

Research suggests that pets provide a unique insight into their owners' personalities, and that dogs have a better sense of humour than cats.

The work, carried out by Prof Richard Wiseman (University of Hertfordshire) involved asking over 2000 owners to rate their personality on several factors (e.g., sociability, emotional stability, and sense of humour), make the same ratings for their pets, and indicate how long they had owned their pet.

“The results revealed significant similarities between the personality of owners and their pets. Previous studies have revealed that owners often show a physical resemblance to their pets, and this work suggests that they may also think alike’, commented Wiseman. “Interestingly, this similarity increased over time, suggesting that pets may slowly come to adopt their owner’s personality, or vice versa”.

Large differences also emerged between the personalities of pet owners. Fish owners were the happiest, dog owners the most fun to be with, cat owners the most dependable and emotionally sensitive, and reptile owners the most independent.

Wiseman commented: “For years, owners have insisted that their pets have a unique personality – not only does this work suggest they might be right, but also reveals that people’s pets are a reflection of themselves”.

Finally, the work also revealed telling differences when it came to rating pets’ sense of humour, and suggested that 62% of dogs had a good sense of humour, compared to just 57% of fish, 48% of cats, 42% of horses, 38% of birds and 0% of reptiles.

Prof Wiseman’s survey will continue online at www.petpersonality.co.uk, and he is especially interested in having those with more unusual pets participate.

Prof Wiseman has recently written Quirkology: The Curious Science of Everyday Lives. Further information at www.quirkology.com.

Previous studies.

Many animals appear to have stable personality traits. For example, work by Sam Gosling (University of Texas at Austin) and colleagues, had dog owners rate their pets on known human personality traits (eg extraversion, emotional stability), and then strangers watched the animals in a park, and made the same ratings. Reporting in the Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, the researchers noted that the owners and strangers agreed on an individual dog's personality, suggesting that the dog personalities are real. Similar work has been carried out, with the same results, on other animals including cats, cows, horses and goats.

We also know that people tend to choose dogs that look like them. Psychologists Michael Roy and Prof Nicholas Christenfeld (University of California, San Diego) showed that people choose purebred dogs that resemble them. Reporting their findings in Psychological Science, the researchers photographed 45 dogs and their owners, separately. The researchers then showed 28 judges pictures of the owners, their dogs, and one other dog and asked to pick the true match. The judges matched were able to match the dogs with their owners at above chance levels.

My study combines these ideas, looking at whether people believe that their animals have the same type of personality as them.