring one of her therapy dogs as an important issue that was explored from several angles including the impact on the dog, her clients, and herself as therapist. Ethics requires those of us who partner with animals in human therapy to ask whether or not this raises the ethical bar or standard in how we make decisions for therapy animals, particularly end-of-life issues – something often missing from the field and the AAT literature as a whole. The chapters exploring the selection, assessment, desensitization, and training of therapy dogs were helpful in emphasizing the need for species-specific competency.

Chapter nine provides brief and simple examples on the ways in which AAT can be used as a modality in the various theoretical orientations. This is welcome and appropriate for undergraduate students in counseling psychology; however, stronger emphasis could have been placed on the need for therapists to have in-depth knowledge and competency in a specific orientation *prior* to the incorporation of AAT rather than the “jack of all trades, master of none” approach that is common among novice therapists. AAT adds a layer of complexity to the sessions and being well-grounded in one’s orientation and philosophy *before* adding an animal facilitator is essential for effective practice as well as assessing and articulating the impact of the sessions. Depth and archetypal orientations were not mentioned specifically in this section although the vignettes and examples had a number of instances in which this lens would have been helpful.

This book would be appropriate reading for undergraduate students in the social sciences who are interested in the ways in which the field of AAT has evolved, is defined and what it looks like in actual practice. The appendices are useful and offer the reader detailed information on programs for training and certification for both humans and canines. The citations in the reference section provided an up-to-date review of the literature in the field of AAT. This book is a welcome addition to the introductory practitioner literature in AAT.