What Do Pet Owners Believe About Dog and Cat Emotions?

Harold Herzog

Follow this and additional works at: https://www.wellbeingintlstudiesrepository.org/sc_herzog_compiss

Recommended Citation

This material is brought to you for free and open access by WellBeing International. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of the WBI Studies Repository. For more information, please contact wbisr-info@wellbeingintl.org.
What Do Pet Owners Believe About Dog and Cat Emotions?

Pet owners think dogs and cats experience both simple and complex emotions.

Posted March 30, 2023

Reviewed by Vanessa Lancaster

KEY POINTS

- While some philosophers disagree, most dog and cat owners know their pets experience emotions.

- Researchers recently asked pet owners about the number and types of emotions they observed in their cats and dogs.

- There were significant individual differences in the degree to which owners thought their pets experienced emotions.

When he gets excited, Moose, my daughter Katie’s Goldendoodle, is a bundle of joy. But when Katie leaves the house, his mood plummets. He’s down in the dumps with a
serious case of separation anxiety. In contrast, Watson, our daughter Betsy’s beagle-mix, is a laid-back canine dude—an even-tempered sweetheart with not much in the way of highs or lows.

Moose's feelings are easy to read—Watson's, not so much. But what do pet owners really know about the emotional repertoire of their companion animals? Lincoln University’s Olivia Pickersgill, Daniel Mills, and Kun Guo recently surveyed 438 dog and cat owners about their pets' emotions. Their results were fascinating and recently published in the journal Animals. (You can read the full report here.)

The researchers investigated the number and types of emotions dog and cat owners ascribed to their pets. Two hundred twenty-seven participants lived with a dog, 93 had a cat, and 68 had both a dog and a cat. They completed an online survey with demographic information about the owners and their pets and a checklist of 22 emotions the animals might experience. The survey also contained a list of behavioral cues of
The list included six primary emotions, presumed to be largely instinctive and biologically based—anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and surprise. The list also included 16 “secondary emotions,” such as guilt, embarrassment, and pride. These involve higher brain centers in the cerebral cortex and require greater cognitive capacities.

The Comparative Emotionality of Dogs and Cats

In some ways, the owners were surprisingly similar in attributions of emotions to dogs and cats. For example, as shown in this graph, among the most common emotions reported by owners of both species were curiosity, happiness, love, fear, and anxiety. Similarly, guilt, grief, embarrassment, pride, or disgust were the least common pet emotions.

But in other ways, there were substantial differences in the perceptions of canine and feline emotionality. As a group, the
dog owners said their pets experienced an average of 14.3
different emotions, while cat owners said their pets experi-
enced an average of 10.9 emotions. Dogs scored higher than
cats on 20 of the 22 emotions. However, more cat owners
than dog owners thought their pets got angry. And dog own-
ers were much more likely than cat owners to say that their
pets experienced complex secondary emotions—confusion,
pain, positive anticipation, guilt, envy, frustration, and
sadness.

Pet Owners Differ In Their Views of
Animal Emotions

Pet owners, however, do not always agree about the emo-
tional lives of their furry friends. For example, I asked my
daughter Betsy and her husband Brion to take the emotional-
ity survey as it related to their dog Watson. Betsy thought
Watson experienced 12 of the emotions, while Brion thought
Watson experienced only five of them. These differences also appeared in the emotionality scores of pet owners in the Lincoln University study. For instance, some dog owners thought their pets experienced three or four emotions, while others were convinced their dogs experienced all 22 emotions.

Why should there be such large individual differences in what pet owners think about the minds of their dogs and cats?
Men and women did not differ in the number of emotions they thought their pets experienced. Nor were the number of attributions of emotional states to pets related to their owner’s age, cultural background, or mental health profiles.

The researchers found that dog owners with more years of personal experience with dogs tended to think their pets were capable of more emotions. But the effect was quite small. In contrast, dog owners with professional experiences with animals (e.g., working in veterinary medicine or canine behavior training) tended to attribute fewer emotional states to dogs. But, again, the effect was weak.

ANIMAL BEHAVIOR ESSENTIAL READS

How Much Should I Walk My Dog and Exercise Them?

Do Animals Have Culture?
who lived with both species thought their cats experienced only eight of the emotions, while cat-only owners believed their kitty experienced 13.

Among dog and cat owners, the pet’s sex, breed, coat, or body type had no significant impact on the emotionality ratings.

![Graph showing owner reports of emotions in pets](image)

Source: Graph by Hal Herzog

**Animal Emotions Controversies**

Animal emotions are controversial. The neuropsychologist Lisa Feldman Barrett argued that emotions are a uniquely human phenomenon. In *The Guardian*, she wrote, “The idea that other animals share our emotions is compelling and intuitive, but the answers we provide may reveal more about us
ample evidence that many species experience complex emotions such as joy, happiness, grief, romantic love, and embarrassment. Indeed, the title of his *Psychology Today* blog is Animal Emotions.

Nearly all the participants in the Lincoln University study would agree with Bekoff. (Only two said their pets did not experience any emotions.) The study did, however, uncover differences between cats and dogs. The researchers suggest several possible explanations for why owners thought dogs experienced more emotional states than cats. These included owners' greater attachment to dogs, differences in the domestication history of dogs (primarily work) versus cats (primarily pest control), and the fact that owners view dogs as family members more than cats. Most controversially, Olivia Pickersgill and her colleagues suggested that pet owners may be overestimating the emotional capacities of dogs and/or underestimating the richness of the emotional lives of cats.

*ARTICLE CONTINUES AFTER ADVERTISEMENT*
know why Betsy and Brion disagreed over whether Watson experienced disgust, guilt, boredom, confusion, positive anticipation, and happiness. I’m hoping the research team’s next project will delve into individual differences in how people view the mental lives of dogs and cats.

References


So Hard To Think Straight About Animals.

Online: Hal's book website, Facebook, Twitter

More from Hal Herzog Ph.D.

Do Pets Really Save $23 Billion a Year in Health Care Costs?

A new pet industry report claims pet-ownership saves Americans $23 billion a year in medical costs.
Do You Suffer Guilt Over Owning a Pet?

While pet-owner guilt is common, it has only recently been studied.

More from Psychology Today

What Dogs Really Think, Feel, and Need

"Dogs: A New Understanding" is goldmine of what we know and a wonderful source for future research.
Why Certain Dogs Learn More From Watching People

Social learning refers to skills acquired by watching other individuals performing relevant activities.

How Horses See the World

For starters, vision may not even be their primary sense.
11 Essential Rules for a Successful Relationship

Don't break these rules that should keep you together.

Crow Cosmopolitics: Exploring Crow–Human Coexistence

Many people harbor a dislike for crows, often based on myths and negative narratives.
Stand Up Straight, Your Neurons Are Watching

Animal bodies bend and move when locomotion happens.

Companion Parrots Suffer More Than Most People Realize

Problem behaviors may be seen in the form of excessive whistling, aggression or feather damage.
8 Reasons Your Cat Will Always Be Your "Baby"

Cat owners often see their cats as their babies, despite their independent nature.

Find a Therapist

Get the help you need from a therapist near you—a FREE service from Psychology Today.

City or Postcode
Countries:

Australia  New Zealand
Austria    Singapore
Belgium    South Africa
Canada     Sweden
Denmark    Switzerland
Hong Kong  United Kingdom
Ireland    United States

Are you a Therapist? Get Listed Today