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# Beware of Strangers: Dogs' Empathetic Response to Unfamiliar Humans

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## Abstract

Empathy is a complex cognitive ability once thought to be unique to humans (Batson, 2003). However, studies suggest dogs can exhibit empathetic behaviors towards owners in distress (Sanford et al., 2018; Bourg et al., 2020). The current study examines the empathetic capacities of dogs presented with a trapped stranger crying or humming behind a see-through closed door. Opening behavior and physiological markers of stress including heart rate variability (HRV) and coded stress behaviors were measured. Unlike in past research, dogs did not open more or faster for the distressed stranger than the non-distressed stranger. This fits with findings on the importance of familiarity on empathetic responding (deWaal, 2008). Additionally, the HRV and owner-reported fear of dogs in the crying condition were lower for dogs that opened than those that did not, suggesting that like children, dogs must have low personal distress to show empathy (Eisenberg et al., 1996).