

The Relationship between Empathy, Perception of Pain and Attitudes toward Pets among Norwegian Dog Owners

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Abstract:

Anthropomorphism, attachment level, and belief in animal mind, as well as owners' level of empathy and attitudes toward their pets, are some of the factors that affect human-animal interactions. Owners' ability to identify painful conditions in their pets may have important consequences for the welfare of these animals. In addition to characterizing the typical Norwegian dog owner, the aim of this work was to study the relationship between empathy, attitudes, and perceived animal pain. A sample of 3,413 dog owners in Norway received an internet-based questionnaire (QuestBack™), to which 1,896 responded. The questionnaire included four parts: demographics, the Pet Attitude Scale (PAS), the Animal Empathy Scale (AES), and the Pain Assessment Instrument (PAI). For the PAI, participants were presented with 17 photos, showing dogs experiencing painful situations of varying degrees, and were asked to rate the level of pain they believed each animal was enduring, using a Visual Analogue Scale (VAS). Results showed that Norwegian dog owners had very high levels of animal-directed empathy and equally high levels of positive attitudes toward pets. There were differences based on gender, childhood pet keeping, income and education. Differences were also found rooted in owners' use of their dog, whether kept for companionship or hunting, as well as household size, an indication of human social relations. A strong, positive correlation ($r = 0.58$) was found between animal-directed empathy and positive attitudes toward pets. Empathy was found to be the best predictor of how people rated pain in dogs. The correlations were, however, moderate, indicating that other processes are also involved when observing animals in pain.

Keywords: [ATTITUDES](#); [EMPATHY](#); [HUMAN-ANIMAL RELATIONSHIP](#); [PAIN](#)

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