

my cats, at home

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Human-Feline Relationships: Cats as Babies

Myrna Milani

You don't need to listen to people talk about cats for very long to realize that something about the species elicits the full range of human emotions even among the most ardent cat lovers. Consider what goes through Mary Stewart's mind late one night when she discovers that her beloved Persian, Hairy, has repeatedly sprayed the door of her new home. Part of her wants to carry her "furry little boy" to his satin pillow at the foot of her bed as usual, while another wants to whack him soundly on his furry behind for fouling her property. To understand how and why this happens, this month we'll begin looking at how people and cats relate to each other and how this may affect the cat's health and behavior, and the human-feline bond.

"But I'll always love Hairy, no matter how angry he makes me!" insists Mary, guiltily putting down her rolled up newspaper and squirt gun.

While that may be true, we know from studies of the human-animal bond that Mary's and Hairy's feelings about each other may effect a whole range of physiological parameters from heart and pulse rate, to cholesterol and triglyceride levels, to the immune response. Although this may strike us as quite amazing, in fact Ivan Pavlov—of bell-ringing, drooling-dog fame—discovered this many years ago and called it the Effect of Person.

Consequently pet owners experiencing medical and/or behavioral problems with their pets as well as any people involved with the animal must get a grip on themselves first. Otherwise they'll need to contend with all the negative effects of their own feelings on the animal in addition to whatever medical or behavioral problem the animal has.

In general people relate to cats in one of three ways. Sometimes we adopt an anthropomorphic view and see our pets as fur-covered babies. Other times we opt for the chattel view and treat our cats like animate objects. When we assume the third orientation, we take an integrated view that incorporates any time, financial, emotional, or physical limits we may have into the relationship.

Love Me, Love My Cat

Most likely as a result of the cat's inherent maternal/sexual nature, many people find it very easy to relate to cats as furry little humanoids, usually as somewhat mentally impaired babies.

"Ooooh, Mummy wuvs her wittle pussy cat!" Mary gushes to Hairy as she ties a bow around his neck.

Although many people consider relating to an animal like a human the highest tribute we can pay them, in fact it represents the easy way out. When she treats Hairy as her baby, Mary completely ignores all of his unique feline qualities. She feeds him from her own plate rather than that "yucky stuff in the can," unmindful that even her most elegant meal might not fulfill his unique nutritional requirements. She accuses him of being spiteful, mean, or stupid for spraying the door because she knows nothing about normal cat behavior and this is how she would respond to a person who did the same thing... Minus the rolled up newspaper and squirt bottle, but no never knows.

However Mary's choice to evaluate her pet in human terms makes the problem worse rather than better for Hairy. Now he must add the stress of what he might very well consider her spiteful, mean, or stupid response to that caused by the terrifying sound of the neighbor's

motorcycle that compelled him to spray in the first place. And that can set him up for medical problems, too.

Suppose in addition to the stress of his new environment Mary's response causes Hairy to experience a flare-up of his "nervous gut," and he adds diarrhea to his spraying. Now Mary's in a real bind. Unlike his spraying which she perceives as spiteful, she perceives his diarrhea as something over which he has no control. Because of this, she would never whap him with her rolled up newspaper or zap him with her water pistol at such times, even when he has diarrhea on her new brand wall-to-wall carpeting.

"That would be like kicking someone when they're down," she asserts with certainty. "That's inhumane!"

Although many aspects of her anthropomorphic orientation spell trouble for her pet, Mary's tendency to respond more fearfully to behavioral than medical problems looms like a particularly dark cloud on the horizon of their relationship.

This occurs for two reasons:

1. Mary doesn't know that much about human "mental" compared to "physical" problems.

2. Even if she did, normal feline behaviors are often so different from human ones, applying the human standard to cats is iffy at best.

Needless to say, this lack of knowledge

leads to some rather erratic owner responses. When Hairy sprays the door, Mary feels betrayed because she'd never do such a horrible thing. Besides, she tells herself, he knows how much she loves new home. But when he succumbs to a stress-related diarrhea the day after she chases him around the house screaming like a maniac, she babies him more than ever because, after all, she experiences diarrhea on occasion and knows how miserable she feels under those circumstances.

The result of Mary projecting her beliefs and feelings on her cat is a total breakdown in human-feline communication. Mary blames Hairy's spraying on his spitefulness and his diarrhea on "some virus." The fact that the spraying and the diarrhea are both effects of the same cause—his fear—never crosses her mind. And because it never crosses her mind, the chance of her helping him by eliminating it doesn't cross her mind either.

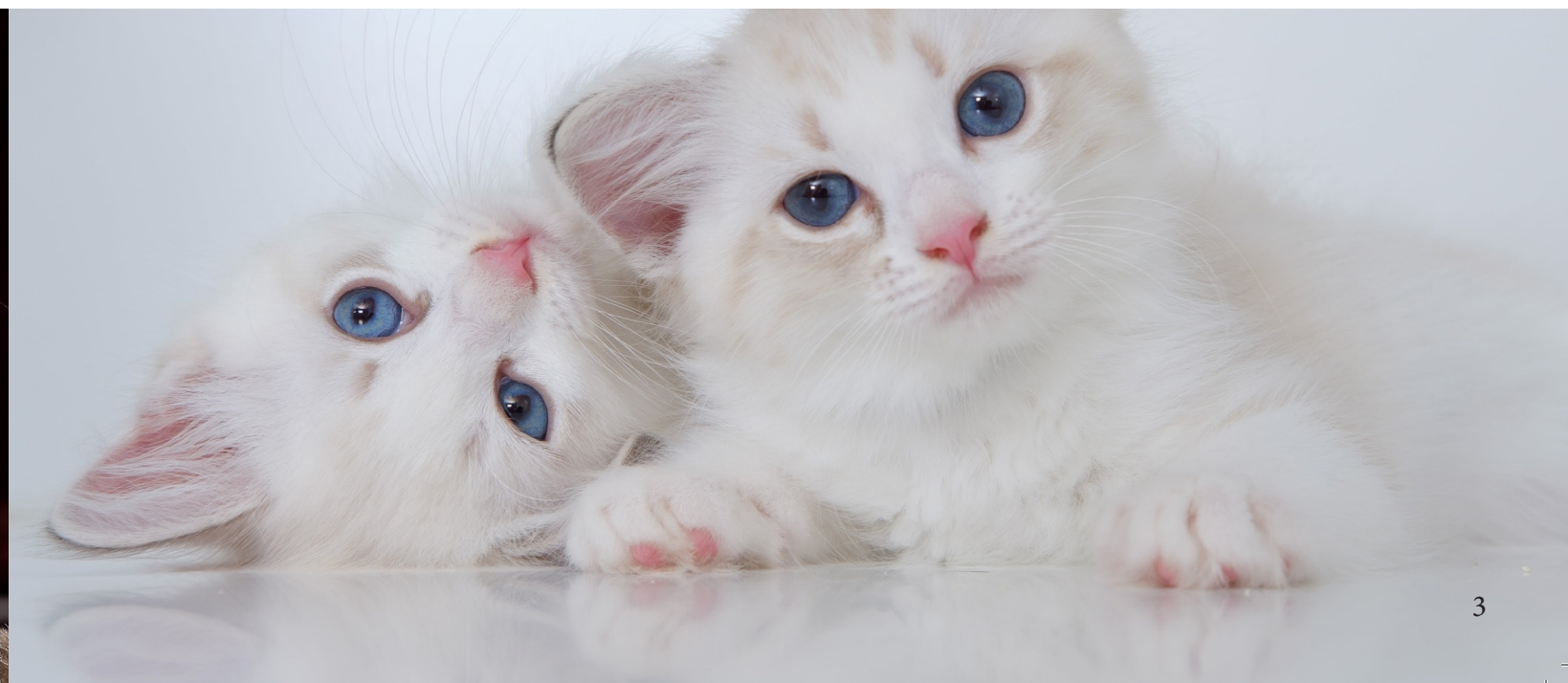
I use Mary and Hairy moving into their new home as an extreme example, but in reality we all treat our cats anthropomorphically from time to time. The challenge is to determine whether that approach is detrimental to our pet's health, behavior, and the quality of our psychological bond, preferably before we treat our pets this way, but at least before it causes problems.

"So how do I know if something that

seems so right and natural to me might negatively affect Hairy's health, behavior, or our relationship?" Mary shakes her head in bewilderment.

One good way is to keep track of how you interact with your cat for a week and jot down which, if any, of your responses are based on your own feelings about what you would do or feel in that situation and put an A (for anthropomorphic) after them. Then review your list again and determine whether your behavior results from your emotions (E) or solid knowledge (K) of normal feline physical and behavioral needs. If your list sports a lot more Es than Ks, it's time to beef up your feline knowledge.

As we'll discover time and time again, the problem isn't how we relate to our cats, but whether solid knowledge of their needs as well as our own guides us.



Not the Cat's Meow? The Impact of Posing with Cats on Female Perceptions of Male Dateability

Lori Kogan, Shelly Volsche

Simple Summary:

People use dating sites to look for both long-term and short-term potential partners. Previous research suggests that the presence of a pet may add to women's perceptions of male attractiveness and dateability. This study sought to understand to what degree, if any, the presence of a cat has on women's perceptions of men. Women responded to an online survey and rated photos of men alone and men holding cats on measures of masculinity and personality. Men holding cats were viewed as less masculine; more neurotic, agreeable, and open; and less dateable. These results varied slightly depending whether the women self-identified as a "dog person" or a "cat person." This study suggests that a closer look at the effects of different companion species on perceived masculinity and dateability is warranted.

Abstract:

The aim of this study was to investigate whether men were considered more attractive when posing for a photo alone or holding a cat. Prior research suggests that women view pet owners as more attractive and dateable than non-pet owners; however, this effect was strongest with dog owners. We hypothesized that men posing with cats would be more attractive than those posing alone. Using an online survey, women viewed images of a man posing alone or with a cat and rated the men on the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) and the Big Five Inventory. Women viewed men as less masculine when holding the cat; higher in neuroticism, agreeableness, and openness; and less dateable. These findings suggest that pets continue to play a role in women's mate choices and dating preferences, but that a closer look at the effects of different species of pets is warranted.

Keywords: dating; cats; personality; sex roles; human-animal interactions

1. Introduction

People use dating sites for various reasons. Some use the sites to find a long-term partner while others are looking for a casual, short-term encounter. Depending on their reason for using online dating platforms, the qualities and traits each person seeks in a partner may vary. For example, an individual looking for a long-term relationship may want to find someone caring and responsible, while someone seeking a casual, short-term relationship may focus more on physical attractiveness.

Buss [1] identified these distinctions as long-term and short-term mating strategies, and argued that, while women may initially seek a physically masculine partner ("good genes") for short-term

mating, they still often evaluate that partner as a potential long-term mate. Research since the early 1990s has further refined this understanding to emphasize the influence of key factors such as: (1) the timing of a woman's ovulatory cycle; (2) age and life history; (3) current relationship status; and (4) cultural factors defining what is "manly" [2]. However, it is worth noting that, despite these variables, women under the age of 30 seem to consistently prefer men who are higher in physical and behavioral masculinity.

Fiore and colleagues' [3] research on attractiveness in online dating profiles supports the connection between ratings of masculinity and women's positive perceptions of profiled men as "attractive."

When participants were asked to rate online profiles that included both photos and free text descriptors, high masculinity ratings were the key predictor of overall attractiveness. Likewise, men's attractiveness was connected to perceptions of photos as trustworthy and extraverted.

Mitchell and Ellis' research [4] may help inform how pets in men's dating profile photos may influence the viewer's perception of the man as masculine or feminine, and even perceptions regarding sexual orientation. A college sample of 485 individuals, aged 18-23, watched short videos of two men playing a popular board game and then answered a series of questions regarding the men in terms of labels, sex roles, and personality traits. The authors found that when labeled a "dog person" the men were perceived as more masculine than when labeled a "cat person." This is congruent with Perrine and Osbourne's [5] findings that self-identified or externally labeled "dog persons" were perceived as more masculine and independent.

As relationships between humans

and companion animals continue to evolve, pets are becoming increasingly important in the lives of their owners. A growing body of literature suggests that many people perceive their pets as members of the family, up to and including the role of child [6-8]. Because of this, pets are often relevant in the formation and development of new romantic relationships. Gray et al. [9] found that women consider how potential partners behave around pets when determining whether to pursue or continue a relationship. They also found that women self-report more attraction to pet owners compared to non-owners. This hypothesis was supported by Gueguen and Ciccoti's study [10] that found men were more successful in obtaining women's phone numbers when accompanied by a dog (28.3%) than when they approached women alone (9.2%).

When comparing dog and cat owners, dog owners have been rated as having more potential as a mate than cat owners [9]. This may be due to perceived differences between dogs and cats as companions. Dogs are typically recognized as being more social than cats, and thus requiring more attention and direct care [11 - 14]. Cats are perceived as more solitary and may interact less directly or less frequently with humans. While both species require care, perhaps being viewed with a dog suggests a greater ability to connect and care for another being.

Because the association with a pet appears to increase a person's rated attractiveness, we hypothesized that men posing with cats would be considered more attractive and desirable for short-term casual dating than when posing alone. In addition to attractiveness, we predicted that the cat's presence would make the men seem more trustworthy, gentle, and caring, alluding to the possibility of a potentially valuable long-





term mate and future father. However, we recognize the possibility that a women's identification as "dog person" or "cat person" may influence their ratings. To this end, we hypothesized that women who identify as a "dog person" may be less likely to perceive a "cat person" as dateable.

4. Discussion

This study found that college-age women viewing a photo of a man alone versus a photo of the same man holding a cat rated the man holding the cat as less masculine; higher on neuroticism, agreeableness, and openness; and ultimately, less dateable in the short or long term. Yet, it is important to note that these findings were influenced by whether the female viewer self-identified as a "dog" or "cat" person, suggesting that American culture has distinguished "cat men" as less masculine, perhaps creating a cultural preference for "dog men" among most heterosexual women in the studied age group.

Prior research [1,2] suggests that women desire different traits in a partner for short-term mating strategies (i.e., hook-ups) compared to long-term mating strategies (i.e., committed relationship).

For short-term relationships, women are more likely to seek a man high in physical masculinity (i.e., large chins, certain facial features) and behavioral masculinity (i.e., dominance display). Part of females' short-term mating strategies also includes evaluating the potential mate for suitability as a long-term partner. In the case of our study, women viewed the photo of the man alone as more masculine and more dateable for both short-term and long-term pairing. This supports the hypotheses that women are more likely to seek masculinity first, then consider other components of the potential mate (i.e., perceived personality, suitability for long-term relationship).

Because Gray and colleagues [9] found that women evaluated potential dates positively based upon ownership of a pet, we hypothesized that the photo of a man holding a cat would be deemed more dateable. Contrary to this hypothesis, only female respondents who identified as a "cat person" found him more desirable for short-term or long-term relationships. Gosling, Sandy, and Potter [15] found that self-identified "dog people" and "cat people" differ in personality markers. In their study, over 4000 participants completed the Big Five Inventory and self-identified

as a "dog person", "cat person", both, or neither. The analysis found that self-identified "dog people" were higher on extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness, while "cat people" were higher on neuroticism and openness. Our participants echo this cultural belief. The women who participated in our survey identified the man as more neurotic and open when holding the cat, and more extraverted when viewed alone. It is possible that the women completing our survey unconsciously defaulted to the idea that the man alone was a "dog person" or, perhaps, more willing to date a "dog person". Interestingly, the presence of the cat did enhance agreeableness, perhaps suggesting that agreeableness is a trait present in the identity "pet owner" and alluding to why Gray and colleagues [9] found women were more interested in dating pet owners than non-owners, regardless of pet type.

It is interesting to note that, while Male 1 and Male 2 were not rated by the same respondents, the significant differences in the Big Five ratings for Male 1 (increased Extraversion when alone, increased Agreeableness, Neuroticism, and Openness when posing with the cat) were not found in Male 2. Because these men were not rated by the same

samples, it is difficult to say if this is the result of variation in the sampled women or some perception of the men themselves. While attempts were made to control variables of individual dating preferences, these confounding variables are inherently present in any sort of comparative survey, contributing to statistical noise in the results. Despite the discrepancy in the Big Five ratings, it is relevant that in both instances, the photos of the men alone were perceived as more masculine and the photos of the men holding cats were less likely to be perceived as dateable, except by "cat people".

The current study used a short form of the Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI) (BEM 1974). The BSI had been used previously to determine whether self-labeling or external labeling as a dog or cat person is related to one's self-reported personality as masculine, feminine, independent, athletic, or dominant. Surveying 126 undergraduates, Perrine and Osbourne [5] found that self-identified or externally labeled "dog persons" were perceived as more masculine, regardless of the respondent's gender, experience with pets, or self-label. This effect did appear stronger for male "dog persons". Being labeled "cat person" did not

interact significantly with perceptions of femininity or masculinity. They did, however, find that "dog people" rated significantly higher on independence than "cat people". It is possible that our respondents also viewed the photo of the man with the cat as less independent and therefore less attractive.

Given that our respondents perceived the photo of the man holding a cat as more feminine, it is also possible they subconsciously (or consciously) perceived him as being gay. Kranz, Pröbstle, and Evidis [16] found that homosexual men were rated as more feminine and less or equally masculine than heterosexual men as rated by college aged men and women. If this indeed remains a cultural perception, then women who perceive a man holding a cat as less masculine could, potentially, believe he is also gay. This may be compounded by the perceptions of him as more neurotic, as well. However, additional research would be needed to confirm this possibility.

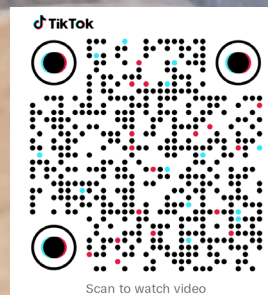
This supports our first finding, that our respondents perceived a man holding a cat as less masculine and less dateable for both short-term encounters and long-term relationships. This returns us to Buss's [1] assertion that

women prefer men with "good genes", often defined as more masculine traits. Clearly, the presence of a cat diminishes that perception.

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One TikToker's
experience with
cat talking
buttons ---->

Why do cats go
batshit crazy in
the middle of the
night?



Articles

“Human-Feline Relationships: Cats as Babies.” MMilani.Com, 3 Nov. 2014, [mmilani.com/writing/articles/cats/human-feline-relationships/](https://www.pexels.com/photo/writing/articles/cats/human-feline-relationships/).

Kogan, Lori, and Shelly Volsche. “Not the Cat’s Meow? The Impact of Posing with Cats on Female Perceptions of Male Dateability.” *Animals* : an open access journal from MDPI vol. 10,6 1007. 9 Jun. 2020, doi:10.3390/ani10061007

“Why do cats go batshit crazy in the middle of the night?” WhyCatWhy.com, 2016. <https://www.whycatwhy.com/why-do-cats-go-crazy-at-night/>

Photos

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Sami Aksu
Funny Picture of a Cat in a Crown Sitting Next to a Candle
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Julie’s phone

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