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**Human and Companion Animal Compatibility:
Stereotypes and Health Consequences**

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Abstract

The major theme of this thesis is compatibility of human-companion animal relationships, particularly with respect to cats and dogs. This theme was explored from two perspectives, the first of which focused on how the compatibility of people and their pets is **perceived** by others and involved three studies of stereotypes about human-pet compatibility. The second perspective consisted of one study which focused on some of the health consequences of the **experience** of compatibility between pets and their owners for the latter.

In the first of the stereotype studies, 102 participants matched up ten photographs of people with ten photographs of pets and provided reasons for their selections. Chi-square analyses demonstrated significant matching trends, i.e. stereotypes, for all but one of the ten target persons. Examination of the reasons for selections suggested that participants used similar themes to those traditionally found in person perception studies (gender, age, hair colour etc.) to categorise the target persons, and made pet selections on this basis. The second study provided profiles of nine target persons who varied on a number of dimensions. One hundred and seventy two participants selected a pet for each target person, specifying the species, breed, sex and name of each pet. It was hypothesized that female target persons would receive a greater number of small dogs and cats than larger dogs, and males would be given medium to large sized dogs more frequently than small dogs and cats. It was also hypothesised that target persons would receive more same sex than opposite sex pets. Results of chi-square analyses of the animal species, breed and sex information provided some support for both hypotheses and suggested that there are certain stereotypical perceptions of particular person-pet combinations. The third study involved 542 participants who rated slides depicting a man and a woman, alone or accompanied by a dog or a cat, on 40 psychological attributes. Contrary to predictions, the woman was seen more favourably with the dog than with the cat or alone, and the man was rated more positively with the cat or alone than with the dog.

The final study concentrated on actual relationships between people and their pets and introduced compatibility as a key dimension. A study was conducted to examine the effects of compatibility, attachment and social support on mental health and physical symptoms. One hundred and seventy six pet owners completed a questionnaire incorporating a compatibility measure developed for this study, the Pet Attachment Survey, the Interpersonal Support Evaluation List, the Mental Health Inventory and

a shortened version of Pennebaker's Inventory of Limbic Languidness. Regression analyses showed that compatibility was independently associated with better mental health. Unexpectedly pet attachment was positively associated with physical symptoms and not mental health. Social support was positively related to mental health but not physical symptoms. No interaction or mediating effects were discovered.

The findings of the stereotype studies suggest that there are certain person pet combinations which are perceived to be more compatible than others, which are dependent primarily on age and sex characteristics of the owner. The final study showed that actual compatibility between pet and owner can be quantified and that it is associated with beneficial health effects for the owner.

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