

What Role Does Your Cat Play In Your Life?

Your Child? Your Friend? Or Both?

By Brad Kollus

Talk to most cat owners and they will start to tell you how special their kitty is. After a few minutes you realise the important role their cat plays in their life. But what role is that? Scientists in the field of human/animal studies have been researching this question and have discovered some fascinating conclusions.

The Role of Child

For many years the main theory as to why people kept cats as pets was attachment theory. This theory states that the same process that occurs between a mother and her baby is occurring between a cat owner and their cat. Human babies are designed to elicit nurturing responses from their parents. "There is an innate tendency for nurturing, but young cats and young dogs also have those signals. Young animals including baby humans have relatively large eyes looking forward, a pug nose, no sharp features in the face, and a rounded head. These features automatically elicit nurturing behaviour in humans (this is often called the 'cute response')," said Dr Dennis Turner, Director of the Institute for Applied Animal Ethology and Psychology, co-editor of 'The Domestic Cat: The Biology Of Its Behavior'. One study found that of couples without children, two-thirds had cats or dogs and half of them treated their pets like children.

Role of Friend

In the last few years, another theory has come to challenge the attachment theory as the main mechanism underlying the feline-human bond. Social support theory, which has traditionally been applied to the human-human bond, is now being applied to the bond people have with their pets. "Social support theory arises from the notion that humans are highly social and actually need to feel they are part of a network of mutual obligations and support in order to be psychologically and physically healthy," says Dr James Serpell, Professor of Animal Welfare, Director of the Center for the Interaction of Animals and Society at the University of Pennsylvania, and author of the book 'In the Company of Animals'.

Dr Serpell and other researchers have found that cats and other pets provide social support to their owners in ways that friends or family members might. This is outlined in Dr Serpell's paper 'Anthropomorphism and Anthropomorphic Selection - Beyond the Cute Response' published in the academic journal 'Society and Animals'. Pets provide people with company and emotional and physical support similar to what they receive from friends and family.

Child and Friend

Dr Turner decided to perform a study to answer the question "Which roles do our cats primarily play in our lives as children or as friends?" His study, "The Human-Cat Relationship: Human Social Support or Attachment", was published in the academic journal 'Anthrozoos'. 330 women participated in the study. Dr Turner concluded that both social support theory and attachment theory were at work, depending on the individual. This means that for some people their cat acts as their child and for some as their friend. For people who had a large social network, or many people in their homes, social support was the main mechanism at work and their cat was another friend providing emotional support. For people who lived alone and did not have a strong social network, attachment theory was more at work and the person may consider their cat more as their child. Dr Turner says the types of relationship a person may have with their cat 'are not separate', which means for some people their cat may play the role of both child and friend. He says, "The relative importance of each attachment and social support depends upon the individual person."

Conclusion

Our cats play important and magical roles, whether as our child, friend, or both, and we should be proud of this. Non-cat-owners often 'don't get it'. It's our responsibility to make them understand.



A New Theory – Pets Help Define Who We Are

A new, third theory of the feline-human bond has recently been developed by Dr Sue-Ellen Brown, Clinical Psychologist, Veterinary School, Tuskegee University. The theory is based on the field of self-psychology and says our cats act as self-objects for us. Dr Brown writes about this in her article 'Companion Animals as Self-Objects' published in 'Anthrozoos'. "What is important about a self-object is not the object, it's the function they provide for you. So a cat or dog can essentially be holding a person together through your self-cohesion, and self-esteem," says Dr Brown. The object - in this case the cat - helps the cat owner define who they are.

How can a person tell whether a pet or another human is a self-object to them? "Loss is the key to knowing whether your pet is a self-object or not for you. If losing them would make you fall apart then they are a self-object for you," says Dr Brown.

Self-objects can play one to three different roles for a person:

1. Mirroring

This is where the act of taking care of a cat makes a person feel that they are essentially good, caring and nurturing. Cats make many of their cat owners feel this way because cats are dependent upon us for many of their needs.

2. Idealising

This is where a person might look up to and idealise their pet for its qualities. "It makes you feel like you're something special because you are identified with them. You could get this from your special show cat," says Dr Brown. You would feel connected to the show cat's beauty and perfection toward a breed standard. Another way a cat may play this role is through its independence. Many owners admire this quality in their cats.

3. Twinship

This is when an owner feels they are so connected to their cat that they are one with each other on a spiritual level. "Blending with the animal on a spiritual level, cat owners said, brought them closer to nature, closer to their creator, to spiritual awareness. And I think that is common with cats. They lend themselves to that," says Dr Brown.

Dr Brown feels that attachment theory, social support theory, and self-object theory are all pieces of a puzzle and they complement each other. "I think all of the theories have a place because they describe a piece of the bond we have with our pets," says Dr Brown.

Quiz 1 – What Role Does Your Cat Play in Your Life?

- Do you talk to your cat using a baby-talk voice?
 - Never – 3
 - Sometimes – 2
 - Most of the time – 1
 - All of the time – 0
- Do you have young children at home now?
 - Yes – 3
 - No – 0
- Did you have children, but now they have grown and moved away?
 - Yes – 0
 - No – 3
- Does your cat have a baby-like nickname?
 - Yes – 0
 - No – 3
- Do you tell your cat about work issues?
 - Never – 0
 - Sometimes – 1
 - Most of the Time – 2
 - All of the Time – 3
- Do you tell your cat about your relationships?
 - Never – 0
 - Sometimes – 1
 - Most of the Time – 2
 - All of the Time – 3
- Do you talk to your cat about your life in general?
 - Never – 0
 - Sometimes – 1
 - Most of the Time – 2
 - All of the Time – 3
- Do you have many photos of your cat either framed or in a photo album?
 - Yes – 0
 - No – 3
- Do you feel you have
 - No friends – 3
 - A few friends – 2
 - Many friends – 1
 - Almost too many friends – 0
- Do you hold your cat like a baby?
 - Never – 3
 - Sometimes – 2
 - Most of the time – 1
 - All of the time – 0
- Do you consider your cat your baby?
 - Yes – 0
 - No – 3
- Do you consider your cat your friend more than your child?
 - Yes – 3
 - No – 0
- Do you feel your cat provides you with emotional support?
 - Never – 0
 - Sometimes – 1
 - Most of the time – 2
 - All of the time – 3
- Do you feel your cat provides you with social support?
 - Never – 0
 - Sometimes – 1
 - Most of the Time – 2
 - All of the Time – 3
- Do you carry a picture of your cat in your wallet?
 - Yes – 0
 - No – 3
- Do you feel your cat calms and soothes you and makes you feel at peace?
 - Never – 0
 - Sometimes – 1
 - Most of the Time – 2
 - All of the Time – 3
- Have there been similar situations where people have given you the same kind of emotional or social support as your cats?
 - Never – 0
 - Sometimes – 1
 - Most of the Time – 2
 - All of the Time – 3
- Do you dress up your cat for their birthday or holidays or give them parties?
 - Never – 3
 - Sometimes – 2
 - Most of the Time – 1
 - All of the Time – 0
- Are you planning to have your first child soon?
 - Yes – 0
 - No – 3
- When you give your cat treats or catnip do you use baby talk or feel as if you're giving your baby these treats?
 - Yes – 0
 - No – 3

Quiz 2 – Does Your Cat Help Make Up Your Identity?

Self-Object Theory states that a person or pet can act as a self-object if it makes up a part of someone's identity or personality. The test is usually that if the person were to lose that friend, family member or pet, he or she would fall apart, because the loss would be so great it would be as if the person had lost some of him or herself. There are three types of self-objects:

- Mirroring – those that make you see yourself as a good person
- Idealising – those that you look up to in a meaningful way
- Twinship – those who you feel you are one with, essentially one soul in two people.

If you answer 8 or higher on any of the following questions, it's a good indicator that your cat is a self-object for you and helps to make up a part of your basic personality or identity.

How does caring for your cat make you feel?

- | | | | | | | | | | |
|---------------|----|----|----|----|------|----|----|----|-----------|
| 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. | 5. | 6. | 7. | 8. | 9. | 10. |
| A Little Good | | | | | Good | | | | Very Good |

How much do you look up to or idealise your cat for their beauty, independence etc?

- | | | | | | | | | | |
|--------------------------------|----|----|----|----------------------------|----|----|----|-------------------------|-----|
| 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. | 5. | 6. | 7. | 8. | 9. | 10. |
| I Don't Really Look Up to Them | | | | I Look Up to Them A Little | | | | I Look Up To Them A lot | |

How much do you feel as if you are one with your cat, or you are soul mates?

- | | | | | | | | | | |
|--|----|----|----|----------------------|----|----|----|------------------------|-----|
| 1. | 2. | 3. | 4. | 5. | 6. | 7. | 8. | 9. | 10. |
| I Don't Really Feel That Close To Them | | | | I Feel Close to Them | | | | I Feel That We Are One | |

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Scoring

- Choose an answer that best matches your relationship with your cats for each question. Then add up all the numbers next to each answer. That will give you your score.

If you scored:

- 0-20 your kitty mainly fulfils the role of child for you
- 40-60 your kitty mainly fulfils the role of friend for you
- 20-40 your kitty fulfils the roles of both child and friend for you
- Remember, regardless of the quiz results, you know what your relationship is with your cat. What's most important is that you love them and, of course, as cat owners we know our cats love us.

Have fun!




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