Halloween, Superstition, and Black Cat Bias

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Introduction

• Black Cat Bias (BCB): “Cats with black coats are viewed more negatively, adopted less often, and euthanized more often than lighter colored cats” (Jones & Hart, in press)

• Shelter records of 2170 cats showed black cats stay in shelter about one month longer than non-black cats (Kubesova, Voslarova, Cecerek, & Vucinic, 2017)

• Length of stay in shelter positively correlated with risk of contracting URI (Dinnage, Scarlett, & Richards, 2009) and coronavirus (Pedersen, Sato, Foley, & Poland, 2004)

• Jones and Hart (in press) found black cats were perceived as more aggressive and less friendly than non-black cats

• Jones and Hart (in press) found that black cat bias (friendliness, aggressiveness, willingness to adopt) was predicted by superstitious behaviors, but not religiosity nor racial attitudes

Methods

• Sample
  • 33 females, 4 males
  • $M = 19.1$ year, $SD = 0.7$ years
  • 3 cat-people, 13 dog-people, 20 both, 1 neither

• Materials
  • Demographics: sex, age, cat-, dog-, both-, neither person, number of cats lived with
  • BPP scale (Tobacyk & Milford, 1983)

  • 25 questions with 5-point Likert scales
    1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree
  • Black magic really exists; The number 13 is unlucky
  • Test-retest: $r = .67$
  • Validity: intercorrelations with seven other scales

• Design
  • Demographics
  • BPP
  • Explicit cat rating task
    • See picture and description of cat
      • 4 black, 4 non-black cats in random order
    • Rate each cat on 5-point Likert Scale on “I would like to live with this cat” and “This is a good cat”
  • Brief Implicit Associations Test (Sriram & Greenwald, 2009) (Implicit cat rating task)
    • Remember two categories (black cats and bad words vs. non-black cats and bad words)
    • Categorize 20 stimuli (10 cat pictures, 10 words)
    • Reaction time (RT) measured
      • $d = (M_{RT \text{ non-black cats}} - M_{RT \text{ black cats}}) / sd$
      • d will be positive if BCB exists
  • Participants do tasks twice: 48 to 65 days before and 0 to 17 days before Halloween

Results

• Sample of cat-people too small to compare to dog-people

• Insufficient evidence of BCB measured explicitly

• Superstitious behaviors do not reliably predict BCB

• Belief in witchcraft predicts BCB at time 1 explicitly, $r(36) = .283$, $p = .045$, and at time 2 implicitly, $r(36) = .297$, $p = .037$

• Implicit BCB stronger nearer Halloween ($M = 0.238$) than farther from Halloween ($M = 0.169$), $r(36) = 1.826$, $p = .038$, $r^2 = .085$

Discussion

• Belief in witchcraft but not superstitious behaviors predicts BCB

• BCB is stronger around Halloween than earlier in semester
  • BCB is pliable – it can be changed by external factors

• Future research could look at whether an intervention designed to reduce belief in witchcraft would reduce implicitly measured BCB

References