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The Cat Effect:

Investigating the relationship between cat ownership and health

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment
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Abstract

Companion animals are an important part of the New Zealand psychosocial environment and companion cats are particularly popular. A number of studies have explored the relationship between pet ownership and physical and psychological health but the results have been inconclusive. Despite a lack of conclusive evidence people continue to believe that the presence of pets can enhance health and wellbeing. Specifically, there is increasing interest in the benefits to be gained from animal assisted activities and therapies. Research based on the connection between animals and health has mainly focused on physical and psychological outcomes. The present qualitative research differs from the previous work in that the focus is on investigating the nature of the owner-to-cat relationship that underpins claims of enhanced health and wellbeing. A sample (N=10) comprising five males and five females 45-77 years of age were recruited for the study with the main inclusion criteria being that they owned a cat. Open ended interviews were transcribed and the transcripts were subjected to a thematic analysis technique to identify themes that captured common aspects relative to the person-to-cat relationship. Four themes were identified. First, communication enhanced connectedness and tended to be anthropomorphic in nature. Second, companionship was linked with pleasure and often involved a close bond. Third, inclusiveness enhanced a sense of belonging when cats were often presented as one of the family. Fourth, interdependence was linked to responsibility and a sense of purpose. The overarching theme, however, was the affirmation of identity for the owner that featured throughout the transcripts. Identity formation, maintenance and protection were found to be fundamental to the nature of the person-to-cat relationship. Identity affirmation was linked to a need to feel good, a need to belong, a need to feel competent, a need to have meaning in life and self-esteem, all of which can enhance psychological health and a sense of wellbeing. These findings related to a small group of devoted cat owners so the findings may not apply to other types of ownership. Broader implications related to pet assisted activities are called into question when just having a cat around or a brief encounter may not be enough to have a positive effect

on health. For this reason, if a relationship with a cat is to have a positive effect, you may have to really love your cat.

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