

Empathetic people experience dogs' expressions more strongly

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Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. People with higher emotional empathy evaluate the facial expressions of both dogs and other people more quickly and intensely. Credit: Miiamaaria Kujala and Sanni Somppi

Human empathy can even extend to dogs: empathetic people interpret

dogs' facial expressions more intensely.

A study by the University of Helsinki and Aalto University explored how empathy and other psychological factors affect people's assessments of the facial images of dogs and humans.

The results show for the first time that human empathy, or the ability to share someone else's feelings or experiences, also affects perceptions of the [facial expressions](#) of pet dogs.

"Empathy affected assessments of dogs' facial expressions even more than [previous experience](#) of dogs, probably because the face is a biologically important stimulus for humans. Our earlier studies have showed, however, that when considering the entire body language of dogs, previous experience of dogs increases in importance," explains postdoctoral researcher Miia Maaria Kujala.

Based on previous results, the researchers knew that people with higher emotional empathy evaluated other people's expressions more quickly, accurately and often also more intensely.

However, Kujala notes that it is possible that they over-interpret the expressions of dogs.

"Empathy speeds up and intensifies the assessment of dogs' facial expressions, but defining the accuracy of such assessments is currently unreliable."

A threat is easier to perceive than happiness

Communication based on facial expressions has been studied in social mammals for decades. Darwin was already able to perceive similarities in mammals' expressions, but it has taken until the present day for

researchers to begin to understand similarities between the [emotional expressions](#) of different species.

The Animal Mind research group has previously demonstrated that dogs clearly recognise the threatening expressions of both humans and other dogs.

"They gazed intensively at threatening dogs, but quickly looked away from threatening humans. Also human subjects were good at recognising the threatening expressions of dogs and considered them much more intense than similar human expressions," Kujala describes.

In contrast, people assessed happy faces more intensely in the case of humans than dogs. The researchers suggest that this may be due to the tendency to consider the faces of one's own species generally more pleasant.

On the other hand, people may find it difficult to recognise happiness in dogs based on their facial expressions. This is indicated by the fact that people experienced in dog training estimated the happy expressions of [dogs](#) as happier than others did.

Produced collaboratively by the University of Helsinki's Faculty of Veterinary Medicine and Faculty of Behavioural Sciences as well as Aalto University's Department of Neuroscience and Biomedical Engineering, the study entitled Human Empathy, Personality and Experience Affect the Emotion Ratings of Dog and Human Facial Expressions has been published in the *PLOS ONE* journal.

More information: Miiamaaria V. Kujala et al, Human Empathy, Personality and Experience Affect the Emotion Ratings of Dog and Human Facial Expressions, *PLOS ONE* (2017). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0170730](https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0170730)

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