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Comparing personalities of self-identified cat colony caretakers and bird conservation professionals

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Feral cats have caused wildlife extinctions, particularly on islands, and kill billions of birds, reptiles, amphibians, and small mammals annually (Loss, Will, & Marra, 2013; Nogales et al., 2004). Wildlife advocacy groups, especially those linked to bird conservation professionals (BCPs; e.g., The Audubon Society, The Nature Conservancy, American Bird Conservancy, The Wildlife Society) began working to address the challenge (Barrows, 2004; Peterson, Hartis, Rodriguez, Green, & Lepczyk, 2012). Cats removed from natural landscapes and placed in shelters, however, were often euthanized, causing cat advocacy groups, including cat colony caretakers (CCCs), cat advocacy non-governmental organizations (NGOs; e.g., Alley Cat Allies), and some cat owners to rally around protecting outdoor cats and cat colonies. Ensuing conflicts may have been at their most acrimonious levels in the context of managing colonies of outdoor cats (Peterson et al., 2012), where the conservation community, particularly BCPs, leveled severe criticisms of how colonies were managed, particularly in relation to trap-neuter-return programs (Lohr, Cox, & Lepczyk, 2013; Longcore, Rich, & Sullivan, 2009).

Developing an understanding of this conflict's roots is essential to both mitigating it and developing constructive solutions to the wildlife conservation challenge posed by outdoor cats. The context, however, has elements tied to almost every possible driver of conflict. Data-driven conflict is evident as cat advocates often reject, mistrust, or misinterpret research presented by BCPs and wildlife researchers (Peterson et al., 2012). Relationship conflict is evident in repeated negative interactions between groups. Value and identify conflict were evident in groups having different criteria for evaluating ideas, and uniting around perceived injustices (e.g., cats or wildlife being killed). Another intriguing, but unexplored, explanation for the conflict may lie in parties having fundamentally different personalities. Although personality research is nuanced and diverse, a five-factor model called The Big Five (Goldberg, 1990) represents the most widely accepted among psychologists (Bono, Boles, Judge, & Lauver, 2002). This model divides personality into five dimensions: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, neuroticism, and openness.

Bono et al.'s (2002) review highlights the complex relationships between personality and conflict. First, one's personality can shape how conflict is experienced, but there can be impacts associated with a partner's personality and the differences between them. Second,

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each dimension of personality has unique impacts on how conflict is experienced. Agreeableness relates to being altruistic, trusting, and compliant, and low agreeableness creates conflict and exacerbates its negative symptoms. Conscientiousness relates to achievement orientations, dutifulness, and orderliness. The dimension has weak links to conflict, but one may imagine disorganization or excessive attention to detail may foment conflict. Extraversion is linked to being positive, social, joyful, and interested in other people. Although a weaker driver of conflict than agreeableness, extroverts can prefer competition and dominance over less aggressive conflict resolution strategies (e.g., compromise, acquiescence). Neurotic personalities are expressed through negative emotions including fear, sadness, anger, and guilt, and are positively related to conflict intensity and frequency but negatively related to openly expressing anger. Openness relates to being creative, attentive to personal feelings, introspective, and curious (Bono et al., 2002). Individuals scoring high on the openness dimension of personality readily approach arguments, versus avoid them but lean toward compromise as a response to conflict.

We explored potential roots of conflict over outdoor cat management by assessing and comparing personalities of CCCs ($n = 319$) and BCPs ($n = 224$) from 47 U.S. States and the District of Columbia in 2011. We used a purposive form of snowball sampling in each state starting with an initial BCP identified through lists of bird conservation specialists employed by universities, wildlife conservation agencies, and NGOs, and an initial CCC identified through CCC webpages and veterinary clinic personnel employed to conduct trap-neuter-release programs (Peterson et al., 2012). The sample included respondents from all states except North Dakota, Wyoming, and Ohio. Although this article was primarily descriptive, we hypothesized CCCs would score higher than BCPs on openness and neuroticism, as cat people scored higher than dog people in those domains in previous research (Gosling, Sandy, & Potter, 2010). We measured the Big Five personality traits using the 44-item Big Five Inventory (BFI: John & Srivastava, 1999). A technical error led to the omission of 2 of the 44 BFI questions: one from Agreeableness (I see myself as someone who is generally trusting) and one from Openness (I see myself as someone who is sophisticated in art, music, or literature). Cronbach's alpha scores were acceptable for all five factors: Extraversion ($\alpha = .86$), Agreeableness ($\alpha = .76$), Conscientiousness ($\alpha = .78$), Neuroticism ($\alpha = .81$), and Openness ($\alpha = .75$). We standardized scores on a 0–100 scale to facilitate comparisons.

Respondents were between 22 and 85 years of age with a mean age of 40.9 ($SD = 11.70$), were likely to be female (72%), and self-identify as White (97%). Most respondents were CCCs (56%), followed by BCPs (40%). BCPs were more likely to be male (61% vs 9%; $\chi^2 = 173.9$, $p < .001$), and were slightly younger (M age = 39.6, $SD = 12.9$) than CCCs (M age = 41.8, $SD = 11.15$; $t = 2.03$, $p = .043$). The CCCs scored higher than BCPs on Agreeableness (BCP = 79.91, $SE = 0.81$, CCC = 77.14, $SE = 0.97$, $t = -2.21$, $p = .028$), but lower than BCPs on Conscientiousness (BCP = 90.31, $SE = 0.92$, CCC = 83.10, $SE = 0.77$, $t = 2.34$, $p = .020$). We did not detect differences between groups for Extraversion (BCP = 60.73, $SE = 1.35$, CCC = 63.73, $SE = 1.13$, $t = 1.71$, $p = .088$), Neuroticism (BCP = 32.59, $SE = 1.25$, CCC = 33.70, $SE = 1.04$, $t = 0.68$, $p = .497$), and Openness (BCP = 77.47, $SE = 0.89$, CCC = 77.615, $SE = 0.75$, $t = 1.13$, $p = .259$). Both BCPs and CCCs scored near national averages reported for Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Openness (64.0, 78.2, and 75.8, respectively), but scored far lower than the national average (59.7) for Neuroticism, and far higher than the national average (70.0) for Conscientiousness (Elleman, Condon, Russin, & Revelle, 2018).

One article, however, identified similar scores for Neuroticism (31.0) and higher scores for Conscientiousness (77.1), although the latter remained much lower than those identified in this study (Gosling, Rentfrow, & Swann, 2003). Because all five personality dimensions have socially desirable poles, findings can reflect on groups having more positive self-assessments, but, in this case, neither group consistently rated itself higher than the other across dimensions.

These preliminary personality profiles for CCCs and BCPs highlight potential roots for interpersonal conflict and individual level experience of conflict. Regarding the former, lower Agreeableness among BCPs than CCCs may encourage conflict if BCPs exhibit less trust and altruism, traits associated with Agreeableness, than CCCs expect (Bono et al., 2002). High Agreeableness correlates with high engagement in social initiatives (Rentfrow, Gosling, & Potter, 2008), implying personality may relate to well-publicized efforts among CCCs to develop community-level management of cat colonies. This propensity for advocacy and campaigns may also exist among BCPs as both groups scored unusually high on Conscientiousness, a personality domain correlated with religiosity (Rentfrow et al., 2008), and BCPs scored higher than CCCs. The communal and cultural aspects of religiosity can exacerbate conflict between groups when issues are treated as sacred (Ginges, Atran, Medin, & Shikaki, 2007; Peterson, Peterson, Peterson, Lopez, & Silvy, 2002). Personality profiles for BCPs and CCCs may suggest avenues for mitigating conflict. Both groups scored high on Conscientiousness and low on Neuroticism, and this profile suggests both groups value achievement, dutifulness, and orderliness (Bono et al., 2002) while avoiding rule breaking and criminality (Rentfrow et al., 2008). This article suggests personalities of BCPs and CCCs will render establishing rules for outdoor cat management difficult but encourage support for rules once they are established.

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