

Seven personality and behaviour traits identified in cats

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Credit: Milla Ahonen from photos of Heikki Siltala (catza.net/fi)

Researchers at the University of Helsinki have developed a new comprehensive questionnaire for surveying feline personality and behavior. A dataset of more than 4,300 cats representing 26 breed groups revealed seven personality and behavior traits, with significant

differences observed between breeds.

Cats are our most common pets, and feline [behavior](#) is increasingly being investigated due to a range of behavioral problems. Another topic of interest in addition to behavior traits is personality since it can be connected to behavioral problems.

"Compared to dogs, less is known about the behavior and personality of cats, and there is demand for identifying related problems and [risk factors](#). We need more understanding and tools to weed out problematic behavior and improve cat welfare. The most common behavioral challenges associated with cats relate to aggression and inappropriate elimination," says doctoral researcher

Seven feline personality and behavior traits

In a [questionnaire](#) designed by Professor Hannes Lohi's research group, personality and behavior were surveyed through a total of 138 statements. The questionnaire included comprehensive sections on background and health-related information. By employing, among other means, factor analysis to process the data, seven personality and behavior traits in all were identified.

- Activity/playfulness
- Fearfulness
- Aggression towards humans
- Sociability towards humans
- Sociability towards cats
- Litterbox issues (relieving themselves in inappropriate places, precision in terms of litterbox cleanliness and substrate material)
- Excessive grooming

"While the number of traits identified in prior research varies,

activity/playfulness, fearfulness and aggression are the ones from among the traits identified in our study which occur the most often in prior studies. Litterbox issues and excessive grooming are not personality traits as such, but they can indicate something about the cat's sensitivity to stress," Mikkola adds.

Differences in the prevalence of traits seen between breeds

In addition to individuals, clear personality differences can be found between breeds. In other words, certain personality and behavior traits are more common among certain cat breeds.

"The most fearful [breed](#) was the Russian Blue, while the Abyssinian was the least fearful. The Bengal was the most active breed, while the Persian and Exotic were the most passive. The breeds exhibiting the most excessive grooming were the Siamese and Balinese, while the Turkish Van breed scored considerably higher in aggression towards humans and lower in sociability towards cats. We had already observed the same phenomenon in a prior study," says Professor

The researchers wish to emphasize that no pairwise comparisons between breeds were carried out at this juncture.

"We wanted to obtain a rough idea of whether there are differences in personality traits between breeds. In further studies, we will utilize more complex models to examine factors that affect traits and problematic behavior. In these models, we will take into consideration, in addition to its breed, the cat's age, gender, health and a wide range of environmental factors," Mikkola says.

Assessing reliability and validity

Feline behavior and personality can be studied, for example, through questionnaires aimed at cat owners. Such questionnaires can measure feline behavior in the long term and in everyday circumstances, which is impossible in behavioral tests. Furthermore, cats do not necessarily behave in test settings in a way typical of themselves. Due to their subjective nature, the reliability of the questionnaires must be assessed before the data can be exploited further.

"Internationally speaking, our study is the most extensive and significant survey so far, and it provides excellent opportunities for further research. The reliability of prior feline behavioral questionnaires has not been measured in such a versatile manner, nor are they as comprehensive as this one. Establishing reliability is key to making further analyses worthwhile and enabling the reliable identification of various risk factors," says Lohi.

The researchers reached out to cat owners who responded to the questionnaire one to three months ago, requesting them to fill out the questionnaire again or ask another adult living in the same household to respond to the questionnaire regarding the same cat. The goal was to assess the questionnaire's reliability both temporally and between respondents. Based on two additional datasets accumulated through this method, it was possible to evaluate the reliability of the questionnaire temporally and between respondents.

"By comparing the responses, we noted that the responses provided for the same cat were very similar, while the personality and behavior traits were found to be reproducible and reliable. We also examined the validity of the questionnaire or whether it measures what it intended to measure. In these terms, too, the questionnaire functioned well," says Mikkola.

The research conducted by Lohi's group will make it possible to identify

genetic, environmental and [personality](#) factors relating to problematic feline behavior.

More information: Salla Mikkola et al, Reliability and Validity of Seven Feline Behavior and Personality Traits, *Animals* (2021). [DOI: 10.3390/ani11071991](#)

Provided by University of Helsinki

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