

RESEARCHER IDENTITY MEMO ASSIGNMENT

I never considered myself a cat person, although I have had cats as pets during different stages of my life. I remember my first encounter with our inside cat Tiger. He would lay at my head when I went to bed, his purring was so soothing and would help me fall asleep. I never realized this until my parents put him outside because he began a territory war with our male dog. Once he was gone I could not sleep, after several days I realized that I could not sleep because the cat was not at my head purring, my parents substituted a wind-up clock for the cat and the ticking noise put me to sleep from then on. My next cat would be completely opposite of Tiger, Princess was wild, she only came around when she wanted to be petted and then when she was done. She would bite you and run away. She was this way until the day she died. I went for many years with only having dogs as pets after Princess, and then my uncle passed away, leaving my aunt all alone. I became close with her. She and my uncle agreed to make me the executor of their will and were leaving everything they had to me. I was the only family member who was close to them.

She passed away five months later, leaving me everything as they said they would, the car, trailer, and 35 cats inside the trailer. She requested that I reach out to the humane society to take the cats, unfortunately they were not able to take them. I was responsible for driving 40 miles one way every day to make sure they had food, water, and clean litter, this went on for three months. I reached out to every place that would take animals and they all told me they had no room. I could not find any farms to take them either. The local Humane Society helped me to euthanize most of them, several were so sick when I got to them, they were dead as I came to check on them. Six cats were friendly, and I found a place to take them once they were all fixed. That place was Small World Animal Rescue. I was exhausted from running back and forth for so many months and grateful for this rescue. I contacted the owner, and she said to come in.

I walked into the rescue, sat down on one of the couches, and immediately was greeted by Sarge, he jumped on my lap and gave me a hug and rubbed my face with his. Then all the other cats started working their way onto the couch and on to me for greetings. I never experienced such love and warmth from a cat as I did that day. As I walked out of the rescue that day I was so relaxed and my anxiety and grief of the loss from my aunt was greatly reduced. I thought to myself, do others feel the same thing I just felt? Do they experience the calming nature of the cats and feel peace when they visit with them? I want to research this subject to prove that cats can be excellent therapy animals and that they should be accepted as therapy or emotional support animals.

I began to investigate how to utilize the cats for therapy with clients with anxiety and other emotional challenges. I do not feel that there will be any issues with race or social class associated with my study as all races, classes, and people may have cats or like cats. I am not sure if all religions would consider cats as pets, they could be looked at as evil by some religions. There is a stigma associated with cats that they are a woman's pet and that most men do not like cats, or if they did they were feminine. I hear it all the time from the owner, I can't believe you like cats as not many men like cats. I have always been around cats and never saw an issue with owning one or more, I have always been an animal lover and when I was little wanted to be a veterinarian, like Dr. Doo Little.

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?

Through the assumption that all participants will have similar experiences with the cats as I have, my research will be beneficial for showing that cats can be used as therapy animals. The rescue is set up like a home and is very welcoming for all who visit. My Inclusion criteria consist of the participants visiting the center and interacting with the cats for at least an hour. They are adults with the ability to describe the experience and are struggling with emotional challenges. These inclusion criteria come from my experiences during my first visit which was over an hour. I hope to find thematic similarities between my participants and my own. I prefer at least six participants for the research. The confidentiality of my participants will be kept confidential, the participants will be chosen from people that come to the rescue and I have been given privacy for my interviews. The participants will be the only people in the rescue on the days they plan to visit, during that time frame.

Because the rescue is similar to a home setting, it allows for the participants to feel at home. Many people believe cats are mean and moody, while some of cats do have particular personalities, they all are loving. I am biased toward the cats because I spend every evening with them, so I must keep this in mind and allow the participants to experience and develop their experiences with the cats. "Companion animals can fulfill "basic social needs" of their owners, such as emotional closeness (attachment), social integration, reassurance of worth, reliable alliance, guidance, and the opportunity for nurturance" (Martens et al, 2016). There will be some who believe that the emotions of the animals are in the minds of the owners, but others know the truth. I never realized how intelligent cats truly were until spending so much time with them. The majority of my experiences with animals have been with dogs, losing a dog is like losing a child. But the same can be said for cats.

Regardless if I believe that the cats at the rescue are good for therapy and would work as service animals, the ADA only permits dogs to be service animals (ADA.gov, 2010). I know that petitioning the ADA will be no easy task, but I hope that this research my give some support for cats as service animals. I have seen several people come in to the rescue and walk out changed, I have had many conversations with these people and we have had some agreements that cats

should be considered service animals. I am excited to get this research started and look forward to proving that cats can be effective research animals. My research team will consist of my dissertation chair and those on my team.

References

- Martens, P., Enders-Slegers, M. J., & Walker, J. K. (2016). The emotional lives of companion animals: Attachment and subjective claims by owners of cats and dogs. *Anthrozoös*, 29(1), 73–88. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08927936.2015.1075299>.
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