



# *ABSTRACT*

## *Human-Animal Relationship in Europe: emotional Importance of companion animals, anthropomorphism and empathy*

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Given the global interest in human-companion animal relations, there is a paucity of cross-cultural studies on attitudes towards companion animals. We performed a worldwide study comparing attitudes towards animals, however our sample only comprised 4 European countries (UK, France, Germany and Switzerland). The study was conducted using questionnaire surveys of adults, taking 5-7 minutes to complete on a voluntary, anonymous basis. The questionnaire included demographic data and 29 attitude statements including 5 controls. Participants had to express their opinion regarding animal feelings, cognition, and pets, among others, on a 5-point Likert scale. We analysed 1222 European questionnaires (5409 worldwide), collected in Switzerland, Great Britain, France and Germany. We found significant negative correlations between all sets of control statements indicating correct understanding by the participants. In general, European participants agreed that keeping pets are beneficial to humans, but disagreed with the statement that keeping wild animals as pets at home is acceptable. They agreed that animals have feelings, but that these are different from the feelings of humans. Both cats and dogs were seen as likeable animals, dogs slightly more so than cats. Responses were influenced by pet-ownership, past and present pet owners generally being more animal-friendly. There was a systematic difference discernible between the four European countries only when dogs were concerned. Respondents in Great Britain were more in favour of dogs as ideal pets than Swiss or French respondents, and both British and French respondents deemed stray dogs a problem, whereas Swiss and German respondents did not. However, this difference might stem from a different understanding of the term “stray”, either as unowned, or as unsupervised dog.



Animals, especially companion animals, can mean much to children: many studies in different countries show that animals are so-called 'significant others' to children, offering them socio-emotional support in times of need. behaviour and integration of children, and on the learning atmosphere in their presence in classroom settings. Different programmes have different goals: Some centre on bite prevention, others teach care and humane treatment according to the species-specific needs of the animals. Many children's programmes utilize the emotional feelings of children, their empathy with animals, even anthropomorphic exercises, to reach their goals. Anthropomorphism, the projection of our thoughts and emotions onto animals and the assumption that animals have similar thoughts and emotions as we humans, was long frowned upon – especially in the field of ethology. That has changed somewhat amongst scientists in the last two decades given 1) the knowledge that humans have been selected by evolution to anthropomorphize; 2) it is indeed a useful source of hypotheses which then can be tested by objective means. The question arises whether such humane education school programmes have long-lasting effects on the development of empathy with both people and animals. This was positively answered by Ascione and Weber (1996, *Anthrozoös* 9: 188-195). Further, a relationship between empathy towards

been established in children (Beetz and Ascione, 2004, SCAS Proceedings). These and other research findings prompted the International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organizations (IAHAIO, see [www.iahaio.org](http://www.iahaio.org)) to unanimously pass the 'Rio Declaration on Pets in Schools', which was also endorsed by the WHO Training Program on Human-Animal Interactions held in Sao Paulo, Brazil, 2001.