

Measuring attachment to companion animals: a dog is not a cat is not a bird

R. Lee Zasloff

Center for Animals in Society, School of Veterinary Medicine, University of California, Davis, CA 95616, USA

Abstract

Although the literature on human–animal interactions has documented the physical, psychological, and social benefits resulting from positive relationships with dogs, cats, and other kinds of companion animals, many attachment instruments include items that pertain to specific kinds of interactions with dogs. For this reason, dog owners attain higher scores on these measures than owners of cats and other types of pets. This study introduces a scale for measuring attachment in terms of the perceived comfort received from a pet. A sample of 87 cat owners and 58 dog owners completed the Comfort from Companion Animals Scale. The results showed that, when two items pertaining to dogs were included, dog owners showed a significantly higher degree of attachment. When only the 11 items pertaining to the emotional nature of the relationship were included, however, there were no differences in the scores of the two groups. The results indicate the importance of clarifying both the commonalities and differences of human interactions with various companion animal species.

Keywords: Pets; Animals; Attachment; Interaction; Measurement

1. Introduction

Many studies of human–animal interactions have explored issues regarding the attachment of people to their animal companions. To date, several standardized measures for assessing pet attachment have been developed (Templer et al., 1981; Katcher et al., 1983; Holcomb et al., 1985; Poresky et al., 1987; Lago et al., 1988; Johnson et al., 1992). These kinds of instruments have the potential advantage of providing an objective, quantitative evaluation of the human–animal relationship from the pet owners' perspective.

Because dogs and cats comprise the vast majority of animals kept as pets, instruments for assessing attachment primarily reflect the types of interactions possible with these

species. Furthermore, the dog, through both observation and tradition as 'man's best friend', tends to serve as the ideal model of animal companionship in its ability to engage in a particularly wide range of behaviors similar to those exhibited in human companionship. For this reason, relationships with pets often are evaluated based on behaviors that mainly pertain to human–dog interactions such as taking walks, traveling together, grooming, and training the animal. This is in contrast to assessing emotional aspects of the relationship such as the love, trust, loyalty, and joyful mutual activity which can characterize relationships that humans enjoy with pets of all kinds. As a result, studies that have compared the attachment of dog owners and cat owners often have reported dog owners to be more highly attached to their pets compared to owners of cats and other types of pets. For example, a study of veterinary hospital clients reported significantly higher scores among dog owners on the Relationship Maintenance subscale of the Pet Attachment Survey (PAS) (Holcomb et al., 1985), but found no differences between dog and cat owners on the Intimacy subscale of the same instrument. 'Relationship maintenance' was defined by various physical and interactive behaviors such as training, grooming, and obedience of the animal, and 'intimacy' was defined by attitudes and feelings such as regarding the pet as a family member, enjoying physical closeness, and seeking comfort from the animal. Similar results on the PAS subscales were obtained in a study of pet ownership and generativity (concern for the next generation) among young adults (Marks et al., 1994).

On the other hand, some investigations have identified both differences and similarities in the interactions possible with these two species. A study of attitudes toward dogs and cats identified separate, although overlapping, sets of attitudinal factors related to dogs and cats (Selby and Rhoades, 1981). The findings of a descriptive study (Voith, 1985) showed that dog owners were more likely than cat owners to take their pets with them on errands and trips and cat owners were more likely to allow their pets on the furniture. However, dog owners and cat owners were equally likely to view their pets as family members, talk to and share food with them, and to believe that the pets understand their owners' moods (Voith, 1985). A study of pet attachment in the general population reported no differences between dog owners and cat owners based on six items common to interactions with both species although dog owners and cat owners as a group scored significantly higher than owners of other pets (Stallones et al., 1988). The results of the latter study contributed to the more recent development of the Lexington Attachment to Pets Scale (LAPS), an instrument constructed with careful attention to excluding items which produced significant differences between dog owners and cat owners (Johnson et al., 1992).

The purpose of the present study was to examine attachment in terms of the perceived level of emotional comfort that dog owners and cat owners report receiving from their pets. It describes an instrument which focuses on the emotional aspects of human–animal relationships for the pet owner apart from the specific behavioral traits of the animal. The central hypothesis was that no differences would occur in the perceived level of emotional comfort reported by dog owners and cat owners when only emotional factors were assessed.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Development of the scale

The Comfort from Companion Animals Scale (CCAS), consisting initially of 13 items, was developed to measure the perceived level of emotional comfort owners received from pets (see Table 1). Nine of the items were derived from the postulations of Beck and Katcher (1983, p. 27) on how animals contribute to human well-being. The remaining items were taken from studies of human interactions with wildlife (Lott, 1988) and discussions among researchers at the Center for Animals in Society at the University of California, Davis, School of Veterinary Medicine. Previous pilot testing of the construct validity of this instrument (Zasloff and Kidd, 1993) was conducted by correlating scores with those on the Lexington Attachment to Pets Scale (LAPS) (Johnson et al., 1992). A coefficient of -0.68 ($P < 0.05$) was obtained (the scales are inversely related). Pilot reliability testing produced a Cronbach alpha of 0.85 ($P < 0.01$). Table 1 shows the items included on the CCAS. Responses are based on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree) so that a higher score indicates greater perceived comfort from the pet. Each respondent was given two scores: one based on all 13 items and the second eliminating items 6 and 9, concerning safety and exercise, because these two items usually are more closely associated with dogs than cats. Therefore, it was expected that when all 13 items were included in the scale, the scores of dog owners would be significantly higher and when items 6 and 9 were eliminated, there would be no differences in the scores of dog and cat owners.

The scale was included in a packet of survey materials mailed to 177 dog and cat owners living in the San Francisco area in September 1992 who were already participating in a longitudinal collaborative study with the Center for Animals in Society and the San Francisco Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA). A total of 145 individuals returned the survey forms for a response rate of 82%. Of these, 87 (60%) were cat owners and 58 (40%) were dog owners. Of the respondents, 117 (81%) were

Table 1
Items on the Comfort from Companion Animals Scale

1	My pet provides me with companionship
2	Having a pet gives me something to care for
3	My pet provides me with pleasurable activity
4	My pet is a source of constancy in my life
5	My pet makes me feel needed
6 ^a	My pet makes me feel safe
7	My pet makes me play and laugh
8	Having a pet gives me something to love
9 ^a	I get more exercise because of my pet
10	I get comfort from touching my pet
11	I enjoy watching my pet
12	My pet makes me feel loved
13	My pet makes me feel trusted

^a Items excluded on the second scoring of the CCAS.

Table 2

Significant differences in perceived comfort scores between dog owners and cat owners based on two scorings of the CCAS

Scale	Cat owners (<i>n</i> = 87)		Dog owners (<i>n</i> = 58)		<i>F</i>
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
A (13 items)	44.2	5.3	46.4	5.4	5.7 *
B (11 items)	39.6	4.8	40.1	4.8	NS

* $P < 0.05$.

female and 28 (19%) were male. Respondents ranged in age from 17 to 73 years with a mean age of 40.2. Seventeen (12%) of the participants did not give their age.

2.2. Statistical analyses

An *F* test (Dean et al., 1990) was used to determine differences in scores of dog owners and cat owners on the CCAS when the items on safety and exercise were included and when they were excluded. The level of significance was set at $P < 0.05$.

3. Results

Table 2 shows the results based on the two scorings of the CCAS. As expected, the *F* test for scores on the 13-item scale showed a significantly higher level of perceived comfort among dog owners compared with cat owners ($F(1,143) = 5.7$, $P < 0.05$). However, as hypothesized, when scores were based on the 11-item scale consisting only of emotional factors, the *F* test showed no differences in the scores of dog owners and cat owners ($F(1,143) = 0.3$, $P > 0.05$).

4. Discussion

The main hypothesis of this study was supported. When items more descriptive of dog behavior were eliminated, dog owners and cat owners showed similar scores on the CCAS. The results are consistent with those of studies cited earlier (Holcomb et al., 1985; Marks et al., 1994) that reported differences between dog owners and cat owners regarding specific interactive behaviors but found no differences in the owners' feelings of intimacy with their pets. The results underscore the importance of considering the behavioral repertoire of the particular species involved when assessing attachment (Stallones et al., 1988; Johnson et al., 1992).

This study raises important questions about the accurate assessment of human–animal attachment and shows that the role of attachment in human health and well-being is not well understood. Although dogs generally may participate in a wider variety of interactions with humans than cats and other pets by going for walks and playing outdoor games, cats can be an equally important source of unconditional love, affection, and companionship (Zasloff and Kidd, 1994a). Many positive psychosocial effects associated with cat ownership have been documented. Australian cat owners have demonstrated a higher degree of psychological health than non-owners (Straede and Gates, 1993) and older people with cats have reported reduced feelings of depression

and loneliness and an increased sense of life satisfaction (Karsh and Turner, 1988; Mahalski et al., 1988). Among men suffering from AIDS, those in poorer health have reported feeling particularly comforted by their cats (Castelli et al., 1995). Other types of small pets such as birds and rabbits can help to fulfill a variety of psychological needs (Loughlin and Dowrick, 1993) and facilitate social interaction (Mugford and M'Comisky, 1975; Hunt et al., 1992).

Studies that did not differentiate among owners of various species have documented benefits to the owners irrespective of attachment. Both older and younger women living only with a pet have reported diminished feelings of loneliness compared to women living either with pets, people or both (Goldmeier, 1986; Zasloff and Kidd, 1994b). Other studies have reported a reduced risk of heart disease (Anderson et al., 1992) and an increased survival rate following a heart attack among pet owners (Friedmann et al., 1980).

Still other investigations have shown important differences between pet owners who were more attached and those who were less attached. Under stressful life circumstances, older pet owners who indicated a strong attachment to their pets have demonstrated a reduced use of physician's services (Siegel, 1991) and lower levels of depression (Garrity et al., 1989) than those who were less attached.

Positive attitudes toward pets have been associated with happiness for unmarried individuals but not for married persons (Connell and Lago, 1984). Among nonurban married women, those who were attached to their pets were happier than those who were not attached (Ory and Goldberg, 1983). At least one study, however, demonstrated no relationship between pet attachment and measures of physical and psychological well-being (Miller and Lago, 1989).

The present study shows that there are commonalities in the emotional experience of having a close and caring relationship with a pet, irrespective of the animal's species. Other cited studies in the research literature illustrate that the linkages between health benefits to humans and the attachment to companion animals are not well understood.

Acknowledgements

The author wishes to thank Dr. Lynette A. Hart for her helpful comments in the preparation of this manuscript and Dr. Aline H. Kidd for assistance with the statistical analyses.

References

- Anderson, W.P., Reid, C.M. and Jennings, G.L., 1992. Pet ownership and risk factors for cardiovascular disease. *Med. J. Aust.*, 157: 298–301.
- Beck, A.M. and Katcher, A.H., 1983. *Between Pets and People*. G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 317 pp.
- Castelli, P., Hart, L.A. and Zasloff, R.L., 1995. The supportive role of animal companionship for men with HIV related diagnoses. Submitted.
- Connell, C.M. and Lago, D., 1984. Favorable attitudes toward pets and happiness among the elderly. In: R.K. Anderson, B.L. Hart and L.A. Hart (Editors), *The Pet Connection: Its Influence on our Health and Quality of Life*. CENSHARE, Minneapolis, pp. 241–250.
- Dean, A.G., Dean, J.A., Burton, A.H. and Dicker, R.C., 1990. *Epi Info, Version 5: a word processing, database, and statistics program for epidemiology on microcomputers*. USD, Stone Mountain, GA.

- Friedmann, E., Katcher, A.H., Thomas, S.A. and Lynch, J.J., 1980. Animal companions and one-year survival of patients after discharge from a coronary care unit. *Public Health Reports*, 95(4): 307–312.
- Garrity, T.F., Stallones, L., Marx, M.B. and Johnson, T.P., 1989. Pet ownership and attachment as supportive factors in the health of the elderly. *Anthrozoös*, 3(1): 35–44.
- Goldmeier, J., 1986. Pets or people: Another research note. *Gerontologist*, 26(2): 203–206.
- Holcomb, R., Williams, R.C. and Richards, P.S., 1985. The elements of attachment: Relationship maintenance and intimacy. *J. Delta Soc.*, 2(1): 28–33.
- Hunt, S.J., Hart, L.A. and Gomulkiewicz, R., 1992. Role of small animals in social interactions between strangers. *J. Soc. Psychol.*, 132(2): 245–256.
- Johnson, T.P., Garrity, T.F. and Stallones, L., 1992. Psychometric evaluation of the Lexington attachment to pets scale (LAPS). *Anthrozoös*, 5(3): 160–175.
- Karsh, E.B. and Turner, D.C., 1988. The human–cat relationship. In: D.C. Turner and P. Bateson (Editors), *The Domestic Cat: the Biology of its Behaviour*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge/New York/Port Chester/Melbourne/Sydney, pp. 159–177.
- Katcher, A.H., Friedmann, E., Goodman, M. and Goodman, L., 1983. Men, women, and dogs. *Calif. Vet.*, 2: 14–16.
- Lago, D., Kafer, R., Delaney, M. and Connell, C., 1988. Assessment of favorable attitudes towards pets: development and preliminary validation of self-report pet relationship scales. *Anthrozoös*, 1(4): 240–254.
- Lott, D.F., 1988. Feeding wild animals: The urge, the interaction, and the consequences. *Anthrozoös*, 1(4): 255–257.
- Loughlin, C.A. and Dowrick, P.W., 1993. Psychological needs filled by avian companions. *Anthrozoös*, 6(3): 166–172.
- Mahalski, P.A., Jones, R. and Maxwell, G.M., 1988. The value of cat ownership to elderly women living alone. *Int. J. Aging Hum. Dev.*, 27(4): 249–260.
- Marks, S.G., Koepke, J.E. and Bradley, C.L., 1994. Pet attachment and generativity among young adults. *J. Psychol.*, 128(6): 641–650.
- Miller, M. and Lago, D., 1989. The well-being of older women: The importance of pet and human relations. *Anthrozoös*, 3(4): 245–251.
- Mugford, R.A. and M'Comisky, J.G., 1975. Some recent work on the psychotherapeutic value of cage birds with old people. In: R.S. Anderson (Editor), *Pet Animals and Society*. Bailliere Tindall, London, pp. 54–65.
- Ory, M.G. and Goldberg, E.L., 1983. Pet possession and life satisfaction in elderly women. In: A.H. Katcher and A.M. Beck (Editors), *New Perspectives on our Lives with Companion Animals*. University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 588 pp.
- Poresky, R.H., Hendrix, C., Mosier, J.E. and Samuelson, M.L., 1987. Children's pets and adults' self-concepts. *J. Psychol.*, 122(5): 463–469.
- Selby, L.A. and Rhoades, J.D., 1981. Attitudes of the public towards dogs and cats as companion animals. *J. Small Anim. Pract.*, 22: 129–137.
- Siegel, J.M., 1991. Stressful life events and use of physician services among the elderly: The modifying role of pet ownership. *J. Pers. Soc. Psychol.*, 58: 1081–1086.
- Stallones, L., Marx, M.B., Garrity, T.F. and Johnson, T.P., 1988. Attachment to companion animals among older pet owners. *Anthrozoös*, 21(2): 118–124.
- Straede, C.M. and Gates, G.R., 1993. Psychological health in a population of Australian cat owners. *Anthrozoös*, 6(1): 30–42.
- Templer, D.I., Salter, C.A., Dickey, S. and Baldwin, R., 1981. The construction of a pet attitude scale. *Psychol. Rec.*, 31: 343–348.
- Voith, V.L., 1985. Attachment of people to companion animals. *Vet. Clin. North Am. Small Anim. Pract.*, 15(2): 289–285.
- Zasloff, R.L. and Kidd, A.H., 1993. What people like about cats. Paper presented at the meeting of the International Society for Anthrozoology on Ethological and Behavioural Approaches to the Study of Human–Animal Interactions, 24 July 1993, Davis, CA.
- Zasloff, R.L. and Kidd, A.H., 1994a. Attachment to feline companions. *Psychol. Rep.*, 74: 747–752.
- Zasloff, R.L. and Kidd, A.H., 1994b. Loneliness and pet ownership among single women. *Psychol. Rep.*, 75: 747–752.