The Cat Effect: Investigating the relationship between cat ownership and health.

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Introduction

When, I was trying to select a topic for my Thesis I came across a sentence in a Health Psychology Text that captured my interest. This sentence suggested that the presence of a companion animal could moderate a response to stress, lower blood pressure and potentially reduce the risk of heart disease. As it turned out a large number of studies have examined the impact of pets on human health and well-being. Some of these studies hypothesised that owning a pet could increase social connectedness while others suggested that having a pet could moderate the effect of loneliness, anxiety and depression. However, while some researchers reported positive effects accruing from interacting with pets, others found that the health of pet owners to be no different to non-pet owners and still others found their health could be worse. So these studies have produced conflicting results. Despite a lack of consistent evidence people continue to use pets in different healthcare contexts and there is also a growing momentum to introduce them to the work place environment.

These studies were usually quantitative as they focused on measuring the individual benefits derived from a human-animal connection. However, throughout all of these studies the association between a companion animal and human health
depends on a relationship. But an understanding of what constitutes this relationship was largely been overlooked. So the purpose of this research was to interrogate the nature of a person-cat relationship and how it might be part of people’s health. Cat ownership was chosen as companion dogs have been well studies in this context

**Method**

In this qualitative study a thematic analysis was applied to data that was generated from 10 interviews. The focus was on what each participant said when they responded to open-ended questions about their interaction with their cat.

5 male and 5 female participants aged over 45 were recruited by word of mouth. The main inclusion criteria was that they had each owned and took responsibility for a cat. They were located in urban to rural environments, two lived alone and three owned more than one cat. They were mostly professionals with one being a retiree.

Each recorded interview took about 60 minutes and was transcribed verbatim. The content of each interview was coded and then the entire data set was coded to summarise features that were relevant to the research question. Following this analysis, 28 codes were identified.

Next potential themes were searched for from the codes highlighting important aspects of this relationship. As a result four themes were identified as supporting an over-arching theme of Identity.
Results

One of the themes identified was that of Communication. This theme was found to be fundamental to the relationship. It focused on the verbal and non-verbal interaction between these owners and their cats.

Participants tended to use human like attributes to interpret the perceived thoughts and actions of their cats. Studies have shown that when we humanise animals it can have the effect of fostering a feeling of connection as we make them seem more like us. For example, one participant spoke how her cat would flick his tail so you knew this wasn’t on and then her cat would march on out. Participants talked about using a high pitch cat voice when talking to their cat. They interpreted meows as demands for food or attention while purrs were a signifier for affection, contentment or a desire to be with them. Some of these participants spoke of their cats as being a talking point or a connector that brought household members together.

Gendered characteristics were also used by these participants to describe the appearance, temperament or physicality of their cats. Again studies have suggested that when gendered attributes are used in this way they tend to project individual beliefs of what it means to identify as male or female. So in this study masculine traits such as being heavy, strong and testing limits and boundaries were spoken about. Some male participants subjected their cats to games of tolerance such as fighting and upside down challenges. Feminine traits such as having a smaller frame, being a real sweetie and a little bit overweight were attributed to female cats. So while a male cat was described as a good looking cat that belied his age
a female cat was described as being very beautiful in the current study. So this notion of communication seemed to provide an opportunity for the owners to affirm their individual identity and a feeling of being connected.

Another theme identified was that of **Companionship**. This captured a sense of closeness and rapport felt by participants when in the presence of their cats. In this research feelings of attachment, calmness, and enjoyment were associated with activities such as following, rituals, games and just a physical presence. One owner spoke of loving to come home to his cat as it just followed him around the garden and he liked the fact that he had company and was not alone.

Another described his after work ritual when he said that his cat would sit beside him when he sat down to have a beer – he thought that he had a good friend—a mate.

The companionship of these cats was found to surpass that which could be offered by human company at times. Some of these owners sought the company of their cats when they felt disconnected or emotionally depleted.

One owner spoke of coming home from work feeling empty with nothing to give, the first thing she did was reconnect with her cats who were always happy to see her. They offered unconditional acceptance, were non-judgemental - she could be yourself –they didn’t mind her being grumpy, she didn’t have to apologise and what’s more, they didn’t hold a grudge. Spending time with her cats helped her feel normal again and then she could reconnect with her family.
This person to cat companionship appeared to enable these owners to feel liked and appreciated and to maintain a socially connected identity.

The theme of Inclusiveness highlighted the status given to the cat and the extent to which they were included into the day to day lives of these owners. The cats in this study were all regarded as a significant member of the household or like one of the family. One owner explained that everyone in her family was equal and that for her personally, their cat was certainly not on the bottom rung. Sometimes the cat was described as having a role similar to that of a child. For example, one owner described her position as I’m like their mum so they are basically like my children. The status of the cat was even prioritised at times. This was when owners attempted to accommodate their demands. For example, one owner talked of how she would try and fit around the cat a bit and so she would wait to strip the bed if the cat happened to be lying on it in the sun. Another participant described how she had a cat door but her cat insisted on using the front door so she had to open and shut it for him.

The regulation of space in respect to where the cat could and could not go also reflected the degree to which these cats were included in the lives of the owners. One participant explained that the sheep are outside, the dogs are allowed in the lounge but the cats are allowed in the bed. The bed was often a contested space. More than half the participants allowed their cat to share their bed. This became the site for bonding behaviours such as smooshing and chest sitting. So while one participant said that when he went to bed the cat went to bed, another said that her
husband didn’t want the cats in bed so every time he went away that’s when the cats came to bed.

So, the inclusive nature of this relationship seemed to affirm a caring identity and a sense of belonging for these owners.

Finally, the theme of Interdependence was recognised as being another important component of this relationship. While the owners saw themselves as providing food and care for their cats this was felt to be reciprocated by companionship and pleasure. This interdependency was described by one participant as a mild contract based on trust and commitment.

The owners spoke of taking this responsibility seriously. One spoke of wanting to provide the very best for her cats so when they went away she put her cats in a good cattery. The accommodation cost more than what they paid if they happened to go camping. In winter they had a climate controlled unit and in summer an indoor outdoor facility.

The owners who lived alone felt that caring for a cat gave them an enhanced sense of purpose in their lives. They thought it was good them to have somebody else to think about besides themselves and something nice to care for. They also enjoyed having the routine of remembering to feed their cat.

Therefore, this interdependent relationship appeared to reinforce a trustworthy and responsible identity for these participants.
The need to protect individual identity and self-esteem was apparent when these participants took steps to censor what they allowed others to know about them and their cats. For example, one participant spoke of talking to his cat quietly in the garden as he wouldn’t want the neighbours to think that he was nutty. Another participant called his cat little monkey which he thought was a personal intimate thing that he tended to moderate if other people were around. This could be due to the uncertain positioning of a close person-to-pet relationship in broader society.

**Discussion**

In summary, the central question addressed was what constitutes the nature of the relationship between an owner and their cat that might benefit health and well-being.

The participants in this study experienced a strong interdependent relationship marked by affection and devotion. The findings suggest that the nature of this relationship may have enabled them to affirm their individual identity, social connectedness and a sense of belonging all of which have the potential to influence health and a sense of wellbeing.

Now this could raise questions around the effect of cats being used to promote health and wellbeing based on a brief encounter as opposed to a long term relationship in settings such as hospitals, residential care homes and the workplace.

However, the findings also suggest that before any cat effect can be felt, as an owner we may have to talk to our cat, be attached to our cat, fit around our cat, commit to our cat but most of all we may have to really love our cat.