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Personnel / Animal Relationships: Affectionate or Neutral? A Discussion

The question, **Should animal care personnel be encouraged to establish affectionate, rather than neutral, relationships with the animals in their charge?** was raised on the Laboratory Animal Refinement & Enrichment Forum (LAREF) on October 26, 2002. Erik Moreau, McGill University, Canada; Kathy Clark, Holliston, Massachusetts; Deborah Hartley, University of Oklahoma; Ann Lablans, Queen's University, Canada; Augusto Vitale, Istituto Superiore di Sanità, Italy; Pascalle Van Loo, Utrecht University, The Netherlands; Terri Hunnicutt, St. Louis Zoo, Missouri; Anna Olsson, Institute for Molecular and Cell Biology, Portugal; Chris Sherwin, University of Bristol, England; David Morton, University of Birmingham, England; Viktor Reinhardt, Animal Welfare Institute, Washington, DC; Lydia Troc, York University, Canada; and Emily Patterson-Kane, Scottish Agricultural College, Scotland, all posted opinions, which have been edited by Viktor Reinhardt, moderator of LAREF.

Most correspondents agreed that development of an affectionate relationship with the animals in their charge is almost unavoidable (Clark, Hartley, Hunnicutt, Lablans, Moreau, Van Loo, Vitale). Empathy can even arise in researchers who go to great lengths to try to ensure that their data are objective (Sherwin). "Having a close relationship with your animals is necessary to regard them as living beings, rather than biological test tubes. As such, you are more careful and patient, and will think more about what the procedures mean to the animals. You will become more creative in finding animal-friendly alternatives for the procedures you need to do on the animals. You will thus increase the well-being of your animals and, by doing so, make them better research subjects and increase the validity of test results" (Van Loo).

There was a consensus that emotional attachment provides an assurance that the animals receive optimal care, both physically and behaviorally (Clark, Hartley, Van Loo, Vitale). "If I didn't think about the animals in my care, I wouldn't notice that someone seems a little off today, he's not participating in social activities like he normally does. I wouldn't notice that one animal suddenly flinches when I feed her something with a spoon, indicating a possible tooth problem. I've seen 'caregivers' that treat the animals with complete indifference miss a million details that they should have noticed. They don't clean well, are callous to the animals, and forget important things. I have watched animals cringe or cower when these individuals enter the room. I have seen these individuals breaking for lunch rather than take a few extra minutes for enrichment. Their emotions may not be absent from the situation, but they're focused somewhere else and so they don't do a good job since they aren't emotionally vested in the outcome" (Hunnicutt). A relationship based on trust rather than fear is particularly important when potentially dangerous animals such as macaques are being trained to actively cooperate during handling procedures (Lablans, Moreau). "Whether such a relationship enhances training success is another question, but it certainly is an effective safeguard against injuries resulting from defensive aggression" (Reinhardt).

There was disagreement about whether it is more difficult to establish a relationship with some animal species than with others. "I wonder if there is a size limit. Is it still possible to establish a relationship of trust with mice, where they will come to you and enjoy being with you, where you can exchange signs of affection?" (Olsson). "There is definitely a taxonomic hierarchy of emotional attachment anywhere you go; the higher you go the more likely bonding will occur" (Hartley). It was pointed out that to work closely with individual animals or a small group of animals and to observe them for an extended period of time is probably a more important factor for the development of a bond with them than their evolutionary relatedness with our own species or their size (Patterson-Kane, Reinhardt). If you take the time to discover the uniqueness of individual animals and to get to know their species-typical needs well enough to develop empathy for them, you will readily form close ties also with the perhaps less charismatic species such as pigs, rats, mice or chickens (Morton, Patterson-Kane, Van Loo).

Concern was expressed that establishing an affectionate relationship with experimental subjects and knowing them as individuals would hamper one's impartiality and capacity to be objective when observing and registering their behavior (Olsson). A caregiver strongly objected: "It seems to me that we get hung up on trying to divorce our emotions from what we hope to be our objectivity. I do not think that any normally functioning human being in the world does anything for any reason other than emotional. Sure, research is done to answer questions, but

isn't the premise of all research to make human (or animal) lives better? If you want to make lives better, it's because of emotion, not because you are logically attached to life" (Hunnicutt).

"Having a name for the animals is one way of being personal" (Olsson). Several participants of this discussion give names to the animals in their charge or to the animals they study as a tool to quickly remember and recognize individuals (Hartley, Patterson-Kane) and/or as a reflection of their empathy (Moreau, Troc, Vitale). Identification numbers are kept in the records for cross-reference (Hartley, Troc). "As a clinical veterinarian I had the experience that nonhuman primate caregivers became markedly more concerned for and interested in individual animals in their charge when the identification number tags on the cages were replaced with name tags. I guess we can all relate much better to names than to numbers, and we tend to treat named animals versus numbered animals differently. The labels (numbers or names) we put on animals are irrelevant as long as we take the time to get an understanding of the subjects' needs and treat them according to those needs" (Reinhardt).

Naming can have its pitfalls. "We should remember that sometimes there are very good reasons for NOT giving laboratory animals names. When we give an animal a name, this is often because of our anecdotal impression of its appearance or behavior. But this can subsequently influence the way that we think about how an animal responds, or the motivations behind its behavior" (Sherwin). Two correspondents responded that name-giving is the result of our subjective, direct (e.g., reconnaissance observations prior to onset of data collection) or indirect (e.g., information gathered about a research subject from caretakers) experiences with a particular animal and that it is this experience rather than the name per se that preconditions our perception of the subject. It's almost impossible not to be preconditioned (Hartley, Reinhardt).