

Pets, Empathy and Moral Development

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Abstract

This study explored the relationship between current and childhood pet ownership/bonding, and current levels of empathy and moral reasoning. The subjects completed the Mehrabian and Epstein Emotional Empathy Scale (1972), the Defining Issues Test (Rest, 1974) for moral reasoning, and the Companion Animal Bonding Scale (Poresky, Hendrix, Mosier, & Samuelson, 1987) for pet bonding. Females scored significantly higher than males on the empathy scale. A nearly significant trend was found for male pet owners to report higher levels of empathy than male non-pet owners, and for female pet owners to report lower levels of empathy than female non-pet owners. A trend was also found for those subjects who got their first pet during the psychoactive stages (before the age of six or after the age of ten) to report higher levels of empathy than those who got their first pet during other stages of development.

Pets, Empathy and Moral Development

The role of pets in human development has recently received increasing attention. Much of this attention has been focused on the human/animal bonding process and its effects on humans across the lifespan. In particular, there are numerous arguments for the existence of a unique child-animal bond and that it can be important in a child's social development. A well-recognized factor in the relationship between children and companion animals is the unconditional love of the animal for the child. The animal accepts the child "as is" and does not offer critical feedback (Levinson, 1969, 1972; Beck & Katcher, 1983). In addition, Levinson (1978) stated that raising pets can aid in the development of children's empathy, self-esteem, self-control, and autonomy. Lack of empirical support for these statements, according to Poresky, Hendrix, Mosier, and Samuelson (1987), may be due to the common assumption that pet ownership is synonymous with pet attachment, a lasting affectional bond with a companion animal. In spite of this lack of empirical support, evidence for the existence of positive effects of pets on human development has been reported.

Davis & Juhaz (1983) conducted an exploratory study on factors in self-esteem of early adolescents. The participants were asked to list things that made them feel satisfied and good about themselves; pets were ranked below parents and above other

adults in their lives, such as teachers. Poresky et al. (1987), in support of Juhaz's findings, reported evidence for a positive effect of childhood pet bonding, especially during the psychoactive stages, on adult self-concept. Also, Wolfe (1977) discussed adolescent use of pets as "transitional objects" in that pets reduced stress, provided consolation, and aided in the adaptation to traumatic events. Further evidence of the importance of pets on human development is seen in the work of Hyde, Kurdik, and Larson (1983), who reported a positive effect of pet ownership on interpersonal trust and empathy in adolescents.

With regard to empathy development, Levinson (1978) suggested that pet nurturing may aid a child in moving away from his/her egocentric view of the world, and that empathy develops as this movement occurs. Since an animal is a non-verbal creature and cannot relay his needs and feelings in words, a pet owner must be receptive to subtle cues from his pet, such as movements, sounds, and facial expressions. Pet-owner communication entails a capacity on the owner's part to imagine how another feels and to mentally step into another's place, somewhat experiencing that which the other is experiencing. Levinson further adds that this behavior between owner and pet can be generalized to an individual's relations with other humans (Levinson, 1978). These ideas of understanding others and experiencing others' situations are seen in the two factors that

the literature supports as comprising empathy: the cognitive factor, which is the ability to understand another's situation, and the emotional factor, the sharing of another's feelings (Gladstein, 1983; Brems, 1988; Shantz, C., 1974).

Much of the existing literature on empathy indicates that there is a positive relationship between empathy and moral development. Kohlberg (1969) said that the ability to take and share the perspectives of others is central to and necessary for the process of moral development. This relationship has been supported empirically. Kalliopuska (1983) found evidence in 9-12 year old children of a positive relationship between moral judgment and empathy, specifically the cognitive pole of empathy, which involves putting oneself in another's position. Roe (1980) reported that individuals who have a high level of empathy in early childhood will tend to develop a high level of internalization of moral values later in life. In addition, Hogan and Dickstein (1972) said that adults who make mature moral judgments tend to be well-socialized, autonomous, and empathic. Thus, a positive relationship between empathy and moral reasoning has been found to exist in both children and adults, with childhood empathy development affecting adult, as well as childhood, moral reasoning.

Although evidence has been provided linking pet ownership with empathy and empathy with moral development, no data completing the chain of pet ownership/bonding, empathy, and moral

development currently exist. The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between pet ownership/bonding and empathy, and the consequences of that relationship in terms of moral development. Based on the existing research on pet ownership, empathy, and moral reasoning, the following hypotheses were generated: 1) Current pet owners will report higher levels of empathy and moral development than non-pet owners. 2) Current pet owners who report higher levels of pet bonding will also report higher levels of empathy and moral development. 3) Subjects who owned pets during their childhood will report higher levels of empathy and moral development than those who did not. 4) Participants who report higher levels of bonding to their childhood pets will report higher levels of empathy and moral development than participants who reported lower levels of bonding. 5) The effects of childhood pet ownership on empathy and moral development will be strongest for those participants who got their first pet during the psychoactive stages (before the age of six or after the age of ten) .

Method

Subjects

Subjects included 99 male (57%) and 74 female (43%) undergraduate students enrolled in an introductory psychology course at Texas A&M University. The mean age for subjects was 19.25, SD = 1.3 . See Table 1 for a subject age distribution. Of the subjects, 143 (84%) were classified as either sophomores

or freshmen . See table 2 for a subject classification distribution. Participation in the study fulfilled a course requirement.

Procedure

After signing an informed consent statement, subjects completed a battery of questionnaires. The Companion Animal Bonding Scale, consisting of eight items concerning the participant's bonding behavior with his or her childhood and/or current pet was included to assess their relationship (Poresky et al., 1987). Each item was rated on a five-point scale from always(4), generally(3), often(2), rarely(1) to never(0). A sample item is, "How often did you hold, stroke, or pet your companion animal?" A total score was obtained by summing the eight items. The subjects were asked to complete the scale in relation to both their current companion animal and their childhood companion animal, if applicable. Companion animal was defined as being the pet to which subjects felt closest and saw as most important. Poresky et al. (1987) found that an SPSS-X reliability analysis of the internal reliability of the scale yielded a Cronbach alpha of 0.77 for the childhood scale and 0.82 for the contemporary scale. Construct validity of the scale is shown through significant correlations between the Pet Attitude Scale (Templer Et al., 1981) and the childhood and contemporary bonding scale of 0.39 and 0.40, respectively (Poresky et al., 1987).

Mehrabian and Epstein's (1972) Empathy Questionnaire was used to measure emotional empathy. The 33-item scale consists of intercorrelated subscales which measure related aspects of emotional empathy. The subscales included are: Appreciation of the Feelings of Unfamiliar and Distant Others; Sympathetic Tendency; Willingness to be in Contact with Others Who have Problems; and A Tendency to be Moved by Others' Positive Emotional Experiences. It has been found that the subscale intercorrelations are all significant at the .01 level and exceed .30 in all instances. The split-half reliability for the entire measure is 0.84. The measure also shows discriminant validity, having a .06 correlation with the Crowne and Marlowe (1960) Social Desirability Scale (Mehrabian & Epstein 1972).

Finally, the Defining Issues Test (DIT), developed by Rest, Cooper, Coder, Masanza, and Anderson (1974) was used to measure moral development. Specifically, the DIT measures the degree to which principled moral reasoning is used in resolving social moral dilemmas (Rest 1990). The participants are presented with six moral dilemmas, and are required to rank the most important considerations used in deciding what action one ought to take in response to these dilemmas. For instance, for the moral dilemma of whether a husband, Heinz, should steal an extremely highly priced drug for his dying wife, participants are asked to consider such issues as "Isn't it only natural for a loving husband to care so much for his wife that he'd steal?", "Whether

or not a community's laws are going to be upheld", and "Is Heinz willing to risk getting shot as a burglar or going to jail for the chance that stealing the drug might help?". The provided statements are based on Kohlberg's moral stages and were designed to exemplify characteristics of specific stages. Those responses that represent principled moral thinking (stages 5 and 6) are summed, yielding a numerical measure of moral reasoning (P score). Test-retest reliability coefficients range from the high 0.70's to the 0.80's (Rest, 1990).

Results

Of 173 subjects, 91 (53%) reported that they currently owned a pet. 156 (90%) reported that they had owned a pet at some time prior to entering college (a childhood pet). Interestingly, only 14 (9%) subjects reported that they did not currently own a pet and had never owned a pet in the past. See table 3 for a pet ownership distribution. A distribution of the kinds of pets that participants reported they currently own is presented in Table 4, and that of childhood pets is shown in Table 5. Thirty-six percent of the subjects reported that they currently owned a dog, 9% reported that they currently owned a cat, while only 4% reported that they currently owned a bird, reptile, or rodent. 63% of the subjects reported that they had owned a dog in the past, 24% reported that they had owned a cat, and 2% reported that they had owned a bird, reptile, or rodent.

It will be recalled that Hypothesis 1 predicts that current

pet ownership will be positively related to current levels of empathy and moral reasoning. In this hypothesis, as well as in others, lies the assumption that empathy and moral development are positively correlated. This relationship was not supported ($r = .049$). Means for empathy and DIT-P scores are shown in Table 6. Males scored significantly lower ($M = 17.80$) than females ($M = 47.00$) on the empathy scale ($F(1,153) = 51.96, p < .001$). These empathy scores are similar to those reported by Mehrabian and Epstein (1971). DIT-P scores in the current study are similar ($M = 28$) to those reported as being the average for college students ($M = 27$; Rest, 1990).

A One-way Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was done on empathy with current pet ownership. However, no significant relationship was found. Using the same analysis, no significant relationship was found between current pet ownership and moral reasoning, either. See Table 7 for mean empathy and DIT-P scores in current pet owners and non-owners. From these results, it seems that current pet ownership does not affect empathy or moral reasoning.

A 2×2 (sex x current pet ownership) MANOVA was done on both empathy and moral reasoning to determine the existence of an interaction between Current pet ownership and Sex. No significant Sex x Ownership effect was found for moral reasoning. However, regarding empathy, a Sex x Ownership interaction approached significance ($F(1,151) = 2.28, p < .15$). Although not

significant, there appears to be a trend for males who own pets to be more empathic ($M = 21.2$) than males who do not own pets ($M = 14.1$) and for females who own pets ($M = 44.6$) to be less empathic than females who do not own pets ($M = 49.8$). See Figure 1.

Hypothesis 2 proposes that bonding with a current pet is positively related to empathy and moral development. However, there appears to be no relationship between current pet bonding and empathy ($r=.03$) or moral development ($r=-.14$), in the present study. Thus, the level of bonding a person has with his/her pet is not associated with levels of empathy or moral reasoning.

Hypothesis 3 predicts that subjects who owned pets during their childhood will report higher levels of empathy and moral reasoning than those who did not own pets in childhood. See Table 8 for mean empathy and DIT-P scores in childhood pet owners and non-owners. A one-way MANOVA was done on empathy, as well as on moral reasoning. No significant effects of childhood pet ownership on empathy or on moral reasoning were found.

A 2x2 (Sex by Childhood ownership) MANOVA on empathy was used to determine the existence of an interaction effect. No significant interaction effect was found. However, a significant main effect for sex was found ($F = 24.27$, $p < .001$), with females showing higher levels of empathy than males. The same statistical procedure was done on moral reasoning and no significant effect was found. Thus it seems that in males and

females alike, levels of empathy and moral development do not depend on whether or not they owned a pet during childhood.

Hypothesis #4 predicted that subjects who report higher levels of bonding with their childhood pet will report higher levels of empathy and moral development than those who report lower levels of bonding. However, this was not supported. It seems that childhood pet bonding is not correlated with empathy ($r=-.110$) nor with moral reasoning ($r=.03$). A significant positive correlation between childhood pet bonding and current pet bonding was found ($r=.35$). Thus, it appears that people tend to bond with their current pet at the same level to which they bonded with their childhood pet.

Hypothesis 5 stated that the relationship of pet ownership to empathy and moral development will be strongest for those subjects who had their first pet during the psychoactive stages (before the age of six or after the age of 10). See Table 9 for mean empathy and DIT P scores for the three age groups of childhood pet ownership. Using one-way MANOVA, no significant effect for age of ownership on moral reasoning was found. A one-way MANOVA was also done to determine the relationship between age of ownership and empathy. Although no significant results were found, there appears to be a trend that is consistent with Hypothesis 5. Subjects who owned their first childhood pet before the age of six or after the age of ten reported higher levels of empathy than those who owned their first pet between

the ages of six and ten ($F(2,152) = 2.2$, $p < .15$). See Figure 2.

Discussion

In general, the results do not support the hypotheses put forward. It was found that pet ownership in and of itself, whether childhood or current, does not seem to be related to current levels of empathy or moral reasoning. This finding contrasts with Levinson's (1978) idea that raising pets can aid in the development of empathy. The finding also calls into question Hyde, Kurdik, and Larson's (1983) report that current pet ownership has a positive effect on empathy in adolescents (Hyde et al. 1983).

Another interesting finding that has implications for all of the stated hypotheses is the fact that empathy and moral reasoning, as measured in the present study, are not related. This suggests that an individual might demonstrate relatively sophisticated levels of moral reasoning, but not have the ability to share another's feelings, and vice versa. This is inconsistent with Kohlberg's idea that sharing the perspectives of others is necessary for and central to the process of moral development (Kohlberg, 1969). The finding that empathy and moral reasoning are not related may also call into question much past research in the area (Kaliopouloska, 1983; Roe 1980; Hogan & Dickstein 1972). Although Kaliopouloska (1983) included a modified form of the Mehrabian & Epstein Emotional Empathy Scale (1972), a combination of the MEEE and the Defining Issues Test (Rest et al.

1974) has not been used in past research to study the relationship between empathy and moral reasoning. It would be beneficial for future research to investigate the possibility that the inconsistency found is, at least in part, a function of the way that the constructs of empathy and moral reasoning were operationally defined in the present study.

An intriguing, yet not significant trend was seen in current pet ownership and empathy when males and females were looked at separately. It seems that males who currently own pets tend to report higher levels of empathy than males who do not own pets. However, females who own pets tend to report lower levels of empathy than females who do not own pets. If this finding were to be confirmed by further research, it would be interesting to investigate whether males and females own pets for different reasons and to look closely into what these differences may be. Generally, although the results were not significant, the existence of a trend seems to suggest that the relationship between pets and empathy is more complicated than was expected and involves more than simply pet ownership or pet bonding.

Another finding that was not significant but that nevertheless is of interest concerns the notion that the age that an individual got his/her first pet will affect the current level of empathy in that individual. It was hypothesized that subjects who got their first pet during the psychoactive stages (before the age of six or after the age of ten) would be more affected by

the pet ownership than those who did not get their first pet during the psychoactive stages. Indeed higher levels of empathy were reported by subjects who got their first pet during the psychoactive stages. Though not significant, this trend is compatible with the findings of Poresky et al. (1987) concerning the effects of childhood pet bonding on adult self-concept. The trend also agrees with the basic Freudian idea that events that occur at certain critical times during childhood (ie. psychoactive stages) affect development to a greater extent than events that occur at other stages in development (Baldwin, 1980). Further investigation into the role that age plays on the relationship between pet ownership and empathy is merited by this trend.

As with pet ownership, the hypotheses stating that pet bonding would influence levels of empathy and moral reasoning were not supported. The findings do not support the idea that the lack of distinction between pet ownership and pet bonding could be why the effects of pets are often not empirically demonstrated (Poresky et al. 1987). In particular, the effects that pets have on the development of empathy and moral reasoning involve more than pet ownership or bonding. The complicated nature of the relationship is reflected in the trends that were found involving age of ownership and sex of owner. It would be interesting for further research to address the ways in which pet ownership and bonding might interact with social variables such

as available social support and sex roles to influence empathy and moral reasoning. It would also be beneficial for subsequent research to involve varied operational definitions of empathy and moral development to determine more closely the existence of a link between pet ownership/bonding, empathy, and moral reasoning.

Table 1

Subject Ages

Age	N	%
17 or under	1	.6
18	49	28.5
19	68	39.5
20	34	19.8
21	8	4.7
22	6	3.5
23	5	2.9
24	0	.0
25	0	.0
26 or over	1	.6

Table 2

Subject Classification

Classification	N	%
Freshmen	92	54.1
Sophomore	51	30.0
Junior	18	10.6
Senior	7	4.1
Other	2	1.2

Table 3

Male and female pet owners and non-owners

	Current Ownership		Childhood Ownership	
	Owners	Non-owners	Owners	Non-owners
Males	53	46	88	11
Females	38	36	68	6

Table 4

Kinds of current pets

Type of Animal	N	%
Cat	15	9.2
Dog	58	35.6
Reptile	3	1.8
Bird	0	.0
Rodent	3	1.8
None	82	50.3

Table 5

Kinds of childhood pets

Type of Animal	N	%
Cat	40	24.1
Dog	105	63.3
Reptile	1	.6
Bird	2	1.2
Rodent	1	.6
None	17	10.2

Table 6

Mean empathy and DIT scores

	Empathy		DIT	
	<u>M</u>	SD	<u>M</u>	SD
Males	17.80	26.27	17.34	6.88
Females	47.00	23.20	17.97	7.55
Total	30.42	28.83	17.61	7.16

Table 7

Mean Empathy and Moral Reasoning Scores for Current Pet Owners and Non-pet Owners

	Empathy			Moral Reasoning		
	M	SD	N	M	SD	N
Current Pet						
Males	21.17	27.68	46	17.17	6.99	53
Females	44.61	25.65	36	19.08	7.87	38
Total	31.22	29.01	82	17.77	7.58	91
No Current Pet						
Males	14.10	24.42	42	17.54	6.83	46
Females	49.77	20.03	31	16.81	7.12	36
Total	29.25	28.67	73	17.22	6.93	82

Figure Caption

Figure 1. Mean empathy scores for males and females as a function of current pet ownership.

Current Pet Ownership Empathy

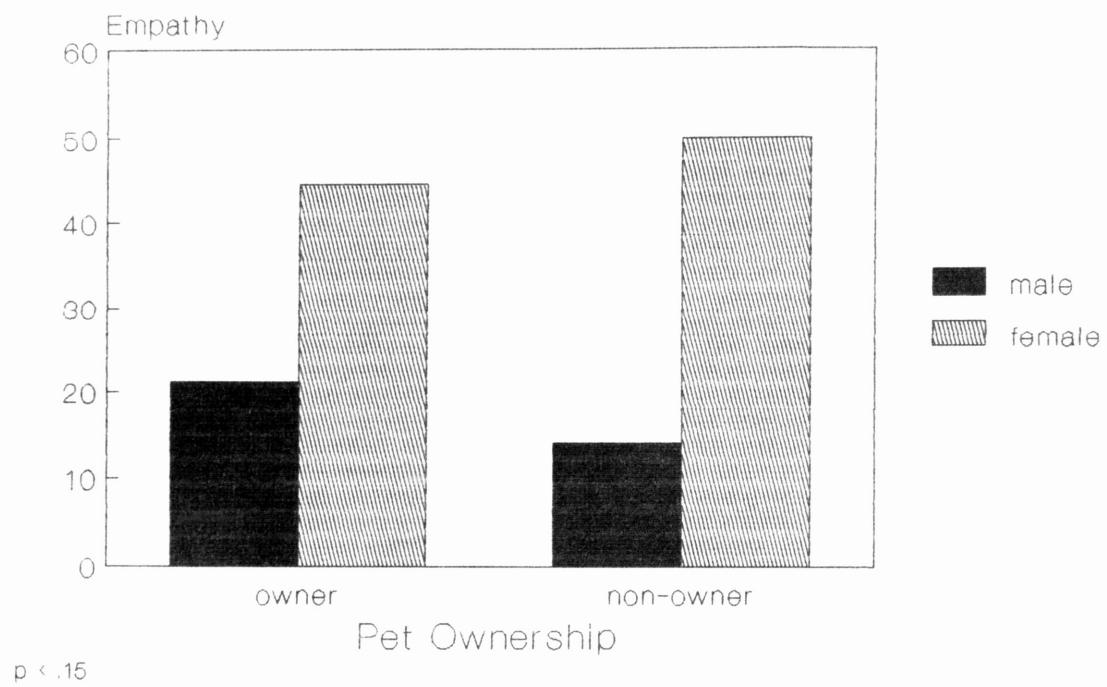


Table 8

Mean Empathy and Moral Reasoning Scores for Childhood Pet Owners and Non-pet Owners

	Empathy			Moral Reasoning		
	M	SD	N	M	SD	N
Childhood Pet						
Males	17.18	26.77	78	17.13	6.66	88
Females	45.57	22.53	69	17.80	7.57	68
Total	29.73	28.57	147	17.31	7.17	156
No Childhood Pet						
Males	22.60	22.59	10	19.09	8.63	11
Females	69.50	25.09	4	20.00	7.69	6
Total	36.00	31.34	14	19.41	8.08	17

Table 9

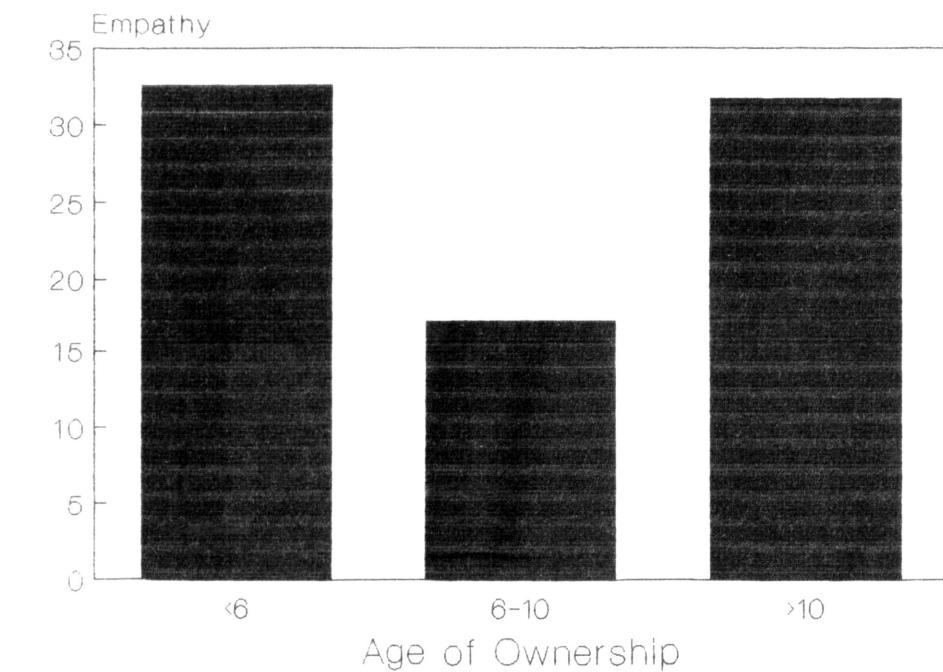
Effects of Age of Ownership on Mean Empathy and Moral Reasoning Scores

Age of Ownership	Empathy			Moral Reasoning		
	<u>M</u>	SD	<u>N</u>	<u>M</u>	SD	<u>N</u>
< 6	32.55	30.67	49	17.91	7.84	58
6 - 10	17.06	38.40	18	16.86	5.81	22
> 10	31.73	24.90	89	17.42	7.26	94

Figure Caption

Figure 2. Mean empathy scores as a function of age of childhood pet ownership.

Age of Childhood Pet Ownership Empathy



p < .12

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