

Exploring pets' own 'personality traits' and their specific social support functions

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Abstract: With the improvement of the overall living standard of society, the progress of social production methods and the increase of life and work pressure, the tendency of pets to become intimate companions in human life has become more and more obvious, and they have received more emotional attention from humans. This paper focuses on the "personality traits" of pets as studied by scholars at home and abroad, and explores the social support function of pets for humans, and finds out the in-depth reasons why pets provide psychological support for humans, in order to achieve a harmonious relationship between pets and humans.

Keywords: personality traits; social support function; pets

Pets are generally referred to as creatures that people breed for spiritual needs rather than for purely economic purposes. Traditionally, pets have referred to mammals or birds, and have been bred for pleasure and companionship. In modern society, pets have come to include fish, reptiles, amphibians, insects and even, in a broader sense, plants, which can be used for pleasure, companionship and to reduce mental stress. The World Health Organisation defines human health as being in a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being. This concept goes far beyond the traditional connotation of being healthy in the sense of being free from disease, and encompasses four main aspects: physical health, mental health, moral health and social adaptation. Pets, as companions and stress relievers, are closely related to human health [1].

1. The relationship between pets and different social groups in life

Pets enrich people's lives, and veterinary experts and biologists have found that exposure to pets can change moods, reduce illness and pain, and improve physical and mental functioning. The Harvard Health Survey also shows that people who own pets typically have lower blood pressure, a more stable heart rate and a calmer state of mind [2].

1.1. The relationship between pets and children

Animals as pets are lively teaching materials and close friends for children, helping them to build self-confidence and self-esteem, to develop a desire for leadership and responsibility, to develop compassion and love, and to help in the rehabilitation and treatment of autism in children.

1.2. The relationship between pets and the elderly

The number and proportion of "empty nesters" is growing at an unprecedented rate. How to enable the elderly to enjoy their twilight years has become a social issue that requires the active attention and support of all sectors of society. Pets help the elderly to feel relaxed, give them a sense of security and full acceptance and care, and provide them with a sense of friendship and affection. They thus have an additional companion in their lives with whom they can communicate, and their longing for affection and friendship can be partially satisfied by their pets.

1.3. The relationship between pets and people with disabilities

Guide dogs can guide the blind; working dogs can help people with disabilities to manage their daily

lives and help people with mobility problems, for example by retrieving lost items or opening doors for people in wheelchairs, or by providing support, carrying items or escorting people across the road who need help when walking. Some dogs are trained to alert deaf people to respond to special sounds, such as the sound of a doorbell, telephone bell or fire alarm.

1.4. The relationship between pets and adult health

Pets can be an effective intervention in the regulation of hypertension, bringing further balance to a person's blood pressure, heart rate, endocrine system and mental state, and relieving the mental stress that people experience during stressful work and life, leading to improved physical and mental health. Medical experts in Australia, through a survey of 6,000 people, concluded that the prevalence of heart disease is extremely low among dog owners, and that dog owners aged 20-59 in particular are at less risk of heart disease [3].

2. The relationship between the "personality traits" of pets and the personality traits of their owners

Pets bring joy and comfort to people, and many keepers affectionately refer to them as companions, even family members. Their existence has a very different meaning from that of wild animals in the natural world. In many individuals, pets are no longer 'animals', but have a role similar to that of 'humans'. Therefore, the study of the 'personality traits' of pets has emerged [4].

2.1. Defining the 'personality traits' of pets

Personality is a unique pattern of behaviour, thought and emotional response that an individual displays in interaction with the social environment, and is one of the characteristics that distinguishes a person from others. Early research on the 'personality' effects of pets focused on the effects of pets on personality differences in people, and on personality development, such as whether pet owners would be more responsible and outgoing. However, with the emergence of the concept of 'animal personality', different species of pets have been explored in terms of their unique 'personality' characteristics. Even individual animals of the same species have their own unique 'psychological traits'. For example, some dogs may be aggressive and others relatively submissive during various training activities. There also seems to be an 'evolutionary' process in the psychological structure of pets, with the more advanced the species, the more complex the 'psychological' structure. It has been found that the 'personality' of dogs and cats is similar to that of humans, with four dimensions of 'personality', three of which correspond to the Big Five's Neuroticism, Extraversion and Pleasantness, and the fourth dimension can be seen as a combination of Openness and Responsibility. The fourth dimension can be seen as the result of combining openness and responsibility. A similar 'personality' structure with five dimensions was obtained directly from the analysis of pet dogs. Using a questionnaire, Su Yanjie et al. asked owners to describe their pet's 'personality', and a factor analysis found that the 'personality' of pets could be summarised in seven main dimensions (loyalty and docility, enthusiasm and activity, aggression and calculating, shrewdness and control, fearfulness and The analysis of factors found that pets' personalities' can be summarised in seven dimensions (loyalty and docility, enthusiasm and activity, aggressiveness and calculating, shrewdness and control, fearfulness and fearfulness, capriciousness and impatience, and alertness and autonomy), which basically correspond to the Chinese Big Seven personality. These studies suggest that pets also have some individual traits that are similar to 'personality', and that these traits are increasingly being understood and categorised. The 'personality traits' of pets are also influenced by environmental factors, and can be nurtured and shaped to some extent. A favourable living environment and the care of the owner are conducive to the development of relatively positive qualities, such as gentleness, loyalty and enthusiasm. In Germany, a questionnaire survey of over 10,000 dog-owning households found that, apart from the two qualities of calmness and bravery, which are mainly influenced by the age of the pet, the plasticity of the dog's 'personality' was significantly related to the training of the owner. In addition, the 'social characteristics' of pets were significantly associated with owner companionship. In a study of rabbits, it was reported that regular cuddling by owners helped rabbits to develop docile qualities and that rabbits who spent more time with their owners had a greater tendency to socialise. This suggests that the 'personality' of pets is both innate and changes as a result of daily interactions with humans, similar to the human personality, and is the result of an interaction between innate and acquired characteristics.

2.2. *The link between the personality traits of pets and those of their owners*

Research has found that people prefer to spend time with pets that match their temperament. Research has shown that the degree to which the personality traits of the owner and the pet match is important to the ability of the two to live together harmoniously, and that only when the 'personality traits' are close will the owner be satisfied with their pet and want to stay with them. Pets whose 'personality traits' do not match those of their owners are often put up for adoption or even abandoned. The Eysenck Personality Questionnaire was administered to 147 dog owners and showed that their personality traits were highly correlated with the dog's 'personality traits'. Highly aggressive breeders were more likely to keep German Shepherds and German Police Dogs. The less aggressive individuals favoured Golden Retrievers, Labradors, etc. Another study with a sample of over 700 university students showed that those who were keen owners of aggressive dogs were more aggressive, more prone to criminal thinking, more sentimental and more likely to be overly optimistic. The higher the level of attachment to the pet, the more similar the personality traits to the pet, or the higher their own self-serving bias, the stronger their service bias towards their pet.

In general, people do not just choose pets at random or by following a trend, but they make preferences based on their own personality traits, intentionally or unintentionally. It is important to note that the 'personality' of a pet is not the result of empathy. Available behavioural evidence suggests that many pets are cognitively independent individuals who not only have different preferences for human expressions, but can also understand some verbal and body movement information. Therefore, the personality bond between pets and humans is the result of humans selecting independent 'personality traits' for their pets, rather than an unfounded or instinctive subjective imagination on the part of their owners [5].

3. Comparison between the social support functions produced by pets and those of humans

As individuals with independent 'personalities', pets are becoming part of the human social support system. Comparing and differentiating between the social support of pets and the social support of humans is one of the central themes of pet research. It has been shown that pet social support complements rather than compensates for interpersonal support and does not generally compete with or conflict with any interpersonal relationships. An earlier study found that the presence of a pet in a family system did not affect the owner's relationship with other members. The level of attachment to family members was the same with or without a pet. Therefore, the attachment between the owner and the pet was not a compensation for the lack of attachment to the family member. In addition, pets do not compete with other family members in terms of relationship closeness. A survey of urban residents showed that children and companions had no influence on the relationship between owners and pets, and that the preference given to pets as special 'family members' in the home did not create any 'jealousy' among other family members. Although human attachment to pets is different from human attachment to people, there is little difference in social function between the two, as they both provide a sense of security and maintain close relationships, and the difference between human-pet and human intimacy decreases as the level of attachment increases. For those with adequate interpersonal social support, they do not rely on pets to meet their social needs, so pet companions are not a predictor of loneliness and depression in this group. However, for those with low social support, the closeness of pet companions is a good predictor of loneliness and depression. Kurdek and his 2009 study of 975 subjects with an average age of 48 years found that when individuals were depressed and in distress, they were actually more likely to turn to their pets mentally than to their parents and siblings, but that the 'comfort' that pets could provide was not as good. However, the 'comfort' provided by pets was not of the highest order, and the social support provided by a spouse or close family member was more desirable. The results suggest that there is a hierarchy between the social support provided by pets and humans, with pets being less effective in providing 'comfort' when relatively high levels of interpersonal support (e.g. spouse) are present[6].

4. A deeper look at how pets can provide social support to humans

It is well established that pets can provide social support and emotional comfort to their owners. A deeper question is therefore asked: how can pets be so socially supportive? What is the nature of its relationship with humans? Ainsworth's Strange Situation Test provides compelling behavioural evidence for this question. At the beginning of the experiment, the owner and her dog were left alone in a room where the pet was allowed to move around freely. A stranger then entered the room, talked to the keeper

and tried to approach the pet. The keeper then leaves the room temporarily and returns after a while to comfort his pet. The results showed that throughout the experiment, the pet interacted with the keeper in a similar way to how an infant interacts with its parents, with the keeper (especially the female) not only using child language and giving the pet soothing physical comfort like a baby, but also displaying infant-like separation anxiety and searching behaviour after the keeper had left. On this basis, the relationship between pet and owner can also be divided into secure and insecure attachments. However, this type of attachment is independent of the pet's age, gender, breed and environment. It can be tentatively inferred that the pet-human relationship is more akin to that of a child-parent caregiver, and is essentially closer to the infant-parent interaction pattern. Subsequent research has shown that there is a difference in the amount of verbal communication between male and female owners on the Ainsworth Strange Situation Test, with females using significantly more child language than males, but no significant difference in behavioural data between the two, which is consistent with evolutionary accounts of sex differences in caregiving behaviour, further demonstrating the high degree of similarity between human-pet and mother-infant relationships. However, the relationship between humans and pets is an intimate one based on caregiving, unlike the true attachment between mother and child, and there are some fundamental differences between the two. Firstly, the 'infant' role of the pet in the eyes of the keeper is constant, and even in the case of an adult dog, it still sees its keeper as a parent, so the interaction between keeper and pet does not change over time in the same way as the parent-child relationship. In the experiment, although the keepers saw separation anxiety and searching behaviour in their pets, they did not ask the experimenter to shorten the separation phase as they did with their own children, either because the pet and the child were not of the same importance to the keeper, or because the keeper perceived the pet to be more independent. Evidence on the relationship between keepers and pets is still limited to external behavioural studies, and the underlying mechanisms need to be further investigated. In the human-pet relationship, the pet often acts as the object of care. From an evolutionary perspective, this relationship is not conducive to human development, as limited resources are not focused on humans themselves, but rather on caring for other species. However, it is an undisputed fact that humans benefit from their close relationship with their pets. The answer is easily obtained if the relationship is understood in terms of its formation and development. Humans are, after all, social animals. The interaction between keeper and pet is essentially one of inter-species bonding. This bond inspires a cycle of loving and being loved, much like the caring relationship between parent and child. Specifically, pets have inherently endearing qualities that are more suited to children in their infancy. This is a characteristic that makes pets a favourite and attracts the attention of their owners. In their daily interactions, the pet's reciprocal behaviour gives the keeper a sense of satisfaction, most notably in the way that they come to understand their pet in a way similar to how they understand the human individual. In some cases, the satisfaction provided by pets can even transcend human relationships, as the bond between pets and humans is very pure and almost impervious to external realities, a genuine relationship that is relatively rare in human interactions. Research comparing feline and human companions has shown that cuteness and unconditional love are two of the most prominent characteristics of feline companions, whereas human companions have the advantage of being able to communicate verbally only, as cats cannot communicate verbally, but can still give pleasure and comfort to their owners. The positive and timely feedback from pets therefore tends to stimulate and reinforce 'caring' behaviour, which in turn increases the owner's commitment to the next step. From this perspective, this 'parent-child' relationship between pets and humans has an evolutionary significance [7].

As special and important companions in human development, pets have proven themselves to be uniquely influential. In modern society, human relationships are becoming less and less interconnected, and life is becoming more stressful. People are looking for pure, non-utilitarian, safe and stable social support. As a result, the importance of pets has become increasingly important and interest in the study of pet psychology has intensified. If future psychology researchers can continue to conduct in-depth research on the relationship between pets and humans, they will be able to make pets more useful in improving people's well-being and enhancing social harmony and stability.

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