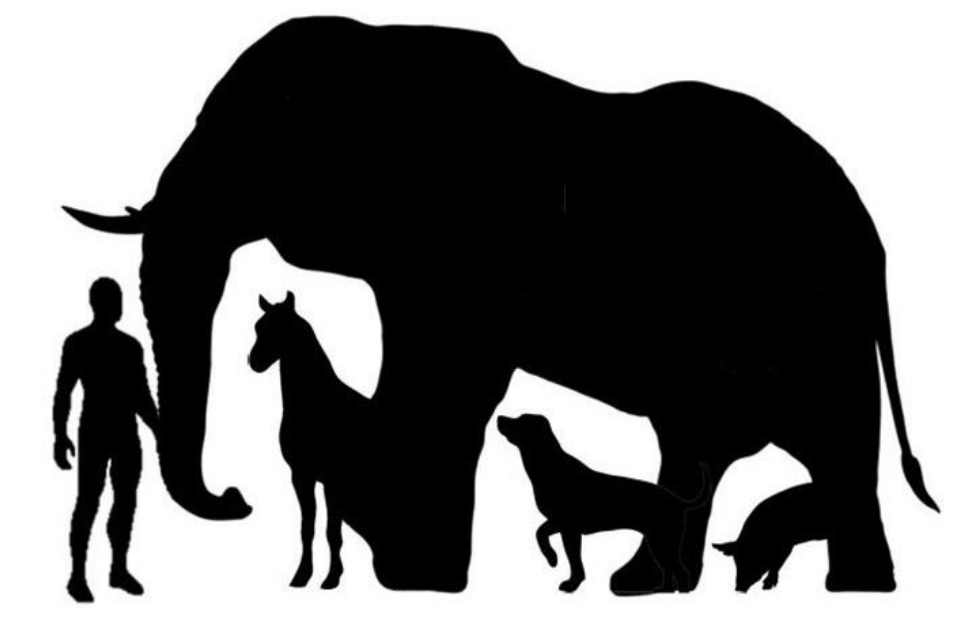


Factors Influencing Perception of Animals Commonly Involved in Animal-Assisted Therapy

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INTRODUCTION

- Human behavior and perception is influenced by physical appearance of others in human-human interactions [1].
- Evaluation and selection procedures for animals that participate in animal-assisted therapy programs rely upon the animal's temperament and behavioral characteristics [2][3].
- Horses and dogs are two of the most common animals used for assisted therapy [2].
- Few studies have evaluated the influence of the animal's physical characteristics on their impact in assisted therapy programs. [3].
- As animal-assisted therapy programs become increasingly more common [2], it is important to consider human perceptions of therapy animals and their impact on therapy outcomes and effectiveness..



Figure 1. Horse coat color images used to ask the survey question "Which horse do you prefer?"

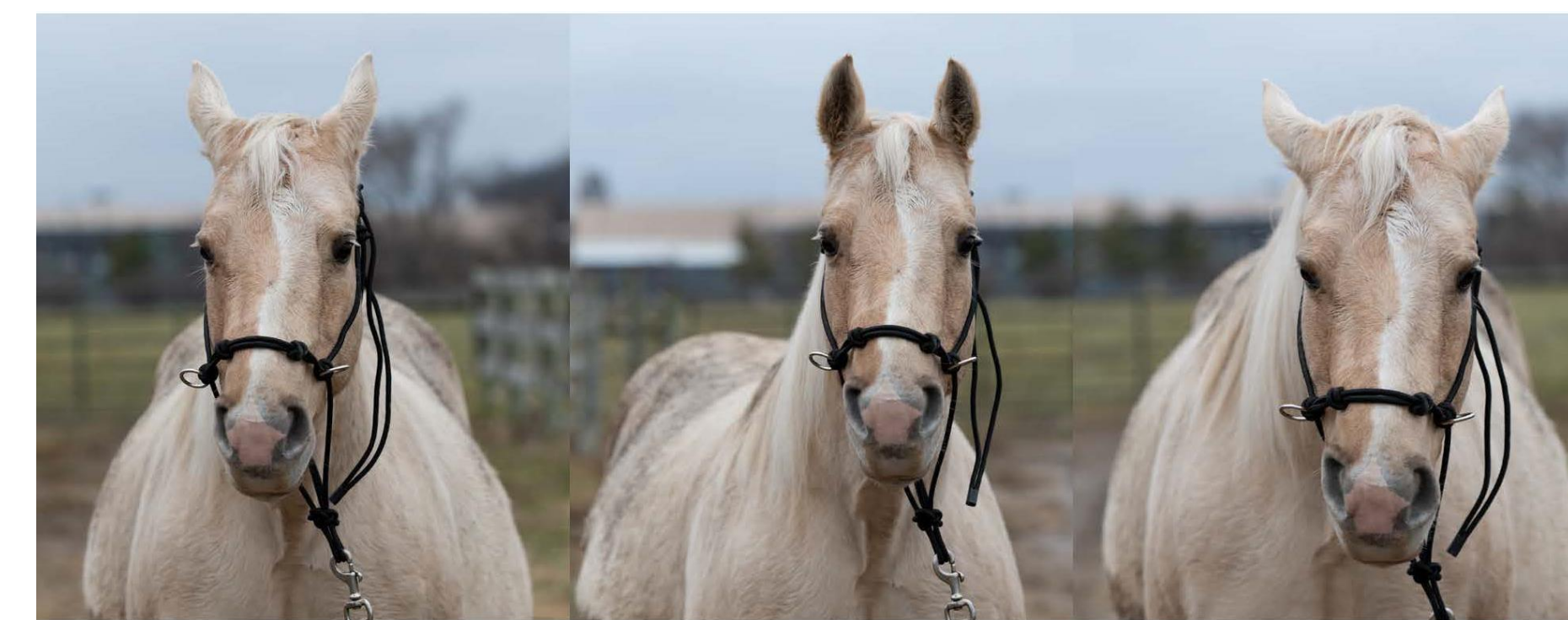


Figure 2. Horse facial expression images used to ask the survey question "Which horse do you prefer."



Figure 3. Dog coat color images used to ask the survey question "Which dog do you prefer?"

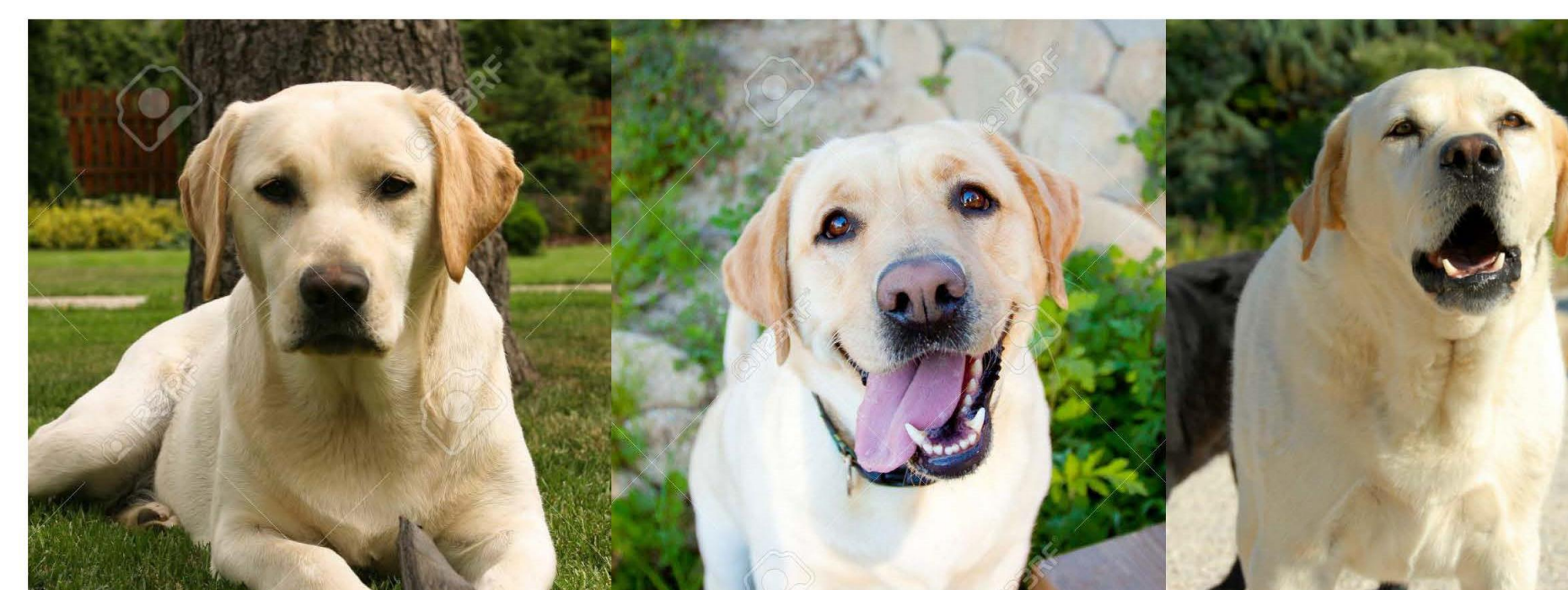


Figure 4. Dog facial expression images used to ask the survey question "Which dog do you prefer?"

DISCUSSION

- Results indicate that experience level with a particular animal species influences preference towards animals with certain physical characteristics such as coat color and facial expression.
- In contrast to previous studies in cats in which participants indicated preference for other coat colors above black, student participants in the present study more often preferred the dark coat color above both lighter options, and the broad population showed preference for the darkest dog coat color [5].
- Previous studies evaluating the success of animal-assisted therapy programs showed no indication of the effect of physical characteristics on therapeutic outcomes [4].
- Similarly, published guidelines for animal selection procedures for individual animals used in therapy programs do not indicate relevance of physical traits of animals being considered [1].

OBJECTIVE

- Evaluate the influence of coat color and facial expression on human preference for animals commonly used in assisted therapy programs.

METHODS & RESULTS

- An undergraduate student population (SP) at the Ohio State University and the general public (GP) completed an identical electronic survey. Participants (SP, n=128; GP, n=270) were asked to select their preferred image of horses and dogs with different coat colors (Figures 1 and 3) or facial expressions (Figures 2 and 4).
- Participants were also asked to select their experience level (beginner, intermediate, or advanced) with each species.
- Results were analyzed using a chi-square test in R and Microsoft Excel (Table 1).

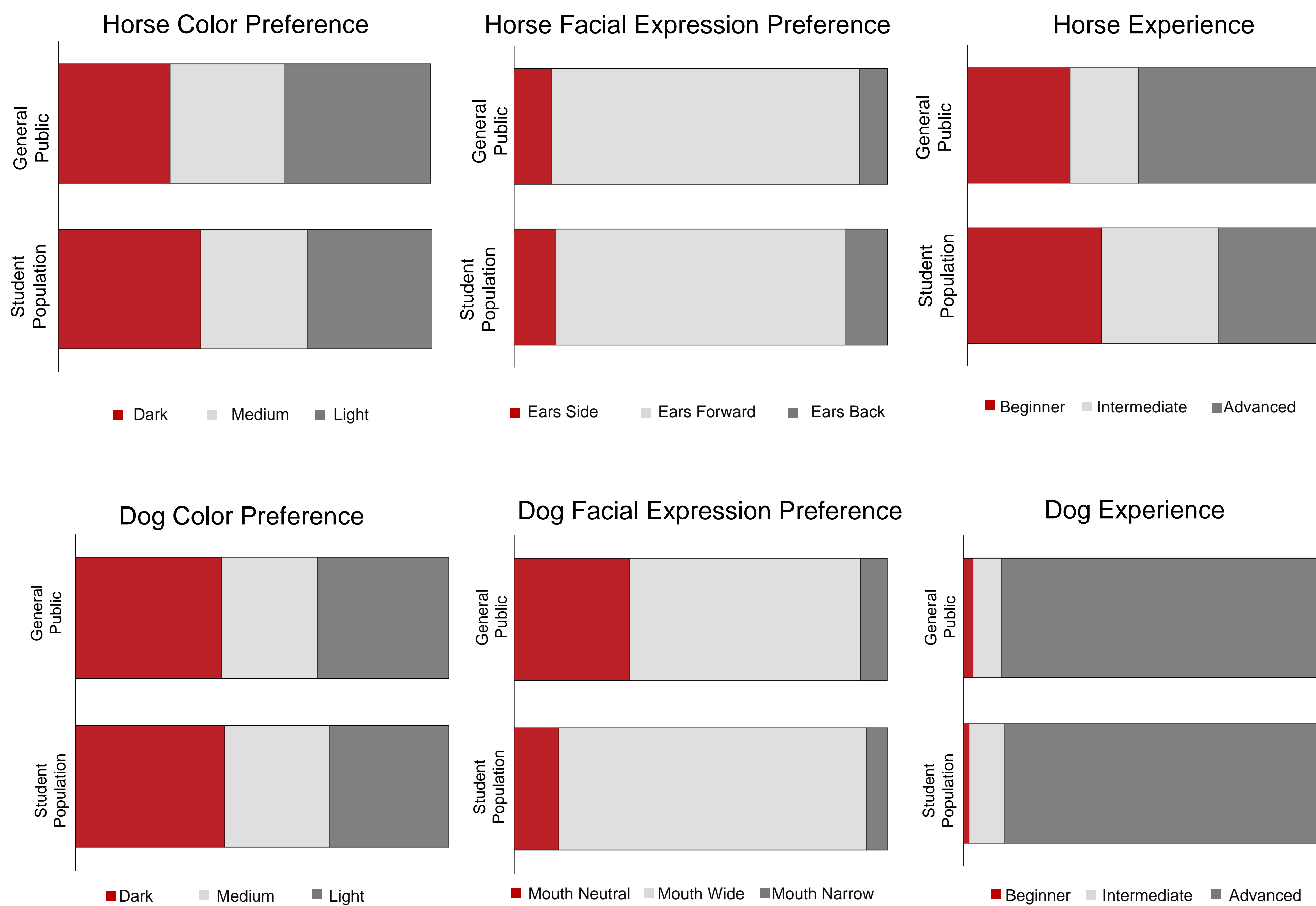


Figure 5. Participant preferences for coat color and facial expression of dogs and horses and their experience level with the animal.

Table 1: Chi-square analysis		
Horse		
	GP p-value	SP p-value
Facial Expression	< 0.001	< 0.001
Color	0.187	0.424
Experience	< 0.001	0.807
Facial Expression x Experience	0.02953	0.009
Color x Experience	< 0.001	0.793
Dog		
	GP p-value	SP p-value
Facial Expression	< 0.001	< 0.001
Color	0.041	0.198
Experience	< 0.001	< 0.001
Facial Expression x Experience	0.0361	< 0.001
Color x Experience	0.6507	0.0487

CONCLUSION

- An animal's physical characteristics and a client's previous experience with a particular animal species may influence therapeutic outcomes.

IMPLICATIONS

- Screening for preferences and experience level prior to selection of therapy animal partners may enhance therapeutic success.

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