Feline researchers say many cats are quite social

> My Notes from reading up a couple of research articles in March

We can look to history to (partially) explain this dearth of information around cat behaviour; humans way back when developed an interactive relationship with dogs, performing tasks together that required some form of companionship and understanding. Our cats' ancestors, by comparison, hunted and existed in solitude. We had less reason to figure out what was going on inside their heads. The cat suffers a bit from its legacy of just being something that lives around people's houses and farms, and keeps the mouse population down.

Even though cats have moved indoors and become human companions, the view persists that they are asocial and detached. And beyond providing fodder for grumpy-cat memes, it can create roadblocks for loving cat owners seeking to correct problematic behavior, or simply maintain a happier home.

There are so many misconceptions that cats are spiteful, or cats are being jerks, that they're being aloof or asocial,. But cats are trying to communicate with us all the time, and people have to be really good at understanding that. If there's a communication barrier, we're not going to be able to get along very well.

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> Cats are not antisocial

Cats indeed descended from solitary creatures, but this doesn't mean they're hermits. In wild or feral colonies — which form the basis of most feline social research — cats develop dynamic relationships with their peers, selecting a few "preferred comrades" to hang out with. A lot of this also comes down to different personalities and social preferences — every cat is individual. Just like you and I might choose to hang out with different people or participate in different events, cats are no different.

Research into feral colonies shows that cats tend to form matriarchal social bonds; **females will adhere more closely to one another** (typically in a community of mothers, aunts and sisters). Males, once they're about a year old, are more likely to move about nomadically. Even though existing research focuses primarily on feral cats, any person who has lived with more than one

feline can attest that the domesticated ones form bonds with each other, too — if they so choose.

Cats actually have a “flexible” social structure, meaning they can exist successfully on their own or in groups, depending on early life experiences (such as whether they were exposed to humans as babies) and their environment.

Research has found that when we give them the same kinds of opportunities or challenges that we regularly give dogs, that oftentimes cats not only can engage in high levels of social behavior, but many cats actually prefer social interaction.

Of course, no one — cat or human — wants to be around others all the time. Domestic cats, just like their wild ancestors, navigate conflict by dispersal; they remove themselves from an uncomfortable situation as protection. That’s often where we run into issues in our homes, because there’s limited movement that can take place in order to be able to avoid conflict.

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> ‘Dominant or submissive?’ It’s complicated

In a multi-cat household, what might be perceived as a display of “dominance” by one cat toward another is often just the grouchier cat’s way of pointing out a problem in their environment.

Dominance is actually such a huge trigger word in the behavior consulting world because it’s so often misunderstood. Cats certainly do not form dominance hierarchies in the sense where there’s someone who’s on top, and then cats existing in ranks below them.

While today’s household cats have evolved socially to coexist with humans and other animals, much of their behavior remains motivated by survival instinct, and encroachment on their space may spark conflict. This means that the individualization of resources — having their own food, water and bathroom — remains incredibly important to them.

Rather than “dominant,” “territorial” is a more accurate way to describe discordant behavior that can arise in multi-cat homes. One cat may obstruct an entrance to the litter box or block food bowls around meal times, indications that these resources should be increased and spread further apart so each animal has its own turf. While multiple cats can harmoniously share a bathroom, it’s important to have a box for each one. The same goes for food bowls, water fountains and cozy areas.



Still, some cats will never be best friends. Differences in age, energy level and lived experience can all fuel clashes. And some cats' personalities simply don't gel. Researchers are trying to figure out why some cats get along easier than others, and to learn more about the roots of their individual personalities. While you can reduce the drama by creating a world where they're not forced to share every necessity, some furry housemates just aren't terribly compatible.

You will get what looks like almost cruel, kind of bullying that goes on. There are cats who will just seemingly get pleasure out of persistently annoying another cat.

They aren't destroying your sofa out of spite

Cat owners may assume their pets are using the furniture as a scratching post or the carpet as a toilet to exact some kind of revenge, but that's rarely the case. They don't wake up in the morning and plot how they're going to ruin your day.

Instead, unusual or upsetting behaviors are more likely to be your cat's way of communicating that something is wrong, either emotionally or medically. Signs that something is amiss might include growling and other forms of aggression, litter box aversion, and constant scratching or other destructive acts. Sometimes, the underlying cause is clear-cut; maybe you need to relocate the scratching post to a more easily accessible spot, or clean the litter box more frequently.

There are many of us who would travel on down the road, rather than using the dirty stall at a local truck stop, so why should we expect our cat to be happy about that?

Other reasons might be trickier to detect, requiring more careful observation. For example, an older cat forced to cohabitate with a rambunctious sibling may isolate, hiss or growl when they can’t be left alone; conversely, a young cat that spends much of the day on its own may create trouble out of boredom.

A lot of the so-called mischievous behavior of cats is simply an attempt to get the owners’ attention. They’ve learned by trial and error if they sit on your desk and throw your pens on the floor, eventually you’ll give them attention or get up. Taking an extra 30 minutes every day to interact with your cat could lead to a happier dynamic.

"misbehavior” in cats rescued from unknown circumstances could also stem from past trauma. An animal who was hungry all the time in an earlier life may be defensive or agitated around meals, just like a cat who was mistreated by previous owners might be anxious around people. As a survival instinct, they are really good at generalizing such fear.

You can teach (some) cats tricks

The stereotype that cats are either too independent or too indifferent to listen to a silly human telling them to fetch or roll over isn’t a universal truth.

There are now classes for both children and adults to strengthen their bonds with cats by participating in activities together, including learning tricks or chasing a toy. While it depends on the individual animal, many cats coming through such classes have demonstrated an interest and ability to walk on a leash, play fetch and perform tricks when they’re given the attention and time.

People who have participated in such programs, have even taken their cats on hikes, kayaks, and all sorts of adventures.

Another study from researchers also found that cats can play fetch — although it was unclear if the behavior was more rooted in a bond with the object than the owner. Classic!

Credits: Colleen Grablick, The Washington Post

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