

Helicopter parenting better for pets than for kids

January 14 2015, by Yasmin Anwar

Helicopter parenting may not be the best strategy for raising independent kids. But a healthy measure of clinginess and overprotectiveness could actually be advantageous when rearing dogs and cats, according to new research from UC Berkeley and California State University, East Bay.

A Web-based survey of more than 1,000 [pet owners](#) nationwide analyzed the key personality traits and nurturing styles of people who identified as a "cat person," a "dog person," "both" or "neither."

Surprisingly perhaps, those who expressed the greatest affection for their pets also rated among the most conscientious and neurotic, suggesting that the qualities that make for overbearing parents might work better for our domesticated canine and feline companions, who tend to require lifelong parenting.

"The fact that higher levels of neuroticism are associated with affection and anxious [attachment](#) suggests that people who score higher on that dimension may have high levels of affection and dependence on their pets, which may be a good thing for pets," said Mikel Delgado, a doctoral student in psychology at UC Berkeley and co-author of the study, recently published in the *Journal of Applied Animal Welfare Science*.

The results echo those of a 2010 study by University of Texas psychologist Sam Gosling, a UC Berkeley graduate, which showed dog owners to be more extroverted, but less open to new experiences, and cat

owners to be more neurotic, but also more creative and adventurous.

While previous studies have focused on people's attachment to their pets, this is the first U.S. study to incorporate the principles of human attachment theory - which assesses the bond between parents and children or between romantic partners—with pet owners' personality types, including whether they identify as a "dog person" or "cat person."

It is also the first to find a positive correlation between neuroticism, anxious attachment and the care of and affection for pets, said CSU-East Bay psychologist Gretchen Reevy, co-author of the paper and a graduate of UC Berkeley.

Delgado and Reevy recruited male and female pet owners of all ages through the Craigslist classified advertising website, their personal Facebook pages and pet-related pages on the Reddit news and social networking site. Nearly 40 percent of those surveyed said they liked dogs and cats equally, while 38 percent identified as dog people and 19 percent as cat people. A mere 3 percent favored neither.

The online questionnaire was based on both human and animal attachment assessments, including one that measures the "Big Five" overarching human characteristics (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness and neuroticism). Pet owners were also rated according to the Lexington Attachment to Pets Scale, which measures affection for pets, and the Pet Attachment Questionnaire, which gauges "anxious attachment" and "avoidant attachment."

People who score high on anxious attachment tend to need more reassurance from the objects of their affection, and in the survey those tended to be younger people who chose a cat as a favorite pet.

Conversely, people who rate highly on avoidant attachment, which refers

to a less affectionate and more withdrawn temperament - and can inspire such rejoinders as "commitment-phobe" in romantic relationships - are much less needy. Both dog and cat lovers scored low on avoidant attachment, suggesting both personality types enjoy close relationships with their pets.

"We hypothesized that more attentive and affectionate pet owners would receive higher affection scores and lower avoidant attachment scores, as higher levels of avoidant attachment would suggest distancing behaviors between the individual and their pet," Delgado said.

Delgado and Reevy plan to dig more deeply into the link between neuroticism and affection for and dependence on one's pet.

"We will investigate further whether greater [affection](#) for and greater anxious attachment to one's pet, and [neuroticism](#), are associated with better care and understanding of the [pet](#)'s needs," Reevy said.

Provided by University of California - Berkeley

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