Here's Why Your Dog Might Not Be As Cute As You Think

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New research shows the importance of cuteness in the human-animal bond.

Posted Dec 21, 2015

I always thought our yellow lab Tsali was the cutest dog in our neighborhood. But a study by Pauleen Bennett's Australian Anthrozoology Research Group at La Trobe University has given me second thoughts. The lead author of the study was Pinar Thorn. The researchers investigated attachment to pets, asking what's more important: a dog's personality or how cute it is?

To pull off the study, the researchers needed to assess dog personality and owners' levels of attachment. This part was easy as Bennett's team had previously developed standardized tests for both canine personalities and for owner attachment. Their Monash Canine Personality Questionnaire is a doggie version of tests that measure the Big Five personality traits in humans. The attachment measure was the Monash Dog Owner Relationship Scale. It assesses three dimensions of the strength of the bonds between people and dogs. The researchers also gave the participants a second measure of attachment developed by researchers in England - the Dog Attachment Questionnaire. This scale measures four dimensions of attachments to companion animals.

But what about cuteness? Thorn and her colleagues discovered there was no instrument to measure how cute dogs are, so they made their own. Their Canine Cuteness Scale consists of a single question “Rate your dog on a scale from 1 (not cute at all) to 6 (really cute).” (For statistical analysis purposes, the researchers transformed the scores to a 10 point scale.)

The Canine Cuteness Effect

In their first study, 668 Australian dog owners (90% of them women) completed the two attachment questionnaires (a total of seven subscales) and the canine personality measure (five subscales). They also evaluated the attractiveness of their pet using the new dog cuteness scale. The participants were also invited to send the researchers high resolution head shots of their dogs.

Here is what the researchers found.

- Neither cuteness nor any of the five aspects of canine personality were highly related to the attachment scores of the owners. In stat-speak, the correlations between cuteness and the dog personality traits with owner attachments were "statistically significant" but fairly low.
• However, cuteness and "Training Focus" (the canine personality trait which includes attributes like intelligence, reliability, and cleverness) were the traits most highly related to the strength of the human-dog bond.
• Cuteness was more important than any of the dog personality traits for three of the seven dimensions of owner attachment.

In other words, a dog's cuteness is at least as important as temperament when it comes to the strength of the human-animal bond. The researchers named this new finding The Canine Cuteness Effect. They define this as “the tendency for modern dog owners to report stronger relationships with dogs they perceive to be cute.”

**Is Cuteness In The Eye Of The Beholder?**

But the researchers wondered whether the owners' cuteness ratings of their dogs were influenced by their dogs' personalities. Perhaps, for example, easy going or smart dogs are perceived as cuter by their owner because of the dogs' personalities. And also they wanted to know if owners thought their dogs were cuter than they actually were.

In a second study, the researchers asked 873 individuals not involved in the first study to rate the attractiveness of some of the dogs in the first study. These evaluations were based on 42 of the high resolution head shots sent to researchers by participants in the first study. Each subject in Study 2 rated the cuteness of one of the dogs in the photographs. In addition, based on the photograph, they used the canine personality test to estimate what they thought the dogs temperament might be like.

Here are the results.

As predicted, owners thought their dogs were a lot cuter than non-owners did. (See the graph.) Indeed, 35 of the 42 dogs were rated cuter by their owners than they were by the non-owners.

![Graph by Hal Herzog](source: Graph by Hal Herzog)
• Interestingly, there was absolutely NO relationship between the cuteness ratings by the owners of these 42 dogs and the average ratings of the same dogs by non-owners.
• Dogs rated as cute by the non-owners were also perceived as being particularly nice (more “amicable”) on the canine personality test.

The Bottom Line

The researchers reported that cuteness, dog personality, and attachment are inter-related. Cute dogs are perceived as having more desirable personality traits. In addition, being strongly attached to your dog may give you an inflated view of how cute your pet really is.

No study is perfect, and as the authors pointed out, a couple of factors might have influenced their results. For example, most of the participants were women and, as you might expect, the participants tended to be highly attached to their pets. In addition, part of the difference in the cuteness ratings of owners and non-owners might have been due to the fact that Study 2 involved ratings of photographs rather than real dogs.

I suspect, however, that the researchers are on to something when they concluded that cuteness does matter in the formation of bonds between people and pets and that dog owners tend to think their pets are cuter that they actually are.

And I do know that Tsali was the cutest dog in our neighborhood. It’s a true fact.

(Post script: I tried – but failed - to find a study showing that human parents think their own children are cuter than the kids actually are. Tell me if you know of any research supporting this hypothesis.)

Reference
