

The social bond between man and cat

Agnethe-Irén Sandem and Bjarne O. Braastad

*Agricultural University of Norway, Department of Animal Science
P.O. Box 5025, N-1432 Ås, Norway. (e-mail: agnethe-iren.sandem@ihf.nlh.no)*

During the last two decades research has provided evidence that pets can have beneficial effects on the physical and psychological health of humans, both prophylactically and therapeutically. Gradually one has become more aware of the pets' role as a social partner for humans. The aim of this study was to analyze the relations between cats and their owners and elucidate the significance of the cat to the humans in different situations, which needs a cat can fulfill as compared with the spouse and children, and which negative traits the cat can have.

A questionnaire was sent to 800 randomly chosen members of Norwegian Association of Pedigree Cat Clubs, with a response percentage of about 50. The questions were grouped into three. In the first part, the owner was asked to give different kinds of information about the cat. The second dealt with facts about the owner, and why and how the cat got into the household, while the last part treated the relationship between man and cat. The owner was asked to state their degree of attachment to the pet on a scale from 1 to 10 (strongest). A mean self-rated attachment score of 8.74 was obtained (N=398). There was no difference in attachment scores between single-respondents and respondents with a partner/spouse. Women were more attached to the cat than men, and owners without children were more attached to cats than owners with at least two children.

The cat's most negative qualities were their tendency to scratch and destroy furniture, aggression, and other annoying behaviour. The greatest disadvantage with keeping cats was the feeling of being bound in connection with holidays and journeys. The most frequently stated reasons for having cat as a pet were their independence and love. The owners were also asked to give their opinion on whether a cat in the household had any effects on children. Overall, 98.2 % of the assumed effects were stated as positive. Some of these were that the child would be more self-confident, more extroverted, more capable of showing care and more responsible later in life.

Differences in relationships with feline companions, partner and child were compared. Unconditional love was the primary benefit of the human-cat relationship and verbal communication and human companionship were the primary benefits of the human-human relationship. Twelve statements for each of the three attachment figures were listed in the survey, for which the respondents were asked to state if they agreed based on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The cat got the best score in the statements concerning both company (my cat/partner/child provides me with companionship) and relaxation (I enjoy watching and relaxing with my cat/partner/child). In general, however, the child got the highest scores.

To conclude, the cat can be an important attachment-figure for humans. Although never a complete replacement for human contact, feline companions can satisfy some of man's needs, some needs even being better satisfied by the cat than by the partner/spouse.