**Qualitative Research Proposal Paper**

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Author Note: This is a proposal for a quantitative research paper

## Abstract

The idea of cats being considered by the Americans with Disabilities Act as support animals is currently not recognized. Through current research concerning the benefits of cats in Animal Assisted Therapy, Animal Assisted Activities, and Animal Assisted Interventions, more data is being collected to push for more than just dogs and horses as support animals. This study seeks to understand the meaning of the participants interactions with the cats at Small World Animal Shelter. Understanding these meanings can add to the current data that has been collected to show how cats can have a positive outcome for people suffering from mental disorders. Even with the results of this research, there is still a need for further research.

*Keywords:* Animal Assisted Therapy, Animal Assisted Activities, Intrinsic Case Study

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**Introduction**

This study seeks to understand the meaning of the participants interactions with the cats at Small World Animal Shelter. This qualitative intrinsic single-case study will answer the question "What are the experiences of interacting with the cats at Small World Animal Rescue?" Through the current research associated with cats as therapy animals for persons suffering from mental health disorders of all types and this research, I will seek to gain a better understanding of the meaning of the participants while exploring experiences of participants to gain an understanding of the phenomenon

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this intrinsic case study is to explore the lived experiences of individuals who interact with the cats at Small World Animal Shelter, focusing on how they make meaning of these interactions.

**Conceptual Framework**

The use of cats as therapy animals has been researched but there is a great deal of gaps found within the literature that has been written over the past ten years. There has been a great deal of research that has explored how cats can be effective emotional and social support animals for a variety of people. Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT), Animal Assisted Interventions (AAI), and Animal Assisted Activities (AAA), all share one thing in common, they all help reduce stress and anxiety for those who interact with them (Bennett, et.al,.2015; Bert et.al., 2016; Meehan et.al., 2017; Stammbach & Turner, 1999). AA T is beneficial in increasing better health outcomes for people with intellectual disabilities, autism, general healthcare concerns, PTSD and other

mental health conditions, Alzheimer's patients, and children in hospitals (Stewart, 2014; McConnell et.al., 2017;  Brooks et.al., 2018; Szewczyk et.al, 2023, Tsai et.al., 2010).

Cats are found to be better emotional and social support for autistic, elderly, LGBTQ, and those with mental health disorders, due to their calm demeanor (Dakin et.al., 2020; Kruase et.al., 2007, Martens et.al., 2010).  The notion that cats should be used as support and placed into a client's treatment plan as an intervention was proposed as it was found to lower stress in heart patients (Tomaszewska et.al., 2017). The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), at this time, only approves dogs and small horses as service animals (ADA.org, 2010). Research to show that cats are worth being considered emotional support animals must be conducted, and this research proposes looking at the experiences the participants have as they interact with the cats.

## Research Questions

The main research question came from my experiences with the cats at Small World Animal Rescue, "What are the experiences of others interacting with the cats at Small World Animal Rescue?"  One sub-question arose from the literature review were designed for the interviews of the participants after their time with the cats. They are as follows: What kinds of pets, if any do you have in the home?  How were your experiences with the cats at Small World Cat Rescue similar or different to your experiences with your pets at home? If you never had or no longer have any pets at home, how were your experiences with the cats at Small World Cat Rescue? How have the experiences with the cats at Small World Animal Rescue affected your mental state, if you were experiencing any beforehand? In what ways do you feel that your interactions with the cats at Small World Animal Rescue have been therapeutic for you?

The questions came from reviewing the literature concerning animal-assisted therapy and animal-assisted activities (Bennett, et.al,.2015; Bert et.al., 2016; Meehan et.al., 2017;

Stammbach & Turner, 1999). The experiences of those in the current research offer similar experiences as I did at the rescue, so these questions are a combination of self-experiences and those of the research subjects in the lit review.

## Research Methods

### Design

This will be a qualitative intrinsic single-case study, I am leaning towards an embedded design as this research will all be conducted in one location but can have multiple subcategories (Yin,1994). My interest in the research topic developed over the past year as I have been volunteering at Small World Animal Rescue, I have observed the reactions and interactions of many people who have come here for one reason or another. The owner has been working with autistic children for many years, they spend time with the cats and if they bond with one, they may take the cat home.

Many people cannot have cats where they live but love cats, this is a great opportunity for them to come and interact with cats. The cats at the rescues do not live in cages, they freely roam through the rescue. Many of the cats were owned by elderly people who passed away and their children did not want them, others were being abused and some were just abandoned at the rescue. Most of the cats when they first get to the rescue are scared and suffer some form of trauma, I work with the cats to help them adjust.

The rescue has been such a blessing to me and so many people that I have met over the past year. The experiences I have had and seen over the past year have motivated me to begin researching if my experiences are similar to others with emotional issues. I believe that cats would be excellent therapeutic animals, and the research can help to bring this to fruition. Right now the only animals recognized for therapy and support animals are dogs and miniature horses.

Assuming that I can use my research to fight for allowing cats to be recognized as therapy animals, I plan to advocate for cats.

Recognizing the effects cats have on people with emotional challenges without conducting research has been very rewarding. This has inspired me to advocate for cats as therapy animals and for my research question. What are the experiences of interacting with the cats at Small World Animal Rescue?

**Research Relationships**

As a Naturalist, I believe that this case will have a real-life impact on the participants and will be a co-creator in the research with the participants (Given, 2008). All participants will be people who have come to the cat rescue in the past or this is their first experience here. The participants must be at least 18 years old, but there are no age limits for how old the participants may be. All Participants will be given an informed consent form and explained in detail all that is involved and the protection of their identities and privacy will be of utmost importance (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). I will co-research with the participants, and they will be active throughout the process. To avoid bias, no participants will be friends or family members. All participant's confidentiality will be maintained to protect them, they will be given alternate names of their choice and will be referred to by these names. All videos and audio recordings shall be kept private and only used by those associated with the research.

**Settings and Participants Selection**

The setting for the research will be Small World Animal Rescue. The rescue is for cats only and the cats roam freely throughout the facility. There are three sections of the facility, The main room I call the living room, there is a TV, a couch, and several chairs along with cat trees. The middle room, I call the kitchen area, is where the litter boxes are located. The third area is

the outside area, where the cats are contained with a wire fence, allowing them to enjoy the

outside weather. I desire to have six participants who are adults, must have some mental or

physical challenges, must be able to describe their experiences, may or may not have any pets at

home, may have lost a pet, and must not be allergic to cats, and must spend at least one hour at

the rescue interacting with the cats.

**Data Collection**

The data will be collected through direct observation fieldnotes of the participants as they

interact with the cats at the rescue (Yin, 1994). The interviews of each participant will be

unstructured to allow them the freedom to share everything they experienced and will take place

upon completion of their interactions with the cats (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). All observations and

interviews will be recorded for validation of the observation field notes and verifying the

verbatim. Coding memos will also be part of the process. Additional interviews may be required

to validate the data after coding. Document analysis concerning the case will be observed to

complete the triangulation for data collection (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

**Data Analysis**

The data collected from the observations field notes and interviews will be coded, and

thematic analysis of all verbatim transcripts and field notes will be explored through immersive

engagement with the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Upon establishing the themes, dialogic

engagement with the participants through a second interview to clarify any questions that may

arise about what was stated by the participants and to see if they agree with the themes (Ravitch

& Carl, 2021). I prefer to use an Excel spreadsheet to help in the coding and thematic development to see what similarities there are in the data.

## Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of the data will come from participant validation of the data collected by a second interview with the participants as they will be cocreators (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Through triangulation of the data any possible problems related to construct validity can be addressed (Yin, 1994; Yin, 2009). The thick rich description will be another way to measure the trustworthiness of the data (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The final test of the trustworthiness of the data will be by a structured reflexivity process as I will acknowledge any of my biases and how they can influence my interpretation of the data I collect (Ravitch & Carl, 2021).

## Conclusion

The use of cats in therapeutic interventions for treating a client can be found to have significant proof of the trustworthiness of feline-assisted therapy. Although there has been a good amount of research done in this area, the need for further study is also seen. What are the experiences of interacting with the cats at Small World Animal Rescue may be one small part in the bigger picture, but it also brings the notion of the ADA eventually allowing for cats to be considered as future support animals for the disabled.

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