

Do people everywhere care less about their cats than their dogs?

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Do canines get more care? Some studies have suggested pet owners are less emotionally attached to and less willing to finance care for cats than dogs, possibly because of cats' behavior: cats may be perceived as caring

less about humans and needing less care in return. But these studies are often conducted on non-representative samples and don't consider possible cultural differences in attitudes to pets. A team of scientists led by Dr. Peter Sandøe of the University of Copenhagen decided to investigate further.

"We and others have found that people are willing to spend much less on their cats than on their dogs," said Sandøe, first author of the study in *Frontiers in Veterinary Science*. "We wanted to find out whether cats could eventually end up having the same high status as dogs do today."

The scientists employed a survey company to recruit representative samples of adult pet owners from three countries: Denmark, Austria, and the United Kingdom. These three western and central European countries are similar in many ways, but they all urbanized at different points in history: the UK earliest, Denmark latest, and Austria between the two. The scientists hypothesized that a more distant history with rural animals among the [general population](#) is a cultural factor that might affect societal attitudes towards pets today.

The scientists' final sample of [pet owners](#) consisted of 2,117 people who owned either dogs or cats: 844 dog owners, 872 cat owners, and 401 owners who owned both dogs and cats. These respondents were asked to answer questions aimed at understanding a variety of different dimensions of care.

These questions included the Lexington attachment to pets scale, which aims at understanding owners' [emotional attachment](#), as well as questions about how much they invest in veterinary care and their expectations for available care.

Caring in different countries

The scientists found that people appeared to care more about their dogs than their cats in all countries across all measures. They had higher attachment scores for their dogs, insured their dogs more often, generally expected more [treatment options](#) to be available for dogs, and would pay more for those treatments.

However, there were striking differences in attitudes between countries. Although the preference for dogs was only slight in the UK, in Austria the preference was more marked, and in Denmark it was very marked.

"While people care more about their dogs than their cats in all countries, the degree of difference varied dramatically between countries," said Sandøe. "It doesn't therefore seem to be a universal phenomenon that people care much less about their cats than their dogs. We suggest instead that the difference is likely to depend on cultural factors, including whether the animals spend a lot of time with their owners in the home."

The pattern repeated across other measures. The difference between dog and cat owners' reported emotional attachment was greater in Denmark than the other countries, and Danish owners were much less likely to have bought insurance for their cats than their dogs. The difference in willingness to pay for treatment was again much greater in Denmark.

"There seems to be no natural limit to how much people will end up caring about their cats compared to their dogs," concluded Sandøe. "The British are often portrayed as a nation of cat lovers, which is certainly confirmed by our study. The Danes have a long way to go but they may eventually get there."

Pets around the world

This may be due to a more recent more agricultural past, where most

animals are kept at a greater distance, and dogs work much more closely with humans than cats. However, other factors could be involved. For instance, people may take more care to insure their dogs because dog treatment is more expensive, or report greater attachment to dogs because the dogs help them in everyday life—for instance, with exercise.

"Our study only looks at three countries located in central and western Europe," cautioned Professor Clare Palmer of Texas A&M University, a co-author of the paper. "It raises intriguing questions regarding what comparative studies of other countries might find. Perhaps there are [countries](#) where the level of care for and attachment to [cats](#) is, in fact, higher than [dogs](#)?"

More information: Do people really care less about their cats than about their dogs? A comparative study in three European countries, *Frontiers in Veterinary Science* (2023). [DOI: 10.3389/fvets.2023.1237547](#)

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